

THE **SMOKING** JACKET

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TSJ Interviews Comedian Anthony Jeselnik

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Anthony Jeselnik is an undeniably rare act in the entertainment industry. Very seldom does a presence or persona make it nearly impossible to bomb, but it looks as if Jeselnik has found a niche to do just that. His deadpan humor, often if not always wrought with darkness and twisted thoughts, has individualized him as “the next big thing,” which was something his fans always knew but the world saw firsthand when he took the stage at the Comedy Central Roast of Donald Trump. Being the newcomer on a dais of many alums, Jeselnik wowed the in-studio and at home audiences alike – even gaining a standing ovation from his peers and a deal from Comedy Central.

He has now just released a special via Comedy Central titled ‘Caligula’ and stars in his own show, ‘The Jeselnik Offensive.’ He recently spoke with The Smoking Jacket about faking a persona, the roast that changed his life overnight and how he loves being the devil of stand up comedy.

The Smoking Jacket: ‘*The Jeselnik Offensive*’ starts on February 19. Can you tell me about it? I don’t know much about it.

Anthony Jeselnik: Yeah! Nobody really knows much about it. It’s going to be my take on the darker, weirder news stories of the week. So I’ll do a long monologue and then a darker, Conan-esque kind of desk piece, and then come back in Act Two where we do a Sacred Cow, where we take a topic that people can’t really make fun of and explore it. Like, for example, I think in the first episode we’re doing cancer. I go and talk to a cancer doctor, make fun of her a little and then I do stand up in front of people with cancer in cancer support group.

ANTHONY ON COMEDY CENTRAL



TSJ: Wow that sounds great.

AJ: It was really fun, actually. A little uncomfortable but really, really fun, and cool to watch. But after that we do a panel. In the first episode we have Amy Schumer and Aziz Ansari. They’ll come on and talk other weird news stories. We’re very excited!

TSJ: That sounds different from what Comedy Central is used to doing. That's really interesting.

AJ: Absolutely! It's kind of my reaction to working on Fallon for a year. I wanted to do something darker. I'd always pitch darker jokes and they'd be like *we can't do that. We want him to be likable*. So this is getting away from that. And most of the stories we talk about you won't hear from somewhere else. It's like someone died, something sad, or something that's tragic and aren't supposed to talk about. But we really go for it.

TSJ: Was keeping it under wraps done on purpose?

AJ: What happened was I got this deal with Comedy Central after I did the Trump Roast. They asked me if I'd like to do a show four nights a week after Colbert. I said that sounded amazing because coming out of Fallon I wanted to do my version of Jimmy Fallon. We did the pilot and it was great; they loved it. But they said their budget changed so it wouldn't be four nights; they weren't going to do that with anyone. So they wanted to pick us up as a weekly show. That's why it's been secretive; we're figuring it out as we go. It's going to be fun.

TSJ: I know you've spoken about the early days of stand up and how you were nervous, saying your act was different. How did you go from the nervous kid starting out to the guy who owns every room he steps into?

AJ: Well, it's easy. You fake it. That deadpan kind of comes out of nervousness. And I'm hoping the audience comes onboard. As you kind of become more famous or well known people sort of get to know what to expect. And then it becomes real confidence, you know? I was just doing open mics at first. And then they start introducing you as 'he plays all around town.' People go *who is this guy?* Then after a couple of years they said "You've seen him on CONAN." And *that's* a huge help. So I'm confident now because the audience knows who I am. That makes it so much easier, honestly.

TSJ: But those early days, I'd imagine the jokes you deliver made it harder to get an audience.

AJ: Oh, certainly. When you're different people don't understand what you're doing. Once they've seen it before they love it. But the first time they're like *what the hell is going on?* So you sort of have to train the audience and train yourself too, to be more comfortable. But those early days, even though they were miserable open mics doing five minutes, they were awesome because I was trying things. I tried everything in the beginning.

TSJ: So when you settled on your style and some people didn't take to it, was there ever a thought to change it?

AJ: No, it's what I wanted. And I was excited that no one was doing it. There was fear in the beginning, me thinking *I love this but would I be able on TV with it?* I was always thinking *could I do a late night set with this?* And someone told me *of course you can because you're not the voice of reason*. I'm just a monster that people get pretty quickly. I've been embraced by a lot of the late night shows.

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TSJ: Today, when a joke does well, do you find yourself ever leaving that persona and retreating back?

AJ: No, I don't really get nervous anymore because there's only a couple of jokes in my act I know might not do well but I like them. You might have to be a huge fan of mine to enjoy it. I think people like seeing me have fun. So if I tell a joke that I really enjoy and they see that, then they enjoy themselves. The only time I ever really break persona is for an audience reaction. If I say something really horrible and the crowd is like "YEAH," that cracks me up. [laughs] I'll start laughing in the middle of my set.

ANTHONY ON CONAN



TSJ: I heard you talk to Maron about jokes VS stories. Is there ever a desire from you to get up and unleash more personal stuff?

AJ: Not really. I'll do shows in LA where it's more laid back and I can talk more about personal stuff or about my day. I'm looking for a joke. But when I hear people telling a story about themselves I feel like it's so self-satisfying. I get bored. I want to enjoy it and hear jokes. I want you to surprise me and be an artist. If your girlfriend broke up with you I don't really care. It just bores me. I don't want to be up there for myself. I'm there to entertain.

TSJ: Is there ever a fear that they're laughing for the wrong reason?

AJ: It's not a fear. I hear it because I play all around the country, all around the world sometimes. Certain paces, if I tell a racial joke or one about domestic abuse and someone is excited for the wrong reason that annoys me a little bit. I'll tell jokes about rape but if someone yells out to tell a rape joke, the last thing I want to do is tell a rape joke. For me, it's the cost of doing business. If someone is going to take it the wrong way I'm not going to change what I'm doing.

TSJ: You can't control how they perceive a joke.

AJ: Exactly.

TSJ: Now that you're a name, does it ever get old because you don't have to fight for a crowd?

AJ: It doesn't get old; there's just new challenges. I want to push myself and move into different areas while staying in the persona. I think I just need to get better. People are now sitting and waiting to guess what I'm going to say next. People will now try and yell out and guess my jokes. So I have to make them smarter so no one will see them coming.

TSJ: Did you model your persona after anyone?

AJ: Not really. I basically wanted to be the devil. If the devil did stand up I thought that'd be awesome. Or if the joker did stand up; the joker from the comic books, not from the movies. But that kind of anarchic *I'm here to say the worst things in the world and there's nothing you can do about it* sort of thing. That's kind of what I went for. And it just sort of ended up working. I also found that the more I made comments in between jokes people ate that up. I thought *this is hilarious*. It's also almost like a bad guy wrestler. Did you ever watch like WWF back in the day?

TSJ: Oh, yeah.

AJ: Well, remember when the bad guy came in and everyone booed? I thought it was hilarious. No one else seemed to be doing it. I thought it was fantastic.

TSJ: How would you describe the Trump Roast for you? Did that change things?

AJ: My life was night and day after the roast. I knew going into it, it was going to be a big deal. I had written for a roast before so I sort of knew what I was getting into. I was just so excited for it because I knew it was going to be my moment pretty much. I remember writing my jokes and just really being worried about them. I was just writing and writing and writing. I knew I had to get up and kill.

When I was sitting there, I remember worrying if someone was going to have the same jokes as I did. So Lisa Lampanelli goes up, does well, and didn't have my jokes. And I noticed my jokes were meaner than Lisa's. Whitney Cummings, who is so funny, goes up, and she doesn't do anything I do. And I realize *oh my God, I'm so much meaner than everyone else. I cannot wait to get up there.* [laughs] So when I went up no one knew who I was, and some were expecting me to be a pretty boy; then I just crushed everyone. That changed my life. That's my favorite roast.

Before that I was performing in clubs and on the road for people who just came to see comedy. So that can be a battle; it can be tough. But after that roast everyone knew who I was. So sold out or not, everyone was there to see me. And my jokes are very similar to roast jokes. People ate it up and it made stand up so much more fun.

TSJ: I remember watching it. Everyone on the dais had that same joke of *no one knows him* but you got up there and were able to shut them all up.

AJ: Yeah, getting a standing ovation from the dais was one of the greatest moments of my life.

TSJ: You did something I respect when you were at Fallon. You left to work on stand up. Was there any trepidation to that? I know you said earlier on you wanted to do stand up until you got a writing gig.

AJ: I didn't find the writing gig to be very satisfying. They didn't want *my* jokes. They liked me and knew I was funny; they liked having me there. They understood where I was coming from when I quit. They said *you want to go be Anthony Jeselnik. Go do it.* And I knew they were right. I did want to be Anthony Jeselnik.

I kept doing stand up while I had that writing job. I remember I went to Dave Attell and Colin Quinn separately when I got the job. I told them I had just gotten a job and knew a lot of comics stop doing stand up. I asked them how did they maintain stand up while doing their jobs? They both said the same thing; they both said *I was bad at my job.* They were bad and would go out and do stand up. So I knew that was what I was going to do. No matter how tired or upset I was from work I'd make myself go out and do stand up. And I was so happy I did it. People told me not to quit the Fallon job because it was so great and because of the money. I couldn't wait to get out and I've never regretted it.

TSJ: Did you find it difficult writing for his voice?

AJ: I don't know about that. It was a difficult job, which I liked. I liked that it was difficult. It was one of those things where Jimmy didn't know what his voice was yet. He liked the jokes that were more likable and silly. I would try to do that, I'm writing 80 jokes a day. It's hard. Before that I had written for Sarah Silverman and Jimmy Kimmel. With them, if I loved a joke, they loved a joke. But with Fallon that wasn't the case. And he was right not to love them. I wasn't like *why is he doing this?* I was like *why am I here?* I wasn't very good at adjusting to writing for him. So I was very excited to leave and go do my own thing.

TSJ: How about with your show now. Are you worried you won't be able to do as much stand up?

AJ: No. I think my stand up has evolved. After I left Fallon, I went and headlined for a few months and recorded my next album. After the first album I was a better stand up. Then it took two years to throw out a set and build a new one. And now that my special is done I don't need to get up every night like I used to. Now I work on the show all week.

On weekends I write new jokes for myself. And then every other Monday I perform at the UCB here in LA. I have my own show when I host and deliver all those new jokes. So I'm still developing my act. Then once the show is off the air I'll go on the road for a while. Everything will come back.

I think hosting the show makes me a better stand up too because I'm much more comfortable now. It's almost like you're lifting weights. You lift heavier weights and then go onstage and have lighter weights in your hands. It's much easier.

TSJ: So you write new material every weekend?

AJ: Yeah. I make myself sit down and do it. It's a fear. I have to have new jokes because I just released the special. I've got maybe a new ten minutes but I need a new twenty by the time I go on the road because people have seen the special. That's that fear of disappointing people or having them say *oh, he just tells the same jokes he did on the special*. That really drives me to write new stuff.

TSJ: You did the Tonight Show recently for the first time. Was it hard to narrow down material for a show like that?

AJ: No, they were great to me. They were so great to me! I had done CONAN about a year ago and afterwards The Tonight Show said they wanted me, but it's hard for me to come up with killer, clean late night material. Everybody is like *you can't do this; you can't do that*. I didn't want to do it for the sake of doing it. But now, I've got the special and the show so I really wanted to do The Tonight Show. My parents love it; it meant the world to them. And Leno couldn't have been cooler. They were great with letting me do what I wanted. They were willing to let me do a lot; they wanted it to be edgy. I think it was one of my favorite sets I've ever done. And I was way more comfortable doing that set because I've been working on the show and shot the special.

TSJ: If you had done that before the Trump Roast, do you think it would have gone the same?

AJ: No, I think I would have been nervous. It would have been a big deal; people wouldn't have known me. I really don't think The Tonight Show would have had me on if it weren't for that roast.

TSJ: So with your act and the way it is, do you ever have a bad set?

AJ: I have sets that aren't fun for me. I don't really have bad sets because I can always get through them. But there's times where the crowd is screaming in laughter after a joke and sometimes the energy isn't there. Sometimes the crowd is only half full and sometimes I'm just not there, you know? Maybe I don't feel a momentum and doesn't work. And that's fine because if you're in the audience you can't tell that I'm not having fun. It's the exact same. Then I walk off going *that was work*. But that's the fun of being a comic; you never know what you're walking into. But I haven't bombed in quite some time.

TSJ: I'd imagine with the type of stand up you do, it'd be very difficult to bomb.

AJ: Yeah, the crowd just has to wait for the next joke. If I tell a joke that doesn't land and I get nervous, then they get nervous. Then it's a weird show. But if I laugh at them not laughing at a joke and move on to the next one then everything is cool. But you jut lean as you go, you know? It's like you're wearing armor and every time the audience takes a shot and there's a chink in your armor you fix that and it's stronger there than it ever was.

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