

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.

Thank you for your support!

— Jerry

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INTERVIEW: SAM ROCHA

Sam Rocha (@samhandleyrocha) has a contagious whimsy that's quickly made her one of Chicago's funniest stand-ups and sketch comics. We discuss performing in New York, career goals, Trixie Mattel, pulling yourself out of a rut, structuring transgender material, advice for comics in the queer community, and more!

How was your New York trip? How did that go, your first time performing out there?

New York was really fun. I got to be exposed to a lot of different fun, new comedy clubs and shows. I did The Stand, which was really fun; I've wanted to do The Stand for years. I got to do The Bell House with some comedians who I've looked up to for many, many years: Jay Jurden and Nico Carney. I also got to do Don't Tell. And Sesh Comedy with Josh Ocean Thomas. I feel like I learned a lot as a comedian.

What did you learn?

I found very much for me that some jokes that work at one place will not necessarily hit at another place. I have a lot of material about driving, and that didn't work as well in New York because I don't think it resonates as deeply. But the queer material, like my transgender jokes, I think worked well in Brooklyn, very much so. But at the same time, you can't say something that's the same old stereotype because they're very advanced there. You gotta go in depth. They're super gay. I think that when I do certain transgender jokes, they can go really well with a traditional comedy club audience, whereas that wouldn't be as unexpected for a Brooklyn audience. They're like, "Been there, done that. We know what transgender is." But an audience maybe at like The Stand would be like, "Well, this is a revelation!"

Do you like telling those jokes more for a club audience — people who might not have heard something like that — or do you prefer telling them to...

The gays?

Yeah, the gays.

Truly the most exciting thing is when they both love it, when you can just knock it out of the park with the gays and the straights. And that's why sometimes here in Chicago I've done the Laugh Factory mic and then gone



with the same jokes to the Annoyance mic right after that. I always feel pretty good about a joke if it can do well at the Laugh Factory mic and The Annoyance mic. I always feel best when it's more universal.

When you were in New York, did you treat every show like an audition?

I think I treated it that way for The Stand. I was like, "Let me do my material that is most likely to work." Actually, I did try something crazy at The Stand, and it did not go great. But the set itself was good!

What did you try?

I have this comparison joke. I go, "To me, going to the zoo is a lot like going to a Britney Spears concert. It's like, you know they're captive, but they're so fun to watch." It's a joke about Britney Spears' conservatorship. I did that and sometimes it gets laughs and sometimes people go, "Ooh," because they feel bad for her, which I understand. But it was fun and they thought it was funny that I tried it out.

If you're not getting the response you want on a joke, how quick are you to give up on it? How stubborn are you when it comes to your material?

I think it depends on how much I really like it. The Britney Spears one is kind of a throwaway, so I probably won't do it a

ton more times. But if it's something that I really feel connected to in some way, I'll do it even if there's problems with it. And sometimes I'll have a joke where it'll be a good concept or setup, but I can never really bring it home, and then I leave it for a while, and then I come back to it, and then I have a new way to tell it and I like it better.

Gotcha, that makes sense.

Right now, I'm really trying to work out this bit, and it's a difficult one because it's so out of left field. I've been watching a lot of old YouTube videos of Diane Sawyer interviews, and she has never asked a reasonable question to anyone, ever. That's what makes her so great and so legendary. I have these soundbites of hers where she's asking these questions, and I go into it in the bit, and I do her voice and everything. I don't do it often because it's hard to bring up Diane Sawyer organically, anywhere. But this is just my mind, what I like and what I watch, so I have to find a way somehow.

You're saying you feel like you don't have a good way to get into it?

Yeah, exactly. It does not connect to anything. Sometimes I'll just say, "Let's talk about Diane Sawyer," and they laugh because that's a strange thing to say. But I would ideally like to make it a little bit more relatable. I mean, I don't like the word relatable because we shouldn't always have to be. We shouldn't always be going for relatable; we should be going for what's true to ourselves on stage. I've really started to think, "What am I saying about myself when I'm on stage? What is the story that I'm telling? What is my brand and my uniqueness?"

What do you want them to take away about you?

I would like them to see me as someone who is silly and has whimsy, but also a little bit oblivious to the world in a fun way.

When you were deciding on what jokes to tell for your JFL audition, was it more, "What fits with my personality and brand?" Or was it, "These are my best jokes?" How did you prepare for that?

I did a lot of shows in the preceding month or so. One of my goals was to have some new jokes for that audition because I knew that would be a challenge for me. I knew that it would feel fun if I was doing stuff that I felt was fresh. I had gotten some advice that they are interested in family stuff — that is kind of their wheelhouse — so I knew that I was gonna do some material about growing up with my grandparents.

I knew I was gonna do some of my best transgender jokes because I wanted to show that to them as well. And then it was a question of what other jokes I should do. I did a joke about jaywalking, which I thought portrayed me as hapless, which is sort of my brand. And I did a joke about getting hit by a car. I felt good about that audition; it was an accomplishment for me because I could say it was a big audition that I was nervous for, and I didn't do the same old, same old. But as for choosing the actual material, I just wanted to try to make them understand who I was in as short a time as possible.

I think it's so important in comedy to have something on the calendar to work towards. How do you keep yourself motivated and accountable when you don't have a big audition or something to look forward to?

I would say creating your own opportunities is the number one thing. I think everything that I've been proud of myself for has not been me getting some credit, but just me making something. That can be anything from going to an open mic and trying out a new joke to doing a big video that you work very hard on for a month. I think that it's hard because there's self-discipline involved, and I struggle with that too, but I'm always most motivated by stuff that I just create myself. Because you never know what big thing is gonna come or not come.

In terms of career goals, in a perfect world, what would you want to do?

I would love to have my own sketch show on TV someday in the near future. Writing for Saturday Night Live would be a huge, huge goal. It would be a dream to write for a show like that. Just the challenge of it every week I think would be so fun. I'm a person who very much likes an assignment. I think I can be great when someone says, "These are the parameters, and you have to write for a character who's like this." Then I can go into that

world; that's very fun for me. That would be a big dream, but that's something that you can't control. I do think I have some control over if I were to make a sketch show myself, though, so that would be what I'm working towards at the moment. And then in the further future, I see myself writing an independent comedy film or something like that.

I feel like you're someone who's always writing. What does your writing process look like?

I write it all out on the Google Docs. I'll write down any funny ideas I have on my notes app, then by the end of the week, I'll put it into my Google Docs, and I'll flesh it out more and see if it can become something that I wanna try. Then I'll go back to it and I'll edit it. It's very helpful for me to see the actual words on the screen. What's so fun about the process to me is just being at a coffee shop and writing down all these thoughts. If I have maybe two, three pages of stuff that I've adapted from my notes app, I know there'll be at least one good joke in there somewhere that I can work on.

This is kind of a random question, but my girlfriend was curious. What is it like having Trixie Mattel comment on a bunch of your videos?

Really cool. I've been a huge fan of Trixie for many, many years — well before I ever did comedy. So, it's just the biggest compliment ever. And it does seem like I have the support of a lot of drag queens lately, drag queens that I've loved and that looked up to forever: Jinkx Monsoon, Trixie Mattel, Katya. I mean, it's intimidating, but it really is a motivator. When Trixie Mattel is happy and pleased with you, it motivates you to go on.

Is there a lesson you've learned from a comedian that you look up to or is "ahead" of you?

The biggest lesson that I've learned, I would say, is from who I think is the best working comedian right now, Nikki Glaser. And it's that setup-punchline jokes will never go out of style. She's really an inspiration because I see that structure every time I see her do comedy; it's so ingrained. I always wanna make sure that whatever I'm doing — any comedy sketch, any comedic character — has actual jokes in it, rather than just vibes or somebody acting weird. I have a lot of me acting weird, but if you watch it, I want it to be something where you can actually laugh at the setup-punchline jokes that I'm saying as well. I see a lot of people who have the star quality and have a great character, but aren't necessarily writing jokes for that character. So, I wanna keep working on that and hopefully it just gets sharper and sharper.

Do you have more fun doing a character sketch or doing stand-up, where you're playing an exaggerated version of yourself?

I've really been trying to think about that and really hone in on what brings me the most joy in comedy. I think that right now, I have a much more natural inclination toward characters because I just have more ideas for them than I do for stand-up, just at this moment. I can put them in crazy scenarios and everything, and I just feel generally that I can write for very specific characters a little bit better than I can write for myself and in my own voice. But I've been trying to do characters and bring them into my stand-up too.

When you're filming a sketch, like the Confused Customer one, how often are you riffing around a general idea for those quick cuts of dialogue? Or is it all written beforehand?

I write it all out. I did the coffee one with my friend, Olivia May, who's behind the camera. We had maybe one or two bits where I was like, "Let's just riff on this thing." I just wanted her to have that freedom for a minute. We did that with the Brambleberry Crisp, and it turned out very fun. But for the most part, everything that you see in there I wrote beforehand.



For any struggling comics out there: what do you do if you notice yourself in a rut or not having fun on stage? How do you pull yourself out of that and start to have fun again?

I think that you have to get back on stage as soon as you can. I always feel like I have to get back and make it fun again immediately. In terms of content, I think having something new that you're trying really makes a huge difference and can make the other jokes shine even brighter, too. It's gonna feel stale if you are doing your jokes that you've done for years or months. But when you add something in new that you're really excited about, I think it makes everything a little bit more fun. Or try a different order. My big question for many times in stand-up career has been: Where do I put the transgender jokes? Do I put them at the beginning? Do I couch it in later? I've done it many different ways, and right now I'm in this phase of doing them right up top, and then going into family stuff, and then going into sillier bits. But I've done it where I let them get to know me a little bit, and then I reveal it in the middle. It can change everything about how you're perceived.

Can you elaborate on that a bit? I've noticed something similar when I talk about being Iranian.

I always used to think if it's a more gay room, I'll do the trans stuff up top, and then I'll go into some other stuff. And if it's a more straight room, I'll make it a little bit more palatable up top before I get into the trans stuff. But now, I don't think it matters as much to me. I think that the trans stuff is not just transgender stuff. To me, it's become "These are good jokes, and I just wanna do them." It's important to not feel like I'm trying to sneak it in there and be accepted. I know my performance will be affected if I feel like I'm asking for approval. If I feel like that's why I'm doing it in that order, then I have to change it up. Because I don't want to ever be afraid, you know? You have to go out there, hit them with yourself, and not care.

It seems like you've gotten more comfortable talking about being transgender on stage. Early on, were you ever nervous about the audience's perception and reaction to it?

Oh, yes. I remember in college, when I was just doing stand-up intermittently, my friend asked me to do his bar show in a suburb of Illinois. I had been in these liberal bubbles my whole life, and I'd never really been exposed outside of that at this point. I remember I said, "What if they don't like me?" And he said, "Make them like you." I always remembered that. I thought, "I'm gonna do the trans stuff," even though it's this bar in this random suburb of Illinois. I was worried: "What if they don't like

that? What if they clam up?" But I still did it, and I remember it went well because I had that advice beforehand.

Okay, I'm glad it went well. If it went horrible, then this story's way different!

I would've quit forever! The majority of stand-up I've done has been in Chicago, but I always can be a little bit apprehensive of like, "Well, how are they gonna take this in Ohio or Iowa?" But I just have to walk in and do it and not be afraid. I've gotten better at not caring, but it used to weigh on me more or make me nervous about doing a new show. I think really what I've learned and what helps me is I try to never blame the audience. Because even if it was the audience, I'm not learning anything if I do that.

Right, there's no point.

Exactly. And we all do it from time to time, but there's no benefit at all. With the trans stuff or any material that could be deemed controversial, it's not about the audience; it's about how you're delivering it and your confidence level. I think that was a problem for me early on, was worrying too much about what they're gonna think of me. But then it just got better with time, and I cared less and less.

Do you have any advice for any comics in the queer community who are just starting out? Is there any advice you'd give them specifically?

My advice to the queer community doing stand-up — and this might be a little bit controversial — is to develop jokes and bits that have nothing to do with identity. It's never a bad idea to be sure that you have 10 minutes of stuff that isn't trans or gay related or anything like that. And not because it'll be palatable, but because I think it helps you learn more about yourself as a comic. Sometimes the obvious thing is like, "Oh, I gotta acknowledge that I'm transgender when I go on stage cause that's what everybody sees," or "I have to acknowledge that I'm gay." But don't be afraid not to. You don't have to. Just go on stage and talk about

whatever you wanna talk about. I mean, do as many trans jokes as you want — I certainly do as well — but I think it's important to have a variety of topics.

And do you have advice for the disgruntled Chicago comedian? Any advice for someone who might be frustrated with where they are right now in comedy?

I would say I've certainly been there. Every time I've been disgruntled, it's always come from myself. It's always come from, "I didn't do well." But if you're crushing every time, I feel like you can't feel bad about yourself. What matters so much to me is having fun every time I'm doing comedy. That's what makes it so worthwhile. You're not gonna get 99% of opportunities that are out there, but you can enjoy yourself onstage. That's what I'm always chasing. So, I would say to remember to chase the fun instead of the opportunity. The opportunity will come, and if it doesn't come, if you're having the fun, I think that you have the tools to make the opportunity for yourself.

KEEP UP WITH SAM @SAMHANDLEYROCHAI



Sam Rocha's Top 10 (12) Chicago Comics

(In no particular order)

1. GRACE KILPATRICK

One of the most unique voices you will hear in stand up. every single joke could be told by her and only her. truly a feat to make the wind funny.

2. RACHEL DISPENZA

One of the best comedy producers in the city, you want your show to run smooth as hell, you call Rachel Dispenza. Smooth as hell might also be a great way to describe their comedy- they're dry and deadpan but with a glimmerous twinkle in the eye.

3. OLIVIA MAY

One of my fave-ever collaborators on videos, we crack up every time, she has a hilarious cadence on stage with just a dash of irony.

4. TALIA CLAY

A fellow trans sister and incredible comic who can make hilarious everything from the trans experience to the death of a moth!

5. HANNAH BECK

It is a pleasure to watch her perform every single time. Brilliantly has shaped her story into insightful, meaningful, but never less than hilarious jokes.

6. ZOE DODSON

The sharpest joke writer around.

7. BRYAN BIXBY

His joke about build a bear is just about the funniest thing i've heard all year.

Sam Rocha's Top 10 (12) Chicago Comics

(In no particular order)

8. SAM ROSSI

Conceptual, clever, hilarious, monopoly. another most unique voice in comedy.

9. KATIE KINCAID

You name 'em, she's opened for em. An incredible host every single time and will immediately elevate any show.

10. GEORGIA MOORE

Best crowd work in the city - consistently stepping up her game every time I watch her perform.

11. KARLY SARGENT

Have to shout out this hilarious non-stand up comedian who is killing it with sketch comedy online and has one of the best faces for comedy you'll ever see.

12. JARRELL SCOTT BARNES

The only comic I've ever seen crush every single time he's on stage.

Advice for Frustrated Comedians

"If you don't think showbiz is fair, wait till you find out about the universe."

- **Raanan Hersherberg**

"Chill. Almost nobody's getting the opportunities they feel they should be getting. You just have to be a micer for a while. You go, 'Oh, this is bullshit,' but in a couple years, you're gonna look back and be like, 'I was very silly to think that people should be booking me because they saw me do well for four minutes once.' If people see you murder, that's great, but you're gonna have to do that for months on end before anyone is excited to put you on anything. So just chill. If you're half as good as you think you are, it'll be okay." - **Dan Docimo**

"Success happens on your time. Don't watch other people's success. Be grateful for the place you are in... someone else wants to be in your spot." - **Ali Siddiq**

"Try to get out of town if you're frustrated in your scene and you feel like you're running on a treadmill. New audiences that haven't heard all your stuff, comics that haven't heard all your stuff, that'll re-energize you." - **Aaron Weber**

"I try to reach out to other comedians and get support. It can be very upsetting and depressing. I try not to sit alone with my feelings and isolate. That can be deadly."

- **Jessica Kirson**

"I remember Bill Burr once said to me, 'Don't ever let them fucking see you bitter. The stink follows you around like a fucking fish.' There are so many people who are just angry on Twitter and you're like, 'If you put half that energy into your fucking act, you'd be so much happier.'" - **Sam Morril**

"Blame yourself. Not everyone else. Find your flaws first and fix them before blaming everyone else. Be self-aware." - **Ralph Barbosa**

"Quit now. There's too many comics. Or sell out, do some hack shit, focus on social media. Comedy's not about the audience in the room anymore, dummy! You gotta jerk off that algorithm." - **Kyle Kinane**

"The game of stand up comedy is rigged. All the problems you have with stand up are legit. But so what? Either you're gonna do it, or you're not gonna do it."

- **Kevin Bozeman**

Read the full article on comedygazelle.com!

Comedians Recognizing Comedians

VIVIAN BURGETT

"Talk about a festival darling! She's crushing it in the festival circuit. Her mic Femme Feedback Chicagoland is helping tons of femme comics find their voice on the scene."

RAEGAN NIEMELA, LUISE NOE, & DARRELL COCHRAN

"Raegan, Luise, & Darrell recently moved to Chicago from Milwaukee. The Wisconsin Comedy Scene has lost a magical corner of our world, and that light now resides with you. Take care of them and get ready to laugh (you'll be doing a lot of that)!"

MAYA GHADERI

"She's hilarious and is always out booking shows and working to get even better. She's done so much in her first few months/year as a comic and she deserves recognition for that."

"Everyone should know about Maya because she's still early in her career, but she's already doing the work and creating her own opportunities. She's exactly the kind of comic you'll want to say you knew before everyone else did. She's funny as heck, original, and also gorgeous. She works harder than anyone I know!!"

JACK FINNIGAN

"Jack has a natural ability to write not only good jokes but to take a funny topic and take it to the next level. You can tell that he has a care and love to it that exudes onto the stage. You can already tell that he'll get even better as he grows. One person I think everyone should see."

MARTIN FUNK

"Martin is constantly putting in work at Open Mics and has established his place as an all around nice guy and funny comic!!"

VINNY PAOLINI

"Vinny just hit a year in Chicago, but he has taken immense strides with confidence and tightening his material. This young man is a sleeper!"

EMILY GREFER

"New to the Chicago scene! She is a super helpful listener. Love seeing her out and about."

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

DM US @COMEDYGAZELLE

