IDEAS AT FORD WITH CHARLES BLOW

Comedy for Culture: Turning Laughter into Action with Roy Wood Jr. and Joyelle Nicole Johnson

Stand-up comedians Roy Wood Jr. and Joyelle Nicole Johnson join host Charles Blow to discuss how they use their humor to open dialogues about social justice issues. From abortion access to racial equality and criminal justice reform, they are making people laugh—and unite in creating a more just world.

ANNOUNCER: Please welcome to the stage, Charles Blow.

[applause]

[Charles Blow, a Black man with a gray beard wearing a black suit, Host]

CHARLES BLOW: Hello. And. Oh, okay. Hello and welcome to “Ideas at Ford with Charles Blow,” where we bring together some of the best thinkers and activists who offer ideas on how to solve some of the world's biggest problems. Tonight's topic is comedy for culture. Now, we don't always think about comedy when we think about social justice, but comedy—whether it is stand-up or written satire or sitcoms, sketch shows, movies, stage plays—have been central to social justice movements across time.

And tonight, I am pleased to be joined by comedian, former *Daily Show* correspondent—alright this is not *The Daily Show*—alright—and the host of CNN's *Have I Got News for You*, Roy Wood Jr.

[applause]

And stand-up comedian, actress, and advocate, Joyelle Nicole Johnson.

[applause]

Okay. So let's start with a question for both of you. The list of comedians who have been part of social justice movements, that have made social justice, like, integral to their comedy is incredibly long. And I'm curious as to whether any of those comedians influenced your careers and if that influence bleeds over into the work that you do. I’ll start with you Roy.

[Roy Wood Jr., a Black man with short hair wearing a green double breasted suit Comedian, Producer, and Writer]

ROY WOOD JR: George Carlin comes to mind to start. And Joyelle and I were talking about Carlin backstage, and it wasn't so much that I put Carlin above Dick Gregory. It was that I had

more access to George Carlin because, you know, HBO free preview weekends in the ‘80s and in the ‘90s, that's how you discovered new comedians, is that once a year, everybody in America had HBO, and they would put their best foot forward and they would show *Comics Relief*. And that's where you got Robin Williams and Whoopi and Billy Crystal, and then they would sneak in a Sinbad every now and then. And so that's how I just started learning about those people.

Dick Gregory came a little bit later in my career, once I started doing stand-up and I was doing morning radio in Birmingham as I was building, you know, we would go down to Selma and do like a comedy show or a banquet or something every year during the bridge crossing annual celebration. And so, that is where I met Dick Gregory, and that's where I kind of saw what he did. And it's hard to say, you know, like “comedian-activist” versus “activist that happens to be hilarious.” And I always kind of saw him as a little bit of that, more so than just a straight up comedian. But I mean, you know, in terms of influence, it was like, yeah, it would be nice if the joke can make somebody think. I don't, I don't believe that any of my material is going to—I don't think there's a golden bullet joke that's gonna change everything. But if I can get you to maybe look at it differently, then it’s a win.

CHARLES BLOW: Joyelle—

> **[Joyelle Nicole Johnson**, African-American woman in a bright pink suit with her hair is in an afro puff, Comedian, Writer, and Actress]

JOYELLE NICOLE JOHNSON: I have the same exact answer. I mean, I was a latchkey kid and my mother actually paid for HBO, you know?

> [laughter]

I wasn't watching it for free. I didn’t even know about that. So I would be watching stuff I was not supposed to be watching at a very young age, like *Taxicab Confessions* and stuff like that. I’m like 12 years old, you know? And George Carlin was the first access I had to television because, you know, he's on HBO. And I just remember I was like “That! I want to do that. But oh my gosh, that looks so scary.” And then my mother was like, “Well, there's this comedian, Dick Gregory, who's coming to town and you need to see him.” So I'm watching George Carlin when I’m 13, and she took me to see Dick Gregory when I was 15, and I was just like, “Oh, I'm doing that, baby.” Yeah so.

ROY WOOD JR: So I wish I would have had that.

CHARLES BLOW: You wish you would have had HBO for real?

ROY WOOD JR: I literally did not know my hometown had a comedy club until I got to college, because that part, like the lifestyle part of the newspaper where you look and see the movies and here's where to shop and so—that was—I didn't look at that until December. That was the

only time you even thought about going over the mountain to where all of the suburbs and the white people were, and like, that's like, I never—I watched stand-up every day and had no idea that it was happening where I lived. So, I mean, I think a lot of what you're exposed to, it's partly what you can find but it's also what your parents choose to expose you to. And I'm a child of two educators, but they both—every civil rights march you can name, my mama was there. My father covered it as a journalist. They didn't laugh a lot, like that wasn't…

[laugher]

It was just different.

CHARLES BLOW: You're giving us a bad rap. I don't know, I don't know if I like that,

ROY WOOD JR: But that's where my scope for what's wrong in the world came from. Because I didn't, you know, my dad, like, we rode in the car and we listened to NPR and AM news like, yeah, we didn't listen to soul records. Maybe on cleanup day on a Saturday in the house. But yeah, in the car we was listening to proper, like, news radio.

JOYELLE NICOLE JOHNSON: I mean, we listened to proper news radio, but my mother also was the person who tortured me with talk radio. She'd be like, all right, you have to listen to both sides. So not only did we listen to the left, but she had me listening to Bob Grant and—yeah, word—we're not cheering for him. But I feel you. Bob Grant, Rush Limbaugh and other stuff. And I'd be like, "Mom, can we please listen to music?" and she's like,"You need to listen to this, and you need to understand what they're saying." And I didn't know it was going to prepare me for my future.

ROY WOOD JR: Yeah. It did.

CHARLES BLOW: Roy let me ask you about some of your stand-up. You have discussed criminal justice quite a bit, both in stand-up and also on *The Daily Show*. Why that issue?

ROY WOOD JR: I think that I sit in a unique position where—so I got arrested when I was 19 for stealing credit cards when I was in college. And so we would take credit cards. I worked at the campus post office, would take credit cards, go buy some clothes, sell the clothes, take the money, buy pizza. That was the big operation that we were in. And I got, I got suspended from school for a semester. And that's when I, that's when I got into stand-up. And so you come back into college and I graduate with a degree in journalism, but now you have this conviction on your record that you're dealing with. And I was blessed enough to work in radio, and entertainment is one of the few mediums where your ability to do the job supersedes any mistake that, that you've made.

The level of disposability with which we treat people who have made mistakes in this country is abhorrent to me. And it's not something like I went on a crusade for. But it was just anywhere I have an opportunity or a pocket to do something, I'm going to try and gravitate towards that a

little bit. You know, I was blessed because when I started stand-up, I was 19, I had a probation officer that actually understood that this was something I enjoy doing. So he granted me travel permits that you're not supposed to approve so that I could travel the South on a Greyhound sleeping in bus stations just to do shows. So recidivism—there are more people in this country going on probation than in prison. And probation, in a way, is set up as a, as a trap for you to get back into jail. And so—because that's where the profits are—there's no profits in letting people walk around with an ankle bracelet. And so for me, that became the thing that I was like, I don't know, it just always annoyed me. So I just figured out ways within *The Daily Show* when it fit. You know, we went to, we went to Chicago and we did a walk along with the group of gang interrupters who basically go block to block and intervene and basically mediate tensions between street gangs. And they're all ex-gang members themselves. And so being able to tell the story of Black people doing something about Black-on-Black crime, in spite of what is normally said in the media about it, that to me that helps. And if I can—and the only way I know to do that is to crack a joke. I sold a television show to Comedy Central that we set in Alabama, where the justice system is not cool.

[laughter]

And the show was essentially me playing a version of the probation officer I had. Because when you look at the way law enforcement is presented through the lens of entertainment, it's "catch the criminal, convict the criminal." 85 to 90% of television shows are about how people end up in jail or putting people in jail. There's very few shows that are set up about what happens on the other side when you're trying to rebuild your life. With the exception of *The Last O.G.* with Tracy Morgan, I have to give a shout out. It doesn't. That doesn't happen.

So it was like, "Oh, well, I'll, let's just do a TV show about that"—"Oh no, you should do a show where you're a Black guy and you do. You're, you're a pastor." I'm like—

CHARLES BLOW: That's how they sound?

ROY WOOD JR: Yeah, that's how they be pitching the show. So, I mean, you—they say you write what you know, so I know the side of this country and the judgment that people can put at your feet sometimes, you know, that you are. They try to make you the sum of your mistakes. You know, and you're not that and it's, it's funny because you can also have the same people who will turn around and say that they're for prison reform. Well, you cannot be for prison reform if you're not trying to hire returning citizens, if you're not setting up programs to give them opportunities—like it's not, the things all run hand in hand.

CHARLES BLOW: Joyelle, you've worked with Abortion Access Front, which uses comedy to fight for reproductive justice.

JOYELLE NICOLE JOHNSON: Yes.

CHARLES BLOW: How does that work? What is the set like in front of an abortion clinic?

JOYELLE NICOLE JOHNSON: Oh, okay, so the Abortion Access Front is a group of comedians, mostly, started by a woman named Lizz Winstead, who is one of the creators of a little show called *The Daily Show*. Yes. So, two women created *The Daily Show*. A lot of people don't know that. But, Lizz Winstead—yeah, clap it up for women creating things.

[applause]

CHARLES BLOW: And Madeleine Smithberg.

JOYELLE NICOLE JOHNSON: Yes. And, Lizz is a huge proponent for abortion rights. And when she wanted to start this organization formerly called Lady Parts Justice, she needed a bunch of comedians to get together to, you know, figure out ways to normalize the word abortion. And going back to what, Roy was saying about mistakes and people being the sums of your mistakes in your life. You know, just because you had a pregnancy and you didn't want it, we demonize people who have abortions, and Lizz's goal was to not only to stop that, but to also go out to abortion clinics and see what they need and be there for their support. So what we do as the organization, we did a tour of 16 blue cities in red states. The first time we went on that tour of 16 cities, and we would be doing these shows, and the clinic workers would come and we'd do a talkback after—very similar to this—and they would just say what they needed in the community.

And one of the, the things that, like, hit me the most that they would say is "No one ever comes" —you know, we demonize people who have abortions, we demonize people who support people who have abortions. And I knew that, at my very young age that I was like, "I want to be a person that helps that." And also, my family history is my mother was a nurse and my father was an Ob-Gyn whose specialty was abortions. But he was also a deadbeat dad, which is weird.

[laugher]

My deadbeat dad was a doctor, so. They were doing abortions in Newark, New Jersey, in the late '70s, before Roe was passed. My mother said after it got passed, they were still seeing women coming into the hospital from complications from trying to do a self-abortion at home. So as young as I remember, my mother always told me she's like, "If anything ever happens, if you need me for something, if you make a mistake, let me know."

And I got pregnant when I was in college. And I told my mother, I called her, I was like, "Mom, I'm pregnant." And she was just like, "What do you want to do?" You know, she gave me that choice immediately and did not make, did not judge me, did not make me feel bad about it. And I was able to have a safe, what I like to call a rich white lady abortion. I didn't see a bill. I was in a doctor's office. I didn't see protesters. So I, when I got the opportunity with Lizz to work with this organization, I was like, I want to be able to support people who didn't have the experience that I had. You know, because it's so important when we're escorting women into clinics and

Mississippi and all these places that are getting yelled at and shamed and judged, I can be out there for them. And so while I'm not doing stand-up in front of the clinic, I am yelling at protesters. And it's so much fun, you know?

[applause]

CHARLES BLOW: So, Roy, you grew up in the South—Birmingham?

ROY WOOD JR: Yeah.

CHARLES BLOW: I also grew up in the South. There's a kind of particular comedic sensibility in the South. I think we have a kind of own vernacular cadence.

ROY WOOD JR: Yeah.

CHARLES BLOW: And it can sometimes feel like people are not only laughing with us, but laughing at us. And maybe that's part of the comedy. How does your southernness play into your comedy?

ROY WOOD JR: Well, it's well, first off, with journalism, they, they send us to these voice and diction classes, in the theater department to kind of, in a way, kind of beat the accent out of you and, and it—but it wasn't on some sort of "Hide your culture. Be ashamed of who you are." If you're in broadcast journalism and you're trying to get hired in Arizona to be a reporter, and you can on that, "Maybe I'm told, like this man, tell you what's going to happen. We was out there, man. They was gonna shoot. We seen a gun, and then the dude had a gun and then back to yell like, back to y'all."

[laughter]

You can't report like that. So, so they gave us these voice and diction classes to kind of give you a bit of a baseline. And then when I got into radio, morning radio was completely different because you're supposed to lean into who you are because you want to be relatable to the people that your—that are listening to you. So it kind of gave me a bit of a code switch in a way where comedically in the South, if you're trying to make money in comedy, you cannot perform for one demographic every week. What I started learning is that if you were able to be relatable, it didn't matter how you sounded. You know, there are people that are always going to make assumptions about you because you're from the South, and because they don't view the South as a smart or intelligent place. But that's also why I'm always claiming Birmingham. I'm always talking about Alabama. Most of the charity work that I do is for charities in Alabama, and it's not against any other charity, it's that I know there's only so many people from the state that have tentacles to be able to bring in money from the other 49 back into causes that are happening within the state, because we need outside help.

So, you know, I wear being from the South as a badge of honor. And so it's not something I've ever, you know, run away from. But what I can't be naïve about is that my job as a comedian is to get you to connect with me and laugh with me as quickly as possible. That's the objective. Ideally, from the time you get on stage, within the first 30 seconds, if you cooking, you should be able to do it in 10 seconds. And if my accent is something that's going to keep you from doing that, then the flip is to talk about something that you're into. If I—if I'm talking —like if I drink a little bit, my accent comes out more. So if it's a third show night somewhere, if I talk about something that you care about first, then you at least know that I care about the things you care about. And if nothing else, you will assume me to be competent in spite of how I might sound, you know? So it's—it becomes a weird sociology game of how much of myself can I be and how fast and still get you on board? Because if you're not listening and you think I'm stupid, you're not comprehending the joke.

And now 30 seconds is 90 seconds and I still haven't gotten the first laugh. Now I'm in trouble as a performer on stage, and the goal is to make the people laugh. So. Like the biggest change between Black and white crowds, for me is with white crowds sometimes I will talk slower because I cannot assume every white person to have so many Black friends that you can keep up with the different tempos of Black conversation.

JOYELLE NICOLE JOHNSON: That's real.

ROY WOOD JR: And it's crazy but like, even as a Black American man from the South, I didn't meet my first Latino till the seventh grade. I didn't meet my first Caribbean Black person until college at FAMU. So even catching up with patois, like, like "I'm Trini," I'm like, "Oh, what is that?" Like, I don't know, you're talking too fast like that. So if I felt that within the Black diaspora, then I have to assume that that's happening when I do a show in the mountains of Kentucky when I first started out, so I can't come on, "Hey, what's going on, man? You look good, man. What's going on with the tie?" versus "Hey, sir, what's up with the tie?" It's the same energy.

CHARLES BLOW: But I like that second one too, though.

ROY WOOD JR: But yeah, but is that really who I am, or is that who I need to be in that split second to get him to pay attention? And now that he's with me, when I come back later in the show, "Man what's going, tell me one more thing about the tie, what's going?" Now I can be a little bit more myself. So I don't know. I don't know if it's a code switch or if it's just a matter of using people's biases against them to get them to open up to hearing you.

[applause]

CHARLES BLOW: Wow. Joyelle, I want to talk to you about—I came across this book. It's published in 2002, and it's called *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar: The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice.* And it argues that because social media has made access to comedy more universal, and that that explosion in access kind of came of age at the same time that some of these social justice movements, like Black Lives Matter, came of age, that that

social justice is kind of built into the DNA of some of the newer, younger comedians who exist primarily online. Do you think that's true?

JOYELLE NICOLE JOHNSON: I mean, I think it depends on the person that you're watching, because I feel like a lot of the social media comics—we were just talking about this backstage, how the difference between somebody who's blown up on social media versus people like us who actually were in the stand-up trenches and came up learning stand-up and studying stand-up and studying the craft—is that, those people can talk about what they want to talk about. They don't have to worry about an audience because of the fact that they're doing it into a TV screen or a phone, you know, and then their audience comes to what they want to. But if I am talking to all of you, I need to find a common denominator right here, right now. So it seems like it's just a different, it's just a different situation versus being—live stand-up comedy, there's nothing that's going to compare to having a live audience in front of you and being able to make the audience—you're not going to find the same thing funny that you're going to find. And the two of you might have nothing in common, but I need to be able to make both of you laugh. They don't have to do that on their screens at home. So I just think that's just the bare difference is that we're performing in front of live stand-up crowds, and they don't have to do that.

ROY WOOD JR: I think also, if we're talking about the newer generation of comedians or entertainers or digital content creators or influencers or whatever, I think that. It'll be interesting to see over the next four years, because I don't believe that anger and outrage are going to be enough to sustain a performance or a through line through any type of performative piece. It'll be interesting to see the evolution of humor, because now this is where the real work comes. Because now you juggling dynamite, because now you're trying to make a point, but you also need to make people laugh. And the people that prioritize the laugh over the politics, the politics will slip in there on its own. And I think the ease of setting up a camera—to your point of a live show and feeling that rejection and living in it and going home and knowing that no one in that room is going to remember you. That's the—that's the beauty of bombing, is that—

[laugher]

No one has a favorite bad comedian.

JOYELLE NICOLE JOHNSON: Right? Yeah.

ROY WOOD JR: You have comedians you hate, but that's political. But just if you heard a bad joke at a comedy club, you're not going to retain that. So everybody—most audiences—the new performers have to understand that audiences have a goldfish memory and, and make the point funny. You can't just live in the political, “Yeah, yeah!” Like that's not going to be enough. And I and—I fear that a lot of creators have fallen into that style of writing and presenting their, their viewpoint. And people show up live and even you don't know when you like, even when you're not sure whether or not a meal was good. You know, when it wasn't great. And that, to me, could affect live show ticket sales and people's level of give a damn and people's desire to pay attention to stuff. You know, I've had to like—

CHARLES BLOW: You don't want these bad comedians to drag you down.

ROY WOOD JR: Well, I'm not saying they're bad. I'm just saying you have to change the playing style now. It's like when the NFL started getting more Black quarterbacks. Okay, well, you need faster linemen because the quarterback's not standing still no more. So what adjustment are you going to make? And you're also dealing with algorithms and it's two totally different audiences that are going to be shown that video simply because of the wording of it. So how to even get your message to make sure that it reaches the people is a whole new hurdle that I don't even think we've figured out yet, because they keep changing the algorithm.

CHARLES BLOW: How do you think it is that comedy is able to give people a fresh take on a familiar or decades-old issue? So you're working on the issue of abortion. It's been around for a while. It's an old issue. We've been fighting about it for a long time. How is it that comedy is able to break through and give a fresh take, or make people enter the issue in a different way and see it differently?

JOYELLE NICOLE JOHNSON: I think you just have to make it as personal as possible. That's the way that I feel like I'm able to connect, because if I'm telling my abortion story, statistically, someone in here has also had an abortion and everyone loves someone who has had an abortion. So I think that if I'm personal enough and I can also be funny—which is the point, is to be funny—then I'm going to be able to connect with more than one person, because I'm telling a story that I know. So that's what—that's what I think is what change, what needs to change for comedy. Because observational humor has all been done. We've all—we've heard everything about an airplane that you could possibly talk about, you know, and while there are new takes about airplanes, sort of, we don't really want to hear that anymore. So you might put your airplane joke at the beginning to let people be like, "Ha ha, yeehaw." And then I'm going to get into my more personal takes on a hot button issue, such as, you know, abortion, race, and all that stuff that I like to talk about later in the set.

CHARLES BLOW: So Joyelle, we're coming to an end now. I want to get your take on the future of all of this. What do you think that comedians can do going forward to drive social change in society?

JOYELLE NICOLE JOHNSON: No pressure. I never—I wanted to, you know, run towards the, the hot button topics. You know? I didn't shirk that responsibility because of how I learned comedy. You know, if I'm watching George Carlin. And he made me—I mean, he made me question everything: politics, religion, I'm raising my hand in Sunday school and the teacher called my mother and was like, "Your daughter has to stop asking questions," because I was, like, disturbing the class and getting everybody riled up. So, I mean, it's the constant question of authority. And when we have fans and we make people laugh, we take people off-guard and we can actually get a message through. When somebody is laughing, your heart is open, your, your mouth is open. I'm putting my opinion into your body, you know, and I think that—that's what

needs to never stop, is the question of authority and the making fun of authority, especially when they're in the room right next to you, you know?

CHARLES BLOW: Give a round of applause. And I want to thank all of you for being here. This is our last show of the year, but not of the season. Not of the season. So we hope you come back next month. Thank you so much for coming out.

[applause]

CREDITS

Host
Charles Blow

Executive Producer
Matthew Creegan

Video Director / Producer
Claire Kinnen

Producers
Kylie Holloway
Soriya Chum

Director of Photography
Kenny Chow

Camera
Justin Ott
Andrew Pietranek
Alex Sierra
Zvonimir Vidusin

Editor
Robert Halstead

Graphic Design
David Perrin

Copy Editor
Meredith Clark

Audio Visual Team

Matthew Chilton
Albert Fermin
Brendan Metz

Makeup Artist
Angelique Velez

Music
De Wolfe

[The Ford Foundation logo is stacked in a bold black serif font, then transforms into a single letter “F” set inside a black circle.]

End of transcript.