



Episode 1,505: Dave Smith on Comedy

Guest: Dave Smith

WOODS: All right, we're talking comedy today. You know a little something about that.

SMITH: A little bit.

WOODS: We talked about your background a bit a couple episodes ago, but just refresh our memory: how long has it been since you've been doing standup comedy, and how long has it been since you feel like you've kind of gotten good at it?

SMITH: Well, I've been doing comedy for about 12 years now, and I think I was good for the stage that I was in just about all the way through. But actually good at comedy, it's probably been about four or five years.

WOODS: Okay, okay. Now, sometimes people want to reduce things to formulas. Like they'll ask a musician, how do you write a song? And they think, first of all, of music as being something mathematical and that there's a science to it. But that's not at all how musicians are inspired. And so likewise, I don't want to ask you, how do you write a joke, like you sit down, and there's some formula that you follow. But at the same time, there must be something that, when you read something in current events, makes you say, all right, I don't know what the bit is going to be, but I can make a bit out of this. And I'm just wondering, is there some commonality among all these sorts of things that you recognize them as being potentially the root of a joke?

SMITH: Well, much like I'd imagine with musicians, I know with comedians lots of people have a very different process than the next comedian. I mean, there's people who do it, like I go to the park with a notebook, and there's people who do like all these different things. I've never – I'll kind of just, something will pop in my head, like a funny line or a funny idea, and I go like, okay, I think there's something there. And then I like to play with it on stage. That's almost always how I come up with things. And then after a few weeks of playing with it on stage, I'll usually come up with something else or another tag to it. And then I kind of slowly build these bigger chunks. And before you know it, it's just like a bit.

WOODS: What I used to like about the early episodes of Owen Benjamin's podcast, *Why Didn't They Laugh?* – did you ever hear those early episodes?

SMITH: Oh, yeah.

WOODS: So what he would do is he'd take a joke, and it'd be a joke that kind of bombs or it just doesn't get the response he wants. And so then he starts taking it apart, trying to figure it out, because he's convinced there's something here. Like this should get a laugh, so what's going wrong? So then he'll tweak it a little bit, and you'll hear a recording of him doing it in another comedy club. It gets a little bit bigger laugh, and then he analyzes what the difference was. And then he keeps refining it until it absolutely kills. And to be able to get a peek into that process I found absolutely fascinating. Now, are you doing the same thing with some of yours, where you say, *Look, these SOB's should be laughing. What's wrong here? I'm going to work on this thing until I just have to surrender or something.*

SMITH: Well, my process is not exactly the same as Owen. I love that guy, but he's a psycho. He's so meticulous with the way he develops his material. But I certainly can relate to that feeling of like, I think there's something funny here and it's just not going over. And sometimes you have to give up on those ones. I mean, sometimes after a while, if you're like, this just isn't really getting a laugh, you've got to go like, okay, well, I guess that's it for this one. And sometimes you'll kind of put it on the bench and then a few months later bring it out again, and then you'll figure it out.

I've had experiences before where there's a joke that I think is really funny that's just not working, and one day randomly on stage, I just find a different word or a little bit different way to put it, and all of a sudden, you get this big pop of laughter. And there's something about that experience that's always interesting, where you're like, oh, okay, so that was the difference. Comedy is this weird art form, where sometimes the exact same thought but just slightly tweaking the delivery of it can make all the difference in the world.

And so the art of standup comedy, it's not just about being funny; it's about how you draw laughter, somewhat forcibly, out of a group of people, how you make them all laugh together. And it's not just about saying a funny idea. It's about fitting it into this rhythm where it pops at the end. It's kind of hard to exactly describe, but it's like it's got to fit this formula. It's got to pop in a way that now you know you have to laugh at the end it.

WOODS: Is there in your comedy a line you won't cross in terms of subject matter or material? I know how you feel about self-censorship and about the hectoring culture that we have. You're not supposed to laugh at this or you're not supposed to make a joke about that. But just you personally, not a rule that you'd want to impose on anybody, of course, but you personally, your own style, are there places you won't go?

SMITH: Well, the places that I don't want to – I mean, the short answer is no. I mean, if there's something that I think is really funny, then I'm going to go there because I think it's really funny, so that's what this is about. And I've always been somebody who loves really offensive comedy. I mean, always. Even like the great David Gordon, he loves to tell you the most offensive joke ever. I've always been like that. I love that stuff. I love really edgy jokes. I like really playing with tragedy and comedy.

But there are certainly places that I don't want to go, but it's a totally different direction. Like what makes me cringe and feel bad about my stand up – and I've done this several times before. It's been years, but where I would say something that I don't really believe and it gets a big laugh. And I don't mean literally, I don't believe it; I mean the point of the joke is something I don't actually believe. Or I'd say something that's kind of pandering that gets a big

laugh. And that, literally it makes it hard for me to sleep at night. So that's the stuff that I try to self-censor.

WOODS: I think about being a historian, and I know people think that there's this kind of secret training you get to be a historian, and that's what makes it possible for me to write history books and the average person couldn't. And I think that's a whole lot of BS, and I've been through two elite programs in history, and sorry, I don't buy it. Anybody can do this. I mean, okay, for 10 minutes, I'll explain to you how to go through somebody's private papers and what to look for and stuff. But otherwise, anybody can do this, I really believe.

But I suppose if you read a lot of history and you're just immersed in it, you're going to execute it better. And likewise, I think there are people in a lot of fields where we have this feeling that there's some secret knowledge they have that makes it possible for them to do it, but we couldn't. In history, I just don't think that's the case.

But in comedy, I think there kind of is, but I don't think it's something that you – you don't learn it in school, and nobody sits you down and says, "Here are the seven principles of a good joke. Take notes and write them down and implement them." I don't think there's anything like that. But I still do feel like, even though it may not be something you might be able to articulate, there is something, in effect, you know that we don't. There's an instinct or some knowledge bank you have that allows you to craft a joke in a way that, if I were to do it, just wouldn't be as good. It wouldn't work.

So can you try and help us – I mean, that's my very roundabout way of asking you this dumb question of how do you write a joke, because I realize that there isn't any one way. But still, there are instincts and approaches and there must be best practices and whatever – and you must watch a lot of standup people and see: *I see what he's doing there, or, Wow, that was a really good transition he made to that next joke*, and so on.

SMITH: Sure. Well, it's like the way you structure a joke and the way you layer it. Like, I'll enjoy watching really high-level comedians. You're like, oh, man, that was really good, the way he put that all together. But honestly, I do think it's really – I mean, it's a mix of two things. It's an instinct or a gene – I don't mean that literally in the biological sense, but it's kind of you have this thing, and then it's about getting on stage a lot, doing it over and over and over again, and kind of honing it.

But I've had so many times, I can't even explain how many times I've had, where I've thought about an idea for a joke, and I just don't know exactly how to deliver it, and then I get on stage, and the delivery every just kind of comes. And it's in that moment when you're in front of people, that you kind of get into the moment, into this zone, and then the way to deliver it just comes out, because you know I need to draw this laughter out of people. And that to me is something that I can't exactly describe. It's just kind of like, I think there's some natural instinct to this that I kind of just have, and I can do that in that situation. And then there's lots of people I know who are very, very funny human beings, who just would not be good standup comedians. It doesn't matter how funny they are in conversation; there's a certain thing that they don't have.

WOODS: Well, there's a lot that's demanded of you as a standup comedian, and one of them on a very basic level, frankly, is memory. You watch these people do these long sets. I don't see teleprompters anywhere. I'm sure you're not using them. Now, some of it would be like

me giving a speech on the Fed. Like after a while, I've given a lot of speeches on the Fed. Or when I used to teach college, I used to teach the same section several times a week, and I would teach the same material, so by the third one – plus, I've been doing it for years – I'm rattling off stuff off the top of my head. These kids can't believe how much I know. So to some degree, it's that, but I don't think it's just that. And it's also this ease of transitioning from one topic to another, and I love watching how they do that. Because I know, okay, okay, it sounds like we're still on the same line of joke, but no, we've now moved to another topic. Some are much, much better and smoother at accomplishing that than others. But there's stuff like that, that you have to do. And I think I've asked you once before: was there ever a time when you just flat-out forgot what you were going to say, and now you're just stuck up there and the lights are on?

SMITH: Yes, absolutely. There's been times when I've forgotten what I was going to say, what next joke that I want it to be. In my earlier days in comedy, Tom, when I was a young man, there might have been some light substances involved that probably didn't help that situation at all. But that's not the case anymore. I'm a husband and father now, so that's all in the past. But there's definitely been times I've forgotten that.

But a lot of comedy is kind of smoke and mirrors, and a lot of it is almost presented in this way where it comes off more impressive than it is. I mean, look, just by the very nature of standup comedy, you kind of present these things like it's off the top of your head, when it's not. It's things that you've thought about and worked out.

And there's really nothing that impressive to remembering all of the jokes, in the same way that if you saw a musician, and you might see them do an hour-and-a-half show and be like, *Oh, man, they remembered all the words and notes to their song*. But then if you just think it through, like, how many songs do you know all the words to? We all know all the words to lots of different songs. Your brain is capable of memorizing a lot more things than you think it is. And when it's a joke that you wrote, that you crafted, you just kind of memorize the rhythm and the cadence of it. Like it's almost second nature.

It's kind of like, do you remember, Tom, because me and you are both – like the younger people who listen to this show may not be able to go back this far, but do you remember before you had all the numbers in a cell phone? Do you remember how many phone numbers you could remember?

WOODS: Oh, yeah, true.

SMITH: Like, I use that – now, if you explain that to somebody who has a cell phone, you'd be like, *What? You can memorize numbers? That seems next to impossible*. It's like, no, no, it's actually not even that hard. When you just didn't have them all there, you'd just memorize all these different numbers, because you have to. Otherwise, you can't call people. I mean, I just the other day was struggling to remember my wife's phone number. That's how pathetic we all get with these cell phones here. *Like, wait a minute, is that a 31 or a 13? I don't* – But I remember when I was 10 years old, I knew like everybody in school's number. You just had them all memorized by heart. And so the memory thing is just, once you kind of put a lot into it, it becomes real easy. I mean, think about it from the musician perspective: if you know all the words to a song that you just love, think about the guy who actually wrote that song. Probably pretty easy for him to remember all the words to it, you know?

WOODS: Yeah, yeah. Okay, all right, so I'll concede you're not as impressive as I thought you were five minutes ago.

SMITH: [laughing]

WOODS: All right, not long ago, Dave, you came on, and we talked about the Dave Chappelle special that everybody was talking about. And you said that, in your opinion, he was absolutely up there with the all-time greats of comedy. I'd like to know, let's say we had to do a Mount Rushmore of comedy for you. So four people: who would you choose to be on the Dave Smith Mount Rushmore? And then for each one of them, I want to know what makes that person so good.

SMITH: Well, man, that's tough. That's tough to just do four. But also we're limiting it to standup comedy, because if you're just saying comedy in general —

WOODS: Yeah, I mean, standup comedy specifically.

SMITH: Okay, because, just to say, Chris Farley is the funniest human being who's ever existed, in my opinion, but not a standup at all.

WOODS: I was just showing a good friend an old episode of "The Chris Farley Show," his sketch from *Saturday Night Live*, where he's interviewing Paul McCartney.

SMITH: Oh my god, it's so great.

WOODS: [laughing] It's so great. All right, so go ahead.

SMITH: Everything that guy did was just so, so great. And I mean, look, if I have to do a Mount Rushmore, I would probably say Pryor and Carlin are the ones who have to be on there. Because they really revolutionized standup comedy. To me, they're like the ones who almost invented what modern standup comedy is. I mean, if you go to the generation before them, if you go to like Lenny Bruce or something like that, it's not really what standup comedy is. Pryor and Carlin are the ones who invented this. They were both just groundbreaking, super edgy, a lot of political commentary and all that, but would be funny with it, like never sacrificed funny in order to make a comment on society or whatever area they wanted to go into.

After that, I would say Dave Chappelle. I thought it *Killing Them Softly* and *For What It's Worth* are two of the greatest comedy specials that were ever made. What that guy was able to do with his jokes was just, it was unlike anything I'd ever seen from anyone else. And then the fourth spot, you know, I'll give it to Chris Rock. If you go watch *Bigger and Blacker*, *Bring the Pain*, those early specials that he put out there, I just thought, man, they were just so perfect.

And to me, all of those guys, what I love about it, it's like what *South Park* at its best is, if you watch that show, where you can do this thing, where you're grabbing your sides laughing. And at the same time, you're like, *That is so true*. And it was the best breakdown of what's relevant and going on in society right now, but it's not being preachy or sacrificing funny, or, *I'm moving over here into this serious area*. It's just punching you in the stomach with

laughter, while you're going like, *Yes, you just broke it down perfectly*. Whatever that thing is, I just love that.

WOODS: Now, not to say that you copy anybody, because musicians, the best ones, don't copy people, but certainly they're influenced by them. And I wonder, are there any of these or any other standup comedians you feel influenced by or that you watch and you say, *I want to do something like that. I want to pull something like that off the way he just did?*

SMITH: Well, certainly all those guys I just named, and then there were a lot of guys who were like the best working comics as I was coming up, like guys I actually worked with a lot. So like I borrow a little something from a lot of those different guys and took influence from David Attell, Patrice O'Neal, Jay Oakerson, Kurt Metzger, Nat Bargatze. All of those guys had a big effect on me. I used to watch those guys all the time and really kind of like – when you have an idea for a joke at first, like your first few years in common, you're just like, *Well, how would this guy deliver it? Or how would this guy present it?* And then you what happens to most comedians, certainly happened to me, is in your first few years, you're kind of delivering the jokes like someone else. I think it's very similar with writing. You kind of write like – you're like, *Okay, well, this great writer, how would he put this?* And then after a while, your own voice that you had beforehand starts to kind of shine through, and then you kind of get rid of other people's cadence.

WOODS: I want to ask you a little bit about your actual career as a standup comedian in New York. I mean, obviously, you're able to make a go of – your podcast is very successful, and you do generate revenue from it. And there's no one on earth happier about that than I am, other than you and your family.

SMITH: [laughing] Yes, we're pretty happy.

WOODS: Yeah, sure. But you also are a standup comedian. And to some extent, you've kept that separate from your libertarian side, because you're not always going to have libertarian audiences, so you have to adjust your work accordingly. So for that reason, I find it hard to find out where you're going to be, because you don't go out of your way to tell libertarians, I'm going to be so and so, partly because you want to test out material, frankly, on normal people, right?

SMITH: Well, that's right –

WOODS: And if we stack the deck, you're not going to know what's really funny or what just tickles us because we're libertarians. But I'd like to know about your life as a standup comedian. Like how often are you in clubs, and do you go there and test out material like I've heard Jerry Seinfeld does? Stuff like that.

SMITH: Oh, yeah, no, I absolutely do, and I don't promote those gigs at all, because like you said, I don't want my fans to come see me as I'm working out the new kinks. I want them to see the hour when it's ready. You know what I mean? Like, this is my finished piece. And so that's kind of why I –

Now, I do less standup now than I've ever done in the 12 years since I've been doing standup comedy, and part of that is because I make my living off the podcast revenue and other

things, the TV stuff and stuff like that. Part of it is just because I had a kid this last year, and I just don't like being out every night as much as I used to. I did for the first 9, 10 years of my standup comedy career. I was out every single night, literally did not take a night off. I mean, maybe like one here or there, but I was out every single night, getting up somewhere, some crummy basement show with six people or something. And that I do credit to how I developed into the standup comic I am today, and that's why I can go on stage and make things funny and put things into the language of comedy.

Now, I'll go out. I'll do three, four sets a week, something like that. I just try to work out the new material I have, try to figure it out in different places around the city. The Stand comedy club is probably my favorite. There's a few different rooms that I like a lot.

And I'll do stand up at like the Soho Forum for libertarians, but when you have a room full of libertarians, what's fun for me about that is that I can go into different areas that the mainstream people, the normies, may not get. I can make jokes about certain things that they wouldn't know what I'm talking about.

But to me, I am a libertarian and I am a comedian, but I never tried to be a libertarian comedian. I just want to be a really hilarious comedian who is a libertarian. And of course, a lot of my views bleed into my comedy, and I talk about politics a lot because I'm fairly obsessed with that topic. And I think if you if you watch my hour special, it's not like this is a special that libertarians can get into. I think you could look at it and just be like, Oh, this is a really funny comedy special.

WOODS: Yes, absolutely.

SMITH: That's always what I want to put out. And by the way, I think that should be the goal for any artist who's a libertarian. Make something great, you know what I mean? Or strive to make something great, don't make it just be this niche thing. And that's what I always try to do.

WOODS: How does it work? Do these clubs invite you to do it, or just have an ongoing relationship with them?

SMITH: Yeah, well, after a while, you get passed at a club, is what they call it. So there's like these showcase clubs in New York that will have anywhere from 6 to 12 comedians on a show, and once you're passed there, you can just kind of send in your avails to them, and then they'll book you when they want to or when you're available or whatever. So it's just relationships you build over the years. And it's very hard to get into the clubs at first. It took me years and years to get into any of the good clubs in New York, because there's a lot of comedians. There's a lot of people competing for those slots. But yeah, at this point, it's just kind of relationships I have. And once you've made a little bit of a name for yourself, you have some TV credits, you have an audience, it becomes a lot easier to get in.

WOODS: So what advice – and this is the other kind of cliché question – would you give to a young person who's interested in following in Dave Smith's footsteps?

SMITH: Get out. Don't do it. I don't need the competition.

WOODS: [laughing] Okay.

SMITH: This is my space. I got here first.

WOODS: Well, let's say they don't even want to be – I mean, by the way, when it comes to libertarians, it's you, Andrew Heaton, and one or two other people. So it is a small group.

SMITH: That's true. I can stretch my legs.

WOODS: And I wouldn't want anyone elbowing in on that action either. But just in the overall standup world, regardless of where they're coming from.

SMITH: Well, I would just say if you're getting into standup comedy, my advice to you would be, number one, you've got to really want to do this, you've got to really love it, and you've got to really be willing to sacrifice for years to do it. And if you're not certain of all three of those things, do something else with your life, because you're just going to end up wasting time on this and then doing something else with your life anyway.

And honestly, this is the advice that I give to all young comedians, especially someone just starting out: you've got to just get up on stage a ton. And I know that sounds kind of useless and kind of generic, but that's really it. You've got to get on stage, get on stage, get on stage. Immerse yourself in the comedy world. Hang out with other comedians. Go watch working comedians. Watch failing comedians. Go to open mics. Go to all of them. And then after a while, you will figure out what you want to be in this world.

Now, once you're years into comedy, there's different little technical pieces of advice I could give to somebody. Oh, you know, stay away from this manager, maybe talk to this agent, audition for this club. But at the very beginning, it's as simple as, first off, take a look in the mirror, make sure this is really what you want to do, because it requires a lot of sacrifice for almost everybody. Very few people just end up getting stuff right away. So make sure you really want to do that. And then you've got to just dive in.

Jerry Seinfeld had this great thing that he said about being a comedian. He goes, being a comedian is like being a pirate. He said, the first day, you're a pirate, you're a pirate. There's no warm-up program. It's not like if you want to be a surgeon, day one isn't: go perform surgery. It's like, there's a whole bunch of studying, there's a process, there's going to school, there's all this stuff, there's watching other people. Then eventually, at some point, you're going to do surgery. With standup comedy, it's like, day one, you're a comedian. Get in front of a crowd. Make them laugh. It's something you really just have to dive into.

WOODS: Well, that sounds like good advice to me. That sounds like good advice to me. And I'm glad that it's worked out, because I'm quite sure, as with anything, there are a lot of people who give it their best shot, and they decide they've got to just go do something else. And you've been able to, for 12 years now, do something you love to do, be successful at it, then you have a podcast – which by the way, having a profitable podcast is even more difficult than being a successful standup comedian. I mean, really, people podcast because they love doing it, not because they want to be millionaires. And you've been able to do that, too. I mean, these are not small achievements, especially for a guy, a youngster such as yourself. So you know, congratulations on your good fortune.

SMITH: Well, thank you very much. And I really am quite fortunate in many ways, and I'm well aware of that. Like, first and foremost, I have a really great wife and daughter who are both amazing and healthy and happy and beautiful. And the fact that I can support my family doing what I love to do, that I'm in – you know, with all the stuff we talk about, the cancel culture and the crazy political climate, I'm in a space where I just basically can say what I want to say, do what I want to do, I'm able to support my family off that. So I really am very grateful. Everything worked out.

It did require a lot of sacrifice. I mean, it wasn't easy. There was about nine years of doing standup before anything started to pay off for me, like before anything was coming together at all. And some of those years were very dark and very, very challenging. And I had a lot of fear in many of those years, that I was like, *Man, this really might not be working out well.*

I remember, Tom, there was a time – how long ago was this? This must be in like 2009, 2010. So this is like nine years ago. And I was like, you know, I've been doing comedy for years already at this point, maybe three, four, five years into comedy, like those years. And like nothing was paying off. I'm making next to no money. I was falling behind on bills. I was going through different terrible day jobs that I had to have. And it was just really rough. And then I'm sitting there reading Murray Rothbard till four in the morning, like just obsessed with libertarianism, and I remember a certain point thing to myself, like, *What am I doing with my life? This is ridiculous. I'm obsessed with Austrian economics. This is information I do not need to know that is not benefiting me in any way.* And I'm spending all of this time and effort in this and in this comedy career, and nothing's paying off. And it was very scary. And there were times where I was like, *Man, I've got to go get a job. I've got to do something.* And when I look back at it now, it's really it is kind of remarkable to me. I'm like, wow, that all really came together. It just kind of worked out.

WOODS: Yeah, even that, you may have thought, Well, look, when I do get things together, the Austrian economics isn't going to be helpful, but I'll have a happier life. And yet it turns out, it all helped.

SMITH: Yeah, it all kind of synergized into one thing. Even as I'm saying it now to you, it's like, wow, it is kind of strange and wonderful.

WOODS: Well, I just had somebody the other day who has just gotten to know you a bit call me up and say, "Is this Dave Smith the real thing? Because everything I hear out of his mouth, I agree with and I love this guy, but I just need to know, is he for real? Like, what is this?? And I said, "Look, he's as sincere and great as you would think he would be."

So anyway, when we're done, I'll tell you who that was. But anyway –

SMITH: Ooh, I'm excited.

WOODS: Yeah, yeah. I mean, lower your expectations [laughing], but it's still somebody not totally insignificant. All right, we still have more Dave Smith Week to come, so we'll be seeing Dave again very shortly. But remember, the podcast is *Part of the Problem*, which you can listen to on GaS Digital Network. I'll link to it at TomWoods.com/1505, and we'll have Dave's comedy special, *Libertas*, linked there also. So make sure and do both of those things, get the special and listen to *Part of the Problem*. Thanks, Dave.

SMITH: Thank you so much, Tom.