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Engineer Fahim Anwar becomes a comedian

The former Boeing employee starts with YouTube videos and graduates to stage and TV appearances.



Fahim Anwar will appear on Comedy Central's "Russell Simmons Presents." (Anne Cusack / Los Angeles Times)

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By Gina Piccalo
March 3, 2010

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Until recently, Fahim Anwar had a pretty big secret. He carried it around for three years, from his colorless Long Beach office cubicle to the crowded Sunset Strip. He was, in fact, leading a double-life: Aerospace engineer by day. Comedian by night.

FOR THE RECORD:

Fahim Anwar: An article in Wednesday's Calendar about rising comic Fahim Anwar said he would be appearing on the MTV reality show "Disaster Date" in May. His installment actually is scheduled for this month. —

"Having a dream like this is very fragile," Anwar reasoned. "It's very easy for people to write it off. It's better to keep that to yourself."

Yet there was no sign of this mysterious duplicity Feb. 24 as the wiry 25-year-old bounded onstage for his first televised stand-up set on Comedy Central's "Russell Simmons Presents Standup Comedy at the El Rey Theatre." There he was, riffing

about his "Afghan Jerry Seinfeld" look, then breaking into a mean moonwalk that roused the packed house. Aerospace never seemed so far away as it did from the stage on that night.

Indeed, it has been just a month since Anwar left engineering. No more analyzing the floor beams of airplanes for the Boeing Co. No more hiding in the conference room to powwow on his cellphone with his talent manager. No more ducking out at lunch to audition. Anwar's guest starring role as an M.I.T. dropout on "Chuck" aired in early February. His gig on MTV's reality show "Disaster Date" (in which he plays one of the disasters) debuts in May.

The Comedy Central stand-up show airs in June.

And this fall, he'll be a regular on the college comedy circuit thanks to a successful performance at the National Assn. of Campus Activities conference.

But this isn't your average Cinderella story. This kid plotted out his career with the pragmatism of, well, an aerospace engineer.

It started when he was 17, living in Seattle with his Afghan-born parents, who refused to pay for college unless he pursued something practical. Medicine. Law. Engineering. He chose the least demanding of the three. His plan was simple: Get a mechanical engineering degree from University of Washington. Get a job in Southern California. Get a talent manager. Get on TV. When his earnings as a comedian were sufficient, he'd leave engineering.

"It's the most elaborate plan ever hatched to do stand-up comedy," Anwar said. "But it worked for me. In my mind, it made perfect sense."

Anwar learned everything he knows about comedy on the job. He's never taken an acting class nor had sketch comedy training. His manager, Jennie Church-Cooper, found him two years ago in a tiny club in Long Beach. Back then, he was taping comic sketches in his apartment and posting them on YouTube, desperate to get stage time in L.A. (His goofy how-to guide on attending an Afghan wedding went viral, landing more than 500,000 hits.)

Just last week, Anwar moved up another rung. He gave up his Long Beach apartment and moved to Los Angeles. And Comedy Store owner Mitzi Shore recently gave him a weekly spot on one of her club's smaller stages, the so-called Belly Room. "The next step," says Church-Cooper of Principato Young Management, optimistically, "is his own half-hour special."

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Despite all this, Anwar says his parents aren't entirely sold on his new career. They've moved past the days when his mother would ask him forlornly: "What is this comedy? Is it worth throwing your life away for?" But recently they suggested he consider dentistry, like his older brother.

"It's hard to wrap their brains around making a living in entertainment," Anwar said. "They think it's Tom Cruise or nothing. They don't realize there are multiple tiers of success."

It's likely their opinion was shaped by their first -- and only -- experience watching Anwar perform live. He was 18 or 19 and had beaten about 330 other people to land a spot on the Harlem-based Apollo Theater's touring "Amateur Night" when the show came to Seattle. Anwar was psyched and had invited his whole family and everyone he knew.

Then, as they watched, he was booed off the stage by 4,000 people. "Honestly, it can never get any worse than that," Anwar said.

But it hardly thwarted his ambition. Anwar saw it as a rite of passage that he got out of the way early. Though he hasn't invited his parents -- or virtually anyone else -- to another show since.

"I just like performing in front of strangers, knowing there are no stakes," he said. "If you have a bad set, you'll never see these people again."

All that mystery has made Anwar something of a legend back at Boeing. Or a punch line, depending on whom you ask. Mention the comedian to engineer Cameron Stevenson and an eye-roll is almost audible over the phone.

"He had funny things to say at lunch," recalled Stevenson, who was an intern and hung out with Anwar on the job. "Pretty witty guy. But I never expected him to be a comedian. When I was looking him up on Facebook, I found the Fahim Anwar Fan Club. I thought it must be another Fahim Anwar."

It wasn't. In fact, after Anwar left Boeing, someone curious about his departure finally turned to Google. There was Anwar performing sketches on his own YouTube channel. And Anwar the "comedian, actor, writer" on FahimAnwar.com blogging about his kung fu lessons on the "Chuck" set.

"People were making jokes," Stevenson said of Anwar's sudden career change. But, he added, "everyone was really excited when he showed up on 'Chuck.' "

The morning after that episode aired, his colleagues burned up some office bandwidth watching it on Hulu .com.

"We were all pleasantly surprised how well he did," said Stevenson, who landed Anwar's old job and can now quote Anwar's jokes from memory. "We all joked he had to use his own clothes for the show, because that's how he dressed."

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This guy is a total phony. Most comedians don't want to perform in front of him as he rips off material. Would he be on 'chuck' or doing a diversity tour if he wasn't afghan or even get an article on latimes? Of course not, he is a total affirmative action opportunist (and rich spoiled kid who didn't struggle like most comics).

LakersDude (03/04/2010, 1:56 AM)

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Nice article...too bad the writer messed up the spelling of the intern's name: Cameron Stephenson not Stevenson.

Sam@usc.edu (03/03/2010, 8:12 AM)

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