(Music)

You're listening to a podcast of APA Compass, the Pacific Northwest's only Asian Pacific American Public Affairs radio program. APA Compass airs at nine a.m. on the first Friday of every month at *www.kboo.fm* and our archives are downloadable at *kboo.fm/apacompass*. Join our Facebook page *APA Compass Radio* or follow us on Twitter. If you'd like to contact us, we can be reached at *apacompass@gmail.com*. Thanks again for listening. (Music)

(Comedy clip)

Hari: It's very strange to be an American in the UK, because in America I'm not always an American. When people come up to me, they usually say, "Hey, Man. Where are you from?" (Laughing) I tell them, "I'm from New York City," and then they're like, "No, I mean where are you *really* from?" (Laughing) Which of course is code for, "No, I mean why aren't you white?" (Laughing) Which is offensive, right?

I'm being judged based on the color of my skin and not for my most important qualities, which of course are the softness and smoothness of my skin.

(Music)

Sarika: This is APA Compass on KBOO and I'm Sarika Mehta. You were just listening to a bit from comedian Hari Kondabolu. Hari hails from Queens, New York, with strong community organizing ties in Seattle. His first televised appearance was on Jimmy Kimmel Live in 2007, as well as multiple appearances on Comedy Central, including Live at Gotham and John Oliver's New York Standup Show. He's a writer for the FX network show, Totally Biased. Hari stopped at Portland on his Pacific Northwest tour back in May. He joined us in our KBOO studio. We began our conversation with Hari's roots in comedy.

Hari: Well, I grew up in Queens, New York. I loved comedy. I remember watching Margaret Cho do standup on Comedy Central. This is back when Comedy Central had like three programs and they would just air them over and over again. The special I remember, Margaret Cho and Jeannine Garafalo especially used to air a lot.

Margaret had the special where she was in a leather body suit, I remember. I think I remember, yes, that was right. It was just interesting for me to see an Asian-American woman perform, because up to that point I had really only seen Black, White, Latino performers. The idea of this person was talking about their immigrant parents, and it was an acceptable thing.

There have been so many performers, but Margaret was the first that made me think I could do standup. I did it in high school when I was 17. I started a comedy night called... Comedy Night. It was basically mostly a bunch of sketches that were old 1970's SNL sketches, and then I did standup at the end. It was awful. It was great because nobody was really doing it, but like, objectively it was terrible.

It took me a while to figure out how to write my own jokes, how to develop my own voice and feel comfortable. That takes time. I went to college from there, Bowdoin College, which is a small liberal arts college in Maine, and really learned how to perform there and at Wesleyan University where I went for a year, as well.

I kind of developed a more political voice in college, especially post 9/11. After that, seeing what was happening around the country and seeing hate violence, even in New York, and deportations and detentions and things like that, I started reading more and studying more. My comedy didn't really match that voice and I didn't really have the audience for that until I got to Seattle. Then I started to really experiment with both longer form jokes, not just quick punchy things, as well as more honest material - saying things I actually wanted to say and believed.

Sarika: That's actually my next question, is that your comedy lies more in politics and race. This is a different trend from a previous style that ethnic American comedians seem to rely on using ethnicity for comedy, such as Carlos Mencia and Russell Peters.

How do you feel about this shift away from… what appeared to me as making fun of Mom and Dad's accents?

Hari: Right. There's also a place for that style as well. I think Russell Peters is an interesting example, because Russell Peters is not really a mainstream American figure. In the South Asian and Asian community he's a very well-known figure. He's big in Canada, but if you go to a typical comedy club and say his name, most people won't know who Russell Peters is.

He's very much a community figure. His style of performing and what he writes about is not mine, and he's never been an influence of mine, but I do appreciate him in that he's the first that's broken through and made lots of money and built an audience. He's the guy that dealt with racism early on in his career and wasn't given opportunities. He started in Canada and then he had to build his way to where he is at now. Again, his audience - it is not a mainstream audience. He's brought so many people to comedy who hadn't been exposed to comedy before. He's brought comedy to more people than possibly anybody else in the world. He's traveled to so many different countries.

Whether or not you objectively look at it and say this is something you like or I like, that's not really the point. I think what he's doing is in some ways bigger. It's, again, not my style. And I have my own philosophies on what I want my voice to be, what I want to say on stage and what I won't do. I know Russell does use accents, which is something I've always been uncomfortable with.

I try to be thoughtful about every word I put on stage and sometimes maybe to my detriment. You might say something that you later regret. That's true in life, so why would it be any different on stage? Right? I try to be as thoughtful as possible, and that's the kind of art I appreciate, in general, not just comedy-wise but art in every shape. I appreciate people who made very deliberate choices because they knew how it was going to impact their audience.

Sarika: Speaking of this message, talk about your film "Manoj" and these experiences that you were just talking about that Manoj might also experience.

Hari: Sure. Manoj is a short film I made back in Seattle in 2006. It's been so long. He's a stereotypical South Asian comedian who ... I guess this is a spoiler but I played him and I play myself in the film. The stuff that Manoj does in the film is, most of it is my early material, the stuff I did when I was in college and when I started in Seattle ... stuff that... you did what you could do to make people laugh whatever it took.

Part of me is sympathetic more now to that for all performers, because as a standup, too, the hardest thing is to make people laugh. When you are just starting out, you do whatever you can. To expect a performer when they start to have a clear voice and to know what their limits are, you have to figure out what your limits are. At the same time, I'm very embarrassed about... the jokes I had back then. I didn't think I had... guts on stage. I think I wasn't particularly courageous other than just being on stage and performing. I wasn't taking any risks and I wasn't saying things I truly believed.

I had a lot of really easy stereotypical jokes, and that's what Manoj does in the short. Some of them I wrote the day of. It's really not very hard to write for that voice. If you “other” yourself, it's pretty easy.

Sarika: We had the recent Ashton Kutcher *PopChips* debacle in which Ashton Kutcher appeared in brown-face portraying a seemingly pathetic Bollywood director for this ad. We've also had the NBC sitcom, Outsourced.

What is your take on South Asians being the latest form of derogatory comic relief in mainstream television and advertising?

Hari: I don't know if we're the latest form. I think we went from not existing to being a joke, but we've kind of been a joke for awhile. I mea, you know, Short Circuit 2, Fisher Stevens was ... I thought that dude was Indian. I thought, oh, there's an Indian actor that made it. When I was a kid, I was excited to see that movie because it was an Indian actor. It's a white dude. It's Fisher Stevens in brown-face.

Apu is like an achievement for us, but even though he's a white dude's voice on *The Simpsons*, it was an achievement because there was something. That's how sad it was. We had something and it was that. Honestly, as much as I love *The Simpsons* and as much as I loved that character growing up, I don't really. I find it really messed up and it's kind of an interesting thing, because the only justification we have for that character is, “it's *The Simpsons* though!” It's a great show. It's a brilliant show, but that character is what he is.

It's frustrating because all I think we're fighting for is just the ability to be human in public. That's not asking very much....

I feel like, you see that with the black community historically. There's this huge period of minstrelsy - white folks in black-face - and black performers being allowed to perform, but playing really demeaning roles still, and then a slow acceptance of a few figures.

I don't understand why we have to go through all of that every time. The gay community has dealt with that as well. Why do we have to go through all of those steps. It's obviously a bad idea.

Part of it is something my friend Hasan Minhaj said in response to the *PopChips* thing, "We're a clownable minority." Not to justify any kind of racism to any group, but I think there's something about the South Asian community that is seen maybe as docile and weak, and they couldn't fight back and who cares. It's something we have felt growing up. We didn't really have a voice and we were made fun of both in school, the work place, on television and in film. We're not seen as part of this. That's what it is.

The accent thing ... people have said, well, shouldn't actors have the right to play parts? He was selling chips. Ashton Kutcher was selling chips. This wasn't an interesting part. This didn't have a real point to it. Even if brown-face in any circumstance I have to seriously consider, but this certainly wasn't it.

Also, in terms of the accents, somebody made a very interesting point on Facebook, a fan that said, "Another thing is that there are so many members of our community who are afraid to speak up for themselves because they hear their accents and are embarrassed and worried that

people will laugh at them, so even when they have something to say they don't say anything."

That's what this is doing. It's furthering that fear of I'm going to be seen as a joke even if I have an interesting thing to say or even if I stand up for myself.

It's very frustrating and especially in an era when you have Aziz Ansari and Mindy Kaling, and these are mainstream figures. They're powerful figures now who get three-picture deals and get to create their own programs and are seen as not just actors but creators of art. It's weird that we still have this, as well.

Sarika: Going back to what you were talking about a little bit earlier, about being a brown man on stage. Talking about white privilege to a likely white-majority audience, and that's part of the voice you wanted to create anyway. Talk about that experience and your process.

Hari: It's fun when I perform for *my* audiences, like people that come specifically to see me, because it's not just going to be the mainstream white-majority audience.

Whether in Portland or in Seattle, it's very racially diverse, people from many different faiths, the queer community is comfortable to come out. That to me is a big deal, because there is so much homophobia at standup shows. That's great that I can be at a safe space for people to laugh at.

It's like part of me is writing to that audience, which is my audience which is a very diverse audience, an open audience. The other part of me also is aware of that's not what I'm going to get most times. I'm just a comic as opposed to, “Oh, it's the Hari Kondabolu show” versus “here's comic X who is performing in this town” or at this college. At that point I'm anybody, right? They don't know who I am and I have to find a way to win them over.

It's tricky because there is a bit of a balancing act. Either a joke which is aggressive has to have somewhat of an out, as opposed to when it's my audience I can say whatever I want and I don't need to worry. I don't need to soften it. Or it's like, okay, I'm going to give you a few hard ones. Here's an easy joke about Weezer. Something like that, you know? Well structured, well written and I like the joke, but still not necessarily for me coming from the heart. Yes, it's tricky and I don't like to compromise.

I think I did a lot of that when I started. I did a lot of that early on because ... I think about my set on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* in 2007. I look at that set and I'm horrified by it. I also understand it's like, your first time on television. I was working as an immigrant rights organizer. I was asked

that week to be on the show. I was scared. I had never ... the idea of being on television ... I didn't plan a comedy career.

I went to school even after all this stuff happened to get a Masters in Human Rights. My background is in organizing and Human Rights. I was on the show and my opening joke was about being a virgin, which is something I did a lot of early on because I felt like if I emasculate myself early then anything aggressive I say after is kind of softened.

It's okay I think to make fun of yourself, but I made very deliberate choices to weaken myself so the audience was in it. I don't want to do that anymore. That's not who I am. It took awhile to get to a place where this is who I am, and you're going to accept me for who I am. If not, then see somebody else.

Sarika: If you're just tuning in, you're listening to APA Compass on KBOO. I'm Sarika Mehta and I'm speaking with comedian Hari Kondabolu.

(Comedy clip)

Hari: When I was living in London, I was dating this English woman and the first three months I was there I was really excited. She was over at my place three nights a week. Immediate trust. And then four months in she was over at my place four nights a week, and I noticed she was starting to tell me what to do, like when to wake up and when to sleep and what to eat, and I'm like, this is weird. But, early on in a relationship you have to set boundaries, so maybe this was part of that boundary-setting process.

I'm like okay, let's go with this. Five months in, she's over at my place five nights a week, and my brother had come to visit. I don't know what she said to my brother but by the end of his week there, like, he was angry at me. She'd turned my brother against me. It was so strange.

Then six months and I hated how I was being treated. I decided to assert myself. I said, I don't like how I'm being treated. I'm a human being. I deserve more, and that's when the beatings started, (Laughing) and I don't know why she felt comfortable hitting me, but she did and it was terrible. I felt defenseless. I felt like nobody could help, nobody was listening, and after seven months she's over at my place seven nights a week. She has her own place. She has her own place that she's paying rent for but she's over at my place every night of the week eating my food, telling me what to do, hitting me, and that's when I knew this wasn't love....

This English woman was trying to colonize me. (Laughing, applause).

I, of course, did what I was trained to do in such situations: Nothing. (Laughing)

I simply didn't cooperate. I used non-violent resistance. After a month she finally left and she took most of my best stuff with her: Food. Art. Self-esteem... all gone, and she left a few things. She left some clothes and some books and of course....an extensive railway system! (Laughing, applause)

So uh , for the non-South Asians in the audience, uh who perhaps didn't understand why there was applause, the British built a really extensive railway system throughout India before they left. It wasn't so much for transportation for the Indian people, it was because it's really hard, of course, to plunder on foot.

Sarika: Earlier this year, the State Department sent you to India as part of the Make Chai, Not War tour, so talk about that experience and especially with writing jokes that are based on cultural references and history.

Hari: Yes. It was very tricky for me to do a show that the State Department sponsored. It's funny, because I've struggled with not wanting to do certain auditions and then I did this tour for the State Department. The State Department has... to be nice, you know, a mixed record. I should say that it wasn't like at the top of the State Department. It was like their cultural affairs division.

The idea was, they usually bring jazz music or things like that from the States to India and try to say this is cultural stuff that we're bringing over and sharing, but I think they thought it would be interesting to bring standup comics because they know there are more South Asian standup comics.

My friend Azhar Usman and our other friend Rajiv Satyal started this tour, *Make Chai Not War*, but they very graciously asked me to be part of their tour. And you know, my issue was, I don't want to restrict myself. I want to be the best I can be for that audience, like I always do. I want to do the best I can for whatever audience is in front of me.

You know, it's funny. As much as I talk about it now, not wanting to compromise or restrict myself, performing in India was hard because I didn't know what the groundwork was. I didn't know what was going to be in front of me. I didn't know.

There was that State Department thing in the back of my head. Are they going to make me not say stuff? But the other part was, what is this audience going to understand? And also, you start to realize it's not one audience. An audience in Calcutta or Mumbai is not the same as an audience in Patna. It's in a smaller developing area of the country.

You're performing in front of a thousand or twelve hundred people a night. Imagine not knowing if anything is going to work. You're basically open-

mic-ing in front of a thousand people. It was an incredible rush. It was the most extreme experience I've had or really felt before. Oh my god, I'm in front of this many people. I have no idea what's going to happen, but...it's frightening.

I remember I was talking to my parents about the stuff and really going over what I could say, what I couldn't say, and I never do that ever, but for his it felt appropriate. It was like, don't talk about sex. Don't talk about religion. Don't talk about ... basically, by the end of it, it was don't talk about anything. (Laughing) It's best you just stand up there and just wait and the time will pass (laughing) and somebody else will go on stage. It's exaggeration, but they were very worried about everything I could possibly say.

Sarika: They wanted to protect you.

Hari: Yeah, yeah, basically. Also, their India is an India that in some ways is frozen in the late '70s from their experiences, right? It's not necessarily big city Indian either, right?

When I got there when I was in Chennai, that was the first place, I have this joke that I talk about dating an English woman. My mom likes that joke, and she said it's a good joke, but change it from an English woman that you're dating to, like a male roommate, because people might be uncomfortable with a woman staying at your place in India, so it's best to just make it ... take that gender dynamic out of it.

I did the joke which made less sense now because of that change, but I did it because, you know, she suggested it. It did fine. It wasn't as great as I'd like but it did fine.

After the show these young kids from Chennai about my age, like mid-20s, late-20s. They came up to me, dressed similar to me, they said they were huge fans and they were asking me, “Why don't you do stuff on Occupy Wall Street?” (Hari) “I didn't know that would be something you would want to hear about.” (kids) “Yes, it was a good set but we noticed that also you seemed to kind of hold back a little bit.” I said, “What do you mean?” They said, “Well, we've seen your stuff online. You held back. That colonialism joke, you said it was a man but it was actually a woman you were dating. Why did you change it for us?” And I said I spoke to my parents and my mom said that you might be upset, that the audience might be upset if a woman stayed over, so I thought it would be easier if it was a male roommate. And he just had this look. He smiled but he was a little annoyed. He said, “Hari, you know we have sex in India, right?” (Laughing)

“Seen the numbers.” (Laughing) It's just kind of the shock of it. There was me figuring out each city as we went along.

Also, it was interesting, because we got questions during the Q&A sections of the shows which we did most shows. People said, “Why is your government sending you here? Why is this relevant? Why are you doing this? Why are you criticizing your government?” It seems interesting that their State Department is sending you here, and we all had critical things to say about various government policies and the way life is here.

It was interesting, because the people at the consulates, when they spoke, they'd answer those questions. They said, “Well in the U.S. we believe in freedom of speech and we believe that people have the right to question the government. What better way to show that than bring comedians who are doing just that? We're paying for us to be criticized, basically.”

(Music) AndiIt was such a good answer and I didn't know how to deal with it. “You got me again, yes!” How do I ... I will say that if it was Bush, this wouldn't have happened. It had to be this administration I think for even the possibility of something like this to have happened. It was pretty incredible. That is what we were doing. We were being very honest with our point of view. If we didn't say something, it wasn't for political reasons, it's because it wouldn't have worked. That's why we would hold back. It wouldn't have worked. We all figured out over the course of the run what did and what didn't work, mostly because the other two had performed in India before, but for me each show was like an awakening. That was one thing definitely that I took away, that we were allowed to criticize our government in another country and they, in fact, were happy we did.

Sarika: It's a rare privilege.

Hari: Yeah! It is!

Sarika: My last question, what is the best part about your career as a comedian and what are the biggest challenges?

Hari: The best part for my career is still making people laugh as has always been. I mean, that is the reason I do this. It's funny, because sometimes people will call me a “social justice comedian” or an “activist comedian” and I hate it. I appreciate it because I feel like it's coming from a place where they have similar values and they do the work and I am relate-able to them as a former organizer, and the way I approach a lot of the things I write, but I don't like it because that's not why I do this.

I'm not doing this to change the world. I believe in the things I'm saying and I think they're funny. If they weren't funny I wouldn't say them. I'm a comedian just like any other comedian. And also, as much as it's a complement to say those things to me, in a weird way it marginalizes me.

It puts me in this box of, you're this kind of comedian. No. I'm a comedian. I do mainstream things. I get to be on television. Once you put me in a box, this doesn't work. Getting the points of view across to a wider mainstream audience is important for this to really have the weight people who are calling me an “activist” are calling me. That's part of it. It's well intentioned but I'm a comedian.The best part of being a comedian is making people laugh.

The frustrating thing for me is the constant travel. As much as I love traveling around the world and it's a privilege, it's a little ... it's weird not being grounded in a place. I'm a person who believes strongly in community, in creating community and shaping community. How can I do that when I'm moving all the time? I miss my days in Seattle working as an organizer, performing at night because I was part of an artistic community, a standup community that was young and vibrant and I was part of an activist and organizing community that was as well, that is still. I miss that, and I wish and I hope I get to a place where I'm in a setting like that again with like-minded people who force me to push harder.

Sarika: Thank you so much, Hari Kondabolu, for joining us on APA Compass.

Hari: Thank you very much.

Sarika: I've been speaking with comedian, Hari Kondabolu. You can check out his comedy at his website *harikondabolu.com*. I'm Sarika Mehta and you're listening to APA Compass on KBOO 90.7 FM in Portland.

(Comedy Clip)

Hari: I want to talk about the Islamic community center that's being built a few blocks from Ground Zero or as it's being referred to in tabloids around the world, The Ground Zero Mosque.

The first issue is that it's not a mosque. It's actually a community center open to the general public. It is not a mosque. It's open to everybody, and just like any community center, it's going to have basketball courts and swimming pools and ping-pong tables, so it's weird to hear people say things like, "They're building a terrorist haven right next to Ground Zero."

A terrorist haven? What kind of terrorists play ping-pong? What are you imagining happening at this community center? (clonk) yes (clonk) yes, (clonk) yes, Sears Tower, good idea (clonk) yes. The Empire State Building, should have thought of that sooner, yes (clonk) yes (clonk) one more game, one more game. Yes (clonk) yes (clonk) what do you want to play to? (clonk) We'll play till sudden death, ha ha! (clonk) (Laughing). It's a community center. What do you think is happening?

So I went to this party recently. People had been drinking, and you know when people get drunk they become a bit more honest, and sometimes honesty sounds racist, sexist, homophobic, etc. So, the party's going along and we're getting drunker and I hear this man say, "That Ground Zero mosque they're building, it's terrorizing Americans. It's just awful."

I go up to this man and I say, "Hey man, I just want to say, it's not a mosque. It's actually an Islamic community center, and even if it was a mosque, you know what? That would be okay too."

He turned to me and he said, "Well you're just saying that 'cause you're a Muslim."

And I said, "Actually, I'm not a Muslim, I'm a Hindu."

And he's like, "Well, that's the same thing."

And it's *not* the same thing. The first clue is that they are two different words. Also, Hindus and Muslims have been killing each other for *hundreds of years*.

So I explained that to him and he said, "Well, I'm sorry, but you have to admit, you look like a Muslim."

Fair. Fair enough. I was wearing a Weezer t-shirt and Converse sneakers at the time, that's what all Muslims wear at all times regardless of context. (Laughing) What I actually told him was, "Here's the thing man. Islam is perhaps the most racially diverse religion in the world, so, technically, white man, you also look like a Muslim."

I thought that was really clever. He did not. He said, "I'm a Christian, idiot." I said, "Yes. You are a Christian idiot." (Laughing) (Applause)

And then he said, "What? What is that supposed to mean?" That's when I lost my temper. Because the religious intolerance, I know how that works in the world, right? But that was a basic grammar joke, man. I moved the comma to the right.

Because if you cannot understand a basic grammar joke, then we have nothing in common.

Thank you so much everyone. (Applause)

(Music)