

What Gary Gulman Knows About Comedy and Life



Like most, I was introduced to Gary Gulman's comedy with his incredible set on *Conan*, imagining a documentary about the naming of the states.

I watch a lot of comedy, but this set struck me as different. You could sense his love of language and his folksy decency. I became an instant fan. I watched some of his earlier sets about trivializing Hitler, discmans, and Trader Joe's. Of course I laughed, but I was also struck at his ability to weave meaningful stories from the overlooked minutiae and frustrations of life.

Then his comedy changed. Unbeknownst to most viewers, Gary suffered through a very challenging mental health episode. Performing a comedy set on *Colbert*, without mentioning the word depression once, he spoke about living with depression. With imagery of fork prints in ice cream and unchanged Brita filters, he vividly describes a life in normalized chaos. "I know your world," he says—mostly in jest but also revealing the deep sense of empathy evident throughout his work. "I know your world," *I understand completely how the smallest task of replacing the toilet paper on the holder seems insurmountable.* "I know your world," *because I live it.* His comedy transformed into something more than comedy. It became a way to discuss some of the most painful parts of daily life. "The thing they don't tell you about life is this," Gary says plaintively, "life: it's every, single day." You can feel his words getting heavier as he says "every, single day." In 2019, he released *The Great Depresh*, a charming, inspiring—and of course hilarious as always—special on HBO, about his battles with depression and mental health.

At some point, through a rather circuitous and fortuitous chain of events, I not only became a fan of Gary—I became a friend. He became a mentor and role model for how to lead a more empathetic life and, most of all, how to become friends with yourself.

I don't have an HBO special, nor is one in the works, but I have spent years writing comedy, albeit on a much much smaller scale. My most significant contribution to comedy has been talking about what kind of shirts Jews like to wear (spoiler: It's Charles Tyrwhitt). So, I have a way to go. But there is something about the process of comedy and personality of comedians that reveals a tremendous amount of doubt and insecurity. It's an industry built on soliciting a reaction. And in a world where you're constantly beholden to an audience's reaction, it can become easy to equate their reaction with your self-worth. It's a phenomena present within nearly every industry, but I think it is far more acute in comedy.

Great comedy serves as a level of sorts—finding the perfect balance between tragedy and monotony to transform life into meaningful commentary.

In 2019, Gary spent the entire year tweeting a daily tip on comedy writing. I once asked Gary over lunch if he ever considered becoming a full-time professor or teacher. I loved his response. "I think what I do now is teaching," Gary explained. Comedy makes us laugh, but it also elucidates how we see the world.

In the 2002 documentary, *The Comedian*, which follows an established Jerry Seinfeld and a young comedian named Orny Adams, there is a moving exchange between the two about the anxieties of the profession.