

## **FREAKS & GEEKS: MEETING THE BEST BEARD IN COMEDY**

**BY ADAM BAER, NOVEMBER 2005**

Zach Galifianakis is the most innovative comic you've never heard of. And if you have heard of him—or can visually identify the bearded, piano-playing ironist ("At what age do you tell a highway it's adopted?")—you're probably one of those "alterna-comedy" fans networks don't care about. Thankfully, however, Galifianakis can't just be seen in lounge-y clubs like L.A.'s Largo—or on warped VHS tapes of "Tru Calling," B movies like "Out Cold," or his cancelled VH-1 show "Late World with Zach." With his comedian friends—Patton Oswalt, Brain Posehn, and Maria Bamford—Galifianakis currently stars in "The Comedians of Comedy," a straight-to-Netflix film and Comedy Central show of the same that chronicles a concert tour of the nation's smaller live-performance venues. On the eve of the film's L.A. debut, Radar's Adam Baer spoke with the admitted author of "Schindler's List 2: Let's get the Party Started." Held in Galifianakis's humble Venice, C.A. home, the resulting conversation, as expected, was mind-numbingly tedious.

**Adam Baer:** So I noticed that I mistyped your last name in the e-mail I sent to you. I'm sorry about that.

**Zach Galifianakis:** Oh, did you? That's alright. It's an easy mistake. What did you leave out? The 7? It's tough. Twelve letters is my last name. But it's shortened. It was Galifianakisberg...That's one of my old jokes. It never worked on stage either.



**AB:** So I take it there weren't a ton of Greek comedians in your neck of North Carolina growing up?

**ZG:** There weren't any Greeks there. We were the only ethnic family. It was a pretty hillbilly place. I actually just bought a farm there. A 45 acre farm. I'm going back to cultivate the land. Sadly, there are no Greek comedians there, but David Sedaris is from North Carolina.

**AB:** That's what I was going to ask you. Is he not from your town?

**ZG:** He's from Raleigh, and I used to work for the Sedaris family. They were, I guess, cousins of the famous Sedaris family. I don't know David, but it's weird he's from North Carolina. When I read his books, I kind of feel a connection with him. Greeks in North Carolina: they don't really belong.

**AB:** What's your obsession with Noam Chomsky about?

**ZG:** I don't know, I've tried to read his books, and they're so hard to follow. I've seen him speak several times, and I love the guy. If his message was being delivered by someone who was younger and more vibrant, I think people would really perk up...but he's an MIT professor. I want to do a sitcom, though, where it's just me and Noam. And I say in this college-dude voice things like: "NOAM, I WANNA GO TO DAYTONA. IT'S SPRING BREAK!" And he gives a reason, one of his famously long and brilliant explanations, why not to Daytona. And then my tagline is: "NOAM, YOU'RE SUCH A BUZZZZKILL!" And then people applaud. It'll be great.

**AB:** On "The Comedians of Comedy," you have a manservant. Is he off today?

**ZG:** He is, I'm afraid. His name is Albert, and he's been in my life for about 12 years. He's my old next-door neighbor. And a very hard worker.

**AB:** You're kind of the observer of the group in the film—the guy who provides the meta-commentary. Are you like that in all social situations, or just with this motley group?

**ZG:** Well Brian and Patton are so similar to each other in terms of interests. They really are professional nerds. If I saw them outside the documentary, and didn't know them, I'd be like: "That's a little bit over the top." I'm surprised that Patton doesn't have duct tape on his glasses, but I love the guy to death. I called Brian last night, and in a flat monotone he answered the phone: "I'm playing Dungeons and Dragons, what do you want." He wasn't making a joke. He and Patton were playing D&D together.

**AB:** Live action D&D?

**ZG:** I don't know man, and I don't want to know.

**AB:** They're not just trying to be geeks for the sake of being hip, right?

**ZG:** Oh, no. These guys are the real thing.

**AB:** Who's the easiest to sleep with: Brian, Patton, or Maria?

**ZG:** You mean sexually?

**AB:** However you'd to answer the question is fine with me.

**ZG:** Well, then, I'm definitely the easiest, but there wasn't a whole lot of sleeping going on. I'm afraid to sleep around those guys.

**AB:** What's been the most fun shitty movie you've been in?

**ZG:** Oh, they've all been fun. Hey, shitty movies paid for this house. I do, though, choose not audition for too many things anymore. This town is a shit factory. And I'm tired of going into a room and trying to impress people who aren't as smart as me. And I'm not even smart! But you know, the process is fun, and I really enjoyed myself last year, when I was on this show on Fox.

**AB:** What was it called again?

**ZG:** "Tru Calling," with Eliza Dushku.

**AB:** Oh, I remember her...

**ZG:** Oh, me too. Me too...

**AB:** We were all really sad when "Late World with Zach" didn't catch on.

**ZG:** I knew it wasn't going to last. I actually predicted on the air that we'd be cancelled, and celebrated when we were. The brand of comedy I was doing just wasn't going to make it on a channel like VH-1.

**AB:** In “Comedians” you say you played the piano in your act so many times because it ate up time...

**ZG:** I actually do everything just to eat up time, but seriously, I've been phasing the piano out of the act. I find it limiting when I have to do a certain kind of comedy as opposed to the monotone stuff. I just started playing pianos that were in the clubs. I don't know how to read music. Can you tell?

**AB:** I'm actually a former professional musician and also review music in addition to interviewing comedians.

**ZG:** Man, the critical world is tough. I always wanted to do a show that criticizes the Siskel and Ebert show. You know: Do what they do about what they do, with clips of their show behind me. Did you know that Ebert put the video of his open-heart surgery for everyone to see online? That's art.

**AB:** Not as artful as a commitment to fulltime beard-wearing, though.

**ZG:** It was never a commitment, per se. I'm just really good looking. I wear the beard so as not to drive too many adoring fans insane. When I shave, I look like Malcolm Jamal Warner. People keep asking me to shave, though.

**AB:** Casting directors?

**ZG:** Yeah, someone just asked me to do it the other day. Just to do a guest-spot on that shit-com Joey.

**AB:** Have you ever done Leno—if not, would you?

**ZG:** Someone asked me about it a couple of years ago. A writer called me, and I never really looked into it. I would have had to drive to Burbank. On another level, you know, standup in that late-night format is really watered down, and it's kind of old-fashioned to me. People expect a certain formula like, “Well, have you ever noticed...” or “You know what gets on my nerves is...” What you do in clubs is a lot more freeing. I am a little hesitant to do this stuff on late

night shows—I mean, I do it on Conan O'Brien a lot—but I'm not crazy about doing standup on television for television, as opposed to watching a film of a live standup performances on television.

**AB:** It seems like you and Conan are more on the same wavelength, though.

**ZG:** He's raised the bar, no question. I never watch Leno. But I think he's a watered down version of what he used to be. He used to be a great comic.

**AB:** I actually wrote a piece not long ago questioning whether or not Conan would have to water himself down when he takes over the Tonight Show.

**ZG:** Well, first of all, he's going to do it out here, in LA. And that's a weird spot to be in. Leno plays to the middle of the country, and I guess that's smart, ratings-wise, but I don't know how Conan will tackle that.

**AB:** Well, maybe all the younger people with smart senses of humor will finally age and procreate wildly across the expanse of the heartland so it won't be a problem.

**ZG:** I don't know, man. Goddammit, I hope you're right. Because this is getting to be the dumbest fucking country in the world.

**AB:** Didn't someone on the Comedians of Comedy say that yours is really the only reality show because it isn't scripted?

**ZG:** I think Patton made that point. It's not a reality show. A reality show usually means there's a contest and a lot of humiliation. But yeah, there's nothing scripted, no rehearsal, just a camera following us around.

**AB:** Who's idea was it?

**ZG:** Patton's. He called me and said he wanted to go shoot this little test pilot. So he and I flew to Atlanta and a few other cities, and he put it together and sold it to Netflix.

**AB:** I just noticed that Netflix is your backer. This is actually the company's first attempt

at producing a film. Does that say something about how the big studios view the fate of a standup comedy concert film?

**ZG:** Well, the guy at Netflix just really has a really great sense of humor. I mean, he's a fan of Mr. Show. Which is really surprising for an executive. And Netflix means that films don't have to be huge in the theater for them to be successful and reach the people you want to reach. Now you can go straight to DVD, and tons of people will rent and watch it. It's cool that whatever this kind of comedy is, that it's starting to be shown. I mean, I'm not sure my parents get what I'm doing, or know what to call it...

**AB:** If I were an executive, I'd have to say "alternative" comedy, right?

**ZG:** I hate that term. I hate it. To me, it's just comedy. We just don't happen to be doing airline jokes. To me it's just like left-of-center stuff. I compare it to music. Some music is mainstream, some isn't.

**AB:** I know, I just heard Sarah Silverman on Elvis Mitchell's KCRW show "The Treatment" on the way over here, and...

**ZG:** Oh did you hear that too? Were they talking about that?

**AB:** Well, Mitchell was just deconstructing what she does with so much complimentary lit-crit language. Said she's so "groundbreaking" and "innovative." And she just seemed to be flattered and totally believing it, which, I guess, is understandable...

**ZG:** I know, he really was into her. I was expecting her to go, "What the fuck are you talking about? I don't know, I'm just writing stupid jokes, don't look too far into this." I gotta give her a call and make fun of her for that. You know, there's a famous quote: "I want to be so famous, I'm never told the truth again." But that's the scary thing. And it's real. You're given all this attention like Sarah is—and everyone's vulnerable to it if you're put up on a pedestal—and soon you start to think: "Maybe I am that great..."

**AB:** Well, maybe it's just flattering, and in the moment, on the radio or something, that's all anyone can do.

**ZG:** But with comedy, you gotta watch it. Because you forget what brought you there in the first place. You have to be yourself and maintain that. Once you start gettin' wealthy, and all that crap, you become very unfunny. Bill Murray and Dave Letterman are the only two [older very successful comedians] who are still hilarious. But they're fuckin' crazy. They're both just still nuts. Which is good.

**AB:** Speaking of crazy, what's on your new DVD?

**ZG:** I put some footage from "Late World with Zach," and a lot of live performances that didn't work. It has me being heckled in coffeehouses, me bombing on stage, me yelling at audiences. I wanted to show bad shows. To me, it's much more interesting to show the other side. Some people don't know what it is. If you get bored, fast-forward me to lip-syncing to Anita Baker. It's really good.