

On figuring out what success looks like



Comedian and writer Patti Harrison reflects on the things that inform her comedy, the concessions you make in order to make a living, and being honest about your own definition of success.

June 25, 2019 -

As told to Kailee McGee, 2738 words.

Tags: [Acting](#), [Writing](#), [Comedy](#), [Identity](#), [Inspiration](#), [Income](#), [Success](#).

Growing up, what was your family's relationship to the arts? Were you raised to care about art?

My mom is admittedly not very artistic. I used to ask her to draw sharks for me, because she was so bad at drawing them, and the way she drew them made me laugh every time. All of the fins would be backwards; the triangles would be facing the wrong way. In hindsight, I realize that's a very cruel thing—to have your child laugh at your artwork. As a child, I was a very gifted drawer. I was like a child prodigy, but then I leveled out, and I just became as talented as everyone else. I just thought it was so funny that my mom could not grasp... every time, the fins being backwards. It's probably why she resents me so much and why our relationship has deteriorated but...

I would say I got whatever creative genes from my dad. He was a soldier in the US army, which is how he met my mom, and he's always done blue-collar work. He's a mechanic, but he was a good drawer and loved playing guitar. I'm the youngest in my family, and I have older sisters, all of them except one could draw really well. And the one who can't draw well is very kind and cool and has her life together, and all the ones who can draw well are really mean, terrible, vicious bitches. They're all... I'm joking. I really love them, and they help me every day, and I'm grateful for them and all that they've done for me. Yeah. I grew up very poor, and no one did anything especially artistic, for sure. My mom also had a blue-collar job and still does.

When did you realize you were an artist?

When I was a little kid. When people would give me attention for what I would draw, and I started this gifted arts kids program. Comedy-wise, I didn't start that until college, but it was kind of the same sort of impetus of noticing, "Oh, people think that I'm funny." I've always made a ton of jokes, but I never really thought that would be a career path for me. Then in college, my friend was like, "There's an improv group on campus, you should audition for it." And I did, and I got it, and then I did my first show, and I was like, "This is really fun. It feels very validating. It's validating the most twisted, deformed parts of my little tiny measly piss-ass ego. This is massaging part of my brain that is a deeply dark part of my id." It felt nice.

If you're at a party, what do you say to someone who asks, "What do you do?"

It depends on the context of who's asking me. If it's someone that I feel like is trying to network with me or something, I'll lie, but I usually just say I'm a comedian. I write. If they ask how I make money, I say that I write or I act.

If you were to lie, what would you say as a lie?

A lot of times in LA when I lie about what I do, I say that I'm a copywriter for an advertising brand that does a lot of stuff for cosmetics, specifically soaps and moisturizers and make-up. If they press a little more about it, I say that it's kind of morally compromising because advertising is ultimately not great, so I can make some made-up world and also make myself look cool. But, I would say comedian before anything else.

What are you working on right now?

I write on a Netflix cartoon called *Big Mouth*, and I am acting on the Hulu show *Shrill*. That's it for right now. I haven't been doing a lot of live shows. I don't do much stand-up lately. I'm falling behind on that. I feel like I should be doing more live shows, especially as someone who identifies as a comedian and is not doing any comedy.

The first time I saw you perform, you were doing a character bit about being a book editor's assistant or something like that, and I was enamored with your specific and strange and convincing sense of humor. Talk to me about what you think is funny.

Just generally across the board, I tend to think there's a hierarchy of what I'm attracted to comedically, and it's usually women. I think women are funnier, so I'm usually drawn to projects done by women, but I guess that's not saying what I actually think is funny...

I think dumb people who have the worst opinion you can have, but really earnestly believe that they're doing the right thing in an optimistic way, are really funny. A lot of what I do and what makes me laugh are those kinds of characters. They are not my actual thoughts. It's more of, through the lens of me playing a stupid person who is saying something wildly not okay, but with this kind of commercialized optimism that's informed by a culture fully built on commercials and performing happiness.

People getting the tone wrong will elicit laughter in me. I love when someone applies a bizarre lack of urgency to something that should be more urgent, or vice versa, if someone's way too upset over something very small. A lot of it's tonal, which is hard to explain in an interview or through text. It's a lot of the way something is said, versus the actual joke, which is something I'm learning now in a writer's room, where I have to be able to write a joke. The words have to be funny, and I'm like, "Oh, I'm so used to just saying things." There's a lot of subtext in the way something can be said.

Also, any animals making noises. If an animal can scream, I think it's so funny. There's this video that comes up a lot called "[33 Screaming Frogs](#)," and I revisit it about once every two months. It's just a bunch of frogs screaming, and they sound like little people. It's very scary, and it makes me laugh. I also love videos of turtles and tortoises humping shoes, and the little noises that they make when they have sex. It sounds like the breath leaving a baby for the last time. They make this noise when they're fucking, and it's like [turtle imitation]. It's the craziest most subtle noise. It's very breathy.

How different is your public persona from the real you?

As a comedian, for the most part, I feel lucky because I can kind of be more unabashedly myself, because I profit from that. I make a lot of jokes in my personal life. I'm pretty crass online and offline, but I don't think I'm as sexually graphic in day-to-day conversations. What's been happening more often recently is people who know of my comedy or like me online will come up to me and say something very sexually graphic. And out of context, if I don't know that they know my comedy or something, it's very jarring and makes me really uncomfortable and feel bad. So, I'm like, "Okay. I've created this situation where I've emboldened people to come up to me and start talking about getting bare-backed 'til they throw up blood." Now, I'm trying to learn how to communicate and be like, "Hey, I'm still a stranger. I don't necessarily think that's very funny if I don't know you." So yeah.

In person, I'm more nervous. I make a lot of jokes when I'm nervous, so if I'm feeling nervous in my daily life, then you'll be hearing me make a lot of jokes. I would say that I'm just stressed out a lot, so I feel like my

energy is more nervous. And, online it's very goofy and silly. I guess I'm not pleasant to be around is what I'm saying. I'm really fucking hard to be around. I'm really a drain. I'm a drain on everyone around me—mentally, emotionally, physically. But, online I'm really funny, so that's cool.

What is your relationship like with your phone?

It's bad. I'm on it way too much. I lost my phone for eight hours when I was in New York a couple months ago, and I had, for the first time in my life ever, sent a sext, like a sexy picture, and my phone was unlocked. I was having a meltdown about that, but also I couldn't navigate. As soon as my phone was gone, I was like, "How do I go to the street? How do I go through the door?" I was so over-encumbered not knowing how to navigate without my phone that I was like, "I would die if I didn't have this phone." I would somehow wander into, I don't know, a crocodile enclosure or some shit.

I would find a way to die if I didn't have my phone, just because I'm dependent on it so much that—and I haven't even processed it because everyone else is depending on their phones, too, so I don't feel bad about always looking at my phone—but it's like this is really affecting my brain chemistry and how I feel about myself. I'm more anxious and nervous and depressed than I have been in a while. And oh, it's because I'm on my phone all the time. It's all stuff that when I think about it my eyes glaze over, I go far, far away.

You act, write, and perform on stage. Which medium is the most creatively draining for you?

It really depends. What I'm finding now is my job in the writer's room is pretty mentally taxing, just because it's a comedy show and there are a lot of jokes, and I'm working in a room full of people who have been comedy writers for much longer than I've been, so they're all really sharp and really fast. I'm pitching with them all day long. It is much more tiring than I thought it would be because by the end of the day, all of my creative energy is going into coming up with jokes for the show. It is really, really fun, but there are days when I just feel like I have nothing. I have no juice. That's why I haven't been doing very many live shows.

Acting is like... there are definitely things that I've worked on in the past that I didn't have a good time doing. Those things were usually frustrating because I was having a hair and make-up meltdown because I have body dysmorphia stuff, so doing hair and make-up shit is always stressful at some point. Sometimes it's been really stressful to the point where I'd get petrified and I feel like I look so weird and bad that I can't perform. Those are times when it feels most exhausting and like, why am I doing this? *Shrill* was so fun to work on, and it was so easy and not creatively draining. The hair and make-up experience was amazing, because everyone was very open and flexible. It was the most control I've had on how I looked while working on something, which was really nice.

It just depends on if I think what I'm working on is good. Not everything you work on (especially as someone who needs to make money and isn't making a lot of money) is gonna be a passion dream project. You're going to work on things that you're like, "I think this is fine," or "I think this is bad, but I'm not going to say anything about it." And those are times when I think it takes a lot more energy to give myself pep talks to keep going and whatnot.

How do you fight getting burned out?

Doing stuff that is unrelated to what I'm working on is important. I really like spending quality time with people. I really like meeting up with friends and hanging out, sitting in people's houses. Just sitting on the couch and watching movies. That's my dream. It's just perfect.

And, watching something that isn't necessarily in the vein of what I'm working on. So yeah, I've been watching *Chernobyl* a lot, and that's a very dark show and based on real events, so it puts things in perspective for me. I'm like, "Oh, I'm worrying about this little thing," or "I'm worrying about how someone didn't think something I said was funny." Then I'm like, "Oh, at any moment there could be a nuclear holocaust and all my skin is just going to slough off and I won't even realize it's happening until my skin's already gone, and I'm standing at Intelligentsia waiting for my matcha and all the skin on my face just like dissolves away and everyone can see my

raw gums." So that's nice.

Trying to find other things to do that aren't comedy has been good, but it is also not foolproof, and there are times when I am just completely burned out, and I'm not doing my best. That just oscillates.

What does being successful mean to you?

That, too, depends on how you're talking about it. If someone asked me if I feel successful, then I would say sometimes I do. Like, okay, I set out to get a job in comedy and pay my bills through it, and I'm doing that. So, I succeeded, and I feel lucky to have that.

There were also times when I didn't feel successful because I was working on things that I didn't like, and I wasn't happy, and I felt like it was morally compromising. I was questioning, "What the hell am I doing? Why am I doing this?" Being successful is succeeding at what you set out to do—if you're happy with what you've done and the effort that you've made, if you get that good chemical feeling in your brain, then *that* is success. You did something right, because your brain is letting out little jizz chemicals inside that make you feel a sense of reward.

Even if you're someone who's a comedian, but you're not making a living doing comedy—you have a day job, but you feel happy, and you have balance and you have a good routine... not a comedy routine, but a schedule. Your comedy routine should be really good, and it should be really tight and concise and full of observations that other people haven't thought of yet. If you feel like you're in a good groove, then that's an accomplishment and then if you actually accomplish stuff, that's literal success. You've done something right, if that makes sense.

What does happiness look like for you?

When I can go down the list of people in my life currently, and check off that their feelings aren't hurt. Like, is there anyone in my life right now whose feelings I hurt? No? Okay great!

This is you asking me this question now. I'm so up and down that if you asked me this next week, I could be like, "It's all fucking twisted bullshit. No one's real. I just want to meet someone who's real!" Said me, while smoking a Juul and wearing thigh-high boots with a slick, high pony.

Happiness is when you have stuff to look forward to... which might be a bad way to be happy because it's like you're not being present, and you're not being in the now. But, I always feel giddy when I'm like, "Ooh, something's coming up this weekend." Because it means that there's more on the way. I don't think I necessarily have an issue being present. Like I said, I like quality time. If I'm alone for a long time, I start to feel depressed, and I feel happiest when I've hung out with people. So yeah, if any of that is coherent, that would be amazing.

Patti Harrison Recommends:

-[Chernobyl](#) on HBO

-[16 Shots](#) documentary

-[Hail Satan](#) documentary

-Highly recommends writing a song

-Wiping every time you release stool

Name

Patti Harrison

Vocation

comedian, writer, actor

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