

Still Buffering 440: Paris is Burning

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[theme music, "Baby You Change Your Mind" by Nouvellas plays]

Sydnee: Hello, and welcome to *Still Buffering*, a cross-generational guide to the culture that made us. I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Taylor: And I'm Taylor Smirl.

Sydnee: Well, Taylor, have you been getting a lot of rain up there? I haven't asked you that.

Taylor: Uh— Oh, yeah, rain and cold.

Sydnee: Oh, it's cold?

Taylor: I don't— It is cold. I just have to take it as a personal offense. It is the month of pride in New York City, the month where you want to walk around, like, half-naked, covered in glitter, as many days as possible in a row. And it was... It was *56 degrees* yesterday.

Sydnee: Oh, my gosh.

Taylor: Five, six! And rainy.

Sydnee: That is... a personal attack, is what that feels like.

Taylor: It's a personal attack.

Sydnee: It's homophobic.

Taylor: [laughs] It is! It's homophobic weather. [with grumpy tone] I guess God really does hate the gays!

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: [grouching] Oh, fine! [laughs] At least in the eastern panhandle.

Sydnee: We, uh, have been doing *The Prom* – you know, for outdoor theater, the show *The Prom*.

Taylor: Mm.

Sydnee: And our show got rained out Saturday night. And it happened right in the middle of a scene of where there's a big PTA meeting, where they're protesting what they're calling the, quote, "homosexual prom," which means a prom that everybody can come to. [laughs]

Taylor: Right.

Sydnee: And so one of the actors says something about, like, "I don't want my kid going to a homosexual prom!" And right at that moment, there was just the largest thunder, that just shook the whole amphitheater. And we had to stop the show afterwards. And so we were debating, like— I feel like that was God condemning homophobia. I feel like that's what just happened.

Taylor: [reluctantly] Eh, I mean, I don't know! Like, I just found the best track record, so it could go either way.

Sydnee: [laughs] That was our take on it. We decided to interpret it that way. Like, "See?"

Taylor: You know, somebody that was dragged into that audience is sitting there, like, "See? There you go. End scene! Play's done! God said so."

Sydnee: [laughs] It was a torrential downpour that we did not see coming.

Taylor: [sighs] Well, to be fair, that's not really an act of God. That was an act of underprepared weather service, because of Trump's budget cuts, correct? [laughs]

Sydnee: Yes. Yeah, that is my theory as to why— So as somebody who

does outdoor theater every year, I watch the radar. This time of year, I am watching— every day, I am checking the radar constantly. And, I mean, it's usually decently accurate. Like, it'll say, "Rain's gonna start in ten minutes," and rain starts within about ten minutes! Like, it's usually pretty on point.

This year, no clue. I have been standing outside in the rain, and my radar is like, "There's no rain in your area." And I'm like, "Well. There is." [laughs] "Well..."

Taylor: It's a lie. [laughs]

Sydnee: "There is definitely rain! It's falling on me." Great for my plants. I already have a zucchini I've harvested this year, so it's great for my garden. Bad for theater.

Taylor: I had— a few of the cold, rainy days we've had up here, I had that conversation. That "Trying to find peace" conversation in my brain. Like, "This is good for the earth! It's good for the trees! The plants love this."

But I'm done. I'm like, "You good? You good, trees? Is this enough? Can I have a nice day!?" [laughs]

Sydnee: See, I'm wondering if it would help undo the damage that, I think, the cicadas are doing to the trees.

Taylor: [simultaneously] What the cicadas doin'?

Sydnee: [simultaneously] The cicadas are hurting the trees, I think.

Taylor: I didn't hear about this! I don't know why I would. I don't know what news source I check in on that would tell me that.

Sydnee: [laughs] Well, all the trees have brown on them.

Taylor: They're— Wait. Trees are brown... What?

Sydnee: No, like the leaves. Like the leaves.

Taylor: Oh, okay. [laughs]

Sydnee: Like the leaves do.

Taylor: Uh, I didn't know that cicadas damaged trees.

Sydnee: I thought they did. I thought I read that. I thought cicadas did something to trees. Like, they don't— 'Cause I was researching to see if that's why my garden wasn't growing, did it have something to do with cicadas?

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: But no, it has nothing to do with cicadas. But then they were like, "They can be hard on trees, especially young trees!" And, like, we have little apple trees growing in our backyard that we planted. But they seem fine. I don't know; they look fine.

Taylor: Well, see, I don't know anything about this. I realize— I know we talked about *The Birdcage* last week, but that scene where Robin Williams' character is saying, like— His son says, "Don't you read the news?"

And he's like, "Yes! The style section..."

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: Or, like, "The theater section," whatever, "The *Who's Who*."

Sydnee: Uh-huh.

Taylor: And it's like, that's how I feel right now. I'm like, "Why don't I know about this?" Well, Taylor, you watch cartoons, and...

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: You know, you listen to the weather, that's it. And *that's* not even

reliable anymore. Like, you don't engage with this stuff! You're not so deep in the news that you get to cicada news. You're not there!

Sydnee: See, I have children who wanna tell me things like this. So...

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: I had to learn all about why— Do you know about the fungus that infects cicadas?

Taylor: [clicks tongue] Don't want to.

Sydnee: [snorts] Well, *I* had to learn all about.

Taylor: You're gonna tell me anyway. [bursts out laughing]

Sydnee: Charlie was like, "Why does that cicada have, like, white stuff coming out of it?" And I was like, "I don't wanna think about it. I don't know. [laughs] It's gonna be gross!" And it's gonna be gross in, like, the way that *I* don't enjoy. Because there's a lot of stuff that people find gross that, as a doctor, it doesn't really bother me – or, like, I even enjoy.

Taylor: Yeah...

Sydnee: Like, I will open an abscess any day of the week, I very much enjoy pimple popping. But, um—

Taylor: Eugh!

Sydnee: I do! I do, I like that kind of thing. It does not gross me out.

Taylor: Ugh...

Sydnee: But the white stuff exploding out of cicadas, not my bag. Not something I wanted to know about. And it turns out that that is a – hold on, I'm gonna tell you the name of it – that is a fungal infection.

Taylor: I knew it was gonna be fungal!

Sydnee: That— Yep. Hold on, is this the right one? Yes, *Massospora cicadina* is a fungal pathogen. It infects only the 13- and 17-year periodical cicadas, so that's why we're seeing it.

Taylor: Oh!

Sydnee: And it replaces, basically, all of the organs in their abdomen with a bunch of white fungal spores.

Taylor: That's disgusting.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: See, I was gonna say, like, there is no fungal body horror – which is, I think, why *The Last of Us* is so disturbing. But there's, like, a temperature reason that humans don't have to deal with most fungal infections, right?

Sydnee: Yeah. Yeah.

Taylor: Like, there's just, like, a... And there's always this threat of, "But if mushrooms figure it out! If they do the math at some point, and figure out how to infect us, we're screwed!" [chuckles uncomfortably]

Sydnee: Ugh...

Taylor: 'Cause it gets *real gross*, and real messy!

Sydnee: It's— Ugh. Yeah, it's really gross. I wouldn't recommend looking up any pictures. Um... [laughing softly]

Taylor: You are, right now, yeah. I'm looking at the horror in your eyes, as you look at your phone.

Sydnee: Yeah, it's...

Taylor: You are looking at pictures.

Sydnee: It's really— It's—

Taylor: Yeah, I don't... Ugh.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: That's something, like— I eat mushrooms a lot.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: But mushrooms, like, on a... what, theoretical level? I don't know. They scare me! They're not dead, they're not alive, they're something else.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: If something would lead to a zombie apocalypse, I would believe it would be a fungus. Which was— Again, like, *The Last of Us* was smart.

Sydnee: The only thing that was interesting— Charlie told me this, and I had to look this up to see if this was true. So, like, this is all very grody. Like, their abdomens fall off, once they're completely filled with fungal spores. But the Stage I infected male cicadas respond to mating calls of both males and females.

Taylor: Oh, no.

Sydnee: And attract healthy males through flicking their wings, which is usually a behavior that's only observed with healthy females.

Taylor: So you're telling me the gay bugs are evil.

Sydnee: They're not evil, but what I'm saying is, if—

Taylor: No, they're...

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: They're gay *because* they're evil.

Sydnee: [through laughter] They're not evil! But they're—

Taylor: They are a danger to the future of their species, by way of being gay.

Sydnee: I'm saying, the fungus makes them gay. [laughs]

Taylor: This is the homophobic episode of *Still Buffering*. [laughs]

Sydnee: No!

Taylor: God hates you, and...

Sydnee: [laughs uncontrollably]

Taylor: The fungus makes you bad.

Sydnee: But Charlie said, "I read that it can make them gay." I said, "It makes cicadas gay?" [laughs] "That can't be right!" And then I read about it, and I was like, "Well..."

Taylor: Yeah. Yeah...

Sydnee: It interferes with their traditional mating call in such a way... that they're gay. [bursts out laughing]

Taylor: They mimic the— Yeah. They seduce the good, normal male bugs...

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: ... by pretending to be the lady bugs – not ladybugs. You know, the...

Sydnee: Yeah. The lady cicadas.

Taylor: Yeah, I— Yeah!

Sydnee: Cicada ladies.

Taylor: This is— Oh, no. Oh...

Sydnee: Lady Cadas.

Taylor: Lady Cadas! I was gonna say, there's definitely a sound there.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: [sighs loudly]

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Well... Well, shoot!

Sydnee: Well, shoot. So anyway, that's— If you see cicadas with white stuff exploding out of them, that's what's happening there.

Taylor: I mean, sometimes, you're gay. Sometimes, you're evil. Sometimes, you're gay *and* evil. It's just... It's just random.

Sydnee: Well, I mean, I don't think we need to say that there's plenty of evidence that there are straight evil people... [laughs]

Taylor: Oh, no, I know! [through laughter] I know. I'm aware.

Sydnee: We're very... accustomed. Maybe you saw the evil straight parade the other day. [laughs]

Taylor: Oh. Yeah... I don't know, is it bad that, like, I'm offended – of course, just the nature of the parade. Just spending that much money on a parade to celebrate the most feeble man to ever live, like, I don't want— That's so much money to spend for that stupid reason. But I am equally offended that it was a *bad* parade.

Sydnee: It was a bad parade. It was a bad parade. It was pathetic, and small, and sad. All of it was small and sad.

Taylor: Sometimes you see those, I don't know, the North Korea parades. And obviously, this is bad and oppressive, but wow, they put on a show! If you're gonna spend \$45 million dollars, could you at least have had some of those— Like, you know, those— I don't know, there's always a cheerleading squad that can do really impressive flips that's super racist that would show up for something like that. None of that! It was just sad.

Sydnee: I think it— I mean, I don't know. It, for a lot of reasons, was awful, and stupid, and a waste, and terrible, and...

Taylor: [wheeze-laughs]

Sydnee: I mean... Like, I don't know. I've never once thought, like, "Man, I wish they would have old tanks rolling down the street in DC for us to look at." But I'm sure someone wanted to see an old tank. Whatever.

Taylor: I think *one* person wanted to see an old tank.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: And, unfortunately, he controls our country.

Sydnee: Apparently, there were also robot dogs.

Taylor: Oh, yeah, that's— [sarcastic] That's a sign of pride in our nation.

Sydnee: I know. Old tanks and robot dogs – this was the anti-pride parade.
[laughs] There are no old tanks and robot dogs at a pride parade.

Taylor: No. I mean, an anti-pride would be shame, and that's what it was!
[laughs]

Sydnee: Yeah. It was a shame parade. But I think it reflects that... he believes in nothing. He's not even—

Taylor: Yeah...

Sydnee: I mean, he's not even really a fascist in the sense that, like, he has always deeply believed these things, and he's gonna try to inflict this fascist government on us, because it's what he feels is right. He believes in nothing.

Taylor: There's two ways I could look at that statement, as far as, like, "How dangerous does that make him, versus somebody that believes in an evil something?"

Sydnee: Right.

Taylor: Because to a part of it, it's like, well, that's safer. Because ultimately, somebody that believes intensely in an evil something could organize to work towards that. But also, if you believe in something, you understand that something must be preserved. And the danger of somebody that believes in nothing is, then nothing's worth saving. Anything could be lost, it's just...

I mean, we know these people in our personal lives that just seem to have a void of just, like, that's... There's nothing there, and so anybody could get hurt. Anybody could...

Sydnee: I don't understand. If you— I am not somebody who, like— Obviously... [chuckles] This may be shocking. I'm not, like, a Bible literalist.
[laughs]

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: And so I don't believe there's gonna be, like, an Antichrist and Revelations that's gonna happen, and all that stuff. I just don't. But...

Taylor: No.

Sydnee: If you were someone who did, I don't know how you don't look at somebody like Donald Trump, and be like, "Well, that seems kinda like what he'd be like, right? Somebody who just... believes nothing. Values nothing. Holds nothing dear, or sacred... Something to whom no one matters, and no thing – no idea, no value, no *anything* matters. Like, *that* is – if there is an evil, that would be the evil. I don't understand.

Taylor: Well, that really is— I agree with that, because it goes beyond – you know, sometimes, I feel like lazy depictions of an Antichrist would have, like, somebody who's hypermaterialistic, which is like— You know, they'll be like, "Oh, stuff and money! That makes you evil."

It's like... No. I mean, that man eats well-done steaks. He does not know the joy of materialism.

Sydnee: Mm-mm.

Taylor: He doesn't know the joy of a well-tailored suit. He doesn't— Like, he has no taste. He has no joy in— Like, that is, what I would think, on a Biblical level, would be the true Antichrist. Nothing on Earth pleases you. There is nothing on Heaven *or* Earth that...

Sydnee: And you don't know what... I mean, there's also something inhuman about not knowing what pleasure *is*. Because if I'm thinking, like, "I have endless money, and I'm going to—" First of all, I wouldn't buy, like, household fixtures for myself if I had endless money. I would want to, like...

Taylor: Golden toilets? [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, I would want to solve problems, right? Like, if I had endless money, I would wanna end hunger, and homelessness, and— I mean, I would want to do big things with all that money.

But let's say that I did have enough money where I could, like, treat myself to the best bathroom fixture ever. Like, most of us would think of, like, "Oh, there's this shower that I once saw, that I would really love to have!" Or, like, a bathtub that would be really luxurious, right? Like, you would think of things that would bring you *pleasure*, and *joy*.

Taylor: A Japanese toilet.

Sydnee: Well, yeah! You'd get a really fancy Japanese toilet. You would not think—

Taylor: The one that, like, talks you through it, and...

Sydnee: Right!

Taylor: ... and cuddles your buttcheeks? Yes.

Sydnee: That's warm, and has— Yes. And all that stuff, probably like a light show and whatever...

Taylor: Yeah!

Sydnee: That is what you'd think of. You would not think, "Make the toilet gold."

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: You wouldn't think that! Because why is that more luxurious? Like, it doesn't improve your experience in the bathroom. You're not having a better bathroom time, 'cause you're sitting on a *gold* toilet. In fact, it's probably less comfortable than a million other things you could make your toilet out of!

Taylor: I think that this is the better question of, you know, could there be an ethical billionaire? Could there be an ethical very rich man? And I think it's that all of the stuff that makes you a good person keeps you from that. You know, like, that— And it can be selfish. It doesn't have to be selfless. It doesn't have to be, "Ooh, if I had money, I'd give it away to people." It's that when you're like— I don't know.

A normal person, it's like, "Yeah. There's things to enjoy in life." Like, I know I could be better off financially, but yeah! I love... I love living on Earth. I love the things that Earth has to offer. I love a good meal. I love a good drink. I love going to a good show.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Like, that's where I spend my money. Because what is the opposite of just, like, having it, so I can... I don't know. Like, I don't— That's not how I operate, and I think that's how most of us operate. Is we... we see money as an ends to the things that bring us joy.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: And someone who just doesn't have anything that brings them joy... other than just, what, taking it from other people? I think that's what it comes down to.

Sydnee: I— Yeah. It's a mindset I don't understand. It is an interesting question, is there's somebody— Could we ever give that kind of money to somebody, and they would use it in a way we would all say, like, "Good job"? 'Cause, I mean...

Taylor: Well...

Sydnee: Well, if you think about it, that was, briefly, the narrative around JK Rowling. When she first got...

Taylor: [laughs gruffly]

Sydnee: Remember this? When she first got super rich, she gave away so much of her money that she wasn't a millionaire anymore. Do you remember this?

Taylor: Yes.

Sydnee: And everybody was like, "Wow! What an incredible person!" And then we all find out, like, "Oh, no! Oh, *no*! She's not! She sucks!" And we all found that out, later. And it's like, is there a such thing? Could there be anybody?

Taylor: Well... I'm hesitant to have faith in anybody that's insanely rich, but I do wanna say that at least one person that the narrative still holds is – and this is the Obi Wan for the hope of rebellion – Dolly Parton.

Sydnee: Yeah, that's true. Dolly Parton.

Taylor: Dolly Parton. She does a lot of good with her money. She has consistently fallen out of the *billionaire* sphere, because she does so much. She donates a lot, she has long-running scholarships and programs to educate the youth. She has a free book program. Dolly Parton seems to be somebody that has what she wants in life. And she lives very luxuriously, but she also... does a lot of good.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Yeah. No, there are definitely – I think you're right. There are examples, and there are certainly people who aren't billionaires but who are wealthy, famous people who also give away a ton of money, and don't live extravagant lifestyles. Like, there are other examples we could point to, but...

Taylor: No, I think—

Sydnee: It's hard to imagine getting to that level of, like, monetary power and maintaining some sense of, I don't know, humanity.

Taylor: Yeah. Well, it's just this, like... I think it's probably what Trump and

Elon had in common, is there's a certain breed of black hole men. And that's what it is, it's just an inescapable void inside of them.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: That everything gets sucked in, but nothing fills it up. And you just have to hope those people don't gain power.

Sydnee: On a side note, Taylor, I know you don't watch *Doctor Who*. But this last season of *Doctor Who* talks about this very well.

Taylor: Oh, really?

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: That feels like a very Whovian concept. [laughs]

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. *Doctor Who* knows exactly where it stands, and it is unwavering in its wokeness. [laughs] In its commitment to wokeness.

Taylor: Well, and their posterboy, I mean, David Tennant – you can ask David Tennant about the weather, and he'll say, "Trans rights!"

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: "I don't know if it's gonna rain today, but I do know trans people deserve rights." [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] I actually— I looked to see if he had any new t-shirts I needed to buy, because any t-shirt he's wearing, I'm usually like, "Oh, I want that one, too!" [chuckles]

Well, Tey, speaking of – I think this is a good segue.

Taylor: Absolutely.

Sydnee: We watched *Paris is Burning*.

Taylor: Yes.

Sydnee: The documentary from 1980— When was it?

Taylor: Eeh... Uh, it starts in '86, but I don't know if that's when it's released. Um... It came out in 1990.

Sydnee: '90. I was gonna say, I knew it did an update at the end in '89, so...

Taylor: Yeah. Yes, it's an amazing documentary by Jennie Livingston. And it started in the mid-80s, documenting really, sort of, the high point of ballroom culture in New York City. Which, if you're unfamiliar with what ballroom culture means, uh... Gosh, how do you blurb—

It's just such a unique and beautiful creative endeavor of largely underprivileged communities coming together in costume, and dance, and music, and celebration. Just sort of— I mean, I don't know. Like, how do you even encapsulate it in a... [laughs] I can't elevator pitch ballroom!

Sydnee: Well, it's weird, too. Because I was watching it, and Charlie and Cooper were kind of in and out of the room while I was watching it. They were watching at it, 'cause there are elements of it that I thought especially Charlie would think were interesting.

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: But then there's also a lot that just... It's hard to explain, when you're raising children in this era, this time, and you want them to be good people. And then you're watching a film, which is a time capsule, and they're using, like, the F slur.

Taylor: Right.

Sydnee: I don't want my kids to say it. They don't— They've never heard it. I don't— So, you know, it was one of those things where, like, "How do I

explain this in a nuanced enough way, so that they understand?" You know, like... I don't know. So they were kind of in and out of the room [chuckles] while I was watching it.

But there were so many things where I was trying to explain, like, "Charlie, this is where all this stuff you love from, like, *Drag Race*, all these terms that your generation has just made part of their language, all this slang. Here is where it came from. Like, this is the community that invented it." And it was kind of cool, 'cause they just take that for granted.

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: They're, like, talking about shade, and tea, and stuff like that. And it's like, "This is... This is the language that you're using."

Taylor: Well, and it really— I've seen this movie a few times, but it really hit home this time how much specifically, like, modern drag culture— Like, when you think of mainstream drag, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, that is so pulled from this.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: That is so pulled— Like, drag has been around since, what? I mean, we had drag queens back in the Shakespearean era.

Sydnee: I mean, forever, yeah.

Taylor: Yeah. There's always been drag. But *this* specific identity of drag...

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: ... that is still popular now is specifically from ballroom culture.

Sydnee: Yes. Yes. And it is interesting, because as I'm watching it, none of it seems new, because it is so much part of our culture now. You know what I mean?

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: It's weird how you can draw a direct line from that to, um— And it's not just queer culture, now. I mean, to a lot of just general youth culture is pulled from that, you know?

Taylor: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Like, the language in this, you know... "That's the tea," "reading," like, that is all—

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Just anybody uses that.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: But that need to create a culture that is yours— And, I mean, especially centered around displays of opulence, displays of beauty that earn awards... It's really touching when it's from communities that have been deprived of a sense of belonging, a sense of pride. The ability to have opulence, to have riches.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. To afford things.

Taylor: Yeah. "We're gonna create our own place, where we're gonna be kings, and queens, and models, and stars, and legendary."

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: "And you can't take this from us." And it really— I don't know. It hit me as, like, "It *has* been taken away." And it's good that this is stuff that— Like, the language should persist. But you need to go back to the source material, and have thanks to that, and understand where it comes from.

Sydnee: Yes. Yes. No, you're exactly right. You're talking about the line between appropriation and appreciation.

Taylor: Yes, yes.

Sydnee: Yeah. Which is like, the... [laughs] The language that you're using, the things you're saying, it's funny, and it's clever, and it's a better way of expressing something dull that I was saying. And so I want to express it the way...

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: You know what I mean? Like, that's appreciation. I want to express things the way *you* did, because I admire the way you see the world, and the way you're giving language to that. And so I want to echo that in my own self. That's a very human thing, right? Like, we do that. That's... I don't know. That's how we come up with what cool is, basically.

But doing that, while also elevating and paying homage to— I mean, you can't do that and then, at the same time, have a country that, you know, undermines trans rights. And undermines the rights of Black people, and people of color, and— You know what I mean? Like, it can't be both.

Taylor: Yeah. Well, I mean, literally the nexus of every conversation we're having right now with the government is the hatred of immigrants, the hatred of trans people, the hatred of people of color— It's like, but where does... This is the source of all of our culture. [laughs]

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: It's the source the everything good, and cool, and interesting, and beautiful. And, you know, when you watch this documentary, you kind of get— It's all right there!

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Everything that is everywhere, it starts here. And it's because people had to create a culture, because they were shut out of everything else.

Sydnee: And it's really admirable, how fearlessly they create that culture. And they live their lives, and their truths. I don't know that, again, young people today would have the appreciation for how brave they were, and how dangerous those choices were at the time that they were making— You know, to be who they were.

I not saying to choose to be a drag queen. I mean, to choose [chuckles] to be themselves, at a time when it was so much more dangerous, even than it still— I mean, it still is. But it was *so much* more dangerous at that time.

Taylor: Well, what, the Masquerade Laws? The things that were used against queer people during this time period, and what led to Stonewall, like, that... That still is— I mean, this is after that, but they still hang on.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: The idea that, if you walk down the street and you just look a little funny... that's cause to, you know, pull you in for questioning.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: "I'll throw you in the back of a cop car." Like, that... We've moved past that, for now, but that was enough to get you in trouble back then.

Sydnee: It's weird, because the 80s – and this is beyond the scope of any area of my expertise, but – most things are tied to capitalism and money, in the history of America. I feel like that we get back down to that, and the way that it's used to oppress people based on their gender, or their race, or their sexual orientation. That usually comes back to that.

The 80s were a time of wealth in this country. I feel like, as much as there were people who were free to express themselves sexually – as long as it was heterosexual – and free to do drugs, and sort of— I mean, drug culture was very glamorized at the time, right? Like, nobody was eating food. Everybody was doing coke. [chuckles softly]

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Everybody was drinking. Everybody was smoking. And everybody was being promiscuous, and that was all fine in the 80s – as long as you're straight. [laughs]

Taylor: Right.

Sydnee: And also, I would say, we still hadn't moved past the— And also, it's only okay if you're white.

Taylor: Oh, absolutely. Well, and it's weird, because in all of those scenarios, you would've been having sex with, you know, trans women, people of color. You would've been *using* people that are shoved at the bottom.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: But they don't get included in the conversation.

Sydnee: Exactly.

Taylor: And that's— I think that's— I mean, in my opinion, I think that's part of the problem now. It's don't think that conservative people in power want these elements to stop existing. I think they just want them not to be able to advocate for themselves, because they want to be able to continue to take advantage of them, and use them for their own needs.

Sydnee: Well, I mean, it... Having an enemy, having a villain, a bogeyman, something scary that you can try to use to manipulate people, is always useful. Especially in fascist regimes. And so I don't think they want, you know, people to go away who they disagree with. They wanna keep them around to, exactly like you said, manipulate and use them to make everybody continue to follow them.

I mean, that's the panic now. Like, "You should be scared of immigrants and trans people." That's the message that we get from our government; that has nothing to do with the daily struggles of most Americans. Neither of those things. But that is a message that they can try to use to manipulate and unite people against.

Taylor: Well, I mean, this is somewhat anecdotal, but that's part of why it's— The idea that Trump is sort of the mastermind of this, it's like, famously in New York, he had lawsuits about not paying construction companies that were largely comprised of immigrants, many of which were undocumented.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: So he understands the benefit that he has personally benefited from: these people not being able to advocate for themselves.

Sydnee: Oh, yeah.

Taylor: He just wants to make sure that can continue to happen.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Like... You love immigrant labor. You just don't love paid immigrant labor. [laughs]

Sydnee: Yeah. It's all about maintaining the balance of power. I mean, that's what it's all about.

Taylor: Well, and then compare it to this documentary, which is just people trying to live their lives.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Trying to find some joy, find some community. The part where they're talking about how people that are rejected by their families seek— have that need for family.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Like, these aren't people that are trying to dominate the world. They're trying to find some joy, find some community, find some happiness, have moments where they feel like they matter. This is what we can all relate to.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm!

Taylor: These people are all of us.

Sydnee: That is said numerous times throughout the documentary, like, "I just want to live a normal life." And what they're saying is, "I just want to get up, and go about my business of my life without being harassed or terrorized for it."

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: And that's it. [laughs] "And be allowed the same opportunities as somebody who isn't Black, or isn't trans, or, you know, isn't gay would have."

Taylor: And what a beautiful way of going about seeking that. Like, I don't know, there's something that is so magical. And I don't think we can honor it. I'm not sure if we can replicate it, that the ballrooms were what came out of this.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Like, we are going to make spaces where we are beautiful, where we are *shining*. Where we are draped in finery. Where we are... real.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: And that term, which gets – you know, it's kind of even a point of debate sometimes. But, like, "realness." Like, "What does that mean?"

'Cause it's not like... I mean, there's the one young woman, Venus, who's talking about wanting to be a *real* woman. Like, she just wants to be real. And... like, you were always real, you always were, but this is a place where you can *feel* that, safely.

Sydnee: Yeah. Well, and I think it's such a nuanced conversation. Because I feel like the conversation has moved to a point, now, where we recognize that who you say you are is real, regardless of any external factors. Right? It does not matter what anyone else sees, or thinks, or would label you as. Whoever you say you is who you are.

And I think we sort of are at that point where we understand that, somewhat. Or at least some of us do, I don't know. [laughs] Obviously, there are people who don't.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: But there's still something to that, the desire that you hear echoed over and over again in the film, to be fully seen and accepted that way by society. Which is still a real thing. It shouldn't matter what society thinks, but that desire is still very real in all of us. Like, we all have that.

Taylor: Yeah, we don't live in any little vacuums. We are a community. We're all a communal species. Being seen is a communal effort.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: And it's funny, 'cause I do think even now, I think that there's a level of where polite society will say, "Oh, whatever you think you are, I'll call you that." And I always know when I'm dealing with somebody who feels that way. Like, "Hmm. I want people to think I like trans people, so I'll call you whatever you want me to tell you." Versus somebody that's like, "No, I see you."

Sydnee: Mm-hmm!

Taylor: "I see you." And those people don't feel the need to bend over backwards to, like, overcorrect their language. They just see you. And if

you've never walked that road, you might not understand how much one hurts and one feels amazing.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: And it sucks to live in a world where you're so hungry for something, and you can't provide for yourself. You can work every day of your life, and you can't give it to yourself. You need someone else to give it to you.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Yeah. And I think they talk about that idea in so many different ways in the documentary. Like, in terms of their gender, in terms of their presentation, in terms of wealth, in terms of... when they talk about being an executive.

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: "I can put on a suit, and you could think I was an executive. That opportunity isn't open to us. I couldn't really be one, because the world will not allow me to. But I can trick you into thinking I'm one." I don't know, I think that's— And it's echoed in a lot of different ways.

Taylor: There was even, like— I think it was around that point that there was a discussion of mopping, of stealing things.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: And that there's the one person that's talking about how it's... I can *tell* when you walk in something that you stole. And, like, you should work for it. Which, you know, different perspectives there. I think some people would say, "Ah, stealing, who cares? Who are you hurting?"

But I thought it was a really beautiful moment of, "We can *make* things. We can make ourselves as beautiful as to beat out something that we could steal from you."

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Like...

Sydnee: I do think that was interesting. And they talk about it, where I wonder if we haven't shifted again... I forget— Who's the queen who's putting on makeup the entire... [laughs]

Taylor: Oh! [laughs] She's my favorite. I don't... [chuckles]

Sydnee: When she's talking about the children now are, like, they're wearing designers and labels, and it's that. Like, in *my* era, it was about constructing these big, beautiful showgirl-style, beaded feather, sparkly things. And it's not that now. Now, it's about the price. Like, "This is a piece of clothing that someone else made, but costs a lot of money. And it's impressive to own."

And my suspicion is that we've kind of moved away from that. You would know better than me, you're much more entrenched in drag culture than I am. But I feel like we're back to where you can make things.

Taylor: It's interesting, because I feel like if you look at drag just in the world of *Drag Race*, which I don't think you should... [laughs] I think if you like *Drag Race*, you should go to your local shows, and support your local queens. And then you'll experience real drag. Because real drag has moved beyond the conversation that *Drag Race* started.

Drag Race is almost on the opposite trajectory, where now every queen walks down the runway in these, like— They are spending \$100,000 dollars before going on the show, to buy their packages, their wardrobe. I mean, some of these, they're walking down in designer— It's legitimate designer clothing that they're wearing.

Whereas what I see – I mean, I live in Brooklyn, which I think... I live in Bushwick, which is just home to weird... [laughs] eccentric...

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Teylor: ... what-are-you-even-doing drag. Which I love. I love when someone gets up in stage, and I'm like, "I don't understand *any* of this. But I love it." And I think that's...

All things can exist. I think it all can exist. But we can't lose the importance of the crafty queens. The people that make something from nothing.

Sydnee: Yeah!

Teylor: 'Cause that's what it started as.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Teylor: You know, there was just the— I think it goes in the same conversation, the Met Exhibit and the Gala, the theme, the Black dandyism.

Sydnee: Yeah. Yeah.

Teylor: Which it really is, like... "You can think whatever you want of me, but I am going to be dressed better than you."

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Teylor: "And I'm going to look better than you. This is me elevating myself, as an act of radical resistance."

Sydnee: I like— There's the breakdown of, "Who can stunt, and who's not good at stunting?" [chuckles]

Teylor: [through laughter] Yeah!

Sydnee: Yes.

Teylor: Yeah... [laughs]

Sydnee: Which also, did you notice that that person in the documentary was holding a *Betty and Veronica* double digest? [chuckles]

Taylor: I did not! But of course *you* did. [laughs]

Sydnee: I got very excited. I rewound. I was like, "Is that a— That's an *Archie*! That's a *Betty and Veronica*. I have that one!"

Taylor: [amused sigh]

Sydnee: I got very excited.

Taylor: I like—

Sydnee: Do you know what occurred to me, when I was watching this? That what *Rent* is supposed to be, that's what this is. I feel like, for as much as growing up as a, you know, a white kid in West Virginia, listening to *Rent* 'cause I was a theater kid, and thinking, like, "Oh, wow. This is real, this is what it's like." This documentary is— I mean, no, no. *This* is what it's like.

Taylor: I think that both things— I mean, yes, I agree with you. I will never— I mean, *Rent*... But that's the thing. *Rent* was important, because would *Paris is Burning* ever have reached Huntington, West Virginia when we were high schools?

Sydnee: No. That's true, it didn't. It didn't, and *Rent* did.

Taylor: I mean, I watched it for the first time in college, and it... it shifted my world a little bit, but *Rent* also did that. And—

Sydnee: That's true. And I love *Rent*. This is not me— I would never slam *Rent*.

Taylor: No!

Sydnee: But I'm thinking, like, "This is the world that *Rent* was talking about, sort of."

Taylor: Well, you know, if you say, like, "This is the source of the culture—" And I think it's comfortable to say that Jonathan Larson was aware of this culture, and reflected it in *Rent*.

Sydnee: Sure.

Taylor: And then you kind of— At some point, it gets so diluted that it never works its way back to source.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: You can take stuff from source, and put it in the popular culture. But you always need to make sure it gets back to source, because that's how you elevate it.

Sydnee: Yeah!

Taylor: Once you just get so far away from it, then you're just stealing. Maybe that's where the breakdown happens.

Sydnee: [chuckles] Yeah.

But, I mean, I thought it was good as I was watching it again. Like I said, Charlie and Cooper were kind of drifting in and out of the room, 'cause they were doing their— I don't know, it's summer. They're doing their weird summer kid things.

Taylor: [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: You know, in the summer, where you just do all kinds of weird stuff, 'cause you got too much free time?

Taylor: Yeah! Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah. Just kind of doing that.

Taylor: [crosstalk] just going into the kitchen, and putting all the random baking ingredients together in, like, a glass...

Sydnee: Yep. There's a lot of that happening. Um, Cooper painted the upper bunk of her bunk bed, the railing of it. I came in, and she had made it— It's actually really well-done. She made every bar a little rainbow.

Taylor: Oh, cute!

Sydnee: But she interspaced them with the white ones. It looks— It's a very attractive pattern. [chuckles]

Taylor: Nice!

Sydnee: Now, it is all hand-painted with paint markers, so... The execution, perhaps, leaves something to be desired.

Taylor: Meh.

Sydnee: But I was thinking, like, they're a little young to understand everything in this. And there's just some complicated things. I mean, there's a lot of stuff about sex that they just wouldn't understand yet. And then there's, like... Like I said, how do you explain to a ten-year-old, "This word you're hearing is a terrible word, never say it, but this is why I want you to understand that this word exists"?

Because it's important to know that people who are, you know, oppressed by society are still oppressed by society. So that you can stand up against that, and call that out, and...

Taylor: Well, 'cause there's even a step beyond that, which is— I, when I'm out with my friends, I hear that word all the time, because people use it comfortably in their communities, where they feel safe about themselves. Like, that is...

Sydnee: That makes sense.

Taylor: ... like, reclaiming words. That's just... Like, I don't think— I don't know. I mean, I think certain words, it's not like, "The intent behind the word was evil." Words are just words.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: And you just have... The problem was the intent. The problem was the evil, was the hatred, was the misunderstanding.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: And sometimes, people just go, "Oh, that's a bad word. I won't say it." But what you need to understand is, it's the injustice behind it that you want to eradicate. A word's just a word. You shouldn't say it, but other people might say it. You might hear it, and you should just let it roll, if that's a word that they're reclaimed for themselves.

Sydnee: Well, yeah. I mean, if you were directing that at me, I'm not going to say it. I'm not... [chuckles]

Taylor: No, no, I'm not telling— No, don't. You shouldn't, and I would not— [bubbles into laughter]

Sydnee: No. And I don't want my children to say it, but...

Taylor: It's a nuanced conversation that maybe, like, a ten-year-old's brain can't get.

Sydnee: Right. Well, and that— So as they get older, I would like to revisit this with them. Because I do think it's important that they understand that when they say, like, "Ooh, that was shady," I want them to understand what they're saying there. You know what I mean? I want them to know where that comes from. Because we do have the privilege of saying and doing a lot of things that, obviously, the people in this documentary do not.

And so to just take those sorts of things without— I don't know. That is important. I think it is important.

Taylor: Well, it's not— Sometimes, that can sound like, "Ooh, you have to know history. You have to honor your ancestors." Kind of a boring, like, thought there. But it's a bigger recognition of all of the things you enjoy are usually made my people. Not the people at the top of the power structure.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: It's usually made by people at the bottom. And that's why you need to lift up these people. You need to protect these people. You need to... defend these people.

Sydnee: And there's also— I think there are always lessons to be learned from people who are living in a time and place where being themselves is either super uncomfortable, or dangerous, or even a crime. But then they choose to anyway.

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: To live their truth, despite that danger. And despite the being ostracized by society, sometimes. I think that there's always important lessons to learn there, and I think at the end of the film, when the one queen is talking about, "You don't need to make your mark. You made your mark by just living through it."

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: I think that's a really powerful lesson for anybody, you know?

Taylor: I think that's something that, like... It's like a sort of Hollywood narrative that if you're yourself, and you be yourself, there's some reward for that. And you have to win big, you have to be something amazing, you have to elevate yourself. And that is such a beautiful and important thing to be reminded of, is that the reward is that you've lived your life as you.

You know, on a personal level, I tell myself that a lot. [chuckles] Because, you know, it hasn't been the easiest road. But every day I wake up as me is a better day than a day I woke up as not me. And even if my life is always hard, and I always struggle, and I'm always a little bit lonely and less successful than I'd like to be, I'm *me*. And that is... That's the best gift I could ever give myself.

And it's nice to see that I'm part of a long line of people that have been doing this.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Since the dawn of time, people have been making that choice: happiness over comfort.

Sydnee: She says, "You don't have to bend the whole world." I think that's a really powerful message.

Taylor: Well, I—

Sydnee: It's—

Taylor: Go ahead.

Sydnee: Oh, go ahead. Finish your thought.

Taylor: No, no. I— [chuckles] Too many thoughts. Say what you're gonna say.

Sydnee: I was just gonna say, it's really impressive, as a-- I've said time capsule, but beyond the— They're having conversations, obviously, about ballroom culture, and then larger, about the queer community, about being Black in America, about living in poverty in America. Obviously, about being trans.

They're also having conversations about consumerism, and materialism in the 80s that are really nuanced. Then, there's the whole model scene, where they're having conversations about feminism. You have all these reporters getting in the models' faces, saying, "How do you square this with women's lib?"

Taylor: That one guy liked that one line so much, so he just kept saying, "How do you square it?"

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: "How do you square it?" [chuckles]

Sydnee: I mean, and then just to look at it. Like, the girls were watching it, and they were like, "What is this movie?" I'm like, "This is a documentary. This is how people looked." And they're like, "What?" I'm like, "This is how people dressed! Like, I mean just the crowd scenes. I don't mean in the ballroom. I mean just, like..."

Taylor: Those scenes, they were wild.

Sydnee: This is what the '80s *looked* like. [chuckles] It's wild! It's a fantastic piece of art, in and of itself, just the way it is put together.

Taylor: But it's not— You know, I understand why you're saying it's a time capsule. It is! But it's... it's unfortunately still incredibly current.

Sydnee: Oh, yeah.

Taylor: This is still where we're at, in this country.

Sydnee: Yeah. I think it is a really important— Especially this pride month... I think it *is* an important thing to revisit, for people to watch and understand. I mean, I don't think— And it's like an hour and 18 minutes. Like, it's not a huge... [chuckles]

Taylor: I wish it was ten times longer, honestly. I...

Sydnee: Right?

Taylor: If they wanna release— It's already Criterion Collection, is the version I watched. But if the Criterion Collection wants to release a ten-hour "Every cut piece of footage" from this, I would eat it up.

Sydnee: Right. Yeah, nobody's asking you to read *War and Peace* here. Just watch this; this is— It's important, it's enjoyable... It's interesting. I mean, I think people should watch it. And I'm glad that you suggested we do!

Taylor: Oh, thank you for watching it.

Sydnee: Of course.

Taylor: For watching it again. [chuckles]

Sydnee: It had been a while. It was good to watch again. And like I said, once the kids are a little bit older, I will revisit it with them. But no, I was really glad to watch it.

So what should we do next?

Taylor: Well, sticking with our theme here, I thought we could do *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*?

Sydnee: I would love to do that.

Taylor: I know that was a big one for you. You were actually the person that I first heard talk about that movie, 'cause you were really into it in high school, college?

Sydnee: Mm. In high school, I had a boyfriend who loved it, and shared it with me.

Taylor: [chuckles]

Sydnee: [laughs] We'll just leave it at that.

Taylor: Yep.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: Uh... Wonderful.

Sydnee: [laughs heartily]

Taylor: I look forward to watching that.

Sydnee: Uh, nobody's ever said I'm the most feminine of women. I...
[chuckles]

Taylor: Well, you know, sometimes, you have a gaydar. And sometimes, you know someone who is a gaydar.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: [laughs] It's just sometimes, *they* don't know it. [chuckles]

Sydnee: [laughing gasp] My thought was that it was like, "Oh, if I'm attracted to this, maybe... Maybe what I'm liking here..." [chuckles]

Taylor: Hey, I think that's a... both things at once.

Sydnee: Yeah. "She's kinda like a dude – maybe. Maybe!" [chuckles] But [it's alright?].

Hey, we are where we are, and I'm glad that we're here, so...

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: Anyway, we're gonna watch *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* next time.

Taylor: I want that on a sign. 'Cause it's somehow so sad, but also empowering. "We are where we are, and I'm glad that we're here."
[wheeze-laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] It's the truth!

Taylor: [sighs loudly] "I don't really know what we are, and I don't know where we are. But it's... it's fine." [chuckles]

Sydnee: But we're here, and I'm happy about it. And we'll do it again tomorrow! [laughs]

Taylor: Yep. Every day, wildly enough.

Alright. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Alright. Well, we'll watch that for next time. Thank you, listeners.

If you've never watched *Paris is Burning*, it really— It is, I think, a very important— And, again, enjoyable. Sometimes when people say "important," it's like they're assigning you a book in high school. They're, like, telling you you have to read... I don't know, *The House of the Seven Gables* or something. And it's like, [sarcastically] "Oh, no, not important!" This is genuinely good, and important.

Taylor: I didn't learn anything from *The House of the Seven Gables*, but I did learn a lot from this. And I'm gonna go as far as to say, if you're a queer person, I think this is fundamental.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm! Yeah. And if you're not, but you, um...

Taylor: Care about people... [laughs]

Sydnee: ... really love watching— Well, and I would say for everybody who really loves watching *Drag Race* and uses, like, a lot of the slang and stuff,

and expressions, I do think that this is important for you to go back and rewatch. If you're an ally, I guess, is what I'm saying.

Alright, well, thank you, listeners. Please go to MaximumFun.org, check out a lot of great podcasts there that you would enjoy. Thank you to the Nouvellas for our theme song, "Baby You Change Your Mind"!

Taylor: This has been *Still Buffering*, a cross-generational guide to the culture that made us.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Taylor: And I'm Teylor Smirl.

Sydnee: I am still buffering.

Taylor: And I am, too.

[theme music plays]

Sydnee: [Getting that TikTok surfaced to me?] "My name's Valentina."

Taylor: [chuckles]

Sydnee: "And I'm part of the LGBTQ community." [laughs] Or whatever is the— She's an ally.

Taylor: "Ally!"

Sydnee: "Speak. Ally!"

Taylor: [chuckles]

Sydnee: [laughs]

[theme music ends]

Taylor: I like the people that just do it with their pets. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Yeah! [laughs] "Ally!"

[acoustic sting]

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