

Jimmy Pardo: Classic comedy done right

by Daniel Perlman

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Veteran stand-up, trailblazing podcaster and brand new warm-up comedian for the *Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien*, Jimmy Pardo is going to make you laugh— one way or another.

Jimmy Pardo was once a young kid from Chicago who dreamed of becoming the next Johnny Carson. Today, Pardo is a 20-year comedy veteran, having paid his dues through things most comics go through (nightmare gigs and several failed pilots). He's now making a name for himself as host of the hit podcast, *Never Not Funny*— which, if you've followed Pardo's comedy trajectory you will know the podcast makes perfect sense.

For years now, Pardo has hosted live talk shows onstage, games shows for television and has made a habit of liberally dipping into his stand-up audience for laugh fodder. It's all done with class, however. A true pro, Pardo is able to interact with his crowd and still maintain an edge without hurling insults and cheap shots.

Lucky for us, Jimmy recently chatted with *Punchline Magazine* about podcasting, what makes a good talk-show host, and much more.

Let's talk about your podcast, *Never Not Funny*. What was your goal when you first started the it?

I'm very good talking with people, and I'm good at winging it onstage, but if you told me, 'Hey, you should write a blog every day and tell people what you're up to,' it would sound like a 14-year-old girl who has no knowledge of English whatsoever. Any time I try to write something in that way, I just look like an idiot. So then in 2006, I was approached by the guy who's now my producer (and co-host) Matt Belknap, and he said, 'You should do a podcast.' And I thought that's the perfect way to get these funny things out there every week, as sort of an audio blog entry.

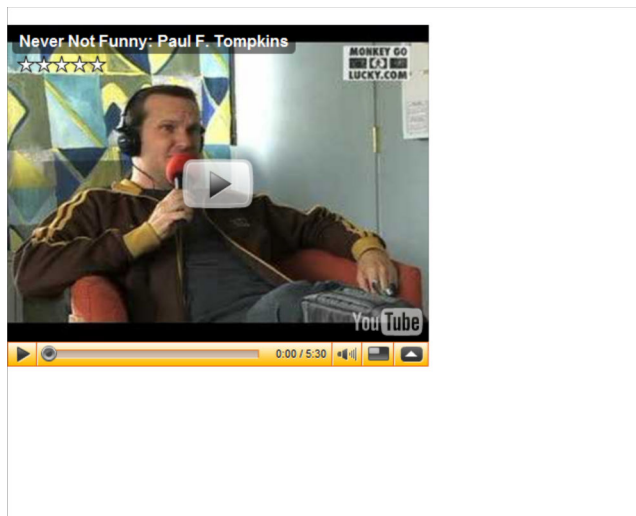
How much preparation goes into each episode?

Zero. I'll think of some stuff in my head, but I find whenever I write down topics I wanted to hit, my mind isn't free enough to go with the stream of consciousness conversations. If somebody says the word "ghosts," I want to be able to say "Do you believe in ghosts?" and then we'll talk about that for 25 minutes. I don't want to be thinking, 'We gotta get back to McDonald's!'

We had Adam Carolla on recently. And Adam and I don't know each other all that well, but Adam was hysterical. And very much like Carson, my role at times like that is just to facilitate. I would chime in from time to time to keep the conversation moving, but Adam was doing all the heavy lifting. And there's other episodes where it's more of a tennis match, back and forth.

You recently started charging for the full podcast. Did your listeners get pissed?

Everyone expects everything for free on the Internet. Stealing music, TV clips. It was a calculated risk to go to the pay format. But if you can drive to a bar and make money for doing stand-up, why not make money for doing this? People bitched for a while. But the number of people that have paid is still far beyond what I ever expected.



What do you think it is about *Never Not Funny* that's made it successful?

I think the key is to have people who have good stories; that's where we find the funny. It's great, and it's my favorite thing I've done in my career. We've done over 170 shows. I think there are maybe three that are good, and the rest are very good to great. And I say that humbly, based on comments on the Internet and that sort of thing. When I listen back to them, sometimes I think I sound annoying. But for the most part, I think 'That's a pretty good episode.' And I'm lucky I have these talented, funny people that come on that make people want to pay to listen to it.

You're also now the warm-up comedian for *The Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien*.

Yes, Monday through Fridays. Knock on wood, it's turning out to be the second-greatest gig in the world. My dream obviously is to be on television. But when Conan asks you if you want to do warm-up for the brand-new *Tonight Show*, you say 'yes.' It's the greatest talk show in history, and Conan is terrific. The atmosphere is great. A lot of them have been working together for 15 years, but they've really treated me like a part of the team.

Is it mostly crowd-work during the warm-ups?

It's a lot of crowd-work. I'm out there 10-12 minutes a night. You've got some legal things you have to cover, cell phones and all that. But then I just go into the crowd and talk to people. And that's what my stand-up's become anyway. It's a seamless transition. The main difference is that these are people who are not coming to see Jimmy Pardo. It can't be as biting as a stand-up show, because it's Conan's name on the banner.

You mentioned that your traditional stand-up sets are now based on a lot of crowd work now. But I've I read that you decided to go into more of an improv direction onstage a long time ago.

As an open micer, I would improv quite a bit. I'd take a lot of chances. But once I started getting paid I thought I had to be a quote-unquote 'comedian' and thought, 'I better stick to my set.' And that was a mistake. I was tired of people telling me that I was the funniest guy they'd ever worked with off-stage. And people would say if I did onstage what I did off-stage, then I'd be great. And I didn't really understand what they were saying for a while. I guess it was around '93 that I decided to shift. I went back to taking chances, doing stream of consciousness stuff like Richard Lewis would do, and that helped me find my voice.

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So before you found that voice, what was your relationship with stand-up?

I cut my teeth on a bunch of one-nighters in the Midwest. I'm sure those experiences made me a better comic. A

lot of shit gigs with bachelorette parties in the front row. But one thing I regret: early on, I sort of chose to be a middle-act in the B-clubs as opposed to MC at the A-rooms. And I probably should have taken advantage of the chance to MC at the A-rooms more. Because I'd be working with better comics, better crowds. But I went with more of the middling in the B-rooms. I probably would have found my voice sooner had I MC'd at the A-rooms.



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Have you done a lot of MCing as a comic since you have such a huge interest in hosting?

Well, in Chicago, I did host a lot of showcase nights, and I was good at it and enjoyed it. I tried to take a page out of Carson, making the show my own. Almost like a *Jimmy Pardo & Friends*. Like, 'I'm hosting it and here's six guys you're gonna enjoy watching.'

What do you think makes a successful talk-show host?

Just being present. And there are some talk-show hosts who aren't present, because they don't know how to be in a conversation. They're just thinking, "OK, when he's done talking about his kid, I've got to ask him about the movie." Johnny Carson, Letterman, Conan, these guys can be in a conversation, and if there's something funny about kids, they'll go with it and talk about kids for five minutes. Then at the end they'll say that he's in whatever movie, which I think is much more valuable to have a funny conversation like that than to have to talk about the experience on the set, just so you can plug a movie.

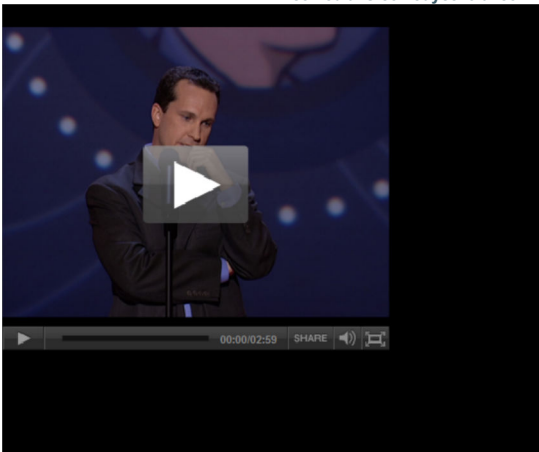
Is stand-up comedy in a good place right now?

When guys like Jay Leno were starting, there wasn't a comedy club on every corner. They had a tough time in that respect. I started in the boom where I could work every night, making money or performing in front of a real crowd. I believe in hard work. Because even though I'm using the podcast as a marketing tool to an extent, I don't really understand Twitter and MySpace. I think it's easy to get a set out there and get noticed. And I sound like an old, pompous asshole when I say this, but my generation had to go out there and it had to be elbow grease.

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Jimmy Pardo - Cement Walls

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And there are a lot of comics now, where no one should be seeing what they're doing. You're learning how to do comedy. Why would you want a video posted from your first year in comedy, just so people can write 'You suck,' 'you're a faggot,' or 'don't quit your day job.' So I don't like the idea that there's a shortcut, and I really don't think people should be using it. I think people should be working harder behind the scenes, and then put something on the Internet. When I was starting, we always joked about the guy with the great press kit. With the glossy folders and everything prepared—the guy who was worried about the marketing before he was worried about his comedy. And it's the same way with the Internet; the more you focus on the marketing early on, the less you're focusing on getting better as a comedian, in my opinion.

An executive comes to you and says you can make whatever project you want. What would it be?

To that question, I've always said a talk-show, and I guess that's still the case, but I've done some live game shows out in LA and do love the interactions with real people that a game show provides.

For more info, check out jimmypardo.com and the *Never Not Funny* site at pardcast.com.

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