

Episode 23: The Mulaney Incident

There was a period of time in the mid-to-late 00s, where I would have loved to write for a tabloid magazine. The idea of writing a headline like 'SCREAMING MATCH AT THE GROCERY STORE. Sources say they're headed for divorce', then superimposing it next to a fairly innocuous set of a famous couple frowning at the label on some coconut water and then spending an afternoon arranging dresses into 'HOT' or 'NOT' categories, seemed like weird fever dream of a job where I got to look at famous people and do some creative writing.

I use my brain for other things now – not a judgment call, who I am to say whether this is better than gossip mags. Or even whether my 9 to 5 is, to be honest. Capitalism bleeds us all dry. But the point is, I never really grew out of reading celebrity gossip. I feel slightly more morally conflicted about invasions of privacy and the stripping away of humanity in the name of celebrity or whatever now... but like not enough to actually stop reading the gossip-Instagram Deux Moi. You know?

Anyway, if you have even the tiniest piece of online presence or even a little bit of interest in comedy, you might have noticed what I'm calling the John Mulaney Incident – that is, the complete and utter meltdown the internet had following the comedian's announcement of his divorce/

subsequent announcement of his dating Olivia Munn/ subsequent announcement of Olivia Munn's pregnancy. People are treating it as though their best friend of many years has turned around and pulled of their Groucho Marx glasses and moustache to reveal a new and villainous personality that's been waiting to secretly betray them this whole time.

This is, of course – not the case. He's objectively just a man who got a divorce. But it's a fascinating phenomenon, so I thought we could take a look.

I'm Alex – this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today, I'm thinking about the Mulaney Incident.

My big rule about famous people is that you should never meet them or try to meet them. Personally, I apply this broadly to all famous people because I long to cease being perceived by mortal eyes, but I think you should specifically apply it to famous people who are related, no matter how tangentially, to pieces of media that you love. The fastest way to ruin your relationship with a piece of media you love is to talk to the person who made it – because there are an infinite number of ways it can go wrong. You're weird, they're weird, you perceive them to be in a bad mood, they actually are in a bad mood, your understandings of that piece of media are fundamentally different,


they have an overinflated sense of their own craft (never talk to actors about acting, is my second rule). The list is endless, and I genuinely recommend, to avoid the heartache, just never meeting them ever.

That being said, for reasons that are not entirely clear to me, I have a little internal counter of 'Hollywood Men Who Would Never Hurt Me'. These are men who, based essentially on vibe alone, I have decided would not do anything that might break my heart – the parameters for things that might break my heart run the gambit from actual crimes, to bad political opinions, to being rude to service industry staff and are ever shifting. I'll give you an example – Keanu Reeves is on the list. His vibe is that of someone who takes everything in his stride and is having a nice time. Recently someone pointed out to him that the Matrix was a trans allegory and he said "Oh I didn't know but that's cool!" He's chill. The Rock, perhaps surprisingly for anyone who has met me, does not make the cut, partially because I suspect due to his overall likeability, he might do something stupid like run for president or something. I trust him not to commit a crime, but not to refrain from doing something well-meaning but ultimately ill-informed to disastrous effect. Like I said – it's a vibe. The unspoken, additional layer to the Hollywood Men Who Would Never Hurt Me list is that they're also men that I think would be kind of fine to accidentally end up in a social situation with. Based on pretty much nothing at all, I've arbitrarily decided that if we were two people who didn't know anyone at a party, or we were stuck in a lift together or something, we would probably be fine

to chat. I don't want to meet them, but if the social situation suddenly undermined my "never meet famous people" rule, it would be kind of okay.

I'm making jokes about it, but despite its totally arbitrary nature, the list has big implications for my feelings. And the reason I'm telling you about it is not only because John Mulaney is on my list, but because I think his speed run of rehab, divorce, dating and impending fatherhood has revealed that other people are a little bit less honest with themselves about how they interact with the media they consume and the celebrities involved in creating it. On the one hand, there are people acting like it's the worst betrayal they've experienced in recent times, and on the other hand there are people acting like having any sort of interest or investment in celebrity is completely insane. So I thought we could spend some time today looking at what makes this different from other celebrity divorces, media consumption and the separation of art and artist. You know? Simple things. Not at all large, unanswerable questions that have plagued people for years. And we're going to do it in 20 mins. Fine. Doable. Normal, even.

Ok, I'm going to start at the top for those of you who are less terminally online than me. As I'm sure you've gathered from the intro, John Mulaney is a stand-up comedian whose work you might have seen on Netflix – specifically Kid Gorgeous which won an Emmy, or John Mulaney and the Sack Lunch Bunch which is a delightfully absurd "children's show" (I'm doing inverted commas here). I would call the comedy itself a pretty unique blend of confessional and observational – parts



of it are profoundly dark, but everything is discussed with such clean wit and in such formal tones that it could be easy to miss if you wanted to. Across much of his work, Mulaney referenced the process of dating, proposing to and marrying his wife, Annamarie Tandler. The jokes ranged from observational snap shots of their life, to snippets of sincerity – like in *Comeback Kid* where he says “I didn’t know being in a relationship could make you feel good about yourself. That’s not a joke, it’s just a nice thing I like to say.” So that’s the comedy, but what about the events? What about *The Incident*? In December of 2020, Mulaney checked into rehab for what would later be revealed to be the second time that year. He exited the program in February to live in a sober living facility. Then in May of 2021 his divorce was announced – Page Six reported that his rep had confirmed the divorce and said “John will not have any further comment as he continues to focus on his recovery and getting back to work.” They also reported Tandler’s statement saying, “I am heartbroken that John has decided to end our marriage. I wish him support and success as he continues his recovery.” In June of 2021, Mulaney and actress Olivia Munn were spotted on a lunch date in LA, seemingly confirming what all the best gossip corners of the internet had been saying for months. And then a couple of days ago in September, after Munn was snapped with a fairly noticeable baby bump, Mulaney appeared on *Late Night with Seth Meyers* to confirm that he was having a child with Munn. Munn has since gone on to give an interview where she gushes about impending motherhood and supportive Hollywood parents. For her part, Tandler seems to be dedicated

to processing the whole thing through art, positing a series of haunting photos on Instagram ahead of an upcoming show at *The Other Art Fair* in LA.


Now, despite the apparent speed run of events, I would argue that this seems like pretty standard celebrity divorce fare, only with slightly less allusions to mutual or amicable splits through expensive PR firms. The Mulaney Incident to me is not so much about the events themselves, but rather the online aftermath of the events. Something about the rapid-fire “rehab, divorce, dating, pregnancy” timeline really lit a fire under superfans of Mulaney, allegedly casual fans of Mulaney and people who claim they couldn’t care less. Somehow, they’ve all ended up in a death spiral on social media having either a meltdown about Mulaney’s innocence, a meltdown about Mulaney’s guilt, or a meltdown about how none of this means anything and everyone who has a feeling about it is so stupid. Those who cry innocence seem to fall into two categories – either people who are superfans of Mulaney gushing about how happy he looks and how they missed seeing him on TV, or people who seem to somehow be trying to be objective by saying things like “well looking at the timeline, it looks like he was already divorced by the time he shacked up with Olivia Munn and so actually everything is fine and above board”. All the replies to the first category are either equally gushy or equally vitriolic. And with the second category, all pretence of objectivity crumbles the second anyone is questioned and they seem determined to die on the hill of **THE TIMELINE IS FINE AND NORMAL**.

Those who cry guilt tend to reference Annamarie Tendler in their diatribes – her recent art has largely involved her looking like a haunting in the large empty rooms of her former marital home, and people have really leant into her apparent grief as a sign that Mulaney committed the ultimate betrayal. The general sentiment seems to be, how dare he use her as a prop in his comedy to build himself up as a good man and then so publicly move on so quickly. There's also some suspicion around the timeline of his relationship with Munn, and Page Six has reported allegations of cheating, though these have obviously gone unconfirmed by everyone. And then the final crowd are all tweeting things like "This is insane, this means nothing, you don't know these people, how can you possibly be upset?" Which is technically true – John Mulaney does not know we exist. He is not our friend. This ultimately has no social impact on us – the planet is dying, who cares etc.

So, does it mean everything, or does it mean nothing? Perhaps unsurprisingly, I'm a little of column A, little of column B kind of gal. Like I said at the top of this podcast, John Mulaney is on my list of Men Who Would Not Hurt Me, but the conditions for that list are made up are therefore completely arbitrary, guided by vibe alone. I treat his comedy specials like comfort food, which means that they do hold a special place in my heart. This puts Mulaney in a precarious position on my list, because any disruption to the joy I feel when watching those specials, however minor, might mean that I simply must cease watching them. This was internal dialogue I had and ultimately came to terms with – namely that I felt a

bit bummed, did some navel gazing, came to terms with it, kept him on the good boy list. Now, saying all that out loud in the simplest terms possible is probably enough to make you go "Jesus Christ, shut up, no one cares about your internal process", regardless of where you fall on the loving or hating Mulaney spectrum. Which kind of neatly illustrates my point, I think. I have a personal relationship with the media I consume, and the random rules that guide how I feel in that relationship really only impact me. What we're seeing play out on social media is a bunch of people assigning their own morality to a comedian, and either being disappointed when he doesn't live up to it, or being angry when other people's feelings about that comedian change, or being angry whenever people express either extreme out loud.

Parasocial relationships are something we've talked about on the podcast before – the simplest explanation is that it's a term to describe the relationship between an entertainer and their audience. The term describes something that is not only a normal phenomenon, but also pretty vital to the nature of celebrity as we know it. What I've noticed is that people have taken a half-baked understanding of the word, and started to misuse it so profoundly that it's become almost totally devoid of its original meaning. You can see a similar phenomenon with words like "abuse" or "gaslighting" which people have warped to mean "hurt feelings", or "triggered", which now just means "upset". At this point, it's almost become a pathology – parasocial relationships as things that are exclusively harmful. When people accuse you of having a parasocial relationship with something on Twitter,



it's almost definitely an insult. But I think it's interesting to note that a lot of the mainstream publications that are publishing think-pieces on the Mulaney Incident, are using the term 'parasocial relationship' in their discussions of fan responses, and are using it to structure a scenario where Mulaney was some sort of conscious manipulator of his adoring public and that the cries of betrayal on social media are actually an inevitability. Writing for Vox, Aja Romano compares Mulaney's pregnancy announcement to Kylie Jenner's and concludes that people are less outraged by Jenner's because her public persona has always been one of spectacle, where Mulaney's has been one of relatability. While she notes that people frequently re-evaluate their relationship to particular cultural symbols as their values change, she also says that the problem with Mulaney is that his narrative of domestic bliss through his stand up was used to further promote his brand and cultivate a fandom. She says, "He was a likable, happily married everyman, and that made him approachable and unlike the "average" Hollywood celebrity. He performed this role so well, in fact, that it didn't feel to the audience like a performance — and so they forgot that it was, and had been all along." She then goes on to align the narrative with the crumbling of Louis C.K.'s image after his sexual assault allegations saying, "This latest instance of a stand-up comedian pretending to be a normal guy, but then turning out to have the same clichéd problems as so many other white men in Hollywood, feels like a dirty twist. It wasn't the narrative we were promised." Which is an objectively insane reach — someone falling out of love and getting a divorce, and someone

vigorously wanking in front of a person to the point where they quit their stand-up career are two VERY different things.

I think there's something here, I just don't think we can walk it out to this extreme. I think what's actually interesting about the Mulaney Incident is the changing nature of fame and its relationship to an art form. We've seen big celebrity splits before — Brad and Jennifer, Brad and Angelina, Tom and Nicole, Tom and Katie, Ben and Jen, Ben and other Jen... there's a lot of repeat offenders here... anyway. Not my point is, the people were not moved by these splits. Sure, people had some thoughts — that 'Nicole Kidman on the day her divorce was finalised' picture does the rounds every so often. But no one spent huge swathes of time melting down about it on the internet — or like they did, but they weren't average people. I've seen some real normies have strong opinions on the Mulaney Incident. And I think the key difference is in the art form — the splits I've mentioned are actors and they're ultimately filtering emotion and relatability through a script or a specific piece of media. Comedy, perhaps more than other artforms that ask you to put your face to your name, requires a certain level of authenticity or relatability. At the very least, it requires comics to personally bring the room along with them as they work through filtered thoughts and feelings that are often designed to be delivered as though they are unfiltered or off-the-cuff. Think about Bo Burnham's Inside again for a second. That show is a bit absurdist, but it also feels so personal and relatable that it's a little bit like watching a man have a breakdown on screen. I think the artifice in these scenarios is deliberately a bit

thinner for most comics, but particularly for comics who are doing something confessional, which Mulaney is.

On top of this, the nature of streaming services has meant that live comedy is now in your home on your TV or laptop. Rather than live comedy being an event where you pay money, you get up and schlep to a theatre to have someone talk to you and a hundred other people, it's now something that you can just do in your bed. Now I know people had cable and comedy channels or whatever before, but streaming has made it so much easier for people to see comics they like and watch and rewatch sets on demand. Live comedy is often a bit of a weird niche that people fall into enjoying – my early experiences with it were exclusively because the only people who are guaranteed to do sets in shitty rural locations are comedians looking for a gig. When I moved to the city, it was like a weird revelation when I made a friend who wanted to come and see touring British comedians with me. Obviously, famous comedians existed before and after, but few, if any, have reached the level of fandom that Mulaney has. He's is an exceptionally talented comic and writer, but I don't think he would have hit the huge levels of mainstream success he has if it wasn't for the readily available nature of his sets to people.

So what does all that mean? I think it's my little of column A, little of column B argument. The Mulaney Incident means something to people because people obviously always have a personal relationship with the media they consume. It doesn't mean something to everyone, and the desire to call out

or demonise people who have even the most proportionate of responses seems to be a response to the increased visibility both of fan opinions, and of the mechanisms that guide fandom. And for me personally? For now, Mulaney can tentatively stay on my list of Hollywood Men Who Would Never Hurt Me, because ultimately, if I stick hard and fast to rule number one – never meet famous people – he'll never have an opportunity to do so. His vibe remains what it was before – a little sad and a little dark. All that matters for the list is the vibe.

Well, that was my attempt at navigating the complex online meltdown around John Mulaney without getting to caught up on my own, not insignificant, feelings on the subject. To be totally honest with you, it's helped me work through some stuff, and I think I'm probably going to re-watch the Sack Lunch Bunch – specifically the song 'Do Flowers Exist At Night?' which I think about often. If you've got a favourite Mulaney line... or even just a favourite stand-up comedian, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub. Peace!

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