

# An Introduction To **Stand Up COMEDY**

A short, somewhat complete and almost  
meaningful guide through the world of stand up comedy



**IAN GUTOSKIE**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This has been a year in a half process that has made me want to pull out my hair (if I had any) and I could never have completed this myself without the help of dear friends that read and helped edit along with the people that have helped me out through the years that made writing this a possibility. I'd like to thank Derek Richards for taking me on the road and teaching me about comedy and the "business" side of show Business. Nat Baimel that read and edited this book on more than one occasion. My amazing wife that has spent as much time on this book as I have and made this thing legible! All the support from bookers that believed in my comedy Brian Heffron, Joe Sanfillipo, Bobby Jewel, Les McCurdy, Rene Hart, Adam Webber, Joe Golanis, and Roger Paul. To all my comedian friends that pushed me and in one way or another made me a better comedian and human being. Also my therapist Cindy Fabico that has been instrumental in my growth. My Mom for keeping my spirits high and my ego in check, my Dad, Brother, and my entire family that support me through my life.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	Page 4
SOME THINGS TO KNOW	Page 7
GIDDY UP	Page 10
WRITING	Page 12
OPEN MICS	Page 20
PROFESSIONALISM	Page 29
MARKETING/BIO	Page 30
NETWORKING/MERCHANDIZING	Page 34
GOALS	Page 37

## INTRODUCTION

So why read this book? Who am I to give insight into the world of stand-up comedy? My name is Ian Gutoskie, and I'm a professional comedian who has been touring for over a decade making my living solely off of this business. Maybe some of you are not looking to make a living at this; maybe you want to work a few weeks a month, keep a regular job, and get to live the best of two worlds. That's OK – everyone has their own journey. Maybe you just want to overcome your fear of public speaking and you're crazy enough to do it through standup! This book will help you understand the many parts of the industry that make up the multifaceted world of stand-up comedy.

I started January 17, 2003, in a small club that is inside of a bar, inside of a hotel in Altamonte Springs, Florida, at an open mic that has seen the likes of Daniel Tosh, Larry the Cable Guy, Carrot Top, and Billy Gardell. I started comedy because it was all I ever dreamed about since I was a 12-year-old boy. Being an insanely shy kid growing up in Canada, I couldn't raise my hand to ask a question in school, or talk to any other kids to make a friend. Growing up in Canada gave me exposure to the television program the Montreal Comedy Festival; it would come on at night and feature all the funny young comics coming out of the United States and Canada. Watching this show would eventually change the course of my life. I remember seeing Harland Williams (a huge influence on my career), Tommy Davidson, Richard Jeni, and many other well-known comedians. I was sick of not having any friends to talk to or hang out with so I would memorize some of their bits. When I finally built up the courage to regurgitate them to the other kids at school, I got a response that I couldn't believe... laughter! It gave me the greatest feeling; I was in disbelief and couldn't wait to get back home and memorize more standup. (Obviously now that I'm a professional

comedian I write my own material!) Comedy had afforded me the chance to come out of my shell, be more vocal, express myself in a positive manner and connect with people, and eventually grow as a person. Through my teenage years I was heavily involved in sports; I played everything but my passion was basketball. I grew to be 6'6" and was really good by Canadian standards so I left Canada my senior year of high school to pursue a career in the United States, or so I thought! Once arriving in the US I thought, "Here it is, the start to my career that will lead to the NBA!" I firmly believed I had a greater chance at professional sports than ever becoming a professional comedian. Well, turns out Americans are quite a bit better at sports than we Canadians (except in hockey) – go figure! So I decided to give up basketball, get a start on life by getting married when I was 20, and start a career. I only had three jobs before I started standup. I spent six years working for a John Deere dealership, eventually working my way up to general manager. I was making great money but was very unhappy and had a drinking problem, so when I had a job opportunity to travel the country working on cranes, I took it. It was another high-paying job and was better than John Deere but I still felt very unfulfilled. I was 25 years old and at a crossroads. I've always told my closest friends that I wanted to be a standup – I say closest because others would scoff at the concept. So I saved up some money and decided to jump into the world of making people laugh. I thought, "Wow, this is going to be great! Getting to make people laugh for a living! But how do I start? Where do I start? How do I get paid? How long will this take?" So I bought some books on standup and performing, I enrolled in acting and writing classes, I quit my job and took my third and final job...working at a grocery store for \$6.50 an hour so I could stay close to home and really work on my material and hit the open mics around Orlando. After three months of researching and writing, I decided to go find an open mic and just watch for the first time, even the thought of watching an open mic made me sick to my stomach, but I got in my truck (not a good comedian vehicle!) and started to take the half-hour journey to Altamonte Springs. I remember thinking to myself, "Oh my God, what if I'm horrible at this? This is my dream, if this doesn't work out, what do I do with my life?" So with no answer to that question, I get to the open mic, I'm an hour early, and none of the other comics or open micers are

there except for one. It was his first time too and he was going up that night! I told him I was there only to watch and to get a feel for it, but after some convincing and shots (...and beer) I decided to go up as well. I had an OK set, way better than I thought I was going to have. I had imagined drunk people throwing empty beer bottles at my head. That being said, the next open mic I tanked HARD! No one laughed and I couldn't wait to get off stage. But it was too late – after the first open mic, there was no stopping. That day started my love for standup comedy – however, it also started an even greater addiction to alcohol, which caused severe depression in my life for the next several years. Obviously not the romantic journey I thought I was about to take, but low self-esteem and stage fright caused me at a young age to numb myself instead of figuring out what the hell was going on inside me. It's over ten years later, I've been sober for over two years and my stage fright, while still there, has subsided greatly. Now this will be a book by itself if I keep talking about my personal journey, and everyone has their own road to take, so I will stop here and use other stories from my career as anecdotes. I want this book to give you the tools to live out your dream, because this is a tough, ruthless business. It has the potential to make you lose your sanity, or on the opposite end of the spectrum, you could become a great comic and a better person. Not everyone is suited for standup comedy; there are only about 1,000 professional comedians working in the United States today. These are not necessarily the funniest people alive; rather, they are the ones who put in a huge amount of effort and sacrifice for something they believe in. I'm not trying to scare you off, I am simply giving you some facts so that you're not overwhelmed when you cross some of the many bridges in comedy. I have carved out a living in one of the toughest realms of show business. I tour nonstop and have had amazing opportunities to work with my heroes. I have performed for the troops, done some commercials and a movie, and I work in some of the nicest comedy clubs in the country. I will give you insight into my process, and share things that I have learned through experience. The reason I'm writing this book is because I feel the need to give back to an industry that has taught me more than any other experience in my life. Many classes claim to teach you how to be “funny” and insist that anyone can be a successful comedian. I want to give you a glimpse into the real world of

comedy and arm you with crucial information so that you can make that decision for yourself.

## SOME THINGS TO KNOW BEFORE YOU START

First, let me give you a short list of definitions of comedy vernacular that may be foreign to you. I won't give you all the terms, just the important ones; you'll pick the rest up rather quickly as you start to hang out with comics at the open mics.

**OPEN MIC** – Usually held on an off night like Tuesday or Wednesday, this is where new comics as well as working and professional comedians come to work out material.

**PROFESSIONAL SHOW** – A show in which the audience has paid to come in and watch working and professional comedians. It usually consists of an MC, feature, and headliner.

**WORKING COMEDIAN** – Someone that does comedy part-time; this person can still be in the headliner position. These comics have other full- or part-time jobs.

**PROFESSIONAL COMEDIAN** – Someone that makes all their income from working in comedy.

MC – The host of the show and always the first person on stage to address the crowd. Brings comics on and off stage while still keeping the crowd engaged. This spot is paid at the majority of clubs, however there are clubs that do not pay the MC.

FEATURE or MIDDLE or OPENER – This is a paid spot right between the MC and the HEADLINER; you perform 20–30 minutes depending on what the club dictates or how much time the headliner wants you to do.

HEADLINER or CLOSER – The last person up on stage, this person is paid to carry the show. If the crowd is drunk, talkative or disengaged, it's the headliner's job to make it a great show. This spot is between 45 and 60 minutes.

GUEST SPOT – An unpaid spot after the MC at a professional show; this is your first step out of the open mic before you start getting paid. Usually a guest spot is 5–10 minutes long.

SHOWCASE – This is common in New York City and L.A. The nicer clubs throughout the country also hold showcases on nights early in the week, from Monday through Wednesday. This is where 10 to 12 working and professional comedians each get 7 to 10 minutes on stage. These are usually unpaid spots.

BLUE MATERIAL – When you first start you may hear a comic refer to another comic as “blue”; this terminology means the comedian's material is dirty or sexual by nature.

SET – Whether you're on stage for 5 minutes or an hour, this is the time spent telling your jokes on stage. For example, when you come off stage after your time, if you were funny, another comic might come up to you and say “nice set.”

PREMISE – The subject that you base your joke on.

**BIT** – This is a chunk of material dealing with one premise in your act.

**SETUP** – The beginning of a joke that gives the crowd your premise.

**PUNCHLINE** – Comes after the premise and is the funny part of the bit.

**TAG** – Follows the punchline to make the joke even funnier.

**CALLBACK** – Bringing in a punchline from a previous joke later in your act.

**BOMBED** – This means things did not go well at ALL! Nobody laughed, or people started talking through your set. This will happen from time to time. No matter how good you are, it is inevitable!

**KILLED** – This is a word used heavily in comedy; killing on stage means that everyone is applauding and losing their minds over your jokes.

**HACK** – A joke based on a premise that is easily thought of and many comics have the same joke for that premise. Example: *Passion of the Christ* was a good movie, but I liked the book better.

**TIMING** – The act of adjusting one's tempo of speaking and moving for dramatic effect.

**CADENCE** – The rhythmic flow of a sequence of words.

**TAKING A BULLET** – The first comic up in a show trying to warm up a crowd before the other comics perform.

**STEPPING ON YOUR PUNCH** – This means you're moving too quickly through your punchline and not allowing the audience adequate time to laugh at your joke before moving on to your next joke.

“A” ROOM – Celebrity-driven room, meaning all the headliners are nationally known comedians.

“B” ROOM – Rooms that run 3 to 5 nights during the week, i.e., Thursday through Saturday. They bring in celebrity acts from time to time but use a lot of up-and-coming comics.

“C” ROOM – Usually in a bar or hotel; typically runs Friday and Saturday.

### GIDDY UP!

This job is a marathon. It takes many years to become good at comedy and years before you start getting booked on a consistent basis. Young comedians will look at the Nick Swardsons and Dane Cooks that were doing standup specials on Comedy Central in their mid-to-late twenties and think, “Wow! They broke into the industry so young, how did they do that?” Well, both of those guys started in their late teens and were veterans by the time they got to that place in their careers. I started when I was 25 years old, and I started getting booked sooner than most; there are a few factors that enabled me to do so. As with any job in life, you have to work harder than your counterparts to excel. I believe the greatest factor for me getting work quicker than your average comic was that while

many people were doing just the once-per-week local open mic, I was driving up to three hours away to get in as much stage time as possible. So for each person doing one open mic a week, I was doing four or five. If you look at it comparatively I was getting a month's worth of stage time in a week. Some other helpful factors were that I read three books on standup, went to an acting class, and took a writing class. I wanted to give myself an edge, something that would separate me from the rest of the field. The books I read were about what to expect when I hit the stage, and the different levels of comedy - very generalized reading material but it did serve a purpose in my young career. The acting class I took was at Art's Sake acting school; it was a small class taught in Orlando, Florida. Yvonne is the teacher there and one of the best instructors I've ever had in my life. You studied not only acting, but life, unlocking what you have buried inside of you. It had a profound effect on me letting go on stage, not being so timid and allowing myself more freedom in the moment. This class was instrumental in my growth on stage. Even if you don't want to act and your end goal is to be a standup, acting can really help open you up and allow your standup to grow much faster. The writing class was at McCurdy's Comedy Club in Sarasota, Florida, which was also a great experience. Les McCurdy, who is also a comedian, was the teacher and provided an environment where others like myself wanted to be funny on stage or open up a little in their personal life, so there was a feeling that we were all in it together. After the class was done there was a graduation where all the students got to perform on a Sunday show for about 200 people. I had all of this before stepping onto the stage, whereas the guy beside me at the open mic had written down a few funny jokes or stories. I set myself up to be more successful. That being said, there is also the funny element; you will meet comics that are just naturally gifted and others that have to work much harder on their material to get to a higher level of funny, but that's OK. Everyone is on their own path at this. You'll see one or two that will excel very fast and start doing very well early in their career, then there are comics who take more time to craft a joke and make it work well on stage. Also, it never makes sense to be jealous when a friend or another comic is moving faster than you! There is no cap in this industry that says "OK! We have the top 100 comedians, so you can all go home!" There is room for as many

great comedians as this country can produce. The thing that this business has no room for is inflated egos and rudeness. Now don't get me wrong, ego is in all of us and is one of the greatest factors that makes us want to go on stage in front of strangers and make them laugh. If you think walking into an open mic and acting like you're hot shit will get you some respect from the other comics, think again. You will end up being run out of most open mics. Your material is what will grade you against the rest of the field - which brings me to comedy etiquette.

## ETIQUETTE

One of the biggest reasons I stay booked year-round is because I'm not a douche. That's right, it's that simple: be nice to the other comedians. Networking is the single greatest factor to getting into new clubs. A comic with a good reputation can talk to club owners and recommend unseen talent to them. There is a pecking order in comedy, one that is similar to the military. You treat the working and professional comics with respect; they are the ones who can help you get into clubs and take you on the road with them. When I'm off the road I will always hop around to a few open mics in Orlando and ask the host who's doing well and working hard at rewriting and getting as much stage time as possible. Then I will watch them perform and if their set is funny, I'll go talk to them. If they are nice and pleasant, I will start talking to them about doing a guest spot or MCing a show for me. This is what gets the ball rolling in a young career: if you're funny, work hard, and a non-douche, you'll stand out to the professional comics and the bookers, placing yourself in a much better position to book work.

## WRITING ~ WHERE TO START

You can't go on stage and wing it! I've been the house MC for the Orlando Improv and my home club Bonkerz in Altamonte Springs,

Florida, and I would always smile when someone came up to sign in to my open mic and said they were going to wing it. Those words came out to me as, “Hey! I’m going to go up there and eat it!” When you see great improvisers on stage, that skill takes time to cultivate. Improvising is a difficult art to learn, and takes time to craft. I’ve had the pleasure of watching over a thousand people try an open mic and the few that have uttered the words “wing it” bombed hard, 100 percent of the time.

Another very important thing to know is never... I REPEAT... NEVER steal someone else’s jokes. Comedy is a very small community, and other comedians will have a not-so-pleasant talk with you after your set if they see you’ve plagiarized someone else's work. I’ve had material stolen twice throughout my career, two bits that took months to craft. Word got back to me very quickly and spread throughout the comedy community. When you take something that you have not earned, it will not pay off in any way. It can get you banned from the open mic where it occurs and every other open mic in your area. Take into consideration that every minute of good, sound material will take weeks or even months to work out, so be patient with the material and yourself.

Now that we have that uncomfortable topic out of the way, let’s talk about the two basic types of comedy acts: the “joke writer” and the “storyteller.” There are many subcategories like physical, prop and alternative, but I will only talk about these two basic types as I think you will naturally fall into your subcategory with experience. To help you decipher between the two, Dave Attell is one of the country’s best joke writers – it’s a setup and punchline approach – while Brian Regan is one of the country’s best storytellers – I swear that man can make any life story of his hilarious. Now it goes much deeper than this, but if you haven’t been on stage yet, these are the two primal formats.

Every comic I know uses a different technique to write. When I started out I typed everything on my computer and then printed it out. I’d go over every line, perform it out loud over and over, then I’d tape record every set from the open mics and listen back to the material, marking it for laughs and when a joke tanked. Listening

back to your own voice is strange and can be difficult to get through, but it will help immensely in your growth. These days my writing has changed dramatically; nothing is in my computer anymore. I take short notes on my iPhone, writing in a couple of punch lines, and take it directly to stage to see how it works.

Like I mentioned before, there are several techniques to writing, and I will only be going over one. My suggestion is to start off with what I'm explaining and follow it very strictly, and as you get better at writing, you will fall into your own pattern and method. I will go over a few points before I explain this technique and the importance of each step.

Write out your act word for word  
Practice in front of a mirror  
Recording your set will help you  
Revise, Edit, Rewrite.....Revise, Edit, Rewrite

Write Out Your Act Word for Word:

Why I think this is so important early on is to practice memorization. Write it out, print it out and go over it in your head again and again. I know this is a little robotic, but it will be your foundation to getting better at remembering your material much, much faster.

Practice in Front of a Mirror:

You can perform your act in front of a mirror or in your living room. this will help with your confidence, but keep in mind that there is a dynamic in a comedy club that cannot be duplicated. You can even go to Radio Shack and buy a cheap ten-dollar mic so you are used to it before hitting the stage for the first time. It helps so the mic doesn't feel so foreign.

Some of you may want to practice your jokes on friends and family, but I didn't have a good experience doing it. I ran my material by family early on in my career and when it didn't go over well, I lost all confidence and it took weeks before I mustered up the courage to try it in front of an audience. Regardless of how you decide to practice, some of these things will make you feel awkward and

uncomfortable but this is preparing you for the feeling of being on stage in front of complete strangers.

#### Record Your Set:

If you're working on your writing like you should be you will find as time goes by your material will expand or condense naturally on stage. For example a 1.5 minute bit grows into a 3 to 5 minute bit, it can also shrink down to hit harder with the crowd. This is why it's important to record every set. If you don't you will come up with something on stage organically and when your set is over you won't be able to remember what the hell you said! Also, recording helps you listen to your voice inflection and this has a huge impact on how the joke lands with the crowd.

#### Revise, Edit, Rewrite...Revise, Edit, Rewrite:

This is by far the most important part, without reworking material it never grows. Rewriting is where the funny is: tightening up every joke and playing around with the punchline so the joke is as strong as it can be. Think of it like the gym - the more you work, the stronger you get!

## LET'S WRITE!

#### Step 1:

Write out an idea or story that you have in mind, keep your mind moving and don't worry about how funny it is, or about writing it down with proper punctuation and grammar, you just want to get the story down on paper so you can examine it and start to turn it into something. Here's an example from a joke in my act that I no longer use.

I was visiting some friends in Boston a few years ago and we ended up at a bar called the Field House one night across from Harvard. After a few drinks we left and walked back to the car. As we were walking a guy bumped into me and said "Hey man! Wanna go?"

"What? Go where?"

"Come on man you wanna fight?"

“Why?”

Then he yells out his mantra.

“I graduated Harvard in 1997 bitch!”

How does that help you in a fight? That’s not scary at all if anything it fills me with confidence if the fight moves forward. The only time you should yell that out is if somebody needs help with their taxes.

Step 2:

OK, so that’s my story – not all that well formed, and not all that funny. It’s time to change it into a more well-crafted bit. So the way we do that is by shortening the setup and trying to add some more funny to it.

I was in Boston at a bar one night with some friends, when we left a guy bumps into me and wants to fight. (Notice the opening is much shorter than before)

“Hey you wanna go”

“Me? Maybe if I was 18 and this was prom and you were eyeing my girl”

Then he gave me his fighting mantra.

“I graduated Harvard in 1997 bitch!”

“What? How does that help you in a fight? Is there some mathematical equation you can use to kick my ass there Good Will Hunting?”

That is the least scariest thing you can say. The only time you need to yell that out is if somebody needs help with an essay. If you really want to scare me yell out something like.

“I work at jiffy lube bitch!”

Step 3:

Now the bit is becoming more defined. It’s still not that funny but we are getting some of the structure down. Let’s keep taking away words that don’t need to be there so we can get closer to the punchline and tighten up the punchline to be stronger.

I was at a bar in Boston. As my friends and I were walking out, some drunk guy bumps into me and says:

“Hey you want to fight?”

“Not really, I’m a grown man and the last time this happened, I was fighting for my prom date’s honor.”

Then he yells out his fighting mantra: “I graduated Harvard 1997, BITCH!” What? How does that help you in a fight? Is there a mathematical equation you can use to kick my ass there, Good Will Hunting, because unless you’re doing my taxes, that doesn’t make sense! If you really want to scare me, yell something else out, like, “Daytona Beach Community College, motherfucker!” (act out)

“Ohh shit, he does not take education seriously at all – he looks like he’s going for a communications degree”

I added more punchlines and made more of a parallel with Harvard and Daytona Beach C.C. than with Jiffy Lube. I also want to “act out” being scared of the guy that’s going to Daytona Beach Community College as it adds to the joke as well. At this point I was comfortable taking it to stage and trying it. This joke worked well out of the gate for me; after listening back to the recording I constantly change and tweak the material until it flows with the way I talk in natural conversation.

This is what the road comics and bookers at the back of the room are looking for. There are so many young comics that come in week after week with the same jokes and never rewrite, and they can’t figure out why sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. The answer to that question is easy: the joke is not evolving. When the crowd is hot and ready to laugh, material doesn’t have to be that strong, but when they’re a little tougher, your material has to be well crafted.

You have to look at your material from every angle. Can I make the setup funny? Try using more descriptive words, and keep switching around the punchline and tags. When you’re writing, cross out the words you don’t need in your setup, and look for what words can be switched around to make it funnier.

## MATERIAL MATTERS

### Clean and Dirty Material:

Here are my thoughts on this subject, because it is always discussed in the comedy community. My take is this: write what makes you laugh. If it's clean, it's clean, if it's dirty, it's dirty – just make it funny! There are as many, if not more, blue comedians working today as clean. Working dirty will make this a slower process; a lot of clubs don't like their MCs to be too dirty, but just be yourself. One of my good friends is a blue comedian, and a very funny one at that, and is always coming up to tell me he's writing clean material.

I'll watch his set and his clean material just never hits that hard. He was opening for me in a club where the average age of the crowd was 110 years old, so he decided he was going to work clean for the old folks. He did, and he bombed. If he would have done his real set, he would have gotten a better response from that crowd, and who knows, he may have had a great set. He would've also walked away feeling better about himself because he didn't censor himself to placate the audience. You can't force something you don't believe in wholeheartedly. Never buckle to what others tell you should do as far as your material. When I give advice to younger comics, I may give them some tags and areas to practice on, like confidence, voice inflection, and to keep their energy up through a rougher crowd. I will never attack another comic's material when giving advice unless it's stolen; it's your observation of your world no one else's.

#### How Much Material You Need:

The last thing I want to discuss is the amount of material you should write before going on stage. Most open mics give 3 to 5 minutes and we'll go over that in the next chapter. Write out 7-10 minutes, it's up to you. If you just want to write out 3 minutes, that's fine too, I just find when you're practicing at home at a normal pace it's a lot different from what comes over you when you get in front of strangers. Most tend to fly through their jokes and clock in well under what they had anticipated. So if you only write 3 minutes, that may translate to 50 seconds on stage. When you take it to the stage, keep working it out and rewriting the same material. If after 3 or 4 rewrites it's still getting no response, try another joke out. I see young comics try a new 3 or 4 minutes every week thinking it will impress the MC. When I was the house MC at the open mics I would always pull those guys aside and say, "It's nice to see you have a lot of material, but it has to be given time to grow. Without rewriting, the joke will never mature."

#### TIMING & CADENCE

I will now explain why it's so important to work on your timing and cadence. When I started comedy, most of the open mics I went to consisted of small, difficult crowds who landed unknowingly in the

middle of a comedy show because they just stumbled into a bar on an off-night to get wasted. Grabbing their attention seemed impossible at times, and when they talked through everyone's sets it was very distracting. It is easy to start to get into your head and can become very hard to keep your thoughts together to get out your 5 minutes of jokes. To combat this I would simply yell out my act; I figured if I was loud enough I could drown them out and be able to do my act. It did serve that purpose, but the problem is as I was starting to do guest spots and the occasional MC spot, I carried that over to an attentive crowd. It can be very off-putting if you're simply yelling your act at them. I'm sure many a crowd wondered, why is this guy yelling his entire set?! I learned that yelling my show gave it no dimension. The jokes still got a decent response, but nothing like when I learned to control my voice. I experimented all the time with being very quiet and then loud just to try getting used to the feel of it. Every part of what you do has to be tested; it's so easy to fall into a pattern and not experiment as it can be scary to try different things, even something as small as voice inflection. Dave Chappelle is an amazing example of that, very calm and easy through his stories then a burst of energy. He's great to watch; that's his style and I'm sure part of who he is. The practice of timing and cadence has to fit your personality. I talk about voice inflection and I can't help but think of Stephen Wright, one of the all-time greatest joke writers, deadpan and monotone through his act and he kills with it. There are so many ways to approach it, but in the end the goal is trying to find as much YOU as possible in your act.

### WAIT!

"Stepping on your punch" is a term you're bound to hear early in your career. It means delivering your material too quickly and not allowing the crowd adequate time to laugh at your joke. It takes a lot of stage time to get your timing down; our brain is telling us to puke out these jokes as fast as we can to get to the funny. Comedians for some reason are scared of silence when actually, silence is your friend. If you're telling a story and the crowd is quiet and paying attention, it's much more powerful than during the laughter and applause break. The crowd is interested in what you

have to say, and that's very important. When you deliver your jokes too fast, even if your material is really funny, you could be getting only a chuckle instead of a much better laugh. This is because without timing, you're setting up your next joke while the crowd is still laughing and not paying close attention. An audience knows how important it is to get all the information to decipher what's funny.

### YOUR VOICE

As you get further along, you start to find your voice. You'll hear that terminology a lot. In my opinion, finding your voice is about finding a connection with yourself in order to connect with others. It's about looking past the funny and understanding the connection with the crowd. I see a large portion of young comics morph a little of their heroes' style into their delivery and material, whether it be swagger on stage or cadence. I understand this is because they love comedy and it's awesome to have people to look up to. I don't believe this is a bad thing, but it can be a defense mechanism to create comfort inside of someone else's style. Don't let your heroes style influence you too much... This is a journey to show your own personal style and perspective. As long as you're doing comedy consistently and continue to write diligently with conviction about your perspective, you are on the way to finding your voice. You will first learn to be funny, then sometime after that you will learn to be YOU and be funny. After a decade of doing standup I'm still changing and evolving; that will never stop. You never figure comedy out, you just work hard and try to grow every year from it. So... Now you have the tools to give yourself a leg up before your first open mic!

### OPEN MICS

So your material is ready to go - what's next? You have to find an open mic. Where you are in the country will dictate how many there are. In Orlando right now, there are five-plus open mics going on, so it's a great training ground. The best way to find them now is

through Facebook; most cities have a local comedian page that you can go to and see where they are. Do a Google search for comedy clubs close to you and give them a call. Comedy club open mics tend to be better as far as crowd turnout and the response you'll receive. People come to these shows and know they're there to see a comedy show. Most clubs do an open mic on an off-night (an off-night being a Tuesday or Wednesday) and they may only take 15 or so comics to perform. In this scenario, you have to call ahead and get your name put on a list. Most open mics are held in bars and coffee shops that other comedians have started themselves to get more stage time. In both cases, always show up a half-hour before the show starts; if you're late and still want to get on the list, sometimes there's no room and you can irritate the MC. If you do have a job that forces you to work late and you have a hard time getting there on time, let the MC know right away the reason for your tardiness. If it is in a bar or coffee shop, go the open mic and ask who the MC is. Once you find that out, go up, introduce yourself and be very friendly and humble. Going in cocky is the kiss of death, MCs are very dismissive of that and will most likely tell you there's no room on the list or put you up after the local road comic that kills it and then feed you to the wolves. If the MC tells you there's room on the list, you will either have to write your name down or they'll ask for your name and write it down for you. If you see they have written your name down fourth on the list, that doesn't necessarily mean that's when you're going up. Most MCs build a show; when a road comic comes to an open mic, they will tell the MC when they want to go up, and that bumps everybody down on the list. MCs love when pros come in because they know these people can get the crowd laughing. This may seem a little unfair at first but these people have years of experience and have paid their dues, and are building the show how they want. If this is your first time, expect to go up first or last, the two toughest positions. The list works just like a batting order in baseball; expect to be in this position as long as you're new. As you improve, the MC will start sliding you to the middle of the list where the better spots are. The MC will tell you when you're going up; in most cases he won't let you know until he's got three or four ahead of you. At a comedy club open mic, most lists are set in stone, so you know before the show starts where you're going to be in the lineup. Never bother the

MC about when you're going up; they most likely have 15 other guys asking the same question. They didn't forget about you they have a lot going on and are trying to make the show run smoothly. Even if you're the first up, always stay for the whole show. If you like someone's material, go up and introduce yourself and let that person know you enjoyed their stuff. Comedy is very cliquey so be friendly to everyone. The comedy community in every city is very tight, so this is a great way to network with other comics and possibly make some friends. The other thing MCs will notice is if you take off right after your set. You have to show you're serious about comedy to be taken seriously. So if you are rewriting, being friendly, being respectful, and staying for the whole show, you're showing the comedy community you are serious. The sad reality is that open micers come and go, with only a handful moving on to paid work, some with great talent who never show their respect and motivation and therefore will never move up.

Now you're ready to hit the stage; pay attention to how the MC runs the show so you know how to get on and off stage. Before the show, most of the time the MC will explain to you "the light"; it is used to let you know when your time is up. When you see the light at the back of the room the MC is telling you it's time to wrap it up, so finish your joke - you're usually left one minute to close up your set.

OK, so the MC just called your name. It's time to make your way to the stage and grab the mic! One of the things I always noticed is when it's someone's first time on stage, they usually hold the mic too far away from their mouth. Remember, if you're too loud, the crowd can still hear you! The best way to start is to hold the mic so the end is pointing directly at your mouth, not under your mouth, so your voice will travel into the mic instead of over it. Then you can gauge the sound and make slight changes in distance so everyone can hear you without blowing out their eardrums. One of the most disorienting things that happens is getting hit with very bright spotlights that can blind you for a second if you look up. Try to stay as comfortable as possible; you will always have butterflies in your stomach before going up, and they will calm down once you start talking. Being totally comfortable on stage takes time; the one bit of advice I always give young comedians is that experience is the key. The more times you're on stage, the more comfortable you will be

on stage. Make sure to keep looking to the back of the room for the light, as going over on your time is a big no-no! Not only does the MC get upset, but the other comics that stick to their time get upset. It's usually a forgivable offense the first time, but the second time can land you in hot water with the MC and they can make your climb up the ladder a lot tougher. I have had instances where after the third time a comic went way over on time, he was banned from the open mic. You must respect every aspect of the open mic, and if you show respect, you will get it back. Make sure you thank the MC after the show. When you start the MC is dealing with a lot of different comedians and you can get lost in the shuffle quite easily. Your next time at that open mic, make sure to introduce yourself again. Once the MC gets to know you and sees that you're polite and respectful, you have a much greater chance of landing those better spots. As I pointed out earlier, get to know the other comedians. Networking is key in this industry; the other comics with more experience know where all open mics are, and it's a much easier feeling going to a new spot knowing you'll see some familiar faces!

#### NEXT!

Now that you have a few open mics under your belt, what is the next step? Keep working out material until you have 5 minutes that always does well. Just worry about getting your 5 minutes really strong; it will get you noticed by the working comedians. Most of the time when they notice you stringing together good shows, one might invite you to do a guest spot in front of a real comedy show. The time frame will vary on this depending on how hard you're working and your natural ability to be funny. I've seen some do it in a few months, and for some it might take six months. The guest spot is your first glimpse into the world of the working comedian, in front of a crowd that is there to see live comedy on purpose! These can still be tough. I remember when I started doing guest spots and thinking, "Now it gets easier." It does to a certain extent, but your nerves are usually in hyper drive because you want to do well in front of the other working comedians and the crowd so you can keep doing guest spots. It's like being called up to the major leagues to see how fast you can throw: if you don't have a great

show, you may be sent back down to the open mics for some more training.

The one thing you have to deal with in this industry is failure. It's at every corner and never leaves, but the greatest thing about failure, if you're learning from it, is that it sets you up for greater success. Failure comes in different forms – sometimes you fail yourself, and sometimes you fail the crowd. What I mean by failing yourself is, sometimes the crowd really enjoys your show but you still walk off stage with a sense of dejection because you know you could have been more dedicated, or you had some bad timing they didn't notice. The audience is happy, but it doesn't matter because YOU still know the level at which you are capable of performing. And sometimes the failure comes in the form of you walking off stage happy with a show, but knowing the crowd didn't get that into you. I want you to think of failure as a tool; in comedy, working through and learning from failure is the way to achieve success, because when we fail we find a different way to attack a problem. If a joke is failing on stage, keep rewriting it and performing it until it starts to perform the way you want it to. One of the oldest arguments in comedy asks, "Is there such thing as a bad crowd?" A lot of comedians say there is no such thing as a bad crowd, just bad comedians. Every crowd is different; there are crowds that are very tight, meaning they're hard to warm up and to get them laughing with the energy level you want. If every crowd was the same I don't think this job would be anywhere near as fulfilling! I have seen some great comics turn a seemingly bad audience. A "bad" audience can mean a few different things. A crowd that is known as "tight", it's common to see this on an early Friday night show. The crowd has just had a long week of work, there trying their best to relax but can still be a little unsettled making it tougher to make them laugh. There is also the unattentive crowd, a crowd full of chatty people, this is a tougher one to handle it can be like trying to wrangle in a herd of cattle. The best I ever heard it explained is that if you gave it everything you have and the crowd didn't respond, you didn't have what the crowd wanted to hear that night. As you go through the open mic circuit you'll see comedians performing at many different levels. Some nights you may have the best set of the night and the following week, have one of the worst. It's just how this works and it

is the driving force to get better. But don't worry: those less-than-stellar shows should decrease as you get more experience under your belt. The guest spot is also where the club owner or booker will come and watch your show; this is where you can get moved up to the MC and feature spot. Usually after your performance the booker or club owner will come up to you with their thoughts; you'll either get passed or they will tell you to give it a few more months. You have to look at either of those answers in the right light. If you get passed, that's great! He or she will usually set up a time to call or to have you email your available dates to start working. If they give you some constructive criticism and tell you that you need more time, don't get down on yourself; you made it to that spot for a reason. Most of the time people don't get passed on their first guest spot and a lot of times an owner/booker won't come out and look at you until you have plenty of guest spots in the bag. You have to keep working hard and moving forward. Take the criticism with a grain of salt as well; the bookers do have an insight into the business, but when it comes to material, you have to determine for yourself what is good advice and what is bad advice. The one thing you get a lot of in comedy is advice, so you have to keep your thoughts straight, stay true to yourself and filter. Take only the advice that will serve you best.

## THE MC SPOT

The MC spot is your launching pad to the rest of your years as a standup and is the most notorious spot in comedy. It is unlike the feature and headline spot and I learned some very hard lessons about being a good MC. This is where the unsung hero is. As an MC you have three very important jobs:

1. Be funny
2. Keep the show moving and flowing properly
3. Get the club's announcements right

This is the order that is in every young comedian's mind, but it is actually the reverse of this. How do I know? Well, I almost lost my job as the Orlando Improv's MC. I was lucky enough early on in my career to host the Improv's shows every Sunday. I would get to the

club and the manager would come up and hand me the announcements. “OK, Ian, make sure you get these right. Here are the upcoming headliners and in between the feature and headliner, mention our sponsors.” “Sure thing!” I replied as I grabbed the piece of paper, barely paying attention because I was too busy going over material in my head while he was giving his directions to me. I had two or three weeks of getting the announcements mostly right and was doing quite well at the MC spot and getting stronger at this position. Then on Week 4, when the manager came up to me I was expecting him to say, “Ian! You’re doing an excellent job. We should pay you more money!” Instead I got “ Do want to keep your job as the MC here?! Then get my fucking announcements right! You forgot one of our sponsors and they were in the crowd last week and I had to deal with them, trying to keep them on board!” That was my first lesson that showed me that the words show business had a lot more to do with the word business than I imagined. My thought process instantly changed to, “Man, what I’m doing up here can cause this company to lose money!” I started to panic a little and the next week my announcements became the most important thing on my mind because there is no material to go over in my head if I’m not working! It’s OK to read the announcements, as you will have a lot thrown at you. The feature and the headliner are going to have you write down how they want you to bring them onto the stage; this is called an “intro.” You will also have to take care of other things – for example, you might get handed a note to say “happy birthday” to someone in the crowd and have to announce it and make it funny. Keep the crowd pumped up, be engaging, make sure you’re collecting comment cards for the club (not all clubs use comment cards), and be funny! Comment cards are feedback cards that are put out before the show on tables that ask about everything from the entertainment to the service to which comic they’d like to see in the future. These cards are gold to the clubs. You want to make sure you’re doing a great job on every level, so now you know to get the announcements right, and make sure you greet the headliner and feature – introduce yourself and let them know you’ll be the MC for the evening. Ask them for their intros, as almost all comics will have something they want said about them before they go on stage – where they’re from, what they’ve accomplished or something funny about themselves. Always bring a paper and pen with you because

you are responsible for writing it down. I always tell the MC to read my intro off the paper if he or she cannot remember; my last name is tough to pronounce, so I'd rather have the MC read my name than try to remember and stumble over it for a few seconds. This is where flow comes into the picture – getting the crowd into every comedian that comes up helps the show tremendously. I see so many MCs just bring the next comic up, doing nothing to get the energy of the room right, just finishing their set and saying, “Here’s Johnny McShiggins.” Here are a few things that will help with your time on stage and the other comedians’ sets, because you want the whole show to go well. You always want to be at your funniest but you need to set up the show to give the audience the best show possible.

Here’s the first thing: as the MC, you’re the first one up on stage. Most of the time the crowd is still talking, ordering drinks and eating food, so if you go directly into material, it’s hard to wrangle everyone in. When you get on stage, do something to get the crowd engaged. What I usually do is get the crowd to clap three times. You can do what feels right for you, but here’s what I usually do:

1. How’s everybody doing tonight?
2. Your feature tonight is John Doe, he’s at the back of the room – let him hear you!
3. Your headliner John Smith is also back there – let him hear it!

When someone starts to clap, people will look around and instinctively start to clap as well drawing all the attention to the stage. Now that you have their attention, you can go into your act or announcements, depending on how that particular club wants them done. Once again, it’s very important that you stick to your time. If you’re given 8 minutes, try to stay over or under by 1 minute. When you’re done, let the crowd know you’re done and get them clapping and cheering again for the feature act.

When you bring the feature act up, stay up there and shake his hand, and look at your watch to check the time and see approximately when he or she will be wrapping up. Once the feature is done and you go back up, this is when a majority of the clubs

want you to do their announcements; very rarely do you do time in between the feature and headliner and if you do, the club owner or headliner will let you know. After you bring up the headliner and he or she is done with the set, you may have a few more announcements and sometimes have to collect comment cards. Always do these things with enthusiasm – remember, clubs are always looking to keep the great MCs working! The MC spot is a skill that takes time to refine. Work hard at being a great MC because it will allow you to move to the next spot, the feature.

## FEATURE/MIDDLE

Every step up you try to take will be met with some resistance. Remember, if you are a great MC, they will try to keep you there as long as they can, even when they know you're ready to feature. Once you have a solid 20 to 30 minutes, you can make the push to feature. You can call or email the club and ask them to be given the opportunity. Some may give you the chance; others may tell you they want you to have a little more experience at the MC spot. If they give you a shot – CONGRATULATIONS! If they don't, it's always a good idea to talk to the features and headliners that already work that room for advice. In some cases, the headliner may bring you to open next time through or one of them can vouch for you. When someone asks me to vouch for them and I see talent and someone that I know can do the job, I send an email to the club. Most of the clubs I work for love this and I'm very careful who I send to them so that they will keep taking my word for good young talent. I'll get more in-depth about the networking aspect in another chapter.

Let's say you booked a feature date. In my opinion, this is the best spot in comedy. You don't have to carry the show like the headliner and you don't have to warm up the crowd or do announcements like the MC – you get to simply go on stage and hit the crowd with your funny for 25 minutes or so. The rule of thumb when you're middling and getting better as a comic is to open strong and close strong. I've seen instances where a comic was killing for their opening 5 minutes and closing 5 minutes, just filled with applause breaks and hysteria, and then was bombing in between each of those 5 minutes

with the crowd looking at them much like confused Pomeranians. The crowd still loved them and they will remember that person being funny because they opened and closed strong. Obviously you want to be as funny as possible for the entire time you're up there, but it's a work in progress. When you start at this spot and you're up there with all the material you have, you will have softer moments in your set. Maybe even a joke that doesn't fly at all. If this happens, don't panic or fly through the joke - have faith in it and continue to tell it with conviction. A crowd smells fear like a dog, so always show that you're in control. At this spot, you usually get a light 5 minutes before you have to wrap it up - again, be respectful of the time.

You will spend a number of years at this spot, for most people, a minimum of three years. This is where you will learn the most: you have a good amount of time on stage to keep your act growing and if you're working on the road a little, you can feel out the lifestyle. Not everyone is cut out for this; there are a lot of nights in hotel rooms (some not so nice) and long travel days in your car. This does wear on you and does take time to get used to. Being a feature can be exciting, getting to travel around the country and visiting places you never would go if it wasn't for comedy. That being said, working as a nationally touring feature will NOT sustain you financially and you will need supplemental income. Because of the travel and food costs, you will only be able to walk away with a small profit margin. It is not uncommon as you grow in the industry to move from a headlining position back to feature to work in front of celebrity acts. I still feature to work with celebrity acts; sometimes I do it just to fill weeks and sometimes I get to work with my heroes. But now, after all your years of feature work, you're thinking about headlining so here we go!

## HEADLINING/CLOSING

I won't spend too much time on headlining because by the time you're ready to close a room, this book won't be instrumental.

Headlining isn't for every comic. There are a lot of comics who get stuck featuring or want to stay at this position. The reason for this is that closing a show is the most stressful spot. The show lands on you – if you suck, the people have a terrible night that cost them money and the club manager/owner will be pissed! The other issue is being able to follow some very funny feature acts that can make your life difficult. After the crowd just got hammered by a great comic, the next comic up can have some difficulty through their set because the crowd has it in their mind, “How can anybody be funnier than that!” and then you have to be.

How do you know you're ready to headline? In most cases, three things can happen that will allow you to make the transition. The first is you're undeniably funny and making it difficult for the headliner to follow, so the club will make the decision to move you up to headliner. This is the best scenario; when a club owner/manager moves you up, he or she believes you're qualified for the job. If you have a week with six shows and two don't go as well as the other four, the likelihood of you getting rebooked is high as they know you're growing into the headliner position. The second is having a discussion with the manager/owner to start closing you. If you take this avenue, make sure you're in the position that you can really hit a crowd hard for 60 minutes and you can follow really funny middles. If you push yourself into the headliner position by asking the owner/manager to close you, one bad show against five great ones can move you back down to middle. I've done this with clubs before and they purposely put a headliner to open for me in the feature spot to make sure I can do the job. Talking yourself into this position is no easy task – remember, there are only 52 weeks in a year, so in turn only 52 spots for that position whether it be a week long or weekend room. Be persistent without being overbearing. You may have to go through the club as a middle a time or two and keep talking to the booker so they keep remembering the conversation; remember, these people talk to hundreds of comics in a year. The last way is through a referral. A headliner with a good reputation carries a lot of weight with bookers, so a good headliner that has confidence in the candidate will usually help with a recommendation if the comic that is middling is ready to take on the job of headliner.

## PROFESSIONALISM

This is something that can really set you apart from the rest of the field. A lot of comedians don't put a whole lot of thought into being professional, including me for my first four years of comedy, but I slowly figured out that the more professional I was, the more professionally I was treated. I believe the one thing comics constantly lose sight of is that in this business, being a funny comic is only a small percentage of the overall picture. Yes, this is show business, but it's the last word that is important to everybody on the other side of this industry, from club owners, agents, and managers to producers. Here are some basics for professionalism:

Always show up to the club at the time they request  
Clubs will have you come a half hour to an hour before showtime.  
Always be on time. If you do run across a circumstance where you're running late, call the club and let them know.

### 2. Do not go on stage drunk

You will work with many comics that like to tip back a few cold ones before a show or get sloshed. This is something you want to stay away from! Being drunk on stage slows response time and can play havoc on your timing; you want to stay as alert and aware as you can on that stage.

### 3. Be courteous to the staff

The staff is at the club day in and day out. If you treat them poorly, your name will be brought up to the manager at some point and if the reviews are bad, the manager may not have you back, even if you killed. Also, tip the staff well, and be friendly. They have the ear of the manager. If you're friendly and tip heavily, the staff will start asking when you're coming back.

### 4. Stick to your time on stage

Time is very important in clubs! Tables need to be turned over, and if the show goes too long the crowd can get worn out. Whatever

time the club or the headliner gives you, stick to it the best you can. If you go over or under by 2 minutes, you're OK, nobody is going to get mad at you. If you're 5-plus minutes over, you will have a problem. If it happens in a few different clubs, you can get a bad reputation amongst the club owners and your peers as it is a very small community.

5. Spend time at the end of the show to shake hands with the audience

This can be difficult for some comics; talking and shaking hands after a show can be draining, especially after you exerted all your energy on stage (Google serotonin!). However, handing out cards and talking to the people that loved your show is the best way to build some fans. If they feel a connection with you, give them a way to stay in touch with you by way of your website, Facebook or any social media you're into.

## DRESS CODE

As far as dress code goes, I think its important at the MC and the feature spot to dress up a little. Some club bookers look at showing up to their club in a T-shirt as disrespectful. A button-up shirt and a nice pair of jeans and shoes (no sneakers) are a good place to start. Most clubs appreciate the fact that you took the time to put some thought into your dress. Once you're headlining, you can dress more the way you feel comfortable, wearing clothes that fit your onstage persona.

## MARKETING

To start getting paid work, there are other basic things you will need: headshots, website, business cards and social media

accounts. You're going to have to spend a little money in some of these areas, but they pay off. The first thing you need is a headshot. It costs between \$150 to \$300 to get them done. Take some time to figure this one out – look at your favorite celebrity comic's head shots. You don't want a generic smiling headshot in black and white, you want something that shows your personality. You want to make sure you have something you're going to like because you will have them for a few years. I also think it's important to get new head shots every two to three years. As your act grows and you grow older, you want to make sure that what you look like in real life is as close to that picture as possible. I can't tell you how many times when I was featuring that I'd show up to a club, see the headshot of the headliner, and upon meeting them realize they haven't updated it since the Reagan administration.

I know many comedians that just have Facebook and Twitter accounts, but most clubs still want their comics to have websites. That way they can link it to their site and people can browse through your video and tour dates; this will bring more people into the club, which is the end goal for you and for the club. There are many great website builders I have listed at the back of this book which cost around \$10 a month and are easy to use. With these, you can make a nice, professional-looking site; be sure you build a site that fits your personality. Go to some of your favorite comedians' pages and see how it suits them; use their sites for inspiration. Keeping up with a site can be a challenge if you're doing it yourself, as you need to keep updating content to keep people coming back and checking out what you're up to. Build multiple pages – you don't want to have a one-page site. Here are some great pages to have on a site: Tour Dates, Blog, Pictures (with fans), Bio and Headshot, Videos, Merchandise. Also link all of your social media to your website so people have an easy way to keep up with you. Having a website is a great tool, so spend time a little time every week keeping it up!

Marketing toward clubs is directly connected to professionalism. Even if you have great references, the booker can feel uneasy about booking you if you don't have your ducks in a row. Here's what you send when you're trying to get into a club:

Headshot

## Bio

Video link to your comedy

Blurb about why they should book you

Everything is done mostly through email; rarely will a club ask for hard copies of your promo package. Since you have your headshots and they look amazing, what about your bio? Your bio should be unique and a solid paragraph long. So what's in a bio? It's a paragraph about what you do on stage, what you talk about and a few of your accomplishments. You should also constantly rewrite this as well. Get creative and stay away from generic words and phrases like "rising star" and "original"; using a thesaurus in this case helps. There are many ways of saying the same thing while still being unique to your own personality. Here is my current bio, saying those things without using the words.

BIO:

Ian has transformed his act over his career into a meaningful, insightful look at himself and humanity while still being silly, charming and just plain goofy. Ian started his career in Orlando and now makes Los Angeles his home. He takes you through his experiences of his old life where beer landed Ian at a military base wearing nothing but his underwear and Reeboks to growing up and dealing with the tough subject of mental health. You've seen Ian in the movie National Lampoon's *Robodoc*, heard him on *The Chatter* with Robin Quivers on the Howard Stern Network, and he's a part of Comics on Duty entertaining the troops.

I try to be as descriptive as possible and let the audience know what they're in for if they decide to see my show.

Video is very important, not only to the booker but also to people that will search for you before coming to the show. I see many good videos with bad sound – this is a huge NO-NO! This is what you use to get work or have people come out to see the show, so you must make sure it's of high quality. The best thing to do is patch into the audio board for sound so it's a direct pickup from the mic. Also, spend some time before the show, before people even get into the room, and have the audio/lighting tech set the lighting like it's a

show to test your camera and make sure it is getting a good clean shot. If you walk in and set it up while the house lights are on, it can ruin your shoot. There are some clubs that just downright suck to shoot video in. There are also some clubs that will shoot for you for a price; it's usually cheap and you should do it. You need to get together a few different edits of your videos for different uses. These include a short three-minute clip that features your best material for people who may want to come out and see your show to view, and a five-minute clip that's unedited in length for comedy festivals and club bookers because that's generally what they want to see. There are some clubs that want to see your entire set as well; for that I have a Vimeo account I send them to it because I can keep it private and upload the entire set. You don't want all your material out there for everybody to see – save that for your specials!

The quick blurb you want to send the club usually outlines the clubs you're working for, that you're professional, and some references from other comics and club owners. A majority of bookers will contact your references. Don't make the blurb too long, as they get a ton of emails every day. It's unusual to get an email back right away; you have to be persistent. Write down when you sent the email and every week or every 2 weeks, send another email – a follow-up email asking if they had a chance to review you yet. If you do use a reference, be sure to ask the person you are getting the reference from if that's OK. I've had a few comics come up to me after the fact and say, "Hey, Ian, I used you as a reference for this club. Hope that's cool?" That doesn't bother me, but I am honest – if the booker calls, I will let them know exactly what I think of the person and their act. I take giving references very seriously: if I have sent a club fifteen great comics and on the sixteenth, give them one that bombs, my word to that club has been destroyed and I won't be able to help out any other comics.

Getting booked is the toughest part of this job and requires diligence. Don't be afraid to make contact multiple times; the more they see your name, the more they will start to remember you. Finding the right balance with each booker will vary.

Now that you have your promo together, social media is one of the most important marketing tools, as I'm sure you know. It's constant

contact with people that enjoy your show, want to follow you and know what you're up to. There are so many tools out there and you should be using all of them – luckily, they are mostly linked together now. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vine & YouTube should be used constantly, and updating and creating material specifically for these avenues will help tremendously with getting your fans to come back and see you next time you come through. Make them all uniform; have the same profile picture on all of these. You're a brand, no different from Pepsi. You have to keep yourself in people's minds; that's why Pepsi still spends millions of dollars on marketing when everybody already knows what Pepsi is!

## NETWORKING

This is the quickest way to get into new clubs, by far the biggest obstacle you'll face in this industry. When you first try to get work, it's much like coming out of college and at every turn you find "experience required." So the question is, how do I get a job when I don't have the experience? Here are some answers that will help you get past that hurdle. The most important word in getting booked is networking. Networking is how most touring comedians get their work – this is why it is so important not to walk around with a chip on your shoulder. Always be nice to your fellow comedians. It will be hard sometimes to be polite, but this is about reputation.

The more people know your name, the more people will talk about you. Early on, the best way to network is to start an open mic; it's easy to do, but hard to start a great one. You can go to any bar or coffee shop and ask to set up an open mic. It costs the venue nothing and there's a hope that it will bring customers in. One of my favorite open mics is a coffee shop on Sunday nights – it's been going for ten years and the place is packed every time I go there. When you set up an open mic, you are in direct contact with your fellow open micers and the road comics that are coming through. Running an open mic takes dedication and patience, but the payoff for you is worth it. Networking with fellow comedians that are also starting out is extremely important; these people will become your allies. You will help one another with material, put shows together,

and support each other as you go through the different tiers of comedy. On a personal side note, be mindful of who you hang out with. Stay around other positive comedians, as being around negativity will cause you to become negative as well – misery loves company. I'm a person that constantly tries to surround myself with creative, motivated, and happy people so I feel more inspired and happy throughout my day. From time to time you'll need your comedian friends to lean on, as comedy will test your limits and you have to be mentally strong to have longevity in this industry. It's imperative to have good friends in the same field to help you through it.

Networking goes into the clubs as well; the bartenders and wait staff can help you get back to the club too. Before we go into that, there is an unwritten rule (and in some cases a written rule), and it is DO NOT sleep with the wait staff! Treat them with kindness and respect; if the staff likes you, they have the booker's ear. A lot of times they might bring your name up to the booker. "So when's Tom coming back?" The staff at a club can be instrumental in helping you get back to the club and avoid being lost in the shuffle. I know this may sound a little out there, but it's about giving yourself every opportunity you can to keep yourself working.

## GETTING BOOKED

While networking is the quickest way of getting work, there are other avenues you can take. Make a list of clubs and start finding out how they book their comics. Each club has a different way; some look at your promo package and some want you to do a guest spot. If you don't know how a club books, make a phone call and ask for the information. If they want a promo package, send them an email with all the info. This is where persistence comes in. Because bookers get so many emails, you have to set a schedule to keep emailing them. Once you send the initial information, send another email in a week or so asking them if they've had a chance to review it yet. If there is still no response, keep emailing every two weeks. You will eventually get a response; there are times where you will

get an email back saying they aren't looking for new comics or you're not right for the room or you may send emails for a year with no response at all. Do not let this sway you, though. Never take it personally, just keep moving forward. You're going to get a lot of no's in this business; you just keep working for the yes's. If they only book through guest spots, bring your promo package and a date book. If your set goes well, you can hand them your material and possibly get a booking right on the spot. This is fairly common in the industry, as they want to see how your material does with their crowds. If you're starting out, pick the smaller clubs, the weekend C rooms, as these tend to be easier to get into. These rooms are great places to get better, because the rooms can be a little tougher crowd-wise. Remember, bookers get dozens of emails a day from comics trying to get work, so keep in the forefront of your mind, "What's going to get my email a response?"

## FILLING YOUR SCHEDULE

We are now in the digital age where everyone relies on the calendar app on their smart phones. It's a great idea to still keep a hard copy in a calendar book in case something happens to your phone or calendar app. In my opinion, early in your career take as much work as you can handle from as many different clubs as you can get into. It's nearly impossible to make a living, but you're trying to get better and the only way is more stage time. Sometimes it won't make sense to break even or even lose money, but you're trying to build your business. Once you increasingly start working for clubs, you can start to route work so you can begin making money. Routing your work can be complex and difficult but as you work for more and more clubs it gets easier. Lets say you book a gig in Detroit and you live in Atlanta. You want to try and book a week before and after in between the two cities. So your three weeks on the road will allow you to be more profitable as you don't have to keep traveling back and forth. You will have days off, as you get to know different comedians in your travels its very common to spend your off nights crashing at another comics pad. It can take a very long time before you can make a living just off of comedy, so

working as much as possible, even if you lose a little, will get you to making a living telling jokes much faster. When you're starting to get paid work, just be concerned with working steadily and keeping your schedule full.

## MERCHANDIZING

Clubs do not pay for travel and travel costs can be very high, so many comedians turn to selling merchandise after shows. Most comedians sell T-shirts, DVDs and CDs. This is a great way to help earn a living at comedy much faster. There are weeks where my sales are more than the pay from the club. In my experience, T-shirts sell the best as they are a great impulse buy. You can make T-shirt with a saying on it, something from your act or a graphic that depicts something from your act. I use graphics on the shirts I sell; you want something you're proud of so you don't mind being behind a counter selling after a show. If you're not a natural salesperson or don't have any experience selling, the idea can feel awkward and it takes some time to get used to. But the extra money makes a huge difference in your bottom line. Always set up your merchandise close to where the audience is leaving; most clubs have a designated area for you. Track your sales by writing them down in a book. Always take half your money and put it away to pay for future reorders and taxes; you never want to put yourself in a place where you need more product and you don't have the funds to reorder. If you are selling a CD or DVD, make sure it's of high quality - I've had people being wary about buying my DVD because of past experiences buying from a fellow comedian and feeling ripped off because the recording was terrible.

## GOALS AND PHILOSOPHY

I'm a firm believer in setting goals for oneself. In this business it can be easy to get used to staying on the road, making money working, and not attaining your original goals. Write down ten things every year you would like to accomplish; they don't have to be huge goals but it can be as simple as getting up early every day to write for 10

minutes. When you can visually see these goals, they make you accountable. After writing down your goals, hang them up in a place where you can see them so you have to look at them every day. It's proven that doing this gives you a much higher chance of obtaining your goals. As your career grows, you'll be able to define which aspect of comedy you would most like to be a part of, whether it be writing on a sitcom, starring in a sitcom, growing a fan base or moving to L.A. or New York City. Just how far do you want to take this?

When it comes to moving to one of the big cities, some move right away with no experience and some take time to try the road. My train of thought is, everyone has their own set of character traits, motivation and natural talent. If you feel giving L.A. or N.Y.C. a shot right out of the gate is right for you, go for it! It's much harder to get on the open mics and get things moving, but the tradeoff is getting into position to be seen by producers and being in a place that can challenge you creatively. If you choose the route of starting in your city and moving up the ranks to working road comic, then when the time comes to move to one of the big cities (if your goal is to advance your career beyond road comedian), you'll be more seasoned for the stage and will have some contacts already living in the city to help you navigate around the comedy scene.

This is an industry where rejection is at every corner, and having goals to shoot for will help you stay focused and thinking positively even when something doesn't turn out. In my personal experience, comedy has made me take a hard look at myself over many years. I write stories from my life – some are traumatic stories and making them funny for complete strangers is a very odd thing, so when the crowd doesn't connect with my vulnerability it can make me question myself and humanity. This is more than just a job of going out and telling jokes – it tests your outlook, strength, patience and ability to maintain a positive mental state constantly. It is important to put certain things in place to keep a positive perspective and motivation as you move forward, otherwise it can be easy to fall into depression or become jaded and callous. There are some great books written with the artist and human being in mind that help keep things in check with a positive outlook as you move through

this journey; I have listed them in the References section. It's very easy when things don't turn out the way you plan to get into a negative space and dwell on it. If you're willing to put in the time, make some sacrifices and stay persistent, you will surprise yourself with what you can accomplish.

This book is based on my opinion, which has been informed by my own life experiences. Take from it what will help you with your goals, and discard the rest. What I really hope to get across to everyone who reads this is, be humble, professional, good to one another, and not too hard on yourself. I'll leave you with this... If I could write the world's shortest book on success, it would only have three words in it:

Persistence.

Hard Work.

There are the basic tools to help give you a push in the right direction to give standup a try. Good luck!!!

## REFERENCES

### BUILD YOUR OWN WEBSITE

Webs.com

Wix.com

### BOOKS TO READ

*The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron

*The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz

*Daring Greatly* by Brene Brown

*UnMarketing* by Scott Stratten

