Little Big Dog Pill Explanations: Humour, Honesty, and the Comedian Podcast

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Erving goffman's dramaturgical metaphor of self-presentation can be readily applied to stand-up comedy performance.[1] With a literal front-stage and back-stage in the space of live stand-up performance, the audience develops certain expectations of the front-stage behaviour of the comedian as separate from their back-stage behaviour. As the comedian performs themselves on stage through intentionally comedic material developed from their own life and perspective on the world, the audience can often expect to find something out about the comedian: whether or not they are married or have children, what annoys them about everyday life, or what aspects of popular culture capture their imagination enough to warrant commentary. What the audience may not expect from the front-stage stand-up comedy performance is an honest confession told in a way that moves in and out of a comedic frame, something that is simultaneously serious, absurd, and life-threatening. The audience would not likely expect the comedian to engage in an open discussion of relapsing into addiction by stealing painkillers from their dogs, and eventually being driven to the brink of suicide from the comedown. In episode 144 of *Walking the Room*, a weekly podcast hosted by stand-up comedians Greg Behrendt and Dave Anthony, this is exactly what Behrendt engages in.

The comedian podcast mixes discourses of humour and honesty, comedy and tragedy, and performances of the comedian-as-person and the comedian-as-comedian.[2] To use Goffman's terms, it brings backstage talk to the front. To put it another way, the comedian podcast is part of an increasingly successful form of introspective comedy that "cut[s] the jokes."[3] From the privacy of *Walking the Room*'s recording space in the closet of Behrendt's master bedroom, the two comedians talk about their lives as people and as comedians, mixing a range of absurd and vulgar jokes with frequent threats to kill one another, and then broadcasting these conversations on the virtual stage of the podcast. By bringing the comedian's backstage self into a front-stage venue, the podcast gives audiences "more of a sense of [the comedian] as a complete person"[4] than the comedian's stage act alone can provide.

The idea of the self-reflective, and more purely self-representational comedian is a concept that is only beginning to emerge as an understanding of the comedian as a cultural figure also develops in cultural and textual studies. Taking a more traditional approach to cultural understandings of the comedian, Tony Moon argues that despite the cultural ubiquity of comedians, they remain "elusive," rarely revealing their motivations or the creative processes behind their works. As Moon writes, the lack of self-reflective revelation provided by stand-up comedians leaves numerous questions unanswered about the people who do the work of comedy, performing as spokespersons for specific cultures through humour: Who are comedians, how do they regard their audiences, and can we trust anything they say?[5] In searching to uncover who stand-up comedians are as people, Moon looks to representations of the stand-up in both stage and screen fiction. However, I propose that through the virtual stage of the comedian podcast a more promising opportunity to understand individual comedians appears. Speaking as themselves, comedians may now be more easily identified as people and as practitioners of comedy, and their podcast performances may

shed light on the cultural position of comedians more generally. In this essay, I argue that the comedian podcast provides a unique venue for comedians to perform a hybrid form of both humour and honesty, acting as a new media reinvention of the introspective and unstructured alternative comedy of the 1990s. In this humour-honesty hybrid, there is evidence of Freud's theory that humour is the triumph of the ego and the pleasure principle: in joking about adversity, humour creates distance from it and allows one to minimise the adversity's power.[6] Through the discourse of the comedian podcast, the comedian engages in a performance of self that demonstrates how humour is at work in facing the comedian's off-stage life, and invites their audience to a space of limited behind-the-curtain access to share in the process.

The routine in which a comedian presents a version of themselves on stage through personal and confessional material is not an entirely new concept. However, the expectation that the comedian might reveal at least something personal or private, revealing who they really are on stage, has not always been the norm either. Oliver Double credits the "sick comedians" of the 1950s, such as Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce, with introducing "the idea of stand-up as self expression."[7] Sahl and Bruce's style introduced a casual and conversational mode to stand-up comedy, which coloured the comedian's material with their personal opinions and point of view. Prior to this, engaging with political and social critique that could potentially divide an audience was considered an on-stage taboo for the stand-up.[8] From their place within a post-World War II beatnik counterculture in the United States, the "sick comedians" dismantled the taboo against articulating their own potentially divisive personal opinions in the form of social and political commentary. Sahl and Bruce in particular are credited with "challenging the status quo during a historically conservative time," encouraging both audiences and fellow comics to question contemporary social order by representing their own authentic point of view in their comedic stage material.[9]

Closer to the contemporary context, it was the rise and fall of the US comedy club boom of the 1980s, and the backlash against the impersonal setup-punchline style of material cultivated in comedy clubs of the same decade, which led to the development of another kind of comedy counterculture. The "alternative" comedy scene of the 1990s, featuring comedians such as David Cross, Patton Oswalt, Marc Maron, and Janeane Garofalo, was typified by the performance of "subjective [and] self-referential material" that had been uncommon in the comedy club system.[10] While still widely used, the term "alternative comedy" has since become largely redundant in reference to contemporary North American stand-up comedy. Many comedians of the alternative scene have achieved mainstream popularity and stylistically influenced subsequent generations of comics, continuing in the tradition of the self-reflective material of the 1990s and giving the style a prominent place in the contemporary mainstream comedy landscape. At the time, however, the alternative label was quite fitting. In mid-1990s New York City, young comedians performed on stage in ways that were informal, unpolished, and experimental: a mode that was a clear alternative to the traditional comedy club act.[11]

With the mainstreaming of alternative comedy throughout the early part of the twenty-first century, advances in digital media distribution platforms have given rise to a new venue for raw, informal, personal, and self-reflective humour where the comedian performs more transparently as their off-stage self. Brett Mills argues that comedians occupy a unique space in celebrity culture, drawing on the tropes of both star and celebrity performance in the way that they are granted cultural permission to move between performed states of "acting and being" as themselves.[12] This hybrid performance takes place while the comedian also keeps both forms of performance under the umbrella of the name of comedy, giving no explicit indication of a clear boundary between the two states. This is unlike, for example, the film star, whose performances exist in

clearly demarcated modes, where they are either "acting" while performing as a screen character and "being" while performing their public persona for an interview or publicity event. The comedian's performance also differs from the reality TV star's mode, since the latter constantly performs as a version of themselves that is rarely understood as "acting" in a public performance as if upon a literal stage. Their performance, rather, is generally constructed as "being" only the performance of a private self in public. By contrast, the stand-up comedian who appears as a panel guest on a late night talk show often uses modified chunks from their stage act in place of the kinds of personal anecdotes that may be expected from celebrities in such a forum. The stand-up is ostensibly not performing the "act" of themselves in that moment, yet by bringing elements of their stage performance into the performance of their "being", the lines between the two identity positions are blurred. In this context, the comedian podcast could be considered a new genre or adaptation of mainstream-alternative comedy, where comedians consistently perform in off-stage states of "being" themselves before a non-co-present audience, rather than "acting" themselves through their pre-prepared stage routine for a live audience in a room.

The comedian podcast gives comedians, as both podcast hosts and interview subjects, a forum that allows direct and intimate communication with audiences in ways unmediated by content regulations, advertiser requirements, or the politics of comedy club bookings.[13] The stand-up comedian podcast often takes the form of an unstructured interview between host and guest, as in Marc Maron's *WTF* or Pete Holmes's *You Made it Weird*, or an unstructured conversation between two hosts, such as in Anthony and Behrendt's *Walking the Room*, or in its Australian sister podcast *TOFOP* with Wil Anderson and Charlie Clausen.[14] It may even allow for the monologue of a single comic, such as in Bill Burr's *Monday Morning Podcast* or in the introductory self-reflective monologues from Maron on *WTF*. The flexible, unstructured form of the podcast allows comedians to

self-reflexively dissect stand-up comedy as both a craft and a business, enabling them to comment on their place in the industry and their experiences as comics. The podcast is the place where a story may be told for the first time, only later refined into a performed joke or chunk of stage material. It is the raw, experimental testing ground for new material and for the working through of thoughts and ideas about current events or personal circumstances, although it is without the burden of a financial imperative or a co-present audience who requires the comedian to constantly and consistently attempt to elicit laughter.

In his writing on comedy podcasts, Vince Meserko claims that the distinction between comedian and podcaster is becoming increasingly difficult to identify within the current Los Angeles comedy community.[15] The same trend can be seen emerging among Australian stand-ups. For example, the online guide to the 2014 Melbourne International Comedy Festival highlights an extensive list of almost thirty podcasts hosted by Australian comedians, including those of Wil Anderson, Justin Hamilton, Peter Helliar, and Josh Thomas. Comedians are embracing the podcast as a tool of both artistic expression and self-promotion that allows them to reach their audience in "the most direct, intimate way."[16] The nature of the podcast as a portable, on-demand form of entertainment that can "time-shift and place-shift content"[17] allows audiences to actively seek out the specific type of content they want, usually with no additional cost beyond that of the listener's existing internet connection and a portable digital audio device, be it a smartphone, tablet device, or other MP3 player. The accessibility of the podcast allows the listener to integrate it into their daily routine whenever and however they want: commuting, exercising, working, doing everyday household chores. Michael Bull writes on the everyday use of music on portable MP3 players like the iPod, arguing that the portable, on-demand music library has the ability to isolate an individual from the sociality of public spaces, turning the user's

focus inward and onto a personal soundtrack of their own choice, a "personalised narrative" set to a personalised soundscape.[18]

By listening to the comedian podcast, the individual's attention to the social world is similarly focused on themselves and the conversation they are now privy to, as a third party and after the fact. The individual may be disconnected from their immediate surroundings through sound but, for the listener of a podcast such as *Walking the Room*, they are also immersed in the backstage world of their chosen comedians. The individual's inward focus generates personal reactions to the conversation to which they are an absent aural observer. They may react with laughter or pathos, agree or disagree with opinions or behaviour, or identify elements of the discussion that allow the listener to mentally nod along, registering their recognition of the podcaster's story as something that relates to their own life. The integration of the podcast into the everyday lives of listeners, paired with the immersive nature of the mobile listening device that disconnects the listener from their immediate surroundings, adds to the sense of intimate and direct communication between podcaster and listener.

It is *Walking the Room*'s originating principle of candid conversation between two comedians whose careers in the entertainment industry have not exactly turned out as they had hoped that works to endear the listener to the comedians in their acts of "being" their off-stage selves. Both originating in the San Francisco alternative comedy scene of the early 1990s, Greg Behrendt and Dave Anthony's comedy careers had reached a stalling point at the time of the podcast's inception in 2010. Behrendt's sudden fame in the self-help world as co-writer of the bestselling book *He's Just Not That Into You*, as well as his multiple appearances on *Oprah*, and a stint as host of his own daytime talk show (on which Anthony also worked as a writer), had put him in a position at odds with his self-image as a stand-up. His comedy shows had begun to attract audiences whose members were more often interested in relationship advice

than in comedy. As his audiences dwindled, Behrendt repeatedly considered quitting stand-up entirely.[19] Anthony, meanwhile, after what he describes as a history of self-sabotage that resulted in his own stunted career, took a break from performing stand-up comedy to care for his young son, working primarily as a writer and commercial actor.[20] It is out of these trying circumstances that *Walking the Room* began. For somewhere between sixty to eighty minutes per week, Anthony and Behrendt's conversations, which occasionally include guests, chronicle the ups and downs of their lives and careers through the discourses of honesty and humour, creating a performance that fellow comedian and podcaster Paul Gilmartin encapsulates in his description of the show as "funny and honest and dark and wrong."[21] By aiming to be a candid reflection of the two comedians' lives and selves,[22] the podcast seeks to illustrate, as Anthony describes it, that "just because your hopes and dreams died a horrible, fiery death doesn't mean that you can't still have a great life."[23]

With its open depiction of things not always going right for the two hosts, *Walking the Room* becomes not only a weekly hour or so of comedic entertainment for the regular listener. Rather, as the listener identifies with or forms a parasocial bond to the podcasters, the show also becomes a social event that is akin to the practice of checking in with friends. Episodes act as serialised instalments that form an ongoing narrative of Behrendt and Anthony's lives, so that as the listener tunes in to hear what is happening they also seek to engage with the latest in an ongoing collection of narrational plots. What are the latest stories about Anthony's assortment of bizarre and annoying neighbours, for instance, characters who are already well known to frequent listeners by codenames such as Crickets, Linus, and the Hobotangs? What personal or professional misfortune has caused Behrendt to once again consider quitting stand-up comedy in favour of professionally designing pants, focusing on his instrumental surf music band, or going to barber college? Has

either of the comics been through a particularly rough weekend of shows with idiotic hecklers, brawling audience members, or near-deaths in the crowd? And what is the latest addition to the pair's recurring comedic riffs, which often span multiple episodes, such as the fictional podcast about dollhouse construction called *Little Big Dollhouse Explanations,* or the duo's bemused fascination with the Juggalo culture of the rap-metal band *Insane Clown Posse*?

Mark Rozeman draws a comparison between *Walking the Room* and HBO drama *The Wire* for the way in which each episode builds on the one previously podcast.[24] *Walking The Room* develops through the elaboration of Behrendt and Anthony's continuing day-to-day life stories, recurring jokes, and references, and the expansion of the ever more refined lexicon of the show, which has itself elicited a fan-written glossary that is designed to bring new listeners up to speed on the language of the show and its listeners, who are themselves christened as "cuddlahs."[25] The show confirms the podcast as a form that encourages the interested listener to keep returning in order to find out how its hosts, in this case Behrendt and Anthony, are doing, and to stay involved in the ever-growing pool of in-jokes shared between the two comedians themselves, the comedians and their listeners, and between the podcast's online community.

Double compares the relationship between the audience and on-stage comedic performer to other relationships formed in everyday life, noting the pleasure the audience finds in "think[ing] of the comedian as somebody we actually know."[26] The podcast is not only a venue for the comedian to perform honestly, to practise "being" their off-stage self, but also to engage in an intimate and direct communication mode with audiences, which, with the ongoing nature of regular instalments, enhances the parasocial bond the audience member feels for the comedian. The mixed discourses of humour and personal truth that are presented in the comedian podcast serve to position the comedian as a figure the audience feels they know, developing what is perhaps an even more enhanced state of

parasocial connection than would be achieved if the audience were to see the comedian's stage performance alone. The comedian themselves becomes what appeals to the podcast's audiences rather than the material they might talk about or their particular approach to material on stage.[27]

This is achieved not only through identification with the comedian's sense of humour or take on the world, as would usually occur in the usual stage performance of stand-up, but because of the personal stories the comedian shares, and the way the comedian allows the audience into their lives and behind the curtain of their work, not only as stand-up comics, but as performers in the entertainment industry more generally. Through *Walking the Room,* listeners get to know the hosts not only as stand-ups, but through their tales of their other work as well: Anthony as an actor in commercials and television writer for programs such as *Talking Dead* and *Maron*; Behrendt as a musician and author of the dating self-help books whose notoriety he can't seem to escape. The ongoing and personal nature of the one-sided conversation between podcaster and listener leaves the listener with the sense that the comedian is somebody that they know, and actively seeks them out each week to spend time with them through a new instalment of the show.

In the case of *Walking the Room*, an extended interruption to its weekly schedule left dedicated fans speculating on the reason for its absence, and reaching out to Anthony and Behrendt on social media. The candid honesty that both comedians had strived for throughout the podcast's run, as well as the reaction from listeners to its absence, necessitated an honest explanation. After a six-week break in *Walking the Room*'s schedule in early 2013, the podcast returned in April with episode 144, "A Very Special Episode." In this episode, as mentioned earlier, Behrendt discusses his relapse into addiction by way of his use of readily available dog painkillers. It is an inherently tragicomic event: that a husband and father who has previously detailed his struggles with addiction, anxiety,

and depression, should end a fifteen-year stretch of sobriety not by returning to alcohol, street drugs, or prescription pills, but by surreptitiously pilfering heavy-duty painkillers, intended for his elderly dogs. In talking about it on *Walking the Room* and explaining the podcast's extended absence, Behrendt and Anthony recognise and acknowledge the absurdity of the circumstances of Behrendt's relapse. After Behrendt admits he had not been sober for some time, the two play out a dialogue in which Anthony assumes an innocent and genuine enquiring tone, although he clearly knows the circumstances in advance:

GREG BEHRENDT I wasn't sober and I had not been sober.
DAVE ANTHONY For a little while.
GB Yeah, for about a year [*laughs*].
DA Okay, so you were drinking?
GB No, no, I don't—no I wasn't drinking
DA So, you were doing cocaine?
GB I did not do cocaine.
DA So, you were—not meth, you don't seem like a meth guy.
GB No, no, no, the show would've been much better.
DA No, yeah, I agree with that.
GB There would've been no excuse for our show.
DA So, you were taking, let's say... like, codeine?
GB No, but close.
DA Like, you were doing like a cough syrup kind of thing?
GB No, not cough syrup.
DA You were taking vicodin?
GB Yes!
DA You were taking vicodin.
GB Yes.
DA What kind of vicodin?
GB Well, here's the thing. I was taking the dog's vicodin.
DA [*laughs*].

Throughout Behrendt's honest retelling of the process of his relapse, the two continue to riff on the absurdity of Behrendt's use of dog pills, introducing the dog in a drug deal metaphor, where Behrendt

secretly meets the dog to make the exchange, and joking that he has to attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings for dogs.

The podcast provides a unique stage on which to joke about something so tragicomic, confessional, and personal to the comedian. An addict making light of their recent relapse (dog pills or no) is a topic that could not be easily honed into a tight chunk of stage material designed to appeal to a broad audience unfamiliar with at least some of the personal history of the comedian. While the raw and unpolished tradition of alternative comedy is continued through the comedian podcast, the podcast benefits from being part of a larger serialised life narrative: 143 episodes of *Walking the Room* have come before this confession of Behrendt's relapse. The listener has an extensive backstory of the person they have come to know as Behrendt, which includes the ups and downs of his life and career as he has shared them with the audience before reaching this point. His confession is contextualised, and discussing a serious personal issue through joking discourse does not diminish the gravity of the situation, but rather, realising the essence of tragicomedy, serves to temporarily suspend the weight of it.[28]

The blend of comedy and confession in Behrendt's retelling of his relapse is an example of the way the comedian podcast is positioned as a new form of alternative comedy. Switching to a serious, introspective tone, Behrendt references his history of depression and addiction as previously discussed on the podcast. He details the process of becoming addicted to the dog's painkillers: this begins when he takes half a pill at a stressful period of his life; he then uses them on-and-off with greater frequency as a means of self-medicating his anxiety and depression; and, after the death of one of his two elderly dogs, an excess of unused pills becomes available to him. Behrendt eventually reveals that constantly withdrawing from his use of the painkillers has exacerbated his existing mental health issues and caused him to become suicidal. He matter-of-factly recounts hitting his rock bottom, doing so in a way that is both

confessional and seeking of understanding, not only from Anthony, his friend and co-host, but from the podcast's listeners as well:

GB This is something that I can say and I just know people will get it and then so I don't have to explain it. Everybody has shit.

DA Yeah.

GB And everybody has shit that they don't deal with. Some of that shit is buried in there from their early lives and the problem with it is—here's something about getting old: that shit wants out, and it grows and grows and grows. And if you don't go to a therapist, and tell the therapist the fucking truth when you pay for them, and you don't go to your meetings and you don't have a sponsor, and you don't even tell your best friend who you do a podcast with every week—

DA Yeah.

GB Shit starts to build up.

DA Yep.

GB And suddenly your life is completely unmanageable, even on the Lexapro.[29] And I fucking... just one weekend, boom. I took, like, five.

DA Five of the dog pills?!

GB Over about a three- or four-day period, during a very, very stressful time in my life... Anyway, the point is, I hit the wall.

DA Yeah

GB I told my—you know. I just fucking... I had to go—I had to get help.

DA Yeah.

GB And I went for help.

DA You told everybody, you went for help.

GB I went for help, 'cause I didn't want to die.

DA Yep.

GB And I didn't want to keep lying and I just... so it just—I went for help.

This conversation stems from the private recording space of the *Walking the Room* closet, intended to be heard through the intimate broadcast context of the podcast, and integrated into the everyday activities of the listener. Its confessional nature and the illusion of one-on-one communication that the podcast offers is not a type of communication that would be found on the traditional live comedy club stage. There is no humorous intent on the part of Behrendt and Anthony in this part of the conversation, but rather an invitation into

Behrendt's headspace that encourages the audience to identify with his situation. Speaking of his situation in terms of a universal experience—affirming that everyone has emotional issues that burden them and our human instinct is to not reveal them to others—Behrendt creates an allegiance between the comedians and the audience. As laughter acknowledges and forges a sense of allegiance between comedian and audience, and among members of the audience in a live stand-up comedy performance, so too does the sharing of personal experience in the humour-honesty discourse of the podcast.[30]

An example of this kind of serious, tragicomic, and emotional revelation incongruously appearing in a live comedy stage context occurs in Tig Notaro's *Live*. In this recording of an August 2012 set at a Los Angeles comedy venue, Largo, Notaro takes the stage a few days after being diagnosed with breast cancer.[31] Throughout the set, Notaro unloads about a series of personal tragedies happening in a short amount of time: being hospitalised with pneumonia and a life-threatening intestinal infection, the sudden death of her mother, breaking up with her girlfriend, and her cancer diagnosis. Responding to audience applause, Notaro opens the set with an overly bright "Good evening, hello, I have cancer, how are you?" The audience's laughter becomes increasingly sparse and uncomfortable as they begin to realise that Notaro is serious. It is simultaneously a personal revelation and a non-comedic topic: a combination not typically expected from a stand-up comedy performance. In addition, as the cliché dictates, comedy equals tragedy plus time: but here, time is not a factor in the equation, and thus this disrupts the formulaic expectations of comedy. Notaro uses the stage to work through her personal tragedies as they are still in the process of happening.

Throughout the set, Notaro repeatedly apologises to the audience for her inability to tell any of her pre-written jokes and the heavy, personal tone of the set. Attuned to the audience's reaction, she often stops to assure the audience that "it's okay," calling out audience members for laughing too much, or making sympathetic

sounds. When she asks the audience if she should just transition into her jokes, the audience vocally responds in the negative, and supports Notaro in her obvious need to work through her current situation on stage. When she ends the set with one of her pre-prepared jokes, the conceit of the joke (frustration at being passed by a bee while stuck in traffic) is recognised by the audience as incongruously false as against the rest of Notaro's set. The audience is appreciative of the authenticity of Notaro's soul-baring performance, and her tragi-comic attitude has the effect of uniting the audience in a raw, human moment. *Live* is a recorded performance so unique in its break from the typical expectations of live stand-up comedy performance that it garnered Notaro a significant amount of media attention, and praise from other comedians, including Louis C. K., who released *Live* as a digital album through his website.

The unusualness of the raw honesty of Notaro's *Live* set is something that is made less out of place in the comedian podcast by key features of the form, such as the lack of both a co-present audience and the pressure to be consistently funny. The comedian lets the audience in to their lives in ways previously unavailable in the context of comedy stage performance. The intimacy of the podcast form and the strong sense of a parasocial bond between listener and performer is continually negotiated on the emerging virtual stage of the podcast. In *Walking the Room*'s "A Very Special Episode," Anthony expresses his annoyance with the gossip and speculation in which fans had engaged during the podcast's hiatus. Both hosts express their appreciation for their fan base, but Anthony clarifies that, despite the way the comedians have invited the listeners into their lives, there is still a lot in their lives that remains private, details that the listeners would never know about:

> DA A lot of you guys feel like you're our friends and you are in a way, but we also don't owe you anything... You don't get to come into our lives as much as my sister or my best friend. You're just not there, and I'm sorry if you can't take that.

Here Anthony articulates the particular parasocial bond the listener feels for the comedian, and its inherently one-sided nature. While Anthony and Behrendt are seemingly accessible to their fans on social media platforms, like Twitter and Facebook, the volume of communication from listeners they receive makes it impossible, as Anthony goes on to point out, for significant (whether in quantity or quality) personal one-on-one interaction to take place. Therefore, the relationship between the listener and the comedian remains of a one-sided, parasocial nature. Yet this relationship can seem closer to the listener than the parasocial relationship that is forged with a comedian or other celebrity through traditional media venues, where there is a lesser sense of intimate, direct communication, and where the everyday integration enabled by the podcast is unavailable.

Lawrence Grossberg writes of the affective response and connection that fans feel to their chosen cultural texts, and how the fan uses a text in the construction of their own identity, "authoriz[ing]" the text to speak for them.[32] Similar to the role of the on-stage stand-up comic acting as a spokesperson for the values of a culture,[33] the comedian podcaster, in the state of performing the "being" of themselves in the more intimate setting of the podcast, can be thought of as acting as a spokesperson for the individual listener, or smaller community of listeners, rather than for the broader culture at large. In this seemingly more intimate, back-stage context, the fan may feel a stronger parasocial bond, or a stronger sense of entitlement to access the comedian's off-stage life. However, here Anthony is emphasising the notion that, despite the back-stage nature of self-performance in the podcast, the form remains a public stage where elements of the comedian's private self and private life can remain private. This reinforces the idea of the comedian podcast as a public venue for the comedian to perform the state of being themselves. While the comedian podcast provides a sense of access to the comedian's backstage self, it remains a only a partially backstage self that is performed, by virtue of the

fact that an audience will eventually hear the podcast within a front-stage comedic frame.

While these boundaries of public and private are in place, the sense the audience gets of being given access to the comedian as a person and as a performer remains potentially beneficial to the comedian's career, as audiences continue to respond positively to the comedian's accessibility and the personal revelations this offers. Just as Notaro received increased mainstream attention after her raw and honest *Live* set, comedian podcasters who engage with introspective self-revelation have met with similar increases in mainstream attention and career progression. The most prominent example of this is Marc Maron of the podcast *WTF*. Setting an example that Behrendt and Anthony themselves followed, Maron began the podcast out of desperation as his career faltered. The podcast has brought Maron more recognition than ever before and, in addition to consistently drawing crowds to his live shows, Maron has subsequently released a book of personal essays, a stand-up special on Netflix, and a television series: IFC's *Maron,* where Maron plays a fictionalised version of himself. While *Walking the Room* may not have achieved such a level of success as *WTF*, it has exposed Behrendt and Anthony to a wider audience, particularly as the podcast has been supported on social media by fellow comedian Patton Oswalt in its early days, and promoted to a large following in Australia through the podcast's association with the locally popular Wil Anderson. Both Behrendt and Anthony have spoken on the podcast about how neither of them would be likely to have been still working stand-ups if it were not for the increased audiences that the podcast has brought to their live shows. Through comedian podcasts, niche audiences and comedy fans may find comedians who may not have otherwise received high levels of exposure in the entertainment industry. The intimacy of the podcast platform can forge a dedicated audience who wants to enjoy their favourite comedian podcasters both as comedians and as people, and support their live shows in addition to the virtually free entertainment that the podcast provides.

I have argued that the comedian podcast offers a platform for comedians to perform the state of being themselves, bringing what would typically be regarded in a mainstream comedy club context as a backstage identity to the front, allowing the comedian to present a comedian-as-person identity. As evidenced by *Walking the Room*, the ongoing nature of the podcast as a serialised narrative of the podcasters' lives, and the intimacy created through the podcast's ability to be integrated into the everyday lives of the listener, forges a deep parasocial connection between audience member and comedian. Freedom from commercial imperatives and the absence of a co-present audience allows the comedian freedom, diminishing their constant need to be funny, and opening up a space for personal reflection and introspection. That is not to say that all comedian podcasts are inherently dour or shoegazing, or even that the excerpts from episode 144 of *Walking the Room* presented here are entirely representative of the podcast's form as a whole. (For example, only the first half-hour of episode 144 is dedicated to Behrendt's relapse story: the remainder of the episode moves on to other topics, such as recent movies and television, and Anthony's annoyance with the bad behaviour of other parents at a Malibu Easter Egg hunt.) There is plenty of comedy to be found in the self-performance of comedians. However, when that comedy is accompanied by the occasional personal confession of an existential crisis, career disappointment, or dog pill addiction, it can become, as Louis C. K. writes of Tig Notaro's *Live* set, "A way to visit your worst fears and laugh at them... Not by distracting us from the terror but by looking right at it."[34] The humour-honesty discourse of the comedian podcast may occasionally reinforce the trope of the sad clown, but as *Walking the Room*'s Juggalo-mocking catchphrase suggests, perhaps it can be thought of as a case of "clown from the neck down." From the neck up, there is the possibility we can all use humour both to pause on, and to distance ourselves from every private darkness, if only for a moment.

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Notes

1 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), xi-xii.

2 I use the term "comedian podcast" to distinguish this form from the broader umbrella of the comedy podcast, which includes shows such as *Comedy Bang! Bang!*, *Doug Loves Movies*, or *Improv4Humans*. While these latter examples may contain elements of self-reflective conversation, they skew more obviously toward traditional comedic performance.

3 Jaime Weinman, "How to Make it in Comedy: Cut the Jokes," *MacLean's,* April 17, 2013, accessed March 11, 2014, http://www.macleans.ca/culture/television/how-to-make-it-in-comedy-cut-the-jokes/.

4 Wil Anderson, "FOFOP 87: Better Call Kenobi," *TOFOP*, podcast audio, February 6, 2014, http://www.tofop.com/?s=kenobi.

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