

# Seriously Funny

Comedian

**COURTNEY  
GILMOUR**

Courtney Gilmour is a Canadian stand-up comedian, whose performances often include life experiences as a congenital triple amputee. Among her most meaningful achievements, she was the first female winner in the 19-year-history of the Homegrown Comics competition for emerging Canadian comedians at Montreal's Just for Laughs festival in 2017. Courtney says with a laugh, "Isn't it crazy that there were no funny women before me."



A television writer and a finalist on Canada's Got Talent, Courtney was a JUNO-nominee (Comedy Album of the Year) in 2023 for her debut album "Let Me Hold Your Baby". She is one of Canada's most unique voices and sought-after comedy talents.

Her solo show "Congratulations! Stories of Achievement, Embarrassment & Self-Worth" debuted at the Toronto Fringe Festival in 2019 and was met with sold-out shows as well as multiple awards. "It was a storytelling show about some of my best professional accomplishments happening during one of the toughest times in my life," she says. "It was about balancing comedy success while struggling with things like anxiety and a really rough break-up. Being vulnerable doing stand-up comedy is one thing, but I was divulging personal demons and secrets that I'd never said out loud before. It was an awesome experience but honestly, I don't know what compelled me to do that."

She has written for and made appearances on This Hour Has 22 Minutes and most recently she can be seen on two episodes of CTV Comedy's Roast Battle Canada. You can catch Courtney touring around the country at Yuk Yuk's Comedy Clubs and hear her on SiriusXM and CBC LOL.

The 40-year-old comedian sat down in a café in her Toronto neighbourhood with *thrive* publisher Jeff Tiessen to talk about her life on and off the stage as someone living with life-long limb difference.

**thrive:** *Who on earth chooses stand-up comedy as a profession?*

**Courtney:** Great question. I think people who are deeply unwell!

**thrive:** *Did you choose comedy as a profession, or did it choose you?*

**Courtney:** I always felt that there was a performative quality to my personality, but I never knew exactly what I needed to do to tap into it. Growing up, I tried different arts, like dancing and singing. I just had this feeling that there was something about me that wanted to perform. I just didn't know what it was. It's not like I always wanted to be a stand-up comic. I didn't even know it was an option. It just all happened accidentally.

**thrive:** *How does standing on stage telling jokes to strangers happen by accident.*

**Courtney:** My first time was at a fundraiser that I was helping to organize. I was making arrangements with the professional comic who was the headliner. The comic said, "You sound like you have a good sense of humour. Would you be interested in doing a five-minute opening spot?" I was taken aback but it piqued my curiosity, so I said "sure" and wrote a five-minute set. I'm so glad I didn't film it. I would hate to watch that back or expose anyone else to it.

**thrive:** *Was it that bad?*

**Courtney:** No, but I wasn't really sure what I was doing. In the moment, I felt really good. I was lucky that my first experience was with family and friends there to support me. I found out much later that there wasn't always going to be the soft landing for my jokes like I had with an audience of people who all knew me. I knew I was funny, but I just needed a little push and I got it. I've actually always been quite shy and very introverted. My jokes were always little side comments. I'd use the Internet to be funny. It was safe.

**thrive:** *So, at some point I imagine, you tell your parents that you want to make a career from comedy? And they said?*

**Courtney:** They were supportive but were probably like most parents when it comes to a child pursuing the performing arts. "How will you ever make money?" "What did you go to school for then?" "It's one thing to be funny, but are you funny enough to make this a full-time thing?" I understood their concerns. But they trusted my judgement. My parents and I have extremely different worldviews and we disagree on a lot of things, but we are a supportive family.

I did see how difficult it was for them to see me talking about very personal things on stage and in public. But I never invited them to dank open mike nights. Once I started making money, and doing theatre shows, and not just dingy basements, they were a little bit more relieved... like "okay, this is legit." I only invited

*"I'm always telling people to keep the change, and people think that I have a very generous spirit. In reality, it's just more convenient for me."*



*“I get asked if I’m a Thalidomide baby. That really bothers me because how old do they think I am?”*

them to Just for Laughs tapings and CBC Galas. It gave them the impression that what I do every day is perform for thousands of people.

**thrive:** *When you’re talking about these dank basements, is there a raw, not-for-prime-time side of your humour that we don’t see on YouTube?*

**Courtney:** When people look me up, they’re only seeing a polished, squeaky-clean version that is for theatre or filmed for television or recorded for radio. When I do dark and dirty performances, I feel more uncensored and I love that. It’s about performing for different audiences and doing different types of material. My voice sounds like a cartoon squirrel to a lot of people, and I love the contrast of delivering raw material. It really catches people off guard... scathing things coming from my sweet demeanour. I just love it. It allows me to explore different parts of my personality. It’s really liberating.

**thrive:** *What does it feel like standing in the wings ready to go on stage? What’s going through a comedian’s mind?*

**Courtney:** It depends on the show really. Generally, there’s a bit of anxiety. But once you’re doing comedy full-time and you’re on stage every night it feels very second nature. The nerves die down a little bit. You’re excited. Once you get out on stage, then you’re golden, good to go.

**thrive:** *How would you characterize your style of humour?*

**Courtney:** I would describe it as observational, anecdotal, things from my own life. Encounters with people and how I live my day-to-day life.

**thrive:** *Sticking with your material, and disability humour specifically, what makes a joke about disability funny? How do you pull that off?*

**Courtney:** I think that the funniest jokes about disability in my life are the ones that are relatable to the audience from their vantage point. It’s about my own experiences. If I’m making a joke about someone, it’s about able-bodied people ... like Uber drivers and some of their dumb questions. The audience can see themselves as that person. It’s funny to them because it’s calling out something that they don’t pay attention to regularly in their everyday lives. Pardon the pun, but it’s disarming. When I’m doing comedy that is more dark and dirty, I go into things like sexuality for example... something that audiences don’t often associate with people with disabilities. “Wow, she dates? Crazy.”

**thrive:** *But there is a sensitivity to humour about disability in the disability community itself. In this age of unfiltered social media feedback, how do you manage that?*

**Courtney:** It’s interesting, I don’t get a lot of push-back from the disability community. But the occasional time that I get criticized, it’s from people who are not disabled, telling me, you shouldn’t joke about that. But they’re not part of our community? What I know very well is not having two hands and a right leg. If I’m delivering material about encounters that my blind friends or my deaf friends share with me, I make sure to do a little bit of extra research to make sure I’m using proper terminology and speaking from a place of being educated about their disabilities.

**thrive:** *A strange question maybe, but did you have a “normal” childhood? Like girl guides, ballet, and no institutions?*

**Courtney:** Ha! Yeah, no institutions. I would say it was pretty normal. My parents wanted me to experience things that I was interested in. I did do ballet, and church activities, and swimming and skiing. I really wanted to try everything to see if it was for me. A lot of the time it wasn’t. I spent most of my childhood using prosthetic arms. Hooks and then myoelectric ones. Ballet is a really hard thing to do with two prosthetic arms. But I wanted to try it.

I was really hyper-independent, even to my own detriment sometimes. I probably should’ve asked for help at times, but I didn’t. There was this narrative in my head that I had something to prove. What that meant to me, was never complaining about things and not asking for help. Like I said, to my detriment sometimes for sure. I wouldn’t recommend that approach. There’s nothing wrong with asking for help. I’m still a little bit like that, less so but very stubborn. It’s second nature to me. But I’m trying to be better.

**thrive:** *You say you’re getting better, meaning asking for help?*

**Courtney:** Yes. Here’s an example. ATM machines. Putting the card all the way into the slot is no problem, but pulling it out is a pain. If I’m carrying tweezers with me, I use them to pull it out. But generally, I’ll just grab somebody off the street and ask for help. I have no shame in that. I guess, really, it comes down to a lot of soliciting.

**thrive:** *Great comedy material no doubt, but I read that you’ve considered cutting hand jokes from your performances. Why?*



Art by Naz Nahidi

**Courtney:** I think about that a lot. It's not that I don't ever want to mention it, but a lot of things make up my identity. And in comedy, I don't want to be just the no-hands-joke girl. I don't want to feel like that's the only thing I'm funny about? Sometimes I get on stage and I don't want that to be the first thing I talk about. It can be very mind-numbing using it as an icebreaker every time just because I know what everyone's thinking. I really want to trust myself with other material too, and trust that the audience will appreciate it. It's about trying new things. Seeing what sticks. It's not about disowning that part of my identity; I just don't want it to be the whole thing.

**thrive:** *Much of your material is about everyday encounters. How about encounters with strangers that aren't funny to you?*

**Courtney:** Assumptions without basis. Assumptions that I can't drive a car. Why would you assume that?

Assumption that it takes a really long time for me to get dressed. Preconceived notions. Those really bug me more than anything else when it comes to my abilities. Generally, people have the bare minimum of expectations. I live alone with my cat, and people are surprised that I don't live with my parents or with a caregiver.

Being watched in public. I get flustered quickly when people are behind me in a line waiting and I'm struggling to get what I need out of my purse, which I have way too many things in. Then I get less coordinated. Nobody can function properly when being stared at. And getting praised unnecessarily for doing ordinary things. And people's many colourful approaches to asking what happened to me? It amazes me. I would never go up to someone in a wheelchair and ask, "what happened to you?" I think, often, it's people's aversion to uncomfortable situations for them. It's not a bad thing to be

uncomfortable. It's a learning moment. But I'm not going to walk on eggshells around someone like that. My amputations are congenital. I don't have any trauma attached to it. I don't have any emotions invested in losing something, but for those who do... ?

**thrive:** *The entertainment industry. I've gathered it's tough for women. Add to that a woman with a disability. Can you pull back the curtain on that a little bit?*

**Courtney:** Thankfully we've come a long way. There are so many more funny women on TV and on stage. I am so bored with the narrative of "women aren't funny". The man with his arms crossed in the audience, there's nothing I can do to change that guy's mind. If he doesn't think women are funny, I doubt he thinks disabled comedians are funny. There's a stigma around "disabled comedians" – kind of like we are one-trick ponies and that's all we talk about. But four comics in a row can talk about their genitals and their Tinder dates and that's okay? It's not a booking problem for me because I'm a woman or have a disability. But I'm not for everyone, like every comic is not for everyone.

**thrive:** *Bad days at the office. Everyone has them. What's that like for you?*

**Courtney:** The sooner that a comedian understands that bombing at some point is inevitable, the better. It's going to happen but it's not the end of the world. The more experience that you have, the more gracefully you can bomb. You go down with the ship or you switch gears to more sturdy material that you know generally works. I don't even know how to describe it. Well, maybe I do. It's like plummeting without a parachute. It requires a lot of healthy self-talk.

