



## Maria Bamford



by [Kyle Ryan](#) April 20, 2009

Maria Bamford is one of those comedians whose “real” personality seems mysterious. In her act, she shifts through personas and voices—her parents, bitchy former classmates, airheads, co-workers, monsters, Alicia Keys—so seamlessly and with such pitch-perfect imitation that it’s easy to think Bamford is 100 percent vessel, 0 percent real person. Of course, those numbers are way off—it’s 50-50, at least. In real life, Bamford comes across as far happier and more “together” than her obsessive onstage alter ego.

That’s hard-won, as she describes on her new CD, *Unwanted Thoughts Syndrome*. The title references a real disorder that plagued Bamford for most of her life. She’s mined the pathos in her material to great effect, but she isn’t joking when she describes how paralyzing the problem was. In the liner notes of the CD, Bamford writes, “I was unable to sleep at night for fear of being a rapist or a murderer or a genocider, and would have constant anxious thoughts of doing those things—to friends, family, babies, kitties, etc.—and it was especially powerful the more taboo or inappropriate the situation.” Like, say, shitting on the altar while yelling “I am a Promise Keeper!” in a church. She describes it in great detail on “Free Clinic,” one of the new album’s highlights that’s also a staggering

look at the very real problems that dominated Bamford's life for so long. Just before *Unwanted Thoughts Syndrome* was released, *The A.V. Club* spoke to Bamford about bad thoughts, recording albums, and the Nigerian man who posed as her on Facebook.

**The A.V. Club: The liner notes for *Unwanted Thoughts Syndrome* seem genuine when you're talking about your OCD and giving suggestions for people with similar problems.**

**Maria Bamford:** Ohhhh, is that weird? It's sincere, and I think that is embarrassing, if a comedian can be sincere. It is uncomfortable. [Sighs.] It's not sarcastic or anything, no. It's for reals. I feel passionate about it because I had that OCD thing until I was like 34. I had all of these therapists, and it's been such a horrible thing, and I went to this therapist, seriously, like, twice, and this thing that had plagued my whole life was gone. [Laughs, sighs.]

**AVC: How did that work?**

**MB:** They do like cognitive, behavioral stuff like on facing [fears]. Like for me, I had all of these unwanted, sort of sexual, violent thoughts, ever since I was like 9 or 10 years old, and I always felt horrible about them. They'd get worse if I was with other people or any sort of anxiety-provoking situation, which was just about everything. [Laughs.] I tried to tell a bunch of therapists over time, but they didn't identify that. They just said, "Well, let's talk about your childhood," and I'd be like [Labored voice.] "I've talked about it a million times before." So yeah, I Googled it and went to this guy in Glendale and was just like, "Dr. Boone, you're blowing my mind, man!" He had me just record my thoughts into a tape recorder and listen to them over and over again. And seriously, it was gone within a couple of months.

**AVC: It seems like you could freak yourself out even *more* by listening to that.**

**MB:** Well that's the thing. I guess this is the philosophy—who knows, maybe it wouldn't be helpful to somebody else. Okay let's say you're like, "I'm unclean. I've got to wash my hands." So you get the idea, "Oh, I'm unclean," but instead of washing your hands, which is the compulsion—the obsession is that you're unclean, the compulsion is washing your hands over and over again—what you did is get your hands super-dirty, and you just sit there, sit in the anxiety. I guess the idea is like with a panic attack, there's only so much your body can panic. There's only so high your anxiety can go, and then your brain just gets bored. So it was like getting to that super anxiety and not trying to make it go away. Just sitting through it, and whatever my worst anxiety was—that was I was gonna chop people into chunks, have sex with the chunks, and put the chunks on Cobb salad and feed it to my parents—like "Okay, so that's the worst thing. Just listen to that over and over again and finally get kind of bored with it."

The thing that keeps the thoughts coming back is the power that you put in the thought that you *can't* think of it. I was totally scared to do it, but I was like "Well, this is so paralyzing." I wouldn't spend time alone with most people. So stand-up's really good,

because it's as if you're alone if you look straight into the light bulb. So it was just awesome. But that's serious... it's not super-funny.

**AVC: Have you read *Me Talk Pretty One Day*? Some of your OCD sounds like the "Plague Of Tics" story.**

**MB:** Yeah! I didn't touch things, but I would clench my fists and kind of squeeze my eyes together, and I'd have to sit on my hands a lot if I were with other people, because I was worried I'd lunge at them with my grasping fingers. So I'd sit on my hands. What else did I do? Yeah, a lot of my stuff was just avoiding people altogether. But I would clench my fists together thinking I was getting the thoughts out of my head. But in fact it doesn't at all, and it can make it worse, because you're focusing on it more, I guess. What else did I do? I found other things to obsess about. I think I, like a lot of people, have that type of brain where I find it interesting or fulfilling to worry about something.

**AVC: In your stand-up, you seem so at ease with bringing up these horrifying thoughts, but when you first started doing it, were you nervous?**

**MB:** Oh yeah, yeah, totally. I felt—I still feel scared that people will misunderstand it, but oh well. It's almost my wish that people don't live with secrets or stuff they don't tell other people, because if people don't talk about it, you don't know you're not alone. I mean, I don't know, maybe some secrets are good, like what your PIN number is. You know what? I'm going to tell everybody my PIN number in this article. People need to know.

**AVC: Then other passwords, like Facebook.**

**MB:** I have a funny story about my Facebook account. It got hacked—well, it wasn't hard to hack into, because my password was my birthday, but all of the sudden the other day, these friends started coming to me like "Maria, I was chatting with you on Facebook, and you said you were in trouble and you needed money?" I'm like, "No, I'm fine, and I don't even know how to chat on Facebook." They were chatting with me for like an hour! So I changed my password, and some friends sent me the conversations they had had with me, and they're basically like "Oh hey, how you doing?" "I'm in desperate trouble, I need help." And the guy changed my Facebook quote to say "I need hlep," H-L-E-P. My friend said "Where are you right now?" "I'm in Lagos, Nigeria." But the best part is, somebody had sent me like a comedy video saying "Hey, would you check this out?" The guy watched it, saying that it wasn't funny. I just thought that was so hilarious. I mean he's going to hack into a comedian's website, and he's got an opinion about comedy. That was the best, 'cause the poor guy who sent me the video was like, "Oh, I'm so sorry, Maria, that you didn't think it was funny." I'm like "Oh no, it's one guy in Nigeria. Don't pay attention to what that guy says."

**AVC: How long do you generally live with bits before you feel comfortable recording them?**

**MB:** When I did a half-hour special for the first time for Comedy Central, I had never done a half-hour before, so some of those jokes were pretty new, like filling the time. I kind of believe—I don't know if this is responsible or what, but if somebody is asking to do it, if Comedy Central is like, "Oh yeah, you could do a new CD," I think, "Oh, I must be able to do a new CD!" [Laughs.] I heard the CD, and I was like, "Oh no, those jokes have gotten so much better at this point!" But I feel like I can't worry about it, either, because I feel like, well, maybe I'd never make anything if I was gonna wait until it was perfect. I usually do something for like a year, and then I feel good or better about it. I've been working on this one joke, "Joy Whack-A-Mole," where my family's playing a new game where one person says something they're excited about, and then the other person just slams it down with all the reasons you shouldn't be feeling so great. I think I've been working on that for at least a year.

**AVC: Have you ever regretted recording something?**

**MB:** Sure, but I read all those spiritual books that always say [Breathy New Age voice.] "You're just a channel for creativity!" I can't be responsible for what comes out of me, so that's my caveat. I'm just a flower in a beautiful garden! It's not my fault what color my petals are! But of course some people might say, "Hey, but you can trim back some of the shitty parts of the flower that nobody likes." [Laughs.]

**AVC: A lot is made of the voices you do in your act, but you often mention in interviews that you only do a few. It's not like "Maria Bamford and her thousands of voices!"**

**MB:** Yeah, I get worried 'cause I think if people come just to hear incredible voice work... [Low voice.] This is my low voice. [High voice.] This is my high voice. Like, I just get worried about that, 'cause I think, "Well, that's not what I mean to be showcased, really." I mean, it's fun, but I've worked with people like [Tom Kenny](#), or [Billy West](#), or people who I feel are genuine voice geniuses, and I think "Well, I'm a person who can do a few here and there."

**AVC: Still, how annoying was it when [Patton Oswalt](#) landed the lead in *Ratatouille* out of the clear blue sky?**

**MB:** [As if choking back anger.] *Oh goddamn him.* But he was so good in that! He was so perfect! Because he's kind of a foodie guy too, like he loves food. I thought that was just such a great movie. It just was so lovely, like even if you're disgusting, and everyone is creeped out by you and thinks you're gross, you know, *keep doing what you love!* That's what I took from it. I may be a filthy rat, but I'm gonna keep doing comedy.

**AVC: You've said that the Comedians Of Comedy made your career. How did you get involved with it?**

**MB:** Well to start, I worked with Patton over the years several times, and then he just asked me if I wanted to go on this tour for eight days and be filmed, and I was like, "Uh,

yeah, that sounds awesome.” So that’s what I did, and it was great. The thing is like a dream come true, because when you’re a comedian, you’re just by yourself. That used to be the upside of it—I just liked to be by myself all the time—but as I get older, it’s like, “Hey, it would be cool if some other people were around.”

**AVC: It must’ve been surprising when that branched out into a national tour.**

**MB:** Yeah, it was surprising how long it went and how big it was. Because I know Patton and [Brian \[Posehn\]](#) and [Zach \[Galifianakis\]](#) have big fan bases already, and so it was lovely to ride their wave. It was really nice. Because I’m a bit more theatrical than those, so it was very nice for them to have me on the show. Sometimes Patton would introduce me like, “Hey guys? You guys, she’s really great, a super-nice person...” It was just awesome, and it was really nice to see everybody work on their jokes, try different jokes. I just love that part of comedy, where you see somebody’s jokes develop. They try something new to see what works, and I just love that part. It was great to see Patton. He just has an idea, and then he tacks it out onstage and it seems like it becomes this beautiful novella. It’s just gorgeous words and all that stuff. It was a great learning experience. To be with such dudes—I’ve never had brothers, and it was fun to sit there and, you know, learn the scent of each other’s farts, and feel really comfortable in that.

**AVC: In an old interview, you talked about doing a pilot for something called *The Right Now Show*, and you said something like “Let’s hope it gets picked up!” It seems like so much of like a comic’s life is enveloped in that phrase.**

**MB:** “Maybe something will happen with this!” [Laughs.] Well, it’s so funny, and it seems like it’s just amazing when something *does* happen. I remember when Patton called, like, “Oh hey, do you wanna do this?” “Yeah, that’d be great.” Then it’s like, “Oh, it’s happening? Great!” It’s just lovely. I think that’s the exciting part of it, too—you never know. I got this weird call this Christmas, from Norah Ephron’s office, asking if I wanted to be in a staged reading of a play. I was like “Uh, sure! That sounds fun.” It’s at UCLA, and it’s *You Can’t Take It With You*. I had to show up there at 9 a.m., and we were supposed to perform it at night. I didn’t really know who else was going to be in it. Turns out it’s Tom Hanks, Rita Wilson, Martin Short, Annette Bening, these huge actors. I’m like, “Excuse me?” I think we’re supposed to read it aloud, which might be sort of boring, but it’s for this benefit. They start blocking it and giving us costumes, and we’re going to perform it that night, so it was just totally surreal. Tom Hanks picks me up and slaps me on the butt during one part of it. [Laughs.] I’m like, “This is the weirdest day ever.”

**AVC: When you started doing stand-up, you performed with a violin and with your head shaved. Would that person recognize you onstage now?**

**MB:** Yeah, it’s funny. Somebody said to me recently, “Oh my God, you’re so much better than you used to be.” And I was like, “Oh, really?” I also have this idea of like, “I am freaking *rocking* right now!” I guess that’s good, there’s sort of an obliviousness.

[Laughs.] If I really saw how I was, I would be like, “Maybe I shouldn’t do this anymore.”

**AVC: That’s such the backhanded compliment. “You suck way less now!”**

**MB:** Yeah, awesome, thanks! [Laughs.] But there is something beautiful about comedy where it’s like, you’ll see somebody go up, and you’ll be like, “Uh-oh, oookay.” And just a month later, a year later, it’s like, “Oh. My. God. They just blossomed!” I mean, it is sort of a humbling profession. Even when you get really good, because it is personal, it is kind of you up there by yourself. There can still be weird moments where it goes horribly wrong, but hopefully those times are less often.

**AVC: Have you had any of those recently?**

**MB:** Well, like in *Comedians Of Comedy*, I was in Buffalo, and it was one of those shows where it was open to the whole school. They had “free comedy,” and then they had Patton’s name, and that’s it, it was packed out with kids. You just go, “Okay, maybe some of the kids know what they’re coming to see.” Who knows, I don’t know what kind of weird energy I was putting out there, but it was very quiet. Someone was like, “You’re not funny, why don’t you get off?” I wish could say I had been like this Zen, calm person, like, “Hey man, that’s cool.” I still, or in the past—that’s what I’m supposed to say, I’m trying to be more positive—in the past, I wasn’t great at dealing with that. I’ll just get kind of sincere, like, “Oh I’m so sorry that you’re not enjoying it.” My mom just got me this book called *Bullies Into Buddies*. It’s for kids and teens on how to deal with bullies. Because the whole thing with calling somebody a bully or a heckler immediately makes them into *eeevil*, and they’re not *eeevil*. I mean, I’ve heckled people. [When I’m heckled] my knees start to shake. I kind of try to start noticing, like “Okay, what’s happening when this is happening?” It’s like this physical-fear thing. But I’m into *Bullies Into Buddies*. [Laughs.] And it turns out I’m not in physical danger, so there’s really no reason to be afraid.

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