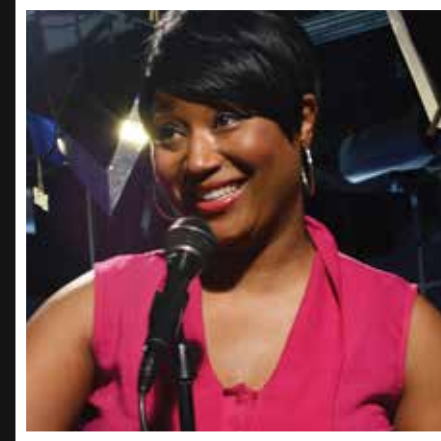
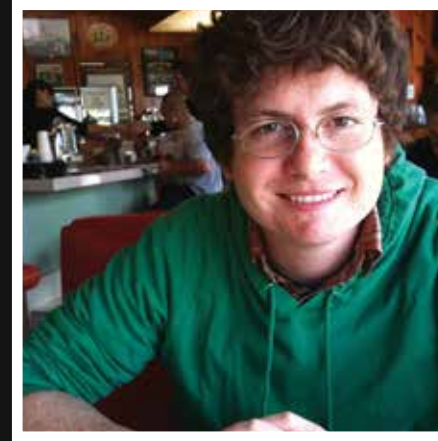


A Laugh a Minute

Three comedians keep audiences in stitches, each in their own way.

by Becky Hopf



TIMING IS KEY IN COMEDY, not only for delivering a line, but also for earning a livelihood, as in the case of 2001 University of Alabama graduate Allan McLeod.

Commencement and the real world were rapidly approaching for McLeod, and he was filling out forms to volunteer for the Peace Corps. His major was in New College, a program through which students design a personalized course of study, allowing him to take classes in both the telecommunication and film department and in theater. He'd been performing in comedy and acting in college, but didn't think a career in comedy was realistic.

Enter Tom Cheronos. The Emmy-winning director and producer of television's *Seinfeld* is a Tuscaloosa native with a 1967 master's degree in broadcast and film communication from UA. He'd returned to teach a film production class at his alma mater, one where students would

experience, from top to bottom, the process of putting together a production, and McLeod enrolled.

Students submitted scripts for a short film, one of which would be selected so the class could go through the entire process of bringing it to fruition, from casting to production, under Cheronos' guidance. McLeod co-wrote a script with Matt Stewart, and theirs was chosen. It starred Michael Thomas Walker, now an accomplished theater, television and film actor.

Cheronos told McLeod he had writing talent, and should consider working in Los Angeles. That was all the impetus he needed. He made the cross-country leap, joining a cluster of former UA students, including Stewart, who make a living in the entertainment industry in Los Angeles.

It has led to a life both real and surreal—real in that even though he's been established for more than

a decade in L.A., he continues to work hard for his success, and surreal because his co-workers have included stars like Ryan Gosling, Jim Carrey, Eva Mendes, Adam Scott and even Mike Tyson.

"I write. I'm a comedian. I don't do stand-up; I do sketch comedy and improv. I write a lot of sketch comedy, I act, and I perform for the Upright Citizen's Brigade," McLeod said.

The Upright Citizen's Brigade is a theater offering affordable comedy shows seven nights a week in L.A. and New York City, according to its website, and it also runs the first nationally accredited comedy school in the country. "It's hard to maintain. I may be an actor one day, the next I'm going in and pitching ideas on a cartoon show for Adult Swim, and the day after that I'm going to shoot a commercial or performing improv for college kids. You're spinning a lot of different plates. You can't rely on the one plate. It's not like a regular 9-to-5 job."



Allan McLeod in a play with Charlyne Yi at The Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre; below, in a Funny or Die video shoot; and Page 3, on the set of FX's *You're the Worst*

He and his work can be found on the television channel Comedy Central and the video website Funny or Die, and his voice in the movie *Monsters University*, among other famous venues. One of his first projects to get national attention was a viewer-submitted video featured on the first episode of *Tosh.0*, a TV series built on commentary about online video clips and other aspects of popular culture. And in July, the FX network began airing a new show, *You're the Worst*,

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in which he has a recurring guest star role.

"My goal is to create a show, and at the moment I think that's attainable, one I could potentially be on that is my own project, and that I could work on with my friends," he said.

It was growing up in Mobile, Ala., where McLeod caught the entertainment bug, and realized he could make others laugh. "I went to two different high schools. I went to St. Paul's Episcopal School for three years and graduated from Murphy High School. It was an important time for me because I was playing football at St. Paul's, but I was horrible at it. I was just trying to make friends."

Watching a school production of *Little Shop of Horrors* made him realize it was theater, not sports, that was his heart's calling. "I was a little afraid to try and make that transition in front of everyone there, so



Cale Hartman



Eunice Elliott in the NBC 13 news studio in Birmingham, where she is the traffic reporter, and below, performing at a fashion show in Montgomery

I thought maybe I should try a new school where no one knew me so I wouldn't have to worry about going from football to theater in front of people. I could just kind of start with theater at this new school and people would accept me."

And they did. "They got my sense of humor. I wasn't a weird outcast. I'd just finally found the right group to embrace me." He took a drama class at the Mobile Theater Guild, and was on his way.

True to his word, Cheronos helped McLeod make connections in the industry. One of his first jobs was as production assistant for the show *BBQ with Bobby Flay* on the Food Network, where his main function was as Flay's driver. He worked as a background actor in TV and movies and booked a couple of acting jobs in McDonald's commercials in 2005, which led to other small roles in addition to his writing.

"Every now and then I get to say something about my job where I worked with someone whose name is recognizable," McLeod said. "I guess I realize how kind of unusual it is for me to live in Los Ange-

les, working and doing what I'm doing, whenever I go home and am interacting with family and friends. That's not really their lifestyle. It becomes clear that this is maybe a little out of the norm to move into this particular career field from where I'm from."

THERE REMAINS AN UNWRITTEN RULE IN EUNICE ELLIOTT'S FAMILY,

which started when they were kids and continues into their adulthood. If you try to tell a joke and you aren't funny, you sit in the "Take the Rap Chair" and await your punishment.

"We would play this game to try and make each other laugh. We had a La-Z-Boy swivel chair, and you would sit in the chair and try to say something funny, and we would throw things if you said something that wasn't funny," said the 1997 UA journalism major who minored in theater. "We still do it, and we're all grown up."

That's how seriously they



"My mom has a great sense of humor. She taught us very early on how to laugh at ourselves, which is a great survival mechanism."

take their comedy. "My mom has a great sense of humor. She taught us very early on how to laugh at ourselves, which is a great survival mechanism," said Elliott, who, with her siblings, would perform dance routines to Wham songs to celebrate things like new school clothes. "We're all very funny—my aunts, my cousins. We're a fun family. I'm just the one who decided to do it on stage."

These days, Elliott begins each weekday with a very unfunny role, as the on-air traffic reporter for Birmingham's NBC 13 television news, infusing her humor to help ease frustrated commuters' drives to work. She couples that with an afternoon radio gig, and sprinkles in speaking appearances, workshop presentations and master-of-ceremony appearances, all making for one busy, and driven, woman.



Rick Dowling, part of the Tuscaloosa Comedy Group, at an autism fundraiser

Up until recently, when distance and other career obligations made it no longer practical, Elliott served as executive director for the DeMeco Ryans Foundation, managing and representing the charity for the NFL's Philadelphia Eagles star who was an All-American football player at Alabama. Both are from Bessemer, Ala., and graduated from Jess Lanier High School.

Ryans appreciated her blend of work ethic and humor. "I had a wonderful experience working with such a special person and dear friend," said the two-time Pro Bowler. "She was not only instrumental in helping my foundation reach our lofty goals, but she also knew how to find fun in every task or situation we had to tackle. She always gets the job done and motivates others, all while making everyone laugh along the way."

Working in sports is where Elliott's career began, an impres-



sive résumé that includes stints at ESPN, with the NFL's Tennessee Titans, and in a player agents' office, among others. Her work took her to Super Bowls and the ESPYs, and befriended her to

some of football's biggest stars.

While a student at UA, she was on the Spirit Team, and wrote for the *Corolla* and the *Crimson White*, and when she was a sophomore, she began working for what was then called Sports Information—the athletic department's media relations office. She would burst into the office after class, sit down on the couch in the reception area and immediately launch into a description of the adventures—and misadventures—of her day. Within seconds, staff members, her fellow student assistants and even the media representatives in town that day to cover practices or events would gather around her, spellbound and laughing at her tales.

"Then, I never thought about being a comedian, but I always wondered

why people were laughing while I was talking. [I'd think], 'Is it a curiosity thing? I wonder why they are laughing, because I'm just talking,'" Elliott recalled. "My senior year in high school, I was voted Class Clown, and I was very offended because I thought I should have been Most Likely to Succeed or Cutest Girl or Best-Dressed. And it still didn't take root in that moment either that that would be something I would do for a living. I never really thought I was funny."

In 2008, boredom led her to comedy. She started going to open microphone nights, introducing herself as a comedian, though she didn't really consider herself one at the time. On her way home, she'd review jokes the comics had delivered, and improve them. Eventually, she was invited to appear at a comedy club in Birmingham, Ala., and was an immediate hit. "I wasn't nervous before. I got really nervous after, when it hit me that I had just gone on stage and performed comedy."



2007," Dowling said. "I did an event called Stand-Up for Autism." It was in support of a Tuscaloosa-based nonprofit—Arts 'n Autism—that his wife, Suzanne, '81, cofounded, which provides an after-school and summer program for kids and young adults with this developmental disorder. "They presented the idea to me, saying, 'You're a funny guy; why don't you get up on stage and tell jokes?'" Dowling said.

Seven years later, the jokes are still flowing as he helps people laugh through some of life's greatest daily challenges. "We do other charity events—hospice, and early intervention for children with disabilities," Dowling said. "Humor helps you deal. I talk to the audience like I talk to friends. I don't do jokes per se; I pull stories from my family—funny things that happen. It depends on the event as to whether the audience really gets it. For instance, when we do Stand-up for Autism, everyone there generally gets it because they are dealing with the same things. And most understand you are not laughing at the kids; you're laughing at the funny things that happen to you, and they relate because they're experiencing some of those moments as well."

He was involved in theater and debate at Alabama's Homewood High School, but never tried comedy until college, when he helped write, produce and act in short comedy bits for *Kapstone Krazy*, a campus-produced cable-access show. Dowling, the coordinator of faculty development in UA's Faculty Resource

Center, never dreamed these early performances would lead to co-writing and co-performing, along with Suzanne and their now 23-year-old son, *Something About Sam*. The trio goes in front of audiences and shares their experiences through stories and photographs, with Sam reading a favorite poem.

"I think you're always nervous right before you perform, but it's nothing compared to how scared we were when Sam got the diagnosis of autism at age 2. We were on the leading edge then. There was still so much unknown," Dowling remembered.

For now, at least, he is content to keep his comedy fairly local, performing within the state. He sometimes fantasizes about life as a comic on a broader scale, but continues to savor each moment on stage. "When you get up and do a joke or tell a story and get a laugh, it's just an awesome, great feeling," he said. "I highly recommend it." ■

She now takes the stage in venues around the Southeast, describing her style as conversational. "I call it everything humor," she said. "I'm the girl next door, regardless of where you may live. I talk about things that people can relate to. "When I'm on stage, it's the easiest thing I'm doing; I'm just being myself. But I still haven't gotten used to the idea of 'ready, set, go, be funny.' I don't feel funny every day."

Her performances have led to roles in commercials—she was the mom in the Holiday Inn Express commercial who knew the toughest play in baseball—as well as videos and small parts in television and movies. "I'd love to be a writer. Right now I'm doing what I want to be doing. I love television. I love radio. I love stage and performing. I like doing different things at different times, and that's the way it is with a lot of comedians—they have a lot of different platforms," said Elliott.

"I can't imagine my life without humor. I always try to encourage people that if they thought about doing something, do it. It's what led me to comedy."

LAUGHTER IS SAID TO BE THE BEST MEDICINE, and perhaps no one is a bigger believer in that than Rick Dowling. Humor has helped his family deal with the ups and the downs of living with a child—their only child, Sam—who has autism.

Dowling, who earned a UA degree in broadcast and film communication in 1985, is part of the Tuscaloosa Comedy Group, made up of stand-up comedians who include fellow Alabama graduates Brad Fisher, '75; John Poole, '96; and Max Karrh, '97.

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