

[Transcript] Plain English with Derek Thompson / PE Greatest Hits: Thompson and Klosterman Debate Why Society Got So Negative

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In today's episode, I talk with the author Chuck Klosterman about why society has gotten so negative ranging from TV to film to politics to social media.

This might be the most wide-ranging conversation I had in the last year and in terms of online reception, it might be the episode, the single episode that I got the most positive feedback from.

Ironically.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy it.

Happy holidays.

And if you feel like giving this show a small gift, head to Spotify or Apple Podcast and leave us a five-star rating and review.

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Happy New Year and I'll see you in 2023.

Chuck Klosterman, welcome to the podcast.

It's great to be here.

You are here because I, well, I wanted to have you on the show for a long time, but I wanted to wait until I had what seemed like a perfect question for us to talk about, something that seemed to live at the intersection of culture and sociology and politics.

And I was listening to you on a podcast recently.

I think it was Colin Coward and you were making a point about the 50 or 60 year history of celebrity in America.

And he made this comment where you said, in the middle of the 20th century, celebrities used to be very simply beloved.

And somewhere along the way, the concept of the simply and universally beloved celebrity seemed to wither and it became cooler to hate famous people than to like them.

And I was like, press pause, open computer, message Chuck, you have to come on my podcast to talk about the sociology of hating people because I think this is a really, really deep subject.

So the question on the table for listeners as we wind our way through this is something like, when did it become so cool to hate things the way we do?

And what does it mean to live in a society where negativity has become high status?

So maybe let's first establish that there is a there there, that this shift is real.

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How do you observe it happening?

Well, you know, it is a slow process.

I mean, everything about culture, of course, evolves and changes over time.

And it's always sort of risky to be like, well, okay, you know, this is the moment everything shifted because it's rare that that's the case.

But okay, so let's just look at the last half of the 20th century.

Right now, there's that Ethan Hawke documentary, you know, the last movie stars, okay.

And in some ways that seems odd to someone, there are many movie stars now.

But what he's talking about is the last kind of movie star, which is that this period of time when it was almost as though anybody who was really famous was seen as completely separate from the consumer.

You know, they often talk about how like in the Middle Ages, during like, you know, when there was, you know, or the feudal system, that like the peasants were sort of like socialized to believe that like the king and the queen were morally superior people because how else could they justify one family having everything and nobody having anything at all?

Well, it was almost the same way and like you were seeing in the 50s and 60s, this idea that that these celebrities were completely separate things and they wouldn't be famous unless you did like them and, you know, but of course the idea of hating certain people and that being sort of the center of who they are as a famous person that has always existed.

I mean, like, you know, you get the clearest example, probably in like the late 70s and early 80s of Howard Cosell, okay.

So Howard Cosell is the color guy for Monday Night Football.

He's the third guy in the booth and he is famous for being this hated figure.

Bars at the time would have these like specials on Monday night where you could all come in and there'd be a raffle and then the winner of the raffle was able to throw a brick through a TV showing Howard Cosell on Monday Night Football, okay.

So like, like he was like his whole identity was based around the fact that he was this hated figure, but within that context, he was still very respected.

Like many people perceived him sort of as kind of like the apex of sports broadcasting and, you know, he was, even the people who despised him, very often the reason they despised him is because he seemed like too intellectual and believed that he was so much better than them, you know.

You move into the 80s, if you pick up a TV guide and it's got like the most hated man on television, it's probably JR Ewing from Dallas, okay, but this is a character.

Larry Hagman, the man who betrays him, is beloved, like it was still, we're still living in a completely fictional world, so if you hate someone, you're almost saying I hate this person and I'm giving them credit for being so good at being unlikable.

But the shift seems to kind of happen in the 90s and there's this rise in reality television.

The idea of memoir writing kind of replaces the autobiography as this like the center of nonfiction writing, where people who are oftentimes unfamous essentially writing about their life, you know.

And there was this kind of this recognition somehow that a lot of what someone felt about a character from Survivor or their interest in a TV show like Survivor had to do with

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the people that they find most problematic, the most troubling people, you know. And then you get to 2003 and that to me seems like a key year because that show, *The Newly Weds* came out with like Jessica Simpson and Nicholas Shea and then later that year, *The Simple Life* with Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie.

And those seem to be examples where the entire idea of the program, every part of it, the writing, the assumed audience, the conversation about it was built on this idea that these are terrible people, like we don't like these people.

Like even if, in fact, if you said that you loved one of these individuals or you love these, this television show, it was almost like you were positioning yourself as being sort of transgressive.

Like I'm supporting this thing that I understand is kind of like socially irresponsible and gross and sort of only for rich people and all these things.

And after that point, then you kind of move into the social media age and that thinking, that kind of thinking from 2003 kind of up through like say *Jersey Shore*, you know, where it's very easy to imagine like the producers of the show being like, they're going to hate these kids, people are going to lose their fucking shit when they see how much they hate these guys.

And that sort of became like a real viable way, like a way to kind of commodify this. And now that seems to be sort of how it is for many things, although the other thing is that there's also more sort of over-the-top adoration and love for people.

It's like there's just no middle class of feeling that, yeah.

So the rise of negativity, the rise of hate watching that you just described, the rise of the anti-fan in culture, all of this strikes me as completely obvious and true about the 21st century.

I see it on Instagram.

I see it on TikTok.

I see it on subreddits.

It's remarkable to me how many fan pages are de facto anti-fan pages.

But if I'm putting myself in the mind of a skeptical listener here, I think one easy objection that I might have is that it's possible that celebrities were always hated as much as they are now, but the internet gives the public an ability to mass publish their private thoughts that previously were just expressed at a dinner table, like maybe everyone always hated celebrities in the 1950s, like everyone always sort of bitched about Marilyn Monroe to their wives and husbands, but we didn't necessarily see that in mass culture.

So I wanted to make sure that listeners came away with at least one data point that they could hold on to, to say, aha, this isn't just vibes.

We have statistical evidence.

We have numbers to put to the case that, as you just said, we have this death of the middle class of feeling or this rise of cultural negativity.

So I thought, who's a celebrity that we have a lot of really good survey data about?

And I was like, of course, it's the president.

The president is the commander in chief, but he's also the celebrity in chief.

So you look at presidential polling since World War II, and it turns out that practically

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every single post war president, Eisenhower, JFK, LBJ, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, George HW Bush, Bill Clinton, all of them had several years with approval ratings over 55%.

Since 2003, since the Klosterman line was drawn in the sands of time, do you know how many presidents had a full 365 consecutive days with 55% approval rating or higher?

Sure, it's none.

Zero.

It is zero.

So for the first time in history, in the history of public polling, we have next year two straight decades of historically unpopular presidents.

And what I think is so fascinating about this is that it's like you could have two writers, one person writing exclusively about presidents and polarization and Gallup polling and another writing exclusively about attitudes toward TV celebrities.

And each of them could write the book 2003, The Birth of the Modern Hate Fest.

So just first, how did you nail 2003?

I mean, in terms of the 2003 thing, that's like, that's no, I can't say that's bro, that's just chance.

That's just when I know, I remember those television shows happening and how it seemed that there was no one who seemed to really like like Nick Lachey, even though he seemed, even though his fame kept increasing, like he became more and more famous.

He wasn't, that wasn't, it wasn't like he was being pushed to fame.

He was being dragged into fame by people who felt like he didn't deserve it.

I mean, that's another thing.

I mean, like, you know, when I, when I talked about the nineties or whatever, you say like, take, Courtney Cox, okay?

So Courtney Cox is not friends.

But you know, before that, you know, she's in commercials.

She's in a Bruce Springsteen video.

You know, she's like plays Alex Keaton's love interest for like two seasons on family ties.

She does all these things, finally gets into position to be on this television show.

The show is huge.

It's almost like, well, for lack of a, like a better term, like she paid her dues, you know?

But then when like the real world came involved and you could just send a tape in of yourself saying like, I want to be on TV.

I think it would be fun for people.

Here's why people were both compelled to watch that, but completely validated and saying, this person did nothing to deserve this.

So you know, it's like a, that their view of that celebrity, I don't think consciously, but maybe unconsciously was they're not, they didn't, they didn't really deserve this.

They got it, but they didn't really deserve it.

So therefore it's okay for me not to feel any sort of, I guess, admiration at all.

It did not seem remote.

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Like it's not like Courtney Cox was a super admirable character, but, but, but compared to Puck from real world three or whatever, it's like, well, at least she like, she had a goal.

She accomplished this.

She, she did all, you know, she, she looks different than me.

She looks, you know, it's like all these things that go into making someone seem like what we used to consider a star, that kind of got changed by the fact that the way to become a star became in the eyes of many, much easier.

And now, and now it's, it's much, much easier because someone can be a star just like, just on like a, on a platform, like a social media platform that many people don't even know.

Like I'm not on, I'm not on TikTok, right?

So there are people who are stars on TikTok that I wouldn't have no idea that they had who they are or we have, unless someone pushes them into a different realm.

That's so interesting that in reality TV, you see this collapsing gap between the audience and celebrities.

And this gives rise to a collapse in admiration.

It gives rise to the sense of, you're no better than I am.

And it's interesting because I've seen a totally similar shift in political culture as well, where it's almost as if the more access that we have to various institutions, the president, Congress, the Supreme Court, the more we learn to distrust them and to see their incompetence.

And sometimes that's because with more access, we get more knowledge.

And we're like, wow, CDC, you're really incompetent.

And finally, I just really clearly see this online, generally, this reflexive cynicism and negativity and anti-fandom.

And I don't have good data here, but this cultural wave of negative vibes just seems really real to me.

I know it.

I see it.

I mean, I just, the key to what you were describing there is when you said like, you know, I see this, I see this.

And that is the key, seeing it.

Like, okay, when I was in high school, for example, you know, I loved Motley Crue and I hated R.E.M.

Okay, I love R.E.M.

Now, but I hated them.

I hated R.E.M. in high school, right?

And I would buy a Motley Crue t-shirt, but there was no way I was going to have any kind of outlet for disliking R.E.M.

Like I wasn't going to buy an R.E.M. t-shirt to destroy it or whatever.

It would just be something I would think and something I would say.

Now if I had been a high school kid with access to social media, what is the likelihood that I would have written about how much I hated R.E.M. much higher than the likelihood of

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me talking about how great Motley Crue was?

I just, that's just a natural inclination sort of, you know, that if you give someone a free publishing device, that they're probably going to use it as an outlet to position themselves as against something as opposed to just sort of being a fan of it, okay?

I think maybe you've been tweeting about that somebody has is sort of about the kind of like the ironies about the perception of the economy right now.

And one of the things that's intriguing is that many people seem to say that like the economy is bad, although my personal economy is okay.

Yeah, I call it the, I call it the everything sucks, but I'm fine principle.

And it's just to jump in really quickly.

It's just this idea that if you look at public polling about the economy, people say the economy overall is worse than it's been in 70 years.

But if you ask them individually about their finances, they tend to say that they're actually doing mostly okay.

And this is also true if you ask CEOs, you ask CEOs, how's the economy?

They say worst in decades, oh, how's your industry?

How's your company doing?

You expect revenue to increase the next two quarters?

Oh, yeah, of course.

Yes, we do.

So it's just very interesting that at this very moment you have this everything sucks, but I'm fine phenomenon blooming across culture.

Sorry, back to you.

Well, because people can see that for other people, there are problems because people who are having problems are expressing them constantly.

If you ask someone in 1974 about the economy, they're going to use their own economy as basically the only gauge unless they're in some kind of weird specified field where they have the ability to see other people who are struggling as they sort of paradoxically accelerate.

For the most part, people would use their own experience to understand the world.

And that that's less and less now that people sort of are almost, in fact, told to sort of don't just think about your experience, you know, that's your bias, you know, that you sort of need to think of things inside of you.

So it's when people are asked about the approval rating of Biden, they're not necessarily saying that they approve or disapprove.

It is almost as though they are gauging it against every other opinion they hear.

And they're like, well, they're like, well, there's a certain kind of person who loves him and I don't like this person.

So their approval pushes me in the opposite way.

There are so many interesting ideas that you've touched on that I want to do something that might initially seem a little bit odd.

I want to try to summarize and synthesize your theories, just like read them back to you as I understand them.

And then you can tell me if I'm wrong or if you want to go deeper into any of them.

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One is that there used to be this relationship between fame and positivity, but that sometime in the last 20, 30 years, fame became more synonymous with familiarity.

And there were two routes to high familiarity.

You could become highly familiar by being successful in, say, the normal way, or you could achieve familiarity through this new kind of negative notoriety, the Nick Lachey path rather than the Marilyn Monroe path, and that that is fundamentally a modern phenomenon, this sort of negative path to fame.

The second thing that I'm hearing you say is that our experience of the world is increasingly mediated by this bizarre understanding of, let's call it the discourse, that when we're commenting on something like the new Netflix movie or the president, we are more aware of what everyone is saying than we used to be, and that that might change our relationship to our own opinions because we constantly feel like we have to react against this sort of ethereal discourse that we're always aware of.

And then number three, this is related to two.

Something very fundamentally strange happened when we democratized the means of publishing, when we allowed everyone to become a publisher, and we said, you're all your own publicists.

We waved a wand over every American.

We said, you are all your own publicist.

They seem to have figured out person to person that the fastest route to publicity in the internet age is not just by praising things, but by finding the right way to be critical, finding the right niche in which to be an anti-fan and sort of negative appraiser of what's happening.

So I don't know if you, if I got any of that just utterly wrong, maybe you can comment on it or you can go deeper on any one of those little areas.

Yeah, well, there's a lot there, I'll just see if I can handle it.

First of all, the third point you make, that actually I think, this part of them figuring this out, I just think an extension of human nature, that there is more interest in negative information than positive information.

If someone came to you in your real life and said like, hey, I got two bits of gossip, one of your friends is getting married, two of your friends are getting divorced.

What do you want to know first?

I mean, the thing is, people are more interested in bad news.

I mean, because it's just how it is.

So that's-

Dose for Dose, bad news is more interesting than good news.

Dose for Dose and it always has been.

You're totally right.

Okay, so the second point you were making.

The second point was about discourse, the fact that in a strange way that people in the 40s wouldn't understand, we know what everyone else is thinking in a weird way.

Well, I've said this a few other places, but I'm going to say it again.

It's like one thing that I feel somewhat complicit in this because I was definitely part of it is there was a period in the 90s when it was just obsessed with the idea of postmodernism.

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Because postmodernism seemed like kind of an interesting new way to look at the world, sort of this idea that like, well, there's this hard reality, then there's also this sort of subjective reality that sort of understands that art understands that it's art and all of these things.

Well, that's sort of everything now, okay?

As it turns out, all the critics of postmodernism were kind of right because what has become is a completely postmodern world now where our experience of reality is mostly mediated. I mean, if I say to you like, imagine a basketball game right now in your head, like imagine a basketball game.

I could be wrong, but I'm guessing you're imagining a basketball game as it is seen on television.

Even though you've probably played a basketball game, you've certainly went to basketball games at some point, if nothing else, junior high.

But the first image you have is the television image.

Most people are like this.

Just so listeners know, I am nodding my head vigorously, yes, I was imagining basketball is seen on TV.

I mean, it's hard not to.

Like I played basketball almost my whole life, but if you ask me that question, I immediately think of a specific basketball game I saw on television in 1984.

That's the first thing I saw, I think of is this, not me in a basketball game, but me watching this one on television.

So that's how it is for all things now.

So when you say like you talked to someone about the president, they're not thinking about the president as a person or as even a politician that impacts their life.

It is almost the same way they would think about a president on a television show like the West Wing or the construct of a president in a fictional movie.

And that all the ideas you have about the president are sort of pushed through this idea that, well, maybe we're not in a simulation, but we're going to behave as if we are.

Like the president is a simulation of what a president is like.

So that also changes the way people feel about what they can say about someone.

If they fundamentally believe the person is unreal, even though their conscious mind tells them this is a real person, if they're sort of general feeling, their unconscious mind is like, well, this is like a television show, they're going to feel differently.

The first point you made was about, I think, what again?

The Nick Lachey versus Marilyn Monroe paths to fame.

Oh, yeah.

Well, in that sort of, I think kind of like, were there people who like despised Marilyn Monroe?

I guess there probably were.

There must have been.

Yeah.

But the outlet for that was different.

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I mean, it was like, okay, here's an example, I'm acquainted with a guy who used to be the editor of Slam magazine, okay, the basketball magazine that, you know, it's like, and he was doing an interview with Kobe Bryant.

This is a while ago.

This is like before the Colorado stuff, the early part of Kobe Bryant's career when he was kind of trying to fashion himself as kind of like a Grant Hill, Dr. J person, like, you know, maybe I can be all things to all people or whatever.

And as a consequence, some people kind of saw him as soft.

And at the end of the interview, this guy, Ryan Jones, says to him, like, well, how do you feel about this idea that like, you know, kids don't see you the way they see Ellen Iverson.

They think of you as this different kind of thing, like not like, you know, softer or whatever.

And he was like, what?

That's what that's what people think.

That's what people think.

You know, and they kind of was like, yeah.

And then after the interview, Kobe Bryant calls him back and says, like, can you tell me what's going on out there?

And it's like, Kobe Bryant was still able to exist in a world where he could only sort of understand how he's perceived through the experience he was having, which is people cheering for him.

The idea that there was this secondary world, you could completely avoid that.

Like when I made this comment about Howard Cosell, one of the jokes people always make about Howard Cosell, if they were like, worked with him, is that he'd come into the office and he'd be like, can you believe what this guy at the Des Moines register?

And they'd be like, Howard, why are you reading the Des Moines register to see what the TV critic thinks of you?

And it's like, he was kind of seeking it out.

An average person could just go through their life and only kind of understand what they see.

So even in like the early 21st century, somebody like Kobe Bryant could almost be immune to that.

And now no one is immune to that.

It is.

I mean, there was there was so much there and I'm glad I asked you about all those three things because you you went as deeply as I wanted you to go.

I want to try to connect this conversation to another phenomenon that is clearly happening, which is the demise of mainstream culture, the demise of the monoculture.

And the 90s are an interesting, it's good to have an expert on the 90s in this conversation because clearly something happened in between the 1990s and the 2000s that seemed to spell maybe the final inning of the illusion of the American monoculture.

Like 1997, Titanic sells more tickets than any American film in history.

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1998, 76 million Americans watch the Seinfeld finale.

The latter in particular is just obviously not going to ever happen again.

And this is clearly true in news that people have this illusion like, when are we going to get back to the Walter Cronkite days where there was like a really true objective mainstream voice in news?

And the answer is never, never, ever, ever.

That was in a period of manufactured scarcity.

There were only three or four television channels.

He was the most famous voice on the number one of those television channels.

We're not going to go back to it.

There's just there's simply too many channels.

How do you feel about the way that the the sort of explosion, the sort of this this big bang that ended the monoculture forever intersects with this phenomenon that of rising negativity?

Well, that's interesting because what you're saying kind of happened twice because people thought that happened in the 80s, too, with with the proliferation of cable television and, you know, and like you would hear people say in 1990, for example, they would say, there's never going to be an episode of television as big as the finale of M.A.S.H. and there never has been.

Right.

That has never happened again.

Okay.

So it felt like, you know, that that had happened once.

Okay.

It felt like it happened to a much higher degree at the end of the 90s.

Okay.

Does the splintering of culture make it more plausible for someone to be hated?

I don't know if that is the case.

I'm not sure.

Can I give you my theory?

Yeah.

Okay.

I have a theory that kind of connects the end of the monoculture to the rise of negativity.

And I'll admit it's like it's a little Malcolm Gladwell-y.

I'm not going to go full Gladwell-y here, but I'll proudly say it's like two-thirds Gladwell-y.

So there's this idea in ecology called niche partitioning.

And the idea with niche partitioning is that if you have an environment where a lot of species are competing over finite resources, the species evolve to coexist in a way that's sometimes antagonistic toward each other.

They have to develop their own niches because otherwise they're going to die.

They're going to starve to death.

So when I think about this happening in the world of media where there are scarce resources, there's only so much attention, there's only so many hours in a day, there's only so many

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eyeballs and ears, the best way to develop your niche, to partition yourself, is to position yourself antagonistically against your competition.

So for example, you're writing a book about the 1990s.

Let's say you're publishing this book about the 1990s into an environment where there were seven famous histories of the 1990s published in the previous two years.

What do you have to tell your publishers?

What do you have to tell CBS, NPR, when you're doing your book interviews?

You have to tell them how your book is different.

Same thing for me and my podcast.

I'm doing a general news podcast.

There's 10 trillion general news podcasts.

I have to consistently try to remind people, how am I different?

And often the best way to do that is to explain why everyone else sucks, all right?

These 1990s histories, they didn't know what the fuck they were talking about, I do.

These other general news podcasts, they don't know what the fuck they're talking about, I do.

And so in environments of abundant actors and finite resources, it makes sense to have heightened antagonism within the system.

And heightened antagonism within the system means you have more negativity.

That's a good theory.

It's possible.

I don't know necessarily why you believe that the resources are finite.

The resources seem to be expanding.

The resources are expanding, but they're still not infinite, right?

I mean, there's still only so many hours that people can listen to news podcasts.

There's only so many 1990s history tomes that people are going to read within a given period.

So you're absolutely right.

The demand can be increasing, but can also be zero sum enough that you need and I need to argue for our difference, to argue for our specialness in order to win that next marginal reader or listener.

I mean, that's possible.

I mean, it makes complete rational sense.

You are, though, sort of, I feel talking about a pretty kind of rarefied level of source.

Like you're talking almost like, although maybe you're not, like are you sort of arguing that the average person on Twitter now is sort of perceiving themselves as a media entity?

Yes.

Yes.

I did not connect it to the average person here, but the next bridge that I would build is to say you and I have a clear self-conceptualization of ourselves as media makers, right?

And with, I think, increasing regularity, ordinary people are having that same awareness.

They're in these media markets of Twitter and Instagram and TikTok and Facebook where they're publishing and recognizing with very quick feedback loops how many people are responding to what they say.

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And they're doing this, as you've pointed out, in an environment where they're increasingly aware of what everyone else is saying.

And I think that you're seeing this rise in, especially online negativity, in part because they are learning very quickly the same lessons that media makers have known forever and publicists have known forever.

The best way to distinguish your product is to point out how it is different from everybody else.

And so in that environment, I think you have a lot of people who are finding clever ways to distinguish themselves.

And the best way to do that often is by being negative toward one mainstream.

Most people think this, but I think that.

I mean, there are a couple things.

I mean, it's like, okay, first of all, we perceive something like Twitter as this, this, this like this waterfall of negativity.

And yet, if you're a famous person or a semi-famous person, however you look at it, if you actually kept track of what is written about you, it's generally much more positive than negative.

It's just that the negative things, because this is how people think, seem real.

And all the positive things seem completely fake and meaningless.

I mean, I interviewed Stephen Milkman from Pavement, and I was talking to him about, you know, like, the kind of the constantly being well-reviewed in the way he was, that that changed the way he looked at his own art, constantly having people tell you you're a genius.

And he was like, well, it's never as good as you want it to be.

And that's true.

If you get a very positive book review, I'm sure this happened to you.

And they said 19 positive things and three negative things in your mind.

That's a mixed review, because that's just how it naturally is.

The other thing is, I feel, and this is like, okay, this is going to be one of these things where people are going to be like, you prove this or whatever.

This is just kind of my conjecture, but I think there has been a kind of a wholesale swapping of the role media used to play with celebrities and that the public used to play with celebrities.

I mean, if you say, you go back to this, you know, in time, and it's like, Rowling Stone gives terrible reviews to Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath, but the fans know the truth. These bands are great or whatever.

Or like, okay, Gryll Marcus reviews the Bob Dylan album, Self Portrait.

And the first line is like, what is this shit?

Okay.

It's basically impossible to imagine that happening to say like Taylor Swift now.

Like, I can't, I can't foresee this.

Like, here's like, like, it seems as though it used to be the idea that the media was this negative and the population, you know, the average consumer had sort of the more

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positive view of the person and that kind of created this balance.
But like, okay, I'm just using an example because it's so recent.
So the new Beyonce record comes up and Renaissance, the New York Times like writes a piece that's coming out and then like a review of the record.
And then also like all the critics go through her entire catalog.
What was the best, you know, moment in Beyonce's career?
They have Michelangelo Matos talk about all the samples that are used on this record.
Wesley Morris writes this big piece in the magazine about sort of her relationship to like black queerness.
And then like, there's a podcast that the Times puts out that sort of like a combination of all these things.
Now, every one of those pieces by themselves is pretty good.
I mean, like, if you have Wesley Morris write about the relationship between Beyonce and like black queerness, like, it's going to be great.
If you have Matos write about like what samples are used on Beyonce's album, it's going to be complete.
The people that are talented, well-written, well-edited, but taken together when you have all of those stories from one outlet about this one person, there's a sense from some people that this is kind of like institutionally sycophantic, like they almost, they seem to be doing something for Beyonce that she could never pay for, like she could buy a super bowl ad.
And it wouldn't be that kind of publicity, because if it was a super bowl ad, people would still be, well, this is a commercial, she's selling us.
This is a, you know, like arguably the best paper in the country, whatever.
It's also kind of validating her and justifying everything.
It's the best kind of publicity.
And I think there is a certain kind of person who sees that and they're like, this is weird.
And they push back against it.
In fact, if you read the comments on a lot of those New York Times stories, they're much sort of more like, seems to almost be a heavier element of like real kind of critical thinking about the value of this in the comments and in the piece.
Like here again, every individual piece is good.
It's just that this idea that somehow it's like the paper's working for her or something.
And I think that now it's the people who feel like we got to push back against this.
It's really interesting because in a way, boiling that down, you're saying the role of the media and the public have swapped in a way.
The media used to be the enemy and the public was the friend and now it's all scrambled.
Sometimes the media is the friend and the public is the enemy and sometimes it's vice-versa.
It's as if like the audience has stormed the stage and they're all sort of interacting together.
And it makes me think of one of your first comments that in reality TV, you saw this collapse between celebrity and consumer.
But you've also seen this boundary collapse between critic and consumer because now the

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consumers are also critics and they're jumping on stage and messing with the critics as well. And lifting up a bit, I think you've taken my initial thesis in a really interesting and a more interesting direction because I initially wanted you to explain very narrowly why it might seem like modern culture and the internet in particular have fostered such a negative anti-fan environment.

But you've also made the point that there's this bizarrely rapturous fandom that can bubble up as well.

Like to use your amazing phrase again, it's the death of the middle class of feeling.

I wonder if you think this sort of thing has gotten worse since the pandemic.

Well, okay.

So like when you look at things that were sort of critically beloved or got a lot of media attention during the pandemic.

So you're looking at like, okay, so you got like Tiger King and Fiona Apple's Fetch the Bull Cutters and White Lotus.

And I guess, you know, to kind of in a different way, but to a degree like the Top Gun Maverick movie.

Okay.

When you go back, like I think in 25 years when we go back and we read the coverage of these things at the time that they happened and all of those things I mentioned are pretty good.

I liked all of them.

But the response was so rapturous that it was almost like this thing has changed everything in a way that if that was true, they should still be in the culture more than they are.

And I think it was because and to a sense, like the pandemic affected everyone, but in a weird way, like it mentally affected journalists more, whereas the average person was sort of like, well, I'm stuck in my house now.

And this sucks.

And I'm worried about this illness.

The media had to be like, well, but what does this really mean though?

And like, will we ever go back to the way it was?

And our culture, like they have to ask all these kinds of secondary questions that sort of make these things that are good into by default, transcendent.

And that, you know, and there, it just, it doesn't, it doesn't seem as though that there is going to be, it's like, the media is more influential now and yet taken much less seriously.

So you need, yes, you need like, it's like the times and the Washington Post and Ellie Times, the Wall Street Journal, to me, they seem more influential now than they have ever been in my life.

And yet people seem to care about the content much less, and they take it much less seriously.

It's now like there's so there's still limited space for things that have real legitimate reach to all people that you have to consider those things more, even though the actual content does not seem as significant.

The very last thing that I want to throw at you, have you read or heard of Martin Gary's book, The Revolt of the Public?

No.

Okay, so Martin Gurrey was a former CIA agent turned like public intellectual Nostradamus type.

And he wrote this book called The Revolt of the Public.

And the story is he was a CIA analyst looking at the increase in communications all over the world, just like the total sum of messages and data being created all over the planet.

And he saw this wave growing and growing and it was the digital communications revolution sweeping the globe.

And at the same time, as a CIA analyst, he was seeing more unrest all over the world, more protest movements, but also, importantly, more failed protest movements.

And he developed this theory that connected these two observations.

He said, maybe there's something about social media specifically that makes it an extraordinary instrument for generating mass protest, but a terrible instrument for creating successful mass movements, like it creates all of this negative energy and then it just dissipates and no solution is created.

And look, Martin Gary definitely wasn't writing about Tiger King or the new Beyonce album, but your comment made me think of a weird connection here that cultural movements seem to peak and fade in a way that is unnervingly fast.

It's like the half-life of cultural movements is getting shorter and shorter.

And I wonder what you think about that connection.

Well, I suppose one response would be that if you think of the internet and social media as an extension of the acceleration of culture, then that would stand to reason, that everything that normally would have happened in culture is going to happen in a smaller window, that someone's rise to notoriety and their evaporation from that is going to happen faster and faster and will only keep increasing.

That there will be a period where it's like the Andy Warhol thing will be 15 minutes is too much, that people will literally be famous for 15 seconds or whatever.

I am sort of of the opinion that in a lot of ways, the most surprising thing about the internet is that in many ways it has decelerated the culture and made things more static and made it harder for us to sort of move forward in a linear way, which then if you put those two things together, that the process of this experience is accelerating.

But the stuff that we are processing is not changing.

Well, that's going to cause a lot of discomfort is the right word.

But it's going to be like, if the culture isn't changing, but the way that we cycle through it increases, you're going to start seeing the strange repetition of experience.

Maybe that's what I'm talking about.

There's this idea that the idea of what happened with Tiger King or Fiona Apple or whatever, it's like, that's just going to keep happening with different things, that we're going to keep having the same experience over and over again.

The thing itself will change, but the way it is received, the way people feel about it and the fact that it will suddenly then seem as if we had somehow made a mistake, but this thing that we said was the most important piece of art of the decade is gone.

That's just going to happen over and over and over again.

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We have to go in a second, but I just want to put a pin in three of your ideas that I'm not going to forget anytime soon.

Idea number one is what I'm going to try to think of as the Rotten Tomatoes effect.

With Rotten Tomatoes, when you know what the rating of a movie is, it's very difficult to have an opinion of that movie in a way that is separate from the discourse.

No, you know what the discourse thinks, it's right there in the number, and in that same way I think our hyper-awareness of what everyone else thinks around us is truly bizarre in a way that I think we don't maybe quite realize how bizarre it is.

In a weird way, it's harder to have your thoughts that are truly your own because you're always positioning your opinion relative to the discourse.

Number two, I think there's something pretty profound to your observation that these once feudal hierarchies between institution at the top and then critic in the middle and audience at the bottom, that feudal hierarchy has been totally collapsed.

A lot of what we think of as internet culture I think comes from this collapsed space where audiences and critics and institutions are jockeying for status.

That's such a fascinating visual image for me.

Number three, this is your Beyonce point and I know we didn't talk about it as much and I didn't anticipate talking about it at all, but I think there's something very interesting about this need of media makers like the New York Times or just someone online to create events, events with a capital E. When we do like something and when we want to go to bat for it, it's not sufficient to say, this thing is pretty good, no, to wrangle the attention of the crowd, we have to elevate it.

But when everyone feels this way, when everyone is trying to create capital E events out of so many different things, it leads to this sense of hyper movements in cultures such that maybe fewer things truly stand the test of time and that as a result of one, two and three, I think you can say that culture is becoming faster, more democratized in ways that are often good, but also I think more negative on balance.

So anyway, that was a blast.

I hope you made some sense and Chuck, thank you so, so much.

It was my pleasure to be here, Derek.

Thank you for listening.

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