Sawbones 590: Catfish, Man of the Woods

Published September 1st, 2026

Listen here on Maximum Fun

Clint: 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'm your cohost, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: You know the phrase I've never really understood, Syd?

Sydnee: What?

Justin: "All politics is local." 'Cause like some is, you know, but like then there's like national and global politics.

Sydnee: Yeah, but I think the— I think what they're really talkin' about is how people like make their political decisions, how they choose— how to— how they identify politically.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: What they— What sticks and what doesn't has a lot to do with like what is happening right around you.

Justin: Okay, so how— Well, what do you think about this? "All medicine is local." Hm. It's interesting.

Sydnee: Mm. Well. [chuckles] I don't know—

Justin: What do you think about that? Do you think that there is something there?

Sydnee: Like— [sighs]

Justin: Like if you could just say “All politics are local," and somebody can— has to come along and justify it, let me just say this, “All medicine’s local." Hm.

Sydnee: I— Well, I don’t think— I don’t think that somebody just wanted to say that—

Justin: Let me—

Sydnee: — and then other people had to find support for it. I think that probably the person who said it, I don’t even know who said that first, meant something by that.

Justin: I—

Sydnee: Like they— they had a thought, and they were like “Man, you pr— we pretend like it’s about these big national figures, that we’re voting for president. But really, when you come right down to it, all politics is local."

Justin: And then I would like kinda push my way into the conversation and be like, “Hmm, not really, if you think about it. ‘Cause much of politics deals on a national scale, and a global scale. But what about this? All medicine is local. Because bodies, everybody’s got one, and you know in a sense it’s all about what’s happenin’ inside, you know. So in a sense, all medicine’s local.”

Sydnee: Like local to your body. What— You mean hyper local, you mean so local, like inside you, inside your very cells.

Justin: Yeah. Yeah.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: And it— Yeah.

Sydnee: Well I mean for you, your medicine is local. Like your personal…

Justin: This is all my way of saying I bring up this famous phrase, “All medicine is local," because it’s interestingly parallels with uh today’s story, which is just about as local as they come here on *Sawbones*.

Sydnee: That’s true. Justin, you were going through an archive of movies that were in some way connected to West Virginia, right?

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: This is how you found this?

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: And among this treasure trove was a short documentary, a 30-minute documentary.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: That was filmed in 1977. About a man named Catfish.

Justin: Yes, and now not… a catfish with like the— the spirit of a man, ‘cause that’s the plot of *The Incredible Mr Limpet*, basically. This is about a man named Catfish. A human man with the name “Catfish."

Sydnee: His real name was Clarence, if you are wondering.

Justin: Yeah, that’s one of those, it’s a pretty easy sub out for a nickname, I think. If you end up with a Clarence, I think you’re gonna try to switch that out ASAP.

Sydnee: Well, what you’re also gonna understand about— you need to understand about Appalachia generally, West Virginia, this is probably true about the South. You’re not gon— Whatever your given name is.

Justin: Your Christian name.

Sydnee: It’s not gonna stick, you’re gonna get a nickname. Especially like in rural locations, nobody goes by their name name.

Justin: Yeah. It’s great when you get people who have gone— grown up through West Virginia, and they just never found the moment to like switch it up. So you get like, “Vote Buzz for Sheriff." [chuckles]

Sydnee: Yup. And it’s just— I mean it’s all people know that person by.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I mean, I— I have family members like that, but like the name that I know them by is not… in any way their name.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So, yeah. And so… Catfish Grey.

Justin: Catfish, yeah.

Sydnee: Or Catfish, Man of the Woods. Catfish, Man of the Woods is probably what he's known best known as, even though that's not really a name.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Um, so this is someone who is very lo— I looked up where he was born and where he lived most of his life, in Glenwood, West Virginia, is like a 34-minute drive from where we are sitting right now.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So that's how close.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: It's up Route 2? You know.

Justin: You know, up— up Route 2, near where the IGA used to be.

Sydnee: You know up Route 2.

Justin: Up Route 2, just past the Giovanni's.

Sydnee: Past the Giovanni's.

Justin: Past the Greenbrier Pool, out past where the IGA used to be.

Sydnee: Past Lesage.

Justin: Past Lesage.

Sydnee: You're gonna go past Lesage.

Justin: Past the Hillbilly Hotdogs.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Keep on goin'. If you hit Point Pleasant, you've gone too far. I'm assuming.

Sydnee: Kinda— Is that near Green Bottom? Is Green Bottom out— up there?

Justin: You're on the way.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: 'Cause if you're out 2, you're gonna—

Sydnee: Yeah, Green Bottom's out there.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Anyway, that's where Glenwood is.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: If you're curious. I— [chuckles] Route 2 is a really beautiful road. We don't talk about this enough. It's also got—

Justin: On this podcast?

Sydnee: No.

Justin: I think we talk about local road beauty plenty.

Sydnee: Well, no we don't. It's also called the Ohio River Road. Because it follows the Ohio River, and it's just a— I mean, it's one lane each direction road, that just goes up the side of West Virginia, right along—

Justin: It's like the PCH, like the Pacific Coast Highway, except for the Ohio River. [chuckles]

Sydnee: It's along the Ohio, and it's gorgeous.

Justin: It's beautiful.

Sydnee: It's absolutely gorgeous, and if you go up Route 2, you get to Glenwood. Anyway, he— [chuckles] So he was a native of there, he worked some jobs and he actually had 10 children.

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: But the most important thing, and this is interesting about Catfish, Man of the Woods. There is the story that I found written down, like as— especially like he has passed away, so like the biography of his life, as to how he got into the work that he's known for.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And then there's the story he tells.

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: So first of all, the story that he— he— that is written down is that he had some sort of accident in the workplace back in the early 1950's, and it— and it— Whatever it was, physical labor was no longer a great option for him.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So instead, he came from a tradition in his family of herbal medicine.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: He said he was the fifth-generation herbal doctor.

Justin: Whatever that means.

Sydnee: Yes. And so he began going out into the woods and gathering, you know, roots and herbs and flowers that he knew had healing properties.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: That he had been taught since he was a child. And gathering them, drying them, and selling them, packaging them up. And this is what he is known for to this day. Catfish, Man of the Woods, fifth-generation Appalachian herbal doctor. And rose to fame because of it.

Justin: The packaging and selling them up is a big part of the— the grind, right? This— This guy was selling the— a— an experience, the Catfish lifestyle. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Yes. I— And I think— So like when he started doing this, I think it's really important to know. I love this— this kinda story because when he started doin' this, it was before everybody was selling herbs. I mean, to say like he sold specialized herbal blends that were supposed to be kinda cure-all things in today's… popular medicine wellness culture, it's like "Oh, so like Gwyneth Paltrow does."

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yah know? I mean there's no— It doesn't feel like a weird thing or a unique thing. But he started doing this before that sort of took off, before it was a fad, before it was a trend. There is a documentary about him, and I'm gonna reference a lot of information from this documentary, because it was, you know, they went and interviewed him, so it's a first-person account. He says in the documentary, by the way, that he was born Clarence Frederick Grey, and that [chuckles] until 1936, he had 67 different nicknames.

Justin: Alright. [chuckles] Alright.

Sydnee: Yeah. So I don't know— He does not tell you what the 67 nicknames were.

Justin: No.

Sydnee: Just the in 1942, he settled on "Sassyfras King." I'm— I'm sayin' it— Sassafras, but he says "Sassyfras," so.

Justin: Mm. Alright, it's his nickname,

Sydnee: So—

Justin: He can do what he wants.

Sydnee: — 1942, he's Sassyfras King, but then this nickname is supplanted by a better one when, and he doesn't give us the year, but at some point him and a bunch of guys were trying to catch catfish. And I guess he was the one who caught all the catfish. Like nobody could catch the catfish, just him, he just cleaned out this— whatever, where they— this pond, wherever they were fishin' catfish.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: He cleaned it out, and he took 'em down to the Dupont Plant.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Yeah, and he sat out— he stood in front of the Du— I— I'm imagining him in like the parking lot with a folding table. He— And he sat up in front of the Dupot— Dupont Plant, and he sold catfish for 25 cents a pound.

Justin: Perfect.

Sydnee: And—

Justin: Perfect.

Sydnee: And because of that, what he says in the documentary is that the Dupont Company started calling him—

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: — Catfish, Man of the Woods. [chuckles] This is in the first 48 seconds of the movie, by the way.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: This entire—

Justin: He lays it all out.

Sydnee: Everything I just told you.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: He— He just very quickly monologues in 48 seconds. It's fantastic. What he goes on to say. So there's this— there's this story that's written down, that he had some sort of accident, he had this herbal medicine tradition already in his family. It's not like he made this in his, you know, ostensibly his family taught him this.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: And— And so he just began to do it. What he says is that between the years of 1954 and 1961, he had 14 heart attacks.

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: This is the story that Catfish tells. He uh—

Justin: 14 heart attacks. This is the same cat who says that he has 67 names, so I don't— I don't know.

Sydnee: I—

Justin: 14 heart attacks.

Sydnee: He's a colorful character. So he had 14 heart attacks in seven years, and according to Catfish, the doctors gave up on him. They told him like "We're really sorry."

Justin: Listen, after— Good on 'em, man. After the twelfth heart attack, I woulda been out. No thank you. You are a problem, you gotta help thyself. I can't do this anymore.

Sydnee: Well, he— Listen. This is— If this sounds familiar to you, I feel like we've talked about a lot of different wellness brands. And this kinda story I think is pretty commonplace.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Now, I will say… this is a lot earlier than a lot of these other people makin' up these stories, so.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: Maybe the— Maybe he's the original. Anyway, so he— the doctors gave up on him, and at this point… I— I will say a Native American doctor.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Yes, he uses— In the documentary, he uses the term "an Indian doctor." And it— I do believe he means Native American, I— I don't believe he means from India.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Arrives from Durham, North Carolina. [chuckles] With a bag of herbs. Um, pipsissewa.

Justin: Pipsissewa.

Sydnee: Pipsissewa. And he told— he tells him "Boil this down to half the amount of water, and then cool it, put it in a jar, take a teaspoon in the morning and the night, and you can be cured in six months." And it like he talks about it too in a very magical way, like he appeared from the woods with these herbs. And so he takes the pipsissewa and he says "It didn't cure me in six months, it cured me in five."

Justin: Wow. Wow, that's one month better.

Sydnee: And at that point is when he stepped into his role as an herbal doctor.

Justin: He knew he could wait no longer, the herb life had chosen him.

Sydnee: [chuckles] If you are curious about pipsissewa, ‘cause I was not familiar with pipsissewa, it’s also sometimes called um like wintergreen or Prince’s pine. It is a flowering pine that— it’s probably found a little north of here typically. Like we’re in West Virginia, it’s typically found in like the northern, north-eastern part—

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: — of the United States, up into Canada. And it— it does have a long history of traditional medical use throughout several Native American tribal populations. The word “pipsissewa” actually comes from a Cree word that means “to break into small pieces," and it’s probably a reference to kidney stones.

Justin: Oh!

Sydnee: There’s a thought— It has a lot of connotation with the urinary system.

Justin: Hm.

Sydnee: So it’s supposed to be good for kidney stones, kidney infections, kidney health. And it is a diuretic, it does have diuretic properties. So if you ingest this herb, you will probably have to pee. So I don’t know. I mean, you could make a— you could make a connection here that he was fluid overloaded. Because of his heart, damage to his heart, maybe he had some congestive heart failure, and then he began taking a diuretic, got some fluid off of ‘im and felt better.

Justin: Okay. Maybe.

Sydnee: I don’t know that that’s what happened, but that’s what I’m saying. It’s possible.

Justin: It’s possible.

Sydnee: It’s possible.

Justin: Five months is a long time.

Sydnee: So, because of this experience, he decided that he was gonna go out into the woods. And the thing is, if you are looking for a lot of the um herbal roots, leaves, things that have some sort of traditional medical use, or are known commonly even today as like herbal cures, you will find them in the Appalachian Mountains. There's lots of it out there. He lived in a rural area, Glenwood is very rural, and so you can go out into the Hollers and up into the hills and find lots of stuff that would have some sort of… supposed medical property.

So his plan, what he did, was to go out to the woods on Mondays and Tuesdays. He had his whole week structured. This was not— He wa— He was not going at this haphazardly, this was organized. So on Monday and Tuesday, he went out deep into the woods, and collected all the things that he knew from his, you know, from his raising basically, what had medical properties. And then for the rest of the week, he would go out a little bit, but he tried to stay closer to home, because that's when people from the community could come buy the herbs.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: They knew he would be available the rest of the time. He said even sometimes on Sunday afternoon. Sometimes.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: 'Cause he was also very religious, so Sunday morning would've been reserved for church.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: But he would gather the herbs, and then prepare them however. Whether it was, you know, cuttin' up roots, or drying leaves, he'd prepare his herbs. And—

Justin: You— You should see the like— They show in the documentary sort of his like collection of herbs. It is like it's wild. Like it's a…

Sydnee: It's huge, first of all.

Justin: It's huge, and it reminds me of like if you look in like a grandpa's workshop, like the random scattering of like infinite tools and jars of this

and that. It looks like that. It looks like that for plants. [chuckles] It looks like that for herbs and like all labelled in like his own like scrawl, it is wild. [chuckles]

Sydnee: And he has like individual herbs that he could sell one at a time, and then also his own mixtures of herbs. So dependent on— Because you could come to him for multiple things. He's not just a salesperson. You could come to him with a medical problem. "I'm having this, you know, I'm having stomach problems, I'm having headaches, I'd like to lose weight," whatever it is. And he might make you an herb concoction. Like not cook it, but put together a bag and say "This is what you need," right.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: So he's also the doctor. So anyway, you could show up at his house on those days, and what he says in the documentary is that if he— if you don't see him there right away, he might be out in the woods right around the house, so you gotta honk your horn.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Three longs and then three shorts. And that's how he knows.

Justin: [chuckles] There's somebody there for him?

Sydnee: [chuckles] You want to—

Justin: That's great. God, it's West Virgina.

Sydnee: [chuckles] That somebody's there for him. Yeah. And he would then come out and talk to 'em and sell 'em herbs. He was also willing to mail them. So as word of— of his abilities spread, he would get letters. Initially, just from West Virginia, but as we'll go on to talk about, it— it soon came from outside the state, from people saying "Hey, I can't come to you, but I'm having this problem," you know whatever, "what would you suggest?." And he began to mail them… herbal products. So it wasn't just like "Oh, you should go out into the woods around your house and collect whatever." He would put together his own herbs in a bag.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And just send ‘em through the mail to ‘em. And hopefully people mailed money back.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But it was— it’s a little bit on faith there. You could also— He had like regular customers who would write him and be like “Hey, I need a refill of pennyroyal, I need a refill of ginseng," whatever.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And he would put that together and— and send ‘em back. He has, in the documentary you can see, he has the letters all over the inside of his house, that people have sent him, you know, thanking him. Saying “Hey, your herbs worked great. I feel so much better."

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And uh— And he— And it was everything. He talks about a letter for weight loss, for arthritis, energy, stomach issues, lots of stuff about sexual vigor.

Justin: Yeah, to— a big topic for him, it seems like.

Sydnee: Yes, sexual performance is a common reason that he is treating somebody. And yeah, he is very quick to point out there are a lot of things that will help your sexual vigor.

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: [chuckles] Um he does— There’s also a great moment in it, ‘cause there’s— You really should watch it. It’s only 30 minutes and it’s free streaming online, if you’re curious. But there’s also a point where he has the doc— the guy who’s doin’ the documentary’s asking him questions. And he points out and he’s like, “Now there’s some horseweed over there," and the guy’s like, “Well, and what’s that for?" And he said “Well, one time a woman came to me and asked me if it would cure rheumatoid arthritis, and I said, ‘Well sure. Horses eat it, and they don’t have rheumatoid arthritis.’"

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: So there you go. Um… [chuckles] Now, this probably would've stayed. I mean, as— as funny and interesting and knowledgeable as this guy was, this probably would've just been one of those local characters that you kinda know about in your community, but that's it. Except, we're about to hit the '70s. And Catfish was into just the right collection of stuff that the '70s would really embrace a guy like him.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So, I wanna talk about… how he became a bigger figure. But first, we gotta go to the Billing Department.

Justin: [imitates a news bulletin transition] Let's go. I was— Is that anything?

Sydnee: I like that.

[transition music plays]

[ad break]

Justin: Uh… Catfish was about to go Hollywood, Sydnee. That was the vibe I got.

Sydnee: So, in the '70s, outside of— Not just in West Virginia, across the whole country, it's not— I don't think it is shocking to say we had sort of an herbal renaissance, or herbalist revival.

Justin: Yeah, well a natural, like all across the— the board, right? If you'd look to another beloved West Virginian, Larry Groce. He had his hit song around this time period, "Junk Food Junkie."

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: That was sort of about, you know, health food and natural cures, and the natural— You know, that natural lifestyle, and things like that.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm, I think—

Justin: That was very much a hot topic.

Sydnee: It was, I mean you look at sort of like the hippie movement of the ‘60s into the ‘70s, all the sudden we’re interested in sort of a return to the Earth.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: The natural, you know, healthier eating and natural ways of living. And part of that is this renewed interest in, kind of like we’ve talked about before, like in the Eccentrics. That was a— a medical movement that happened in the 1800s, when they began to look outside of like the scientific realm for kind of like bespoke cures that nature might provide, and things like that. It was kind of a return to that. We see this “You know, maybe we’re missing it. I know that science is advancing so quickly, and we’re all about being able to treat and cure things we’ve never been able to before. But maybe we’re missing something by not turning to the world around us."

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: “Maybe there are traditional ways—”

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: “— that have worked, and we ignored them." And so there are— I mean, that’s where you begin to see like formal institutions that educate people on herbal medicine. Pop up.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Yah know, schools that you could go to to learn this stuff.

Justin: Huh.

Sydnee: Before then, it was more of like a— a tradition. You would hand it down in your family, but you couldn’t necessarily go take classes on this and become an herbal, or naturopath, or whatever sort of, you know, doctor or, you know, practitioner you wanted to be. And you start to see that happening in the ‘70s. And so as a result of that, a guy like Catfish who’s been doing it for a long time, who comes from, yah know, a folk medicine tradition.

Justin: Appeal to ancient wisdom. One of our classic logical fallacies.

Sydnee: Who's got a great story.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And who is also— He happened to be into a lot of the stuff that the [chuckles] '70s is also into. So if you watch the documentary, you will see there's some people who come to buy some herbs from him, and while they're there, he starts askin' 'em about their zodiac signs.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: He was very into the zodiac. It's like amazing cross-section. 'Cause as— as I said, he was also very religious, he was a Christian, he went to church, and he would quote scripture quite frequently. That was part of his practice, even. Part of his herbal medicine practice sometimes involved scripture.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Alongside that, he also was very inspired by astrology. And so he would advise you on herbal remedies based on your zodiac sign and your broader nativity chart. It wasn't just… "What's your sign?," it was "I need to know the hour of your birth and the location and all that, and I'm going to chart out all the stars and planets, and I can give you a very detailed sort of prescription." And you even see him in the documentary giving like relationship advice, based on that. He's tellin' a couple, because of their signs, the guy is gonna be hot all the time and the girl is gonna be cold all the time. And so living together is going to be really difficult.

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: Because they're never— He— He basically says "Your only option is for you to wear less clothes, and she's gotta wear more clothes, and I don't know." [laughs]

Justin: We've made that— We've made that work for over 20 years now— now, Syd.

Sydnee: See, and Catfish—

Justin: If we can figure it out.

Sydnee: He would've discouraged us.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So what he—

Justin: Shows what he knows!

Sydnee: And it's all— I mean, again, if you've listened to our show for a long time, you'll see elements of— When he's talking about, you know, he's talking about their zodiac compatibility, but then he goes into what herbs they need, and what foods and beverages they should consume. He talks about like "With your sort of personality, or who you are, hot foods are gonna be worrisome at certain times or whatever. And cold foods might be better for you." This is pulling together— It's really fascinating, 'cause he's— he's pulling together these herbal folk traditions with the sort of new age zodiac moment of the '70s, with a little bit of humorism.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Is getting pulled into there, like your, you know, what kind of person, your disposition, your humor disposition was. A little bit of ayurveda even.

Justin: Oh, okay.

Sydnee: Kinda creepin' in. It's all together.

Justin: More of a traditional uh practice.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Rather than just like straight allopathic. Well obviously it's not allopathic.

Sydnee: Well it's not allopathic.

Justin: Certainly not that. But like at the— you— Once you bust out of that mold, right, I think you're more comfortable bringing in other disciplines.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: At least that seems to be the— the case, usually.

Sydnee: Well, and I have to wonder, because I will be completely honest, a lot— a lot of what I'm gonna tell you about him movin' forward is— Because after the documentary, there are a couple of more public appearances, but then a lot of it is kind of an oral history of Catfish. I don't have a lot of other things to tell you about him that like I was able to just source, like "Here's a definitive work of everything he said and did and believed." But I have to imagine he had been inspired by some of these things, as he developed his own sort of unique brand of medical practice. Um he was also big on nudity.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: There's a whole scene where he's like skinny dipping with the documentarian. [chuckles]

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: It was the '70s. So he becomes really popular during the '70s, as people from all over begin to come visit him. He gets letters from all over, he starts talking about that, you know, his letters are no— no longer just from West Virginia, they're from all over the country, they're even from outside of the country. Um and I have to imagine it's not just the herbs. He's— He's very charismatic.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: He's a showman. He's putting— I mean, he's— he's— he's charming.

Justin: It's— He's one of those where like it is— Even if it is a grift, and you know it's a grift, you kinda wanna to just go with it, 'cause it's more fun. You know.

Sydnee: He— He would've done fine if instead of being born in the— in rural Appalachia, if he had grown up on a boardwalk pitching something.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Selling. He would've been extremely successful doing that too, you know what I mean?

Justin: To be fair, he also would've done well selling patent medicines in the 1800s. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. He would've been great at that.

Justin: Yeah, great at that.

Sydnee: Oh, he would've been huge. His face and name would be on so many bottles of tonics.

Justin: Yup

Sydnee: And elixirs and tinctures. He just— He really, he seems like such an affable guy, and I will say that is supported by every single Facebook comment about what he was like.

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: Is that he was incredibly nice, and generous, and pleasant to be around. Um so this is at the height of his popularity, is this documentary that I've been referencing, *Catfish, Man of the Woods*. It was actually 1974. I said '77, but it was '74. Um by Appal— Appal Shop Inc. It's "Appal" like "Appalachian," by the way.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: This has nothing to do with Apple. [chuckles]

Justin: The fruit?

Sydnee: No, the company, Apple.

Justin: Oh, okay.

Sydnee: Um.

Justin: I— I figured you might've [chuckles] meant Gwyneth Paltrow's kid. [chuckles]

Sydnee: No no no. And you can see him doing all these things we're talkin' about, collectin' herbs and talkin' about it. It also, because he became so popular, he got invited to appear on two different late shows. He was on David Letterman in 1984, and he was on Johnny Carson in 1992, and he went on both shows with like big piles of herbs.

Justin: Yeah, it's very funny.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: We watched one of those appearances, right?

Sydnee: Was it Letterman? I thought it was Carson, maybe it was Letterman.

Justin: I feel like we watched one before. We watched one on YouTube.

Sydnee: Yeah, you can find— It's hard— It's hard to find some of these, but you can look for 'em and you can see him with his piles of herbs. And he really— To keep up with like a late-night talk show host and be a guy who grew up in Glenwood, West Virginia is pretty cool.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yah know? Like he— he's— his patter, his— his—

Justin: He does a great job.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: It's really fun.

Sydnee: Um, there's also— I found a collection of photos of him through the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Uh that were taken by Will Endres

in 1977. And they're really cool, just showing him out in his natural element, collecting herbs and, I don't know, being silly, being a funny guy. But aside from all that, I really— A lot of what I was able to find otherwise about him came from Facebook. [chuckles] And people posting in groups about like "I grew up in Huntington." A lot of people will misidentify him as being from Huntington originally, which I mean we would take him, but—

Justin: Well, yeah.

Sydnee: — he wasn't technically from Huntington.

Justin: Coulda been born here, maybe. Might've been born in the hospital here.

Sydnee: Oh, maybe in the hospital.

Justin: I don't know.

Sydnee: Yah know, that's a— that's a fair thing to say. Yah know, this would be the closest hospital. Yeah. Yeah, I think especially at the time.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: I don't think there was anything closer. Um so that makes sense. But a lot of people who grew up in Huntington who were older would have known him because he would come to the markets here.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And sell his products, sell his herbs sometimes. So he would set up at City Market, or Sixth Street Market. He also set up at, not in Huntington, but the Milton Flea Market, which is just up the road from us. And sell all of his herbal concoctions, and then do his whole thing. Like talk about your zodiac sign, give you advice.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um everybody says that his herbs were incredibly reasonably priced. He never— He never overcharged. He would put together, like I said, bespoke mixtures for you, if you can up to him and said "This is my

problem," he might say “Let me put you together— You need a bag of this, this, and this. Let me put it together for yah." And he even passed out recipes for his most famous.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Like his bitters.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And I’ll get to his recipe for his bitters at the end. I— I wanna go through—

Justin: Guarantee you it would be easier to have him collect all of them.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Like I feel like he’d hand it to you, be like “Ah, you know what, Catfish? I’m just gonna keep buyin’ ‘em from you, pal." [chuckles]

Sydnee: Yes, absolutely. I wanna go through a few of the comments, ‘cause I don’t— I know this isn’t— And this is a little off for.

Justin: Eh, oral— oral history, yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah, it’s like an oral history that— that has been accumulated through people commenting on Facebook. One person said “Met him when I was about 6 years old. He left an everlasting impression. I rubbed a few herbs on my cousin’s wart, and said a few scriptures, and the wart was gone in two days."

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: Love these stories.

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: Um this was at the market at the foot of the Sixth Street Bridge.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Is where he set up. There was another person who knew him who also sold herbs for him.

Justin: Oh, yeah?

Sydnee: With— At the Milton Flea Market, and said that "He told me Eunice Shriver visited him when she was pregnant with Maria."

Justin: Oh.

Sydnee: Maria Shriver's mom.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Visited him while she was pregnant. [chuckles] Um to get advice, to get herbal advice. I heard that story several places, actually.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: But who knows.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Who knows if that's true. Uh another commenter said "I used to go down to the City Market after it had closed for the day. We would sit with Catfish, and he would tell us wild stories. He once drew a map in the dust with a stick, and he told us it was Heaven, and that he got it straight from the top guy."

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: So allegedly, he had a map of Heaven.

Justin: [giggles]

Sydnee: Um another commenter, "My dad visited with him every time he went to the City Farmer's Market. He would bring home lots of his sage advice. Pennyroyal tea was one that he made for when we had colds. Sure made us feel better." Pennyroyal was a big one throughout the comments. "I went to his home several times when I was young. He gave

my parents some sort of root to boil and give to help my brother, who had a kidney issue." We may know what it was.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: "We got ginseng from him as well." Ginseng is huge here. You can sell ginseng for a lot of money now.

Justin: Ooo, yeah. Yeah.

Sydnee: It—

Justin: Big market for that.

Sydnee: There's a big market for ginseng, and it grows wild out in the hills. And so if you know where to look for it, and you'll see in the documentary, if you watch it, he does. If you know the leaves, you can dig up the root.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And you can sell it for a good bit of money.

Justin: Go sengin'.

Sydnee: The knots— Yeah. That's what it is. If you're goin' sengin', then you're lookin' for ginseng. The knots on the ginseng, it's interesting 'cause it details, tells you how long how many years the ginseng's been growing.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Every knot is another year, so you can look down the root to see how old this is. He says "I remember chewing on it. He said 'Never eat tomatoes, with or without salt'."

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: That was interesting! I found— I went down this uh tomato rabbit hole, and somebody else clarified "He believed that tomatoes were harmful, and could cause cancer, citing that animals like cows, horses, sheep, goats, and deer do not eat tomatoes, and do not get cancer."

Justin: Okay, yes.

Sydnee: "Whereas rats, mice, pigs, and chickens, which do eat tomatoes, do get cancer." So he advised "Avoid tomatoes."

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So when he had said "Don't eat tomatoes with salt, and don't eat tomatoes without salt," what he's sayin' is…

Justin: Just don't eat tomatoes.

Sydnee: Don't eat tomatoes. That was a big belief of his, I didn't know that. And there was another one of these, "When I was a kid, my dad Jarflea…"

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: "Would go there to his place, and we would talk about all the herbs. And Daddy knew so much about all of it, and Daddy dug the yellow root and ginseng all the time, and he boiled that yellow root when we had sore throats." So we have people— I mean these are— These comments, by the way, are from Facebook from the last year. They're within the last year.

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: So these are not— These are individuals who grew up in these folk medicine traditions, who interacted with Catfish, bought his herbs. Whose families were also participating in these folk medicine traditions, who are alive and well today.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And ostensibly may be passing on these folk medicine traditions to their children. And it was great, 'cause these comments came from a Huntington-based group. So these are— I mean, I'm not naming names, but these are people that I know. [chuckles]

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Some of them I know. [laughs]

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: He— He interacted a lot with our university, with Marsh University. There was a Professor Dan Evans who did a lot of botany classes, I took a class from him on plant taxonomy. And apparently if I'd stuck with plants, which I didn't. I love plants, but I hate memorizing the names of things. And so I was discouraged. He would bring Catfish in to talk about herbal plants.

Justin: Ugh.

Sydnee: For some of his herbal medicine class.

Justin: How fascinating.

Sydnee: I know, I wish I'd stuck with it long enough to be there, because he occasionally— There was also several people who said that their sociology class went on field trips to his house, to visit him and learn about Appalachian culture and folk medicine traditions from him.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: So he was connected with Marsh University in that way. Um my mom remembered him. My mom met him. I realized at some point that if he lived up Route 2, my mom grew up out Route 2… At some point, my mom had to have met him. And she did, she said that she also met him at City Market, he would go there a lot apparently. Her and her friend Lisa. And they were told to— Her granny told her "Will you buy some dandelions from him, 'cause I don't want you to— I don't want you to collect 'em, 'cause the milk can burn your fingers."

Justin: Huh.

Sydnee: I guess if you have a— an allergy, it can be a skin irritant.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: I mean, I've collected dandelions, I mean why not? I haven't—

Justin: You didn’t burn.

Sydnee: Whatever. Okay. So my mom bought dandelions, with her friend Lisa, off-a Catfish at City Market, when she was a kid.

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: So, yeah. I— The last thing I wanna share is his most famous recipe. It was his bitters, and this is not— He would hand this out to people, so he wanted other people to be able— If you can gather all this, you can make it. He called it his “bitters," his “tonic," or his “pepper-upper."

Justin: [chuckles] His pepper-upper.

Sydnee: His pepper-upper. It was a mixture of 15 herbs, I think in equal parts. His recommendation was that you would boil ‘em, like put it in a gallon, or basically put it in an amount of water. I think one of his recipes said two quartz, boil it down to one quart, so reduce it by half. Uh and then you’re gonna take it three times a day, three tablespoons three times a day.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: And it’s just gonna fix what ails yah, everything.

Justin: I will say, I spot one thing on here called “spikenard," and I will tell you that is an edible plant.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: It is a berry that you can snack on. I learned that this week on *McElroy Family Clubhouse*. Actually, if you’re interested in this topic, we had Alexis Nicole Nelson, theblackforager, on our show this week.

Sydnee: This coincides perfectly.

Justin: Yeah, it’s great.

Sydnee: I hadn’t thought of that.

Justin: So if you're interested, uh go watch that episode on YouTube. I think that it's one of our best. It was a lot of fun.

Sydnee: Yeah, it was a lot of fun. I— I love her, so it was very exciting for me to, you know.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: I wasn't there, but I could imagine that I was there. Uh but there are a lot of things— And we could— we could probably put this in our show notes, or in our show thing.

Justin: Yeah. Yeah.

Sydnee: I think in case you all are interested, because he did share it, and I think it's cool to put that out there. But it— 15 different herbs, they were all what would grow native in the area, and they do include some things you've heard of like ginseng, like spikenard, like black cohosh, yarrow, slippery elm, red clover. There are— Peppermint. There are a lot of things in there that you've probably heard of, and then some things that are maybe a little more unique. And some of those that we use even today, like if you go to like drug store shelves and buy some of their supplements and herbal medicines, black cohosh for instance is really popular for anything related to menopause.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: It— You will find lots of preparations out there. Probably Gwyneth Paltrow sells one. I don't know.

Justin: Gotta imagine, yeah.

Sydnee: I don't if that's true, but I feel like that she would.

Justin: It sounds true when you say it.

Sydnee: It— It— But that has been out there for a while for— for things related to menopause. Ginseng, of course, has been a popular supplement for cognitive stuff, brain function, energy. Although ginseng is also panax.

Justin: That’s what they used to put in Pepsi-Max.

Sydnee: For?

Justin: To make your ding dong bigger.

Sydnee: Uh slippery elm was a common tincture that would—

Justin: Is that a curse? That wasn’t a curse, right? Ding dong? That’s—

Sydnee: No. No, that’s okay.

Justin: Oh okay.

Sydnee: Slippery elm you would put on wounds a lot. It was thought to be good like as a— as a poultice, but you could also use it for sore throat, stomach stuff. Yarrow is— I grow yarrow. Some of the things, I got excited because I can walk outside and point to them in my yard.

Justin: Nice.

Sydnee: I’m growing some of these things. Um but uh some others I’m gonna have to go diggin’ for. So this is my next plan, is I will put recipe up. I want to find… I believe in the mountains and forests around our house, I believe I can find all 15 of those herbs.

Justin: I have faith in you, Sydnee. I have faith in you.

Sydnee: I— I’m worried about pipsissewa, because I don’t know that it grow— It must grow here!

Justin: Road—

Sydnee: It must grow here.

Justin: Road trip.

Sydnee: He included it, he wouldn’t put it in there if it didn’t grow around here.

Justin: Road trip.

Sydnee: It must.

Justin: You—

Sydnee: It must.

Justin: Let's go get some. Hey, thank you so much for listening to this podcast. Maybe you're on a road trip! Listenin' to all the *Sawbones* back-to-back. Wow. What a treat. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Thank you.

Justin: Hope you're enjoying it. Safe travels. Thank you so much to the Taxpayers for the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our programme. Um, I think that was still have some *Sawbones* stickers at mcelroymerch.com, with our new logo by Matt Ash Taylor, so you can check those totally out.

[outro music fades in]

Justin: And uh anything else, Sydster?

Sydnee: I think that'll do it.

Justin: That's gonna do it for us. Until next time, my name's Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

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

[outro music plays]

[ukulele chord]

Maximum Fun.
A worker-owned network…
Of artist-owned shows…
Supported directly by you.