

# on the town

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Robert Hines' unreleased, independent comic film, "Chasing Robert," will be screening at the Lakeshore Theatre. BETH ROONEY/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

## He's a stand-up kind of guy

Comedian Robert Hines, aka Toby Jones, is more than ready for his turn in the spotlight



In the Chicago rock scene, there's a standard joke: "Everybody in Chicago is signed." Ha!

Comedy is a bit different. It seems as if first you have to explain to people how improv, sketch and stand-up differ. Chicago is most famous for the first of them, but it's the last one that is the calling card of comedian Robert Hines.

You probably don't know Hines by his given name, unless you're a comedy-club habitue, a veteran, perhaps, of his past lives in front of microphones at South Side joints

such as Alexander's Steak House.

No, you, like more than 2 million others, probably know him from his YouTube video, "Jones Big Ass Truck Rental and Storage." Hines plays proprietor Toby Jones. After years of making his way on stand-up stages and holding a day job as a jail guard, Hines may be about to blow up. Big. But he has that nice guy persona of the performer who has worked really, really hard for that shot, a two-decade overnight sensation. It's a good-natured bonhomie that makes his shtick that much more appealing.

That's how he was raised, says his mother,

who Hines describes as "the black Martha Stewart."

"He's a friendly person because that's what he has been taught," says Vera Hines, 65. "No matter where he goes in life, he must keep that about him."

To catch a free screening of "Chasing Robert," the unreleased, Chicago independent comic film Hines stars in, at 7:30 p.m. on April 2 at the Lakeshore Theatre, e-mail [chasingtix@gmail.com](mailto:chasingtix@gmail.com).

Find out more about Hines, and a batch of other comics to watch, on PAGE 5.



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# Cover Story

## Comedian Hines still proving he belongs

By Steve Johnson  
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Within three years of starting in stand-up comedy, Robert Hines had done three national television shows.

"And then, for 15 years, nothing," he says, a phrase he'll repeat twice in the course of an interview.

Well, not nothing. He worked regularly, emceeding weekly at the now closed Alexander's Steak House on the South Side, and performing regularly at the late All Jokes Aside, keeping alive the dream of making a living from comedy.

But there was nothing like that early, mid-1990s flash of TV exposure, the one that seemed to suggest the Chicago Vocational Career Academy graduate was on a fast track to stardom.

"There was nobody looking at me — 'cause I was on 79th Street," he says. "I wasn't in Los Angeles or anything. I was on 79th Street telling jokes. I was getting better at it. I wasn't getting more exposure."

But in recent years, all that has changed, thanks to what Hines calls the great equalizer of entertainment: the Internet.

Hines starred in a fake ad that was probably passed on to you, by a person who probably thought it was real.

The spot was for "Jones Big Ass Truck Rental & Storage," and in it, Hines plays Toby Jones, the "drunk," dealmaking proprietor of a desolate lot on which he's willing to store whatever you've got.

"This is a bus. Do you know how big a bus is?" he asks.

Sitting on the hood of a rusty muscle car with a racing stripe down the hood, urging viewers to store it with him, he says, "You ain't the Dukes of Hazzard."

The dead-on spoof of low-rent advertising went viral, and then some. It exists on many Web sites, but the most popular of several YouTube versions has been seen more than 2.5 million times.

"The Internet is the great equalizer. You don't have to worry about executives and whether they think they can sell you and whether they think you're cute enough," Hines says. "You take your stuff directly to the public."

Now Hines is in active conversations with producers, and two sitcom treatments are making the rounds, one about Toby Jones as a car salesman.

Radio stations started calling him to talk to "Toby Jones," and he's gone from "feature" comic to headliner at many of the clubs he plays around the Midwest — including March 26 and 27 shows at the Lakeshore Theater, the converted cinema on the North Side that highlights innovative comics and has long backed Hines' work.

And he's figuring he and his wife will move from south suburban Harvey to Los Angeles very, very soon.

"I was expecting to be out there by now," he says, not because he wants to leave Chicago but simply because it's a reality of the entertainment business. "You've got to be out there to be in the game."

### Nice guy

Talk to Robert Hines' friends in Chicago comedy, and you hear descriptions of a good and friendly man, one who is willing to help young comics develop.

"He is boisterous," says Tony Blanco. "He's very high-energy. He laughs a lot, and it's real genuine. He's got, like, an infectious positive attitude. ... He'll grip the audience ... and not let go."

Offstage, says Blanco, Hines is the same: "He's sort of a team player. A lot of stand-up comedians are so on that they're, like, abrasively forcing themselves on you. Robert's just lighthearted and easy-going and sweet-natured."

The comic known as Shay Shay credits Hines' ability to play to both urban and suburban audiences and says, "I've never met a person that did not fall in love with him just upon meeting him."

Pedro Castro and his brother Romero, members of a comedy troupe called Big Dog Eat Child, had tried to make the Toby Jones character work earlier in the decade.

Then in July 2008, recalls Pedro, they saw Hines performing at Lakeshore, remembered meeting him at the Fat Bean club in Naperville, and instantly thought he could make the character work.

"People didn't think it was funny when we did it," Castro says. "Robert had a great voice and great energy. The script we had was kind of a guideline, but he just kept going off with different lines, and a lot of what he said made it into the final cut."

That and a couple of follow-up Toby Jones videos have been seen more than 10 million times, Castro says. A fourth is in the works.

Explained Blanco, "You get irons in the fire, and they can be developed and then get hot and cold, but Robert is like perpetually about to break ... out."

### Juggling comedy with real life

For years, comedy to Hines was almost a juggling act. There was a day job, as a guard at Cook County Jail. There was the steady work at Alexander's.

There were lessons along the way. One time he had to go on after Bernie Mac at Mac's own club.

"I learned from Bernie Mac, you've got to follow whoever you've got to follow," Hines says. "He was like, 'Dude, you can't be no punk if you're gonna hang around me.' And that night, I failed miserably. But it taught me that I had to tighten up."

Another lesson came from Shay Shay. Hines went through a period when his act seemed in a rut, he says.

"Shay told me I've got to show them my pain," he says. And Hines' casual storytelling style took a turn for the more personal.

"It's the evolution from being funny to being a comedian," Shay Shay says. "Instead of trying to make an audience laugh randomly, it's making them laugh at his world."

Hines talks about being heavy, for instance, but it's more than standard fat-guy material.

"I love cooking," he says. "I'm a fat guy who can make himself fatter on demand."

As his act improved, there was an independent movie, a crime story set in Chicago called "Chasing Robert," the project that prompted Hines to leave the guard job he didn't like anyway.

Hines was a star — with comics including Andy Dick, Larry Miller and Dan Castellaneta — and it was directed and written by Len Austrevich, the former owner of the Funny Firm, and the man who had first put Hines on a stage as a raw 21-year-old.

The film is finished and looking for a distribution deal, Hines says.

### Working the circuit

But, more than anything until the truck rental video, there was the Midwest comedy circuit, not as big as it was in stand-up's late-1980s and early-1990s heyday, but still there, a collection of casinos and clubs, all of them needing somebody able to get on stage and entertain a roomful of paying customers.

Hines reels off the names of some of the towns he's played: Spring Lake, Mich. Duluth, Minn. Wausa, Wis. Indianapolis. Decatur. DeKalb.

Naperville? He is asked. "No, not Naperville.

Naperville's too close. You had to drive eight hours to make \$150. I had a Chevy Blazer. I ran that ... into the ground. When I got rid of it, it had 180,000 miles on it."

To keep him company on the long rides, he had talk radio, conservative stations mostly, because that was all there was. And he would fire himself up.

"I would think, 'As soon as I get here, I'm going to prove I deserve to be here,'" Hines says. "There was a chip on my shoulder just to prove I belong here because they didn't really want to give you the opportunity."

For an African-American comic working in a lot of mainstream rooms, the hurdle was a little higher, in part because "Russell Simmons' Def Jam," a comedy showcase TV series that lived on after many of the others had disappeared, had taught people to expect vulgarity and outrage from black comics.

"No one wants you to come in and do a lot of the filthy stuff in front of the women, so you've got to prove to people first that you're not 'Def Jam,'" Hines says.

Through it all, he's had a couple of credos to keep him going. One is that you get out of it what you put back in, so he would drive the eight hours to make the \$150, even when it would have been easier to figure that his good union day job made more economic sense.

The second credo is perhaps most important to anybody who would stand in front of a room full of skeptical people: Be confident.

"It's just a matter of putting me in front of the public," he says. "Once I go out to L.A. and start headlining, everything else will take care of itself."

"All it's going to take is for somebody to see me a few times, because I'm going to bring home the money. That's what's going to happen. Because I have no other choice. I've been doing this too long. I can't fail."

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After years on the Midwest comedy club circuit, Robert Hines has found acclaim with a YouTube spoof of low-rent advertising. BETH ROONEY/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

### COMEDY

Based on a very informal survey of comics and club people, here are four Chicago comics worth looking out for.

**Andy Woodhull:** An Elkhart, Ind., native who now lives in Chicago, Woodhull earned a science degree in college and is cited by staff at Zanies for "irreverent wit." "In 2005 Andy's unique sense of humor won him the Carnival Comedy Challenge in Chicago," says Woodhull in his online biography, "and later that same year inspired a man in a Boston bar to beat the stuffing out of him."

He'll headline at local Zanies on March 23-28. Visit [zanies.com](http://zanies.com) for more information.

**Hannibal Buress:** The "Saturday Night Live" writer, 27, is hotter than hot. In addition to appearances on the "Late Late Show With Craig Ferguson" and Comedy Central, he'll be featured this summer on the national "F Yeah Tour."

He'll do five nights at Zanies Chicago, March 30-April 3.

**Junior Stopka:** "He's kind of like a comic's comic of Chicago," says Pedro Castro of Big Dog Eat Child. "I don't think all the audience get him yet." Fellow comic Tony Blanco says, "There was this weird darkness about him that turned into this super absurdist dark weirdness."

**Beth Stelling:** Known for her deadpan, Stelling runs the variety show "Entertaining Julia" on Sundays at Town Hall Pub. "I'm not a TV regular," she says on MySpace ([myspace.com/bethstellingcomedy](http://myspace.com/bethstellingcomedy)), "but my dad was the Santa Claus in the (televised) WGN Christmas Parade."

9 p.m. Sundays, Town Hall Pub, 3340 N. Halsted St.; 773-472-4405 or [townhallpub.com](http://townhallpub.com)

— Steve Johnson