

WALKING ON THE WORLD

Catching up with political comedian and commentator W. Kamau Bell



PHOTO BY JOHN NOWAK/CNN

W. Kamau Bell is a sociopolitical comedian and host of the CNN docu-series *United Shades of America*. Before launching the show last season, Bell was probably best known for his critically acclaimed — and criminally short-lived — comedy series, *Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell*.

Bell recently released his third comedy album, *Semi-Prominent Negro*. He has a monthly public radio talk show, and he co-hosts two podcasts: *Politically Re-Active*, with his friend and fellow comedian Hari Kondabolu, and *Denzel Washington is the Greatest Actor of All Time Period*, which he co-hosts with friend and fellow comedian Kevin Avery.

He's also a husband and dad. It's safe to say that Bell is a busy guy, but we caught up with him in the midst of his spring/summer tour in anticipation of his May 19 show at the Hult Center.

Is the Dumpster fire of 2016-17 a gold mine for a political comedian?

It's more like sugar shock. It's like when my daughters go to those frozen yogurt places, where you can put all the candy you want on it, and I always go, "You put on a pound more candy than you should have." That's what it's been like. It's like there's too much. And so the big thing is how to sort through, and to curate and to figure out what's the stuff I should talk about. Because there's so much — like even right now, as we talk, President Trump is about to speak in front of the NRA. It's like, "Why the hell are you doing that now? What does that have to do with anything that's going on right now in this country, of all the issues that are happening?" So it's tempting to write about that or talk about that, but it's just a distraction. You have to be careful getting caught up. It's fun to make fun

of Trump. It's fun to make fun of Sean Spicer, but Melissa McCarthy's got that covered — I'm gonna let her handle it.

Although Trump's saying it was harder to be president than he thought it would be, really did seem just like an Onion article.

[Laughs] I bet every president has a moment where they think it's hard to be president. But you're not supposed to say it *out loud*. I don't want to hear that from my president, I don't want to hear that from my doctor, I don't want to hear that from my barista. You're just supposed to do the job. You're supposed to *try harder*.

Your show *The United Shades of America* takes a wide look at the relationship between education and discrimination. As you go around the country and talk to folks, what are you noticing?

Everybody lives in their little corner of the country, and, for the most part, they love how their area does it. People who live on the west and south sides of Chicago — as much as those areas are demonized — they love those communities. People who are living in Appalachia, even though there's a lot of poverty and a lot of drug use, they love being in the outdoors. They love the natural landscape. And people who are living on reservations — even though we hear about how those people are so poor — they're proud to live there. The thing that unifies them is everybody wants better jobs and everybody wants better schools for their kids.

How can we move closer to the ideals that this country was founded on?

If there's anything that the last election should teach us, it's that we have to get out of the team-sport approach to electoral politics, on all sides. We have to get focused on

issues and not this whole red/blue notion. You know, if you talk about a "red state," you're just sort of freezing it in time. When, really, I've traveled all over the country, and when we get in a room together we can have a discussion. If we can get out of the "I support this team and I support that team," and instead say "We need better leaders, we need better jobs, we need better schools" — that'd be a start. Like right now, Trump is onstage talking to the NRA, and he's just feeding red meat to a red crowd, so he can feel better about himself, because he's having a hard 100 days as president.

Well, it's tough. He can't drive anymore. He's sad about that.

[Laughs] It's so funny! It's so funny. I mean, we all know he didn't want to be president! But he thought he could do it through force of will, the way he sold shoddy real estate or defaulted on business deals.

What are your inspirations as a communicator, as an interviewer?

You know, CNN is a big microphone and it's kind of ubiquitous. Even if you don't watch CNN, you could be in an airport, at a gate, waiting for your flight, or you're in a coffee shop or your dentist somewhere. So for me, that's great, because then people get to see the show. And it means I get to get in front of audiences who normally wouldn't pay attention to me. And what that means is, even if you don't like me, which is entirely possible, you're going to see people talking the way people don't normally talk on TV. If you watch the episode set in Chicago, you're going to hear gang members talking about situations in their lives that we haven't really seen a lot. Or when we're at Standing Rock, these are conversations we haven't really had. So I hope people get exposed to hopefully new information, and hopefully learn to let go of their assumptions quicker, when their bubbles are popped.

What do you think we can do to make this better?

We have to be able to engage with each other and listen to each other and have conversations and be respectful about how to have those conversations. I travel all over the country, and when I show up in communities that you might be surprised that I go to, I go in a respectful way, in order to engage with them, not to lecture at them.

Why do stereotypes dehumanize us, and how can we foster more equity?

We need to be more quiet than loud. We need to do more listening than talking. You should be walking on the world, realizing that we don't know everything that's going on in the world, that we can't assume. You can walk around being prejudiced about things, but you need to be willing to let go of those assumptions you've made, once you interact with people. That's the thing I've learned. I certainly walk around with prejudices in my head and preconceived notions, but I try to be really good about letting them go once I realize things aren't fitting into my expectations. And you have to be willing to mix up the influences in your life, whether that's the books you read or the TV shows you watch or the people you hang out with. Try to get yourself in more diverse — I hate the word "diverse," it sounds so corny — but you have to be willing to change your surroundings and get yourself around different people. And it doesn't have to be racial. It could be different types of religions, job descriptions, because all those things will make you smarter and more inclusive, just naturally.

Do you tailor what you're doing to the community you're in?

There are always bits I'm working on. But whenever I go places like Eugene, that I haven't been to in a while, I always Google the name of that community plus the word "racism" just to see what's going on. ■

W. Kamau Bell appears 8 pm Friday, May 19, at the Hult Center; \$28.50-71.50, tickets at HultCenter.org.