

January 4, 2017 - Aparna Nancherla is a comedian who's appeared on *Inside Amy Schumer* and has written for *Late Night with Seth Meyers* and *Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell*. Last year she released her debut comedy album, *Just Putting It Out There*, on Tig Notaro's Bentzen Ball Records. She has a popular Twitter account, and made Tom Hanks laugh out loud with a piece of her writing.



As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2091 words.

Tags: Comedy, Process.

# Aparna Nancherla on being more than just funny

## **How do you establish yourself in comedy when anyone with a social media is cracking jokes all day?**

Comedy is one of those things where, even if you might not have trained anywhere or taken a class, you can just be naturally funny. In that sense, people can think they're really good at it without necessarily having done it for years and years. Having a career in comedy is very different from just making people laugh.

If you want to fully do comedy as a career, you can't just be a funny Twitter person. Whether you're interested in stand-up or sketch or improv or script writing or writing a book, you have to work as much on that as being funny on Twitter. It's good for dipping your toe in the water and getting out there, but it's not the only thing you can do to establish yourself. There are people who are happy to just be funny anonymous Twitter people, and then have their other life. That's a totally valid choice. It's just up to you how much you want to delve into comedy.

## **You put out a comedy album last year. How important is something like that in regards to establishing yourself?**

It's interesting... I went about recording one in a backwards way. Tig Notaro approached me about doing one for a new label imprint she was starting. I'd back-burnered the idea of recording an album before, but I'm someone who's always putting off goals or being like, "Oh, I'll probably be more ready in a few years." When she came to me, it made the incentive more immediate. So I was like, "Yeah, just go ahead and record one." If nothing else, it'll just be a snapshot of where you were at this point in comedy for yourself, which is what it ended up being. I've also gotten a lot of positive responses from people wouldn't have heard of me otherwise.

I was surprised because I'd had the idea that maybe [comedy albums] are a little outdated, in that you can find comedians' sets a million other ways—on YouTube or a podcast that has sets from people's shows like *2 Dope Queens* or *Put Your Hands Together*. I was like, "Are albums even as timely as they were before?" but I've been surprised by how many people consume comedy that way. I think it's easier for them to buy your album than to maybe come out to a show. It's more convenient and digestible.

## **People are often curious about how someone "makes it." There's obviously no single path. But the other day Tom Hanks tweeted about you. Which is one of those unpredictable things that could help establish or bolster a career. When something like that happens, do you see that as a chance for momentum, or do you take it in stride?**

It is a thing where you're like, yeah, "I should keep this momentum up and keep doing what I'm doing." At the same time, it's a sign that you really can't control what may or may not get seen by whom. In that sense you're like, "Oh, all I can do is what I do and hopefully the right people will see it or will respond to it." But the part that's in my control is only my part of it. Maybe that's demoralizing to people, but I find it kind of liberating in that I can't force people to like my comedy.

I guess it depends on the person. I never really had specific goals, but someone's goal might be to be on a certain show or *SNL* or write for *The Office* or something. Entertainment tends to be such an unpredictable path. Shows are made and scrapped all the time, so you can't control it to the degree of getting the exact thing you wanted.

Some people do, but it's like winning the lottery. There are a lot of people that have the same goal who didn't, but they might've gotten something as equally cool that they couldn't foresee when they started. In that sense, you can't plan it or map it out exactly. You have to be a little adaptable. When stuff like the Tom Hanks thing happens, it's so cool and unexpected. I guess it bolsters the fact that you're like, "Oh, I'm doing the right things," or "I'm getting out there in the way I want to be."

**He was responding to a written piece of yours. How does writing for the page differ from writing for stand up?**

Stand up is very much its own form. Even now that I've passed the 10-year mark this past year, I'm still figuring out the best way to write or shape a bit. It's trial and error, by virtue of the fact you have to try things in front of crowds before you know what's going to work. Stand up is very much a joint process of writing on your own and working it out in a more live setting.

When writing more long-form pieces, I approach it by sitting in front of the computer, getting it all out on the page, and then shaping it from there. I'm less likely to do that with stand up than I used to be. Maybe I started that way, but now I might just use that as a free writing exercise to maybe find some ideas.

**Some people I've spoken to have talked about using Twitter as a test ground where you tweet something and people respond to it or don't. Jokes that you've ended up using for stand up, have any of those emerged in that kind of process?**

I definitely use [Twitter] as a joke incubator. I remember going through a period where I felt so immersed in Twitter that I was having trouble writing longer bits. Everything was coming out in these short, little thoughts.

If you find you've written 15 tweets on the same thing, you're like, oh, maybe I can structure all of these around their bigger theme. In that sense, it's very helpful. You're sending out little thoughts and seeing which ones spark... it's kind of like the creative process.

**Speaking of Twitter, one thing I've noticed—by following you, Patton Oswalt, David Cross, and others—is that comedy people are much less afraid to be very opinionated about politics. Even if they're not necessarily making a joke. They're often more outspoken than someone you'd expect to be, like somebody in a punk band or something. What do you think it is about comedy that makes people feel this freedom to make a statement?**

There's definitely an element of ego to it, in that a lot of comedians think of themselves as philosophers of society, in a sense. They're looking big picture at the way humans behave and trends we follow. In that sense, they feel like they have carte blanche to comment on [politics] to any degree, to point out what's ludicrous and what's not.

There's a fine line between being funny and just stating political opinions. Comedians have this notion that they observe the world in a more attuned way than the average person, so they're always drawn to point out hypocrisies and things that don't make sense to them.

**Do you have any comedy regimen of keeping up on current events? If you weren't a comedian, would you find yourself researching things on a daily basis?**

When I worked for talk shows like *Totally Biased* or *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, those are very news driven shows, so you had to be on top of what was happening in the world because that's mostly what you were writing off of. Right now obviously it feels hard to ignore the news because it feels more urgent than usual. I'm still not someone who immerses myself in current events and then is like, what do I want to talk about? When I'm generating material, I'll start from my own life and then tie in bigger themes as they make sense. I'm more likely to start on a more mundane personal level and then blow it out into bigger themes.

**In a piece you wrote for the *Village Voice*, you talked about comedy in the Trump era. Does it seem to you that the focus is already shifting? In the sense that people are less focused on "Let's make fun of Trump" or "Let's worry about Trump," and more just want entertainment? I've seen it starting to happen a bit.**

I think there's definitely an element of that. I've heard a lot of comedians forego political material. I was talking to a friend and it seems like women and/or minorities are more likely to talk about the current political climate than straight white men. I've seen a lot of straight white men just forego the topic or refer to it in a sort of sideways way, but not with any direct takes.

As a straight white male I think people are like, "How are you going to feel the effects of this?" They have to find a way to talk about it without people being like, "Well, easy for you to say," or thinking it. In that sense, I understand why people are being a little gun shy about it. For those that it might affect more directly, it's really hard not to talk about. It almost feels disingenuous to act like it's not happening.

**When you're doing stand up now versus a month ago or whatever, do people seem more primed for wanting to hear jokes about politics?**

It varies. Honestly, it feels like any other material where it plays better in some places than others. There are definitely places where people are a little bit more sensitive about it. A room in Brooklyn might not be ready to laugh as easily about it, but they're still willing to hear you out. Whereas in other rooms they'll just let you go on the topic and let you think it out loud. Maybe in that sense, it's helpful for people to just be able to hear people talking out what is happening in a less serious space than just reading the news.

**Do you find yourself wanting to keep writing about what's happening?**

I think so. It's hard not to want to talk about it. It feels very surreal and strange in a way that I haven't experienced since before living in this country. It's hard to focus on other stuff. It's like any other bit in that you're trying to find the best way to approach it.

It's like, what am I trying to say? What is my goal with writing about this? Or not even goal... but just what statement am I trying to make? It feels like everyone's still trying to figure out what's happening.

Aparna Nancherla recommends:

flowing water – I love the sound of bubbling brooks and waterfalls. I find them so soothing. They're so unbothered.

music – I regularly listen to music, find it incredibly therapeutic, forget how great it is for a day or two, and then rediscover it again with dumbfounded joy. It's a timeless loop.

pens – I love good pens. A good pen will make me write for longer. I guess it's like a good car on the road makes you want to drive for longer.

coincidences – Nothing makes me more content than a flipping coincidence, it is the beauty and chaos of life at its finest.

overheard conversations – I love listening to snippets of other people's conversations and lives. It makes me feel like I'm in a giant play.

5 popular tweets by Aparna Nancherla:

All Lives Matter feels like a stranger showing up at someone's funeral & going "Hey guys, it's actually my birthday today, so could we not?"

political correctness has become an umbrella term for having any reaction at all to ppl saying words, which i believe is how language works.

A bad analogy is like a cucumber

Have you ever heard someone honking so aggressively & for so long that you're like "this was never about the traffic, was it, buddy?"

What is it like to be a woman in comedy? I would say it's 1% jokes & 99% answering this question.

Name

Aparna Nancherla

Vocation

Comedian, Writer

Fact

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