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Context to the nugget

Atul speaks about how he got started in his career in Stand up. He traces it back to a New Year Resolution he made on 1 Jan 2012 that he would do something to change his life and sign up for the first open mic that would come his way. After having tried DJing and Bartending, he speaks about how he nervously approached the first performance he gave with absolutely no prior background in Stand up or any Public Speaking in his childhood.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Atul you were getting a little worn down by the IT Business. You tried your hand at a couple of B2C spaces DJing and Bartending that didn't quite work out. Talk to us about where the seeds of a career in Stand-up Comedy were sown

Atul Khatri (AK): Now what happened I just like go back, in 2010 is when I joined Facebook, okay, when Facebook just came in, there was Orkut, I never got onto Orkut bandwagon fortunately, but I got straight onto the Facebook and Facebook gave opportunities to express your opinion through those posts or status updates or whatever you call them and you get instant gratification from friends, from your family or whoever is connected to you on Facebook. And I loved that because I used to put up some, I still do that every day, I put up some three-four posts every day; it's an observation on Bollywood, on politics, satire, life, family, what's happening around, I used to put up these posts on Facebook and I used to get lot of good feedback from there. And I used to do always original, I used to always put very humorous kind of updates or satire or whatever you call it. And that's where a lot of people used to tell me, hey dude you are very funny, you are very funny, you are very original, people used to get, I used to get calls from my NRI friends saying that we only log in to Facebook to see what's happening in India through your posts because you make a comment, political comment or some satire on it, and we get to know about and then again after four hours we again log in to see what have you posted, just to know what's happening in India, just to know what's happening around. And there lot of people say hey, you are very funny, you are very original, why don't you try your hand at stand-up comedy, and this is 2011. At that time, you had to realize that stand-up comedy was very, very new, I didn't... I just used to see some posts happening, comedian Vir Das, Papa CJ, they had started some things, they used to do these comedy shows. And I never knew that what stand-up comedy was, I mean generally I was not... I was a fan of comedy, if you reflect back, I used to love Kishore Kumar and Mehmood and the Padosan and Bombay to Goa and if given a choice I would always love to go for a funny movie than a serious play. I mean, I will choose my movie or choose... it has to be funny; I just don't want to go for a boring or some epic historical movie, I always go for the fun stuff. So that's when I said, okay, let me go. So there were some shows happening around in Bombay and I went there and that was the time also there was this comedy club in Bombay called the Comedy Store which later on became the Canvas Laugh Club and now as we speak it has shut down in 2018... 2017-18 it shut down because of some financial reasons.

DJ: And I found it amazing, I have been to The Comedy Store in London. And I was amazed that I think they had one in London, one in Manchester and the third one they opened in Bombay if I am not mistaken?

AK: Yes, correct, correct, correct. So it was in fact... and honestly I generally give them all the credit for being the very, very big catalyst for the rise of stand-up comedy in India because at that time... so I'll come to The Comedy Store later because to let you know how they really helped a lot of the careers, a lot of the comedians. So, what happened was that I started going and watching some shows that The Comedy Store and some other bars and open mics which used to happen, and I said, hey, I think I can give this a try, you know, it seems this and that was also a time there was this very popular Russell Peters video which went viral on YouTube, these are times when YouTube was sort of coming and not everybody had access to YouTube, not many people knew what YouTube, you know talking about time, I think there was 1G or 2G technology, so there was not enough streaming and things like that. So that Russell Peter's video came and I said chalo, let me give it a try. So, it was actually a New Year resolution 1st Jan 2012 or 31st December 2011 however you look at it? I said, now this year I have to change my life, I have to give it a shot. So, I said I will sign up for the first comedy open mic which comes and the first comedy open mic was on 2nd Feb 2012 after a month and I didn't know what stand-up comedy was, honestly, I didn't, but I wrote something because I used to write these funny posts, I knew what satire was, so I wrote a big piece, I memorized it and went and did my first open mic and it went off very well. We didn't tell our children about it, my wife asked me, do you want me to come along with you? I said, yeah, please come because I don't want to jump off the bridge if I bomb, it would be a bit too embarrassing at this age, 45 year old man going and trying comedy and uncle coming on stage and doing. So, I said no, please come. We didn't tell our children about it, we just told them we are going out for dinner, because children would have thought dad's gone mad trying to do comedy at this age. And that time my elder daughter was 17, younger one was 15. So yeah, it started from that open mic, and I did very well at the open mic, I met a lot of the other comedians who said, hey, you are very original, you have a very good voice; voice means you have an opinionated voice. So don't leave this because a lot of people they do it like a bucket list, they do it only once and because generally this graph is so, going up on stage, writing jokes, making people laugh I think is a very, very difficult job, it looks very easy, but it's generally, I know the craft so I know how difficult it is. So, I went and actually it is from that open mic it started, I started doing more open mics, started doing there and for four years from 2012 to 2016, I did both my CEO'giri as well as stand-up comedy and 2016 when I saw that, you know, that was a time the market was booming, the stand-up comedy scene in India, because comedy clubs, more comedy clubs were opening in different parts and comedians were coming, we were getting a lot of corporate gigs. Comedy as an art form started getting accepted in India. And 2016, then I finally took the call and I resigned from my CEO Job, and I got full time into comedy, yeah. So, this is my sort of journey in I think 15 minutes.

DJ: It's quite incredible Atul, because in a way you been very honest about comedy was the third thing you're tried and you spoke about DJing and milt looked like a concerted effort to move out of the current...

AK: Genuinely, it was not really to move out, it was more to have one more aspect to be very honest with you, it was not that, when I started it was not that ki chalo, I have to stop this and get into that. Leaving my CEO Job and getting into comedy was a call which is... I saw that opportunity that this line was growing very fast, I had a good name in it, and because of my age and because of my material I get lot of corporate shows. I still I am think very humbly I will think, I am one of the few comedians in India who can handle a corporate show very well because not all comedians can handle a corporate show because of the material, because of the sensitivities of just reading the audience. So, I could see I was doing well and it would be foolish of me not to ride this faster horse

to be honest with you. And it was not that I was not doing well here or the company was not, till the last day like... and also let me tell you one thing when I shut down the company it was done very, very methodically. So haan, so we didn't shut down the company, I shut down my division because my brother never wanted to get into hardware and sales because that's like a plumbing business, honestly. So, he didn't want to get into that, he was very happy doing his consultancy work, the margins are much higher there and PC sales are all very thin margins, high volumes but thin margins. So, he didn't want to get into that game, he was never, he didn't like that business at all. So, we decided to shut that division and I took one year to shut it down. It was not like one day I come and say chalo, bandh ho raha hai company. It was like I took one year to shut it down, I met every client of mine because we were, you know, I was the face of the company, these were the clients who we had relations for 25-26 years and I went up to them and told them that hey guys, many of them some of them knew I was doing comedy because four years I was into it, some of them didn't know and you would be surprised to know 6 out of 10 CEOs I met after the meeting used to tell me, Mr Khatri we want to spend two minutes alone with you in my cabin, they used to take me into the cabin, shut the door, and they said, how the hell did you do it, humko bhi nikalna hai yahan se, ki tell me what is the mantra, I said, I don't know yaar, go for it whatever you like, go for it.

DJ: And you are right, everybody deals with midlife in the closet, right? Nobody wants to come out of...

AK: I think it was very lucky because when sometimes when I think of it Deepak that morning of 2nd Feb 2012 when I went for that comedy, generally I was not sleeping I think three nights before because just the thought of going on stage because... also one more thing at school I was never the guy who was into elocution and debates that over-smart kid who wanted to take part in every play. I was that studious kind of a guy who will probably just introduce the chief guest and run away. So, getting on stage was a very, very frightful experience. So, I was just thinking that particular morning I could have bailed out, it was just telling me telling myself, hey I have this important presentation to make tomorrow, I have this important proposal to make, forget it, chalo next month I will do. And that next month if I had done, I would have never done it because then I would have chickened out of it, because see other than bartending or learning DJing it's sitting with somebody in a room and learning something but this was going up on stage, throwing yourself in front of 30-40 people and trying to make them laugh and believe me when you go on stage 100 people, 200 people, sometimes I have performed for even my maximum crowd has been 3,500 people where they look at you, okay now make us laugh, like snap and make us laugh. We have paid you, now chalo kaam shuru karo, so... Show me what you have got; show me why I have paid 1,000 rupees for your ticket. So there is a lot of pressure on you and that pressure sometimes can get on you but it's very, very scary, till today whenever I go on stage and most comedians, most of us whenever we go on stage even though I have been doing it for eight years now one hour before the show like I have got rats running in my stomach, butterflies in my stomach, I am pacing up and down, I stop eating, stop, just keep on sipping water. So, all these things happen, which is I think a part and parcel of this.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Atul speaking about him nervously approaching the first open mic reminds me of how this podcast started about 4 years back. I knew I wanted to start doing a Podcast series on Leadership, Transitions and Careers but was struggling to figure out where to start. I remember waiting in the Mumbai airport waiting to board my flight and I happened to see the Tennis Legend, Vijay Amritraj from the corner of my eye and walked up to him and said I would like to interview him on his journey. He looked at me quizzically saying "Who are you again". Somehow, I managed to convince him of my intent, and he asked me to come to Bangalore to his hotel room in Leela to record this

conversation which I did. Sometimes, I need to pinch myself on the journey till date after about 60 conversations over 4 years. But like Atul says, there was a bit of “I need to put myself out of my comfort zone” that kicked the ball in motion.

What is interesting is that Atul says that he had no prior background in Public Speaking / Stand up. But he felt he had the intrinsic for it. Often we constrain our world of possibilities by looking at our skills. One of the pieces to watch out for is “what is the one piece of feedback that people give you that you take for granted about yourself”; that is often a super-power that we are sitting on that could open up a new pathway for the future. And that pathway could be in an orthogonal plane.

End of nugget transcription

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Atul Khatri - Nuggets

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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