

Wonderful! 322: Unbuttoned to the Max

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[theme music, "Money Won't Pay (feat. Augustus)" by Bo En plays]

Rachel: Hi, this is Rachel McElroy.

Griffin: Hi, this is Griffin McElroy.

Rachel: And this is Wonderful.

Griffin: Awoo! The coyotes are out. It's a hot night in the city. It's time for wonderful nights.

Rachel: [chuckles]

Griffin: The dark and sexy like Cinemax version of the podcast.

Rachel: Uh-huh?

Griffin: Where we record it at night. Because our lives have been a maelstrom of chaos, illness and travel for the better part of a month. And it ain't slowing down.

Rachel: Do you wanna unbutton a button?

Griffin: I'm two buttons down, if you want me to go for the triple.

Rachel: [chuckles]

Griffin: Oh, god, I'm so cold now.

Rachel: [titters] We don't typically record at night. Typically, we are in our full three-piece suits and fancy shoes.

Griffin: Matching. Our matching three-piece. Our extra big David Byrne three-piece suits.

Rachel: Mm-hm!

Griffin: That's how we record every episode of Wonderful. Now, it's unbuttoned to the max. To the navel.

Rachel: Yeah, uh-huh.

Griffin: Do you have any small, sexy wonders? [titters]

Rachel: [chuckles] Oh, let's see. I will say, you were just on tour.

Griffin: I was, so lonely.

Rachel: In the great city of Chicago.

Griffin: Hell yeah.

Rachel: And whenever I don't go, I like to kind of peruse the show picks that I can find.

Griffin: Yes.

Rachel: And I'm just really grateful for that, honestly. That's my wonderful thing, is that I get to see little bits and pieces of the performance through the shared media of the internet.

Griffin: Oh, of our show?

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Oh, I thought you're talking about like your own like Netflix like—

Rachel: No!

Griffin: Oh, well, that's—

Rachel: No, I will like specifically look for pictures of your performance, so I can see y'all.

Griffin: I appreciate that, baby. Social media has kind of gotten weird, like...

Rachel: [chuckles] You guys heard about this?

Griffin: Specifically, from the perspective of like we do a live show now. And Twitter's such a fuckin' unrecognizable hellscape that I haven't touched in god knows how long. And Instagram's like okay at it. But there's no like immediate kind of like feedback thing.

Rachel: I know. Well, and I'm having a hard time like finding or sorting it so that I can find current stuff.

Griffin: Yeah, right.

Rachel: Like I'll enter in like 'TAZ live' and I'll get like pictures from like three years ago.

Griffin: We need to just like codify a hashtag or something and like talk— but anyway, this is very inside baseball.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: I'm going to say, The Circle back. The Circle... back. And it's on Netflix, season six of The Circle. And it remains just fuckin' stellar, like interesting, competitive reality television.

Rachel: I will say, I am not in love with the cast so far this season.

Griffin: Yeah...

Rachel: But the mechanics of the show continue to be delightful.

Griffin: They did a thing this season, they introduce a thing. That I'm pretty sure they talk about in like the first 10 seconds of the show, so it's not really a spoiler. But it's something that I—it's an idea that I've had for this type of

show for a long time and it's wild to see it like actually happen. Where they had an AI like housemate, or whatever they call them, who was an AI chat bot. And so like I guess the producers would type the player's like messages into this AI chat bot and generate answers. And then they had to like figure out who the AI was. And they did actually a pretty good job of like integrating that into the show.

Rachel: Oh, I was gonna say, the contestants did not. The contestants did not do a good job. [titters]

Griffin: No, the contestants didn't do the best job. One of the contestants is an AI engineer. And so there was a lot of hoping there that he would be a real Sherlock about it. But it's just a cool show that explores... I don't know, online social dynamics through extremely limited like forms of communication. That I find like I could watch, I could watch a million episodes of that show. I think it kicks ass.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Even if the players this time are like, they skew pretty young. And I don't know, there's not as many people that I'm just like fully rooting for.

Rachel: I am learning a lot of slang, though, that I didn't know.

Griffin: That's true.

Rachel: Say less was an expression I had not heard.

Griffin: Say less. Drop the bag, anything referencing the bag.

Rachel: [titters]

Griffin: I knew some of the stuff. I felt pretty good about that.

Rachel: Well, yeah. I mean, you watch the TikTok.

Griffin: I do watch a TikTok here and there. Oh, it's windy out there. One of our wonderful nights! You go first this week.

Rachel: I do.

Griffin: What have you got?

Rachel: Okay, so by the time this episode comes out, April will be over.

Griffin: What?

Rachel: [titters] Yes.

Griffin: Oh my god, you're right.

Rachel: Yeah, dude!

Griffin: Oh my god.

Rachel: Wow. You're just finding this out here?

Griffin: Wow!

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: It's tomorrow, isn't it?

Rachel: Yeah, yeah.

Griffin: The Justin Timberlake meme is going to be out there tomorrow, isn't it?

Rachel: Well, it probably should have been today.

Griffin: It probably should have been today, yeah.

Rachel: Or else it can be anywhere.

Griffin: Damn.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Damn, I missed it. My favorite annual meme. Damn.

Rachel: [titters]

Griffin: Damn, Daniel.

Rachel: Wow.

Griffin: You remember him?

Rachel: Only through you.

Griffin: Yeah, that's fine.

Rachel: [chuckles] You're my connection to all the things that—

Griffin: Hip internet culture?

Rachel: All things that young people like.

Griffin: Like 'the bag' and 'damn, Daniel?'

Rachel: [titters] Uh-huh. Anyway, April was National Poetry Month. And I couldn't let April go by without a celebratory trip to the poetry corner.

Griffin: Wa-hoo, celebratory. We're hopping the roller coaster. That's right, an indoor roller coaster.

Rachel: Ba-do, ba-do, boom-boom, waaa!

Griffin: Waaa! [sings] Step by step, day by day.

Rachel: [chuckles] Oh, was there a roller coaster at the beginning of that?

Griffin: Yeah, famously is the good ol' roller coaster.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: [sings] 'We'll make it better the second time around.' You remember that shit?

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: That was some good shit.

Rachel: That was lovely. Thank you for that.

Griffin: So, who are we taking with us in the step-by-step roller coaster to the poetry corner?

Rachel: [chuckles] In my head, the poet was already there.

Griffin: In my head, the poet is the car that we're in.

Rachel: Oh. Oh?

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: In my head, you walk to the corner and the poet is waiting for you.

Griffin: No, in my head, the poet is like a cat bus.

Rachel: Oh, and it like zoom in?

Griffin: Yeah, yeah.

Rachel: And then we all get inside?

Griffin: Not really. I mean, you know a cat bus—we gotta actually get into this segment.

Rachel: [laughs] Okay. The poet I wanted to talk about for this week's Poetry Corner is Jamaal May. Jamaal May is a Detroit poet that I was actually not familiar with before I started doing this research.

Griffin: Detroit, it's an amazing city up in Michigan.

Rachel: [titters] Mm-hm.

Griffin: Auto City. Chrysler City, I think they call it.

Rachel: Yeah. Jamaal May has two books of poetry. His first book came out in 2013. It was called Hum. It won an American Library Association Notable Book Award. And then his second collection was called The Big Book of Exit Strategies, it came out in 2016.

Griffin: I like that.

Rachel: He kind of came to poetry through unusual means. He has a twin sister, and his sister was getting involved in kind of the slam poetry energy of the city I guess that was happening. And was like, "You should do this too." And he was not comfortable with performance or public speaking. And kind of found his way to poetry that way. And kind of once he enjoyed success in that arena, started moving towards the more kind of technical, classic way of presenting poetry in these books. And I wanted to read one of his poems from that book, The Big Book of Exit Strategies, that is called Ode to the White-Line-Swallowing Horizon.

"Apologies to the moths that died in service to my windshield's cross-country journey. Apologies to the fine country cooking vomited into a rest stop bathroom. Apologies to the rest stop janitor. To the mop, galvanized bucket, sawdust, and push broom—the felled tree it was cut from, dulled saw, blistered hand, I offer my apologies. To the road. To the white-line-swallowing horizon. I've used you almost up. I'm sorry I don't know another way to push the charcoal outline of that house into the ocean-dark behind me. For being a grown man with a boogeyman at his back. Apologies to the grown man growing out of a splintering boy's body. Apologies to the splinters. Little ones, you should've been a part of something whole."

Griffin: Jesus Christ.

Rachel: Isn't that lovely?

Griffin: That is beautiful. And very—it made me feel sad. But it's words, which is crazy. You know what I mean? Like you hear words and it makes you sad? Who would have thunk?

Rachel: [chuckles] You know what's interesting? So he gave his interview. AWP is this big annual convention that happens every year. I think it's like Association of Writers and Poets. They have it across the country in various convention centers. And in 2016, he gave an interview with PBS. And he said, quote, "On a deeper level, what draws me to poetry is this idea that I can build a mechanism to approximate emotion." He goes on to say that he had trouble connecting with people growing up. And with poetry, there was this way that he could build something and show the reader what he was looking at, but also give them space to have their own experience.

Griffin: Yeah, sure.

Rachel: And he talked about how a poem becomes, quote, "A conduit between people."

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: I just really like enjoyed that way of thinking about it. Because I just, I feel like when you sit down to write a poem, especially if you have been in an academic environment for a very long time, you kind of forget that like emotional resonance that like drew you to poetry in the first place.

Griffin: Sure.

Rachel: And this reminder, and he talks about it in the interview, that he's really interested in kind of these two like powerful like sources of conflict in his life, and then figuring out that space between. And kind of trying to write about that. He gave another interview in 2013 and he talks about—he says, quote, "I've been thinking a lot about poetry being pretty much the only art form in which the practitioners are regularly called upon to explain if and how their art will solve society's ills."

Griffin: [chuckles]

Rachel: "I've never seen or heard an interview with Jack White that asks him how his guitar solo on Ball and Biscuit will cure cancer and stave off the zombie apocalypse. I once worried about the fairness of this paradigm, but I'm starting to see it as a show of respect. That people keep wondering how poetry will change the world seems to start with the implicit assumption that it could. I believe it already does, but not in the singular, immediate way that seems to be demanded by some to justify the creation of literature. It is one of many human endeavors that, taken together, help to repair our minds into more thoughtful devices."

Griffin: That's incredible.

Rachel: Isn't that incredible?

Griffin: That's really good. Have you ever seen that Ethan Hawke interview where he talks about sort of like the arts and how they are unnecessary?

Rachel: No?

Griffin: And how it's like people who comment on how it's not a real job because you don't make anything that people need. But then you get your heart broken. And like you need to know if someone out there has felt the same thing as you before. And then in that small way, like it is everything for you. Which is kind of aggrandizing, I think, being a sort of like artist person as Ethan Hawke. Or us, I would say we're on the same level as Mr. Hawke.

Rachel: [chuckles]

Griffin: But to like hear it put that way is really, really wonderful.

Rachel: Yeah, he goes on to say in that interview, he says, "Art via poetry, music, sculpture, puppetry, the whole of it inspires change on a personal level, rather than a global one. This is important because the individual is the whole. The creation of art argues that people are connected. Ideas are connected. The past and future are connected by this moment."

Griffin: Fuck yeah. That's so good.

Rachel: Isn't that incredible?

Griffin: I think I like that—the poem was great. I think I like that shit better than the poem even.

Rachel: [chuckles] Yeah. You can tell that he's thought a lot about this. And he's really kind of examined it almost as an outsider.

Griffin: Yeah, sure.

Rachel: You know? That's what I think is really exciting about him as a poet, is that he's still—even though he's been doing this obviously now for a long time, still feels like it's new to him. And he's able to have this perspective on it that's really kind of exciting.

Griffin: Yeah, that's so cool. I feel like that is like one of the hardest things I imagine. Like when you are an artist or someone who creates, in order to like see it from the outside in and get—like fuckin' get it.

Rachel: You do all this work to feel like an earned member of the community.

Griffin: Right.

Rachel: You know? Like you figure out who came before you and kind of what the tropes are and what the approach—and you get so immersed in it that you kind of aren't able to communicate its value in the same way anymore. And I feel like he does that really well.

Griffin: Yeah. That's great. What's his name? One more time.

Rachel: Jamaal May.

Griffin: Jamaal May.

Rachel: Mm-hm.

Griffin: That's great. Thank you, Jamaal May. Can I steal you away?

Rachel: Yes.

Griffin: Cool!

[theme music plays]

[ad reads]

Griffin: I'm very excited for this next one. I would like to talk about a musical artist that I have been listening to for about three days now. It's hot off the presses. Sometimes I talk about like artists or whatever, or games or something on this show. And I think like this isn't widely known by our audience, and so I'm getting in there and like providing an incredibly valuable service.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: But this is the opposite. Because I feel like I'm the last one to the Chappell Roan train.

Rachel: Yeah, you asked me pretty confidently like, "Oh, you're probably familiar." And I was like, no, I'm not.

Griffin: No, and I may be saying her name wrong, now I'm realizing. I should have looked up the pronunciation. But I'm gonna say Chappell Roan. Chappell Roan is a singer, songwriter. She's got a big ol' powerful voice. And she makes, in NPR's own words, queer girl bops. And that is an incredibly good and apt description of the music that she makes. And she makes a lot of them. So, she put out her first full-length album last year called *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess*. She's from Missouri.

Rachel: Oh, I didn't know that?

Griffin: Yeah, she's from Willard, Missouri.

Rachel: Is that why you asked if I knew her? [chuckles]

Griffin: Did I say—no, I didn't mean it in that sense.

Rachel: No, I know.

Griffin: Yeah, the music video that I sent you actually is made and was shot in Springfield. I didn't know how familiar you were with Springfield. So yeah, she—this album, *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess*, it is long and just loaded with horny, like sapphic, like dance jams. And horny, sapphic like love ballads in just huge, generous quantities. I did the thing where like I heard a couple songs of hers and I was like, this fucking rules. And so I was just listening to those two like a lot. And then I was like, I wonder what the rest of them are like? And they were all just fucking stellar. So, her music uses like a ton of '80s pop-synth like sounds, without sounding like a kind of gimmicky '80s like tribute or pastiche, or anything like that.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: It feels like modern, even though it's like working with these very retro sounds. And it's a really kind of incredible feat because it doesn't really sound like anything else I feel like I've heard before. It's like if Wham just started to make new music, but it was like modern and really horny and—well, horny... I feel like Wham had some horny hits. Anyway, I'm not gonna go down that rabbit hole.

Rachel: [chuckles]

Griffin: I'm gonna play a new song, a new single she just put out a few weeks ago called *Good Luck, Babe*. To give a sample of sort of what her music sounds like.

[excerpt of "Good Luck, Babe" by Chappell Roan plays]

Chappell Roan: [sings] It's fine, it's cool. You can say that we are nothing, but you know the truth. And guess I'm the fool, with her arms out like an angel through the car sunroof. I don't wanna call it off. But you don't wanna

call it love. You only wanna be the one that I call baby. You can kiss a hundred boys in bars. Shoot another shot, try to stop the feeling.

Griffin: So, her voice is fuckin' rad. Just like super powerful across like a really huge range. And she wields it on some of these choruses to forge just these unimaginably catchy riffs.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: I have had like a few of those choruses just like stuck in my head wholesale, even though I've only been listening for a little bit. So Chappell Roan was born Kayleigh Amstutz in Willard, Missouri, in 1998. And she grew up in a trailer park, in what she described as like an ultra-conservative environment. She described like kind of struggling in that environment, like feeling like she wanted to be a good person. She was going to church three days a week and you know, wanting to feel like a good person. But also feeling this like incredible drive to just like escape.

So, she started to learn like piano and practice singing when she was 10 or 11. When she was 14 or 15, she started uploading YouTube videos of her singing and playing piano covers of like various songs. And in 2015, at age 17, she uploaded an original song to YouTube called Die Young. It's still up there, you can go watch it. That caught the eye of some like talent scouts and big wigs. And so in May of 2015, she signed with Atlantic Records.

Rachel: Wow.

Griffin: But she did a few singles that were like critically well-received. Including, she had sort of her first breakout hit which is called Pink Pony Club, which also slaps.

Rachel: [snickers]

Griffin: But it didn't make like a huge splash. Atlantic actually dropped her from the label in 2020.

Rachel: Wow.

Griffin: Her producer and collaborator at that time, this guy named Dan Nigro, went off at that point to go work with Olivia Rodrigo, on *Sour*. Which is another very good album. And she didn't really have anyone else she wanted to work with. So she moved back to Springfield to work on her music and she was like working in a drive-through at the time. I think she had also just broken up like with a very longtime boyfriend and was just kind of like going through it, it sounds like.

But in March 2022, she reunited with Dan Nigro and started just jamming out singles, that started to get a lot of attention. And then she was signed on as the opener for Olivia Rodrigo's *Sour* tour, where she got like a shit ton of exposure. And since she has put out *Midwest Princess* last September, she has just been on like a meteoric rise. She has—

Rachel: So many people's story like ends. Like the first half of that story where it's like she was on Atlantic and then they dropped her, and then she moved back to Springfield, like period.

Griffin: Yeah, period, the end.

Rachel: There are so many circumstances where that could have just been it, you know?

Griffin: Yeah, the music that she made back then was great, but I feel like it has gotten much more playful. And like I—the camp that is sort of intrinsic to her music—I hope that adjective isn't dismissive in any way. Because to me, it is just a sort of like way that she embraces this really fun, really dauntless, really randy, brash like queer-positive energy. She attributes a lot of that to just like being inspired by drag queens whom she's worked with as openers to her like touring act, à la Orville Peck, which is incredibly cool. And she just like, she—when she talks about her music and sort of the vibe that it has, she like describes it as like a huge pendulum swing away from this conservative upbringing that she never quite like fit in to.

Rachel: Yeah, the like joyousness that you talk about, I feel like is what really kind of makes you like, I don't know, pulled in.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: You know?

Griffin: Go listen to this album. The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess. I think it's incredibly special and just really, really fucking good. And to leave off, I want to play one more song, I think my favorite of her's. It's called Hot To Go, off of Midwest Princess.

Rachel: Oh my god, I love this one.

Griffin: And yeah, like I said, the video for this one's also really fun. She shot it in Springfield. It features a bunch of drag queens and her grandparents that she taught this choreographed dance. It fuckin' rules. This is Hot To Go.

[excerpt of "Hot To Go" by Chappell Roan plays]

Chappell Roan: [sings] I could be the one or your new addiction. It's all in my head, but I want non-fiction. I don't want the world, but I'll take this city. Who can blame a girl? Call me hot, not pretty. Baby, do you like this beat? (Na-na, na-na, na). I made it so you'd dance with me (na-na, na-na, na). It's like a hundred ninety-nine degrees (na-na, na-na, na). When you're doing it with me, doing it with me. H-O-T-T-O-G-O, snap and clap and touch your toes. Raise your hands, now body roll. Dance it out, you're hot to go. H-O-T-T-O-G-O.

Griffin: Hey, do you want some wonders from our friends at home?
Wonders from afar?

Rachel: Yes, please.

Griffin: Rebecca says, "My small wonder is when you're wearing exactly the right clothes for the weather outside." It's getting hard, init? It's getting hard for us here, init?

Rachel: [titters]

Griffin: Sometimes you go outside and it's like 60. And sometimes you out there and it's like 89. And that's no good.

Rachel: See, I always dressed for 89.

Griffin: I love a jacket. God, I love the jacket.

Rachel: I know. I know you love a jacket.

Griffin: I never wanted to live in California, no shade California. I love visiting you—

Rachel: It's just the opposite side of the country from you.

Griffin: It's just the opposite side of the country from everyone that I know and it's... 'sensive. But every time I'm there, I always am like, it's 71—it's like the perfect—

Rachel: I know.

Griffin: And I'm always like, wow, great weather we're having. And everyone who lives here is like, "Yeah, this is pretty much... it's pretty much always this." That sounds pretty choice.

Rachel: That's why like the Jesse Thorns and the Paul F. Tompkins can wear the full suits. You know? The weather is perfect for it.

Griffin: The weather outside is delightful. Leif says, "My small wonder is a left green turn arrow at stoplights or any other symbol that means left turn without having to yield. I have so much driving anxiety, especially when yielding to oncoming traffic. So I get a big rush of relief when I see that merciful green arrow." I love a protected left turn.

Rachel: Yeah, that is nice.

Griffin: That is so nice. I have also, I think I've talked about it maybe on this show. I don't think anything makes me angrier than when I'm in a line

for a protected left turn and someone is on their phone, or otherwise wasting this incredible opportunity given to them from on high.

Rachel: Because usually, you only get space for like three or four cars. And then it's like, if you haven't figured it out...

Griffin: Yes, exactly. That is it! Thank you so much to Bo En and Augustus for the use of our theme song, Money Won't Pay. Another small wonder here at the end of the show, we just played through a game with Henry called Pikuniku. Just a cute little platformer. I think it's on Switch and Xbox and iOS and stuff. And I was like vibing out to it. It's like a really cute game, very funny. And the soundtrack was like very playful and interesting and cool. And then we beat it and rolled credits and it was Bo En who made the soundtrack.

Rachel: Yeah, that's cool.

Griffin: Which I thought was really neat. Anyway, thank you for the music. And thank you to Maximum Fun for having us on the network. Go to maximumfun.org. Check out all the great stuff that they got poppin' over there.

Rachel: Do you know what merch y'all have?

Griffin: We have a new sticker up in the merch store that is modeled after DJ Thumbs. Probably my favorite character who's come out of TAZ Versus Dracula so far.

Rachel: Yes, that's great!

Griffin: Designed by Lucas Hesperheide. Just really, really cool. There's some other stuff over on there too. And...

Rachel: And thank you to our listeners who have been patient with us.

Griffin: Yes!

Rachel: We did not have an episode last week.

Griffin: Yes. We have been—we really have had—

Rachel: Just a lot of travel and illness.

Griffin: Like a month of weekends of travel and everyone's been getting sick and I know we—I feel like we always kind of do that around this time of year as I start touring, in the spring-springs. And we all just like you know, suffer through the pollen count. But we will get this ship back on track. Ships don't traditionally go on tracks. Can we stop now and go watch The Circle?

Rachel: [chuckles] Yes, please.

Griffin: Okay. Goodbye!

[theme music, "Money Won't Pay (feat. Augustus)" by Bo En plays]

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