

FND Interview
By: Andrew Parkkila

FND Films is a three-part sketch comedy team based in Chicago. The trio is made up of twenty-something ex film students named Aaron Fronk, Vinny DeGaetano, and Cooper Johnson . Aside from being YouTube partners that get enough views to pay the bills, they have been feature on *Tosh.0* in Reddit, and have done ad work for a few major corporations.

The comedians granted me a face to face interview at a local bar in Wrigleyville, just a short walk from their apartment. All three were extremely open and generous with their time (we even stuck around for an hour or two after the interview was finished). They came with a very casual attitude, an easy going sense of humor, and they seemed to be lacking that arrogance that so much young talent has.

AP: What would you guys call your brand of comedy? If you had to sum it up in a couple words, what would you say about it?

VD: You know, I've never really thought about it, but somebody else did and they called it absurdist stoner something...

AF: Stoner absurdist comedy. That's what they labeled us as.

CJ: Was it stoner absurdist or absurdist stoner? 'Cause there's a difference.

AF: No it was stoner-absurdist.

CJ: Good, Good. As long as it's not the other one.

AF: I wouldn't wanna' label us as one thing, but I think that we do strive for more wacky, off the wall material.

VD: And the thing is, a lot of people think that when we come up with ideas we're high, but it's the complete opposite for me. Like, if I'm stoned the last thing on my mind is trying to conceptualize or hold together any concrete thought.

CJ: Yeah. You guys were doing this for a lot longer but when I joined while we were at Dwight Lofts it was like, smoke weed all the time then make ideas. Because that's what was going on in our lives. And I feel like the way you come up with ideas directly reflects on how old you are, where you are in your life, what you like to do.

Now we're out of the Loop, out of school and everything. I mean it's still fun and games and absurd, but we take it seriously. Go one hundred percent. That's how you get the best results.

AP: Who are your influences? Talk about some of the people that have made the biggest influence on you.

AF: Man, there's a ton. I think some of our biggest influences would be our peers in sketch comedy, at least for me. Other groups that are actively making content online and releasing it. It's just cool to be able to gauge yourself and the work that you're doing compared to what other people your age are doing. So Magic Hugs, Good Neighbor, BriTANick. They're all hilarious and they're frequently putting stuff on YouTube. But as far as Hollywood and people who have gone far beyond us there's Trey Parker and Matt Stone, Bob Odenkirk, David Cross, the whole crew from *The State*, The Whitest Kids U'Know have some funny stuff...

CJ: Then there's also Chris Farley. I love all of the comedic, dumb shit he's done. I mean, I read his book twice. That was one of the books that I read and was like, "I'm going to read this again." It was awesome. And he was actually a genuinely good actor. I think he could have done more dramatic stuff had he not done heroine and coke and whatever. So there's a person like that and then there's Christopher Guest. He's basically cornered the market or set the bar for mockumentaries and improvisation in narrative film. He's really just mastered that so, if anything, that's a formula that he's created that people are starting to go off of. He's awesome.

AP: So if you could trace it back, how did FND Films start and how did you end up here?

VD: Well, Aaron and I have been buddies since middle school and he had been making movies even before we met with people that we were good friends with. It was just what we did for fun you know? We'd play video games, and go outside and shoot hoops then, "Let's make a movie tonight," and we'd go down to the basement and shoot something. And it kind of just evolved. Like, for the first FND sketch we just spent winter break trying to make a series with G.I. Joe's. We were going to call it "Battle Schmoes." And it looked shitty by the time we tried to test it. And the summer before that we did an hour-long movie and these two projects weren't awesome. They were fun to do, but we learned quality over quantity so we just started doing little bits. Then our first FND sketch was our sophomore year of high school and we liked that format a lot. So we started making movies and we wanted to share them with our friends so we made a website (this was even before YouTube) but we wanted to share more so we started putting them on Newgrounds and eventually YouTube came around and people were like, "You should put your shit on YouTube." So we said, "Okay, why not?" And by this time word of mouth had spread and we actually heard that people in Indiana were watching our videos. And I was kind of blown away by that. So at the end of the day it's all word of mouth.

Then we decided to go to film school. So we came to Chicago and we met Coop at Dwight Lofts and he started working with us. Our comedic sensibilities just kind of meshed naturally. He brought a lot to what we were doing and it just grew organically into where we're at now where the fan base continues to grow and we're just going to keep rollin'.

AP: Since you were featured on *Tosh.0* have you noticed an increase in viewership?

AF: We definitely saw a huge spike on "Celery" [the skit featured on *Tosh.0*] itself. That went from what our videos usually get, like from fifty thousand to a hundred thousand-

VD: It's not over a million yet, is it?

AF: Yeah, it hit over a million. So every time you have a spike on one video it helps all the others. Like "Tasty Treat," our big Klondike commercial was featured on Reddit and then we saw a spike on all of our other videos because on YouTube it's easy to just go to related videos. And any publicity is good publicity, but I wouldn't say that, overall, *Tosh* really changed how many people watched our videos. You know, things got back to normal and our views are settling back to where they were before.

CJ: Even for the sake of the video, *Tosh* helped a little bit obviously, like people probably came to watch that specifically and then dipped out right away. But "Celery" was also number two on Reddit for, like, an hour or something. But I think that actually got us a lot more views in a short of amount of time than *Tosh* did.

VD: Yeah, Reddit's definitely a huge view booster because it's for people that steer away from what "they" want you to think is big and cool and everything.

CJ: It's this genuinely massive group of people coming together and liking something. So that helped.

AP: Since your earlier days have you guys noticed a huge change in taste or method regarding the making of your videos?

AF: I'd say that our comedic sensibilities or taste has transformed pretty significantly. When we met Jake and Jon from Rubydog Films we kind of started growing a much darker comedic sense because of them. Things changed a lot, for the better I think. Our stuff was really light hearted before we met them. And even though we did violence and beat the crap out of each other it always felt kind of goofy and fun, but then they just brought a really dark side out of us that hasn't left.

VD: I think it was them as well as just getting older, growing up, and going to college. You're exposed to a lot more evil in the world and it brings something out of you that... It doesn't corrupt you, or make you jaded, but...yeah...

AP: You're forced to develop this soul crushingly dark humor because if you didn't laugh, you'd cry.

VD: (laughs) Yeah.

CJ: When you're young there's this certain innocence of just doing whatever you feel because it's funny. When I was in middle school or high school we would make the stupidest videos but we thought that they were the funniest things ever, but to others it's just like, "Okay..." It's kind of an inside joke funny, just going wild, but I guess as you grow older you get a different taste for what you can actually do with your comedy and you go from being wacky and wild for the sake of wacky and wild, or being wacky and wild but with a purpose or a message. No matter how ridiculous that message may be, there's still a purpose to it. So as long as there's a purpose of some kind, it doesn't matter what you do within that realm.

VD: And that's always a weird line. Like sometimes I feel like I want to put a message into the videos, but then Green Day started sucking when they got all "political."

CJ: It doesn't need to be political, but you need to stand behind what you're doing.

VD: Yeah, you want to have a deeper core to what you're doing.

AF: I think everybody wants to have some kind of intelligence behind what they're doing so people think you know stuff. I think that any video that we do that pokes fun at any certain subjects, we like to educate ourselves on it and make sure that we're not coming across as idiots and make sure that we know what we're going to joke about.

VD: But I'm sure that we'll watch our video and be like, "Wow, those are fucking stupid."

CJ: Yeah, that's the beauty of it because even in 5th grade when we were making videos, at that time it was the very best that we could do and we loved it. Then you just wait a week and you can already do better. So it's a great learning experience that leads to you constantly finding yourself.

AP: What's your process? Is this something that you need to put aside time for every single day? Or does it just happen organically?

VD: Well now that this is our main source of income it's kind of become a job. I hate calling it that. Every time Aaron's like, "We gotta' do work," I'm like, "No, guys. Fun

time. Call it fun time.” Because I don’t like that idea of it being work. But yeah, we have to set time aside to work. We’ll get up and hang out for a little bit and then we’ll say, “Alright let’s write this idea out,” or, “Let’s work on this sketch that we’ve been working on.” And then we’ll write a script out or we’ll have an idea. And where do ideas come from? I don’t know. You’ll just go about your day, something just sparks and we’ll bring the idea to each other and if it’s something that we all like then we’ll kind of spark something within each other and we’ll start throwing lines back and forth. And we’ve done this enough times that we’ve developed a small arc in the story or basic story elements and we’ll write the script out and throughout the next week we’ll kind of rework it.

CJ: It’s a bit of a catch 22 in the sense where you want to set time aside to sit down and think of something but the best way to think of something is not to think at all. So it’s that weird line of organizing yourself with deadlines that you’re trying to meet and just letting your mind go free. So it’s kind of an awkward process but...

AF: I think that the one thing we’ve learned is that with content online you have to have a presence. Because if you don’t have a presence online and you don’t keep feeding the masses then they just go away. It’s so easy for someone online to just not pay attention to you because if you don’t make something to put right in front of their face, there’s a million other things to look at on YouTube or Facebook. So I think that every time we finish a video it’s like, “What’s the next one?” I mean, shit dude we have a new sketch that’s going up this week and still, we’re like, “What’s the next one?” You can’t stop or you’ll lose people.

CJ: And that’s how it works in any media, after you accomplish something, what’s the use in relishing what you did? Move on. Like once you’ve “made it” so to speak, you start over with a blank slate. You’ve done what you’ve done to get here now build on it and you better keep doing it.

AP: So were the FND Dailies a conscious decision to keep people interested while you’re in between movies?

VD: I guess so. I mean, I think the Dailies started as small things to do to keep viewership perpetual.

AF: I don’t think we started them to be a mini reality show like they’ve become. We started them because Vinny’s FND Extras channel sat dead for so long, and we wanted to put stuff on there so bad and finally when we came upon the Dailies it was almost an excuse to goof off and do short, half-baked ideas without tarnishing the FND channel with dumber stuff. So it was really an excuse to just expel all of that from our systems.

CJ: Yeah it almost just felt like an experiment and then it was like, “Why do fifty thousand people give a shit?” So why not keep it going? It also keeps us motivated

to think of major sketches for the other channel if you're constantly energetic and trying to think of some funny shit.

VD: Our friend, Marty Kane, also brought up a good point that when we're in older we'll be able to look at these and say, "Holy shit that was us fucking forty years ago." It's almost a surreal thing to think about that we'll be able to look at that and say that was us.

CJ: Almost like a scrapbook. Just memories of retardedness.

VD: Show our grandkids the episode where we're throwing dildos into our ceiling fan.

CJ (impersonating old man): Remember that?

VD: There's grandpa!

CJ: It's also cool because we took an improv class at Improv Olympic and I think we all enjoyed it very much but we didn't continue. I kind of like making sketches more, but the Dailies are a way of improvising and staying fresh with that and it's a different technique. It's on video and we get to edit around things but a cool part about it is no one is ever not committed when the camera is on for a Daily.

AF: Yeah, I would say that the coolest thing about the Dailies is that they're improvised. I think that in a way, like Coop said, it's our own kind of improv. The Dailies are just kind of what we get when we turn the camera on.

uAP: **Talk a little bit about the deals you've had with Teen Nick, Motorola, and Taco Bell. How did working for those corporations change the way you approached your work?**

AF: For Teen Nick we did FND TV, which was a short web series that was comprised of segments. They were 30 second long, or less, bits that we strung together into a longer sketch. Teen Nick saw the idea and they were looking to expand content for their new website.

VD: They wanted an edgier vibe to it.

AF: So we made FND TV 3 for Teen Nick, specifically, and it never went on their website (laughs). But we got paid so it's alright. I think that they were confused about what demographic they were trying to reach and I'm not sure if, when we finally delivered it, it was too weird for them. I guess or stuff doesn't pair well with Deglassi, or whatever.

CJ: As far as the other stuff, I had been working at an ad agency before I met these two and I just got to intern there for all of college. So I started showing videos to just whoever and I didn't even show it to that many people. They just moved up the chain until some of the people with the higher creative power saw them. Then finally, after asking annoying question after annoying question and telling them, "Our videos do well with this demographic. Is there anything we can do?" Motorola gave us a chance to create these videos for employees for Best Buy who need to know what the latest, greatest Bluetooth headset's capabilities are. So we would come up with ideas to show the strengths of the new technology in an entertaining and engaging way so that when these employees would come in at seven in the morning tired and hung over they wouldn't have to watch some boring ass video from the '80's.

Then for Taco Bell, I was literally at a bar when some guy called me up and said, "Hey, you guys wanna' go to L.A. and shoot some stuff for Taco Bell?" So we had a discussion and decided to go. But what we did was literally the exact same thing as our dailies. They wanted us to go out to Newport Beach, pretend that we're Taco Bell interns and film us having a good time in Newport Beach. That's kind of what we do, anyways [in the Dailies] so it wasn't going to be that difficult. It ended up being a pretty fun experience aside from all of the cooperate...

AF: Malarkey. Oh, we can swear, right? Bullshit.

CJ: As long as you know that the mute button's on when you're talking to clients you can say whatever you want.

VD: Except when you say stuff to people in the room inadvertently.

CJ: Yeah, some people speak their mind without putting any walls up.

AP: **Is there a story behind that?**

AF: Not that we should tell.

VD: I mean, I don't see a problem with telling.

(A few seconds of awkward glances and nervous laughter go by between the three of them.)

AF: All right, whatever.

CJ: Talking to corporate people is different than answering to ourselves because you actually have limitations and if we have an idea that we think kicks ass and is hilarious, but is a little too edgy or makes fun of old people or something; we don't give a fuck but there's all of these corporate people that don't want to get sued so

obviously they have to watch their asses. It's like threading a needle, trying to get things past legal offices. But it turned out fine, I think.

VD: They never ended up using any of the Taco Bell stuff.

CJ: (laughs) That fell through, too.

VD: It took them like two weeks then they were like, "Nah, we're not going to use it."

CJ: We're one for three.

VD: But it was a great experience.

AF: We're not complainin'.

AP: **You guys sort of already touched on this, but were there any other forms of censorship, either internal or external, that you experienced when working for these corporations?**

AF: Yeah, it's funny because we get the jobs because of our work, but then realize how we can't make the commercial work like our work. There are so many more restrictions when it comes to the corporate world. We had a lot of fun making it, but when we're working, we're only passing through each other. And if the three of us are okay with it then we're like, "Yeah, let's do it." But when it comes to the corporate world you gotta' go through levels, you know? It's not just the people above us; it's the people above them. Overall, it hasn't been too bad, but legal is where it gets ridiculous.

CJ: Because with legal it'll be like, "We think that this is hilarious, but it's never going to fly."

AF: They don't even have to give us a reason, they can just say that it won't work.

CJ: Yeah, not everyone can be like Trey Parker and Matt Stone and just make something and have it unknowingly sweep the nation and then get a show.

VD: And if anyone sees Trey Parker and Matt Stone, I'm sure that there's a team of lawyers behind them. As for Taco Bell and Motorola, they're lawyers aren't quite ready to protect us.

CJ: They would never even take the risk in the first place. Advertising's very spry and if there's anything that could hurt the brand, then they have to say no. Some brands are very conservative and some are more liberal, but that's just the reality of it. It's hard to get really edgy shit out there.

AP: Can you think of any examples?

AF: Yeah, in the “Where’s Waldo?” sketch for FND TV we had a gun in a bag and we couldn’t show the gun.

VD: And I think Jake [the actor that played Waldo] was threatening to kill himself and we couldn’t show that either.

AF: There was also something really small, like one of our characters were smoking a cigarette and they came back and said that it was imitable behavior.

VD: And there was the glass sandwich.

AF: Oh yeah, there was a sketch where I made Vinny a sandwich and gave it to him and he ate it and his mouth started bleeding because there was glass in it. Then I say, “There’s glass in it!” and Vinny says, “I’m allergic to glass!” They flagged that as imitable behavior. Because they said the kids would see that and then make glass sandwiches for each other.

VD: ‘Cause kids are dumb.

AF: It was ridiculous.

CJ: For Taco Bell, the whole thing was us pretending to be interns and them giving us assignments. It was a “Taco Bell Spend-less Summer.” How can these interns have fun on an affordable budget.

AF: Are we aloud to talk about all this?

CJ: Yeah.

AF: Okay (laughs).

CJ: So one of the assignments was to go find celebrities and try and get their autographs and try to get an interview with them. Then legal came back and said, “That’s fine. You’re just not allowed to say any celebrity names, you can’t talk about the celebrities, you can’t show their homes, you can’t show their front gates. If you actually get a hold of one and talk to them, chances are unless they sign a release we can’t use it. But proceed, find some celebrities.”

VD: It became a very vague adventure.

AF: It almost became part of the joke.

CJ: It just became us climbing up trees and calling, “Celebrities!” That’s all we could do.

VD: I think it made it funnier in the end.

AF: Yeah, I liked it a lot.

CJ: That's almost more fun, being so pissed off at the limitations and then asking ourselves, "How goofy can we be while working around all of these limitations and still making it an entertaining video?" It's a good challenge.

AP: Are there any other differences between doing what you guys do and then working for larger companies?

AF: Just getting approval for ideas is something that we're not used to. The whole idea that we have to pass our ideas through someone else is something that I can't get over.

CJ: For Motorola, the first job we had, they wanted three videos, and I think we ended up writing twenty-five different scripts over the course of three days. We come up with all of our ideas in a short amount of time so they knew that we could do that. One day we were there and they were like, "These two aren't going to work. We have three hours. Can you guys come up with five more?" That kind of quick turn around can be frustrating, but the pressure is kind of exhilarating.

VD: And that's not normal for them to ask that of us. It was such a new experience for both of us; for us to be working with them and for them to be working with us. I guess they felt free to ask us for more because they knew that this is what we were dedicating our time to. We weren't typical vendors that they would normally outsource work to; we were something totally different. So it was a very experimental process for everyone involved.

CJ: They were definitely babysitting us from the first day we walked in until they saw the results. I think Aaron was editing it and he had to make thirty-five different cuts. He got called at like three in the morning by this producer.

And then we got another job and we weren't sure if we should take it because the first job sucked so bad. But then the second job was worlds easier because there was a higher level of trust there. We told them how we felt about the first job and we told them how we wanted to do it and they respected that. So it was much, much easier.

AP: So you guys have been involved in two longer projects now. There was *Action World*, a twenty minute short, that you wrote and directed, and Born Ready Film's *Red Balls*, which just premiered last Friday at Stage 773. What are the differences between doing sketches and committing to something longer?

VD: Well, *Action World* was something that we dedicated a lot of time to because it was ours. Where as *Red Balls* wasn't that huge of a dedication. There were just a few scenes that we filmed. And if you talk to Drew and everyone else at Born Ready, they had way bigger obligations than we did. We just acted in it. Acting compared to writing, producing, editing, directing; there's a world of difference. There's much more responsibility when you're the driving force behind something as opposed to just being a piece of it.

CJ: But with *Action World*, the whole two-month process that it took to make the film put a huge restriction on the amount of sketches that came out. Like Aaron was saying earlier, if you don't have a presence then people forget about you and that's that. So when you're making a bigger project then there's really no time to do sketches which means that the channel goes down, but it's also a bonus because there's a bigger film now that can be moved around at festivals.

VD: Yeah, we took it to two different film festivals. That was fun.

CJ: So it's bittersweet, but I guess it is actually better because that's the goal, eventually. To make feature films, that's what needs to be done.

VD: Yeah, when we came to college our goal was to write a feature film, shoot it, then take it to festivals. I think that's every film student's goal. But in the back of my head it's always, "What if something else happens?" And something else did happen. That was YouTube and the sketches and being able to pay rent with the ad revenue. It's kind of incredible. A right place right time kind of thing. But we never lost that urge to do a feature film. We wanted to, but it's hard because we have to feed the monster and keep pumping stuff out. We were actually working on a feature film last summer, but it fell through. It's still not out of the question, but it's just when we find time to do it. It's all about balancing anything.

AP: So do you have plans for future projects with a longer in the works?

CJ: Definitely.

AF: We were planning a longer short film this summer.

VD: (laughs) We always say that.

CJ: That's another idea that fell through

VD: We had an idea, but someone already did it, kind of.

CJ: That always takes all of the momentum out of it.

AF: Yeah. But we do want to shoot something longer. Probably this summer.