**HOW WE WRITE**

**Interview with Cody Melcher**

(Interviewer: Alice Batt) (Date of interview: 5/2/17)

**I'm Alice Batt. I'm here with How We Write, a podcast about how we write just about anything. We’re at the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin, so any background noise you hear is our consultants working with people on their writing, since exams are coming. And I'm here with Cody Melcher. He used to be at UT as a rhetoric and film major and moved to Chicago to do work in comedy. Hi, Cody.**

Hi, thanks for having me.

**I'm glad you're here.**

I like, I like this, like, diagetic noise going on in the background.

**It’s good, isn’t it?**

It's lovely.

**Yes, and as people come in at the hour and the half hour, it will rise.**

It's like a very nice background. You know, it's like, it's like it's almost as if you put it in, like, fake coffee shop noise just to make it sound as if we have a nice hustle and bustle.

**But, in fact, it's all real.**

Right, you want to create the scene.

**Genuine.**

Yes.

**Yes. So, Cody, I'm going to share with people your write up from--Is this on your Web site?**

Yeah that's right. This is my bio.

**OK. This is Cody's bio.**

**Cody Melcher is a wit wanton and literary gentleman who weaves a tapestry of obscure observations and personal proclivities designed to delight and entertain. Based in Chicago, he's host of the critically acclaimed podcast Tom… *Tomefoolery* (T O M E F O O L E R Y), producer of The Chicago Nerd Comedy Festival, co-host of a variety show called *Shindig* and movie talkback show *Tamara Just Saw.* He’s opened for Mark Normand, W. Kamau Bell, and Stuart Huff. He's performed at S.F. Sketchfest, Snubfest, Pridefest Milwaukee, and the Comedy exposition of 2014. In 2013 he was a finalist in the Advocate's National Queer Comedy Search and in 2016 was a finalist in the Laughing Devil Comedy Festival in New York. The Chicago Tribune has called him “ridiculously zesty.”**

Mm-hm.

**What a fabulous appellation.**

I know, I was like, “Oh, is that what it is? Is that what I’m doing? That's what I’m doing.”

**What do you get from that? What earned you the title “ridiculously zesty”?**

I think it's a mix of what I wear onstage and also just my personality on stage. I have a tendency to run on to the point, onto the stage pretty much. I explode onto the stage more than just kind of walk on it.

**Having listened to your podcast, this does not surprise me.**

Yeah, also I'm usually bejewelled. Because like I said I do silly and serious. So, you know, like, I'll talk about--I talk about myself and I talk about, like, you know, societal stuff as well. But I try to be kind of silly with it, you know, kind of very like 1960s British, you know, beyond-the-fringe kinda, where it's like, “Look, we're going to be silly. It's going to be a little smart and it's going to be a little serious.” And, um, the--my business cards say, “Big words with a little razzle dazzle.”

**Nice.**

Yeah. So what I always say is like “Look, if you get sad, just stare into the jacket crystals. Like, they will soothe you. And then come back, and then come back.”

**Terrific. Well, let's start by talking a little bit about your podcast *Tomefoolery*, for people who haven't had a chance yet to hear about it or hear it. You look at what I would consider to be cringe worthy books.**

Yes.

**Right, OK. How did you get involved in looking at cringe worthy books?**

So what I tell people is that it's a---I bring on two entertainment or comedian friends of mine and we talk about a weird or messed up book I just forced them to read. So we do, we do everything from, like, silly to very bad, messed up books.

**Yeah.**

So, like, the third episode was the *Pink Swastika*—

**Oooo.**

--one of my favorite books, written by Pastor Scott Lively. It is about who's responsible for the Uganda kill-the-gays bill and Russia's gay policies.

**Oh, my god.**

It's about how homosexuals started the Nazi party—

**Oh?**

--so that they could fake persecute other homosexuals, so that in the 1990s we could pretend that we were persecuted class of people and get rights.

(laughter) **OK, so I love how you just out and say, “This is my *favorite* book.”**

It's a great book. (laughter)

**Because frankly, you know, I've listened to a couple of them. I listened to *YOLO Juliet--***

Yep.

**Right?**

Yep.

**By William Shakespeare and Brett Right--**

Right. We’re doing another one of those later this year with the improvised Jane Austen group in Chicago.

**Ah!**

It’s *Pride and Prejudice* through Tinder.

**Oh my God. OK. That sounds perfect. And *What's a parent to do*? (1971, C.S. Lovett), which terrified me. OK. And explain to them, you know, those that have not read it--**

That is a, um-- That's like an old school Christian child-rearing book like, you know, like, “how to—

**“How to beat your child with love?”**

Yeah, “how to keep Timmy off drugs with, you know, spare-the-rod, spoil-the-child,” etc.

**Right. So as I was going through lists and, you know, listening to some and then looking at others and feeling like…I could tell that reading some of these books would just put my blood pressure through the roof.**

Oh, yeah.

**Right.** **So I'm wondering, first, how you do it? And secondly, have you ever found a book so cringe-y you just couldn't put it on the show?**

So I will say this: The *Twilight* episode is the one where I have a nervous breakdown really on the show.

**Really? Oh, I just almost listened to that one last night.**

I just start falling apart because it was on the New York Times bestseller list. It’s just so poorly edited and written. It's not that it's about Sparkle vampires—everybody, you do your own thing-- but it's just not well-written, it's not well edited. It's like, it's like, um, it's like reading Ayn Rand, which we also did on the show, where it's just like, it's not necessarily that this bad philosophy, although it is, but it's that it's just like no one edited this. No one paid attention.

**OK.**

No one cared and it's just--there's so many points where you’re like, this is--either just sentence structure is just bad, or “It's too long. Cut this!” You know, especially Ayn Rand. But *Twilight,* there are like literal, literal points in the book that contradict themselves, where they describe, they describe Bella like several different times in several different ways, where it's confusing, kind of. And in terms of books that I wouldn't do on the show...So there are some. There are some that have a bit of gravitas to them that I necessarily…I’m shying away from but it's just like “Do I really want to do this one on a comedy--”

**Yeah.**

--podcast?”, because it is a comedy podcast, at the end of the day. And we treat everything with, you know, with the gravitas it has. And I try my best to also get people representative of those areas, you know? I've tried to have, like, Jewish guests on we do anything Nazi related. So I don't want it to be, like, “Hey, we--we weren't affected by most of this.”

Or if there’s racism or slavery books, I try to bring on, you know, more--like I try to have a nice balance of like of opinions that are related to those and that are influenced. I'm not going to do, you know, a bunch of white guys talking about an anti-feminist book. You know, things like that.

**Balance**.

Yeah, yeah, you know. And so...But things like *Mein Kampf*. I'm not going I'm not going to say “no” to, but that's definitely going to be, like, a special—by special episode I mean, I don’t say special episode as if that’s like a “hey, glitzy”--

**Wooo!**

--but more like Mein Kampf, if I ever do that episode, would be one where it was like, “All right, we really need to make sure we handle this one.” And I do my best to try to make sure we handle the perspective, you know, in a balanced way as well.

**Yeah.**

Even on the book, because it's also really easy to sit there and go “Oh, these people are dumb. Look at how dumb these people are.” I believe very much like radical empathy where you don't--you know, empathy doesn't need to be a soft noodle. Empathy can be a sword. And empathy can be a shield. And the idea of being empathetic towards people doesn't mean that you have to, like, give them a pass.

**Right.**

But you can also…you can also kind of look at the fear that is influencing a lot of these decisions and a lot of this rhetoric and see where that's coming from. And then still condemn it but try to, you know, try not to treat the symptom.

**And I think that's… Really passing judgment here, but it sounds like a really healthy approach for a writer.**

Yeah.

**You know, I mean what you're doing is looking at people's intentions and looking at what formed them and trying to get a sense of--**

Well, and that’s like, that's rhetoric. That's the way I learned rhetoric.

**Yeah, so let’s..let’s talk about rhetoric.**

Oh, but real quick to firmly answer it. There was an MRA book that we had just done a bunch of—oh, sorry: “Men’s Rights Activists—

**Oh, thank you.**

--Meninists. We do a lot of those. I still get several death threats from them.

**Ooh. Yeah.**

I do a fun type of comedy that results in, like, some serious blowback from some radical groups.

**Well, that was my next question. I was going to say, actually, “Have you ever had to deal with these authors and who would you least like to run into a bar or a coffee shop or grocery store?”**

I've never had to deal directly with an author or to my knowledge. I've had to deal with some of the men's rights activists people who are followers of that author.

**Yeah.**

People who are really you know because especially men's rights activists are are mostly internet based and they are in camps and they follow people and they have

**Wow.**

I mean I was I was uploading the episodes on to YouTube, because I was trying to figure out more platforms to put the podcast on. And I like, I was uploading every episode onto YouTube so I was working late into the night, and it was 4:00 o'clock in the morning when the men's rights ones went up, and people were commenting immediately on them--

**Really.**

Like they had—

**Like they were waiting?**

--they had notices, like they have e-mail notices for keywords set up—

**Wow…**

--because there's no…Within minutes, comments. There's no way they're following me specifically that closely

**At four o’clock in the morning.**

Especially when I'm only just now putting episodes up. It's not like they waited for me to put up, you know, over time. I one day decided to put all of them on YouTube and they found them immediately.

**Wow.**

So that's the most, is the followers groups and stuff. It's mostly men's rights activists, a couple of racists. But yeah, but we try to balance perspective. That's the weird thing is like if they listened to episodes, we're still condemning them but we are giving them a better shake than I think a lot of the general--you know, just like me or population—would. A longstanding joke that starts from the *Pink Swastika* episode of the show is that we like, here on *Tomefoolery* we like to give Nazis the benefit of the doubt.

**[laughter]**

You know, we're like “OK, they're Nazis, but like, but what did they say? Right. Because I mean, we can just go like “Yeah, they're Nazis,” but like, what are their points right now? Because it's, it's easy to dismiss the Nazis--

**Right.**

It's very easy to dismiss them because they're wrong, but you want to look at the individual points, you know? I want, I want the list of the bullet points.

**Well, this is where I want to get back to, you know, you had a traditional rhetorical education, right? I mean that's what you studied here, so--**

And I still study it--

**--what part does that play in the work that you do?**

I mean I think that's pretty much all of it.

**Yeah.**

Like that's the crux, not only in terms of the podcast, but also my standup is very rhetorical. I mean, a stand up is just rhetorical.

**Yeah**.

I always like to think of standup—(you know, some standup--not obviously everybody’s stand up is doing this)-- but standup in some ways is kind of the last bastion of like Greek philosophy style of this idea of like you know Steve Martin for Zoot is the ego's last stand. But it's, you know, you're a person standing on a stage orating to an audience a point of view.

**Yeah.**

And a lot of the time, for a lot of comedians, a philosophical point of view, to some extent. And that's kind of, you don't really get that much these days in terms of that very classical, you know, oration.

**No. You don’t.**

Outside of politics.

**Yeah. So who are you--Who are you writing for, when you write comedy? Who is that audience? And does it change when you walk into the venue?**

So I try to kind of write universally. I write from my internal. Like I write for...I write for as many people as I can. But I try my best to write for as wide a net as I can, which is very difficult to do, and with comedy also so you have a tendency to, to change on the spot a little bit.

**Mmhmm.**

You know, if I’m in a certain area-- As an example, when I'm in Texas versus Chicago, if I'm doing material about Texas I don't have to explain certain aspects in Chicago (or in Texas--I do have to in Chicago).

**Right.**

And if I'm…I have a--one of my closers is about chivalry in the south. And how about that's how it's hard to be gay and practice chivalry because of the aspect that you’re two men and chivalry as a societal construct is an over masculine way to subvert women’s roles and authority in society, because what you're doing is basically treating women as fragile objects and not necessarily as like as part of--

**What does this closer look like? I want to see this. Can we do this?**

I mean, if you want me to perform the closer?

**Yeah! Perform the closer!**

Yeah, uh, OK.

So, all right…”So it's hard growing up gay in the south but not for the reasons that you might be thinking, although to be fair, those as well. A lot of lassos, not the fun kind.”

**[snort of laughter]**

And it's also it's also rated R. Is that ok? I don't know…

**You know, we’ll cut it if it's a problem. [laughter]**

Yeah, I won't do the final line.

**Okay, that’s good.**

“But, you know, but it’s a lot of lassos, not the fun kind. But it's more for that kind of chivalry code that still seems to persist in the south. It's why I dress like the Riddler’s boxing promoter, and it's also why I usually have a hand fan. I have one in studio.”

**[laughter]**

“That’s why I carry this fan around with me wherever I go.”

**[laughter] It’s this green and, and gilded….**

And yeah, it’s a very multi-colored—

**It's lovely.**

--sparkle fan. “You know, it's why I carry this fan around with me wherever I go. You know, it gets hot out there and I don't want to faint from the vapors if there isn’t a mint julep readily available.”

**[laughter]**

“You know what I'm saying? She knows what I’m talking about.”

(And then I put the fan away.) “But it's hard to kind of use that chivalry code…like, OK, you all seem like a postmodern enough crowd to realize that chivalry as a societal abstraction is kind of an over masculine way to subvert women's roles and authority in society. You know, like ‘Oh, this voting lever is so heavy.’”

**[snorted laughter]**

“You know what I mean? And so, the problem is it's really hard to kind of play that over masculine overplay when you're trying to date another dude bro or a bro ham.” And then I usually make a sex joke here that I will avoid—

**Avoid for the sake of the younger population.**

--for the sake of the podcast. Yes. “And so it's hard to apply that to a dating situation. Like, case and point, when we go out, do I get his car door? Does he get mine? Do we just kind of fire drill?”

**[laughter]**

“When we're at dinner and he comes back to the table from the bathroom, do I stand? Does he remain standing for the rest of the meal? Do we have our waiters sit at a separate table and serve us from there? And when we come to a puddle, do I throw down my jacket—well, this jacket is a nice jacket. Do I borrow—do I use his jacket? Do I borrow a jacket from a stranger? Is it biggest jacket? Do we roshambo? When we go out to town for…when we go to town on Sunday, do we both wear skirts…” Wait…

**[laughter]**

[00:15:15] It's hard to perform when you’re just, like, sitting down—

**Yes, I know.**

--talking.

**I'm sitting here staring at him.**

“Well, when we go out to town on Sunday, do we, do we both wear floor-length skirts out to town to remain chaste in the eyes of our Lord? And then, and then finally and most importantly, when we kiss each other to show our love, do I punch him in the face and call him and the F-word, does he punch me in the face, or do we just fist bump F-words? I don't know. Please let me know after theshow. I’m Cody Melcher.”

And then I leave. So for that bit, that bit has a lot going on.

**Mmhmm…**

And part of the…so, part of the issue is getting people on board with the chivalry concept, and part of it is I'm directly addressing this awkwardness of being gay and dating with having been raised in a very kind of like culture of, like, you know, you wanna, this is how you like…I'm very much like a gentlemanly person in the sense that like I believe that manners are social grease.

**Mmhmm…**

You know, you treat…if you treat people well, the hope is if we all do that, everybody's having a good time.

**It’s gonna be fine. Yeah.**

Everyone nice. You take--It's a very improv-y thing: take care of your partner.

And so it's kind of a weird thing to operate. And so it's about that. And then it's also about homophobia in the south—

**Yeah.**

--like the final line is about homophobia in the south and how that interplays with chivalry. That’s a lot to pack into a joke.

**It really is.**

Um, and so the problem is, is that the chivalry bit I used to say: “And we all understand chivalry is an over-masculine and way to subvert women's roles and authority in society.” And then I'd move on. And I would say it like that: that was the original way I did joke. And I was in Chicago performing and a woman yelled out no it isn't.

**Ah, yeah.**

I was like, “What?” And she’s like, “That’s not what chivalry is.” And I was like, “Well, can you explain to me what you believe chivalry is.” And she said, “It's like a guy holds the door open for you to be nice.”

And I was like, “Well, yeah, but that's, that's a, that's a byproduct of a greater societal issue, which is that chivalry—“

**Infantilizing women.**

Yeah, yeah. “Old school chivalry--the whole point of that is that women do not have the ability to take care of themselves. And some men have to help them because they might, you know, faint if it becomes too hard for them to pull the door open.”

**So what you're telling us is that you actually engage in dialogue with your audience?**

Oh yeah.

**Over these issues…Like, there was assumption there that you all didn't share.**

**So you had to come to an agreement on it. Did you win?**

Well, so. So part of comedy is also, like, you know, you kind of have to suppress. Like, you have to make your point kind of move on.

**Yeah.**

And so I engage as much as I can as long as I don't think I'll throw off the show.

**Yeah.**

And so then I ended that that my my retort with you know, it's like, “Oh this voting lever is so heavy.” And that got a laugh. And then she stopped talking and I moved on.

**Yeah.**

But so what I ended up doing was updating the bit to add that line to the end of it and also added “as a societal construction” into the bit to make it clearer that I'm talking about the actual social issue.

**Yeah**.

**Um, so I'm going to ask you a question I ask my writing for nonprofit students. I teach a course called Writing for Nonprofits for the rhetoric department.**

That’s great.

**It *is* really cool.**

I've--actually one of my dreams is to start a nonprofit similar to, like, Nanowrimo or 826, to try to get rhetoric into elementary schools in some capacity, because I think one of the fundamental things, especially with the Internet, that we're really missing is younger people need to have a better understanding of rhetoric so they can dissect—

**Yes…**

false information and where their information is coming from, who--like the ethos of where it's coming from, all of that--

**Yes--**

--I think is what is gravely missing, especially in the Internet era, and I think we are, you know, not to get too current event-y, I think we're noticing that now.

**“I think we're noticing that now.”**

Yeah. So sorry to cut you off—

**No, that's OK.**

**My question, which you may have already, you know, answered, was what's the goal of comedy?**

Oh, boy. Um, I will—uh, not to get too pedantic. I don’t know. [laughter]

**And I should back it up. I'll give you a second to think it through.**

Sure.

**When we're talking about with [Writing] for Non-profits, it has to do with when they’re grant writing--you know, what's the change you want to see in the world? That's the thing you're setting up as your goal, and then what are the programs you're putting into place to make that happen. So yeah, like, what's the change you want to see in the world?**

I would, um, I would say that it is different for almost every comedian. You kind of put people into groups to some extent, you know, like “Oh, you all are close enough keywords. We can put you over here.” But I mean, there, there are some comedians that are just like “I want to make people laugh,” you know, and “I want to make people happier.” And that's it. They don't, you know, like, they’re one-liner comics that are like, “Look, I'm not doing a greater purpose than anything other than just I want people to be happy.”

**Happy at the end of the evening.**

Yeah. And make people’s days better. I would say I am trying to do that. I want to make people's lives a little bit better.

But part of that is also a little bit of education and a little bit of enlightenment--

**Mmm-hmm.**

--and a little bit of connection. So I want--

A lot of artists--and especially comedians, entertainers, um, writers--want to be something that when they were a kid would have made them feel better. And that's kind of where I am. Like, I want to be my favorite--I want to be childhood me’s favorite comedian. And in that it means I want to connect with people because, like my personality--my comedy is my personality; I’ve have kind of just leaned into it--and a lot of that is I'm a real weird dude.

[00:20:52] And so I'm not relating to the audience in the sense that it's like, “Aren't we all interested in trebuchets?” But that I'm related to you because we're all interested in something, like we're all… there's, there's something that makes most of us weird. You know, the people who are at least thoughtful about their lives. You know, there's definitely a segment of the population I'm not really going to hit. And those are people who float through their lives without really doing any introspection, without really kind of looking around and trying to care about what they want out of their lives, what the world is giving them out of their lives, etc.

But especially, like, leaving Haven Conn. which was an LGBT, you know, gaming and comic book conference, I personally connected with that conference and with those people there and then they connected with me because they are who I was as a kid and still am.

**Right.**

And so I want to connect with people so that they can understand that they are connected to other people. I also want to be funny, you know? I like, like, at the end of…Dan Telfer, who is a teacher of mine in Chicago--he's a standup, he lives in L.A. now and he's fantastic, he's a nerdy comic--he once said, “At the end of the day, your number one priority is comedy. You're a standup comedian.” If… Number two, or 1b, it can be, you know, greater truths or I want to dissect politics, or I want to bring, like, hope or whatever. But your number one thing is comedy. And if that isn't it, then you need to do something else--be a spoken word artist, something, they're all great—

**Yeah.**

--you know. But if you want to call yourself a stand-up comedian and you want to do stand-up comedy, it's comedy first. And so, then within that is…yeah, I want to kind of elucidate. I think, like I said earlier, it's kind of the last bastion of philosophy, and so I feel, like, in that kind of Socratic method of, like, hey, let's get to the deeper truth. And that's where the comedy is. It's pointing out the absurdities in life. It's, it's dissecting and also bringing a little bit of comfort to the world.

**Mmm-hmm.**

Like, hey, I started watching Rachel Maddow a lot after the election because there was the thing where it's like, if Rachel is still OK, it's like—

**We can all be OK. [laughter] Yeah.**

Yeah. They say if you have a fear of flying, you’re supposed to watch the flight attendants

**Huh…**

because if the flight attendants are just like, sitting on their phones, and it's bad turbulence, you know—

**nothing is wrong**—

--Yeah, because they go through it, and they go through everything. If they look worried, that's when it's bad. I mean, that's comedy. And that's also Rachel Maddow. And for me. But that's comedians, too.

It's like we're the flight attendants. We’re there to, you know, not placate you, but to at least make it feel like the world and life isn’t hopeless in any capacity whatsoever. So I guess, in the largest context ever, I think that in terms of what is the goal of comedy in general, I would say that.

**Hope?**

To some extent, yeah.

**And that sort of, um, leads me to the next question, which is about revising. You were talking earlier about how, you know, having performed something and…and felt it not go over, you could throw in a couple of lines here and there and, you know, make the assumption clear so that joke could ride. What's your typical writing process--I mean both drafting…getting inspired, drafting, revising. Do you sit down to write stand up?**

Mine is mostly I come up with a premise or an idea, or…or sometimes, even just, like, a punch line. And I will kind of try to flesh it out a little bit. I do a lot of writing on my feet. My friend Pete that I referenced earlier, he is very much a “writes the whole thing out on paper.” Mine is a sentence or something like that, and then I'll kind of try to move from there. Actually, you know what? I can, if you want, I have some of it--some notes--

**Sure.**

--that I've written down--

**Yeah.**

--for bit ideas and I can read you some of those.

**Oh, great.**

[00:25:05] “OK, you know you're getting old when you see a castle in a Disney movie and just think ‘Oh, so much dusting.’”

**[snort and laughter]** **I'm sorry, that one's done.**

[laughter] So that's one that I'm trying to figure out “OK, how do you make that a larger joke?” You

know, but that's kind of the idea. I had that thought, and then I realized it was funny--

**and you could flesh it out--**

--and I could write it down.

**Ahhh.**

This is a reference to--I saw it on Facebook-- a picture, it was one of a nerd group and they were like…It was a picture of the Flash and someone else, and they were like “Who would win in this, in this, like, race?” And somebody had commented, “Flash wins, hands down. This is a joke right?” And so I wrote that down because I wanted to dissect the concept that, like, “No, this is a very serious ‘Which comic book character would win? We need to know.’” Because the idea that “This is a joke, right?” is like “Why? What would be serious about that?”

**Right.**

Yeah. And then “I've reached, I've reached Victorian-lady-with-a-deadly-disease levels of politely excusing myself to silently vomit.”

**[snorty laughter]**

I was explaining to someone earlier that, because of my upbringing, it's physically impossible for me to vomit in front of another human being.

[laughter] **I'm sorry, I'm remembering YOLO Juliet, where were you just like---you tossed your cookies before the episode, so you were refreshing telling us about that during the episode.**

This bit is from when I had food poisoning.

Yeah. And I do a bit about the food poisoning and so I need to…I'm trying to figure out how to incorporate this into that, because I talk about how I've lost 30 pounds this year and five of it was from food poisoning. And while I had food poisoning, I was doing crunches because I was hoping that if I lost enough weight, I would have abs at the end of it. So yes, some of it's just like things will happen and I’ll write them down, or if I tell a friend and they laugh and I don't realize—

**Yeah—**

it’s a little bit of that. “I can't stand philosophical justif…justifications which are basically answers to nothing. ‘You can't take stuff when you die.’ No one says you can.

No one is saying that. I don't buy things I, like because I was going to have a weird pyramid later with me.” So I wrote that down.

“I was trying to be a chameleon but I was actually a chaise lounge.” I don't even know what that means. I think it's about when I was a kid and I was trying to blend in but I wasn’t doing it correctly.

**Ah. [laughter]**

Oh, this is “fencing tear-away pants over regular pants.” I was telling a story about when I was a fencer. I had a…an intimidation tactic where I would wear—so, you know, like, tear-away pants like basketball players wear?. I would, I would wear tear-away pants over regular sweatpants over my fencing pants. So when I would get to the strip, as my intimidation tactic, I would rip off my tear-away pants and then slowly take off the pants underneath them, and that would throw off the other kid.

**“AAAAIEE!”**

The kid was like--

**“What are you doing?”**

“Why was he wearing tear-away pants over other pants?”

**Over sweatpants! [laughter]**

Yeah, like “He was just wearing other…” Like, I just have another pair of pants under my pants.

**Oh, man.**

And it was just my attempt to…And so, that is, I was telling a friend that story, and they thought it was funny. And that happens sometimes in comedy where you’re like “Oh, I didn't realize that was weird.”

**[Snorty laugh]**

Especially with me. That happens a lot with me.

**I didn’t realize that was weird. [laughter]**

Like, I have a story now that I tell in the show which is about growing up. I used to play house with people and I would demand to be the valet, but I kept starting fights with people because they would call me the butler.

**[laughter]**

And that's a different job. And so I’d get really upset at them about it, and then stop playing house, and it was like “Oh, no wonder no one hung out with me when I was a kid because I was yelling at people about valets.”

**[laughter]**

So. But I'm, but I'm way more conversational. And also, that's probably a lot of my improv background. And so I do a lot of my actual writing on stage, and then I'll try to audio record a lot of it, and come back to it, or I'll remember when I get off stage and I'll add notes to it. And so a lot of my bits have changed and grown over time which is for a lot of comedians as well. But I am less “Everything is written out.” Also, a lot of mine is memorized, which I've only been doing it for six years, so I'm not sure how good of an idea that is because I'm worried that in the future I won’t be able to remember as much—

**Because it's not written down, you'll have lost it.**

Right.

I mean, hopefully the goal is to record a CD—

**Right. Right, right.**

And then you won’t do those bits ever again.

So that's kind of the plan. But, um, yeah, it's a lot of writing on its feet, but it starts with a premise or it starts with a story, because I do either, you know, premise-driven, you know, observational comedy or I do storytelling. Like those are kind of the two areas I traffic in. So it really kind of depends on the bit. But a lot of it is just “Oh, this is a weird thought” or “Oh, that's something that’s happening.” I have a whole bit about the *700 Club*. And Pat--this is actually a very good rhetoric bit. This is literally a rhetoric bit. So, I can run through the bit kind of.

**Sure.**

So it's about, um—So, we just said this—so when I wrote the bit, we just had it.

So… “We just got a Supreme Court ruling for same sex marriage, which was great. I had a really fun time during that time because I like to watch the *700 Club*. Anybody here?

[00:30:04] No?” (One time I did it in Indiana. Too much applause.)

**I’m sure. [laughter]**

And I was like, uh, I was like, “For those of you who, like, you don't know the show, It’s a Christian ‘news’ organization. I put air quotes around ‘news’ because Pat Robertson, the host of the show, once said that Haiti deserved their earthquake because they had made a pact with the devil to defeat the French—“

**Ew—**

“which is ridiculous…”

**Yeah—**

“because no one needs a pact with the devil to defeat the French.”

**[laughter]**

“Like, if Mexico can do it, anyone can do it. You know, Cinco de Mayo.”

**[laughter]**

That’s the whole thing.

[00:30:34] “So during the Supreme Court ruling, Pat Robertson said that homosexuals are using their shadow powers to destroy America.”

**[sotto voce] “Shadow powers.”**

Right. “Which again is ridiculous. But also it's just bad rhetoric because think about it: If your whole thing is that you don't want young men to choose to be gay, don't tell them they get to control shadows if they do.”

**[laughter]**

And so then there’s more to the bit. But that's a, that's a rhetoric bit.

**Yeah.**

I was watching *700* Club, and he said that, and I was like, “You think that people choose to be gay. why would you tell me I get super powers? Basically like you're saying that like I get to join this really cool evil cabal? Like, yeah, of course I'm going to do that. Like, you're losing the culture wars. You're the one doing it.” But that's completely a rhetoric thing comes from the dissection of that argument.

If I was just watching and I was just like “Oh, that's a dumb thing to say!” and I just took it at that level, then you have a real placid bit there.

**Mm-hmm.**

Um, but yeah. So a lot of it just comes from those different angles. That was a very long answer.

**That's OK. I really enjoyed that answer. Um, challenges? Like, what are the challenges that you've come across as a comic?**

So, um, in my experience, yeah, the biggest problems are just kind of, you know, figuring out the career elements. How you, like…in terms of keeping going. It's a, it's a-- It's the worst parts of social media, in terms of comparing yourselves to others. It's a very hard field to not compare yourself. I mean, like—

**Sure.**

--I've had people that started in Chicago after me who now have television specials and who write for, you know, Fallon. And I have, and I have friends who have been doing it twice as long as I have or longer who don't have any, like, don't have what I have in terms of credits. It's a real tough field, um, and it's mostly luck. Anybody who tells you otherwise is lying. Um, Comedy is entirely luck-based in terms of career trajectory.

But, as with most luck things, it's about how much skill and how much work you've put into it before the luck happens.

**Yeah.**

You know, because getting lucky--getting lucky but being unprepared—

**It’s not a good thing. Yeah.**

--is not gonna get you far. It’ll, like, get you the thing, but it's not going to get you the next thing. I know plenty of people who have gotten a break and fell flat on their face because they didn't put the work in beforehand. So it's about being prepared to be lucky.

**Mm-hmm. So, um, on the subject of, you know, how to help younger comedians, um, what kinds of tips do you offer for comedians who are just starting out?**

All right. So, the biggest ones

I would say are…Don't….So, these are some of the—like, it's a mix of business tips and comedy tips.

**Okay.**

Business-y tips would be: Don't compare yourself to others. Uh, it's a career where everyone's gonna be at different trajectories and different levels. Um, like I said, there are people who started after me who have much more high profile careers than I do, and there are people that have been around longer than I have that have lower profile careers. It's all luck. It's all being prepared for that luck and ready to work for it. And, um, and also it's a weird business. It's a business at the end of the day

**Yeah.**

And so just like we've all worked, you know, a, um, an entry-level job somewhere or part of a corporation, where the boss is going to make a weird decision and everyone's like “What are you talking about?” because you're on the ground floor and you're working with, like, you know… Studio executives and club bookers aren't always necessarily like you know sitting and looking at audiences--

**Yeah.**

--and, you know, really interacting with that as a form.

And so just like, you know, your boss might say, ”We're going to, like,….” Somebody who works in corporate in a different city is going to say, “We're going to switch to summerwear in February—

**[laughter]**

And it's like—

**In Austin.**

Yeah, Chicago, it’s Chicago, it's snowing and people don't want tank tops right now. Like, they're not prepping for summerwear right now, they're still focusing on “I don't have a jacket. Can I get one to wear? And it's not here? OK, I’m gonna leave then.” And…So, don't focus on others. Don't read the comments.

Do remember that you're constantly working. Your heroes, the people that you see, are people who experienced the lower levels as well. Everybody always--everybody always, you know, tends to look at these famous comedians and go “Wow, they're perfect and amazing geniuses and they were born, you know, out of Zeus's skull and have them come forth perfect in being. You know, you know, we all remember that time that George Carlin arrived at the shores on a clamshell.”

**[laughter]**

But—

**[laughter] I'm sorry. That image.**

[00:35:10] But yeah, you know, remember, remember that you're working, and pay atten-...unless your only goal is to be famous, and you have, no other goal, like, then A) you shouldn't be doing comedy; be an actor or something.

Because if you're only pure--and I'm not saying that all actors want that--

**I was going to say all the actors are, like, “Grrrrrr!” [laughter]**

But if you're-- But if you want to be a comedian, part of your goal needs to be that you want to you know make people laugh. You want to, you want to be entertaining. If you just want to be famous, then there are better ways to get there. And like you can just--if you can be a really good actor and make it, and actors just have to worry about being good actors. They don't have to worry about the after-effect of like--There are a bunch of actors out there that, like, want to bring truth to a character and want to make people think about something, and there is an internal art to that. But you can also be an actor that's just like “Hey, I'm just real good at acting, you know.” And it's, like, “That is fine. We will take it.”

**Mm-hmm.**

But if you wanna be a good comedian you have to care about the comedy. Just like being a good writer. You know, like, there are certain--There are writers… If you want be a good copy editor, and those are--that's a totally different skill, and that is a great skill. But that's different from being, you know, a fiction writer who writes, you know, fantasy novels. You know, very different skill. And one of them is way more in the words, and one of them is way more in the ideas. And so very similarly, you focus on that, not on the fame. Work hard. Work hard at those—at your craft and your skills and everything in the art process of it, but is an art, and it is a craft. So it requires the art side, it requires the craft side. It's, you know, it's the difference between, um, making a functional chair and making a beautiful chair.

**What do you think about, um, staying balanced? I mean, how do you, how do you keep your brain in the right place to do the work?**

Oh. Oh, man, that's a tough question because that's a really hard one. Because that's one that I don't always have the answer to personally. And, um, sometimes it's, it's just kind of keeping your head down.

**Mm-hmm.**

I-- a big, big one that I do is I, um, whenever someone says something positive about my career, I keep a folder of it. I'll screenshot it and I'll save it, and then I also have a bunch of quotes on my mirror that are just, you know, inspirational quotes. But then I've also printed off two of them and saved them. One of them is just someone talking about how much they appreciated me as a comedian, who is another comedian and booker in town that I respected and it felt really nice to have them publicly, like, tell people about me.

**Yeah. Yeah.**

And I'm--one of them was--a post that I had made about--I did a show in, in, like the outskirts of Illinois. And a woman came up to me and told me that I had changed her husband's opinion on homosexuality.

**Wow.**

And I'm not saying that to be, like, “Look at how great I am,” but to also remind people that, like, comedy is a very personal--

**Yeah.**

--art form and craft. And so that, I remember that because--just like this weekend I went to this LGBT convention, this nerd gaming convention, and, you know, I heard a lot of stories, not only about me but about the convention in general, of connecting to people. And there are a lot of people that feel disconnected from the world. And that is part of what comedy does is brings people together. And divides them sometimes.

**[laughter]**

But the whole point is, you know, to kind of just make people laugh, and you have to focus on that aspect as well. And so the balance is, yeah, just kind of finding what you love about it and remembering that that's still important, and remembering--

**Yeah.**

--that, that you're doing it for a reason. A big thing I always tell myself is--when I'm not enjoying doing comedy--is I'm doing it because I love it. And if I stop loving it, then I might as well go do another job I can make more money at. Like, I could make-- I could stop doing comedy and start, you know, trying to work on something else, go and get a job in an office or get it, you know, even, even…Honestly, like, you know, a job…if I devoted the time I did in comedy into, you know, an entry level position somewhere or working retail or, you know, at a restaurant, I can make more money--

**Yeah. Oh, yeah.**

--you know, with the amount of time I’m putting into comedy, in those jobs. Um, but I'm doing this because I love this. And then when I stop loving it, then what's the point of me being here?

**You said something along the way, though--at least, I think I heard you say—um, “when I'm not liking it.” I mean, it's possible to love something and not like it at the same time.**

That is true, too—yeah, yeah, yeah.

A friend of mine [who] has been married for a very long time once said, like, “I love my partner the most when we're not in the same room.” And yeah, and there's an element of, um…people tend to romanticize art and romanticize relationships and it's very similar. You know, I am definitely--I used to jokingly be in a relationship with the open mike I ran, on Facebook, for a while. But it's, like, yeah, I don't…

[00:40:08] I talk a lot about like how I can't… I probably am not somebody who will have children because that would require me stopping doing a lot of my comedy to do that, and my comedy is my child. That is my--it's my art form and that's what I'm going to give to the world. You know, that's what I'm leaving behind. And that's kind of what children are. To some extent is like--

**Yeah.**

--this is, and this is what I'm leaving behind for the world. This is my influence. And that my influence is this. And so. Um, yeah, a lot of it is just remembering that it's all a process. And, and very much like the rest of life, everything changes on a day to day basis. There have been moments where I thought, “I'm done. This is, like, I can't, I'm not, I can advance anywhere.” And then the next day or an hour later, I’ll receive a phone call that's, like, a huge opportunity. I mean, it's--at a really dark time of my life last year, I got an e-mail from--I’m trying to figure out a way to say this in the most generic way possible--I got an email from a network, a television network, about them being interested in having me apply for a writing job in some aspect. I didn't get it, and that's fine. But I, I was feeling really down about myself personally and professionally. That came on a morning after I had cried all night.

**Yeah.**

I woke up to that and--

**It can change everything.**

Yeah. And I didn't get the gig but it-- but I also know I didn't get it because there were other competent people and it's not because I wasn't good enough for it.

**Mm-hmm.**

And you have to focus on those little things. Life changes drastically with every little decision that you make and with everything, and there's plenty of stuff happening around you that you don't realize is going on. And it's just, it's sometimes slow process and you've got to keep going at it.

And another thing to focus on is you've got to do-- with comedy, you have to do a comedy that you like to do and that you, that *you* find funny. And that, like--you don't have to be the same type of comedian as like your favorite comedians, but you do need to have comedy that internally is the comedy that you write and that you enjoy writing and that you're the best at writing and that makes you laugh, and that you...you can keep doing.

George Carlin would not be a good clean comedian. Jim Gaffigan is a great clean comedian who, if you told him to write George Carlin material, could probably do it and--

**He wouldn't like it.**

--isn’t gonna enjoy it--

**Yeah.**

--and isn’t going to be as good as George Carlin. And George Carlin could probably do clean comedy and hate it, and wouldn’t be able to do the stuff he wanted to do. You have to--and there, there's all this stuff about, like, if you're a clean comedian, you can make it quicker and faster and make more money because it's an easier booking for corporate gigs or, you know, Christian areas and stuff and, like, religious organizations that don't really want somebody who's going to be like that. But if you're not that type of comic, you can do it.

**Right.**

You're not going to enjoy it.

**Yeah, and sustain it.**

And like I said, you've got to still enjoy doing it because if not, why are you there? There's no reason to be in a, in a-- in such a tense relationship. You know, unless you really love being there and you like it sometimes. Sometimes.

**Well, I think that's a great place for us to end.**

Yeah, I hope…

**Thank you so much for coming in.**

Thank you. I'm sorry there was so much talk.

[laughter]

**Ah, we’ll take care of that.**

I appreciate it. Thank you for having me.

**I’m Alice Batt, and I’ve been speaking today with comedian Cody Melcher. To learn more about Cody’s work, visit codymelcher.com. *How We Write* is a production of the University Writing Center at The University of Texas at Austin. Our theme music was created by Michele Solberg. Until next time, keep writing.**