

A lifetime in Portland

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Nathan Brannon has a comedy career spanning a little less than a decade, but to hear him describe it, it's been "long enough."

Long enough, indeed, to make a mark on the Northwest comedy scene. Brannon won the Seattle International Comedy Competition in 2014, made Willamette Week's "Portland's Funniest 5" for 2013, and won Helium Comedy Club's "Portland's Funniest Person Comedy Competition" in 2012.

Brannon — who released his first comedy album, "I Black Out," in 2013 — has opened for the likes of Dave Chappelle, Damon Wayans and Maria Bamford.

This month, Brannon will record his second album, "Because," after joining the roster of talent at Kill Rock Stars, a Portland and Olympia, Wash., independent record label.

The recording will happen at two Jan. 22 shows at the Alberta Street Pub, 1036 NE Alberta St. — at 7:30 and 10:30 p.m. Tickets are available online and at the door, but it's a small venue and tickets are selling fast.

Brannon, a lifelong Portland resident, says much of his understanding of the city has

changed since his childhood.

For starters, many of the people he grew up with in his Northeast Portland neighborhood are no longer there, he said. "The scenery is definitely different."

Sue Zalokar: *Do you live in the same neighborhood now?*

Nathan Brannon: I live in Southeast now. I got chickens in my yard and everything. I try to go back and visit my old neighborhood. You try to get nostalgic about it, but there's not really much to be nostalgic about anymore.

My dad passed away last year. That left my mom (to cover expenses). They had a house, and she couldn't handle the payments on her own. She had to move out.

We looked and we looked, and there's nothing for people who are on the lower end of the income scale. It's impossible. Now, she lives up in Longview (Wash.). That was the closest place we found that was safe and affordable for her. She raised my sister and me. She gave a big part of her life to this city, and it was like when she needed it, the city turned its back on her. It turned its back on us.

It wasn't like she just stopped paying bills. It was a traumatic experience, and it felt like the city said, "Tough. We couldn't care less about where you live."

It really left a bad taste in my mouth. After living here for so many years and then the priority goes to the people who can afford it now. Time spent in connection to this city doesn't mean anything.

S.Z.: *I have a few friends who left the city this year because their income was far overshadowed by their expenses.*

N.B.: It's pretty obvious. At this point, in Portland, if you can't afford to keep up with how fast the prices are rising, then you leave the city. People who have

Nathan Brannon talks about his city — from programs that helped him in his youth to the housing market today — and how he tackles serious issues



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been here for 20, 30 years. Simply because somebody thought the price should go up.

It's arbitrary to a large degree. This summer, I know of a whole apartment complex that was evacuated, pretty much. Their rent got hiked at once, and it was just a fleet of moving trucks moving people out.

In our neighborhood, there were vans camped out around the small park that we live near, for like a week or two. You see families (living in a vehicle), and

you know there might be some (questionable behavior) in the neighborhood, but you don't call the cops because you're not going to call the cops on a family being tossed out.

It's sad that it is this city, of all cities, you know? The rest of the country looks at us as open-minded, and we make sure everyone is taken care of. Meanwhile there are people with little kids living out of cars.

S.Z.: *How did you come to comedy?*

A life in comedy

of open mics that night. If I hadn't received that list from them, I might not have started comedy.

S.Z.: *You worked as a youth zoo animal presenter, a program that still exists at the Oregon Zoo today.*

N.B.: The ZAP Team was my very first job. It taught me everything from better time management to a love for nature and conservation. It was also the first real exposure to public speaking for me. I was fortunate to have a job, right out of the gate, that I loved doing. I even came back and became outreach supervisor of teens in the program after college for a while.

S.Z.: *You did that through the Prospective Gents Club. Tell me about that.*

N.B.: It was here in the '90s to mid-2000s. It was started by a group of adults here called the Bridge Builders.

It was a program that took inner-city, young black boys through a rite of passage program similar to the rite of passage that you would go through tribally in Africa. With that as a background, it focused on scholarship and community service. It is basically to teach young black boys how to be men.

I owe so much to that program, it's not even funny. I don't think I would have gone to college if they hadn't prepared me the way they did. Sadly, it's no longer operating in Portland. The director, he moved out of state. He started similar programs throughout the country.

S.Z.: *You have a podcast called "The Hamster Village."*

N.B.: I started this podcast to start to understand what it means to be in an interracial relationship in a country that weights race so heavily.

The idea came from the experiences that my wife and I have. How you can go through things that are normal couple experiences, but they are all framed in race because of the weight that we give race in this country? When really, they just have a different preference.

I thought about other couples out there where situations like that can lead to rifts when there doesn't need to be. They just need to be able to voice their concerns with other couples who are going through the same thing. It's a normal thing when you are in an interracial relationship.

It's meant to be more of a societal commentary podcast. A lot of the couples who have been on the podcast are involved in comedy in some form or fashion. So, it can be funny.

S.Z.: *I can't think of a comedian who doesn't have a podcast.*

N.B.: I held off for the longest time. But this has something that people can take away — whether it's challenging a stereotype you might have or a situation that you can relate to. If they find it funny, that's a bonus.

S.Z.: *You're a father now. Has that had an effect on your work?*

N.B.: My son is 9 months old. I thought about him a lot, and somewhere down the road he's going to listen to this (new album), and so I wanted something that was going to be honest and was more insightful. If he chooses to listen to it, it would be something he

would be proud of.

S.Z.: *What do you think about Tamir Rice (the 12-year-old in Cleveland who was fatally shot by police)?*

N.B.: It makes it hard to tell jokes sometimes; I'll be honest.

I forget who said it — I think it was Chapelle — that the position that we have as comedians and performers is an obligation to address the things that other people can't express or articulate.

At some point you have to speak your mind. I wish it wasn't happening. And I feel like I'm doing a disservice if I don't bring it up in an atmosphere like recording an album.

Now that I have a son, these thoughts can weigh on me daily.

S.Z.: *I'll bet. Or the whole non-race issue of just taking your son to school.*

N.B.: Yeah. This morning I was looking up bulletproof backpacks. You take a step back and it's like, "This is what we're doing now?"

I love being a comedian because you can address stuff like that through comedy.

S.Z.: *Bill Cosby has been charged with the rape of one woman and is accused of raping many more. I don't even know what to say.*

N.B.: For me, as a black man, it's extra hard. Seeing a role model of yours growing up could be accused of something like this. You want to think, "Say it ain't so!"

In entertainment, people are accustomed to seeing a person's body of work and then associating them completely with that body of work. That performer's actual personality isn't (the same as the characters he plays).

In this case, Cosby's character may be quite different from (Cliff Huxtable's) character. Just because he made this wonderful body of work, it doesn't mean he's not capable of terrible things.

He was a hero to the black community. Now we have to think a different way. At some point you have to be real. He's capable of it and if he did it, then that's it. He deserves what he gets.

In our society, we are too quick to dismiss the woman's point of view. I'm not going down that route. I have (a family member) who was assaulted way before I was on the planet. I naturally have a soft spot (on this issue).

S.Z.: *What will this new year bring for you?*

N.B.: This album, for sure.

I'd like (to develop) the podcast. I'd like it to encompass all aspects of interracial society. I'd like to put a lot more focus into that and try to get guests like history professors or sociologists or hairdressers — whoever — to address these issues (of race).

(Laughs) At the top of the list: taking care of my son. And try to get him walking.