



January 14, 2011

Those Voices in Your Head May Be Comedy Podcasts

By REYHAN HARMANCI

What's funny about podcasting?

Quite a lot, actually.

Over the last year, the steady flow of comedy podcasts online has turned into a flood. Though the podcasts take different styles and formats — Jimmy Pardo's loose riffing on his "Never Not Funny," Marc Maron's confessional interviews, tightly edited pieces from the Bay Area sketch group Kasper Hauser — comedians have embraced the do-it-yourself medium for similar reasons.

For starters, podcasting is easier than writing jokes. This fall, the San Francisco-based comic W. Kamau Bell thought that his phone conversations about race and culture with Vernon Reid, the guitarist with the band Living Colour, would be interesting to a wider audience. He and Mr. Reid, speaking over [Skype](#), merely pressed "record," and with production help from a volunteer found on [Twitter](#), their podcast was born.

And it's cheap: Cole Stratton, a comedian and co-founder of the annual [SF Sketchfest](#), which began Thursday and will run through Feb. 5, introduced "Pop My Culture" with his co-host, Vanessa Raglan, in March 2010 with a \$100 microphone. Now with 20,000 downloads per episode, they have spent only about \$1,000 on equipment in total.

There also is no pesky F.C.C. to wag a finger. Mr. Maron, who, like many podcasters, hosts guests on his show, curses freely. His show, which averages 230,000 weekly downloads, is seen as a breakout success in large part because of the intimate atmosphere he creates with his guests.

Podcasting as an audio form tends to favor the personal — and what comedian doesn't like to talk about himself or herself?

“This year especially, pretty much every comedian has a podcast,” Mr. Stratton said. “And if they don’t now, I’m sure they’ll have one soon.”

Mr. Bell said, “I have two podcasts, and I’m not really trying.”

The increased prominence of podcasts figures heavily in this year’s SF Sketchfest lineup, which will feature local practitioners of the form like Kasper Hauser and national figures like Mr. Maron (of “WTF with Marc Maron”), Paul F. Tompkins (“Pod F. Tompkast”), Chris Hardwick (“Nerdist”) and Jamie Kilstein and Allison Kilkenny (“Citizen Radio”).

Apple’s iTunes would not release figures on comedy podcasts, but others in the industry say 2010 was a banner year. Rob Walch, vice president of podcaster relations at Wizzard Media, a company that hosts more than 15,000 podcasts, said he saw a definite rise in downloads of comedy podcasts. “In 2009, there was one comedy podcast in the Top 10,” Mr. Walch said. In 2010, there were six.

According to Scott Simpson, part of the trio behind a podcast titled “You Look Nice Today” and an employee of Apple who used to work in the iTunes department, comedy has always had “a solid place in podcasting,” thanks to the early efforts of [Ricky Gervais](#) and others, but it has been more high-profile recently.

“The last year or so has seen, to my eye, a blossoming of comedy podcasting from more professional sources,” Mr. Simpson said, noting that he was not speaking as a representative of iTunes.

But even some of the most successful and enduring podcasters say they did not imagine it would be financially viable. Mr. Pardo, who works on [Conan O’Brien](#)’s show, began his venture in 2006 on the suggestion of another podcaster who saw his talk show at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theater in Los Angeles. “I saw it, at the time, as something to do while I wasn’t on TV,” Mr. Pardo said.

About two years into his podcast, Mr. Pardo made the decision to take it to a subscription model. While he declined to give numbers, Mr. Pardo said he made about a third of his income from the podcasts.

“I was the last guy to be on [MySpace](#) or [Facebook](#); I’m an old-school show biz guy,” Mr. Pardo said. “But I decided to follow by leading. I didn’t want to hear about how great [Patton Oswalt](#)’s podcast was.”

Jesse Thorn, a former Bay Area resident who has been recording his podcast, “The Sound of Young America,” since 2004, cites creative freedom as one of the chief appeals. “Until five years or so ago, a comedian’s career was determined exclusively by outside forces,” Mr. Thorn said. “New media means you don’t have to go to the gatekeepers; you can go directly to the consumers.”

But those who make money from comedy podcasting — like Mr. Thorn and Mr. Maron, who both rely on donations, and Adam Carolla, who began an advertising-supported podcast when his radio show was canceled in 2009 — are the exceptions. For most working comics, the goal of a podcast is to shore up that all-important personal brand and draw bigger audiences to live shows.

As more established comics enter the field, emerging podcasters will have to work even harder to get noticed. Mr. Thorn pointed to the Sklar Brothers, a comedy team, as an example of podcasters who actually write jokes for their show and come well prepared for their podcast interviews. “That’s the only way to distinguish yourself,” Mr. Thorn said. “The only other way is to be famous.”

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