

Eugene Mirman: A Pretty Funny Guy

Park Slope Comedian Joins Celebrate Brooklyn! for Night of Laughs

By Jess Goodwin

According to the folks in charge of Celebrate Brooklyn!, there's a comedic renaissance going on in our borough, and Eugene Mirman is at the forefront of it.

Several years ago he and Michael Showalter started up a weekly comedy show at Union Hall in Park Slope, where they both currently reside. In 2009 alone the *Village Voice* named him Best New York Comedian, while *Paste Magazine* recognized him as one of the 10 best comedians of the past decade. Earlier that year he released *The Will to Whatevs*, a satirical self-help book in which he gives advice on how to survive school and raise a family.

Earlier this month Mirman brought together a handful of his comedian friends, most of whom live or lived in New York, for a show ("Eugene Mirman and Pretty Good Friends"), as part of the Prospect Park Celebrate Brooklyn! series. Kumail Nanjiani, who recently moved out to Los Angeles from Brooklyn, led the line-up, discussing some of the differences between living in Park Slope and Bushwick.

"I saw a man on the street catching pigeons and stuffing them into his pockets," he said of his time in Bushwick. "It was like some horrible reverse magician's act."

Lower Manhattanite Janeane Garofalo came out next, and recounted how she not only has been mistaken for Kathy Bates, but for herself: "This guy said to me, 'No offense, but you look like Janeane Garofalo...'" she said, her eyes rolling. "And then it's even worse: 'Whatever happened to her?'"

Showalter followed, mournfully celebrating his 40th birthday. His night brightened when he was presented with a large cake shaped like a cat with his own face. (Showalter is known for his love of felines.)

Next was Jerry Minor, who had to throw out his Auto-Tune act due to technical difficulties, but recovered gracefully with what at first appeared to be a heartfelt story about ethnic pride. (It wasn't.)

John Hodgman, another Park Slope resident, came out next, with a routine likening his neighborhood to a *Children of the Corn*-esque cult. Deadpan and cool as a cucumber, only once did Hodgman let a laugh slip — when describing the Upper West Side as the most exciting neighborhood in the world.

Finally, Jim Gaffigan gave a special performance, discussing his "daily" gym and McDonald's routines, as well as how whales probably have severe body-image issues.

The band Blitzin' Trapper, who Mirman became friends with earlier in the year, closed out the night.

"We met Eugene in London," said frontman Eric Earley. "He proceeded to drink so much whiskey... it was impressive."

Mirman often uses props and gives presentations during his stand-up. During the recent Celebrate Brooklyn! show, he played a video he recorded with *Grist.org*, a site which provides "environmental news and commentary with a wry twist." In the video Mirman interviews protesters at the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference. He also handed out Father's Day cards to children to give to their own fathers.

"Thanks for not being like that dad in *Dead Poets Society*," one read. "Dear Dad, I'm sorry it's a little late for you to teach me about sex, but don't worry: I figured it out on my own. Ouch!" read another.

Growing up Mirman

Mirman, who was born in Russia and grew up in

Massachusetts, named Emo Phillips, Bill Cosby, Bobcat Goldthwait and Jake Johannsen among his favorite comedians growing up.

"I watched a ton of stand-up in the '80s," recalled Mirman in an interview with the *Eagle*. "When high school ended I realized it was something people could do for a living; pretty soon after that it quickly died as a popular thing to do."

He attended Hampshire College, a school best known for its dismissal of a traditional grading system and course structure, where students are encouraged to design their own curriculum. Mirman created a "major of comedy," and performed an hour of stand-up as his thesis. According to the bio on his web site, "people made fun of him for it, because they were majoring in practical things, like playwriting and semiotics."

Now a resident of Park Slope, Mirman said that he gets recognized on the street only occasionally.

"I've never come home to a stranger waiting for me with dinner or anything," he explained. "People are usually pretty nice."

Though he's indisputably awkward, a certain unidentifiable allure radiates from Mirman. He's relaxed and personable when performing, his jokes often punctuated by his own at-times nervous laughter. His onstage persona seems like it's probably the same as his offstage one — that of someone who would be fun to hang out with. His brand of humor, described as "absurdist," probably crops up in casual conversation; his delivery convinces you that he does indeed regularly toss out observations like how the World Cup may be "the world's largest sporting event now, but in eight years it'll definitely be Rollerball," as he did recently on his Twitter.

Mirman has released and appeared on several comedy albums, starting with "The Absurd Nightclub Comedy of Eugene Mirman" in 2004. His most recent, "God is a Twelve-Year-Old Boy With Asperger's," is titled after an experience he had while promoting his satirical self-help book *The Will to Whatevs*. He was interrupted by a young boy with Asperger's, who pointed at him and shouted, "Why's everyone looking at him and not at me? Oh, because he's funny." Several moments later he pointed again and cried out, "Who doesn't he accept me as his God!?" "What that little boy doesn't understand," says Mirman during the joke, "is that I do."

In August, season two of "Delocated," the Adult Swim show in which Mirman stars as a Russian hitman/stand-up comedian, will begin. "Bob's Burgers," an animated series about a family's burger joint, to which Mirman lends his



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voice as Gene, the 10-year-old who wants to be an entertainer, will premiere on Fox later this year.

Next month, Mirman will perform ahead of She & Him at Terminal 5 in Manhattan. No stranger to opening for bands, he said that he always feels nervous beforehand.

"It's always kind of a risk," he said, "to perform for people who might dislike you for 30 minutes."

That Special Something

What is it about Mirman that makes him so accessible to audiences?

"Mirman has a charm that lets him say anything and bring you along," said Brooklyn resident Jonathan Stromberg, who came down from Williamsburg for the Celebrate Brooklyn! show. "He can say the most awful things — not that he always does — and the audience loves it, because he's standing there with that goofy look on his face. You're always like, 'yeah, right on, f*ck that little kid,'" he added.

Only occasionally does anything truly "awful" escape Mirman's lips, and, as Stromberg pointed out, when

it does, the audience eats it up.

"When I was growing up from sixth to 12th grade," Mirman recounts during his Comedy Central stand-up special, "they put me in special ed. because they thought I was slow ... but I stayed in special ed. for the ladies." The crowd loved it. (Granted, it's a bit easier to get away with being offensive as a comedian, since everyone just assumes you're joking.)

Like many other comedians, Mirman is able to take childhood experiences like — and far worse than — this and turn them around into something his audiences can laugh at. In *The Will to Whatevs* he discusses the time a classmate threw fire at his hair.

"People weren't always throwing fire at me," he said when asked if such occurrences were standard fare. "But it felt like they were!" he added with a chuckle.

He's also able to see the humor in just about any situation, while someone who doesn't make people laugh for a living might not. He once, for example, received a phone call from a Christian non-profit organization who wanted him to switch his long-distance service to one that specifically opposed gay marriage. After being prompted to press "one" if he was opposed to gay marriage, he did so, and was brought into the beginning of a very memorable conversation.

"You are against gay marriage?" asked the operator.

"Well, I want to destroy it, yes," replied Mirman.

"That's great to hear," said the operator, and before she could finish, Mirman cried, "Like the fist of God we will smash them!"

Mirman is by no means against gay marriage, but this — along with writing angry letters to gas companies and airlines — is the kind of situation he revels in — and a perfect example of his humor.