

Interview: ‘30 Rock’ Star Kevin ‘Dot Com’ Brown Embraces Career in Comedy

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CHICAGO – While some stand-up comics shield themselves with an ironic, larger-than-life persona, Kevin “Dot Com” Brown’s approach is more conversational. He mines the humor in his own life while developing a genial rapport with the audience. Some may still find him to be larger than life, but that would most likely be due to his formidable size.

After sharpening his acting chops on stage and screen, Brown got his big break when he was cast as “Dot Com,” the stage-trained actor in Tracy Morgan’s entourage on Tina Fey’s hit NBC sitcom, “30 Rock.” Shortly after Brown’s special appearance at April’s C2E2 convention, Hollywood Chicago spoke with him about his accidental entry into show business, his longtime friendship with Tracy Morgan and how his background as a bodyguard helped him land movie roles.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you were growing up in the Bronx, were there certain comedians that inspired you to pursue a career in comedy?

Kevin ‘Dot Com’ Brown: No, none of that was the case. [laughs] I actually had no desire to pursue comedy. I got to it late in life. When I was growing up, hip hop was just being formed and I was in the Bronx at that ripe age of 16, 17. I rounded up a group of my friends, formed a DJ crew and we’d go around and do parties. As I got older, I started doing more and more parties and they became more successful. In 1987, I started doing huge parties in the city where 4,000 people would attend. It became really hectic. You’d have to hire 50 to 75 security guards, you’d have to get one million dollar insurance policies—it was a grueling nightmare to pull off these parties. I did a concert in 1989, and it was a disaster. A riot broke out, I lost a lot of money—it was a horrible, horrible disaster.

Then my brother, who was a budding comedian, invited me to his comedy show. I had never gone to a live comedy show before. I bought a 20 dollar ticket, I’m sitting in the audience with everyone else, and the host never showed up. After we were waiting 45 minutes to an hour, my brother comes up to me in the audience and asks, “Kevin, could you do me a favor and host the show?” And I’m like, “Are you kidding me? I’m not funny, I’m not a comedian,” but he knew from me being a party promoter that I was used to speaking in front of crowds. So I went up onstage out of the audience and said to everybody, “Listen, I’m not a comedian, they just asked me to host, so please bear with me.” I introduced the comics and we had a great time. That was my real first introduction to the comedy scene. It was on-the-job training.



Kevin Dot Com Brown at the April 15th C2E2 convention in Chicago.

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: That experience must have prepared you for your subsequent film roles as bodyguards.

Brown: Oh yeah, absolutely. It's the [bodyguard] mentality that I had to adjust when I decided to be an actor and a comedian. When I was doing the parties, they were so stress-filled, I didn't even know how to smile. As I'm talking to you, I figure that you can hear happiness and joy in my voice, but I am a totally different human being from what I used to be. When I decided that I was going to be a comedian, I literally had to go stand in front of the mirror in the bathroom and teach myself how to smile. I'd put my fingers to the corners of my mouth and try to get a bigger smile, make it look more natural and show some teeth but not too much. It wasn't a part of my lifestyle to make people comfortable. So in the transition to becoming an actor while being so huge and intimidating, I had to learn how to disarm people and make them feel comfortable around me. Then when I started getting some acting roles—my first role was a bouncer, my second role was a security guard, my third role was a bodyguard. So even though I had tried to move away from being intimidating, it definitely came in handy when I got those roles.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you go about finding your voice as a comedian?

Brown: After I hosted that first comedy show, I was still a businessman, but I felt like I had just gone through life therapy. It felt amazing to have a real hardy laugh up there. So I went to my brother who had promoted the show—he obviously didn't do a good job because his host didn't show up [laughs]—and I said, "Man, if we had a great time like this with just your friends and family in the audience, I'm sure everyone else who saw this show would have a great time too. Here's what I want to do: let's do this again, except this time, you just handle the talent and I'll handle the coordinating of the event— negotiate with the theater, handle the promotion and the marketing, book the hosts. I'll make sure that the details are covered with backup plans so we never find ourselves in that situation again."

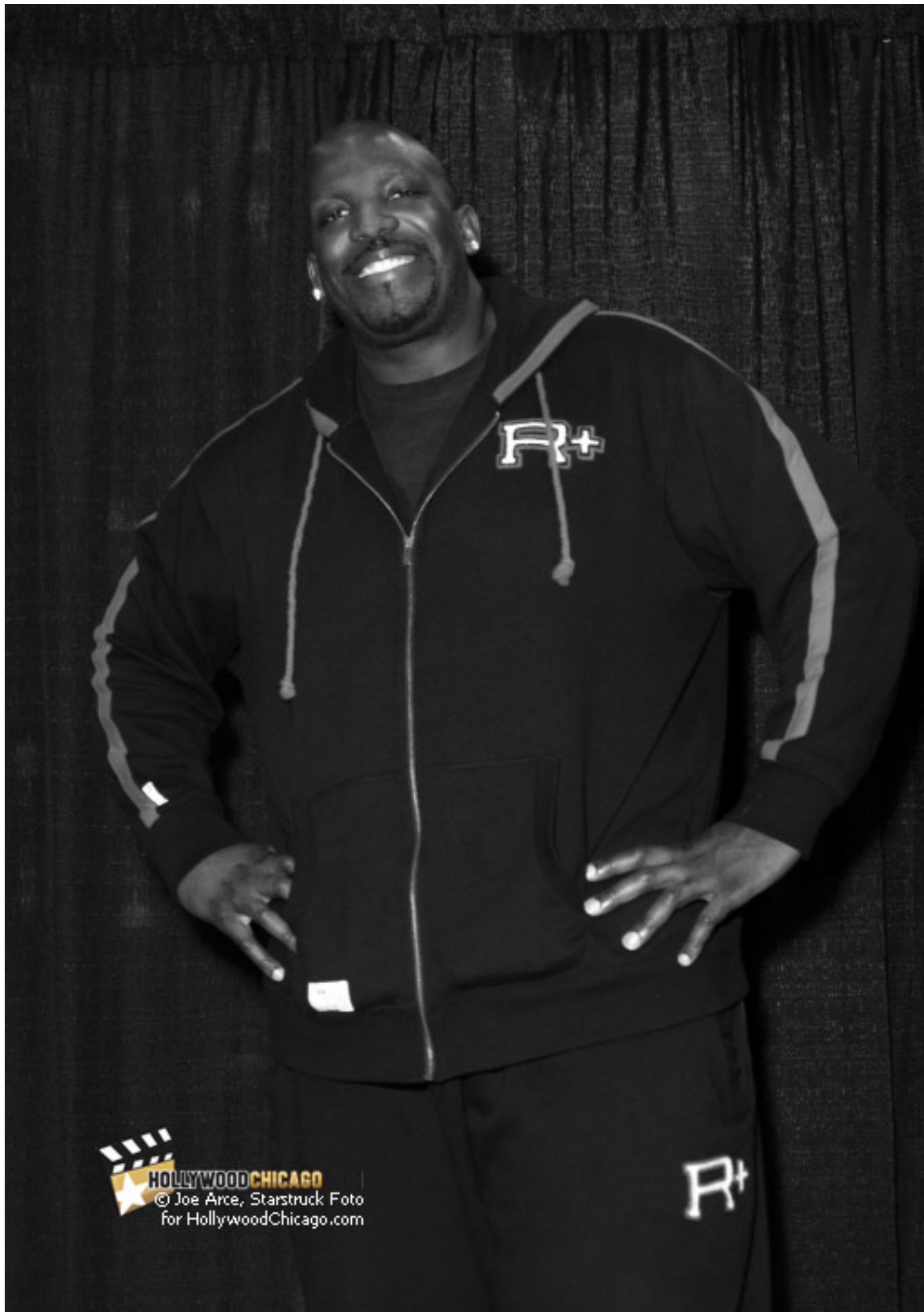
So we started doing the shows on a regular basis once a month, then once a week, and then I opened the Uptown Comedy Club. That's where I got the chance to see a lot of these comics that are huge stars now, but were just starting out at the time. I saw great performances that were never videotaped. I saw Tracy Morgan when he had been doing stand-up for six months and he was killing the audience. I saw Mike Epps, Bill Bellamy and Bernie Mac at the beginning of their comedy careers. I also saw some of the greats like Robin Harris and D.L. Hughley. I saw some really great underground performances where there were no restrictions. I got an example of how it's supposed to be done by watching these guys as they excelled in their careers. That's what I drew from.

Anybody can write a joke and just go by the book. For me, when I finish my show, I want people to know who I am. I want to entertain them but I want them to get to know me and know more about me when the show is over than they did when they walked into the building. I want to make a connection with them. When I'm in front of an audience, they're like guests in my home. I want my guests to feel comfortable enough to kick their shoes off, put their feet up, just laugh and have a good time.

HollywoodChicago.com: Has your size limited your choice of acting roles?

Brown: It's a reality of the industry. It's gotten better for me. I was blessed on "30 Rock." The character that they created for me on "30 Rock" really is me—it's an embellishment of me, it's not my real name, but it's a bright big man. It's a big man that they let get a little spotlight, be articulate, have a nice point of view, be the voice of reason, all the things that I was looking for. The good thing about being my size is you can always find a role in a movie or TV show for the big, bald headed black guy. It doesn't matter what the show is about, you can always put the security guard at the door. There's always a celebrity that needs protection. So that was a plus, I could always add another check to my resume.

But the downfall to me was that my characters were always one-dimensional. You never see that character get a whole lot of dialogue. You never see that character with a wife or kids or interacting with his immediate family. That character was always subordinate to someone, so it was my goal to try and fight that stereotype. I studied my craft as well as the other guy, and just because that guy is 5'5" and I'm 6'5", why is he the only one that has the opportunity to have an emotional arc? I studied just as long as he did, I'm just as talented as him and I think I should get that opportunity too. That was my mission.



Kevin Dot Com Brown at the April 15th C2E2 convention in Chicago.

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the key to your chemistry with Tracy Morgan?

Brown: We remind each other of the good old days, before there was any money involved, when we were just doing it for the love. We innately take each other back to that moment. Tracy always cracked me up. From the first time I saw him, he would crack me up and make me laugh harder than anyone I knew. I accidentally gave him his first opportunity in TV. I was shooting a TV show and Chris Tucker had missed his plane. My partner asked me if there was someone that could fill the seven minutes saved for Chris Tucker. There were 50, 60 comics running in the room and I looked around and saw Tracy. I asked him if he could give me a hilarious seven minutes like he did in the club every night. He had never done TV before, I didn't know if he was going to choke, but the opportunity was open and I picked him. He went, "Of course, Kev, you know I'm ready," he killed the crowd and was on TV ever since.

We had some great milestones in our careers at that time, and when we ran into each other again on "30 Rock," he was a little nervous. He had a bad experience with "The Tracy Morgan Show," so he was a little nervous about coming back to TV. When he walked in the room and saw that I was there, he was like, 'Okay, I have family here. I have someone who was with me since the beginning of my career.' The energy that we created was perfect for the character that they wanted him to become in "30 Rock." That's what kept me around so long. We just have that natural rapport and natural chemistry.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you acquire the name of "Dot Com"?

Brown: Kevin Brown is a real common name. When I was young, I noticed that there was always another guy named Kevin Brown in school. One time, I got pulled over by the cops for speeding or something, and they pulled out all these warrants for my arrest. I'm like, "What, are

you kidding me? I didn't break into a house and steal property." All the warrants were for the arrest of Kevin Brown. I have to tell the cops, "Don't go by the name or by the date of birth because a lot of Kevin Browns are born on April 4th. Look at the description because that guy is probably 5'9", 180 pounds." That's how I get out of it. [laughs]

When I started doing comedy, I saw that all the comics in the urban comedy world had a cool name like Cedric the Entertainer. I was going by the name of Big Kev, and the name was becoming very popular. My name was on 10,000 fliers a week. So after a while, other party promoters named Kevin would do, "Big Kev's Boat Ride," "Big Kev's Ski Trip"—I started seeing all these copycats and I thought I needed something to distinguish myself from all these other guys. So I changed it to Big Kev Dot Com. I hadn't seen Tracy Morgan for about eight years before the pilot for "30 Rock," but the last time we saw each other, I was going by the name of Big Kev Dot Com, which is a mouthful.

When Tracy introduced me to Tina Fey on the "30 Rock" pilot, he called her over and said, "T Fey, come and meet my man, Dot Com." She liked the name. We shot the pilot in 2006, it got picked up three months later for nine episodes, and we came back to start shooting the show. I didn't have any dialogue or a character name. I was just a part of Tracy's posse. While we're shooting the second episode, an AD comes up to me and says, "The writers love what you're doing on camera. They're going to start writing you in from time to time." I was like, "Does that mean I get more money?" and they're like, "Yes it does." The first time I got written in with dialogue and a character name, they invited me in for a read-through. I show up, open the script and it says, "Dot Com." So if Tracy had introduced me to Tina Fey any other way, that name wouldn't be in the script. But he did, and the rest is history.

HollywoodChicago.com: Would you ever consider making Chicago a stop in your stand-up tour?

Brown: Yes, Chicago is absolutely a destination I have in mind. I got so much love when I went out there for the C2E2. It was incredible. When "30 Rock" came on the air, Tina Fey, Tracy Morgan and Alec Baldwin were already household names. But nobody knew the rest of us. You don't know what the impact is when you go shoot a show like that because you're not out there to see it. So here we are after being on the show for six years, going into syndication—I'm on TV literally 25 times a week right now,—and I'm now starting to realize that people in Chicago are familiar with my work. People in Wyoming and California and Iowa and Florida and England and Australia are familiar with my work. That's the most incredible thing because I've never been to these places before. When I was in Chicago for the expo, I saw the look in people's eyes as they walked by, not knowing that I had a booth. Their eyes told me everything that I needed to know. I could feel their heartbeat when they stood next to me to take a picture. All of that information is just an [affirmation] of my work.

'30 Rock' stars Tina Fey, Alec Baldwin, Tracy Morgan, Jane Krakowski, Jack McBrayer, Judah Friedlander and Kevin 'Dot Com' Brown. It was created by Tina Fey. It airs on NBC.



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