I didn’t start college knowing I wanted to be a science comedian. But freshman year, I entered a stand-up comedy contest on a whim and ended up enjoying it. By the time I graduated with my molecular biology degree, I had even been asked to perform on campus a few times, opening for real comedians and a student band in a coffee shop. In graduate school, I started performing at open mic nights, and as the years passed, I said yes to any comedy-like opportunity that arose.

I was poisoned at corporate murder mystery parties. Dressed as an orthodox rabbi, I made fun of elderly relatives at bar mitzvahs. I held doors in a tux at a Kenny Loggins concert, wrote humor pieces for National Lampoon, joined an improv group, and appeared as a thug in a Korean soap opera. I even convinced the school to let me teach a stand-up comedy class for undergraduates.

All the while, I tried to keep the science and the comedy separate—no science jokes, and no joking while doing science. I didn’t want to be the comedian for whom comedy was clearly a minor hobby, and I didn’t want to be the scientist who was perceived as not serious enough. I also enjoyed feeling like Batman: leaving the lab, putting on my black T-shirt and jeans, and slipping into a completely different world—or driving home late from a comedy show, opening my laptop, and digging through dissertation references.

In retrospect, building a wall between science and comedy was the wrong choice. I tell my stand-up students to think about what specialized knowledge they have that sets them apart from other comics. For me, that niche was science, but I was ignoring it. Then I slowly began merging science and comedy. I published a book called Surviving Your Stupid, Stupid Decision to Go to Grad School, which led to a monthly science humor column. I began touring grad schools and scientific conferences, telling jokes about liquid nitrogen, grant funding, and the absolute hell of proctoring undergraduate exams. Suddenly I realized that audiences—even non-scientific ones—want to hear about science. To me, lab work is the everyday default; to others, it’s exotic.

My two careers haven’t merged completely. Not all of my scientific colleagues have viewed my hobby positively, and in my day job as an industry biologist, I don’t go around writing jokes into lab protocols. But I find that stand-up has made me comfortable communicating science, helping with everything from simple interpersonal interactions to larger presentations.

Having a day job and a Batman job also means that I do a lot of juggling. It means red-eye flights and writing after my kids are asleep and working through new jokes during my commute and a periodically nagging fear that I’m neglecting something (typically sleep, occasionally hygiene). And I love it. As for the mouse malaria, I’m fine—though I did suffer the side effect of several hours spent filling out occupational safety paperwork. Over the years, I’ve learned that comedy and science don’t always mix, but they’re not completely incompatible either. On stage at the Laugh Factory that night, my vinyl Band-Aid sticking slightly to the microphone, I knew I’d still be doing that in 10 years. And I also knew I had no intention of, as they say, quitting my day job.

Adam Ruben is a molecular biologist, science comedian, and the author of the Science Careers “Experimental Error” column. Learn more at adamruben.net.
Of mice and mics
Adam Ruben

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