

THE WORKING LIVES OF COMEDY PERFORMERS

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This paper looks at the realities of working in comedy in the UK. Drawing on over 20 semi-structured biographical interviews with professional stand-up comedians and other key respondents such as television and radio producers, we examine how careers are pursued in the industry. Existing academic literature on the creative industries tells us that artistic labour markets are characterized by informal relations and social networks (Blair, et al. 2001; Paterson 2001). As career progression is largely unstructured, individuals navigate their working path by building relationships and making a name for themselves in the industry (Baumann 2002; Haunschild and Eikhoff 2009). Our preliminary findings suggest that this is also the case in the world of comedy.

Our paper aims to address a series of questions about the working lives of comedy performers. For example, what does it mean to be a 'professional' comedian, especially if the level of entry is so low and the boundaries between other artistic labour markets (e.g. writing, acting) are so blurred? How are careers negotiated in the absence of stable institutional structures? Who acts as the gatekeepers to the industry and how does the cultivation of social networks impact on the ability to find work? Our paper reflects on these questions by presenting some early research findings that are based on extensive empirical material from the field.

References

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