



Baron Vaughn – comedian, actor, regular on Netflix series *Grace and Frankie*

Other shows that Baron Vaughn has been in include the t-v shows *Law and Order* and *Girls*. He's also the voice of Tom Servo on the upcoming re-boot of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Baron's story begins in a place not widely known as a comedy hot spot.

"This is in a little town called Tucumcari, New Mexico. It's on Route 66, America's main street. It was the actual main street of Tucumcari."

That's where he grew up. He was raised by his great grandparents. For him, that's where comedy started.

"They were the people I loved and the people I looked up to. There were t-v shows they watched that made them laugh. At the end of the 70's and early 80's there was a glut of sitcoms featuring black people like *The Jefferson's*, *Good Times* and *Sanford and Son*. They also watched Nick at Night. Shows like *Dobie Gillis*, *Patty Duke* and *Mr. Ed*. The first time I saw Sammy Davis Junior on *Patty Duke*, I had to react the exact same way that black people in the 60's reacted: 'We're on t-v, we made it!' I watched all of that stuff and was soaking it in and observed the laughter from my parental figures and I was like 'Oh, I can get them to do that.' That's when I saw that I had some power and some value. I could make them laugh as hard as all the t-v shows they were watching and loved."

Baron moved to Las Vegas with his Mom when he was around eight. He lived there with his Mom, his grandmother and eventually his step-father. It wasn't the most nurturing environment.

"I grew up in a family that was keeping a lot of secrets and a lot of fear and shame. My mother, God bless her heart, was an addict when I was in high school. You don't become an addict unless you have some sort of deep, deep pain that you are trying to medicate. This is the person who was raising me. Being a child of an addict is a sure-fire way to have some sort of anxiety or depression when you get older. I was internalizing things. When you're an adult and someone treats you that way, you say "That has nothing to do with me.' But when you're a child, you don't know that, especially if it's someone you love."

Baron says he was a nerdy kid who really wanted to be liked. So he was always doing funny voices and comedy bits. He didn't fit in with the kids in his neighborhood and he was black, which added an additional layer of otherness. At home there was pain, addiction, abuse. So life at home was predictable and dangerous. Life outside was unpredictable and dangerous.

"When I was a kid, I apologized a lot. I hung my head in shame possibly because I was being shamed a lot. You have a giant group of people saying 'How you look is wrong. How you talk is wrong. How you act is wrong. How you believe is wrong.' If you say that to a huge group of people, it doesn't dissipate over the group. Every person internalizes it. And it becomes a thing they have to deal with for the rest of their lives whether they want to or not."

At school, Baron says he was treated like he was being disruptive. Other words to describe him might have been precocious or imaginative.

"There were a lot of teachers who encouraged me, which is why I am who I am today. I decided to become a professional artist because I had teachers whose voices cut through the chorus and said 'You actually have some gifts. You should explore your imagination.'"

He graduated from a performing arts high school in Vegas, went to Boston University and starts doing standup. A small part in a Broadway show soon after and more standup. Enough standup and commercial acting work that he can quit his day job at a law firm. And then he's a professional performer. Far away from where he grew up. This gave him a chance to think about what happened in those early years.

"I conflated love and anger. Because of what was happening to my Mom, she had a lot of anger and resentment. At the same time, I am her flesh and blood. Her son. So she loves me. But her love was always tinged with this resentment or anger about the situation we were in. So as a straight man, when women show affection to me, I project my mother. I think 'They must be angry at me in some way because they love me.' Or if they're angry at me, it must mean that they care. So I was scared of people caring about me."

In 2011 when he was about 30 years ago, he got his big professional break.

"I was shooting a t-v show on the USA Network and I had to move to Vancouver. All the other cast members in the show were married. So when they didn't have to be filming, they would come down to Los Angeles to see their significant other or their significant other had flown to Canada to hang out with them. But me, I was just sitting there in Canada. I would be off for two weeks, sitting by myself, completely disconnected from everyone I knew. Now I see that the behaviors I was engaging in were textbook depression. I'd stay in bed for days. I was subsisting on a diet of Cheerios. There was a grocery store that was probably a two block walk. At some point, I decided it was too far. That walk was harder than having no food. I would be out of toiletries, but I had dish soap. So I would be bathing in Dawn. I did that for weeks on end."

“I wasn’t feeling sad, it was just a malaise. A numbness, a nothing. I described it to a woman I was dating and she said ‘I think you’re depressed.’ A light bulb went off and I thought ‘Is that what this is?’

There a lot of reactions from people about a diagnosis of depression and what looks like a chronic disease. Lots of folks are devastated. Some are in denial. But with depression, a lot of times there is a sense of relief. This thing has a name, there are ways to address it.

“It helped immensely. I would get out of bed and I’d think I might as well shower. Then I’d go outside. That simple adjustment helped me get through the rest of the time I was in Vancouver.”

There is a lot of stigma around depression. It’s shamed and laughed at. Baron Vaugh had to overcome several other layers of stigma.

“Black people, when I grew up, were not being told about depression. Especially a small town, church community like the one that I grew up in. ‘You should probably pray on that’ was the answer to every question. As opposed to, ‘I should get some therapy, I should see about some medication or get a diagnosis.’ Mental health was not a part of our world. When I started thinking about depression and anxiety, I didn’t see how much racial baggage I had wrapped around those things. I would think ‘You mean depression, that thing that white people do?’”

Baron says oppression in the black community has been more of a rallying point than depression.

“Oppression is something we experience. It’s something that can connect you to others. Oppression can play into depression. I walk into a store and I’m just a person who wants to buy a candy bar. But then I look into the clerk looking at me extra close, so I have to become conscious about what they think I’m trying to do. They think I’m trying to steal. That constant eye you have on yourself can become unhealthy. You’re taking in hatred. People are hating you for something you cannot control. The work is to let those things go. The other work is to create a world where that is not happening to people.”

Baron says he hasn’t used medications to treat depression. He’s not against them, but talk-therapy has been more helpful in making sense of what he’s been through. His advice for others?

“Be patient with yourself. Give yourself time to heal, just like you would with a broken leg. And seek some help from a mental health professional. A therapist is not trying to ‘fix’ you. They are a coach on your team. They’ve coached other teams and see what plays will and won’t work.”