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COMEDIAN DAVID CROSS WAS WORKING ON A NEW TV SHOW IN LONDON RECENTLY. SO, DAVID, HOW'D YOU LIKE IT?

"As a whole," he says, clutching a mug of coffee in his Manhattan living room, "I think the people there are kind of shitty. Also, it shuts down early, so unless you want to take the night bus—which I do not recommend—you have to be on the tube by 12:15. The pubs all close at 11. And it's really expensive. Like, really, really, really expensive."

A pause.

"But it's a beautiful city," he says. "Beats L.A., that's for sure."

Sometimes it's tough being a glass-half-full kind of guy. But give David Cross credit: He's trying.

On a gray, rainy Monday, Cross, 46, is stretched out on a couch in his East Village co-op, sporting rumples khakis, a zip-up hoodie, his trademark black bifocals, and a faded gray T-shirt that matches his beard. The apartment is appointed with all the hallmarks of fortysomething hip-

sterdom: Whole Foods grocery bags, Kiehl's bath products, piles of CDs. In a spare bedroom there's a *Rock Band* drum kit, and on one wall hangs an (ironic?) oil painting of Michael Jackson with Ronald and Nancy Reagan. Curled up at Cross' feet is his favorite possession of all: an adorable mutt named Ollie Red Sox. (Cross grew up in Atlanta but is a Boston fan.) "I fucked up and spoiled her early on," he says, sweeping a clump of brown fur from the couch. "Now she does what she wants."

To a generation of comedy nerds, Cross is an icon, a pioneer of the kind of left-field absurdism still earning belly laughs in nightclubs and megaplexes. (Think Zach Galifianakis, Tim and Eric, Dane Cook. OK, not Dane Cook.) Yet it's hard to think of a funnyman who's had a longer string of rotten professional luck. Cross' 1992 entrée into Hollywood, writing for *The Ben Stiller Show* alongside a young Judd Apatow, ended ➤

when Fox killed the show after half a season. *Mr. Show*, the game-changing sketch series he created with his friend Bob Odenkirk, ran for a comparatively epic 30 episodes before HBO pulled the plug. A *Mr. Show* movie, called *Run Ronnie Run!*, never saw theatrical release. By these standards *Arrested Development*—the late, lamented Fox sitcom on which Cross played the jeans-shorts-clad, possibly closeted “analrapist” (short for analyst-therapist) Dr. Tobias Fünke—was a smash, lasting three whole seasons before the network dumped it in 2006.

“He was pretty depressed for a while,” says his good friend, *Vice* magazine founder Gavin McInnes, who met Cross when he hired him to write grouchy, Andy Rooney-esque rants. “He’s got a lot of anger, and he enjoys confrontation. I think that puts a lot of people off.”

Cross’ newest project, his third CD of stand-up for indie-rock tastemakers Sub Pop Records, is unlikely to change this fact. Called *Bigger and Blacker*, it’s vintage Cross—60 minutes of acerbic, misanthropic glee. Here he is on opponents of health-care reform: “I don’t want you to have health care. I want you to die.” On climate change (and religion): “You know who I think the true victims of global warming are? Orthodox Jews. Because wintertime is the only time those people don’t look absolutely ridiculous.” And on race, from a bit where he says he wants to get a Martin Luther King license plate personalized to read NGR LVR: “It’d be confusing, I think. People would go, ‘Hey, what the—well, huh...’”

“I get comments,” Cross says. “You know—I’m a prick, I’m an asshole. I don’t know how many times I’ve had a journalist say, ‘I told my friend I was going to interview you, and he said, ‘Careful—that guy’s a dick.’”

(He’s not exaggerating. A day earlier I told a friend I was going to interview Cross. His response? “I heard he’s kind of a dick.”)

For the record: David Cross is not a dick. He’s definitely complicated—an atheist Jew from the South who makes his living (in part) mocking Southerners and Jews; perhaps the only performer in history to cash checks from Kurt Cobain’s label and *Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Squeakquel*. But he’s also warm and polite, loves animals, and answers the door with a handshake and a hot coffee. Friends say he’s thoughtful and generous to a fault—he’ll do things like take a big group on vacation, pick up the entire tab, then feel guilty about it and donate the same amount to charity. “My wife and I were considering making him godfather to our children,” McInnes jokes, “but then we remembered he doesn’t give a shit about kids.”

Cross is in his kitchen now, talking real estate. He used to love this neighborhood, but lately he wants out. “Fridays and Saturdays, it’s the fucking French Quarter down there. Frat dude central.” He points to the

housing project across the street. “That place is even worse: 3 A.M.—‘Yo, yo, yo! Shaniqua! Throw the keys down!’” He nods toward his refrigerator, 100 percent serious. “I keep eggs in there for times like that.”

David Cross—has there ever been a comic whose name suited him better? It feels so right it could be made up—like Megan Fox or the vasectomy doctor named Dick Chopp. (Google it.) Onscreen his characters tend toward the neurotic and weird, but onstage he’s a first-rate crank, raging righteously against hypocrisy, stupidity, and moral injustice. Politically, he’s solidly on the left, slamming homophobic bigots and pro-life zealots. But he’s also pro-death penalty and calls the Koran “a violent tome” and its adherents “suspect”—although that probably says more about his antipathy toward organized religion, which he thinks is pretty much the biggest crock ever.

Whether he’s skewering abusive priests or Larry the Cable Guy, Cross’ comedy is defined by two basic tenets: a cynical view of power and a fierce commitment to intellectual honesty. Growing up in Georgia, he says, “I felt a very real sense that most of the authority figures I was exposed to were not very bright.” There was Ms. Coleman, the junior high math teacher who gave him detention for saying the word “transvestite” (“Even in sixth grade, I knew that was absurd”); Ms. Casey, the English teacher who told a misbehaving Cross—referring to his Jewish heritage—“I don’t know how they let you in their club.” (“The Jew Club!” he marvels. “Now over 5,000 years old!”)

Even by comedy standards, Cross’ childhood was rough. His dad, Barry, sold women’s clothing but couldn’t hold a job. By the time Cross was 10, the family had moved numerous times, from Atlanta to Florida to Connecticut to New York and back. Even when Barry was working, the Crosses were Dickensianly poor: food stamps, government cheese, lunches at a local soup kitchen. David remembers coming home from school to find out they’d been evicted; his younger sister Wendy recalls once going a week eating nothing but fried cornmeal and maple syrup.

Because the family moved so much, Cross was always the new kid at school. He was kind of an outcast, bookish and small—a tough combination for a Jewish kid in the 1970s South. “I was a huge pussy,” Cross says. “I would do anything to avoid a fight.” Wendy says he was outgoing, if not great with girls (especially after he started losing his hair in high school). “Some people thought he was really funny,” she says. “And some people thought he was a dick.”

One day, not long before Cross’ 10th birthday, his dad took off. He’d resurface every once in while to bum food, crash on their couch, steal things. One time he took a Star of David necklace Cross had gotten for

CHILD’S PLAY

DAVID CROSS ISN’T THE FIRST COMEDIAN TO WORK BLUE ONSTAGE AND KID-FRIENDLY ONSCREEN. A FEW OF OUR FAVORITES...



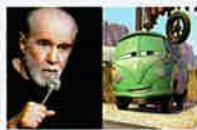
Richard Pryor
STAND-UP: “I’m not addicted to cocaine. I just like the way it smells.”

THE MUPPET MOVIE (1979): “A beautiful chicken like that deserves two balloons.”



Eddie Murphy
STAND-UP: “Would you rather have somebody say, ‘Oh, make love to me,’ or grab the back of your head and say, ‘Fuck the shit out of me?’”

SNICK (2001): “We can stay up late, swapping manly stories, and in the morning I’m making waffles!”



George Carlin
STAND-UP: “I never fucked a 10, but one night I fucked five twos.”

CARS (2006): “There’s a lot of love out there, man.”



Gilbert Gottfried
STAND-UP: “A little boy comes home from school. He goes, ‘Dad I got my first blow job today!’ The father goes, ‘That’s great. How was it?’ He goes, ‘Tasted awful.’”

ALADDIN (1992): “Oh, boy. He’s cracked. He’s gone nuts.”



Chris Rock
STAND-UP: “If a girl has a pierced tongue, she’ll probably suck your dick.”

MADAGASCAR (2005): “When a zebra’s in the zone, leave him alone.”



Wanda Sykes
STAND-UP: “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if our pussies were detachable? Just so much freedom.”

OVER THE HEDGE (2006): “I’m sick and tired of everybody taking one look at me and running away ‘cause they think I’m filthy.”



STATIONS OF THE CROSS

From left: The comedian as semi-closeted "analrapist" Tobias Fünke in the late, great *Arrested Development*; clowning for the crowd during a 2009 stand-up gig in Chicago; and mugging with actress girlfriend Amber Tamblyn.

his bar mitzvah and hocked it. Another time he cleaned out the savings accounts the kids' grandmother had started for their college tuition. Cross recalls going to court with his dad for a child-support hearing and listening to him tell the judge how broke he was; meanwhile, he says, "I'm thinking about my mom and my two sisters in that shithole, and the beat-up '72 station wagon, and my mom can't afford to feed us, and school's coming up again. I thought, Wow, that's pretty gross."

It doesn't take a professional "analrapist" to see Cross' lifelong commitment to truth-telling as a response to his dad's lies. "It's a scar that runs deep," Wendy says. "Dave's really smart, he's gone through a lot of therapy, but he's still very closed, and I think that stems from having somebody he loved not love him back." Cross finally severed ties with his dad when he was 19. He won't discuss details, except to say, "He did something really shitty, and I decided that was the last time I would talk to him." The elder Cross lives in Manhattan now, less than three miles from his son, but they haven't spoken in 25 years.

So: A funny, balding, alienated teenager with a fucked-up home life and an antiauthoritarian streak? Cross was built for stand-up the way LeBron was built to dunk. He'd always been a comedy fan—Monty Python, Dr. Demento—but as a teenager he started taking it seriously. "It's really all I was skilled at," Cross says. "I'm not good at math, I'm not good at sports. But I can make people laugh." He got suspended from the student radio station twice: Once for dedicating the lunch menu to Irishman Bobby Sands, an imprisoned IRA member who'd just starved to death during a hunger strike, and once for reporting that traffic was "heavier than Ms. Jackson," the assistant principal.

After graduation Cross fled Georgia as fast as he could, enrolling at Boston's Emerson College. He failed art appreciation and dropped out within a year, but by then he was booking regular stand-up gigs, doing "Andy Kaufman performance-type stuff"—fake characters, audience confrontations, etc. Along with friends such as Sarah Silverman, Janeane Garofalo, and Louis C.K., he was helping invent the "alt-comic" movement that would help define comedy for the next two decades.

He eventually moved to L.A. and got hired at *The Ben Stiller Show*, where he met Odenkirk, with whom he'd go on to create the groundbreaking *Mr. Show* for HBO. "After *Mr. Show* came out, there were a lot of mini David Crosses sprouting up in the comedy world," Silverman says. "He could argue one side of an issue and make you agree with him 100 percent, then turn around and argue the opposite side and change your mind completely. However he's seeing something, he has this power to bring you right to his point of view. And it's always hilarious."

BY NOW THE RAIN HAS

stopped, so we take a walk around the corner to a bar called 2A. This is Cross' local. He takes Ollie off her leash, helps himself to the popcorn machine behind the bar. "Hey, Donovan," he says as the bartender pours him a pint, and Cross takes a seat by the window.

Not too long ago Cross was a New York nightlife fixture. You could hardly visit a bar or an indie-rock show without spotting his chunky black glasses and stubby dome. He partied with bands—the Strokes are friends—did shots with fans, even had his own impostor ("Fake David Cross"). He has slowed down some but still loves tequila and beer and cops to a lasting affection for speed and cocaine. "With the exception of maybe hallucinogens, I'll do whatever somebody has," he says, sipping his beer. "I'm more than happy to have a good time—especially if

somebody's got some blow. That's when it gets to be six in the morning, and I'm naked, standing on the table going, 'I AM SPARTA!'"

Last May, Cross outdid even himself. As part of an ongoing who's-crazier contest with McInnes, he snorted coke at the annual White House Correspondents' Association dinner—right in the middle of Obama's speech. He pulls out his camera and starts scrolling through photos: "Here's Antonin Scalia. That's Dan and Marilyn Quayle. Here's Michelle Obama..." After he did it—just a bump, not a line—he immediately sent McInnes an e-mail: *Tag, you're it.*

At this point in his career, Cross is a strange sort of paradox. To scene-sters he's the alt-comedy hero who's also done dramatic turns in arthouse fare such as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and the cracked Bob Dylan biopic *I'm Not There*. But his steadiest work comes on the cartoon circuit, where he's lent his voice to such pre-K juggernauts as *Kung Fu Panda* and *Curious George*. His upcoming projects straddle both worlds: In Column A, there's *The Increasingly Poor Decisions of Todd Margaret*, a new show he's writing and starring in (the one he was doing in London) about an incompetent loser who lies his way into increasingly catastrophic predicaments. In Column B, he's reprising his role as a crane next year in *Kung Fu Panda: The Kaboom of Doom*. (As for the long-rumored *Arrested Development* movie, Cross says don't hold your breath. "There's no movie, I'm telling you now. You've got all those different people to bring together, there's still no script...It's not gonna happen.")

Cross still keeps in touch with his *Arrested* cast mates—he's in a fantasy football league with Will Arnett and a fantasy baseball league with Arnett and Jason Bateman. (Other members include *The Office*'s John Krasinski and ex-ESPN anchor Keith Olbermann—which Cross is none too happy about. "Fuckin' Olbermann's gonna win again! And you know he has inside information.")

But these days his closest friend is the one he described on the jacket for his 2009 book, *I Drink for a Reason*, as the woman he's "currently fucking." For the past two years, Cross has been dating actress Amber Tamblyn (*Joan of Arcadia*, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*), a knockout redhead 19 years his junior. "At the beginning I was very self-conscious about the age difference," he says. "The voice kept nagging me: *This sweet little girl. You're gonna look like the biggest fucking creep in the world.*" Eventually, though, love won out; now they're living together, and Cross says wedding bells might even be on the horizon...someday.

Normally they'd be cooking dinner right now, but Tamblyn is filming in Boston, so we head back to his place for a nightcap. Cross pours himself a glass of cabernet, then takes a jar of peanut butter out of the fridge. "It's my dinner," he explains. "You dip some pretzel rods in there, and I swear to God, my favorite fucking thing." It's only later I realize tonight was Passover, the Jewish holiday. Apparently, that's how David Cross does a seder—pretzels and peanut butter.

Lovely girlfriend, steady work, a good dog. Is David Cross finally happy? "He's the happiest he's been since I've known him," McInnes says. Last year Cross bought some property upstate—a little cottage on five and a half acres, just a two-hour drive in his SUV. "I'm really surprised at how happy I am to go up with Amber and Ollie," he says. "I love chopping down trees. I love walking through the woods. I love barbecuing meat. I love driving down to the lake and jumping in."

Cookouts? Brush-clearing? An American gas guzzler? Not to stereotype, but it all sounds pretty...red state.

Cross nods. "After a while I kind of had to face facts," he says. "I guess I'm a Southern boy."