

GRANTLAND

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Q&A: *The Jeselnik Offensive*'s Anthony Jeselnik on His New Show, His Stint With Jimmy Fallon, and Trying to Hit a Home Run Every Time

By [Robert Mays](#) on February 22, 2013 12:31 PM ET



COMEDY CENTRAL

As a stand-up, Anthony Jeselnik has carved out his own space with punchy one-liners that play verbal ping-pong with topics most others wouldn't touch: disease, rape, cancer, death, baby death. Nothing was off-limits. The idea was, "Fine. If no one else will talk about them, I will." Now, with his own show on Comedy Central, that sheer abuse of the envelope has moved to late night. Last night, I sat down with Jeselnik right after the taping of *The Jeselnik Offensive*'s second episode to talk about his early stand-up career, what he took from his time as a writer on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, and choosing between comedy and the bullshit that often comes with it.

So I want to start with your stand-up. I remember seeing you do *Comedy Central Presents*, but when was that?

I want to say I did it in 2009. I remember being on *Fallon*, and I remember it airing around the end of *Fallon*, which was in 2010. So late summer 2009, I recorded it.

It seemed that from the beginning, your stand-up style was unique, but when you started developing your act, how did you decide, “This is what I want my stand-up to be?”

I took a class to get into it. I knew I wanted to do it, but I didn't know how to start, which I think is common for a lot of people. I was working in a bookstore, and I found the thinnest book on stand-up comedy I could find. At the end of the book, it said this guy teaches a class in Santa Monica. So I went and did it, and he'd say, “Talk about yourself.” I was a 22-, 23-year-old kid. Nothing's interesting about me, at all. I was telling the same two stories over and over again. I was bored with it, but I didn't want to quit. I was kind of ashamed to be a comedian in the beginning because when no one knows who you are, it's an embarrassing thing to do. But the only thing that sounded more awful than, “I'm trying to be a comedian” is “I used to be a comedian.” So I was like I can't quit, because of that.

I would go to open mics all the time, and I saw B.J. Novak, who [was] a producer on *The Office*, and he started doing these clever one-liners. And I was like, “Oh fuck, you can do that.” I loved Stephen Wright, and I loved Mitch Hedberg, but they seemed like geniuses you could never emulate. You'd just be ripping them off. So I thought, “Oh, that's what I want to do.” I can write a million jokes, and I perform them all the time; I don't have to wait for something to happen to me. That just seemed like more fun.

And I hated being new, so I just thought, “What if I pretend I've been doing this for 20 years, that I'm some wunderkind comedian?” As I started to do that, people fed into it. If I'd say something like, “You guys are fucking idiots, you don't understand,” and when they laughed at that, I thought, “Oh, this is it.” Then I started to get mean with it; it was a mean twist. I always wanted a twist. I wanted it to be smart, kind of like *Deep Thoughts* with Jack Handy.

I've heard you say you thought those were the funniest things in the world.

The funniest things in the world. And I thought, why not be the funniest thing? Why not try to emulate that? It helped me, because instead of trying to be like Seinfeld or trying to be like Mitch Hedberg, I was trying to be like someone who wasn't a comedian. It helped me get away with a little bit more.

It seems like Mitch Hedberg spawned 1,000 terrible comedians.

Every comic went through their Mitch Hedberg phase — the glasses, the hair in the face — and you knew immediately when they were doing it.

So that mean twist is actually something that came a bit later.

I always had a dark sense of humor. Again, it was “These are the funniest things,” but I had to find it. I would write 100 jokes a day. Most of them were terrible. But I just said I'll write more than everybody else, and that's how I'll get better. You can only get five minutes of stage time a couple times a night, if you really hustle in L.A., but you can write for 24 hours. I came up with this one — “My girlfriend loves to eat chocolate,” the crack addict joke — and I remember the comics at the open mic went, “Oooh.” That's how you know. I told it at the show, and the laughter was like this wall of sound that I've never experienced since. It was this light-bulb moment of, “That's it.” And everything I've done since is trying to be like that joke.

I've heard you say that the way you have to get into the topics you talk about is that you kind of have to have perfect jokes. Unless they cut the perfect way, it's not going to work. Did you feel early on that there was an adjustment period where they weren't hitting that way, and you were getting some pushback about it?

A little bit. My goal was, “What if every joke was a home run?” Did you ever read Matt Christopher as kid?

Of course.

You remember that book *The Kid Who Only Hit Home Runs*? What if I could be like that kid? What if every joke fucking knocked it out of the park? What if I worked harder than everyone else, and I got there? What if I can get five minutes of these kinds of jokes? Then it was seven minutes. Then 10. Then 15. Could I feature with it? Could I get on TV with it? Could I do an hour of these? When I did an hour, can I do it again? That's what drives me. It seems like it shouldn't be possible to do all these jokes over and over again. Now, finding a way to do it is what drives me. I always need some sort of challenge. I always need a new joke.

That doing it over and over is something I wanted to ask you about. Again, you've said making those dark jokes hit is a matter of getting into the perfect joke. But now you have to pump those out weekly. How do you reconcile those two?

You have more of a canvas to play with. When I'm telling my jokes, I can only go so far out. The jokes have to be short. That's why everything is my girlfriend, or my mom, or my dad or my sister, because you know that relationship immediately. With the news, I have all these other things. I can just find different ways into horrible subjects through the news.

One of my big passions on this show is that I try to make jokes about returning soldiers killing themselves. Not because I think it's funny in any way, but because no one ever talks about it. Everyone knows the state that so many of these guys are coming back [in] and killing themselves; it's horrible. But nobody really does anything. You can make a joke about it, and people kind of joke about it, but you're still on the side of the angels. Does that make sense? I think this show is trying to see if we can do it for 10 episodes. It's the same way that I used to say, "Can I keep this up for 10 minutes?" Now it's, "Can I do this for a whole episode? Ten episodes? One hundred episodes?" That's the challenge that keeps me in this show. I'm not just standing there. It's not *Entertainment Tonight*. It's got to be a big challenge.

I've heard you say that, in a way, in making jokes about things like that, you kind of feel like you're doing a service for your audience. You're going to make them laugh about things that people might not normally laugh about, but maybe to deal with them, they should.

What I do is noble. People are like, "You're a piece of shit. You're just trying to offend." No, this is what's interesting to me, and I think I really am helping people. Everyone's going to die. All these horrible things are going to happen to you and the people you care about. It's fun to laugh at them. That's the only way. I take a certain amount of shit, but that's what you have to do to be like this. If you want everyone to like you, you would take less shit, but that's not as valuable. You're an entertainer as opposed to a comedian.

When you started, you didn't actually want to be a comedian. You wanted to be a writer, which you were for Jimmy Fallon. How did that experience inform what you wanted to do if you ever got the chance to have your own show?

Again, it was a light-bulb moment. The dream job for me, before I even started stand-up or took that class, was sitting around a table with a bunch of funny people, throwing out jokes, and laughing all day with people you respected. You saw the show tonight, right? Getting to sit there with Patton [Oswalt] and Nick [Kroll], I'm happy to be one of them. It's not ego. I just can't believe I get to sit there with these two hilarious guys and joke around. That seemed like part of the dream. Once I finally got the job at *Fallon*, stand-up had been going well enough, and sitting around the table — I have a problem with authority.

That's shocking. I would never imagine that.

Yeah, so I'm sitting around this table, and everyone's pitching jokes to Jimmy. The writers would laugh like crazy, and Jimmy's like, "No." I look at the producer, and the producer's just like [shakes head]. Next joke gets a big laugh, and Jimmy's like, "No, not for me." The producer's just sitting there. I'm thinking, is the producer going to say "Jimmy, this is funny, you've got to do this"? And that never happened. A joke would come out, and Jimmy would say, "Ya know what, no one laughed, but I like that. Let's do that." I realized everything revolves around him. The producer's job wasn't to control Jimmy. It was to make him happy.

I thought, I want to be the star of a show where everyone's got to come through me, where I can [say], "Listen, we're doing this fuckin' 9-11 babies joke because I like it. We're going to find a way to get it in there." That's what I wanted to do. I never would have guessed it if I hadn't sat there and watched him do it.

So when you were doing stand-up after that, did you kind of have this in mind as an end goal?

I never knew if I would get my own show, but I knew I loved stand-up. Traditionally when people got the writing job, they'd quit stand-up, because it was too hard. But I wanted to be a great comic, and I felt like I was on the track, that I could become a great comic, just because I'm different enough.

I was at the Comedy Cellar in New York; they embraced me immediately. A couple weeks after I was there, I came in said, "Guys, I got this great job." Because I was fucking poor. It meant the world to me. And Estee, the woman who runs the Comedy Cellar in New York, says, "Oh, that's too bad. You were really funny." I said, "What do you mean? I just got this job." Mike Sweeney — who's the head writer for *Conan*, he's been there forever — was this great comic at the Cellar. He got the job, they had this big party for him, and they never saw him again.

I said, "No, Dave Attell does it, Colin Quinn." She said, "Dave Attell needs to do stand-up. You're not Dave Attell." So I went to Dave Attell, and I went to Colin Quinn, and I said, "Listen, I've got this writing job, but I want to keep doing stand-up. How did you guys write for these shows and still be good at stand-up?" They both, individually, said the exact same thing to me: "It was easy; I was really bad at my day job." So I would go out every night. I would work my ass off at *Fallon*, and I'd go down to the cellar, have a big, stiff drink, and I would do my act. I wasn't writing new stuff. It was miserable. But I just had to keep turning the wheels in order to still be a stand-up and keep that identity. After a year, I went to *Fallon* and told them I wanted to leave. I said, "Listen, no offense to you guys." They said, "We understand. You want to go be Anthony Jeselnik." That was exactly what I wanted to do.

So I left, recorded an album, started touring, got on the Roasts — all those things. People thought I was crazy for taking the *Fallon* job, but they also thought I was crazy for leaving. At first, it was, “You could be a great comic if you really tried at it.” Then it was, “Why are you leaving this cushy job?” I like people saying, “You can’t do this.” You [can’t do] a show on Comedy Central that’s all dark shit every week. You can’t do a whole monologue about death and dying. That’s what I want to do, and I’m going to do my best.

And how did Comedy Central approach you to do the show?

After I left *Fallon*, I wrote for the David Hasselhoff roast. I loved the roasts, more than I even loved comedy. They just seemed like so much fun, with this great energy. It was almost the epitome of what I do, trying to get that big laugh, the “I shouldn’t be laughing, but I am.” You can get away with it there. So I always tried to write for them, but Comedy Central never wanted anything to do with me. I couldn’t even submit a packet, for whatever reason. And then for the Hasselhoff roast, I was one of the only new writers hired. That’s how I met Tom Johnson, my head writer and executive producer of my show. We just hit it off. They really liked my jokes, and they thought about putting me on that roast. They asked Jeff Ross, and he said, “You know, he’d be great at it, but he’s been giving away his best jokes for two weeks. Let’s put him on the next one.”

So they told me I was going to be on the next one, and I was thrilled. Writing on the roasts is actually more fun than doing them.

I can imagine that’s a fun room.

It’s such a fun room, and you’re there for like 12 hours. So at 3 in the morning, you’re trying to think of the meanest thing you can, and you’re laughing your ass off.

How many roasts were you on, then? Sheen, Roseanne ...

I did Trump, Sheen, Roseanne.

And I guess that was the start of this. Is that what you'd say?

Right before the Trump roast, I had a meeting with them, the big people at Comedy Central. I didn't even know who they were. I thought these were just people. I have no idea who the fucking president of what is. I sit down, and they ask, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I want to kill this roast. This is my moment. If I'm known for anything, I want to knock this roast out of the park." And then they asked if I'd want to do a TV show, too. I was like, "Uh-huh." So right after the Trump roast, like, immediately after, they offered me what they call a three-point deal, or whatever it's called. [Daniel] Tosh was the first guy to get it. You get the hour special, you get three roasts, and a development deal. They all just ended up working out.

They originally wanted the show to be a four-night-a-week show, and it was going to be called *Midnight*. We did it, and it killed, it was great. It was going to be a monologue, a short piece, and the rest of it was panel. They said they loved it, but then the budget changed, and they decided not to do a midnight show.

What would you say is the thing that has been hardest, that you didn't think would be?

Being in the moment, being the boss when there are so many different moving parts. It's such a different muscle, going from stand-up to being a host. I don't know if you saw the first episode, but when I go out to do the monologue, I can get an applause break. As a stand-up, I sit in that shit for as long as I can. If they can do it for 10 minutes, great. When you're hosting a show, you have to keep it moving — applause break, smile, right into the next joke to make them stop. It took me all last week to learn that. I had to do the whole monologue again because they said I needed to pace it up, to focus up. These are the things that I've learned.

I always mumble under my breath when I do stand-up. If the crowd's laughing, I'll say, "This is fucking great." When you do it as a host, you look like you're fucking crazy. So it's the little things I'm learning to change up.

But I think it also helps my stand-up. I always talk about it like Fight Club. Doing a roast or doing your own TV show, it's such a huge pressure thing. The pressure of stand-up, which used to be monumental, it's like a dull roar in the back of your head. You stand up there, and it's like, "Who gives a shit? No one's going to boo me off stage. I've hosted a show." It helps.

When you walked in to the first meeting, what did you want the show to be?

I wanted it to be my version of a late-night show, a pure version. You have to be likable to be a late-night host. You have to get everybody. I was like, "What if I didn't?" What if I was just myself from my stand-up, and I made that into a late-night show? Basically, "What if the devil had a late-night show?" That's what I wanted. Whatever it took for me to get there, that's what I wanted. And I thought people would be interested.

My ego is misplaced a lot of times, where it's, "People are going to watch this show just because it's an Anthony Jeselnik TV show. Wouldn't they want to see that?" Then I remember, "No one knows who the fuck you are." You're on a roast, and you're selling some albums, and that's great. But in the grand scheme of things, you are a fucking complete nobody.

I think it was the Sheen roast, when you were introduced. "This is Anthony Jeselnik, and you know him from right now."

Yeah, "You know him from being introduced right now."

What have you learned in the first two weeks, in the sense of what you'd want to do differently?

I think it's just learning to take the pressure off yourself, like with the test show. I sweat sometimes. The pressure comes up, and I want to get things right, and I start to sweat. The test show was a fucking disaster of sweat. They had to keep stopping and coming out, and I was getting nervous because they were doing that. So my goal for the first one was just to be comfortable.

Once you learn where to look, the prompter gets more natural. You learn how to do things. I want to be as natural on the TV show as I am on stage. I want to say, "I want to do this. I know they like me." I've learned how to be professional, how to do it almost effortlessly, how to take certain notes and reject others, which has been really helpful. I think I've learned how to be comfortable in my own show, and that it's *mine*. No one can take it from me. I'm not auditioning for anybody. I've got the gig. But it's certainly a process. I'm glad I have 10 episodes. I think every episode is going to get better. Tonight's show took an hour to tape. Last week took two hours. I thought two hours was great, and then I look at the clock tonight and think, "Oh, shit."

You just want to have a show where people can come and have fun. Nick Kroll walked off and said, "I had a blast." That's all I want, is for comics to have fun.

That's all you want. But when people are talking about the show, if they can say to their friends one thing about the show, what would that be to you?

"He talks about things other shows can't." I don't think it's about "wouldn't." I think it's about "can't." Fallon could never talk about these things. I would pitch things, and he'd just say, "I can't say that." Sometimes I worry that he'd think I was talking shit on him. I'm not at all. Jimmy's a huge success, and he was right to reject everything I ever pitched to him. But I had a joke, "Researchers are saying that the birth-control pill might not be as effective in obese women. Doctors are telling those women, 'Don't worry about it.'" I fought for that joke every day for a month. And Jimmy liked it. He'd get right about to tell it, and they'd say, "It's going to make fat women hate you." It's not worth it to him. I don't give a shit. That's a fucking funny joke.

Like the Mindy Kaling [joke I told] tonight. I've got friends that work on that show. It was the funniest one I could do. It was the funniest joke I could make. And she wrote a book where she talked shit on the roasts, and that it was a waste of time, and that it was bullshit. So it was like, "OK, maybe I can kind of ..." But I'm going to hear about that one. I made the choice for comedy, as opposed to friendship.

Isn't that a choice you've been making for a while now?

Yeah, but I've never really been able to use names. Occasionally, I'll have a tweet. I tweeted about Patrice O'Neal, and people got mad. But that's a tweet. Two hundred thousand followers is not a lot. It's not as big a deal. Doing it on a TV show, on Comedy Central, that's a pretty big slam. Once I thought of it, I couldn't chicken out. I had to do it.

It seems like you've always been pretty indignant when people have complained. "Well, that's the show." It seems like this is just the next iteration of that.

Absolutely. I wanted to just take my stand-up, and all the things I could give two fucks about, the things I put into the roasts, and make it how I host a TV show. I'm still figuring it out, but if I can just stick to my core beliefs and hold strong, take the hate that you're going to get, I think it's going to be a huge success.

Like if I was in high school ... how old are you?

25.

OK, have you ever seen episodes of *The Ben Stiller Show*?

Yeah, and I've definitely heard a lot about it .

Well, when that show came out, I was in seventh or eighth grade. I would go in to school every Monday — it was a Sunday night show — and I'd say, "Did you see this fucking show?" No one had. It was the first time I loved comedy, and that it didn't have to be popular for me to like it. There were some things that were hidden gems. I want this show to be like that. If I was 16 years old, and I saw this show, I would think it was the greatest thing ever. That's what I'm going for.

If we get canceled ... people are going to talk about this show for years. I don't need the big audience, but I want it to be great. You want to be loved by a certain people, I guess. That's what I think this show is going for. We don't need everyone, but the people who watch it are going to fucking love it.