On trying to be funny, collaborative, and productive while quarantined

Comedian Kurt Braunohler on the power of podcasts and audio narratives, the challenges of being a performer in a currently quarantined world, and why being a successful comic depends on having lots of ideas and never taking no for an answer

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3041 words.

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Where are you right now?

I'm in Los Angeles. I'm in my garage, which is also my office, but now also where I do stand up. I have a little studio setup, with a backdrop, and a mic setup, and a little lighting system. So yeah. So this is my world now.

It's a funny thing to be doing interviews with people now across a variety of creative fields, because everybody's just trying to think on their feet about how to keep working and how to keep doing their thing.

I'm pitching a show right now. I wrote it up in a couple of days, and it's something that can be completely shot on Zoom. And so, fingers crossed, we'll see if that goes somewhere. All of the projects that I had going are essentially stalled out, other than the *Bananas* podcast. Thank god we can do that from here. We can all call each other and/or Zoom and then it can all be pieced together.

It's been amazing to see how people have figured out how to make it work. I feel like drag queens have really been the pioneers of this, doing shows over Twitch or Instagram, having a way where you can tip them, and just doing shows from their living rooms while advertising it and monetizing it. It's pretty incredible.

Yeah. We're doing the same thing with our weekly comedy show called *Hot Tub*. We've been streaming on Twitch for the past month. We take donations, and we're donating half of the money to the staff at the bar where we normally do the show, who don't have jobs right now. We pay the comics, and we also donate money to getting masks to L.A. hospitals. We kind of put it all together in about a week, which was nuts. And luckily there's this whole Twitch thing that works for stuff like that. People have been live streaming video game shit for so long, so there is all of this technology that works really well already. It just needed to be picked up by performers.

If you're doing some kind of comedy thing, something where theoretically you would feed off the energy of a room, or the response of an audience, how does that work if you are just talking to your computer or a camera? It must feel very weird.

It feels weird. It feels *very, very* weird. I did this show called "Laugh Aid" that my buddy organized. There were lots of huge comics. Every comic in the world did it, and they raised $370,000 for this fund for working comics

who have gigs canceled, which was great. So, Howie Mandel was hosting my section of the show and I was doing my bit, which was like five minutes long, but what I was looking at on my screen was weird. When I'm doing a bit for my show *Hot Tub*, I'm not looking at anybody on my screen, but the way the Laugh Aid system had it, I was just staring at Howie Mandel while I was doing my bit. I saw him on the screen for the entire time and he couldn't have been more bored and more disinterested. And so, it was like totally putting me in my head, because the only feedback I have is a bored Howie staring back at me. It turns out that Howie Mandel was not actually on screen with me, or at least that's not what other people were seeing, so it turned out to be fine. But when I got off of it, in that moment I was just like, "What the fuck? That was horrible." I'd never felt so shitty. So yeah, it feels weird to do stand up without an audience, but it never actually felt shitty and horrible, and *that* felt shitty and horrible. But usually, it's just very strange. You know? We're all figuring out how to get used to it. It feels like you're just rehearsing your stand up to an audience of no one.

Also, I haven't done straight jokes, like pre-quarantine jokes, during this time. I've just been writing new stuff. So, with that performance, I'm just very focused on hitting all my beats for the new piece that I was working on, almost so much that I'm not paying attention. I don't even know where the laughs would be because I've never performed it for a crowd. Whereas, when you're doing rehearsed jokes, you know exactly where the laughs would be and you know how long you have to hold to say the next bit and how it has the best rhythm to it.

Right now we are seeing so many people who are trying to make sense of this moment, but also doing it without the benefit of other people around them, or from their own isolation chamber, wherever it is. It's just such a profoundly weird time to be making things, particularly for comedians.

It is very strange. I'm on the older end of the comic spectrum and I have two kids, so right now they're napping. That's why I was like, "We can do this interview at 1pm?" Do you know what I mean? To find time to create is incredibly difficult, and I have so much stuff that I need to get done. I'm going to have to start waking up at 4:00 in the morning because they get up at 6:00, so I need to get two hours of work in before they get up. And then I have to go to bed when they go to bed at like 7:00 PM. Otherwise, nothing gets done.

In a weird way, I feel busier now than I did before all of this, and I'm just in my apartment all day.

Yeah. I work out of my house and I always have, so I'm kind of used to it. At first you're like, "It is good. It's cool that I don't have to go anywhere." But it's also like you never *don't* work. Whenever you're relaxing, you're like, "I should be working." That feels amplified now.

At this point, you have been involved in almost every aspect of what it would mean to be a comedy person, from doing stand up, to being a writer, to doing podcasts, to acting. Is the key to making it in your industry just to be the most creatively ambidextrous and have the willingness to do/try anything?

Yeah, you have to be. I think comedy, more than anything else, is just a succession of rejections on all levels. Just to survive, you need to have 10 things going on at all times, and just try to not become overwhelmed by managing them all. And you have to have things going in all the different worlds—all the possible ways you could get your voice out there. And you need to be doing all of this all the time in order to sometimes be paid for *something*.

Like, "How am I going to be paid this month?" is a constant question for the majority of working comedians, unless you get the golden gig, which is like a TV show or something. That is something I think about constantly, because I play the pitching game all the time. I'm always pitching shows, and luckily, we've just sold one to Adult Swim, which we're working on right now, which is…well, knock on wood, but it seems to be moving forward.

The process and the odds are like this—just to get a pitch bought is like a 100 to one. And then to get the script picked up to pilot is a 100 to one. And then to get the pilot to make it to series is a 100 to one. And then, the probability that *your* TV show—out of the 400 TV shows that are now available to view—is successful is *another* 100 to one. When you see a show that succeeds, it's impressive to think about how many times that one idea managed to win the lottery and make it to a screen.

There are so many opportunities for something to fail.

Yes. My daughter is three now and it seems like to us that she just *really* likes to perform. And I'm just like, how do I make her not get into this business? What can I do? [*laughs*] It's one of my biggest fears.

Had you not done comedy, what do you think you would have done?

That's the thing. I keep thinking about it now that we've entered this new phase of existence. I think a lot of comedy clubs are going to have to close permanently. You know? I don't know when we'll be back to public performance. This is a brand new world we don't know anything about. I just keep thinking, "What else can I do? Do I have any other skills?" And it's just like, nope, I don't. I've basically locked myself into doing this. So now I just have to figure out how to exist in the new world.

You've done a lot of work in podcasts and you just recently launched a new one, *Bananas*. What does the process of putting together a podcast typically look like for you?

The process for how we make *Bananas* is pretty much the same for how you make any podcast, which is made easier now with technology. This podcast in particular is something that we've wanted to do for a very long time, something that just comments on insane news items. Originally this was something we thought about doing for TV, but then it was like, "We should do this idea as a podcast, because then we could actually do it."

I do think that like for a very long time we've kind of been culturally obsessed with comedies that almost aren't super funny but are very meaningful. And I feel like this pandemic maybe will bring back a little bit of desire for just funny stuff. At the moment I think people just want goofy, funny stuff, and that's right up our alley. That is our brand. We're like, "This is funny. This is just dumb and funny and we're not really saying anything other than you should laugh at how stupid and insane this is." It felt like the right time to take a moment to appreciate how fucking absurd life on this planet is. That is the motivating philosophy of the show. On that level, I find it very enjoyable to record this podcast because it fills me with joy and wonder at how weird human beings are.

I know you came up through the UCB improv system and that you also do stand up. How important do you think those experiences are for someone who also wants to write comedy?

I came up through UCB in 1999 in NYC. I took one of the first classes when they opened their 21st Street location. I remember that we would have class on Saturday at 9AM, which is crazy. To this day, I'm always like, "Why did we have class at 9:00 AM on a Saturday?" It's so fucking crazy. But yeah, I started improvising and I was just obsessed with it. I was in, hook, line, and sinker. I soon started teaching improv as well. It was like my church. I wasn't as interested in writing then, I just thought everything should be about the experience. Like there should be no record of joy, it should always just live on stage and then die. I did that for around eight years before I started doing stand up. I didn't start doing stand up until I was 29. I think all of that just prepped my brain for how to start writing, but it was still really like starting over. When I started doing stand up, it was a completely different skill set from doing improv comedy. So it was like I started completely over when I was 29 years old. Then I was just like, "Oh, I prefer this to doing improv, actually."

As you were saying, this is such a weird moment in time. It's hard to say what *any* industry is going to be like when the world starts moving again, but for people who are trying to work in comedy—either as a comedian or a comedy writer or a podcaster—what advice do you have?

People who are starting comedy now? Oh no, I'm so sorry for you. I am so sorry. I don't know. It's dead. Start a podcast. [*laughs*] I predict that stuff like Oculus Rift and VR stuff and augmented reality stuff are going to fucking explode in the next few years. Honestly, I don't know if public performance is going to come back in the same way. It's funny to think about.

Back in the day, if you were an actor, or if you were a comedian, it was kind of similar in society's views as to

being like a prostitute. You know? Like you were just like one of the dirty people. And I feel like comedy and live performance might go back to being like that for a while. Like only people who are willing to risk their health and others' health would go to a club to see comedy. And these people who are performing there are kind of asking people to come in and risk the public's health. You're kind of seeing it now, all this stuff with online shaming for public gatherings, which I think is something that makes sense right now. We totally need it right now, and I'm happy that people are aware, but I think it's going to feed into our subconscious in a way that is going to dramatically reduce the amount of public performance that happens in the future. And I don't know how to get around that. I think there's going to be a lot more VR performances and stuff like that in our future…but they got to make those headsets fucking cheaper.

What other kinds of quarantine-appropriate projects are you working on?

I'm working on a game show right now that you can do through Zoom. I've got two movies that I'm trying to get off the ground right now. I'm going to start writing an actual scripted audio series. It's an idea that I had for a movie, but since I already have two movie things that are out there and I'm looking for funding for both of them at the moment, I was like, "I just want to be able to make something and fucking have it exist in the world." I thought an audio series would be the best way to do that. It's kind of like a sci-fi rom-com, which I'm really excited to write about. What's so exciting about audio is that you just can do whatever the fuck you want. You can have stuff that in a movie would be too expensive for an indie comedy, but in audio, you can fucking do it, and it's so exciting.

The advent of podcasts and audio narratives is so interesting. It reminds me of hearing my grandparents talk about everyone gathered around a radio listening to a radio play, where there was a narrator and actors and someone in the background creating sound effects. Also, it's commendable that you have been so creative during this time. A lot of people feel pressured to be productive during this quarantine, which isn't always easy to do.

It's a challenge. Like I was saying, I have two children—two very young children—who require constant maintenance. It's like you have to be touching one of them at all times, or they're going to get into something. If we didn't have kids, I would just be fucking banging shit out from morning to night. I would take rests and everything, but I would just be working. I would be so excited to not have the distraction of a regular life, but also, that's what I do. This is my life.

My normal day is always a version of something like this: I wake up, I'm at home, and I need to make things in order to pay my mortgage. So I'm just used to that drive to constantly self-generate. Make the next thing, make the next thing. You just have to get into that mindset where you always have an idea at the ready. It's like, "Oh, you're going to say no to that? Well, I've got 10 more ideas, you fucking pieces of shit, you goddamn gatekeepers!" I hate gatekeepers so much. I really just want to make my own stuff, and put it out there. And sometimes that's what you've got to do. You can't wait for someone to say "yes," you just have to figure out a way to try and do it yourself.

Kurt Braunohler Recommends:

All right, I'm going to shout out some podcast stuff. I'm going to shout out *Rabbits* since we were talking about good kinds of audio narratives that are scifi and creepy. *Rabbits* is really fun. Another podcast that I really like is *Heavyweight* from Gimlet Media. And of course, obviously, the *My Favorite Murder* guys are great.

A book that I really liked recently is called *Recursion* by Blake Crouch. I'm not giving anything away here, but like the first 20 pages you learn that there's a virus in the world that makes people remember a life that they didn't live. And so it's very on topic for a virus-y time. But don't worry, it doesn't freak you out about coronavirus or anything by reading it. And it is very, very good.

Also, there's an author, N.K. Jemisin and she writes this series all about a world where certain people are born with the ability to create earthquakes, or control them. It's a very fascinating world. It sounds like such a weird basis for a novel, but it's fucking awesome. It's really, really good. She's excellent.

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Vocation

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