

spotlight on...



Illustration by Carlos Ruiz

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Aaron Karo, Incorporated

by Jamie Beckman

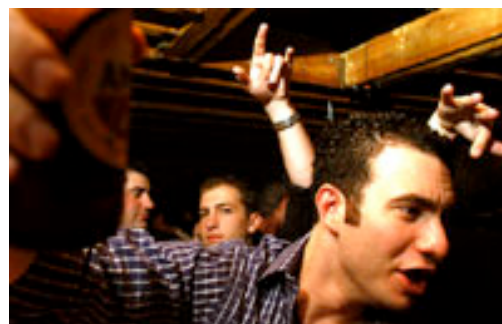
At age 24, Aaron Karo has tied his name to a multimedia conglomerate. What have you done today?

You are Aaron Karo.

Aaron Karo's friends are your friends. Aaron Karo's bars are your bars. Aaron Karo's job is your job.

At least that's how it seems. How else would he know what you're thinking?

Once a month, Aaron Karo sits down at his laptop in his immaculate bedroom next to a bottle of Karo corn syrup and tells you excruciatingly minor details about his life in an online column called "Ruminations." He might mention eating food out of the



refrigerator of some chick he hooked up with last week or the time a deli tried to charge him for a bottle of water he already had or how all of the souvenir cups in his kitchen seem to have Charles Barkley on them. Unless you're Aaron Karo, those details would translate to instant comic death. Because, frankly, who cares? But with impeccable comic timing and a gift for calling out minutiae most people would glaze over, Aaron Karo makes those details yours. He knows you pause and listen when you hear noises that could be sex coming from the next apartment and are disappointed when they're not. He knows moving into a new place results in impossibly tangled cords and a beeping noise that takes hours to identify. And, disturbingly, he knows all about the parties you went to in college—especially how the full keg cup you fought hard for can get lost so easily.

Like his column's tagline points out, he's been writing what you're thinking since 1997, and you immediately think, "I could do that."

The difference between you and Aaron Karo, though, is that you haven't parlayed your thoughts on college and the twentysomething experience into a multimedia business venture. He has. His projects include a monthly column spanning six years, a book (*Ruminations on College Life*; Fireside 2002) that's in its fifth printing, a just-launched college-life advice column in *Seventeen* magazine, a website, a stand-up career that regularly sells out shows in fewer than 15 minutes and negotiations with a major studio to turn his thoughts into a sitcom. And he's only 24 years old. Unless you're Mary-Kate or Ashley Olsen, you haven't even started to build an entertainment empire based on your name by that age. What's more, Aaron Karo hasn't even really paid his dues as a comic, at least not conventionally, yet he's headlined sold-out shows at venues such as New York City's Caroline's on Broadway and colleges across the country.

"I think you need to have a niche, and I have this niche of the twentysomething crowd and the college crowd, which is honestly the best demographic there is," he says. "They're the ones that all the TV shows are for, all the advertisers are trying to get, and they spend money and go out. But I've built a following. People who go on the road are building a following. I did that. I just did it a different way."

Yes, Karo regularly uses words like "demographic," but he also has the mouth of, well, a fratboy. That's the Karo charm; you feel you should ask him for resume advice one minute, and you want to challenge him to bong a beer with you the next. But he's aware of who others think he is. Go ahead, compare him to Seinfeld. Most people do. ("Everybody compares everything to Seinfeld," Karo says.) Not that there's anything wrong with that.

"I'm a fucking Seinfeld fanatic," he says. Then he rattles off his Holy Foursome: "There's God, Moses, Seinfeld and Sandler."

He's even seen two of them in person. He met Sandler in an L.A. office and gave him his prepared two-minute-long "elevator pitch" about his column, his standup, his

company. (Yes, he has an elevator pitch.) Sandler wished him luck. He hasn't heard from him since. Two weeks ago, he saw Seinfeld perform. As he strained to see his idol, he kicked himself for not picking up observations Seinfeld made, for not writing down similar thoughts he had on the way to the gym, on the treadmill or walking down New York's streets. Then again, Karo doesn't have the 25 years of experience Seinfeld has on him.

Yet. [more>>](#)

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The Way

It's a typical Saturday afternoon in Karo's Manhattan apartment. (In fact, it's probably a lot like your apartment: one roommate, a too-small living room crammed with mismatched furniture and some sort of a burning smell emanating from, hmmm, the air conditioner, maybe?) He's been out late the night before. Really late. He's chugging water from a bottle, blowing his nose every now and then and waiting to watch the Yankees game later in the afternoon.

Compared to the in-your-face tone of his column, Karo is pint-sized at 5'7". He's wearing morning-after clothes: a Hagar the Horrible t-shirt, a backward Yankees cap, too-big jeans and an occasional flash of red plaid boxers. He's sitting on his couch and talking. Just talking. But Karo's voice booms. He's loud and articulate and asks endless questions, and when he picks up his always-ringing cell phone and shouts at the person on the other end, you want to join in and shout with him for reasons you can't explain. "Ruminations" works the same way.



"I don't know why people like it, but they do," Karo says as he hugs a throw pillow and glances in the direction of his coffee table. The *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition* sits on two copies of *New York Magazine*. "I just literally say what people don't or can't articulate, and I think that definitely strikes a chord."

Karo—and you have to call him Karo; everyone else does except his manager, who refused—and his laid-back persona create an appeal that has reverberated with at least the 30,000 people who've signed up to have "Ruminations" delivered directly to their e-mail inboxes. Not too shabby for what started as a witty e-mail to a handful of friends one sleepless Sunday night after a weekend of drinking his freshman year of college.

"My body was so messed up," he says. "I don't know. I just sat down and wrote it. It's like legend now."

He pauses in a moment of modesty.

"But thank God I did that."

The Business

It's easy to trace the success of the column back to his friends, who forwarded "Ruminations" to their friends, who forwarded "Ruminations" to their friends, and a timely e-mail from an L.A. manager at the end of his senior year offering to help compile his pages of text into a book. ("No lending! Everyone buys their own copy," Karo says, even to the college guys who say his is the only book they've ever read.)

Well, maybe it's not that easy.

The brain behind the running commentary belongs to a 2001 magna cum laude graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Business School. He had a stint immediately after pushing papers on Wall Street before he chucked it all to pursue comedy full time, but not before creating his own nest egg to last him a year or two. Karo is a businessman. And it shows.

"People say, 'You went to Wharton and then you worked on Wall Street, and you quit, and now you're a comedian? You've wasted your whole education,'" he says. "I use more of my business education now than I ever did on Wall Street. I run this thing like a business. Those are my customers, and word of mouth is how a business spreads. I do consider myself business-savvy."

The first thing that had to go was the Post-It notes. When Karo used to come home drunk from Pennsylvania college bars and empty his pockets, he'd pull out endless streams of scrap paper, bar napkins and Post-It notes all emblazoned with chicken-scratched bits of "Ruminations" he'd try and piece together the next day. So he did what came naturally: He bought a credit-card-sized digital tape recorder and created a joke database on his laptop that has now grown to 3,000 jokes. They are organized by the day he thought of them, what category they fall into ("girls" is a big one) and what other jokes they'd work well with. It's not geeky, he insists. It's actually pretty cool, at least according to him.

But then again, Karo was never "normal," per se. Especially according to those who've known him for years, says his high school friend David Epstein.

"I'll never forget, one day we were putting together a high school yearbook picture. We had a group of friends called The Crew, and we had to put together a bunch of pictures for the yearbook. One picture was out of place, and he started bugging out, yelling, because one picture was out of place. I mean, yeah, it looked a little better, but for Karo, it had to be perfect," Epstein says. "I think that's part of what keeps him going. He's a perfect blend between comedy and capitalism. He's exploiting his own comedic talent. Not many people can."

Karo says he reads every e-mail he gets and answers 99 percent of them, even the ones from Jewish fathers trying to set him up with their daughters, people sending him their own "Ruminations" and girls down the street asking him out for drinks (he used to do that, but it got weird because he had nothing new to tell them; they already knew his whole life history and his funniest stories). But he's not just doing it to be a nice guy. Not when his business is on the line and he's got a possible sitcom in the works.

"I get e-mails from, like, the middle of nowhere, and that's great, also. Sitcom people love to hear that because those are the people that watch. Kansas City: huge. I'm like, 'How do you even—are there even bars there, you know?'" Karo says. "I'm cultivating a fan base, and if they took the time to write me, I feel like even if I just say thanks, they'll say, 'Oh, this guy wrote me back,' and they'll tell 10 friends. It's almost like I never know what the next e-mail is going to bring. It could be, like, a movie deal."

As self-aggrandizing as that sounds, Karo got a manager through an e-mail. He makes regular trips to L.A. to further negotiations for a sitcom about twentysomethings in the city aimed at Fox, NBC or the WB. (He plans to write and star in the sitcom, by the way.) Why not a movie?

"They're really looking for fresh talent: this demographic, our age, shows that target us. Look at TV. The best shows are going off the air. *Friends* is done. *Sex and the City* is done. *Frasier* is done. What's left? *Will & Grace* is in its seventh season, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, well, that's on cable. They're like, 'We need something!'"

And that something might as well be Aaron Karo. [more>>](#)

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The Party

Karo is getting drunk on a Friday night. His blue plaid shirt and deconstructed jeans fill out his small frame. His dark curly hair is smoothed with gel, and he's wearing cologne. He's noticeably attractive tonight. This is not an accident.

"The goal is to meet women and take them home against their better judgment," he says.

The heart of Karo's recent comedy and columns is his nightlife. It's where ideas form and crazy shit happens and people are less guarded and talk a lot more. "I believe in work hard, play hard, but play is a lot funnier," he says. Even late nights during his college tour provided fodder for the column. And, of course, added to his fan base.



"I go to three schools in a week. I'm going to come and I'm going to fucking hang out, you know?" he says. "Like, I'm going to make myself accessible. I go to the bars, I hang out, I hook up with the chicks. Whatever makes them happy."

Tonight, he and five of his friends sit around an Ikea coffee table and sip Skyy from tinkling, ice-filled glasses. Conversations criss-cross the living room and are interrupted by a chain reaction of cell-phone rings, which are interrupted by loud shouting about Will Ferrell's new movie, Jenna Jameson, Hilary Duff and the Big 12 Conference, which are interrupted by lulls in conversation and pop music from a digital cable music channel. (In fact, it's probably a lot like Friday nights when you and your friends get together. But you aren't sitting with a credit-card-sized tape recorder in front of you, waiting to capture any little thing that happens.)

Talking to Karo is like having tea with Miss Manners. Chances are, you'll make a mistake or say something strange, and if it's big enough, you might see it in a column someday. Tonight, his friend Harlan, who's famous for missteps like these and has inspired the "Ruminations" term "Harlanisms," makes the column (or its database, at least). He's talking about college: "Man, the last four weeks of my old job, I partied for six weeks straight." Karo presses his recorder to his lips amid whoops and laughter from the rest of the crew and repeats the Harlanism back into the plastic

casing. A "Rumination" is born. It'll probably show up as one of Karo's Quotes of the Month.

Tonight, the plan is to go to the Tiki Room, a pastel club with fake jungle foliage and asymmetrical shapes tacked to the ceilings. It's dead. Karo wants to leave. Plus it's raining, which always means more guys than girls. "When it rains, girls want to watch *Notting Hill* on DVD. Guys are like, 'Let's go get some ass!'" he says. He sips his Bud Light and talks to a few Penn State girls, but he can't really remember any of their names, nor does he want to. But they remember his. He puts his arm around a few of them anyway.

As Karo slips deeper into inebriation, his eyes glaze, and he mistakenly puts his hand around my waist once.

"I'm 24, I'm single, and I'm a quasi-minor Jewish celebrity. I just want to get laid," he slurs into my ear as he spits on my cheek. Whether this is actually true is anyone's guess. Talking with him sometimes seems like an extended publicity push for the Aaron Karo brand. Other times, it really does seem that all of this success is a random gift for an incredibly perceptive guy's guy who can write. And perform. And flirt.

But after his last comment, his business side kicks in, and Karo gets smart. He leads me to the door.

"I've got to ... you know."

And I do know. It's what you would be thinking at the end of a night of drinking and trying not to act stupid. Aaron Karo is tired of doing his own PR.

He kicks me out of Tiki Room at 1:30 a.m., before things get too out of control.

Before I can write what he's really thinking.

"I own the stage tonight," Aaron Karo types in an e-mail the afternoon before his Thanksgiving Eve stand-up show.

Karo isn't known for his modesty, but even if he bombs tonight, the statement is true. He's headlining at New York's Caroline's comedy club tonight, which means he does own the stage, if only for an hour. He also owns the Green Room, stocked with five bottles of Pellegrino and six lemon and lime slices hooked onto a champagne glass.

When Karo strolls into the green room at 9:40 p.m. (the show is technically scheduled for 9 p.m.), he starts smiling. A lot.

"I've never had my own Green Room before," he says as he views his name on the door.

Green Room or not, Karo's one pre-show constant is the speech his dad gives him before every performance. It's the same pep talk his dad knelt down and gave him when he started playing soccer: "Play smart. Stay between the man and the ball. Stay on your feet. Take no prisoners."

Karo takes the stage amid a crowd of well-groomed twentysomethings who seem more interested in the two-drink minimum than his comedy. As Karo's voice fills the club, a group to his right from Atlanta won't stop talking. A girl in a striped tank top sips her martini and falls back, eyes half-closed, against the back of her seat. A foursome of beefy guys chortles after spilling a drink on the floor. Tonight is not going well.

Later, as he details his sexual escapades in what he dubs "the R-rated portion of tonight's show," he offends his sister, who's never seen him perform before. Afterward, he rates the show a 7.5. He went too fast in the beginning and might have pushed the taste envelope too far at the end, but the young crowd still seemed to love it. And as long as the niche audience he's created keeps packing his shows and listening to him—even if his humor doesn't transfer as well to the stage as it does to print—he's happy.

www.aaronkaro.com

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