

January 31, 2017 - Brooke Van Poppelen is a comedian and writer based in Los Angeles. Last year she released her first comedy album, *Hard Feelings*, and she is a host on truTV's *Hack My Life*.



As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3796 words.

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Brooke Van Poppelen on being funny for a living

Every creative industry has its own kind of hustle, but comedy seems particularly grueling. As someone who has done all kinds of stuff, from stand-up to comedy writing to hosting on television, is having the ability to do a little bit of everything the key to making it in that business?

I look at my body of work at this point and it's a little all over the place. I started diversifying a couple years ago because I live with, I think, a very realistic and healthy fear that, like, what stand up comic just makes it on stand up alone? Almost no one. More power to you if you can make that work, but I also realized that it's not the only thing that interests me. I love doing it, but I mostly wanted to use it as a tool to break into writing and television. Lo and behold, my plan worked! But, I'm interested in all aspects of storytelling and so that includes writing for TV or making a webseries or being a story producer on someone else's show or any of the above. It's been a huge learning curve. I'm also waking up to the idea that maybe I'm looking at being a director by my mid 40s or something. Maybe that's what all of this is leading to? I've come to accept that I don't totally know what I'll end up doing and I'm open to that, even though that feels crazy and scary to me sometimes. I'm also of the belief that it's never too late to start doing anything.

When it comes to writing for someone else, maybe as opposed to writing something that's going to be for your own act, do you find that it scratches the same kind of creative itch? Or is it different?

It's weird. Again, this is all part of your own creative process and your belief about yourself. So say if I'm writing for a funny, punchy topical game show or something like that, like an @Midnight style type show. I worked on a couple MTV shows that felt like prototypes for what is now @Midnight, which does it the best. It's such a great show. Writing these very left brain things, jokes that were an economy of words, things that were short and super punchy... it was like being given permission to be the comedian that I don't think I personally am. It was very gratifying to be like, "I can do this, this feels great." But for whatever reason I don't have the bravery to parlay that kind of thing into my own act. I'm just so personal with everything I talk about in my own work, so to have this pop culture related, sort of clever writing job really surprised me because I feel like I didn't flex that muscle for really long time because I mine so deeply from my own personal experiences. So it did scratch an itch. I was like, "Oh my god, I think I'm actually good at this?" But it was for someone else, which was great, because I felt like I did a good job for the people I was hired to work for. But it sometimes begs the question, like, maybe I don't give myself enough credit as a joke writer? You know, for myself?

I could see how if you're used to talking about your own life and things are really personal, trying to do things that are purely topical would feel like a very different thing.

I guess maybe a good way to put it is, like, my style of comedy is like a podcast. It's confession, rambling, just off the top of the head and that feels natural to me. The most exhausted I've ever been was

crafting perfect little monologue jokes to be considered for submission to *Late Night*, but I did it and I was so proud of the jokes. They were good, but I was exhausted because that really took a lot of wrangling my brain into working in a more formulaic kind of way. I've heard that people who successfully write for late night shows, that usually their brain kind of syncs with their formula and that's how they plug in their different topics. Eventually you adjust into this rhythm and flow with it. That was hard for me. I've never been a real mechanical joke writer or a real craftsman of words, so something like Twitter has always been a real hot and cold thing for me. Sometimes I'll have a week where just cute little blurbs are coming to me, and then I'll go silent for two months. You know?

I don't think most people can imagine what it's like to write jokes for television, to be asked to come up with 30 or 40 funny options for a line and do it really quickly. The amount of material they are required to come up with is really astounding.

Your output, all day long, is insane. You can end up writing 100 jokes to have them all thrown out and then you start again the next day. I don't think I have the constitution for that. It's not that I take things so personally, it's just that I'm so like, "Oh my god, but that was funny, I don't want it to go away!" It's not easy for me to just effortlessly be hilarious, so to have things just tossed to the side, that would likely destroy me. Some people are just machines that way, and I have to give them credit, it's awesome. One thing that was interesting was seeing these old skills I had from my college years with copywriting and advertising stuff come back to the surface, those skills were strangely applicable to the world of shorter joke writing.

I know you lived in New York for a long time. What is it like to be a hustling comedian trying to make a career in such an expensive city? What do you have to do in order to exist and also make name for yourself? Is it just a situation where you have to do everything and try to say yes to as many things as possible?

A majority of my time in New York, I worked six or seven days a week at a restaurant, or side gigs, or as a barista, just anyway I could keep making money to just live and stay in New York so I could keep doing comedy. I was a waitress forever, and it's tough sometimes because when you get the night shifts that means no comedy for you that night, but you also really need to have that 300 dollar shift because that will buy you some time.

Around 2008 things started to change for me. I was one of this first wave of comedians to start getting jobs blogging. Back then it was like, "I'm sorry, what is that?" Basically I was just writing online content for people. In some ways I wish I had stuck with it because some of those people I knew back in the beginning really blossom into amazing writers. Some of them are now really accomplished writers for television and they were able to get those jobs because they had amassed this undeniable body of work after writing for years and years for the internet.

I didn't see the value in the internet at that time, you know? I was like, "No, doing comedy in real life—being up in front of people—is what's most important." I look at someone who I admire, Julieanne Smolinski, who's being praised right now, writing for *Sex&Drugs&Rock&Roll*. She has written for so many other television shows. We all wrote together on AOL's first female lifestyle blog. It was mostly fluff, but they gave me a column and it was so fun to do. And, thank god I did, because it taught me that I can write and there is an audience out there for what I do. With these little resume builders, slowly but surely I was able to transition into writing full time. The day that I let go of my very last brunch shift was profound. I was like, "Oh man, I will not be marrying ketchup bottles EVER AGAIN... I hope." To really feel like you were cutting the cord and committing to this creative life was amazing. Like, "We're in! We're going all in!"

You've written some very funny things about your experiences doing stand up, but also some very honest things that are both sad and funny. There is this notion in popular culture that comedians are secretly the saddest or most tortured, that the really funny thing is always from some source of pain. In terms of your own work, and your stand up, how much is that actually true?

I wear my heart on my sleeve a lot in my stand up, so just having life kick me in the face over and over and over again has 100% given me lots of comedy material to work with. I just feel like I don't have any choice but to take these disappointing, embarrassing, frustrating life lessons and spin them into

something funny. Because I've had so many things in my life happen that would floor a person and make you full-on depressed, I feel this weird responsibility to spin those experiences into something else. I just decided I'm going to take this pile of shit and... well, I don't want to say make shit lemonade since that's a gross way to put it, but yes... you make shit lemonade. And hopefully that lemonade will be funny. I'm not necessarily a sad person, I'm just coming out of a really extreme decade of personal growth. My life was absolutely upended when I was younger and the person who I thought I was was absolutely not the real me. I really really found myself in New York. This place is so hard. New York absolutely showed me what I was made of. There were so many times that I wanted to pack up and leave, but there was always something that kept me there.

I recently moved to LA and when I look back on my time in New York it's still hard for me to make sense of my experience there. It's like, "I don't even know what I was going through, but it was *something*." And even when it was a nightmare mess, it still generated lots of what is now hilarious material. But I've also been in therapy now and I think it's a dangerous belief to think that your best work can only come from sadness. That being said, I am also currently trying to figure out how to be funny when I'm happy. When I'm happy, I'm a little nervous, you know?

We're often told that things aren't legitimate unless they are hard, that somehow everything has to be difficult in order to be real-work, relationships, careers. It is kind of weird to come around to that idea that maybe not everything has to always be terrible.

If anything, what I got out of my years of struggling was a really great coping mechanism. I learned that you can really throw a lot at me and I get back up pretty quick these days. Comedy provided a way of seeing the world, a way of processing all of that stuff. And also life is hard and confusing no matter what, there's no reason to try and make it even harder if you don't have to.

Now that you're in LA, do you find that the culture for comedy stuff feels and sounds radically different than it did in NYC?

No. I will absolutely say up top that I've only been here six months and I've either traveled for a large portion of it or I have been sick and unable to leave the house. Comically enough, I moved to LA-like a lot of people-felling like, "Oh, it's all just gonna be so easy breezy being in LA!" and almost instantly my immune system crashed. My immune system hates LA. All of these weird health things happened to me that make no sense-like, I got a rash from a hot tub, which is something I talk about on my comedy album. I contracted some rare third-world style intestinal bacterial infection that lasted for two months. Doctors were like, "We don't even know how you got this or where you could've gotten it from." Then, because my intestines were destroyed, I caught respiratory infections over and over. I was like, "I don't know what I did exactly to deserve this karma!" Luckily I'm about a month into just being nice and strong and healthy and normal again. I absolutely think I'm on the up and up. But right now my opinion of LA is a little crappy. But I know it's a specific experience that I've been going through. There's a lot of great stuff happening here and I feel like if you were to check in with me again in another six months I'll have been able to embrace it and get a little more of a foothold here in the comedy scene. But on the upside, I've done really cool weekend trips. I've gotten back into communing with nature, which is something that I've missed. But apparently I have to go light on the communing with nature until I start immunotherapy, because I'm allergic to everything. I wanted to embrace this LA life with such gusto but my body was like, "Nooo! You just lived in a city with one tree for ten years, so it turns out you're allergic to everything except rats and germs."

How do you break up your time? Are you working on multiple things at all times and also doing stand up here and there?

Right now my schedule is a little jarring because I'm jumping back and forth between New York and LA to shoot another season of *Hack My Life*. I love being in New York in the summertime, it was making me really question my choices, but I also know that I'm happy I moved here to LA. But to be back in NYC and to feel plugged in, to be there working, you're just like, "New York is it, man!" You're just wandering the streets at night, just back into that vibe and that energy. It felt easier in some ways in New York to collaborate, which I think is important if you're trying to do comedy stuff. Find your people to work with and write with and perform with. Get up in front of people as much as you can, which is really the only way to get better. You just have to be kind of relentless about it. NYC was good in that way for me, it

felt easy to run around the city and do that stuff.

Then you come back here to LA where it's quiet, it's more chill, it's isolated. I don't see people. You have to actively make plans to see other humans in LA. I think that's a huge difference that a lot of people mention when they've left New York and come out here. Everything feels more work at home slash freelance when I'm in LA. A lot of my creative partners are still in New York, so I realized as much as I still talk to them and Skype and all that, I'm trying to actively get a foothold for things that I actually do here in person in LA so it feels more real.

My good girlfriend and I are going to get into podcasting; I'm going to film some sketches with another comedy partner out here; I have shows booked. So those are the things that make you feel like a resident, but also like a working comedy person. The people that seem to do well are people who can and will do a little bit of everything. It's a lot of putting yourself out there and failing, waiting for that thing that actually works.

You put out a comedy album, *Hard Feelings*, last year. Comedy albums seem to having a renaissance lately. More people are listening to them and more comics seem to be making them. What made you want to do it? And how does one approach making a good comedy album?

For me it really came down to timing. I feel like there's a fan base now that I've built up a little bit over the years, particularly in Brooklyn, on the East Coast, and in Austin. Like a lot of comics, I have my cities where I feel like people know me and like me. Now that I get a little bit more of a national reach because of the television show, it just felt like timing would be better to put out a product. I know a lot of comedians who started doing albums around six or seven years ago, and for whatever reason there just seems to be more of a craze around stand up comedians having albums again. Or maybe I was just oblivious to it, I'm not sure. I have really specific habits. It's like, if my best friend puts out an album, chances are I'm not going to listen to it, because it's just not my habit... and I also know their material inside and out and see them all the time. So I was just slow to realize that this could be a good thing for ME to do, much in the same way where I'm like, "Oh, I could have a podcast, and I'd be good at it," but you know, like four years too late. I'm just sometimes slow to come around to these things.

There is no set path if you want to be a comedian, no guarantee that things will ever pan out or continue to pan out once you start to do well. However, there are certain things that feel like important milestones when you do this for a living. Doing a set on late night TV feels a little bit like getting a diploma in comedy. It feels like you've graduated into something. In that same way, I realized that having a physical copy of something that people could buy—people who maybe aren't in the position to come see me tell jokes at some place in Brooklyn—is maybe a smart thing to do. I've picked jokes and material that covers about a six-year time span, which made it really hard to narrow things down... but it felt good. I was able to do 70 minutes of material that I loved and then we chopped it down to 45 minutes for the record.

It's also just a cool document that you'll have forever. A cool time capsule.

I'm slowly realizing that's maybe the coolest part of all. I used to work in record stores, why wouldn't I want my own album? All I did was worship comedians and rock bands and everyday I handled and touched their albums and fondled their CDs. To me, it's like, "Helloooo, this is actually really symbolic." It's funny how sometimes you just don't see a good thing right in front of you. You can work at something forever and not realize when it's actually turned into a career. Like me of all people, the girl who worked in a record store is finally, 13 years into her career, making an album. That's funny.

Brooke Van Poppelen recommends:

I love listening to Radiolab on WNYC. The range of topics are so broad and skillfully executed. It reminds me that any topic can be rich, compelling and surprising when you really dig into it.

I can't recommend journaling enough. When I'm feeling lost at sea, creatively stuck or depressed, picking up a pen and just scrawling nonsense in a spiral notebook from the dime store is so soothing. I've journaled my way into great inspiration

for scripts, funny anecdotes for my stand-up, deep realizations and truths about myself—you name it. I've also used it as an exercise to ground myself when I'm having anxiety. It helps focus my crazy energy.

Since moving to LA, I can't get enough of all the gorgeous cacti and succulents everywhere. When I want to treat myself to a visual feast, I love visiting a nursery nearby and strolling through the rows and rows of insane looking desert plants. What's even better is they're inexpensive out here so the act of picking out a few plants and making a little pot garden makes me feel happy and connected.

Comedy and writing are what I excel at but there's an inner rockstar hiding inside me so I've always been a fan of checking out music open mics. You never know who is going to knock your socks off musically and it's typically free. In NYC there is a venue called Rockwood Music Hall in the LES and they have multiple shows every night, every hour on stage 1—it's free to watch but you have to purchase one drink per set that you stay for. I have stumbled onto so many unforgettable musicians and bands that way and always leave with warm fuzzies. Hotel Cafe in LA has a similar vibe so I'm starting to check out new music on the West Coast too.

I live in cities that rely heavily on taxis, car service, and Uber and I really enjoy talking to drivers. I think it's so easy to just scroll through your phone and not connect with people but I've had some awesome conversations and connections with taxi drivers that are hilarious, poignant and even confessional. I mean, there's a reason there was a show about this phenomenon but I'm keeping it alive! Talk to people whenever you can—our culture is getting far too absorbed into a tiny rectangle screen. People are on their phones looking for "experiences" when they're right in front of you for the taking.

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Vocation

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Fact

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