

# THE COMEDY GAZELLE



**MICHAEL MEYERS**

# 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 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 include an exclusive interview, as well as whatever else I can pull together.

Hope you enjoy.

— Jerry

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# INTERVIEW: MICHAEL MEYERS

*As evidenced by his #1 album, From Afar, Michael Meyers has some of the best crafted jokes you will ever hear. With over a decade of comedy experience, Mike's picked up quite a few things about "the craft." We talked storytelling, the highs and lows of comedy, and — of course — 11 year old penises.*

## **I know you're a big Norm fan. How big of an influence was he for you?**

He's been one of my favorite comics for as long as I can remember. Growing up I'd watch SNL at my buddy's house and he was on it. I don't know if I fully grasped what he was doing at the time, but he always made me laugh. One joke I always remember is "The Princess of Monaco had a birthday party. And if you wanna know what it's like being a princess on her birthday, you get two cakes." I remember being like ten and seeing that and thinking that was funny, but it just seemed so dumb. So that was really kind of different. But I think he's had a huge impact on me and sometimes I'm worried I kind of do Norm. I'll catch myself in my head thinking that I'm doing his delivery. But then I talk to people and they're like, "I can see the similarities, but I don't see you ripping off Norm." It's just hard, especially if you watch a lot of his stuff. You watch a comedian, then you go and you start to feel like you're doing what they're doing.

## **So what do you do when you start recognizing that?**

I try to correct that. But I do think as long as you're not doing a blatant rip off or rewriting their joke, then I think that's more of an inspiration than copying. I think my jokes have always been longer, but for a while I was like, "You gotta write faster jokes and have more punchlines." Like a Late Night type thing. But then I found every time I tried to write faster jokes, it didn't really work for me.

## **And how long did it take you to get to that point where you were like, "This longer stuff works better?"**

I think the thing that brought me to where I am was that a lot of people when I was younger would tell me that I was good at telling stories. So I started taking that into the stand up too. So then the jokes were more like stories than just setup and punchlines. And I just found that worked for me and then I'd have people compliment that because they said it was different. So I just started writing in that way because that's just what worked for me and that's the way it's comfortable.



## **How do you balance the length of those bits? If I'm trying to do a story and it works, I'll try adding to it. But then it'll be too long and not work.**

That comes with more of just doing the material more and shaping it as you go. Sometimes I'll do a longer thing and I tell it a certain way and it works that way. Then at one point I'll tell it differently and I'll leave something out and then I realize, "Oh, that's a much better way to tell that because that part was totally unnecessary." It's all about cutting the fat off. What is necessary in this story and what is just filler?

## **But are some of those little filler laughs fat?**

No, if you're getting a laugh from something I don't think that's filler. I'm not talking about that. I think a lot of times when people do long stuff the setup may be unnecessarily long. And not even by a lot, it could just be a few words. You don't need to have those words in there. You're still gonna get the point across, but you'll get to the punchline quicker. But that was the thing with longer stuff: if you have something really long and you do a show, it's better to not start with it. Because you want people to laugh at you at first. A lot of times if people don't know you, they'll give you a short

amount of time to make an impression, and if you exceed that, you'll start to lose their attention. I have a joke that I start out with – that wooden people thing is a longer joke – but it relates to starting a set, so it works. But if you have a story, I think that kind of stuff is better in the middle of your act or the end of your act. At the beginning you kinda wanna have your stronger, shorter stuff so that people have confidence in you when you do tell the long stuff.

**I wanna ask you about your 11 year old penises joke. What was the process of trying to work that out? [Mike has a story where he fluffs himself up in the locker room and gets made fun of for having a boner]**

Well that's an actual story from my life. That was one of the most embarrassing things of my childhood. Like at the time I thought my life was over. All my friends think I'm gay and get boners in the shower. And now if you're gay it's pretty cool, at least in Chicago. Northwest Ohio was not a cool place to be gay. So I was like, "I'm gonna get made fun of all the time." That's always been a vivid memory of mine.

**Did you get a lot of shit for a while?**

Yeah, I mean there were a handful of kids that were really assholes to me. And hockey players are assholes anyway, so they'll take anything and just hammer it. So I had a couple kids on my team that were relentless with it. And even years later in high school they'd bring it up. And I'd be like, "Coddamnit you gotta let that go!"

**That's hard, man.**

It's something that's very much burned in my brain. So when I first told that joke, I didn't repeat the 11 year old penis thing. But I think that I just mentioned how these kids had huge penises. And the joke was supposed to be that I fluffed myself up then walked in with a boner. But I was at an open mic here and I think just saying 11 year old penises was making people laugh. So just harping on that. But what's funny about that joke is that I could initially only tell it at open mics because the way that I was telling it was not coming off humorous. Kind of just, "Why is this guy talking about 11 year old penises?" So for like a year I didn't tell that joke. And then I think Nate Burrows and I were talking about it and he was talking about how he loved that joke, and so I told it at a show. And maybe because I had gotten better at comedy I was able to tell it in a way that worked. And then from there I had more confidence, so I started telling it more at shows and kind of figuring out what it is that makes people laugh about it.

**What was it that you found?**

I mean, it's the 11 year old penises. Just saying that and then having it build to like "Well maybe you guys should visualize this." And it's funny cause you tell that joke and you see a lot of guys in the audience laughing because a lot of guys have had that experience of having to take a shower with a bunch of other dudes and get made fun of because you're fat or have a small dick or something like that. You could see them laugh and then other people start to laugh, so it just kind of developed over that. Doing it more and more and finding a way to tell it without it being creepy. Cause it is like a creepy joke, but you can find a way to tell it where the funny outweighs the creepiness.

**Where do you put it in your act?**

I usually do it towards the end. That's not a joke you can just open with, cause then people are like, "What the fuck is this guy talking about?" So that's a good example of where you have to build confidence for the audience in you to tell that joke. Because they need to know it's going to be okay.

**That's interesting. Building the audience's confidence. I've only thought about that at the beginning of a set, not throughout the course of your whole act. I've mainly been thinking about tying jokes together.**

And that's really important. Audiences love that shit. They like those tricks and usually it's very surprising when there's a good callback. Cause that's all it is, if you can make people surprised. That's what elicits laughter. So if they see everything coming then they're not gonna laugh very much. But if they don't see it coming and it's funny, that's gonna be the response that they give you. It's nice to have everything flow together, but I don't think that's necessarily as important. Because at the stage where you and I

are at, the audiences don't know. They don't know who we are and a lot of people — unless they're comedy fans and understand the process of comedy — think that unless you're a big name, you suck. So you have to prove to them that no, I am good at this, and that helps build confidence. If they're confident in your ability to make them laugh, you can get away with a lot more. That's why I do that bit at the end, because hopefully by that point I've made them laugh consistently and me describing 11 year old penises is not going to turn them off. They'll be like, "Ok, well, I'll follow this to see where this goes because the other stuff worked."

**And with that joke, do you remember the first couple times you told it? Were you nervous about it? That's a difficult thing to talk about.**

I was nervous just because it kind of brings you back a little bit to that moment of being embarrassed about it. But I'm in my 30s now and that happened when I was like 10. Bringing up old embarrassments is never easy, but that's what's good about comedy is that you can make it funny. I think the first time I told it it actually went pretty well, so it felt good to be like, "Oh, I've made something positive out of something that really kind of sucked for a number of years when I was young."

**I'd love to do more personal stories like that, but I feel like they're really hard to pull off. Like you were saying, you either creep someone out or make people too sad or whatever.**

I read this thing in *And Here's the Kicker* where they do an interview with Bob Odenkirk and he talks about *Mr. Show*. One of their most popular sketches is *Titannica*, and Brian Posehn wrote it, and when he pitched it everyone in the writer's room was like, "Ehh." And then Bob Odenkirk was like, "Well, what do you think is funny about it?" And so he described what he thought was funny, and from there they were like, "Oh, that is funny" and they started writing the sketch. I thought that was really helpful for me when I was starting cause if you think a story is funny or you think you can make it into a stand up bit then it's like, "Okay, what is funny about it?" Then write around the aspect of what is funny. I also feel like doing personal stuff is really helpful. Some people are really great and have really interesting ways of viewing the world and have great takes on current events, and that was never necessarily my strong point. So I think through just doing material from my own life, I was able to build the skills of writing better and learning how to



craft a joke that is funny. It's also different. If you ever do a storytelling show it's so much different than doing standup. Storytelling has a different flow to it and there are different beats in storytelling. You can go for long stretches in storytelling without having any laughs. But when you try doing a story in stand up, sometimes it doesn't translate because people are looking for jokes. So you want to try to punch it up as much as you can before you get to a long stretch where there aren't any laughing points.

**Interesting. I always thought, "This long stretch here isn't funny. I need to find a way to make it kinda funny." Do you think it's better to just punch up the parts around that stretch?**

I mean, that's what I would do. It depends on what you're saying, but if you have a good intro and maybe a good laugh line, then you can more comfortably get into the long thing without the laughs. Earlier I was talking about building confidence in the audience. They've already laughed at a part of it, so now they're more invested in what you're saying and you have more liberty to be in that space where that isn't a laugh line. But it's eventually building to something that will make them laugh. There is something to building tension, and that's what I like about long jokes. If the people trust you and are invested in what you're doing, they'll let you do that and then when you get to the punchline, it's such a

relief that the punchline can hit harder than if you just had joke, joke, joke. That's what's cool about long stuff to me, is that it is an exercise in patience and being rewarded for your patience.

### **How do you deal with the highs and lows of comedy?**

I think it's weird because the longer you do it the highs get shorter and the lows get longer.

### **That's really depressing.**

I think more in the sense of what are your goals are with comedy. My goal is one day I'd like to have my career be comedy, have my bills be paid by comedy. So when I go through a stretch of shows and getting good opportunities, I feel good because I feel like I'm on the right path. But then when you go through the periods where you're maybe not getting booked or not writing the way you wanna be writing, then that feels so much longer than when you're feeling good. So it's easy to get stuck in that mentality and become bitter or feel like you're losing it. The way I deal with it is if I feel like I'm not doing something, then I try to do it. If I feel like I haven't written for a while, then I'll sit down and try to write. Even if it's crappy, I'll get the crap out and maybe something good will come in place. Or if I feel like I'm not getting booked, then I'll be like, "I need to start emailing people." Which is the worst part of comedy. You feel like everyone else is getting booked and they're just asking to do the show. When I started, there were less comics and less shows, so generally someone would ask you to do the show. Now it's not the case it seems. Now the case is whoever emails and is persistent and in someone's face gets the spots. So it's hard balancing not being a pest, but being like, "I would do well on your show and I would really like to do your show." That's the thing that gets me down the most about comedy because I'm not good at that aspect of it. But comedy's all about getting out of your comfort zone so you eventually have to do it.

### **Do you think you've grown a lot as a person from doing stand up?**

I definitely think I have for a while. I met some of my favorite people doing comedy. I moved to Chicago for comedy, which is something I would've never done. I'd probably just be in Ohio still. I don't know what I would be doing if I didn't do stand up. I'd probably be more financially stable. But I think in terms of confidence and doing something creative and something that is more fulfilling to me, it has been a really positive part of my life. It still is a positive and I still love doing stand up, but right now it's kind of this limbo where it's like, "What do I do now?" Is the goal to become a regular at a club here? Or is the goal to move somewhere bigger and try to do something else? So right now it's one of those things where I just kind of feel in a limbo area. But overall it's been a positive thing for me as a person.

### **So right now you're not at a high or a low, you're just kind of at a "What do I do now?"**

Yeah, I'm just kind of stuck. Last weekend I did a show in Indianapolis and I got to close out the show and it was a great lineup. I mean, there were people with TV credits on the show and I got to close it out and I did great. I had a really good set, and people were really complementary, and so that was a huge high. But then I come back here and I look at the calendar, and it's like in the next month and a half I have three dates.

### **Something I've noticed is that I'll be like, "Okay, I need to do well on this show." Then say it goes well, nothing becomes of it.**

Yeah, and that's hard. It's really easy to get bitter about stuff and fall down that path.

### **You don't seem very bitter to me.**

No, but I have been bitter and I do get upset cause it's like I've been doing comedy for ten years and I've done a lot of things that other people haven't, and I see other people getting opportunities that I feel like I'm more qualified for in a certain way. It's really easy to fall down that

and become very bitter and write everything off like, "I'm not getting this because of this." But that's just kind of how it is and if you love doing it, then you're gonna continue to do it and hopefully something good will come of it and hopefully eventually you'll get those same opportunities. You can get in your head so much "I'm never gonna get this" and then it does happen and it's great. Then you're like, "But that didn't really change anything." I did it and I'm really happy I did it, but now what is the next thing to go on to? And that's another thing that can drive you nuts about doing comedy. It's just a constant thing of what's next, what's next, what's next? "I'm not doing this so now I'm a failure." Whereas you can redirect yourself and focus more on, "Well, what can I be doing to become a better comedian so I am getting this stuff? Writing more? Performing more?"

### **What're you trying to focus on?**

I'm still looking to record an album, which I had scheduled for Fall of 2020 and obviously that didn't happen. So that's why I put out the bug noises [From Afar]. But I'm planning on doing that and hoping I can do it in late winter. But my goal right now is to get that recorded and I'd like to be able to put it out on a label. I'd like to get that material tight.

### **How do you run an hour?**

I mean here it's tough. There's a few shows that'll probably give me 20 or 30 minutes.

### **You just kind of stack those?**

Yeah you do that. And I've done a lot of stuff in the midwest and I've gone out to Colorado and a few other places. So I'd probably go on a little tour and see if I can set up headlining spots in certain places to run a longer set.

### **You can just do that? Be like, "Hey, I'm trying to run my hour?"**

I mean, there are people that I know in cities that run stuff that I've worked with in the past that would provide me a space to do that. And that's another thing too. A lot of people come to Chicago thinking this is the place where you do comedy and you only do your comedy in Chicago. But really, especially if you're not really getting booked a ton, getting outside of the city if you have a car is a great way to do longer sets in front of different audiences. It's really helpful to do comedy in small towns and places where you walk in and you're like, "Everybody here is gonna hate me." But then you do it and you're like, "People didn't



*A breakfast sandwich Mike made*

hate me." Or maybe your material isn't going well enough, so you find a way to adapt for that audience. Cause it's nice to be able to do one of the really good shows here, because the audiences are keen on comedy and are usually comedy fans. But if you can do well at like Mustang's in South Beloit, then that feels almost better because those people aren't very adept comedy fans and usually they're hostile audiences. Those guys have probably been working like 12 hours a day at the factory or some shit, driving their truck around all day trying to find work. Then I drive my Prius into the parking lot and they immediately don't wanna give you any kind of credence. So to win them over feels good. I feel like that is a true testament to your ability to make people laugh, is that you can make a wide variety of people laugh.

### **How much time do you think you need to have in order to start going on the road?**

I think if you're going out and wanting to set up headlining stuff, you should probably have at least half an hour. Probably closer to 40 minutes. But you can go out with a group of people, like three people, and try to set something up. And if everybody has 15-20 minutes and then wherever you're going has a couple local people — that's a show right there. I think it depends on what would make a show. It's also just nice to have a wealth of material because then if something is going poorly you can maybe shift to something else you think they might like.

**Yeah, you're not stuck in your 15-20 minutes.**

Yeah and obviously not everybody has access to cars and stuff like that, but if you can get out and set things up, I think that's really helpful. One of the bigger things that helped me was hosting an open mic. So here's another thing – I feel like that helped until it didn't. Then it became more of a burden than something that was helpful.

**How long were you doing that?**

I was at that for like 4.5 years and then I ran a weekly show. The show was a lot different, because if you run a good show you have an audience that isn't comics and then you're actually testing in front of people. Then you can slide new material in to see how it works in front of a real audience. Most open mics don't have an audience outside the comics, so a lot of times what you're doing is performing for other comics and then your material starts to veer towards what makes comics laugh. Which is good to make comics laugh, but a lot of times comics have fucked up sensibilities and have seen so much comedy that it may be misleading.

**That's the thing. I feel like it's really hard to gauge material if you're mainly doing mics.**

Yeah, but once you start to do more and do more shows and find your voice – which is a real thing, that's not just some stupid thing people say, it is true. I think towards the end of my time in Columbus I started to recognize how to write for myself and it felt like it clicked. And I can't really explain how that came about, but it felt like, "Okay, now I understand how I can be successful in front of audiences."

**Was it like you had a bit that worked and then you were like, "Oh, more of this?"**

No, I had a lot of bits. When I started out I was more offensive, which I think a lot of comics are when they first start just because that's how you get a reaction from people. But my stage presence wasn't that good and my ability to react to things wasn't that good. But then the jokes I wrote I felt like they could work, and they would work, but not consistently. And then somehow just through doing it more and more I started to kind of figure out how to tell my material in a way that worked. And that kind of changed a lot of things for me.

**Do you think it was a lot of delivery versus writing?**

Well delivery and writing, I think both. But delivery is huge. I've seen people go up with terrible material. Like if you wrote the material down and read it, it's not funny. It's just like this person is saying nonsense and I don't understand the joke at all. But they have incredible stage presence, great delivery, and so the audience is kind of...

**Tricked into laughing.**

Basically, yeah. It's like a magic trick cause they're like, "Wow this person is really good at speaking." And they take more of their cues from the person's delivery and body language than they do the actual material. Both are very important. I think starting out, developing stage presence is key because it can really fill in gaps where maybe your writing hasn't gotten to yet. So you want to work on both of them. But until you have a good stage presence, you could have great material, but if you can't deliver it nobody's gonna laugh at it.

**You were talking about how you're kind of monotone and what not. How can you have a quiet stage presence without being the guy who's overdelivering?**

Well, I just started to lean into that a little more. A lot of times I'll follow people that are very big personalities and then I go up and I'm just like "Hey." And sometimes that is actually a good transition because people are like, "Woah this is different." Then you kind of let the dead air sit for a little while. That's another thing that's helped me too, is that I've gotten comfortable with dead air. If you can be comfortable delivering stuff and just letting it sit – even if it bombs – you kind of



push them off balance a little bit. Because then they start to become slightly uncomfortable. But then if you can find a way to bring them back, you can make them laugh even more because you saved what they thought was going to be a bad situation.

### **Did you do anything to try to get more comfortable in silence, or is that just an experience thing?**

Well, I've bombed a lot. Starting out someone threw a lemon at me.

### **Why?**

It was maybe two years into doing comedy and I did a show in Columbus. The girl was in the front row and I was bombing, and she pulled out her phone and was filming. I asked her to stop and she was like, "I want something to laugh at later." I'm like, "Well, you're not laughing now, so you're just gonna use this to mock me." And then she just kept filming, so then I started saying mean stuff to her. And people were kind of laughing, but a woman who was in the bathroom and didn't see the phone exchange came out and just saw me being mean to this woman. The bartender was cutting fruit at the bar, so she just picked up a whole lemon and yelled, "You're being mean!" and threw the lemon at me. It missed wide right. I saw it go and then one of my friends went and picked it up and I still have it. I have it on my mantle. It looks like a walnut now cause it's all dried up.

### **You saved it? I love that.**

Yeah, but that kind of stuff would happen to me – I mean, I didn't get lemons thrown at me a lot, but I had a lot of stuff that just didn't necessarily work for the audience. So I would bomb, but it would work for comics or someone would be there that I respected and they would compliment me on what I was doing. So it kind of gave me confidence in the material and to be like, "Well, just because the audience doesn't get it doesn't mean it's bad." So it gave me more confidence to be okay with sets not going the way that I wanted them to go and kind of being more comfortable in that space of nobody's laughing, but that's okay because maybe eventually I can find something that will make them laugh. Or it'll just be uncomfortable. But life goes on and then I'll go again and hopefully do better the next time.

### **You're a producer on a Stand Up Stand Up [@standupstandup], what goes into producing a successful show like that?**

Well that's a monthly show, so that one is better because with a monthly show you're not stressed every week. The biggest thing is finding people you wanna work with and that are good, especially if you're doing a weekly show. You're with those people once a week trying to do something that can be very stressful. But then beyond that, actually making the show good? I think having tickets that people have to buy, or if it's a free show you have a separate room from a bar where the show takes place. That way anyone who is in that room is there specifically for comedy. Cause if you just do it at a bar and you just ambush the bar patrons, you're setting yourself up for failure. From there, it's all about promoting. I think here in Chicago the best way to do it is: "What neighborhood are you in and how do you advertise to that neighborhood?" You're not advertising to all of Chicago, you're advertising to that specific area. And then beyond that, you wanna book great comics. There should be shows that have newer comics, because that's how newer comics get better. But if you're trying to produce a really good show, you should try to book the best people you can. A show should be no more than an hour and a half, max. And don't book so heavy. It shouldn't be like 12 comics doing 7 minutes a piece, because every time you change, it makes it seem longer and the audience has to adjust to a new person. The less they have to adjust, the more engaged they are with the people who are on stage and the more likely they are to laugh. And always pay your comics. Even if you do a free show, try to collect donations at the end. I'd push people to find a way to pay the comics what you can.

**If you could change anything about the Chicago scene, what would it be?**

I wish people wouldn't get so wrapped up in the extraneous shit, like the drama about stuff. Just recognize that what you're doing is ridiculous. Take it seriously, but don't get to the point where you're arguing with people on Facebook about comedy. Or calling people out for stupid shit. Cause that just causes drama and causes division between people. I wish there was less of that, but I think that's just kinda the nature of doing comedy. Beyond that, I don't know. They should book me more.

**One last thing. I saw that your AIM is Krusty199. Can you explain that?**

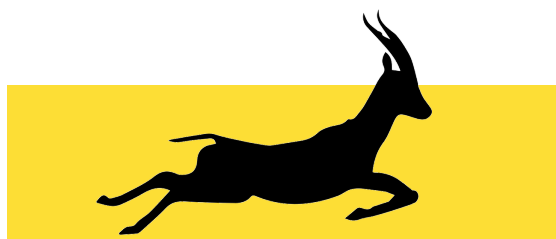
I just liked Krusty the Clown. Growing up I watched *The Simpsons* at least an hour a day. I was obsessive with it. I watched it and memorized the episodes and had books about it.

**Is that what got you into comedy?**

That was a big part of it. If I stayed home sick from school I'd watch Comedy Central. That got me really interested in stand up. When I was like 13 or 14 I told my mom I wanted to be a stand up comedian.

**That's awesome.**

She said, "That would be a very hard life." And she was right!



## **BONUS: Mike's Top 10 Chicago Comics**

### **1. STANDUP STANDUP CREW**

**(BLAKE BURKHART, MO GOOD, MIKE ROBINSON, ERIC EMERSON)**

### **2. HIGH DIVE CREW**

**(NATE BURROWS, LAEL O'SHAUGHNESSY, REBEKAH GIBSON,  
STEVE GERARD, DAVID VAGNETTI)**

### **3. MARTY DEROSA**

### **4. KRISTEN TOOMEY**

### **5. ROVAUGHN HILL**

### **6. JOEY VILLAGOMEZ**

### **7. JIM FLANNIGAN**

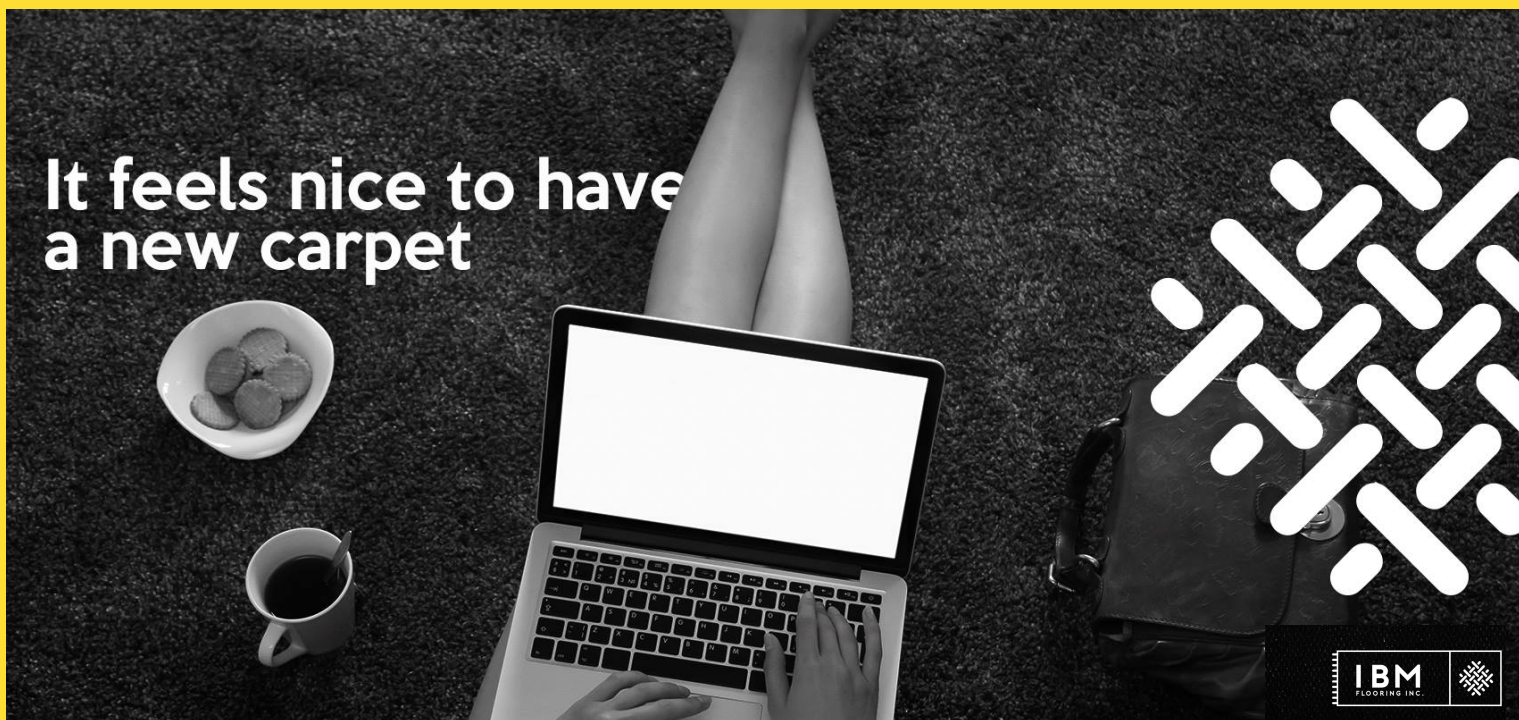
### **8. DALE MCPEEK**

### **9. PAT MCGANN**

### **10. JEANIE DOOGAN**

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## ARTWORK: PETER BONELLO



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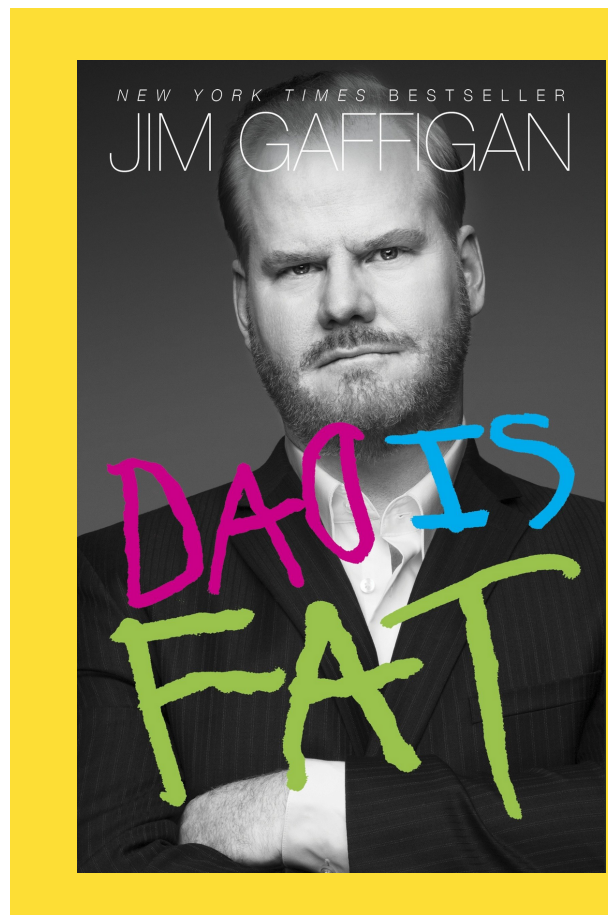
## BOOK REVIEW: DAD IS FAT

Review by Keay Crandall (@keaycrandall)

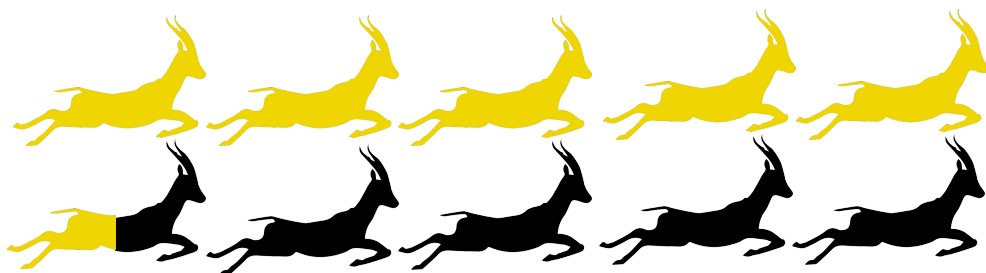
Jim Gaffigan loves his kids, his wife, comedy and New York City. He goes to great lengths to balance his passions of being a dad and getting paid to tell dad jokes. This book confirms that living in a tiny NYC apartment with his wife and five kids while being a full time comedian is just as insane as it sounds.

Gaffigan's life is circular. His comedy is about his kids. It's clean, absurd, and based off of a truly chaotic lifestyle. But his family is involved in his comedy, too. The Gaffigans rent tour buses and hire nannies, making family trips out of cross country comedy bookings.

Highlights include hand drawn diagrams of how seven people sleep in a two bedroom apartment and the vivid imagery of traveling by public transportation with five children under the age of eight. That's the whole book. All 290 pages are about being a dad and near creepy descriptions of how much he loves his fertile wife.



Overall Rating: 5.5/10 Gazelles



**THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO  
MADE THIS POSSIBLE.**

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?  
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

**DM US @COMEDYGAZELLE**

