

Andrew Clark: Today is our last Primetime, which I admit is a terrible name for our speaker series, but it's what we started out with, of 2013. We saved the best for last. (*Andy Nulman laughs*) We did! He's someone who I met many years ago at Just for Laughs. He was a cofounder. He's someone who, every time I would see him, he would be doing something interesting and new that I had not really heard about. For instance, in 1999 we were talking about this strange idea of having "apps" on your phone that you would interact with and do things with. And I remember thinking, "What?"

Andy Nulman: Yeah, right.

AC: I should've had more faith. I had no idea what it was.

AN: You said what everyone else said: "You're stupid. You're an idiot." That's what everyone told me in 1999.

AC: I was more polite, I think. In first-year History of Comedy, we studied Just for Laughs and Andy Nulman, so please welcome Andy Nulman, everybody. (*applause*)

AN: Thank you, but hold on, hold on: we were *studied*? I was actually *studied*?

AC: We studied the history of comedy, and one of the chapters in my book, as you recall...

AN: Oh, no. My name was mentioned in the class? That's so surreal.

AC: So you'll be grilled on your own history later. We'll see if you can remember it all correctly.

AN: Let me tell you, it's like Woodstock: if I can remember it, I wasn't there. Trust me.

AC: Now I'm gonna give you the first question, which is how you got into comedy. Your career is a lot bigger than comedy. We're gonna talk, not just about comedy, but about technology, entertainment, all sorts of stuff. The first question for these guys, just to refresh everybody's memory, is how you got into Just for Laughs, that first year for you.

AN: Well, it's a great story, because it's a great story about life, and about how things lead from one to another. But before we do this, let me just set this up, OK? I'll answer that question, I'll answer all your questions, and hopefully we're gonna have, not just questions from you guys, but I really want to understand what you're interested in learning and hearing about. I'm coming to this today very, very... How would you put this? Disillusioned. I'm coming here with almost a bone to pick with the comedy industry. I'm not here to say how wonderful it is, how great it is. I really think, and we'll get more into this afterwards, but I really think that it's at a standstill. I find that comedy is dreadfully dull, and I'm actually taking action to leave it, to be very frank. This interview could be one for the archives, as you said. I find that it needs a good kick in the ass, and we'll talk about that, but basically what this is not going to be is some really nice puff piece, despite the fact that we're going to talk about the beginnings of Just for Laughs and maybe the ending of Just for Laughs. It's not some puff piece about, "Isn't comedy wonderful, isn't it a wonderful life you have to look forward to, this golden yellow brick road of opportunity for all of you." That's really not what this is going to be. *(Some clapping)* The cynics clap, and the other say, "What the fuck am I doing here?" *(laughter)*

But let me answer your question to begin. Here's how I got involved with comedy, and how it led to Just for Laughs. It's a long road. I was a journalist at the age of sixteen, I've

basically been working since I was sixteen years old. I was here in Toronto, and somebody took me to Yuk-Yuk's, and I thought, "Oh, this is kind of cool," because at that time it was so different, it didn't exist. To walk into a club and see somebody onstage talking to you, making fun of things, didn't exist, at least in Canada. It was so eye-opening when I went to Yuk-Yuk's for the first time. Then what happened is that Yuk-Yuk's opened in Montreal, and me being the guy who'd seen it about a year before in Toronto, and being the entertainment editor of a newspaper at the age of seventeen, I said, "I'm going to cover this." So the same way rock and roll music was covered, I got into comedy in that way, and I covered people who came in through Yuk-Yuk's, and they worked the tiny little stages. Steven Wright, Howie Mandel, Maurice LaMarche, Jim Carrey. I could go on and on about these guys who came and played Yuk-Yuk's in Montreal, and Stitches in Montreal, which was Ernie Butler's club. And I was there, I was a journalist, and I was covering it. So I made friends with a guy named Howie Mandel. Howie was just starting out, and I remember they did a show...Stitches had expanded from this little club, and they did one night in the Centaur Theatre, which was about 240 seats, and Howie was the star attraction then. We became friends for a number of reasons. One of the reasons was that my parents sold clothes. They were sales agents for women's clothes, and Howie was not a transvestite, that's not where I'm going with this, but he came to the house, and my parents were typical Jewish parents, "Oh, look at your wife here, we may have clothes for her," so they gave Howie's wife clothes, Terry Mandel, who I'm still friends with, they gave her clothes, and we became friends. I was working at a newspaper, as I told her, and I told you it's a long story, but it's important to understand the ways...just the shit that happens in life and where it leads to.

I got into a fight with my boss. Now, I was ready to be a journalist the rest of my life. I was the happiest guy in the world. I was 23, I had a girlfriend who's now my wife, I was going into work every day, and people would kiss my ass because I was a journalist. A table here, free records there, free movie passes here. If you're 23, it's unbelievable. Also, because I was going to McGill, I was the one person at the newspaper with a semblance, a modicum, a soupcon of education, and they said, "OK, since you're so well-educated, you can be the promotion manager, since you're doing marketing at McGill." So I was the entertainment editor and promotion manager of the newspaper. I did a big event one night with some guy who used to be on Montreal television. Long story, you'll never know the name. We did this event, and at the event, the sales manager of the newspaper got drunk, and he thought it would be funny, and this is a very important comedy lesson, to cut my tie. I don't know anything about me, ladies and gentlemen, but if you've done a little bit of research, or even just by opening your eyes, you'll realize one thing: don't fuck with the clothes. That's the one thing you don't do: you don't fuck with the clothes. Even at that early age, you don't fuck with the fashion. So what happened was, he cut my tie, so immediately I said, "On the scale of jocularly—" I don't know if this is something that's taught at Humber, the jocularly scale—"What equals a cut tie?" So I was trying to get that balance proper, so it seemed that to me, the equivalent of a cut tie is a glass of red wine thrown on a white sweater. That, to me, equaled a cut tie in the annals of hilarity. So that's what I did. I had a glass of red wine, and I threw it on him. I ruined his sweater, and we were equal, in my book, until three weeks later, when he became the editor of the newspaper, and showed me that things don't always work equally. The first thing he did, the first order of business, was to fire my ass. Gone.

So I was 23 and unemployed, and I was just at a point of despondence, because I loved being a journalist, it was what I was going to do for the rest of my life. Here I was happy, in a gig I wanted, and it was taken away from me. I'm telling you something, and I'm not making this up, you can ask my wife, who went through many evenings with me: I was *despondent*. I thought my life was over. I was 23, and I said, "I'm done, I'm history. I don't know what I'm gonna do. I'm *done*." So I was either going to crawl into a hole and die, or come up with something, so I just had to start something. I couldn't get a job getting out of McGill, I'd finished my last year at McGill. My hair was down to my shoulders. I went for one job interview. It was with a company called General Mills. I sat in front of the guy at General Mills, and this was my one-word job interview. He looked at me and went, "No. No, no no. No. No. No no no, No." That was it. (*laughter*) I left, and I came home, and my parents were asking, "How did the job interview go?" "Oh, it went great. He was very talkative." But no work. So I started a marketing and promotion company. Because I worked at a newspaper, I had some friends. I was able to write. I had guts, because there was nothing else I really had, no marketable skills. I just had guts. So I would call people, and I got these gigs. One of the people who gave me a gig was Rubin Fogel. Rubin Fogel owned Club Soda, which became one of the big venues at Just for Laughs, and Rubin said, "Look, you can write our press releases." So I just wrote every press release for the rock and roll acts he brought in, and the comedy acts. My press releases, I gotta say this, were works of art. They weren't just press releases. I used to use...Do you remember the comic Mark Gluttenen?

AC: Yeah.

AN: Mark did a show where we put blood on the press releases and put band-aids on it. Yakov Smirnoff, he was big at the time, his was censored by the Russians, we cut out holes in it. We had fun with these press releases. I had the time of my life writing press releases. So one day, Ruben said to me, we did, again, Steven Wright, (Jay) Leno in Club Soda, and I was writing the press releases. So one day Ruben says, "I want to bring in Howie Mandel." So I said, "Oh, I know Howie!" This was just after he started on *St. Elsewhere*. I called him at home, and I put Ruben and him together, and Ruben said, "Thank you," but this is the difference, this is one of the important points in the story, is that you meet people, and some people are dicks who cut your tie, and others say, "Hey, we're friends, you're doing all this work, you knew the guy, you set me up, so rather than just writing the press release, why don't you co-promote the show?" I was 23, unemployed, and I said, "OK, what does 'co-promote' mean?" And he said, "Well, you give me ten thousand dollars," because Howie's fee at the time was twenty-thousand dollars, "and any money we make over the twenty-thousand dollars plus our expenses, we split." Sounds fair to me. The only problem was, I didn't have ten thousand dollars. So I begged. I begged my family, and I managed to scrounge up ten thousand dollars, and suddenly I was a promoter. I was twenty-three years old, standing outside St-Denis Theatre, promoting my first show. You're watching people coming in, and you're thinking, "This is so cool! It's a sold-out show, wow! There's a guy there scalping tickets! You really have a success when someone scalps tickets to your show! Hey, that guy looks a little familiar. It's Howie's tour manager. That's kind of strange. What's he doing?" If you know the annals of concert promotion, the act gets twenty tickets to do with what he or she wants, sometimes they get more, sometimes they get less, and what he was doing with the tickets we gave him was scalping them and putting the money

in his pocket. I think this is so cool, so I go to Ruben and say, “Hey Ruben, the guy’s scalping tickets.” And Ruben went apeshit. *(laughter)* “Holy Christ!” So he brings (this information) to Howie Mandel and shows Howie. Howie fires the guy on the spot and says, “You guys want to pick up some dates?” So I said, “Yeah!” Again, what do I know? What does that mean? Girls? “No, no, ‘pick up dates’ means I’m doing a whole bunch of shows across the rest of the country, and they’re yours now because I’m firing this guy’s ass.”

So suddenly we’re promoting shows in Toronto. We did one here at, what’s it called now, Sony Center. It wasn’t called Sony Center then. We did that, and suddenly we’re across the country doing these Howie Mandel shows. Then Howie says, “Hey, you know what I’d like to do? Now that I’m on *St. Elsewhere*, I’d like to do an American tour. You guys want to do an American tour?” “Sure!” So I was still unemployed, I had no job. I was teaching part-time at LaSalle College. Anybody know LaSalle College? *(laughter)* OK. I was teaching part-time at LaSalle College, because I had to make some sort of money, and I would go on the road on the weekends, and we did Howie Mandel (shows) across North America. We did every major city. But because he was on *St. Elsewhere*, we could only do weekends. So we’d go out Friday, so a show Friday, a show Saturday, maybe a show Sunday, and then back home, and then we’d do the same thing every weekend. We did shows at Universal Amphitheatre, and Carnegie Hall. And there I was, I was like 26, and doing a national (tour), and we got Budweiser—I just wrote to Budweiser, “Hey guys, would you like to sponsor this tour?” “OK!” Suddenly they’re giving us all this money. So I was a tour promoter. It was unbelievable. Again, you’re at Carnegie Hall, and it’s unbelievably cool. But of course, it all comes to an end, and at that point in time Ruben calls me and says, “There’s a guy named Gilbert Rozon who just started this comedy festival in French, and he wants to expand it to

English, and he's looking for somebody who A, has some experience in comedy, B, has some experience in the United States, C, can speak a little French, D, has worked in television"—which I hadn't, but the last show of Howie's tour was in Chicago and HBO filmed it, and because I stood around and watched it happen, because I was the guy who said, "Ladies and gentlemen, Howie Mandel!" I had a TV credit. So because of that, there was one guy in the city who had the prerequisites that Gilbert Rozon was looking for, and I got introduced, and the rest was history. So that's a long story, but it's important, because, to take it back for a second, it has to do with discovery, with not knowing what you're going to do, it has to do with dealing with assholes, it has to do with being friends, it has to do with being in the right place at the right time. While it was happening, even while it was going on... In retrospect it just seems so nice. But while it's going on, face-forward, I'm thinking, "Oh my god, I'm lost."

So that's how I got into comedy. Really, it was all a series of accidents, and as I said, two things. The beauty of Just for Laughs, the thing that was so exciting back in '86 and '87, is that nobody knew what a comedy festival was. So we would go out and say, "Hey, would you like to do a comedy festival," and it's like, "What's a comedy festival?" (People) had no idea, it didn't exist. And that was kind of tough, but that's what drove me, the fact that nobody knew it exists. I didn't want to do something everyone else was doing. I was so excited to be able to say, "Here's something nobody knows about." And to show you how shitty we were treated, right now, with people like (festival organizers) Robbie Praw and Bruce Hills, and people roll out the red carpet (for them) and kiss their asses up and down. But back then... Let's put this in perspective: we were buyers. We had cash. We were ready to lay out cash for *your* acts, ladies and gentlemen. We have cash, you've got acts, we'll pay

you for them. And agencies wouldn't talk to us. I'll never forget the day I went to Gilbert and said, "Guess what? William Morris gave us a meeting! They gave us a meeting! William Morris gave us a *meeting!*" So we had to buy what they had to sell. And we went to William Morris, and we were so low on the totem pole. (Agencies) would say, "Let me get this straight. It's a comedy festival, which we don't know what the fuck that is, in Montreal? Wow, the metropolis of the world! We can't wait to hear from you!" So what happened was, they wouldn't even let us in their office. The meeting with William Morris happened in the lobby. We sat there in the lobby in front of reception, a guy came out and said, "OK, tell me what you got." And we stood there in the lobby like two idiots, pitching Just for Laughs.

So that's where it went, and that's how I got into the comedy business. I've always been way more of a rock and roll guy than a comedy guy. It just chose me more than I chose it. I had a blast along the way, but really, that's what happened. So I say this, and I'm actually going to come to the end of this answer—you're gonna get in three questions in an hour and a half, and then it'll be over. The point of the matter is, sometimes the world's worst luck is one of the greatest things that'll happen to you. If that guy hadn't cut my tie, I'd probably still be a journalist. I'd probably be fired, because journalists right now, you know what a great field that is. I'd probably be unemployed, destitute. I had, and I'm still having, a great ride, but the fact is, when you're sitting there, and you're fired, and you come back to your office and it's been ransacked, and everyone's going through it to get all the free stuff and going through drawers, pulling out rulers and pens, that's a big downer. But in the end, (you think) "Wow, thank God for that, thank God the guy cut my tie." So there we go.

AC: It's interesting, remembering that time. Your enthusiasm for that period is pretty palpable, even today. Now, let's flash forward to, how many, thirty years, to the state of comedy now, and how about your feelings on that?

AN: Ugh, I'm so bored. And here's why. I was telling Sandra before, I told you, when I went to Yuk-Yuk's the first time, it was in Yorkville. And now, find me another industry that is still stuck thirty years in, what's it called, suspended animation. And I really do believe, and again, challenge me on this, yell at me, scream at me, call me an idiot, but I think the industry's in suspended animation. Yes, I think there's a lot more technology, but I don't think people are using it. But still, you go to a comedy club, and it's the same thing. I was mentioning to you before. Did you hear about that gag where the guy came out of an alcoholic stupor, and his friends convinced him that he was in a coma for ten years?

(laughter) Did you hear about that? That's the state of the comedy industry. I go to a club now, and I go, "My god, nothing has changed." Even the mics are shit. The mics are still shitty. I can't believe it. I can't believe I'm still hearing *(makes white noise sound)* when people are talking. With all the technology, they couldn't have gotten a better mic? So this is what drives me bananas. Again, maybe it doesn't seem that way to somebody's who's fifteen or sixteen or twenty or twenty-five, but to someone who's fifty-four, who went there as a twenty-three year old and as a twenty-two year old, twenty-one year old, I'm saying, "My God, nothing has changed. *Nothing* has changed." Same shitty wall, shitty curtain, shitty stage. People looking like shit with the same shitty material, and the same shitty MC, and I'm saying, "What's going on?" So that's what drives me bananas, *bananas*, that at that level, and with all that's going on with technology, I find that the industry's in suspended animation. And don't think this is the kettle not calling... I can't even give the proper poor

analogy. But do you think Just for Laughs is that progressive? It isn't! I go to some of our own shows, not all of them, but some of them, and I'll go, "I can't believe this is what we're doing. I can't believe this is a show." And people aren't complaining. I'd be freaking out! I'd be freaking out if I was paying top money for this. On the other hand, I go to some of our other shows and I'm in awe. I see some of the stuff we're doing at Place des Arts, where we're really trying to integrate technology into things, and do things in a big manner.

That's one of the hassles we had in the early days. A lot of comedians would come and say, "It's too glitzy." OK, so go, here's a fucking curtain and a shitty mic, go have fun. I'm sorry we have twelve cameras, I'm sorry we put a million dollars into sound and lights and scenery. When we moved from (Theatre) Saint-Denis, which people had problems with back in the day, (they'd say) "Saint-Denis is too big, it's too this, it's too that," when we moved to Place des Arts, people said, the first thing, "It's a bad comedy room. Too big, too wide. It's a bad comedy room." "Have you tried it?" "No, it's a bad comedy room." "Have you been onstage (there)?" "No, it's a bad comedy room." Anyway, Place des Arts, to a comedian, to a man, to a woman, to a tee, they all say, "Wow, this place is great!" Why? Because it almost plays like a club. The lip of the stage is right in the middle, and you're surrounded by people. The balconies are basically right in front of you. It's like you're just engulfed by people. And the fact that we have a shitload of lights and sound going on behind you is a good thing too. It looks good on TV, and to me it elevates a performer and a performance. It's one thing to say, "OK, go do your best in front of a fake brick wall." It's another thing to say, "Go do your best when the floor is the cost of a nice apartment." Again, that's not to say (the surroundings) have to be wealthy, it's not that at all. But it is saying that when you're putting that time and effort into making it look great, make it great.

Even there, I get pissed sometimes, because I see, and maybe this is just me, maybe I'm putting too much emphasis into this, but really my background is in marketing. I've been in show business really my entire life, and I can go back before I was sixteen. I've really been in show business my whole life, but it's really coming from a marketing sense. We've just put a couple million dollars onstage, we have television cameras shooting this, we have the industry of the world coming to you, and you walk onstage and you look like shit, and it kills me. Has someone not told you that this is a television show? And it kills me sometimes, the lack of interest people put into their appearance. And again, it's me, who gives a shit? But you know, I gotta tell me something. I'm coming here, I'm sitting in front of an audience: look good! You may not think this looks good, but I think it looks good. But at least I thought, "This is what I'm going to wear today to actually look good in front of an audience," versus, "This morning I walked my dogs, and what I wore to walk my dogs, I'm wearing here." Didn't think that. So it drives me nuts sometimes. I can go on and on and on about people (saying), "That's my persona." No, it's not your persona. If it is your persona... "Well, Louis CK wears that." Yeah, but that's Louis CK, do you understand that? Louis CK has taken fifteen years to become Louis CK. He's earned the right to look like shit. *(laughter)* You have not yet earned that right. Do something to make you stand out. Do something to elevate yourself. Do something that people are going to remember. Don't say, "Oh, (I'll wear) those dirty jeans and the T-shirt with the hole in it." So that's what drives me mad.

To me, the comedy industry needs to, and I hate to use this term, because I'm not using it in a derogatory way of putting anybody down, but I'm using it in the way of, it's time to grow up. It's time to grow up and say, "I'm in an industry." It's time to grow up and

say, "What can I do in comedy that they're doing in rock and roll?" And I have a whole bunch of ideas about that. But why is it that comedy is still a second-class citizen? Why are there no comedy movies, other than *Annie Hall*, winning Oscars? Why are comedians treated like shit compared to rock and roll (stars)? Now, believe me, we've discovered, especially with JFL 42, this city has shown us that there is the comedy fan. Even us, as a comedy festival, didn't believe they existed. They do. They're out there. And we see them come out in droves for JFL 42. But still, and again, look at a rock and roll fan, and look a comedy fan. And you're saying, "Why are there fewer people that get excited about comedy than there are who get excited about rock and roll?" Why? It doesn't make sense. You're all too young to remember this, but you (Andrew Clark) will remember this. Our old agent Marty Klein, God rest his soul, he's the one who really changed Just for Laughs. He's the one who saw us in '87, and he was a guy from Montreal, and he called me and he set up (a conversation) through Glen Schwartz, and he said, "I like what you're doing." I'm going to try to do his voice afterward, because he sounded like Kermit the Frog. He ran APA, the Agency for the Performing Arts. He basically discovered Steve Martin. If you read Steve Martin's book, Marty Klein's mentioned in it. Marty said, "I like what you guys are doing, but you guys are low-end. I can help you. I can help you bring it to another level. I can get you on HBO, and I can get John Candy to host your show." John Candy was mega. So I'm looking at him, and I'm waiting for the devil horns to sprout out (*laughter*), and I'm thinking, "OK, this is a crossroads." Where was I going with Marty Klein?

AC: Rock and roll...

AN: Oh yeah yeah, thank you. I still remember this, because they would interview him, and this was the cliché back in the day, Marty would go, “Rock and roll is the comedy of the 80’s.” Or, I’m sorry, “Comedy is the rock and roll of the 80’s.” That’s what he would say all the time. So NBC would come up and do these big reports on Just for Laughs, and that was the big cliché, that comedy was the rock and roll of the 80’s. Well, it wasn’t. Let me tell you, it wasn’t. It wasn’t in the 90’s, it wasn’t in the 2000’s and it’s not in the 2010’s either. And that’s a drag, because it should be. It really should be. So yeah, I’m disillusioned, I’m pissed. I’m pissed because I don’t think the industry has reached its potential. I don’t think it’s even come close. That drives me bananas.

AC: We have time, I think we should take a question.

AN: A question? We have an hour.

AC: Right there.

Audience member: So you criticized the aesthetic of shows, and how that hasn’t progressed. But you also mentioned briefly that, content-wise, there hasn’t been much progression either.

AN: Sure. Now, one thing I see often is that, and here’s the problem, and again, it’s coming from me. Challenge it, say I don’t know what the fuck I’m talking about, that’s all OK. I think one of the worst things to happen to any comedian early in their career is getting laughs, because it’s intoxicating, and it’s like getting a hit, it’s like a drug rush. And at that point you think, “Well, that was easy. I will do everything I can do get that again.” It’s like with any speaker. If you’re a speaker onstage, you want people to laugh, to clap, to cheer, to respond

to what you're doing. When you're a comedian, there's only one response that makes any sense, that has any value, and that's laughter. So if you get a laugh early, you're like, "Oh God, that was great, I gotta do anything I can to get that rush again, to get that going through my veins. I got one by saying 'fuck' and saying 'baby' in the same sentence. 'Fuck a baby,' Ok, so I gotta do it again." *(laughter)* See? I just got the laugh. "I gotta do it again and again and again," without saying, "What am I going to do to hone the craft?"

At Just for Laughs, after seeing so many people, watching the writing process is what fascinates me the most, and also, not seeing enough of it is what disturbs me the most. There's an old cliché, and excuse me for going there, but "If it ain't on the page, it ain't on the stage." And it's so true. And you see the difference between people who really sit and write and write and write and write and write, and test and write and write, and test and write, and they're saying, "Fuck the laughs." I saw Larry David, Larry David was the worst goddamn comic in the world. *(laughter)* But he would work. He would stand up there at Catch a Rising Star late at night. He had index cards, and he would go through it, and he'd scratch things off, because he would be honing that syllable. And again, we got to work with John Cleese, I had the pleasure of working with John Cleese, and I'm gonna tell you what it's like to work with a Just for Laughs host. When I say Just for Laughs host, do you know what I mean? The people who host the gala shows. I was very pleasantly surprised this year by people like Whitney Cummings and Sara Silverman and Dane Cook who worked their asses off. I was so impressed with them.

But usually the Just for Laughs host thing is this, and I'll name names. I love the guy, he was very good to me, he basically broke out in 1990 at Just for Laughs, but he got very

lazy when he became a star: Tim Allen. I'm using his name, but you could put fifty other names in there. You're doing a show, we're paying you a shitload of money for a show that's gonna be in front of three thousand people and on television. It's hard to get in touch with you, here's the scripts. So suddenly they show up. The show's at seven, OK? They show up at one. All right, we have a three-hour rehearsal. Three hours. And they're saying, at one-thirty, "Come on, let's go, let's go. How much more of this do I have to do?" The scripts that you worked your ass off trying to send to them are finally getting their first view onstage, where people are on their knees and scratching things off. The teleprompter woman who only speaks French is freaking out because she has to go ahead and insert (lines). They're running through the stuff then, and they're saying, "This is shit, OK I gotta go, I have a massage at four," I'm not making this up, "Come on, guys," and they have all this stuff waiting for them. Then they walk away, and that night they sort of wing it, and the audience goes, "OK, I'm happy to see a star, but this isn't what I expected," and the TV network says, "Well, we're happy to have a star on our network, but really there's not a lot of stuff we can use," and we're standing there holding the bag saying, "Christ."

So that's what happens most of the time. So I'm going to give you the antithesis of that, which is John Cleese. I worked with John Cleese a number of times. I hope you know who he is, Monty Python and all that. I say that only because of the fact that I have two kids, one's twenty-six and one's twenty-three, and the twenty-three year old, I brought him and his girlfriend to the show in Ottawa, and she knew John Cleese as the guy from *Harry Potter*. (laughter) She's a wonderful girl, she's in Psychology, she's an angel, truly an angel, but that's how she knew John Cleese. She obviously did not graduate Humber. So this is Cleese. He has a show in July. February, we get a call. "Where are the scripts? What are the

ideas?" We have conference calls planned weekly to go over the idea that we're working on with him. March, we're sending stuff back and forth. We keep going through April. We send people to New York, because he's going to be in New York, to meet with him, to sit and go through the writing, cut things off, hone it, hone it, hone it. The week before, his show's on a Saturday, he comes in the Sunday previous. We're doing table reads at Place des Arts, walking through it, we're marking it with tape and doing walk-throughs and run-throughs. It was incredible, and this is the first time I worked with John. And the way he would go and look at each syllable. Like Larry David, he would sit there, and you can see this if you go on Youtube to the John Cleese funeral, he writes his own eulogy, he would say "homage". I remember he would obsess, like, "Should I say 'oh-maage' or 'oh-mahge'? If I stretch it out, is that too much? Well, let's test it." And he'd go and do it in front of people, and he would do it in dress rehearsal. "Oh-maaage. What's funnier? 'Oh-maaaaage,' 'oh-mahge,' 'oh-maaage'." And he would just be obsessive over the syllable. And then the performance, the second time I worked with John he was ill, he had prostatitis, he almost died, people don't even know that, but the first time was magic, because he worked that, and he cared about the craft.

The only time, and this is a Toronto story, the only time I ever saw John Cleese pissed was when we were onstage at Massey Hall, and he was gonna reach into a bowler hat, he was basically talking about how desperate he is for money, and someone brings out a bowler hat, and he goes, "Oh, you want me to do the silly walk," and the guy says, "No, I want you to reach into this bowler hat for this five-dollar bill, but it's filled with glass." So he reaches into the bowler hat and comes out with the five-dollar bill, because he's desperate for money, and his hand is dripping blood. And there's a bloodpack in there, blah

blah blah. So he goes in, does it, he reaches in, his hand comes out, and there are like four little drops. So he goes, "What's going on here? Where's the blood pack? I thought there was supposed to be a big explosion of blood." And the stage manager says, "Well, I basically cut the blood by three quarters." "Why'd you do that?" "Well, we have this carpet here, and we were worried you were gonna stain the carpet." And you saw the blood rise in him, and he goes, "Let me see if I understand this. You are screwing with the funny because you're afraid to get a stain on this piece of shit carpet?" (The stage manager) said, "Yeah." And (Cleese) said, "No! No! What's important is the funny, not the carpet! You can get another carpet! You have to think of the laugh, my God!" He was so insulted. So back to the craft. When a guy like that still gives a shit about a syllable, still gives a shit about blood, versus phoning it in, that's what's important. So yeah, my disillusionment, yeah, because what happens sometimes is, "Yeah, I got the laugh, it's easy. I'll just swear, I'll do this, I'll say something that doesn't matter, good enough for me." But it's really not good enough. But that's just in the writing part. I can also, I'll hold on to this, but I can talk about the staging part, which I have a whole theory on, because I think the industry needs one brave soul or brave team, because it's more than a one-person experience, to really change comedy completely. But that, we'll get to soon.

AC: *(to audience)* Another question? Joel, yeah.

Audience member: *(question inaudible)*

AN: Do you know "Set List," (the live show hosted by) Paul Provenza? I think that's the most recent great idea in comedy. Why? Because it's dangerous, and it fails more than it succeeds, and still goes. Because that's what comedy is about. In the end, it does fail more

than it succeeds. When it succeeds, it's magic. And when it fails, it's tough, and you have that feeling. I've done standup comedy, and I sucked. I sucked bad at it. I was terrible. I did it at Yuk-Yuk's. I hosted a night, and you know who saved my life? Eileen Brennan, the late Eileen Brennan. She was in the movie *Private Benjamin*. I was a journalist, and I did comedy at Yuk-Yuk's. I was terrible, terrible to the point where I literally said, "I'm gonna kill myself" the next day, because I was so shit. I had an interview with Eileen Brennan, and I told her how despondent I was, how I was basically gonna go home and kill myself because I bombed at Yuk-Yuk's. We went to see *Private Benjamin*, me and her, and watched her on the big screen. So Eileen Brennan basically saved my life. But that's the way it goes. It fails more than it succeeds, and if you can't accept that, then you shouldn't be in the business. But when it succeeds, holy Christ, there's nothing like that in the world. But to get there is really tough. But that's what I love about what Provenza is doing. It's dangerous, and it takes people who are cocks of the walk, people with big attitudes, and he says, "OK, get up onstage with some things that are really twisted." Not the usual improv shit, like we talked about before, like, "OK, where are you?" "I'm in a coffee shop." "Who are you sitting next to?" "Rob Ford!" "I'll give you a profession: nurse. So you're a nurse in a coffee shop sitting next to Rob Ford." (*bangs mic against head*) Oh, God. (*laughter*) I'm dying. What Provenza does... You know, it's funny, the last time I did that, I actually cut my forehead. It's a true story. I was singing a Bruce Springsteen song, and I cut my forehead. (*laughter*) I was bleeding, and I didn't know. It was very embarrassing. That's, unfortunately, a very true story.

But what Provenza's doing is what comedy could and should be about. And again, when you see a "Set List," you watch a show, and most of the time it's shit. But when it's

good, it's like it's from another planet. And that's what I love about Paul, is that he's always been that way. He will always say, "Let me do something someone else isn't doing. Let me try something new." Paul was the first guy to really go inside the comedian's mind with *Green Room*. He was the first guy to do that. HBO ripped him off, but that's fine. He was the first guy to really pay comedy that respect, to say, "Let me understand what you're all about, and let's put you guys together." So I love what he's doing, and I think the world of him, and I think "Set List" is perhaps the most entertaining and interesting thing in comedy. Yeah, there's *Key & Peele*, and there are a whole bunch of other people who are doing some pretty cool sketch stuff, like Amy Schumer. But again, it's a lot of shock value, but it's that intelligence that's the twist. This is my take on comedy. I wrote a book about the element of surprise. It's a marketing book. I used to teach comedy, believe it or not, comedy writing, at Concordia, and I studied the shit out of it to understand it. And really, it's not a game for fools. It's not a game for idiots. Comedy is a game for the intelligentsia. Comedy is a game for the informed. Comedy is a game for people who understand things that others don't. It's not for fools. That's the thing that kills me... OK, you gotta remind me of two things. You gotta write this down.

AC: I'll remember.

AN: You gotta remind me of "the sign" ...

AC: The sign...

AN: The sign from God. What was the other thing I said? Oh yeah, "muse." Just remind me of "muse" and "the sign from God."

AC: I can do that.

AN: So a lot of people say, and I get this all the time, “Can you put on a comedy night?” And I’ll say, “No, I can’t.” They treat comedians like shit. “Do your shtick!” “What do you mean, ‘do my shtick’? What are you talking about?” “Oh, get up there and do a half-hour. Just go up and do a half-hour.” Do you know what a half-hour is? First of all, do you know the time it takes to do a half-hour? Do you know what it is to hold an audience’s attention for a half-hour? It kills me, the disrespect that comedy gets. It is an intellectual exercise. What comedy does, and I’m not telling you anything you don’t know, is it takes you down a road of expectation, and it changes the expectation and takes you somewhere else. But the point is, you have to understand where you’re going. You have to understand the relevance to where it’s taking you. You have to understand why it’s relevant, why it means anything. So it’s an intellectual exercise, and what kills me is the lack of respect that it gets. So again, Provenza, big props to him.

AC: *(to audience)* Catherine.

Audience member: *(question inaudible)*

AN: I gotta tell you, the French, the difference is very minor now. The differences between French-Canadian humour and English humour is very, very minor. These guys (French-Canadians) are not mired in the world of standup comedy the way that Canadians and Americans have been. They didn’t live in the Borscht Belt. There wasn’t the Poutine Belt for them. They didn’t have any of this stuff. But they grew up watching American comedy. Some of my biggest French requests this year were for Sara Silverman, Dane Cook. People wanted to see them because they knew who the hell they were. (Jerry) Seinfeld is funny.

One of the great stories is that I got to see Seinfeld last year, at my own show. I was invited to see Seinfeld by Jean-Francois Lisee, the Minister of, um, Hatred in Quebec. *(laughter)*

He's a friend. He actually is a friend, go figure, so that's kind of surreal. But they're coming very close together. I know this because when we try getting them for a host, they're always off doing a TV show or movie, so it's like, "OK, guess what, they've become American." Quebecers are a lot more American than they used to be in that regard.

Comedians like Martin Petit, if you ever hear, what's his name, that guy, I can't believe I'm forgetting his name, Jean-Marc Parent. Jean-Marc Parent is one of the great monologists. Sometimes it boggles my mind that people don't go to him and say, "I'll pay you X amount of dollars. Let me buy your stuff, and I'll do it in English." No one's gonna know, and if they do know, so what? So what? It boggles my mind, the amount of material that's out there that nobody knows. It could just be purchased, reformatted, and brought to a new audience. It used to be, in the early days, it was very different. Very costume-oriented.

Daniel Lemire would do Uncle Georges. They all had their characters their personas. He had Tremblay, all these guys who you probably don't know who the hell I'm talking about. But there was a character, a persona. You had to have a little persona. You had to have a funny hat or a wacky costume. That's not what I mean when I talk about the aesthetic, trust me. But it's changed now. You see guys like Maxim Martin, Martin Petit, these are all guys, and women too, Cathy Gauthier, a lot of the female (comics) are very standup and American-oriented. So that has changed immensely in the past little while. There's still the Quebecois flavour, but man oh man, you take somebody from another planet, and you put a Quebecois comedian and American comedian and Canadian comedian onstage, and it's the same thing.

AC: *(to audience)* Billy? Yeah.

Audience member: *(question inaudible)*

AN: Ha! "Muse." There he goes. We hit that one.

AC: OK, "muse" is out.

AN: What's the other one we have?

AC: "The sign."

AN: "The sign from God." OK. Here's the debate, and again, this is my debate, but at Just for Laughs, I don't know if anyone...let's just do this to see the relevance of this. Anybody go to a gala at Just for Laughs at Place des Arts? Anybody? OK, three people. *(laughs)* Well, you can see the difference on television shows, and we saw this when we did our 30th-anniversary show with Strombo (George Stroumboulopoulos). You saw the difference in the staging. But we were at (Theatre) Saint-Denis for the longest time, and with Saint-Denis, what happened was that the people who designed the set designed a theater set. It stayed in motion, you brought shit on, brought shit off, rolling things, flying things, but it stayed in motion, and you lit it up with lights. So the way it may have changed for me versus you is that my lighting might be different, and maybe they brought two things down, but basically it's the stage that didn't move. I went to a couple of rock shows, this is years ago, we're talking six, seven years ago, and the proliferation of screens, and it really hit home when I saw Peter Gabriel, I still have the photo on my phone that really knocked it home, and I said, "This is the way to communicate comedy." It's more emotive, you get closeups. You can get different angles, even if it's pure standup, you have a different angle of the person speaking, you can get the side shot, get a closeup, while he or she is onstage. It

works wonders. So we were gonna change the stage and make it all digital. There was nobody in Canada who could do it, so I met a guy named Bruce Ryan, who does all the shows in the States, and every comedy show in the world, and I went to Bruce and I said, "I want an all-digital stage, and I want to be able to create a world." So there are all sorts of hassles I could tell you about, the glass in front of it, the reflections, fine. But the point is, we built a stage that we could do anything (with). If I want to have a roaring fire, if I want to have a forest fire behind me, I could have a forest fire. It took a couple years for people to understand how to use it, because it's like giving someone a Ferrari, and saying, "Go drive a Ferrari to get milk." It's tough, it's not meant to be driven to get milk. Same thing with a stage like this. It really wasn't meant just to be a background for standup comedy. It was meant to be integrated.

So what happened was, it took a couple years, and I have pictures I wish I could show you, of this political comedian, and he sort of got it. He was doing political commentary while he had these big pictures behind him. So it's this little guy, and then this big picture of Osama Bin Laden, and the visual was striking. But they used stills, and I said, "No, guys, it can move, it's digital, it can do whatever you want. It can move. Do you understand that?" So we started working with a company, and suddenly what happened behind them was that it moved, and it's sort of integrated. But what we got from a lot of comedians was, we'd say, "You can do anything! We'll pay, *we'll* pay. Whatever you want behind you, we'll pay. We have computer artists, we'll go ahead and develop stuff that's gonna boggle your mind." "No." "Why?" "Because it's going to interfere with my words." So that was the debate, and again, what I said before, we need a new way to say, "Hey, you know what? My words ain't that goddamn important. The package is important. How am I

going to affect people?" It's a visual medium. How do you communicate now? You communicate by pictures. People send me pictures. My kids, my friends send me pictures to explain, "Where are you now?" *Click*. Not a phone call saying, "I'm standing at the corner of here..." I get a photo of where I am. I get a photo when someone wants to explain how happy they are. I get a photo to say, "This is my mood." People are communicating with visuals, yet the comedian, and not all of them, I'm not generalizing, but they'll say, "You're fucking with my words." No I'm not, I'm augmenting your words, the same way I'm not fucking with your songs by putting something visual behind you while you sing them. So this is the basic story. No one's taken this up. They'll say, "OK, maybe." I'll say, "Tell me what your setlist is about, tell me what your subjects are. We'll create visuals for you. We'll do it. And we'll sync them so that when you're talking about them, they're gonna appear onstage like *that* as you speak, and they won't lag, because we'll have the script." "No."

So, Muse. Let's go to Muse, a little aside for a second. So I went to see this band Muse, you know them? I loved it. It's not my favorite band in the world, they're kind of cheesy in some ways, but I kind of dig them, I think the music's pretty cool. But I went to see their show, and I was knocked out, because at the end, they were almost irrelevant. You could've had anybody onstage playing this stuff, but the staging...I took a thousand pictures, it knocked me out, how great the staging was, and how every word...It was all synced, so as they were singing, *bang bang bang bang*, the words were coming up, and the visuals came up to match the words and the mood. I said, "This is what I want to do with comedy." I've been talking about this for two years now, because it's been two years since I saw the band. We're talking about technology, and it's a quantum leap, because it's not just you, it's a team. This is something we were talking about before too. Comedy used to be a depressed

person in a basement getting their angst out and going onstage with a microphone and regaling the crowd and going back to being depressed again. I'm not making fun of depressed people, my wife and I are on the board of Ami-Quebec, we're very heavily involved in raising funds for mental health. So it's not something we make fun of; far from it. But we understand it. But it's there, and that's the archetypal...is that the right word?

AC: That's the archetype. That's the motif.

AN: "I'm fuckin' depressed, and then I'm gonna go up onstage and be the little clown, and then I'm gonna go backstage and cut myself." It's a solo act. Even when it's a team, it's a solo act. It's a bunch of soloists coming together as a team (thinking) "How can I outdo the other guy or girl?" I'm looking at it as something a little bit different. I'm saying, "OK, I'm going to be the stage person, I'm going to be the visual person, I'm going to be the connecting person," but it's a teamwork thing. This is my fantasy: taking a standup comedian or comedienne or comedians, and saying, "Let's develop a set, and let's develop visuals behind that are going to be in sync with the words and create something brand new, a brand new way of presenting comedy." It would be the antithesis of the shitty brick wall and the ratty curtain. And yeah, it's gonna take time, it's gonna take money. We are open to that, and I say that, but I have so little relevance in the festival anymore, you'd have to speak to Bruce and Robbie. But that is what would get me excited, is somebody changing the game, changing the rules and going out there, and that's where we'd see comedian rock stars. When you see comedian rock stars, what happens? Disappointment. I'll give you names, and I like these people, but Dane Cook, Russell Peters, who go out there and play big rooms, but in many cases they're just big rooms with a screen. What's the other guy, the

ventriloquist who plays big rooms? Jeff Dunham. But what have you done other than put a camera on you? Because you could do it. This is what Eddie Murphy did. Steve Martin did too, back in the day. The demand was so big that you just had to play the arena. You just had to. There was more demand than supply. But they're not thinking arena, they're thinking, "Here's my stage show, hope you can see it. We'll put a camera on me, here's a big fuckin' screen, have fun." That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about using technology to integrate and create something new. But it's tough as hell. On the other hand, I see what people are doing on Youtube, I see what people are doing elsewhere. Someone's gonna do it. And not just do it—someone's gonna change the rules and become a megastar. And maybe you don't want to be a megastar. That's cool; nothing wrong with that. But someone's gonna break that code and cut through, and people are gonna say, "Holy shit, why didn't I think of that?" And then suddenly everyone's gonna do it. And they're gonna come to Just for Laughs with their tech person, and their USB drive, and say, "Here's my visuals and my tech person, and he or she is gonna be able to do this," and we're gonna have a new world. That's my dream, ladies and gentlemen. So there we go. *(applause)* Thank you, thank you! Remember this! You're recording it for prosperity! And one day, as you look at me now like a fool, like they did in 1999 when I talked about entertainment on cell phones, they said, "He's insane," and look at us now.

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

Audience member: I was just wondering if there are any up and coming comedians who might have the same work ethic and enthusiasm that John Cleese had when you were working with him?

AN: I see a few, yeah. I remember Mitch Hedberg, despite everything else, crazy work ethic. I loved Mitch, really loved Mitch. Again, huge props to Louis CK with the amount of time and effort he puts into his craft, I think it's unbelievable. But I gotta tell ya, I'm the old fuckin' man now. You'd have to kill me to get me into a club anymore. It's just too hard. And again, I want to have that excitement again, and I think it's gonna come from what I've just described. But what impresses me is not the young comedian who does it, because I think that if you don't, get out of the game, get out of the business. It should be the driving force. But what impresses me is people who used to be lazy as hell who've become very strong in their work ethic. I'll give you an example, and it boggles my mind: Joan Rivers. She was never lazy, but her work ethic is nuts. Sara Silverman, crazy. What a difference. I remember she came here, she did a show for us here in Toronto. Dreadful. Dreadful. Didn't give a shit, read off cards, "Get me off here." She was unbelievable this year, from beginning to end. Whitney Cummings, same thing. Kathy Griffin, same thing. Dane Cook, same thing. Craig Ferguson, same thing. So what's funny is people who could sort of phone it in are realizing, "Holy shit, I can't phone it in anymore." So that's what impresses me. Because they could. They could say, "Hey, I don't have to," but in the end, I think they all have to.

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

Audience member: You were talking about developing audiences before, and I was just wondering, what was the motivation for Just for Laughs going to Australia and developing that market?

AN: You know, the money sometimes is a mitigating factor, and you go up there because you think there's money there, or some people say, "We'd like to bring Just for Laughs

elsewhere." I'm gonna be honest with you and say that basically, other than what we do with JFL 42, which I'm very proud of, anything done anywhere else (under the Just for Laughs name) is shit. It's a second-rate Just for Laughs. It's a disappointing experience, because what it is is a second-rate Just for Laughs. It's the difference between Paris, France and the Paris casino in Las Vegas. That's the difference. Because what you're doing is trying to replicate it. You can't replicate it. We failed in Toronto dramatically because we tried to replicate Just for Laughs here, and no one cared. It was a nonentity. And then we said, "Let's do this, fuck that, let's go after a very, very small niche. We're going after the niche of niches. We're going after the comedy fan. Fuck everyone else. They don't matter. We don't care. We're going after the comedy fan, it'll be built for comedy fans, so they communicate with each other, it'll be JFL 42." And that's the event I'm really proud of. But everywhere else, it's sort of a second-rate Just for Laughs, and you get there and the staging isn't as great, and the music is played. I have no problems with the phones ringing, trust me, because we've made so much money with the Airborne and mobile business... *(laughter)*

AC: It's like music to your ears!

AN: To me, all it is is a reminiscence of a very, very fun period. So don't worry. Don't even turn off your cellphones. Keep them on loud, I don't care. *(laughter)* So when you get there, it's nice, but it's sort of like a farm team. It's second-rate. It's like going to Winners. *(laughter)* You go there, and it's not the same thing. Montreal is where it happens. Montreal is where Just for Laughs happens. If you've been there, you understand it. It's magic. It's insane. There's more and more...it's a mix of everything. It's hope, it's glory, it's people who are jaded, it's people who are massive, it's people who are just starting out. It's fans, it's

people who care, it's the city, people who don't care, people who just want to get out and enjoy themselves. It's magic. So you can't say, "How are we going to replicate that everywhere?" We're not Disney. I wish we were, but we'll never have the same amount of money or time. So that's why they've all been a disappointment. So why were we in Chicago? Why were we in Australia? Well, we thought we could make money there, and somebody kind of wanted to do something. But again, it was Just for Laughs lite. And you know what it's like any time you have something like Philadelphia Cream Cheese Lite. Yeah, it sort of tastes almost like a cream cheese, but it's not cream cheese. Same thing with Just for Laughs. But here, with JFL 42, different ball game. Looks different, smells different, tastes different, all different. And it was something that was unique, and it's something I'm excruciatingly proud of. *(to audience)* We had a question there, and then a second one, and then we'll go back to you. Go ahead.

Audience member: *(question inaudible)*

AN: I deal a lot with artists. I love contemporary art. I collect it, and I love the (art) world. I see this with artists all the time, where they're willing to be shat upon and do anything to get ahead. But I say this to my son, who makes furniture, creates one-of-a-kind, high-end furniture. I say, "Hold your price." People say, "Do it. It's good for your career." "You know what's good for my career? Getting fucking paid. *That's* good for my career. Doing some bullshit..." *(applause)* You don't have to clap. Don't worry about it. I'm doing this for free.

AC: No, there is a sweatshirt.

AN: Oh, there's a sweatshirt! *(laughter)*

AC: So...

AN: Now you've got me! Clothes?! Clothes?!

AC: Just for posterity.

AN: If there's accessories too, I'm just going to enroll next semester!

AC: No one leaves Humber empty-handed.

AN: But seriously speaking, it's like, "You want to do something for my career? Pay me!" I see this all the time. "It'll be good for your career, it'll be good for your career," yeah yeah, yeah. And then you get up there... you can't believe the stuff where I've said, "It'll be good for my career," and nothing has come of it. Zero, zero, zero. I'm saying, "OK, well, that was *really* good for my career. I've humiliated myself for nothing. That's wonderful." So what I tell (young artists) is, learn to say no. It'll feel good sometimes, and you may pass up something and someone'll say, "You're making a mistake." "Yeah, I may be making a mistake, but you may be making a bigger mistake." Some kid came to me, he knew I liked art, and he came to me with a picture he painted. It was gorgeous, I loved it. It was Casper the Friendly Ghost getting a tattoo from a very hot Wendy the Wicked Witch, who's a tattoo artist. It's gorgeous. It's on my blog. And I asked him what he wanted for it. He's a young guy, and he said, "I want \$900." So I said, "You know what? Here's a story. I collect a lot of contemporary art. I have a ton of people come into my house and see it. I have Warhols, Basquiats, Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, I got 'em all. I'm gonna put your piece next to them. You know what that's gonna mean for your career? Fuck all. So here's what I'm gonna do. Here's what I'm gonna pay you: \$900. Why? Because that's your price. You asked me for

that. I'm gonna pay your price or not pay your price, but I'm not gonna go ahead and try to get \$100 out of an artist. Not that I'm Mr. Rich, but the thing is, you are an artist, and you could use a hundred bucks more than me. So yes, I'll save \$100, or I'll save \$200. You'll sell three for \$700, you'll sell three for \$500. But why? Hold your price, learn to say no. I'm gonna pay you what you asked for." The guy has become a friend, I love him, his name is Jono Doiron. I love the kid, we work together, I've brought him up onstage where I've spoken. But I said, "Hold your price. Have dignity. And have dignity when you walk away." I tell that to my son too. Don't let someone say, "Oh yeah yeah, it's good for you, because I'm gonna show it to people." You know what? Fuck that. Your rent isn't paid by (having someone show) it to people. But it's one of two things, and again, I'm not painting everyone with the same brush. But you find that a lot of people who go into comedy have personality and, what's the word, not credibility or integrity...

AC: Personality, emotional, mental, physical... *(laughter)*

AN: No no, issues of... self-esteem! There we go.

AC: And that too.

AN: Self-esteem issues. And trust me, I have them too. I mask them pretty well, but I have them too. So the point of the matter is, yeah, it's kind of tough to say that, but you've got to, because that's when the respect will come. When you start saying, "No," that's when the respect comes. If you say yes to everything, they're gonna say, "I got a pushover," and that's that. So that's one of the ways (you get respect).

AC: *(to audience)* Patrick.

Audience member: Hello.

AN: Hello. Sorry, Patrick, you were hidden by a lot of blonde hair.

Audience member: *(question inaudible)*

AN: Oh, really? That's a very good point, Patrick. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm not talking about pyrotechnics going off at every punchline. That's a cute little gimmick that'll last, but that's not gonna build a career. I don't know who that is, and I actually feel sorry for the person. As someone who grew up with KISS and all those bands of the seventies and eighties who basically blew my ears out with pyro and explosions, I get it. But that's salt. If you're eating salt, it's not really good for you. It's a spice. It's perhaps a good little gimmick once or twice, but by the eighth time you want to kill the guy. What I was talking about before was an aesthetic. I was talking about changing the rules, versus saying, "OK, here's something..." There was a comedian, and I forget the guy's name, but again, sometimes when I talk about the aesthetic and standing out and having a character, a persona, something that makes you unique and different that separates you from the rest, versus being a fool. And sometimes you cross the line, and you bring it back. There used to be a comedian, I forget his name, but he wore a very, very loud checked jacket, and big glasses, and he was playing a song on the toaster, "I Like Toast." And he would bang a fork (on the toaster). Yeah, you saw him the first time and you were like, "That's cool," and the second time, it's like, "Yeah, that's kinda cool," but the third time you wanted to kill him. That's not the way you build a career. So yeah, pyrotechnics going off...I don't know the guy's name, thankfully. *(to audience)* You had a question?

Audience member: I was wondering about JFL 42, that format you guys used with checking into shows. Is that a concept you would try to use in Montreal?

AN: It's something we probably will use elsewhere. Montreal is too big, and maybe there's a way, but again, we have to change the ticketing world, and if you think the comedy world's tough to change, go try and change Ticketmaster. Here's what we like about JFL 42, and again, we just won an award for it last week at the Canadian Marketing Awards, I may add. Don't clap, don't clap. It wasn't a gold. They called me up, and I was like, "What did we win?" "A bronze." "OK." Click. *(laughter)* Sorry, we won gold last time. But what I like about JFL 42, for those of you who don't know what it's all about--do you know what it's all about? What was great about it to me was, first of all, we knew who was checking in where, it's inventory management. We know where you're coming from, we know what part of the city you're coming from, we can track it all on maps. It's really a fascinating thing to see, but what's more fascinating is the interaction between comedy fans telling other comedy fans (about shows), sharing things on Instagram, the access the comedy fan has to the performer. The performer could have four shows booked but end up doing twelve shows, depending on the popularity of the performer. A really unique thing about JFL 42, and we're gonna keep expanding it. People will come to us (and say) "You're so exclusive, exclusatory..." I don't know the right word.

AC: Exclusionary?

AN: Exclusionary. There's a journalist here, thank God there was one here. "You're so exclusionary because of the fact that if we don't have a smart phone, we can't participate." Yeah! You're right! *(laughter)* Get a smart phone! I'm sorry, we can't be for everybody,

because if that's the case... It's like those restaurants. You ever go to those restaurants where you ask, "What do you serve?" "Well, we have pizza, and Chinese food, and Mexican, and steaks." Well, you know nothing's gonna be really good, because they can't be good at everything. You've seen those restaurants. Well, that's where the comedy festival was getting, and sometimes it's like that in Montreal, where it's a one-stop shop, something for everybody. No, those don't work anymore at any place in the world, except maybe Amazon, but even with Amazon, if you're buying books on Amazon, it's rare that you're gonna get something from Amazon Paint. It follows your niche. So that's the great thing about JFL 42, is it is that niche. We want the people who are smart phone oriented, who are tech savvy. We want that group. If you're not in that group, we don't want you. And that's OK. We don't want everyone. That's fine. You don't want everyone in this school, do you? Do you want everybody in this school? "Hey, I can't get into an accounting program, so I'm coming here." No, you want people who give a shit. It's the same thing with JFL 42. I'll tell you the great learning we did the first year. We tracked every tweet. We had this company in Montreal called Nexology, and they crunched the data, which is one of my big loves of life now, data crunching for entertainment purposes. I'm dead serious. We crunched the data on JFL 42, and this is what we saw on the Twitter feeds. The second most popular word used in all tweets was "Toronto". Which, when we got a grant from Tourism Ontario, we were able to say, "Hey, look at this." Even if you tried to game this, you can't game the system because it's so big. So the second most used word was Toronto. That was great. It established itself as a Toronto event, which we couldn't do with our other incarnation. And the most used word, can anyone guess what the most used word was in tweets? Not JFL 42, not "funny," not "LOL." It was "tonight." It was you telling me you're going here tonight, and me telling

you I'm gonna be at this show tonight. "Where are you going tonight?" "I'm going here tonight." "Tonight" was the key word, which meant that people were talking to each other, which to us was worth zillions of dollars. We cracked the code, and we let comedy fans talk to comedy fans to decide what's going down. That, to me, was heaven. So we are gonna try to do more of that, because that's where the world's going.

Audience member: *(question inaudible)*

AN: No idea. I gotta tell you, I am so far removed from the festival right now. I've given up everything. You don't even know this. I've give up my title, I've given up my responsibilities, because I don't want to do adult daycare anymore. I don't want to solve other people's problems. This is what being the president of a comedy festival is: "I can't get a budget for this trip, and I gotta go because I gotta meet this one, go speak to this person." Or someone telling me, "You're the president, it's your problem now, you solve it." Or "We need pizza, we work late, but company policy is we can't order pizza, what do I do?" And I'm like, "I can't believe this. I'm in a creative industry, and I'm dealing with everyone else's bullshit problems. I can't do this anymore." I said, "I don't need the title, I don't need it anymore. I have no relevance in the comedy world anymore, because I don't go to clubs and I have a son, so let Bruce and Robbie and their team do it, let kids do it. They don't need a 54 year old guy doing this anymore. I saw an article in the paper, I didn't know it was coming. I saw an ad in the paper, and it was heaven, because I don't need to approve these fakakta ads anymore. People are doing it without me. It's great. I don't care about the yesterday, I don't care about the today, I care about tomorrow. Where can I push this event digitally? From here, I'm going to meet the president of Google Entertainment (to talk about) what do we

do, where do we take comedy, what's the next thing? Right now, even on Youtube, what's comedy? Primarily, it's "Put a camera on me and I'm gonna do a monologue or something stupid." But it has to be more than that. It has to be.

So where does comedy go? What is the future? How do we crack the code so it's more than just putting a camera on something that exists? So that, to me, is where I'm really putting every bit of energy into. What's tomorrow about? How do we use what today and yesterday are to build tomorrow? I don't know who's headlining. And sometimes, when they tell me who's headlining, I don't know who they are. I'm like, "Wow, I'm so impressed," and then I'll go look at Wikipedia and say, "Who's that?" Maria Bamford played our event four times before I went to see her, and I said, "Oh, she's OK I guess, she's fine." But people were going insane over Maria Bamford, and I said, "OK." We had Just for Laughs, our Comedy Awards, and I had no idea who half the people were. But that's what happens when you're focused on other things, when you're getting to an age where it doesn't matter anymore. It shouldn't matter. Let the kids take care of it. Let Bruce and Robbie's team take care of it. They're thirty and under. It's their game now. I had my game. I had a blast. I built what I had to build, but I want to build something that no one else is touching. I want to be Paul Provenza. I want to do things that are dangerous and different, versus, "OK, here's yet another standup comedy show." "Our next act, ladies and gentlemen, comes with this TV credit, and did this, and did that, and you may know him from this commercial, please welcome..." Who wants to do that again? I'd kill myself if I had to. So I don't know who's gonna headline. Sorry. But check haha.com. You can find out.

AC: Did we get to "signs"?

AN: Yes. I'm doing this, and I'm not gonna round you up, but I'm gonna ask the question: are there any Jews in the house today? OK. So you'll get what I'm talking about. *(laughter)* Sometimes you'll ask, "Are there any Jews here," and given history, people get worried. "Not me, not me!" *(laughter)* Very Andy Kindler-esque, one of my favorites, but anyway. *(laughter)*

Audience member: *(inaudible comment)* Yes, yes, you are. But it could be the German "Knormann," with the double n, and the K at the beginning, the silent K. Long story short, my son comes back from Israel with his girlfriend, they went to Israel and Europe, and my wife's the vice president of the synagogue, and we're doing a thing, an aliyah, where you come up to the Torah and you say a few words, and it's very, very holy and nice, and it's a nice honor. So we're doing an aliyah, my son and his girlfriend, they'd got back from Israel safely, because let me tell you, that's one of Jews' biggest worries. "You're going great, come back safely, there's a big celebration." So I'm at the Torah, which, for those of you who aren't Jewish, is the holiest of holy scriptures, it's hand-written. I'm standing at the Torah on the bimah, which is the elevated thing overlooking a thousand people in the synagogue. I'm there, and I'm saying, "Oh, my God, I'm so bored with all this crap, I gotta just refocus my career and do something different. I'm standing up here at the Torah, and I need a sign. Maybe I'll ask God first. Gimme a sign, God, gimme a sign that what I want to do is right. Gimme a sign that it's time." And I'm sitting there, and my son and his girlfriend are next to me, the rabbi's behind me, the cantor's here, and I say to myself, "What an idiot." I'm talking to God, like God has to worry about me. "Oh, you know what? I got a million things, the Philippines thing to deal with, but Andy wants a sign." So I said to myself, "What an idiot. Look what I'm doing. I'm asking God to give me a sign. How embarrassing."

Anyway, we left the bimah, at the end of the service we're walking, and we're walking downstairs to the kiddish, which is of course the food, because find me a Jewish celebration without food. They don't exist. We're going downstairs to eat, and as I'm doing that, a guy tugs on my jacket, a little old man, and I say, "Yes, sir?" He goes, "Look, I gotta ask you a question." I say, "What?" He goes, "My men's group in Cote St. Luke," which is a little Jewish enclave (in Montreal), "My men's group in Cote St. Luke, we want to bring in a comedian for our Sunday brunch. Could you help me?" And I said, "Thank you, God! You've given me the sign! Of course!" Because this is my life. We talked before about respect. You guys know this: Just for Laughs is one of the biggest arts and cultural events on the planet. It's mega, it's massive. Yet still people come to me and say, "Oh, you're the guy who does the Comedy Nest, eh?" No, I don't do the fuckin' Comedy Nest, motherfucker! I'm the biggest motherfuckin' comedy guy around! *(laughter)* And they'll go, "Oh, tell me a joke!" *(laughter)* Oh, god fuckin' damn it. It happens all the time. So that's the sign. So I said, "I can't do this anymore. I can't." I'd much rather be recognized as, "Wow, you're the guy who blew up the Youtube thing," or I came up with this brand-new whatever. I wrote a book about this, my life with Just for Laughs, and I swear this is true, I would be at funerals and people would come up to me, and the guy next to me (would say), "Tell me if you heard this. There's two Jewish guys..." *(laughter)* We're at a funeral, the rabbi's talking. I swear on my life, people would come up to me all the time and try to tell me jokes. That's what bothers me about the comedy industry. Believe me, I'm around a lot of other people. Christopher Plummer, no one goes to Christopher Plummer and says, "To be or not to be!" They don't do that to Christopher Plummer. They don't go to a rock star and start singing. "Listen to this!" They don't do it. So why do they do it to me, and I'm not even a goddamn comedian. So that's the

thing that drives me nuts. That was the sign. If I ever doubted the existence of a superior being, it was erased that day when the little man tugged (on me) and said, "We want to do a comedy Sunday brunch." Oh God, you've saved my life.

AC: We've talked a lot about where the business is going, and just to touch a little bit on what people can avoid doing to sort of sabotage themselves, you've seen a lot of comedians come and go, younger comedians. Any kind of best practices that you might give them? There's obvious stuff we try to drive home, like "Be on time."

AN: It's so funny you bring that up. What we get sometimes is what we call the, oh God, I'm trying to think of the right terminology, but it's the disproportionate talent-to-entourage equation. So Katt Williams, I don't know if you know him. Katt Williams arrives. The guy comes in, looks like a million bucks, 42 people with him, and it's like James Brown. Someone's shining his shoes, someone takes off his jacket, someone's combing his hair, throwing rose petals down to his dressing room, it's unbelievable. Then the guy gets onstage, and I'm saying, "Oh my God, it's the most horrific, pedestrian, nonfunny material I've ever seen in my entire life!" (*laughter*) What is this shit? Terrible. We get that all the time at Just for Laughs, but you're right, the small details. You know what? A, show up on time. B, be prepared. We asked you to come with what you're wearing onstage, so bring it with you. When we ask, "What's your closing line," tell us your closing line. It's small things like that that really make a difference. There are certain performers who are so wonderful year after year. Someone mentioned Demetri Martin before, you may have mentioned him. What a great guy. What a great guy who comes, shuts up, smiles, does the work, is pleasant to everybody, and makes demands, but does it in a way that is (good) for the performance.

Someone asked me this before about Cleese, and they also asked about pains in the ass we've had, like Mort Sahl and Roseanne Barr, Jerry Lewis. People who were pains in the ass who you (Andrew) wrote about--you lost my original on that (photo). The only place it exists is in your book. But Jerry Lewis strangled me. Certain people are pains in the ass because they're pains in the ass. Other people are pains in the ass because they want a great performance.

Believe it or not, I do a lot of public speaking and MC'ing. I do this thing at C2 Montreal, which is a huge creative conference in Montreal. It's massive. The year I was there, last year, Richard Branson was there, and Barry Diller, and Diane von Furstenberg, people from all over the creative industry, and I was one of the speakers. I went ahead and said, "I need an hour of rehearsal to go over what I'm doing, because I have music cues, I have angels appearing onstage with me, I'm closing the show by jumping off the stage into the hands of people who are preset." I'm not doing that today, don't worry. And they looked at me like I was a psycho. They said, "What do you mean?" I said, "No one's asking for rehearsal?" "No." I said, "Well, I'm asking for rehearsal. I'm not going onstage without a rehearsal." I was a pain in the ass. I stood there, and I said, "Who's the stage director?" "There is no stage director." "What do you mean, there's no stage director? This is a multi-million dollar event. You're charging \$2,500 bucks a person to get in. There's no stage director?" "No." So I was the stage director. I was saying, "OK, lights, here's what I want. Guy at the lighting board, let's go. I want to see hot wash right now, thank you. No, hotter. OK, great. Sound cue, I want to hear my opening music. No, I want it louder. Please fill the monitors." So I was a pain in the ass. But I wasn't a pain in the ass because I said I want shit in my dressing room or magic carpet rides or whatever. I was a pain in the ass because I

wanted a great performance. People paid bucks, I'm putting myself on the line, because it's good for my career if I score. I don't wanna go up and do a speech for three thousand people and bomb. So I'm being a pain in the ass for performance. If you're a pain in the ass for performance, people will forgive you. If you're a pain in the ass to be a pain in the ass, they'll hate you, and they'll do things to fuck you up.

But the other thing I can say is, A, write. Write. Keep writing. Keep writing. Write, keep writing, keep writing, test it, write, keep writing. It's never as funny as you think it is on paper when you start performing it. You can always make it funnier. Write. Keep writing. Second thing, be unique. Be different. Have a persona. Never let people say, "I don't remember the guy's name. He has fireworks shooting out of his ass, but I don't remember his name." Can you imagine, you have fireworks in every punchline, and no one remembers your name? How embarrassing. So I think it's key that at least someone says, "Oh yeah yeah, Mitch Hedberg, the guy with the glasses, and there's a look, there's a feel." I say this all the time. You may not remember a goddamn word I say today, or my name, or anything. But you'll remember the check passed. Trust me. You'll remember the check passed. Trust me, you'll remember the check passed. *(laughs)* Somebody will remember the jewelry, but you'll remember something. It isn't some asshole who got up here and didn't give a shit about being in front of you. There was thought. Take thought. Who are you onstage? What's your persona? Why would someone remember you? Why would someone ask for you? In everything you do, the way you deal with people, the way you look, the way you talk onstage. There are certain people whose vocal inflections make them unique. It's key. Gilbert Gottfried's one of them. Mitch Hedberg's another one. Steven Wright's a third one. I could go on and on. Seinfeld's another one. I could go on and on.

And also, I always say this, try to do something memorable. One thing, one. Most of us get nothing in life. Most of us get nothing, but if you do one thing that's memorable... I have a bunch of them, but there are two acts who, to this day, stay with me as, "Oh my God, that's one of the greatest things ever written," and I never get tired of them. That's one thing about comedy. Comedy's like lighting a firecracker. The first time (you think) "Oh, that was fun," but when you see the punchline's coming, you think, "OK, who gives a shit, I know what's coming." But there are a couple of performances, and one in particular, I'll name both of them, but Larry Miller. The five levels of drinking. Do you know it? Who said yes? *(laughter)* One of the great bits. There are three bits of writing that I love. "Four Yorkshiremen," which predates (Monty) Python. There's no wasted word in that sketch. Probably the best sketch ever written, "Four Yorkshiremen." It leads you on a journey, and gives you a surprise close at the last fuckin' word. Brilliant. Best sketch ever written, "Four Yorkshiremen." But the best standup (bit) I've seen (is) Larry Miller's five levels of drinking. Unbelievable. The words are beautiful. It paints a picture, it takes you on a journey, it leaves you at the end with something. It's complete, it's whole. Every time I see Larry Miller, I say, "I know you're gonna hate me for saying this, Larry, I know you're gonna think I'm an asshole, I'm sorry. But man oh man, I can never get over the 'Five Levels of Drinking'. You did 'Born to Run,' do you understand? You did 'Let It Be.' You did 'Jumpin' Jack Flash.' That's yours. No one can take that away. You've done a million other things, but you've done that, you've left one memorable thing." The other one, Jim Breuer, it's all about drinking, but Jim Breuer did a bit about the party, and all the things going into the stomach...

AC: I think I recall.

AN: Phenomenal routine, phenomenal. But again, it paints a picture in your head, versus most of the stuff I see where I bang my head against the wall. Because I can give you the typical standup routine. There's the basic introduction, trying to rally the audience, but they don't care. Observation, observation, let's try to make some sort of connection. And it's like, God, what are you saying? Why are you going onstage saying, "Hey, how's it going? Everyone having a good time tonight? I'm from Philadelphia, anyone else here from Philadelphia tonight? Great. Well, you know Philadelphia..." I could do it in my sleep, because it's formulaic, and who gives a shit? Versus a guy like Larry Miller getting onstage and saying, "There are five levels of drinking--six if you live in a trailer park, but tonight we're gonna talk about five. Level one..." What the fuck just happened? You're in the story, he's painting pictures in your head, versus, "Hi, where you from? Anyone here ever fly?" I know I'm painting too much of a cliché, but it's still out there, and that's why I won't go (to clubs) anymore, because every time I go, it's like, "Oh God, it hasn't progressed." So it's up to you to progress it. Or to say, "I can't progress it, but you know what I can do? I might be able to be the advisor on what someone should wear. I may be able to be the advisor on how to build a persona. I may be able to be the tech person to work with a writer, and find the third person who's a better performer, and build something." That's the beautiful thing about comedy. (Some say), "Well, if you can't stand up onstage with a microphone, you suck." No. Many times, you see this all the time in music, there's a million stories at every level of showbiz, where someone is not good at one thing, but they have enough knowledge to work with others who are to say, "Let's build this together as a team." So yeah, a perfect example is Larry David. Larry David was not comfortable as a standup comic. But he honed that craft and was able to be a phenomenal writer, and then was able to say, "I can take that

and build myself into a phenomenal television persona.” But he was a shitty standup comic. So what? He’s a billionaire international creative star, but he wasn’t a great standup comic. But he found his niche, and he worked with people who helped push him along.

AC: Well, we might be about ready (to end). We maybe have time for one more quick question before we wrap up, if there is one.

Audience member: *(question inaudible)*

AN: What’s my relationship with fashion? We’re just friends. *(laughter)* It’s a great question. My relationship with fashion is, I’m a five-foot-four, nondescript Jew, OK? Growing up, I had a pudding face, looked like everyone else, had no distinct characteristics, grew my hair long, like everyone else when I was growing up. What fashion helped me with was the book cover. You can’t judge a book by its cover? Bullshit, of course you can. You may not be right, but at least it’s something. I might make a decision to buy this book versus that one depending on what the cover is. It’s one of those things, and it’s funny because it works all the time. My friend Joel Warner and Pete McGraw just wrote a book called *The Humor Code*. They were in the *Wired* humor edition, and they’re trying to find the DNA... He’s a marketing professor, a doctor at University of Colorado at Boulder, and they’re trying to find the DNA of humor. They wrote a book, and I helped them out a bit, it’s great, but in the book my description is, “Always the best-dressed guy in the room.” The point is, he got that. I didn’t ask him, but he got that. And that’s my relationship with fashion. At least I got the cover. I may or may not have anything underneath, but I got the cover. In a room of people, it happens all the time, especially when I speak at young artists conferences, I stand out.

Believe it or not, I'm insanely shy. Great onstage, wonderful one-to-one, (but at a party, death. Terrible. I stand in a corner. I won't talk to anyone. But if I'm wearing enough shit on my hands, with my rings, people will come to me and say, "That's interesting, what's that all about? I love your tie. I haven't seen a tie clip in ages." Or whatever it is. People will come to me. It's a magnet for people to actually come to me, because I would never go to them. If somebody started a conversation, and we were talking before about people saying, "It's good for your career," that's where I've found things are good for my career, when people come to me and start talking, and eventually see we have something in common. Which is why, by the way, I read. I read a lot, I read when I'm on the road. I never sit in my hotel room, I always sit in the lobby bar alone, or in the lobby, because there's a chance of someone coming up to me and saying, "Oh, I love that book," or "What are you reading," or "Can you suggest a good book," or something. There's a chance I'm gonna meet someone, versus if I stay in my room, no one's knockin' on the door. So that's what this is, my relationship (with fashion). It's a very serious answer to a question that may have been facetious (*laughter*), but that is the true answer. Basically, I'll throw it back at you, because you're wearing the thingamajig around your neck, right? Because people will talk about it. They'll ask, "What's that?" And it's like, OK, it's a Satanic symbol, so, "Oh, that's interesting, you're a Satanist." (*laughter*) "Wonderful. Have you sacrificed anything lately?" "Yes, a young baby." "Really, that's so cool!" But the point is, that's why you wear that. I'm far from making fun of you. You wear that for a reason, because if there wasn't one, it'd be under your T-shirt, correct? There you go. Well, ladies and gentlemen, I must say that this has been a lot of fun. (*applause*)

AC: It has been terrific, everybody. Wonderful. Thank you, Andy. We have here, speaking of fashion...

AN: Parting gifts, Johnny!

AC: That's right.

AN: Let's see. Will it fit? Did you get him the large?

AC: Probably.

AN: Ha ha, I can tell people...

AC: It'll make a statement.

AN: They'll be so impressed I went to Humber. *(laughter)* Really? He graduated *there*? Oh, I love it. This is great. Let's see what size. A medium. No, because I go to the gym a lot, and I wear hoodies all the time. It's perfect, wonderful. Thank you, guys. I will wear it with pride. Thank you! *(applause)*