

Wonderful! Ep238 Wild Stories About Music Stuff

Published July 27th, 2022

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[theme music plays]

Rachel: Hi, this is Rachel McElroy.

Griffin: Hey, what's up? This is Griffin McElroy.

Rachel: And this is *Wonderful!*

Griffin: This is a show we talk about things that are good, things we like, things we're into!

Rachel: Uh-huh.

Griffin: The- Only the best for you, the cream of the crop. And you're hearing this from the past, um, as we jet set across the globe on our way to—

Rachel: Slash country.

Griffin: Slash country, which is part of the globe.

Rachel: True.

Griffin: As we make our way to our new home of Washington, D.C., the room where it happens. And we're so happy that you have chosen to be here with us right now on this special day.

Rachel: I just... See, "The Room Where it Happens," was it New York at the time?

Griffin: Uh, I was speaking sort of more, just sort of, like, um, figurative... Figuratively.

Rachel: I didn't know if we were like, goin' direct *Hamilton*, like, verse.

Griffin: I guess it was in New York then...

Rachel: Mm-hmm.

Griffin: Well, okay, you're right. The joke was bad, and I should feel bad.

Rachel: [laughs] Oh god.

Griffin: I think that's what the takeaway is.

Rachel: This is gonna be a tough one, I think.

Griffin: This is. Listen, this is... Let's... Let's really put the tiger on the table and yell at it.

Rachel and I have been embroiled in a... I would call it full-blown... It's not a battle, because it's not two-sided, right?

Rachel: I know.

Griffin: We have been... We have been just very, very uh—

Rachel: Under siege.

Griffin: Under siege from a contractor who will remain nameless.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: In the Austin... In the greater Austin area.

Rachel: In the heating and cooling and plumbing and everything that can ruin your life uh—

Griffin: Department.

Rachel: Yes.

Griffin: Uh, who in the last two and a half weeks has broken our air conditioning, gone two weeks without repairing it, during which time there was complete radio silence.

And then came in and installed a whole new system we had to pay for—

Rachel: Yesterday.

Griffin: ... yesterday. And then today the ceiling is leaking because they didn't put it in right, and now they're givin' us the runaround again.

It is... It is a level of rage that I'm unaccustomed to.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Obviously, I feel the same sort of latent background rage that every, I think, sort of online person feels all the time.

But this is very concentrated and it's very focused and it's also... It's very toothless. There's like nothing we can- There's nothing we can do.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Aside from leaving what I can only imagine will be a full-blown, chemical warfare carpet bomb Yelp review that will be my magnum opus.

Rachel: You know, back in the day my parents used to write letters to the Better Business Bureau. I don't know if that's still on the table, but that is a thing that I would be willing to do.

Griffin: And it's... I'm uncomfortable being that way, because I'm... It's antithetical to the type of person I am and the type of vibe that I try to adhere to.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: But this fucking Yelp review—

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: ... is going to- I am going to get a fuckin' like, Peabody Award or something for this Yelp review.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: They will publish it, a review, in the *New York Times*. It will get a hundred percent good score, and they'll write things like, "The rage of a generation is—"

Rachel: I really, like, because of the level we- of stress, we are experiencing currently given all the things that are happening for us that are monumental, it is an unfortunate time for somebody to come at us.

Because we have like a very short amount of patience.

Griffin: Well—

Rachel: But when it started leaking today, I had that feeling that the people in the medieval times had where I just wanted to go burn their office to the ground. [laughs]

Griffin: Which we would never do.

Rachel: Which we would never do.

Griffin: But we're stressed enough as it is, without having goddamn Marmaduke come into our house and just like, kick a big bucket of paint fuckin' every-

Like, we're trying to do some shit here. Stop breaking our shit, please. I'm begging you.

Rachel: I have heard that this happens when you decide to sell a house. Like inevitably something will happen right before you like, are ready to put it on the market.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: But I just... I don't know. I was kinda hopeful that it wouldn't be, you know, this.

Griffin: Yeah. We... It's... Obviously it's... It's whatever. It's small... It's a small deal in the grand scheme of things but it is...

There was a point, a couple of weeks ago when we started dealing with this where we were like, "Hey I just went over the top."

And you were like, "Yeah, I also just went over..."

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: This AC thing has just pushed us just past that precipice—

Rachel: Yeah...

Griffin: ... of stress.

Uh—

Rachel: So all that to say—

Griffin: We're... We're fightin' to keep it posi.

Rachel: When Griffin and I entered the studio, there were concerns, I think. But I am excited to get started.

Griffin: Mm!

Rachel: And get in the positive space.

Griffin: Do you wanna try, like just as sort of an *amuse-bouche* do you wanna give me a Small Wonder?

Rachel: Yeah, I think we should do that.

Griffin: Okay.

Rachel: Uh, I will say that as part of my farewell tour of Austin last night I got to go see Brandi Carlile at Austin City Limits—

Griffin: Fun.

Rachel: ... which was so great. It's such a nice like, bookend. You and I have been lucky enough to see a few shows there.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: And I have been to a handful of tapings at this point.

And so it just felt like a real nice way to say like, "Hey, thanks Austin, there's a lot about this town that's good, and I get to do one of those things." and that was great.

Griffin: I'm gonna say, a cold shower after hot work.

Rachel: [laughs] Yeah. I don't know that I've ever intentionally taken a cold shower.

Griffin: I think this... Honest to god, I think it has been, being without air conditioning—

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: It gets sweltering hot in our bathroom.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Because it's, like, not ventilated at all. And so the Sun shines in there through these big windows and just like, turns it into a convection oven.

Rachel: Yeah. [laughs]

Griffin: And so like, we've been working nonstop to get everything packed up and doing a bunch of stuff outside.

Today I hauled everything up from our backyard into the garage and was just like, the shweatiest [sic] Freddy ever.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: But I hopped in that shower, turned it right down to cold, just for like, 90 seconds. Just a pretty short shower, just a little scrub and go.

Rachel: Okay, yeah.

Griffin: And it was exhilarating.

What?

Rachel: No. I just... I like... I like... I like that you had that solution for yourself.

Griffin: Wh- Of pouring cold water on my body?

Rachel: Well, and kind of, you know, getting your head back in the game after some tough work.

Griffin: Oh, I mean it wasn't from like... I know some people do it to get unhorny, I guess?

Rachel: [bursts out laughing]

Griffin: That's never made sense to me.

Rachel: That's not what I was sug- That's not what I was suggesting.

Griffin: Oh, okay.

Rachel: I was saying you were doing some difficult physical labor.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: And I think a lot of people would be like, "Well, that's it for the day."

And you were like, "Know what? Cold shower. Right back at it."

Griffin: Yeah. Except the "it" that I'm getting right back to is being grumpy on a telephone with a contractor and then sitting down and talking about good stuff with you.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: My beautiful wife.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Do you wanna do your thing, now?

Rachel: I do. And I wanna kind of take you on my journey—

Griffin: Okay, you just—

Rachel: ... towards this topic.

Griffin: You keep...

Rachel: [clapping in slow rhythm]

Griffin: You keep quietly clapping with every word and I'm excited where it's going.

Rachel: 'Cause typically what I would do is I would reveal my topic.

Griffin: Yes.

Rachel: And I would go on to talk about it.

Griffin: How... What other option is there?

Rachel: [laughs] Instead I wanna kind of take you on the journey and then have you help me decide what my topic is.

Griffin: Pshh. Great.

Rachel: [laughs] Because what happened was, I started out with one topic and then at the end I got excited about the other topic I discovered during my research.

So, let's just start out—

Griffin: This is fucking fun.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Already.

Rachel: Minute one, I'm gonna say, I wanted to look up the story behind "Ba-da-bap-bap-ba, I'm lovin' it."

Griffin: The Mc-uh-Donald's...?

Rachel: Yes.

Griffin: Okay...

Rachel: Yes. I think about how this is a real thread, kind of through the McElroy comedy.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: I have noticed. It is not uncommon to listen to a McElroy product and hear somebody reference this song.

And I will say, also, I have listened to a lot of other comedy podcasts, and everybody does this. [laughs]

Griffin: It's a funny way to say you like something.

Rachel: Yes. the very nature of like, saying that you love something, just kind of, I feel like, motivates—

Griffin: Why say I love the thing... Like I watched *Triple R* last night. Why would I say, "I loved it," versus "I'm ba-da-bap-bap-ba loving it."

Rachel: Exactly.

Griffin: It's way more fun to do the latter.

Rachel: It's fun! And it's difficult because it's not like I love that song as a piece of art. But I just like... there's something very satisfying about it.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: So I wanted to kind of find the story about it. Do you know anything about it?

Griffin: The "ba-da-bap-bap-ba loving it"?

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Of course not.

Rachel: So you like... Like if I asked you who sang it first?

Griffin: Prince.

Rachel: [laughs] Okay.

Griffin: Prince?

Rachel: We got a lotta work to do.

So this is like... This is the longest-lasting campaign. This started in 2003 and you will still see this today in commercials on occasion. Like it is—

Griffin: I feel like you don't get as much of the "ba-da-bap-bap-ba", like, acapella performance?

Rachel: But it'll just say, "I'm lovin' it", at the end?

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Or it'll just play like a little jingle, like "bum-bum-bing-bing-bing" with like a piano or something?

Rachel: Yeah, uh-huh.

Griffin: Okay.

Rachel: So before that the longest-running ad campaigns, 1967 to 1971, was, "McDonald's is your kind of place." [laughs]

Which I just... I like as a slogan, it's just like, "You would like to eat here", period.

Griffin: I don't know that I've ever walked into any establishment and been like, "this is my kinda place!"

Rachel: "My kinda place!" Uh, 1984 to 1988 was, "It's a good time for the great taste of McDonald's."

Griffin: Okay.

Rachel: Which I... You know, okay.

Griffin: No, it sucks. It's awful. Both of those are so terrible.

Rachel: So 2003, I think early 2000s when there really was a lot of mounting concern about fast food and so a lot of fast-food entities were trying to figure out like, how to get people back.

And so McDonald's held a competition between 14 international ad agencies. And the firm that ended up winning was this tiny firm located in a Munich suburb in Germany.

And the idea was, "Ich liebe es," which translates to, "I love it." And they were like, "Sounds great. Thanks, Germany!" [laughs]

Griffin: Did the... But... Hold on. Did the firm... Did they also come up with the "ba-da-bap-bap-ba"? Or just the word... Literally the words, "I love it."

'Cause that's not even it, guys.

Rachel: It was kind of... So it was a combination of things. So what ended up happening, after "I love it." So, Mona Davis, as a... like a music entity... like, helped deliver that five-note thing, or whatever it is.

Griffin: Oh, okay. I see.

Rachel: Yeah. yeah. Uh, and then once that was all packaged up, that was when they brought in... Justin Timberlake.

Griffin: Wait... Really? He did the original, "Ba-da-bap-bap-ba, I'm lovin' it"?

Rachel: Yeah, not only did he do that. This is what was kind of genius about it. And this is not unusual for Justin Timberlake if you think about his, uh, properties.

"I'm Lovin' It" was a full Timberlake song that was developed and released in advance of the campaign.

Griffin: Th-Th-This was a transmedia entertainment event, is what you're telling me?

Rachel: So *MTV News*, in August 2003, reported that "I'm Lovin' It" was leaked to the radio and internet—

Griffin: [laughs]

Rachel: And so he's gonna release it this fall. He partnered with The Neptunes, which was a duo of Pharrell and Chad Hugo to produce the track, and they developed a music video.

And then a three-song, "I'm Lovin' It" EP was released.

Griffin: [incredulously] In-In partnership with McDonald's or... ?

Rachel: No. So this... It was all part of the strategy. Like, I mean, the start of it was McDonald's and the motivation was McDonald's.

Griffin: Yes.

Rachel: When it was released though, it was explicitly released as a Justin Timberlake property.

So Steve Stout, who is a music industry veteran, market executive, who introduced McDonald's to Timberlake, described it as, quote, "reverse engineering."

Where you would boost the credibility of a brand's message by first putting it in a pop culture form that isn't connected in any way to a brand, and then promote it before the campaign.

And then start promoting the marketing slogan. So there's like, momentum, with it and it feels like a, "Oh they got that hip new song in their commercial."

Griffin: But they fed Timberlake that like, five-note—

Rachel: Yes.

Griffin: ... like, ostinato with the—

Rachel: Yes.

Griffin: That's fucking bonkers!

Rachel: There's a whole music video. You can find it online. It's like him runnin' around chasing this woman through New York and like—

Griffin: Well that's... That's fucking menacing.

Rachel: I know. [laughs] It's... It is kind of menacing.

Griffin: J-Timbs.

Rachel: Because it shows her like, getting in and out of public transportation and him like, racing to catch up with her.

Griffin: Jesus Christ.

Rachel: And every time she gets out of a subway car, he's like, there. Like, "Hey, it's me. Aren't you enticed?"

Griffin: You gotta cut that out, Timbo.

Rachel: So, um, this was huge. Timberlake got an estimated \$6 million from McDonald's.

Griffin: Did they just pay in, like... Like, hamburgers or... ?

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: You think?

Rachel: Just the dollar menu. Just—

Griffin: Uh-huh.

Rachel: Uh-huh.

Griffin: Did Farrell get his cut of tasty burgers or... ?

Rachel: This is what's interesting. And so this has started leading me down a different path.

Griffin: Uh-oh.

Rachel: So there's a *Pitchfork* article that came out about the controversy, which is... You know I told you about like the German company, and the German music house—

Griffin: Mm-hmm. Yes.

Rachel: ... and Timberlake and all this.

So Pusha T came out, who was part of a rap duo at the time with his brother, and said he was involved. That he put together the "Ba-da-bap-bap-ba, I'm lovin' it."

That like, those notes and that whole initial concept, that he was involved in it.

Griffin: Okay.

Rachel: So everybody associated with McDonald's kind of denied that, and said, "No, no. It's this... It's this German agency."

But Steve Stout, that same marketing executive—

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: ... that I told you about earlier, gave an interview in 2016, and he said, quote, "That's crazy that Pusha T wrote the song to McDonald's 'I'm Lovin' It'."

So he kind of like, fed this fire, and everybody was kind of like, "Well, wait. Who is it?"

Okay. So part of what lends credibility to this is that Timberlake's album *Justified* was produced by The Neptunes.

And the Neptunes also produced the debut album from Clipse, which was a duo comprising Pusha T and Malice, which was his brother.

Griffin: Okay...

Rachel: So there's this kind of connection of like, all these people are kind of working with the same people and this idea that The Neptunes were involved with Timberlake and Pusha T kind of at the exact same time?

There's this kind of suggestion.

So Pusha T has given interviews since then saying that he just got like a lump-sum payout of like, \$500,000 and that was it. And... But nobody will... Nobody on McDonald's side will validate those claims.

So the reason all this became interesting, especially to me, is that very recently, as of 2022, there is an Arby's commercial—

Griffin: Oh god.

Rachel: ... called "Spicy Fish Diss" [dissolves into laughter] —

Griffin: [dissolves into laughter]

Rachel: ... it has Pusha T taking aim at McDonald's Filet-O-Fish.

Griffin: Fantastic. It's all full circle.

Rachel: And so there are lyrics in there, basically, suggesting that he created the "I'm Lovin' It" song, but now he's coming out to do this thing on behalf of McDonald's.

So I wanted to share this short clip with you.

Griffin: Oh, please.

[Pusha T's "Spicy Fish Diss" starts]

Pusha T: [rapping]

I'm the reason the whole world love it.

Now I gotta crush it. Filet-O-Fishes, then you should be disgusted.

How dare you sell a square fish, askin' us to trust it?
A half slice of cheese, Mickey D's on a budget?
Arby's crispy fish is simply it.
With lines 'round the corner we might need a guest list.
Exit stage left, the sandwiches taste fresh.
A little cube of fish from a clown is basic.
Say less, this argument is baseless.
Drowned in tartar, that Filet-O-Fish is tasteless.
See, Arby's only deals in the greatness.
I bet the house on it like it's Vegas.
Look, I could sell water to a whale.
How could you ever think I'd fail?
Yeah, the crispy fish sandwich blazing trails.
Them other clowns just too frail.
Yeah, if you know me and you know me well.
Our fish is gonna tip that scale.

Griffin: [breaking in] That is an official—

Arby's Legal: This is a paid advertisement brought to you by the unrivaled, the unparalleled, Arby's.

[Pusha T's "Spicy Fish Diss" ends]

Griffin: Well...

Rachel: Okay. That's... that's the one I wanted to play. I guess there's multiple versions of this out there. [laughs]

Griffin: That is... This is a wild, wild, wild, wild romp that you've taken me on today.

Rachel: Uh-huh.

Griffin: Is there more to the romp?

Rachel: No. That's... that's... that's what I wanted to kind of highlight.

Griffin: I understand why you had trouble sort of putting it into words.

Rachel: Yeah, right? So like, that became more interesting to me. [laughs]

Griffin: Yeah, I would say to summarize—

Rachel: Initially the like... The Justin Timberlake, which actually ended up going on to be performed by Destiny's Child...

Griffin: [incredulous] What the fuck?!

Rachel: [laughs] So in 2003, Timberlake does it, apparently, he told GQ in an interview that he regrets doing that deal.

And then a year later Destiny's Child took over.

Griffin: [as sad Justin Timberlake] "I regret my \$6 million dollars I got for the hamburger song."

Rachel: [laughing]

Griffin: Shush. Shush JT.

Rachel: So yeah. SO then all of a sudden when I discovered this controversy and then discovered... [laughs]

Griffin: Pusha T's McDonald's diss track?

Rachel: ... the Arby's diss track.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: Which like, then made me think, should I call this wonderful thing The Fish Sandwich Wars. But then—

Griffin: No. God, don't—

Rachel: ... I felt like—

Griffin: Do not start that.

Rachel: ... that's not... That's not a thing.

Griffin: No, that's not what it is.

Rachel: That's not gonna be a thing.

Griffin: This is a celebration of music, at the end of the day, is what it is.

Hey, can I steal you away?

Rachel: Yes.

[*Home Improvement* theme plays]

Griffin: Got a couple Plumb-Bobs here for ya and I would looove to read the first one, if I may, because it is for Future Mika (and maybe Grace), and it's from Past Mika, who says:

"Howdy Future Mika (and maybe Grace), it's Past Mika here to haunt you! Happy birthday! Hoping 26 is goin' okay and that paying for health insurance is sufficiently offset by finally seeing MCR.

"Grace, if you're listening, and even if not, I love you and can't wait to be married to the most wonderful woman in the world. Remember, fear is the mind-killer."

That's a really romantic deployment of the *Dune* thing. Did you remember that's from... ? We watched *Dune* together, yes?

Rachel: No.

Griffin: Oh.

Rachel: No, I was trying to figure out what MCR is.

Griffin: Oh. Well, what'd you land on before I tell you the correct answer?

Rachel: The Marvel Cinematic Reboot.

Griffin: Yes. Uh, the Marvel Cinematic Reboot. They're doin' Schpider-Man [sic] again.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Um, do you want the next one? Oh, it's My Chemical Romance.

Rachel: Oh! Thank you.

Griffin: You're welcome! See, I know about that stuff because I'm kind of a—

Rachel: You're kind of a cool guy.

Griffin: Kind of a scenester. [laughs]

Rachel: [laughs] Uh, this next message is for Alyssa, Ben, and anyone that can relate. It is from Alyssa.

Griffin: Fuck yes.

Rachel: I like this. What a nice—

Griffin: I do too.

Rachel: What a generous way to use your Jumbotron.

Griffin: So kind.

Rachel: Just like anyone that can relate.

“Breakups hurt, and are not so wonderful, but listening to Rachel and Griffin has inspired me to look for a love like theirs. I hope anyone that hears this Jumbo Bubbly is blessed with love success like theirs.

“And forever sending love to my kitties Herald, Maggie and Coco, y’all are the best.”

Griffin: That is phenomenal. Sorry to hear about the breakup, but you do deserve so much better. So much better.

Rachel: It’s true.

Griffin: I like a blessing in a Jumbotron.

Rachel: Yeah?

Griffin: That’s sort of... I think that’s gonna be the hot thing for the rest of 2022.

Rachel: [laughs] Okay.

Griffin: Is just this sort of like, “Hi, listeners, this isn’t for any particular person, but today you will have extraordinary luck. And if a stranger asks for help, give it to ‘em, ‘cause you might just form a soul connection.”

Rachel: Wow.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: I want to more talk about the fact that, do you ever feel like we’ve fooled everybody when they comment on our love? Like maybe like if they really knew us... ?

Griffin: Oh, if they really knew how we did?

Rachel: [laughs] Uh-huh.

Griffin: When the cameras aren’t rollin’.

Rachel: Uh-huh.

Griffin: And the shit gets so real, y’all.

Rachel: Uh-huh.

Griffin: The other day...

Rachel: There's a lot of, "No, you!"

Griffin: A lot of, "No, you do it!"

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: "Sp... Dude!"

Rachel: Uh-huh. What happened the other day?

Griffin: Oh, well. You know. The... the meatballs?

Rachel: Uh-huh.

Griffin: You remember what happened?

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: With the meatballs.

Rachel: I made 'em in the microwave for our little son and he ate 'em real fast?

Griffin: No. the big meatballs.

Rachel: Oh.

Griffin: That I made for both of us, and you let one roll.

Rachel: And I said, "This is too spicy!"

Griffin: Yeah. And then I... I cried for about 45 minutes.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: I can't even joke about our love not being real.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: It hurts my heart to even do a make-pretend of it.

[MaxFun ad plays]

[MaxFun ad ends]

Griffin: This episode's starting to feel a little bit like a *Mental Floss* article, but I'm okay with that because I want to talk about the... Uh, the theremin.

And this is sort of a spiritual sequel to my vocoder segment that I did like, two episodes ago.

I prepped this and was like, "Why does this sound kind of familiar?" And it's because I also did a very sort of kitschy synth, very, very recently.

Rachel: Yeah. I thought we had talked about a theremin too.

Griffin: We've not talked about the theremin and I'm glad we haven't because there's a lot of buck wild shit in the story of the theremin.

Rachel: I believe that. I believe that 'cause the concept and the execution of it, like all of it is so unreal.

Griffin: Yeah. Buckle up. So the theremin is, if you don't know, its... And you probably do. It's an electronic instrument, you play it without touching it, is sort of the big... the headline.

It's an instrument that you play when you need something to sound, like, scary or a spaceship, basically. It's a very—

Rachel: Yeah, that's [laughs], that's a very succinct description.

Griffin: If you need a musical instrument that evokes, "It's a ghost" or "It's a spaceship," the theremin is where you go, for that. And I appreciate the sort of specificity there.

You control a theremin with two inputs that you control by holding your hands in proximity to two antennae.

One of the antennae, it controls the pitch, where the closer you get to the antenna, the higher the pitch of the note gets.

And then there is a volume antenna that the further your hand gets away from it, the louder the note gets.

Which is almost a sort of reverse polarity, I think, of the other one.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Which is... There's a lot of reasons why the theremin is kind of difficult to play.

I forget who said the quote, but it was, uh... There was a quote about why the theremin's difficult to play, and it's that you not only play the notes, you have to play the rests.

Rachel: Yeah!

Griffin: Because you can't just drop your hands, 'cause then it just plays the notes. So you have to like... you're always moving. You are always articulating by sort of like, vib- Like, shaking your hand to get vibrato effect.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: And it's a very difficult instrument to master.

Also, I feel like all of those kind of like, instruments that... You know how a guitar has a fret... like, frets on it? And a piano has keys?

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: I feel like once you get into like, trombone/violin territory, where it's like not... there's not like, little things that you can touch to show you what notes you're playing, like, it gets harder.

And theremin doesn't have anything for you to touch while playing it, so that's... That's... That's, you know, challenging, and I appreciate that.

And I also appreciate that it's just instantly recognizable when you hear a theremin in a song. Like, there's no confusion of what it is that you are hearing.

And I also do love that it is a very genre instrument. Like, you don't hear it in a lot of pop songs. But if you're listening to a horror or sci-fi movie soundtrack, you're way more likely to hear it on that.

Uh, the history of the instrument is what I really want to dial into. Because I think it's more interesting than the instrument itself.

The theremin evolved from Soviet experimentation with proximity sensors, like for military purposes. There was this electrician and inventor, I don't know why I said the word that way.

[Old-timey voice] "This invent-or!"

Named Lev Sergeyevich Termen, and he is the first person who adapted the proximity sensor technology into a musical instrument all the way back in 1919. So the theremin is much older than I think a lot of people appreciate.

So he took this weird musical instrument and he toured Europe with it, just kind of like on a... Almost like a technological showcase. He went around showing it to people.

And people were kind of blown away, because it was... It made music and you didn't touch it. That's, I mean, in the Roaring Twenties, a pretty wild concept.

Rachel: Yeah. I think it's still kind of a wild concept today.

Griffin: Sure, yeah!

Uh, and so like, people were really fascinated by it, and then he moved to the US in 1928 where he was able to patent the invention.

The name, well, he changed his name around that time to Leon Theremin. So Lev Sergeyevich Termen became Leon Theremin, and that is where the name of the instrument comes from.

Rachel: Okay.

Griffin: It's his name.

So he sold the like, commercial production rights, to RCA and they went into production on it. But they started selling it during like, the stock market crash of 1928. So it didn't really set the world on fire.

But it still had this like, very niche place in the hearts of like, touring musical performers. And so despite the fact that like, it didn't become an instrument that a lot of people owned, it was an instrument that a lot of people like, built a career around touring and performing with.

Which is super unique, and after World War II it pretty much fell completely out of fashion as a musical instrument too.

But it wasn't completely forgotten, because in the '50s it went from being this like, musical fascination for musical performers and became more of a technological fascination for like, electronics enthusiasts.

And whenever you have that crossroads of like, electronics enthusiasts, and music enthusiasts, is Robert Moog who did indeed sort of get dirty with theremins—

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: ... as well.

He actually credits the things that he learned by building his own theremins with the work that he would then go on to pioneer with music synthesizers.

He actually started selling build-your-own theremin kits to consumers to sort of like, really capitalize on the electronics nerd aspect of it.

Rachel: Yeah!

Griffin: Where it wasn't just like, "Here's the instrument, go play it! Here's a... "

It was, "Here's a big box of parts. Now build a theremin out of it."

Rachel: Wow!

Griffin: Which is still like, kind of part of the...

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: ... the theremin allure today. Like, you can buy one at a guitar center, right, and get it out of the box.

But there's a lot of companies that just like, sell you a box of theremin parts.

Rachel: Wow.

Griffin: And then it's up to you to kind of like, construct it. And that's like, inarguably pretty rad.

It is still, you know, obviously a very niche thing. But it has been featured prominently in a lot of soundtracks all the way back to the 60s.

The original soundtrack for the original *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was lousy with theremins.

First Man, the frickin' uh... Oh shit! I can't remember anything about... It was about the first man on the moon, and it had Drive in it. The man from *Drive*. His name...

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: You know, first man on the moon, it had Drive in it.

Most recently *Loki*, the Disney+ show that came out?

Rachel: Oh!

Griffin: Had theremin all over it and that soundtrack for that show is like, so good.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: And that's all well and good.

Leon Theremin's story, from when he licensed the rights to RCA, and then on into the future, is even more wild.

So in 1938 he returned to the Soviet Union under mysterious circumstances. And the reason for his return is like, debated.

There were reports that he had been, essentially, kidnapped by Soviet agents and you know, repatriated back to the Soviet Union.

Uh, he would later go on to say that he had just run into significant financial issues in the United States that he was sort of eager to evade.

But he was imprisoned when he returned to the Soviet Union and he was put to work in like, a secret gulag lab, on radio technology.

Specifically, he was working on creating espionage, like, listening devices. And he made maybe the most famous listening device in history, which is called The Thing.

Have you ever heard of this?

Rachel: No.

Griffin: I hadn't either. It is like, a large wood-carved version of the Great Seal of the United States, with the eagle holding the arrows and all that jazz.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: And in 1945, Soviet schoolchildren delivered this The Thing, this... this wood-carved seal, to the Soviet-US ambassador.

And it hung in his office in plain sight for seven years!

Rachel: [laughing slightly] Oh my god!

Griffin: During like, the origins of the Cold War. Just like, recording and transmitting everything.

Rachel: Wow. That is wild. you know, that's like something... We were watching *The Americans* for a while.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: That I was just a... Like, kind of like, "Oh, this is a clever device for a television show." But like, that was... That was real life, that was happening.

Griffin: And honestly, like, there's a lot about how bugs and stuff were portrayed in that show that like, kind of is true, I feel like?

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Because it was... The Thing was discovered by accident. There was just some like, British radio officer who was dialing into some frequency and was getting this signal from this bug.

And so they found it after a sweep of all of the ambassador offices. Which I imagine then kickstarted, like, whole new echelons of paranoia.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: So yes, the guy who invented the theremin, the weird instrument that you don't touch, also invented the like, most infamous, espionage device maybe in the history—

Rachel: That's fascinating.

Griffin: ... of the Cold War.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Yeah. I thought it was really cool too.

Anyway, this whole thing has been cool stuff. Thanks for listening to cool stories—

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Wild stories about music stuff.

Rachel: This is kind of like an episode that like, starts out about one thing and it becomes another thing.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: It's like a... Like a uh... Oh gosh, what's it called? Uh, like a metamorphosis, let's say.

Griffin: Yeah. like a... A transfiguration.

Rachel: There you go.

Griffin: Thank you to bo en and Augustus for the use of our theme song, "Money Won't Pay," you can find a link to that in the episode description.

And thank you to Maximum Fun for having us on the network. Maximumfun.org is where you can go to check out just all kinds of great programming.

There's lots of other stuff. Mcelroymerch.com's got all our merch.

Bit.ly/mcelroytours for our upcoming shows. We got some in Detroit and Cincinnati and DC and maybe a couple other places.

But that's it. No episode next week, as we complete our eastward migration.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Um, hopefully.

Rachel: Have you thought about all the time zones that we're gonna cross in the next few weeks?

Griffin: It's gonna be pretty fucked up.

Rachel: It's gonna be brutal, I think.

Griffin: It's not gonna be... But in some ways that sort of like, muscle confusion, might be a good way for us to adjust back... Well, for me, back to eastern time.

Rachel: Your home.

Griffin: My home time, of eastern time.

Rachel: I've never lived outside of central time. This is gonna be wild.

Griffin: Oh, you're gonna love it, babe.

Rachel: This'll be wild for me. All these east coast people they stay up so late!

Griffin: They stay up so late and we move fast, baby!

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: All these Texans I've been living with for these past... this past decade. It's just been like, [snaps fingers] "C'mon guys! Hurry up! I'm on eastern time over here!"

Rachel: [laughs] Yeah. "I'm eastern time!"

Griffin: Ey!

Rachel: Ey! [laughs]

[theme music plays]

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