



Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 650, Interview with Zach Sherwin

Jasmin Singer: Welcome to Our Hen House, Zach.

Zach Sherwin: Hi, thank you. I'm so excited to be here!

Jasmin: I am excited too. Partly because I have quickly become a big fan of your work. And partly because we have the same graying pattern in our hair.

Zach: Thank you for being a fan of my work and thank you for lining up so squarely with me on the gray pattern. It's definitely coming in at the temples and, um, the beard is...it's unmistakable at this point.

Jasmin: I waxed my face this morning so I don't know if my beard is still gray but I'm just gonna assume you are what I would look like if I had an entire face of facial hair.

Zach: Totally. It's like Woolly Willy. Did you have that toy when you were little with the little metal shavings? Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jasmin: Yes, totally.

Zach: This is me. I am your Woolly Willy.

Jasmin: Well, thank you so much for coming on Our Hen House and I think that's it, I think we've finished our talk! *laughs*

Zach: *laughs* We covered it all.

Jasmin: Yeah, no, I think we're good...*laughs*

Okay. I have a lot to talk to you about...firstly, I know that you have been vegan for a long time and I would love to start by hearing how it relates to your comedy. Because we all know that vegans aren't necessarily beloved to everyone. I think we have been rated higher on people's hate list than serial

killers; and that we're all humorless. I'm also a lesbian so I'm really, really unfunny. I'm just wondering how you handle it; do you bring it up at all in your work?

Zach: Mm-hmm...so much here. Um, first I'll say how nice it is to be in a space where I know that the host is vegan and that everybody listening is vegan. In part because you do have to do all this damage control when people find out about it. So yeah. I have been vegan and vegetarian for a long time. I come from a line of...my grandmother was vegetarian, like before there were any products whatsoever.

So she's like old school vegetarian. Or was, she is deceased. My mom has been a vegetarian for a long time, decades and decades and decades. And then, yeah, I was vegetarian till I was like 21. And then I went vegan and I'm about to turn 42 in a couple weeks.

So I used to do a joke where I would say it's been about 13 years since I barred meat from my diet so I call it my bar meat-zvah. And puns plus veganism, man...Now you are really asking for it.

I think that my answer to your question about how it ties into my comedy is that, first of all, I just think ambiently, if you do anything for 20 years...I've been vegan longer than I've been doing comedy. So it's just gonna inform, I think, a lot of choices that you make in like, not, um, super obvious ways.

And then I have at times tried to do material about being vegan explicitly and to take it on. I used to do a joke about how people would always tell me that they would go vegan, but they couldn't give up cheese. And I would say like, "Well, you'd think with all that calcium, you're getting, you'd have a little more backbone, but, um," and so like people who were okay to laugh, you know, would be okay with it, but a lot of people would just kind of shut down.

And that's so funny that vegans are like, "we all know killing is bad." Is that really true about serial killers...vegans being rated as more loathsome.

Jasmin: I think so. Yeah. I think, I think that I've read that in a few places and I believe that people hate us more. Yeah.

Zach: That's like a deep truth about some ugly aspect of human nature that like serial non-killers are more reprehensible than serial killers.

You know, the way I try and do it nowadays, like I've written some songs that touch on it or like, you know, I've written songs like celebrating vegetables and that kind of thing in my weirder, whackier rangings, but the way I'll do it now is I'll like show a picture of a dog during like one of my shows, like a cute dog and people will go, "Aww!" You know, and there's like all this animal love, and I'll just quickly say, like with a smile on my face, "like if you think that dog is super cute and you eat meat, you might wanna rethink some of your choices moving on to our next..." you know? And so I just try and sneak it in a little bit, but yeah, it's definitely a fine line to ride.

Jasmin: I know that we have Myq Kaplan as a mutual friend, and I was able to see him perform a couple weeks ago in Rochester. And he actually stayed with us, which was wonderful. And he manages to straddle that line somehow. Like he is able to talk about veganism on stage without undermining the reasons why we shouldn't eat animals.

Like he somehow manages to not sound self righteous and to make people laugh, but like not in a laughing at him kind of way. I think that what you just talked about. It sounds like it accomplishes the exact same thing, but like in general, how can we not appear to be self righteous when we're right?

Zach: It's an impossible paradox and yes, we love Myq Kaplan, let's take a moment to celebrate how great he is. And I know he's a repeat guest on here. A thing I also admire about what Myq does is that he doesn't throw himself under the bus too much.

I've seen people be like, "I'm a vegan. So now you all hate me," you know? Except in joke form, but like you can see them just debasing themselves before the crowd, in an attempt to talk about something that they want to talk about.

And I really admire and aspire to when people don't sell out the philosophy super hard while they're broaching the topic, just because we all are conditioned to know, like "vegans are bad, they're a safe target to make fun of." I feel like it's a hacky topic.

Like, remember when it was okay to just be like "Canada sucks." It was brought to us by South Park. I think vegans are like that too. It's just like, "this is the safe kind of target to hate, to shit on." And so, yeah, I mean, it's so cognitively dissonant to move through the world and be like...let me put it this way. I feel much more of a connection to someone, like their stock instantly jumps a bunch of percentage points with me, when I find out that they're vegetarian or vegan.

Yeah. I mean, it's impossible to wrap my mind around not doing it.

Jasmin: So you gave us a little glimpse into your timeline. Actually we're the same age. Well, I'll be 43 this year, but we'll be 42 at the same time for like four months. And we should definitely talk about being 42 together during those four months, but...

Zach: I'm gonna need an experienced guide to that year of life. *laughs*

Jasmin: I kept it warm for you. *laughs* It's like we've... I don't know if you are a drinker or not, but I am. Okay, good. Because now you're twice the age of a legal drinker so you can have twice as much. I think... I think that's how it works. *laughs*

Zach: And yet I find that nowadays I get buzzed on half as much. So I don't know what math is going on there, but...

Jasmin: I was a theater major so don't trust me for math. In fact, forget everything I've said until this point.

But we have been vegan for about the same amount of time also, when you were saying your timeline, leading me to believe we are related. But that being said, even though we're obviously siblings, I'm wondering, if in the 20 years or so since you've been vegan, you have felt any shift in attitudes. Are people less judgmental than they used to be when you talk about it?

Zach: That's such a great question. And I will also say that I, up until this podcast, believed myself to be an only child so I'm really looking forward to the experience of having a sibling. And I appreciate you expanding my life in that way. *laughs*

I would say... I'm kind of spitballing here, so let's see how it feels after I say this.

I feel like as veganism has moved more into the mainstream over the past two decades, and there's like more product available and there's Impossible meat now, and we all have some vague sense that raising beef and pork contributes to climate change, it's just less weird and fringe seeming.

And then at the same time, I think that that has made it a bigger target. And so I would say, as it's become more accepted, there also seems to be a proportional amount of like, again, "these are people it's okay to shit on because they're

choosing to take like a very strong, ethical stance and to align their behaviors accordingly.”

And maybe this is a self-serving interpretation of that, but I think people are threatened by people...cuz I think everybody knows at a deep level that like this does not work and that you are literally torturing an animal who we all love when we're kids. We know that instinctively that like animals are good - our toys, our books, everything.

So I think it's just like a threat to the philosophy and the operating system and people react offensively, is my diagnosis.

Jasmin: Yeah, I totally agree. We have a segment on Our Hen House called Rising Anxieties where we report on what the opposition is saying about vegans. And it almost requires no commentary because it's so ludicrous, just the headlines alone. Talk about comedy. I mean, it's hilarious.

So I agree, as veganism is becoming more and more in the mainstream, the rising anxieties is also swelling a bit, but I think we're like almost at the tipping point. Like I think we're almost at the point where people, at least won't be hostile about it. Like maybe they won't necessarily go fully vegan, but it'll just be like, “oh yeah, cool, cool.”

Like I used to, it used to be that you have a gay cousin and now it's that you have a vegan cousin and soon it'll be like, it's not your cousin, but it's your kid or your parent. And then it's you. So basically everyone's going to be a gay vegan is the moral of this...*laughs*

Zach: Jasmin you're you're so far ahead of the curve.

I mean, you're gonna be decades in and you'll be role modeling for everybody.

Jasmin: That's my goal. Thank you.

Switching gears just a little bit. I've been dying to ask you this question. Zach, tell us about the Brutus saga.

Zach: I love talking about it and it's kind of from another phase of my creative life. So I welcome this question.

I had a friend who was teaching at a boarding school in rural New Mexico. And I went to visit him at the, I live in LA, I went to visit him at the school where he

was teaching and they have like a farm. And I went down and I got a little tour of it and I like met some dogs. And then we went into a barn that they have, and there were no animals in the barn except for one duck.

And I said, “what is the deal with this duck?” And they said, “well, that's Brutus.” That's the name, he's Brutus. And I said, “wow, what is his story?” And the guy who ran the farm said, “so we used to have a bunch of chickens and other like fowl here. And there's some wild dogs that live in the Hills and they like rated the barn and they got all of them, except for Brutus. He's the only one who survived.”

So maybe I should have trigger warning-ed that story. But I said, “wow, that's incredible. Like what's gonna happen with him?” And he said, “oh, we're gonna. We're gonna eat. 'em like, that's what we do with these, with the animals here.” And I just, every fiber of my body rebelled, like, I thought this cannot happen.

Like it's enough that it happens all the time, but to actually put a face to this purported meal of an animal and after hearing his story. So I just switched into like, get a done mode, Jasmin, like I just operationalized. And so I started... went back to LA. I said, “please let me try and find a home for him.”

So I called all these shelters. They kept putting me in touch with the next person and the next person and the next person, none of it was working out. Eventually. I just like on a, on a whim, did something I should have done at the beginning and tried to shelter in, in New Mexico, not far from where the bird was, called Kindred Spirits.

And the operator of it was like, “yes, you can bring him here if you can get him here.” And so I persuaded a guy at the school to crate him up and bring him there. And things were really like dragging their heels. I was really worried as to whether or not it was gonna work out. And then one day I just got a text from the woman who operates kindred spirits, the shelter in New Mexico and it just said “duck delivered.”

Jasmin: Wow.

Zach: And so Brutus passed away in 2020, but he lived the rest of his life at that shelter getting, you know, like a macrobiotic diet and a safe, protected exercise space and the company of other ducks. Which I learned is like really important. They're social creatures and being alone must not have been great for him.

But so he kind of hit the jackpot after a pretty traumatic, like middle part of his life. And I actually got to go visit him there while he was still alive. And I got to see him being a duck. In a protected sanctuary space, but, um, he was doing his duck things. It was like, you know, I hope this is an okay place to say that it verged on the sacred for me.

I was like, “I just wanna help this guy.” And so there were so many weird twists and turns along the way that I wrote a trilogy of raps about it because I am a comedy rapper, perhaps that'll be in the intro, but I wrote these three raps about the whole experience and all the characters and twists and turns along the way and made music videos for them.

And they're on YouTube and there's a lot of stuff in there that's like poetic license, but the bones of the story and as many details as possible are as accurate as I could report them.

Jasmin: Wow. That, that's a really powerful story. I'd love for our audience to hear it. Can we play part one?

Zach: Yes.

music starts Here's the plan today. I'm going to tell a tale in an expansive way. 3 parts, but before we start, I'm going to bow my head and fold my hands and pray.

Grant I may share my narrative as well as I can relay. An anecdote, help me spread my wings like a manta ray. As Superman would say “up, up and away.”

Okay. My friend teaches at a boarding school about an hour outta Santa Fe.

I went to see him there and on the final day of my campus stay, he suggested visiting the farm to see the animals they had living in the barn. This guy Nate provided a guided tour. He said, “these are our new chickens.” I asked about the previous batch of birds. He says, “there are these wild dogs living in the hills and they raided the farm. And every last feathered Hen was massacred by those blasted curs, a blood bath occurred. It was nasty and brutish.”

We moved on to the next stall, Nate pointed and he said, “that is Brutus.” I looked, there was a duck. He was sitting on the floor, dirt packed and dusty Nate said, “he's the only survivor of the dog attack.”

Yup. Miraculous, not a single hair on him was harmed. That's not the miracle, ducks don't have hair, but what this duck did have was balls, a gigantic iron clad pair.

Nate said, "he'll be dead soon though." I asked why the duck just sat there and Nate goes, "oh, we're gonna cook him and eat him." What, how is that fair?

Fate had spared this lucky duck. If he were human instead of a creature he become a national hero or at least a motivational speaker or a preacher who believed fervently the eternal had called upon him to serve a holy purpose. But all the duck was gonna be served, was a l'orange.

Brutus, named for a traitor whose heart was impure and scheming, bra. But now he was being betrayed by his human caretakers. That's so ironic it could cure anemia. I felt like screaming "ugh!" But then I had a thought KERPOW a light bulb flash an idea..."Nate," I said, "could I sponsor this water fowl? Could I donate some dough in exchange for you keeping and lodging and feeding the duck?"

Nate said, he'd check with the farm director, but was certain that some agreement could be struck. Well, yay. So on my way back to LA I gave the situation some consideration and decided to insist on making a deal with three stipulations: One- Brutus could never be slaughtered. He'd live in the barn until he died of old age Two- each week they'd have to send me a photo of somebody holding a page of that day's paper up next to his face so I know that he hadn't been whacked. Curtains. and Three- I can't resist closing on a pun- they'd have to change his name to Quack Sherwin.

So when patting myself on the back, smoking, thinking how humanitarian of you, I even regaled the friend that I ran into with all the details of all that I planned to do.

But he emailed me the next day. And he wrote, Quote, "I think that duck having to live until the end of its natural life with no other ducks around is going to be rough." So I Googled it and sure enough ducks get dejected unless there's a friend. Next step was to send a request to protect and defend him from harm to the farm director, Ben. I wrote, "I hope I'm not too late, but I want to save that duck at the farm from becoming a meal. Ideally, I'd arrange to take it somewhere where it can live around water and other ducks."

He replied. "Hi Zach. Thanks for your note. I have called all of the farm sanctuaries in our area. None of them will take a male duck because they are so

aggressive. The reason he was confined in the first place was because he was beating up our chickens. You are welcome to see if you can find someone willing to come and get him. We have fed him a long time and he's had a decent life with us until recently. We plan to slaughter him soon and eat him unless other arrangements can be made shortly. Thanks, B.”

I had to move quick. Be a swift arranger. Brutus was in the grip of danger and don't be miffed or angered or flip the finger but I'm stopping here on a cliff hanger... to be continued. *music ends*

Jasmin: Sorry to end on a cliff hanger, but I mean...so you said people can hear the rest on YouTube. We'll also link to it in the show notes. I love that story. It can be so powerful when we have direct communication and a direct role in saving an animal. And I just wish that everyone had that happen, vegan or not, because it does change you.

But that being said, let's talk about cognitive dissonance because I do know a lot of people who maybe they saw a pigeon on the side of the street who was injured and they took care of that pigeon, or maybe they even helped to rescue a farmed animal and yet they don't stop eating meat. So I'm gonna ask you the big, giant question.

Why? Why do people still eat animals?

Zach: Man...I feel like the answer feels so wide ranging. I mean, it must be tied up with all these forces in our, these powerful structural forces in our society. Like it must pertain to capitalism. It's intersectional with like, with white supremacy. I think there's like, I mean, I just, the industry is so powerful that they have been able to shape this narrative just kind of ambiently again, in society that like, this is what is done. Beef is what's for dinner. I mean, got milk. Like these phrases are iconic and totemic. And so I think it just has to do with people wanting to exploit our taste buds in the same way. Maybe now I'm really spitballing, but that social media like gobbles our attention in the name of making a buck and these creatures who are unable to advocate for themselves besides existing and being the powerful entities that they are.

You know, they can't speak up against it. So. It's just so counter norm. Unfortunately it feels like it must be systemic because any individual except, um, unless like you're, you know, you have some disordered thinking or you are truly a cruel person. Like we like dogs, we think cats are cute. We have pets.

And yet, so many people can't connect the last two inches of the bridge.

Jasmin: Yes. Yeah, totally. And you know, we've been doing this podcast for so long and we focus on activism usually, but I do like to kind of go back to that question sometimes, because I think that as society shifts the answer to that question shifts also. I just mentioned activism and I wouldn't necessarily describe you as an activist, but my favorite part of Our Hen House is when we get to interview people in the performing arts, in any capacity, whether they're a photographer or comedian or an actor or a musician, or you name it, who are bringing their ethos of advocacy for marginalized communities to their work. Am I on the right track here? Like, is that how you would describe yourself?

Zach: I don't lead with my activist stuff, but since 2016 and really 2017, I have been active with an LA-based white anti-racist group called White People for Black Lives.

I'm pretty active with them. After we record this podcast, I'm gonna out the door to an action, in fact. So that's been a part of my life that I've really tried to invest more in over the past five years or so.

Jasmin: I was just talking to a friend of mine who's an actor and has reached that degree of success in notoriety that a lot of actors want to reach.

And she was saying that she feels like her activism is to just basically be a vegan person and be known for being a vegan person and not necessarily showing up to all the marches anymore, because I think she's starting to feel like maybe that wasn't the same energy as she wants to exhibit in the world.

So I love that you're going on stage as a vegan. I love that you have this duck story. I love that you are working on anti-racism. I lived in LA until last year and I am very familiar with that group. And I think that that is incredible. I just wanna go back to the duck for one second, cuz I didn't ask you this and I am curious what your thoughts are.

Do you feel that telling the story of one individual animal is more effective than telling people about the billions of animals who are suffering and dying? And I say this knowing that that's not what you do, but I am curious for people who are listening to this who identify as advocates or activists who might have that one story.

I'm just wondering your thoughts about talking about an individual.

Zach: Man...Jasmin your questions are great because my mind is like flooded with different tributaries that I wanna follow. Okay. So to try and focus into it, I

don't think I had ever considered the binary of telling the story of one animal versus speaking to the situation or the problem or the genocide or whatever as a whole.

But let me put it like this. I have never been inspired to write a rap that's like being vegan generally is good. And I had a very clear gut sense of the direction that this trilogy of raps could go. Like I'd never written a three part music cycle or song cycle or whatever before. So this was like an outlier of an experience for me.

And I mean, the lyrics of the first part of the song are me sort of reckoning with the fact that I'm gonna do a different thing in, in these next couple of songs anyways. So I guess my answer to your question is like, I found that like being able to talk about this really striking experience that did sort of relate to one animal was my way into tackling a topic that's really big and really important to me, but like kind of overwhelming to figure out, like, how do you start climbing this mountain? Like where do you put your toe and hand in for the first time?

And just to circle back to what we were just talking about, I haven't yet found a way to bring like another big part of who I've become as an adult, which is, which is this anti-racist work into my material. That seems really, I will tread very lightly if I ever do go there of talking about white anti-racism in like a comedy space.

Like if I figure it out, I'll go for it full-throated but it just seems that one seems really tough. But I have been finding, I've been doing my damndest to like, find ways to just say to people at shows, like, just to mention The Crossword Show, which is the, the big creative project I'm involved with nowadays, we just have one moment in every show, which is like a big comedy music wordplay kind of thing to say, like, Sometimes I literally say this and sometimes I just imply it, but to say, "this is a luxury to like do this workplace stuff, but there's also stuff going on that's like infinitely more important. And so just a heads up that we'll be like making a..." we always say, we tell crowds that we make like "a small but significant donation from our ticket and merch proceeds to..." and then we'll like name an organization that's relevant to some content in the show. And I feel it's important to not let a show and a crowd go by without being like, "it's fun to goof around and we need distraction and life is so heavy so there needs to be some lightness. But we also can't be oblivious or like, look the other way to how much is really unfair."

Jasmin: Yeah. There's so much in what you just said that I appreciate. And I do realize I'm asking you these enormous questions and I appreciate that you're just going with it because when I have a performer on, I am curious about some of

their thousand foot high views of things. As opposed to, if I have like some on who's working on a particular campaign, we might just dig into that campaign, but you get the joy of being able to talk about all of it so I appreciate that. Yeah. And now you just mentioned The Crossword Show, so I know that much of your work doesn't involve animal rights at all, but I am very eager to hear more about The Crossword Show. So can you tell us more about it?

Zach: Yeah. It's my favorite thing to talk about. I don't know if you can hear my, the smile in my voice...

And by the way, it is brimming with animal content. It's not explicitly animal rights all the time, though it is often. But I really...it's like my partner. She is vegan and she was vegan before we met. And what seemed like a luxury I now realize is a necessity. She's the first vegan I've like been in a serious relationship with. And, you know, I hope we'll be together forever, but life is weird and things happen, but I think I'll never date somebody again, who isn't vegan.

And similarly, I feel like my comedy just needs to be more and more like I am. And so it would be weird to do a whole show where animal rights and veganism, and just reminding people how, how weird this is, that they do this, in subtle and not so subtle ways, is really important. So, um, with that out of the way, The Crossword Show is like my Magnum Opus.

It feels to me like the culmination of all these things that I'd been doing throughout my performance career, namely comedy and comedy music. Specifically rap and word play and kind of like trivia and like quirky esoterica and just weird facts. And also hosting. I feel like some part of me is like a camp counselor or literally a former bar mitzvah tutor.

Like I like to take info and deliver it in a fun way. So a few years ago, someone reached out to me on Twitter and was like, "Hey, you tweet wordplay stuff with what seems like a near obsessiveness, I make crossword puzzles. Like, do you wanna try and collaborate on something?" In retrospect, I recognize that I viewed this reach out with some irritation and I like to recast that, like, "who is this rando reaching out with this like bizarre left field request."

But in retrospect, the story I tell myself about it is that it was me sensing that a big new chapter was about to begin and that it was gonna be a tremendous amount of work, but boy has it been worth it. So what it eventually wound up being is, the way the show works is, I've written six of them so far, or I'm midway through writing number six, each one, I collaborate with a different crossword puzzle maker.

You know, I always choose New York Times published people because their brand is so prestigious, more to say about that if we get there, but these people make a different grid, I write the clues and they work like normal crossword puzzle clues, except they also work like rhyming rap lyrics. So there's like an across clue rap and a down clue rap.

And then a panel of guests, kind of like Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me style, works their way through the crossword. And then every time they get a word right, I do some comedy inspired by that word and we go down a little rabbit hole. And then at the end, there's like a grand finale rap with all the answer words that they figured out from the puzzle weaved together in some clever way.

Jasmin: Oh, my God. That is, that is so cool. I know that you've also had some, like, really prominent vegans on which is another sort of, uh, another sort of layer there. So do you wanna talk about that briefly? Feel free to name drop, please, drop names.

Zach: Well, the two biggies, well, so like River Butcher has done the show, the comedian River Butcher has done the show a couple times and he's been vegetarian...I think, I think he's like a gold star vegetarian. Has never eaten meat, was raised without it, and then kept it going in adulthood.

Jasmin: Wow. I didn't know that! I totally follow his work and I, I didn't realize that that's so exciting.

Zach: I believe I I'm 99.9% on that. And maybe he, yeah, I don't know that. That's all I know, but I do, I do feel like I know that. Mayim Bialik uh...so most of our guests are comedians because they're so funny, but we also really like having people who aren't on, if it's the right fit. And, um, Mayim Bialik is a friend of a friend and we had her on and she's so smart and so crossword puzzle-y. It doesn't happen often, but sometimes I'll have guest solvers, like calling me out for like clues that they don't think are up to snuff. And Mayim was totally busting my balls on stage and was like, "would that clue get published? Like, are you sure about that?"

Jasmin: Oh my God, that's amazing.

So I interviewed her a couple times and the first time I interviewed her, I like couldn't speak because I never...which is bad for an interviewer, by the way. I, I almost never get, you know, like tongue tied when I'm interviewing people. I don't really notice. It very much, if someone's extremely famous, I don't really care, but it was Blossom, you know?

Zach: I know. And, and we're right in the pocket.

Jasmin: Exactly, exactly. It was. So I like, I feel like my heart is racing a little bit even right now. So anyway, go ahead. I just wanted to nerd out for a moment that I love her.

Zach: No, that's great. She's great. And she was so good on our show. I just wanna make the show be like beautifully presented.

So like I want the venues to be nice. I wanna be really prepared for the material. And I think having guests who are like exciting is great whenever I can do it. So, and then sort of the big name who, uh, we don't put it on our publicity because it was sort of in an unusual private show kind of context, but I'm happy to talk about it here.

We had someone who loves our show hire us to do like a birthday party for her, like perform the show for her birthday party. And she was one of the guests. And then she's really good friends with Natalie Portman. And so, uh, I got to have Natalie on stage as a guest solver, which was...she is by far the most famous person that we've had on the show.

And. Not coincidentally, she's like a joy. She was great. She totally played the game. She was a super good sport and yeah. You know, in LA it's like when someone really, really famous is in the room, like everybody's doing a good job keeping it together, but I was definitely like turning off part of my mind and being like, it's just another guest panel. You got it. Still do the comedy. Still make the jokes when you see the opportunities.

Jasmin: That's awesome. I would've been like, I would've fainted, but I was actually, when I was a child, I went to this performing arts sleepaway camp called Stage Door Manor.

Oh yeah. And do you know, Stage Door? Have you heard of it?

Zach: Mm-hmm yeah.

Jasmin: So Natalie Portman, I mean, everyone was there who...everyone's kid was there. Everyone was there who was famous and Natalie, who's younger than us, but she was there at the same time as I was. So we were in the same like tap dance class, which is a very funny, like, I don't know. It's just funny to like, know someone sort of when they're a child and then see that they've become crazy famous, but anyway, that's so amazing.

I love your brain and it's so weird. Like your brain...I mean, but the fact that you actually got a crossword puzzle published in the New York Times, is that right?

Was that like the biggest thing in the entire world that's ever happened to anybody? Cause it sounds like it.

Zach: Yeah. So the story with that is this show has just been such an adventure and by the way, thank you for the compliment you paid me. Weird brain is like, I mean, that's all I want is just people to be like, I appreciate your weird brain.

It's so gratifying. And it, it really satiates my bottomless performer's ego.

I have no memories of my grandmother earlier than her doing the New York Times crossword puzzle, like iconic grandma. Um, the one who was a vegetarian forever, my God Jasmin. It all ties together. She used to just, I, I was just like indelibly associated with her sitting at her kitchen table doing the puzzle.

So. Decades go by. I make up The Crossword Show. And then there's a woman in The Bay area whose name is Andrea Carla Michaels. And she has, I think she's constructed like almost a hundred puzzles for the New York Times. Constructed, by the way, a verb that's now familiar to me, but I should pause and say, that's like the specific term of art in crossword world for making a puzzle...constructing.

So Andrea, we've done a bunch of shows in The Bay area and Andrea is a friend and a fan and she reached out, um, and said, "Hey, like, could we collaborate on a puzzle? I'll do a lot of the like heavy lifting. And we'll just like check in about it." And the idea for the theme, for the puzzle that she had came from one of my videos.

So she was like, "I'll like build the grid and we'll use your wordplay idea. And I think we can get it published." So we submitted it, they accepted it. And then like the pipeline is so long at the New York Times that it took like a year and a half for it to get published. But in February, the puzzle did come out and I...

The ways in which it's most meaningful to me are like, it's just so legitimizing to be the host of a crossword show. And now have my name on the byline of a, of a puzzle in the New York Times. But also honestly, the thing that means the most to me is like, so few of my show business accomplishments are the thing that my grandmother knew or would even have a shot at knowing.

And this one would've just been like, she died before I got published, but it still made me feel like she would've loved this. She would've been so excited. So yeah, that's as meaningful as anything.

Jasmin: All right. I have a couple questions about your grandma. So my grandmother was my most important person in my life and also was the person with the crossword puzzle at her kitchen table.

And my grandmother went vegan when she was 86. Um...

Zach: Whoa!

Jasmin: Yeah, there's actually, if people are interested, people listening to this, she wrote an essay called *It's Never Too Late to Go Vegan*. And if you look for it on Our Hen Houses's website, we published it. Her name was Sherrey Glickman.

So why was your grandmother vegetarian? Like, was it for ethical reasons?

Zach: I think so. I think she was grossed out by the concept of eating meat.

Jasmin: And where did you grow up?

Zach: She and I both grew up in Cleveland, Ohio though I moved away when I was like a teenager for family career reasons.

Jasmin: Mm-hmm, interesting. But she wasn't around to see the New York Times puzzle but I love when things happen to us after these like iconic matriarchs are no longer with us. And we are able to sort of still tap into their energy when they happen. Like that is one of my favorite parts about continuing to be a creative person, is like, I know what my grandma would've thought of this thing and that thing.

So I'm an atheist. So I don't wanna get too woo here. But I will say I sort of think that she is still with you and I'm sure that she's like in some capacity, whether it's the legacy that she left or whatever was/is proud of you. And I love that I'm kvelling. Did you frame it? Did you frame the crossword puzzle?

Zach: I didn't, but I had hard copies sent to some key people, including two of my grandma's kids, my mom and my uncle.

And I feel like atheists are like the safest people to woo out a little bit. Cuz you have it baked in from the beginning. Like, and this isn't about some magical god thing. But it just is like for the rest of my life, it'll be like a connection to my grandma or at least for the duration of this show, it'll be like such a concrete connection to her, even though she died years ago.

And actually the way that it makes me think about it to go woo myself for a little is like looking back at all the countless times that I was like around her when she was doing the puzzle and just being like, you were setting it up, like this was the long payoff of being from this family of crossword people.

So yeah, I think it's very moving. I mean, it makes me feel emotional as we talk about it.

Jasmin: And also like I'm an editor, so I'm sort of imagining your memoir and I'm sort of imagining, like the end point is maybe the first memory of watching grandma do the crossword puzzle. And you know how, like you sort of wanna then end with the same point.

Like you're the end point is maybe opening the New York times and there's yours. I don't know..

Zach: Yep. We call it back. Yeah. That's perfect. That's perfect. Yeah. I love it.

Jasmin: Cool. Call your agent, tell them, tell them you have a great idea. All right. So I just have a couple more questions for you, even though I feel like I could talk to you forever, uh...

Zach: Same! This is such an enjoyable conversation.

Jasmin: It's because we're like long lost siblings who just found each other.

Zach: Yeah! Obvi.

Jasmin: Yeah, obvi. So you're about to go on tour. Tell us all about it.

Zach: It was such an exciting time...so the first Crossword Show ever was in November of 2018. And then my 2019, I have never had a year like this. I was blasting material out.

We were doing shows monthly in LA. It was like becoming a thing. Different celebrities would just be there every month at the show. It was like a joke with

me and my co-producer that like the house manager would pop their head backstage and be like, Kyra Sedgwick is here, Moby's here. Nice vegan name... So, um, we had that a bunch of times it was so exciting.

Forgive the, the shameless name dropping, but, uh, it just was like,

Jasmin: Well, I just hope Moby wasn't there the same day as Natalie. Okay, go ahead.

Zach: Uh, no comment on that.

Yeah, let me think of...I'll try and think of a different celebrity for the next time I tell that story. Anyway, it was just an exciting thing. And it felt like there was all this energy. So then we went on tour in early 2020, and we sold out all the venues that we'd been in the last time we were around.

And we were like on the east coast. And we were like, this is it. Like, it's time to step up. Like next time we come through, we need to book bigger places. Cause it's like building. And then that tour ended on, um, March 6th, 2020. So everybody had their own version of the pandemic, completely changing momentum and direction.

And we certainly had our version of it. So this tour that we're doing next month is like us dipping our toe back and coming back to the East Coast, definitely with some humility being like we sure hope we can still have good showings at the venues that we did. But we're really excited. I spent the pandemic writing a fifth Crossword Show.

It is, it is like the biggest and most ambitious of any of the ones that I've written so far. And I'm really excited to do it. It's kind of about the experience of creating a major, like one piece of major creative output during the pandemic and I'm just excited. So, yeah, so we're doing a, it's just over a week of shows on the East Coast, like in new England to tune up a bit in some small cities like Portsmouth, New Hampshire and Brunswick, Maine.

And then we're doing one show in Boston at our favorite venue, The WBUR CitySpace, which is just like state of the art tech. Our show has a slide show, that's a big part of it. And so it's awesome to perform there. And then we're doing two shows in New York City and one show in Arlington, Virginia, right outside of DC.

So yeah, that's, that's the tour.

Jasmin: We will definitely put information about that in the show notes. That is so exciting. I definitely wanna see this live at some point soon, so I will keep a close eye, uh, on the dates and the locations.

Zach: Lifetime guest list fam. Oh, yes. Now that we're related, just speak the word and you're VIP. Perma VIP.

Jasmin: Okay, thank you. I'm totally gonna cash in on that. I'm so excited. That's the best thing, that the best perk I've gotten excepted a little, except for the little dog purse that my Chihuahua is currently in right now. Other than that, the VIP thing. Yeah, it's pretty great. All right. Well, I'm hoping you'll stay on for the bonus segment so I could talk a little bit more about your weird brain, but I just wanna thank you so much for taking the time out today.

And before you leave, can you tell our listeners how they can find you online, follow your work and support you?

Zach: Yes, absolutely. And I'll say in the spirit of bringing it back around to where it was at the beginning, it's so nice to get to say some of the stuff that I said. I had to be a little bit brave to say some of it.

And like it's downright therapeutic. To not have to just sort of like quietly roll my eyes all the time at people I love like ordering lamb in restaurants is just really like...what a...it's an incredible thing that you provide by making room for these conversations. My social media stuff is all Zach Sherwin @ZachSherwin, um, with a CH Zach with a ch.

And I would really direct people to the crossword show website, which is just www.crosswordshow.com. Or as we like to say at our shows, when we put up a slide of the URL, [www dot crossword show dot com](http://www.dotcrosswordshow.com). And so, uh, but all our tour dates are there and like pictures of people we've had on the show and information about what it is and our email list and how to book us and all that stuff. Crosswordshow.com.

Jasmin: Oh my God. The crosswords how it's like kind of blowing my mind. I'm like staring at your bio while you're saying that. And like, it just was like, why does it say crosswords how instead of crossword show!?! I'm confused. Oh my God. That's fabulous. Well, Zach with an H, as a Jasmin no E I totally feel that pain where...you gotta get both email addresses, by the way.

Like, if you're Zach at something, you gotta tell your web person to get the K one too, you're missing emails. That's my advice to you as an older person, who's like four months older than you now. Yeah, you're welcome.

Zach: That's some of that secret wisdom they share on your 42nd birthday, obviously.

Jasmin: Exactly.

Zach: Thank you for breaking the taboo.

Jasmin: Yeah, of course. You're welcome. All right, well thank you for joining us today. Stick around for bonus and definitely come back sometime soon and talk to us about what you've been up to.

Zach: Thank you, Jasmin