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# HIS Dark Material

Mike Gunn chats to Col Howarth of Stand Up For Comedy about his rise from hard times to good, and how the stand-up comedy road helped him find both confidence and direction.

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1994. **M**y first gig was at Jacksons Lane Community Centre in Archway. It was an end-of-class presentation with people from the comedy course I'd done there.

'It was in a little theatre. There was a kids' play on so there were a few mums in with their kids. It went terribly badly. I didn't get any laughs, and I was heckled by a 7-year-old child! He said something like *You're rubbish mate*. I went *Yeah. You've got a point*. It was the elation of having done it and having faced the fear that spurred me on.

'The teachers on the course were Andy Parsons, Charmian Hughes, Dave Thompson. One of them came in and said, *Right! You! Stand up, be funny!* He did that to the class one at a time. At the end of it he said *That's as bad as it gets. You've all stood up, unprepared and struggled*. If he hadn't done that then I probably wouldn't have had the confidence to do it.'

When you see Mike Gunn on-stage it is hard to imagine him as a person without confidence off it. Here, he is open about the path that led him to the world of stand-up.

'I was a very shy and obscure kind of person. Up until that point in my life I was in a massive mess. I had serious drug addiction problems. I was a heroin addict, an intravenous drug user for many years. I didn't have a job. I was continually being arrested and chucked in jail.

'I went into rehab and cleaned up. That sounds simple but it took years. I basically started a new life. I left everything and everyone I knew. They were all into drugs and all were addicts. I started a whole new life in a different town. I got various jobs. This again took a couple of years. I had various treatments. One day I was working in a job selling photocopiers, and thought *I didn't go through all of that rehab, and hospital, to work in a sales office*. I thought *this is definitely not me*. I needed to do something I wanted to do.

'I didn't just decide to do stand-up, I did a few courses: electronics, juggling, circus skills. I had no idea what I wanted to do. After many years of being on the other side of society. I saw a stand-up comedy course and thought *that sounds like utter hell, like the most frightening thing I could ever do*. If I could do that then it would help me with my confidence. I went on the course, I was so unsuited to stand-up comedy but I did quite well at it. I'm a person of extremes, so if I feel a bit shy about being out in public I go, *Right! Stand-up comedy! That will help me!*

'It is very difficult to get a job if you've got a long criminal record. When you turn up at the bank and they say *right, let's have a look at your CV*. Aah *right: fraud, drug addiction, hasn't done a proper job for 15 years. You're in!*

'It doesn't quite work like that, though it should because that seems to be the way the banks behave. I should have been perfectly qualified.'

Mike's misspent youth, and his naturally cynical view of the world, have helped to shape his distinctly pessimistic, dark comedic style. Has the style changed at all over the years?

'I used to be extremely slow and deadpan...and very dark! After a few years that became my Funeral Director character (the show *Good Grief* was his first Ed show in 2002). I didn't move or take the mic out of the stand. I'd just stand there and do the joke in a deadpan way. I found it hard to sustain. I could do it for 20 minutes but if you want to do it for 40 minutes then it's hard.'

Once people had started tuning-in to Mike's dark material, the praise and accolades poured in. The Independent on Sunday described him as *one of the 10 leading stand-ups in Britain*. His appearance on Live At The Apollo can't have hurt either!

'I'm still not sure that I want to be a stand-up comedian! I used to watch Spike Milligan, Monty Python and Tommy Cooper, not that I'm like any of them. I never looked at them and thought *I'll do this one day*. I saw Lee Evans, who I thought was the funniest thing I'd seen in my life.'

But what about those reviews and TV exposure?

'They don't know what they're talking about. There are hundreds of brilliant stand-ups that nobody has ever heard of. TV is the magic bullet isn't it, but there are plenty of good stand-ups around who have not been on TV. On the comedy circuit we're a bit insular. For example Ben Norris is a fantastic stand-up. Nobody has heard of him outside of the comedy circuit. He is totally unknown. Unless you are regularly on a big national TV show then nobody's heard of you.

'It doesn't mean that you are any better or worse, it just means that nobody has heard of you. Look at Daniel Kitson. Probably one of the best but I imagine most people outside of stand-up haven't heard of him.'

Do you feel that a move to London should be factored into every aspiring stand-up's journey?

*'I did a corporate event many years ago and I turned up and it was badly set up. It was in the days of me playing a funeral director.*

*They were all 80+ year old accountants. I had to pick my way through the room to the stage. There wasn't a proper mic, more of an anglepoise mic and a lectern where I was expected to do the stand-up.*

*It didn't go well. I think some of them were too close to death to find a funeral director act very funny.*

*After about 10 minutes I got off. It was a disaster. I couldn't face walking back through that audience again, so I went through a little door at the side of the stage and found myself in a kitchen.*

*I tried to get out of the kitchen but the doors were padlocked. There was a cleaner sat there. I asked if there was another way out and he said 'no mate, you are going to have to go back through that room'.*

*I noticed there was a dumbwaiter in the corner. I asked where it went and he said to the ballroom below. I curled up into a ball and crawled in. He said when you feel the bump, you'll be in the ballroom. So he lowered me down. I felt the bump. I got out and stood up to find I was in the ballroom, with all the people from the gig upstairs.'*

'The London scene was fantastic. There were loads of open spot nights. It is a lot smaller now and with a lot more people trying to get onto the circuit. It was a great place to be but I'm not sure any more. I think the north is a good place, around Manchester. I think the whole thing is harder now. I don't know if it is essential to be in London. It is just essential to do lots of gigs and be willing to travel. Even with all the gigs in London I used to drive up to Chester for an open spot. You just have to do as many gigs as you can.'

At the time of our chat Mike was looking ahead to being special guest on the next Panic Brothers Presents gig at The Convent Club in Stroud (16th July) following guest-spots by such greats as Phill Jupitus, Jo Brand and John Hegley. What else is in the pipeline?

'I just did a huge tour with Lee Mack as his support. We did a gig during the Ealing Comedy Festival last year. I opened and he closed.



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'We were sat in a portacabin and he went *I'm thinking of doing a tour, how would you feel about coming out with me*. I said *yep, love it*. He actually said *would you be insulted if I asked you to support me?* I said *only if the money's shit*.

'I was seen by 250,000 people on that tour and I did my best stuff. I've now pretty much dumped all that and am trying to get a new hour. I'll probably do a small tour myself. I may do Edinburgh next year but I'm not a big fan. You are better off doing something like the Soho Theatre rather than going to Edinburgh and competing with every comedian in the world. It seems like a stupid idea to me. You may as well pay the money, hire a theatre somewhere and do the show.'

For news and dates visit: [www.mikegunn.co.uk](http://www.mikegunn.co.uk)

For more on the Panic Brothers Presents series, including Jo Caulfield and John Moloney: [www.fromthewhitehouse.com](http://www.fromthewhitehouse.com)

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