

## Kevin Hart, Think Like a Man: He's the most successful stand-up comic in America.

### Why isn't he more famous?

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So why isn't Kevin Hart more famous?



*Kevin Hart performs during the MTV Video Music Awards on Aug. 28, 2011 in Los Angeles, Calif. Photograph by Kevin Winter.*

2011 tour with two sold-out shows in Los Angeles that netted \$1.5 million in ticket sales. The special he filmed on those two nights, *Laugh at My Pain*, later grossed nearly \$8 million, making it one of the most successful independent movies of 2011, as well as the biggest solo comedy concert film in years. Outside the stand-up realm, Hart scored roles in the romantic comedies *Think Like a Man* (which opened at No. 1, making \$33 million last weekend) and *The Five-Year Engagement*. He also just got a deal for a new TV show, *House Husbands*.

The mainstream press coverage one would expect to greet this remarkable success has not yet materialized. Some stand-up observers may have dismissed Hart as merely a popular practitioner of the form—a Dane Cook from Philly, a Jeff Dunham without puppets—and not a particularly interesting one. (If that's the case, they're mistaken.) Or perhaps only one comedian can be anointed a breakout star each year, and 2011 was undeniably the year of Louis C.K. In the case of Hart, it's also hard not to see the persistence of comedy's color line, which continues to separate mostly white audiences from mostly black ones, with only a handful of once-a-decade superstars—Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle—bringing those two crowds together.

Of course, there's still time for Hart to become one of those superstars, as he's not yet 32. Though he openly aims to achieve the rock star status Eddie Murphy attained in his early 20s, stand-up as Hart practices it is a middle-aged art, one crafted over time and shaped by experience. Hart's comic persona is still in flux: Even during these last few very successful years, he has worked quite openly on his identity as a performer. Given his knack for telling funny family stories with a big blue streak, he could become a kind of Cosby crossed with Louis C.K. He could also drift into more purely clownish comedy, the sort he already practices as a kind of court jester to the NBA—material he pulls off quite well, but which seems a waste of his storytelling talents. These diverging paths are not entirely up to him: Where Hart goes from here will depend not only on his own choices, but on those made by entertainment executives—and by comedy fans.

Kevin Hart should be a household name. I don't mean that he deserves to be more popular. I mean that he's already so popular that it's surprising that more people don't know who he is.

Who is Kevin Hart? On his WTF podcast this week, stand-up tastemaker Marc Maron calls him “probably the biggest comic in the country right now.” The numbers back that up. Hart, who was reportedly the top-selling comedian on Ticketmaster last year, closed out his

Hart's persona-shaping can be seen in the very first shots of *Laugh at My Pain*, which is perhaps the best introduction to his comedy. The film opens on a close-up of Hart's face looking pained and weary. An off-camera voice says, "We're rolling," and he snaps to attention, feigning surprise. "We're shooting this?!" he asks. "That's not the look I'm going for! Come on, this is the start of my movie. I'm trying to give off pain. And laughter. Laughing ... my pain." He then makes several amusingly incompetent attempts to convey these emotions with his face before giving up. "Let's just start the movie."

The action doesn't begin with Hart on stage at L.A.'s Nokia Theater. Instead, he takes us to the "stage that prepared him for this moment": north Philadelphia. For the first 15 minutes of the film, he wanders his old neighborhood, visits his high school, and sheds tears of gratitude while sitting around a dining-room table with the sisters of his late mother. It's a bold choice to open a comedy special with naked emotion and very few jokes. But it sets up the best parts of the act to come, which are all about his family—more specifically, his older male relatives.

Hart makes this material funny enough that you don't stop to think about how sad it is. His dad, addicted to cocaine, comes to young Kevin's spelling bees while high and swears at the other parents ("My son's spelling the s--t out of these motherf---ing words!"). He shows up for parent-teacher conferences in sweatpants and no underwear, dismissing the complaints of grossed-out schoolchildren about his alarmingly visible penis. Hart then talks about his cousin Al, who turned to Jesus after his own battles with addiction, and who tells Kevin that he turned to gay prostitution in his darkest days—and that Hart's father did, too. (In a striking coda to the film, Hart wanders into a bar and watches his dad being interviewed by Larry King. The segment did not actually air on TV—it was taped just for the film.) Eventually, Hart comes around to his most popular "character," his uncle Richard Jr., an ex-con whose thug rants were a highlight of Hart's previous special *Seriously Funny*. Uncle Richard Jr. was such a hit that you'll find his rants transcribed online and his indecipherable catchphrases ("Say it with your chest!") dropped into rap verses.

Warning: the video contains profanity.

Masculinity is Hart's great subject, and he approaches it in a novel way. This is where Hart's height, or lack of it, comes in. Though there have been many great short comedians (Woody Allen, Robin Williams, and Patton Oswalt come to mind), few have mined their lack of stature for as much material. This might seem hacky if it weren't closely tied to the way Hart talks about male bravado—in an early bit, he reveals his embarrassment when his girlfriend gets his favorite cereal for him from a high shelf, asking her instead to lift him up so he can reach it.

Though he brings swagger to the stage, Hart's comedy is rooted in insecurity—he's always describing things as his "biggest fear." Granted, one of Hart's "biggest fears," which he announces in *Seriously Funny*, is his son "growing up and being gay"—while he claims at the beginning of the bit that he's not homophobic, the next few minutes suggest otherwise. Typically, however, Hart's fears subvert the standard macho line rather than reinforcing it. Uncle Richard Jr. is a satire on one particularly exaggerated form of machismo, and his "House Husbands" sketches for BET—the inspiration for his upcoming series—cover this ground as well, albeit much less successfully. In *Seriously Funny*, Hart confesses that his "lady" calls him a b----. His unexpected answer: "So? What happens now?" And then a clarification: "It's not that I'm a b----, it's just that I'm smart."

Warning: The video contains profanity.

If you go to Hart's new movie *Think Like a Man* expecting to see this complicated take on manhood, you'll be disappointed. Instead, the script stakes out a retrograde position (courtesy of Steve Harvey) on the sexes, relegating the tiny comedian to pint-sized buffoonery (which he absolutely nails, but still).

More intriguing is the movie Hart is set to star in alongside Seth Rogen, wherein the duo plays history's first-ever interracial pair of buddy cops (the movie is set in the 1940s).<sup>\*</sup> Hart's partnership with Rogen isn't hugely surprising, as he's hovered on the fringes of the Apatow crowd for years, going back to the 2001 TV show *Undeclared*. (He also has a funny cameo in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, and *The Five-Year-Engagement* is an Apatow production.) What makes this upcoming role a departure is that racial difference has never been a big part of Hart's act. (He did attempt some unfortunate jokes about light-skinned vs. white-skinned women on Twitter a couple years ago; it did not go well.)

In his interview with Marc Maron, Hart makes light of the material he used when he first got on stage. In addition to a “horrible” riff about getting “robbed by a cross-eyed midget,” he says he did a lot of “black people talk like this, white people talk like that” bits. “That’s all I heard and all I knew,” he says. He has long since dropped such jokes from his act. The only charge of racism I can recall from his last three specials is directed at a dolphin.

Hart’s decision to abstain from the comedy of racial comparison is a fairly unusual one for a big-time black comedian. Other than Cosby, all of those once-in-a-decade comedy superstars mentioned above—Pryor, Murphy, Rock, Chappelle—made race an overt part of their routines, albeit in a more nuanced way than “black people talk like this, white people talk like that.” In a recent roundtable discussion of black comedians, Desiree Burch notes that her mostly white crowds seem to enjoy her jokes making fun of white people. “Make fun of us, you’re a nice one!” she imagines them thinking. Paradoxically, Hart’s decision not to tell such jokes may have kept him from becoming a cross-cultural comedy icon.

Cosby, who seems like a possible model here, occasionally had to defend himself from the charge that he was avoiding the subject of race in his routines. Hart’s act helps to highlight how wrongheaded that type of criticism is. On account of his frankness about dark personal experiences, no one can ever say that Hart avoids any subject. Race and racism simply aren’t a big source of material for him. And white comedy fans shouldn’t require that Hart speak to them on the matter. His big subjects—childhood, relationships, sex—are universal.

In that roundtable discussion about black comedy, Baron Vaughn suggests that Dave Chappelle’s departure from the scene has left “this void,” one that has yet to be filled by the next great black superstar of stand-up. He then asks, somewhat tentatively, the “weird question” of who might step up and fill that void. His fellow comics put forward a number of excellent stand-ups, including the 29-year-old Hannibal Buress, the wonderful veteran Wanda Sykes, and even the late Patrice O’Neal (the conversation took place a couple months after he died). No one mentions Kevin Hart. It feels like a mistake.

Clarification, April 23, 2012: This sentence has been updated to make it clear that Hart and Rogen will be playing history’s first interracial buddy cops, not that they are the first actors to play interracial buddy cops. (Return to the revised sentence.)

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