



## Oliver Double & Josie Long: Finding Your Favourite Band in Comedy

[00:00:23] INTRO

**Duška Radosavljević:**

Hello and welcome to the Salon. Our guests today are Oliver Double and Josie Long.

Oliver Double has been at the University of Kent since 1999, teaching and researching comic and popular performance. His books include *Britain Had Talent* (2012), *Getting the Joke* (2013) and *Alternative Comedy: 1979 and the Reinvention of British Stand-Up* (2020). Before becoming an academic, he worked as a stand-up comedian on the national comedy circuit, and set up the Last Laugh, Sheffield's longest running comedy club. He continues to perform occasionally, for example in his one-man shows *Saint Pancreas* (2006) and *Break a Leg* (2015), and compères the monthly comedy club Funny Rabbit in Canterbury.

Josie Long won the BBC New Comedy Award at the tender age of 17, and has enjoyed a rich and successful career ever since, as a stand-up comedian as well as a writer for radio and television. Through critically acclaimed shows such as *Be Honourable!* (2010), *Romance & Adventure* (2012) and her latest *Tender* (2019), Josie is known for conjugating political and social critique with warmth and 'silliness', while also foregrounding a female point of view on comedy and on the world. She presents *Short Cuts*, a BBC Radio 4 podcast of short documentaries and adventures in sound.

In this conversation, Oliver and Josie gift us a comedy perspective on the dramaturgies of speech and sound – they discuss the value of maintaining a DIY approach and a punk attitude, the energetic, atmospheric and sonic considerations they make in writing comedy, the political dimension of laughter and the politics of the comedy scene, the labour of chiselling one's own voice, and the process of preparing material for performance.

Their conversation took place between London and Whitstable on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2020.

[00:02:35] SALON

**Josie Long:** Hello.

**Oliver Double:** Hey. How's it going?

**JL:** Good thank you.

**OD:** So one of the things they've asked us to do is use sound cues. I've got, I brought this, right, which is [squeaky noise] – and I did that because I think that silliness is really underrated and I think it's a really, really good quality. And playfulness.

**JL:** I agree. Although my partner is so silly all the time! And I hadn't realised that I'm very much silly in the streets, serious in the sheets. Like, I very much wish for people to be very serious and literal at home and very silly on stage.

**OD:** That's really funny because I think one of the things in your comedy that strikes me is that when I first saw you, which was around 15 years ago I reckon, I was just struck by your earnestness, which is an unusual quality in comedy writing. I mean people think of a funny quality as being a flaw but earnestness is a nice thing, right?

**JL:** Although I think earnestness is definitely always framed as a bad thing, like: 'Oh, this person's, you know, they're, sort of, too heavy for us! They're, sort of, spoiling our fun.' Yeah. It's interesting. I definitely find writing stand-up, I'm trying often to get as close to an earnest position as possible and then to undermine it or to mess with it or something, but to try and keep what feels like what I actually want to say in it, which yeah, is tricky I think.

**OD:** I also think that you've always had that thing of silliness going alongside the earnestness. I forget which show it was of yours, which started with you doing this character going up space.

**JL:** Oh yeah. That was a show called *Be Honourable!*, ten years ago. Yeah. I just started it for ten minutes me just pretending to be an astronaut from where I'm from really, from St Mary Cray, just being,



like: 'Why are you so arrogant about going up space?.'

**OD:** Even the phrase 'going up space' is a really funny phrase.

**JL:** It's because when I was a kid you'd always say: 'Going up the shops', you'd always say that. Or you're 'going up town', or something.

**OD:** And isn't that weird? Yeah. We say that as well. I grew up in Lincoln. We used to say: 'Going up town', but what's weird is in America they say: 'Going downtown', don't they? 'Going downtown.'

**JL:** Yeah. Why is that? So it must be something to do with people building their villages above or below a hill.

**OD:** Yeah. There was another thing. When I was growing up there was a thing in Lincoln called – I forgot what time of day it was on – but it was on a Saturday and I think it was called the 'Two O'Clock Pose'. So all the punks and mods and anybody that was part of those youth tribes would just go and hang out by the Stonebow in Lincoln just to be seen by others.

**JL:** Well, that's like the 'passeggiare'.

**OD:** What's that?

**JL:** It's where people in Italy have a little walk just before dinner and everyone sort of passes through the neighbourhood.

**OD:** That's a really nice idea, isn't it?

**JL:** Yeah. I mean it's funny to think that it's built in that there's a time where you need to see and be seen.

**OD:** Yeah and also it's quite different, isn't it, because it's similar but different because I imagine in Italy it's a sort of, you put on your nice clothes and go through – but with punks you put on your torn clothes and look really badass, you know, going down the–

**JL:** Gel your hair right up.

**OD:** Yeah exactly. I remember reading a thing about The Ramones one time and they were saying that – I think it was Johnny Ramone or something – and he was saying, somebody was in his flat and he went: 'Ah, look at these jeans!', and they were particularly torn and he said: 'Yeah. I'm saving those for a special gig!'

**JL:** That's nice. Now the internet has taken all that because you can even schedule a post for 2pm, you don't even need to be there in person.

**OD:** That's true. That's true and there's a thing apparently where people put a selfie on Instagram, or whatever, on Sunday night and then they're really upset if nobody mentions it at school the next day. It's really sad, isn't it?

**JL:** Yeah. I feel sorry that young people don't get as much alone time and quiet time. It feels very sad. Although I spent most of my alone time writing letters to my friend Tasha, that's what I mainly did! Desperately! So I would have just been texting really.

**OD:** I had a lot of alone time when I was growing up because I'd lived a long way away from my school when I was in secondary school and most of my friends were from these estates in Lincoln, which my mum thought were a bit dodgy because they–

**JL:** Because they wouldn't let you go.

**OD:** Yeah. I very rarely went to see my friends out of school because it was a long way and it – I mean I don't think that there was anything wrong with those places but my mum was a bit fearful perhaps. So I used to spend my whole time drawing cartoons and trying to make music even though I had no musical ability at that point. I couldn't – yeah. I had a Casio, one of those Casio VL-1s. It cost about 30 quid and it was just basically a glorified musical calculator and I used to try and make records on it by recording it and then playing over the top of it and recording that and things.

**JL:** Oh my God. I love it! Are you the same as me in so far as I was in bands and then I discovered stand-up and then I was like: 'Oh! This is the thing I actually like.'

**OD:** I think that is exactly it actually, because when I was at – I studied Drama at university and when



I was doing that my total life plan was to be in a band, and I was in a couple of student bands, one of which even played gigs, you know, amazing! I mean, three or something but, you know!

**JL:** Not bad!

**OD:** Yeah, yeah! I remember going to a thing called the Chaotic Cabaret, which was a student arts committee, which is an amazing thing. So students programming arts events and they did this termly event called the Chaotic Cabaret where you could pay 20p and then you get on stage and you got a can of beer if you did it. And the first time I went to it I'd never seen anything like stand-up, that was the first time that I had seen anything like stand-up. And I'll tell you who was on that night was John O'Farrell who'd just finished studying at Exeter at the time and he did a skinhead character. And I just thought it was the best thing ever. I walked home and I wanted to do something but I was too nervous. And I walked home feeling unaccountably excited and then the next time they did one I did three turns because, like—

**JL:** Three beers as well!

**OD:** Three beers! What's not to like!? And that's why I remember when I first saw you I went: 'Wait, this is amazing! Because this is somebody who's talking about stuff that I've always been interested in', like DIY culture, making your own fanzines, all that kind of thing.

**JL:** Yeah. Yeah. I remember I was very lucky when I was about 22 I did a tour with Stewart Lee, or Stewart Lee brought me on his tour and he was quite funny because at one point he was like: 'You've got the same sensibilities as someone from the '80s', and I was like: 'Yeah, yeah, nightmare! No one else does!' Yeah. I do very, very much like – and I see it as a political thing, like controlling the means of production! I love this sort of immediacy and satisfaction that comes from the pure creativity of making a whole project, like making a tour or making something from scratch. Although in recent years it has been amazing to employ professionals to design a set or make a film with crew that are actually gifted at the things that they are doing. Like actually going it is good to have people who are – like I'm a terrible graphic designer, absolutely appalling, and so when somebody manages to kind of take my style and make it better I'm always a bit like: 'Yes, thank you!'

**OD:** Yeah, it's interesting because I always made posters for things that I've done. Again, that thing of controlling the means of production – I remember when you became much more overtly political, perhaps about ten years ago, I remember people said: 'Ah, she's gone political now', and I always went: 'Well, she's always been political because that DIY thing is political.'

**JL:** Yeah. Well, to me everything just made sense and fits in because, yes, exactly that – I think it's quite small 'p' political to advocate for people to be more creative and advocate for people to be more involved in community or more loving towards other people. That kind of thing to me fits in with what is a broader big 'P' political scheme around stuff. Yeah. It's funny that. And lifelong learning as well. I did a show about lifelong learning and I feel that's massively, massively political. Like in a very partisan way, like Conservatives do not value that in the same way. It's not how they want education or the world to be organised.

**OD:** Because they want everything to pay for itself right? So: 'You're done. You've got to 22, or whatever, you've finished your education, go out and earn money.'

**JL:** Yeah. Or it has to be to do with business, but what's interesting as well is there is a massive double standard because you also have people who, kind of, hanker after the Classics and go and study Archaeology and Anthropology at Oxford and Cambridge themselves but it's very much, kind of like, these are rarified things for the people that can afford them and everything else should not be in that way, which is bad.

**OD:** That's terrible. That's absolutely terrible. I completely agree. But I do think there's something – whenever I've done something or I've made something I really like the thing of: 'I'm going to do everything for this.'

**JL:** Yes. Yeah. Well it – what appeals to you about it the most?

**OD:** Well, I tell you what one of the things is. I used to make posters by using Letraset and Letratone and cutting things out and photocopying and what I really like is using some of that technique but using a digital process to make it look really good. So well, can I play one of my sound cues?



JL: Yes!

OD: Ok. So I'll just play it and then say what it is.

**[00:12:33 to 00:13:09] Funny Rabbit sound cue from Oliver Double**

JL: Beautiful! But I think as well it's about curating, isn't it? It's about actually wanting there to be a real sense of atmosphere and a real voice to it. I really feel like the best thing about writing a stand-up show and taking it to comedy festivals – although I do feel that perhaps as I've got older I've not got as much time or thought to do it – is this idea that you have that room and you can turn that room and that space into your house, your venue, whatever you want for that hour. And you can create that atmosphere from the ground up in every aspect if you're thoughtful enough about it.

OD: I completely 100% agree. So the reason that I made that tune was because compering our club I hate that thing of when you go on and people are just talking and stuff. Because if you do something that just gets people's attention and in a really silly way then when you come on and they give you some applause and so you've already got somewhere. And also they've listened to this stupid song and it's probably going to stick in their head as well.

JL: I've had a couple of things like that. Once where it was a big success and once where it was an utter failure, which is I used to do this thing where I would do pre-show karaoke. So I would be playing a song and singing it and then, kind of, taking it apart to make people laugh a bit and it was as people were coming in. So then it was such a fun experience because some people would be like: 'Oh, we've missed the start of the show', and I'd be like: 'This isn't the show!', but it meant that you got laughs in advance. It's so great to get laughs in advance of the show because by the time you come on stage people are like: 'You're – we've already laughed!' They love it! But then recently in my last show I used a recording of a song that I made with my friend, which is some songs that I wrote for my daughter – like, not 'wrote', I mean that is pushing the definitions of writing a song – songs that I would sing to my daughter, but honestly they would annoy and alienate the crowd so much by the time I got on the stage there was an atmosphere of mistrust. And so I had to stop because people would be like: 'Oh, this woman is tedious and terrible', and I would be like: 'Ah ha!' So it's a fine line to balance, isn't it?

OD: It really is. I love that thing of bonus laughs though. The pre-show show that's not really the show.

JL: It doesn't count!

OD: Yeah.

JL: It only counts for the good.

OD: I've seen you do that. It worked really well by the way.

JL: Thank you. It was a fun thing to do because it took away some of my pre-show nerves as well. Not nerves, but jitters. It got me warmed up in the best possible way.

OD: But I know what you mean about curating the room as well because I think – a couple of things: one is I always really pick the music that I play before the show really carefully because it sets an expectation. The other thing is I've got this thing, and it's a silly thing, because people are just doing what they think is best, but I really don't like the modern comedy club poster, which is just a bunch of circles with faces in of the different comedians they've got on because to me it just – okay, it looks good, it's professional, but it doesn't say anything about the particular character of the club. So I do a photo montage and scan it in and then make it look, you know, tidy it up a bit on the computer but there's something about that thing of going, well, it's like a band poster or something. You want it to look like it's got an atmosphere to it or something. That's where you're starting to set a thing, I think, in people's minds: 'This is what my publicity looks like so don't come if you don't like this.'

JL: Yes. And someone like David O'Doherty is a comedian who all of his photos really represent who he is and it's not artifice. Well, it is artifice in as far as it's cleverly done but it's not fake. He has a good friend and they muck around and he always does his photos and they try and think of funny ways and silly things to do, but it's always understated. So he knows what he's doing. He's deliberately curating it but it's genuine as to who he is and what's he's like and it's such a good representation of him and his style. And I think, yeah, it's important, like you say people understand who he is as a comedian before they've even seen him.



**OD:** And actually that thing of what you were saying about it's authentic but it's carefully crafted, I mean in a way that's stand-up isn't it? That you try to be something that you are, that you feel is part of you that you want to share with an audience, but you select really carefully and you craft it and hone it and it looks like you've just thrown it together but you haven't.

**JL:** Yes, yes, yes. I think – yeah. You want ideally to feel like you are coming across as genuinely as possible. But what's funny is that then you just – sometimes it just really mucks around with my memories because I'll write something based on fact, but the eventual product will be 100% tweaked, amplified, ameliorated, and then I look back and I can't remember the truth of the memory anymore because a thousand times I've said it a certain way. It becomes the official version of events.

**OD:** That's really interesting because I think to extent that happens anyway when you revisit a memory where you're remembering the previous time you remembered it, or when you've told a story lots of times just socially. But I think with stand-up even – it must imprint really firmly because of the stress of performing stand-up.

**JL:** Yes. I think it really does because you never forget old routines, 'routines', old bits. Also it's a very interesting thing to have been doing comedy, you know – well, you'll be the same – since you were a student, since you still were working out who you are. Because to me I don't really know what I am without it as much. At the moment the pandemic is so odd because yes, I perform online but I miss being onstage and I miss that part of who I am really, really, very much because it is such a big part of my life, such a practised part of who I am. Even though it's heightened and even though it's definitely not a normal interaction. It is a big part of usually my day, you know, to have that in it. Yeah. I miss it.

**OD:** Yeah. It's interesting because I saw, I think it was Kiri Pritchard-McLean was saying something very similar on a podcast, it felt like it had been ripped out of her identity because she's not able to get in front of an audience and I can really see that. It's a bit like being on stage doing stand-up is a bit like a phone voice of when you've got to be polite or something, you know, if you suddenly never had to do that again it would be weird.

**JL:** Yeah. It's like that except when you add on to it the fact that quite often it's how I work out how I feel about things. It's how I work out what I want to say or where I am in my life or it's how I find what my comic register at that time is. Sometimes when you're trying out new material and you hit that vein that feels right and suddenly you're like: 'Ah! This is what I want to be, this is what I'm doing', you know. It's like when you're first, if you're dating somebody and you have really, really deep intimate chats and suddenly you're like: 'Oh, I now realise where I am in this world because I've shared so deeply with someone.'

**OD:** Isn't that interesting because I think often the way we conceptualise ourselves is that your being, your self, is all internal, it's in your brain, it's the stuff that's encased in your skull but actually a lot of who we are is through our interactions with other people.

**JL:** Yes, truly! And then how funny to have spent 20 odd years having this very particular type of manicured interaction that is so meaningful to your identity.

**OD:** Another thing that I wanted to ask you about was that, going back to the DIY culture thing, one of the things about stand-up that I think actors find quite hard to understand is the idea that you can perform and not have a formal script saying every single word that you say. And I teach stand-up and obviously the people I'm teaching are – on the whole they're drama students, so they're used to having a script, learning it and performing it. And it's quite hard getting them to the point where they have to find their own way of noting ideas down. But one of the things I show them is one of your spider diagrams of one of your shows because that's so interesting as a way of – do you want to just, because obviously this is an audio thing, do you want to just describe what that looks like?

**JL:** Yeah. So I think there's two types of stand-ups. I think that there are stand-ups who sit and write something akin to a script and then take that and perform it verbatim. Or people who write jokes and they perform their jokes. But for me what my comic voice is about is it is about being on stage and speaking more so than writing. It is about finding the most natural way to say things as speech not as text. And so sometimes as part of a show there'll be a few lines that I'll write and write and write and craft so that I know exactly that they are like a poem or a motto or a slogan or something. And then it definitely does form itself in quite a homogenised way by the end of writing it. But for me it's very much



like mining it on stage and then honing it down to what feels very, very natural and very real, and also to what has the right effect on people in a sort of persuasive way, in a tricking people way, in a performance way. And also for me, I don't sit down and go – well, it's complicated – I do tend to know what I would like to write about but I don't sit down at a computer and go: 'This show is about this, blah blah blah.' I think: 'Okay, I think this show is going to be about this and this', but it's only on stage that you really understand and discover what it really is and then you find the themes of it and the motifs of it and sometimes the motifs of it – I remember I had a show that had about four or five things about boats in it and there was just no need for it but it was like: 'Well, this is a recurring thing that for some reason I've got in, let's keep it in!' And so basically what I do is before I go on stage – and it's usually an hour before I do my first warm-up show because usually I'm frightened, so I put it off and it's all at the back of my brain – I'll get myself ideally an A3 piece of paper and then I'll put the title of the show in and I'll just try to think about all the different little bits and bobs that I've got going on, all the different little ideas I've got, all the different things that may not feel quite related yet, and I'll start putting them down and trying to join them up and different sort of sections. So there might be earnest and political things that I'm desperate to say but there might also be what's happened in my life and what I want to talk about. And it all gradually – I take that on stage and hopefully I don't forget bits. But what's interesting is quite often when I do go on stage for the first time I sort of splurge and quite often it ends up being more or less the structure of the show. It's quite shocking to me – maybe, I've written one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine – I've written about 11 shows but I've probably toured about ten, maybe 12. I've probably written about 12 hours and toured about ten, maybe more, but who cares, maybe more. But I've toured ten shows and with the ten shows I've toured two of them the show structure quite dramatically changed along the way. Most of them I did it, recorded it, and was like: 'Oh yeah! This is probably the order that I'll put it in.' And then obviously it refines and you find things and you take little things out and chip them back in and muck around but I like the fact that initially you have all this complete freedom to decide what's what.

**OD:** There's something quite interesting about that because another thing I like about your stand-up is that I really like stand-up – I like gaggy, very gaggy stand-up as well – but my sweet spot is stand-up that seems like it's just conversation. You can listen to recordings of Mort Sahl, recorded in the mid-'50s, and you don't get half the references but there's something that you do get, which is that you can hear that he has that relationship with his audience that it just sounds like a guy talking, a person talking. And I think that's another thing that instantly appealed to me about your stuff because at the time you were doing a lot of visual stuff. You were doing drawings and stuff but that allowed you to talk around that really freely and it felt really authentic and natural and conversational.

**JL:** Oh thank you. What's interesting for me is that I think I feel most safe and relaxed on stage and actually it's so weird to me to think that I'm probably more capable of a better seeming conversation – like a more watchable conversation on stage than I am in real life. I find, I think partly because it's such a safe space for me, it's something that I've done so much, and partly because I love it, and partly because it is such an unsociable thing. You're literally going: 'I'm presenting to you', but I feel so relaxed and at ease and able to kind of – I think I suppose on stage there's no anxiety about whether you're allowed to speak. And I don't mean allowed to say things in kind of like: 'Is this offensive?', I mean allowed to speak, literally. You know, I think, you don't feel, I don't feel – I don't know... I feel very entitled onstage in a positive way, not in a negative way. It's nice to enjoy exploring what makes you 'you', and what you love, and what you find funny knowing that the audience enjoy it too.

**OD:** And I think that's why it's so important for stand-up to diversify. That it's so important that there are more women and more people of colour and so on because I think for a couple of reasons. I think that everyone deserves that, right? Everybody deserves a chance if that's what they want to be able to talk to an audience. But also hearing other people who are quite unlike you explaining what the world looks like from their perspective is really enlivening and important.

**JL:** And to connect. The more true someone is to themselves the more you connect with them and it doesn't matter how different they are from you. What matters is the authenticity of it because the human experience is the same for all of us in some ways and the differences are exciting. But on a deep level we connect to each other through that difference. I think a lot about – recently Mae Martin had a TV show and in it she plays her as a stand-up. Now that to me is quite a trope that's been done quite a lot



but I found exciting was it's not been done by someone like her. And when I watched it, it was such a thrill because so often a show about a stand-up is about a sort of schlubby guy, or a bit of a losery guy, and his problems are that he can't really get it together and his style and personality is that, you know, a certain thing. And what was such a thrill was seeing her actually being really true to her neuroticisms and her intensity and her unusual style and her performance style, everything. It was so, so exciting and it felt so fresh and so wonderful to see a new perspective on this and to take something that had been done by other people but never like this. And so we actually – yeah, it matters so much, who's making stuff.

**OD:** I think there's something really political about it as well because I think it's a lot harder to be a horrible person towards a group of people if you know people in that group. The Black Lives Matter thing has been a really important thing to me in the last, you know, since the George Floyd thing. And one of the things about that is we have a lot of students of colour, right, and the idea that they might suffer something, any form of indignity, just because of something that's an accident at birth, something that's who they are, is horrific. And I remember reading – there was a brilliant thing and I can't remember the name of the photographer, but some guy in America did a project where he went round photographing fathers and sons, African American fathers and sons, and then they, the fathers talked about having the 'talk' to their sons. The 'talk' being: 'Here's how you have to behave with a policeman because otherwise you might be shot.' And I thought about – I mean my kids are grown up now – but I thought about I've never had to do that with my kids and I feel so lucky that I've never had to do that and nobody should have to do that. It's horrible. And I think that when comedians go on and explain their experience, if you go and laugh at somebody who's say a Black comedian – it's probably harder for you to be a racist prick.

**JL:** Well, I think it's laughing with somebody and understanding somebody.

**OD:** Absolutely.

**JL:** And also understanding peoples' experiences helps dismantle the fact that so much of the narrative of our society is one of white supremacy. It's sort of in everything. That's why again it is political to actually have people onstage who represent what the world really is, not what people have been brought up to believe it is. I was thinking as well when you talked about that – I did an interview with Reginald D. Hunter, who's an African American comedian who lives and works in the UK, and he was talking about when he grew up, again his parents had a similar thing with him, they said to him like: 'You are a big guy. You are always going to be seen as a threat to people.' That is what his mum had to tell him when he was a little young teenager. And his mum was saying to him: 'You need to mitigate that.' So already he's got all this stuff put upon himself where he's not allowed to just experience who he is and do that authentically. He's already had that kind of interaction. And he said that that hung over onto his approach to how he started to write stand-up comedy. He saw himself as something that he needed to filter for the largely white audience in the UK, or filter for the largely white, I suppose it would be like, gaze of the media. And he says that it's something that only now as he gets into middle age that he's dismantling for himself. And I think it is complicated because I think that that is probably the case for many people in our society who are subject to prejudice and subject to discrimination. But also it feels like the injustice of that, like him just not from day one being able to sit and explore exactly as he would want to perform. He has to feel like he has to alter that performance.

**OD:** Absolutely. Have you heard of the 'laughing barrel'?

**JL:** No, what's that?

**OD:** Okay, so there's an amazing book about African American comedy called *On the Real Side* by Mel Watkins. He traces it all the way back to slavery and the humour that slaves shared as a survival strategy. But basically the laughter of Black people was feared, was feared, and was therefore unacceptable. So there's a sort of urban myth or a folk tale, or whatever, that that there would be barrels in the street so that if you were Black and you felt a laugh coming on you just go put your head in the barrel so white folks didn't hear it. I mean what more powerful image could you have of a horribly racist system where one group of people is just subjugated to the extent where their most natural reactions have to be curbed.

**JL:** Also I think it's again why it's political for people as artists to gain prominence and to express



themselves. But also to express themselves in a joyful, free, wonderful, loving excited manner because, yeah it in itself is an act of resistance, like an important act of like: 'No, we're going to be our fullest selves against this, like, bullshit that we're up against.'

**OD:** There's also something quite interesting – I went to see Margaret Cho at the Leicester Square Theatre a few years ago, and because she has a big LGBT following I became aware that I was actually in a minority and I'm so privileged. Like I'm a white, middle-aged guy, I'm not poor anymore, you know, I'm heterosexual, all these things, I'm able bodied, all these things that are privileges that I enjoy the whole time, I don't have to think about them. And it was actually a really beautiful experience because suddenly I was like: 'Okay, I'm in the minority here in this room and now I'm going to have to google what the word "twink" means because I don't know and everybody else does.' And it was actually – I loved it. I loved that experience because I felt: 'Well, it's good for me to understand what–', I mean it's not 'understand' but at least have a sense that the world isn't the same for other people as it is for me. It isn't as easy for other people as it is for me. And also I went away feeling: 'Okay, well I've been educated because now with the help of Margaret Cho and Google I know what a twink is!'

**JL:** Wow. It's a whole new world for you!

**OD:** Yeah! It was great.

**JL:** Well, partly, what's interesting is erasure of people who did play a big creative part in the past. This is sort of tangential to what we're talking about but, you know, when I first started comedy people would always go: 'There aren't any funny women are there?', and then you actually look back and you're like: 'Well in the '80s there were so, so many.' It's very weird to see that different parts of the population that were getting out there, making brilliant art, being appreciated for it at the time and then the official history becomes exactly homogenised, in retrospect as well! I was thinking about with regards to what you were saying about – I think maybe I was just thinking about Mort Sahl then, I was thinking about the fact that since stand-up started, or since vaudeville and music hall they always have been actually more diverse representations of society that then it's like: 'No, no, we shan't remember them!'

**OD:** That's completely true. I mean it's interesting when you go back to variety it's true that the majority of comedians were male but there were some very, very successful female ones. I mean Gracie Fields was thought of as a comedian and was probably the biggest. No other star is internationally as famous as her. And also that certainly having talked to a few people who worked in variety they said that it's true that you would see social prejudices reflected in the material – so wife jokes and things like that – but actually backstage I think it was much more egalitarian than the general society was then. The main hierarchy was based on the position within a bill as opposed to gender, race, whatever. And there were very successful singers, for example. There was a guy called Hutch and there was a guy called Turner Layton who were not only very successful but they were sophisticated, like sharp-dressed guys, who people would look up to. The weird thing about that is in their everyday lives those audiences were probably way more racist, way more openly racist, than people would be today, but they could still have this weird doublethink where they could look up to and admire these Black singers. But I think that's why stand-up is – I think it's harder to do that with stand-up because in stand-up you're really getting people to engage with your viewpoints.

**JL:** I guess you're not so much keeping people on a certain pedestal.

**OD:** Yeah.

**JL:** You're like: 'Oh that's music', you're actually – so one of the things I love about stand-up is when I love a stand-up comic I feel like I want to be friends with them. I think that's what it is. You go because you're like: 'Oh, I love how they are.' And because they're sharing how they muck about with you, that's a very intimate thing. That's their life and their register and so when somebody does that you do feel like you're connecting with them personally, just you and them. And so – yeah I do think it is different with stand-up. And similarly that's why I get frustrated when people act like, people who set out to offend people or mock people different from them, are like brave and wonderful because I'm like: 'This is so unpleasant. This is people connecting with, like, bullying, you know!' I don't know.

**OD:** Also like people go: 'Oh, they're so brave, they're so outspoken', but it's not like I never have bad thoughts, right? We all have bad thoughts it's just I try to, sort of, not be a dick about it, like go and have a word with myself if I have a jealous thought or an unpleasant reaction to something.



**JL:** I think as well stand-up is also what you choose to focus on. And so is life. I do wish that I was better at curating my entire life in a more positive way but at least with stand-up it's very chosen. You've chosen what you want to talk about, you've chosen how you want to talk about it, you've chosen the energy you want to bring onto the stage. So you really have the option – and I remember when I wrote my first show, my plan for it was to only try to write about positive and joyful things and the reason I knew I wanted to do that was because I knew – well I hoped – I was going to be performing it a lot, and I did not want to have to carry around that energy with me. And I definitely, when I wrote shows later on that were largely about anger, or shows that had a very painful emotional moment in them, or shows that had something that made me feel icky to talk about, it was so much less pleasant to cart that around and to get into that headspace and to get into that space of feeling a performance and do it than it is to come on stage and be like: 'Hello! This is playtime!' And I know that nothing here is curated to upset people and if something does upset people – if something unintentionally does so, if somebody speaks to me I can take it out and make sure that it's a space where people feel relaxed and playful.

**OD:** I think sometimes comedians really are resistant to that like we did a show, our second show I think for Funny Rabbit was International Women's Day, so we had an all-female bill except for me, and to show solidarity I wore a frock, right. And I really tried to make it very women focused. So we do a thing where we – this evolved from the audience really, but I'll pick out someone who deserves some criticism, like a politician, and then the audience has to think of what's going to be in the letter and then the letter will actually get sent to that politician. So on that occasion it was the stupid guy who – [MP] Christopher Chope who tried to stop the Upskirting Bill and things. Yeah so I got people in the audience to write about male dick behaviour, basically, and it was sort of good because it was a really sharing thing, but it was also not great for comedy because a lot of them were so sad and depressing. But I did a bit of performance and somebody came up to me afterwards and said: 'When you did that bit, all the examples you gave were men and it shouldn't have been', and I was like: 'You're absolutely right, I shouldn't have done that and if I do that again I'll change it.' Like, why is that a bad – why would you see that as a threat? That's a good bit of feedback, it's a useful bit of feedback.

**JL:** Yeah, I think people don't – what's funny is the people who get the most abuse and criticism online are women of colour in comedy. It just reflects the gross, shit behaviour of our society, right? And the people that get the least friction online to have to deal with are white, male, offensive comedians. They might get people pushing against them but they do not get targeted abuse and I don't know whether it's the whole – they are so unused to criticism in that way and it's so – criticism is the wrong word. They see criticism as abuse because they do not know what abuse is, I think. And so you have everyone else being like: 'Are you serious? Look at my replies to my things.'

**OD:** Another interesting thing that you were saying before about women being funny and people going: 'Women can't be funny.' The thing that's weird about that is the people who say that must have a filter, a permanent filter around them, because women are funny the whole time in life. I grew up with sisters, right, I was one of four kids, there were two boys, two girls and my brother was first to leave home, so I was the only boy in the house for several years, through my teenage years. My sisters are both hilarious and then there's loads of funny female actors and there's loads of funny female stand-ups now as well and funny female singers and whatever. So in order to have that as a belief you must just have not to hear the laughter when a woman makes a joke and it gets a laugh.

**JL:** Well, I think it's more than that. I think it's people in relaxing back using meaningless tropes instead of really being alive. People just going: 'Well, I guess I'll say that', or people not appreciating that actually they're not funny if they say – like when people say jokey sexism it's actually not funny. And that's a thing and people think it doesn't count when they do it, and it does. I think in recent years in the defence of some dodgy internet figures people have come out a lot to say that comedy should be about saying the unsaid or: 'Comedy has to be about offending people!' And it frustrates me so much because comedy to me is this wide, wide blank slate. It's free open terrain of whatever anybody can bring to the table. Whatever anyone can think of – you know, and now it's not even down to the limits of being live. It's whatever anyone can make and get out there in whatever medium they can work. And it's similar to music, it's similar to visual art, it's just everything, it's a way to understand the world in its fullness. And so when people act like the purpose of comedy is to test limits or to offend people it's just embarrassing because it's not its purpose. Some of its purpose is that, but some of its purpose is Tim



Vine throwing a pen behind his ear. Some of its purpose is to sing and be delighted and surprised. It frustrates me when people try to boil it down to something that is so dull. And when people – when I first started doing stand-up I got a lot of abuse because I was this young woman being ostensibly nice, and people fucking hated it because it wasn't what they decided what comedy was. And similarly anyone who brings something to the table that doesn't fulfil a very narrow remit is going to get people telling them they're not doing it right when actually they're doing it perfectly for them.

**OD:** It's interesting because one of my big influences on my life was punk. I got into it when I was in my early teens and people always just think of it as spitting, swearing, loud music and what have you. What they don't think of is actually the breadth of musical styles that were explored by punk. So if you listen to The Slits say, they sound completely different from the next band. If you listen to something like, there was a German band that was called Trio who did a song called 'Da Da Da', which was recorded on one of those Casio VL tones I mentioned earlier which was so cheapo, and it doesn't sound – it's not full of loud, distorted guitar or anything, and it's amazingly punk and it's amazingly cool. And for me the thing about punk wasn't: 'You have to be loud, you have to angry', it was like: 'You can be that if you want but you have to find the best thing you can do by making it from your own means, and that's okay.'

**JL:** It's just very frustrating to me that the discourse that becomes the official discourse is always so stupid and reactionary and reductive. You see it with protest movements, you see it with artistic movements, you see it with who's allowed that legacy, it becomes – it's exactly that, it's like: 'Oh yeah, punk was just kids spitting and three chords and that's it.' And it's like: 'No! Punk was this explosion of creative energy that was wide ranging', you know? And punk was reduced to John Lydon being a grim, old dickhead now, you know? No! It's not this sell-out man, it's everyone!

**OD:** Do you know that Viv Albertine record that came out about six or seven years ago?

**JL:** Oh, I heard about it at the time but I still haven't listened to it.

**OD:** It's so good. Well, her book – I can't remember what it's called – like *Boys, Boys, Boys, Music, Music, Music, Clothes, Clothes, Clothes* or something – I've probably got the order wrong there, but her book is one of the most amazing books I've read about music or anything. You can't put it down. But basically she went away from doing music, she became a TV director and stuff and then she became, I think she was a homemaker for a while and stuff. And then she had to relearn and she just started doing open mic nights where nobody knew who she was, and she made this record and it's so awesome and it's so personal and unusual and so full of just brilliant words and brilliant sounds and I love her so much. And I'm just – and she's in her 60s now and that's, like if you went with the stereotype of punk you'd go: 'Oh well, she can't be a punk, she's not in her teens', or something. She totally can! It's totally punk rock!

**JL:** And also it's about having the guts to follow your own inspirations and to build your own vocabulary onstage in your writing. It's about the guts to say, like with jokes, you can very easily go: 'Okay, well, I know what the rhythm of a joke is, it's this. I know how I should be writing, it's this, this and this.' And the most exciting stand-up comes from people who go – you see them onstage and you're going: 'Where is this going? What does this mean? How is this person doing this?' When I've seen people doing genuinely delightful or unusual or be so articulate but with their own rhythms and their own lengths of jokes, you know, absolutely not conforming to what they've been told they're allowed to do is a massively big deal I think.

**OD:** I completely agree. I'd call it: 'We're not in Kansas anymore.' When you're watching a show and you go: 'Fuck, where are we?' There're two examples I can think of that just spring to mind. I had a student years ago who was never going to make it as a stand-up, not because he wasn't talented, but he just didn't have that thing of you have to keep doing it, you have to really keep trying, you have to kick those doors open and build up your network, but he was so talented. He was this tall, willowy, posh boy with cheekbones and long blond hair. Again totally privileged, but he just had a very unusual way of seeing the world. And he did this one set where he told this story like it was a true anecdote but part of the story is that he becomes a woman and he wakes up and he decides to seduce this socially awkward heavy metal fan. And it was so odd, and I just went: 'I've no idea where you're going with this', and the audience were just loving it and going with him on this weird journey. The other one is –



**JL:** What is he doing now?

**OD:** I've no idea. He's a Facebook friend but I don't know what he does.

**JL:** Oh my god. You've got to get stalking on Instagram or something.

**OD:** Yeah I should. I might message him after this actually. The other one that immediately springs to mind is going to see Stewart Lee. I think it was the *Content Provider* tour. Somebody went out in the first half – this was in Canterbury – somebody went out and then they came back and he went, he says: 'Ah, don't worry, I'll tell you what you missed.' And he starts doing that bit again. Now that's a joke that I've seen lots of comedians do but what I haven't seen them do is do ten minutes recap, the same stuff twice the speed, half the energy, including all the improvised bits. It was unbelievable. I can't believe he did it and it was just beautiful and special.

**JL:** That's the other thing, isn't it? It's about enjoying the moment enough. That's what I love about stand-ups who you see them and you feel that they were born to do it, is that they enjoy the moment enough to be flexible with it, and to be open to things happening. The least appealing thing on stage is some who for whatever reason is clearly annoyed in the way of a deputy headmistress, you know? It's horrid! I think about with stand-up it's about making people trust you a bit. It's about making people trust that they're safe with you. And so again that's why I'm not attracted to people who are wanting to kind of say like: 'Say the unsayable', because I don't want to have to be sat here the whole time thinking: 'Is this grim, what is this?' I want to be with someone where I'm like: 'We're going to have a great time and we can all have a great time.'

**OD:** That's one of the great things about Pappy's is that they bring this party, this feeling that it's just messing about, just these guys messing about.

**JL:** Yeah. Yeah. I love that sort of energy.

**OD:** And also somebody like Ross Noble. I love his comedy because I think that people probably just go: 'Oh, it's just a bit silly, it's frivolous, there's no content there.' I actually think if you listen carefully there's a lot of content but it's just silliness and crazy, and surreal imagination is his stock in trade and people just can't get beyond that I think.

**JL:** It's the same with David O'Doherty. People think it's just little songs and actually he's talking in a very deep and profound political way about life and where we are, and that's the great con trick of stand-up, isn't it?

**OD:** David O'Doherty is really, loads of substance there. Don't let the cheap, electric keyboard fool you?!

**JL:** And also ironically I think a lot of people who pertain to have a lot of substance actually is quite shallow analysis. There'd be people who are like: 'I'm a political comedian. Now let me doing an impression of Tony Blair eating an egg!', and you're like: 'Great. So deep, such deep thought here.' So actually, you know – let's slag off straw men a little bit more – like a lot of people who think that they're doing something very edgy you do end up going like: 'Have you even read anything beyond *Spiked* online as an inspiration to this?'

**OD:** *Spiked* online is a really interesting phenomenon because those were the people who were in the Revolutionary Communist Party in the '90s and then went right over – and they were apologists for ethnic cleansers and things.

**JL:** Here's the thing with that. I read something this week that made me really reassess them because they love to say: 'Well, I used to be on the far left and now I'm disillusioned.' And I actually think that since its inception, the whole thing has been not in good faith. I think that in the '90s when they were the Revolutionary Communist Party that was not genuine. I think *Living Marxism* was – the whole point of it was to occupy space on the left but completely poison it, and that's what they're still doing and infiltrate industries. Sinister. Sinister shit. And when they came to Edinburgh to do reviews I was having none of it!

**OD:** But also those people you have to bear in mind that they've monetised that. That's a good living for those guys is being these fearless free speech warriors. They know how to make a good dollar out of it. And also I'll tell you something else that's really weird and sinister that I've barely even heard ever mentioned. So there's an organisation – I can't remember what it's called now – but they organise



debates at schools, debating competitions.

**JL:** Oh! Debating competitions. Yes. I think I know what it is.

**OD:** Ah it's called Debating Matters. That's run by those guys.

**JL:** Yes. And do you know what they do? They look out for people that they can radicalise and utilise. That's why every few years there'll be this cohort of young people suddenly appearing on BBC News the whole time because they need people who are willing to go and do those slots the whole time and push their messages. It's genuinely so sinister. Literally funded by the Koch brothers, *Spiked* online was founded by them.

**OD:** By the Koch brothers?

**JL:** And this is the thing that annoys me about people talking about – you can see the offshoots of it in particularly online edgy comedy. You see how the threads link, and I think to myself: 'You people are better funded, more established, and your messages are being used by our political leaders and you dare to pretend that comedy is some cabal of the left where they have this outreach of influence when it's the exact opposite.'

**OD:** Actually what's quite interesting is that they say they are in favour of free speech but by saying that they're saying they prefer the left not to even have that outlet, which is actually quite a censorious instinct.

**JL:** I remember when people were coming out for the YouTuber who got his dog to Nazi salute, and I remember when people were really, really coming out for him. Nobody did the same when a woman's vindictive ex-husband tried to sue her. Nobody did the same when – well, for example, when Stewart Lee was being picked up upon by conservative MPs when there was a real row about something that he said. It was not the same because actually a lot of their free speech and a lot of their chat is really about trying to normalise hate speech.

**OD:** I did an event with some people who are connected with some of that thing and it was talking about comedy and free speech, and I gave the example that when we did the Funny Rabbit just like a day after the general election, the next day, how I was heckled within 30 seconds of being on stage for slagging off Boris Johnson by a guy who went: 'At least he ain't a terrorist!' That was literally the heckle, right, and I went: 'Well, clearly they didn't want me to say that', but nobody was interested in that as an example of free speech being squished by audiences. All they wanted was talks of political correctness and woke culture. That's all they wanted.

**JL:** And you see it's nonsense because all they're basically saying is: 'We can no longer say racial and homophobic slurs in public and we're fuming.' That's all they have. I think that's the thing that's deeply frustrating, and it's frustrating with stand-up sometimes because I would love it if my stand-up would change our political situation. I would love it. I would love it so deeply if me being onstage was somehow so messianic that everyone went home and changed their affiliation.

**OD:** But you have to look for small victories, because I don't believe the line that comedy doesn't change things. I think all culture changes things.

**JL:** I do too. That's why I hate the fact that they are online funding a culture war because everything has a–

**OD:** But to put it in a more positive light there will be people, for sure and certain, who've gone away from seeing your stand-up for the first time who'll go: 'There is somebody else like me and now I feel a bit more confident in that and now I'm going to get involved in this.' That will definitely have happened, for sure and certain.

**JL:** And I'll tell you what's been interesting – thank you by the way, that's an incredibly generous and kind thing to say – but also what's interesting is now the comedy circuit is so much bigger, there's so many more comedians, what I found is people don't have to settle for me in the way that they might have done insofar as now if you're a woman wanting to watch another woman on stage you don't have to go: 'Oh, this person will do.' You can go: 'This person. This person is my soul twin.' You know? There's so much range and variety of comedy now, and I love that. I love that people really, really can find their favourite band in comedy. They don't have to be like: 'Oh, I'll just put the radio on, I guess.' They can find their favourite band and I love that.



**OD:** Yeah. I love that too.

**JL:** Thank you so much for having me. It's so nice to chat to you and I really appreciate you being so generous and kind about my work and letting me chat.

**OD:** Josie, and thank you so much for doing it. I knew you'd be great on this and I always really like talking to you.

Transcription by Tom Colley

### Clips Summary

[00:12:33 to 00:13:09] *Funny Rabbit*

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