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# THE COMEDY GAZELLE





# ABOUT THE GAZELLE

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

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

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

Thanks for your support!

— Jerry

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**DOES ANYBODY ACTUALLY READ THIS?**

# INTERVIEW: DAN DOCIMO

*Despite knowing them for 5+ years, I realized I didn't actually know a lot about the enigma that is Dan Docimo (@dandocimo). One of the most consistently funny comedians you'll see, I sat down with Dan to discuss their writing process, losing their ROTC scholarship, coming out as non-binary, advice for frustrated comics, and more!*

## **I know you graduated from Notre Dame. Does it ever feel weird walking away from your education to pursue comedy?**

Kind of. It feels weirder to me that I ever went to Notre Dame. This makes more sense to me than that did. But the type of day jobs I've been getting since graduating, they're always like, "You went to Notre Dame and you want to work here?" And the older you get, the worse it gets, because now it's like, "You're 28, you went to Notre Dame and you want to work here? What the fuck is the matter with you?"

## **Did you start stand up in college or before then?**

The first set I ever did, I was 18. And then I did more in college, but I was in South Bend, Indiana. There was one weekly mic and one monthly mic. And then we would have a show on campus once a month. And I usually couldn't do the weekly mic because I had shit to do.

## **When you were in school, did you know that was what you wanted to do?**

Yeah. I actually went to college on a Navy ROTC Scholarship. So the original plan was the Navy would pay for me to go to college and then I'd be in the Navy for five years. And then I lost that for medical reasons, which kind of blew. Then after that, my parents were like, "So what are you going to do?" And I was like, "Comedy." And they were like, "What the fuck did you just say?" They were not thrilled about that at all. It was honestly harder than coming out to them as non-binary. It was literally like, "Well at least I don't have to tell them I'm a comedian again."

## **They're like, "Cool, how are you going to make money?"**

Yeah, I mean, they're on board now. They were not on board at the time. Picture you're a doctor, your husband's a doctor, your kid is kind of directionless, but at least they have a full ride and they're going into the



Navy, so they're taken care of until they're at least 28. But then they lose the scholarship for wanting to kill themselves and then you ask them what they're going to do now and they tell you stand up comedy. I would not be thrilled either. My parents were like, "This is a really fucking terrible idea." Then they saw me do it. And they're comedy fans, especially my dad.

## **Did you grow up around comedy?**

Yeah, I saw Bill Cosby when I was eight. My parents took us to see Bill Cosby live. None of us knew at the time, so it was like the fucking coolest thing ever. On long drives we would always listen to Jim Gaffigan and stuff, and then I had a Mitch Hedberg album, and my parents didn't know I had it because I was like eight. My parents loved Jim Gaffigan because he's Catholic. Kathleen Madigan is another one. Obviously Jim Gaffigan and Kathleen Madigan are very funny, but it's just kind of funny that my extended family thinks Kathleen Madigan's the GOAT. Then when I was in high school, I started getting into Louis; he's the big one for me.

## **You mentioned wanting to kill yourself in college. Did standup help you get out of that? Did it not help you? I'm curious how comedy came into play, if at all.**

I definitely think it helped. For a while, comedy was the only thing that made

sense to me. I've been obsessed with it since I was very little; I don't remember not knowing I wanted to be a comedian. I watched all the Marx Brothers movies, and I would binge read a bunch of comics, and then I would binge listen to stand up when I had it on CDs. And all through college, I was still kind of doing that. I was totally out of touch with who I was and what I wanted, but I also knew that shit is funny and that helped. A lot of comics give you that sense that, "Oh, I'm not alone. There are people to whom this makes as little sense as it makes to me." And it's like, "Well, they're still here, so I can still be here too." But yeah, I almost attempted and instead I called the cops and got hospitalized. Then when the Navy found out, there was this whole medical review and they were like, "Well, sorry you want to kill yourself, but we have to take your full ride away." And that cheered me right up.

**Oh, shit. If you're having mental health problems they can take away your scholarship? That's fucked up.**

Yeah, the moral of the story is don't get help. But it was alright. I wasn't exactly like, "Oh no, I don't get to be in the Navy!" I would not have minded being in the Navy, but the most fun I ever had with it was at the end of every year, the freshmen — the midshipmen — would roast the graduating class. And my freshman year, I hosted it and just destroyed everybody. I was like, "It seems telling that the most rewarding experience I've ever had in this was doing stand up." I love boats, I love water, but I didn't give a fuck about America at all; I just didn't want my parents to pay for college.

**I know you've been doing some of these different festivals. Do you feel like you've gotten anything out of them?**

I think so. I also didn't do the world's best job of taking advantage of them. A few years ago, I did Altercation, then before that was 10,000 Laughs and before that was Limestone. And that whole time I was really in my head about personal life shit. I was kind of in denial about having gender dysphoria.

**Is this before you came out as non-binary?**

Yeah, this was like my last gasp effort of being like, "No, fuck that. I'm a man." Like, "I do not want to not be a guy." And so, it doesn't put you in the right headspace for networking. I definitely think I could have gotten a lot more out of it. But it's a credit, you put it in your bio, and I did meet a lot of really cool

people in a lot of other scenes that I can hit up if I'm ever in their city. And so I take advantage of that sometimes. But I definitely think I could have done more to try and meet the bookers that were there and things like that. At the time, all I wanted to do was go back to my hotel room.

**After you came out, do you feel like that helped you with your comedy at all? Did you feel more clarity or freedom to talk about whatever you wanted? How did that impact you?**

At first, I felt like it made it worse, honestly. I had been portraying myself in one way this whole time, and then all of a sudden it's like, "Okay, I'm not doing that anymore." I'm getting used to being more authentic, but that's never what my comedy was. My comedy was always very jokey. One complaint that some of my close friends have is that you can watch me for 45 minutes and you have no real sense of who I actually am. And that's how I like it. Because the shit I'm saying is way funnier than I am as a human being. I personally don't love it when someone just goes up on stage and talks about themselves the whole time. A lot of times it feels a little bit like you're not putting enough emphasis on the funny part of this, and it's more like you're grateful a room full of people is listening to you. So at first, it did feel like it made it worse. Also, the jokes I did have about myself were about identifying as a gay man. Some of those were really good; I miss doing those, but they're not true anymore. Now I'm like a pansexual, non-binary, confusing human being. And of course, now it's two years later and still no one believes me. You really don't have to worry about it when you come out as non-binary because nothing changes at all. People just go, "Oh, so you're still a man?" And it's like, "Alright, thanks." But as I was processing all this shit, I did write more jokes about it, which helped. For a long time, being funnier was way easier than just being myself. I feel like a

lot of people are working on, "Oh, how do I write funny shit?" And I'm like, "How do I be sincere? Ever."

**I think it's hard trying to prioritize funny, while also being authentic and honest.**

I think the ideal thing is if you can combine those, and just be yourself, but in a way that's punchy. Because nobody's just themselves on stage. And if you are, you're either a dickhead or a person or not that funny as a comic. Because your authentic self is not funny. Your true authentic self is just an extremely vulnerable, little terrified child somewhere in there. Don't be your fucking self, idiot. If people wanted to just watch you be you, they'd be at your house like it's the zoo. Nobody wants to watch you be yourself. There's nothing that funny about me, but the shit I'm saying is funny. To me, it's almost like giving a presentation where there's this imaginary thing over here and you're like, "Isn't this shit over here funny?" I happen to be the one who thought of it and wrote it down, but it was there already. All of the funniest shit is already there and it's just waiting to be said. It's stuff that you have never thought before, but the moment you hear it, you recognize that it's true. And if you tell the truth in a concise enough way with some timing, it's the funniest thing you could possibly do. It's funnier than any pun you could come up with. Just making people go, "Oh my god, how did I not think of that?"

**Yeah, I get that. I feel like more of a funny thinker or observer than a funny person. You know what I mean?**

Yeah, people call it a sense of humor, and I think that's exactly what it is. And everyone thinks they have a great one, which is always funny. It's like if you walked into a school for the blind and everyone was like, "I see fucking awesome!" But I do think it's just another sense. It's something that some of us have and can use, but it's not who you are. It's just something you do. And I think if you confuse it with who you are, that's a psychologically dangerous thing to do. It's just like any other talent or any other sense. You can develop it and shit like that, but there is a certain level where you either have one or you don't.

**Can you walk me through the initial stages of your joke writing? Do you just notice something and then make a note on your phone?**

I'll think of something funny and I'll write it down in my notes app or my voice memos. And then I'll just walk around; I'll pace back and forth in my room or walk



around the block and talk to myself under my breath until I figure out a wording that I want to try.

**You just do it all out loud?**

Out loud is definitely the first step for me, because the finished product is out loud. If you're writing something that people are going to read, then I think it makes sense to put it on paper first. But we don't write the way we talk; it's two different areas of your brain. Sometimes you'll be at a mic or a show and you feel like someone is reading to you. It's because they wrote it down and memorized it and now they're reciting it. I just think it's the quickest way to get something to the point where it's stand up. Why not start writing it as if you're doing stand up? Cause that's what you're gonna end up doing. So instead of writing a journal entry, just talk to yourself as if you're talking to a room full of people.

**In the past few years, a lot's taken off for you: you got all these festivals, a manager, you just headlined Zanies. What do you feel like has changed for you?**

Honestly, it does not feel like a whole lot has changed, which is strange to say because obviously it has. Three years ago, when I got asked to co-host Beer Belly Open Mic, I was super excited; that was the biggest thing I had in Chicago comedy. Like, dude, I called my fucking parents about being a Beer Belly Open Mic host. So obviously, yes, things have changed. I think I have similar goals to a



lot of us. I want to not have to have a job, I want to tour and make good money, and just be able to do comedy. But I think I'm a lot less career oriented than a lot of people. When I was six years old, I wasn't obsessed with selling tickets; I was obsessed with being funny. To me, that's the most important part of all of this. I'd rather make 30 grand a year and be hilarious than be Ali Wong. I think if you get funny enough, there are people whose whole job it is to find you, you know? This is probably the opposite of what Ken Flores said when he was like, "No one's coming to get you," but I got a manager because she hunted me down.

### **How did that happen?**

Basically, I got that Netflix is a Joke audition at the Laugh Factory. I did five minutes at that, didn't get the festival, but my manager had another client who was at that audition show. She asked them how it went and they were like, "Well, there's this one person there that just buried everybody." And she was like, "Well, who was that?" And then she hunted me down on Instagram and ended up in my requests. When I saw it, I was like, "This is clearly a scam." So I did every manner of cyber-stalking imaginable before replying to this person. But that's how I've gotten everything I've gotten so far: people talking about me or people seeing me somewhere. There are other ways to get stuff. A lot of people are way better at promoting themselves and sending emails than I am; I think that's a perfectly acceptable course of action and is something I need to prioritize more than I do, but at the same time, that's only going to get you so far. If really important people see you not being that good at this, what is that really going to do for you? If you go up on stage and just crush, I dare you to make things not work out. The people you see that murder all the time and are not very successful are very actively ruining their own lives.

### **Right, right. If you're really funny, good stuff will probably happen unless you fuck it up.**

I am putting a little bit more effort into posting and things like that. I just had a thing go viral and my Instagram following doubled. But again, that didn't just go viral for no reason. It's a really fucking good joke. It does reward you to put the most effort into what you're actually doing. A lot of people are very good at appearing to be successful comics, and that can take you very far; a lot of those people are richer than I will ever be, and good for them. But you have to be so lucky for that to work. I think the funnier you are, the less lucky you have to be in the long run.

### **I think it can be really easy to get trapped in just playing "the hits" and never actually growing your set. How do you balance building new material while still doing well on the shows you're booked on?**

I don't think there's anything wrong with playing the hits when you're getting paid to do something. I think it's a professional thing to do. For the most part, if I write something new, I'm not going to do it at shows for a while. I'm going to do it at mics probably longer than I have to. I think at mics, the really important thing is to tell it like it's funny. Even if you're not confident that it's going to work, you should think that it's funny. Because why else would you have written it down? And why else would you be here? I've seen people do sets where I'm like, "That would have gone so much better if you acted like it was funny." Then once you get it to work at mics a couple of times, just do it on shows. At some point you have to go up in front of a regular crowd that isn't all comics and be like, "here's a joke," and just pretend that you think it's going to work. Then as long as you close on a few things that are going to work, you're golden.

### **What's some of the best advice that you've gotten? Anything that still sticks with you?**

I think some of the best advice that I've gotten is, "Don't get caught up in the lifestyle of being a comic." I was probably 23 or 24 when Alex Dragicevich told me that. He was like, "Look, you pluck any 23 year old comic at random, and when they're 40, they're more likely to have a substance abuse issue than they are to be a professional comic." A lot of people lean into, "Oh, we're comics, we like to party all the time." And it's fun to, but he was basically like, "You're not a comic yet. The whole point is you're trying to be one." A lot of people can

really fuck themselves up in other ways while trying to pursue this because drinking and substance abuse is pretty normalized in our community, where you can be drunk seven nights a week and nobody will bat an eye because we all know 40 people who do that. I think a lot of it is, "Take care of yourself outside of this, and don't think of yourself too much as a comic because that can make it easier to make bad choices." Don't get a coke habit while you're trying to be a comic; don't fuck up your liver while you're trying to be a comic. I did that one. I can personally tell you: don't fuck up your liver while trying to be a comic.

**How has being sober affected your comedy? Do you feel like that's helped you progress career wise?**

Yeah, absolutely. I think a lot of things that people do that hurt them in comedy are directly impacted by stuff like that. You get too drunk at the Lincoln Lodge and you yell, and then that takes a while to blow over. I haven't said anything super fucked up in three years, I haven't gone on stage and slurred my words to the point that the whole crowd is like, "Oh no, I can't wait for it to be eight minutes from now." You know that's not gonna happen when you book me. It just makes you more of a sure bet, and then at the same time, you're just more in control of every interpersonal interaction you have. So much of this is politics and networking, which is a risky thing to do if you're gonna black out. You're gonna get fucked up and then talk to people who might have power over how your career goes? You just have to be brutally honest with yourself about whether what you're doing is too much.

**What specific advice would you give to somebody that was in your place a couple of years ago, where they're funny, but not getting the opportunities they feel they should be getting?**

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." That's kinda what it is when you're first starting out and nobody knows who you are. Anybody can have a fluke, great open mic set every once in a while. 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.

**"If you're half as good as you think you are, it'll be okay." I love it.**

I think for a lot of us, you don't see the path in front of you. You're in it, you're stuck at one point at all times, and wherever you are, it just feels like where you're gonna be there forever. But you have two options: you can keep doing comedy, or you can quit. And that's basically all you have control over. So if you really think you're that good, keep doing it and just see if it doesn't work out. I also think you can do yourself a lot of disservice by being vocally not content with where you're at. You have to realize a lot of these shows you want to get on, like CYSK and Zanies and Laugh Factory, are run by people who've been in this game for decades. So from their perspective, it's like, "Where do you get the balls to be good for three months and be mad that you're not on CYSK?" But when you're in it, you're like, "But I'm funny!" Well, no one cares yet. No one's gonna care for a while.



Because people don't even like that you're funny. People are mad that you're funny. If you show up and you're funny, you have to be so nice because people don't like that. If I've been doing comedy for forever and I'm 45 years old and you're 23 and I see you murder, I'm not like, "Wow, that's exciting!" I'm like, "Fuck, dude!"

**That just brought me back to one of my first ever shows at Comedy Bar. It was a lineup of [Kristen] Toomey, [Geoff] Asmus, Blake [Burkhart] – all these headliners – and me, and I just completely ate shit. Then I get off stage and I'm talking to Toomey and she's like, "Dude, you're a year in; this is what's supposed to happen. If you were really good a year in, everyone here would hate you. You'll be fine."**

Yeah, people don't like if you're good. Why would they? They're doing the same thing as you, and sometimes they're doing it for way longer and not as well. Why would they be thrilled that you just showed up and you're doing well? So even if you think it doesn't make any sense, and even if you think you deserve all of this shit — which you almost certainly don't — if you have a couple minutes that goes really well and you think you're some hot shit, and then you act like it, just watch yourself go nowhere real fast. When I started out, I did have that chip on my shoulder, like, "I'm way funnier than that dude!" And then you realize that maybe you have more natural talent than that guy, but the more you and him are on the same lineups, you start to notice that guy's better at stand up than you because he's been doing it forever. He's been in all kinds of different rooms, in all kinds of different horrible situations doing stand up, doing ambush bar shows, and stuff like that. So even if he doesn't have the greatest material in the world, experience does come into play. I would so much rather book someone who's pretty good and been doing it for 10 years than someone who seems like they're going to be huge one day and they're a year in. You know what you're getting with someone who has a bunch of experience. If you are that person who's relatively new and unusually talented, you have to realize the perspective of the people who aren't booking you yet. They can't trust that you're gonna do well yet. And there is part of it too, where if you do every show in Chicago too early, you're going to end up with 10 great minutes and nothing else. Cause you haven't really been developing anything else; you've just been doing the run of shows. Then you get to a point where it's time for you to move up to featuring, but guess what? You don't have 20 because you haven't been doing any mics. You've been doing shows and you've been crushing with 10 good minutes and now you have to write ten more real quick. So my main advice to that person is to chill. chill. And I do laugh at the attitude I used to have, like, "I can't fucking believe that every time I go up, it's going well and I'm still not really getting the recognition!" And it's like, "Yeah, you're just not going to for a little bit." And that's kind of a good thing.

**Yeah, even if you're funny, you still have to wait in line.**

Right, and it doesn't help you to be seen as someone who has no respect for the larger game and no respect for the scene that you're in. Maybe you think you're as funny as someone who's headlining a bunch of shit, but you have to understand that there is some importance to the fact that they've been around and you haven't. I mean, your first six months everyone just thinks you're going to quit anyway. And if you're good, they hope you're going to quit. No one's rushing to get you on their show. There are a lot of funny people in this city, so don't be surprised when nobody is kicking your door down. Make some friends with the people who start at the same time as you — you have no idea how helpful that's going to be — and be in the spot that you're in, because if you move forward too fast, I think that's weirdly one of the worst things that can happen to you.





**THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO ATTENDED  
OUR OCTOBER VOUCH AUDITIONS!**

**REMINDER THAT THIS IS A MONTHLY  
SHOWCASE, SO IF YOU WEREN'T SELECTED,  
YOU WILL HAVE ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY TO  
COMPLAIN NEXT MONTH!**

**WITH THAT SAID, CONGRATULATIONS TO:**

# VOUCH

THE COMEDY GAZELLE PRESENTS



*Hosted by*  
BRANDON KIEFFER

*Featuring*  
MITCHELL POTTS, DINA LEWIS, ROVAUGHN HILL  
MAX SORICH, COURTNEY ALBERS, LAUREN WARWICK

*Laugh Factory | 8:00pm | 10/30/24*

# Comedians Recognizing Comedians

## **WILL CUNNINGTON**

"Will is the host of the TBD mic which is easily becoming a hotspot for comedians. He's a guy who draws an audience everywhere he goes cause he's a charming young man. He is getting booked more, but deserves even more cause he is easily becoming a favorite in the city."

## **JACK ALLEN**

"Jack Allen's style is totally his own and he has some of my absolute favorite bits. He has a really refreshing and fearless approach to writing jokes and it's awesome to watch him crush."

## **CLAIRE PARLETTE**

"Claire is one of my favorite comics in Chicago. Her energy and stage presence are unmatched and her bits are extremely funny, unique and off the wall. She lights up every room she's in."

## **LIO CUNDIFF**

"I love watching Lio's work. He always brings a strong energy to the stage and has a story, perspective and style unlike anyone else on the scene."

## **SEAN NITSCHMAN**

"Sean's ability to tell personal stories hits harder each time he steps out on stage. The specificity of the tags coupled by the timing of each joke makes his stage presence uniquely familiar, almost like catching up with a funny friend from your hometown."

## **DANNY HAMEL**

"He has become a really good host and he has been the powerhouse behind the Jerks open mic for the past 2+ years. He designs the flyers, runs the social media, and takes and shares photos of all the comics. Everything that makes that mic unique is because of Danny's vision and hard work. Book this man in the clubs!

## **SAM SELBY**

"Sam not only helps host one of the best mics in town at Schuba's, she also has an amazing ability to help create one of the best spaces to perform comedy in the scene with Glitterus. If you want to see an example for what it takes to make a difference in the scene look no further than Sam."



# Comedians Recognizing Comedians

## ARIEL JULIE

"Leading the epic charge of a truly grassroots Chicago comedy fest. And she's doing it for free. Chicago's legendary comedy scene needs to induct Ariel Julie into the hall of fame. The woman makes moves. Most people dream big but don't actualize these goals. Ariel is a leader who does not shy away from the hard realities of production. Watch out, the Windy City Comedy Fest is coming!"

## MIKE CACERES

"Mike is one of the most underrated hosts in the city. His unique personal anecdotes coupled with great energy and stage presence keeps audiences fully engaged in every show. He runs a very cool room on Sundays at Lily's Bar I cannot recommend enough."

## ZACH HACKER

"No other person in the scene is devoted to creating good comedy shows more than Zach. He doesn't care about the exposure or the business or what's popular or not, he just cares about what makes a good show and god damn it the shows he puts on are some of the best, funniest, and most awe inspiring things you can see locally. He really shows that hard work paired with a great comedic mind can make something fantastic."

## KAYLEY HORTON

"I recently booked her to do 20 minutes and she fucking murder the whole time, all new stuff I hadn't hear before, it was most fun I've had watching someone maybe ever. she is a stone cold killer."

## MATTHEW DOYLE PEREZ

"Matthew has been a supportive member of the comic community for many years, and is always showing up to shows, recommending producers book his peers, and helping introduce new comics to the community. He's also starting a new Saturday mic in 2025."

## TORY WARD

"Tory is a comic that I can't get enough of. Very good writer and easily liked by audiences. She'll climb to the top of the scene in no time."

## SONAL AGGARWAL

"She's so good at what she does, I laughed at the same joke two days in a row. She's also a great cheerleader for other comics and lifts others up with her. I'm forever a fan and grateful for her friendship and respect."

**HAVE SUGGESTIONS?  
WANT TO CONTRIBUTE?**

**DM US @COMEDYGAZELLE**

