

A close-up, high-contrast portrait of Baratunde Thurston. He is wearing black-rimmed glasses and has a short beard. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on his forehead and nose, and deep shadows on the sides of his face. The background is blurred.

# BARATUNDE THURSTON

---

## **COMEDIAN/ ENTREPRENEUR/ WRITER**

Baratunde Thurston is the CEO, cofounder, and hashtagger-in-chief of Cultivated Wit. He is author of the New York Times bestseller, *How To Be Black* and previously served as director of digital for The Onion for five years. Baratunde cofounded the black political blog, Jack and Jill Politics, has advised the Obama White House, and has over a decade of experience in stand-up comedy. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.



BARATUNDE THURSTON IS THE CEO, COFOUNDER, AND HASHTAGGER-IN-CHIEF OF **CULTIVATED WIT**. HE IS AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLER, *HOW TO BE BLACK* AND PREVIOUSLY SERVED AS DIRECTOR OF DIGITAL FOR THE ONION FOR FIVE YEARS. BARATUNDE COFOUNDED THE BLACK POLITICAL BLOG, *JACK AND JILL POLITICS*, HAS ADVISED THE OBAMA WHITE HOUSE, AND HAS OVER A DECADE OF EXPERIENCE IN STAND-UP COMEDY. HE LIVES IN BROOKLYN, NEW YORK.

“ I’d love to have part of my legacy be that I was compassionate; that I exuded joy, warmth, confidence, and competence; and that I was more than talk-- I was a man of substance.



**SO WHAT ARE YOU  
DOING NOW, OTHER  
THAN MAKING US  
LAUGH?**

---

IN SOME WAYS, THAT'S IT,  
BUT THROUGH VARIOUS  
MEANS.

Right now I'm the cofounder and CEO of a company called Cultivated Wit. There are three of us at its helm, and we combine the power of comedy and technology to explain complex ideas; tell stories in unique ways; and humanize technology by deepening its relationship to humor and creativity. Sometimes we act as an agency by doing marketing campaigns with wit and digital pizzazz, but we tell our own stories more directly. We also do original productions, like the show *Funded on AOL*. Occasionally we'll put on events—hackathons—where developers and comedians build weird and funny apps over a weekend. We have other ideas for products that we could launch out of that sphere, but that's our base.

Outside of projects with Cultivated Wit, I'm a comedian, public speaker, writer, and pontificator. I wrote a book called *How to Be Black*, which I continue to support by doing talks on race, identity, politics, diversity, activism, media, and the new versions of all of them.



## SO, WHAT'S THE REST OF YOUR STORY?

I think my life is best explained by the lives that came before mine. My great-grandfather was born into slavery in Virginia in 1870—a year when that should have been legally impossible, but things are sometimes inefficient in America. He moved to Washington, DC, and the big family lore is that he taught himself how to read. He had two daughters, one of which was my mother's mother, Lorraine Martin. She was the first black employee at the US Supreme Court building, and there was even press about her. However, I didn't know any of that until 2005, after my mother passed away.

My family never talked about it: we were quite broken and dysfunctional when it came to my mother's relationship with her mother. By the way, most families are dysfunctional—if a family looks happy, then their secrets are usually even darker.

My mother, Arnita Thurston, was born in 1940 in Washington, DC, and grew up during the transition to Black Power. She was raised in a very Christian household—Baptist, with a white Jesus on the wall—which she left to become a black activist, civil rights street protestor, and radio station takeover specialist. (laughing)

That's where my path begins. I was born in 1977, and I have an older sister, Belinda, who is nine years ahead of me. We were raised in a house with a very politically active and independent mother, and a father who wasn't around. Our fathers never lived with us. My father was killed during a drug deal when I was six years old. He was the user, but no one knows exactly what happened. No one was ever caught, and there were no arrest records—just a death certificate and a body.

My mother never graduated college, but she was smart as hell and worked her ass off to get us a house to live in. She distributed Yellow Pages and sold dinners that we never got to eat to other families; she was a domestic worker who cleaned floors; she did paralegal stuff and secretary work. Eventually, she got herself a good job in computer science and became a programmer. She did that without any formal education, in the late 1970s, as a single black woman living in Washington, DC.

## WHERE DID YOU GO TO COLLEGE?

I ended up getting accepted to Harvard early, despite my wishes to avoid your kind. (laughing) I wanted to go to Morehouse in Atlanta and be surrounded by my kind, as I saw it at the time.

(laughing) College was actually when I started being funny.

## YOU WEREN'T FUNNY BEFORE?

I wasn't funny growing up, but my family enjoyed humor. We took family road trips and listened to audio cassettes of Bill Cosby, Whoopi Goldberg, and Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon. I wasn't a killjoy—I was fun to be around—but I didn't make jokes or see myself as a kid who made people laugh.

Some of the funny was born in high school, when I found humor through the Internet and spread it around through email lists, becoming a curator of jokes. Before college, though, I was a serious, self-righteous, holier-than-thou individual. I wasn't condescending, but I was very judgmental.



How to Be Black was released by Harper in February 2012 and has since become a New York Times best-seller