



# FREESTYLE COMEDY

FREESTYLE HIP-HOP, IMPROVISED COMEDY AND IRISHNESS ARE THREE THINGS THAT SOUND LIKE THEY SHOULD NEVER BE IN THE SAME ROOM TOGETHER, LET ALONE COMBINED ON STAGE. DOING JUST THAT, **ROB BRODERICK** IS ALL ABOUT BREAKING THE MOLD. **GRAEME BIRRELL** MET UP WITH HIM TO FIND OUT HOW HE CAME TO MIX HIS RAP WITH HIS FUNNY, AND WHERE HE IS GOING WITH IT NEXT.

After improvising his way to the final of *So You Think You're Funny* in 2005 and then winning the Hackney Empire Best New Act Award for 2010 with his three-man impro hip hop band **Abandoman**, Rob seems destined for big things. Indeed, after asking to meet me in an exclusive Soho private members club, I couldn't help but feel he may have already made it. But after meeting him, it became immediately obvious that he's just a down-to-earth Irishman who loves what he does.

## Lets start at the beginning, how did you get into comedy and hip-hop?

Comedy came after hip-hop. I got into hip-hop for the very first time, and went 'this is amazing', it was House of Pain. You know the way you always look up to the guys who are three years older than you? Well, the coolest guy, the one I perceived as being the most popular guy, he loved "Jump Around" by House of Pain. I was twelve, he was fifteen, he was a Scout, and we went on this trip and that was all he played, him and his mate. And they would rap all the lyrics - I remember thinking they were like Kid and Play from House Party! They kinda swapped over rhymes and stuff, and I was like 'this is dope, it's the greatest thing ever!'

Then about a year later I went off to Irish College where you live in the west of Ireland for three weeks in a place that speaks Irish, you live with a family that speaks Irish and you go to a college during the day. This guy who was in my room was really into Body Count - Ice-T's metal group - and that's all he would play. It still makes me giggle - it's the crudest album I've ever heard. So when I left Irish College, I was like 'so I think I really like hip-hop', bought a Snoop Dogg album - *Doggy Style* had just come out - and then became the only guy in my year who liked hip-hop. Even the guy who is now Ireland's biggest rapper who was in my year hated hip-hop - he was a big Nirvana-head.

As an Irishman who only grew up with very much commercial radio, the first time I put in *Doggy Style*, and it had all these routines like in between the songs it has all these fills - as a 14-year old who'd never heard this before, it was such a big deal. And it was like 'I didn't know you could do this in music'. Then I got into Public Enemy - that was the first concert I ever went to see and they were phenomenal. It was kind of

embarrassing as well, because Ireland didn't really have a band to open - they had this one called Grasshopper who were all guitarists singing songs and opening for like the best hip-hop group at the time. I remember the sound guy came on stage, and he was black, and a lot of the audience thought he was Chuck D, so they started chanting 'Chuck, Chuck, Chuck' and I remember thinking, 'this makes us look retarded'.

And it went from there. When I was sixteen I started a little hip hop crew - for one night, and we gigged. We were called Two Sac and the Enormous DIC, because we really loved Beavis and Butthead and dick jokes.

## So this is kind of the beginning of a natural progression into comedy already?

Yeah, kinda. Connor Deasy - the lead singer of The Thrills - as well, was two years ahead of me at school, and he'd seen us that night. I asked him why The Thrills weren't there, and he was like 'we're too big'. So I was like 'what a dick'. Then two years later I saw him on the cover of Rolling Stone, and I was like 'nope, he was right!' So Two Sac and the Enormous DIC were never really destined for fame and fortune.

Anyway, from all that comedy kinda came in 1998 when I started debating in school after I crushed a vertebrae playing rugby and couldn't do much else. But English debating was full up, so I had to do French debating. And I don't speak French. So what I did was to write speeches in English, and give them to my older brother James, who got an A in French. He translated them and gave them back. But I still can't read them. So he has to give me phonetics. So I end up doing this entire series of debates for a year but all off phonetic cards. So essentially, if I didn't sell it with huge performance I was screwed because people could heckle you in French, and I wouldn't know what they were saying. So we'd prepare on the back of these cards generic rebuttals, which would all start with me praising them on what a good question they'd asked. These performances became larger and larger to the point that people would crack up. I'd be so angry and banging my fists, and strutting about, and everything was pure emotion. People would be pissing themselves laughing - and I wouldn't know why it was funny! I remember one time I got a giggle and a round of applause, because my brother had put in a joke, and I hadn't even asked him to.

At the same time as this, I was going to comedy clubs where you'd see **Dara O Briain** as a 25-year old, and **Des Bishop**, **Mark O'Doherty** (**David O'Doherty's** older brother) - and I just went 'bang, that's what I'm doing!'

Then I went off to university and it took another five years before I had another 'fuckin' hell' moment when I worked with Jonzie D. He's a big rapper from the 90s who now runs huge hip-hop theatre shows - half of them are breaking conventions, where people like Diversity and Flawless came through, and half of them are theatre shows. So I did a show for him where I freestyled the whole thing, and I killed. And it was the greatest feeling I ever had on stage. I was like 'wow, this is insane' - I'd never mixed comedy and hip-hop, let alone freestyled a routine that got a bigger applause than I'd ever got doing stand up. Then a month later Jonzie cast me in a show with Bashy and Soweto Kinch - both MOBO Award winners. And that was when I started thinking 'I could do this'.

So I booked a month in Brighton, and took down a show that was nothing but a few thoughts and a guitarist and freestyled. And it's just grown ever since from that.

## So freestyle came quite naturally to you?

Yeah, it did. When I was 18 I started freestyling without much concept of me freestyling, which is kind of a weird thing to look back on. People always say 'when did you start? Can you teach me?' and I'm just like 'well, I was 18 and I'd be drunk, and I'd freestyle' and I don't know where it came from, apart from listening to hip-hop.

And impro, I adore. When I did stand-up, for the first two years I had one joke, maybe. And I got to the final of *So You Think You're Funny* - every single word improvised - which was nuts, because it wasn't intelligent, but it worked. It was much more natural for me than going, 'this is my joke' - I hate that. For many years I've been envious of people who are writers. For me it's just get on stage and see what happens.

## That's a good niche to have. You just won the Hackney Empire Best New Act Award; you must be pretty pleased about that?

Yeah we were thrilled. The whole thing was really good. As a band we've only been together

for a few months, not long. We got together one night when we were on the same bill - James [another member of Abandoman] doing music, I was doing my rap thing, and I just asked him to join me on stage. We did that twice, and then my favourite rap group, Atmosphere, came to London and I blagged my way into being Atmosphere's support act at Scala. We didn't even have routines - we wrote them backstage. When we sound-checked, Slug from Atmosphere asked us what we did, and we had no idea what to say! But we went out to a full hip-hop crowd and it was lovely. And then we've more or less worked together since then.

Hackney was a big date in the diary. We went out to 1,500 people - we're not used to that. And, yeah, we just blew them away - I'm still surprised. We got a standing ovation, which we couldn't see because of the lights. It was quite insane when we won. When they were announcing fourth place I was like 'cool - if we get fourth place, I'm happy', then fourth place got announced, and I was like 'cool - if we get third place, I'm happy', then third place got announced, and I went 'cool - I really want to win!'

Winning has been a cool thing - the main thing for us has been that Irish hip-hop that's improvised doesn't sound very good [on paper], so having Hackney in our back pocket is phenomenal.

## Would you say it's been a bit of a turning point, where people start to take you a bit more seriously as a comedy act?

It has. The kind of gigs I was getting before Hackney were mainly me as a compère. And since Abandoman has taken off, I've changed the focus of my direction. I really want to take the band to comedy clubs - but it's always hard. You're kind of back to where you started as a new act. So it's been lovely having Hackney behind us for that. It allows us to go 'look, it doesn't sound like it works, but this is something we have won'. The nice thing about this whole project is that we can do hip-hop clubs too.

## Do you get a pretty good reception there?

Yeah - they're lovely places. They're really into it because they are looking at different things. They probably enjoy the comedy, but they also are more aware of the freestyle, its capacities and

what goes into it. And we try to bring something to hip-hop clubs that they maybe don't get a lot of. And we seem to get very good receptions.

## So have you got any big gigs lined up in the future? Are you going to Edinburgh?

Definitely going to Edinburgh with the band, which will be very good. We're also working on getting back to Ireland more. And we have a bunch of other great shows coming up in London too - we're doing the Bloomsbury Theatre. We did Daisy Lowe's birthday party recently - she actually talks about us in *Vogue* magazine! We did the BRITs afterparty last week. We just have more and more cool gigs coming up each month.

## Are you interested in doing the summer music festivals? They seem be gaining profile with their 'comedy tents'.

We're actually trying to get into festivals more at the moment. We did Bestival last year. It was very cool, so we're trying to get more of those. What's really cool is that the band can play a music stage as well as it could a comedy venue - when someone comes in with a comedy show that also works musically, there's quite a bit of excitement there. Which is why I think **Flight of the Conchords** really works - musically their stuff stands up, the same with **Tim Minchin** - his music is fantastic. A lot of people are worried that musical comedy will only work in a comedy club - and in some cases that's true. But those guys can play both rooms. I'm not saying we're in the same league, but that's kinda what we're trying to do.

## Would you compare yourself to Flight of the Conchords? It could easily work in a TV series couldn't it? An Irish impro hip-hop crew that moves to New York?

No, but it could work. We've got a few ideas like that, and places we want to experiment with actually. Drama stuff especially. I write for a hip-hop touring show, and I'm a performer in that as well. So it would be interesting to do something like this with Abandoman. At the moment we just play songs, but it would be interesting to try and open that door and maybe do something more dramatic with songs in it. Possibly something akin to a hip-hop musical!

## Is that the long-term goal, then?

Well, the long-term goal is just performing like this for life. That sounds so cheesy! I'm taking that back! My long-term goal is just that it gets to the point where we can tour easily. To be able to continue doing what we're doing now, but on a bigger and bigger scale. I'd love to tour with music bands as their opening act - that's something we're trying to work on more. That would be dope. And then getting to the point where the act stands on its own feet, and we're able to do music venues as well as comedy ones. Music venues are like the Holy Grail for me. Well, maybe not the Holy Grail, but they're what I aspire to. I think I've always seen them as really impressive places to do live concerts.

## People go to music venues with a slightly different attitude don't they?

Yeah, when I used to go to hip-hop shows back in Dublin and people like Ugly Duckling were coming through and doing these live shows that had all these different elements - really good interplay between the MCs and the DJ, and the whole thing was really fun and really silly. That's what I'd love to take to our hip-hop shows. Like Kanye West when he did *Late Orchestration*, that was a show! In music shows, the great live performers are the ones that give you a great show - The Flaming Lips, for example - they give you a great production that is so much more than you could ever get from listening to their records. That's what we'd love to do.

## What about Comcomedy [the first place I saw Rob on stage; a great venue for up-and-coming comedy acts] as a venue? It's the only place I've really seen you. What are your thoughts on it?

It's definitely one of my favourite shows around. They've been really great to us, and we're looking at shooting more stuff with them - they're really cool people.

## Do you feel like you get a good vibe at their live nights?

Yeah, they get really good audiences. I think it's probably something to do with them having a good space. And they get really good acts too, that are often really experimental. It's brilliant. It's different from the 'one man and his mic' experience of other comedy nights, a really varied bill.