Shmanners 267: William Dorsey Swann

Published June 29th, 2021 Listen here on themcelroy.family

[theme music plays]

Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you're listening to *Shmanners*!

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette...

Travis: For ordinary occasions! Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear.

Travis: How are you?

Teresa: I'm good! Fine. I mean, I'm—

Travis: Oh boy. Oh!

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Whoa! Slippery slope. Where are we going?

Teresa: My foot is broken.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Um, but, you know, still alive.

Travis: This is true. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Teresa: And, uh... I count that as a win.

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Gonna have to get a cast on there.

Teresa: Probably.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Or a boot and some crutches. Who knows? Who knows?

Travis: Something. Okay.

Teresa: I will keep you, dear listeners, updated.

Travis: So, um... [holding back laughter] who or what are we talking about this week? [laughs]

Teresa: Oh. Well, someone who is a champion, was a champion of perseverance.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Which is why I talked about my foot being broken, but yet...

Travis: Continue on.

Teresa: I do continue.

Travis: I had a teacher in high school tell me that actually the correct pronunciation is per-severance.

Teresa: Wha—?

Travis: Yeah, I know. No—no human being says—maybe that's how they say it in the UK?

Teresa: Maybe. I mean, like refrigerator? Per-severance?

Travis: I know.

Teresa: I don't know.

Travis: I don't know. Also, I think the same teacher said it's actually

diction-er-y.

Teresa: Hmm.

Travis: And not dictionary.

Teresa: Diction-ry.

Travis: Diction-er-y. I don't know.

Teresa: Perhaps.

Travis: [blows raspberry]

Teresa: I had a geology professor in college who said my-an-aws instead of

mayonnaise. [laughs quietly]

Travis: Huh. Okay.

Teresa: But he was from the UK.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: So...

Travis: Man, some people say things different, am I right?

Teresa: [laughs loudly]

Travis: Okay, so who are we talking about? Who is this person? I know—I don't

even know their name. [laughs quietly]

Teresa: Okay! Well, we are going to talk about William Dorsey Swann.

Travis: Huh, okay.

Teresa: Yeah. This was suggested by our listener, Hannah.

Travis: Thank you, Hannah.

Teresa: Thank you, Hannah. Centuries before—no, sorry. One century. More than a century before Stonewall, there was William Dorsey Swann, the original queen of drag.

Travis: Okay! I don't know the name, I don't know the story, I'm excited to find out.

Teresa: Well, good! Well, good.

Travis: I'm sure, much like our listeners, pins and needles.

Teresa: Yeah. Uh, this is a continuation in our series of people you should know, but don't, so here we are. Alex wants to note that a lot of this research is directly from a book that will be coming out next year by Channing Gerard Joseph, titled *House of Swann: Where Slaves Became Queens and Changed the World*.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: So, uh, check out—

Travis: Great title.

Teresa: I know, right? Check out their website. Um, and we do want to say that all of the articles mentioning William Dorsey Swann list their pronouns as he/him, so that's what we were able to locate and that is what we are going to say.

Travis: Okay. And I'm guessing, because one, you said century, and you're using past tense—

Teresa: Right.

Travis: That William Dorsey Swann is no longer alive.

Teresa: Correct.

Travis: So we cannot ask them what their pronouns are, so we have to go off the information we have. Got it.

Teresa: Exactly. Um—

Travis: Oh! Uh, and before we get started, we quote a couple articles in here, the articles, the quotes themselves originally contained some outdated offensive terminology for people of color, and so we will be editing those out. So, if you hear us say "blank," that is why.

Teresa: And—okay. So, here's the thing. Over the course of his life, Swann would endure slavery, the Civil War, police surveillance, torture and imprisonment, and more injustices than you can count. But, he was probably the very first American activist to lead a queer resistance group, and he was the first known person to dub themselves the queen of drag, AKA a drag queen.

Travis: Okay! I'm... hooked, reel me in!

Teresa: Okay!

Travis: You know what I mean?

Teresa: Uh, like many of the time period, we don't have a lot of exact dates regarding his early life. Um, we know he was born around 1858. Again, didn't have a specific birth date on record, because he was born into slavery, in Hancock, Washington County, Maryland.

And we know that he was the fifth oldest child in a family of about 13 children.

Travis: Phew!

Teresa: Right. Um, and we also know that he began his life as property of a white woman named Ann Murray, and was living on her plantation when Union soldiers marched through in the winter of 1862. Um, and so Swann and his family were freed that winter by the Emancipation Proclamation, which went into effect January 1st, 1863.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And, uh, quite luckily, his parents were able to buy their own farm in the DC community after the Civil War, and down the line, Swann was able to find a job as a hotel waiter.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: So, like I said, uh, between 1863 and the 1880's, there's not a lot.

Travis: Okay, this is where it gets a little fuzzy.

Teresa: This is the fuzzy part. Um, but once we head into the 1880's and 1890's, this is when we find evidence that William Dorsey Swann began to organize gatherings and dances for formerly-enslaved men to dress in drag.

Travis: Okay!

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: Was this—do we know if this was, like, a common thing? Or is it, like—

Teresa: Uh, well, it was not. It was not. In fact, when the party was raided by police on April 13th, 1888, there was a headline that read "Blank dive raided, 13 Black men dressed as women surprised at supper and arrested."

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: That was the headline in the paper, and I have to assume that if this was a common occurrence, it probably wouldn't be front-page news.

Travis: Okay. I'm very interested by this, because—well, one, it's an interesting story, so far.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: But it also was like, I wanna know, like, what was the impetus for this thing? Was it just like, "Well, I have these friends that we used to do this thing, or that I know are interested in this thing, and we have nowhere to do it, and so I'm gonna organize a party"?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: That has to be it, right?

Teresa: I mean, pretty much. So, um, as we mentioned before, uh, the author of the book where a lot of this information comes from, Channing Joseph, um, he told the BBC that he'd never heard of a drag ball happening that long ago.

Travis: Mm-hmm.

Teresa: And he knew that this was something he needed to know more about.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Um, and it—it was really awesome to find that this is—this person, Swann, is one of the first known instances of violent resistance in the name of LBGTQAI+, uh, rights. And Joseph basically dedicated himself to researching the life of William Dorsey Swann.

So, here's some disheartening and interesting information.

Travis: Oh no!

Teresa: Uh, so when you think about homosexuality specifically being illegal, about what time period do you think of?

Travis: I mean, up until... oof. Okay, I know that this is one of those things where I'm going to say it and it's not right.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: But I'm going to go later than I would normally guess.

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: 1950.

Teresa: You are going to be so disappointed.

Travis: Why?

Teresa: Maybe—maybe not. 2003, in the United States.

Travis: Illegal?!

Teresa: Uh, the Supreme Court decision of Lawrence V. Texas overruled a previous case from 1986 stating that homosexuality was illegal, even in the privacy of one's home.

Travis: Hoo! Okay. Okay. Okay.

Teresa: In 2003.

Travis: Okay. So—okay. I'm very disappointed.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Uh, it—in—

Teresa: Disappointed and surprised, or not surprised?

Travis: Well, here's the thing. So, what I was going to say it, when you said 2003 my immediate response was gonna be, "Oh, so is this one of things where it was, like, on the books, but, like, nobody was enfor—" But then you said 1986!

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: It clearly was being enforced, because there was a case about it.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: And it was upheld in 1986!

Teresa: Yep. It was struck down in 2003.

Travis: Oh boy. Oh man!

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Ugh! Ugh!

Teresa: So-

Travis: And you know—here's—

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: —a little soapbox, just for a second.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: I've seen some people, specifically a few young folk, occasionally say, like, "Why are we even doing Pri—like, why is Pride even a thing?" 2003!

Teresa: That's—yeah. Yeah. When did you graduate high school?

Travis: I graduated in 2002.

Teresa: I graduated in 2003.

Travis: Ain't that long ago. Okay.

Teresa: Nope. Nope, nope, nope. Okay. Um, back to William Dorsey Swann. Not having it, right? Um, the Washington Post article that Channing Joseph discovered was far from the only instance of Swann's party-based civil disobedience. William Dorsey Swann threw countless parties and drag balls, all in secret, to protect the identities of those who came to participate. Um, his feeling that a queer Black space needed to be created, protected, and celebrated. And so if no one else was gonna do it, Swann was on it.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um-

Travis: He sounds cool.

Teresa: Yeah, totally! Uh, always wanting to protect his guests, he was very careful about how he got the word out. Uh, invitations were often guarded and whispered among—among young Black men participants, uh, and Swann was even—

Travis: So much of this—I mean, it also just keeps hitting me wave after wave to think about the level of danger that he would have been in at this time, right?

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: 'Cause we're still talking about, like, 1890's, right? And here's this young Black man who is, like, throwing parties for men to dress in drag. Like, so much of this is, like—the idea that even if it, like—there's so much at risk here, not just from people, but the system, everything, and him still saying, like, "But there needs to be a place for this."

Teresa: Exactly.

Travis: Like, this needs to be able to happen. The bravery that that took is immense and impressive.

Teresa: And not only the fact that it was so brave, but also that this is hurting nobody, right? Like, it's just—it's a fun thing to do on a Saturday night.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: And one, how great is it that people really put—you know, put themselves on the line for—for their generations, and for their peers, but also, like, let people live!

Travis: Well, it's just another highlighting of the importance of identity, right?

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: Because, like, this is an example of... they—they all—sounds like all the participants, right? Are putting themselves in immense danger to do it. But their desire to be able to express themselves and to, like, be themselves around their friends and to have this thing that was for them, right? Like, the danger... was not as important as expressing themselves, right?

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: They had a lot to lose in doing this, and they still did it. That's the importance of identity!

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Like... yes.

Teresa: Yes. Okay. During this time, these events, is when Swann began to refer to himself as the queen of the drag community, and so this is the—

Travis: I wonder where the—the actual word, like, "drag," why it's drag.

Teresa: Well, I—I'm gonna explain a little bit.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um, so queen was less based on appearance at that point, but it meant leader.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And the parties were referred to in slang as drags.

Travis: Okay. Like...

Teresa: So, the leader of the party was the drag queen, the queen of drag.

Travis: Okay. Okay. I'm also reading here, 'cause I looked it up, that the definition probably originated in the theater of the 1800's where male performers wore petticoats to perform as women, and their petticoats would drag on the floor, and so they referred to dressing up as women as putting on their drags.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: That's another one I found.

Teresa: That's another one. So, there is a very famous picture of Swann himself wearing a uh, you know—

Travis: Oh, wait. Also—

Teresa: Okay?

Travis: —to yours, it may have been the term was slang for grand rag, which was historically used for a masquerade ball. A party.

Teresa: Okay!

Travis: So, grand rag became drag, and that was the masquerade ball. So, there you go. It's one of those two things, according to Wikipedia!

Teresa: Thanks, Wikipedia. There's a famous picture of Swann wearing a very—a beautiful smile, and looking... very happy, um, in a big bonnet-like headpiece, along with a ruffled gown and a large decorative fan.

Travis: Ooh, lovely.

Teresa: And everyone who came to these parties had to be dressed to the nines, right? Um, in fact, here's another police report—

Travis: Dressed to the nines, another idiom.

Teresa: Idiom!

Travis: I have no idea what that means. Why isn't it to the tens? You'd think it'd be the ten—okay.

Teresa: I don't know. Write it down. Okay, so, uh, a raid on January 14th, 1887, the Washington Critic reported, "Six blank men dressed in elegant female attire were arraigned in the dock at the police court this morning on a charge of being suspicious persons. They nearly all had on low neck and short sleeve silk dresses, several of them with trains, as well as corsets, bustles, long hose and slippers, everything that goes to make a female's dress complete."

That's awesome.

Travis: I can't wait to learn more about Swann, but first, how about a thank you note for our sponsors?

[theme music plays]

Travis: You know what, folks? I wanna say thank you to DoorDash. Because sometimes, you know, you've got dinner figured out, right? Maybe you're gonna order dinner. Uh, or you're gonna make it or whatever. But I'll tell ya, there's nothing—where, there are more frustrating things.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: But on the list of very frustrating things would include to me getting home from the store and realizing you did not get the thing that you actually went to the store to get.

Teresa: Oh, man. I hate that!

Travis: Right?

Teresa: You need it—like, you're looking through, you're out of deodorant, you need that deodorant for tomorrow. I mean, or in our case, diapers and baby wipes.

Travis: Oh yeah.

Teresa: It always seems like we have them everywhere, and we're out.

Travis: And we also have a problem getting one and not the other.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: 'Cause it's like, "Well, we just bought that one, so there should be plenty—we used those, too? Oh no!"

Teresa: "Oh no!"

Travis: Well, good news, 'cause DoorDash not only connects you with the restaurants you love, you can also get grocery essentials with DoorDash. You get drinks, snacks, other household items, delivered in under an hour. Ordering is easy. You open the DoorDash app, choose what you want from where you want, and your items will be left safely outside your door with the contactless delivery drop off setting.

So, for a limited time, our listeners can get 25% off and zero delivery fees on their first order of 15 dollars or more when you download the DoorDash app and enter code "shmannerspod," all one word. That's 25% off, up to a 10 dollar value, and zero delivery fees on your first order when you download the DoorDash app in the app store and enter code "shmannerspod." Subject to change, terms apply.

I also wanna tell you about Curology. Uh, you know, [hesitantly] I have had a bit of a skin journey.

That's a terrible way to put it.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: That's a terrible phrase.

Teresa: You have psoriasis and occasional acne.

Travis: Yeah, I've had breakouts since I was, like, you know, since I turned 12, 13, right? And I still get 'em now, 37! It's frustrating! [laughs quietly] I don't like it. But luckily, I have started working with Curology, and Curology has built a customized prescription formula with three active ingredients picked for me to tackle my skincare needs, to help with my dry skin, help with my breakouts. It's incredible.

Curology matches you with a licensed dermatology provider who gets to know your skin, and if it's a good fit, you'll get a customized prescription cream to address your acne, fine lines, dark spots, and more, all shipped right to your door. It's wonderful, it's effective, it doesn't dry my skin out like some products I've used before. It's great.

I highly recommend it if you, like me, have some issues that you've been dealing with seemingly forever. So, take control of acne, dark spots, breakouts, or whatever your unique concerns may be, with a powerful skincare treatment made just for you today. Go to curology.com/shmanners for a free 30 day trial, and just pay for shipping and handling. That C-U-R-O-L-O-G-Y.com/shmanners to unlock your free 30 day trial. See curology.com for all the details.

And here we have a commercial message from Christina Faulkner, who wants you to check out geeky hand-dyed yarns at Merryandmae.etsy.com. That's M-E-R-Y-A-N-D-M-A-E.etsy.com. "Merry and Mae Fiber Arts is an indie dyeing shop started by a nerdy librarian. We dye yarn inspired by fandoms and geekery, including music, books, audio dramas, and more. We can also dye custom colors inspired by your D&D characters."

Teresa: Ooh! It's enough to get you back into your knitting, huh?

Travis: I actually just ordered some more, so... yes.

Teresa: Nice!

Travis: So check out merryandmae.etsy.com for geeky hand-dyed yarns.

[music plays]

Justin: Hi, everybody! My name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: We're both doctors, and—

Sydnee: Nope! Just me.

Justin: Okay, well, Sydnee's a doctor, and I'm a medical enthusiast—

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: —and we create *Sawbones*: a marital tour of misguided medicine.

Sydnee: Every week, I dig through the annals of medical history to bring you the wildest, grossest, sometimes dumbest tales of ways we've tried to treat people throughout history.

Justin: And lately, we do a lot of modern fake medicine... because everything's a disaster. But it's slightly less of a disaster every Friday, right here on Maximumfun.org as we bring you *Sawbones*: a marital tour of misguided medicine. And remember:

Sydnee: Don't drill a hole in your head.

Travis: Okay, Teresa. Tell me more about William Dorsey Swann.

Teresa: You may have been surprised about the ruling that we discussed in 2003, but I don't think that you'll be surprised that toxic masculinity was rampant at this time. [laughs]

Travis: Uh-huh.

Teresa: Of American US history.

Travis: Uh-huh.

Teresa: Um, it was very interesting to read some of these quotes and be like, "That sounds like something that I might have heard in a 90's sitcom," or something—it's very hard—no, I take that back. It's not hard to believe.

Travis: No.

Teresa: Uh, that the toxic masculinity, especially in media and the press, really had an adverse effect on this community that we're talking about.

Travis: Oh, absolutely! This is the—okay. This is the inverse of—of the importance of identity, right? Identity is about you, and toxic masculinity and a lot of toxic stuff is about the other, right? Of saying, "Well, the thing you do makes me uncomfortable, so you shouldn't be allowed to do it."

And toxic masculinity is especially dangerous, because it is what you're told is supposed to happen, right? What you believe, and not about, like... expressing yourself, or being comfortable being yourself. It's the opposite of identity, in many ways.

Teresa: Right. Um, and so the press coverage wasn't good for really anyone's mental health, but the only thing—

Travis: It so rarely is.

Teresa: Yeah. [laughs quietly]

Travis: But go on.

Teresa: The thing it did do was get out the word to anyone who might have been interested in joining Swann's secretive safe space, right? Um, and so it had—it had the opposite effect that the media wanted. Instead of condemning these people for their joy and seeking out their own identities, it actually made it more popular.

Travis: Well, that's—that's a good—that's an unexpected plus.

Teresa: Uh, but law enforcement kept cracking down.

Travis: Mm-hmm.

Teresa: Um, in 18—

Travis: [sarcastically] Because I'm sure they didn't have any bigger problems.

Teresa: Of course not.

Travis: [sarcastically] 'Cause I'm sure they didn't have anything else they could've been doing!

Teresa: Uh, in 1896, he was falsely convicted and sentenced to 10 months in jail for, quote, "keeping a disorderly house."

Travis: What?!

Teresa: Which is a clumsy euphemism for running a brothel.

Travis: Ohhh. Okay. Okay, that makes... I mean, not sense, but it makes more sense than being arrested for having a messy house.

Teresa: Right. [laughs]

Travis: Which is what I thought it meant. Okay.

Teresa: And, uh, upon his sentencing, Swann actually made another historical move. He requested a pardon from President Grover Cleveland, making him the very first American on record to pursue legal and political action to defend the LGBTQAI+ communities right to gather.

Travis: Okay!

Teresa: It was denied.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: The pardon was denied.

Travis: Still, historical.

Teresa: Yeah. So, Swann is working hard, doin' what he needs to do, what he wants to do for his community. But... in 1900, he began to retire from the drag scene, uh, because all that, like, violence and aggression takes a toll on you.

Travis: Yeah! It sounds like he was constantly being judged, constantly being pursued by law enforcement, constantly being vilified in the press. You know that there's people in everyday life, right? Who would see him and yell stuff, and maybe, you know, threaten him or throw stuff—like, that's... a lot.

Teresa: It is a lot. Um, so Swann passed away in Hancock, Maryland in 1925, um, and because nothing gold can stay, after his death, local officials burned his house.

Travis: What?!

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: What?!

Teresa: I think it's—it was part of this attempt to erase, right? Erase who you don't agree with, that you don't understand. Just erasure.

Travis: Oh my God.

Teresa: Yeah. But... they could not burn the impact that William Dorsey Swann had on the drag community. So, today, over 100 years since his last known ball, the houses of the contemporary drag scene still have the same basic format of the House of Swann's. Um, there are still competitive dances with exaggerated pantomime that are organized around family, like groups led by mothers and queens. Drag mother is still a term used to denote rank within groups of ball participants.

And, you know, we, like I mentioned before, use the term "queen" pretty loosely today, but back in Swann's time it was reserved for someone in a position of power, and honor, and leadership in the community, making William Dorsey Swann the ultimate queen.

Travis: Excellent. Excellent! Thank you, Hannah. Thank you for suggesting this topic. I love learning about people that, you know, cis, straight, white, male history didn't decide was important enough to teach at school.

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: Uh, because one, they're always incredibly interesting, and two, it's, like, so impactful to the world around us. That fills in so many gaps of, like—

Teresa: It really does.

Travis: —"Oh, this makes a lot of sense. Oh, okay, now I get—" like—[sighs]

Teresa: Once again, the book, *House of Swann: Where Slaves Became Queens and Changed the World*, by Channing Gerard Joseph, is set to come out in 2022, so check that out!

Travis: I definitely will. Thank you. Thank you to Alex, our researcher, without whom we would not be able to do this show. Thank you to you, Teresa, for week after week educating this goobus, who I—I guess I can't even figure out how to figure out which episodes we're doing!

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: But this was fascinating, and I really appreciated it. Thank you to you, our listeners, for listening, and for submitting episode ideas. If you have an idea for a topic we could talk about, you can email us, shmannerscast@gmail.com. Um, if we do an episode where we need your listener-submitted questions, we ask for those @shmannerscast on Twitter.

Umm... oh! We have the *My Brother, My Brother, and Me* virtual event. If you're listening on Friday the 25th, it's tonight at 9PM Eastern Time. Tickets are 10 dollars, and you can get those tickets at bit.ly/mbmbamvirtual. It is Summer Boy-B-Q-themed, 'cause we're three summer boys talkin' about our summer joys.

Um, we're gonna have Sawbones as the opener, and if you can't make it tonight and you still wanna get tickets, video on demand will be available for two weeks after the show ends. Uh, just a couple weeks until *The Adventure Zone: Crystal Kingdom* is out. That's our newest graphic novel. Uh, you can go preorder that at theadventurezonecomic.com. Um, let's see. Oh! Go to mcelroymerch.com. We got

some new merch there, including a pin of the month that features Griffin's beautiful face saying "I also want a sword," and that benefits—the proceeds from that benefit The Trevor Project, which provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth. Um, and we've got the "Hear that, babe? We're legends," shirt, a portion of which also goes to The Trevor Project. So, go check that out. Happy Pride, everyone!

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: Thank you for joining us.

Teresa: Also, thank you to Brent "brentalfloss" Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. Also, thank you to Kayla M. Wasil for our Twitter thumbnail art, once again, @shmannerscast. And thank you to Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for the cover picture of our fan-run Facebook group, *Shmanners* Fanners.

Travis: And that's gonna do it for us, so join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required!

Travis: You're listening to *Shmanners*...

Teresa: Manners, Shmanners. Get it.

[theme music plays]

[chord]

Maximumfun.org.
Comedy and Culture.
Artist Owned.
Audience Supported.