

Montage

Art, books, diverse creations



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Harrison Greenbaum's *What Just Happened?* (left) combines his two creative obsessions: comedy and magic. And Greenbaum, who performs more than 600 stand-up shows a year, is a regular at clubs like the Comedy Cellar in New York.

Magic led him to comedy. As a freshman, he joined the Harvard Magic Society ("It had, like, three members—I very quickly became president") and started spending Tuesday nights at the Mystery Lounge, a weekly magic show held above the Hong

TODD SEIDENBERG

Comedy Is Magic

For Harrison Greenbaum, it began with "Pick a card..."

by LYDIALYLE GIBSON

HARRISON GREENBAUM was five when his father pulled out a deck of cards and told him to pick one. Greenbaum did, and then watched his dad riffle the rest of the deck beside his own ear, saying the cards would tell him which one his son had chosen. With a flourish, his father named the card. Greenbaum doesn't remember what it was, just that his father got it right.

"But he wouldn't tell me how he did it," says Greenbaum '08, now a comedian and magician. And that's when the fixation

took root. "I became super serious about trying to figure out how this trick worked. I used to go to the library and check out magic books. And we'd go to magic stores in New York" from the family home in Long Island. "Those are some of my favorite memories." He started attending magic camp every summer and discovered a whole world of other weird kids as nerdy and magic-obsessed as he was. By the time he solved his father's trick—he says now it was probably the only one his father knew—Greenbaum's fascination was deep and wide.

BRODY BRODO

Kong Restaurant in Harvard Square. “My apprenticeship,” he calls it. The magic show was hosted by the stage’s main tenant: the Comedy Studio. “So that started rattling around in my head, the idea of stand-up.” Later that same year, he tried it out, performing a few jokes in a student-organized campus show.

He was hooked immediately. Partly it was the adrenaline: “Doing stand-up is like jumping out of a plane without a parachute,” he says, “and you hope you can build a parachute while you’re falling.” Partly it was the stripped-down purity: “That’s what makes it almost a blood sport. You remove so much, until it’s just you and a microphone. It’s very raw and visceral—you feel everything.” But even more exciting was the freedom. He was used to performing magic in a blazer and khakis. In stand-up, the dress code, and the expectations, were wide open.

He spent his college summers in New York City, working an internship at MAD—“comedy boot camp”—and barking comedy-club customers in off the street in exchange for a little stage time. Back on campus, he helped found the Harvard College Stand Up Comedy Society (HCSUCS; “To Harvard’s credit,” he says, “once they figured out the acronym, they never made us change it”) and wrote a prize-winning senior thesis on the effect of racial humor on prejudice. After graduation, his parents implored him to take the LSAT, but instead he leapt into performing full time. He moved to New York and gave himself two years to make it work.

Eleven years later, “work” is the operative term. Greenbaum performs more than 600 shows a year, locally and internationally, headlining at places like Carolines on Broadway and the Comedy Cellar. In 2010, he won the Andy Kauffman Award, given to promising comics doing unconventional material. In 2015, he reached the semi-finals on *Last Comic Standing* and later appeared on *America’s Got Talent* and *Conan*. More recently, he created a Web series for the United States Tour Operators Association, called *Recalculating*. It’s kind of a video travelogue with a quirky comic touch: Greenbaum samples Aztec mosquito-egg pancakes in Mexico City, drives a dog-sled outside Vancouver, eats fire at a Coney Island sideshow, and rappels down a wall in Slovenia in search of aquatic salamanders said to be the offspring of dragons. “My career has been a bunch of random, crazy jobs,” he says. “I like to say yes as much as I can.”

Last August, he debuted *What’s Your Prob-*

O P E N B O O K

Hoffa and Harvard Law

new book, *In Hoffa’s Shadow: A Stepfather, a Disappearance in Detroit, and My Search for the Truth* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$28). From the introduction:

One evening in early December 2003, I found myself alone in a brightly lit cavernous office on the fifth floor of the United States Department of Justice, reading a stack of Supreme Court decisions about the Fourth Amendment’s prohibition on unreasonable searches and seizures. At the time I was serving as the assistant attorney general in charge of the Office of Legal Counsel, a position that made me a senior legal adviser to the attorney general and the president. A few weeks earlier, I had concluded that President George W. Bush’s secret two-year-old warrantless surveillance program... was shot through with legal problems....

My thoughts that stressful December evening began with a crisis about national security and presidential power but soon veered to a different turbulent period of my life. One of the cases in my “to-read” pile was a 1967 Supreme Court decision... that restricted the government’s use of electronic bugs to capture private conversations by stealth. As my tired eyes reached the end of the opinion, two citations leapt off the page like ghosts: “*O’Brien v. United States*, 386 U.S. 345 (1967); *Hoffa v. United States*, 387 U.S. 231 (1967).”

...The *Hoffa* case involved the pension fraud conviction of James Riddle Hoffa, the autocratic leader of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, who would later vanish, on July 30, 1975, in what remains one of the greatest unsolved crimes in American history. The *O’Brien* decision concerned the conviction of Charles “Chuckie” O’Brien, also a Teamsters official, for stealing a marble statue of St. Theresa from a U.S. Customs warehouse in Detroit Harbor Terminal. The Supreme Court vacated both convictions so that lower courts could determine if

Jack Goldsmith is Shattuck professor of law. As such, he is known for his work on the legal aspects of terrorism, national security, and other fraught topics in international law. But like all faculty members, he has a life beyond the classroom and his scholarship. In his case, the complications of that personal life are the subject of the



Close to home: Jimmy Hoffa (foreground) and Chuckie O’Brien near the federal courthouse, March 1, 1964, after Hoffa’s trial for jury-tampering

the government had eavesdropped on Hoffa and O’Brien in possible violation of a new governmental policy and developing Supreme Court jurisprudence....

After reading the decisions, I immediately saw their connection to each other, and to me. In the 1950s and 1960s, Jimmy Hoffa was the nation’s best-known and most feared labor leader.... Chuckie O’Brien met Hoffa at age nine and later served as his most intimate aide for more than two decades. Chuckie helped Hoffa bulldoze to the president of the Teamsters. He was Hoffa’s trusted messenger to organized crime figures around the country, and was by his side during his seven-year battle with Bobby Kennedy that ultimately sent Hoffa to prison....

But in 1974, he and Hoffa had a falling out.... Soon after Hoffa vanished, Chuckie became a leading suspect.... Based on a slew of circumstantial evidence, the FBI quickly concluded that Chuckie picked up Hoffa and drove him to his death.

I knew this history well because Chuckie O’Brien is my stepfather.

ROBERT W. KELLEY/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES



Greenbaum samples local culture in Vancouver and Mexico City in *Recalculating*.

posterous prescription.

That's how Greenbaum comes across in his stand-up routines, too: easy, relaxed, full of gentle bemusement. He takes obvious, dis-

lem? a series of improvisational Facebook videos in which he plays a "comedian therapist" to unsuspecting passersby. Dressed in a cardigan, and trailed by a small entourage carrying an upholstered couch and a framed diploma, Greenbaum, who gradu-

ated summa cum laude in psychology, stops New Yorkers on the street and invites them to sit and talk (and joke) about their money woes and dating quandaries and, in at least one case, "a cat issue." Each "session" ends with a hug and a hastily written, mostly pre-

arming delight in bantering with the audience, including (maybe especially) hecklers. Partly that's a comedian hitting his stride after years of practice and study; he recently gave an interview to a comedy podcast that amounted to a two-hour master class

O P E N B O O K

"The Luckiest Books"

In an era of omnipresent digital media (and distractions), Leah Price '91, RI '07, is an anti-alarmist about the future of reading and of tangible books. The former Higginson professor of English, an expert on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature and on book history, recently decamped to Rutgers, where she is Henry Rutgers Distinguished Professor and founding director of the Rutgers Initiative for the Book. In *What We Talk About When We Talk about Books: The History and Future of Reading* (Basic Books, \$28), Price reassures: "One constant in the history of books is their power to take new forms, and to prompt new ways of reading as a result." In the course of making her case, she describes a class visit to a venue where *lots* of old-fashioned books await their next users:

One blustery February afternoon, the class...took a field trip. A school bus whose bright yellow looked like something out of a Richard Scarry illustration ferried us to an exurb an hour west of Boston, where a climate-controlled Home Depot-

books in Harvard's depository also inhabit a scale incomprehensible to human minds. As tall as five people stacked on top of one another, the sublime crags of the depository's 30-foot-high metal shelves produce the same vertigo as a stark cliff face. On campus, books are shelved by subject; here, by height. Arriving at the depository, each volume encounters a sizing tray....Also on arrival...each book's title is replaced with a bar code readable by a pistol-grip Motorola scanner: prisoner without a name, cell without a call number.

The ticket to this Siberia isn't always one-way. At some point in their exile, the luckiest books will be released at the request of a catalog user. If that user requests hard copy, the volume will be zapped by a scanner in the grippy-gloved hands of a fluorescent-lumbar-support-clad worker riding a cherry picker, bundled into a plastic bin, shunted onto a metal hand-truck, and loaded into an 18-wheeler to trundle past the sentry box and the nearby Kwik Print to the highway leading to campus, and finally into the reader's hand. When books do make the trip down the highway...they travel...11 million times slower than a packet of digital information. More often, therefore, the catalog user requests page images—meaning that the lucky volume will be scanned without ever escaping the building.

Where there are still plenty of real books: the Harvard Depository

style hangar refrigerates Harvard Library's 10 million least-loved volumes in off-site storage. A clang drew our gaze upward: 20 men were shoveling snow from three acres of roofs. Beyond the fumes of the loading dock, neither leather spines nor wood shelving lay in sight. Instead, my students encountered fluorescent lights, linoleum floors, metal carts, plastic bins sold by the thousand-count, an eyewash, and a stenciled hard-hat reminder. Climbing on the cherry picker for a high-tech hayride, the students looked about as credible as politicians posing in a tank.

Stored at a temperature inhospitable to human bodies, the

STEPHANIE MITCHELL/HFAC



In *What's Your Problem?* he stops New Yorkers on the street and invites them into his roving "office" for some comedic talk therapy.

battle-tested jokes is about Roy Sullivan, a park ranger who set the world record for surviving the most lightning strikes: seven times, between 1942

and 1977. Greenbaum ambles around inside the joke for several minutes, building digressions, unearthing absurdities, detonating little moments of surprise, before finding his way back for the final flourish. His favorite project right now is a comedy-magic show he's been developing for the past 10 years and recently began touring: *Harrison Greenbaum's What Just Happened?* It combines the rhythm of stand-up—a laugh every 10 or 20 seconds—with the suspense of a magic show, weaving in original tricks that connect to the jokes. The show bears out a conviction Greenbaum often preaches when he speaks at magic conventions: tricks, like stand-up jokes, should *start* with an idea. "Comedians come up with an idea first, and then figure out a funny way to say it," he says. "In magic, a lot of people go out and buy a trick and just jam it into their act." But if magic is an art form—and Greenbaum believes it is—then its practitioners, he says, should strive for originality and self-expression, should be willing to push the envelope in ways that feel political or personal. "When I give lectures on magic, I always encourage people to break stuff. Just break stuff and see what happens. You'll figure out how to put it back together." After all, it's magic.

on joke structure. But it's also the fact that his jokes—observational, narrative, sometimes playfully political—often arise, he says, from a feeling of love. "For a lot of comedians, the motivating emotion is anger, but for me it's more like, 'Isn't this amazing? Isn't this insane? Let me show you.'" One of his

and 1977. Greenbaum ambles around inside the joke for several minutes, building digressions, unearthing absurdities, detonating little moments of surprise, before finding his way back for the final flourish.

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"A Melodic Being"

Singer Ali Sethi finds his voice in classical Pakistani music.

by LYDIALYLE GIBSON

"THE DRUMS are calling out your name," Ali Sethi '06 exhorted the gyrating audience in Sanders Theatre, as he and his bandmates wound toward the climax of the night's final number, a song with roots stretching back to the medieval period in what is now Pakistan. Some listeners were already on their feet, and a handful of students were dancing on stage. Behind Sethi, the tabla player's fingers flew across the drums, pounding out a rhythm that was intricate, ecstatic, irresistible.

It was the headlining concert at Harvard's ArtsFirst Festival last May, and the song, "Dama Dam Mast Qalandar," is a South Asian favorite, with a melody composed in the 1960s and lyrics drawn from a thirteenth-century poem honoring the Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. The work is often performed at Qalandar's shrine in southeastern Pakistan, where pilgrims commune with the divine by taking part in *dhamal*, a whirling, pounding, trancelike dance. Inside the song's feverish rhythms, Sethi told the

audience, traditional boundaries among worshippers—class, caste, gender, geography—break down.

Something similar seems to happen with Sethi's music: boundaries fall away—between past and present, earthly and transcendent, between art and religion and politics. "We are many and we are one," he says. A singer classically trained in Pakistani traditional music, whose voice can shift from plaintive to raw to warmly intimate, Sethi (pronounced *say-tee*) has become a star in (and, increasingly, beyond) Pakistan. Since 2012, when he appeared on the soundtrack for the film *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (directed by Mira Nair '79), he has toured internationally and become a regular presence on *Coke Studio*, Pakistan's popular live-music television show. This past April he made his debut at Carnegie Hall as one of three soloists in *Where We Lost Our Shadows*, a multi-



Ali Sethi brings the Sanders Theatre crowd to its feet during a concert last spring. His Harvard mentor, Ali Asani (right, in suit and tie), joined him on stage.

media orchestral work co-created by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Du Yun, Ph.D. '06, about human migration and the flight of refugees. And for the past several months, he has collaborated with Grammy-winning musician and producer Noah Georgeson on an album, to be released by summer 2020, that combines classical South Asian music with his own songwriting.

Born and raised in Lahore, Pakistan, he is the son of dissident journalists; his father has been jailed repeatedly, and in 2011 the family fled the country for more than a year after receiving death threats. Sethi