



COMEDY

# Close to the bone

After Andrew Barr's friends staged an intervention, the comedian got clean. 'There's this idea that if something awful happens to you, you should turn it into art'

GLENN SUMI  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Since an intervention from friends, Toronto comedian Andrew Barr has been sober for a year. He now brings his comedy to an audience that appreciates his honesty, since addiction usually comes with stigma, embarrassment and shame.

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PHOTOS  
TORONTO STAR

Most recovering alcoholics and drug addicts intentionally avoid bars and clubs for fear of relapsing.

But for Toronto standup comic Andrew Barr, who's been clean and sober now for just over a year, bars and clubs are his workplace. If he wants to get out of the \$15,000 debt he incurred paying for his rehab treatment, he needs to keep doing comedy.

Besides, as he's proven in his live act and in his recent album "The Pursuit of Haplessness" (Comedy Records), which earned him a spot on my list of the best Canadian comedy albums of 2023, he's really good at it.

"In rehab you have to come up with an action plan for your life after you get out," he told me recently at a West Queen West cafe.

"You spend your time thinking, 'OK, when I get out, what am I going to do every day? How am I going to maintain my sobriety? What is my routine going to be?' And basically, when I left rehab I went back to hanging out with the same people I hung out with before in all the same places, around all the same substances. Which is not a good idea when you're newly sober."

What he's found since he's stopped drinking and taking cocaine, however, is that his act has become a lot more personal and distinctive.

"Before I went to rehab, I didn't talk about myself very much onstage," he said. "There were funny bits, but there was no story, no angle, nothing that attached me specifically to the material. These new jokes are ones that only I could tell. So it's all helped me grow as a performer."

That's reflected in his album. He recorded just over half of it before he got sober, and there are first-rate jokes in there about getting through the pandemic, the randomness of fast food "family combos" and the ridiculousness of the store name "Blinds to Go."

"But after I got sober I asked Barry Taylor at Comedy Records if we could delay the release of the album because I wanted to add some more stuff," he said. "I wanted it to represent the most present version of myself."

And so Barr added material that cuts way closer to the bone: about coke-fuelled orgies, suspicion around the "higher power" language of AA, mistrusting his bodily functions while on a bender. This material goes to some dark places but has the ring of truth to it.

Barr also began uploading upbeat recovery videos on his Instagram feed, counting down to his one-year-sober anniversary right before Christmas and telling stories about how eating cookies for dinner is healthier than drinking 10 pints of beer and phoning ex-girlfriends in the middle of the night.

In a few months, the account — @andrewbarrcomedy — has grown from a couple of thousand followers to over 55,000. But just as encouraging are the messages and DMs he's received.

"I've got messages from people saying these videos helped them on their own path to recovery or made them think about getting into it," he said. "Some addicts who have been sober for a long time thanked me for talking about the subject so openly and candidly. As progressive as we are today, there's still stigma, shame and embarrassment around addiction. But I'm a comic. I've been embarrassing myself in front of people for over a decade."

Barr grew up around Sarnia, Ont., and at 18 moved to Toronto to attend the Humber College Comedy Program. Initially, he was hoping to pursue sketch and improv, but after hitting the city's open mics he soon gravitated toward standup, doing up to 20 sets a week with fellow comic and roommate Nigel Grinstead.

Once he began getting paid work, his substance abuse issues started ramping up. The comedy club setting was a natural enabler.

"An addict will always find a reason for doing what they're doing," he said. "If a show goes great, you think, 'Awesome! Let's get some drinks or grab a bag.' And if it goes horribly, you think, 'Oh no, what a bad show, I need to drink to forget that.'"

Barr says he never hit the proverbial rock bottom but "just sort of skimmed it." He almost ruined a friend's wedding and there was an incident in a hotel room in London, Ont., that involved the police. He also went to bed after drinking nearly a whole bottle of whiskey to counteract the effects of cocaine, after which his heart was beating so erratically he thought he might die instead of wake up.

These days, if he has a great show and he's coasting on the adrenaline rush, he'll stick around and talk to people for 20 minutes or so and then treat himself to a burger on the way home. He's become a regular gym-goer and a few months ago finished his first marathon.

He's considering developing his new material into an hour-long show, possibly for a fringe festival. For his own peace of mind, however, he might not include all the stories that happened to him while he was drunk or high.

"There's this idea that if something awful happens to you, you should turn it into art," he said. "Years ago, I had a bad breakup and I felt I had to turn it into a joke. I wrote a five-minute bit about it and it went over well. But whenever I told it I would be reliving the worst day of my life and it caused more pain than it was really worth. So I eventually let it go."

One of the best things about his sobriety is the feeling that his friends — who staged an intervention to get him into recovery — and family aren't continually worrying about him.

"People don't realize what it's like to have others constantly worrying about you," he said. "You don't want to be a burden and it's not healthy to think of yourself as a burden because that will keep you low. It feels really good not to be taking up this negative mental space in people's brains."

Then he got extra serious.

"It's also really nice knowing that I'm probably not gonna die anytime too soon."

BARR PERFORMS REGULARLY AT THE "AFTER HOURS" SHOWS AT COMEDY BAR, 945 BLOOR ST. W., ON FRIDAYS AND SATURDAYS.

