
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Sameena Mustafa Interview

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Interviewer: Uyanga Chinzorig

Artist: Sameena Mustafa

Location: In Person, John T. Richardson Library, IL

Date: February 7, 2017

Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in ART 200: Asian American Arts & Culture during the 2017 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, and Media & Design.



Bio and image courtesy of the artist

Bio: Sameena Mustafa is a stand-up comedian, actor, and writer named in the *Chicago Reader's* Best of Chicago 2016 issue. She has been featured in videos by *The Onion* and performed on world-famous stages like the Laugh Factory and Biograph Theater. A Northwestern University graduate, Sameena is a sought-after speaker and host, praised for founding Simmer Brown, a comedy showcase featured in the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *Redeye Chicago*.

Interview Transcript:

Uyanga Chinzorig: I wanted to start off by getting to know you a little more. Can you tell me little bit about yourself (where you grow up, which school you went etc.)

Sameena Mustafa: I was born in the U.S in Evanston, IL which is not far from here. I was raised in the Chicago area. My parents are originally from India. We lived on the North Side of Chicago. I went to Regina Dominican all-girls Catholic high school in Wilmette and ended up at Northwestern for my undergrad. My artistic side came out when I was in undergrad. I was part of the writing program at Northwestern which is a creative writing program. I was in the writing poetry program.

UC: How did you get involved with stand-up comedy?

SM: I originally started doing a sketch writing at Second City in 2013. They have a very specific style of sketch writing and I didn't particularly care for their style. Someone suggested me to take a women's stand-up and storytelling class. I took that in January of 2014. That was my first exposure to writing and performing stand-up comedy. The course was five weeks. You have to do some writing during and outside of the class. There was a graduation show after five weeks where you are expected to perform. February of 2014 was my first time performing. It has been exactly 3 years since I've started stand-up comedy.

UC: How did your family take it when you said you will pursue stand-up comedy?

SM: They don't really relate to it, culturally. My dad more or less understood the idea just from watching the Tonight show with Johnny Carson, but my mother didn't understand. She still isn't 100% sure what stand-up comedy is. My parents have never seen me perform. My siblings have. I have a lot of friends and family who have come to the show and they've been very supportive.

UC: What was the oddest thing you heard from the people around you?

SM: It was from my mother. I didn't really talk to her about it but she heard it from my cousin, who is my mother's sister's daughter. My mother said: "I hear you're telling stories at parties" which is the weirdest thing to hear and makes me sound kind of shady. The typical thing I hear from people is: "Oh, that's so scary. You are so brave to do it." I think: "No, firefighters are brave. Stand-up comedy is not brave." It is kind of odd that people think that there is something so brave about it. I guess people are very scared of public speaking.

UC: How would you define yourself and your art?

SM: I would say my art is mission driven in terms of my writing, in terms of my performance and in terms of the spaces I create, and the alliances I form. I try to create a community and equity, expand and increase the participation of marginalized groups: whether it's women or women of color. I feel like Asian Americans in general, are underrepresented in art. It's very important to me that I started a collective that is South Asian. But we feature artists from all backgrounds: African Americans, Caucasians, Latinos and LGBTQs, all the representatives, and

we also have religious diversity. For example, my producing partner is Hindu and I am Muslim. That is kind of a good way to summarize my art in two words: mission driven.

UC: Can you tell me about “Simmer Brown” stand-up comedy collective?

SM: I found another comic who is South Asian, Indian like me. I had only been in a comedy scene not even quite a year at that point and saw that there was a vacuum of shows that had diversity in a meaningful way. What I saw was mostly shows run by white performers and producers, and most of their shows were white. There were a handful of other shows produced by other performers and they were either white identified people of color [if you understand my meaning by saying that], or they were shows produced by people of color for people of color in sort of ethnic or racial enclaves. I saw sort of segregation of “a black show in a black neighborhood, Latino shows in a Latino neighborhood” and all the audiences were niche audiences. What I wanted to get away from was doing a show that was a niche show or had an audience that was one heritage, or one race, or one religion. I wanted to create a diversity in the audience as well as the lineup. That’s really the thinking behind Simmer Brown. It’s not just enough to say we have one slot for women of color or we have one slot for LGBTQ. That’s often how comedy shows are produced in Chicago. It’s all one type and they throw somebody in for variety. There is no real strategic thinking about how do you create a space that is beyond that, and how do you develop an audience that also reflects that. It’s a twist on all of these, sort of, tried and true methods in terms of building an audience. Also, I knew that I wasn’t interested in cultivating the audiences that other comedy shows had. They were primarily bringing in people who are comics or people who are already consuming comedy. I had a feeling that there were more people like me who were older and were seeking out comedy, that was smarter and was geared toward more sophisticated audiences.

UC: What inspired you to open this collective?

SM: There were some shows that I saw and thought: “They are doing a good job of producing and getting a good lineup. They are getting performers to come in and definitely getting an audience. But I really didn’t see anything quite like what I was creating. I saw a Latino comedy producer who is still very successful in Chicago, but his lineup is primarily Latino and his audience is primarily Latino. There was a little bit diversity in the lineup but it’s very much he’s gearing to this one audience. I thought: “That’s great. He’s doing it. He’s part of that market.” There are plenty of shows throughout the city that is either all white, or all black, or all something. If I drew any inspiration; I knew I wanted our show to be a show that you paid for. I thought they have created a market for independent, non-club [not affiliated with a club]-essentially that was the business model. If anything, I said: “There is an audience that is willing to pay for the quality.” I’m not sure how much they are willing to pay, but they’ll pay something.

UC: I heard you head to neighborhood bars after the show together with the audiences.

SM: We started developing a little bit of after party. That was a good way for us to connect with the audience, to learn who is coming to the show and get a sense of community. There are a couple of people who we call them ‘super fans’ because they come several times a year and bring new people every time. We are developing almost like a ‘community’ movement of people

who, again, aren't the typical comedy audience or typical comedy fans. They are interested in political comedy, interested in comedy that isn't typically addressed in comedies. It's usually about dating or sex, or something a little bit more trivial. We have some of the comics, but for the most part, our audience prefers a little bit of a nuanced, more educated point of view.

UC: What do you try to address in your work? Where do you get your ideas?

SM: On a producing side, I try to address diversity, inequity, and inclusiveness. In terms of my writing, a lot of my writing has to do with issues of social justice and the politics of the day. I am very topical on what I write and what I focus on. They pair well together in the space that I have created with Simmer Brown.

UC: What are the biggest obstacles of being female stand-up comedian?

SM: Where to start. That is a big question. There are a lot of assumptions made about what topics women should talk about. A lot of women comics follow one of two paths, sort of predictively. They either focus very much on relationships, things like dating. That's very sort of women's issues. There is a class of women comedians who take on a very masculine persona, whether that is expressed through dress or gender. In many ways, stand-up comedy is very masculine. It's very male dominated. There is something about stand-up, the fact that is a solo endeavor, that a lot of it happens late at night, a lot of people who do stand-up comedy are literally on the road and traveling by themselves to small towns all across the America. In many ways, it is difficult to navigate as one. I tend not to seek out those opportunities. There are several obstacles in terms of logistics of gigs. Another barrier that is pretty significant is, if you look at the top ten earning comedians in stand-up comedy, [based on] Forbes or Fortune list etc., only last year did a woman break that list. So, money is a huge factor. Stand-up comics who are at the top-top levels, the men are getting paid more than women across the board. You see a lot of comedy bookers who are affiliated with clubs or larger venues, still have the mentality of "you can't have more than two women." You can't have a woman host, feature, and headline. A typical structure for a comedy show is having a host who does a little bit as a stand-up, feature who does maybe 15-20 minutes and headliner does maybe 45 minutes to an hour. Typically, they have no problem making that male, male and male; that makes total sense to them. But if there is a female host and female headliner-no. That is a risk they won't take. In their minds, comedy bookers are essentially like in the 1950s at best, in terms of their thoughts about gender. Very few of them are going to create a lineup or a structure that is all women. What they will do is, they will set aside one or two nights a week as a diversity night. They will have women's night where there will be all women, or they will do LGBTQ night, or Latino night, or African American night. They will do niche shows like that. I see this today, this is happening as we speak. I think that's why a lot of women tend to build their own spaces. They tend to build their own shows. Being a comedy producer is often times a coping mechanism. Since I'm not going to get the stage time as much as my male counterparts, I figure out how to work around that and I create my own space.

UC: I recently finished reading a book called "*Lean in*," where the author addresses about gender issues. Was there any time you wanted to quit because of that issues (gender inequality)?

SM: It's not really about gender issues. This is not unique to stand-up comedy only; this is also true in acting and in some other art forms. You spend a lot of years, lean years, where you make very little to no money doing something. There is a hazing mentality. You somehow have to go to rituals, that are somewhat humiliating, then be allowed into the fraternity where you get paid a certain level. But even still you're a new recruit. You only get paid that much and you have to keep building. I think that has given me some pause and given me some thought: "Is this really the path that I want to take?" Perhaps, I want to create another path. There are a lot of women who will put up their own 'one-woman show.' They realize what they can do to distinguish themselves because the Improvs, Zanies and the Laugh Factories of the world are not designed for them. What you find often are women who are stand-up comics that do other things like writing, other kinds of performance, like acting- commercial or dramatic, and podcast or other creative endeavors to supplement their creative life. Writing books that sort of thing.

UC: Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes or histories in your artwork?

SM: Yes, all the time. Being Indian, being South Asian and being brown is one of my biggest issues. Name of the collective is "Simmer Brown" and 'brown' is baked into the name. It's most definitely the stereotypes that come with being South Asian, particularly. There are a few comics, comedians and performers out there who take up all the attention. On the women side it's Amy Schumer; she is the only one people think of now. In terms of women in comedy, the thinking seems to be that there can be only one at a time. Asian American comics who are currently at the top of their game are unfortunately, with few exceptions, have in many ways walked away from their 'Asianness'. Mindy Kaling is the perfect example. I think she wrote one Diwali episode for the Office, but most of her shows, her character is white identified. She acknowledges that she is an Indian, but there is a very little about her character and her persona that is Indian.

SM: We are doing something in between where we are acknowledging our 'Asianness.' I am still acknowledging my 'Asianness.' I'm not walking away from it. I'm not calling myself Sam or changing my last name. Mindy Kaling was one of the first prominent of South Asians, so it's kind of understandable. These people who don't have Indian sounding names are felt like that is what they had to do. I think we sort of were at 1.0, now it is a 2.0. People can be who they are, use their real names and sort their Asian identity. I think it's a shift.

UC: What are you currently working on?

SM: I am moving beyond Simmer Brown. I am working on two big things. I am trying to cultivate a series of workshops that are specifically for women of color and those will be stand-up comedy workshops. I am working with another partner who currently has a stand-up comedy school. This is the part of my mission driven focus; trying to get more representation of women of color. Based on the fact that, I as a producer, actually have a very hard time finding women of color performers. It is a quite a challenge. Instead of sitting on my hands and being like: "Oh, I wish more women would show up," I'm creating this as a way for them to step up. The other thing I am working on is, I literally met someone in the morning, hoping to do a podcast; possibly a blog with another comic. She is an African-American comic and the project will be focused on women of color. These are the two things I am working on now on my artistic side.

UC: When you are working on projects or preparing for the shows, do you look for sponsors?

SM: This is all self-driven. For the workshop, we had a small fee that was involved. These are all self-generated. Things like podcasting are democratizing of content because anyone can start a podcast. Actual equipment and required set-up to do a podcast are pretty inexpensive. You can start a podcast right now. That's fairly a low cost. The only thing I worry about if you get sponsors, as an artist, is whether they have restrictions or have expectations on what kind of content you are presenting. My only caution with sponsors is how much control they want to have.

UC: Could you give few tips for beginning stand-up comedians?

SM: The more consistent you can be, the better; whether you are writing or performing. Stand-up comedy is very solo, but the actual world of stand-up comedy is open mics and shows, so there is a social aspect to it. I have seen people time and time again who are drawn to the social aspect whether being at open mics or at shows. There is almost an addiction to being in that space. I see a lot of newer performers spending more time going to open mics than actually writing. Writing is a key. You have to generate a content. It is like a muscle. You need to flex it constantly, regardless of whether you have a real solid 5, 10 or 15, whatever number of minutes of a set you have. A lot of people think "I can be on stage for 20 minutes" but is it a good 20 minutes and how are you developing that? Essentially, you are testing materials at open mics. What I find is, a lot of people are going to open mics socializing and presenting the same material. They are not really challenging themselves. I have a lot of respect for performers, some of whom are very experienced. Even though they have been doing this forever, they still go to open mics, because they know they need to stay sharp and keep that level up. You can be Louis CK, Wanda Sykes or whoever headliner, if you're not doing it consistently, it shows. You can hear it. You have to keep practicing. The actor gets rusty too, but there is something about stand-up comedy; having a comfort level with your material and flexing with your audience. There is a lot of improvisation that happens with stand-up comedy. That is the other point I would call out. For whatever reason, improvisers and stand-up comics hate each other, or there is a rivalry. They need to embrace each other. Improvisers should be able to work with scripted material, but stand-up comics also have to know how to improvise. They know how to riff and flex based on what's happening in the audience or due to the occasional hackler. That is a key skill. Consistent writing and performing, being open to other genres and comedy types are very important skills; especially if you are thinking this is something you want to do professionally. Part of being a stand-up comic is that your scene partner is the audience. Just like an actor has a scene partner, that is same for stand-up comics. You are engaged and breaking the fourth wall. You have to sense the dynamic and energy. You have to harness it and redirect it, or heighten it.

SM: The number of people who are just making a living by performing stand-up comedy is very low. There are people who are producing. Someone like a Kevin Hart. He is the perfect example. He is producing movies, he is touring; like that guy doesn't stop working. Like Louis CK or Amy Schumer, or Margaret Cho. All these people have taken that skill and have applied it elsewhere. Understanding the marketplace and learning the business side of it are the last pieces to know. Don't be afraid of the business side. Putting up a free show is good for practice, but

understand if it's something you are serious about, it requires an investment. Part of that investment is not to be afraid of taking classes or seeking out mentors. There are a lot of "I can do this, I can figure it out" for new comics. You went to few open mics and you are Louis CK now? That does not happen. Even for Louis CK. It took him 20 years to break out; and you hear this arrogance from comics only one year in or six months in.

End.