Interviews: New Local Comics Get Into the Act at ‘Just for Laughs Chicago’

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- 2013 [2]
- Ben Bergman [3]
- Chicago [4]
- HollywoodChicago.com Content [5]
- Humboldt Park [6]
- Interview [7]
- Jesnaira Baez [8]
- Just for Laughs Chicago [9]
- Kentucky [10]
- Patrick McDonald [11]
- Stage 773 [12]
- Stand-Up [13]
- TBS [14]
- The Cosby Show [15]
- Vince Avecedo [16]

CHICAGO – As the TBS Network’s “Just for Laughs Chicago” winds up on June 16th, the six-day comedy festival has become a major happening during the beginning of the summer entertainment season. Experiencing new comics on the local level is one of the joys of the event, and one of the places to find them is at hot new venue in the city, Stage 773.

HollywoodChicago.com talked with new faces Vince Acevedo, Ben Bergman and Jesnaira Baez, to get an idea of their careers and comedy passion.

Vince Acevedo

Vince Acevedo at ‘Just for Laughs Chicago,’ June 13, 2013
Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

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

Vince Acevedo: I was brought up in a strong Latin household, being Puerto Rican, and my parents were from the island. The large and strong family unit is a big part of my comedy, because I can bring their character to life in a different form for the crowd. I can talk about my grandmother, with her broken English. I can talk about how militant my Dad was, to make sure I didn’t get into trouble. I grew up in Humboldt Park in Chicago, I had to be street smart. Even though the neighborhood is much better now, I still had to know ‘what’s what.’

HollywoodChicago.com: What makes the Chicago stand-up sensibility different from comics elsewhere?

Acevedo: Chicago is a great stepping stone to build your credibility as a solid comedian, whether as a host, feature or headliner. The other comics help and influence me, Chicago is really good for that.

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?

Acevedo: My Dad was really against me doing stand-up, as a Latin father he wanted me to work hard and then go home to the family. There was about three years of struggle, because I was getting booked, but he still wasn’t accepting it. Finally, I decided to headline. I booked a venue and sold out a 400 seat room. All of his friends bought tickets, and my friends, and finally when it was all said and done, his attitude really changed. Once he saw that there were other avenues to be successful, he told me to go for it.

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

Acevedo: It was in regard to how guys are not as tough as they think they are. They see that centipede going across the carpet, and then we turn into little girls. ‘Throw me a shoe. No, not my new ones, my old ones. I don’t want to ruin my new ones.’ And I got the laugh.

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?

Acevedo: I'm the tale of two extremes. I'm a fan of 'The Cosby Show' from the 1980s, because my Dad reminds me of how Bill Cosby was on that sitcom. The other side was Andrew Dice Clay, and although I was too young for him, I caught onto him, and listened to his CDs and watched his old shows. I'm blending that edginess into my more family-oriented show, so that it works everywhere.

Ben Bergman

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

Ben Bergman: I make fun of my family. [laughs] It's a natural thing for comedy, because they're all goofy and attention whores. They don't tell me funny stuff, they do funny things. Last week, my stepfather, mother and I were at Bob Evans restaurant, where everybody is a thousand years old. They're old too, but that didn't stop them from making fun of other old people as they walked by.

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?

Bergman: The first time I tried stand-up is when I was in Kentucky, where I grew up. I actually took a class, and told my Mom. Her reaction was, 'you're not going to try to do that sh*t for a living, are you?' Parents don't know when they crush everything inside you. [laughs] So I didn't do it again for another two years.

I was in Nashville, and I just broke up with my girlfriend, and my first gig was the week of Valentine's Day. So I just talked about how it was raining, and she would tell me it's my fault. It was that kind of thing.

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

Ben Bergman in Chicago, June 13, 2013
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Bergman: It was awful. I said, 'I wouldn't have sex with a transvestite, but I would have sex with Serena Williams, which is about as close as I could get.' I told you it was horrible. [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?

Bergman: When I was a kid, I would stay up and watch the 'Ben Stiller Show.' They made what was dumb really funny. I really like Stiller's comic style.

HollywoodChicago.com: You don't think he's lost his edge?

Bergman: You can't stay gangsta forever. Ice Cube used to talk about his day being good because he didn't have to shoot anyone, and now he's in 'Are We There Yet?' You can't be gangsta in your forties, you just get older. As for now, I like 'Breaking Bad' for their humor, and '30 Rock.'

HollywoodChicago.com: If you were doing a hypothetical dinner party, and you get to place five comedians or comic influences at the table – living or dead – who would they be?

Bergman: It's tricky, because I would pick people that I look up to, because I feel like I can't do what they do. But also I want to bring someone way less funny than me, so the other people wouldn't look down on me. So it would be Lewis Black, Bill Burr, Brian Regan, Nick Swardson, and then I would bring in someone really sh*tty.

HollywoodChicago.com: And that would be?

Bergman: Chris Lloyd.

HollywoodChicago.com: From 'Back to the Future?' He's great!

Bergman: No, no! There's this guy from Tennessee named Chris Lloyd. He's terrible. [laughs] All the others would experience him, then look at me, and think at least I'm not as bad as the other guy.

Jesnaira Baez

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

Jesnaira Baez: I grew up in Humboldt Park on the westside of Chicago, where a lot of Latin people grew up. In my comedy, I try to incorporate my Puerto Rican heritage, that's what I represent. I didn't appreciate it when I didn't do comedy, now I really appreciate it. [laughs] That's where I get my material

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?

Jesnaira Baez in Chicago, June 13, 2013
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Baez: It's about where I came from, and looking at the audience laughing at what I'm saying. The fact that I can make them laugh, that's what keeps me wanting to do it.

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

Baez: I talked about going to college in Iowa, and how there they talked about 'spooning.' I didn't know it meant to cuddle. I was in the cafeteria, and a guy came up to me and asked me if I wanted to spoon. I was eating spaghetti, and I told him, 'no, I'm using a fork, you idiot.' That's a true story.

HollywoodChicago.com: [Laughs] 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?

Baez: I loved 'The Cosby Show,' because Bill Cosby was just himself and that is what was funny. Now I love 'Modern Family,' and any stand-up comedy shows featuring female comics.

HollywoodChicago.com: If you were doing a hypothetical dinner party, and you get to place five comedians or comic influences at the table – living or dead – who would they be?

Baez: Bernie Mac, Richard Pryor, Paul Mooney, George Lopez…

HollywoodChicago.com: What about a woman comic?

Baez: Wanda Sykes!

The TBS Network Presents "Just For Laughs Chicago 2013" continues through Sunday, June 16th. Click here *[17] for FULL schedule and ticket information.*

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