

Interviews: New Faces of Chicago at Just for Laughs Chicago

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on June 16, 2012 - 8:24am

- [Chicago](#) [2]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [3]
- [Interview](#) [4]
- [James Fritz](#) [5]
- [Just for Laughs Chicago](#) [6]
- [Kentucky](#) [7]
- [Mark Henderson](#) [8]
- [Mike Lebovitz](#) [9]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [10]
- [Stand-Up](#) [11]
- [TBS](#) [12]
- [The Comedy Bar](#) [13]
- [The Cosby Show](#) [14]

CHICAGO – One of the great nights of the TBS ‘Just for Laughs Chicago’ comedy festival is the ‘New Faces of Chicago’ revue. The cream of the Windy City crop did their killer stand-up routines at The Comedy Bar, a new laugh venue in the River North neighborhood in Chicago.

To get an idea of the burgeoning stand-up scene here – several new clubs have opened in the last five years – HollywoodChicago.com talked to three of the “new faces” who performed. James Fritz, Mark Henderson and Mike Lebovitz spoke about their backgrounds as comedians.



James Fritz

HollywoodChicago.com: How does where you grew up and how your family was inform your comic style?

James Fritz: It made me angry? I don’t know. I grew up in Kentucky in a really religious environment, and think that’s why that sh*t is in my brain, a lot. I tried to make a bit work once that no matter if you believe or not, the way your brain is taught to absorb that guilt – those synapses – they still fire long after the hope of eternal life is gone.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was that moment that you first had, that despite all the odds, you decided to make a run at stand-up comedy?

Fritz: I wanted to do it forever, it just took me a long time to get up the nerve. I was almost 27 years old.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the first joke you told in front of a microphone, and what was the roots of its subject?



James Fritz in Chicago, June 14, 2012
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Fritz: I honestly don't remember. I was very drunk the first time I got on stage. I have some comedian friends who were tired of me saying that I wanted to do it, so they got me f**king loaded, and signed me up. I was blacked-out drunk during my first set. Luckily most of the crowd was in the same state.

HollywoodChicago.com: To get a sense of your comic style, what kind of comedy TV show or film were you most likely to watch as a kid, and what are you most likely to watch now?

Fritz: As a kid, I did love 'Sanford and Son' and the original 'In Living Color' growing up. It was weird, because my Dad would say some Kentucky racist things but his best friend in life was a black female co-worker, and he just loved black humor. When I first started doing comedy, he would ask, 'have you met Steve Harvey yet?' [laughs] He thinks there are about five people doing stand-up.

Now I like that show 'Happy Endings,' which I don't think is cool to like, but it's very well written and the cast is likable.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, what advantage do you have as a Chicago comic?

Fritz: Stage time. I'm moving to Los Angeles in October, and my biggest worry is stage time. In Chicago, there are rooms every night. Just buy a seven day CTA bus pass, and you can go to three places every night. Also nobody is auditioning for TV, so the acts are just real. There are so many great comics here.

★ Mark Henderson

HollywoodChicago.com: How does where you grew up and how your family was inform your comic style?

Mark Henderson: For people who haven't seen my set, I do a lot of jokes about my family – and some of it is exaggerated, some of it true, but it definitely influences the way I write. Also because I grew up the way I did, I'm a clean comic. It's about Christian values, and I never use profanity on stage. And it opens up so many doors for me, to do anything. I do church functions, corporate crowds, and my material is TV ready.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was that moment that you first had, that despite all the odds, you decided to make a run at stand-up comedy?



Mark Henderson in Chicago, June 14, 2012
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Henderson: Actually it was because I was living in Minnesota, I went there to go to college, thinking I was going to be an electrician. I found out that the college I chose was only offering degrees for an electronic technician, so I was in Minnesota for absolutely the wrong reason. [laughs]

When I was there, I was just trying to figure out what my next step would be. I used to watch TV every night, a show called 'Comedy Revue,' and I thought I could be just as funny as them. So at that moment, before I even hit the stage, I just started to write down jokes in a book. I came back to Chicago four months later, I hit the stage and did the jokes in that book, and had a great set. The very first time I did comedy, Deon Cole – who now writes for Conan O'Brien – gave me the microphone. That's why I respect Deon.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the first joke you told in front of a microphone, and what was the roots of its subject?

Henderson: It was about somebody breaking into my car. I said the first day they broke into my car, they stole my radio. So I put a 'Club' on my steering wheel, and the second day they broke in and stole my Club. That was my big joke. I thought it was the greatest back then.
[laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: To get a sense of your comic style, what kind of comedy TV show or film were you most likely to watch as a kid, and what are you most likely to watch now?

Henderson: As a kid, it was 'The Cosby Show,' and right now it's still that show because when I look at it, because I want my comedy to bring families together, like you can bring your whole family around and watch it together. I love that show because I used to watch it with my family, and I want my comedy to do that for other families as well.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, what advantage do you have as a Chicago comic?

Henderson: The comedians are cool with each other. We're close, we tell each others about different venues and we help each other out. It's very family oriented here. It keeps you confident and working hard.



Mike Lebovitz

HollywoodChicago.com: How does where you grew up and how your family was inform your comic style?

Mike Lebovitz: I grew up in Hyde Park on the south side of Chicago, and my Dad was a professor. Probably the flavor of the neighborhood finds its way into my inflection. It was a very diverse community and had a certain openness that helps what I do.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was that moment that you first had, that despite all the odds, you decided to make a run at stand-up comedy?



Mike Lebovitz in Chicago, June 14, 2012
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Lebovitz: I was an actor first, and I moved back to Chicago after college to do improv. Then I got kind of disillusioned with it. There was this improv show called 'Overstock,' at a bar called The Spot, in Uptown. They would have these improv groups on the bill, and have a stand-up host it. I wanted to do an improv set with a buddy of mine, and asked the coordinator if we could get on. He said they were full, but the host just canceled, would you want to host it? I knew, after doing that night, that I was going to move on to stand-up.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the first joke you told in front of a microphone, and what was the roots of its subject?

Lebovitz: It was about eight minutes long. Since I started in improv, I didn't know how to write a joke, so it was basically a one person sketch that I was acting out. It was a conversation with three different parts of my head. I had a sleep disorder called sex-somnia, where you actually have sex without waking up. So I talked about it in terms of Freud – first the Id wakes up, and tries to have sex with the girl, than the Ego wakes up and says, 'why didn't you ask me?' And then the Superego wakes up and says, 'okay, guys, let's not tell anyone about this.'
[laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: To get a sense of your comic style, what kind of comedy TV show or film were you most likely to watch as a kid,

and what are you most likely to watch now?

Lebovitz: When I was a teenager, I really like 'The State' [on MTV in the 1990s], and I was in the perfect age group for 'Beavis and Butthead.' More recently, I like 'Arrested Development' and 'Party Down.' I like movies like 'Election' and 'Little Miss Sunshine.'

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, what advantage do you have as a Chicago comic?

Lebovitz: What I think it great, and it may be changing, is that there's not a lot of industry here, so you can feel free to experiment. Because of the cross pollination with the improv scene, and there is more of an experimental aesthetic to it, which I think is good.

The TBS Network Presents "Just For Laughs Chicago 2012" continues through Sunday, June 17th. [Click here](#) [15] for FULL schedule and ticket information.



[16]

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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 19 2024 - 1:13am):

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