



“I’m doing something I really have complete control over and people seem to dig it, and I really like it. It just feels different and I really like it.” — Marc Maron

The Internet’s wide reach plus Marc Maron’s long history with some of the greatest comedians working today lends an intimacy to the podcast that a know-nothing commentator just couldn’t deliver. And it’s paying off: WTF With Marc Maron consistently lives in the iTunes Top 20 podcasts, and occasionally floats to No. 1.

“I just saw podcasting as a way to get away from radio and do the type of show that I wanted to do, which was something intimate and expressive and to have some genuine conversations,” Maron said. “That’s the most engaging thing. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you’re talking about as long as it’s engaging and authentic. That’s when it’s compelling and people want to listen.”

Success rungs in comedy used to be limited to a Comedy Central special or a spot on Conan, but the Internet has opened up a new platform for comedians to work, and Maron’s found a successful niche interviewing folks like Louis C.K., Judd Apatow and Dave Attell.

“Now it seems like I’m genuinely satisfied, and I don’t have as much fear and insanity and doubt about what’s going to happen,” Maron said. “Along with that comes the reality that I got lucky. Or maybe it’s not luck, maybe it’s the quality of the thing. But the outlet of iTunes and the format of the podcast and the accessibility of it has definitely changed the game for me.”

The podcast, created with his producer and editing whiz Brendan McDonald, sprung up in September 2009, from what Maron calls “a creative fury sparked by the kind of panic that happens when you don’t know where your career is going.” The initial WTFs were done after-hours at Air America, after he and McDonald had been canned — again.

“The last time we got fired, they didn’t take our security cards from us, so we’d break in afterhours and do the show. We did the first 10 like that, those were the shows with Gaffigan, Stanhope, Todd Barry,” he said. “We’d bring them up the back way and record the episodes.”

Most WTFs are recorded at Maron’s house in Los Angeles, using two high-end mics run through a six-channel mixer; Maron then uploads the uncompressed .afi files and ships them to McDonald in New York, where he adds music, tightens for flow and polishes up the sound.

“Brendan puts a lot of his creativity into it. He does what he does well and I do what I do well,” Maron said. “He really loves it when I do on-the-road shows, like when I did Eddie Pepitone in Albuquerque. He likes to take all the pieces and put it into a narrative and an arc.”

He does his own booking, and tracking guests down is usually through an old black book or a friend of a friend. There’s never a shortage of people to interview, but Maron doesn’t envision interviewing more than one person at a time. He’s got a wish list, though: Tom Waits, Iggy Pop, Michael Ian Black, Fred Armisen and Tina Fey, to name a few.

“I’m no huge star and I never have been. I’ve always been sort of a

marginal character, but obviously I know a lot of people and there are people who have enough respect for me to do the show,” Maron said.

He doesn’t go in with a game plan, and just kind of lets the interviews play out. “I’ve known some of these people a long time, but how long do you talk to somebody you really know for an hour? ... A lot of these things have the dynamic of a first date.”

The digital world has changed the way comedians can connect to people, but it hasn’t changed the problem all artists — including Maron — still have: how to make it pay.

“It’s gratifying to make a sketch or a podcast and have it out there and have everybody listen to it, but when it comes down to brass tacks, I’m doing two of these a week and booking interviews and doing the editing, and it’s more work than I’ve done in a long time,” Maron said. “This is work and it’s work that I’m qualified to do as a comedic performer and writer, and I’m putting it out there for free.”

The Internet’s no magic bullet for success, either: New venues for fame are also new venues for failure.

“That ego struggle of putting yourself out there and not being heard is still the same,” Maron said. “Alongside the possibility of people finding you and loving you, you also find more possibilities of feeling rejection.”

WTF has connected Maron to his fans like never before, and he gets tons of e-mails from fans about how the show affects their lives, be it a how-to

on auditioning for [Late Show with David Letterman talent coordinator] Eddie Brill or checking in on his cat Boomer, to teenagers who listen to the show and feel less alone. Maron said the informal, immediate connection is at once overwhelming and satisfying and heartwarming.

“The downside is not a downside, but it’s an interesting phenomenon: People who listen to it get a real sense of who I am and what I go through in my life, and they know things about my life. Sometimes it’s a little interesting, because I know that they know me, and I have no idea who they are, so it’s sort of honoring the boundaries of that,” he said. “It’s exactly what I’ve been working toward, and it’s very odd how I’ve sort of disassembled any fourth wall and am not very consciously working toward that.”

Whatever dissonance that might lead to in his day-to-day life, meeting fans who might know more about him than he realizes, Maron’s happy to give WTF to the comedy community.

“If I had this when I was younger — the opportunity to hear the people that I looked up to just talk as people — it would have been mind-blowing,” Maron said. “A lot of comedians are having that first wave of ‘What the fuck am I doing?’ and ‘I hate myself’ and ‘How do I get famous?’ and ‘How do I get on TV?’ and I think hearing that we were all going through that gives them a certain amount of hope.”

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by Michelle Peterson

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