



JEN KIRKMAN TALKS COMEDY AND GROWING INTO YOURSELF

BY CARRIE COUROGEN

You may know Jen Kirkman from a variety of places, from her regular appearances on shows like “Chelsea Lately” and “Drunk History” to her best-selling books and hit stand-up specials. Her latest special, “I’m Gonna Die Alone (And I Feel Fine),” adapted from her Netflix special into her third comedy album, is out today.

Kirkman’s style of comedy is for those who maybe think a little too much, for those who spend a lot of time inside their own heads. In “I’m Gonna Die Alone,” Kirkman thinks out loud about being in your 40s, divorced, and childless when society still doesn’t quite get it. She has found her comedic voice and knows just how to use it, whether in writing, on camera, or on stage, but hasn’t been easy. We caught up with Kirkman while on tour and talked about comedy, creative processes, and figuring out who you are.

How does your writing process differ between stand-up and a book? Do you ever get an idea for one form, then think that it might work better if you used it somewhere else? Is there one medium you like working in best?

Yes, that’s exactly what I do. I get an idea for one form and sometimes, through the process, I realize that it’s better used somewhere else. I have tried to put jokes from my act in my books — figuring that a joke is a great way to end a paragraph or even a chapter. My editor has disagreed at times and I want to stamp my feet and say, “But this joke killed in Philadelphia at the Helium Comedy Club last week!” But it doesn’t quite read the same on the page... and I’ve come around. Or, I’ll think I have such an interesting story idea, but then realize that it’s not impactful enough and it would serve better as an anecdote for my podcast. I don’t have a medium that I like more — that would depend on where I am at in life. Sometimes I just want to be quiet and write a book. Sometimes I need to speak out loud what I need to say. They both need to exist in my life.



The album is audio from your Netflix special. When you put out stand-up set as audio-only, are you ever concerned that some jokes play better when you can see the performance, versus just listening to it?

Well, now I am! Kidding. One thing I like about comedy albums is that I can sort of feel left out. I wasn't at the taping. I can't see anything. I am hearing the crowd laugh but I didn't hear the comic say something. Did she make a face? What's going on? I love listening and trying to figure out what's going on in the room. There's something special to me about taking away people's vision that forces them to experience the album as a moment in time that they weren't at, but get to eavesdrop on, and it might not translate, but I think that can be the cool part.

Your comedy style is pretty personal, but is there anything that's off limits, or any subject you've tried, but wouldn't revisit?

Yes. Things that would hurt those close to me is off limits. And that is 85 percent of life, isn't it? Life is mainly knowing people, keeping their trust, having secrets with people, having boundaries with myself, knowing what's funny, knowing what would only damage me or others to talk about. And the 15 percent that's left to reveal – it seems very personal because I always let the audience into what I was thinking while going through something that's actually very typical and universal and safe.

How has your voice changed from when you first started doing stand-up?

Oh, I don't even know because it's hard to remember 20 years ago. I don't go back and look or listen to old things. But, I'm obviously more sure of myself just as a human being on earth, so I know that I don't cop a posture, meaning I'm not trying to be angry, I'm not trying to be anything. I'm just being me. I think the first 10 years of my stand-up, I was really trying on different sides of my personality to see which one fit as the one to lean on.

I eventually realized that it's not a persona I need to create; I need to strip things away, not affect a style of speaking or behavior. I'm also friendlier on stage. I have a good time telling my jokes and stories – even if I'm relating a story about a time I was upset or mad or frustrated, I'm not actually up there ranting against the world. I'm trying to connect with the audience. I think when I first started out, I wanted the audience to laugh, but connecting with them was not a concern. It's like being a bad date. It's basically what being in your 20s is for – to be selfish, and try on different personalities, and insist that you aren't trying on different personalities. Your 20s in stand-up is just to begin to know who you are.

You go really hard on Twitter about politics — do you think this election will inspire any material?

Nope. I don't do political comedy. I am pretty literal about using Twitter as a social media tool. I use Twitter to talk politics — not even as comedian Jen but as the citizen Jen. I go to mix it up with people I've never met all over the country. I don't address politics anywhere else in my comedy life. I seriously can't even make my political opinions funny. It's such a blind spot with me. I write one good political joke a month. I just enjoy being exasperated on Twitter. That would not be funny on stage.

However, I'm a woman, and the personal is the political, so, I guess it can't be avoided. For example, right now I have a new bit about walking alone in the South at night and a guy in a truck pulling over to talk to me, and it turns out he was a nice old married guy who wanted to talk about my shoes. But, I take the audience through the journey in my mind about what was going to happen to me. And there's politics in that rant, but it's social politics. I'm talking about street harassment, not some wonky policy about the housing crisis. It's telling the audience, "Hey, when I walk down the street and a guy in a truck stops — here's what fears strike in the heart of a woman..." but I make it funny, and usually people don't even notice that we just had a sort of feminist political moment together. They're laughing. I'm happy. On to my next joke about a tattoo.

Ed. note: After being bombarded with hate tweets, including death threats, in response to a joke she tweeted about Hillary Clinton, Kirkman has been on a break from Twitter since early August. While you can still follow her to keep up with tour dates, the comedian is no longer personally managing her handle, ignoring all @ mentions, and having someone else tweet her jokes.

Are there any comedians you haven't worked with that you'd love to collaborate with at some point? Or any that you'd like to work with again?

Oh sure! I always love working with my friends but I don't want to list names because people get mad. Comedians are my best friends but they are also jealousy, petty, assholes who have Google alerts on their names and I swear some of them have Google alerts on the absence of their names.

Have you ever had a bad show or job or stretch of time where you thought maybe you wouldn't end up being a comedian?

Oh my God, pull up a chair. How long do you have? I started doing comedy in 1997 and didn't get my first full-time writing job until 2008. That entire stretch was met with ups and downs. I was even on a TV show produced by Dan Harmon and Jack Black on VH1 in 2005 called "Acceptable TV" and had to work a job on the side because that network doesn't pay squat. That was a giant realization that being on TV doesn't mean I'm going to be rich or famous. It's just a job. And it wasn't even a job I could survive on.

After that show ended, I went back to temping in a windowless room on Robertson Blvd. in Los Angeles for a law firm. I was making \$15 an hour, had been a comedian for over 10 years, and realized, "I may never realize my dream of touring or being an author." And I accepted that. And once I accepted that what I want might never happen, but that I could always do comedy for free at night in really cool clubs and rooms all over the city because it's my passion — my life changed. I'm sure it was on pace to change anyway, but the last moments of being a temp were certainly more pleasant as I sat in acceptance instead of terror and resentment.

Who inspires you?

Howard Stern inspires me a lot, and has consistently for decades in terms of show business stuff. I admire his level of self-care. He's a meditator (I am too, but he actually does it — ha) and he takes care of his voice, he makes it seem cool to go to bed at 8 p.m. and be in a committed marriage and adopt kittens and go to therapy four times a week. I'm inspired by the way he's changed in front of his audience, to the point where a lot of them feel alienated that he's progressed beyond their simple radio shock jock needs. I'm inspired by his work ethic and his instincts. I'm always inspired by people who manage to be hugely successful but aren't always grabbing for the spotlight.

Do you have any advice for younger women, particularly those who are aspiring comedians?

My advice is that I'm 20 years older than you guys and you should have the true rebel comedian spirit and not give a crap what I have to say. You should also listen to one thing I say, which is enjoy bombing and hope to do it for years. It's the only way to find yourself. And don't wish for success too young. Don't complain. Just get up and do stand-up all of the time. Learn other skills in show business too. Write scripts. Don't bother people to watch your stuff on YouTube. No one can save you. And, try to have some goddamn fun. It's not all torture.

What's one thing you would tell your 25-year-old self?

You don't deserve any success yet. Be nice. And also, you won't be so anxious in 15 years. You'll really learn what it means to be comfortable in your own skin. Quit smoking. Oh, and 9/11 is coming in a year — don't wear heels to work that day. Trust me. You'll have to walk 60 blocks to your boyfriend's apartment. Bring sneakers.