

# Sandra Bernhard on embracing your mistakes



September 30, 2021 - Comedian, actress, singer, and writer Sandra Bernhard first burst into popular consciousness in 1983 playing a kidnapper named Masha in Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy*. In the years since, Bernhard has literally done a bit of everything—from playing television's first openly out lesbian on *Roseanne* to performing her one-woman show on Broadway (while pregnant!), to currently hosting her own show, *Sandyland*, on Sirius Radio. *Without You I'm Nothing*—the 1990 film based on Bernhard's one-woman show of the same name—remains one of the greatest cultural documents of its time, combining stand up comedy, outré performance art, and the greatest cover of Prince's "Little Red Corvette" ever committed to film.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3044 words.

Tags: [Comedy](#), [Beginnings](#), [Identity](#), [Success](#).

**These days the idea of experimental, free-form observational comedy isn't that unusual, but I can imagine that back when you started out it was really unheard of. Did people think you were insane?**

When I started performing nobody really understood what I was doing because it was a real hybrid of all the different styles of performing that I loved—from musical comedy to rock-and-roll to Bette Midler—bigger than life entertainment. It was a mix of doing some throwbacks to Vegas entertainers mixed with edgy comedy, everything was thrown into the soup container and mixed up. Anything that influenced me, anything that I loved, I would put in. I didn't even know what I was doing; I was just reflecting what I loved to do, which was entertain. I loved everything from Burt Bacharach to the Detroit sound, Motown, whatever... it was all the musical styles and old movies and everything that I grew up on. You know, after growing up in the Midwest and moving to Arizona when I was a kid, I absorbed all these different things. It was like a road map of everywhere I'd been.

**How did you find people who understood where you were coming from?**

It was crazy, to be honest. I was a manicurist in Beverly Hills and I met this woman named Judy Vallen whose parents were vaudevillians and she had left her husband and kids in Ohio and moved back to Hollywood to pursue her career as a lounge singer. I was hanging out with her. I don't even know how we started hanging out. I guess maybe she came to me to get a manicure or something and she thought I was funny. I was 19 and she said, "Oh my God, I've got to take you to open mic night at the Ye Little Club in Beverly Hills and I'm going to introduce you to two people who are going to love you." Those two people were Paul Mooney, who used to write for Richard Pryor, and this woman Lotus Weinstock who was Lenny Bruce's last lover.

Anyway, I put together this crazy little set, five minutes, and she took me to the Ye Little Club which was on Canon Drive in Beverly Hills. This is like 1975 and it was open mic night and I got up and did my little five minutes of crazy material and then Paul Mooney and Lotus Weinstock were introduced to me. They thought I was the funniest, craziest person in the world and they both took me under their wings and helped groom me to be the outrageous person that I was... and still am.

**So you went to LA alone as a teenager in the mid-'70s? Was it just that classic story of someone running away to Hollywood to become a star?**

I went to LA knowing I was going to be an entertainer. I had no clue how I was going to go about it. I literally got to LA and was living with my aunt and uncle. My uncle was a jazz professor at UCLA. They lived in Westwood and I crashed in one of their rooms. I went to manicurist school—the Charles Ross School of Beauty—and eventually I got my job and I moved out and got an apartment in West Hollywood. I had all kinds of funny, crazy roommates—some bisexual guy who was a hairdresser, my friend Bobby Shields who was an actor. It was a hodgepodge of the craziest people in the world and I truly didn't know what I was doing until I met this woman Judy Vallen and she directed me to the right place.

My first summer in LA I remember that every week I went to see the Rocky Horror Show live on Sunset at the Roxy with the original cast. That was my outlet, my fantasy outlet, and I met a lot of kids from the San Gabriel Valley who were insane and amazing. We went dancing every night. We went to all the gay discos. Basically I hung out with all these gay guys and that was what informed my performance style. I was performing wherever I was at any given moment. Then suddenly I realized there was an actual stage where I could be up in front of people... and then that was it.

Once I hit Ye Little Club, I started going from club to club with Paul Mooney. He took me everywhere. I performed in places like The Parisian Room. I performed a lot in front of black audiences, which was great because they were tough and they just thought I was this crazy, skinny white girl and they loved me. When the black audiences love you, you know you're going to make it.

**Were you a hyper-performative child?**

Very. I was also quite observant at the same time. I've always been as I am now, actually. I spend a lot of time walking around New York City. Now that I'm doing my radio show everyday at Sirius, I take the train and I watch people. I love to watch people. I don't need to be the center of attention. I don't like to suck the air out of a room because there's so much to be gained by just being quiet. I'm like a time release capsule. It may take me 12 hours to fully absorb and suddenly I'm releasing my crazy again... and then I'm calm again. That's just how I am. That's the best description of myself yet.

**Do you remember when you first started to feel like, "Hey, this is actually my career now!"**

I knew it was my career before I even started it. I just needed to be pointed in the right direction. Since I was five years old, I knew I was going to be a performer. I did a lot of performing in my room and singing along with other people and writing little sketches, but I always did it by myself until I moved to LA. Actually that's not true—I did perform at my cousin's bar mitzvah when I was eight. I sang "Hello, Dolly." I did stuff like that but I was never interested in joining, like, children's theater or anything like that. I had contempt for that kind of stuff. I needed to be the solo show. I needed it to be the Sandy Show.

**I was just watching some footage of you doing standup from back in 1984. You were singing "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" and making all of these jokes about Whoopi Goldberg and Dionne Warwick and AIDS. There is a bit in it where you talk about how Hollywood didn't know what to do with you. There was this sense of disillusionment of being welcomed into this place where everybody suddenly loves you and wants to work with you, but only if it involves changing you completely.**

Doesn't sound like anything's changed since then. Oh dear.

**Is that the feeling you've always had about Hollywood, that they didn't know what to do with you?**

Pretty much. I guess if I had started out now there'd be a lot of outlets for me because there's so many women-centric comedies that now I would've fit in to. I guess you get into your own little orbit, you know? I've gotten comfortable doing what I do. I've done a fair amount of films and I keep doing television stuff. I always have this feeling that there's going to be at least one more big, big role that will be another breakout part for me. I'm not sure when that's coming along, but I keep thinking about it, looking for it. I've been writing them too, but it's hard to get things done. I've always been a person who's fantasized about how things are going to be, which is sometimes almost as satisfying as something actually happening.

**There are certainly lots of performers that hide behind some kind of persona, but there is this feeling when seeing your solo shows that we're really seeing some very real version of you.**

The point is, it's a heightened version of me. But yes, it is me. Performing is when I really come out—spring out!—and I put it all out there. I think that being able to do that is a gift and it's what I love doing best. I like acting of course, but I really like doing things that feel closer to me and closer to home. I like to play different versions of myself, but

I think that's kind of what everyone ultimately really does. There are a few people who are real chameleons and can sink into something and truly disappear... but that is really not what I was meant to do.

**When you think about putting together a new show—in terms of what you're going to talk about and what songs you're going to sing and what the material is—what is that process like?**

It sort of unfolds over many months because I'll take notes and then I'll sit down and start to look at it like a puzzle. I take different pieces of what I've been thinking about and what I've been saying or feeling and literally start fitting the pieces together. I think about the music and suddenly it's, "Oh god, that little idea and this little piece will blossom nicely around that song." Then it's like, "Oh yeah and here's this little punctuation, a little one-liner, something overheard, something overseen when I was walking down 10th street," you know what I mean? It's like weaving a sweater or working on a loom. Suddenly you just decide, I'm going to throw that color thread in because I think that will look pretty in that place where the sleeve meets the body. I don't know, you feel like you're almost being guided along by a higher force sometimes. It just unfolds... and that's where the magic is.

**When are you happiest creatively? Is it during the process of putting things together or is it being in front of people and making them laugh?**

It's both. It's very satisfying when I come across a song that I love and I just know that I'm going to bring something to it that nobody else has before and I can imagine what that will evoke emotionally from the audience. It's this exciting feeling that comes with the lead up to doing the show for the first time and thinking about it. Sometimes I'll wake up in the middle of the night and I'll think, "Oh my God," and I jump up and jot down an idea that ends up being a connector to a couple of different pieces. In those moments you feel like you're a well-oiled machine and that's very satisfying. It feels good to be in the middle of that creative process.

**Sandra Bernhard Recommends:**

I always recommend taking a walk on the [High Line](#). From the original structure of the elevated train tracks to the beautiful design that brought it to life, the planting, the vistas, the smells, the openness and community—it has been a game changer for New York in so many ways.

[Serena and Venus Williams](#) are two major inspirations. There is something so definitive about a great athlete. It is empirical—you either have it or you don't—which I find refreshing.

If there is one place I could return to again and again it would be [Morocco](#). It is my spiritual homeland—the mystery, the medina, the calls to prayer in the early morning, the winds—all bring a sense of the infinite I can't seem to find anywhere else.

[Dogs](#)—especially my dog George, who is a rescue from Tennessee—are a great source of unconditional love and whimsy. You can go back to childhood and roll around on the floor with them, have a thousand nicknames, sleep with them curled up on your stomach and watch a movie, stare at them when you are bored or restless, trim their whiskers, sing to them, adore them.

Washing dishes or [doing a load of laundry](#) is both meditative and incredibly rewarding. It is one of the few tasks in life in which you see immediate results. Watching the water run off a hot dish, shaking out a towel and folding it perfectly, the light scent of lavender, what could be more soothing?

**What is something that you wish you would've known when you were younger, either about the entertainment business or maybe even just about yourself, that would've been helpful?**

It depends on which direction I would've wanted to end up taking. If I wanted more commercial success, I guess I wish I would've been willing to play the game a little bit more and be a little bit more malleable in that way... but I wasn't. I'm still not, really. It's just not who I am. Therefore, I don't really ever look back and think, *Oh God if I'd only...* However, sometimes I look back and think, *If I'd only bought something in the Hampton's 30 years ago!*

Other than that, I don't really think like that because I like my life. I like the mistakes I've made. I think I've learned a lot from my mistakes. I've never hurt anybody—I mean in a serious way, of course we've all hurt people—and I think I've been a good person. I think I've been somebody who's been socially conscious, so there's not really a lot of regret about that per se. It's just sometimes... sometimes it's just frustration.

Sometimes I'm like *shit*, *I wish I'd been in more movies* or *Shit, I wish I'd had my own TV show, I could've made tons of money!*, but then... I don't know. I still feel like I'm at the precipice of something and maybe if I'd had that big thing already I wouldn't feel that way anymore. I don't know what's ready to unfold. Maybe it will just be something small, maybe it will be something huge, we never know. As a creative person, I think it's important to always feel that way. I know that I'm still inspired to do what I do and I still enjoy it... I guess that's really the key.

**People love your radio show. How has the experience been for you?**

The fact that people are listening is amazing. I'm totally inspired by the feedback and just the sweetness of people. It's wonderful. I really enjoy hearing what the listeners have to say about what they are feeling. When Prince died we took a lot of calls and that was particularly moving and wonderful. Because the show is very open and because I haven't boxed myself into a corner regarding what the show is about, I think people feel very relaxed about talking about whatever is going on in their lives. That is a really nice feeling.

**Having spent so much time as a guest on talk shows yourself, how does it feel to be on the other side of the couch? Do you enjoy interviewing people? Does it allow for you to be creative?**

I think the great thing about what I get to do on my show is that I try to make it a conversation, unless somebody's being really uptight, and then I can go into a more conventional interview mode... but that's rare. People do like to go off on silly tangents. Usually it's just like this conversation we're having right now. Yes, you're asking me pointed questions but still it enables me to be silly and funny and free form. I think that's what people want more than ever now. When you are promoting something you get so sick of talking about it. When you've got a movie to promote or a book or a TV show, it's just like, how many times can you tell the story of what it is and what the process was like? Who cares? Let's talk about your latest meal or how you slept last night. Anything. I try to make it so that the conversation is not contrived, it just unfolds. You know, occasionally there are some people who come in who are aren't what you might think they'll be. There haven't been too many people like that but there's a few. There are a few that are just sour. You're like, *Oh God please make this go fast. Please dear God*. When people don't want to talk and have fun, a minute can be an hour. It's shocking how slow time can go or how fast time can go depending on whether or not you are having a good time.

**Will you ever write another book?**

I was just talking to this book agent a couple hours ago, actually. I'm trying to put together another book—something like, *Welcome to Sandyland!*, which could be random essays about, well, you know. Everything. So there's that and I have a script for a TV show based on my first five years in LA. Years ago Justin Vivian Bond and I wrote a musical called *Arts and Crafts* and now we've teamed up with a writer who is helping us put that together as a television script for the two of us to star in. So, there are a lot of exciting things, but it's always about waiting to see what comes together first. That's the nature of this business. You have to be willing to try lots of different things. Sometimes you have to be willing to wait.

Name

Sandra Bernhard

Vocation

Comedian, Actress, Powerhouse

Fact

Comedian, actress, singer, and writer Sandra Bernhard first burst into popular consciousness in 1983 playing a kidnapper named Masha in Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy*. In the years since, Bernhard has literally done a bit of everything—from playing television's first openly out lesbian on *Roseanne* to performing her one-woman show on Broadway (while pregnant!), to currently hosting her own show, *Sandyland*, on Sirius Radio. *Without You I'm Nothing*—the 1990 film based on Bernhard's one-woman show of the same name—remains one of the greatest cultural documents of its time, combining stand up comedy, outré performance art, and the greatest cover of Prince's "Little Red Corvette" ever committed to film.



