

Taylor Higginbotham raised his bottle of Miller High Life, “Tonight we’re talking about drugs.” The audience erupted into cat-calls and whistles. Taylor nodded, his beard like a giant black cloud above his black Eastside Denton t-shirt. He’s the kind of tall that middle school basketball coaches drool to find. You can tell by the way he slouches that he hit his growth spurt at a young age. He speaks much faster than most Texans, most Americans even, rarely fixated on any given word—quick like a salesman or a downtown attorney. The guy knows Photoshop and Illustrator like a butcher knows cow parts.

Onstage beside Taylor, Brad McKenzie leaned, fingers on his checkerboard hat with its bill curled up, “We’re Two Brave Boys.”

It was Monday, one hour short of August 1st and a choking 85 degrees, yet the backyard of Dan’s Silver Leaf in Denton swarmed with people. Front row, five women shouldered together, dressed for a midnight booze-run or a shopping spree at Dollar General. A man in a bathrobe slouched into the fence, done up like “The Dude” from *The Big Lebowski*. Next to him, a group of 20-somethings fanned their necks, panting. It had the feel of a secret, a secret between the people who make Denton unique: Hair stylists, bartenders, professors, musicians—lots of musicians. The humidity reeked of liquor and beer fumes, patio and sandals. The barmaid rushed from table to table, hugging up empty bottles and glasses. As soon as she collected an armload, she had to rush back to the bar, the horn blare of a passing train behind her.

“Yes, the topic of tonight’s live podcast,” like he’s opening an envelope, “is drugs.”

A man to the right of frontstage shouted, “Whewwww! Fuckin’ Molly—Whewww!” The outburst felt forced coming from a guy in a pink button-up slightly darker than his shiny-bald head. The man added a few more “whew”s, like a drunk girl in Cancun yelling “Spring Break! Play ‘Free Bird’!” Nobody laughed, and for a moment Brad and Taylor paused, blinking.

Brad is shorter than Taylor, but most people are, so it’s tough to guess his actual height. He might have freckles under the grassy tangle of beard, the beard of someone who grows facial hair often only to hack it off impetuously. A healthy turmoil churned amid the playful blue of his eyes. A depth. Any time he hears a song from Postal Service’s album *Give Up*, he’s overtaken by a familiar nostalgia, transported back to his childhood, with flights alone to visit his dad in Costa Rica, then back again—accompanied only by headphones and music. When he’s in an airport, he remembers how that felt, and he listens to the album as he waits.

Taylor broke the silence by noting that Brad looks like someone who got kicked out of a ska band for looking too ska. Unfazed, Brad recounted his days as a raver. He earned nicknames, titles. His primary nickname was “Stomp,” a reference to his trademark dance move, “the stomp.” The dance, said Taylor, resembles the tantrum a kid throws after being told he can’t eat Cap’n Crunch for dinner. Feigning anger, Brad replies: “You’ve done drugs, too!”

“I’m very personal with my drugs,” Taylor replied. “I smoke weed very personally. I don’t go outside and when I do it’s awful.” He grinned into a straight face. “It’s awful for me, it’s awful for everyone who I come into contact with. I smoke weed twice a day, I’m not gonna lie—because my boss is here,” a pause. “I don’t like being in public. It reminds me of the time I

was alone without my parents.” The punchline reeled in its unexpected dark tone, the kind of joke that will make comedians laugh. Taylor relished the moment, hunching a nod, then topped it with a non-sequitur: “If it was dance move, it would be me sitting in a chair, staring at a wall, convinced that that wall was too textured for my taste.”

The shaven-headed man near the front bent forward laughing, his hand on the table like he needed it for balance. He straightened up when he saw the bartender, then wrestled an ice cube from his cocktail glass and shouted a mangled phrase at the stage. His outburst annoyed the pecan-brown German Shepherd splayed on the ground nearby. The dog would sigh through most of the show, like a teenager surrounded by toddlers, all moaning like a trainwreck.

\*

By day, Denton resembles the pristine small town from *Back to the Future*. At night, it’s a music town, and a damn fine one at that. But most people outside Denton don’t know about its burgeoning comedy scene. Taylor describes the *Two Brave Boys* live podcast as a microcosm of that scene. “You get to watch local comedians do stand-up then you get to see them hangout, which is exactly what we do all the time.”

Brad notes that the Denton comedy scene hasn’t always been as tight-knit as it is. “Taylor did so much to make the comedy scene what it is—he’s established a shitload of comedy open-mics in town, he held comedy shows out of his house.”

Taylor side-steps: “The only thing the scene was missing was proper marketing, and that’s really

all I brought. The talent was already here.”

“He’s underselling a lot of that. First off, he’s really funny.”

Both Brad and Taylor work at East Side, where they first met. It feels like they’ve known each other since elementary school, but they haven’t. They balance dialogue like the Beastie Boys balance lyrics, able to deliver a complete idea in longform by quickly switching off. When Brad mentions the future of their live podcast, Taylor immediately follows: “The hope is to get outside the North Texas local comic and get traveling comics and comics that are known elsewhere.” Then Brad: “And traveling comics that shouldn’t be well known.” Then Taylor: “But a lot of them should be, because they’re working their asses off driving themselves around the nation.” Then Brad: “Essentially what we’re doing onstage is a version of conversations we’ve had in bars, or conversations we’ve had at lunches...in bars.” They pass the dialogue back and forth like a hacky-sack.

Growing up, Brad spent a lot of time in front of a TV watching comedians. Even when they appeared on late-night talk shows, they were performing routines. He always wondered, what are they actually like? The Two Brave Boys live podcast is his answer to that question: “Audiences get to see a stand-up set. But immediately after—we don’t even let the person leave the stage—they’re done, then we walk up with our fucking mics and immediately pull a table to them, we pull up our stools and we all sit down immediately, so the moment the comedian is done, we start talking to them.”

“We’re like the two hipster theater masks on either side of them.”

Matt Quenette, General Manager of Dan’s Silver Leaf, has gotten to know them well, and

a distant admiration fills his voice as he notes that Taylor and Brad work for drinks, by choice. “From the start they said, ‘we don’t want that money.’” Instead, they asked that he use it to pay the guest comedian. “Two Brave Boys is a good name for them. But, man, those kids are hungry. They want it bad.”

\*

After Taylor and Brad combed through some drug slang, they introduced the night’s feature comedian, Denton-based Javoris James, who ambled on stage, a black hoodie slung over his shoulder like a wet towel. His t-shirt was a mashup of Huey from *Boondocks* posing like the baby from Notorious B.I.G.’s *Ready to Die*. Javoris clapped up the mic, grinning a bit, young—22 and restless, driven by the will to succeed and the inevitability of death.

“All right, let’s get this out of the way: I look like Craig Robinson. I look like LeBron James.” He knew he could make the crowd laugh harder, “I look like LeBron if he just blew his knee out. And he shrunk. And he spent the rest of his retirement eating junk food,” grinning into the laughter. “I look like Lesley Jones cosplaying as LeBron.”

Like B.I.G., who never wrote his lyrics down, Javoris performs his jokes from memory. He’s constantly integrating new bits into his routines, although he’ll follow the impulse to free-flow if it strikes him. You can tell he’s spent years watching Chappelle, Patton Oswalt, Bill Burr. And in his two years on the scene, he’s made strides. He recently opened for Baron Vaughn, who voices Tom Servo on the reboot of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*.

Taylor and Brad wandered through the crowd like ushers at a theatre in the dark.

He doesn't typically talk about drugs in his sets, but he maintained the theme with ease. "I don't smoke weed but I've been around it enough to realize that my dad, not only did he smoke it, he probably sold it at the same time." At the back of the crowd, a group of black-leather-vested metal-heads gradually grew louder, more drunk, less interested in the show—full-blown conversation.

If Javoris was bothered by the chatter, it didn't show—later, he would tell me that, disruptions really do bother him. Although it's the quiet moments that rattle his focus. He's learning that the audience is quiet because they're drawn in, taken. And his style depends on it. At the start, he's soft-spoken in a way that lures people forward. He builds the joke like it's a Tribe Called Quest song, swaying a little, so that he can hit the audience with an angle they hadn't seen coming.

In real time, he handled his own, seemingly aware of the crowd and how to get them to fetch. The drunk metal-heads' ears perked when Javoris mentioned his dad's collection of digital scales. "For the longest time I thought the smell of weed was chicken."

The pink-shirted bald man to the right of the stage smacked at his thigh: "WHAT!" A ripple of groans took cascade through the backyard. Javoris stood there. He grinned halfway as he fiddled at his logo-less black hat. With a sharp turn, "I witnessed my first drug deal earlier this year." At an abandoned car wash. The punchline blended into a bit on 80's hip-hop.

The heckler gagged and snorted.

\*

Every comic bombs. Even the best. Bill Hicks bombed, high on LSD, at a disco/country dancehall in Louisiana—under the glitter of a spinning disco ball, the crowd hurled bottles at the stage. Chris Rock was booed off stage 20 minutes into a set at the height of his career. Bill Burr bombed a midday show at a college cafeteria in Kansas. Several times, Dave Chappelle bombed so badly that he made international news. As has *Seinfeld*'s Michael Richards, though for much darker reasons.

Most comedians describe the experience as hellish, unending.

Norm Macdonald loves it. His eyes turn to fire when the audience starts groaning. In an interview with AV Club, he explained that “Comedy is surprises, so if you’re intending to make somebody laugh and they don’t laugh, that’s funny . . . I have a little bit of an out-of-body experience where I enjoy the scenario, and I really do like seeing a crowd turn into a mob, and I do nothing to stop it.”

Javoris feels differently. He realizes hecklers are something every comedian has to deal with. Why is heckling so common at comedy shows? “People see hecklers on TV. They see videos on YouTube of ‘Watch this comic take out a heckler’. And they think it’s just a part of the show,” his eyebrows flunk. “It’s not.”

At one of Taylor’s shows, a shady figure in the audience yelled at him for wearing a Wu-Tang Clan t-shirt. “You think I’m just some white guy wearing a Wu-Tang shirt because the gold

‘W’ looks cool? Wu-Tang is part of my life.’ Then, he spent the entire set rapping songs from 36 Chambers, word-for-word.

The Two Brave Boys live podcast is especially vulnerable to hecklers. Brad and Taylor interact with the audience frequently, and the show begins late, at a bar—all the combustibles that lead to a heckler. “We’re never surprised when someone calls out. When they take it too far, we pull them onstage and we roast them.”

“I think we enable it, but we’re also not against it.”

“We’re not gonna get in the habit of pulling hecklers onstage.”

“Hell no. We’re not gonna be Bozo the Clown gaming up there.”

“We’re not The Fuckin’ Price is Right.”

Also in attendance that night was Joe Coffee, the President of the North Texas Comedy Festival and a touring comedian. What did he think of the heckler? “Was that the one when girl kept giving the ‘Sieg heil’ because the comedian was German?” he thinks for a moment. “No that was the week before.”

Joe won the 2017 Denton Arts & Music award for Best Comedian. He makes a living doing comedy. “You know how many people I’ve talked to that have told me that they go to comedy shows strictly to heckle?” he says. “A lot of them—they’re just too cowardly to go up and do an open-mic.”

Most of the time, he encounters two kinds of hecklers: “There’s someone who’s intentionally, maliciously trying to tear you down—cuz’ they hated what you said or they hated

way you look or they made some preconceived notion. That heckler is THE worst.” The less volatile, though still repugnant, kind is the drunk heckler. “They just want to be part of the show and they don’t realize they’re hurting it. They don’t know comedy etiquette. If they’ve seen stand-up, it was on a Netflix special. And they’ve seen Louie (C.K.) just kill for an hour. They don’t know a lot of the grind that went behind him making that happen.”

His approach to hecklers has changed as he’s matured and evolved as a comedian. He used to bully them, and it got laughs, but they were the wrong kind. “I mean, sometimes you literally have to tell them to shut the fuck up, but a lot of times you can get them back on your side.”

The qualities that make Brad and Taylor’s live podcast unique--the conversational tone, the intimate feel, the laid-back insight--also leave them more susceptible to hecklers. “What Brad and Taylor are doing is really hard” Joe says. “You have to establish that you’re up there for a reason.”

Because performing onstage takes guts and charisma, an athlete’s intensity, the ability to perform under pressure. That pressure is tenfold for comedians, who—unlike other artists—have to hone their craft in front of an audience. Comedians need people. But most of the time, when shit does goes wrong, it’s the audience’s fault.

As soon as Javoris finished, Taylor and Brad shuffled onto the stage with a table, stools, and fresh alcohol. The three comedians formed a huddle midstage. After a few minutes, the heckler laughed like a sea lion. The man was a forceful laugher, the kind who punctuates each

phrase like a marker for where laughter has to be. Sitting alone at a table near the front, he had spent much of the set shouting at the stage. He hadn't gotten a single laugh. Only groans. Yet he had kept going. He'd built force, even, cackling louder with each failure. And he kept trying to get onstage. He wanted to perform.

Halfway through the roundtable with Javoris, Taylor and Brad got fed up.

“What the fuck do you want us to do?”

“Let me up there,” he said. “Roast me!” Taylor and Brad's faces bore the weary look a parent gives a crying baby, willing to do anything to shut it up. They shrugged and the man rushed forward. Onstage, he asked: “Is this okay?”

Brad chuffed into the mic: “Not really. I mean, it's almost like we had something planned and you interrupted the planned thing we had.” In a pair of slip-on Vans that he bought when he was sixteen, Brad tugged at his checkered hat.

The heckler bombed, overtaken by an indifferent crowd who treated his time on stage like a scheduled intermission. He shuffled back to his seat and the show continued. Brad sighed into the microphone, “I'm not against audience participation, but I'd prefer if people participated a little less than you did.” Then he brought the show back and the crowd regained posture.

A harmony settled over the audience as the three comedians got lost in conversation, and it was like they were alone at a bar, their mechanics and vulnerabilities in full view. For five minutes, they talked about their lives and their comedy. Brad followed an impulse: “Let's imagine that Javoris is a dolphin and it's 1967 and you're out of water and a scientist just gave you acid, what would—” but he's interrupted. Again. Again. Again. Again.

“Go pee! Pee your pants on stage! Peeeee!”

The outburst pinched Taylor’s last bit of patience: “Jesus, shut up. You stood on stage and you’re still screaming? God . . . Fuck.” For a moment, Taylor looked like a wounded gladiator, unkempt in a sand storm, bloodied, sober. His hair was confetti in the stink of a breezeless night. But when Brad shrugged and grinned crosswise, Taylor freshened back. A train passed in the distance and the moon hung sprightly grey. The clank of glass bottles thrown into a trashcan.