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## Maria Bamford: Obsessively funny

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**Comedian Maria Bamford says she has a hard time being charming. Fuck charming. Charming isn't funny. You know what is? Everything Maria Bamford does. She only proves it further on her new Comedy Central album *Unwanted Thoughts Syndrome*.**

There are a few things about comedian Maria Bamford you may not know. For example: did you know her mailman's name is Steve Smith (he just got knee surgery and is retiring in a few months), or that she needs to floss more (according to her dentist) but that she's never had a cavity in her 38 years on this planet or that people in jail and autograph hobbyists send her snail mail requests for her to sign recipe cards? These are, perhaps, mundane details from the rather unique life she lives as one of the nation's most well-respected contemporary comedians. But still, it's all the type of things you might learn about the Minnesota native upon having a leisurely chat – leisurely for Bamford, an

admitted caffeine addict – while at her Los Angeles home. It's a welcomed respite from otherwise heady and over-analytical discussions about comedy. But we can't avoid that topic for long.

Since the release of her 2003 album, *The Burning Bridges Tour* on Stand Up! Records, Bamford's popularity has grown exponentially. Two years after, she was starring alongside comedian friends Patton Oswalt, Brian Posehn and Zach Galifianakis in

Comedy Central's tour documentary show the *Comedians of Comedy*, which yielded a cult-like franchise that included two live DVDs and most importantly more live tour dates with her cohorts across the country. During and after that time, she gifted comedy nerds worldwide with *The Maria Bamford Show*, a web series produced for the now sadly defunct Super Deluxe. Each episode – all of them are included on the bonus DVD in her new album – finds Bamford exposing her insecurities, neuroses and obsessive compulsions.

That leads us to *Unwanted Thoughts Syndrome*, the name of her new, and arguably, strongest album, and the name of the precise type of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Bamford suffered from. In the liner notes of the album, Maria reveals that when she was nine years old, she began having thoughts about doing unspeakable things – rape, murder, that sort of thing – to her friends and family. As such, she purposely didn't form too many strong personal bonds. Today, however, the Bammer is thriving and happy and, as always, ready to sprinkle her eccentricities (run through a comedy filter first) upon the eager – and, sometimes, rather confused – masses.

**How is this album different than your first two?**

I feel like my first one was the best because that was material I worked on for 10 years. And then you do the second one and you listen to it and you say to yourself, 'Those jokes are so much better now, God dangit!' But what I tell myself is that I'm just a channel and I can't be responsible for what comes out of me. I just kinda have to keep putting it out there. That may be unfortunate for the purchasers of the albums. But I'm very proud of what I did on this one and I hope that other people like it. We'll see.

I would hope something amazing always comes out of my brain, but I'm sure that's not true. Everything's been thought of or said before in a much more beautiful way by other comedians; but I can't help it. I'm a human being, so I have to keep talking. I don't think I'm a genius in any way.

**You've been doing a bit onstage for a while – the last track on the new album – where you sort of mock the stereotypical female comedian (see video below). How did that come about?**

Yeah, I actually didn't mean it that way. I meant it like it was sort of what I wish I could be, like someone who's charming and fun; but it pains me to be charming and fun. And a lot of people will come up to me after the show and say that was one of the funnier things I did, but not because they understood the irony. They're like, 'Oh, I really love that. Those were the best jokes of the night.' And I'm like, 'Yeah exactly.' But I don't think that I can provide that for some people. I'm somewhat jealous of people who are charming.

**Charming or not, you're one of the better-respected comics of our day. Are you still worried about what people think of your comedy?**

The only circumstance that feeling comes up with are during late shows on a Friday or Saturday night at a club where people don't know what they've come to see. Then, I feel genuinely scared. Maybe they're super wasted or they've come out with a group of

people or whatever and they're attitude is like 'We're here to have a great time!!!' And then it's like, 'Oh no, this lady is talking and her jokes are theatrical. STOP IT!' Then I feel genuinely obsessed with what people think of my comedy. I want to somehow please them or connect with them. But usually I get hostile. I'll think they're jackasses and assholes.

But I know what it's like when you go to a comedy show where you're surprised by the act and then you're trapped and then have a couple of drinks and you think, I need to voice my opinion or at least talk to some other people. Like I was at a scary movie recently, and I just felt I needed to talk to my boyfriend during the movie because it was so upsetting. And I think that's why people have to talk during comedy shows — what's going on onstage is so upsetting that they need to calm themselves down.

### **Really?**

That's what I think. They have to talk about it because it's right in front of them and it's horrifying. They don't like it so much that they have to kinda talk about it. That's my new theory.

### **So it's not that they're rude? They're just trying to connect with something they feel familiar with?**

Yeah, exactly. I love stand-up comedy. But it is kind of odd having someone fairly physically close to you going on and on about their personal life. Like I have a tendency to quiver a little bit onstage because I'm so jacked up on caffeine. When my sister comes to see me, she gets very nervous. It's the like when I can't watch singers being sincere. I'm very uncomfortable with sincerity.

### **In the liner notes of the new album and on your official site, you're very open with telling people about your depression and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Do you feel there's still a stigma attached in being on meds or going to therapy?**

I did these online webisodes [*The Maria Bamford Show*] with the whole premise that I went mad and I was living in my parents' attic. I got a lot of e-mails from Australia — because I've performed there a couple times — with people saying, 'Oh my God.' But I think that's a more conservative country in terms of mental health. I know where I'm from in Minnesota I think it's OK [to have mental health problems] but people don't like to say it's them who might have problems. Because it is your brain. I know I don't want to be thought of as somehow unstable or untrustworthy or out of control. Those aren't attractive traits. There's still some shame in me that I'm kind of super sensitive.

### **It seems like you're trying to reach out to people to let them know it's OK for them to ask for help.**

I just hate it when you hear about someone committing suicide and you're like, 'For chrissakes if someone could've just drove you to a hospital. Sometimes people go off their meds and they say, 'Well, I'm going to try this new thing.' As I get older, it seems like the depressions get worse on a certain level. Because life is so good right now, I start thinking I'm such a jackass. If I were poor and didn't have things going so well, I could go, 'Well there's a specific reason.' But now it's like I'm such a douchebag because I'm

so depressed. But things are going well. I'm a very happy person at the time of this interview.

**You said that you're many times jacked up on caffeine. Isn't that bad for someone with OCD?**

It totally hurts. My psychiatrist says you need to cut down and all that stuff. I don't know. I mean, I don't seem to be able to cut down. So I don't know what's going to have to happen in order for me to cut down. It's not good for anxiety but I like that feeling of feeling aware. And I think it is an antidepressant for a certain amount of time—and then it wears off completely. It's not good. I need to be in some crazy support group to come off caffeine but there doesn't seem to be any out there.

**Where do you feel most at peace?**

I think it's just familiarity that makes me feel calm. I'm not an extroverted person. I'm definitely more introverted. I just have to get to know people a little bit. I always feel that when I get to a new town it's like a dark spectre and everything is an ominous sign and everyone's against me. And then three days in, I'm like, 'This is the best place. I think I'm going to move here because everyone is so nice.' I'm like that with music too. If I hear something three times it becomes good to me. And friends and family of course make me feel good. Also, I'm in a jillion 12-step support groups. I always love those. It's like McDonald's. You always know what it's going to be like—the people will be slightly different, but it's the same format.

I also like a gas station sandwich. I've eaten a lot of gas station sandwiches; I just had one right now. It was an egg salad. I like a 7-Eleven sandwich. That's always delightful. I don't know if you noticed, but they had that promotion Big Eats, Cold Treats at 7-Eleven and where they had these marvelous sandwiches and then they just dropped them; they decided they didn't need those anymore. I don't know what happened. But they had some great roast beef sandwiches. I do like gas stations, because that's where comedy clubs are near—across the freeway from a gas station. But now, I'm staying at better hotels, which is fun. My agent I think put it in my contracts that I have to stay at nicer hotels. It's awesome. I think I've softened considerably. I fear that sometimes. Like when the audience is too good and maybe I'm cheating myself. But who cares if I'm cheating myself. That's all right.