

# THE COMEDY GAZELLE



**SAKU**

**YANAGAWA**

# 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.

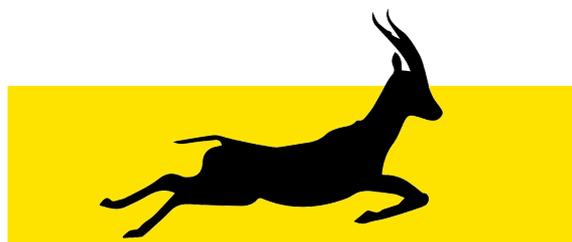
Each issue will include an exclusive interview, as well as whatever else I can pull together.

Hope you enjoy.

— Jerry

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**INTERVIEW: SAKU YANAGAWA, 3**  
**ART: DEMITRI HALDES, 12**  
**BOOK REVIEW: KEAY CRANDALL, 14**



# INTERVIEW: SAKU YANAGAWA

*A lot of people claim to love comedy, but how many would move to another country just to perform it... in a second language? That's exactly what Saku Yanagawa (@saku\_yanagawa) is doing, and it's cool as shit! We talked about Japanese comedy, his crazy schedule, nuking Japan, slaughtering animals, and more.*

## **So why do you always wear baller suits on stage?**

In Japan, it's natural for comedians to get up in suits, so I thought that was natural too. So when I came to America and I got on stage for an open mic, I wore a suit. And then people started calling me a well dressed comedian. I cannot even go back to sweatpants. I wanna do that so bad. I had a show in a park, the Out In The Open show, and when I left my apartment I was wearing sweatpants and an Under Armour t-shirt. But I was like, "It's not Saku Yanagawa," so I went home and put on a suit. It was 90 degrees. In Japan nobody describes me as a well dressed comedian.

## **Yeah, I'm curious. Stand up is a very American art form. What's it like in Japan?**

Actually, there's no stand up comedy culture in Japan. But we have so many kinds of speech style comedy. Traditionally we have rakugo, which is storytelling. If you want to be a rakugo artist, first you have to be someone's pupil and learn everything: from how to talk to the traditional stories themselves. We also have Abbott and Costello style comedy, called manzai. There's a straight man and a fool, and when the fool says something, the straight man corrects the mistake. And that's the sign for the audience to laugh together. That's mainstream comedy in Japan. People don't get on stage with a microphone and talk about their perspectives.

## **So how did you find out about stand up?**

I watched a lot of American comedy movies. In King of Comedy and Blues Brothers there are stand up comedy scenes. I knew that was probably the American style of comedy, but I didn't know what it was. After I retired from baseball, I was watching a TV program about a Japanese stand up comedian who had been doing comedy in New York City for 20 years. I was like, "Wow, he's cool." I searched him on Facebook and messaged him. His name is Rio, he was on Last Comic Standing in 2006. I sent him a message and I flew to New York the next day. I visited all of the comedy clubs in New York, trying to do an amateur show.



## **The next day?**

Yeah, next day. I wrote my first English joke on the airplane.

## **Do you remember what it was?**

Yeah, I was born and raised in the Texas of Japan. Really, really conservative place in Japan. I was like, "My parents are rednecks, but I call them orange necks because they're yellow." Something like that. I also talked about the Japanese government at that time. Because Japanese people cannot pronounce Ls and Rs correctly, right? So I said, "Our prime minister sent a lot of Viagra to the US Congress because they heard the previous result of the erection was bad." I thought I was a genius. But after that, I went to Texas and talked about George Bush and a guy threw a Heineken bottle at me. I realized I was not a genius.

## **So what did Rio tell you when you first met him? What did he tell you about stand up?**

He told me how much money comedians get from regular shows. No matter how big of a stage you get at a comedy club, you probably get \$30 or something. He said, "But do you still want to be a comedian?" And I was like, "Hell yeah." And I swore I'd never go back to normal life.

**How important were arts in your life growing up? I know your grandpa was a writer and your grandma's a piano teacher.**

I thank my parents because they told me, "If you want to get true leadership, you have to be book smart and street smart. Sports and art." They kept telling me that when I was young.

**They were trying to have you do everything.**

Yeah. I wanted to play video games probably, but I had no time because I had piano, ballet, school work, and also baseball every day. But luckily my father was the baseball coach. He built a batting cage and when I turned three years old we practiced every day and I was crying because sometimes I didn't want to play, and he was so strict and tough on me. He told me, "If you cry you don't have to keep doing it." I was like, "Let me play, let me play."

**So you enjoyed it?**

Yeah cause I could hit. That's the reason I could keep playing. I think it's the same as comedy. Sometimes people laugh at my jokes and that's the reason I cannot quit. I'm addicted.

**You're doing a lot. You're performing, you've got your radio show, you've written a book — did you get that work ethic from your parents?**

Probably something for sure. But I have a mission. There's no stand up comedy culture in Japan. I strongly believe that stand up comedy can be the best tool to heal division. Because people can meet comedians or people who have different opinions from themselves, and if they can laugh about it, it's gonna be really, really good for society. There's no stand up comedy culture in Japan, so I have to build it from scratch. My mission is to keep getting up on stage in America and get big in this country as the first Japanese comedian, and then people can see me from Japan. Then I can export the culture to Japan and tell people how wonderful stand up comedy is. I don't perform just for me, it's more for the culture I guess. That's why I have a lot of pressure. Many people in Japan know stand up comedy through me, so if I'm not even funny, people think stand up comedy isn't even funny. There's a lot of pressure on my shoulders.

**Comedy's something that can take a long time to progress at. How do you deal with the pressure to be really good right now?**

Getting big is one thing, but that's one thing I can't control. I can't control how famous I am. I'm not interested in how famous I am. It's more like I have to

write good stuff. I wanna make good work, that's what I want. That's why every day I wanna get as many things as I can from movies, newspapers, magazines, novels.

**Do you feel like you're in a hurry?**

I set a time limit on my goals. Every year I make 10 goals. For example, release an album and make it to #1 on iTunes. If I cannot make it, it means I didn't do good. That's a result for sure. The most important thing is to keep making good work. Keep writing good stuff and keep brushing up my material. And even as an actor, act really good on stage too. Of course the timeline is really important, but the most important thing for me is the work.

**What are some of your current goals you've set?**

By 35 I will be the first Japanese cast member on SNL, that's what I've been saying. But in three years I want to have a Netflix special. And in the future, by 40 I want to have a big show in Japan. There's a symbolic arena called Budokan. I wanna have my solo show there as the first stand up comedian. It means I built the stand up comedy scene and culture in Japan. If I can make it in America, I'm pretty sure I can make it in Japan. They're like, "Oh, he's famous in America. Wow!" But I have to brush up my work, because people can see your real skill for sure. Nobody's an idiot.

**How big of a challenge is the language barrier for you?**

That's actually huge. As a baseball player I'm right handed. That's my Japanese. I can pitch probably almost 90mph. But speaking English is like throwing lefty. You can't pitch 100%.

**You feel like you're telling jokes with your left hand?**

Yeah. I have no freedom. I can't even throw a slider.

**How would your comedy be different if you could tell jokes in Japanese?**

Humor should be really local, and every single place has a different sense of humor. The language barrier is really big, but local humor is really, really big. My humor in Japanese is completely different from what my humor is in English. When I do my set in Japan, in front of a Japanese audience, we share the lifestyle and the same culture. I don't have to explain who I am.

**Do you do the same material?**

No. I've never done it.

**Do you like performing in Japanese or English more?**

I like both. But in terms of audiences, I like an American audience better. Because they're not as passive. No matter how big or famous a comedian is, an American audience doesn't care. They listen to their story, and if he's not funny, then the audience doesn't laugh. It's fair. In Japan, they're more passive. The audience needs a cue that it's okay to laugh together. Even in the language, Japanese comedy is passive. In Japanese, making people laugh is called "okeru," which means "to receive something." In English, it's "kill" or "murder." Also, "punchline." For us it's "ochi," which means "drop." I think comedy terms show the difference between the attitudes of American and Japanese audiences.

**So if your mission's to bring comedy there, how do you get the culture to open up and be more willing to laugh?**

Even in Japan, nowadays people talk about diversity. In manzai, the straight man's job is to share the same perspective as the audience, but I think it's impossible for this guy to have the same perspective as the whole audience. They have different opinions. It cannot be the same as one person. That's why I think in Japan, stand up comedy will be the future. The audience should realize that it's okay to be different from other people.

**You're trying to change people's mindsets. Is there a lot of division in Japan?**

Yeah, it's the same as in America. Especially social networking services, everyone just gets their opinions from people who have the same opinions as themselves. Trump supporters follow Trump supporters and Biden supporters follow Biden



supporters. They don't try to get opinions from the other side. But in comedy, it's gonna be a huge challenge to get different people's opinions with laughter. That's why I like to do it.

**You mentioned you read a lot. What does your day to day look like?**

I wake up probably at 7:00. My routine is to read eight newspapers: six American and two Japanese. Cause it's like a cancel culture right now. The comedian's job is to edge the line, so we have to be informed. We need to be book smart. That's why I have to read all these newspapers.

**So you wake up and you read eight newspapers. Then what?**

I'm a slow reader in English, so that probably takes 3.5 hours. Then I work out. I watch movies. There's a time difference between here and Japan, so I have to do some virtual and radio shows in Japan too. I don't have to sleep. Kind of a waste of time I guess. 2.5-3 hours is enough.

**You only get three hours of sleep? Are you insane?**

Since I was probably 16 or something.

**You don't ever feel drained or exhausted?**

Sometimes I take a nap for 1.5 hours or something. I don't wanna keep closing my eyes for more than three hours. I'm so scared.

**Of sleep??**

While I'm closing my eyes, the whole world is going to be changing. I'm scared of that. I don't wanna fall behind. Cause while I'm sleeping, some people work. Some people are getting funnier, right? I don't wanna sleep. That's kind of a waste of my time, I guess, as long as I can stay healthy. I don't want to have any regrets. I moved to America, leaving everything in Japan. All of my friends became rich as business people, but some people hate what they do. But in my case, at least I do what I like and what I want. I gotta be honest to myself and keep doing what I want. I don't want to make excuses. I have to make an environment where I can't get away.

**What do you mean by that?**

Some people try to make a situation where they can escape by making an excuse. But in my case, I do what I like with many people, and I have a responsibility to them and myself and my life. I don't wanna escape from anything. I don't wanna blame anyone if I cannot make it, because it's all on me. But if I succeed, I will always think it's thanks to everybody.

**I love that.**

I also try to watch at least two movies during the daytime. Movies have so much culture stuff and I learn a lot about comedy from movies. Also in the future, I want to move to the movie industry, actually. I want to make my own movie.

**Do you envision this happening after you bring stand up to Japan?**

Yes. I will keep living in America for sure, but I don't think just being a stand up is the best style for me in the future. Cause I am a lefty in this country, right? I'm pretty sure I'll be on movies as an actor and make comedy movies too. But I explain to Japanese audiences all the time, being a stand up comedian means you have to be a good writer, good director, good producer and good actor all at the same time. That's why being a stand up comedian has been the best way to become a comedy actor. Even Japanese people know Robin Williams, Eddie Murphy, Jim Carrey. They all used to be stand up comedians, that's how I explain stand up comedy to Japanese audiences. I'm pretty sure I'll keep doing stand up, but I'm not afraid of doing movies and being an actor. That's probably my ideal shift.

**You told me you opened for Dave Chappelle in Japan. How many people were at that show and how did it go?**

300 people I guess. 99% of them were expats. There was no news about it in the Japanese media at all. Local people still don't know who Dave Chappelle is. Some people know him, of course, but 90% of Japanese people don't know who Dave Chappelle is.

**Isn't Netflix popular in Japan? Does nobody watch stand up comedy?**

It's really difficult to understand, right? Cause even though we put the subtitles in Japanese, do you think you could laugh at Japanese stand up comedy with English subtitles? I think it's natural to not laugh. Humor is really local, right? So that's why I don't think Japanese people should laugh at Dave Chappelle's jokes. We have a great Japanese comedy scene, and for me it's really interesting, cause when American people describe Japanese comedy they always say it's slapstick and animated. But it's the same as when Japanese people describe American comedy. They only know the surface of it, not the deep side.

**Right. And to really get American comedy and why Dave Chappelle's so funny, you need to be able to go below the surface.**

You gotta know American culture and America as a country, deeply. So that's why I always say to Japanese people, if you can laugh at Dave Chappelle's jokes it means you know America well.

**I'm really curious about Zen Buddhism. Do you incorporate anything from Zen teachings into your comedy or your approach to life? I know it's pretty big in Japan.**

Some people get an essence from Zen, but in my case I've never gotten it. For example, I get so nervous every time I get up on stage. So to calm myself down I do breathing, but I have never regarded it as Zen.

**You still get nervous?**

Every time. People probably don't think I'm nervous, but I'm hiding it. If it's a small bar show with only two audience members, I get so nervous. Equally for an audience of 1,000.

**Why is that?**

I don't know. It's like war for me. Our purpose is very clear. My purpose is to make them laugh and they came to the venue to laugh. So if I cannot make them laugh, it means the show is bad. And if I'm never gonna be nervous, it means I'm over as a comedian. Getting up on stage with just a microphone should make me nervous. People probably don't think I'm nervous because my attitude doesn't change, but I'm hiding it.

**One thing I wanted to ask you — because this is something we debated in my 8th grade history class — when we covered World War II, we talked about nuking Japan and whether or not it was the right thing to do. Where do you stand on that?**

Actually that topic should be covered for sure. I have a Japanese perspective, but I do not support what the Japanese government did during World War II. At all. Especially at that time, Japanese politics was almost dead. It was not even a democracy, the Japanese military and army did what they wanted. There was no justice over there at that time. But also, I don't support American people who think the atomic bomb was the right way to end the war. I can't say it was the right thing to do.

**Is that how a lot of Japanese people feel as well?**

Yeah. Actually, during the war my great grandpa was the master of the zoo at the time. The biggest zoo in Japan. And every single Japanese person knows his story because of a famous children's book. The army ordered my great grandpa to kill all of the zoo animals. If a bomb broke the cages, animals would run wild in the city, so he had to kill lions, leopards, snakes, bears — and he took care of all of them as if



they were his children. And the last part was elephants. They were so smart that they didn't eat poisoned food. Then he tried to inject poison into their bodies, but their skin was so thick that the needles didn't work. So he had to starve the elephants to death. 27 days.

**This is a children's book?**

Yeah.

**What is this book?? Our version of that is Dr Seuss' If I Ran the Zoo. And the Japanese version is just slaughtering animals?**

Yeah, it's called Faithful Elephants. I think it takes only a few minutes to read. It's sad.

[Saku shows me the story on his phone]

**"Then it was Tonky's and Wanly's turn to die" — WHAT?? How is this a children's book?**

In Japan we have been educating children to hate war. No one blames America at all. They just blame the war. I don't want to make people hate America. All I want to do is stop the war, that's what I want. For example, I love to do nuclear weapons jokes, but some people say you shouldn't make fun of nuclear weapons. But I have a very strong belief that by saying that joke, I give people the opportunity to think about the war, and if they're laughing it means they have some feeling about it. I

want people to face that feeling when they go home. That's why I keep saying that joke. I never make fun of people who died from the atomic bomb at all, because my grandpa lost his whole family from the atomic bomb. Probably I have a unique perspective for World War II, that's why I've got to make use of it. It's going to be my weapon. I read all of his diaries and I want to make a movie about it in the future for sure. My job is to tell this true story to the next generation.

**If you were talking to the next generation, what would you say to a 16 year old kid in Japan who wants to be a comedian?**

I would probably say you should come to Chicago. It's the best place. You should know who you are, what you like, what you hate. That's going to be the best way to become a good comedian. Know yourself. And be smart. Both street and book. You have to be informed. You have to read as many books, watch as many movies, and learn as much as you can. Also, you have to walk around the city and talk to people. It's a combination of book and street smarts.

**Is there anything you don't like about Chicago?**

Actually, I really like Chicago's comedy scene so much. I believe that Chicago is the comedy capital of America. I keep saying this to the Japanese media too. I'm here in Chicago because it's the comedy capital. But the thing is, only a few Chicago comics notice that Chicago is the comedy capital. People should be proud of the Chicago comedy scene. That's why I'm organizing a Chicago international comedy festival.

**Yeah, the World Comedy Expo. You're launching that next year, right?**

Yeah, March of next year. The submission form will be out soon and we will do a video review as a team. I just want to show off Chicago's comedy power. Everyone in Chicago should be proud of Chicago's comedy scene. We gotta be proud of Chicago.

**How difficult was it for you to get your visa so you could even perform here?**

First of all, without a visa a comedian cannot get any money from the show legally. That's why if we wanna be a comedian legally in America, we gotta get an artist visa first. But to get an artist visa, we have to prove how good we are as an artist. But in my case, there is no stand up comedy in Japan, so I had to travel to a bunch of countries to get credit. For example, my comedian friend from Africa told me they were gonna have a big festival and asked if I was interested in headlining. He said, "We cannot give you a flight or hotel, but do you still want it?" I'm like, "Yeah!" Edinburgh too. I traveled to many places to perform and spent probably \$40,000 – that's my debt. To get an artist visa we have to collect all of our credit, hire a lawyer, get a sponsor company in America, get five letters of recommendation, and get a three year contract. Many people in Chicago helped me get my visa: Curtis, Second City's former producer Deanna, Vik Pandya, Kyle Lane. Many people.

**When you need to renew I'll sign for you. Comedy Gazelle.**

That's great! Thank you.

**Thanks for your time, Saku. This was awesome. You love stand up more than, like, anyone.**

Really?

**People say they care about it and kind of work at it, but how many people love it so much they'd go to Japan and do it in Japanese, just so they could do it? You have a love for it and that's really cool.**

I'm pretty sure I'm such an idiot.



**"I'M PRETTY SURE I'M SUCH AN IDIOT" – SAKU YANAGAWA**



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

- 1. VINCE ACEVEDO**
- 2. VIK PANDYA**
- 3. CORREY BOYD-BELL**
- 4. GEOFF ASMUS**
- 5. ABI SANCHEZ**
- 6. CHRIS TRANI**
- 7. MO GOOD**
- 8. KRISTEN TOOMEY**
- 9. ZAKO RYAN**
- 10. ERIC EMERSON**

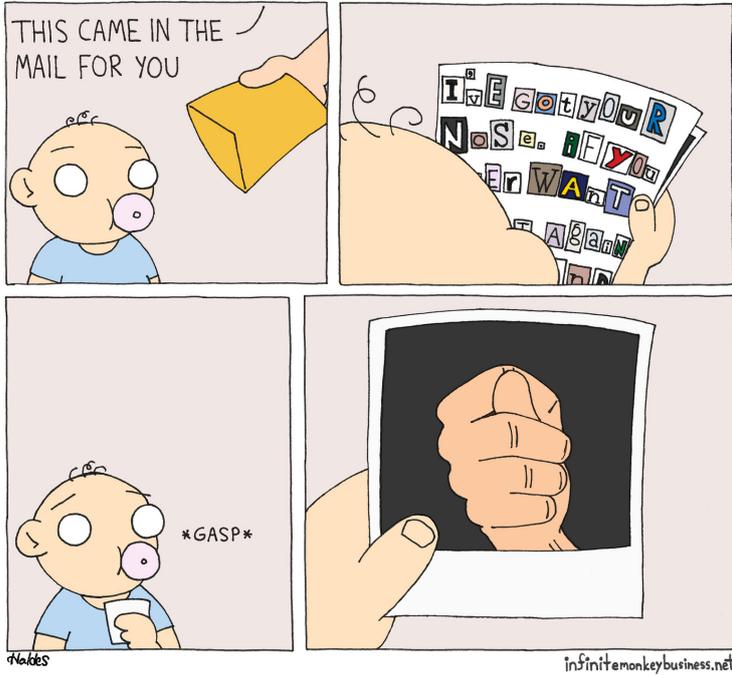
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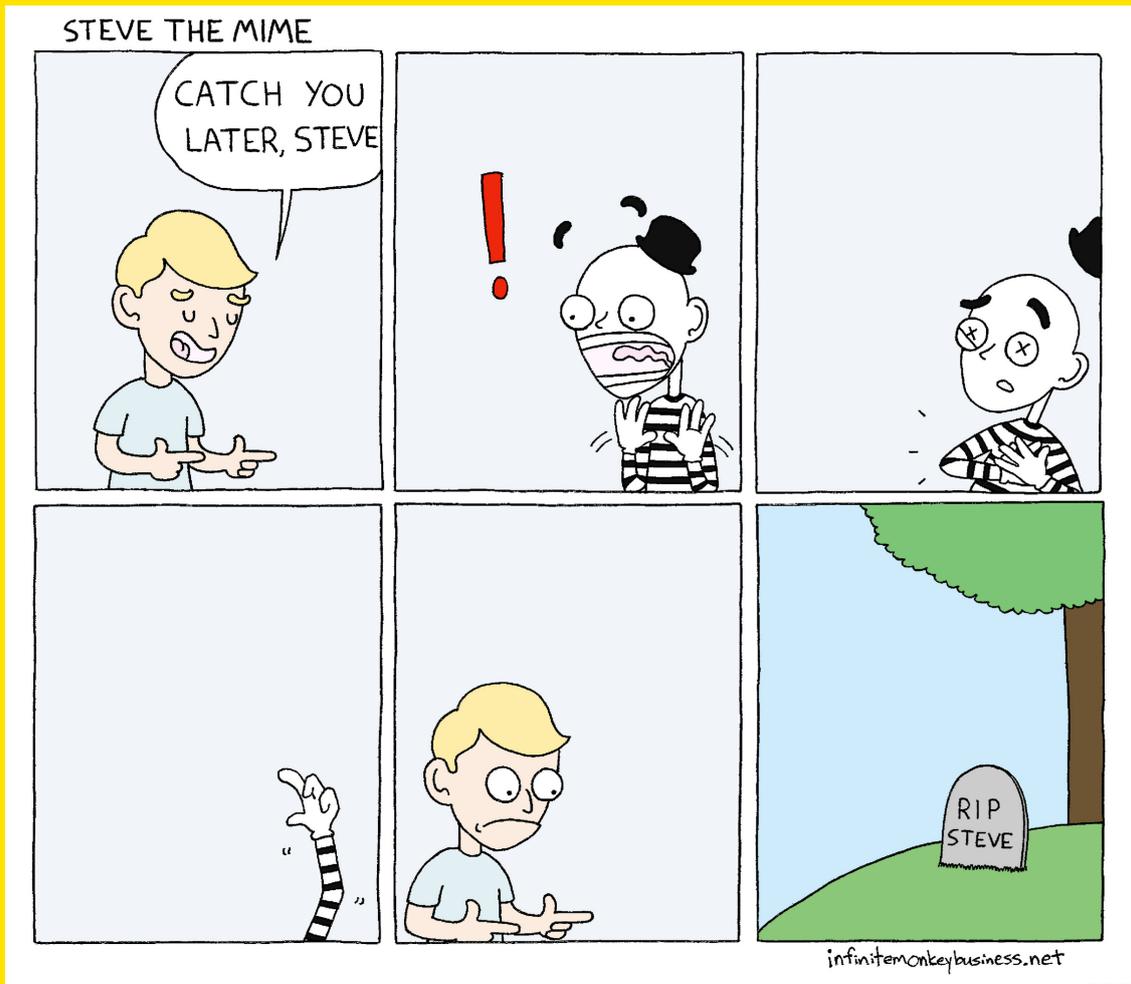
**(773) 790-5029**

# ARTWORK: DEMITRI HALDES



## HUNGRY PHILOSOPHER





**DEMITRI HALDES (@INFINITEMONKEYBUSINESS) BEGAN CREATING COMICS AND POSTING THEM ONLINE IN 2014. AS A KID, HE LOVED CARTOONS/COMIC STRIPS – EVERYTHING FROM CALVIN AND HOBBS AND THE FAR SIDE TO THE OLD SCHOOL SPIDER-MAN COMICS TO DRAGONBALL AND AKIRA. HE ALSO LOVED TO DRAW, ALTHOUGH HE NEVER TOOK CLASSES OR PURSUED IT SERIOUSLY. AND HE ALWAYS ENJOYED MAKING PEOPLE LAUGH. CREATING COMICS WAS SOMETHING DEMITRI ALWAYS WANTED TO DO, AND SEVEN YEARS AGO HE DECIDED TO GIVE IT A TRY. HE STARTED RELEASING ONE OR TWO STRIPS A WEEK. THE EARLY STRIPS WERE PRETTY ROUGH – THERE WAS NO COLOR, HIS STYLE WAS UNREFINED, AND MANY OF THE JOKES WERE CHEAP. BUT OVER TIME HE GOT BETTER AT IT (HE THINKS) AND STARTED TO ATTRACT SOME FANS. HE HOPES TO CONTINUE DOING IT FOR AS LONG AS HE CAN!**

# BOOK REVIEW: YEAH, I SAID IT

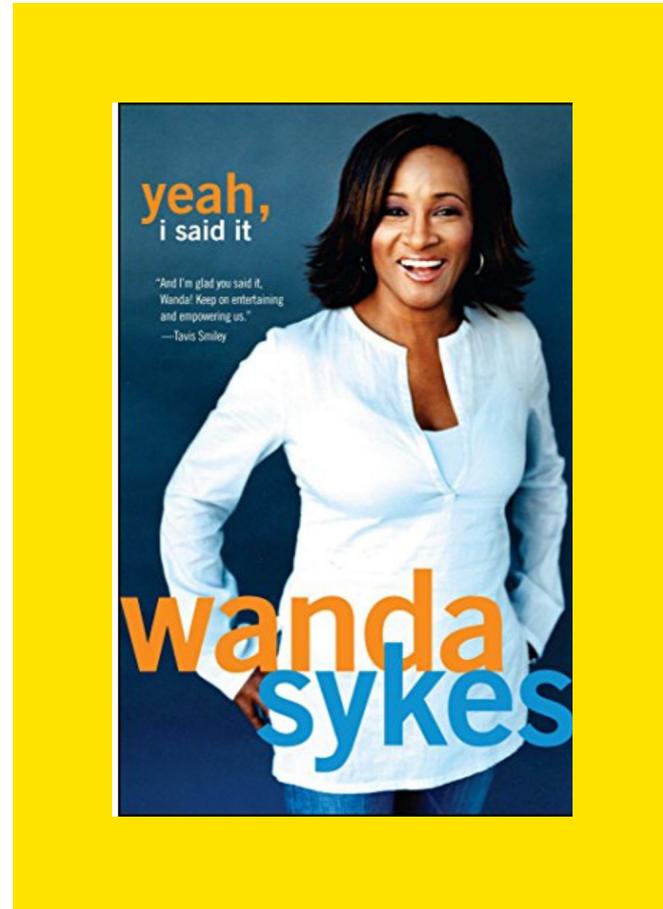
## Review by Keay Crandall (@keaycrandall)

You'd think that topics from 2004 would have aged out by now. But really the political and social issues Wanda was joking about on stage and in her book are still relevant. She comes in hot calling Bush out for the unjustified war he started in Iraq. Then drags him for caring more about athletes playing "too" good on steroids, gay marriage, and space travel than the looming deficit and failing education system.

Wanda is really with the times... even 17 years later. She imagined that we were all trapped in a Fox reality TV show called "Joe President" where the president is actually a construction worker. Not far off. I like Wanda's writing style. It is conversational, yet intelligent and thoughtful. What kept me reading was the ridiculousness of it all then and how little has changed.

Books like this are great to look back on and see the evolution of what topics were funny. Not everything Wanda wrote aged well, but Wanda also didn't know she was a lesbian yet.

Overall Rating: 7.5/10 Gazelles



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

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?  
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

**DM US @COMEDYGAZELLE**

