

## **The Problem with Jon Stewart Podcast Bonus Episode: A Conversation With Adam McKay Final Transcript**

[CLAP]

Jon Stewart: We started with a clap because our guest today never goes anywhere without applause. He is a man who will not leave his house unless you applaud for him.

[ADAM MCKAY LAUGHS]

[INTRO MUSIC]

Jon: Folks! It's a special edition of The Problem podcast, and we are back on television as well. The Apple TV Plus show is on and our next episode is on the climate. This was probably a bad choice, but we filmed it from inside a burning tire. I don't know that it may negate some of the message, but the rest of the message gets through. We have a wonderful conversation today with a filmmaker and comedian and friend of mine. "Don't Look Up" is his latest movie nominated for eight thousand Oscars in the— that may be an over, an exaggeration, but it's close to that. He was the former head writer for SNL, an improv impresario. And you probably remember him from "The Big Short" and all those unbelievably f\*\*\*\*\* hilarious Will Ferrell movies. So here it is, a special episode conversation. I hope you enjoy it. Adam McKay.

[TRANSITION MUSIC]

### **Interview with Adam McKay**

Jon: Adam McKay, how the f\*\*\* are — you have an Oscar. You're, you were a sketch writer —

[ADAM LAUGHS]

Jon: Now you're rolling up f\*\*\*\*\* Oscars.

Adam McKay: I was even wor — I was an improviser. I was in Chicago doing Freeze Tag.

Jon: My God, the lowest form of entertainment. [ADAM LAUGHS] No, actually standup comedy is the lowest form.

Adam: I was a guy — I was the guy who blows in the wind outside of muffler repair shop. [JON LAUGHS] That was my job for a good six years.

Jon: Everybody's got to grab cash. Did you start in Chicago?

Adam: You know, I started in Philadelphia. I was in college when the standup comedy boom hit in the '80s, around '86, '87. And you know, that was when the whole comedy thing started rolling that was like Letterman came on, "The Simpsons" got going, standup comedy was everywhere.

Jon: That's when I moved to the city to do standup was '87, '86, '87.

Adam: That was it. And so I was doing standup comedy. There's one other comic from that time you may have heard of — or there's a couple.

Jon: Yeah.

Adam: Paul F. Tompkins was kind of —

Jon: sure!

Adam: — In my circle

Jon: Hilarious

Adam: He was the funniest of all of us and a great standup. But there was another Blaine Capatch —

Jon: Yeah. All those guys.

Adam: — was in our circle 'cause I was in Philly.

Jon: Blaine was unusual, though, because he was live. Very few of us were live.

Adam: Very live. Ahead of his time.

Jon: I would almost say willowy.

Adam: Willowy could have been in an Anderson film.

Jon: Yes!

Adam: Before Wes Anderson was even making films.

Jon: Blaine was a throwback and super funny. I worked with him once and Brian Posehn. And who else were we working with? It was on some bill in Seattle or something. And those guys were just so f\*\*\*ing funny.

Adam: Oh my God. Capatch. Capatch and Tompkins were like, came out of the gate with 99 mile per hour fast —

Jon: Just had it.

Adam: Meanwhile, I was just throwing junk. I had about five different pitches. None of them that strong and I could eek my way through about 15, 20 minutes. Get some laughs, make 50 bucks. And then I moved to Chicago and got — and that was the move that kind of changed —

Jon: That changed everything.

Adam: Yeah. Then I got in improvisation, sketch, writing, directing.

Jon: I remember people used to say, they used to say about Adam McKay, he's the Phil Niekro of comedy. Guy's just throwing. Nobody can hit him, but nobody knows why. It's just all knuckleballs and spitballs. [ADAM LAUGHS] Where were you? Where did you work in Philadelphia? Like what? What was the club scene then?

Adam: So my big highlight of my little scrappy, sweaty standup career was I opened for Chris Rock for a week at the Funny Bone on South Street. And that was like my sort of highlight. I was riding so high off of that, I quit my minimum wage job at Tower Records. That's how —

Jon: Tower records? My lord!

Adam: Yeah, yeah. I used to work in the jazz section of Tower Records. Thought it would be the coolest job ever. Guess what? It wasn't. [JON LAUGHS] A lot of, if you've got time to sit, you've got time to clean, you know, or whatever that old phrase was.

Jon: Right.

Adam: And so I opened for Chris Rock and I thought that's it, I've made it. And then the week ended and life was just normal and no one cared. So, um, yeah.

Jon: Do you think it's strange that we've gotten to the point in our lives or when we discuss our history we mention obsolete business models where it's just, you know, so I was working at a blockbuster [ADAM LAUGHS] across the street from a Tower Records. And yeah, it's been a long road. I can remember in early standup, I opened for Richard Lewis.

Adam: Oh, I used to love Richard Lewis.

Jon: Richard Lewis is so f\*\*\*\*\* funny.

Adam: I still — he's still funny as hell.

Jon: He's hilarious. But I dined on that credit and my introduction for maybe two or three years in the standup circuit, "and he's open for Richard Lewis!"

Adam: That was the big thing. If you had to open for someone decent.

Jon: Yes.

Adam: So I was "He opened for Chris Rock." I had like a year and a half before he stopped doing standup.

Jon: Right.

Adam: That was my entire career, by the way, later like about eight years ago I had lunch with Chris Rock. No memory of me whatsoever. [JON LAUGHS] Which of course, the guy's doing standup 200 days a year. But I did open for him for a week like we were around each other for a week. No memory.

Jon: That's — the only reason why Richard remembered, and years later, he was on the show and we got along really well, I had — it was at Caroline's at the Seaport, I don't know if you ever worked that room.

Adam: I know it. Yeah.

Jon: And I went in —

Adam: I wasn't good enough, wasn't good enough to get in there.

Jon: Oh, really?

Adam: Oh yeah. Caroline's was like, legit. I was scrappy.

Jon: Yeah, that was actually, that was a pretty good room.

Adam: Yeah, yeah.

Jon: I went into his, and there was only one dressing room. And so this was down at the seaport and I had needed to use the bathroom. And so I knocked on the door and I said, "Hey, Richard, I'm opening up for you, would you mind?" And he went through about five minutes of "I have diarrhea and it's not a good time." [ADAM LAUGHS] And I could just see like the bathroom door was cracked a little bit and there was toilet paper piled up on the seat like he created a toilet paper throne and there was just like medicine bottles around it. And I was like, "You know what? I'm just going to — it's by the seaport, I'm just going to go outside. It's fine. Don't, don't even —"

Adam: [ADAM LAUGHS] "I'll go in the seaport."

Jon: I'll go in the seaport. Alright. So you head over, you're done doing the stand up and you move into the Chicago scene. Stand up is out the window now? You just, you immediately just move to improv?

Adam: So I'm kind of thinking I'll do some standup occasionally to make like 50 or 100 bucks on the weekends. And so I've been told about this magical world in Chicago by a good friend of mine, a guy by the name of Rick Roman. And he said, basically, you go on stage with these groups of people, and anything you say or do just becomes a reality. And it's called long form improvisation. And I remember I asked him, like, because there's no internet. So we stayed up one night and I just asked him five hours of questions. The first one was like, "Wait a minute. And people pay to see this?" [JON LAUGHS] and he's like, "Oh, yeah they get big crowds." And it was one of those cases where I was like, "This is it. I'm doing this." I dropped out of college —

Jon: Oh wow.

Adam: I sold my comic book collection. I bought a Chrysler New Yorker '78, Chrysler New Yorker with shag carpeting —

Jon: Style baby!

Adam: A style! It had an eight-track player. The only eight-track I had was Jethro Tull's greatest hits. [JON LAUGHS] And I drove to Chicago and the guy, my friend Rick was right. Everything he described, it was true. There were theaters. There were like packed houses.

Jon: It was Oz. It was a magical land.

Adam: It was amazing and it was so much more in line with what I was good at.

Jon: Right.

Adam: I was more of a writer, sort of director, sort of, you know, heady guy. And as a stand up, I was always kind of, you know, C+ I didn't have the kind of lead the room kind of good time sort of vibe, uh.

Jon: Yeah, stand up is pugilism. [ADAM LAUGHS] Standup is the sweet science, but you're just in there throwing haymakers and trying to dodge stuff. Improv was — we always thought of improv as kind of when people came out and they really wanted to do theater. They decided like, "I could either be an actor or I could go —" was this around the time like Colbert and Carell and all those people were in Chicago?

Adam: Absolutely. So there was a crazy thing going on in Chicago. Once again, there's no internet.

Jon: Oh, right.

Adam: So if you want to perform you had to go to Chicago to do sketch and improv.

Jon: Right.

Adam: So I got there and there was like this hilarious kind of, you know, people just coming to Chicago. There was like Colbert, Carell. Eventually, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Chris Farley had just gotten hired at SNL.

Jon: Jesus.

Adam: Mike Myers, my buddy Neil Flynn, who's been on a million different sitcoms. I mean. I could —

Jon: F\*\*\*\*\* murderers row. It's murderer's row.

Adam: Honest to God, I could list Dave Koechner, Rachel Dratch.

Jon: Right.

Adam: Like Jon Glaser, like a hundred and fifty-two — Brian Stack, like people that are either writing, performing or directing to this day and they were all just there at the same time. And it was awesome. It was so much fun.

Jon: It's incredible how, you know, there's been certain kind of seminal shifts in comedy like the National Lampoon infrastructure of like the '70s and all those guys. Unfortunately, P.J. O'Rourke just passed away, but he was one of those guys. Seminal. But you know, there was that lineage that came out of the Lampoon Group and then there was that other lineage through Chicago that really hasn't been matched. Like those names that you mentioned, like that was a farm system unparalleled in creating the next generation of writers, directors, comedians. I mean, Jesus, Fey, Poehler, Carell? Like Farley, all those guys, incredible.

Adam: Even like David Mamet was a dishwasher at Second City now, obviously before —

Jon: Was he really?

Adam: For real. Because there's also an incredible theater scene in Chicago. You know, obviously Steppenwolf Theater is really famous. So what was cool —

Jon: And that was Malkovich, right? Didn't Malkovich come out of there too?

Adam: Malkovich, Sinise, Laurie Metcalfe —

Jon: Sinise, right. Incredible.

Adam: Like this insane list of actors John Cusack, that whole Evanston scene, Tim Robbins was there for a while. Insane, insane scene. So, what — and then you're right like that National Lampoon lineage blended. Like, what Lorne Michaels did was he blended the two, the Lemmings

National Lampoon with the Toronto and Chicago's Second City. And that was Saturday Night Live. I mean, that was the alchemy.

Jon: See and the Lorne thing people don't understand, you know, and it's super easy to take shots at "Saturday Night Live." Everybody's goin', "oh, it's not as funny as you —" there has never been, and I don't think ever will be a — imagine creating something that is 40 some years old and is as relevant as it has ever been. There's still not something that can create a cultural moment like SNL, 40 years later. It's unprecedented in show business I think what he created. No question.

Adam: I mean, it's now that we're living in the time that we're living in it, it's almost more of a stable institution. In fact, you kind of could argue it is. After what was done to the U.S. Post Office. [JON LAUGHS] Like the US Post Office is on shakier ground than "Saturday Night Live." Like, I think without exaggeration that's true and I loved the Post Office but the corrupt government, you know, hamstrung it and like, put all these requirements on it. But like —

Jon: Still, though.

Adam: — SNL may outlast the Post Office.

Jon: F\*\*\*\*\* remarkable and its comedy — and he was ab — he created a formula but not only that, like you could point to Kate McKinnon and Kenan Thompson and all that as astonishingly good as the early days folks, the people that they all point to, as you know, the creators of that form like the ability to find and bring talent to the fore in that manner. I just I cannot think of an analogous — like there have been moments like your "Show of Shows" where there was an alchemy and it blew up, and these incredibly talented people sort of went their different ways in the writing room was, you know, Mel Brooks and Neil Simon and all these incredible people. To keep that f\*\*\*\*\* thing going at such a high level for that long. You'll never see it again.

Adam: Incredible.

Jon: Yeah.

Adam: And then you would say, "Well, you know, there are other good sketch groups like the Kids in the Hall —"

Jon: Yes no question.

Adam: Well, guess what? Lorne produced them? Look —

Jon: Did he really?

Adam: Yes.

Jon: He did that, too? Oh, that's f\*\*\*\*\* up. Alright I didn't know that. That's unfair.

Adam: That's Lorne Michaels.

Jon: Alright, that's not fair.

Adam: No, it's crazy. And I think you put your finger on it. His real talent, having, you know, seen the guy work about, you know, about a six year window with him, it is picking talent. The fact that like just no matter what age he's at, he just has grit. Like Kristen Wiig, I would argue Kristen Wiig is as good as anyone who's ever been on that show, ever.

Jon: No, every generation, he keeps finding these seminal talents that end up creating the next wave of whatever new comedy is coming out.

Adam: And just to be his age, and I don't know, what is he, early 70s?

Jon: A hundred and thirty

Adam: Is he that old?

Jon: So Canadians — it's very different than you and I —

Adam: I've heard this.

Jon: It's like a gravitational force on Jupiter. It's much different. So he's around a hundred and seventy eight.

Adam: And he has like a biblical amount of kids. [JON LAUGHS] He has seventy eight sons.

Jon: Yes.

Adam: Yeah.

Jon: So, here's what you don't realize. 30 Rock is actually an ark. And so —

Adam: Is that true?

Jon: And he's been tasked with putting together a comedy — so if the Lord becomes angry with us, the prophecy has said that you will put together two by two sketch comics, standups and improv, and you will put them all together and then they will be saved and repopulate the new world.

Adam: Because now that I think of it in Lorne's office, he always had a male and female tapir just roaming around. [JON LAUGHS] And I would always say "why?" And he would say something, and he would just say "someday the rains will come" [JON LAUGHS] and then he will go, "What about the cold open?" So this is all —

Jon: It's adding up, isn't it, Adam?

Adam: Yeah, because I mean, he is, he's a hundred and thirty eight.

Jon: Yes, Canadian years. It's metric.

Adam Canadian years.

Jon: It's a different thing.

Adam: Something to do with the curve of the Earth, right?

Jon: No question. When you're that high towards the poles.

Adam: Yeah, yeah. And so you think about it all those children, 30 Rock — because they remember there were heavy rains about a year ago and someone said 30 Rock start — was floating about three inches off the ground.

Jon: Here's the thing you do. Do you remember there was a huge blackout yet somehow Jimmy Fallon was able to tape his show? So clearly there's a power source there within that building that allows them to do these things

Adam: Well he was always pretty open about it. He would say, "Adam, we're here to do two things put on a good sketch show and find a way to power 30 Rock through geothermal nuclear power." [JON LAUGHS] And he's like, "I wish the show was shot in Iceland. We could power the building with geothermal power, but we're not. We're in New York, so we do what we can do." [ADAM LAUGHS]

Jon: There is — here's how you know the influence of a man. There has never been a more imitated individual in the history of comedy than Lorne Michaels.

Adam: Never.

Jon: Never.

Adam: Never.

Jon: All he does is hire sketch comics, improv comics and impressionists, and they all just walk out of the building with a Lorne Michaels impression. That's, that's the parting gift.

Adam: I mean, he used to be like John Wayne, and Nixon used to be slightly ahead of him, but I think he moved past them in the last five years.

Jon: There's no question. Had you — did he — would you see him in the comedy scene in Chicago? Would he come down there and kind of be doing that kind of like uh, like scouting like a ball, you know, a baseball scout, a football scout like just in the back room checking stuff out? Or was that a yearly pilgrimage that he would make to Chicago? How did that pipeline get established?

Adam: So what happened was, I, you know, we started the Upright Citizens Brigade with Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, Amy Poehler, that whole group. So we were doing that. But, you know, it didn't pay. So Second City had auditions and I was like, guys, I'm broke. [JON LAUGHS] So I ended up auditioning and got into Second City and the people on the main stage were Carell, Colbert, and Amy Sedaris —

Jon: Oh Jesus.

Adam: As well as a bunch of other and just.

Jon: Right.

Adam: Like talk about a murderer's row. I mean it was crazy. It was like '86 Mets kind of stuff with those guys.

Jon: Also with the cocaine, similar terrible cocaine problems.

Adam: With the bucket of speed before you go on the field. Yeah.

Jon: No question.

Adam: And yes, Colbert was Kevin Mitchell [JON LAUGHS] if anyone's wondering, but —

Jon: Just catching a ball with his bare hands, the glove doesn't even matter —

Adam: Do you remember that?

Jon: Oh my God, that was the moment! Kevin Mitchell running back for a fly ball. He puts his glove up and then he just goes like this and catches it with his bare hand. That was the greatest moment.

Adam: Kevin Mitchell was a bad, bad man. And I mean that entirely in a positive way.

Jon: Positive way, powerful swing.

Adam: Another quick baseball story.

Jon: Yes!

Adam: Johnny Bench, apparently once was catching a pitcher whose stuff just wasn't great and he was throwing a fastball that wasn't very intimidating. So on one — and Bench kept yelling at him to throw the curve and the pitcher wouldn't do it. So on one plate, in a game, Bench caught his fastball with his bare hand, threw it back to him and said, "Now will you f-ing throw the curveball?" Yeah. Bad man.

Jon: That's hilarious. Bad, bad man.

Adam: That's back when baseball was bad ass. Yeah.

Jon: Yes.

Adam: But anyway, yeah. So he did. He came to Chicago. Lorne Michaels. I eventually got on the main stage and you looked in the back of the room and he was back there with the binoculars, with his card, giving all the stats. And then we had a comedy combine where he had us run the forty. [JON LAUGHS] We had to do reps. We had to do shuttle runs. And I kept saying, "Why does this matter? It's not an athletic endeavor"

Jon: Isn't it?

Adam: And someone would lean in and whisper, "Just do it."

Jon: "Just do it, it doesn't matter".

Adam: And I had a hell of a combine.

Jon: You were a red flag guy, though, they were, here's what I had heard about you in terms of the scouting report. Really funny, great director's eye. A lot of red flags, behavioral stuff. It was a lot of —

Adam: off the fields, off the fields

Jon: — alotta of off the field problems, a lot of things. It's why your draft stock had gone down. What he — did you get a sense that you guys were being separated on-air performer, writer — because he empowers the writers to really produce and kind of direct their own sketches. It's kind of unusual. Would you see that stratification in that process?

Adam: He was always — you know, it's funny. It's a great question because he was always very loose with that. He had no problem with writers doing a bit on "Update." I did one when I was there. I did a couple other small bits.

Jon: Right.

Adam: Because he was a writer who sometimes would do on camera stuff. You know, one of my favorite writer performers ever is the legendary Jim Downey, who was just —

Jon: Oh God, yeah

Adam: Oh my God, like so funny on camera.

Jon: Dry as s\*\*\* and funny.

Adam: "We make change" is the famous one, what's that — I can't remember the name of the bank —

Jon: Was it Bank of America or MasterCard? It was one of those.

Adam: It was a fake. There was something — if you look at, "We make change commercial parody."

Jon: "We can do a five into two ones and a two. We can do a 50 cent into twenty." Yeah it was tremendous.

Adam: Oh, genius. So but you're also 100 percent right that he gave the writers a ton of autonomy to produce their sketches in a way to kind of co-direct. I mean, we always had. Beth was our director, Beth McCarthy who I love.

Jon: She's the best.

Adam: All time greats.

Jon: She started with me at MTV.

Adam: I know. I know

Jon: She was the kind of person that you'd be like, "Beth, we're going to tape our show on Friday, and she's like, Well, Thursday night I'm doing Nirvana and Pearl Jam live in Seattle. So when I'm done with that, I'll just fly back and we'll do it" and we'd be like, "You can't do that." She's like, "No, it'll be OK." She'd come — the most, you could throw anything at her, handle it like it was — I mean, killed. Just the best and attitude, like everything. The best.

Adam: The best. So my one Beth McCarthy story really quickly. I wrote some sketch that had the band Hanson in it, and we were, you know, because —

Jon: We all have our Hanson sketch. Everybody has their Hanson sketch

Adam: We had our Hanson sketch. Not the best thing I've ever written. When it got chosen, I kind of immediately regretted writing it. But, you know, in the moment, it made me laugh. So we're blocking the sketch and the like 11-year-old drummer is from Hanson is screaming at me about

how the sketch isn't funny [JON LAUGHS] and you're in this position where you're like, I'm at the time and I don't know, I think I'm the head writer at the time, so I'm like, 29 and I'm like, I can I yell at a — these thoughts are going through my head. Can I yell at an 11-year-old?

Jon: He's 11. But he's a drummer, a drummer so I guess —

Adam: He is a drummer. You're allowed to yell at drummers

Jon: Yes.

Adam: And Beth just comes up and puts her arm around me and says, "I got this. Why don't you go back to the office?" And she just goes, "OK, everyone," and takes over and blocks this sketch and I walk away, and I'm just like Beth McCarthy is royalty.

Jon: She saved you from being pulled out in handcuffs that day. [ADAM LAUGHS] That was going to be the way that thing was going to go down. Yeah, I think SNL too, like if you think about even the writers that have gone on it like Conan, Bob Odenkirk, Smigel like guys that have gone on to be famous performers.

Adam: James Michener was a big one. Kurt Vonnegut, Dostoyevsky wrote two years —

Jon: Vonnegut I remember, was on "Fridays". [ADAM LAUGHS] He wasn't on "SNL".

Adam: Oh, you know what? You're right.

Jon: He was on "Fridays", and I think Dostoyevsky was "madTV".

Adam: He was MadTV. And now that I think about it, James Michener, was SheTV?

Jon: You know what? I think actually, he was Logo.

Adam: Oh, okay [ADAM LAUGHS]

Jon: He came on Logo. [ADAM LAUGHS] But listen, it all. Look, we're old enough now that you can mix this s\*\*\* up and it doesn't matter anymore.

Adam: It's the same culture. I mean, you know, Jon, I shared an office with Jonathan Franzen and yeah. [JON LAUGHS]

Jon: I didn't realize that.

Adam: He wrote all the Bobbi and Marty's. Will Ferrell and Ana Gasteyer, that was kind of his thing.

Jon: I didn't know that. So when I first came up at MTV, it was just me and Jonathan Safran Foer. [ADAM LAUGHS] Now I'm just trying to think of all — now I just don't know what to do. You know, Thomas Pynchon and I were —

Adam: Murakami was an apprentice writer on your MTV show [JON LAUGHS]. Alright.

Jon: You can feel it. You can feel — So now you've done this, you've gone to, you're the head writer there. You're doing all these things. And I'm sorry to take you down. It just I never get to talk to enough and taking it down a, you know nostalgia way. But I'm just so interested in the pipelines because when people understand how to like mine and develop these groups, it's sort of like a

Belichick like you see their influence that is amplified like force amplifiers all throughout the business. And I think that's why it's always been such a held up as such a destination for anybody that's performing. Such a dream because you feel like if I can get my foot in that door, it's getting into, you know, medical school at Harvard like it's the highest college, you know, it's the highest learning environment you can be in for what it is that we do and want to do.

Adam: I mean, the biggest thing for me was, yes, the experience was incredible. You work with lots of different actors, you get your butt kicked, which is always a good thing.

Jon: Sure, yup.

Adam: But then when I directed short films my last two years, I directed about a dozen short films. That was transformative. I mean, that was I got to have a crew. I got to write it. I got to play around with, you know, different film stocks and lenses and he just gave me kind of — God bless Lorne Michaels. He just gave me free rein to try these — you look back on them, they're pretty crazy shorts. They weren't like, you know, "Chronicles of Narnia" as sort of big honking hits. They were pretty odd. A couple of them hit OK. But that was it. That's when I started realizing what I wanted to do. And looking back on it, the SNL experience couldn't have been any better between producing, writing gets you, you know, getting to help with the directing the actors, rewriting the pressure of it. I mean, Ferrell and I later, when we would do our comedies together, we would be having a hard day and we would just look at each other and say it's not nearly as hard as SNL, and our day would just get lighter. We just be like, "Oh yeah."

Jon: As bad as it gets, it's still not 4:00 in the morning, and we're trying to rewrite something on a Thursday night. Getting ready for —

Adam: That was it and you know, and also you're on this show with like 20 other writers and like sixteen cast members. I mean —

Jon: Right.

Adam: One of the tricky things with that show was just the sheer amount of bodies that were in the building that you were trying to kind of get your piece on the air through —

Jon: The distribution of opportunity and all that. Is that what makes it hard? You know, when you think about the decision to call it quits there, and it's always a really difficult decision for people. I mean, it's very rare that I think somebody just says like, "Oh yeah, I'm just ready to move on." It's one of those places that, kind of like the mothership. It's a really tough decision to step away from that machine because as difficult as it might be, there is an excitement in it, a cultural relevance in it. There's all those things that I'm sure were really hard to walk away from.

Adam: It was the easiest decision of my entire life. [ADAM LAUGHS]

Jon: Really? That's f\*\*\*\*\* crazy. I never would have thought that.

Adam: Yeah, it was. Well, here's why.

Jon: Yeah.

Adam: Because I was head writer for three years, which was an incredible experience. Then I had two years where I was doing the short films and still writing sketches. Those were the most enjoyable two years where I got to kind of just be a, you know, a roaming sort of writer filmmaker it

was, it was a joy. And then through those last two years, I started writing feature scripts and I'd written something with Will, I'd written another thing with Higgins and Denis McNicholas —

Jon: Dennis McNicholas! Another was a blast from the past.

Adam: Denny McNicholas who still produces "Update" on SNL. And a friend of Jon and mine's, really funny writer. He's got something that just came out that's like a comic book batman comic book podcast.

Jon: Yeah, he and Josh Lieb and Steve Higgins, and all those guys, they were all on the old show that I did on when I was supposed to be Arsenio. And so who better to imitate Arsenio than having writers like Dennis McNicholas and Josh Lieb and and Steve Higgins.

Adam: That was a good show, though.

Jon: Oh we had — hey, man, we had some f\*\*\*\*\* fun on that show, that's for sure.

Adam: Oh my God, you could tell. You know they still have music clips up from your show and it's YouTube.

Jon: We had music on that show like you can't like — I'm talking about like Biggie. You know, some of the most incredible music. Johnny Cash. Public Enemy. Like, it was Bruce Gilmer, who I think I don't know what he's done. I think he's producing a bunch of stuff is one of the guys he came from MTV, so the music that he could bring to that show and Beth was the director and she had directed all those "unplugs" and everything else. So the level of music, it'd be like Mike Watt you know, coming out to do a song and Eddie Vedder and Dave Grohl and Pat Smear are with them playing with them and then the Meat Puppets would be on. And then like —

Adam: You had like crazy —

Jon: F\*\*\*\*\* crazy.

Adam: And it's all still up on YouTube.

Jon: Oh wow.

Adam: So sometimes I just buzz through YouTube looking for old weird live clips and I swear to God there's a bunch of them from your show on there. It was a cool show.

Jon: Oh, we had a ball.

Adam: Yeah. And I had fun with those guys, too. They were like Dennis and I became really good friends. Higgins is awesome, Lieb's awesome. It's a great group. But anyway, so yeah, I was starting to do rewrites and I was starting to kind of get ready to go. So the timing was perfect. And for me to leave SNL and I sat down with the —

Jon: And you didn't look back? There wasn't a moment where you thought, like, "I don't know, man, I'm in a pretty sweet spot here. I'm directing my own s\*\*\*\*" because it's a gamble.

Adam: I knew where I wanted to — I was always interested — by then, I got the directing bug in an even bigger way.

Jon: Right.

Adam: I always loved movies. I was always watching every movie there was thinking about movies, so that was always the leap. The funny thing was my grandfather was alive back then and he was a depression era guy, you know, raised in the 20s and 30s and he couldn't comprehend. "Well, I don't understand you have a job. [JON LAUGHS] It pays well, you have health care. Why would you leave that job?" I go, "Well you know, Grandpa, I want to go. I want to do —" "I just don't understand it. You have a solid job. [JON LAUGHS] You're working in Manhattan and you're going to leave." I mean he was a good guy, so he wasn't like mad at me, but he was baffled that I was going to do this. And then, of course, Ferrell and I tried to make "Anchorman" and every single studio and financier on planet Earth said no. So there was a moment about a year later where it was like, "Huh? Should I have left that show because we did not, we weren't allowed to make our movie."

Jon: When you guys left it's not like you were walking into another solid situation. It's not like you had this thing lined up already. You actually had to then kind of hustle a little bit.

Adam: A little bit. But like, you know, we got paid to write "Anchorman" and it was part of a script deal that Ferrell had. It wasn't a lot because we were new writers. It wasn't enough to live a whole year on, but it was a little chunk of money. I did a rewrite for someone else. The rewrite thing is big, so I was doing rewrites. I was making OK money. It never got scary but when all the no's came on "Anchorman", that was the time where I was like, "Maybe this plan is not going to work." And then the only script that they wanted Ferrell to do was one where he was a grown man playing an elf. So Ferrell and I found ourselves —

Jon: I'm not familiar with that so he was a —

Adam: It never was released.

Jon: He's a grown man, and he's an elf? [ADAM LAUGHS] How would that even work?

Adam: Ferrell and I were so bummed and we were in my crappy little apartment in New York rewriting it. And I remember looking at Ferrell. Ferrell, by the way, was still on SNL. He stayed for a couple of years longer than me.

Jon: Right.

Adam: So and I was like, "What the hell happened?" And he's like, "I don't know, but we better make it good." [JON LAUGHS] And we were just like, "All right, let's make this" —

Jon: "Sure let's make it good".

Adam: Let's make it the best grown man playing an elf movie you ever can. And kudos to that whole team. Jon Favreau did a great job directing it and cast a great cast, and it worked and really through that. And then "Old School" by Todd Phillips also broke Ferrell. So kudos to Todd Phillips. And because of those movies then they were like, "'You can do 'Anchorman'."

Jon: And it's so interesting how they won't, you know, decision making out there is so based on fear that unless they feel like you've hit gold like — I'm sure the script for "Anchorman" was the same, the participants were the same, but everyone's so afraid and it's not — listen, "Anchorman" is not, you know, "The Phantom Menace" like the budget on it is very small. [ADAM LAUGHS] Like, it's not a huge gamble with such a big reward. And it's funny, you know, Sandler paved the way for a ton of this s\*\*\* because he went out there with kind of these very modestly priced comedies that f\*\*\*\*\* went crazy. And it paved the way for so many other comics to get that opportunity.

Adam: Couldn't agree more. Sandler created the model.

Jon: Right.

Adam: And also the style of his first couple of comedies too were really loose and funny and a lot of comics in 'em. And then you had obviously Mike Myers who was doing a similar thing —

Jon: Right. Spade and Farley and all that. And yeah.

Adam: Oh my God, the Spade/Farley movies were like. And it was just let's let the funny rip. And it coincided with the invention of the Avid, and I always thought that they were — the Avid is a big part of that comedy kind of explosion of the late 90s into the 2000s, because then you could time your movies exactly to the laughs in the crowd. And it was amazing you could get rolling laughs as opposed to the cam where you got to take the actual negative out. Yeah. So —

Jon: Take the slice.

Adam: The Avid mixed with affordable comedies like \$15 million, \$18, \$12 million comedies at that time.

Jon: Right.

Adam: That combo was just an explosion. I mean, we know it was Sandler, it was Judd Apatow, it was Ben Stiller.

Jon: I never realized like I'd never connected it to the technology. Because for "The Daily Show", the avid was a lifesaver because the way that we used to edit was in the online room. So you would sit in there, and if you f\*\*\*\*\* up, you had to go back and start again at the beginning. So if you wanted to layer a montage, you'd be in there for eight hours. The Avid was such a game changer, but I never thought of that for comedy in film as well, which is it must have been enormous. And then the advent of video that looks like film that gives you that same quality. And suddenly, studios don't mind you going out there and just f\*\*\*\*\* around, like your style of directing. You really let your guys run.

Adam: Always and especially with the laugh driven comedies that I did with Ferrell and John C. Reilly and Paul Rudd, Carell like we played all day long, although, you know it's crazy those are all shot on film.

Jon: Oh, you're kidding. How did you have the balls to let them improv when you knew that's just burning money?

Adam: Well, it's not. The truth is, it's not that much to shoot on film. It's a little overrated. And I did one movie on digital and I hated the way — I did "Anchorman 2" on digital. I finally got to like —

Jon: You didn't like the way it looked. Right.

Adam: I didn't like the way it looked. And then everyone would tell me, "Look, digital has gotten really good", and I go, "Yeah, but is it better than film?" And they would all say, "No".

Jon: No.

Adam: And so I —

Jon: It's just easier. It's like a microwave. Is it taste better than cooking it on a stove? No.

Adam: No.

Jon: It's faster.

Adam: It's faster if you got other your s\*\*\* going on and it's like well we're only here to make a movie. [JON LAUGHS] So that was it. And then the great thing was, you know, if you're getting, if the movies are playing and, you know, doing what they're supposed to do within their kind of commercial box, that Hollywood has set, you can kind of do anything you want. So within the realm of these absurdist comedies, I was able to really play around with how I shot stuff, really learn about how to use CG, how to use high speed, how to like, you know, I constantly was talking to my DP's, Oliver Wood was one of the big ones that I work with, an incredible DP and just always asking questions and playing around with Dolly, trying different arms, trying different, you know, whatever you could do. And it was —

Jon: Just educating yourself as you went along.

Adam: Yeah, yeah. And while laughing like a goon and then, you know, always Ferrell and I would have some point of view in our comedies. There was always something, whether —

Jon: Right.

Adam: It was the collapse of news or sexism.

Jon: Right.

Adam: Or whatever it was, there was always something in there —

Jon: But more broadly satirical than maybe, you know, some some of the stuff, was that then so if the decision to leave SNL wasn't hard or any of those other things was the decision to do a bit of a tonal shift. Was that something that came from a maturation of you as a director or as a, as a person or you just felt like I want to challenge myself in a different direction? How do you move from that into something like the "Big Short" or those other types of movies?

Adam: Well, I mean, I'm sure you know, this it's pretty well publicized, but I was in a boating accident, and I, no — [ADAM LAUGHS]

Jon: I remember very clearly

Adam: I was trying to get the most dramatic story. [JON LAUGHS] It was basically ordinary people. Only —

Jon: Yes.

Adam: And that's what led me to do the "Big Short" um —

Jon: I was lying on my deathbed.

Adam: It came at a really practical thing, which was the financial collapse, and we were like, "hey, can we do a big comedy that's kind of about the financial collapse?" And we made "The Other

Guys" and the whole, I spent hours [JON LAUGHS] and hours with Chris Henchy designing the whole movie to be a parable for the financial collapse. But then it's also —

Jon: Oh my God.

Adam: Oh my God, so many hours. And I was like, we're not going to do drug smugglers like that, that isn't the problem anymore. And God bless Chris Henchy and Ferrell they kind of put up with me doing this and all this time, and then we released a movie —

Jon: You sure we don't want to do drugs here.

Adam: [ADAM LAUGHS] And then we put the movie out and no one noticed, [JON LAUGHS] and it was like the only thing was in the end credits, I did these end credits that were pretty nakedly about the financial collapse. And I was like, "That's weird. How did no one notice?" Like and everyone was just like, "where did those credits come from?" "And I was like [JON LAUGHS] the whole movie is about", and I'm not a big fan of blame the audience. So it was, I was like, "Oh, I get it." If it's, you know, if you're looking here, if the audience is looking here, it's hard to see over there.

Jon: Let me go directly at it.

Adam: Yeah, yeah. And then I started thinking like, Well, this is weird. I don't know if you can do these movies anymore because the entire world economy just collapsed [JON LAUGHS] because of flagrant illegalities and malfeasance, and our media didn't report it. And two presidents in a row W. Bush into Obama let everyone off scot-free. And you can see that this whole system is starting to spiral out of control and get really scary. I don't think I can do "Stepbrothers 2" even though I wanted to.

Jon: Right.

Adam: And then I stumbled upon one of the great books at that time, "The Big Short," and that was a —

Jon: So good.

Adam: — a peanut butter chocolate kind of moment.

Jon: Yeah.

Adam: And from that point, we were sort of off to the races with, you know, the funny thing is people are always like, "Oh my God, you change what you did." But these are all like the "Big Short" has a lot of laughs in it. "Succession" has a lot of laughs, "Vice" even as dark as that movie is, has some big laughs and then certainly "Don't Look Up" is a comedy. It's actually pretty silly —

Jon: Right.

Adam: In a lot of ways so. So it was still comedy. It was just trying to find that level. And you know, you I feel like you've dealt with this your whole career, too, whether it's "The Daily Show" or what you've been doing with movies. It's always that line of how overt are you, how subtle and clever are you, because the subtle clever is awfully fun. And there's a certain crowd of people that are going to love it, but it's not going to really play for the big like, I love "Death of Stalin" it's one of my favorite movies of the past 20 years.

Jon: Oh yeah. So good.

Adam: But a very small group of people saw that and appreciate it. So, so now the game is sort of like, how can you make a populist film that talks about the s\*\*\* that no one's talking about that our media is ignoring? We're all ignoring, which is corruption, inequality, and —

Jon: It's funny, they, they used to do it in fables. You know, it was sort of like that Preston Sturges or Capra, like they were the ones who did those, you know, "Meet John Doe" or really populist movies, but also could be really funny but about those divides. And it's really hard to, I think I mean, obviously, look, those guys are the geniuses and the pillars, but it's a hard line to walk. And as very clearly, I think the audiences generally enjoy it a little bit more than the commentariat.

Adam: Yes.

Jon: [JON LAUGHS] I will, I will call them. They seem actually quite angry about the whole thing. [JON LAUGHS]

Adam: Yes, I think that is a fair assessment.

Jon: Seems to be a fair assessment.

Adam: Yeah.

Jon: Commenta —

Adam: I also, I also think we're in unparalleled times. And I think like, I mean, the way I look at it is like, hey, we got to try some s\*\*\* like we

Jon: Right.

Adam: We're not crossing over. There aren't like magazines or news articles or movies that are crossing these divides because, you know, people forget they used to, you know, there used to be movies and cultural events that were collective events like all the movies that were made about the threat of nuclear war in the 60s.

Jon: Sure.

Adam: Really made a difference. And, you know, the famous one is "The Day After," this series that was put out in the '80s that that about —

Jon: Rachel, Rachel, Ward and wasn't that the, it ends with her like on a mountain holding hands with somebody. [JON LAUGHS]

Adam: Yes.

Jon: The whole thing, yeah, yeah

Adam: It flipped America out. But —

Jon: Sure.

Adam: It scared Reagan. And he changed his nuclear policy because of it. And then there's the —

Jon: Right.

Adam: "The China Syndrome", which freaked people out about the dangers of nuclear power. So I think we're kind of relearning that right now because I think we've had a blast for 30 years. You know, they call it "The Great Moderation" and we have had a hell of a party for 30 years. But now we kind of have to —

Jon: We got to sober up, we got a clean up, take a shower, get a shave, get our s\*\*\* together, [ADAM LAUGHS] get a job, f\*\*\*\*\* get a job. But do you —

Adam: Pay, pay attention.

Jon: Pay attention. Do you think about, the one thing that I've always sort of it has been a question in my mind is efficacy, and I've never seen what we do as effective. I've always seen it as this is, it's in some ways selfish for me. It's a way that I process things. But I guess I never viewed it in the sense of, "and this will make a difference." It's more like, this is the way that it's the art that I make about things I care about. But efficacy never sort of entered the picture.

Adam: It's, it's very tricky because the truth is likely what's going to happen. First and foremost, everything I've done has been me expressing my feelings about it. I mean, you sat at that desk through the W. Bush years and rode that emotional maelstrom, which was a horror show.

Jon: Not fun.

Adam: Yeah. And so me doing "Vice," I wanted to dig into it. I wanted to hire some journalists and find out like, what the hell, where did this guy come from? So there is a selfish motivation, but so efficacy has to be a byproduct.

Jon: Right.

Adam: I don't think you can say I'm making this movie to create this reaction, which will be something that will have a tangible result. You can, however, make a movie that's maybe going to fire some people up. That's going to create passion, anger. I mean, and of all the ones we've done, "Don't Look Up" came the closest to that.

Jon: Right.

Adam: I mean. You know, we're hearing that they're doing "Just Look Up Day" in the nation of France through all the major cities in March.

Jon: Wow.

Adam: And it showed up in Brazil. We have like climate scientists who were in tears saying, "I'm finally feeling heard." So and then of course, there's people that like hate it and are angry about it, which I kind of love. So of all [JON LAUGHS] the movies we've done, this one probably created the most noise. Let's just say that, I won't go to the level of efficacy, but I'll say it's certainly —

Jon: But it created a conversation —

Adam: Yeah, yeah

Jon: And a moment. For you as a director. So, you know, sometimes you look at people's careers and you think at a certain point they get to a project that is almost like a doctoral thesis of everything you know. And you talked a lot about the things you picked up from doing stand up in

Philly and doing improv in Chicago and starting to direct those short films. And did, did you look at that film as like, this is kind of a doctoral thesis of, you know, everything that I've learned, I've put into the sum total of this.

Adam: I don't know if I consciously thought that, but my approach to the movie was, we are not, we are not creating things that are crossing over or appealing in a broad populist manner. I'm a guy who's done populist stuff. I've done comedy, the only sort of popularism that I'm seeing out, populism that I'm seeing out there, a lot of it tends to be, you know, leaning right wing or about race or cancel culture. I mean, populism, we forget in the 19th century, there was a political party called the populist party. It was incredible that actually —

Jon: And mostly about economic justice.

Adam: Exactly.

Jon: And fairness.

Adam: And you know, the writer, Thomas Frank, has written a lot of incredible stuff about this. So I was like, wait a minute, why can't we do a populist movie that can be positive and not divide? And I realized it's the old story of the guitar player trying to battle the devil with blues, and then he goes back to his classical training. Is that Ralph Macchio? [JON LAUGHS] who did that in that old movie?

Jon: I believe it was Macchio.

Adam: I think it was. And so I was like, you know what? I'm going to do a big honkin' silly comedy.

Jon: Right.

Adam: And then we'll break genre at a certain point in the end. But that was really it, and it was cool to see all these big actors with all their awards go, yes. That's the way to do this. Let's do a comedy.

Jon: Right.

Adam: And if everyone can, one thing we can all laugh at is that the world is a, you know, a frickin' snow globe full of nitroglycerin right now.

Jon: But that was the weird thing is, you could almost look at it as a cautionary tale for so many different things. I mean, obviously, climate change is the most direct, but you could sort of relate that to the financial crisis. You could relate to a lot of the different things. And I was expecting the funny, but I have to say at the end of the film, there's a poignancy to it, the kind of that, that caught me off guard, and I'm going to have to say from Chalamet of all people, when he sits at the table and he offers a prayer, it was a bit of a gut punch because I — one of the things that I think comedy does well is, it gets you, most people approach things like this, and at some point maybe you bring your arms down if you're absorbed in a different direction.

Adam: Yup.

Jon: And once somebody brings their arms down, then whatever you throw is a big — can be a real haymaker. And I thought that you did that really, really beautifully in that, in — and that's as someone who has not done that as beautifully. It's a f\*\*\*\*\* hard, that's a hard tightrope to walk. I really loved it.

Adam: Oh, thanks, man. I mean, it was probably of everything I've ever done the most emotional sequence for me, because quite honestly, it was a discovery. It was in writing the script, I realized, "Oh, we're living in a comedy. We're living in a farce. We're living in this kind of Ralph Steadman cartoon." But there's a reality underneath it. And in the end of the movie, when I realized I wanted the characters to become real again, it led to that scene. And it was, you know, it was one of those things. It started choking me up when we were looking at the first cuts of the movie, and the prayer was really it. That really, because I think that we're so used to religion being used as a cudgel and a political tool, and to divide us or for people to be superior. And our co-producer, Ron Suskind, just said to me, "What about faith?" And I thought, "Oh yeah, I forgot."

Jon: That's right.

Adam: Yeah.

Jon: We could us that at the end of the world.

Adam: Yeah.

Jon: That might be something they might throw in there.

Adam: And I forgot. Faith is a beautiful [JON LAUGHS] thing you like it's actually not a bad thing because I've seen it abused so much.

Jon: Right?

Adam: And the second we had that prayer, you also forget, because Timothee Chalamet is such a giant movie star, the guy is an incredible actor, and he delivered that prayer. And I remember Melanie Lynskey like, oh my God, I'm going to start sobbing, like we were all like. And then DiCaprio comes up with that end line. He actually came up with that on set.

Jon: Oh, really?

Adam: And I'm assuming most of the movie's been out for a while. But he says in the end of the movie, "when you think about it, we really did have it all." And he came up with that line on set and he told it to me and my script supervisor and I and both of us started getting teary eyed immediately. But yeah, that ended up being the movie, the movie is we're living through this entertainment click, you know, slot machine of a world. But at the end of the day, it's going to get real and it's going to be about the people to the right and left of us. And it's going to be about simple things like faith. And it's both beautiful and it's terrifying.

Jon: And regretful. Like there's a truthfulness to it and a real regret. And I thought that was the saddest part is that sense of great regret over opportunity lost. You know?

Adam: Well, you said it, it's not obviously, I wrote the movie motivated by the climate crisis, but it relates to towering, you know, inequality, corruption in our government that's never covered on the media. And really, what I realized the movie was like a depiction of gaslight culture. And right now, the US.

Jon: Oh that's interesting, yeah.

Adam: Is being, we're being gaslit to a level. I mean, it is, I joke with my friend, like, this is the quality propaganda. This is like the blue crystal from, you know, "Breaking Bad" or whatever that,

nuff he had. This is the "Heisenberg," was that his name was? This is the "Heisenberg" propaganda that we've got. And it is good s\*\*\*. And then by the way, I watched the Super Bowl. I talked about the halftime show for way longer than I should have. Like, I see an ad for a bizarre Taco Bell creation, and I'm like, I want to put that in my mouth like I am part this —

Jon: For sure, it's good mouth, it's got a good mouth feel. We all are. I think you can do both. And maybe the question is you get into that question of, is this malevolence or is this just system in place where they're incentivized for a profit? You know, the question is, are we being gaslit or are we just participating in a system that's kind of purely incentivized for the highest profit margin?

Adam: I think that's the question, and I would also re-frame that question as it pops up in a lot of our movies: are they dumb or are they corrupt?

Jon: Evil?

Adam: Yeah.

Jon: Dumb or evil?

Adam: Are they dumb or evil? And I think your question is, basically, is it dumb or is it evil? And because I don't think there's a star chamber of six people —

Jon: That's what I was getting to yeah.

Adam: Yeah, no, I totally agree. I think the amount of money that hit the US in the '70s into the '80s was so gigantic post-World War II that it in a way just swamped our democracy. So and by the way, I mean that in a right and left wing way, you look at Bill Clinton, you look at, you know, Obama to some degree, Joe Biden.

Jon: Deregulation is more owned probably by the left in the '80s than the right.

Adam: A hundred, a hundred percent, Jimmy Carter too, people forget, did a lot of deregulating. So yeah, I agree. But whatever the result is, it feels really good in the moment. But it's it's not working so well because it just —

Jon: It's not, and that's —

Adam: It just snowed in Pasadena a week after a 90 degree heat wave. So yeah.

Jon: It's getting, things are getting volatile out there. I guess you would say, yeah, climate volatility will be the new thing, but we're going to have to — I've just been informed you actually have s\*\*\* to do and I could sit here and talk to you all day. But I've really enjoyed it. I never get to catch up with you enough. It's always wonderful to run into you and thank you for, you know, you've always been very generous to me with your time when I've run s\*\*\* by you and I've always appreciated it. So thank you for that.

Adam: Jon, thank you so much and keep going, man. We're going to figure this out. We are.

Jon: We're figuring it out man. [ADAM LAUGHS].

[MUSIC CUE]

Jon: That's the episode. My thanks to Adam McKay for spending the time with us. A wonderful hour. I got to tell you, it's, I feel a little guilty in that there's a little bit of high school reunion to all of that, but I hope you enjoyed it. And that's that! We'll be back with our regularly scheduled episodes of The Problem. Our next episode is on the climate. I believe that young David Wallace-Wells will be joining us on that podcast, and then we have the television program, the Apple TV+ show also on climate. Check it out, link in the episode description. And thanks for listening.

[MUSIC - THEME SONG]

Jon: "The Problem With Jon Stewart Podcast" is an Apple TV+ podcast and a joint Busboy Production.