

Mike Sacks: All right. Thanks for returning. I'm really excited about this one. I asked my top three picks to be here, and they all said yes, so I'm very excited about this. Collectively, they've written for a ton of amazing magazines and publications, but let's do it individually. Brian Raftery, at the far end over here, is a writer for *Entertainment Weekly*, *GQ*, *Wired*, *Spin*, *New York*, and he's currently Managing Editor at *Yahoo Movies*. To my right, Adam Frucci runs a little site called *Splitsider.com*, which might be my favorite site on comedy. He's to my right. And to my left is Jesse David Fox. He's a freelance writer who's written for *New York*, *The New Republic*, *The Awl*, *Hairpin*, *Pop Matters*, and is currently the Associate Editor of *Vulture.com*, and he's also associated with *Splitsider*. So thank you all very much for coming, I really appreciate it. (applause)

The subject is writing with humor about humor, and this really fascinates me, because when I was growing up, even when I'd just gotten out of college, there was very little written about comedy, and you certainly couldn't do so consistently. The only books that I knew were about *SNL* or *Your Show of Shows*, you know, Tom Shales's book on *SNL*. And in the past five to ten years, it has just exploded, and amazing material is being written about comedy, consistently. With *Splitsider* alone, every day there are a few articles that are just fantastic. So I'm excited to even talk about this today, but Brian, let's start with you. You write in a forum that I really love: the oral history. It's very easy to read, it's very enjoyable, but very difficult to put together. So what is it about the oral history format that you feel works so well for you and this subject matter?

Brian Raftery: Well, for me, I like them partly because I used to love reading them. I used to be obsessed with *Premiere Magazine* in the nineties, they'd do really great ones on *Jaws* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. It feels like I'm kind of making fun of them by saying that they're breezy and easy to read, but they really are. I feel like when they're done well, you do sort of eventually start hearing all of those voices if they're talking to you directly as a reader. But I think the big reason why I started to do them is because I, as a writer, having written a lot of features for magazines, more and more I just liked taking myself out of the equation. I rarely ever write first-person things or intrude myself unless I really have to or I feel like it's adding to the story. So for me, it's like I can sort of step back and let everyone tell their story, and it's more of an editing job for me, like how do you arrange all of these stories, what are the through-lines, the narratives here? How do you make it feel like you have all of these people sitting around a table, and they're kind talking to you, but really talking to one another, and telling the story through these little mini-stories? And you are trying to make them funny, especially if they're about comedy, you want to have these build-ups and payoffs. So when you're doing oral histories about comedy, for me, I'm never being funny in terms of, here's a funny transition sentence, but it's more like you're taking their words and building as if they're all on a stage and they're telling these stories and it's gonna build to a punch line.

MS: It's interesting too because when you know the actors or comedians or writers, you can almost hear their voices in your head, so it's very effective for comedy. Do you find it's a nice format specifically for comedy?

BR: I think for pop culture it's great, because you always have these great storytellers, whether they be filmmakers or screenwriters or actors, but for comedy especially, and also the few comedy oral histories I've done—I did one on *Cheers*, I did one on UCB—you're also writing about these people who were a community and all worked together at one point, so you say, "Oh, Ted Danson told me this story about something that happened on set, were you there?" And they're like, "Oh, I was there, I remember that," so it really does feel like you're getting these variations on the same story. And with comedians especially, they're so great as interviews because they are trying to be funny, and they do know they're with a writer, and they do know their words are gonna be taken and put out there, and I think when they know it's an oral history, and they know you're not gonna be interfering with their jokes or losing a line here or there, they really talk for a long time, and they'll really give you tons and tons of material. That's one of the things I love is going through these transcripts and going, "I can't believe they said this or that, and I have so much stuff to work with."

MS: Do you think they do that more because they know it's in the first person and it won't be through your prism, it won't be through you writing about them?

BR: I think some of them do. You sometimes also get big names who are like, "What's an oral history?" and you try to explain to them what it is. I remember

Laurence Fishburne asking me, “Brian, what is... an *oral history*?” And it’s like, “Wow, it was almost seductive the way he asked that.” (*laughter*) I wonder if that’s part of it. I think also, when you’re writing about comedy, these are all people who’ve studied popular culture and love popular culture. Especially if you talk to comedians, they’re all read the Tom Shales book, probably multiple times. So I think they know the format, I think they know it’s a good way of telling these longer stories that won’t get completely truncated by the writer.

MS: What is your policy when you’re dealing with these interview subjects? Do you give them final sign-off? Final sign-off means when you interview someone, and you edit it, you send it back for their approval, and they can change whatever they want to change. Some magazines do it, and some don’t. Is that your policy?

BR: I’ve never done that for anything. Most of the places I’ve written for are magazines that have rigorous fact-checking things, but if you’re going through it and some story doesn’t seem to quite wash, or you feel like someone’s missing... I remember with the *Cheers* oral history, there were one or two actors who were a little bit older who told a lot of stories where you’re like, “I don’t think they’re lying, I think it’s just an apocryphal story,” and then you ask four other people and they’re like, “That never happened.” Never major things, but that’s the extent of what I do. But I would never turn anything over in terms of having them sign off on it.

MS: So how many hours are we talking about in terms of putting this together? Getting people onboard, doing research, transcribing the interviews, editing them. How long are we talking?

BR: I don't even know if I can estimate it. Especially for stuff like the *Cheers* piece, where I spent four or five months on that. I did two trips to L.A., I did at least half of those interviews in person, and I watched like seventy *Cheers* episodes, which was probably the most enjoyable research I've ever done for anything. And to this day, I'll just put on a *Cheers* episode, and it just lulls me, it's like warm milk for me at this point, because it's the most enjoyable show. But I wouldn't even be able to estimate it. Some of those interviews go on for hours, and then, even if you do a great hour-and-a-half interview for these things, you might go back and do an extra twenty or thirty minutes with some of these people. So it's a lot. In recent years I've hired a transcriber, because otherwise, even though I like to transcribe myself, because you're hearing their voices and their rhythms, and sometimes you're picking up on little cues that a transcriber might not, but also it would just never get done unless I had someone transcribe that stuff for me.

MS: Do you reach out to these people, or do the magazines reach out to these celebrities?

BR: I almost always do it myself. And it's really tough. With oral histories, it's great that they're so popular now, but now we're at a point where, in the last year, there's been a bit of an oral history backlash where it's like, "Why does every pop-culture moment need to be commemorated through these anecdotes?" And they're increasingly harder and harder to do because you need all these little variables to happen. It has to be a magazine or a publication... Actually, I'll step back. Usually, for all these oral histories, there's one person who has to say yes. And if that person

says yes, everyone else will say yes. For UCB, the first person we reached out to was Amy Poehler and the original UCB founders. And once they say yes, with every person you go to, their first question they're gonna ask is, "Are you talking to Amy and the UCB founders?" and you say, "Yes." With *Cheers*, it was, "Are you talking to Ted Danson or Jim Burrows, are they signing off on this?" And once you have that, for the most part you can get almost everyone if you have that top person, but for whatever it is, whether it's comedy or films, it almost always starts with one or two core people, and you just have to get them on board for everyone else to say yes. And then it has to be a publication that they'll want to talk to. The *Cheers* thing was for *GQ*, which I think is why Ted Danson probably wanted to do it. The UCB thing was for *New York Magazine*, which I know Amy Poehler is a fan of and she loves New York City, so that made sense for them. But I usually do the reaching-out myself because it's just easier. Because someone's gonna say, "Oh, here's George Wendt's e-mail address, just e-mail him."

MS: Who do you reach out to? Do you reach out to managers, PR people, agents?

BR: If you write about pop culture, you need an IMDB Pro account, because that has every publicist, manager, agent, and you usually start with the publicist. And weirdly, for the UCB thing, I talked to a lot of people who'd gone through UCB over the years and became big stars, and because they all came to New York at the same time, there are only two or three managers representing that whole group of like twenty to thirty people. So they would say, "Oh, I also have Donald Glover, Ellie

Kemper, do you want to talk to them too?" So they would streamline all of those requests for you.

MS: I think that's an excellent resource for writers, especially with this: IMDB Pro. I don't know how much it costs. I get it through work. Do you know how much it costs?

BR: Is it like fifteen bucks a month or something? Something like that.

MS: It's really worth it, because each of these stars, comedians, writers, they all have representation, and you usually have to go through representation. And you can usually find out specifically, not just the agency, but who in particular is representing a specific person, and go right after that person. It makes it a lot easier. So IMDB Pro is great.

BR: And some actors list their actual e-mails on it. Like, I think Billy Zabka's e-mail is on it, which is like, "Is this his real e-mail?" A couple months ago, we wrote him, and he actually wrote back. And it's like, "You might not want to do this." If you have fifteen extra dollars and a *Karate Kid* fetish, you might be able to stalk him very easily. *(laughter)*

MS: What was the e-mail, do you remember?

BR: It may have actually been billyzabka@aol.com. The funniest thing is, I do find for all of the oral histories I've done, and sometimes they're about older actors and writers and sometimes it's about younger, everyone who worked on *Cheers*, their e-mail is something something @aol.com, and with everyone at UCB, it's something

something @gmail.com. *(laughter)* It's a generational divide. You can't guess it, it's not teddanson@aol.com. It's very hard to guess the first half, but it's all AOL. If you're over forty-five and a performer, you've been on AOL for a long time, and you're not leaving it.

MS: So Jesse David Fox, you grew up in Valley Stream, Long Island, which you told me was home to some other comedy greats.

Jesse David Fox: Sure. I mean, it wasn't when I was growing up, but the guy who wrote the *Cheers* theme song is from Valley Stream. It's something Portnoy, because I know his nephew, I went to school with him. Is it Gary Portnoy?

BR: Yeah, yeah.

JDF: So he did, and then Larry Miller actually went to elementary and high school with my mom. Fred Armisen's from Valley Stream, Jim Breuer's from Valley Stream. Steve Buscemi also is, though I don't know if he's a comedian. But he was in the same school district as my mom in elementary school. So *Vulture* recently ran an exclusive photo, which was a photocopy of my mom's yearbook, of Steve Buscemi at like nine years old.

MS: Cute kid? *(laughter)*

JDF: Yeah. He had the same eyeballs, but just a little face. *(laughter)*

MS: This is just an aside, but the guy who wrote the *Cheers* theme, did he make a living, can he live off the royalties...

BR: I think he did. I think everyone involved in that show did. If I had a time machine, I would not do anything with any actual meaning in the world. I would just go back and get an associate producer gig on *I Married Dora* or something. If you were on even the worst sitcom in the 80's, you made tons and tons and tons of money forever.

MS: It's like Andy Borowitz. He was on...

JDF: *Fresh Prince*, yeah.

MS: And now he's rich as can be. He has all the time in the world to write "Shouts and Murmurs". So what were your comedy influences growing up?

JDF: Chris Rock I remember being the first thing I was really into. I just remember when that special came out, it was that special, and I watched Comedy Central a lot, and I watched *Dr. Katz* and *My Family*. Other than that, I mostly just watched *The Simpsons* constantly. Any time it was on, which was almost all the time, that was the thing. And I was lucky that that was good, but it's possible that if *The Simpsons* was worse, I still would've watched it that much. But my family always let me watch it, so I was probably watching it since I was like four or five, and then never stopped. So there was that, and then *In Living Color*, which was also on then. Those were probably the biggest things.

MS: I wonder if, for kids, growing up watching *The Simpsons* at a very young age helps them with their comedic sensibility. Because being a four-year-old, five-year-

old, and getting the jokes you get then, and just watching it through being a teenager into being an adult, when you grow up with that, it's only an advantage, I'd think.

JDF: It's impossible to know. There are probably lots of kids who watched *The Simpsons* who are not funny at all (*laughter*), because a lot of people watched it. For me, it became a shorthand, and there's a certain rhythm to *Simpsons* jokes that is so engrained in me, and I see it in other shows constantly, and I never really stopped watching *The Simpsons*, which I think was almost an advantage because I grew up as it got slightly worse, and was able to see the strings of it a little bit more. I think watching something that is good so often can only help. And it's studied so often in the history of how jokes work. There are some jokes that were like vaudevillian, there are some jokes that were much more subtle. *The Simpsons* was like a joke factory, and a lot of shows had that same pace, but at the time it was really something different.

MS: So you attend the University of Maryland. Where did you end up after that?

JDF: Immediately after, I worked at Wichcraft, which is a sandwich place. (*laughter*) Which I always say is my favorite job, because I love sandwiches so much. We took so much pride in the quality of the product. (*laughter*) So my goals were to work in the music industry, and entertainment more generally. So I started writing because I could write about music, and it was all related. And after college, while I was working at Wichcraft, I was freelancing for a website called *Kiwibox.com*, which I think now officially doesn't exist, but it was geared towards tween girls, and I was

writing music reviews, and I remember I wrote reviews of both Bon Iver and Cheetah Girls in the same week.

MS: What was the rating system?

JDF: It wasn't numbers. I just wrote reviews, and I liked both of them. I liked Bon Iver's album a lot, and Cheetah Girls I admired for how savvy it was. *(laughter)* It just seemed really good for the demographic it was going after.

MS: Like the marketing...

JDF: Yeah. I remember they sampled a Mozart song that would be the first song you'd learn how to play on piano, which felt like a really smart thing to do.

MS: And no one owns the rights to that, right?

JDF: No, that stuff would be public domain, I think.

MS: So it was called Kiwi...

JDF: *Kiwibox.com*. So I did that until I got a job at William Morris, which is a talent agency. And so they made me stop, and then I was basically just working at William Morris for a year and a half before I realized, "I definitely hate this, and I don't care if I get fired, and also they don't know that I'm here." So then I start writing a personal blog that no one read but my friends, and it was very bad. But I wrote it constantly, like it was good, and I got better, enough that I would reach out to Jewcy.com, which is a Jewish pop culture site that let me write television stuff. And then I reached out

to *Splitsider* to do podcast-related things. And then I wrote the podcast column for *Splitsider*, and wrote more and more stuff, and eventually got a job with *Splitsider*.

MS: Well, we were talking about that before. Rather than waiting for opportunities to come to you, you start your own blog. You write it every day and put it out there.

JDF: Yeah. I think for me, I was a bad writer, I'd say for a large portion of my life. But my desire to write, and my desire to have my opinions heard, were greater than my desire not to be embarrassed. But it was still enough where I wasn't going to reach out to people, because I didn't think it was at that level, but I had a New Year's resolution where I was like, "I want to see if someone would like this other than my dad and my mom."

MS: But by sending them a link, did that make it easier, do you think, for them to check out...

JDF: Oh yeah, definitely. I was like, "I want to do this," which was, when NBC had four comedies that were good at the same time, I reviewed it as a night. And I reached out to the editor at *Jewcy* and I was like, "I just want to do this again," and he was like, "OK." It had nothing to do with Judaism, he just kind of liked it. I was lucky that that editor, who I'm still friends with today, let me write weekly about television comedy even though I had no real background doing it. And then with *Splitsider*, I was listening to podcasts, but I was also aware that they didn't have any coverage, so I was like, "I imagine if I e-mailed about this, I'd get a response." I think I e-mailed Adam about something else and he didn't respond, (*laughter*) so I was totally trying to be a little more savvy. And I saw a gap there, where there wasn't

really coverage of podcasting really anywhere, but also on the site that would welcome it. And I pitched an interview with Scott Aukerman and Jeff Ulrich, who were running *Earwolf* at the time, because I had a friend who knew Scott. And so I was like, "Well, I have that access already, that might be some sort of advantage." And that worked. The first people I ever interviewed were those two people.

MS: Looking back now, you weren't happy with what you wrote at first, but everyone has to start somewhere, and what you're going to start off being, unless you're a genius, is not as good as what you're going to become. You're going to start off mediocre.

JDF: Yeah, well, I think I was very bad. I was always a bad English student. And I had the advantage of being a pretty funny writer, and I had decent enough ideas, and that can overshadow bad sentence structure for a little while. I was writing for a while, and I'd get better, and people would just tell me how certain things worked. But by the time I had a full-time job writing, I think I genuinely knew how to use a colon. *(laughter)* I remember learning it. I saw Adam use one, and I was like, *(laughter)* he wrote a thing and he put a colon and I was like, "Oh."

MS: You had not used a colon...

Adam Frucci: I taught you how to use a colon? Wow. I'm honored.

MS: Where was the hunger to go from wanting to be in show business, wanting to be an agent, to wanting to be out in front writing?

JDF: I guess I thought I was interesting and my opinions were interesting. But eventually a friend said, "You should start a blog," and I felt like, "Well, if one person says I should do it, then I'm not just a person who thinks he should do it. I'm a person who's like "That guy said it, so I'm not just a narcissist." Which was enough to justify being a narcissist. *(laughter)* And then I just liked it, and by the time I got better at it, I really, really liked it. I became more enamored by actually writing than getting my ideas out. And it's been like four years or so where I've been taking it pretty seriously. I don't know what it was. I think, when I wanted to work in entertainment, I just liked entertainment, and also I had no other drives. I was like, "I guess I like music, so I'll work in the business of music." Which I think a lot of people do. Working at a talent agency, what I realized is that there are a lot of people who have an interest in things, so they're like, "I guess I'll work in the business of that thing." You're told you can have some sort of dream job, but you don't necessarily know what that is, and you don't think you can make it as a rock star or an actor, so you're like, "I guess I'll sort of be in that world." What I realize when I see the people who succeed is that they really like business, and that's the thing I didn't realize. I hate business. Any job I tried to work in the entertainment industry was still a business job, and I have no sense for it. I'm so bad at it. It was a lot of being an assistant, and I'm terrible on the phone, and I hate organizing. *(laughter)*

MS: That sounds like a disaster.

JDF: Yeah, but they liked that I was there.

MS: You were pleasant.

JDF: I was pleasant. Eventually, it got to a point where William Morris merged with another agency called Endeavor, and they were just firing a lot of people, and eventually my boss, who liked me a lot, was like, "You shouldn't be here. If I fire you now, you can get severance," because it was part of this big thing. And I was like, "That's probably right." *(laughter)* I wasn't broken up by it. And he was definitely right. It was just something where I was spending all my weekends and nights writing, that was my recreation, so I was like, "I guess this is what I like to do." I was like, "Maybe one day I'll get a job doing it." My goal, by the time I was thirty, was to get a job doing it. But also, I was like, "I liked working at Wichcraft, I like working at restaurants and coffee shops. I can do that for so long, and if I get to write a couple things a week, even for free, that's fine."

MS: For the love of writing...

JDF: Yeah, and that was really enough. Now, I'm happy I have a job doing it. And at the time, this seemed like a better life than trying to make it in some business.

MS: It felt like a better fit.

JDF: Yeah.

MS: So Adam, *Splitsider* is one of my favorite sites.

AF: Thank you.

MS: It's consistently great. *(to audience)* Are you guys familiar with *Splitsider*?

(applause) It's a great site. Can you tell me how it came into being? How did it start?

AF: I was an editor at *Gizmodo*, which is *Gawker's* tech site, and I wanted to leave because I don't really care about gadgets that much, and I also just didn't like *Gawker* that much. It's kind of like a gross, tabloid-y place. I'd been doing improv stuff at UCB for years, and I was like, "Well, I like comedy a lot on the side, that's kind of my passion, and I know how to do blog stuff because I've been at *Gawker* for four years." So I just set up lunch meetings with people in the industry that I knew, and one of them was David Cho, who was the publisher of *The Awl* at the time. He was a friend through other ways, and I had lunch with him, and I kind of unknowingly pitched him on *Splitsider*. They had just the one site at the time, and I was like, "I have this idea for a comedy site, there's not really a site for me as somebody who likes comedy, and I feel like I know enough about comedy that I could do this. I might try to start this myself, do you have any advice?" And he was like, "Well, actually, we kind of want to expand, and this would be a good fit." So it was just very serendipitous. So four months later, we launched the site.

MS: That's a good example of just being out there, meeting people, talking, networking. He never would've known about it otherwise.

AF: Exactly.

MS: What year was this?

AF: 2010. That was like April 2010, and then we launched in September.

MS: So at that point, there was *The Onion AV Club*. Were there any other sites devoted to comedy, writing about comedy?

AF: There was *The Comic's Comic*, and then *Punchline*, which has now lapsed, and I believe both existed, but they were too local and stand-up focused. I wanted a teenager in Kansas City to get as much out of this as someone taking improv classes in New York or L.A., and I felt like those two were just like, "Oh, you know these stand-ups who perform at the Comedy Cellar every week. OK, but these people don't know them." I wanted to write about movies and TV shows and all these things that were more national. So that was the opportunity that I saw, because these things all seemed way too specific. I wanted to do something that was broader.

MS: Did you ever want to *write* comedy? Was there ever a time you thought you wanted to write *about* comedy?

AF: I wanted to write comedy in college. I interned at *The Daily Show* when I was in college, and I was like, "Yeah, this is something I'd want to do." But then I'd be like, "All right, time to sit down and write some comedy," (*laughter*) and I would be like, "Eugggggh." It was never something I was driven to do. It was like, "This sounds like a fun, neat job," but then when it came down to the nitty-gritty of doing it, I didn't really have it. It didn't come naturally to me. I do improv, and I love doing that, but that's totally different.

MS: What I find fascinating is that writing about comedy has become viable. It's almost like writing about the music business. And it surprises me that, pre-2009, pre-2010, it just wasn't out there. And what you just said is fascinating, that you wanted to appeal to those in Kansas in their bedroom, a teenager, or to professionals. I think that's a great combination. Because there are a lot of people

out there who want to write comedy, who want to follow comedy, but have no idea how to get from point A to point B.

AF: Right. It felt like, with the internet, there was this new type of comedy that was becoming prevalent. I like to model *Splitsider* after *Pitchfork Media*, in a way, in that, when *Pitchfork* started, they kind of defined a genre of music by what they covered, and it was like, “Oh, with all of these new and interesting types of music, this is what we review, and this is how you know the *Pitchfork* sensibility.” So I kind of wanted *Splitsider* to do that. I didn’t want to define it by “smart comedy” or whatever. No, we just cover the stuff we like, and you get the general sensibility based on what we do and don’t cover. And I think it was good timing, because there were Youtube and so many sketch groups, and *Funny or Die* launched, and podcasts became a huge thing, there were so many more things that you can...

MS: When did Marc Maron’s podcast start?

AF: 2008, maybe?

MS: So a little bit before you.

AF: Yeah.

MS: But you always tried to avoid getting too academic. I hate when books about comedy, or about shows like *The Simpsons*, can be too up their own ass.

AF: Right. Or just boring.

MS: How do you avoid that? Where do you even find the writers for this at first?

AF: Kids at sandwich shops would e-mail me out of nowhere. *(laughter)* No, I just put out a call. Being attached to *The Awl* helped a lot, because that was kind of a writerly blog that had a history of people submitting to it and then getting book deals, or moving on to more high-profile jobs, so it kind of had a pedigree baked into it. It's like, "You know, *The Awl* has produced these books, and people who now have great full-time jobs at *The New Yorker*," so I could kind of be like, "See, you can come and write smart things and people will see them," which was nice. So I just would tweet and people would just e-mail. There was a lot of people cold e-mailing in and asking to pitch. I didn't do anything too special to try to wrangle people.

MS: Brian, did you ever want to write comedy rather than cover comedy and pop culture?

BR: I think, when I was a kid, I used to draw comic strips and comic books and stuff like that, because I was really obsessed with *Bloom County* and *Calvin and Hobbes*, so I was always trying to write jokey little things. I've taken a couple of sketch-writing and improv classes just because I was writing about those worlds so much that I wanted to make sure I could speak the language of that. And it was fun, but I don't know if I just grew up in too much of a middle-class house where it was like, "You gotta get a real job, real job, real job," if that just scared that out of me, but I was always totally fine with being on the sideline of it, and watching it and learning how it worked as an observer. I've learned enough about certain insane sitcom writing rooms or certain crazy scenes where I've thought, "I don't know how well I would've functioned in that particular scene." We were just talking about that *Saturday Night*

Live documentary that James Franco had, and I watched that, and maybe it's just because I'm older now and I'm kind of exhausted from having kids, but I was like, "I can't stay up until four o'clock riffing! I can't do that! I need to sleep! I don't know how these guys do it!" So I don't have a pilot script right now, sitting in a shelf or desk somewhere.

But that's the thing we were talking about earlier, about how some people wrote about comedy. I'm a little bit older, I think, than Jesse and Adam, but there was definitely, from the late eighties to the early aughts, all you had was the occasional magazine profile of Bill Murray, or a *Saturday Night Live* cover story, and you would just study it over and over again, because you just had no idea how this all worked. *Saturday Night Live* was the only thing you any kind of insight into, because it had been covered since the mid-70's by *Time* and a lot of papers and by *Rolling Stone*. And when *The Simpsons* started, even then, those first couple of years, you'd be like, "Who writes these things? This is insane! Do they just sit in a big room that's hilarious?" And the funny thing is, and I think even *Simpsons* writers acknowledge this, there's that great *Simpsons* episode I always think of when they go to the *Mad Magazine* office, and it's just like *Mad Magazine* come to life, and that's what I thought *Mad Magazine* must have been like. They're all goofy, and there are whoopee cushions, and there's *Spy vs. Spy* over here, and Dave Berg's saying stuff. *(laughter)* And I thought the same thing about TV, like they're all just sitting around making jokes the whole time, and someone just writes it up, and there really wasn't anything to learn about.

And so I think that's why I've always been like, even when I write about comedy now, I'm still fascinated by the behind-the-scenes stuff, even though so much of it is known now. I don't like the dry, academic approach to writing about comedy, but I do appreciate that as a field of scholarship. There's still someone who's fifteen who's discovering *Mr. Show*, and they're going to watch all these sketches in one weekend on Youtube, and they're going to go online and read three books and fifteen articles, and they're gonna know everything about how *Mr. Show* worked. For some people, that may be demystifying, but for me that's fantastic. There's so much information out there about how to write a sketch that was not available when I was thirteen or fourteen. If it had been, I might've jumped into writing comedy at that point.

MS: Did you sense that too, the sense of mystery around what went on behind the scenes?

JDF: Yeah. I remember the *Simpsons* jokes that made me realize that people actually write television. I recently interviewed the show runner from that era, and in answering the question before, he literally said, "I remember all the classic jokes when they happen," and I was like, "Do you remember this one?" and he was like, "I have no idea how that happened." (*laughter*) But I was like, "Oh, people probably write shows." And I think, over the last ten years, there have been enough things, like the *SNL* book, where you get some information, and now it's at the point where I write for a site where you can say things like "pilot commitment," and a lot of people just know what that means, which is such an insider-y, business-y term, but there is a very savvy audience who knows the difference between a multi-camera and

single-camera sitcom, and they know shows have writers' rooms. Show runners get interviewed now, just as much as the stars do. And it helps that show runners are often more interesting interviews than the actors, because the actors just say, "The writers wrote a thing, and I'm happy to be there."

BR: And you don't have to explain to them what a show runner is anymore, which is insane. When I worked at *Entertainment Weekly* in the early aughts, if I'd been like, "OK, you guys name me this show runner," people would've been like, "What does that mean?"

AF: And now there's a documentary about Dan Harmon. He's the cult figure from that show more than any of the actors are, which is insane.

MS: Yeah, the creator becomes more famous than the stars. It's amazing. Let's talk about pitching. A lot of people here want to pitch, want to write for magazines, websites. What do you do and not do when you pitch?

JDF: Well, I'm terrible at it, because I always think I'm a burden. So don't do what I do, which is apologize immediately. *(laughter)* And that's a big reason why I wanted to get a job, because I can't pitch all the time, because it'd just be too stressful. My feeling is, make sure what you're pitching is something they need. At least for us, I get e-mails with pitches for interviews with comedians. And we don't really do many straight interviews with comedians because we've got into a habit of having comedians interview each other. That was something I kind of brought in. And also, we can get access to any comedian. Someone pitched an interview with Tig Notaro, but that's not enough, just you as a person interviewing Tig Notaro isn't enough. It's

a matter of making sure what you offer is specific and needed, and very much knowing the tone of the site. When I pitched Adam, I was being very specific regarding what they don't have and what I can offer, and tried to just lay it out. I think if people can say what you're actually supposed to, I can kind of guess.

Audience member: You mentioned the idea of a fan. Do you find that that happens a lot? That there are fans who are using the idea of trying to write an article...

AF: And it almost never works. You get a pitch and it's just like, "I really like *Mr. Show!* That's my pitch!" (*laughter*) No! That's nothing.

JDF: The most popular *Vulture* pitches will have fancy words, and they sometimes will give us the intro paragraph, but essentially it's "This thing is good." And that is not a pitch. It's not an angle.

AF: It's like, "I want to really spend a long time talking about my appreciation of this thing." And it's like, "No." And it's always this thing that came out six months ago, so there's no news peg for it, and it's like, "I want to just, out of nowhere, write about why this is good to me specifically."

MS: How many pitches do you receive on average in a day?

AF: Maybe a half-dozen.

MS: So what works and what doesn't work, from an editor's standpoint?

AF: Specificity. Having a clear argument that you want to make that you can back up. I get a lot of bad pitches. You'll get stuff that's like, "Dear *Thought Catalog*," because

they forgot they sent the same pitch at different times and places, and they forgot to change it, and I'm just like, "Delete." But I recently wrote up submission guidelines, because I was getting so many of the same bad pitches. I like research and reporting. I like when you can go out and talk to a primary source. I like when it's news-pegged, so it's like, "This thing is coming out in three weeks and I'd like to write about it in advance so you can put this up the day it comes out." Something that is illuminating, where it's like 'Here's a new angle on something.' If it's something that's old, it's not just like, "Here's why this is good." It's like, "Actually, here's something you didn't know about this that makes it interesting and you can appreciate it in a new light." I get a lot of very generic pitches, and I feel like specificity is the most important thing you can bring to it.

MS: So for the initial contact, what do you need? What should be in the subject line, what should be in the e-mail?

AF: Just three sentences, just like, "Hi, my name is so-and-so, I'm a freelance writer, here's a link to something I've written," if you have it, or just say, "Here's my pitch," then just sum it up succinctly. Sometimes you get a five-paragraph pitch, which is too much. You just want something short and sweet that gets the idea across, and just be polite. I don't think there's any real trick to it.

MS: So as the relationship develops, it could be just a one-sentence pitch.

AF: Yeah, with writers that I have worked with before, yeah. It'll be like, "Hey, here's this idea, let me know," and I'm like "Yes" or "No," and it's pretty cut and dry.

MS: So for a new writer who hasn't been published on the site, can sending too much be a liability?

AF: Yeah. Honestly, I think the biggest thing you can do is just write with proper spelling and grammar in your pitch e-mail. I get "Dear *Sidesplitter*," and that's not the name of the website. *(laughter)* It's *Splitsider*. Or someone pitching where it's like, "Oh, I ran this a week ago, that someone else wrote, and you're pitching it." But really, there are so many pitches that I get with misspelled words. It's just the simplest things. It doesn't take that much to stand out as a good pitch. I can comprehend it, and it's written properly, so I know you're an OK writer, because you're able to write an e-mail that doesn't have spelling mistakes in it.

MS: And if the pitch is gonna have spelling mistakes, what will the piece be like?

AF: Exactly. If you send a pitch that's like one long run-on sentence with a bunch of mistakes in it, it's like, "No! No!" This is your introduction to me as an editor. It can't be a sloppy thing you typed out on your iPhone and left typos in, because that shows a complete lack of care and respect for what I want to do, so you have to show that you put some care into it.

MS: An editor basically wants a clean piece, no problems with the writer, and to get the piece in on time.

AF: Yeah. It's kind of sad how low the bar is. *(laughter)* It's like, "Can you write well, can you write an article that is clear and sets up an argument and has high school English? Do you have a thesis statement in your article?" Half of the things that are

submitted to me do not have a thesis, and I'm like, "Well, this is OK, but it's very jumbled, and you don't really make a point, and it's just kind of rambling, so pick one of these ideas, write your thesis statement, every paragraph supports that argument with evidence to back it up." It's just very basic, Writing 101 things. It just doesn't happen a lot. It's surprising how often that doesn't come through.

MS: From someone who wants to be a professional.

AF: Exactly.

MS: Brian, what's your pitching process? Do you know these editors at this point, and if you don't know an editor, what do you put in your e-mail?

BR: I freelanced for ten years before starting at *Yahoo!* a few months ago, so I haven't written anything in three months. But during those ten years of freelancing, the New York magazine scene, which I think is now two magazines (*laughter*), but at the time, even though it was very big, it still felt very small, in the sense that if you knew four or five people, you knew a lot of people. I was never someone who was a schmoozer, where it was like, "I gotta go to this event to talk to so and so," but my first job in New York was working for four years at *Entertainment Weekly*, and almost every single job I've gotten since has somehow been connected to someone I worked with or met there. That's just because, in magazines, people, again back when they existed, they would just leave after two or three years and go somewhere else. So you work with someone for two years at *Spin*, and they leave and go to *New York Magazine* and say, "Hey, I'm doing this up here, do you want to pitch something?" So now you have a connection at the old place they worked, because

you've written for them, and you have a connection at this new place. And I don't know now, if you're going into places cold-pitching, I don't know the best way to get your pitches across other than making them really solid. And I think, one thing a lot of people don't do when they're starting out is really researching your pitches, in every sense. Make sure the outlet has not done this story before. If you write to someone and say, "Hey, John Swartzwelder writes these crazy books, you guys should interview him and talk to him." And it's like, "OK, great, he's a crazy recluse (*laughter*), have you already figured out how this is going to happen? Are you going to talk to him first?" Especially for interviews, it's really good to actually know that you can secure that interview first. And a lot of times, it's not really hard to do, especially if you're writing about comedians who are very active on social media. It's probably easier to get an upcoming standup on the phone than it would be to get Tom Hardy or Jennifer Lawrence on the phone.

Editors read their e-mails. That's what they do. That's mostly their job now. Ninety percent of my day is writing e-mails. And with the pitches I get that I respond to, I don't care what's in the subject, I don't care if I know the person. If, in the first two sentences, someone is pointing something out to me that either I wasn't aware of, or that sounds really cool, or something I kind of knew was going on but never put it together, and they say, "Here's who I think you could talk to and here's how this would work," that's all I really need. I need an idea, and I need an idea of what you're gonna do with that idea. And it's great to have other clips as a way of making an introduction, but honestly, there are definitely things I've been sent that I don't need

to read, because if you have this great idea, we'll work on the story, we'll work on the writing.

AF: I feel like a pitch should be tailored. You shouldn't have a pitch you can send to ten different places and have it work. There's no pitch that works everywhere. And you can tell as an editor who gets a lot of pitches, if you get something where it's like, even if it's not like, "Dear *Thought Catalog*," it's like, "Oh, this is super-generic and is not right for us," because you don't know our site, you don't read our site, you're just like, "Well, I want to get it up somewhere. I looked at a bunch of websites and pitched a bunch of them." It has to be like, "This fits in, it already compares to these things that are already on your site." Just show that there's some care put into it, some thought put into it, like "You are the number one place that this piece should live." It's not just throwing it at the wall.

BR: Ideally, you know the outs. When I was freelancing for ten years, I'd have an idea, and you look at all the places you could pitch and you go, "How do I make that a *Spin* story, or do I make that a *Blender* story, or do I try to pitch it as a *New York Magazine* story?" And if it gets turned down there, you look at it and again you go, "Could this fit as a *Rolling Stone* thing or an *Esquire* thing?" There are definitely ideas I have not let go of for years and years and years, not in a Colonel Kurtz kind of way (*laughter*), but you just revisit it once a year and you ask, "Can I make this story work now?" I had this thing about four years ago, where for years I'd wanted to write about it. I grew up really obsessed with "Weird Al" Yankovic, and really loved him, and he was very influential for me. For the last ten years, every year or so I'd

want to do a Weird Al story, and it was never the right time, and then eventually I found a way to pitch it to *Wired* about five years ago, before his big resurgence had happened. And it was one of those things where I could not let go of it. I had to write about him in some way at some point, and it took me probably four or five years to get to the point where I could get someone to greenlight it and make it work.

MS: But how does that work? Because oftentimes, you need a person to write the article, but you can only write the article if you have the person. So in this case, did you go to him first and say, "Listen, I have an idea for *Wired*?"

BR: Yeah, I went to his manager and said, "I'd like to pitch this. I know he doesn't have an album out right now and there's no reason for him to do press." Because it was like two years after his last album.

MS: So *before* you pitched it, you...

BR: Yeah. Because that was the thing about *Wired*: it's one of the most intense pitching processes, which would take up a whole hour and fifteen minute show on its own. And I couldn't stand it at first, but I actually left thinking it was great. They want so much research, because before it gets in the room and the editors look at it, you sort of have to guess what their questions are going to be and stress-test it beforehand. You say, "OK, they're gonna ask, 'Why now?'" and you have a whole paragraph that explains that, and they're gonna ask, "What kind of access can you get?" and you say, "I've already contacted blah blah blah, I'll be on the road with him in two weeks." So in the case, I talked to his manager like twice, and I think they were pretty excited. I wasn't expecting him to be a recluse or anything, but he was

actually great. I think they were kind of like, “Why do you want to do this story now?” and I had found this backward way through *Wired* to do it.

AF: Did you have a relationship with *Wired*? Because I feel like if someone I hadn’t worked with a lot reached out to somebody and said, “I want to do this thing for *Splitsider*,” and then a publicist e-mails me and says, “Oh, you have a writer working on this for you?” and I didn’t know who that person was, that would piss me off a lot.

BR: Yeah, I think you need to be very upfront and say, “I’d like to pitch this to this place. I don’t have a lot of experience with them yet, but I really want to write for them, and if I were to go to them, could we talk about...”

AF: Yeah, I think you have to be very upfront and open and not misrepresent yourself. Because if you say, “I’m doing this for this publication,” you need to be pretty clear, because you could definitely screw that up pretty bad.

BR: You’ve got to be upfront with everyone—your editors, the publicists, your subject—and say “This is what I want to do.” Because if you try to cover your ass in some way, you’re just going to lose the story, and the publicists, the editors, the subjects, are going to be like, “Why should I trust this person?”

AF: Yeah, I’ve had a publicist say, “Hey, I know you already have an interview set up with my client, but then this other writer e-mailed me asking to set up the interview,” and I’m like, “No, that person never e-mailed me first, I don’t know what they’re doing,” and that’s a huge no-no.

BR: Yeah. In that case, I'd been writing for *Wired* for two and a half years at that point. I think I told my editor, "I want to pursue this 'Weird Al' thing," and he was like *(in skeptical tone)*, "All right, go do it, *(laughter)*, have fun." And then he wound up having to send me on the road with "Weird Al" for two weeks.

MS: *(to audience)* Any questions? Yep.

Audience member: I'm a little confused, because this morning they said you don't pitch things, you send in your whole piece. And now you're talking about pitching things, so...

MS: I think the difference is between fiction humor and non-fiction. So as a journalist, you can pitch an idea, but you wouldn't go out, interview "Weird Al", write the whole article, and then submit it. But for "Shouts and Murmurs," you would write out the entire 1200 word piece, or for *Esquire* you would write up the piece. So it's fiction versus non-fiction in this case.

Audience member: Oh, OK.

MS: *(to audience)* Yes.

Audience member: I just have a question about the whole "Weird Al" thing. *(laughter)* Was it just a feeling? You mentioned a few times that it was a story you wanted to write and research, but you didn't feel it was the right time. Later, you made a comment that it didn't make sense, even, since it had been years since his last album. Was it just something in your bag, and you said, "This is a good time to do it?"

BR: Yeah, I pitched it to *Wired*, I think this was about five years ago, and at that point Youtube was just millions of song parodies, and so the way I pitched it, song parodies were kind of looked down upon in comedy for decades. Even “Weird Al” was kind of looked down on, doing these quick-hit music video and song spoofs that are now dominating Youtube. And I said, “Let’s just pitch this as “‘Weird Al’ Invented Youtube,” which actually became the headline, in a tongue-in-cheek way. And that just became the backdoor approach to saying, “This guy is also this incredibly influential, huge thing.” And also, I’d been interviewing comedians over the years, like Paul Scheer, and they’d go on these long digressions about “Weird Al,” and I was like, “I think for this generation, he’s a much bigger touchstone.” So I just tried to bring all those things together. But for *Wired*, that Youtube, song-parody angle is what eventually sold it.

MS: As far as you pitching, are you basing it on what interests you, or what you think might interest the editor?

JDF: Me, I can only write about what interests me. If I’m going to pitch something, since I have *Vulture*’s full-time thing, if I’m going to pitch, it’s going to be a story that I need to write. I’m about to pitch a personal essay that I wrote. There have been a few things where it’s like, “Oh, I want to write something for *GQ*, let me see what they need,” but it’s going to be what I really want at this point. Especially for a long-term project, I lose attention really quickly, and I don’t really care about it.

MS: And I think that's one of the disadvantages of making a living as a freelancer, which is that it often forces you to write what you don't want to write. Did you find that to be the case, Brian? You worked as a freelancer for years and years.

BR: Yeah, but I always tried to find something interesting. I never felt like I was just doing something soul-sucking. One place I really loved writing for was *Blender* because I had written so much stuff for *Spin* in the early aughts, when people still cared about indie-rock politics, you just ended up writing these long pieces where "So and so signed to a major label," and after a while you're just like, "I'm kind of sick of hanging out with pasty white guys such as myself on a tour bus." But the *Blender* stories were fun because it was like, "Do you want to go on the road with the Pussycat Dolls?" And I'm like, "Am I a huge Pussycat Dolls fan? No. But what could I find that would make it interesting for me?" Or writing an entire Jennifer Lopez cover story, which was during the nadir of her music career. It's like, "All right, what can I do to make this interesting?" So I never had to write anything where I was like, "Ugh, yick, take my name off this." I was never snobby about that. But yeah, if you're freelancing, you have to do stuff once in a while where you're like, "This is not the dream, but how can I make it as dreamlike or hallucinatory as I can?" I just want to get through it and then my rent's covered for the next couple of months.

MS: So you actually made a living freelancing.

BR: Yeah. I spent ten years freelancing and four or five of those years I was a contributing editor at *Wired*, which means I had a contract, and I was getting a

monthly salary from them. But I was also freelancing for other publications at the time.

MS: So why did you decide to take the current job?

BR: I'd been doing magazines for ten years, and I'd taken a break for about nine months. I also worked at *Gawker*, I helped them start a music blog a long time ago. I had started out in my college paper in the 90's, doing the online editing, and my first internship was at TNT's movie-news website in the late 90's. So I just feel like there are a lot of different muscles you can work with in your writing, and at a certain point I just sort of felt like I wanted to write shorter things and do some more editing. There were a lot of reasons for me to say no to it, like, "Oh, this is new, and it's kind of scary, but I'm going to learn a lot, and we'll see what happens." So that was the impetus for that.

MS: (to audience) Any questions? Yes.

Audience member: Adam, I'm a big fan of *Splitsider*.

AF: Thanks.

Audience member: Recently, you guys had an article about the *SNL* sketch that closely mirrored a *Groundlings* sketch. I thought it was handled very delicately and gracefully, but without skirting the issue. Do you find it hard to run those kinds of articles that are critical of an institution? You are a performer, so does that make it tougher...

AF: We don't run a ton of super-critical stuff. We try to keep the site pretty positive, just because there's no real point to saying, "This sketch on the internet that's been viewed 1500 times, I'm gonna shit on them and tear them down." (*laughter*) So it has to be a pretty big institution like *SNL* to criticize it. I don't think it's too hard, and I try to be really evenhanded. With that *SNL* thing, I am very skeptical of anybody who accuses somebody of stealing a joke. I think it happens five percent of the time, and with the rest it's people who are just looking to get attention, or they think something is similar and that means it has to have been stolen. So even with that *SNL* and Groundlings thing, I was like, "Maybe they're kind of similar, but also this was just a stage show for five weeks this summer. The odds of someone having seen it are pretty low." With that piece, my writer Erik Voss, who is basically my *SNL* correspondent, he writes all of our *SNL* reviews and features, he wrote that and we talked about it a bit beforehand, and when he pitched it to me I asked, "What's your take on it?" And I had written a thing back when the site started about joke theft, basically, like "You think someone's stealing your joke? Here are some questions you should ask yourself: what are the chances someone's seen it? Why would this person do it? Is it really close to it?" And he mentioned that, like "I kind of want to use that as the angle." And I was like, "Yeah, that makes sense." So we took an air of skepticism towards it, but we also showed both sides. So I think we struck the right balance for our purposes.

Audience member: Not a question, but just an anecdote you might want to comment on. I've been published in *The Awl* a couple of times, but the first time I got published, my subject line was, "Here's an article you didn't request on a topic you

probably don't care about." And I don't know if that helped, but I sent a fully written piece and it was published the next day. But I sort of felt like that approach was in keeping with the tone of the site, and demonstrated an understanding of what the right tone was.

MS: You don't recommend someone sending a full piece, right?

AF: Not really. Sometimes I'll get a full piece and I'm like, "Yeah, this works," but often it's like, "Well, if you'd pitched the idea first, I would've steered you in a specific direction, and instead I have to say, 'Please rewrite half of this.'" So I think it's almost always better, unless you already have something where you wrote it for somebody else and then you went through a bunch of edits and they killed it and you now have this piece to give to somebody, yeah, you can send it over, but if you have an idea, definitely pitch. I think it's always better to pitch the idea first instead of going through all the work of writing it up when you don't know exactly what the editor's looking for.

JDF: If you did write it up, there's no benefit to including it. They're not gonna be like, "I don't like this idea, but let me read the entire piece." All I can do is like, "I like this idea. I guess I'll read this now." You'd rather have them say yes to a thing, and then work on it, then have them be able to say no based on the thing you gave them. Because they're not gonna start doing edits with you if they already read a thing and thought it wasn't good. You might as well not send it; there's no benefit.

MS: Do you read every pitch that comes your way?

AF: Oh yeah, definitely.

MS: So everything that's submitted is read.

AF: Yeah. I read every e-mail that comes in.

Audience member: Comedy is very cyclical. Do you guys think that the boom of writing about it is a boom? In other words, will it bust?

AF: I think it's pretty tied to comedy itself. I think as long as there's comedy coming out that people are interested in, there's going to be an interest in people writing about it. So I think it's tied pretty tightly to it. I can't see comedy getting more popular and then writing about comedy getting less popular at the same time.

JDF: There was a boom, and I think we're at a certain point of its existence. There are a lot of people who got shows who then lost their shows, so in that way it feels like there's a cycling of that. But there are still things that exist. Even in the post-comedy-boom of the late 90's, there was still writing about comedy that existed, but it's not going to be the same thing. You're going to write so many articles about the person that got their shot and then that shot went away. So the things you're talking about are going to be different. Maybe there'll be a different kind of writing, I don't know.

Audience member: Yeah. I wrote a column for the *Toronto Star*, a weekly column about comedy back in the 90's, and it was a fight every week. I'd say, "We should do a cover story on Norm McDonald," and they'd say "No" or "Who's that?" So for me, it's interesting to see the stuff you guys are doing.

MS: Does that make it harder as a writer to pitch now? To get access to people, is it more difficult now?

BR: I don't know. I work in this *Yahoo! Movies* job where we do movie star interviews, and it's too easy to get people now. Especially when you have these big movies or TV shows coming out, you get pitches for the same three or four people, and these people are going to be everywhere, and they're going to say the same things they said to everyone, and it's just not super exciting. You guys probably cover comedians more directly, but I feel like a lot of the ones coming up now are more active on social media, more approachable and more easily accessible. I remember three or four years ago, I did a thing for *New York* magazine with Hannibal Buress, and I think I just guessed his e-mail address or something, and he was just like, "Yeah, I'll meet you tomorrow for drinks." And he was like, "I'm doing my show tomorrow, you want to go backstage?" And I'm like, "OK." I'm not doing *any* work here, there's no heavy lifting at all. This guy was OK with just having someone hang out with him, and I don't know if he's at that point now, because he's huge now, but if you're writing about comedy, a lot of people are still just sort of starting out.

AF: Yeah. Everybody except for, like, Lena Dunham is pretty easy to get access to. There's a top level of like two dozen people who we can't get access to, and otherwise it's pretty easy to get almost anybody else.

MS: Who are some of those people? Steve Martin, Albert Brooks...

AF: Yeah. Steve Carell, Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, Amy Poehler, Bill Murray. The heroes, the people who, when something comes out, they're like, "Yeah, I'll talk to two places, I'll be on the cover of a magazine, and that's my interview." People who are super-handled by PR. For anybody who's like an up-and-comer or isn't starring in their own show, it's pretty doable.

JDF: Well, Aziz Ansari just sold out Madison Square Garden, and it was very easy to get an interview with him. They asked us to do it. And we've covered Aziz a zillion times, both *Vulture* and *New York Magazine*. And he's playing Madison Square Garden. But there's the tier where they are doing the two things they do a year. I had interviewed Stephen Colbert, but it was a very sideways situation where he was doing a charity event, and part of his agreement for doing the event was to meet with three press outlets. And so I got three minutes with him. We ran every single word of it (*laughter*). They said, "You can get seven minutes, but the first half has to be about the event." So I did the first three minutes, which were all about the event, and then they said, "Actually, he has no more time." So any other question I had for Stephen Colbert, I was not allowed to ask. Luckily, it was a readable interview, and I got to meet him, which was really cool. But that's the extreme case. Although I can't imagine Fallon is doing a lot of Q&A's.

AF: Late-night hosts are tough.

JDF: With Seth Myers, his show isn't as big as Fallon's was, and Seth is around, and he likes *Vulture*, but it's still hard to wrangle to get Seth Myers. And he's even doing the Emmys, and we're doing lots of quick Emmy interviews, but there's not a one-

on-one, and it's like, "I need you in-person, for thirty minutes, some time in the next three months." And I was able to get one half-hour on a Friday or whatever. But yeah, late-night hosts are pretty impossible. You don't see anyone interview Conan, really.

AF: Yeah. Lorne Michaels is also impossible.

JDF: Yeah, Lorne Michaels is real hard. *(laughter)*

MS: So if someone out there wants to write about comedy, what would you recommend? What would the first step be?

BR: I would write every single great book or article about comedy. I would just research it, because you're going to learn how to write about comedy, but you're also going to see these names that pop up. If you pick up some of those *Rolling Stone* cover stories about *SNL* or Bill Murray in the 70's and early 80's, there's going to be someone mentioned in the background where you're like, "Who is that person? That's a story right there." And I'm not thinking of anyone in particular, but there are all these people who either don't become big names or who drift away from it, and those are great sources for stories right there. Like I said, if there's scholarship on it, I've read Tom Shales's book twice, I haven't read the new version yet, but I've read the old version twice, and that *Saturday Night Live* book is so much fun, and if you aim for writing that kind of book right away, you're going to be disappointed, because that's a really hard book to write. But you learn so much about reporting and interviewing from that, and how you can use all those quotes to build and tell a cohesive story across 400 pages or so. I think diving into the history of it is going to

teach you about what's been written before and also fill you with story ideas, so they won't just be sitting there waiting for someone to discover them.

MS: Would you recommend starting writing on your own blog, or reaching out to websites?

BR: I think you should start writing. There are places like Medium where you can put up your stuff. Do the kids even do their own blogs anymore, or do they just go on Medium and places like that and just write their own thing and put it up there and promote it?

Audience member: I'm sorry, what is Medium?

BR: Medium is this sort of publishing platform, I've never used it, but it's a publishing platform that has a lot of self-published stories that, from what I'm told, allows you to plug in your text and you get a really nice layout and there's a lot of good features on it. I think David Carr from *The New York Times* has occasionally written some Medium things, just because it's something he can't do for the *Times*, or it doesn't feel right, and he just writes it and it's sitting there and he promotes it socially and it gets lots and lots of views. I don't know what the best self-publishing platform is right now, but I think there are a lot of people on Twitter who are really smart and funny and interesting, and if I follow them and I know they're smart, and they say, "Here's a thing I wrote for Medium" or "Here's a thing I wrote for *The Awl*," I'm going to go read it just based on the fact that I already feel like I know their voice a little bit.

MS: What about you, Jesse? What do you recommend?

JDF: To start? Any time someone asks me for advice if they're starting in writing, especially if they've gone to journalism school, I say, "Take improv classes," which I have not done. But I think that at this point you're going to have to start writing on the internet, and you need a voice. Previously, when you started, you didn't have to have a voice, you could just report stories and do it pretty cleanly, but there's not much room anymore for people to do that. You need to have a voice in your writing. And improv doesn't necessarily make you funny, but if you are funny, it's a good way of finding what's funny about you. I didn't do that, I was fortunate enough to get a sense of my voice pretty early. I'd say that's a good way of doing it that's not just writing forever. It's something different that can help you get rid of bad habits, and especially for the comedy, anything that can help you think about how a comedian thinks about something is really helpful. I've worked on a sitcom pilot, and even if nothing happens with that, I have a better sense of what a writer does when I interview writers than I did when I didn't do that. Anything you can create that's not just journalism or criticism is ultimately helpful. And then you have to just write a lot.

MS: How about reading? Reading beyond comedy?

JDF: Yeah, I guess you should probably read. *(laughs)* I read a lot of blogs, and I think that helped me a lot. I'm getting better now at reading books. But I think what helped me at *Vulture* was, I had been reading *Vulture* daily forever, and so I knew that voice. And *Vulture* has a very specific voice, and lots of people come in and don't

get that. They're either too mean or way too earnest, and knowing the tone of the site is very important. You can't send a post for *Vulture* to *Gawker* because it's a different tone. On the internet, everyone has certain tones, and you need to be able to get into it. And that only comes with reading pretty regularly.

MS: Adam, has improv helped your writing about comedy?

AF: I guess. I think that what improv does is it teaches you to trust your gut and trust your subconscious when you sit down to write. You can start writing and be like, "All right, I know I can put this stuff out and trust where my brain is going and then go back and edit it."

MS: So you look at writing as being kind of like improv.

AF: Yeah. The rules of improv are basically the rules of doing any creative medium. It's just learning to trust your instincts and build on things and follow what's interesting, and that sort of thing can be applied to anything. So I think it's good practice for any kind of...

MS: Beyond that, any suggestions? You see a ton of these pitches. What if these attendees want to write for *Splitsider*? What would you recommend?

AF: Definitely read the site so you know what sort of things we already run and are looking for, and then you have to come at your pitch and what you want to write from the angle of a writer as opposed to a fan or a comedian. You have to be like, "What's the angle here? What am I bringing to this piece? What is making this a piece and not just a personal, navel-gazing essay?"

JDF: I'll say this: your hope is to pitch something, especially if you're really beginning, that is specific enough and good enough that they would want you to write something else. And when I pitched the podcast thing, it would've made sense if I was like, "Hey, you don't really have a podcast column," and then it's like, "Of course, you're the guy who did that one interview, I'll put you with the other guy that did the one other article about podcasts." And obviously, they still have a podcast column. Any time you pitch anywhere, you want to pitch something that they need and that is also indicative of who you are. So they'd be like, "Oh, who's the person who wrote that one thing about that? This is something that's similar." There are certain comedy stories that I can't write, maybe because I know the person and there's a conflict of interest, so we go to the only other person who's pitched about comedy to *Vulture* in the last year, and she's written three or four things, so she's the other person. So it's a matter of making sure you're known and it's very clear that this is the thing you offer.

MS: (to audience) Any final questions? Yes.

Audience member: What if I had something that I wanted to be written about? Like, let's say I have a show I want covered, and I have to act as my own publicist because I can't afford one. What do you look for that makes you think, "Oh, maybe we should cover that"?

AF: I get a lot of press-release things. We don't cover a lot of events. I get a ton of people who are like, "Come see my shows at UCB, please. I'll put you on the list." And we never cover anything like that. So you at least have to know that the site covers

what you're pitching first. I think it's honestly kind of a crapshoot. I get fifty different web videos sent to me every week. I can only watch so many of them. I watch the first fifteen seconds of most of them. And you just have to say, "Here's my thing." If there's a name that we would recognize or something, you might say, "This has this person in it," that we would know. But you just have to put it out there and send it a couple times. But I don't think there's a trick to getting something covered. It's just like, "Well, if it's good, and it grabs us, then we'll cover it." But if it's like a web video or something like that, we see so many of these, and we don't cover that many of them. So it's kind of a tough thing.

JDF: I have an e-mail address that is listed with my website, which doesn't seem like a thing that many people go to, but my e-mail address is all just press releases, and they all read like press releases, and it's just a jumble. And if I click on any, it's usually because the name of a person in the thing is part of the *Vulture* brand of who we cover. Otherwise, everything looks like a press release, and you can try to make your subject heading look like something that isn't a press release, but then it'll just look like that genre of press release. *(laughter)* Really the only way for someone at our level to notice is to have someone at a lower level pass it up. By the time it gets to us, unless there's a famous person attached, it's going to have to be a decent level of viral. With *Vulture*, there are very few just regular comedy videos, unless it's something from *Key and Peele* or *Inside Amy Schumer*, or it's something about the TV shows we cover. So if you have a sketch about *Game of Thrones* that you want to pitch right now, maybe I would watch it, but otherwise, if it's just, "This is a funny

thing," it's hard. You have to already have a decent amount of views to justify any coverage.

MS: All right. Jesse David Fox, Adam Frucci, Brian Raftery, thank you very much.

(applause)