



What About Vietnam - S3-18 - Discover an emerging comedy scene in Saigon - A must do!

Kerry Newsome: 00:00

Xin Chào and welcome to “[What About Vietnam!](#)”. I'm very excited about this year. This is our first episode for 2022. I'm excited because I think we're going to be able to visit Vietnam as the airlines announce, just this week, opening flights to the UK, Europe, US and Australia.

00:25

I'm thrilled to have my guest, Niall Mackay on the show a Stand-up comedian, located in Saigon, he's going to be talking to us about the comedy scene in Vietnam. I'm also thrilled to have him on because he does what I do. He's a podcaster. He's based in Saigon, and he's been running “[Seven Million Bikes Podcast](#)” since 2019. And another one called “Did that really happen” as a sub set of the original podcast. A funny guy, very talented, interesting. And going to give us some background to just how the comedy scene has developed in Saigon over the last few years, he's been a big part of that and played a very instrumental role.

01:13

He likewise is going to give us all some insights, just how COVID has affected that, with 2020, being a year where it was, you know, all up and happening to 2021 literally being shut down. So, while it's been in hibernation, it's certainly not going away. The comedy scene is there to thrive. And I'm very excited to have Niall on the show to give us some insights. Please welcome him to the program. Hello, Niall. Welcome to What about Vietnam.

Niall Mackay: 01:53

Hello, Kerry, thank you so much for having me, I'm excited to be on too.

Kerry Newsome: 01:59

Look, I don't know where to start. But I'm just going to kind of throw up the first things that come to mind. And that kind of starts with someone arriving at Saigon. And they had done all the great things that you can do from Saigon and whether that's going to the Mekong Delta, whether-- we said, during the Cu Chi Tunnels, there's lots and lots of things to do. And we talk about that on other shows. But when it gets to nighttime, and it's still hot, but, the Vietnamese, as soon as it gets dark, something I've noticed is everybody comes out. And there's a lot of out and about kind of feelings. So, tell us a little bit

about how people would find entertainment. And I'll just preface that with entertainment that is maybe more for Westerners. So English speaking entertainment, and more about comedy, because I figure, you've got a lot to talk about in the comedy scene.

Niall Mackay: 03:10

Yes, sure. So, when I first came to Vietnam, I had the exact same struggles as well. My wife and I, we would get to the evening. And you'd be like, what do we do now. And it was difficult to find things to do, especially- we came here six years ago. And you're used to kind of western style entertainment, right. And especially English language speaking entertainment. So, we struggled a lot for a long time.

So, there is obviously things you can do as a tourist:

- You can go on a food tour.
- You can be like a local and go sit on a street corner and drink beer on a plastic stool, and all that super fun.

But if you're here long enough, or you just want something different, you can really have to seek out their entertainment, but it's gotten a lot better over the years. I like to think I've been part of that as well. But it's not just me as well. Like there's so many people doing so many amazing things who know you can find:

- Music.
- Quiz nights.
- And like you mentioned, comedy as well.

Kerry Newsome: 04:08

Comedy probably wouldn't be the first thing that I would think about, but I love comedy clubs. And I know you've got **Seven Million Bikes** as your podcast, but also, it's aligned, I think and I'm hoping you're going to share with us; aligned to your comedy shows because you're a Stand-up comic. I mean, let's get this out their people, this guy is funny and funny on stage. So, what you're hearing in this podcast might be serious, Niall, but he does have another half and that's on stage as a Stand-up comic. So, talk to us about the comedy scene and a bit of history bit of where- you're heading, lockdown, blah, blah, blah.

Niall Mackay: 04:55

Well, thank you very much. First, I still find it weird when people call me funny and even, last week I sent a video to my best friend. I've known him since he was five years old. I sent him a video, just a short clip of me on stage. And his response was the best. He said, when did you become funny? You weren't funny in school.

Kerry Newsome: 05:15

Thank God you've grown into that.

Niall Mackay: 05:17

Only your best friend can tell you that. Right? I just thought it was brilliant. But no. So, the history of comedy here is quite amazing. So, when we first came in six years ago, and my wife and I, we lived in

Australia, we'd love Stand Up Comedy in Australia and New Zealand. I loved it all my life. And then we found out about an open mic here, we called Brian and Diana do shows. And so, we went to that. And it was just great to see Stand-up comedy again. And I hadn't, I wasn't even doing it at that time. But I've been wanting to do it for years and years. And then we find out more about shores by a guy called Ben [inaudible 5:57], he'd been putting on shows. And there actually had been a group here called Saigon Comedy or Comedy Saigon.

Kerry Newsome: 05:24

--Funny People?

Niall Mackay: 06:01

Saigon Funny People, they came afterwards. But before them, there was something else. And they were bringing over international comedians, quite sporadically. But there was a history of international comedians coming here. And so, from there on, we started getting into going into comedy shows. And then I started doing comedy myself. And like most comedians here, most comedians around the world, they just want to be on stage more. And it can be quite difficult to get stage time. It's the biggest thing for any comedian.

06:37

So, what a lot of comedians do, and I did the same, they end up putting on their own shows. So, I was like, I wasn't getting on stage as much as I wanted. I had a background in event management. I knew how to run an event, so I put on my own comedy show. And then luckily partnered with an amazing bar in District One, just near the Bến Thành market, Bến Thành food market. As a craft beer bar, I love beer as well was becoming friends with the owner, it was with fuzzy logic, it was a hop shop. And so that was the start of it.

07:07

One of the things I think, is my strength. And it seems kind of simple, but I know how to set up a room. And that was one of the things I really wanted to bring, to make a quality show, I was to make sure that the room is set up properly. There's sort of so little- so many subtleties, like just small things like make sure everyone faces the stage, make sure the stage is a focal point. The lights are done properly, things like this that can make or break a comedy show. So, I really focused on that. But then the other big focus was tourism because this was back in 2019. And being near Bến Thành market, I was like,

"Right, we are going to get tourists in."

I lived in New York previously, in a big thing in New York, especially around Times Square, as comedians go out during the day and they give out flyers, or they even do this in Thailand. If you want to perform at the Thailand Open, mate, you have to flyer for at least an hour outside the venue.

07:58

So, I was like,

"Oh, Gung Ho!"

I'm quite okay with publicity and promotion. So, I was like, right. All the comedians, we're all going to go round Bến Thành market and we're going to give out flyers and flyers printed. Most comedians, they don't want to do that. And so, most of them backed out, couple of them are like,

"No, I'm not doing that."

And I was just kind of like,

"Yeah, well, I'm going to do it."

So, I went around Bến Thành market, handing out flyers, like a wierdo, walking up to strangers, like.

"Here, we've got a comedy show tonight."

But to me, like, I'm not too bothered about doing that kind of thing. And because I have seen it in New York, and I knew, in Thailand, I was like,

"This is what you do."

And one of the best things was, sure enough, when an Australian couple showed up at the comedy show, because I'd given them a flyer. And they were the loveliest couple. They were from Perth. They loved comedy. They're like,

"We go to Stand-up comedy shows all over Australia. We love going to the Perth Comedy Festival."

08:50

The thing about the Saigon comedy scene, it's changed now. And we can talk about how and why it's changed, which is obviously pandemic related. But at that time, and for the next year or two, the standard was and still is, but was especially so high. And I know I'm biased to say that. But I know because people would come to the shows and the most common thing we would hear nearly after every show was,

"Wow, I never expected it to be that good."

And this couple, that came from Australia, they were like,

"We go to the Perth Comedy Festival. And that was as good as anything we go to in Perth."

09:26

So, we knew we had good comedians here. I knew I could put on a good show. We had 20 to 30 people every show, the feedback was always amazing. And it was always the same thing, like I think people come- you're in Saigon. You think you're going to get some amateur comedians, which we all are, but you think you're going to get some probably like pretty bad comedy. I don't think that's bad

comedy, but there's awkward comedy. So, I hate it. And I'm sure you're the same when you go in those- not just that there's no laughs like, that's fine if there's no laughs, but if the comedian makes it awkward, then it's just a horrible experience. And I've had that before we are sitting in, you're like,

"Oh, my goodness, he's been going on for 15 minutes now and-"

Kerry Newsome: 10:04

When's he going to be over?

Niall Mackay: 10:05

Yeah, exactly. So, you can watch a comedian, and they are not very funny, but you're still enjoying the experience, you know?

Kerry Newsome: 10:12

Exactly.

Niall Mackay: 10:13

So, our comedians were funny, and the room was just rollicking with laughter. And so, the beginning of it was really focused on tourism. Being around Bến Thành market. And every show, we had a nice mixture of local expats, local Vietnamese people, tourists coming in, we even had comedians who were touring, who were just on holiday, would get in touch with me and they said,

"I saw your comedy show, can I get a spot?"

And I'd be like,

"Yeah, absolutely."

So, there was a hilarious guy from Canada, another girl from- I think she's based in Hong Kong, someone else from America, like, all these traveling comedians is coming through. And then from there, it's kind of snowballed, because these shows were going well. Then another bar, who was friends with the owner of this bar got in touch with me, and they were like,

"We want to do shows."

So, we started doing shows this time was in District Two, not too many tourists at that one, because it's a little bit further in town.

11:09

Then we started doing shows in District Seven, which again, no tourists at that one, if you probably know, District Seven is almost like Singapore. It's like a different country here. But that was the reason why we wanted to go to District Seven, because we wanted to bring comedy to the people in D7 because my biased opinion is they don't leave very much. But my friend who's from D7, he counters

that and I'm probably again, having a biased opinion, they do leave, but you definitely- there are many of them, you need to go to them.

11:36

So, we started doing shows in D7, and then I started working with a Hard Rock Cafe here, which was just incredible. They have an amazing venue, like any Hard Rock Cafe, setup for music, but unbelievable sound systems, stage, sound engineer. And it was amazing. So, I went to this meeting with Hard Rock Cafe, and I was like,

"Okay, what am I going to pitch them, so they do music, I do comedy. Alright, let's do musical comedy."

So, I went into this. And I was like,

"I think this will be a great fit. We'll do a musical comedy."

They loved it. We thrashed out all the agreement and they were like,

"Yep, okay, let's do it next month."

We had no musical comedians in Saigon at the time.

Kerry Newsome: 12:20

So, nobody can sing. But they can tell jokes, right?

Niall Mackay: 12:24

Pretty much we had two musical comedians at the time, both are new, like one of them, [sysco 12:31] Wani West was new on the scene. The other one Tommy Boulevard. didn't perform too often. And he was super new. I could play a guitar, but I can't sing. And I was like, okay, so I went away, and I was like,

"Okay, let's put this show on in a month."

So, I contacted Wani first, he's Australian from Melbourne. He's hilarious. One of the funniest people I've met. And, so I went,

"Can you do this?"

"Yep, no problem."

"Can you do 15 minutes? Three or four songs?"

"Yep. No problem."

She had to go and write a couple extra songs. I think at that point, he had two songs. I approached Tommy, same thing.

"Yep. No problem." Right. Okay, I've got two comedians now, I need at least four and a host. I'm the host right. So, okay, I've got to go and write songs. So, I got to sit down and write some songs.

13:17

Again, I can't sing. I spoke to a friend who's a professional singer, I was like,

"Can you give me singing lessons?"

And ended up not happening. I could sing better than I realized. I'm still a terrible singer, but I wasn't as bad as I thought. And then I was like,

"Oh, Tommy", told me he did one verse of one song during his Stand-up, maybe he can do more. So, I approached and he's a beautiful singer. I was like, Tommy, can you do musical comedy? He's like,

"Yeah, okay, I can do it."

So, I played guitar for him for a couple of songs. He used a backing track. And then the last one was AJ Miller, who she did comedy. And she did music, but she never did them together. When she did well. So, I was like,

"AJ, can you do musical comedy?"

And she's like,

"Yeah, absolutely."

So that was it. We had a show. So, we did rehearsals, we practiced for a month. And then a month later, we had like, over 150 people in the Hard Rock Cafe. Unbelievable. And that was like probably the high point for me anyway. Absolutely. The high point for comedy here in Saigon for many other people as well.

Kerry Newsome: 14:20

So, was that 2019?

Niall Mackay: 14:23

That would have been 2020, through Christmas. I can't- I don't even know what year it is now. What year is it now?

Kerry Newsome: 14:31

It's just clicked over to 2022.

Niall Mackay: 14:33

Okay then it was Christmas, November 2020 was the first show there.

Kerry Newsome: 14:39

2020, because let's just touch base, as we talked before, about a bit of a timeline, because 2020, when the rest of the world was kind of locked down and really feeling the full frontal of COVID, Vietnam at that point, was hubba hubba. Yeah, it was rocking and rolling. I was talking to some people who was saying they were going to 5-star resorts for cheap prices. There were some DJs that happened to just kind of get stuck when the borders got shut in Vietnam, so they couldn't get back as quickly. So, there was some talent walking the streets and like offering themselves up to various venues. So, I hear, 2020 was- it was pretty happening. Am I right?

Niall Mackay: 15:33

Yeah, no, it was amazing. We had a brief lockdown of sorts in April for a month. And then everything went back to normal. We had zero COVID strategy, borders were closed, we were just basically like this little island. Shows went back on, comedy was thriving. I don't know too much about DJs. Because I'm not really in that scene. But that makes total sense that DJs would have been stuck here and then performing. We had so many comedians, so many new comedians, some got stuck, like absolutely, that same thing with comedy. Some comedians got stuck here and ended up performing. Regularly, we had more and more shows. And then yeah, that by the end of 2020, again, Hard Rock Cafe. And now even though I can't imagine doing a show with 150 people, I personally probably wouldn't want to do it. Not probably, I wouldn't want to do it now.

Kerry Newsome: 16:25

And I think something that you mentioned about a show is, sometimes it's not just down to the comedians' jokes, it's also about their presence. I think it's also about, as you said, the staging, and I'm glad you mentioned that, because if I walk into a venue, and it really looks clappy, like, it's crabby. And the feeling is, there's not that vibe, you can create a vibe, believe it or not, with the right setup. And I think if you give it every chance, and that comedian has also got every chance of being a success. So, I think it's great to see, because I probably would have thought,

"Oh, gee, if I'm going to go to an English-speaking comedy show in Vietnam, run by a guy who's got a Scottish accent, I would have gone. What am I really in for here?"

Like, is that kind of some of the feedback you get? How does this voice attach itself to Vietnam and comedy show? It's my God, that's a stretch. It's a stretch.

Niall Mackay: 17:35

Yeah, I think so. I think that just comes in when people don't have that expectation that it's going to be good. One of the amazing things was and big changes where we used to have lots of Vietnamese comedians doing English comedy, and they were hilarious they were so, so funny. And, yeah, no, unbelievable. And you're just like,

"How are you so funny in your second language, this is unfair."

They are the some of the best comedians in Vietnam. And then in 2020, or 2021, I can't remember the exact timeline, I think 2021 They started doing comedy in Vietnamese, which had never really been done before.

18:18

This has been discussed a lot on my podcast and within comedy circles, to do comedy in Vietnamese is really, difficult, because of the language, because of the jokes just don't translate. And if you check out my podcast, I talked to a woman to who's a Vietnamese comedian, and she's not performing now, but she's one of the best, again, she explains all the things that make English language comedy funny. So, like double entendre, tone of voice timing. I mean, these are the biggest things, the way she explained it. The Vietnamese language doesn't lend itself to those types of, of nuances.

18:19

So, it's difficult. And traditionally, Vietnamese comedy was just really slapstick, even just like a guy dressing as a female was hilarious, a guy getting slapped across the head, all this stuff. So, there was never really a Vietnamese comedy scene in Vietnamese language. And then, suddenly, these guys who had been doing English language comedy, [inaudible 19:25], who had all been doing my shows, suddenly started doing their own shows in Vietnamese, and putting their stuff on YouTube and TikTok, they, of course, they just exploded. They got millions of views on TikTok, they used to come and do my little amateur shows. Now I can't book them for love, no money. They are like no huge celebrities.

19:47

They put all the comedy up in Vietnamese, so I don't know, what is same, but it looks amazing. I've watched a couple of videos. The crowd are laughing, too. They are now the pallbearers for Stand-Up Comedy in Vietnamese. And when I say separated themselves, I don't mean like, in a negative way, but they've completely separated themselves on another level from the existing comedy scene that was here because, there's 10 million people in Saigon and 90 million people in Vietnam. So, it's a massive market, to speak to, but the people- the expats seen, I think in Saigon, there was 100,000 expats, that's probably a half know, obviously, an English language speaking Vietnamese, and who do want Western culture and a lot of returning overseas Vietnamese, who appreciate Western culture, but it's still a completely small amount of people compared to the Vietnamese speakers. So those guys, they are amazing, they're killing it.

Kerry Newsome: 20:43

And that was going to be my next question, which is like, do you steer your comedy, your stories and your kind of anecdotal situations or whatever? Do you steer them to things that you experience, and a Westerner is going to get, as well as a Vietnamese person? Or are you kind of having a bit of a spin off some of the nuances amongst Vietnamese, like, you kind of taking them on? How do you make it so that- because I'm thinking of- just say, I'm just flown in from, let's say, the UK, I know very little about Vietnam, and I'm at this comedy club, and you're telling some jokes that maybe only a local would get, because they don't know enough about Vietnam yet? So, tell us a little bit about how it is steered and what your focus is, so people can understand.

Niall Mackay: 21:46

That's a good point. And sometimes I and even other comedians, you hear them tell a joke, and you're like, you only get that joke if you live here. And so that happens sometimes but you're trying to make your comedy accessible to everyone.

Kerry Newsome: 22:03

Universal? Yeah.

Niall Mackay: 22:05

Yeah, universal. I mean, most of my stuff, and a lot of the comedian stuff- everyone's different, I guess, maybe I think a lot of my stuff is the kind of fish out of water. So, you're an expat living in a different land. So, the fine line is well, and I've had positive praise on this from local Vietnamese, which I really appreciate, is being respectful of the local culture. So, you always want to make sure that you're not making fun of them for, but you can make fun of them. So, it's like, [crosstalk] yeah, that's always a good question, and I had this with a podcast as well. So, what you've got to try, and do I guess, what I always try and do, to answer your question is, I'm the part of the joke, not the Vietnamese person or the Vietnamese culture. I'm the part of the joke for not understanding it.

Kerry Newsome: 22:58

Yeah, I get it.

Niall Mackay: 23:01

You don't want to make fun of them, even though you can, make fun of them. But yeah, so, I do think about that.

Kerry Newsome: 23:08

I'm cheering you on all the way with what you're doing. Because it's something that I think is a great add on for a traveler coming to Vietnam, as the doors are starting to open, and they're starting to look at new scenes and new things to do. I mean, Vietnam has been in hibernation now for a couple of years. So, we're all coming out of a pandemic. I haven't been back for two years where I normally am, like three, four times a year, for extended stays to get around and experiencing kind of stay. So, I'm missing Vietnam a lot. How do I direct? Or how do people find these gigs? Where do they go? Are there other places? Advertise? Because I've never seen it in the hotels or anything yet. Maybe that's coming?

Niall Mackay: 23:58

Yeah, that's neat. You gave me a good idea. Hotels. Yeah, that's a good one. You probably know what it's like in Vietnam. As someone said to me, Facebook is king here. I think.

Kerry Newsome: 24:09

Oh, gotcha!

Niall Mackay: 24:09

I think it is less around the world. Now it's declining or not growing as fast. But in Vietnam, everything happens through Facebook. So that's just the main thing to do is go on Facebook, go to the events

page. But there's also like [sysco 24:21] Saigonese, so, we partner with Saigonese, we post our events on there, and they post, they have a calendar of events. So, you can find things there. As you mentioned, we have just gotten the **Seven Million Bikes** website, you'll find all our events on there. But if you're looking for any event on any night, you go to Facebook, go to Events. Look up what's happening tonight, and you'll find it there.

24:43

But as you know, with anything, it's all marketing, right? Like there's no shortage of marketing ideas. If I had unlimited budget, I would have posters in every hotel and I would have ads on YouTube and then the shows will probably all be packed because, the more you spend on marketing, the more people are going to come. Everything's done on a shoestring. Everything's done with a small budget that you have, which is often zero, the only time I've really thrown any budget at anything, it was the Hard Rock show because it was a big show. And we knew that the more we threw at it, the more people we would get through the door, but most of our shows is kind of a 20, 30 people, Max.

25:16

But it's sad, because before the pandemic, as I mentioned, with the tourism and the locals coming out, and even just the children of expats, which is regular as well, people come for a year or two at a time. We had every single show was 20, 30 people sold out. And then the Coronavirus came in it's never recovered since then for various reasons, unfortunately. So, we've been on a holding pattern there, like you and the opposite. Do you have not left Vietnam in two years, but a great place to be. But we've been on a holding pattern just like when the pandemic hit, well, they are six months, Christmas time, we'll be back the tourism will be back, the shows will be back, everything will be packed.

25:56

And then that didn't happen and then start this year. Again. We're like,

"Okay, the things were looking up, the vaccines were coming, cases went down."

Things were opening by April, May. Well, by March, April, like,

"Yes, okay, it's going to be the year."

And then May came and [sysco 26:10] Delta came in. And, again, we've never recovered. So, we shut down all the events, move them all online. Or we did online comedy, which was unbelievable. I did a show in Australia, Quote Unquote, which was three o'clock Vietnam time, but it was in Australia. It was amazing. We did it for free for healthcare workers. And so, we had a massive audience.

Kerry Newsome: 26:31

Oh, Fantastic!

Niall Mackay: 26:32

Yeah, that was a connection through my sister. As I mentioned, she's in the healthcare industry in Victoria. So, she opened it up to all her healthcare professionals, and we offered it to them for free. So,

t that was incredible. And so, we moved everything online, we were doing weekly quiz nights, we were doing comedy nights, everything was amazing. And then October 1st, the government opened the country. So, nobody wanted to be online. But we couldn't do events either. So that was crushed. So, we went from being offline to online to nothing, and just now shows are finally starting to recover. So, I'm doing my first comedy show, hosting my first comedy show in like nine months next week, I'm performing this week, not the first time, but I'm performing this week at somebody else's show. There's a whole bunch of other show runners here. That all put on comedy shows. And so, it's getting exciting again, but like everything, I think we're all just thrilled to see what's going to happen next. So hopefully, nothing happens. But we'll see how it goes.

Kerry Newsome: 27:34

Yeah, and, I was talking to someone in Vietnam, earlier this morning. And they were saying that the government is talking about now counting hospital numbers, rather than case numbers. And, if that's going to be the case, I think that's probably, to be honest, a good measurement for the future. Because if Vietnam follows Australia, and many other countries with the Omicron virus, fortunately, if the country is highly vaccinated, then the Omicron comes as probably more of a slight flu. And you are certainly unwell. And certainly, if you have any underlying conditions, you are going to be in a worse situation. But so far, Omicron is not our biggest issue with a hospitalization.

28:38

So, I can only cross my fingers. Because as you know, I'm in the travel industry, what an industry to be in, in the era. So, I think news for everyone listening is that Vietnam is opening and the way you can tell that most prolifically is with the airlines opening their routes again. And that's already happened. The first of January was a big release with Vietnam Airlines, Singapore Airlines, in January as well. Bamboo is going to be flying out of Melbourne, and we're waiting for the release of dates there. But certainly, Vietnam Airlines has started selling.

29:20

I think, just for people to be aware, it is a situation to watch. And I'm hoping your comedy shows and events can continue. And as they are and I'm sure Vietnam is going to embrace that because they know they're going to have to have that kind of entertainment when everybody does come back, because everyone's going to be wanting to get out there, have fun, throw off the Omicron badge, look in the rear vision to COVID and get out and have a good time.

29:56

So, Niall, I want to say thank you again for coming on the show. It's been great to chat and great to get an understanding of the comedy scene and what's going on in Saigon. I'm just yet grateful for your time and to learn a little bit more about what's going to happen and what I can come and do when I arrive in Saigon, first stop, I'm coming to a show.

Niall Mackay: 30:22 Awesome. Well, we can't wait to see you. Yeah, thank you so much for having me on. I could talk about Vietnam and comedy and entertainment here all day long