

The Problem with Jon Stewart Episode 201 Final Transcript

Interview with Judd Apatow

Jon: I'm getting a note here, you got to move back. I guess a little bit.

Judd: Yeah, I'm too close. I'm too. I get more Jewish when I'm closer to the microphone. [JUDD LAUGHS]

Jon: I think we get more Jewish as we get older.

[INTRO MUSIC]

Jon: Hello everyone. Jon Stewart, here. We are back in a sense, uh, currently we're in production getting ready for Season 2 of the show, The Problem, uh, but while we're doing that, we're going to try and do some podcasts every now and again, when appropriate, when apropos and apropos similar to, uh, our guests name is actually your, your given name was Judd Apropos.

Judd: Exactly. [JUDD LAUGHS]

Jon: People don't realize. Emmy-winning writer, producer, director, Judd Apatow is joining us on this special edition podcast, because Judd, I want to talk to you about this documentary, this "George Carlin's American Dream," which is out. People can watch it on, on HBO Max, man. Thank you. Thank you for putting this out. Thank you for doing the deep dive into one of the greatest comics and minds of, of any generation. And certainly one of my, uh, personal touchstones and heroes. How did this even come to pass?

Judd: Well, thank you for being in it, Jon you provide a great insight and you know, you were one of the few people that had a closer relationship than most, because he was somewhat of a solitary person. It was hard to find people who hung out with him, but I just got a call from HBO before the pandemic and we worked on it throughout the entire pandemic. And I was definitely worried about doing it because I didn't know him personally. And I thought, how am I not going to screw this up? Because I really don't know the vibe of the guy. I don't know how he behaves and it was very scary because you really don't want to screw it up.

Jon: Right.

Judd: I talked to Kelly Carlin, his daughter beforehand, and she basically in, in her own words said, you know, "Make my dad proud. Don't do something that's bulls***."

Jon: Right.

Judd: "Don't do the classic corny way to do this."

Jon: Any of those things. I saw Kelly, uh, just a couple of days ago and she loves it. I think she's really proud of it. She's really proud of the job that you did on it. And I think she feels like you did him right.

Judd: I'm so happy about that because I think one of the reasons why a lot of these are bad is usually people are alive and they want to look good and they don't want you to talk about their weird stuff. And even with some people who are no longer with us, who I've danced around doing documentaries about, a lot of times, the family is like, "Can you not talk about this thing or this weird relationship he had?" And they go away. So it's really important that people like Kelly say, "Tell the truth. I don't care. You could, you could talk about all of it." And some of it is dark, I mean, he had a cocaine habit and, uh, his wife, Brenda, Kelly's mom, had an alcohol problem and that house was a war zone for a period of years. She had a pretty harrowing childhood and they somehow worked through it. And, and, you know, were able to get sober. I think George probably was on and off for most of his life, but she got sober and found her, her strength. And it's an amazing love story at the center of it. And she trusted us to, to talk about that. It's funny because about three weeks before locking, she says, "Guys, I'm so sorry, but I found a bag of all their letters to each other."

Jon: Oh, the letters.

Judd: "Of their entire lives." And we didn't have those still really locking. And I was like, "How do we... How do we fit these in?" And it's literally like from Ralph's, it's a supermarket bag with letters.

Jon: [JON LAUGHS]

Judd: And the letters are like literally the day after they met. The letter he wrote her, the day after they had sex for the first time, the day after he asked her to marry him, which was only a few months after they met. But then it turns into the letters which are, "We're broke. Can we borrow money from your parents? Because we have \$7 in the bank." It literally said, "\$7." And then it turns into big star stuff and then apology letters for terrible fights and drug problems. And then at one point there's a letter that he's saying, "I'm sorry for how I behaved. I need to stop taking..." and he lists it... "Cocaine, alcohol, pot, Valium and Adderall."

Jon: [JON LAUGHS]

Judd: [JUDD LAUGHS] He lists, like that's a lot of things to quit, but then it turns into love letters again, and they found each other again. So, you know, most families would say, "Let's drop that letter." But Kelly was like, "Nah let's, let's tell the true story."

Jon: And she was always the adult in the relationship anyway. I mean she raised George and Brenda very well.

Judd: Exactly. That's what happens to a lot of us, right? Like our families are so wild that you know some people they fall apart as a kid and maybe the rest of their lives, they fall apart and other people become super achievers and they become, you know, the people who try to help fix everything. And she certainly —

Jon: That's right.

Judd: — is a great spirit that way. She's really evolved and worked on herself and she wrote a beautiful book about being, uh, their daughter and did stage shows about it.

Jon: Right.

Judd: And at some point we realized, oh, this is, you know, a lot of this is Kelly's story.

Jon: No question.

Judd: And, uh, and the other thing that happened is we were looking for these tapes. We heard that Tony Hendra, who played the manager in Spinal Tap —

Jon: Yes.

Judd: — who sadly passed away, I believe from ALS, that he had done all the interviews for the autobiography of George Carlin and —

Jon: Oh wow.

Judd: — we knew that somewhere, there was a box of all of the interviews and we asked, you know, his family, "Can you find those?" But he was very ill at the time. And, and finally, um, they did, they, they made the effort and found, found these tapes. It was 23 hours of Tony and George talking, and that really made the documentary. So, I'd love to thank his family because you know, at a very, very difficult time they located these. And so, in a lot of ways, George's narrating his own documentary.

Jon: That's right. I was going to say that, you know, unfortunately a lot of these projects turn out to be, you ever been to a funeral and the eulogy is delivered by like the rabbi or the priest, and you could tell, he knew the person like in a perfunctory way.

Judd: Yes, like grandmothers, "I hear that Molly loved knitting."

Jon: Right. That's right. "We all know of her love of the Grateful Dead." Uh, so there's kind of a lack of specificity and a lack of connection to it. But like having George narrating it in his incredibly observant and self-reflective and perceptive way. And having Jerry there, obviously to kind of add in the, what I liked about Jerry's role is he kind of comes in and goes like, "So they don't have two nickels and I say, 'I gotta get this guy on the road to Buffalo.'"

Judd: Yeah, the manager is the greatest, the funniest thing the manager said to me, I showed him the documentary with my brilliant co-director Michael Bonfiglio and we were on the phone with him and our editor, Joe Beshenkovsky who's really like the key to all of it, he did the Shandling doc with us as well. And we were just saying, "What are we getting wrong?" And we were trying to find out if we had made any mistakes. And he said, "You know, the thing about George is he loved cocaine. I mean, he said to me all the time, 'I just love cocaine.'" But they really kept us in line. Like, what was the spirit? What was important to George? What were these eras about it? And he explained to us that in some weird way, it almost was like a uh, a way of dealing with ADD or something.

Jon: No question.

Judd: You know, like a form of self-medicating himself. And he clearly had running thoughts and, uh, was obsessed with words and ideas and would take cocaine and disappear in a room and write jokes and listen to music. And it was never to hang out with people. I didn't hear one story of him like with another person.

Jon: Right. No, I, I don't think he was, he was a social guy. I think his company was inside his brain for the most part. And that was what I always found interesting. Even being around him a little bit was, you had this sense of the duality of a guy who, you know, he'll run off, like you say, Adderall and cocaine and all these different things, but he really was like a traditionalist, like weirdly true. Like the letters to Brenda. He wrote everything down. Uh, he worked like nine to five, you know, he'd go into the office and he'd kind of type and bang out his stuff. And then he would, you know, get, get high or as he called it punch, punch up time.

Judd: He said that to you. You did one of the great interviews with him at the Aspen Comedy Festival. And, uh, I mean, and by the way, so much of that interview was remarkable. I mean, you really did a great interview with him.

Jon: I was so excited to talk to him. I mean, it was you know, I was, so just honored me here. I was, it was in the nineties. I think I was 30 years old, 31 years old. And this guy was, was the legend and kudos to the HBO comedy festival for doing it in Aspen where the oxygen is almost nonexistent. You get a guy who's had five heart attacks, where should we honor him? How about the top of a mountain? Let's take him up there, make it really hard for him to breathe. I mean, I remember we were walking up the stairs of the opera house. It was at the opera house, the Aspen Opera House and we're both walking up the stairs and we have to stop, you know, every, every, uh, floor to get all the way up to the top where you'd walk down for the stage and I'm 30, 31 years old. I can't make it.

Judd: [JUDD LAUGHS] That was an amazing festival.

Jon: It was an incredible one. Uh, and they used to do those things where they'd gather different shows together and do reunions and things like that. But, uh, I'll never forget the joy of getting to hang out with him not just there, but I went out to Los Angeles and we just spent time together just getting to know each other prior to that. And he always talked about, and this was when Brenda was still alive and they were still, you know, in that, in that phrase of like finding each other again. He always just, he was so grateful for all of it.

Judd: Yeah.

Jon: And that's what, you know, it struck me, there was no bitterness in that guy.

Judd: I didn't, yeah. I didn't feel that. I mean, there was always a searching and he had this energy. I mean, he's, he's a unique guy cause he's just, from another era too, I mean, he is, you know, he started doing standup in 1960, so he's doing standup with like the same clubs as like Lenny Bruce, like it's a pretty wild story that Lenny Bruce saw him in a comedy team with Jack Burns and called his agent and said, "Sign these guys."

Jon: Yeah, yeah.

Judd: And it's so funny when you make a documentary, because you're basically saying, "Who was around 62 years ago to tell me about this?" Right?

Jon: Oh right.

Judd: And I'm trying to like figure out, you know, are there any interviews with this, with Jack Burns, who was in a comedy team with Avery Schreiber, Burns and Schreiber. And he was also the guy in Friday's when Andy Kaufman like flipped out and broke a sketch. And he was a guy that almost got in a fist fight with Andy Kaufman, but I think it was all staged.

Jon: Mm hmm.

Judd: But, Bob Goldade was friends with him and he said, "Yeah, he never did interviews his whole life." So you go online. There's nothing with Jack Burns. Then I'm at Norm MacDonald's memorial. And I'm talking to Adam Sandler's manager, Sandy Wernick, a legendary manager, he's 83 years old. And I said, I just did a documentary on George Carlin. And he's like, "Yeah, I handled Burns and Carlin." And I said, "You did?" He's like, "Yeah, I was their agent. I was there. I remember when they broke up," but he just started telling me all these stories, I'm like, where the f*** were you like six months ago when I was trying to figure out what happened. So that's also the heartbreak of documentary is finding out about things much later

Jon: Because it's never closed, the film has never closed. You can never lock picture because the story is always more, more interesting. I always find too that guys that knew they were special somehow wrote everything down. I think they almost knew like I've got something that people might want to catalog for later.

Judd: Yeah. I need to keep all of my notes and it is a, it is a similar thing to Garry Shandling where all the notes were there. If you looked for a bit he kept the piece of paper where he wrote "a place for my stuff", and he's got all the riffing on it and you could see how he wrote comedy, cause there would just be a piece of paper and it, and there was one that said, uh, that "Everything in America is about being seduced and betrayed. It's all seduction and betrayal. They trick you into thinking this and then they'd betray you,." And it turns into a bit. Or yeah, it's just like a post-it note and it says, "It's a big club and you're not in it." And you go, that's the starting point. Yeah. I'm such a hoarder that, you know, I love that, that exists. I could, I could look at that stuff all day long.

Jon: Are you shocked at how relevant Carlin is today? Like I was telling Kelly, like, there's not a thing that goes by that I don't kind of reflect back on George Carlin with like, like, like the whole bit about your stuff, your, my, my, you know, my s*** is stuff and your stuff is s*** can be applied to almost every conflict and controversy.

Judd: Yeah. My ideas are great and yours are s***.

Jon: That's, that's right. And even now, like when Roe V Wade, one of the only comics that trended was George Carlin.

Judd: He was the guy who had the bit. And when you think about how many comedians there are, right? And a lot of people who've talked about that. I didn't even see another comedian's bit like George Carlin —

Jon: Right.

Judd: — was everywhere the last few days. I didn't see one other comic, no one put up like, there's no Bill Hicks bit there's, you know, whoever you would think of, and the bit itself is pretty incredible. It covers so much ground because he's basically saying "You know when you're preborn, they love you. And when you're, but as soon as you're born, you know, when you're preschool your f****ed."

[HBO CLIP]

George Carlin: Pro-life conservatives are obsessed with the fetus from conception to nine months. After that, they don't want to know about you. They don't want to hear from you. No nothing. No neonatal care, no day care, no head start, no school lunch, no food stamps, no welfare, no nothing. If you're preborn, you're fine; if you're preschool, you're f****ed.

[RECORD SCRATCH TRANSITION]

Judd: And there was another section that I didn't put in the documentary. It was all about when does life begin? And he starts backtracking through like the primordial ooze. Like when do we say life begins? I mean, it's an a, it's an amazing piece.

Jon: Uh, everything that he covers it's, it's remarkable to me, you know, for a comedian to have even a moment's relevance in the culture is look, we're lucky if we can make a living doing this, telling jokes somewhere, going up. If you have your moment, that's even rarer. But the idea that somebody is relevant in comedy for 50 f***ing years, and then after they die like, I don't even know what to make of it.

Judd: Yeah, he's been gone for 14 years and the bits are better and they go around. I don't think anyone else has bits that go around like this. I mean, you know, we always go, "oh, George Carlin is trending," which is incredible, but no one else is trending. Literally. There's no, [JUDD LAUGHS] Richard Pryor doesn't trend, and maybe it's because they don't have the great, you know, video on some of his best specials about like, police brutality. There's not video, but, but there's no one else who trends. And he also was someone who was talking about the corporatization of America, of politics.

Jon: That's right.

Judd: And moneyed interests controlling everything. And that's what we're seeing right now when we see these mega billionaires and Elon Musk just buys Twitter. And Bezos buys the Washington post. And, and that was the thing that he was always concerned about, which is when they control everything that you learn, you don't know what you, what you've lost.

Jon: Right.

Judd: You don't know how much they're controlling. Every lever of society.

Jon: And it's interesting, you know, you find there are very few people in this world whose insights make them a target to be claimed by all sides in a debate.

Judd: Yeah.

Jon: You know, I think the only other person I can think of is Martin Luther King. You know, there's a part now where the right is like, "Martin Luther King would be a Republican, he believes," you know, and they'll throw a quote out there, like, uh, you know, content of your character. And you're like, "Yeah, you didn't read the whole f***ing speech, did ya?" Like there's a little bit more in there that you might want to take a look at. But Carlin in the same way, you find a lot of guys on the right, who will say, "George Carlin knew this political correctness is bulls***." He would never, but he was more complicated than that, like, this is always more complicated.

Judd: Yeah. and by the way, he also didn't live in this moment. He didn't live in a moment where algorithms, uh, control so much of the information that we receive. So he was from a, uh, an era where you could get arrested for what you said on stage. He was really worried about the government interfering with your ability to express yourself.

Jon: That's a great point, that's a great point.

Judd: He, he never lived to see like an algorithm that feeds you conspiracy theories or feeds you anti-vax information. And so Kelly always says, "We don't know what he would have said about this moment and whatever you think it would be, you're wrong, whatever he was going to say about this." She also said, "Would blow your mind," but we don't know what it is because at the time he definitely was someone who was like, "Oh, I'm not allowed to say this word? I'm going to say it." I mean, I was watching a bit the other day where he just listed every offensive word.

[HBO CLIP]

George Carlin: ...Whop, Ginzo, Greaser, Grease Ball, Spik, Beaner, Oye, Tiger, PR, Mick.

Judd: Like every way that you could hurt every group. And it, he said, it's all intent.

[HBO CLIP]

George Carlin: They're only words! It's the context that counts. It's the user. It's the intention behind the words that makes them good or bad. The words are completely neutral. The words

are innocent. I get tired of people talking about bad words and bad language. Bulls***! It's the context that makes them good or bad! The context. That makes them good or bad.

[RECORD SCRATCH TRANSITION]

Judd: He thought less words is bad, less, uh, ability to express yourself is bad and he didn't realize that there's a new era of just people drowning in misinformation and in toxic speech. And it is much more difficult to figure out where the line is because he says in the documentary, uh, "I think a comedian's job is to take people and cross the line and have them glad that they crossed with you."

Jon: Right.

Judd: And that is, amazing. Yeah.

Jon: That last part is the tough one. The last part is the one that separates a contrarian and a provocateur from an artist.

Judd: Yeah.

Jon: And that was what I was so gratified to see in the documentary is towards the end when George talked about because look, I think a lot of us as comedians have a bit of an inferiority complex because I think stand-up comedy is, is, is low art. It's generally held in a basement. It's generally, you know, people are it, they demand that you at least have two drinks while we work.

Judd: You must be drunk.

Jon: You must be drunk. Uh, you must buy food. You know —

Judd: You must be trying to get someone to have sex with you during the performance —

Jon: — during the performance. And yet when he talked about, you know what, "Man, I'm a comic, I'm a, I'm a low art, you know, it's a low form. But I'm also a writer, I'm a writer and an artist." And that I thought was amazing.

Judd: Yeah and he was so inspired about the potential of that. I remember I used to see him work on his set just a few times early in my standup career. He would go to Igby's in LA sometimes, and he would always have the set on little index cards and he would furiously be going through the index cards. And it was all memorization because he wrote it like a one man show.

Jon: That's right.

Judd: He was not the, I write it on stage guy. It was, can I get these words down perfectly? And you could tell it was a memorization nightmare because some of these bits were about firing out hundreds of funny phrases

Jon: Right.

Judd: And Orwellian words.

Jon: And connecting them and the rhythm. It was, it was music. It was rap in some ways, you know, the set that he performed before we did our interview on his 40th special was about advertising words.

Judd: Yeah.

Jon: And man, he ran for 20 min and at that point he just gotta be 60 years old. You know, I can't, my phone number, my wife's phone number. Like I have no f***ing idea and he's just running through 20 minutes of like photographic memory,

[HBO CLIP]

George Carlin: This is called "Advertising Lullaby." Keeping in mind of course that the whole purpose of advertising is to lull you to sleep. "Quality, value, style, service, selection, convenience, economy, savings, performance, experience, hospitality, low rates, friendly service, name brands, easy terms, affordable prices, money-back guarantee, free installation, free admission, free appraisal, free alterations, free delivery, free estimates, free home trial, and free parking. No cash? No problem! No kidding! No fuss, no muss, no risk, no obligation, no red tape, no down payment, no entry fee, no hidden charges, no purchase necessary. No one will call on you, no payments or interest till September."

[RECORD SCRATCH TRANSITION]

Judd: And no one does that anymore.

Jon: He's an incredible, incredible performer. What made you, you know, you've documented a lot of this and I know that, that you started like as a, just as a fan of standup. I mean, we all sort of started that way, but you really maintain like almost a historian. You're the John Mitchum of, of, of our comedy world. Like why do you continue to do that, even though you have your own body of work, to look back on?

Judd: Well, I always came at it as a fan first, just a lonely kid in his room watching Jeff Altman on the Mike Douglas show. So, I just loved it so much. My grandmother was friends with Tony Fields, you know, who, who was in our world a little bit. And, but also my grandparents talked about her as if she was the coolest person who ever lived. They also had gone to see Lenny Bruce a lot because my grandfather was a jazz producer and they talked about him, you know, like he was John F. Kennedy. And so, there was something about comedians and comedy that was respected. They would go, "We were at this party and we were hanging out with Bob Newhart." And, and, and it made me think, "Oh, there's something special about this." And also no one was interested in it when I was a kid. Like now people love comedy. Like there's a "Netflix is a Joke" comedy festival and millions of people are obsessed with it. But when I was a kid, there was no one to talk to about it, like no one gave a s*** at all. And I thought, well, maybe this is the little thing I can be into that's mine. I'm not good at football. I'm not good at sports. I, I'm not seeing, I don't seem to be doing very well with women, but I can, I can have this thing that no one cares about.

Jon: [JON LAUGHS]

Judd: And I also had a sense, I think one day it will pay off. I think that there will be other people. I will, this could work as a business. I was aware of it and that part of me that interviewed comedians in high school and wanted to know more about it.

Jon: I love those stories, by the way. There's all these stories for those of you who know, Judd's got these great stories of when he's like 14 hanging outside of like, Steve Martin's house.

Judd: Yeah.

Jon: Trying to get him to talk to him

Judd: And that was always, you know, my dream, like as a fan to sit with Steve Allen and just ask him questions for an hour and a half. And now as an adult, you know, I just put up the new book "Sicker in The Head" where I did more interviews and you were in the first book. You know, to sit with, like, for me to sit with Nathan fielder for two hours and go tell me how it works. Why are you doing this? I'd tell me the process —

Jon: How does the brain work? What is going on?

Judd: — with like Rami and Sasha Baron Cohen and to, I mean, I had a great conversation with Lin Manuel Miranda because just as a creative person, myself, how do you keep going? How do you not get insecure after a success? How do you, uh, feel like that's not the best thing you're ever going to do? You know, uh, the, these are the answers that I want. And for these documentaries, because I'm a hoarder at heart, there's nothing makes me sadder than the idea that there isn't a George Carlin documentary that's as good as the Bob Dylan documentary that

organizes his life and organizes his work forever, because I do know that most of this stuff is disposable and the only way people will rediscover it is if it's organized in a documentary like this. So, I want to do it just for my love of these people and my fear that no one will know who they are in five years.

Jon: What I think is remarkable about that is, nobody honors comedy like that. You know, there's just very few, you know, when you say like, it's gotta be as good as the Bob Dylan documentary, like, oh yeah music is given a, a different status in the culture, you know, I've, I've, I've always said, you know, the best comedian gets laid less than the worst bass player. Like it just has a different style. And, and giving it that treatment and giving it some import was really gratifying, you know, because Carlin was one of the few where, you know, look, I do a lot of topical s***. There's nothing more ephemeral than topical comedy. It's the egg salad of the comedy world. Like, yeah, it's good for about two, three days. But after that, like get it out of the house cause it's gonna stink it up. But it's, it's really nice to see that. But when you talk to all these different comedians. Are you starting to discern patterns of what drives them? Like everybody that I generally respect in, in art, whether it be music, comedy has a similar mindset of how they create and what they're trying to accomplish. Are you finding that in your conversations?

Judd: Uh, I think that, you know, we all notice that people slowly find themselves. You know, and, and it takes a while. And usually, people don't find themselves till their thirties or their forties. And then you go, wait a second. How did Tom Segura land here? Right. Like people find their greatness.

Jon: Right, right.

Judd: And we see all these people that we've known for a very long time, you know, like Sebastian or somebody, and then suddenly it's it just clicks because —

Jon: Bill Burr

Judd: — Bill Burr who just keeps peaking and peaking and getting better and better.

Jon: Right, puts it all together.

Judd: And, and that's what I'm interested in, which is, there's this creative journey we're all on to figure out what we want to talk about and what's important to us and how to express ourselves. And can we find the courage to take the risk? Because every once in a while, people just s*** on you. They come at you so hard. They have no respect for the, for the courage it takes to put yourself out there. And so you're always fighting against this vicious attack you might get at any moment for any reason. And yet we soldier on we, we, you know, we make the next movie, we make the next TV show.

Jon: We're the real heroes here. We're the heroes.

Judd: I've always seen it that way,

[LAUGHTER]

Judd: But you know, I don't think most people experience worldwide, public humiliation. They don't know what it feels like that at any moment you could go online and have like, people tell you you're an asshole and you're bad at what you do. So, whether it's musicians or comedians or filmmakers. If that's the only thing that we have in terms of our, our careers, our artistic careers, we have to train ourselves to go in spite of it, I'm going to do the next one. And I'm not going to let that live in me to the point where I can't take a risk because all, all art is being willing to go, "I'm just going to leap over the cliff to see what this idea does. What does it want me to say?" And, uh, that's why George Carlin is so impressive because. He, you know, he starts in a comedy team and then he's kinda corny for a while and he's trying to be mainstream on television and then he gets pretty successful. but then realizes I don't think I want to be this guy. So then he finds himself and he has this incredible success, but then he kind of runs out of gas in the way of bands might run out of gas after four or five records, like very few rock bands, sixth record. Is great. And then the world starts s***ting on him and Cheech, from Cheech and Chong makes fun of him.

Jon: I was surprised by that by the way. I didn't realize that in the eighties and early nineties that he had become the butt of the joke.

Judd: Oh, brutal. Like people figured out the impression of him. They were doing a sketch. It was death of a salesman with Ricardo Montalban as Willy Loman to Forrest Kelly, as Happy as George Carlin. as Biff. And by the way, if you go online and watch it, it's like a 15-minute sketch.

Jon: I mean it's brutal. It's absolutely brutal.

Judd: And I think that it was because he was in that moment like he's five six records in he's running out of gas. He was probably on drugs, you know he's exhausted. And then —

Jon: He's broke cause he's got f***ing tax problems.

Judd: — he's probably on so much drugs that he doesn't pay his taxes for several years.

Jon: He's blown his moment. He blew his moment

Judd: And so, and that is a natural I mean it's unfair to a comedian because no one puts out 10 great records in a row. You know Bob Dylan has those moments where you go "Oh I guess it's

over.” And then he comes back and then Cheech says George Carlin's over he's just talking about peas now and he gets so mad that he redoubles his efforts. And then the same thing happens a second time. He runs out of gas again. He has a bunch of heart attacks. He decides he doesn't want to be so stressed out and he makes us act a bunch softer. And then Kinison shows up on the scene —

Jon: That was amazing

Judd: — and Carlin decides I'm not going to be the wimpy comedian who's corny next to this guy. And then for the rest of his career he decides to out-Kinison Kinison.

Jon: And he goes he goes hardcore, and it was interesting to me that Carlin was competitive that he really did have you know it sort of it reminded me of you remember those like cause you know how it gets in comedy clubs like it's, it's kind of a brutal hierarchy and you really are trying to blow people off the stage. And it's like you know they used to have these in jazz clubs, they call them cutting contests and guys would come in and just try and you know and they'd be there for hours just trying to blow each other out of the improv

Judd: Yeah

Jon: You know, uh, Charlie Parker and all these other guys would have these cutting contests. And that's what it felt like for Carlin that he was just like I'm not going to have it. I'm going back to the gym.

Judd: But, but we didn't do that. We were doing comedy, I was doing comedy, when Kinison hit the scene there was no part of me that thought like I'm going to do this better than right. And if you think about it Kinison had one great album, and then it was a lot of diminished returns due to lifestyle that his problems with substances and Carlin saw Kinison and then put out like seven albums that were all you know one greater than the next.

Jon: Yeah, no it was phenomenal, I think he got to a point where he just said I've got this other gear, why don't I use it. And he and he just clicked it in. And I think you know people have the mistaken thought that maybe Carlin was bitter and angry and his comedy was nihilistic towards the end, but I saw it as heartbreak. I saw it as disappointment. Like I saw it as a guy who looked at the opportunity humans had been given, he reminds me of Vonnegut in so many ways, but looking at the opportunity humans have been given and seeing their potential for greatness. And yet they're, they're present of cruelty and of harm. And I think he just, it was heartbreaking to him.

Judd: Well, he talked about the environment like in 1970. I mean he was he was he was a very early voice of we are destroying the planet and —

Jon: Empathetic

Judd: — and he thought this world is so gorgeous. He has a routine about it where he describes how beautiful the world is and that we decided we'd rather live in malls.

[LAUGHTER]

Jon: And think about that man, in the f***ing seventies he's doing that material like, incredible like just so prescient.

Judd: Yeah, and he said you know underneath the cynic is a disappointed idealist. And I always love when it when it got dark because I thought the joke was, this is a character. I'm going to go as dark as you can ever go, I'm going to root on the end of humanity. I'm going to laugh as you all die. I mean that's how far he took it but to me it was always clear that it was a joke stance to say “Hey wake up f***er. Wake up. I may not have that much time here but you do.” And it was very similar to the movie “Don't Look Up” I mean at some point you have to make the movie where everyone dies at the end to say are we really going to let all this happen. Are we going to let this world fall apart? And I think a lot of his act was like that I'm going to take this as far as it can go. And you know he had this thing where he would he would say uh —

Jon: I'm going to sit back. I'm going to sit back and watch the freak show.

Judd: In America you're in, you got a front row seat to the freak show and it was all about like rooting on for bad things to happen. But I think he hoped that people would go like, “Well, maybe I will get a little electric car.” Like, that's how I always looked at it. And it was a great clip in the movie where he's doing an interview with Roseanne, and Roseanne had a talk show at the time. And she's the one who says I think it's all light, I think like beneath it you're trying to tell us to do the right thing. And he admits that that is what he's doing but I love that it's Roseanne.

Jon: “You're trying to, I think it's life.”

Judd: Yeah

Jon: Yeah, she was great with that stuff. When you do a project like this with Carlin and you do a project like you did with Shandling and you talk to all these comedians, what place do you find, are we mistaking cultural power for power? And by the way isn't that okay if we are? But the art sometimes is so born of frustration, but are we alleviating that frustration for people which can have some value and confusing them that that's doing something. And is there a piece missing from all this that we haven't quite figured out or is that not within the realm of art? Art and music and you know any of that stuff.

Judd: Yeah, I mean, I think about this a lot as a fan of your work, political comedy, all the people that, you know, you inspired is what is the point of it? And I think about it for myself. Is comedy just a way for us not to deal with real things, does it allow us actually to shut down in some way? And usually when I think about it and I can get into a depressed place, like, is it, is it just a way to not be real when you have the comedy filter on, but then I think about like a James Brooks movie? I'll think about "Terms of Endearment" and go, no art really does a very special thing and it is, it can be about connection. It can be about growth. And when I think about political humor, one thing I always think about is how amazing your show was during the conventions when Bush was up for reelection. And I remember in a very naive way thinking, how is it possible that Bush got reelected after what you had done on the daily show? Like no Republican is watching it. I just thought that you had framed it, the information in such a brilliant way, in a terrifying way, in a hilarious way, that it was the first time I thought, oh, this doesn't change people's minds. But then, you know, I talked to Samantha Bee for "Sicker in the Head" and she said to me, "Judd, I don't ever think I'm changing anyone's mind. I think the purpose of my show is to tell people that I basically agree with them, that they're not crazy. It's a way for me to commune with them, uh, about that. We're not wrong, but it isn't to do that to, to, uh, change people's minds." But then I always think about The Daily Show. I think a lot about South Park and to me as a parent, I see that my kids are intolerant of prejudice. They're furious about it. They grew up on material like that and things in the culture that sped up gay marriage. And that's when I have hope, I think, well, maybe when I'm changing everyone's mind who is dug in, but for young people who, who don't have the, the decades of all of that, they're in a different place. And I think that is where things like The Daily Show and South Park. And, you know, in a lot of ways, things like Modern Family, uh, changed the culture for the next generation. So that's where my hope comes from, but there's definitely moments where I think, man, all those jokes about Putin did not prepare us for the fact that he is a murderous nightmare. Like all the funny jokes out of him on a horse with his shirt off, maybe made us think it wasn't that dangerous.

Jon: I think that's, uh, that's an excellent point. And I always find that real danger, can also, it appears sometimes as clownishness as absurdity, unless you're really dangerous. Like Hitler wouldn't have worn that mustache if he was a guy who followed norms. You know, most people would be, you know, he walked out of the house like I look good, you know, and you know, it's, it's, I know it's a rather large leap to go from that to everything that he did. But, I think some, in some ways you have to be absurd to commit atrocities because otherwise your mind wouldn't be able to encompass it. And, you know, do you remember that the great Peter Cook story about, I can't remember what it was, when Peter Cook and Dudley Moore were a comedy team and I think they were being interviewed and the writer was saying, uh, "Peter, who do you think are the greatest satirists of all time?" You know? And, and Peter Cook was like, "I, you know, I don't know." And the writer was saying, "I believe it was the Follies in Germany, in the 1930s, who satirized the third reich." And Peter Cook goes, "yeah, they really showed Hitler." And, I just thought, boy, that's such a great framing of like, yeah, it's, it's something that adds to the conversation. And like you say, can add to the milieu, but boy, it's really about tenacity. And maybe that's something that the right has learned. They don't give a s*** about whether or not

any of the movies that are in the top 10, speak to them, but they'll f*** up your school board pretty good.

Judd: Yeah, guns are blazing. And I think that's what George Carlin, uh, talked a lot about, which is, you know, moneyed interests find the wedge issues to keep everyone fighting so they basically can get all the tax laws and the environmental laws that allow them to make billions and billions of dollars. And so, the system is set up where yeah, one person can own Twitter and everything is greased. Uh, you know, Fox news is allowed to say whatever they want. CNN is allowed to say whatever they want. Everything is kind of entertainment and we're all fighting. But at the same time, no, you know, people don't want to give kids a break on their student loans, but they'll give a trillion dollars to billionaires for their businesses to work well.

Jon: Right. and all of it has been you know, weaponized into kind of game theory. And, and certainly, you know, people can point to the daily show and say, well, you guys pioneered a little of that. And I don't disagree with that. Um, you know, obviously in our minds we were doing it in a way that had a context and an integrity to it. It wasn't cynical. That was the big mistake that I thought. But do you look at these comedic trees as like tributaries, like when you were thinking about Shandling and you were working into that, does, did that create a tributary of sort of meta universe comedy? You know, Garry was so brilliant at that kind of that, meta looking at all the tropes of show business and of how shows were put together. And then you look at the George Carlin tributary, which, you know, I would hopefully see myself as a part of. Do you view it like coaching trees?

Judd: Well, there's definitely different schools, you know, and we've studied under a bunch of them. So, you know, we wrote together at the Larry Sanders show when you were also acting on the show. And so, you know, we're trying to help Garry, but we're also students of Garry and we're paying attention to his ethic and his approach. And we're also, you know, listening to George Carlin as little kids. I think that is programmed in my head. As to how to think, how to look at things, how to examine things. You know, I mean, watching MASH made me go, oh, I should look at things differently. I had a different critical eye, what was I doing at eight watching like an hour of MASH a day. And I'm literally like eight years old, nine years old.

Jon: You were studying turn of phrase. Larry Gelbart was the master of turn of phrase and you know, linguistic dancing. He was, I always felt like MASH and Larry Gelbart were like the bridge from Preston Sturgis and all those really great things into kind of George Carlin and people that were using those tools to make social commentary and the way that Sturgis was. It was great.

Judd: And we all have those people, so we've studied under a bunch of them. And so if you see Shandling, you might go, oh, well that led to The Office, 30 Rock, Fleabag. Like you could see Extras, you could see the flow, right. But, but maybe for Garry, he loves Paddy Chayefsky and Barry Levinson. And it was coming from Billy Wilder and the people that he looked up to, Mike

Nichols. And, you know, I remember when we were there, it was just such a war zone because Garry was in this lawsuit with his manager who was —

Jon: The worst, the worst, the worst.

Judd: —Who was, uh, you know, still an executive producer on the show, but Garry had just sued him for a hundred million dollars.

Jon: Yeah, it was so rough on set. I mean, there was such a tough environment.

Judd: And the premise of the sea — of the season, was, Garry was aging out and young, Jon Stewart was going to push him off the show. Right. And you're on the show. Then Garry's also dangling the idea that maybe we'll end the Larry Sanders Show and make it the Jon Stewart Show,

Jon: Right? Yeah. He'd always told me we were going to do it. We're going to make a Jon Stewart Show and add an H to my name. And that's how we were going to keep the characters going.

Judd: And then he ultimately said he didn't want to do business with his manager, with Brad Gray. He didn't want, he needed it to end, which took that opportunity away from you. And I always wondered how you reflect back on that now, because I feel like when I watch your work after Sanders that, do you feel like it influenced, the care or the way you looked at your work, because it also was a nightmare for you. And at the same time, the season was brilliant and your work was incredible. Like, how do you look, look at it now?

Jon: I mean, I loved being out there because first of all, I was such an admirer of Garry and it was kind of hard not to, you know, when, when, uh, the shows that he had done and, and really his comedy. Just the brilliance of his writing. And I was so excited to get out there. So, the tough part for me was the gap between the Garry that kind of seduced me into going out there and doing it and writing, cause I wasn't so, you know, I didn't want to be out in California. Wasn't sure about, uh, all the things, but I really liked the idea of it. You know, he's a very seductive guy when he's convincing you to go do something and come write on the show and, and it was flattering. And then I got out there and he was in the midst of this nightmare and his, his attitude. I felt a little jilted, not by the fact that we weren't going to continue the show because I had real mixed emotions about that anyway, but that our relationship had changed. I think it was more that. That I went from being the object of his desire to a guy. He would call over to his house at midnight to rewrite, you know, uh, the act one. And then he would spend the whole time talking to Warren Beatty and we don't, we'd all just, sitting in the dining room, like, uh, are we going to do this? Or, you know, so it was a really complicated time for me, but not because of wanting to continue that show. It was more, I felt like I wanted our relationship back.

Judd: Yeah.

Jon: And that was the hard part for me. And it was funny because, uh, if you remember Pete and Alex, you know, they were other writers on there and, uh, uh, Adam. I would come in and I was always the positive guy and they would go like, “you know, what's going to get you,” and I'm like, “Nothing's getting to me.” And I remember coming in one day, like four months, five months into it and I was just like, “I am broken.”

Judd: Well, I also felt like, as an observer of that. So, you were coming off of your talk show, not succeeding. Your, it was in a syndicated talk show or —

Jon: Right, the Paramount. So it was, the MTV one had gone to Paramount and then the Paramount one got canceled in like nine months.

Judd: And so, it was like, it was a funny thing cause the shows about talk shows you're coming on, playing yourself. But in a weird way, it's both a step forward and a big step backwards because now you're like on a writing staff doing some acting and it also seemed like this is so great that Jon is doing this. Like, this is like, it's like if you went back to college and said, I need to get a degree in something else. And so, I always sensed, like Jon is so frustrated here and so great here, but wow, this is the thing no one does. No one goes, I don't know what the f*** to do with my career, I'm going to, I'm going to learn something new. I'm going to jump into a new experience. And then when you did The Daily Show and it took off and it creatively was so strong, I always wondered, did anything from the Sanders experience, prepare you for that?

Jon: Oh, absolutely. You know, it's so funny that, that you view the dynamic that way, because it's, so not that, that wasn't for me, part of the, I never looked at it as, oh, that's a step back, I think because my ethos was always, my dream was to be a working comic and getting to do that was always such a gift. And the opportunities that came from that were kind of remarkable, but I don't, I never thought a talk show was my, my dream or my end point. And so, the Sanders, I viewed with such excitement because I was gonna learn narrative. And that's what I learned. And I think the biggest thing I learned from, well there were two things, was the difference between caricature and character and that you remember Garry would, you know, would preach that, because it was so easy for us to just sit in the writer's room and go, how am I going to get out of this scene? And, you know, everybody would be like, why doesn't Hank, just walk in and say, “cocksucker.” And then we'd all be like, “You did it, you broke the story,” you know? And, Garry was so smart about narrative and character and how the conflicts and the dynamics had to be produced, by how a human would react —

Judd: Yeah.

Jon: — not a two-dimensional figure, but I think the greatest thing I learned, and I don't mean this as disrespect, is how to run a show.

Judd: Yeah.

Jon: Because what I saw was so disappointing and, and I knew that he was in a tough place, but it made me realize ya know, if you wanted to accomplish something, there was the thing that I never liked was I always felt like Garry would sometimes use his brilliance to excuse his anger and, and poor behavior.

Judd: He gave himself a free pass —

Jon: I think so

Judd: — for bad behavior. And as someone who preached Buddhism and love and connection, if you pitched him a bad joke, he might give you that look like, like, and it wasn't like, I don't like that joke. It was like, you're a f***ing asshole. And you're trying to destroy me, you're trying to destroy me and I'm onto you and I might destroy you. And you felt it all in that pause. It might be like in like one second, like and it was chilling to observe it because there were certain people, they just were not in sync with Garry. I always felt like the best thing about my relationship with Garry was when my jokes were bad, they were in the ballpark. So, he never gave me that look like, what is wrong with you?

Jon: He used to kill me. I remember writing a scene for, oh, you know what it was, it was the episode that we were doing that was based on an experience I had on the talk show was, uh, Adolf Hankler. It was the whole Adolf Hankler and, and I had written a scene and we were out there working it out and he turned to somebody who was like a grip. And he goes, "would you do this? Would you?" and I was so like humiliated in front of The Wu Tang clan in the moment, because I was acting in the scene. I was in the scene. I had written the scene. And in that moment, I was just like, oh, this is just, he's just doing this to punish me. Cause he had that weird thing with me. Like, I'm going to make sure that you understand I'm better at this than, you know.

Judd: Well, I think he, what you were in the eye of the storm of was, I'm working with these people, like Rip Torn and Jeffrey Tambor and, you know, the best actors in the world. And I think to Garry was like, Jon better step. Jon can't be a weak link. He's gotta be as good as Rip. And I think he thought like, oh, I'm helping him, I'm schooling him. But he also has that thing in the back of his head. Like if Jon doesn't get there, he's destroying me.

Jon: I think you're right and I also think he admired acting. Cause I think it didn't come naturally to him. And so, he basically thought of comedy as like that. Can't, isn't everybody, the most brilliant writer. You know, so he gave Rip and Jeffrey, a grace and a leeway that for us, we, you know, he would turn to us. and be like I can do what you do much easier than you can do it. Yeah. So, f*** you.

Judd: But at the end of the, the end of it, it really was the best season And that's what's kind of fascinating is in the turmoil of it.

Jon: I'm so glad I did.

Judd: Yeah. I mean your work is incredible. I've watched those episodes again. The storyline of the season is pretty remarkable and Garry's dream of pulling it off. He did pull it off and that's the weird thing There are certain people you know who can do this in a very kind of measured calm you know, whatever Seinfeld and Larry David making Seinfeld and with it.

Jon: And they're right across the street from us.

Judd: And Garry is like, no, the only way to do this is we go to hell and try to climb out.

[LAUGHTER]

Jon: It's all pain. I always used to remember, we'd go over to Seinfeld and we're like, how many episodes do you guys do? Like 26. And you're like, what time do you get out at that? Five. And you're like, wait, what we're doing? I think nine episodes. And I'm here at three in the morning.

Judd: It's like a Springsteen trying to get the drum sound, hitting the drum for a month straight to get it.

Jon: Completely. But Judd, I know you've got to run. But man, I always have such a pleasure hanging out with you and talking to you, this "George Carlin's American Dream" on HBO Uh, HBO Max. It's so good. It's such great work. Um, thanks for even making it. Thanks for cataloging and comedy, as you're also making comedy and doing all those things, um, it's really remarkable. And if you could tell your children to be slightly less talented because. You know, I also have children...

Judd: I've, I've passed the baton. It's over for me. I'm going into the room and I'm closing the door. That's, that's the triumph of my parenting is that I'm no longer needed, but thank you for being in the documentary. Uh, it really was, uh, it was fantastic.

Jon: My pleasure.

Judd: You, you illuminated so much for us and whenever I hear you speak about comedy, I always think, I wish I knew how to talk like that. I don't know how to talk like that.

Jon: Teleprompter.

Judd: Yes.

Jon: Everything's in the prompter. Uh it's all good, but thank you so much, Judd, and come back and let's we got so much more to talk about, you know, there's so many great stories, uh, from standup and those other things. Uh it's. It's what podcasting is made for you.

Judd: Excellent. I'll be back. Alright. Take care.

Jon: All right. Thanks Judd.

Jon: So that's it guys. Uh, we will be back, check out the show when we come back, our new season. I don't even know when it starts, but we're going to try and drop some podcast stuff, but the documentary that, uh, Judd is talking about "George Carlin's American Dream" out on HBO max now.

Jon: Please check it out, what an incredible, comedian and human and, uh, for more of our content, you know, our first seasons out there on the, uh, old Apple TV+ Link, in the episode description. Also of course the hotline is always open, man. Drop your thoughts, comments, questions, uh, deepest fantasies? We don't really care what you put on the hotline and, uh, we'll be throwing it up on another mail bag, hotline, voicemail, writers, edition of the problem podcast. Bye-bye.

[OUTRO MUSIC]

Jon: "The Problem with Jon Stewart Podcast" is an Apple TV+ podcast produced by Busboy Productions.