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For Anthony Jeselnik, Writing for Kimmel and Fallon Didn't Work. So He Created a Show for Himself

By Julie Seabaugh Tue., Feb. 19 2013 at 6:00 AM
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Onstage, [Anthony Jeselnik](#) is unlikeable, dirty and downright disturbing. And that's just the way he prefers it. Known for teaching the old-timers a trick or two on the [Comedy Central Roasts](#) of Donald Trump, Charlie Sheen and Roseanne Barr, his new TV show with the cable channel, *The Jeselnik Offensive*, films Thursdays at Hollywood Center Studios until April 18 and debuts today. We interviewed him last week.

Last night marked the taping of your first episode of *The Jeselnik Offensive*. How did it go?

It went great! I feel like every first episode of a TV show is bad, you know, and it always improves. I just want it to be comfortable, and be as good as it can possibly be and go as smoothly as it can possibly go. I think a lot of it had to do with the guests I had. I had [my girlfriend] [Amy Schumer](#), who calms me down, and [Aziz Ansari](#), who is amazing. It really helped me out.



Robyn Von Swank

Anthony Jeselnik

For those who might not be aware, can you describe the format of the show?

It's a little like a talk show. I start with a monologue, and then I do what we call a "desk piece" [like] on a *Conan* or *Fallon*. We did a little thing we called "Who Wore it Better," like those fashion magazines where they compare two models or two actresses wearing the same dress, but then it branches into where two people kind of look alike -- tragically -- like Obama and the Virginia Tech killer. Their photos kinda look similar, then it goes into Lucille Ball and James Holmes; it's just bad.

We had a thing called "Sacred Cow." We won't do it every week, but we pick a topic that people can't really joke about, and then we make a ton of jokes about it. We did "cancer" for the first one, so when I interview an oncologist in the beginning, and then I do stand up for a cancer support group full of cancer patients. Then we do a panel, where we go over the news stories for the week

Who are some of the other panelists you have lined up for other tapings?

Next week we have Nick Kroll and Patton Oswalt. We have Kristen Schaal and Billy Eichner coming up. One is with Jason Mantzoukas and Jessica St. Clair. Reggie Watts and Kumail Nanjiani are on an episode. Doug Benson and Brian Posehn, TJ Miller and I am blanking on the rest. We've been very happy by the people who have come on, people who wouldn't normally do a panel show. I think it's great.

The jokes and all the stories are things that you wouldn't see anywhere else. Every monologue joke, if I thought, "Oh, Jimmy Fallon would do this or maybe Kimmel would say this," then I won't do it. All of them are very dark and very smart. I'm very happy with everything we have.

You were a writer for and the first standup to appear on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*.

That was my dream job; that was the job I really wanted when I got into standup. I wanted to be a joke writer on a late night show. It just seemed so much fun, so when the Fallon job came along I just jumped at it. And I think it was just right place right time. But every day I would pitch something and they'd stare at me and say "That's a great joke for the Anthony Jeselnik show, but it's not for the Jimmy Fallon show." And they were right. But after a year I said, "You know, that Anthony Jeselnik show seems really funny; let's go with that."

I enjoyed writing for someone else's voice but I wasn't very good at it. I had written for *Jimmy Kimmel* and Sarah Silverman in the past. Jimmy had a different voice, and different priorities. He couldn't be the bad guy in the joke; he couldn't upset people, really. That's him doing his job, and I never thought he was wrong for saying no, but that's what I'm interested in.

So I wasn't very good at doing those tailored kind of jokes. I just wanted to do my own thing. It was more to do with doing more stand-up than anything else, but all the ideas, all the frustrations that had built up during Fallon, I wanted to put somewhere. So I've wanted to do this show for a while and I finally got the opportunity.



Jeselnik doing standup

Like most comics, your bits are first-person, and yet your onstage persona is very unique in that the majority of your material can't possibly be taken at face value.

People come up to me after a show and say, "Are you joking about these things?" And I'm like, yeah, I'm on stage at a comedy club. Of course I'm kidding about all these things; nothing in my act is true. They're all made up, and that's actually given me more freedom to talk about worse things. I just like to add unspeakable topics into the joke because it adds to the tension -- so when the punchline comes it's a bigger laugh.

I typically forgo the "Who are your influences?" question, but in your case, I'd be very curious to know where inspiration for your almost blithely unlikable character came from.

I started out a [Steven Wright](#) kind of guy; I liked smart jokes and I wanted to do that. And then I found that people didn't like me. I was this 22-year-old white kid going up on stage, and I mean, "What could this guy possibly have to say?" And they were kind of right. Then I eventually started doing this darker joke and I got this big laugh and I thought, "Well, that's it!" I'm already unlikeable just to look at.

I just kind of played into it, and the more I played into it, the more people went with me. It wasn't a conscious decision; it was more step by step. People were accepting my jokes more because I played this character, and the more I fit into it, the more they came on board, and I wanted to see how I could push these limits.

Did you ever see any professional wrestling when you were little? There's always a good guy and a bad guy, and the bad guy comes out and makes the crowd boo him? I always thought it was hilarious. I thought, "If I can do a little bit of that on stage, I'd be happy."

Does that describe your evolution between 2010 album *Shakespeare* and this year's album/special *Caligula*?

It was more of a "Can I do this again?" If it evolved at all, it just got a little darker. I didn't want to cover the same ground. I needed to tell different jokes. It was more of a "I did the first on CD, and then this was TV," and it was more of a challenge.

Any other projects of note coming down the pipeline besides the TV show?

Oh my God, I can't even think about tomorrow, let alone that! I'll go on a tour once the show is done, and I think there will be a roast this summer or this fall. But that's about it. I have to look at what is in front of me.