

Sawbones 135: Tinnitus

Published March 5, 2016

Listen here on themcelroy.family

Intro (Clint McElroy): Sawbones is a show about medical history and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

Justin:

Hello everybody and welcome to Sawbones, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I am your co-host, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

Sydnee, um, I don't count last week. That's what I say.

Sydnee:

Uh, like in general? Last week didn't happen?

Justin:

I— No, last week—

Sydnee:

Like you're just pretending like last week didn't occur?

Justin:

Last week we had a Q&A episode, and, uh, but as far as I'm concerned—

Sydnee:

Because you were out of town...

Justin:

... 'Cause I was out of town—

Sydnee:

... and you made my life much more difficult. And so it was hard to do all the research I would normally do, and we relied on our listeners - our loving, supportive listeners - to help us out.

Justin:

Correct.

Sydnee:

Thank you, all.

Justin:

Everything you just said is right... But the combo stands, as far as I'm concerned. The combo continues.

Sydnee:

Right. Can I just— I'm just gonna— Let me— Let me pull back the curtain for a second, give you a little sneak peak behind the scenes. Justin asked if we were continuing the theme this week, uh, from previously. We had, kind of, like, a daisy chain of...

Justin:

Yes, we've been daisy chaining themes.

Sydnee:

... of episodes. And, uh, if you'll remember, before our Q&A episode, the last one was earaches.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

And I said, "Well this week it's tinnitus." There you go, I already ruined it. Sneak peak. It's tinnitus. And Justin says, "Is that connected?" I said, "Well, that's ringing in your ears."

Justin:

Well, I knew—

Sydnee:

And he says, "Is that connected to earaches?" To earaches. Ringing in your ears. Do you get the connection?

Justin:

I—

Sydnee:

Maybe? Are you?

Justin:

Yeah, I mean, I get it. I get what you're saying.

Sydnee:

Like, ears?

Justin:

Yeah, like, I get what you're saying—

Sydnee:

Like, they're ears. Like, they're connected by the fact that they're related to ears.

Justin:

Yeah, like, I get what you're saying, but, like... you know?

Sydnee:

No.

Justin:

I— No. So I didn't know if you were intentionally trying to continue the combo, because we did take a break from the combo last week. Can the combo continue, is what— I don't know the podcast combo rules, since it's a concept we invented.

Sydnee:

Well, you just discounted an entire week from human history, so I mean, if you have the power to do that—

Justin:

Not the whole week, just the episode.

Sydnee:

... I think we have the power to create a daisy chain that actually leapfrogs an entire week that now is fictional.

Justin:

Sydnee, can you please tell me about tinnitus?

Sydnee:

[laughs] Justin, I'll tell you about tinnitus, although I feel like you should already be well acquainted with this topic.

Justin:

Because I am somebody who's living with hearing loss?

Sydnee:

That's right. Well, and you have complained of tinnitus.

Justin:

I'm one of the millions of Americans that you know in your day to day life who are living with hearing loss.

Sydnee:

That's true. That's true.

Justin:

Uh, ironically I am suffering some ear ringing right now because I was setting up a new mixer, and in the audio— in the process of setting up a new mixer, uh, I accidentally started playing a YouTube video about how to set up a new mixer at ear splitting volume [laughs] in my headphones, which is, like, the worst you can mess up setting up a mixer. It's just, like, I pushed a

button and it just started, like, blasting. I had to, like, tear my headphones off and throw them across the room.

Sydnee:

Justin, you're never supposed to apologize on the front end.

Justin:

Oh, okay.

Sydnee:

You're never supposed to apologize to your audience.

Justin:

No?

Sydnee:

No.

Justin:

Where'd you get all these show biz, uh, bon mots?

Sydnee:

I thought that was a theater thing.

Justin:

Me—

Sydnee:

Don't tell them ahead of time, like, "Ah, my voice is kind of going, so when I'm singing— when my singing's off, don't mind that. It's my voice is kind of going." Aren't you supposed to not do that?

Justin:

Lowering expectations has been a huge part of my podcasting career at this point...

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

... and I don't plan to stop now.

Sydnee:

I don't— You've got the theater degree, not me. I'll take your word for it.

Justin:

Uh, so what— What are you talk— What are we— I know basically, but what are we talking about when we talk about tinnitus?

Sydnee:

So I'm gonna tell you about tinnitus. I want to thank a few people first. Thank you Magdeline, Matthew, Andrew, Armand, Pat, Janrick, and Jennifer, all of you for suggesting this topic.

Um, I think it's a really interesting one because, uh, again, another little foreshadowing, I'm not gonna have a lot of, like, groundbreaking answers for you on this one, unfortunately. I wish I did. I'd probably be very rich if I did.

Justin:

Hmm. Why is that?

Sydnee:

So we— Well because it— I think it's— You could attest to that it's pretty annoying, tinnitus.

Justin:

Yeah, it's the pits.

Sydnee:

Tinnitus, or what some people call "tin-itis," it's the same thing. Tin-it-us is usually how we—

Justin:

Is, like, a good pronunciation? Is, like, the right one?

Sydnee:

I would. Yes, I hate to be judgmental, but yes, I would say "tin-it-us" is the right way to say it. But if you say "tin-itis," I'll know what you mean. Uh, it's often—

Justin:

I've never said anything other than "tin-itis" my entire life, so imagine my relief. You've never corrected me either, so kudos to you.

Sydnee:

[laughs] It's even, like, on the American whatever Society of Tinnitus, or American Tinnitus whatever, it says, like, "There are two ways to pronounce this. Tin-it-us, which is the way it's pronounced by doctors, and then tin-itis, which is the way the rest of us pronounce it."

Justin:

Yeah, tinnitus is, like, an awkward— It doesn't feel good to say. It doesn't have, like, a good mouth feel.

Sydnee:

Yeah. I understand. Well, an -itis is so...

Justin:

Yeah, right.

Sydnee:

... well-recognized as a, you know, as an ending for medical words. But it's— We call it ringing in the ears a lot, like, that's the definition, but I— That's not entirely accurate, because it can be a lot of other sounds that you hear in your ears.

It could be a ringing, it could be a whooshing, or a buzzing, or a whistling, or a clicking, or a hissing. Throughout history, it's been called a whispering, or a singing. There are lots of different descriptions for this sound that you're hearing. Uh, and the vast majority of it is subjective.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

So it's not something that you could say, "Listen, listen, I have this ringing in my ears," and I could sit across from you, and say, "Ah yes, the— Yes, you do." 99% I'm gonna say, "I can't— I can't hear that."

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Uh, there are about 1% that actually have something going on that might cause an audible noise for other people in the room, but that's a whole other ballgame.

Justin:

There are tests you can do though, right?

Sydnee:

To tell if you have tinnitus?

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Well, no, you just tell me you have tinnitus.

Justin:

Oh, okay.

Sydnee:

There are tests we can do for some of the underlying disorders.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Uh, but not for the symptom. It's a symptom, is the important thing to know about it. It's a symptom you tell me about.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

It's not a sign. A sign is something I can see. I check you out, I examine you, I see a sign. A symptom is a thing that you report. It's like pain. Pain is a symptom. I can't see your pain. I can't test for your pain. You tell me you have it.

Justin:

Hmm. Is that— is that what— okay. That makes sense.

Sydnee:

Um, it can be acute, or it can be chronic. So you can have tinnitus for a brief period of time, or you could have tinnitus your whole life. Hopefully you don't, but you could, and overall, it's estimated that about 15% of Americans get tinnitus at some point in time, either acute or chronic, for some reason.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

So a lot of people get it, and it can be caused by a lot of different things. So again, it's a symptom. So just like pain is a symptom, and can be caused by a, you know, a myriad different illnesses and problems, it can be caused by hearing loss, trauma.

It can be caused by some sort of blockage in your ear canal. Uh, sinus issues, uh, trauma to the tympanic membrane, to the eardrum itself. Problems with your, uh, temporomandibular joint, or "TMJ disorder..."

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... people will say often. Uh, traumatic brain injuries can cause it. There are different drugs that cause it, neurologic problems, vascular problems, it's

really endless. There's a long differential for the things that could cause tinnitus, and as, Justin, you may attest to, sometimes we don't really get there from what the etiology is.

Justin:

Yeah, I still don't know what has caused my— I mean, I assume it's just regular old hearing loss, but—

Sydnee:

Which is a very common cause.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Which I guess, I mean, I— We still don't know why you lost your hearing.

Justin:

Yeah, I— Just to be clear, this is not— It is not that bad. There are certain frequencies that I have a hard time hearing in one ear.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Like, I can't use really use the phone in my right ear. I have to use my left ear for it. It's not, like, the worst.

Sydnee:

So, treatments for this condition date back to ancient times, probably because it is so annoying.

Justin:

It is, yeah.

Sydnee:

So people have been trying to find something to do about it, and originally it was thought to be something that was either divine or evil [laughs].

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

One or the other. Either way, it was something supernatural. It was either, like, a curse, um, like, the ancient Egyptians called it a, "bewitched ear." So something bad.

It's referred to in the Talmud as "the curse of Titus," so it could be something evil or horrible that's happened to you. But there's also some ancient civilizations that thought it was, like, a sensitivity to the divine that you—

Justin:

A little more aware than the rest of us.

Sydnee:

Yes. Like, another sense that you had that perceived a universe that maybe the rest of us weren't in tune with.

Justin:

A very annoying, high pitched universe.

Sydnee:

[laughs] That— Does it make you feel more special? Does it make you feel like you're more in tune?

Justin:

Uh, no. Absolutely not.

Sydnee:

Would you call it a blessing or a curse?

Justin:

Definitely a curse.

Sydnee:

Oh, okay.

Justin:

I mean, like, neither. I would call it tinnitus. [laughing]

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

'Cause it's 2016.

Sydnee:

Or tin-itis, 'cause—

Justin:

I would call it tin-itis. You know what? I'm gonna stick by my guns.

Sydnee:

Um, and, uh, so I mentioned the Egyptians thought it was a bewitched ear, so they had various concoctions that they had kind of devised to try to treat this. Uh, they would actually take a hollowed out reed, and then kind of insert it into your outer ear.

Justin:

Mm-hmm. I can see that.

Sydnee:

And then use that as just a delivery mechanism for various—

Justin:

For honey. For honey.

Sydnee:

Honey, frankincense, oils...

Justin:

I guessed. Yeah.

Sydnee:

... tree sap, dirt.

Justin:

Everything—

Sydnee:

Whatever.

Justin:

Everything a healthy, growing ear needs.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Um, the, uh, the Mesopotamians wrote about tinnitus as well. They called it a whispering, or a singing in the ear. And they thought, uh, one possible cause— so this is good, Justin, one possible cause could be that you're holding hands with a ghost.

Justin:

Uh, yeah. That's— I mean, that's definitely possible. God knows I've tried, but they are so vast and ephemeral. So holding a hand with a ghost is, like, a pretty tricky thing.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Did they mean, like, an actual ghost? Like the actual form of a ghost? Or, like, Whoopi Goldberg—

Justin:

They mean, like, Patrick Swayze focusing all of his energy after, uh, that thug in the subway taught him to.

Sydnee:

Oh, so when he actually— Not when he is in Whoopi Goldberg, and, like, holding hands with her?

Justin:

Yeah, like, when he possesses the pot that Demi Moore's shaping.

Sydnee:

That's not what happens.

Justin:

I think it's— I think I've seen Ghost.

Sydnee:

That's not that scene.

Justin:

I think I've seen Ghost pretty recently.

Sydnee:

I'm sure you haven't, actually. Uh, it was treated largely with chants. Um, and they differentiated. There were different kinds. Like, was it whispering tinnitus? Was it singing, was it speaking?

A lot of it was treated with, uh, certain chants. So one example was, "It hath flown against me. It hath attacked me. Oh seven heavens, seven Earths, seven winds, seven fires, by heaven be ye exorcized."

Justin:

Oh whoa, my tinnitus just got way better. Thank you so much.

Sydnee:

Did it?

Justin:

Thank you, Sydnee.

Sydnee:

Did the chant work?

Justin:

It did. It worked. Thank you.

Sydnee:

And there were all kinds of different chants depending on which ear, and then of course which type of tinnitus it was. Um, for speaking or whispering tinnitus, they would also recommend something that would make you puke. An emetic.

Justin:

An emetic?

Sydnee:

Yeah, yeah, something to make you throw up. So some examples of that would be mustard beer [laughs].

Justin:

Ew, what?

Sydnee:

Which makes— Which kind of makes me— I love beer. That kind of makes me a little nauseous.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Mustard beer...

Sydnee:

Um, or just a lot of turmeric.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Which, I mean, I guess if you— That probably would make you puke...

Justin:

I can't think of many—

Sydnee:

... if you just kept, like, downing it. Kind of like the cinnamon challenge, right? Like, cinnamon's delicious, but if you kept swallowing a ton of cinnamon, you'd puke.

Justin:

I can't think of many, um, uh, spices that wouldn't make you throw up if you ate a whole mitt full of it, you know? Like, I would think they're all pretty gnarly?

Sydnee:

[laughing] And think, all through human history we've just been downing, like, big bottles of spices to see, like, "Does this one make you puke? Wah!"

Justin:

"Is this better? Ah— perfect."

Sydnee:

"Up, nope! Oh, okay, that one does too! Got it, add it to the list of things that make you puke if you eat enough of them." They also recommended, um, opium, belladonna, and cannabis...

Justin:

Nice.

Sydnee:

... as treatments. My guess is that if [laughs], if I was going to the Mesopotamian doctor and they were like, "Do you want a chant or do you want some opium, belladonna, and cannabis?" I would be like, "Well, you know, the chant didn't work last time..."

Justin:

[laughing]

Sydnee:

"I'm just saying."

Justin:

"I've got an, um, an allergy?"

Sydnee:

[laughing]

Justin:

"A chant allergy?"

Sydnee:

Uh, the Greeks didn't have a lot of great ideas about tinnitus. Uh, Hippocrates and Aristotle just advised, basically, that louder sounds seemed to make it better.

Justin:

What?!

Sydnee:

You know...

Justin:

Guys, bad job!

Sydnee:

Just something louder will kind of make it go away, so...

Justin:

I mean, in one sense I guess they're right that if you start listening to something loud, like, you'll notice it less, I guess?

Sydnee:

Just drown it out, buddy.

Justin:

Just drown it out.

Sydnee:

That's actually, as we get to the end of some— with some actual treatments for this, you're gonna be disappointed to find that they weren't completely off-base. Not completely. Uh, now, by contrast, Roman medicine had a variety of approaches and they actually divided it out depending on what they thought the cause was. So if you had what they would call "a cold on your ear," which actually probably referred to, like, what we would think of now as a middle-ear infection...

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... like an otitis media, then they would say, "You need to treat it by, um, clean the air." Uh, like— or, "clean the ear," sorry. "Clean the ear."

Justin:

Oh, okay.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Clean the air, you know.

Justin:

Clean the air!

Sydnee:

Clean the ear. [laughing]

Justin:

We invented a humidifier, okay? I know, I know, it seems crazy.

Sydnee:

Clean the ear, and then hold your breath—

Justin:

I did not know the Romans had Sharper Image catalogs from whence to order these air purifiers?

Sydnee:

[laughs] They got them from Sky Mall. They're, like, these air purifiers that don't look like air purifiers. They look like potted plants and they also double as, like, litter boxes for your cats. It's amazing.

Justin:

They would be so stoked except...

Sydnee:

They get [laughing]—

Justin:

... when they got to the end of the plug and they're like, "And what do we do with this?"

Sydnee:

Yeah, but no, they had aqueducts, right?

Justin:

Yeah, they just drop it into an [laughing]—

Sydnee:

[laughing] I just mean they were smart. Like, they had— They were, you know, inventive.

Justin:

"Get stupid Reggie and have him swallow the strange metal prong."

Sydnee:

Um, so, clean the ear and then hold your breath until all of the bad humor kind of comes frothing, bubbling, out of your ear.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

I would say don't hold your breath until then.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

'Cause, I mean, I guess that would cure the tinnitus, is another way of looking at it.

Justin:

Yeah. I mean, if you start hold— If you hold your breath until frothing liquid came out of your—

Sydnee:

Until humor came out of your ear? 'Cause it's never gonna happen, so...

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Um, if your head is messed up. Now, I don't know what that exact— Like, in Roman terms what they mean, by, like, if it's a head problem. But if it's a head problem, you could exercise, you could gargle, you could rub your ear a lot, that might fix it. There were certain diets, or you could take a mixture of radish, cucumber juice, honey, and vinegar and just put that in there.

Justin:

Just rub it on in.

Sydnee:

Yeah, and then, um, sometimes they would tell you to stop drinking wine.

Justin:

Ugh.

Sydnee:

Which just seems mean. You already have, like, this ringing in your ear.

Justin:

Yeah. I just want some sleep, please.

Sydnee:

Yeah, at least let you have some wine. Pliny, of course—

Justin:

My boy.

Sydnee:

As we covered in the earache episode, Pliny the Elder had lots to say about ears. Um, in addition to some stuff we already mentioned, things like earthworms, mashed earthworms and goose grease that you would want to put in there, he also recommended woodlice, ox gall, fox fat, boar semen. Good luck obtaining that...

Justin:

Yeah. Carefully.

Sydnee:

... uh, donkey dung...

Justin:

Great.

Sydnee:

... [laughs] breast milk, or the foam from a horse's mouth.

Justin:

So he would just basically say, anything that could double as, uh, an insulting nickname given to someone on Salute Your Shorts, just put that into your ear.

Sydnee:

[laughing] I don't remember the character on Salute Your Shorts that's called "Boar Semen."

Justin:

No, he was—

Sydnee:

That would've been a little inappropriate probably.

Justin:

He just— Yeah, he just made it, like, a half season. He was, like, replaced swiftly. Uh—

Sydnee:

He got an awful waffle and couldn't handle it and took off.

Justin:

He was the Miss Bliss of, uh, of the show, it was just very early. Yeah, I— Okay. Pliny's whole jam, I've discovered, is like, he just named so many things and I think his plan was, like, listen. If any of these are right, you got to come back to your boy."

Just be, like, in a thousand years he wanted to be like, "And it turned out the solution to tinnitus was fox fat." He could be like, "I told you!" Like, you named 20 things, Pliny. Like, of course you told us. You named everything that you had!

Sydnee:

He named that— And that was true for almost anything.

Justin:

Yeah!

Sydnee:

Especially ears, though. He had a fondness for ears.

Justin:

He—

Sydnee:

I still haven't figure that out.

Justin:

He wanted to preserve his legacy. Like, his leg— Like, of getting at least one right. Like, 'cause he thought if he just named so many things, one of them had to be hitting.

Sydnee:

Sooner or later.

Justin:

Sooner or later, right.

Sydnee:

Uh, Galen recommended that you take some cockroaches and rose oil, again, or opium. I always like, "or opium," 'cause—

Justin:

Or, you know, opium.

Sydnee:

"Or some opium." Um, from all this came, eventually, there was the division of tinnitus into different causes, at least, that they thought at the time. You could have thick humors and then you would need something that would make you puke to treat that.

Uh, if you had a fever, the treatment was get rid of the fever. If you, uh, if it was secondary to excitement of the senses, take opium, which I guess is good for excitement in general [laughs]?

Justin:

Yeah. I mean, that will definitely handle the excitement issue.

Sydnee:

You will be less excited after that.

Justin:

For sure.

Sydnee:

Um, and if you have a cold, hellebore was also often recommended. And then at various times throughout history, uh, the usual kind of suspects, like onions, vinegar, myrrh, radish, anise...

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... leeks, wormwood, cumin. Just dump it in there. At some point somebody figured out that the ear, even without knowing that the ear was, like, a closed circuit— like, that it ended with the eardrum and so that you could only do so much damage by dumping random inert substances into your ear...

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... somebody must have realized that and was like, "Just dump it all in there."

Justin:

Dump it all in.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Best of luck.

Sydnee:

It doesn't hurt you and eventually something will work.

Justin:

Tinnitus is transient, yeah? I mean, it comes and goes for some people and doesn't for others, right?

Sydnee:

Exactly. Like, some people it's transient. Some people it's permanent.

Justin:

Do you think, uh, this continues a thread, I think, where, I think, we tend to see more robust sets of treatments for things that are, and more varied to the treatments for things that are or can be transient.

Like, you know, uh, hiccups or warts I think are two other good examples of things that, like, because they did sometimes go away on their own, it lent credence to a lot of other things that people just sort of, like, backed into, you know, as a supposed treatment for because it did happen to coincide with when it stopped?

Sydnee:

I think that's very true because there were several times as I was researching this that I found recommendations from various physicians where they would name all this weird stuff and then they would say, "But in general you should try to wait and see if it just goes away first."

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Like, these little caveats. Like, yeah, you could pour radishes and vinegar or whatever in your ear, but at the same time, sometimes it goes away. So I think you're right, because a lot of times people would do this weird stuff, it would go away, 'cause it was going to anyway, and then that would cement for you that, well...

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... who knew? Guess what, boar semen works.

Justin:

It was— I was really hoping, of the available ones, it would not be that one, and it turned out that it was.

Sydnee:

Why that was the first one I chose to go for and try and collect?

Justin:

In retrospect, yeah. So short-sighted. So short-sighted.

Sydnee:

On my own?

Justin:

I'm not getting anybody else's, though, so everybody get your own boar semen.

Sydnee:

Did Pliny have a store? Did he sell this stuff?

Justin:

That's what I'm thinking.

Sydnee:

Okay.

Justin:

He had, like, a general store that he sold this stuff—

Sydnee:

I'm gonna tell you in some future episode if he had a store.

Justin:

Tell me, uh, tell me about some other cultures, how they dealt with it.

Sydnee:

I'm gonna tell you that in just a second, Justin, but first, why don't you come with me to the billing department?

Justin:

Let's go.

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

Justin:

So you were gonna tell me about some other cultures that, uh, that have their own, uh, takes on tinnitus.

Sydnee:

That's absolutely right. So, I think just as interesting as some of the kind of stranger treatments that we've been discussing, uh, for tinnitus are some of the stranger theories behind it.

So one in particular comes from the Annamite tribe of Eastern India who thought that tinnitus was due to the presence of a small animal that was just kind of living in your ear.

Justin:

Just getting crazy up there?

Sydnee:

Just chilling in your ear and it actually was probably not causing you a lot of problems when it was just living there. They specifically thought that the problems were due to another small animal of the same type getting inside and the two of them fighting.

Justin:

What?

Sydnee:

So I don't know if it was, like, a physical fight, 'cause what I like to imagine are two tiny little imaginary ear animals who are like, you know, like—

Justin:

Just, like, Chip and Dale wailing on each other? Over Gadget's affections?

Sydnee:

[laughing] "I can't believe you left a sink full of dirty dishes again, Dale!"

Justin:

[punching sound effect]

Sydnee: He punched him?!

Justin:

He punched him.

Sydnee:

In this reality Dale just laid out—

Justin:

Okay, when you said "fight" I thought—

Sydnee:

Chip?!

Justin:

... I thought "fistfight." Okay?

Sydnee:

I was thinking, like, an argument. I was thinking like, a...

Justin:

First off—

Sydnee:

... Odd Couple-style argument from tiny animals that are happening in the inner ear, and you're talking about Dale punching Chip?

Justin:

First off, um—

Sydnee:

My sisters are gonna cry when they hear this.

Justin:

... Chip would flatten Dale. Like, absolutely, no question about it. Chip would destroy Dale.

Sydnee:

He had on that cool bomber jacket.

Justin:

Yeah. That's true.

Sydnee:

[laughing] Which made him the cooler one.

Justin:

That's the cooler one. Hmm.

Sydnee:

Didn't you ever think about that? I always shipped him and Gadget.

Justin:

Okay, we're moving on to the next thing that you're going to say with your mouth.

Sydnee:

So—

Justin:

[laughs] This thing that you've done.

Sydnee:

To treat this problem with these tiny animals that are living in your ear and fighting and causing noise, you could get a non-venomous snake— Oh, at least that's a relief...

Justin:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Sydnee:

... 'cause you only have to capture a non-venomous one. Um, skin it, and then burn the skin and kind of fumigate your ear with the smoke from that, and that could cure it. Uh, in the Middle Ages, this is another, um, particularly lovely treatment. So you take a loaf of bread. Freshly baked bread.

Justin:

Delicious.

Sydnee:

Right? Make sure it's really hot. Cut it in half—

Justin:

Right. I'm already getting hungry.

Sydnee:

Uh-huh. And then stick half in each ear.

Justin:

Okay, now that's— Sydnee, what you just said is a dumb thing. That doesn't make sense.

Sydnee:

Just stick half a loaf of bread in each ear.

Justin:

I know how big ears are. What are you talking about?

Sydnee:

Just, you know how, like, when you smoosh bread it can get real, like, small? Like you just push— You gotta push all the air out of it, you know?

Justin:

Yeah, like how, uh, a school roll when you crumble up into a ball and— Yeah.

Sydnee:

You mush it into a ball and then dip it in your mashed potatoes?

Justin:

Yeah, for sure.

Sydnee:

Like that. Uh, in the Renaissance period, they actually started trying to do surgery to— They thought that, this was based on a really old idea, that there was wind trapped in your inner ear.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

And so the way to fix tinnitus was to get rid of that wind that was trapped in your ear. So you could cut a hole in the bone there, like, kind of in front of or above your ear...

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

... and then just let the air out.

Justin:

I could see—

Sydnee:

In front, above, behind, you could just cut a hole in the bone around your ear.

Justin:

Yeah, just do it. Now, I could see from the sensation why you would think that would be, like, helpful. You would certainly have something to take your mind off of the tinnitus for a while.

Sydnee:

Yeah. You'd have a hole in your head.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Uh, Paracelsus, who we've discussed before, had an interesting approach. So if you had ringing in your ears and you went to him, he would say you could, um, cut the ear. Cut the outer ear, uh, cup— Do cupping behind it.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

And then, um, do venesection. So, bleeding under the tongue, cut the vein under the tongue.

Justin:

Such, like, a cool day. I— Gosh, my ears really, really must have been very, very bad off, huh?

Sydnee:

He also recommended a plant called Cyclamen, um, because the leaves of this plant look like ears. So if you took a decoction involving these leaves then it might fix your ear problem, tinnitus or whatever, based on, remember, Paracelsus was a fan of the Doctrine of Signatures.

Justin:

Oh— Right, which said that, like, things that look like the other things would help it.

Sydnee:

Right.

Justin:

So if it looked like warts, it would help cure your warts.

Sydnee:

Exactly. That's the actual Doctrine of Signatures, um, not referenced in the Signature of All Things, which I am a fan of.

Justin:

Yeah. It's a great book.

Sydnee:

But not the actual Doctrine of Signatures.

Justin:

Got it. I'm with you.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Um, loud noises also became a popular treatment after a while. Like I mentioned, you know—

Justin:

Loud noises! All right, [crosstalk].

Sydnee:

Just make some [laughing]— some loud noises and then you won't notice it, and then in the 1700s electricity was around, so, like, let's use that.

Justin:

We invented it. Yeah.

Sydnee:

Let's use it for ears.

Justin:

It's around.

Sydnee:

Let's just, you know, electrify your ears, see what happens. We finally started to make some progress with this stuff, um, with Jean Marc Gaspard Itard in, uh, in the late 1700s, early 1800s.

He wrote a great deal about all kinds of different ear problems. He was one

of two, like, leading ear guys at this time period, and he was the first one to actually recognize, like, "Hey, I think this has something to do with hearing loss."

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Which was a really smart connection. However, again, when he started talking about ways to treat it, some of his recommendations were bleeding, or an irritant foot bath. So like, just dip your feet into something that, like, really bothers you?

Justin:

Mm-hmm. Um—

Sydnee:

Which I guess would take your mind off the ringing in your ears.

Justin:

Yeah. Wait—

Sydnee:

Um, he would sometimes even put leeches, like, on the ear or on the head around the ear, or even cut the jugular vein...

Justin:

What?!

Sydnee:

... which I didn't think that was called "treatment," I thought that was called "murder"?

Justin:

Murder. Murder most foul.

Sydnee:

Personally...

Justin:

Yeah, that's like, I know— Listen. Listen. I know it's annoying. I do. I get it. But, like, I wouldn't trust those guys to treat a sunburn. But, like, when they're, like, "I'm just gonna open your neck, okay, Guvnor? I'm gonna open up your jugular." Like, what are you saying? Absolutely not!

Sydnee:

That's a— How bad— And see, you can answer this for me 'cause I don't know. I haven't had tinnitus before. Uh, but how bad is it that you're gonna let somebody Sweeney Todd your neck?

Justin:

Okay, well, I'll— Here's a helpful way for remembering it, okay? Imagine somebody, uh, slicing your neck open, okay?

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm.

Justin:

It's not that bad [laughs]! It's better than that! Like it's—

Sydnee:

I mean, that would be my guess, but I try not to, you know, I haven't walked a mile in your shoes, so...

Justin:

Yeah. That's not treating your tinnitus. That's quitting 'cause you hate having tinnitus so much. Stop being such a wiener, okay?

Sydnee:

Now, to be fair, he did admit that often these treatments didn't work [laughing].

Justin:

Good. That's good.

Sydnee:

Which, why anyone—

Justin:

Sell that honesty.

Sydnee:

Why anyone continued to submit to them, who knows.

Justin:

"So what I want to do is, I want to cut your jugular." "Will that help?" "I don't know. Why does it have to help? What's up with the labels?"

Sydnee:

[laughing] Now, instead he would advise, again, we're back to covering up the noise, and he had specific, like, if it sounds like this, then a roaring fire is your best bet. Or, if it sounds like this, then water falling from a vase into a copper bowl with a hole in it will be a better plan.

Uh, burn some damp wood or a clockwork motor might be a good noise. In fact, there was one of his patients that he actually advised to go live in a water mill.

Justin:

[laughs] Maybe he just didn't like him.

Sydnee:

Which would work [laughs].

Justin:

I would— Yeah.

Sydnee:

I mean, that would— You wouldn't notice the ringing so much. Probably.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

By contrast, the other leading— Like I said, there were two, like, leading ear guys at the time. John Curtis, uh, he basically just said all the stuff that people have been doing for a really long time all over their body for various ailments that wasn't working.

So, like, blister it or bleed it or give you something to puke a lot. Um, also take a rest and go to the spa. Which I guess you're gonna need, after—

Justin:

'Cause of all the blistering, right.

Sydnee:

Right.

Justin:

How do you quantify somebody as a "a leading" somebody when they're just talking a bunch of yay about nonsense?

Sydnee:

They're just two guys who wrote a lot about it. I think they were both advisors to various schools at the time and institutes that were working with, um, not just tinnitus, but, like, hearing loss and all different kind of audiological complaints. So they were both well-known at the time.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

I mean, which, I don't know, like, back then if you just wrote enough about something, I don't know if that made you the most well-known?

Justin:

Maybe. I don't know. We—

Sydnee:

And then people said nice stuff about you?

Justin:

We didn't keep a lot of books from back then 'cause they were so stupid [laughs], so like, if you just kept your one—

Sydnee:

Well, I mean—

Justin:

If you managed to make a book that was, like, thick enough and hard enough to, like, lose over the centuries, that's the secret.

Sydnee:

[laughing] To, like, stand the test of time?

Justin:

Yeah, like—

Sydnee:

Your book was big enough? If you wrote enough stuff, we're gonna lose some of the stuff, but we didn't lose all the stuff, so you win.

Justin:

Right, like—

Sydnee:

You're one of the guys.

Justin:

Yeah. You want a book that's so big that when people are doing book burnings of the centuries, they're like, "Well, not that. I'm not carrying that. No way. Just hide it— Just scoot it under the bed, Scott. I'm not gonna carry that all the way down to the fire, Scott."

Sydnee:

[laughing] That'll be the next person who owns this house's problem.

Justin:

"Yeah. Scoot it under the bed. I don't care what— I don't care what he says. I don't care what he says. I'm not gonna burn this one. It's too heavy. That's

one whole trip, I could carry a whole box of my Danielle Steele senior, senior, senior novels down to the fire. I'm absolutely not carrying this huge book about ear pain that you bought at a garage sale for three kopeks. I'm just not gonna do it." I've placed it in several different centuries now—

Sydnee:

I was gonna say I don't know when this time of book burning was.

Justin:

This many— I'm covering all my bases here.

Sydnee:

Let's just hope it's not in the future, right?

Justin:

Dun-dun-duh! Okay, so do we have a solution for this now?

Sydnee:

So— Well, let me— I'm gonna tell you about, uh, tinnitus now. Let me, real quick, if you do have tinnitus you're in some fine company. Joan of Arc had tinnitus, Beethoven, Michelangelo, Charles Darwin had tinnitus, and actually kept a daily log of the frequency and amplitude.

Justin:

Real hit at parties, that one. Um, now, Joan of Arc, I've heard, uh, people have credited, like, her hearing voices maybe as tinnitus, right?

Sydnee:

That's— And, you know, uh, the question is, like, which one was it? Do we think she had tinnitus, um, or was it really that she heard voices and we, you know, at the time couldn't distinguish between that and tinnitus? Like, writings would have—

Justin:

So maybe she heard— You're saying maybe, perhaps, she was divine? It was either she was divine and hearing voices or she had tinnitus.

Sydnee:

Well, uh— Well, that or, I mean, I'm not trying to, like, call anybody's religious beliefs into question or maybe she had, like, auditory hallucinations. There's also that.

Justin:

Oh, okay. I'm with you. All right. Got it.

Sydnee:

So, it— And all throughout history there were people who had auditory hallucinations that were probably lumped in with the same treatments for tinnitus.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

So, you know, we didn't know how to distinguish all that.

Justin:

Okay. That's—

Sydnee:

That's why— We called it "whispering and singing" sometimes. So now it's still hard. We don't completely understand tinnitus. Um, I told you that there were a lot of different possible causes and certainly if we can isolate the cause, sometimes we can do something about it. Like, for instance, with hearing loss there are some different treatments for it. Like, actually, electricity, sometimes, is used.

Justin:

What? That was legit?

Sydnee:

Yeah. For different kinds of hearing loss in some specific situations. Not for other kinds of tinnitus. Um, we actually do sometimes use sound therapies. Yeah, like, louder noises and things.

Justin:

Like, louder noises? Wow.

Sydnee:

That's actually used sometimes, and then there are actually, sometimes it's just a theory of, like, cognitive behavioral therapy and things like that that might help you, like, habituate to it. Just learn to adjust to it.

Justin:

Just like that we've always been at war with Eurasia kind of thing? Like, oh, no, no, no, no, no. My ears have always sounded like that. It's always sucked.

Sydnee:

This is, like, the normal baseline for your hearing. Well, 'cause sometimes we can't fix it. There really aren't a lot of medications that routinely work. There are some medicines that might work for some people, but as far as, like, a silver bullet for tinnitus?

Ah, it's just not there, unfortunately. I wish I could tell you it was, but this is still a little bit of a medical mystery for a lot of us. It's a very— I can tell you that it's a very frustrating complaint for me as a physician 'cause I often know I'm not gonna be able to fix it for my patients, and I hate that.

Justin:

Um, folks, that's about gonna do it for us. Uh, thank you so much for making the time to talk with us and hear us out about tinnitus. Uh, hopefully you're not struggling with this in your day-to-day, though I'm certain some of you are. Uh, and I'm sorry that we didn't have a secret solution at the end that will fix all—

Sydnee:

But still go talk to your doctor. This is not meant to discourage you from talking to a physician about it. If you experience this, go check it out 'cause there are some things we can address and actually help you out with and nobody is gonna try to, like, stick a leech on your ear or dump boar semen in there now, so, it will be a... [laughs] fairly harmless visit, don't worry.

Justin:

Uh, so we, uh, want to say thanks to the Taxpayers for letting us use their song, Medicines, as the intro and outro of our program. Uh, I do— A quick sidebar. You know, you mentioned uh, the Signature of All Things and that's a book our friend Liz Gilbert wrote. You probably know her from Eat Pray Love, but um, she's written a lot of great books.

And, uh, she is working on a new project called the Compassion Collective and they're— they've got a big push to, as they put it "take back Mother's Day" with some acts of love helping homeless American youth and unaccompanied refugee children, and they're asking people to give and you can do that by going to TheCompassionCollective.org. Um, they didn't pay us for this or anything. I just think it's a really good cause and Liz does really good work.

So, uh, go to TheCompassionCollective.org or you can text the word "compassion" to 91999 and receive the donation form, uh, right there on your phone. Um, the maximum donation is \$25 and donations of \$5, \$10, or \$15 will change the world, so it's a very worthy cause and act of, um, motherly love for the whole planet.

Sydnee:

It's a great way to celebrate Mother's Day.

Justin:

Mm-hmm. Uh, we got a lot more great shows on the MaximumFun.org network. Uh, you should go check all those out but until next Wednesday, uh, I'm Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

[theme music plays]

MaximumFun.org

Comedy and culture.

Artist owned.

Listener supported.