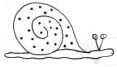




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August 20, 2020 -

As told to Ritam Mehta, 2941 words.

Tags: Comedy, Writing, Collaboration, Beginnings, Adversity, Inspiration, Process.

On knowing what you have to say

Writers and comedians Jeremy Levick and Rajat Suresh on collaborating while maintaining a friendship, taking failure in stride, and recognizing your unique point of view.

When I was looking for your videos, I realized Jeremy's been suspended from Twitter.

Jeremy Levick: I was suspended for impersonating the mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio. He's a very powerful man, and I should've known not to cross him.

Rajat Suresh: [laughs] Yeah. We're never going to cross authority ever again.

Jeremy: You'd better not ask us any questions that are flattering to authority.

Can you guys talk about what you're both working on right now? Either personally or professionally?

Rajat: We're currently writing on a TV show on CBS All Access called Tooning Out the News. Steven Colbert produces it and we do some voices on it. We play investigative reporters, and we write on the show as well. And we're trying to keep doing videos ourselves, in preparation for Jeremy returning to Twitter, hopefully.

On Tooning out the News, you guys appear together, right?

Rajat: Yeah, we're like a team.

Jeremy: We're not funny independent of each other.

Rajat: No, no. We're serious independently. [laughs]

Did you first start by collaborating, and then grow a friendship? Or was it the other way around?

Jeremy: We were friends before we collaborated. And I think we just started collaborating very organically, because we had spent a lot of time together, and we were both freelancing for the same place, and we were spending every day together doing our work side-by-side.

When did you both realize that you wanted comedy to be a career?

Rajat: Jeremy and I both did the fellowship programs at The Onion and ClickHole, so I think that we were both trying to find some sort of pathway in comedy. And we just fell into freelancing there and the videos sort of started just cropping up, because we were having fun and we were annoyed with people, and wanted to make fun of them.

Jeremy: I think our favorite, our best stuff, or the stuff we most enjoy, comes from when we first want to make fun of someone. I think we just started doing the videos because we wanted to make fun of people who suck. [We] didn't set out to be people who make videos. I think we just were like, "Shane Gillis sucks. We should do an impression of him."

I really like how hyper-specific your stuff is. I remember, there's a Verge article about this Facebook meeting leak, and you guys did an audio recording, like a Facebook meeting.

Rajat: Oh, my gosh.

Jeremy: Wow.

Rajat: That's a deep cut. Thanks for watching that video. You were one of... I mean, like 10 people watched that video.

Jeremy: I've never talked to anyone, no one, except for Rajat, I thought, who knew about that video.

Is there a lot of stuff that you guys have made that you think is really good, but no one else likes?

Rajat: I think so. Yeah. There's some stuff we have not released, because we don't know whether it passes muster, really.

Jeremy: I think there's some stuff that we've done that we thought was going to be really great, and then sort of didn't make a big splash, didn't resonate with people so much. The Facebook thing being an example. That's happened a few times.

How do you deal with that lack of response?

Jeremy: We take it in stride.

Rajat: We don't dwell on it too much. We still like the stuff that we did. And still think it's funny.

Jeremy: Well, when you're two geniuses [laughs]... I think if you're making stuff that comes from a real place, if you're making stuff because you want to make fun of something, or you feel really strongly about it, then you don't have to be embarrassed when it doesn't do well. Because you feel like you were...

Rajat: Right. You did the right thing.

Jeremy: Yeah. The worst situation would be if you were pandering and then also fell flat on your face. And then the second worst is if you were being true to your opinion and fell flat on your face.

Rajat: Yeah. Because it's not as if they don't like an artificial version of ourselves. They don't like us like deep down, who we are. They don't like our genuine beliefs.

Jeremy: They just don't like who we are as people. [laughs]

When you guys work together, it feels like a lot of your videos are organic and you're playing off of each other. Do you ever feel any friction when you're writing something together? How do you work through that kind of conflict?

Rajat: We don't agree on everything. Sometimes it's hard when one of us is precious about an idea, and the other one doesn't seem into it. But I think both of us understand if the other person isn't into it, it's obviously not that great of an idea to begin with.

Jeremy: Yeah. I think that sounds right. We definitely talk a lot about all of our ideas and one video might be the product of a hundred conversations about the topic, or what our point of view is. I guess we, because we're friends, will just talk every day about what we think is funny, or interesting, or weird about a certain genre of video, like the Ben Shapiro videos. And sometimes those discussions involve slightly different viewpoints. I feel like our approach is that we usually just try to talk through disagreements. We'll just talk a lot about it until we're on the same page. And sometimes it ends up being that we're not. If we're not fully in agreement, then we'll just kind of table it. And we usually have a lot of irons in the fire, so we'll just move onto another thing that we agree on more.

Rajat: Sometimes it gets made better because of the disagreement. We find some little kernel, [that gets] past that friction, and it becomes better.

Jeremy: I think usually if one of us is bumping on something, the other person knows that there's an interesting or a good reason why. And we'll try and figure it out together. If we talk through it, the final product ends up having a more nuanced and clearer point of view. It makes it stronger.

When you're working, what do you think your worst habit is, either together or separately? And how do you fight it?

Rajat: Personally, I'm pretty impatient, and I have a short attention span. I try to just sort of spit stuff onto the page. If Jeremy and I are writing something [together], I think Jeremy is very thoughtful and he'll write like one or two perfect lines, and I'll write a hundred halfway-there lines. I feel like

that's a reason why we work well together, because I can push Jeremy to do more, and Jeremy can make me think about what I'm writing.

Jeremy: On the flip side of that, my problem is that occasionally I'll get so in my head, I'll be thinking through the point of view of a joke [internally]. And it'll be unclear to Rajat what I'm thinking about, and he'll be waiting for me to talk.

Rajat: I mean, it's fun to try to guess what you're thinking about, and to kind of put words in your mouth. I think we definitely have different work styles and there's parts where we let our bad habits show. I think we both help alleviate each other's bad habits a little bit.

Jeremy: I think working with Rajat has made me a much better writer.

Rajat: Aw. And back at you.

Jeremy: Aw. [laughs]

Rajat, as someone of a similar immigrant parent background, I know there's a lot of pressure among Asian-American and South-Asian-American immigrant parents to push their kids towards a more "traditional" career. Have you had to deal with any friction in your family, or trouble trying to explain to your parents what it is you want to do for a living?

Rajat: My parents were very supportive of my career path, for the most part. My brother sort of took the brunt of it, and became a consultant. He kind of took the spotlight off of me. I was allowed to dick around a little bit more and I was very privileged in that sense. But definitely, my parents were okay with me doing this. Some of my other relatives didn't seem chill that I was doing this. [laughs] And they kept giving me advice, like about how I can always go to grad school, or something like that...

And you took it?

Rajat: And I took it, and I'm going to go to grad school next year, probably. [laughs] My parents were supportive, but I think they were also pretty skeptical. Just also telling me [things like], "Now is the time to be studying for the GMAT." And I was like, "Yeah, just give me a second, maybe something will happen." And they would always be okay with that. But I think they were nervous. They were nervous, but supportive.

It's a question that I always think about with Asian-American creative people: What do their parents think?

Rajat: I went to business school, so they would have been more comfortable if I had just stuck with that, and became a consultant or a finance guy.

It seems like the landscape of what comedy is is very broad right now. It feels like there are like 60 different visions of what success looks like. What do you look towards as something that you'd want to be doing? You want to be a TikTok Hype House teen?

Rajat: We're trying to be Hype House people. [laughs]

Jeremy: I think we want to--this sounds so cliché--but I think we want to do something different, that... I already want to bail on this answer. [laughs] I can see where the answer is going, and it's so corny that I want to bail on it.

Rajat: You're going to bail. All right.

Jeremy: You can fill in the rest.

You want to be a showrunner for a show like *Don't Trust the B-- in Apartment 23*, right?

Jeremy: Yes, absolutely. [laughs]

Rajat: That's what... you filled in the blank perfectly. That's what was coming right after.

Jeremy: I want to do something different about the B in Apartment 23.

Rajat: You want us to trust the B?

Jeremy: Yeah.

Rajat: We have thought a lot about us in TV. It's the traditional path, doing a sketch show. Right now, it feels like we want to do something a little bit different, and we don't know what that really means. We're still trying to carve out what us in a bigger format would look like.

Jeremy: Yeah. I think that's a good way of getting at it, and it didn't sound corny. We've spent some time trying to think about what we could make in more traditional formats. And I don't know if they have so far felt really true to our worldview.

Now that you have to use the internet as a professional medium, how has your interaction with stuff online changed? Are you more critical?

Jeremy: I think making videos that are [commenting on] popular online videos has maybe made us look at a lot of the internet through a pretty critical lens, and look at types of people that are worthy of criticism. I think it's forced me through conversations with Rajat to articulate my thoughts about certain trends on the internet in a way that feels productive.

Rajat: I feel like Twitter and all of these social networking sites, very naturally, their algorithm is just tailored to give you stuff that you like and stuff that pisses you off. And Jeremy and I, I think we feel so viscerally upset at some of the people online and some of the [popular] narratives, that I think we sort of naturally like to talk about that stuff. So that becomes a video.

In terms of how we consume the internet, I guess it feels like pretty much the same. But [now] we have an outlet to sidebar and talk about something we saw online, and articulate our viewpoints a little bit.

What piece of advice do you wish you'd gotten when you first started out?

Rajat: I think everyone in comedy learns that if you work hard and you're nice, that you'll be successful. But I think at the beginning, when I started out, I took "work hard" to mean blindly doing a bunch of shit, and not really thinking about what I wanted to do, and what I wanted to use the medium to say. And I just kind of was [doing things I didn't care about], just because I was told to.

Jeremy: Well, I guess first of all, I feel like I did get a lot of good advice and had a leg up by...

Rajat: Wait. I want that for my answer, too.

Jeremy: I think it's interesting that Rajat just threw...

Rajat: No, no, no. I am also privileged.

Jeremy: Rajat's complaining about not having enough. [laughs]

Rajat: No, definitely not. If anything, I'm really woke, and I acknowledge my privilege and stuff, and everyone knows that about me.

Jeremy: I go a step further and I renounce my privilege.

Rajat: Oh, yeah. Actually, me too. [laughs]

Jeremy: I feel like, honestly, so much of being successful just has to do with having parents that can support you financially, and being around people that have parents that are supporting [them] financially to do comedy. And I definitely had that, plus I got a lot of good advice. I also got into comedy really early, so I don't ever feel like I wish I had someone to tell me what to do. I had an older friend that I knew in college, who was a contributor at *The Onion*. And he helped me start freelancing there while I was still in college. Rajat had the same experience.

Rajat: Yeah.

Jeremy: Not to throw ourselves under the bus. [laughs]

Rajat: I didn't say anything about privilege. I agree with all of this, obviously.

Jeremy: But, I think more broadly, something that I didn't hear, not that I needed more help, but something that none of my mentors told me, was that it's important to just know yourself and know what you have to say.

This is kind of what Rajat was saying. I feel like the biggest driver in our [work] is that we just have a lot to say. And when I think about the stuff that I like, it's [made by] people that have a specific viewpoint, and I think the best political comedy is [made by] people who actually engage with politics and have a nuanced understanding. Rajat and I read a lot, and have strong opinions. I think that's what makes good comedy. Just having a strong worldview. □

That was a good answer.

Jeremy: Can you put an emoji of the face I'm making at the end of my response?

The grimacing one?

Jeremy: Yeah.

If you have any last words of advice to young comedians who might be reading this...

Jeremy: My advice is, you can email me and Rajat.

Rajat: Yeah. We would be happy to answer specific questions.

Jeremy: Yeah. I think in the vein of having a leg up from going to an elite institution and being financially comfortable, reach out to us if you don't have that, and you want to be a comedian.

Rajat: Totally.

Jeremy: Reach out to people who are offering help, and know that it's not your fault that [you're not succeeding]. That it's difficult to make a living in comedy.

Rajat: I think people who are successful, they do like helping others. Well, most of them do. So if you don't like us, and you want to reach out to somebody else, I think that they would most likely respond, and want to help you back.

Jeremy: Yeah. It's really easy to contact people in the industry now, through Twitter, Instagram, and through email. Email is getting really big.

Rajat: Recently. Yeah.

Jeremy: Just reach out to people who you admire, and also just keep writing, keep making stuff. And have something to say.

Rajat Recommends:

Stinky man

The Comeback with Lisa Kudrow is a show I like a lot

This is a good up-and-coming group. Can't wait to see their next video.
Joining a local mutual aid group

Geek Love by Katherine Dunn is a book I like a lot

Jeremy Recommends:

Rajat and I love the monkey that kicks a rugby ball. I recommend animals in general, they are funnier than comedy.

I've been watching a lot of old clips from Onion News Network lately. They did good satire.

I just asked Rajat to remind me what I like and he said music. I love Elliott Smith (I have an Elliott Smith tattoo on my arm 😊) and I've been enjoying the new Phoebe Bridgers album (like everyone on the planet) which I think is about him. I'll also recommend two not-as-famous Philly groups I really enjoy: Friendship and Sadurn.

We both have Pants prints in our rooms and love his stuff.

I love the movie *Punch Drunk Love*.

Name

Jeremy Levick and Rajat Suresh


Vocation


Writers, comedians


Fact

courtesy of Jeremy Levick and Rajat Suresh

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