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THE COMEDY GAZELLE



ABOUT THE GAZELLE

When I first moved to Chicago, I was immediately struck by the level of talent in the scene. "Fuck, she's good," I thought as I watched Kristen Toomey annihilate a sold out Laugh Factory. *Why haven't I heard of her before?*

It's a question I come back to often, and a major problem here. The city's bursting with household-name-level talent, but unless you're in the midst of it, it can pass you by.

That's why I started The Comedy Gazelle – to bring outsiders into the heart of Chicago comedy, and to share knowledge that can hopefully make the scene that much stronger. It was also the pandemic and I had shit else to do.

Thanks for your support!

– Jerry

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INTERVIEW: MARY LINDSEY

Mary Lindsey is the former owner of Jokes and Notes, the legendary South Side comedy club that helped launch the careers of Steve Harvey, Cedric the Entertainer, DL Hughley, Deon Cole, Lil Rel, and countless others before closing its doors in 2016. I was fortunate enough to speak with Mary over the phone and discuss: lessons she taught her comics, qualities that define stars, opening the club, Bernie Mac, and more. Mary has been featured in Crain's 40 under 40, the Chicago Tribune, the Sun Times, and now – most notably – the Comedy Gazette!

I heard that you had really close relationships with a lot of the comics and that they'd call you "Mama Mary." Where did that nickname come from?

Comedians, especially young comedians, show up when they feel like it. You give them the process and then they do their own process, and think as long as they show up it's okay because they're a comic. What I had to teach them was no, I'm the boss. I'm hiring you to work for me, and I'm the one that's going to make you the star. And if you don't know that by now, then you need to get the hell out of my place. That's what I would say to them. I put one comic out and he was like, "I can't believe she put me out!" That's when they started calling me Mama Mary, because I was like, "If you're going to do any of my open mics, or if I book you for a weekend show or a JFL showcase, you need to be on time and dress for the job. Because I ain't dealing with all the crap I see y'all wearing out there. When you come in and you go on stage, you look like you're interviewing for a job. If you can't do that for me, then you ain't going on the stage. I'm the one that's going to get you down to JFL so agents can see you." I would be in New York – I was all over the place and then they started getting it. Then what I did is I created a class. I used to do a monthly class – only for a short period – but I did it because I wanted to teach them some etiquette. And I couldn't believe it; they were all down for it. And I did see change in them. To this day, Lil Rel says, "No, she wasn't messing around." I had him cornered in my office and I was like, "You better never show up here late again." He was like, "Okay." And then he started calling me Mama Mary. Then everybody was calling me Mama Mary.

That's so funny: "Okay, mama."

That's how we became so close, me and all the comics. Cause even Steve Harvey and Tony Rock, both the Rock



brothers, were like, "No, no, she makes things happen for us." And I love the fact that the comics could see the difference in my style and approach to the comedy scene, as opposed to what they had been getting in the past. Cause they weren't getting very much, especially in Chicago. They weren't getting booked at Zanies and hardly any of them were getting booked at Laugh Factory until Curtis [Shaw Flagg] came along.

It sounds like you really went out of your way to help comics with the business aspect of it, like, "there's more to being a successful comedian than just telling jokes."

Exactly. And I went on down to how you think about your wife at home. Just because you're a comedian doesn't mean that you stay out all night while she's stressing out with the kids. Who does that? I would really get deep into it. And so that's why they felt like, "Oh wow, I feel like this is my mother."

Any favorite stories from your time at Jokes and Notes?

One of my favorite stories is when I was opening and I asked Bernie [Mac] if he was going to come through. I worked with Bernie at All Jokes Aside, and he was sort of taking a break when my club opened, so he was like, "No, I ain't coming over there." I was like, "Whatever." I show up to work one day, and I always got there around 5:30. I always go right in the club and close the

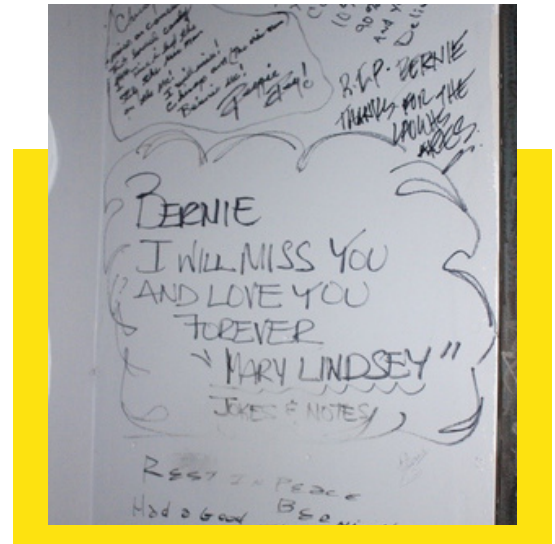
doors because I wanted to make sure there were no kids out there thinking we gonna play. I'm in my office and all of a sudden I hear this pecking on the door. At first I wasn't going to go to the door; I was like, "Oh, they can't get in here anyway." But I come to the door and this voice goes, "Open this motherfuckin' door! Open it!" That was Bernie's line all the time. And the way he said it, I thought I would die. I opened the door, I was like, "What are you doing here? Scaring the daylights out of me!" He's like, "Everybody scaring you." That is one of my favorite comedy stories and that's what put him up on the wall, because he started coming by and doing work for me. He was busy so he couldn't do it all the time, but I was just grateful that he did it. He had started going into movies and all that.

I love that. That's really nice of him too.

Yep, that's why people always hear me say that the comics did a lot for me too. Especially certain ones. They never gave up on me, especially Damon Williams.

I feel like every great club needs the support of its comics. You need them to rally behind it and want it to succeed and have that mutual respect. If someone were to open a club, what steps would they have to take to build that kind of relationship?

I think create something, even if it's once a month. That's what I did. Create a day - during the day, not at night - where they come to your club and you have a sit down. Ask these comics that show up, "What's it like out there for you? Why do you think it's that way?" And then I was able to give them feedback, and boy, that got out there so fast. Before I knew it, I had a room full of comedians. Once a month I would order pizza and give them free beer just so they could feel comfortable in what I was saying. Then when I started seeing them bring their little notebooks, I was like, "Okay, they are feeling it." And that created cohesiveness. I kept telling them, "I'm gonna get y'all into the Laugh Factory," and I did. And then with JFL, I was like, "Okay, come by, I've got some great talent here." Everybody was kind of nervous about 47th and King Drive. So was I. I wasn't from that area, so what I did was I hired two off duty security to be there. So I had that every night. They knew there wasn't going to be no playing around. When the shows were over, you were not allowed to linger in front of my business. They expected it was going to be some hood joint, and then it turned out to not be that. Then people started talking about it.



When you sat down and were giving comics advice, what were you telling them?

It was short and sweet. It was just basically telling them that if you're serious about this business and you want to go beyond an open mic night, meaning you want to go into film and become a nationwide superstar stand up, like a Bernie Mac or a Steve Harvey, you have to take this seriously. I would give them examples and say, "Look at those guys. They're down to business. If you want to do that, take this seriously and dress for the job. Start making sure that you attend different things and go to other comedy clubs and try to get in. Create a resume because they want to know something about the comic." It was like a class, a real class.

That's something I've been thinking about a lot recently: there's a difference between just doing some shows locally and then actually making a career out of it and making a living.

Yeah, I had to instill in them that if you want to be a superstar, you can be a star on TV and still do stand up. I mean, look at Lil Rel now. He is killing the game. Look what Deon Cole accomplished; Steve, all of them. They all worked with me at my club. It's so nice to see them all doing well. Some of their background stories are not pretty at all, and I was like, "Don't let that stop you. This is how you keep moving. Get to the next level."

If you had to put your finger on one characteristic or quality that separates a superstar from a great local comedian, what would you say that is?

In a short answer to that, I probably would say a person that is very focused on their talent. When you're very focused on what you want to achieve or where you want to go in the industry, a lot of people will find you standoffish. They'll say you think you're better than other people, all of that. But you're not; you're really just focused. I think that is very, very true. That's how I was in the industry.

I completely agree. Without that focus you're just kind of floundering. You might be great, but what are your goals?

Yeah, "What's your plan to go after that goal and make it happen for you?" You gotta be able to do that. And I just love it now that Curtis has bridged that South Side and North Side comic gap, cause he has booked more of them now than anybody ever did before him. And Zanies has booked some now too. I like seeing the Em Browns and the T Murphs get booked at those venues, because there was a time they couldn't get in. They didn't think the audience would support it or be diverse enough. And that's what I liked because I had so many different types of friends. A lot of my friends were white. I didn't start hanging out with black people until a certain time in my life. I grew up with a single parent. My mom wasn't messing around; she goes, "Oh, no, you ain't failing on my watch." And that made me stay focused. That's what my personality is: I'm organized. I've always been organized.

Did your mom get you into comedy, or where did that interest come from?

No, she didn't even think that I should be doing the comedy scene at all. She's a person that's never funny. She don't laugh at much of anything; she's very serious. All I got from my mom is the seriousness and responsibility. But outside of that, no, not at all. She didn't like that I was going down that path.

How did you get started on that path into comedy?

It goes back to All Jokes Aside, when I was still working at Chicago Board Options Exchange. I was the first black vice president. I was hanging out with a lot of people that worked at Continental Bank across from the Board of Trade. I met this guy, Raymond, and a group of us started hanging out together. Raymond wanted to have his hands in a whole lot of things, so he was like, "Why don't you come and help us at All Jokes Aside?" I was like, "I'm not quitting my job. No way." And as his



girlfriend, he was putting the pressure on me to help them because my area was compliance and operations. So I told them I'd help them in the evenings for a little while, and that's what I did. I created the structure and I started instilling some operations into the business and along came all the nasty side of that nighttime business. So I ended up telling them, "If y'all gonna have me doing all this, then you got to give me some interest in here," and that's when James and Raymond each sold me 20% of their investment. That's how I became a minority owner in that club. And then Raymond was getting caught doing bad stuff, so I broke up with him. I told him I can't do this and I said, "As a matter of fact, I'm going to leave all of y'all alone." And so I did. And Dorothy Tillman, the old alderman, is the one that approached me; it was her ward on 47th and King Drive. And she asked me if I would come over. She said she came to All Jokes Aside all the time and she liked how I ran it, and she wanted to start re gentrifying Bronzeville. I agreed, and so I went over there and tried for a bank loan and I opened Jokes and Notes. And there I was.

That's fascinating, you just fell into it.

Exactly. Had I not been dating Raymond, I never would've been in there. And that's when Bernie and Cedric and Tony Rock and Chris Rock, all of them did my club on many occasions because they knew who they were working for. Those boys took care of me.

And why did the club close?

I closed the comedy club because, honestly, I was just burnt out from it. I couldn't breathe anymore because comedy was consuming my life. For 36 years I've been doing comedy and getting people hooked up and set up and creating stars. I had to stop and say, "You know what? I gotta think about me now." And that's what I'm focusing on.

A lot of comics are frustrated at certain points in their careers. Maybe they can't get into a club or achieve some goal. What advice would you give to a comedian that's trying to get into a club and isn't having any success?

It just depends on what their resume looks like. That was one of the things I said earlier when I used to do the monthly class: I taught them that you create a resume so that when you go to that comedy club you can show them, "Oh, wow, he's worked at all these different clubs." That's respectability, that's accountability, and all of that. A lot of comics, especially the younger ones, don't put in the work. They have no idea and they don't think they need to do that when they really do. That's how you develop relationships. I would tell comics in the very beginning stage, "Whatever comedy club you're trying to get into, go to that comedy club, buy a ticket and watch the show and the operations of the business." That would teach them a lot because they could see the structure and how it was being operated, that it was no crap. What I don't like about the younger generation now is they'll get my information from somebody and that upsets me because I don't answer phone calls that don't have a name attached to it. A couple months ago, I had all these young comics hitting me up about, "Mary, can you help me with so and so?" And I said, "First of all, I don't know you or how you got my information. And no, I cannot help you. Go to someone that's still working in the comedy industry." And let me tell you, I didn't do that to be mean, but because once you give one of them some direction, they start flocking you.

Yeah, we're like pigeons.

All these comics would have been calling me then. And like I said, I'm not working in this industry anymore and not getting paid for it. I'd send the managers and agents in New York people that they loved and made stars and all that. And so I told the comics, "When you send a resume to an agent in New York, you gotta show them why they should hire you." It's like, "We already got this. Gimme something different." You gotta sell yourself and they didn't think they had to do that. I just tried to teach

them all the aspects of the business and then walked away. Now I don't talk to any of them when I go to a comedy show. They all flock me, so that's why I don't go to many comedy shows anymore. Sometimes I'll go to Riddles because it's nearby and Damon Williams does a show there. Damon and I are really close and I just am so proud of him. I feel like he's the next superstar here to keep the torch going.

If you could do it all over again, is there anything you'd do differently?

No, I actually like the way I did it. The only thing I did regret is after I sold Jokes and Notes, people still thought I had something to do with it and I didn't. People were coming to me when they were having issues and I was like, "I don't have no business dealings there." Then when I went down to the city I found out that they didn't change the paperwork over. I went through the process and got that changed and said, "My name come up anywhere else, you'll be sued." That's what I told them. I was like, "Don't play with me. I gave y'all a great club." So that's how I got here: all by accident. But I opened Jokes and Notes to make a difference in the community and the city, and ended up making a difference nationwide.

You've certainly done that. It's incredible what you've been able to accomplish. No desire to ever get back in?

No, no, I'm too old. See, everybody don't know how old I am. They're still remembering the old Mary Lindsey, but I'll be 70 in August. And at this point, like I said, I was in business for 36 years. When you do the math, it's like, "Oh, okay, she had no time for herself." I was consumed with the comedy, and before I got to the comedy, I was consumed with my job at the Board of Trade. I just need this peacefulness that I have.



Comedians Recognizing Comedians

JEFF BRAUN

"Jeff hosts Sloppy Sundays and is truly one of the best hosts I've ever seen. I've seen him calm drunk dudes and still keep the energy up for performers. His new show GEEZ at Hideout is also a ton of fun. Not to mention that his Frankie the Kid Comedian bit is just so funny."

AARON KLEIN

"Funny + unique + stage presence. Not a lot of comics are good at using silence to their benefit, either. Should be on way more shows."

RONNIE RAY

"Ronnie is a Chicago staple, a true professional, and an overall good dude. He runs Hot 5 at Lincoln Lodge which gives comics more stage time than the average showcase and he works hard to bring in an audience and pay the comics every week. He's also a hilarious host and fun to work with! Would love to see him performing more throughout the city."

DAVID VOX MULLEN

"For years 'Vox' has been super supportive of so many other comedians in "the scene" all without expecting anything in return and it's so amazing to see him finally stretch his wings and headline shows. He is extremely funny and has an amazing stage presence. He is also one of the few comics I've seen who genuinely treats others with respect."

KHAYA OSBORNE

"I just saw them perform for the first time at Cool Kids Table and I was truly dyyyyyyyying. So much fun energy, so engaging, so hilarious— I seriously can't wait to watch them perform again. What a treat."

RYAN TRIMBLE

"He is just working so darn hard. He is pushing himself in new ways and taking risks during his sets. He lives and breathes comedy and there is not a show he does where he does not take a risk. Book him!"

JACK BAKER

"Jack is a comic you see at clubs everywhere and has a great special, but has never really broken through in Chicago the way he deserves to. Whip smart jokes mixed with a laid back attitude, Jack is such a natural and always makes any show he is on better."

Comedians Recognizing Comedians

CLAIRE MALKIE

"She's newer to the scene and is working as hard as anyone. She's funny and it's be cool to see her get a boost from something like this. Yes, she's a friend. No, she doesn't know I'm submitting this. Cheers!"

SEAN NITSCHMAN

"Sean has been making me laugh a lot for a while now. He has a very authentic voice and fun stage presence and his material is pretty polished. He's a great dude and he's working hard. Should be getting more opportunities."

JONATHAN DUNNE

"Jonathan Dunne is one of the most uniquely creative and hilarious comedic voices in Chicago. He is an excellent joke writer and has one of the best senses of onstage character, whether portraying himself or any number of characters a bit my call for."

MATT BOH

"Since I first met him, Matt has made an impressive improvement in comedy! He is not only a good friend but an excellent writer who has been traveling all over America doing shows!"

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