Two years at the South Carolina Governor’s School for Science & Mathematics + four years at the Leonard N. Stern School of Business = a career in stand-up comedy? It may seem an unlikely equation, but it’s how Aziz Ansari (STERN’04) got his start. “I grew up in this really small town and there wasn’t much to do,” he says of his childhood in Bennettsville, South Carolina, about two hours northeast of Columbia. “There were never any concerts or anything—there wasn’t even a movie theater.” So it wasn’t until his freshman year of college that Ansari saw his first show at the Comedy Cellar on MacDougal Street and discovered his true calling. With encouragement from friends, he took the stage at an open mic night and worked his way up to a regular gig at the Upper East Side’s Comic Strip Live, where Eddie Murphy and Jerry Seinfeld started their careers. Ansari’s jokes were sprinkled with pop culture references and, early on, focused on being the nerdy guy who never gets the girl. His material evolved to include stories about shopping for...
Ang eles and New York City, and nights and tours between film-financed viral videos, including YouTube and offered them their acclaimed short film series Shuttlebugs and starred in a slew of self-action on its annual Hot List, and, a talent agency for toddler stars. Awa rd for Best Stand-up at HBO’s Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work, and, like, no one who starts doing stand-up as a passionate foodie, he found another outlet for his funny bone: the Internet. As trying to a Kanye West album, and, I just like to keep working hard so that I get to keep doing what I’m doing.”

ALL ABOUT AZIZ

Hometown Population

9,069

Twitter Followers

1.8 million and counting turn to Ansari for more than just jokes— as a passionate foodie, he frequently tweets restaurant recommendations for towns and cities across the country.

WHERE WOULD JECICA HIL?

After stealing scenes in films such as I Love You, Man (2009), Funny People (2009), and Get Him to the Gavel (2010), Ansari scored his first major role in last year’s action comedy 30 Minutes or Less.

On Feeling Out of Place at Stern

“I wasn’t really aware of the whole finance culture, like, didn’t know anything about Goldman Sachs and that stuff, so it was all kind of foreign to me. I remember there was a class where the professor showed us something from that Talking Heads concert film Stop Making Sense, and, like, ‘oh I know who the Talking Heads were. It was like, wow, I don’t know if I should be in this school.” Ansari says that there were times he considered transferring to the Tisch School of the Arts or the Gallatin School of Individualized Study, but instead decided to pursue a comedy career on his own. “I’d been doing stand-up and was just like, I think I can do something with comedy, so I stayed with Stern because marketing was...how do I put this?...it wasn’t really gorgeous on the workload.”

Hitting the Streets

Trying to break into the city’s comedy club circuit as an NYU undergrad, Ansari spent his Friday and Saturday nights in Times Square handing out flyers to passersby in exchange for stage time. “I think anyone who starts doing stand-up, you’re kind of terrible for the first couple years,” he says. “It takes a while before you really figure out what you’re doing, but I was always very comfortable onstage so that definitely helped me out.”

Lesson Learned

“When I was first starting out, then became a whole series,” Plaza recalls of the gig. “That’s how I ended up getting an agent, because once she contacted me I just kept on, like, harassing her.”

Selling Out

Last year, his 30-city stand-up tour sold 10,000 tickets in New York alone, adding extra dates to meet the demand. But the highlight for Ansari was performing ‘Waiting...’ backed by a 10-piece band. “I never thought thatbig,” he explains. “I never thought about acting or anything when I started. I just liked doing stand-up and wanted to do spots in the city. Like, that would have been great in my book.”

Crossroads

Created by the duo behind The Office, Parks and Recreation follows a group of offbeat government employees in the fictional town of Pawnee, Indiana. GQ named it “Sitcom of the Year” during its second season. Like Mayberry and Springfield before it, Pawnee is a character in its own right, with recurring faces on every corner. “It’s really a dream job,” Ansari says. “There are so few shows that I actually like on TV, so to just be on a show that I think is good, I feel super lucky.”

On the Horizon

Ansari is currently developing a comedy called Olympic-Sized Aushole, in which he’ll star alongside Rhys Darby and Danny McBride. This summer, fans can hear Ansari’s voice a prehistoric rabbit in the animated film sequel for Age: Continental Drift while he wraps up his latest national stand-up tour.
writers of SNL then go on to make their own shows—they're really big heroes of mine. Now I get to work with [Pothier] every day, and that’s always weird to me.

What did you do after graduating from NYU?

I was just hustling. I waited tables and worked at many temp agencies. I would show up at the temp agency at like, people even in the morning and if they had a job for me they would send me out, and if not, they would give me 20 bucks. I pretty much just bust my ass in the city while taking classes and being broke.

Being broke is a great motivating force for someone who wants to be an actress because you just have to keep going. I decided I wasn’t going to have a backup plan, so I said yes to most everything and just did as much as I could. But there were definitely times when I was like, sitting on the subway after an audition that was really tough and writing in my journal that I’m a failure and I have to go back to waiting tables again. I have journal entries up to 48 hours I was in tears from NYU?

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How did you prepare for those first three Hollywood auditions?

At the time I didn’t know what I was doing and I think that actually helped me because I showed up at those meetings in, like, ripped jeans and a T-shirt—not realizing how much it could change my life. I just didn’t know any better.

Are you still getting used to success?

Yeah, it’s totally weird. I mean I forget that I have, like, money now. Like, I wear the same clothes! [Jade] and I, like, oh, yeah, I can actually buy clothes now. But I’m so glad that I had a [struggling] period—even though I know it’s significantly smaller than most people’s. I’m really grateful that I had that time in New York where I was just hustling with my friends, there are probably the best years of my life. I still look back on those as the best days.

Do you prefer working in film or on TV?

Well, doing movies so much; that’s always what I wanted to do and I never really thought I could be on a TV show. But I really love working on the show. It’s like I have this built-in family that I get to work with every day, and there’s a stability there that you don’t get with movies—movies feel like summer camp and then Parks feels like real life.

What’s the best part about playing April on the show?

April is an awesome character because most of the time I can just pretend like I have everyone and have zero energy and just kind of show up. Playing a character that is disinterested and doesn’t want to be there is a fairly easy job, but the fun part for me is when she has these sparks of happiness—like when Andy [actor Chris Pratt] makes her smile or she shows an emotion. That’s really fun for me because it means she has many layers.

April always seems so cool and confident. Does that reflect your own personality?

Oh, my God, I’m the most nervous person ever! Actually the first time I did The Tonight Show With Jay Leno I almost passed out in the middle of the interview. If you watch it, there’s a moment where I kind of pause and I’m just staring at the floor for a minute and I think people thought I was doing it to be funny, but I was really just trying not to pass out. So, yes, I have this false confidence that I guess is very convincing, but on the inside I’m terrified and want to run away.

Like April, you’re half Puerto Rican. Growing up, did that affect your sense of humor as the only “diverse” student in an all-girls Catholic high school?

Yeah, I think so. I was always kind of using my differences to make people laugh. I don’t even look Puerto Rican, but there were only 40 people in my class, so it was kind of a joke to be like, “I’m the only diverse person,” but I was the only diverse person. I actually got a Hispanic of the year award. Every weird thing about me or anything I was insecure about, I always just tried to turn that into something funny.

Back in college you had a sudden, unexpected stroke that caused expressive aphasia. Though it wasn’t life-threatening, what was that experience like, both personally and as a performer who relies on her voice?

I couldn’t talk for only two days, but in those 48 hours I was imagining my life as a silent actress. I actually thought, well, thank God I’m in film school and I can just bang out some scripts now or something. It was really terrifying. I mean obviously I was concerned about a loss of other things in my life and not just my career, but that thought definitely did cross my mind and I was like, this is just the worst thing that could ever happen to me or to anyone, to just suddenly not be able to speak. But it does make me appreciate speaking for the rest of my life.

In early 2009, Donald Glover takes a break from viral videos to shoot their first feature-length film, Myesyly Swan, which they write, produce, and star in—with Glover also composing the original score. The goofy, self-financed indie film—which debuts at Sundance in 2009, rejoins Glover with Plaza, who plays his love interest—

In spring 2009, Glover decides to quit the Emmy-winning 30 Rock after three seasons to focus on yet another of his many passions: stand-up comedy. Tina Fey, the show’s creator and star, tells The New York Times, “Usually, when writers tell you that they’re turning, you want to tell them to keep their day jobs. But with Donald, I had to agree that his talent, youth, and hardboi- ness were not to be wasted sitting in my living room.”

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In early 2002, Donald Glover leaves his sub-urban hometown of Stone Mountain, Georgia, to attend NYU, majoring in dramatic writing with a minor in psychology.

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In 2006 and continues to perform with Derrick Comedy. The group starts a live variety show in Queens that includes appearances by fellow alum Aubrey Plaza. “It’s like we were all kind of helping each other,” she recalls.

In his subsequent live tour appearances, for example, Glover has been known to perform an on-stage “I literally had my NYU paper on the first day of work.”

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