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## The Man Who Engineers Comedy

**RANJIT SOURI, Apr 30, 2009**

Los Angeles-based comedian Rajiv Satyal has played to packed houses across the United States. He is a regular in the major comedy clubs in L.A., has appeared on both mainstream and South Asian TV, and has been featured in the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Rajiv has opened for Dave Chappelle, Kevin James, and Kevin Nealon, and in multiple cities for Russell Peters.

While Rajiv now works full-time as a comedian, he also has an impressive business resume. A Cincinnati native, Rajiv was named the Most Outstanding Student in the Materials Engineering department at the University of Cincinnati. After graduation, he worked in purchasing, media, and marketing at Procter & Gamble, and later moved to L.A.—not to do comedy, but to become the brand manager for FIJI Water.

Rajiv's blog, "on 2 raj: a comic's journey", appears on his website, [www.funnyindian.com](http://www.funnyindian.com). It is an exhaustive record of Rajiv's first two years of trying to make a living doing comedy.

*How did you hear about the "Funniest Person in Cincinnati" contest, and why did you enter?*

At that point I had never thought of doing stand-up. I'd been to only one stand-up show in my life. I'd listened to a few comics such as Bill Cosby, Dennis Miller, and Steven Wright. My brother read an article in the paper about this contest and said, "Hey, maybe you should enter this," and so I did.

*Considering that it was your first time performing stand-up, it's quite surprising that you did well enough to win. Most comics fail their first few times performing.*

I think that I did so well because I didn't know what I was doing. It was completely natural—I just went up there and made people laugh.

*Do you come from a creative family?*

Yes. My mom used to sing on the radio in India. My dad deejays on an Indian radio station in Cincinnati. My brother, Rakash (who suggested that I enter the contest), is a brilliant writer, musician, actor, and all-around performer in New York City, and is an editor with HarperCollins. In fact, he has a book coming out in April called *Blue Boy*. My other brother, Vikas, is not as much into the arts but did one play in high school and got an award for best supporting actor! So yes, I think we all have an aptitude for the arts.

*Surprisingly, after the contest, it took several years before you began performing stand-up regularly.*

Yes, after the contest I took the next three years to write material and develop my on-stage persona. I probably only performed stand-up a total of 10 times between 1998 and 2002.

*For just about every aspiring comic, doing several open mic nights per week is the central part of the process. Whereas you created a process that actually excluded that.*

Being an engineer, I wanted to figure this thing out before I did it. I've always been very analytical, and so this approach made perfect sense to me.

Today, even though I'm more comfortable improvising on-stage, I still think there's something to be said for an analytical approach to comedy. I like to analyze things such as, does the story have the right arc and a logical flow, does the premise properly set up the punchline, are the segues effective. Yes, I'm that much of a dork.

I tend to be literal. I won't set up a joke by saying, "Every time you drive down the highway, X happens."

Because X doesn't happen every time. I'll stay instead, "Do you ever drive down the highway, and X happens?" I want my comedy to be honest.

*Have you ever taken a class in stand-up comedy?*

I've just taken a couple of one-time stand-up workshops. One was with Brad Trackman, from New York City. His was the only helpful stand-up workshop I've ever taken, because he had such



Rajiv Satyal

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*Can you think of an example?*

Yes. Brad said that sometimes you'll feel like one side of the room is feeling you and the other side isn't. He said it could be that you're delivering all of your punchlines to one side of the room. We have a tendency to stand and deliver our set-up, and then turn and deliver the punchline. If you're telling the punchline just to this side, they'll laugh but the others will feel left out. People are more likely to laugh when you're looking directly at them. So do one to the left, do one to the right, do one to the middle—spread your punchlines out over the audience. Then you'll get everybody involved in the laughter.

*When you first moved out to L.A., you weren't performing much.*

No. I moved there for a corporate job in May 2006, and did my first stand-up gig there in August. That gig was at this place called "The Gig" on Melrose. And my name was in lights. On the marquee! My name had never been on a marquee before, and hasn't been since. But there it was. And it was the only name up there. Talk about a sign that you made a good decision.

*Once you got really serious about doing stand-up, you gave yourself two years and a goal. Most comics don't do anything like that. They just like doing it, and they just do it.*

I think that's where a lot of comics mess up. They go into it thinking it's going to be a lot of fun, and they don't anticipate the amount of work that goes into it.

And don't get me wrong—it is fun. As analytical as I am in my process, I still have a blast when I'm up on stage. But I'm able to have that fun because of all the work I've put into it over months and years.

Other comics make an opposite type of mistake: I know guys who say they want to make a lot of money, and that's why they're doing comedy. I think that if you want to make a lot of money, you should go into finance or law or something like that. It is possible to make a lot of money in comedy, but the odds are hugely stacked against it.

Still, I think that if you can take the discipline that it takes to be a doctor or engineer, and put that discipline into comedy, then maybe you have something.

*Shortly after "The Gig," you decided to treat comedy as your main business. What was your criterion for gauging the success or failure of the endeavor?*

Well, I know I just talked about not going into this for the money, (laughs) but the criterion was money. One of my favorite and least favorite quotes is "You can't save the world if you can't pay the rent." I decided that for comedy to be a viable career, I had to make at least a certain set amount in each of those first two years. For Year 1, I fell short. So I modified my business plan—yes, I have a business plan. Seriously, what a nerd. It is many pages long but I can sum it up in four words: Get gigs; be funny.

In Year 2, I made my financial goal three months early, and from that point I was off and running. So I'm now in Year 3. (laughs) My fiscal year runs October 1st through September 30th. I like to imagine that my official title in my comedy company is Chancellor of the Exchequer. Because I always thought that would be a cool title to have, and I think that I'll never have it in real life.

*You don't do a lot of open mics these days, do you?*

There were times, late in my Cincinnati years and early in my L.A. years, that I did open mics pretty regularly, but now I rarely do them.

I know that a lot of comics think there's no such thing as bad stage time. I think this is true early in a comic's development, but past a certain point, I do think that there is such a thing as bad stage time.

If you're a tennis player, you get better by consistently playing with people better than you. If you play with people worse than you, you get worse.

If you're an experienced comic, why do an open mic where there are three people in the audience, and none of them even came to this coffeehouse to see comedy? If you're going to learn something from the gig, or get some needed practice at a particular routine, that's one thing. But if there's no tangible benefit, then why do it?

*And a lot of times with a tiny audience, you end up looking not as good as you really are. You can do a set that kills with a big audience, but with a tiny audience, there's no laughter and people will leave thinking, that guy wasn't very good.*

Yes, definitely! And what if somebody records the set and puts it up on-line? Then anybody who watches it will think, this guy isn't very funny.

*You've done as long as a 75-minute set. How do you manage such a long set?*

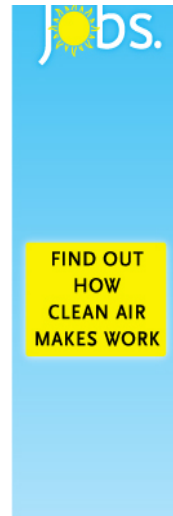
75 minutes is a huge amount of time for a comedy set. To do a good 75, you have to include a lot of improvisation and some crowd work. With a set that long, I usually start out standing up and using a high-energy delivery for the first 20 to 30 minutes, to pull the audience in.

Then I may sit on a stool, grab a bottle of water, talk more to the audience, and become more low-key, more philosophical, more interactive, more conversational.

I also have to be very specific with myself about which of my material works better in the first context, and which works better in the second. And I give people permission to leave anytime. Anything over 45 minutes is presumptuous, audacious, and honestly a little self-aggrandizing.

*You have a close working relationship with Russell Peters. What's the best advice he ever gave you?*

Early on, I was opening for him in Cincinnati, and over dinner



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he told me that I need to talk more to the people in the audience. He said that my act seemed like I was merely making a presentation to the crowd.

He said that I should try talking to the people, and that I'd be good at it. So I tried it and he was right. And that simple note has raised the level of my comedy ever since then.

*On one end of the spectrum, there's the viewpoint that you should write for your audience. On the other end, there's the viewpoint that you should write what you want to write, and let the audience like it or not. Where do you stand?*

I actually do a little of both.

Some comedians try to shock the crowd—these comedians go way off to the side in terms of their content, and then try to bring the crowd over to where the comedian is. Others like to start where the crowd is, then slowly guide the crowd to a new place or viewpoint. I'm the second type.

That's why my set starts with stereotypical stuff like outsourcing and 7/11. That stuff isn't groundbreaking, but as long as it's funny, I'm doing my job. But then by the end of my set, I'm talking about stuff that's more universal and less predictable and going for jokes that are not easy at all.

Comics should remember that our job is to make people laugh. I also like to make people think, but my number one job is to make them laugh. If what you do makes people laugh, then that's great whether it's fart jokes or intellectual humor or a little of both.

I think that laughter is the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine of thinking go down. (laughs) That's a cumbersome sentence, but I think it's true. Ideally I'd like to get people to laugh while they're in the club, and then think while they're on their way home.



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*Ranjit Souri (rjsouri [at] gmail [dot] com) teaches classes in improvisation, comedy writing, and creative non-fiction in Chicago.*

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