

Vernon Chatman on staying true to your stupid ideas

November 7, 2016 - Vernon Chatman started as a stand-up comedian in the mid '90s, but is best known for his Emmy Award-winning comedy writing, alone and as a member of the multi-disciplinary collective, PFFR. He's written for *The Chris Rock Show* and *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, along with other programs. With John Lee, he's the co-creator of the MTV series *Doggy Fizzle Televizzle* (starring Snoop Dogg) and the MTV2 series *Wonder Showzen* as well as Adult Swim's *Xavier: Renegade Angel* and *The Heart, She Holler*. He was a writer for *Louie* from 2012-2015, and a writer/producer of Louis CK's *Horace and Pete* in 2016. He's been a staff writer on *South Park* since 2001, and a producer for the show since 2007. He is the voice of *South Park's* beloved Towelie.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2668 words.

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

You do a lot of different things and you've often referred to your side projects as creative outlets. I was curious about the idea of a creative outlet as a way of doing something that's less stressful than writing for a show with a specific deadline. What does it mean to have creative outlets in what is already a very creative existence?

I definitely transpose projects and obligations against each other. I try to turn laziness into productiveness, in some way. If I'm avoiding doing one project, I'll do another. So, either way, you get productive.

I can't play video games because it comes to nothing. I hate the idea that you put in all this attention and focus and effort and skill and you don't have any final thing. That said, a lot of the most creative, and productive people I know do play video games. It's almost like a meditative way to turn off.

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But yeah, I try to cheat on one obligation with another project or productive, creative thing. It's fun to have a creative outlet, like a creative vacation from your creative vacation and try to set up this weird chain of events, because it's either trying to spin those plates and set those things up, or just lay there and be as lazy as possible. It's like one or the other. I feel like a bad three hours and I could just end up in bed for a couple months out of laziness.

Is it a fear that if you stop you'll have a creative block, or if you stop the flow of things, it'll all collapse in on you?

No, I guess I don't really worry about that. The answer to a creative block is just to do another creative thing. To me a creative thing is almost anything. So like, literally, if I'm writing and can't think of anything, I'll just start moving my fingers typing, sometimes not even words. Just going through the artificial surface motion of it will get your brain going.

But I don't worry about that too much. It's really just trying to keep up... I wish I had the time and the focus and the talent to see through all the vague great ideas that come to me, like, "Oh, that would be cool if I actually did it! If I actually pulled that off."

I remember Louis C.K. saying that you're the one person he knows that will have these vague middle-of-the-night ideas and then go ahead and make them real.

I definitely like ideas that only take on power if you actually do them. It's a funny idea for a second, but if you actually do it, it's like, "Wow." That's what impressive about it... that you really spent the time to do it. There are some ideas that I like that are like that, like [my 2009 film] *Final Flesh* or something. Where it's like, "That'd be a neat, little thought experiment," like, "That'd be a cool little one liner, that's a weird way to do a movie." But it's crazy if you actually do it, if you actually spend the time to get all these people to put themselves out there and spend the money and organize it, put it all together, and package it, and force people to watch it. That's something else.

A lot of the stuff you're creating, people are seeing, but it's not necessarily you standing out there with them looking directly at you. It's your output—but not you—that's being consumed. Does that make it less stressful?

I think so. I don't have an exhibitionist thing, an actor wanting attention thing. To me that's just distracting. Like, best case scenario you get famous and then it's totally distracting. It's this other thing you have to deal with. Money is great, but there's not any part of me that wants to get off on that... Not that it's, like, egoless. It's just that part of it I don't connect to. People who are actors, who are just physically able to do all this stuff and be in control, and express in these ways I've never been drawn to... luckily, because I wouldn't be that good at it.

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I'm drawn to the idea, and my little stupid version of doing a voice, writing animation stuff, and you think in those voices and you do those voices, and you record those voices. You can only write in the notes that you can play. Then you only have to hit those notes, and then you can tell yourself, "Oh, I could've played anything, but I only wanted to do that one..." Just only writing to your own very specific, limited skills.

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As opposed to someone like [*South Park* co-creator] Trey Parker. His ability to do things with his voice continues to blow my mind all the time. It's so funny. He'll bust out a thing and I'm like, "You've been sitting on that for 20 seasons?" Like, "You were able to do that and you didn't bust that out for 20 years? When you could have?" It blows my mind. That's a whole different realm.

You're part of long-term collaborations with *South Park*, with Louis C.K., and with your collective, PFFR. Are long-term creative relationships important to you?

Yeah. I get really wrapped up in things, and you keep your head looking down at that thing, and when you look up it's been years. With *South Park*, we're in our 20th season. It doesn't feel that long because the whole time you're totally present going like, "What the fuck are we going to do?"

I tend to be drawn to personal friendships that are also creative. That's just the most fun. The people who I connect with the most are people who when we sit down and have dinner we end up talking about this cool idea, and all the sudden it's technically work. But it's a project, so just going out to lunch with a friend is like, "Oh, there's a cool idea." It's natural... not in a forced way.

For *South Park*, for example, the core of that show is this friendship between these two immature dudes who met in high school and made each other laugh. And the whole engine for that show is keeping that relationship alive, that funny dynamic alive, and anything else is secondary. So too much professionalism or anything entering the room is bad, it doesn't work.

What makes that show great is that the requirement is that you have fun. The requirement is that you get along and you like each other and make each other laugh and you're having fun. That's the only requirement. And you genuinely want to make each other laugh in a way that's building something.

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So, yeah, right now me, and Matt and Trey in the room, it has been a couple of seasons of that, and that is so fun cause it's this fun dynamic with an end result. And I don't have to do all the work, they have to do all the real work. I go and have fun and then I go home and they have to stick around and really figure it all out.

Same thing with *Louie*. With Louis, I met him when we were both doing standup. I was a big fan of his, his standup, and I met him briefly but then we were on *The Chris Rock Show* together as writers and we would just go for a walk and just joke around. It ended up being a natural thing—we'd get excited about ideas.

He's a dude who obviously has a fully formed ability to conceptualize and execute a ton of stuff, but it's also fun to have that dynamic of bouncing things around and going like, "Oh why don't we do this, can we do this?" Then, again, I walk away and he just pulls off these miracles, and I just bounce the ball around with him while he's working it out.

Five pairings from Vernon Chatman:

- [Luis Bunuel](#) / [David Lynch](#)
- [Manhattan NY](#) / [Cinefamily LA](#)
- [James Baldwin](#) / [Holy Mountain](#)
- [Human Remains](#) / [Brass Eye](#)
- [Old Dirty Bastard](#) / [Joanna Newsom](#)

As you just mentioned, you've done stand up. Do you have an interest in doing more of that or doing something that's more public facing?

Not really. In theory it's not a bad idea to go, "Oh someday that's a cool muscle that might be fun to exercise at some point." But, honestly, I just get excited about having an idea, and bringing it out and then letting it go out into the world and then moving on to the next idea. With stand up you can get so locked into doing the same material so many times. For me, it was that you didn't produce it much. Like, I was doing stand up, and it was great, but then when I started writing on shows, even if I wrote and produced a few minutes of material every week, that was more than I was producing as a stand up. Then after awhile, writing a season of TV in a year, you're writing and putting out hours of material that is just stand up and with more tools, music, and different pieces to play with.

You just try to stay true to the incredibly stupid thing you're trying to do.

So I was just generating more. It was a more efficient use of my time. Then, to have the advantage of not having to stand in a room and be yelled at by drunk people for my whole life. But when people like Louis do all of it, it's fuckin crazy. He keeps one foot in that, like, trial-by-fire world of stand up at all times, but he also has that "I'm going to do this for nobody but me" thing.

I've heard that Louis' approach is really stripped back. He cuts out the fat of most overblown productions. You just do your stuff and leave.

Yeah, it's incredibly lean. Louis saw the way that the normal world works of producing stuff. There are so many pieces you don't need, and they waste time and stop creativity. He and a lot of people I know that are really lined up and in tune with what they are doing... there's this thing of devotion. There's like this pure devotion, it's true for Matt and Trey, it's true for Louis. Like setting up a mechanism to get their stuff produced with as few road blocks of executives, and notes and people standing around with their arms crossed, and people who just aren't on board, or on the team.

In some ways one little wrong thought of second guessing an idea can kill the idea. Like that idea of sometimes you're as strong as the devotion that you put into executing them. If you've done that hesitantly, the whole idea doesn't work. Sometimes it doesn't work when you do it wholeheartedly. So, that's something that they do and I try to do in my shows and I sort of stay in a smaller, Adult Swim, Late Night quarter hour, no one is in the way. Working with Mike Lazzo who is just there as an encourager to go, "Yeah! It's great keep going." He's just like, "You know, just do what you're doin', I don't have any notes." He's just an appreciator. I also, just for my own thing, look for these little pockets of that.

For you, the most important thing is getting a project, finishing it, having something to show for it, and getting to do it the way that you envision it in the beginning. Getting it from beginning to end in the purest way possible?

I mean, you want it to change along the way but, yeah. The impurity comes from second guessing, just someone poisoning your thing because you're doing this to please some other thing or because you're worried that this person is going to think this, or you just don't believe in the idea enough so you try to put some shiny jewels over on the side so people just see the sparkliness. But you just try to stay true to the incredibly stupid thing that you're trying to do.

You have a lot of cultural influence, but because you stay behind the scenes, it's not like you're walking down the street and people are saying, "Hey, there goes Vernon Chatman!"

I never in my life thought for a second that I had any influence. I feel like my things hit a particular group of people that are pre-selected. But I like the idea of popularity and success and penetration and eyeballs... I love them all, in theory, you know! But it has never been my problem getting that kind of attention on my weird things. I love how David Lynch is able to be a pop-culture surrealist.

There seem to be more possibilities for TV writing now, with Netflix, and all these other kinds of streaming services. But in a way it seems like it's harder to get into that kind of writing. Would it be possible to have the same kind of long career that you've had if you were just starting right now? Is it a more complicated path at this point?

It's definitely possible. My only guess would be that you have to be more of a hustler. I think it's more of a freelance world. Everyone is doing their own thing and you have to self-generate a lot more. But that's a good thing, because you can self-generate now and you have to make your own thing. I mean it is definitely, definitely better. When I was a kid if you had a TV show, I think everybody knew who you were. It was a huge thing. And now you can kind of have an entirely fulfilling career and nobody knows who you are.

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The only thing I would say is that there is something about having so much possibility that it in some way, it's too easy. I've seen it with stand ups, with writers, where this person is so funny and then they get a job at this show and you kind of never hear from them again because they got comfortable. It's better to be uncomfortable. But then again the people who were going to do that were going to probably do that anyway. I do see some really funny people that are just on lock: "That person, everything they said was so funny, they have an amazing mind..." And I just want to see all the things they are going to do. And then they go work on *Family Guy*. [Laughs] I guess that's me, too, I'm doing that for *South Park*—but I'm trying to do it all.

Name

Vernon Chatman

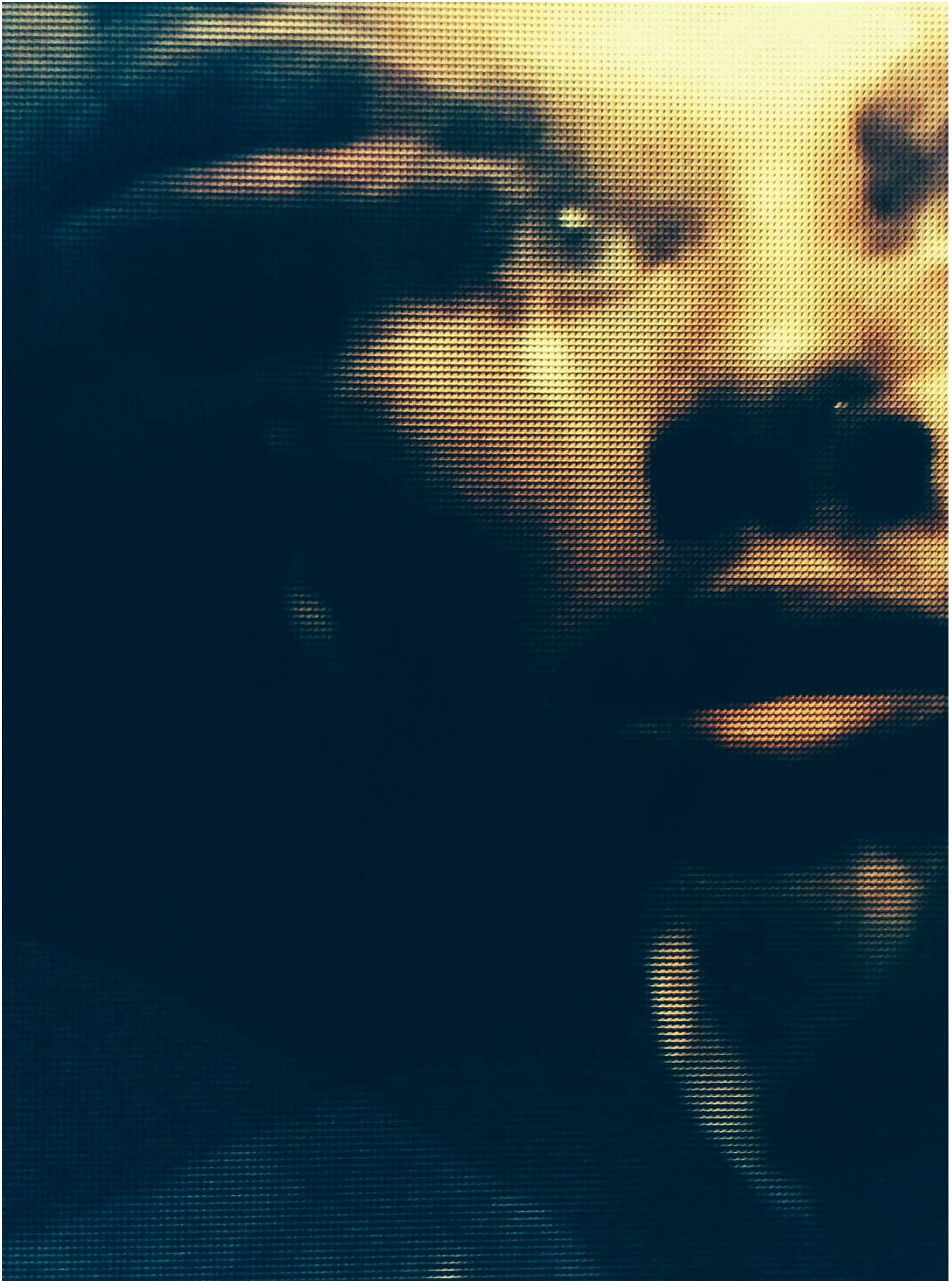
Vocation

Comedy Writer, Author, Television Producer, Voice Actor, Comedian, Musician

Fact

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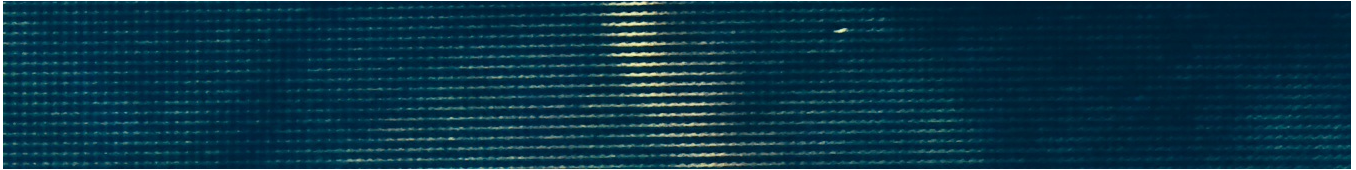


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