

# Hannibal Buress on just trying to be funny



May 18, 2017 - Hannibal Buress is an American stand-up comedian, actor, writer, and producer.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2057 words.

Tags: [Comedy](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

## What do you tell young comics asking for advice?

There is pretty simple advice you can give for stand up. Just write a lot, be comfortable, record your sets, listen to them, pay attention to what works. Do as many sets you can. It's straightforward. At the basic level, there's no getting around that stuff. Then a lot of it is luck. Eventually you get put in a position where things fall together and then you can kind of ride that momentum.

For example, I got my *SNL* writing job because another comic was supposed to be on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*. That person got sick and canceled, so they hit me up the day before. I was in New York already so I quickly prepped my set and then did the set on the show and got invited to meet with Seth Meyers afterwards. He offered me the job right there. There's a lot of stuff, well not a lot, but a few kind of coincidental things that happened in order for me to get that job. Would I have gotten a job like that, or progressed in the industry in the same way, without those things happening? Maybe, but who knows.

My practical advice for a young comic is if you want to do this, *do something*. Do a lot of it. If you want to build an internet presence, then tweet *this* amount of times, tweet *this many* jokes or post *this many* times. There's different things like that you can do. Approach it like a job and take it seriously. Also, don't be an asshole to people, but that doesn't guarantee success, you know.

Also, collaborating with friends is important. I was never too much into the improv/sketch world, but I've done a few videos and different things with other comedians. Looking back, I wish that was something that I did more of. Just film stuff with friends and see what sticks. That's how *Broad City* started. They decided to make their own thing and do a web series and then it became a show. There's definitely some merit to those methods.

## Many of the comedians I've spoken to have mentioned the need to be a jack of all trades in order to make a living. Do you find that to be true?

I could make a solid living if I just focused on acting and television and didn't do anything else. I could do that. Or if I only wanted to do stand-up and tours—that would be exhausting, but I could do that. I just go where the work is. The opportunities pop up, you know what I mean? You pick the things you think are going to be fun and dope and do that, so it's not really a thing of, "I got to do this to pay the bills." I've got an incredibly low overhead. I don't have any kids. I don't have crazy mortgages. I don't own a car. So if I didn't work for the next couple months, I'd be fine. Luckily that's not the case. Work comes in and I try to take the good opportunities and have fun.

## You had the experience of working as a writer for television, both on *30 Rock* and *SNL*. What was your takeaway from writing material for other people?

It's been a long time. I was writing for *30 Rock* back in 2011. I wasn't great at it. Mostly I was helping to come up with storylines. I had no experience in that world, but I appreciated the opportunity at *30 Rock* and the people I met. Also, they put me on camera a bunch—they had me playing the homeless man—so that was kind of my first regular on-camera acting stuff. Mostly it's been cool to see how far everyone's careers have progressed over the past eight years. There were people in that writing room with me who are directing movies now, which is amazing.

## You are, first and foremost, a stand-up. How do you prepare for a gig if you haven't gone up in a while? Do you have a certain way you go about it? Do you make notes or just sort of wing it?

I was on tour for most of the fall, so I have my show kind of set. There's a couple newer things I'll work in. I mean, I still know how to do it. I'm probably better if I've had four or five warm up shows working my way up to a big gig, but even if I'm rusty I'm still probably better than a lot of people. *[Laughs]*

I usually always have some new ideas to work out. If I'm going into a city, especially a big city, like Miami for instance, you play off the fact that each city has its own quirks. There's stuff to talk about. All the shitty, ugly condo buildings they're building there. The nightlife, how everybody's late, surgery, terrible people. So I'll have some specific Miami material and things like that. I try to keep it fresh for myself. If you have some good local stuff or a good city-specific topic it can make the set more organic and kind of drive the energy a little bit. From the top you get those big "we know exactly what you're talking about" laughs.

You know they got a 24-hour nightclub in Miami? I remember leaving there one time at seven in the morning. It's broad daylight now and the weirdest part is that there's people *showing up* at that time. It's seven in the morning but it's still being run like a nightclub and people are saying nightclub stuff like, "Hey I'm on the list!" and blah, blah, blah at seven in the morning! For me, just watching somebody talk to a bouncer that's behind the rope and trying to scam their way into a nightclub at 7am in broad daylight is very jarring but also very funny. Of course I'm gonna talk about that.

## Does doing years of stand-up just sort of naturally prepare you to be an actor?

I don't think so. I'm still weirded out by it. The movie making part is still weird. Stand up and other stuff is cool, but when I'm in movies, I'm like, "What? They want me to do another one and I don't even have to audition? What?" That is crazy to me, because I remember earlier on in my career, one of my first agents would always send me scripts and stuff to go out for auditions. I would say, "What? Why would you want me to try out for this, I'm a comedian! I can't be in movies and shit. I can't do that shit."

Being in movies is a weird thing. I think just doing it more has made it easier. I'm the first to admit that I'm still learning. On this last movie, there was a couple times where I was like, "Am I really embodying this stepfather character? Seriously, am I doing this right? Because I have not changed my voice or anything for any of these takes. The only thing different about me is that I now have on terrible jeans." I watch a lot of film and TV, obviously. So based on that I just show up and try to do what they want. I just try and be funny. Like okay, *that's* what you do when you want to show an emotion? I'm really jealous of actors that can make their nostrils flare. Real moves like that. I'm like, oh that, "Oh that nostril flare, that was good!" Obviously I'm coming to it like a comedian, but you know...there's no secret answer. You just do it. You just keep trying to be funny and do a good job.

## How do you feel about people recording your stand-up sets? I know a lot of comedians get bummed about trying out new material out of fear that it's immediately gonna show up on YouTube.

Yeah, I don't even know how much of it actually shows up on YouTube. Sometimes people post it, but like... I did a pop up in Atlanta last week. I popped in at a spot and this girl was filming or taking a picture but I was like *fuck it*. I was in the middle of a bit and I kind of caught her out of the side of my eye filming and then I thought to myself, Do I feel like jumping out of this bit to tell her to stop? I have done that numerous times at shows. I've done it a lot where I'm just like, *what are you doing?* It's always funny. I react in different ways. I'm all over the place when it comes to that, but mostly you have to learn to either ignore it and not let it fuck up your set or make it funny when you do call someone out.

## Comedy albums seem to be having a kind of renaissance right now and you yourself have released several of them. Did you grow up listening to comedy records? And what makes a good comedy album?

To be honest, I wasn't really that into stand-up until I actually started doing it. I knew of it and would see it on TV sometimes, but I didn't get into it. I don't know if it was high

school or grade school, but I remember other kids quoting stuff from Def Comedy Jams. "Oh, did you see what he said on the Comedy Jam?" I didn't want to do stand-up until I went to an open mic and a friend was doing it. I was already doing some acting stuff so I wanted to try it out. Then I pretty quickly got very into it.

The same friend who took me to that open mic night had Napster and I remember that he ripped the audio of Dave Chappelle's first special, *Killin' Them Softly*. I had that. I bought Chris Rock DVDs. I bought George Carlin box sets. I was trying to devour whatever I could. I remember that I would Google "stand-up comedy," and just whatever came up, I would read about it or listen to it online. I became a student of it once I started doing it myself.

**How long did it take before you felt like stand up was something you were good at?**

Luckily, I started in my college town, Carbondale, Illinois, so I had some rough shows down there but a lot of the shows would go well—probably better than they were supposed to go—because it's a small town and there's not really a lot of entertainment options there. Also, I was able to draw from the college experience, so I had these jokes about the fake security guards we had on campus. Our college mascot was a Saluki, which is some kind of Egyptian hunting dog, they had these fake security guards called the Saluki Patrol that were supposed to enforce the rules on campus but everybody hated them. So I had Saluki Patrol jokes. I had cafeteria food jokes and all this college stuff that you know, if you're performing for other 19 and 20 year olds, it goes over pretty well. It was easy to get press back then in the college paper and in the local papers. If I was putting on a show I would just email writers or the editor of the paper and say, "Hey, I'm doing this. Can you write about it?" Then they would write about it.

It was easy to build up a following. We used to do shows at this place called Longbranch Coffeehouse and it would always be packed. We charged something like \$3 and we'd get like 80 people. It was a fun time. Lots of new comedians being average as fuck but getting lots of love. That's just part of the process. You gotta be average as fuck for a while before you can get good at it.

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