

The West Wing Weekly Episode

4.03: College Kids

Guests: Aimee Mann and Former Secretary of Education John King, Jr.

[Intro music]

HRISHI: We're back.

JOSH: It's The West Wing Weekly. I'm Joshua Malina. [Hrishi laugh]

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: You told me to go first.

HRISHI: Mm-hm. Today we're talking about season four, episode three. It's called "College Kids".

JOSH: The teleplay is by Aaron Sorkin, the direction by Alex Graves, and the story provided by Debora Cahn and Mark Goffman.

HRISHI: Two new names.

JOSH: Two new names, yes. Two wonderful writers, great people. Very fond memories of them both. Debora Cahn would go on to co-executive produce Grey's Anatomy for many seasons, and Vinyl on HBO. Mark Goffman's work includes executive producing Bull, and White Collar, and Sleepy Hollow. So, both have gone on to very busy and successful careers. This episode first aired on October 2nd, in the year 2002.

HRISHI: Coming up later in this episode, we're gonna be joined by two different guests. We'll hear from John King, Jr., who is the former education secretary appointed under President Obama, and we'll have a conversation with Aimee Mann, who appears in this episode as herself, singing a cover of James Taylor's "Shed a Little Light".

JOSH: The first guy also played Jim Harper on The Newsroom. No, I'm thinking of John Gallagher, Jr. I always get those two guys mixed up. [Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: Yeah, now it makes sense to me, last time when you said to John Gallagher, Jr., how much you appreciated his community college action plays.

JOSH: Right, yeah, that was a faux pas. I was embarrassed.

HRISHI: I just thought it was a weird inside joke I didn't get, but now it makes sense.

JOSH: No. A lot of people, by the way, seemed to be a bit of a bombshell, bit of a scoop, a story that we broke, that Tyler from "20 Hours in America", is the guy, is Jim Harper from The Newsroom. Like, that seems to be a fact that I'm sure many people knew about it, but fewer

people than I expected from the fandom. There were hard-core fans that seemed to have been, “Oh my God! I never knew!” and “Oh, he looked familiar!”. There was a lot of that.

HRISHI: Yeah, it was less than 100% of our listeners, and so that was surprising.

JOSH: Right. Yes.

HRISHI: ‘Fewer’ than 100%, ‘less’ than 100%?

JOSH: I think ‘less’ than, yeah.

HRISHI: ‘Less’ than, in this case. Anyway, okay. Let me hit you with a synopsis.

JOSH: Oh yeah! Please do.

HRISHI: I’m gonna give you the choice, do you want the TV Guide, the NBC, or the Warner Brothers synopsis?

JOSH: ‘Hrinopsis’ is not an option?

HRISHI: It’s not an opsis.

JOSH: Okay, you’re really Facetiming it in these days. Okay, I’m gonna go with Warner Brothers.

HRISHI: Warner Brothers. Bartlet’s staff (President Bartlet. Warner Brothers, please). Bartlet’s staff prepares a legal team to deal with the inquiry into Bartlet’s involvement in the Kumar assassination. The country of Kumar is manufacturing evidence to implicate Israel, which could lead to war. The staffers cautiously approach Leo’s ex-wife, attorney Jordan Kendall, to represent Bartlet. [End reading] First of all, that’s not his ex-wife; I’m just jumping in here, but anyway, let’s move on.

JOSH: Right. I also thought they could’ve added “manufacturing evidence to implicate Israel, which is a real country in the Middle East”. [Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: Let me continue. Meanwhile, a key judicial ruling on presidential third-party candidates causes trouble for Bartlet’s campaign. Josh is upset with his girlfriend Amy for accepting a certain job interview. Sam, Toby, and Josh concoct a radical new idea to help people pay for college education, and the approval of prospective executive secretary Debbie Fiderer is threatened when new evidence is discovered. This is kind of a misleading synopsis.

JOSH: Very much so. And I don’t think Josh and Amy are together in this episode.

HRISHI: I was wondering about the overall status between Josh and Amy. I mean we haven’t explicitly seen that they are split up, but they say “I miss you” to one another, which makes it seem like...

JOSH: First of all, it's pretty darn wistful, and second of all they seem to pivot off of it very quickly as if it's a sensitive subject. So it seems to me that they are no longer together, or at least that's the impression I get.

HRISHI: That's what I would think as well. So really, instead of calling Jordan Kendall Leo's ex-wife, they should've called Amy Josh's ex-girlfriend.

JOSH: Yes. There you go.

HRISHI: If you'll allow me to jump right into that scene between Josh and Amy, there was one thing that I thought was a funny little Sorkinism, a little call-back, maybe, which is before we find out that Amy is working for Stackhouse, we get a little reprise of a Mandy moment with Josh. Amy says,

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

AMY: No, you said you called Howard?

JOSH: Yeah, and I haven't heard back.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: When referring to Stackhouse, she calls Stackhouse 'Howard'.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Not that she's dating Stackhouse, but...

JOSH: It's a little tip-off of...

HRISHI: Yeah. And we can recognize it because, you know, keen viewers will remember that when Mandy referred to her candidate by his first name, that tipped off Josh to let him know that she was actually, well actually I think in that instance it let him know that she was dating him, but it suggested there was more to the relationship, a familiarity.

JOSH: Good catch. That flew right over my head. I wish I had picked up on that. I should have.
[Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: Okay, let's go...what were you gonna say? Let's go back to the beginning.

JOSH: I was just gonna say, overall, this almost feels to me like "20 Hours in America, Part 3". It's coming right on the heels of the other two time-wise, sort of like there's not much of a beat missed, which is interesting.

HRISHI: In fact, the opening title card says "That Morning". When they go to the Situation Room, it says "The White House Situation Room, That Morning", and it's a little bit confusing if

you're not binge watching, because it's unclear what the antecedent to that is.

JOSH: What if this is the first episode you've ever seen? What the hell does that mean? [Hrishi laughs] What morning?

HRISHI: Yeah, it's really in relation to the "previously on", they walk into the thing, but yes, it's absolutely, the president even says, the thing that you saw at the end of the last episode is happening right now. He said,

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

BARTLET: Toby Ziegler and Josh Lyman missed the motorcade in Indiana yesterday. It's taken them 20 hours to get home. They're walking into D.C. right now.

LEO: Doesn't matter.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: So we open in the Sit room, scene in the Sit room, and I feel like the button of this one doesn't land the way it's meant to, unless I'm missing something, because we have a very serious group of people in the Sit room, and Bartlet is kind of, as he does sort of throughout this entire episode, sort of cracking not-great jokes, and making light of very serious and solemn situations, and then he and Leo kind of get into it. Leo's not really enjoying the attempted humor or the lightness of his attitude and tells him to hunker down, and then, it seems to me like this final moment in the Sit room that's supposed to be a real zinger that leads us into the credits, is this thing about why there's constant war in the Middle East.

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

BARTLET: It's because it's incredibly hot, and there's no water.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And he's like, "I'm hunkered down". I don't quite get the import of the moment of what does that prove, like "oh you think my eye's not on the ball? Well I've got an anecdote about the climate in the area!" Isn't this supposed to land somehow?

HRISHI: Yeah, I didn't get that last section either. I thought the history teacher story was weird, and then again, he says, "I'm hunkered down, I'm going to East Lansing, we're going to need a lawyer." But we haven't yet heard why he's going to East Lansing, and so that as one of these bullet points of what he's giving to Leo, that one is just a throw away. [Josh laughs]

JOSH: Yeah, in fact it's almost even worse than that, now that you remind me, because it's kind of like "You think I'm not paying attention? Well here's a complete non-sequitor. I'm gonna tell a really weird anecdote, and then I'm gonna exit, having accomplished nothing here." [Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: I'm hunkered down, I plan on getting tomato soup for lunch. [Josh laughs]. Later, I have to call my mom.

JOSH: Peace Out. [Hrishi laughs] We're gonna need a lawyer. [Josh laughs] Cue the credits. Yeah, falls a little flat.

HRISHI: The funny thing too is that Leo keeps getting annoyed at the president for not paying attention, for making light of the situation and joking around, but then he turns around and does the exact same thing to Jordan Kendall.

JOSH: He literally uses potential nuclear scenarios as a pick-up. [Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: I don't know how he doesn't take his own feelings towards the president in the very same room, and then apply them to himself.

JOSH: There at least he's trying to score.

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

LEO: That's an entirely different kettle of beans, and we can have that discussion, but history has shown that if you just wait and tell it to a divorce lawyer you can have half my stuff.

JORDAN: I don't want half your stuff.

LEO: You don't know...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And again, you have to go back to Margaret's interject from before. Look, she's at work. It's a very serious situation, like when Leo was trying to hit on her at the hearing, it's like "no, don't..."

JOSH: Particularly given the headlines of recent days and weeks, the Leo stuff played poorly for me in this watch.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: Like, dude, you're literally trying to use your position and the power imputed to you because you've got like a handprint that gets you...and handprint readout that gets you into the Sit room...

HRISHI: Yeah, and again, Jordan's just trying to be professional, and he's flirting with her, he's joking about actually what he's gonna order for lunch [both laugh].

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And she's taking the situation as seriously as it deserves, which is what, I don't know, a little hypocrisy from Leo.

JOSH: Yeah, and a little sexual harassment. [both laugh] This is also, I think, there are some security protocols I have questions about, because first there's a brief little moment when they're talking about lunch, and he's talking to Jordan...

HRISHI: Yes! And it turns out Margaret's listening in?

JOSH: Margaret's listening in! [Hrishi laughs] And she even starts to say, no he was talking about, like she's gonna say no, he was talking about the assassination of Sharif,

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: And I'm like 'Margaret? What kind of clearance does Margaret have?' [Hrishi laughs] And then later, she does beep in, right after Leo says

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

LEO: We put fourteen bullets in his chest on an airstrip in Bermuda. It's helpful to start saying it out loud.

MARGARET, ON PHONE: I'm sorry, Leo?

LEO: Yeah?

MARGARET: I thought you might want to know that there's a message here for you...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: She's like (expletive) Alexa. [Hrishi laughs] She's always listening. And you should assume that no matter what you say, oops, sorry! Alexa stop! [Hrishi laughs]. I forgot I have one in my room. So, proving my point, Margaret is, I think, the precursor to A-L-E-X-A. (Hrishi laughs). I can spell now, Josh.

HRISHI: I didn't quite get that. What were you trying to ask me? [Josh laughs].

JOSH: So, yeah, I don't think she should be able to buzz in and hear what's being discussed in the Sit Room. That seems like a breach of protocol. [Hrishi laughs].

HRISHI: That's true. I do love the wrinkle of Qumar saying it was Israel.

JOSH: Hmm, yes.

HRISHI: That's a place they didn't need to take it, a complication they didn't need to give us, and I mean it's so messy, I really like that.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree.

HRISHI: And somehow, they know it was the US.

JOSH: I noticed a weird profound moment, I want to call it, on Air Force One. CJ finishes briefing the reporters, and then she walks out to talk to Bruno, and she kind of hits a wall. She sort of...[Hrishi laughs]...it's kind of fantastic. She sort of, I don't know if she loses her balance, but hey, she is on a plane, she's supposed to be flying, maybe it's a brilliant piece of physical performance, but she kind of loses her balance a little bit, hits the wall, and carries on, and you know, I don't know if that was the best take, and they're like, "no, it looked fine", or maybe it's more interesting because that's the kind of thing that happened. It's weirdly real because it's odd.

HRISHI: Yeah. Right. For a second I forgot that it wasn't on a plane! Oh God! I forgot that they weren't on a plane! [laughs]

JOSH: They're not really in the air.

HRISHI: They're not shooting on a plane, yeah, that's on the ground. Right. I was like, well of course, for a second, a second, some splintering thought went off and wandered towards the idea of, "it's impressive that she managed to do all of it without stumbling!" [Josh laughs].

JOSH: Well I think it's why I like the moment so much, is, having shot on it myself I'm so aware that you are just in a studio, in a shell of a plane.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And it really makes it look like she is on a plane, so it's possible it's just another piece of Janney brilliance.

HRISHI: Allison Janney brilliance, yeah. I feel like we've just been complaining about the episode, but I'm just gonna pile it on.

JOSH: Go ahead.

HRISHI: Debbie Fiderer worked in the office of personnel.

JOSH: The paperwork?

HRISHI: But she needs Sam to explain the process of the government background check?

JOSH: Good point.

HRISHI: And explain the new levels of security measures and intensity for the job as executive secretary?

JOSH: Hmm.

HRISHI: She even says she knows about, you know, the SF-86 form, and so it's not like the show suddenly forgot about her previous history, but despite that previous history she doesn't know what the GC-1 is.

JOSH: Yeah. No, that stretches credibility, I think you're right. I think this altogether, I think this episode is fine. I liked it fine, it was okay, but it sort of feels to me like Aaron completed the one-two punch of what was originally aired as a two-parter, and now he's kind of...

HRISHI: Reloading.

JOSH: Yeah, exactly. A little bit of a reload. He's inching things forward a little bit, he's moving things forward in plot. There are a couple very good scenes and great moments and when Bartlet essentially gives an extemporaneous speech...

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

BARTLET: 'Joy commeth in the morning', scripture tells us. I hope so. I don't know if life would be worth living if it didn't.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I like that scene very much. And it's not a bad episode of The West Wing where things kind of inch forward, and it kind of holds your interest, nothing momentous happens but you get a scene like that. That's enough for me, to go like, 'okay, yeah, decent episode.'

HRISHI: What I enjoy most about that scene is, less the speech itself, and more the fact that the president doesn't know that he's gonna do it off the cuff, and he's just gonna talk, and then Sam just throws him this quote from scripture...

JOSH: Yeah, exactly.

HRISHI: ...'Joy commeth in the morning'. And then he takes it and is able to spin it together into this golden thread.

JOSH: Like I'm just gonna talk a little.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I also like that I think Aaron's writing and Martin's performance put over the sense that he could be coming up with this on the spot. There's a repetition of phrases as he works himself towards the next thing he wants to say, and of course he starts with a quote from a Psalm, and he has a little bit of preacherous feel to it, kind of working himself into the message and picking up momentum and the repetition of the phrase. 'Not nearly enough', is that what it is?

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: 'Not nearly enough.' And it's got a little bit of the preacher, and I like the performance, and I think Aaron's writing is spot on.

HRISHI: You know how I've mentioned to you there are moments in the show where I can't help but sing along? This is one of those moments where, it's not just the words, it's the cadence and there's even melody to it that gets stuck in my head, and that moment, the third 'not nearly enough', when he says...

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

BARTLET: There isn't nearly enough, not nearly enough, not nearly enough money in our classrooms, and we...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I can't help but say, 'not nearly enough' along with him. It reminds me of a moment from My Fair Lady, when

JOSH: What???

HRISHI: When he's teaching Eliza the sort of melody of diction.

[My Fair Lady excerpt]

ELIZA DOOLITTLE: How kind of you to let me come.

PROFESSOR HENRY HIGGINS: No, KIND of you, KIND of you. How KIND of you to let me come?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh, very good, yes!

HRISHI: Yeah, not nearly enough, not nearly enough, not NEARLY enough!

JOSH: Now that you mention this and we're talking about the rhythm and the cadence and the delivery, one of the things I like is that Aaron does, I think, his version of a baseball player pointing to the wall because he has Sam talking when they are sharing with President Bartlet what they've come up with.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And he talks about the rhythm, and that's a dummy phrase that's just a placeholder, and the sound, and so he's saying that this stuff is as important as the content in a way, and I'm

gonna show it to you in a minute when Bartlet just speaks off the cuff.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And of course it's also classic Aaron, talking about the musicality of dialogue and speech.

HRISHI: Right. I love that Sam gets to return to the thing that he knows after feeling a little bit like he might have been out of his element in the oval office...

JOSH: Filling in for Josh.

HRISHI: And now you get to remember where Sam's true powers are. Not only is he a great writer, he understands the president's voice so well. He understands the way he speaks, and how to write for him. Even at moments he can say, 'these aren't the right words, these are just syllables, and eventually I'll fill that in.'

JOSH: Right. And also, not to get entirely hung up on the sound and cadence and rhythm and delivery; the content of what he's saying is incredibly bold, the idea – and I don't know how well it would be received today – the idea that on the heels of what appears to be an act of hideous and destructive terrorism, that it would come out in the messages, they weren't born wanting to do this. The idea of any kind of empathy or trying to even understand the kind of evil this comes from and say whatever it is, these people didn't start this way, and how do we try to, you know, make better citizens by educating kids. It's an incredibly bold thing to say.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: But in a way it's kind of brilliant, given at this point they don't have very much information about the people involved, or the group involved. There's not much to say, but I think most politicians would either make an assumption, or vilify the perpetrators. The idea of bringing it around to better education is pretty clever.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think that's a great point. And the dummy phrase that Sam and Bruno have for him, he's rejected that completely. Not only is he saying 'I'm not gonna use those words, I'm just gonna talk for a bit' because what they're suggesting is, 'we'll catch the perpetrators, we'll track 'em down, we'll punish...'

JOSH: Right, just the standard (expletive) you would expect to hear.

HRISHI: Yeah, and the president actively, he takes the bit about 'joy commeth in the morning', but he leaves all of that stuff behind.

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: I thought there was a nice echo of Nelson Mandela in what the president says when he says...

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

BARTLET: They weren't born wanting to do this!

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: There's a quote from Nelson Mandela, 'no one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.

JOSH: Beautiful.

HRISHI: And it reminded me of that. That, by the way, and again I assume 100% of our listeners are aware of this. Earlier this year, Barack Obama quoted that line from Nelson Mandela, or part of it, in the wake of Charlottesville, along with a photo of him and some kids, all different backgrounds.

JOSH: Right. Pretty sure I retweeted it.

HRISHI: Mm-hmm. And that tweet is now the most popular tweet of all time.

JOSH: Very cool.

HRISHI: We'll link to it.

JOSH: How about that? Speaking of quotes and tips of the hat, we missed in "20 Hours of America Part 2", Bartlet's line about 'the streets of heaven are too crowded with angels' is a pull from Tom Hanks' Oscar acceptance speech for Philadelphia...

HRISHI: Right!

JOSH: Yeah, and many people pointed that out.

[Tom Hanks 1994 Oscars acceptance speech excerpt]

TOM HANKS: I know that my work in this case is magnified by the fact that the streets of heaven are too crowded with angels. We know their names. They number a thousand for each one of the red ribbons that we wear here tonight.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Wish I had caught that when we were discussing it.

HRISHI: Yeah. Sometimes we highlight moments where it feels like the characters are reciting bits of their resume, or reciting bits of other people's' resumes.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: And here we have the most egregious version of that where...

JOSH: Leo?

HRISHI: Leo is actually reading Jordan's resume in the Sit Room, and we get the full measure of her legal career.

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

LEO: Maxwell School of Diplomacy and International Relations. Associate Counsel, US Delegation to the United Nations. General Counsel, US Delegation to the United Nations. General Counsel FOR the United Nations. Partner, Whitcome, Wiley, Hawking, Harrison, and Kendall.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, this is a little bit, this is Leo's version of John Cusack and the boombox in Say Anything or something [Hrishi laughs]. 'Look at this screen! I have your whole CV on it!

HRISHI: And there's nothing creepy about it!

JOSH: Right! 'Oh, where do you live? This is when you would die in a nuclear holocaust.'

HRISHI: What? Yeah. Oh, and also I told some military guys to pull up your personnel file.

JOSH: Right. And then later in the Oval Office, President Bartlet asks him how things are going, and he's like 'I think we might have a second date. Oh, that's not what you meant.' I'm like, oh, dude.

HRISHI: Yeah. I thought you might appreciate the moment when Donna lists all of the bands that were gonna play at the Rock the Vote event.

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

JOSH: Who's at Rock the Vote?

DONNA: Aimee Mann, Barenaked Ladies, Chrissy Hein, Sixpence None the Richer, Aaron Nevel, Diamondback Whale, Daisy Chain, Next Big Thing, The Cruel Shoes, and Single Cell Paramecium.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, my feeling was, obviously you have to include Barenaked Ladies and Aimee Mann because we're gonna see them, but if you're not gonna see the rest, why not have The Beatles?

[Hrishi laughs]. She should've just gone really really big.

HRISHI: Mm-hmm.

JOSH: What is it? What's the one she makes up? The something paramecium?

HRISHI: Single Cell Paramecium.

JOSH: There's no groovy bunch of musicians who have used that - it's so terrible, I guess you couldn't even use it if you were hard-core West Wing fans.

HRISHI: How would you feel if you were in the band Cruel Shoes, and Josh asks if you were a made-up band?

JOSH: That's a little insulting. Do you know Cruel Shoes?

HRISHI: Not personally, but they are a real band. Let's see if there's a band now called Single Cell Paramecium.

JOSH: There really should be.

HRISHI: It's still available for any budding musicians who want to start a joke West Wing cover band. I don't know, a Snuffy Walden cover band. You could call yourself Single Cell Paramecium.

JOSH: Cruel Shoes, of course, is the name of a classic Steve Martin short story. I didn't know there was – is there really a band? I guess so.

HRISHI: SingleCellParamecium.com is still available. I mean, bands, you should just...

JOSH: Get on it.

HRISHI: Potential band members...

JOSH: What about – I'm seeing a piece of merch!

HRISHI: A band t-shirt for Single Cell Paramecium? That's pretty good! That's pretty good.

JOSH: Yes! Come on! Right? That is good.

HRISHI: Alright!

JOSH: Of course, you now have to go make it. [both laugh]

HRISHI: What kind of band is Single Cell Paramecium? What genre?

JOSH: Maybe a jazz trio? [laughs]

HRISHI: Punk? We'll figure it out.

JOSH: Okay.

HRISHI: Stay tuned for Single Cell Paramecium band t-shirts.

JOSH: Where were we? Oh yeah.

HRISHI: West Wing.

JOSH: That's right. I love the Agent Casper badass swagger. I could just watch him walking down a hall for an entire episode. [Hrishi laughs] God, I love Clark.

HRISHI: Early in the episode, the president says that Josh and Toby have been given a 4-hour vacation. I like how that manifests in that they don't show up for the first fifteen or sixteen minutes of the episode.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: What'd you think about the scene when they do finally come in and they both have the same idea? Did you buy it that they would both come up with the same...?

JOSH: I think I did buy it; what I didn't buy was that they were so surprised. Like, just that night, the night before, they met this guy and they had this sort of...I assume they chatted about it afterwards. I don't know, to me it wasn't such a shocker.

HRISHI: More shocking was that they were shocked.

JOSH: Right exactly – what are you guys so surprised about? Remember the guy? Remember Matt Kelley, the guy from last night and how you guys were so knocked out by him, and the way articulated what he would like to see and change in government policy. You'd think they would've come up with it together that night. [Hrishi laughs] Instead he's like 'look! I wrote it down too!'.

HRISHI: The part of this plot that I was most impressed by was when Toby and Josh are sort of doing the back of the envelope calculations, figuring out what Matt Kelley's potential tax liability would be. I mean, Toby knows what tax bracket he's in. I was impressed that they knew all of this stuff and really even could just do the math there in a crowded bar to figure out or even get somewhere in the ballpark of whatever they were calculating, that his liability would drop from \$13,300 to \$3,800.

JOSH: Yeah, I was curious to know how real those figures are.

HRISHI: I think just the idea that college should be tax-deductible, I think, in this episode, was inspired by a bill that Senator Chuck Schumer was trying to introduce, but ultimately ended up getting co-opted by the Bush administration in a way that sort of watered it down. The watered-

down version has been what we've lived with for a while.

JOSH: Right, and my understanding is that in January, Congress failed to renew even the watered-down version of the tuition and fees federal tax deduction.

HRISHI: Yes. Yeah. It's crazy to me that to talk about education you have to also be an expert in tax policy.

JOSH: Right. It doesn't make sense. Well, I was reading too, apparently New York State is the only state that has made college accessible for free to anybody who wants to go to a four-year college, and then San Francisco has done a similar thing too. San Francisco found the money by, I think, a tax transfer on houses that sell for over five million dollars.

HRISHI: Which is every house in San Francisco.

JOSH: Right. That includes studio apartments.

HRISHI: Right. [laughs]

JOSH: And they've used that to cover four years of college for anybody, I think, regardless of income, who wants it for free.

HRISHI: Wow.

JOSH: And then Tennessee, Oregon, and Minnesota have two-years covered, two-year college plans. I was watching this episode, wondering whether this is an utter pipedream they are chasing, and it seems like steps have been made in certain places to create situations where college is a lot more affordable, or in fact, even free.

HRISHI: Well let's learn a little bit more about the realities of making college affordable and jump to a discussion with former education secretary John King, Jr.

JOSH: Let's.

HRISHI: In 2016, John King, Jr. was appointed US Secretary of Education by President Barack Obama. He served as deputy secretary before that. Secretary King is now the president and CEO of The Education Trust, which works to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement for all students, pre-K through college. He's here to talk to us about this idea that Toby and Josh want to put forward, of making college tuition tax-deductible. Secretary King, thanks so much for being on the podcast.

JOHN: Thanks for the opportunity to join you.

HRISHI: This episode aired in 2002, October 2002, and I was wondering, did you happen to see it then? Were you a West Wing fan by any chance?

JOHN: Yes, I was a regular West Wing watcher throughout its time on air.

HRISHI: In 2002, were you already in education?

JOHN: Yeah, I was a middle school principal in 2002, and watched West Wing all the time, and it seemed very far away and different from the work I was doing. Never imagined that I would actually be in the West Wing doing anything in particular but watch the show when I was a principal.

HRISHI: And I think you rewatched this episode recently, right?

JOHN: Yes, I rewatched the episode, and you know it's inspiring to watch The West Wing these days because it's very different from the current administration. It's nice to see an administration focused on expanding opportunity, which is really what Toby and Josh get excited about after their conversation with the father at the bar.

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

JOSH: The guy last night, in the bar. Matt Kelley. The one who's taking his daughter to visit colleges. He said it needs to be just a little easier. Not a lot easier, a little. Toby, every nickel spent on college tuition should be 100% tax-deductible.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Right. So what do you think of the plan that they want to propose, on its surface, and in the context of when the episode aired. What was your reaction to this idea of making every dollar of college tuition deductible?

JOHN: Yeah, well you know, I was a middle school principal, and one of our goals for our students was to make sure they were prepared to succeed in college and careers after they finished high school. So at the time, I was excited about the idea that a country could do more to make college accessible and affordable for families. You know, watching it now, I think about all the work we did during the Obama administration to try to make sure that college was affordable. Things like increasing Pell grants to help low-income students to go to college, the American Opportunity tax credit, which would give families up to \$10,000 in tax credits towards college, moving 60 billion dollars from banks to students and taxpayers through the direct loan program. So we were very focused on this same idea, a little bit different approach, but same idea.

HRISHI: Okay, this is my understanding of the background of this plot point, and please correct me if I'm wrong, which I might be. Senator Chuck Schumer had introduced a bill in 2001, the Make College Affordable Act, and it sounds sort of similar to this, it was supposed to be a tax break for families and I think it would graduate, up to \$12,000 would be deductible, dollar-for-dollar would be deductible on their tax returns, and then what ended up happening is it was co-opted by the George W. Bush administration, and sort of changed, but it was watered down a

bit, and then it became what we have known for the last, over a decade, as the tuition and fees deduction. Is that right?

JOHN: You know, because I was a middle school principal at the time, I wasn't really following congressional deliberations on higher-ed funding at the time, but my general recollection of the context surrounding education tax policy says that's right.

HRISHI: One of the reasons I was excited to talk to you about this is because, even that tuition and fees deduction that's been on the books since 2002, or 2001 I think, ended in 2016. But there were also people who thought that it was bad policy to begin with – that it was regressive and wasn't actually helping the families that really needed it. All this is my way of saying, when Josh and Toby put forth this idea on the show, does it seem like pure liberal fantasy, or is what they're proposing something that's even viable, something the government could have ever done if Congress were amenable to it? Is this something the country could afford? Is it realistic?

JOHN: You know, it actually is very doable to try to have a system where you ensure college is affordable for families. I think there is a fair question about, kind of, which college, and how expensive can the college be, so the idea that you can make it possible for students to go to any college for free – that I think is very unlikely. But the idea that you could ensure that if a student wants to go to public higher education, that they be able to do that either for a two-year degree or a four-year degree, tuition free – that's very plausible. And you can do it more directly even than tax code changes, right?. You can do something like what President Obama proposed to do in the America's College Promise, or what a number of states are doing essentially to set some income threshold and say that, below that income threshold, you know that you won't have to pay tuition in a public university system.

HRISHI: What you were putting forward in the Obama administration was actually even more, much more aggressive than I think what they're pushing, right? They're not even saying that college should be free, just that the dollars spent on it should be tax deductible.

JOHN: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah I mean theirs is more limited than what we proposed in the Obama administration, but I think in some ways this set of episodes reflects a kind of enthusiasm in the American public for making sure college is accessible to everyone.

HRISHI: When you were proposing initiatives, did you already have to know and understand where the money would come from in order to pay for an initiative? Could you propose something without necessarily knowing the exact source of the funds that it would take to make you go through? At the end of this scene in "College Kids", Toby and Josh are so excited about it...

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

JOSH: I'm gonna make some time with Leo.

TOBY: Figure out a way to pay for it!

JOSH: Yeah.

TOBY: Good!

[end excerpt]

JOHN: Yeah, so that part of the episode is very accurate. We would have to work with the Office of Management and Budget and make sure that we had a plan for every initiative, exactly how we would pay for it. You know, not every initiative was about new resources. One of the key issues in college access and affordability is the issue of completion - making sure that students not only get to college, but get through college with a degree. And we know that a very large percentage of the people who default on their college loans are people who started school but didn't finish, because they don't have the degree they can't get a good job, so they can't afford to pay back their loans. There's work that institutions can do, individual colleges and universities to provide the right supports, so that student actually finish. Then there's work that the federal government can do to make sure that higher-ed institutions are accountable for whether or not their students finish. So there's a set of, for example, predatory for-profit schools that for years have allowed their students not only not to graduate, but not to really get skills that help them in the marketplace at all. One of the things we tried to do in the Obama administration was put in place an enforcement mechanism so that schools that weren't equipping student with real skills and quality degrees wouldn't continue to get federal money.

HRISHI: What's your take on the father Matt Kelley, what he was wishing for? He said...

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

MATT KELLEY: Putting your daughter through college, that's a man's job. A man's accomplishment, but it should be a little easier. Just a little easier. That difference is...everything.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Since 2002, here we are in 2017, has it gotten a little bit easier?

JOHN: We certainly did a variety of things to make it easier, but at the same time you've seen states really reduce their investment in public higher ed, and that then has translated into more costs for families. You've seen tuition at colleges and universities go up very significantly, that's made it harder. So, on balance, I think it is better than before the Obama administration began, but there's a lot of work to do and I think the energy you see now around efforts to introduce free college programs reflects the collective sense of urgency about making it easier for people to get a college degree and have the skills that they need to succeed.

HRISHI: Is this sense of it being easier, does it change across the income spectrum?

JOHN: Yeah, I mean there were some things that we did that I think did help low income

students. Increasing Pell grants, the grants that go to low-income students for higher ed, by \$1000, that made it a little bit easier. The American Opportunity tax credit, making it possible for families to get up to \$10,000 in tax credit for college, that made it a little bit easier for middle-income families. Certainly, the Direct Loan program, making it easier for folks to borrow at a reasonable rate, helped. But, you know it's not enough, and there's a lot more that Congress could do, there's a lot more that states could do. For wealthy people, it wasn't a problem before, and it's not a problem now. But for low-income and middle-income folks, there's more that the government can do now.

HRISHI: Could you see the work that the last eight years had accomplished being undone over the next four years?

JOHN: Sadly, I think that's already happening. The current administration proposed huge cuts to the Pell Grant program, taking billions of dollars away from Pell Grants and directing them to other purposes. They proposed cuts to a number of student aid programs that help make college affordable for families. They are going backwards on some of the things we did to try to hold predatory, for-profit higher ed accountable for taking advantage of students.

HRISHI: I wonder why?

JOHN: I mean...

HRISHI: It's not like the president has any kind of, you know, private interest in predatory high education institutions, so I don't know why that would be a policy.

JOHN: Eh! Unfortunately, you'd hate to...except that it's so transparent that it's just sort of effort to take from hard-working students and families and put it into the pockets of predatory executives and investors, but that's what's happening.

HRISHI: Knowing this, seeing what's happening, knowing the work that you've done, are you optimistic?

JOHN: It's sort of a moment where you both simultaneously feel despair and hope. Despair about the approach of the administration, the way they want to take money away from student aid programs, the way that they want to steer money towards predatory, for-profit higher ed companies, the lack of conversation about increasing investment in college affordability and completion efforts – so there's a lot to despair about in Washington. But then, you look at states, and you look at a state like Tennessee and what they're doing around free community college, and you look at the conversation that's happening in Oregon, and New York, and Rhode Island, around free college initiatives, and that makes you more hopeful. Right? When you look at the governors and state legislators who are trying to figure out how to make it a little easier, just like the guy in the bar suggested. And that makes you hopeful. And, there are members of Congress who are championing these issues and, you know, we'll see what the landscape looks like down the road. But I think in the end, there is a broad, bipartisan consensus that is possible around making college more accessible, more affordable, and putting in place the kinds of supports that

students need to actually complete college with quality degrees.

HRISHI: Secretary King, thanks so much for joining us on the podcast.

JOHN: Thanks for the opportunity, it's fun to talk!

[Ad break]

JOSH: Okay, we're back.

HRISHI: If you want to follow along with what Secretary King is up to now, we'll have links to the Education Trust and their Twitter and everything on the website.

JOSH: Right on. During this episode, I had a President Bartlet ai-yi-yi moment. It was more just disappointed in him. It was a further elucidation of my disappointment in his joking altogether. There's another comment he makes later on, talking to Fitz and Leo again...

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

BARTLET: No disinformation to US press, right? We don't give disinformation to American press, unless it's about my medical history?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And I thought, I'm kind of charmed by President Bartlet saying that, but if it were Trump, it would be like, 'what's wrong with that guy and his attitude?'. President Bartlet lets me down a little in this episode with his attitude towards the situation he finds himself in and the kind of flip way he deals with it.

HRISHI: Hmm. Okay, here's my apologist theory.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: I think I'm only getting to it now because of what you've just said about the disinformation about his health. For lying about his health, and for killing Sharif, I think the president believes that he has done his penance already. Some part of him believes that Mrs. Landingham was killed in punishment - that's what "Two Cathedrals" was all about. And in the season three finale, as we discussed with Aaron, Aaron said that Simon Donovan was a sacrifice because he had sinned - you know, he had killed Sharif. And I think that the president has grieved. I feel like he has done penance for both of these things and has really had existential self-inflicted torture because of them, and at a certain point he might just feel like Job in the Old Testament, and it just keeps coming. You know this wrinkle about Qumar is claiming that it was Israel, and giving him more things that he has to deal with, I wonder if at some point he's just sort of thrown his hands up and said "okay, no matter what I do, no matter how I try to make amends for past wrongs, I'm never gonna get away from them", and so in exasperation, desperation, exhaustion - he resorts to jokes.

JOSH: Perhaps so. I think, though, you're describing a grade A narcissist [both laugh] seeing other people's deaths as 'he died for my sins, she had to go, haven't I given you enough, why does this (expletive) keep happening to me?' [both laugh]

HRISHI: That really is the heart of that "Two Cathedrals" speech.

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

BARTLET: What was Josh Lyman? A warning shot? That was my son.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I never really thought about him through the lens of being a narcissist. [both laugh]

HRISHI: I mean, I thought we talked about that then? Did we not talk about it then?

JOSH: Did we use that word? I don't know, that's what it takes to be a president anyway, I think.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: What was interesting, to me there's this subtle difference. He screwed up, I think, with the medical information and keeping it secret and not sharing it and being dishonest, and he's sort of owned up to that. He has a rationale, I mean he thought through the difficult calculus of breaking the law technically for what he's decided is the greater good of taking out Sharif. So it's not that he's penitent, he's gotta just figure out what the hell do I do now. 'How do we all not go to jail? How does this not explode into a multi-national war?' You know, there's a difference.

HRISHI: I think he is penitent, even if...

JOSH: Well does he regret it? Does he regret assassinating Sharif? I don't think so.

HRISHI: Right. But I don't think those are mutually exclusive. I think he felt like he had to do it. And I think that's part of the reason now it's resorted to jokes. He had to do the right thing, and even the right thing was evil.

JOSH: Yeah, I think that's true, but I don't think he regrets it at this point.

HRISHI: No, I don't think so either.

JOSH: At this point, now he's got a legal issue and a potential foreign affairs disaster. But, I mean, part of Jordan's response is moral. She's trying to take him on a game of 'what does it mean to have justice if you...'

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And making jokes, he should've said 'lady, I need decent legal advice, I don't need you

to replay with me whether this is the right decision or something. I need you to be my lawyer. How do we respond? What do we do now?’

HRISHI: Yeah. Because of that moment, where she says,

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

JORDAN: Due respect, Mr. President, this isn't funny.

BARTLET: Due respect, Ms. Kendall, I'm the last person to whom that needs to be pointed out.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Anyway.

JOSH: Okay, fair enough. He can joke if it blows off a little steam!

HRISHI: I mean, no one's laughing, including him. No one's laughing.

JOSH: Oh by the way, I wanted to point out just, and maybe it speaks to the fact that this isn't the most momentous episode of *The West Wing*, but I was noticing lots of little things that I wonder whether most viewers think of, including *Air Force One* – somebody walks by, and there are monitors in the background, and there's kind of a news show, maybe it's a CNN or something like that, and there's a *Rock the Vote* logo, so maybe they're talking about the upcoming concert and event. It was just reminding me, there are video people, a team of people, who need to create the content that are gonna be on every screen in the offices, and on *Air Force One*, and here they've gone and made something specific to promote the *Rock the Vote* event that's gonna be at the end of the show. It's just the level of detail and care and thought that goes into the making of an episode of *The West Wing* is impressive.

HRISHI: Right, it's not like somebody turns to the TV screen and says, 'oh look!'

JOSH: Yeah, right, exactly, this is just a two-second walking by, but I kind of caught it, and another thing I was thinking is we get a reverse – I've pointed out that beginning of the staircase, and then the hallway's on another stage, and then Leo and Jordan come from the opposite direction, they come down the stairs, then into another hallway, and one of the things that I don't know if most people know, especially when you're making a big move in the middle of shooting a scene, you have to remember whenever it is three days later, or six hours later when you're filming the next part of the scene, what hand was she holding her bag in, was his jacket buttoned or not buttoned, so that takes people, like the script supervisors, who know all the little pieces of continuity that have to be maintained, and wardrobe people to notice how you were wearing what you were wearing and all that. Just thought I'd shout out to all those departments. Clearly, in the "Rock the Vote" scene, CJ has been working out because Allison has some guns on her. And she's obviously feeling very good about the shape of her arms, because she does the whole scene holding them up, and she's gesticulating, it's like Allison

knows she looks good. She's like 'I'm gonna highlight my arms.'

HRISHI: There was one part in the episode in that section after CJ's offstage where they talk about the pros and cons, you know, the reasons why they ought to bring forth this college tax credit idea.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And Toby says,

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

TOBY: There are a lot of reasons not to do it. But during the first campaign, the president said 'there are two kinds of politicians...'

SAM: 'the ones who try to say yes, and the ones who try to say no.'

TOBY: We're gonna throw these guys out 'cause they want to say no.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I applaud the sentiment of it, especially in this moment where they're talking about closing corporate loopholes for million-dollar bonuses.

JOSH: Yep, it's very easy to get on board with that.

HRISHI: Yes, but the underlying sentiment of what he's saying is, liberal politicians are good, and anyone who isn't, is not.

JOSH: Correct. [Hrishi laughs]. That is the message.

HRISHI: And while I believe that that's what they believe, it couched in such a morally emphatic and undeniable way...

JOSH: Right. No question.

HRISHI: ...that really, you're just talking about two different styles of governing.

JOSH: Yeah, that's true.

HRISHI: And CJ says, 'well, I guess if we're gonna get thrown out, I don't want it to be for that.' You won't! You are liberal democrats! That's not why you're gonna get thrown out.

JOSH: No.

HRISHI: That's not gonna be the thing that's....that's not what you do. What did you think about the Title IX subplot...

JOSH: There wasn't much meat to it.

HRISHI: Yeah, it's barely a subplot.

JOSH: Basically, it made me think about men's and women's soccer. The men's national team not making it to the World Cup for the first time since 1986 or something like that, and the women's team is fantastic. One of the reasons that the women's national soccer team dominates the way it does, is because of Title IX, and because of the lack of similar legislation in the rest of the world. I think there's a book about it, with a great documentary being made too, or maybe it's been made. And that had Title IX and funds and this legislation that prohibits the discrimination between the sexes in education led to many more young girls getting into this sport and funds towards it and as a result we have this incredibly dominating, fantastic team.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It's used, I feel like, in the episode largely to remind us of Josh's chauvinism, and Donna has a good little clapback at the end of the episode.

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

DONNA: If a college football team cut back to 70 scholarships, they'd still be three deep at every position and have a fourth string punter and place kicker. Fifteen scholarships – it's a wrestling team!

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Lot of sports metaphors in this episode, too. President Bartlet refers to what he should say in his remarks to the teachers, about whether or not to talk about the...

HRISHI: ...campaign and all.

JOSH: Right. Or the explosion, or what they should campaign on – the first one 'it's a seven-ten split.' We get a bowling metaphor.

HRISHI: He's from New Hampshire.

JOSH: Nerd!

HRISHI: So you have to imagine...

JOSH: Maybe it's a candlestick.

HRISHI: Exactly, it's a candlestick...the pins he's referring to. [both laugh]

JOSH: I love candlestick bowling though.

HRISHI: I'm from Massachusetts, so it's really the only kind of bowling that I knew growing up.

JOSH: I've always wanted to open a...maybe we can do it together. A candlestick-bowling bar in L.A.

HRISHI: There is a place on the east side...

JOSH: Of Los Angeles? For candlestick bowling?

HRISHI: Yeah. I think so. I think there's a place that used to be a Mr. T's bowl, and now it's been re-opened this very fancy pants place called Highland Park Bowl, and I haven't been there but I think it might be candlepin.

JOSH: Oh, I'd love to...

HRISHI: Did I say candlestick? I meant candlepin.

JOSH: Oh did I say candlestick, too? I think I did, too.

HRISHI: Candlepin.

JOSH: I'm droppin' it.

HRISHI: Oh, there's a little moment that I interpreted as a possible self-reflexive bit of writing...

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

REPORTER: Speaking of copy, is there an advance on the speech to the teachers?

CJ: An advance copy of the text? You must be new.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I thought this might be something that I wonder if someone asked Aaron, you know, can I...

JOSH: Get next week's script?

HRISHI: ...see a copy of the script, you know, a few days early?

JOSH: That's funny! And entirely possible.

HRISHI: Debbie Fiderer, she gets it right – President Bartlet. President Arsenic.

JOSH: Yes. It's a thin hook on which to hang his decision to hire her. Because I'm sure some assassin at one point has said, I mean John Wilkes Booth might have said 'I'm gonna kill President Lincoln'...'Well, you called me President Lincoln, now join me at the theater tonight!' It

doesn't really make sense. But, I still kind of liked the moment, and I liked the shot of her standing there, I like her kind of exaltation at the end when she gets the job, because she's been sort of buttoned up. Earlier in the episode she has a moment where she out-dries Bruno when he comments on her naming being sort of...[Hrishi laughs]

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

BRUNO: Fiderer is a funny name. (pause) Not haha funny, it's just different. {pause} Okay.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: She's so dry, she just doesn't respond at all. [both laugh] So it's kind of fun to see her clench her fists in victory.

HRISHI: Mm-hmm. And I like her admission to Charlie.

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

DEBBIE: Who can I talk to? I want this job Charlie, I didn't before and I do now.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Makes herself vulnerable.

HRISHI: Mm-hmm. As annoying as Leo's levity in the Situation Room is, I do like the way that he orders his lunch.

[West Wing Episode 4.03 excerpt]

LEO: I've been thinking a lot about an egg salad sandwich on a Kaiser roll. If it's Milosh making the potato salad, then potato salad, if it's not, then a potato in any other form will be fine.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That line, 'a potato in any other form will be fine,' cracks me up.

JOSH: That reminds me of, what's the Dave Eggers book that made him super famous? Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, in a recurring fashion, he refers to 'potatoes prepared in the French manner'. [both laugh] It really makes me laugh. I think that's the phrase.

HRISHI: He also thinks that in three or four forkfuls he'll figure it out and then he'll move along with the ___.

JOSH: Oh dear.

HRISHI: Alright, let's take a quick break, and then when we come back, we'll speak with Aimee Mann.

[theme music]

[ad break]

[theme music]

HRISHI: Joining us now is Aimee Mann, who as we mentioned appears in this episode as herself, singing James Taylor's "Shed a Little Light". Aimee Mann has had a storied career since 1983 when she was in the band "Til Tuesday, and then when she began her solo career in the nineties, she was nominated for both an Academy Award and a Grammy Award for her song "Save Me", which was in the film Magnolia. She's been on TV, she's been in movies; she's great in this episode, and before we get to the interview, just to mention, while there is no commercial release yet of her cover of James Taylor, The West Wing Weekly, as an interested party, we're trying to see if there's some kind of arrangement to be worked out. No promises.

JOSH: If we can, we will bring it to you.

HRISHI: I was not in the studio for this interview – it was this rare moment where I had to call in. Thanks Josh for carrying the in-person bulk of the responsibility.

JOSH: For now, we want to talk about your appearance on The West Wing. I guess the first question is the origin story – how did it happen? How did it come about?

AIMEE: Well, as I was telling you before this started, I have a terrible memory, and I can barely remember anything about this event.

JOSH: I tried to set you at ease by offering the fact that I also have a terrible memory, and soon we'll be talking about episodes that I'm in, for which I have no substantive additional information to provide.

AIMEE: Yeah.

JOSH: So the bar is low.

AIMEE: I was there; I don't remember how this happened, or why. My vague impression is that Aaron asked?

JOSH: Did you know him prior to doing the show?

AIMEE: No, I didn't, and as I say that, that seems unlikely. It seems really unlikely. I think someone else suggested me.

JOSH: That doesn't seem unlikely at all. He's a music fan. He has, I think, really good instincts for what type of music to use in his projects. It sounds entirely plausible that he reached out.

AIMEE: Yeah, I can't remember. I remember wanting – having wanted to feel flattered, but having the feeling that perhaps somebody had suggested me to him, and then he was like, 'sure, I guess.' But I don't know. I don't know! [laughs]

JOSH: Sometimes we must choose to feel flattered.

AIMEE: Yeah! I'm going to choose to feel flattered.

JOSH: And were you a fan of the show at that point or aware of it?

AIMEE: Oh my God, yes. A huge fan. And so I was really thrilled. I think I was probably a little surprised by the song choice?

HRISHI: So the song choice wasn't your idea?

AIMEE: No, no no no.

JOSH: Oh, so it was presented to you?

AIMEE: Yeah, it was presented to me, and of course, you say 'yes, sure!' because you know, it was like, for The West Wing, that's a 'whatever you want' scenario.

JOSH: That's a bigger ask though.

AIMEE: I was surprised because, in general, when you ask an artist to be on your thing, it's because you like their songwriting, you know, their songs. So that's the only reason I was not totally sure if the choice of me was Aaron's or somebody else's – because I'm pretty sure the song was Aaron's choice. And I remember discussing it with the music supervisor, and going like, 'Oh! The James Taylor song!' And kind of getting the vibe of, like, well, Aaron's music tastes tend to stay in a certain zone.

HRISHI: The dad-rock zone!

JOSH: Dad rock?

AIMEE: Yeah, yeah.

JOSH: We have a playlist of songs he's chosen that we call "Cool Sorkin Jams".

AIMEE: [laughs] Yeah, I think this is a cool Sorkin Jam. I'm not going to say it's my favorite James Taylor song, but I was okay with it. I think it was a little hard to figure out how to sing it because it's kind of an odd song.

JOSH: What is that process like, figuring out how to cover a song that you didn't choose, and maybe wouldn't have?

AIMEE: Yeah, I think that we probably, there was a producer I was working with on a project, his name was Michael Lockwood so I recorded it with him. My husband, Michael Penn, reminded me that he sang background vocals on it, and I said 'No you didn't!' Like, I have no memory of that whatsoever. [all laugh] He actually said, yeah, I'm kind of proud of the background vocal part that I came up with... [laughs] so he wanted to make sure that I got that in. But I had no memory of that.

HRISHI: Do you remember where you recorded it?

AIMEE: An engineer named Ryan Freeland who I work with all the time – his home studio, in Los Angeles.

HRISHI: So there's this two-step process, right? Like I imagine you had to make the song first, and then go and lip sync to it?

AIMEE: Yeah.

HRISHI: On camera?

AIMEE: Uh-huh.

HRISHI: And how much time did you have to learn the song, arrange it, record it, and then perform it on camera?

AIMEE: It wasn't super rushed – you know, I think I had some reasonable notice. Yeah, because recording it, I mean it does take a little time. We had actual musicians we had to corral and everything. Yeah, we had time to figure it out.

HRISHI: Was there a lot of back and forth between you and The West Wing about the actual recording, or did you get to sort of say, 'this is how I'm gonna do it', and that was it.

AIMEE: I think we just used the original as a basis. We did a straight cover. I mean, I haven't heard his version in years, so I'm not sure how closely we followed it. But I do remember feeling like this is just not a song that's in my style at all, and so I wouldn't – you know, I'm not gonna try to make it my own. I'm just gonna do a version in a key I can sing it in, and try to do a good job.

JOSH: That's interesting. I listened to it on the way over to talk to you, and I hadn't heard it in a long time. I like the song. Your version sounds more stripped down, less sort of studio. There's this kind of studio-ish sound to the original that pails compared to your version. Your version kind of gives me chills in this episode.

AIMEE: Thank you! Thank you. I mean I'm sure I probably did try to make it maybe a little more straightforward, and a little less soft, a little less 'dad'.

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

AIMEE: But it's a pretty 'dad' song. You know, it kind of grooves to chick-chick – you know. I didn't really know how to make that a totally different experience, so, a little bit of my own flavor, but that's about it.

JOSH: And then, is it a nightmare day, lip-syncing it for hours and hours, or were they able to – how long did it take?

AIMEE: It wasn't too bad, and it wasn't over and over. I was mostly in the background for a Bradley scene, and so that was just kind of – once I sort of realized my lip syncing is not really featured right now, since I'm just kind of in the background – then I didn't worry about it so much.

JOSH: Did that get old really quickly?

AIMEE: You know...

JOSH: Especially having to watch Brad act in the foreground?

AIMEE: [laughs] Here we go. Here it is.

JOSH: I'm trying to lead you someplace.

AIMEE: Seven minutes in... [all laugh]

JOSH: I'm trying to lead you someplace Aimee, I mean come on! [all laugh]

AIMEE: It was only a matter of time. [all laugh]

JOSH: Oh man, I overplayed my hand.

AIMEE: Well, I was, you will be delighted to hear, a huge fan of Bradley Whitford.

JOSH: Oh dear. Look, deep down, somewhere deep deep down, I think I am as well.

AIMEE: And I was just beyond excited to meet him and see him in action. So, however long that day was, it could not have been long enough.

JOSH: And did you chat with Brad and Janel, and Mary Louise Parker is in that scene as well – did you get to hang out with any of them?

AIMEE: A tad with Bradley and Mary Louise, a little bit, and I met Janel. Who else was there? I think that...

JOSH: Is Allison also? Janney?

HRISHI: Allison Janney was there, and also Barenaked Ladies maybe? Did you...

AIMEE: I think our things didn't intersect.

HRISHI: Hmm. Where was that scene shot?

AIMEE: It was in a Hard Rock. Right in Los Angeles. On Sunset Boulevard.

HRISHI: Subbing in for Hard Rock in Boston.

AIMEE: They are very similar.

JOSH: I thought it was House of Blues.

AIMEE: Oh yeah! House of Blues! Sorry, House of Blues. I get...

JOSH: Oh so it actually was at House of Blues in Los Angeles.

AIMEE: Yeah, House of Blues. Yeah. I get them mixed up. [laughs]

JOSH: Fair enough.

HRISHI: I guess you've done music videos all your career, so lip-syncing on camera probably wasn't totally foreign to you. Or did it feel like something new?

AIMEE: I mean, it was essentially doing a music video. I remember I, because you get some after money, I got like all my friends to be in the band...[laughs]

JOSH: Oh! That's cool.

AIMEE: So everybody I knew who was a musician, I was like 'be in the band', you know, so they could get...because everyone I knew was like completely broke. [all laugh]

HRISHI: It's like 'Oh! There were five people at the recording but twenty-five on stage!

AIMEE: Exactly!

JOSH: Like twenty-five people!

AIMEE: There's two background singers, and like, a tambourine player, yeah I do remember loading up the...[all laugh]. I feel a little bad about that. But really, like, all my friends are so broke, you know, they were like, we need this \$500, so...

JOSH: You want Aimee Mann, you gotta hire the whole band. [Aimee laughs]. It's a package deal. And you've always been politically active yourself, yes?

AIMEE: I would say 'not always'.

JOSH: Fair enough.

AIMEE: Yeah, now that the world's about to end...

JOSH: Now's a good time.

AIMEE: Yeah. I'm calling my congressmen.

JOSH: But back then, when you did this, was the fact that the show was a political show, did that appeal to you?

AIMEE: I mean, it did. I have to say, like, I didn't know anything about politics until I watched The West Wing. There was something that was really nice...it was one of the things I really liked about the show. It was often over my head – but I liked that. I liked the idea of seeing people talk about stuff I didn't know anything about, and maybe me having to look it up, or ask some questions, or just shut up and listen and learn. And there was something that was really nice about that. I like to feel like I'm learning something and I like to feel like I'm, you know, metaphorically, around people who are smarter than me. I'm not one of those people who wants to feel smarter than other people. I like to learn stuff. So, that was one of the things that was really appealing about The West Wing. It introduced me to a whole different world.

JOSH: I feel exactly the same way. We talk about that a lot – it's one of the rare shows that's usually a step or two ahead of the viewers, rather than watching a show where you're waiting for the show to catch up to where you know it's going.

AIMEE: Yeah.

JOSH: I felt the same way, when I was just a fan of the show, before I was on it, there were some things that spurred me to go learn a bit more about what was whizzing by me.

AIMEE: Yeah, exactly. But it didn't stop to tell you. It didn't have that spoon-feedy feeling that some shows do, when they just assume you're a moron. I like to feel like, oh, they're assuming that I'm not a moron – I better not prove them wrong! [both laugh]

JOSH: I've gotta live up to what the show is asking of me.

AIMEE: Yeah.

JOSH: Do people remember your performance on the show?

AIMEE: Yeah, every now and then people will tweet at me and say, I'm re-watching The West Wing. And I have to say Michael, my husband and I, Michael Penn, I call him Michael Penn, his full name, all the time [all laugh]...we've probably re-watched The West Wing three times at least. So I have seen...I did try to watch the episode last night; of course, that was the night Apple TV did not work.

JOSH: We hear that a lot too. Interview subjects come in and explain that they attempted to rewatch the episode, but technology would not cooperate.

AIMEE: It's so maddening! He'd just gotten a new phone, and that was the controller, and then there was some loop of passwords, leading him to other passwords, leading to other passwords, he lost his mind, and that's – then I went to bed.

JOSH: There wasn't a fifteen-year-old around to help you watch the show.

AIMEE: That's right. [laughs] But we did see it pretty recently. Like within the last year-and-a-half I think.

HRISHI: Do you go back to this show and rewatch it?

AIMEE: Yeah, and I'm gonna guess you've heard this several times too – it's comforting to know that there are smart people in the world somewhere, even if they are not currently running our government. That it's possible that those people exist, it's the reason I'm enjoying reading Hillary's book. It's comforting to know that there are people who can solve these problems, if we'd only let them.

JOSH: We just have to vote for them.

AIMEE: Yes. Or try to make sure that voting is a thing that we can still do.

JOSH: Also important.

AIMEE: Also important, yep.

HRISHI: Not to diverge too far from *The West Wing*, but as a point of comparison, could you tell us about your work on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?

AIMEE: Mostly the thing I remember about that is (this is so sad), I had one line, and it was one of those things where – this is why I will always think acting is hard – where, one line – and I could not say that (expletive) line [all laugh] with any sort of naturalness or meaning or impact or anything. I must have said it twenty-five times.

JOSH: Well perhaps counter intuitively, I think the less one has to do, the harder it is. I've played many single-line or two-line roles, and it's just like, well I've got six words, I could emphasize any of them – let me try it this way, let me try it that way – it can be easier if you get a little flow in the dialogue.

AIMEE: Yeah, I think my problem was, I thought, 'it's one line, I'll just say it!', and then you say it of course, and you turn into like a weird robot who is like 'how do words work?' [all laugh]. Yeah. That was terrible. So my memory of that is not great.

JOSH: I've enjoyed you in *Big Lebowski*, *Portlandia* more recently...

AIMEE: Big Lebowski was in German though!

JOSH: That's true!

AIMEE: That's so much easier.

JOSH: Because nobody understands German?

AIMEE: (speaks German) That's right! Nobody understands German. [all laugh]

HRISHI: I'm fascinated about the Buffy/West Wing thing because they have to have been in close succession. At least those episodes – I think both came out in the fall of 2002.

AIMEE: Oh, is that right? I must have been on somebody's list for like, 'have her be in your television program.

HRISHI: That's what I was wondering! Yeah, how do you...

AIMEE: I probably had a record out or something.

JOSH: Gotta promote.

AIMEE: I was around.

HRISHI: Yeah. I remember at the time, Magnolia was still fairly recent, and I just felt like you were in my life everywhere! You were everywhere! Everywhere I looked! Yeah!

AIMEE: I like that! I think that should happen again! Where I'm everywhere...

JOSH: She wants in your life, Hrishi. Let her in. [all laugh]

AIMEE: ...where I say three lines in German, and then I sing a song in a TV show...

JOSH: And then everyone buys your album.

AIMEE: Exactly.

HRISHI: Could we interest you in co-hosting The West Wing Weekly?

AIMEE: I would be delighted to.

JOSH: Yeah, you could come back at any time, and discuss an episode as a fan!

AIMEE: I would love to!

JOSH: Do you have favorite episodes that jump out?

AIMEE: I do. It's the Sam episode, with the woman who comes to him, the Alger Hiss one...

HRISHI: Yeah, "Somebody's Going to Emergency, Somebody's Going to Jail."

AIMEE: I almost can't even talk about it without crying. It's so amazing. It's so amazing. I really am, like, getting verklempt just thinking about it. I think that the surprise of, I mean you know he's going through this thing with his parents, and his father, and whatever, but you sort of forget about it, and then when you realize how he's projecting his family situation onto, you know, the situation with the woman, and the FBI and stuff – I think it's just really masterful, you know, because it's a thing that we all do, and it's so impactful when you realize that you're bringing stuff from the past to the situations in the present.

JOSH: Aaron is very good at the sneak up on you, emotional payoff.

AIMEE: Yeah. It's amazing. I've actually thought about a musical about that episode – because there's just something really amazing about it.

HRISHI: I'd like to give a shout-out to another connection to all of these things, tying everything together. Your song "Patient Zero" from your 2017 album, first you talked about it with me for Song Exploder, but then also your music video for it features Bradley Whitford.

AIMEE: Bradley Whitford! [laughs]

JOSH: Boo!! [laughs]

HRISHI: So can you draw a straight line (or maybe a crooked line) from doing this episode of The West Wing to Bradley being in your video?

AIMEE: Just a straight line from being a fan of his, and thinking he's awesome. I'm mainly saying that so Josh, like, winces.

JOSH: I like him toooooo.

AIMEE: I think he's...adequate. [laughs]

JOSH: Was it fun to work on that with him?

AIMEE: It was great. I mean, I don't know if you saw the video...

JOSH: I have seen it.

AIMEE: ...but he [laughs] – have you seen the movie The Dresser? It was like in the eighties?

JOSH: Mm-hmm. Love that movie.

AIMEE: Yeah. So, it's sort of based on that, and we wanted him to play a, you know, not Shakespeare, but a real acTOR, a real theater thespian, and so he was super hamming it up, and it was just so delightful! [Josh laughs]

HRISHI: Well, we'll post that music video on our website along with this episode.

JOSH: And you're about to go on tour! Literally about to go on tour, right?

AIMEE: Yeah.

JOSH: You're wearing a t-shirt that says Europe, and you're going to Europe.

AIMEE: So it does, I didn't even pay attention to that.

JOSH: Where are you going? And how can people get tickets?

AIMEE: I don't...I don't know, on a website?

JOSH: Yeah, I feel like that might be written down. Let's see if I've got that.

AIMEE: aimeemann.com

JOSH: slash tour!

AIMEE: Yeah, there's a tour...it's not that many shows...I think three in Germany, Dublin, London, Antwerp.

HRISHI: When this episode comes out, you will be already past your German dates, unfortunately....

JOSH: So how'd it go?

HRISHI: ...So, sorry fans, if you're just hearing about it now.

AIMEE: (laughs)

JOSH: Oh, I see, so that was the unhelpful plug. (Aimee laughs)

HRISHI: But, if you are an early listener and you're downloading this today on the 26th, go see Aimee Mann in London tonight. And then, Dublin and Glasgow after that.

JOSH: And then are you gonna come back here and play?

AIMEE: I don't think so. I think my touring's done. I mean, I'm sure there'll be things here and there, but the touring for the last record is probably, you know, the bulk of it is probably over.

JOSH: And that's Mental Illness.

AIMEE: Yeah.

JOSH: And I love that album.

AIMEE: Thank you.

HRISHI: As do I.

JOSH: Go out and buy it.

AIMEE: Buy it!

JOSH: Yeah! Don't borrow it, buy it.

AIMEE: Just buy it. It's nice and depressing. It'll fit the mood you're in. (laughs)

JOSH: It is a good album for these times.

AIMEE: Yeah. And it is a lot about mental illness, so you will recognize, perhaps yourself, perhaps people you know, perhaps people on the television.

JOSH: Well said.

HRISHI: Aimee, thank you so much. Before we wrap up completely, I just want to make sure – are there any memories from the episode, from making it, surrounding it, or watching it later, that stand out for you that we haven't talked about yet?

AIMEE: I remember it was very dark, I remember seeing it later and being very grateful that I was well-lit and looked pretty good.

JOSH: You looked great in it.

AIMEE: Thank you.

HRISHI: Yeah.

AIMEE: I remember going to a sort-of dressing room area before, when I first got there, and Bradley and Mary Louise were doing some kind of crazy yoga warm-up thing, and I remember thinking, 'oh, actors!'.

JOSH: I know you acted as if there was some sort of stretch for him to play a hemi thespian in your video, and I'm like, that's my memory of every day I worked with him – his legs are back behind his head, and he's doing some ridiculous vocal warm-up, and bouncing around like a maniac. I'm like, dude, take it down a notch.

AIMEE: (laughs) It's so actory! I love it!

JOSH: It's so actory.

AIMEE: I loved it! I was really taken aback!

JOSH: So, Mary Louise too?

AIMEE: Yeah, yeah. It had the tone of, 'let me show you some moves. This will be good for your instrument. (all laugh)

JOSH: Very good! Instrument. Oh dear.

HRISHI: Well, thank you so much for talking to us.

AIMEE: You're welcome! It's my pleasure.

JOSH: And that wraps it up for another episode of The West Wing Weekly. Thanks for joining us. Check us out next week also, when we'll also be doing also, The West Wing Weekly. (Josh and Hrishi laugh).

HRISHI: You can find us online, on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and our website thewestwingweekly.com. You can leave a comment for us in any of those places, and we'll find it.

JOSH: And why not? If you truly in your heart feel this way, give us a little five star review on iTunes.

HRISHI: Many thanks to Zach McNees and Margaret Miller, our post-production team.

JOSH: Thanks to Radiotopia, of which we are a proud part. Radiotopia is a collection of fabulous story-driven podcasts. You can check them out at radiotopia.fm. Among them, you'll find Hrishi's other podcast, Song Exploder, his oldest child, if you will.

HRISHI: On our website, we'll link to the Song Exploder episode with Aimee Mann for the song "Patient Zero", and we'll also link to the video so you can see Bradley Whitford in another role.

JOSH: Boo! You can catch me on Scandal, Thursday Nights, ABC, nine-o'clock, eight central. You can buy a pin or a challenge coin by clicking on the "merchandise" button on our website. Radiotopia is brought to you by the Knight Foundation. Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH, HRISHI, AIMEE, and JOHN together: What's next?

[music clip from The West Wing Episode 4.03; Aimee Mann singing James Taylor's "Shed a Little Light"]

Oh, let us turn our thoughts today to Martin Luther King

And recognize that there are ties between us All men and women Living on the earth Ties of
hope and love Sister and brotherhood

[Outro music]