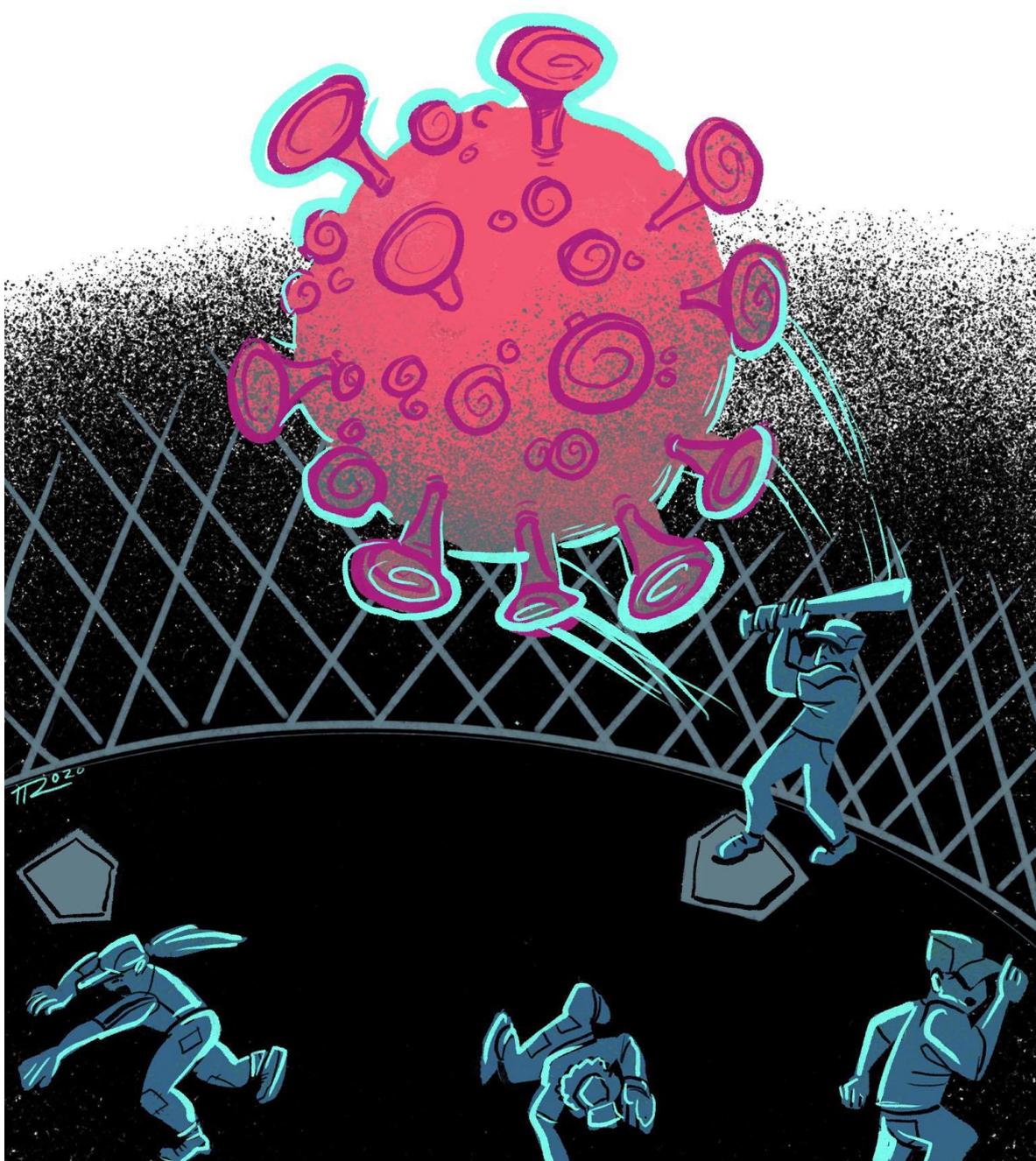


THE COMEDY GAZELLE

THE LATEST IN CHICAGO COMEDY



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW:

CURTIS SHAW FLAGG



ABOUT THE GAZELLE

When I moved to Chicago last October, I was immediately struck by the level of talent in the scene. "Fuck, she's good," I thought as I watched Kristen Toomey supercharge herself with a firm slap of the puss.

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's easy to miss.

That's why I'm starting The Comedy Gazelle — to bring outsiders into the heart of Chicago comedy, and to showcase this city's unrivaled talent. To keep everyone up-to-date on the scene, and to do it in a fun way. And not just in a one-off article, but all the time.

Each issue will feature an exclusive interview, as well as whatever else I can pull together.

Hope you enjoy.

— Jerry

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TALKING COMEDY WITH CURTIS SHAW FLAGG, GM OF LAUGH FACTORY CHICAGO

Curtis (@curtishawflagg) is the GM/Booker of Laugh Factory Chicago, where he has worked for nearly 8 years. We discussed bookings, evaluating talent, "the journey" and more.



How'd you get your start at Laugh Factory?

I was a journalist for a while at the [Chicago] Tribune. Another journalist was the original GM, and I was like, "You don't have to pay me. I just want to be there." I interned for like a year, and then worked my way up.

What were you doing while you were interning?

Social media. I took pictures of every show, every comic. Then I kinda morphed into sound and was the sound guy for a year. Then I started working downstairs and was a host for a year. Box office for a year. Then I moved into the office during the day, while still working at night. I was asking a million questions and they were just like, "How about you do it?" Almost eight years now. It was a slow progression.

How did your background in journalism help you?

I think it helped me with marketing. When print media started to die, digital blogging became the norm. You needed social media. Twitter was huge. Facebook wasn't where it was now. There was no Instagram. And using that self promotional piece helped me leverage the brand visibility of Laugh Factory to start selling more tickets. I'm addicted to that, that's why I continue to oversell shows. There was a time when I couldn't sell a ticket, and now that

people are coming, I can't stop. But now it's obviously changed because it's a health thing.

Can you talk about the submissions initiative Laugh Factory just launched?

I always had this idea of doing a Taste of Chicago Comedy. I always get pitches from people, "I wanna do this type of show" and it's pretty ad hoc. I'm like, let me create a submission portal for any ideas. Our Instagram is huge, our TikTok is huge. I think what's always separated us from other clubs is that we let the inmates run the asylum. We let the comics really have the power to be producers and be creative. Not only in what they do on stage, but curating a whole environment. We obviously can't do it all the time, but I was like, "Let's see what's out there." People have had all this time during quarantine to think of shit.

So this can be anything?

Yep. From A-Z, whether it's a social media short or a live comedy show. We have all of these platforms. While there's no live comedy, the best thing we can do right now is at least raise people's profiles. Mention them, give them some followers, and build off of that. I've been looking at some of the submissions, and there's some really good ideas that hopefully we can make work logistically. But it's all about raising the Chicago comics. Our whole purpose is to give them a platform to become celebrities. Whether it's on our Instagram or our stage, that's our job.

What's one of the best ways to not get a guest spot?

Oh that's easy. During the pandemic, it's showing up unannounced, knowing that there's capacity limitations. And also I've been very clear on letting Kenda [Lutterbeck] or me know if you're coming. Because it's a pandemic and it's just a very selfish thing that I was never a fan of in the first place. Literally 9-5 business hours is when there's no show, no chaos of nighttime operations. And then when there is chaos and you come strolling in like, "Hey can I get five minutes?" — No, I'm in the middle of 50 different things.

If you're there and you're just hanging out, we'll come to you. Any booker, if they want you to get up, they'll reach out to you. I don't really have a problem with persistence and consistency, and reaching out and following up. But there's definitely a line to it. Every now and again someone gets lucky and pesters you enough, and it's usually when it's the first time you put someone up. You've seen them at a mic or around, and they're right on the precipice of getting a guest spot.

What if you're pestering, then you get your shot and blow it?

That's traditionally what happens.

Laughs

Oh, and one of the most overlooked things: a properly put together booking request. You'll get emails like, "Hey, this is who I am, I'll be in town, let me know if I can get a spot." If you're from the outside coming in, or new to the city, don't make a booker do more work than they have to. Present it. Not when you're not available, but when you are available. "Here's 3-5 minutes of material. Check it out, let me know what you think." If it's just your name, availability, and a clip — perfect.

**What about the clip itself?**

I would keep it five minutes, honestly max. I have watched a 10-15 minute clip, but the comic was hilarious from the jump and I just ended up watching it. But traditionally, I don't know any booker, unless it's for a competition, that would watch a 15 minute clip. Cause when you get that amount of inquiries, it's a lot.

How many inquiries were you getting pre-pandemic?

20-30 a week. Incoming comics, people coming from out of town who want to headline. And then anything extra would be from existing comics in the scene.

With booking, there's also an equity piece. When you're booked for a show, are you promoting it and bringing people out? All of that matters, especially now when you see clubs closing all over the place. Yeah it's great if you're just funny, but there are other pieces that need to happen, because at the end of the day, it's a business. But ultimately, you have to be able to appease the crowd. I don't care so much about the back of the room, or the comics, or the staff. None of them are paying; it's solely customers. A comedy club is different than a bar.



I feel like a lot of the time, comics struggle with balancing stuff the crowd likes and their art. Do you have any advice for comics trying to toe that line?

There's a ton of misses in it, but you do have to take those chances. You should never censor yourself, because after a certain point you will get to a place where a club will want to book you. You gotta go for it. Your risk reward ratio can't really matter in finding your voice and truly being creative.

When you're evaluating a clip or talent, what're you looking for?

I think it's super hard to say specifically. I don't know if you've ever heard the age old definition of porn: "I can't tell you what porn is, but I know it when I see it". That's similar. There's a certain feeling where it's like, "That's funny. I gotta get to know you," regardless of whether the material is polished. That feeling when you see it clicking. You see the confidence level, the timing - whether it's there or not. You see it. And when you see it, you almost want to jump on it and nurture it.

Every great comic that you can name, they have some sort of unique, innate, distinguishing quality about them. Like Joan Rivers, or Richard Pryor, or George Carlin. Robin Williams. They all have this signature thing. You can close your eyes and picture it. That's the voice. Not the voice in a literal sense — it can be your material, or stage presence, or overall persona. But that's what you search for.

A lot of comics think that by going to the Laugh Factory mic, or any mic, there's gonna be someone there and that's gonna be their break. I feel like that's a myth.

It is, but it isn't. Somebody being there could be me, or Brian [Morton], or Comedy Central. There could always be someone there who could possibly get you to the next spot or next step. But it's all about how incremental that being there is. That's why you put in the work. That's why you hit the mics and do five shows in a night. Because when someone is there for real, you gotta do your thing.

Comedy Central, William Morris, APA, 3 Arts, etc., will always reach out and say, "Hey, we're in town, who do you have up this weekend?". I'll send them the lineup, they'll look em up, they'll come and check out the shows. If they like people, they like people. If not, I'll never hear from them. If they like them, they'll ask for their contact info and I'll connect them that way. There are several agencies in Chicago — Stewart Talent, Grey — that are always looking for homegrown talent. The whole point is to keep talent in Chicago.

How does it make you feel when people leave Chicago?

It's inevitable. But if they're leaving, hopefully it's for a great opportunity and they get to succeed. Over the 7+ years I've been at Laugh Factory, I've seen several "classes," I'll call them. Some people think they want real hardcore industry work, whether it's in a writers' room for a show, or Late Night, or getting a special, or on a TV show. It's really what you want out of it. And you realize what you want when you either get it or don't get it, and you gotta be able to live with that.

What about you, what do you want?

I'm very happy doing what I'm doing because of the journey. I started as an intern. I was willing to do anything and everything to just be around. I tried a bunch of stuff out, even did stand up. When I found what I feel like my true passion was, which was being on the

business development side of comedy, I found my calling. I found what I truly had passion for and can see myself doing for a very long time. And I'm doing that. Do I want to create more industry opportunities for comics? Yes. Do I want to curate a more fruitful scene for more goal-oriented opportunities? Yes. Do I wanna grow the visibility of Laugh Factory? Yes. Do I wanna churn more comics out who go to a coast, or are very successful in Chicago? Yes. I like watching the diamond in the rough become polished. I like watching Chris Redd go from just doing a Tuesday night show to being on SNL.

Is that the most rewarding thing for you? Just being along for the journey and seeing someone develop?

Oh yeah. The wins for me aren't even true wins, they're wins for other people. Watching other people get things and become household names. I love a comic that ends up just being too big to come back to do a show. It's almost like watching your kids grow up, except half of them are older than you.

What's a common characteristic you see in those people?

You just gotta keep grinding, dude. You can't give up and be self-sabotaging. I'm in a position to put people "on," in a very small sense of the word, but I can't get people the things they're truly looking to get. You just gotta keep plugging away. You'll get it when you get it, but when the opportunity comes, you better be ready. JFL is something a lot of comics put really high on their bucket list. Some people get it, some people don't. But it's definitely not the be-all end-all to comedy careers. And I feel like during this quarantine, it's more evident. There wasn't a JFL, there wasn't an NBC, or a Comedy Central Up Next. But people are becoming popular without needing those otherwise traditional platforms to launch their careers.

How do you think a comic should structure their goals?

I think it's long and incremental. If you're an open micer, it's like, "I wanna get booked on a showcase, however legitimate." From there it's like, "Okay, did I get the guest spot? Alright, now I wanna be a regular." And also, Chicago's a different environment. There are so many opportunities to get on stage. There are a ton of independent showcases and mics. There are more clubs than in most cities. So you just manage expectations according to the opportunities in front of you. I think going from 0-100 is unrealistic, but in the same token you gotta have confidence in yourself.

"YOU CAN'T GIVE UP AND BE SELF-SABOTAGING. I'M IN A POSITION TO PUT PEOPLE 'ON,' IN A VERY SMALL SENSE OF THE WORD, BUT I CAN'T GET PEOPLE THE THINGS THEY'RE TRULY LOOKING TO GET. YOU JUST GOTTA KEEP PLUGGING AWAY."

What do you think differentiates the Chicago scene?

I think one thing comics end up taking for granted is the amount of opportunities. Laugh Factory, for instance, we fit 350 people. Do you know how rare it is to go up on a showcase in front of 350 people and you're not doing a headliner show in a huge theater? Doing that on a Tuesday night or Saturday nights regularly? You don't get that anywhere, really. You just don't get that in New York. It's very unique.

Do you feel like that gets you a different type of comic?

Absolutely. But I also think it grooms people to be ready for those bigger stages. If you're doing small room, small room, small room, then you finally get an opportunity at a huge theatre —that's a culture shock. You have to adjust to that. There are a bunch of comics who end up opening for someone, doing bigger theaters, they're like, "It's good being able to practice." It helps the nerves, it helps your timing — everything you need to be prepared for that type of situation when it comes.

What if I'm interested in comedy, but don't wanna be a standup. Why should I choose Chicago?

I think ultimately you get to truly see the grind. It's like the ultimate behind-the-scenes. I used to call Chicago the minor leagues of comedy, but I've kind of changed that perspective. I think there are writers, producers and content creators who are really getting their chops and could go to LA right now. But ultimately, Chicago is a breeding ground for really learning how to do it. And if you choose to leave, then you are just that much more prepared to go somewhere else and join a writers' room or production team. But Chicago is a large city in the Midwest, so you get the metropolitan **[BIG WORD ALERT]** accoutrements — tourism, and diversity and different things. But you get Middle America's reaction to things. You get blue and red. Sometimes if you're on the West Coast, it could really lean very liberal, so you don't really get any opposition to your liberal views. I think sometimes being able to see both sides of the coin helps you form a fair and non-biased opinion.

What're you drinking there?

Probiotic. I'm all about the probiotics. Advertisement for KeVita. Holler at Jerry for a sponsorship.

Is the toy drive still on? We'd love to include that in our Community Bullshit section.

Dude, that's been killing me. I don't know how it would look. We can't do the party, obviously. I know there are some comics who are putting together a coat drive — kinda looking to link up and figure out a way to maybe have Laugh Factory serve as a drop off point. And maybe we open it up to the general public and we'll give you a ticket to a future show. Whenever that is, I don't know. It's a work in progress. This would be the first time in almost 8 years I wouldn't have done it, but it's also a first for a lot of things that haven't happened. Hopefully this doesn't make that list.



COMMUNITY BULLSHIT

Spotlight: Nate Burrows

From Nate:

My Uncle (a chef of 20 years) and I love sandwiches, and good morale. During the first lockdown, as a way to stay in touch with friends, I'd make sandwiches every Sunday and deliver them to all my pals before the ESPN 30/30 on the 90's Bulls would air. The reaction from friends was incredible, and from that my Uncle had the idea to cook for the homeless.

I had a connection to a ministry called "Precious Blood," that is run by three nuns that work out of Back of the Yards in the South Side of Chicago. We started in May and made 400 gourmet sandwiches. We delivered them around the community and got to talk with all the neighbors about how they were holding up. We decided we were going to do it every month, and it's turned into something bigger.

We now make sandwiches for two different organizations that deliver them to shelters, and we also make lunches for the staff at various ICU's (mostly Rush Hospital). We are currently doing a coat drive and taking individual orders from families (mostly single moms) on what their families need and providing them with good new winter clothing.

Every month we try to add a new aspect — we're going to try and run cooking classes for the single parents in the neighborhood and also do a day where we give free haircuts to anyone in need of a trim (working with local barbers and stylists).

My Uncle and I have a pipe dream of opening a sandwich shop in the future and our goal is to be closed every Monday, so we can cook for the homeless (using money we make from the tip jar), because so far that's been the most fulfilling experience of my life.



Comedian Nate Burrows (center) doing The Lord's work



If you'd like to donate to Nate's coat drive, you can drop off at 5114 S Elizabeth St, Chicago IL, or reach out to Nate and he'll trade you a sandwich!

If you don't have an old coat, but would still like to contribute, you can donate at: [gofundme.com/moralewiches-for-precious-blood-ministry](https://www.gofundme.com/moralewiches-for-precious-blood-ministry)

Thank you for your support!

SPORTS

Last Sunday, over 20 of Chicago's finest comics gathered at the historic Hamlin Park to play some ball. The day started off with me showing up late, then leaving immediately because I had to take a shit.

With temperatures nearing 70 degrees, I enjoyed the short walk down to some hipster coffee bar, where I made stinky then left without buying anything.

Turns out it's called Hexe Coffee Co. I'd normally charge for advertising, but the last two times we played I also took a shit there, so I kinda owe them. Hexe Coffee Co!

I hustled my way back to the field, where the first game was already underway. I don't know who the captains were, so we'll say Team A (my team) played Team B (the team that lost). It was a back and forth competitive rollercoaster of a game. Maybe a little too competitive, with certain individuals aggressively arguing balls and strikes in a no-stakes, co-ed pickup game of 16 inch softball. Final score: 13-12?

We decided to play another game before it got too dark, but that game sucked. Austin Fields picked an absolute trash can of a team that showed less promise than Blake Burkhart's material. It was like 20-1 after 5 innings, so we called it a day.

Additional highlights include:

Bob Keen making 8 straight errors in his Levi's

TJ Sopoci's knees holding up

"Three runs if you hit the stroller in center field"

"You suck and you're bad"

A COVID scare from yours truly



Comedian Paul Miller draws a walk

(Old picture cause I forgot to take pictures)



Comedian Aaron Sutherland walks Paul Miller

HEXE COFFEE CO.

A GREAT PLACE TO TAKE A SHIT



STOP BY THE SHOP.
2000 W. DIVERSEY PKWY

ARTWORK



"How it Starts"

ORIGINALLY FROM CLEVELAND, OHIO, RODESCU HOPKINS II IS A CHICAGO-BASED COMEDIAN, FILMMAKER, AND PHOTOGRAPHER.  @RODESCUHOPKINSII



"The Belly"

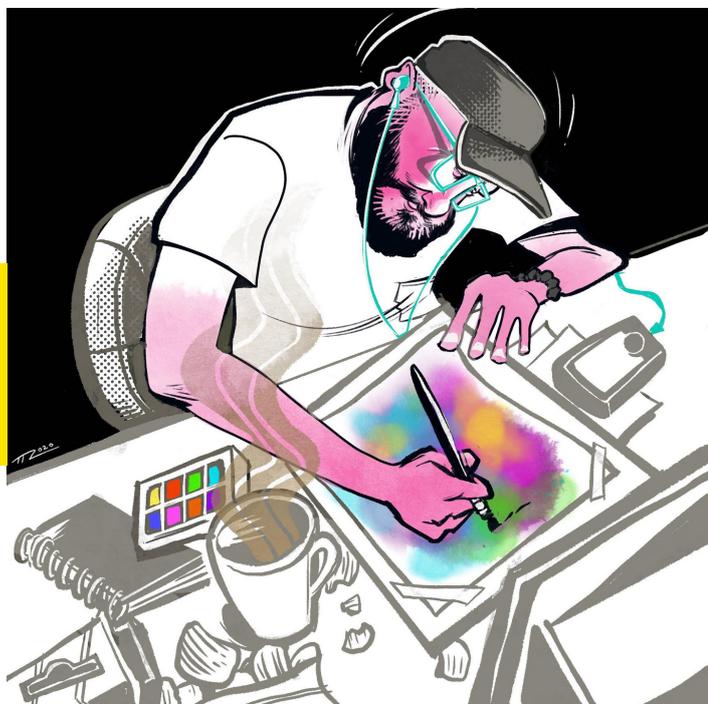


"The Future"

**HAVE ART TO FEATURE?
DM US @COMEDYGAZELLE**

COVER ART BY COMEDIAN / ARTIST TOM RYAN

 **@TIPS.ARE.APPRECIATED**



FEATURED VIDEOS

I can't get a video to work within a pdf, so you'll just have to look these up. Sorry if that's too much to ask, but we don't exactly have a tech team.



<https://youtu.be/ORLcqWjzrB8>

Directed & edited by Steven Haas

Written by Alex Dragicevich

Featuring: Joe McMahon, Chris Higgins, Tim Smith

Shot by Steven Haas, Aaron Klinger

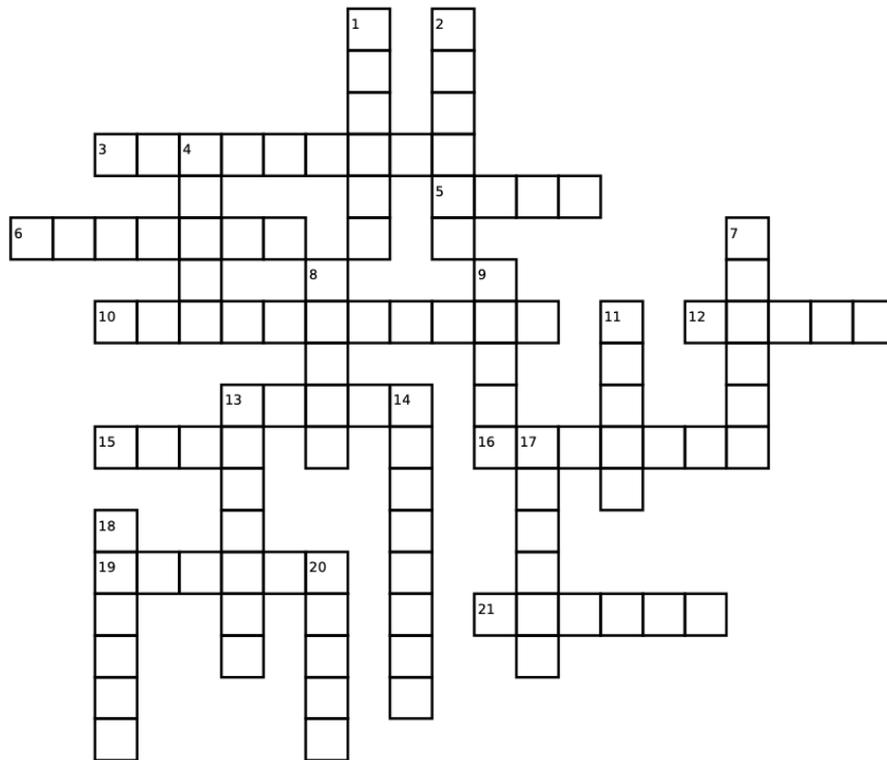


<https://youtu.be/gkblxl9lctA>

Written, directed & edited by Steven Haas

Featuring: Sarah Perry, Megan Lipski, Sohrab Forouzesh

CROSSWORD: COMEDY ALBUMS



Down:

1. "This is a Recording"
2. "What Becomes a Semi-Legend Most?"
4. "Standup Comic"
7. "Let's Get Small"
8. "The Carnegie Hall Concert"
9. "The White Album"
11. "Child of the '50s"
13. "Do You Believe in Gosh?"
14. "From Across The Street"
17. "Dress to Kill"
18. "It's Bad for Ya"
20. "Chewed Up"

Across:

3. "For What It's Worth"
5. "Bigger & Blacker"
6. "Hello Dummy!"
10. "No Respect"
12. "Is It Something I Said?"
13. "Rant in E-Minor"
15. "The Day The Laughter Died"
16. "Louder than Hell"
19. "Shanks for the Memories"
21. "I Have a Pony"

