

**Andrew Clark:** All right.

**Zoe Rabnett:** I can't tell if they're clapping for you having broken the school, or for the start of the...

**AC:** They're happy about us being here, and they're maybe happy because I broke something. *(laughter)* Which I feel like I didn't get much out of, because I would've liked to have broke something on purpose. Really get it out, you know? Get it out. Welcome to our second Primetime. This is gonna be a really great one.

**ZR:** No pressure.

**AC:** I was just about to ask you: how long have we known each other? Forever, right?

**ZR:** I think it's been about twenty years. We're really old, you guys. *(applause)*

**AC:** We're old! Me, anyway! So how many of you have been going to Just for Laughs, and volunteering and stuff? Quite a few? Well, Just for Laughs 42 is on right now, and today we have someone who's a senior producer there, who probably sees and judges and thinks about comedy more than almost anybody. You literally scour the world looking at comedy and looking for great comedians. You're someone I've known through the Canadian comedy scene going way back, which we'll discuss for a long time. So please welcome, Zoe Rabnett. *(applause)*

**ZR:** Hi, everybody! Thanks for having me.

**AC:** These guys are students who are gonna get into that business and make their way. How did you end up in comedy, as an evaluator, as a producer, as a booker? How'd you get your start?

**ZR:** I really was just a fan, to start. I was watching comedy when I was a teenager, and I was going to shows, and I was watching *Kids in the Hall* every week, I was going to their tapings down at the old CBC studios. They were doing a weekly show at The Rivoli that I would sneak into because I was underage. I was just watching shows, and then I got to know a musical comedy troupe called Corky and the Juice Pigs that might be a little before some of your time.

**AC:** It was Sean Cullen. We all know Sean. Sean was in Corky and the Juice Pigs.

**ZR:** Sean Cullen, and Phil Nichol, and Greg Neale. I was a huge Corky and the Juice Pigs fan, I was about 17, 18. I was going to all their shows. So you get to know people. I would talk to them, and they were being co-managed by two people, one of whom was Lorne Perlmutter, who I also became friends with, and then Lorne started the company Diamondfield, which is still running now, which is an agency and management company here in Toronto. He asked me to come and work for him. First, before he asked me to come work for him, they asked me to be the president of their fan club, the Corky and the

Juice Pigs fan club. I was beside-myself happy. I was 18 and just a fan, and so I did that for a little while. I realized now that there was no fan club. It was just me. *(laughter)* And then I started working for Lorne as a junior agent and producer, and we started the Alt Dot Comedy Lounge at The Rivoli, and so I started watching comedy to produce those shows and book those shows. I met people, and started going to Just for Laughs repping our roster, who were performing at Just for Laughs. One thing leads to another, and Just for Laughs offered me a job seven years ago, and I moved to Montreal to take the job.

**AC:** You mentioned Corky and the Juice Pigs, and it's interesting how comedy changes, because they were a musical act primarily. They did some sketch work, obviously, but their big hits were...they weren't really politically correct. "The Only Gay Eskimo" was one. They had a superhero called Man Woman, or Woman Man. And they would play theaters like Passe Muraille, and they would tour the country. A lot of what they did was predicated on theater sales, but also sales of CD's, which of course people bought, even Corky and the Juice Pigs stuff. And then it changed, it all changed remarkably. But let's talk about the genesis of the Alt Dot, which is alternative comedy. Everybody here is probably a fan of it, or has heard of alternative comedy. The Alt Dot in Toronto was kind of ground zero after the Kids in the Hall. Do you wanna talk a bit about how that started, and what it was like in the early days of the Alt Dot?

**ZR:** The Kids in the Hall had a weekly residency at The Rivoli on Monday nights, and had sort of created a comedy community that was a bit alternative and interested in things that weren't the mainstream, which at the time was Yuk-Yuk's or CBC-driven comedies,

things that had more broad appeal. I think all over the world, some other types of comedy had been brewing for a long time, and Toronto didn't have a weekly show, or any show, that represented that kind of comedy. There was Largo in L.A., and there were shows popping up all over New York, but there wasn't one in Toronto. So we decided to start a show that could celebrate some of that non-mainstream comedy, a place to go where you could do anything.

**AC:** What do you think they were going against, the alternative comedians?

**ZR:** That's a good question. Kind of everything. Is that too broad of an answer? They were against censorship, they were against any rules or structure. They wanted to be able to be free to do comedy, whatever that meant to them. What comedy meant to them could be something very unusual, and not necessarily generating a ton of laughs, but it was still an art form of comedy that didn't fit anywhere else.

**AC:** Was there resistance? In the 90's, there were a lot fewer standup comedy venues than there are now. There was Yuk-Yuk's, and there was a place called The Laugh Resort, and you kind of did one or the other. How was the Alt Dot embraced? There was a time, it's changed a little, it's still somewhat, but there was a time when if you worked Yuk-Yuk's and you appeared anywhere other than a Yuk-Yuk's club, you were no longer a Yuk-Yuk's person. How did that affect the Alt Dot?

**ZR:** There was some of that, but there wasn't a ton of crossover at the time. It felt like two very different communities. There was a club community, and the alternative community. Over time, that's changed too. There's been more crossover. People are sort of diving into a variety of specific genres within that overall art form. But at the time, there wasn't a ton of crossover. It was embraced strongly by a community, and it helped build that level.

**AC:** Who were some of your favorites at the Alt Dot?

**ZR:** Sean Cullen was obviously around a lot. Winston Spear back then was a treat to watch.

**AC:** Do you remember any of the particularly odd...I remember it became a venue where you would see very weird things. There would be Dave Martin, who you may or may not know, who would do Glue Guy, who was a glue-sniffing comedian who would do back stock humor joke and just sniff glue and have a nervous breakdown. He had a South African racist comedian that he would do. When Tom Green came, it was he and Jason Rouse eating human hair that they were blowing into the audience. It became a real happening. How long did that sustain? How long did that kind of vibe happen? Now I think it's still alternative, but it's almost really mainstream, right?

**ZR:** Yeah, alternative doesn't mean alternative anymore, the way it did in the mid-90's. I'd say there was a solid six or seven years where it was really kind of alt-y, and that

became a bit more mainstream, and you'd have acts like Pete Zedlacher, for example, who was a real club comic and touring comic and theater comic who also would show up at the Alt Dot and do a character, and he did that thing with Jon Dore where they were in a heavy-metal band. Really weird things. So he was exploring that kind of stuff, and you'd get a lot more comedians like that, and that tended to then mean that there was a little more grey area at the shows, where some people were more the club-comic style. It still embraced that, but it was just a bit more broad-appeal more often.

**AC:** How do you think the growth of the web and the internet affected that scene?

**ZR:** Huge. For people to be able to get a following, to get feedback on their comedy, from such a huge market all around the world, I think it changed comedy overall completely.

**AC:** Do you remember the first time you went to Just for Laughs?

**ZR:** It was at Just for Laughs that Corky and the Juice Pigs asked me to be their fan club manager. I'm really sorry I keep mentioning that, but it was pretty important. I think that was 1995, 1994 maybe. That might've been my first one.

**AC:** We can talk a little bit later on about how the festival itself has changed, the nature of it, but in the early 90's, the first time I went, '91 I guess, there was obviously no web, there was nothing, there was just TV and film and then theater. So going to Just for

Laughs and showcasing there could have an enormous effect. The networks would give out holding deals. So someone like Sean Cullen, they gave him, it wasn't even the largest deal, but I think it was a \$300,000 holding deal.

**ZR:** And they signed it in the hotel bar at 4 AM.

**AC:** Yeah. There was a gold rush mentality, because all of the agents from Los Angeles, they couldn't just go online and look at your act. They had to go to Just for Laughs. And that was pretty much the case until the early 2000's rolled around, and the festival has kind of evolved since then and taken on different shapes. You started seven years ago at the festival, so you were coming in at that point.

**ZR:** Yeah, 2009, I think, that was my first year with the Just for Laughs team.

**AC:** And that year, how much of it were you on the road going to different countries and watching comedy?

**ZR:** A lot. I haven't calculated it, but I'm on the road maybe five months of the year. A lot, yeah.

**AC:** And which countries do you hit? You do Australia...

**ZR:** Typically I stick to Canada, Australia and the U.K. I can see a lot if I go to those. I can go to the Edinburgh Festival, for example, and see comedy from all over the world that comes to Edinburgh. Or I can go to the Melbourne Festival and see comics that have come there from other parts of the world.

**AC:** I'm gonna ask you a very crude, crass generalization. If you had to sum up U.K. humor or the U.K. scene versus Australia versus Canada, are there any labels that you can put on them? We probably have people with all sorts of questions about showcasing and stuff, so we can come back to it.

**ZR:** We might have to come back to it. There are a lot of similar sensibilities across all three of those comedy areas.

**AC:** How about audiences? What are Australian audiences like?

**ZR:** Australian audiences are the most like Canadian audiences: polite, willing to give anybody a chance, and not so hard on comedy. The U.K. audiences are tough. They're really tough. If they don't like you, you know about it, and you know about it loudly.

**AC:** And they're pretty good hecklers too, right? They're pretty savvy...

**ZR:** I feel like U.K. audiences come with their own jokes ready. They come prepared.



**AC:** There have been a lot of Canadians who've gone to the U.K. in the last five or six years, Mike Wilmot being one who's done terrifically well. But Nick Beaton would go over, Jason Rouse, a lot of different people trying it out, and they're always a little surprised when they first get over there about the differences working those rooms.

**ZR:** There's a really big live comedy market in the U.K. There are just tons and tons of places to get onstage. It's a really rewarding career path there, to just be a performer. You don't also have to be a writer and an actor or anything. You can just get onstage and do standup. I think as a result, you can imagine that that means there are a lot of people who think of comedy as a form of entertainment that is an everyday, "let's go to the comedy show" kind of crowd. So they're used to watching comedy. Crowds there are more savvy, I think, than other places. It's such a popular form of entertainment. As a result, the crowds know what they're watching, and they've watched a lot of comedy. They're more informed about comedy.

**AC:** Do you think the British are also more willing to pay? I remember when I lived in England, I ran a club there, and people would just routinely go out and pay five or ten pounds to go see a show. And here, people balk at paying at all. Or is that no longer the case? I thought it was great if you were in the arts that people would think, "Well, I'll pay five or ten pounds."

**ZR:** There are a lot of tickets for sale in the U.K. that people are buying. There's nowhere else in the world that is doing comedy on such a big scale. There are arena tours

constantly. Big, big theater tours of just standup. So people spend good money on those, but also, as much as I think people are willing to spend money, there's a big surge right now at the Edinburgh Festival, for example, which is a place where you can watch for trends and things, where the Free Fringe is developing into a real competitive market, where shows are free. They pass the hat at the end of shows, but shows are free to walk into. It's really popular. Quality acts are on the Free Fringe to go and see. It's a real mix, but I definitely think that U.K. audiences are prepared to pay good money for the acts that they want to see. There's a lot of standup on TV in the U.K., more there than anywhere else. There are a lot of panel shows and standup shows. People get really famous really fast by appearing on those, because they're really popular. Those are the comics doing arena tours and big theaters, and if you're one of those, people will spend a lot of money to see you.

**AC:** *(to audience)* Is there a question yet out there? No? Good. I want to keep talking.

*(laughter)* Do you remember the first time you had to evaluate a showcase as someone from Just for Laughs? I even wrote articles about it. Has anyone here been to a showcase, a Just for Laughs showcase? Wasn't there one not too long ago? I can't remember if there was one just a week ago. Oh no, it would've been in the spring.

**ZR:** Yeah, I don't typically do showcases through festival season, which is sort of May to October.

**AC:** Has anyone been to a showcase or even been part of a showcase? Yeah? Which one did you go to, do you know?

**Audience member:** There was one happening at The Rivoli, a bunch of really good comics.

**AC:** Yeah. Showcases, the first one I saw, I was kind of stunned, because it was so Darwinian, for lack of a better word, because you had your lineup, and it was a great lineup, as I recall. It was at Yuk-Yuk's, I think it was for HBO. It was Chris Finn, Mike Bullard, Pat Bullard was in town. These are all very, very good comedians, and they just go up one after the other, and you get to hear immediately how you're doing, bad, good. You get to hear about how the people before you were doing, and at the end you wait to see what happens. The first time you went as someone from Just for Laughs, sitting at the back with your little pen that has a light on it so you can make notes, what was that experience like?

**ZR:** It's intimidating to know that all eyes are on the audience, but also on the result of it, which seems to land on me. It was a bit scary at first, but at the same time it was so natural to me to watch comedy and have an opinion about it. It wasn't a huge gearshift for me.

**AC:** Do you have anything that you're looking for particularly? Obviously you want them to be funny, but I think what you'll find, you guys, when you go to showcases, it

gets kind of weird. It's a bit like watching professional sports. No one's bad, unless it's Brian Regan at Just for Laughs, who has the worst set of his life, freezes, asks to come out again and again. But most of those sets, you would say, "These guys are all killing." So how do you figure out, out of all these deserving people, how do you make a decision regarding who to consider for that year's festival?

**ZR:** It's definitely hard. The pool of talent across this country and around the world is massive. I can't bring everybody, unfortunately, to all the festivals. Every year, what we're looking for changes. Every year, there are mandates we are following, or some direction that we're taking, or theme shows that we're doing, or galas that have a particular slant to them that we're trying to fill spots for. So I'm looking for particular things, but it changes every year, and often I don't know what those are going to be when I'm watching shows. So I'm really watching for real, original voices, and obviously funny, that goes without saying, but original voices who stand out as being at least unique or different, or would be someone we'd love to put our stamp on, put the branding behind them.

**AC:** Have you had any sort of epiphany moments? I wouldn't say "discover" per se, but seeing someone who blows you away, someone you didn't know about who these guys now might've heard of or been excited about?

**ZR:** Absolutely. It happens all the time when I see people I haven't seen before, because I'm always looking for new people I don't already know. It happens pretty regularly

where I'm genuinely surprised at great talent onstage that I hadn't seen before. Every once in a while, you see people who you've been watching for a long time, and have always been good, and then something has clicked for them, and they've just found their voice, and suddenly they're just head and shoulders better than they've ever been, and they're just so at ease and happy and comfortable and funny onstage. That's a really fun moment.

**AC:** Can you give us an example of a comedian you saw that happen for?

**ZR:** One from this year is Dawn Whitwell, who people might know. She teaches classes.

**AC:** Does everybody know Dawn, from the Comedy Bar? All right.

**ZR:** I've been watching Dawn for a long time, and how long have we known Dawn? Twenty years? And she's always been a really strong standup, always. She's never been to Just for Laughs before, and this year, something about her tone, her material, she's just hit her stride this year. She's so funny. And yes, she came to the festival in Montreal this year for the first time, and that was a real treat to have been watching her for so long, and then to invite her to come.

**AC:** Now, running the Alt Dot for as long as you did, you would've been a lot of aspiring comedians come and go. Are there any work habits or things that the ones who were able

to make a career...Nathan Fielder used to do The Rivoli a fair bit. He used to do Laugh Sabbath, and I don't know if he did The Alt Dot...

**ZR:** Yeah, he did, regularly.

**AC:** What did they do right that these guys can take note of and save themselves some aggravation when it comes to working on your craft and getting better?

**ZR:** I'm not interested in saving anybody aggravation! Come on, Andrew! Get aggravated! It's hard work!

**AC:** That's rule number one: be aggravated. OK. Well, I think we're accomplishing that here at Humber.

**ZR:** There's no formula. There's no "Do A, B and C." I wish there was, because then people could just follow it. I think it's different for every person and every path. The one thing that is so important to do is to be out there, to be talking to other people, to be in the community. That, I think, helps define your own personal style, and your own voice, by talking to lots of people, watching lots of comedy, getting on lots of different stages. Our best resource is each other, when it comes to this business. And so talking amongst yourselves, forming relationships, is probably the best thing that you can do to move ahead, and to keep hustling. It's not gonna come to you, you have to keep being out there

doing things. So you can't just sit back and wait to see what's gonna come for you. You have to go get it.

**AC:** Do you evaluate sketch comedy as well, or just standup?

**ZR:** No, I watch a lot of sketch and improv too. Unfortunately, there isn't a ton of room for it at the festival, so I don't get to watch nearly as much of it as I get to watch standup. The Montreal festival in particular is so standup-driven for television, so that's where most of our focus is. It's a problem. I'd like to have a lot more sketch at the festival. It's a goal of ours. But I do watch a fair bit. Not as much, but now that I'm back in Toronto...

**AC:** So you've relocated from deepest, darkest Montreal to the big city? Is it because the Jays are doing better?

**ZR:** Yeah, that's it. *(laughter)* But now that I'm back, I'll get to watch a lot more sketch here, just to be out watching it, and I won't necessarily showcase it, but just to be out catching shows.

**AC:** Sketch comedy in Toronto has always been interesting because the average trajectory, and I think most of these guys are in a sketch troupe of one form or another, particularly second year, the trajectory was, form a troupe, start doing The Rivoli and a few other places, get some momentum, get the cover of *Now Magazine*, break up. Because there's nowhere for them to go. Do you think that's changing? There's a show

coming up on the CBC, which is a female sketch show. There seems to be a bit of a rash. There's *Sunnyside* on (City). There seems to be a little bit more traction. Do you think that's changing for sketch comedy, and there's a little bit of hope there?

**ZR:** I think there's a little bit of hope. I think it's really hard to be in a troupe and make something work for that troupe specifically, but I think that quality sketch gets seen by people now in a way that leads to other opportunities. So Picnicface, for example, the group from out east. A lot of them moved here, and they got a lot of attention for their TV show. They're not really performing together anymore, but they got showcased in that format, and things came from that. Some of them are now in Get Some, who are performing, and things are happening from that. So I think of sketch more as a vehicle for other things, and I also think it's a really good experience to work with other people, and learn what it's like to...it simulates the experience of being in a writer's room for a TV show, for example, which is what a lot of comedians in this country do also, work on TV shows. It can simulate that experience and get you ready for things, so that when opportunity comes, you're experienced enough to handle it.

**AC:** There's been a lot of discussion in the last year or two about standup comedy and what's appropriate in terms of subject matter, or appropriating some other group or gender or sexual preference's voice. Does any of that come into play for Just for Laughs, or do you have a kind of neutral take on what a comedian can or cannot say?



**ZR:** In theory, we have a neutral take on it, and we're not interested in censoring anything. We just want to hear what people think is funny and figure out where that fits within the context of the festival, but the reality is that we're putting a lot of comedy on television, and there are rules when you put things on TV. But because we work with a variety of networks all over the world, the content is filmed and sold to other countries, each network has its own set of rules. So some are more stringent than others. When we put things on the CBC, there are very different rules than when we put things on HBO. We do have to keep an eye on it, but I always ask people to showcase or to show me their standup or their comedy at whatever they think is their best, whatever that means, and let me worry about where that fits. I would rather not ask people to censor what they do just to be considered for the festival. Because it used to be only CBC galas. That was the only thing we were doing at the festival. So everybody had to showcase clean, and everybody had to have super-duper clean sets for television. And now that's changed. Those rules are very different, and there's a lot of opportunity to put interesting, different things on television now.

**AC:** How many second-years are here today? Do you wanna raise your hands? These guys will all be showcasing in the spring. They do a showcase as part of their curriculum, and then we take the six or seven who've done the strongest, also factoring in experience during the year, so they're all gonna have to go through the showcase experience. Do you have any advice for them as someone who watches a lot of showcases, and has no doubt seen some go very wrong? When a person's putting together their showcase set, what should they keep in mind? Is there a way to structure it? Second-best material to start,

best to close? I'm being a bit crass, but are there any tricks that you would recommend to them to do a good showcase set?

**ZR:** The classic "start strong, end strong" rule is probably a good one, but also I'm always amazed at people who try something brand new on a showcase. It's the worst idea. Do not do new jokes at a showcase! Just because it's the freshest idea in your head, I think that tempts people. "Oh, but I've got this terrific idea that I thought of two days ago, and it's gonna be amazing, and it'll help me stand out." Don't do it. Do the jokes that you know inside and out, top to bottom, that you could say in your sleep, because those are the jokes you're gonna need in your head when you are under pressure and nervous and you're staring at a room that you don't know how to handle. So no new jokes.

**AC:** What about crowd work? Have you ever seen someone work the crowd when they're doing a showcase? I've certainly seen that.

**ZR:** I've seen it. I've seen it work really well. I've seen it fail miserably. It's pretty risky. It depends on the context of what you're showcasing for. If it's a Just for Laughs showcase, and I'm looking to put you on television, then it doesn't make any sense to do crowd work, because I won't have you do that at a gala. So considering who's watching you and what they're watching you for, I think is the best rule of thumb to figure out if you're prepared to do that. If you're not sure, then don't do crowd work. It's not worth it, usually.

**AC:** And going over your time, which I've seen people do. Does that really count against them for you, when someone goes over their time?

**ZR:** Yep. It irritates me a lot when people do that. It's a skill. Showcasing is a skill set, and it takes practice, and you have to keep doing it. The experience of getting to showcase on a Humber showcase is really good for people to do and take seriously, because here, all the festivals in the country do showcases. Halifax comes, Winnipeg comes. There are always showcases in Toronto and across the country for festivals. But if you end up, for example being on a showcase, or ever doing standup in another place like L.A. or New York or somewhere else, that five-minute showcase set is so key. Here, it's a little bit longer, seven or eight minutes, but to have that TV set ready, it's a skill set you have to have in your back pocket, just like hosting is a different skill set, or headlining is a different skill set, and showcasing is one that's really important. So keep doing it as often as possible. Put yourself in those pressure situations.

**AC:** How do you decide, or do you decide necessarily, who is gonna be on the showcase that you're gonna see? In other words, you'll be in Toronto, you'll be here now period, but you used to come in for showcases in February or March, right? Somewhere around the spring?

**ZR:** Yeah, it shifted around a little bit.

**AC:** And you'll go to The Rivoli, right? And you'll go maybe to Yuk's, and Absolute, or whatever? How is it decided who's gonna be on those showcases?

**ZR:** It varies a little bit. So Yuk-Yuk's does a week of showcases in November where they invite all the festivals from across the country to come, and everybody flies in and goes to all of the shows at once for the week. They take our lists, like there might be people we've been looking to see. They factor that in with the people that they would like us to all see, and then they build the showcases. So it's not a ton of input for me to decide who's on those ones, but then when I come back and do showcases in the spring, usually it's February or March, I do a run of shows, then I decide them totally. I pick the lineups and make those decisions myself. I'm about to leave for Australia, and I'll do showcases there too, and those are me picking the lineups.

**AC:** And how do you know those guys? Should these guys be sending you links to their videos hoping to get on a showcase? Or will you put "block" and block them out forever?

**ZR:** No, I'm really easy to reach, and I'm really accessible and really open to hearing about things and new people. I think that it's important to time it right, not only in terms of when your standup is ready to send me a link and say, "Hey, can you watch this and let me know if I'm ready for a showcase?" It has to be ready. I want people to think hard about whether or not they're actually ready. Have they watched a showcase? Do they know what level I'm looking for for things? It's not just TV, I'm also looking for Homegrown acts.

**AC:** There's still a New Faces, right, the Homegrown show?

**ZR:** Yeah. So thinking long and hard about whether or not the standup is ready is one thing. Thinking long and hard about when you're gonna send me the link is probably worth just taking a beat to think, "Is this the right time of year to send her something?"

**AC:** When is the right time of year?

**ZR:** Well, not during the festival. That's probably a bad time.

**AC:** So not in July, not now...

**ZR:** No, just having a quick look at our website to know when our festival dates are can give you a pretty good idea of when to not get in touch with us. It just gets ignored. I've been getting a couple links this week, because people are thinking about Just for Laughs because we're here, so that's probably not the smartest. So just taking a beat to think about how the business is probably run would help. But I'm absolutely open to getting links. Don't all send me links at the same time, but to watch things and get to know people. I'm also gonna be out in the city. I have lots of people I call and trust and whose opinions I rely on to help me understand what's happening at shows that I'm not at. You never know who might be watching in a room, who might have links to other people.

**AC:** Do you have a favorite club you go to around the world? Some people love the Comedy Cellar in New York. Do you have a favorite, or maybe one that's gone now? I always loved the Bay Street club, and even the horrible super club.

**ZR:** Obviously I have a soft spot for The Rivoli here, because I spent every week there for 15 years. But around the world, there are two of them, one in Edinburgh and one in Glasgow, called The Stand. The one in Edinburgh is terrific. It's a great club. The Comedy Cellar in New York is amazing. The Comedy Works in Montreal is pretty great. The one upstairs, it's been renovated now, so it's not really being held together with duct tape the way it used to be. But that's a great place. There are some really great clubs. There are clubs across the country that are pretty great. There are a lot of good places to play.

**AC:** There was a time when American producers and executives looked to Canadian comedians as a kind of interesting strain, if you will. If there was a new Canadian who hit L.A., people would all go out to see them, because they never knew, and there was a kind of perception that Canadians were good at hockey and they were good at comedy. Do you think that's still the case?

**ZR:** Yeah, I think so. I think we're still sort of known for being good at comedy. I think that Canadian comedy in general is getting on the radar of other parts of the world in a way that it didn't used to. Part of that is because of Just for Laughs, because so many industry descend on Montreal and get to see a lot of great Canadian comics. Part of it is

that comics from around the world are coming to places like JFL 42 and getting local openers who we book to open for them, who then establish relationships with them. Mark Forward's on tour with Craig Ferguson right now, because he opened for Craig three years ago at a Just for Laughs show in Toronto at Massey Hall and it went really well, and then Craig booked him twice on the TV show, and now he's touring with him. As a result, Craig knows more about Canadian comedy than he used to. Those relationships are developing from experiencing Canadian comedy right up close and in person. But yeah, I think our reputation as being a funny country still (exists).

**AC:** I think of K. Trevor Wilson, he opened for Louis C.K. at Just for Laughs, and ended up opening for him again a few times. Are there people that these guys should be looking at, comedians that are not quite on the radar yet? When Trevor Noah was picked for *The Daily Show* host, I thought you were one of the only people I could ask, "So how's his career been?" Because you've probably been aware of him and his stuff for ages, right?

**ZR:** For a long time, yeah.

**AC:** So are there people who these guys should be looking for, looking to go and see if they're in town, that you really think are kind of on the uptick or are doing interesting comedy?

**ZR:** I think there are a lot. There's a lot of interesting comedy going on around the world. I think that the internet is an incredible resource, but I think there are some people

bringing in great comedy here. The Comedy Bar is doing a great job, and Ian Atlas is doing a great job of bringing in some great comics in those rooms that are really worth seeing. If somebody is at JFL 42, it's because we really believe in them and think they're worth people seeing, and the whole lineup is worth going to check out.

**AC:** Yeah, it's pretty strong. It's always strong, but it seems particularly strong this fall. There are a lot of good people.

**ZR:** There are a lot of big names among the headliners, and the bigger names at the bigger theaters that are more well known. There are a lot of shows happening at Comedy Bar and Bad Dog and The Rivoli that have really, really great comics from other parts of the world that are worth going to see.

**AC:** We had our Humber Alumni Show at Yuk-Yuk's for two nights as part of the festival for the first time, with Kyle Radke and Caitlin Langelier. *(to audience)* Maybe another question? Yes, Chili.

**Audience member:** So, you said that you were a fan of comedy when you were a kid, and then you became a producer. At what point did you decide that producing comedy is what you wanted to do with your career?

**ZR:** I did just kind of fall into it. When I was that age, there were no resources like this school where you could sort of understand the various aspects of the business. I just kind



of loved it, and kind of fell into it, and had a natural inclination to certain parts of it. I never really made a conscious effort. I went to university, I have a degree in anthropology that is totally useless. So I really didn't know. I didn't have a plan, but it did just kind of land in my lap. I wish that I'd had the resources then to have somebody help me understand what the options were, like you guys.

**AC:** *(to audience)* Uh, yeah.

**Audience member:** What would you say makes a great comic?

**AC:** Good question.

**ZR:** That is a really good question, and one that's really hard to answer. Comedy is so subjective. I'm coming at it from the perspective that I'm coming at it from. I'm watching shows for the reasons I'm watching them. Everybody else might be watching them for a different reason, so somebody could have a totally different answer than me. Like I was saying earlier, I'm looking for unique voices and strong, confident sets that stand out a little bit above the average. That's such a generic answer. I wish I could give you an exact spot where it's like, "Just do this," but it's not quite like that. *(phone starts ringing)* Sorry!

**AC:** That's alright. You wanna take it?

**ZR:** No, I don't. (*laughter*) Yeah, I wish I had an answer for you that was a little bit more specific. But do what you love to do, trust your instincts. Figure out what feels best to you. I think that comes naturally.

**AC:** Is there bad advice you think people get? I know that a lot of managers, or certainly comedians, will come and talk about the terrible advice they've been given by various people over the years. Is there sort of textbook bad advice you think people should have their alarm systems ready for if they get it?

**ZR:** I don't know about textbook bad advice, but getting limited opinions or limited advice is a mistake. Asking multiple people for advice or opinions helps you form your own opinion about things. So I think there's a lot of outdated information there. I often get people thinking that they know what my process is, or what we're looking for, what's going to be happening at the festival, because somebody's told them that's what it is, but that information is so outdated. Whenever possible, go to the source if you have a real question, and go to the person you think is the best one to actually answer regardless of who that person is. Asking a lot of opinions and then forming your own might be the best thing to do, rather than taking what any one person says as gospel. Everybody's experience is so different. What I might say to one person because that's the conversation I'm having with that one person in terms of their performance and where they fit into the overall picture of Just for Laughs might be very different than another conversation I would have with another person. Limiting yourself to a small pool of information will do you a disservice.

**AC:** What's the process, then? Say someone showcases well in Toronto for you, so you've seen them there. What happens next, if they've done a good job? Is there a lot more showcasing? What's the next step? How does it go from there?

**ZR:** Again, there's no real hard and fast rule. It's relationships. I'm trying to build relationships with as many people as I can, and have conversations. It's so unusual and rare that somebody might showcase once and then get booked for the festival. It really is about a process of watching growth and development, so that everybody feels confident about moving forward to have an invitation to the festival. A showcase might be once a year, it might be a couple times a year, it depends on the year and what I'm seeing. I might see a showcase and say, "Could you do something a little bit different?" and ask to see it again, whether that's on a showcase that I'm attending or a video. It really is a dialogue, an open conversation. There's no real A, B, C situation.

**AC:** So it's more like you'll see someone one year and think, "OK, I like that, I'll wait a year, see where they're at, see if it's matured."

**ZR:** Yeah. I think getting asked to showcase more than once is actually, from my perspective, a compliment. It means I liked what I saw and want to see how you're doing the following year, how you've grown. But at the same time as I say that, just because you might not get asked to showcase in back to back years does not mean you're not being considered. It just means it's maybe not what we're looking for this year, it might

just be that I've seen it around other places as well, and I have a good sense for it and don't need to see it again. So you can't assume one or the other. There are some people who think that they're being showcased over and over again because they're just not getting it right, and there are people who think they're showcasing over and over again because they're just about to get it, or they're not getting showcases so they're never gonna get the festival. I change my mind all the time, but not because I have different opinions about people, just because I'm looking for different things, and in one season I've been asked to program something specific for a TV show, so I'm looking for very specific things from people. I know I'm being a bit vague, but it's good for people to understand that there are no real rules about it, and it is about conversation and dialogue and experience.

**AC:** Great. We talked a little bit before we came in about the way comedy, particularly standup anyway, works on these sort of seven or eight year cycles. Can you talk a little bit about your take on that, and then where we are in that cycle?

**ZR:** I do think that comedy is cyclical. I think it's cyclical in terms of the generations that come through and start making waves and start getting known, but also cyclical in terms of genres and styles and subject matter. You see waves of things happening. I might be influenced by the fact that I've just arrived back in Toronto to live here, and so I'm seeing a lot more here than I have in a while, but it does feel like we're on the upswing of a new generation, a new cycle, some new takes on things and some new experimental stuff, with video and standup in a slightly different context, and a whole new generation

of comics coming through. So I have lots of people I'm looking forward to getting to know.

**AC:** Who would you say was the last cycle or generation? Would that be Mark Forward and his wave, or is there one after that?

**ZR:** No, I think more like that Nathan Fielder generation.

**AC:** So Nathan, Levi McDougall, Tim Gilbert, who's still doing a lot of stuff?

**ZR:** Yeah. Tim also just came to Montreal for the festival for the first time.

**AC:** He's great.

**ZR:** Yeah, he's pretty terrific. When I say "cyclical," it doesn't mean that the end of that generation means anything. It just means that there are these sort of pools that are moving through, and they tend to stick together too. You get your own little community that you can rely on and experience the business with.

**AC:** Great. Maybe *(to audience)* Maybe we have time for another question or two, if there is one? *(to Zoe)* When I first went to the festival, I remember Ernie Butler from the Comedy Works...

**ZR:** Comedy Nest.

**AC:** Comedy Nest, yes, pardon me. This is how the festival changed. It was Al Rae, Al and George were the duo, George Westerholm and Al Rae. They were in The Comedy Nest green room, they were all hung over and tired, and Ernie came in and said, “What are you doing? The world is here to see you, to see comedy, and you’re just lying around like this. You’ve gotta show yourselves! Come on, you gotta show yourselves!” And then he cut like three or four lines of cocaine and gave them coke to get them up so they would showcase well. So that’s the old festival, and the new festival I’m assuming is not really like that at all, because it’s a lot more corporate. Can you talk a little bit about the business aspect? There’s a lot more of a comedy conference that goes on at Just for Laughs now too.

**ZR:** Yeah, it’s a little more Red Bull than cocaine now at the festival.

**AC:** That’s a good analogy, yeah. That’s good. I’m not advocating cocaine, by the way, just for the kids. *(laughter)*

**ZR:** The conference is a huge, huge part of the festival. I can’t stress that enough. It’s all day for five days where it’s panel discussions and pitch sessions and one-on-one meetings. It’s really become as big a part of the festival as the comedy at night. And industry (people) come because that’s a big part of it, that they get to see people and talk

to people. Nothing will ever replace sitting across the table from someone or shaking someone's hand and having that relationship.

**AC:** Have you met anybody who you got kind of “president of the fan club” about at that event?

**ZR:** Well, John Cleese was at the festival a couple of years ago, and I'm a big John Cleese fan. I was standing waiting for the elevator at the hotel, and he came up next to me to get on the elevator, and it was just the two of us, and the elevator arrived and he got on, and I couldn't get on the elevator with him. I just let him get on. I had to wait for the next one, because I was too scared about what I might say to John Cleese. Everybody's there. They're all hanging out. It's like comedy camp. It's industry and artists mixing with each other and hanging out. It's pretty special when you look around a room and see the biggest agents and managers in the world, and film producers and TV makers, and Louis C.K. and Bill Burr are all just sitting around in a bar hanging out. It's pretty special. There's nothing quite like it.

**AC:** I'm gonna ask you one question, you don't have to name any names, but there is a theory...

**ZR:** Oh, is this the gossip section?

**AC:** No. There is a theory that the dirtier the comedian is onstage, the nicer they tend to be offstage, and the nicer they appear onstage, the less nice they sometimes are offstage. Do you believe there's any truth to that rumor? No names need to be spoken...

**ZR:** I think there's some truth to that rumor, yeah. I think there's some truth, but I think that like any stereotype, it's not a hard and fast rule for everybody. I think that's probably true for some people, yeah.

**AC:** OK. And another question, we have time for maybe two more, but one I'd like to ask: I had the honor to see Henny Youngman, George Burns, people like that, when they were kind of in the twilight of their careers. Is there anybody of that generation that these guys should try to get out to see, do you think, if they come into town?

**ZR:** Oh boy, yes.

**AC:** Who would you (recommend)? Just a couple names.

**ZR:** Somebody just said a name, was that? No. If anybody comes through town that has been doing comedy for longer than you've been alive, you should go see them. If they still have what it takes to tour and be on the road and draw an audience, there's no reason you wouldn't go to respect that kind of career longevity. It's fascinating to watch, and it can be a bit old-school, might be not your sensibility, but to be able to watch to see what



other people have been laughing at for a long time can help make you a more broadly educated performer.

**AC:** I remember seeing Jerry Lewis. He did three encores, tap dance, gun slinging. He did everything. It was old school. But I'll always remember that. Obviously he's not really touring anymore. All right, well, before we go, if there is a question, you guys are pretty quiet today, but that's all right.

**ZR:** No gossip questions, even?

**AC:** No, they're very well behaved. Normally they're shifting around. *(to audience)*  
Robbie.

**Audience member:** This is a personal question, but being around comedy for so long, have you every tried doing standup? Have you ever been tempted to try it?

**ZR:** Never. *(laughter)* I'm not very good at public speaking. I don't like getting onstage and talking to people. This makes me very nervous, speaking in front of people talking.

**Audience member:** You're doing a great job.

**ZR:** Thanks very much. *(applause)* Yeah, I've never been tempted to do it. I think that benefits me well. I think that every single person who walks onstage and is doing a set

that I'm watching gets the benefit of the doubt from me, and gets credit for just doing something that I know I couldn't do. So at the very least, they get a minute of leeway from me. Yeah, it's never tempted me. But I could do a great job. All the comedy I've seen? I think I could probably steal some great material if I needed to. *(laughter)*

**AC:** *(to audience)* Did you have another question?

**Audience member:** Yeah, this is a gossip question. Have you ever had a famous comedian at the festival who was not nice to you, or was really nice to you?

**ZR:** Yes to both of those things. I'm gonna focus on the positive side of that one. Neil Patrick Harris was at the festival this year. He's probably one of the more famous people we've ever had, and he was hosting galas, and he was an absolute delight. He was professional and fun and kind. We were glued to each other's sides for four days while we tried to do these variety galas that he was doing, and he was absolutely so nice to every single person he came in contact with, not just me, but everybody, and it's really nice when that happens. It's so disappointing when someone you love or admire is a bit of a jerk, and that does happen, unfortunately.

**AC:** And I think part of it too, with someone like that, if someone is famous, any interaction you have with them, you recall. So if you get them on a bad day, that's them forever as far as a lot of people are concerned, and that can be tricky.

**ZR:** But there are really good people out there, people who are really just humans doing their job. Trevor Noah was here a couple days ago. *The Daily Show* starts today. He had every reason to be in just the worst state, and he was delightful and nice and generous with his time. The fact that he even got on the plane and came up here 48 hours before the premiere is pretty great. So yes, there are a lot of really quality people out there.

**AC:** *(to audience)* Did you have another question? Uh, yeah.

**Audience member:** Just going off what you said earlier, you don't have to name any names, but what's considered sort of bad etiquette for performing at the festival?

**AC:** None of this will be broadcast.

**ZR:** *(laughs)* I think when you get in those situations, the pressure is pretty intense for a lot of people, and sometimes people don't handle it very well. You kind of need to be professional. That's part of what we have to do. Getting onstage and doing what you do best is one part of it, but shaking hands and being polite and being open to conversation is another thing. When you're also under immense pressure or stress, people sometimes drink too much, or take it a little too much to the party side of things, and lose track of being able to have their wits about them. That's not to say people don't have a great time. People come to the festival, they have a great time. We often hang out after showcases or whatever, but being able to carry on a conversation is pretty key to the business. You never know when conversation could lead to something further down the road.

**Audience member:** So not flying off the handle.

**ZR:** Yeah, keeping control of who you are and what you're up to.

**AC:** Great. Zoe, this is for you.

**ZR:** Whaaaat?

**AC:** A little present for you. (*applause*)

**ZR:** Thanks so much! Thanks, everybody!

**AC:** Really appreciate you coming down today. Thanks very much, guys.

**ZR:** Thanks, everyone! Good luck! Be funny!

**AC:** Thanks!

**END**

