

EPISODE 37

[00:00:03] SC: *I felt bad about turning 40 and just thinking about, “Where am I going to be in 20 years? Do I have retirement? Who is going to take care of my sisters?” They both have disabilities and neither of them are married. I just started to feel like, what is my long-term plan? At 40, that was the first time. I was like, “What am I doing? What’s my community? What’s my support system? How am I going to take care of my family and survive this, so that I can live a long life and be happy and comfortable and healthy and all that stuff?”*

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:36] LW: Welcome back to At The End Of The Tunnel. It’s Light Watkins. I’ve got a very special guest this week. I’m talking to author and comedian, Sarah Cooper, who’s viral TikTok Trump impersonations led to a Netflix show called *Everything’s Fine*, which is a comedic commentary on the state of America during the Trump years.

I’ve known Sarah since 2012, when she attended one of my meditation trainings in New York City. At the time, I knew that she was working in corporate America and that she really wanted to do stand-up comedy. Two years after we met, she wrote a humorous piece on Medium called ‘10 Tips for Appearing Smart in Meetings’, which ended up going viral and then later became a book.

She did eventually take a leap of faith into becoming a full-time comedian and writer. When Trump was elected president, she began openly voicing her opinion about him on Twitter, so much so that he blocked her in 2017. However, her career wasn’t taking off as fast as she had hoped. Then cut to the beginning of 2020, she’s performing stand up for a crowd of three people at a pizza parlor in New York and thinking, “I’m in my 40s. If things don’t pick up soon, I’m going to go back to corporate America.”

One day, she decides to do a Trump impersonation and post it on TikTok. Then the next thing she knows, it gets a million views, so she did more and each one went viral. Then Sarah

became a TikTok star. She was profiled in the *New York Times* and a bunch of other major media outlets.

After Trump would do a news briefing, the media awaited Sarah's TikTok impersonation. Eventually the floodgates opened, and she got a ton of opportunities. She got a Netflix show, an agent. Having known Sarah for years, but not really knowing her backstory, it was fun to go back and connect the dots from her upbringing to see how where she started led to where she is now, and how my younger brother actually played a key role in her start as a comedian.

Speaking of which, we do speak very openly about some pretty adult topics, so this is probably not the conversation for very young children. We definitely keep it real though. If you are at a crossroads in your life, between sticking with the conventional path and taking a leap of faith in the direction of your purpose or your passion, I think you're going to get a lot of inspiration from hearing Sarah's story in her own words.

Without further ado, I'm honored to introduce you to my dear friend, comedian, and author Sarah Cooper.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:03:16] LW: Sarah Cooper, thanks so much for coming on to the podcast. It's been a while. I like to start these conversations off talking about childhood. You weren't born in America. You were born in Jamaica?

[00:03:32] SC: Yes. I was born in Jamaica. You said it like you were giving me some information, like you're a doctor. You were not born here.

[00:03:42] LW: Are you an American citizen?

[00:03:43] SC: I am an American citizen. Is that a requirement for being on your podcast?

[00:03:47] LW: Did you have to become one later?

[00:03:49] LW: My parents, who are very conscientious, became citizens after we moved here. Because I was young enough, I was naturalized.

[00:03:58] LW: I know Jamaicans have a very strong cultural affinity and loyalty. I wasn't sure if you wanted to maintain your Jamaican thing.

[00:04:07] SC: I don't know why, but when I moved here, I just – I moved here when I was three and I was like, “Oh, no. I'm not going to have an accent. I'm going to speak perfectly. I'm going to speak like an American.” I was correcting my parents, the way that they were speaking. As soon as I could talk, I was like, “You're not saying that way.” For whatever reason, I always wanted to fit in. Then and then when you tell people you're Jamaican, they're like, “Oh, can you do the accent?” No, because I beat it out of myself. I refused to do it. Now I wish I could do it.

[00:04:36] LW: That's right. I've heard you try to speak patois and you sound – You sound like me trying to imitate a Jamaican.

[00:04:41] SC: Okay, so this is how it's going to be. This is how the podcast is going to go. You're just going to put down my accent work. Okay, I get it.

[00:04:49] LW: You obviously understand everything, right?

[00:04:51] SC: I pretty much do. I have gone back to Jamaica and been swindled before, because I didn't understand what was going on. If you have a very, very thick Jamaican accent, it's very hard to understand for me.

[00:05:03] LW: There's an interesting story about how you all landed in Washington, DC.

[00:05:07] SC: Yeah, my grandmother moved here when she was 40. She left a husband to – it just wasn't working out. She just came here on her own. I mean, this is back in the 70s, when there was no Internet or anything. She was just applying for jobs through the mail. She finally found a job as a housekeeper for this lady in DC. She wrote a letter and the woman offered her the job and that's how my grandmother came here. She came here by herself. Then she brought my dad and she brought my uncle, she brought cousins. I mean, she's really the reason

that we're here. She was Chinese. She was Chinese-Jamaican woman, Evelyn Beckford. She died four years ago at 99 and a half.

[00:05:50] LW: Which part of DC did you settle in?

[00:05:52] SC: Rockville, Maryland. I always say DC, but I mean, Maryland.

[00:05:59] LW: It's DC-ish.

[00:06:00] SC: Yeah, it's 40 minutes outside of DC. It's a DC suburb. Yeah, we were in the suburbs.

[00:06:05] LW: Talk a little bit about your dynamic, your family dynamic. You have a couple of sisters, your parents. Did you guys all live in the same area? What was it like in the household?

[00:06:15] SC: Our first home, we rented. My dad, again, found a job; saw an article in the paper about a problem they were having with the subway system in DC, and he knew how to fix it. He sent a letter to someone at the DC Metropolitan Area Transit Authority and got a job that way. He was doing that and my mom was a secretary. It was four kids. It was six of us total. I had an older brother, two older sisters. Then it was me.

My sister that's closest to me in age, Rachel, she's a year and a half older than me, we dressed alike. Everybody thought we were twins. Then my older, older sister, she was born with something called Treacher Collins Syndrome. She was born without ears. She couldn't hear. She had a lot of surgeries growing up. She was in and out of Johns Hopkins, actually. We were going back and forth to Baltimore. Then my brother just was being a teenager, Raphael.

I guess, it was a little tense. Just because my mom talks about how, in Jamaica, everybody's very communal. You get here and people are very isolated and they want their own space. My mom tells me this story about, there was a woman who lived next to us and she had a baby. My mom just thought, "Oh, she had a baby. I'm going to take my kids to come over and see the baby. No big deal. My kids want to see the baby." The woman was like, "Maybe some other time." You know what I mean? My mom was like, "Oh, okay." She just didn't understand the way

that Americans function. I think it was just a lot of that, of my parents trying to figure it out. Me and my brother, and my sisters trying to figure it out.

[00:08:03] LW: What was the problem with the subway system that your dad had to be Superman to come in and save?

[00:08:08] SC: It was something about safety. My dad's an engineer, so I can't tell you specifically what it was. Something with the train track was not working and it was causing small fires, something like that. My dad knew how to fix it. Who even knows if this –

[00:08:24] LW: Is there a subway in Jamaica, in the grill or something?

[00:08:27] SC: Right. My dad was an engineer back, but he – maybe he's embellishing. Maybe this isn't even a true story. I have no idea. Apparently, he was able to get a job through – I feel like, things happen like that back then, where my parents would be like – Before any of this happened, my mom would be like, “You know what? You should just call up Jerry Seinfeld. You should tell him that you want to be on *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*.” Because in their head, “Oh, you just talk to someone and you ask them and you get it.” Things just don't work like that anymore, but it actually did work like that back then. You just reached out and asked.

[00:08:27] LW: Yeah. You may want to investigate that story a little bit further before you mention it in another interview.

[00:09:09] SC: No, I believe him. I don't know what exactly it was, but I do believe him.

[00:09:14] LW: Your eldest sister had Treacher Collins Syndrome, and she couldn't hear?

[00:09:19] SC: She's seven years older than me. I didn't know. I don't think I really knew her when she couldn't hear by the time I came around and could talk to her. She'd flown to London for surgeries, back to Jamaica. Then we moved to Maryland and she had more surgeries. She was able to hear. Her face, if you've ever seen the movie, there's a movie called Wonder –

[00:09:43] LW: Yeah, I've seen that.

[00:09:44] SC: Yeah. I mean, that's the same thing. Really for me, it was more people just thought she looked different, For me, she just looked like my sister, but she just was bullied and stared at and laughed at. It was just really hard for her growing up.

[00:10:04] LW: Well, I was wondering, did your whole family speak sign language? Was that a thing?

[00:10:07] SC: No. I mean, Charmaine used sign language, and none of us did. I think she read lips. Then she, through surgery, was eventually able to hear, so none of us learned sign language. I always wanted to learn, but my sister, she felt like it made her special, I think, so she just didn't want to teach me. I learned a little bit.

[00:10:26] LW: You and Rachel were closer, because you were closer in age.

[00:10:30] SC: Right. We were closer. Yeah.

[00:10:32] LW: Thinking back to little Sarah, you're four or five-years-old in your house, four kids, etc., what was your favorite toy or activity?

[00:10:41] SC: I liked make-believe a lot. I liked coloring. I loved drawing. I won a drawing contest when I was –

[00:10:55] LW: You did.

[00:10:56] SC: Yeah, when I was in second grade. I love making up stories. I always just loved creating things. I remember a friend said that they had – I feel like, maybe it was on TV or something. They said something about an imaginary friend. I was like, “Oh, wow. I can have an imaginary friend.” I just made up imaginary friends and basically, was a schizophrenic little eight-year-old talking to myself. I liked playing and making things up and make believe, playing with my dolls, making little stories with my dolls, all that stuff.

[00:11:29] LW: What did you draw to win that contest? Do you remember?

[00:11:31] SC: It was brilliant, actually. Because I don't think the drawing was actually that good, but it was a drawing of my teacher. I feel like, maybe she was one of the judges. She was like, "Oh, Sarah." Because I remember the drawing. It wasn't that great. I basically was sitting there, they're like, "Draw something for the contest." I looked around. I saw my teacher sitting at her desk. I was like, "That's what I'm going to draw, because it's right there." I drew her. It ended up on the cover of the little drawing booklet they put together.

[00:12:06] LW: Did you go to a big school? Was the competition fierce, or was it a small class?

[00:12:12] SC: I have no idea. I don't remember. I think it was in my own world. I feel like, it was maybe 30 kids in the class. I was just drawing a lot, coloring a lot. Yeah. I was [inaudible 00:12:21], so I tried to do everything right.

[00:12:25] LW: That's a pretty big deal. I remember back when I was growing up, and you and I aren't that far apart in age. There was a grocery store called FamilyMart. They used to have these – every holiday, they'd have these coloring contests. They give out these little Xerox copies of a turkey, or a Santa Claus, and you had to color them and you bring them back. Then they'd select one as the winner. I won a couple of times. I remember feeling – I was like, I won an Academy Award. Because every time you walk into FamilyMart, you see your thing up there, first place. I forget what the prize was, but that's a pretty big deal for a kid.

[00:13:01] SC: It is a big deal. I will tell you, that I remember specifically, even as a child, having that, "Oh, they only picked it because it's a picture of my teacher." I don't know where I got that from. It was in my head or someone else. That was the first minimizing anything that happened, or just rationalizing it. Like, it wasn't me. Someone else. It wasn't me. I was proud, but I was always like, "Oh, I don't know if it was actually that good."

[00:13:28] LW: It's interesting that you didn't – it wasn't intentional. It didn't sound like it was intentional. It sounds like you just decided that that was what came through you. You put it down and then later on, you connected the dots.

[00:13:38] SC: Exactly. Yeah.

[00:13:39] LW: Talk about your family dynamic a little bit. What I'm really wanting to know is, you guys are Jamaican, so you're in America, was there some talk about cultural differences in the home? Was there talk about racism? I mean, you're in the Chocolate City, so what was your relationship with all of that like?

[00:13:59] SC: Yeah. I like to joke that my Jamaican family just discovered racism a few years ago, because we didn't talk about it. You come from Jamaica. I joke about this in my stand-up too, of just feeling like, there are Black people and then there are us. We're Jamaican. Even though everyone thinks of us as Black and we write, we check the box Black, African-American. We don't consider ourselves African-American.

There wasn't a lot of talk of racism, or any of that stuff. We had so many aunts, uncles, cousins in the area. That's who we would hang out with. We'd go to the Jamaican store and my mom would cook Jamaican food. It was just like, we were, I guess, continuing the culture. Yeah, there wasn't much discussion of that.

I remember my dad getting pulled over by the cops, me and my sisters were in the car, and they let him go. I feel like, my dad's always been a little Republican with his views on policing and all of that stuff. I'm just like, "No. You go along with what they say and you'll be fine." I've had several uncomfortable situations with my white husband talking to my Black father, where my white husband is trying to tell my Black father that racism exists. I mean, it's a weird situation. I think, they just didn't see it.

I think there's a benefit too, like just pretending it's like, no, that's not in my way. That's not a barrier. It doesn't exist. Then you actually, you end up hitting it. I think they eventually did start to see it, but I think at first, it just didn't occur to them that that was a thing. Because in Jamaica, people are Chinese, people are white, people are Black, but they're all Jamaican and there's really – There's colorism. There's extreme colorism, but there isn't racism so much.

[00:15:56] LW: That story about you and your Jewish friend walking home, is that a true story? Is that something just for your – was that a comedy bit?

[00:16:04] SC: That was a true story. I changed it a little bit. My best friend growing up, her name is Stacy and she was Jewish. She, again, still is Jewish. She and I were walking and somebody yelled out. They didn't yell at the N word. They called her N word lover, because she was walking with me. I think I turned to her and I said, "Why did they call me that? You're not Black." I didn't understand why.

Then there was other things like, I had a white kid spit in my face when I was in fourth grade or something like that. I talked to my mom about it. I talked about getting back at her and my mom saying, "Well, that's where all this comes from. People retaliating and you do something to me, I'm going to do something to you. That's why you don't retaliate." I remember having that conversation with her.

[00:16:59] LW: What did you want to be when you were a kid, when you were walking home with Stacy? Well, in your mind, what did Sarah Cooper, what were you going to be when you grew up?

[00:17:06] SC: I really wanted to be a singer.

[00:17:09] LW: What kind of singer? Who were you modeling?

[00:17:11] SC: Whitney Houston.

[00:17:12] LW: That aspiration aspirin. Okay. You want to be Whitney Houston.

[00:17:16] LW: I wanted to be. I dressed up as Whitney Houston for one year for Halloween. Yeah, I just loved singing. Was very bad at it, but I loved it. I tried out for chorus four years in a row, never made it. Then I found I found acting. Because I think I tried out for a singing part in a musical. I think it was, You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown. I didn't get a singing part, but I got the part of Pig Pen. I was like, "Oh, I can be on stage and I can perform and I don't have to sing."

[00:17:50] LW: Were you tone deaf, or why couldn't you just practice and –

[00:17:54] SC: I had this awful, awful music teacher. To this day, I will blame him for not being able to sing, because he told me I couldn't sing. Well, when I was very young, I was third grade or something, he told me like, "You can't sing." I feel like, maybe if it had been a different music teacher, who saw how badly I wanted to sing. I remember sitting at my desk, they were calling out the names of who made it on chorus. I was just waiting for my name, just waiting for my name, and they never called my name four years in a row. It broke my heart every time. I loved music and he just never gave me a chance. I blame him. Yeah.

[00:18:34] LW: Was this like an art school? Or was this a –

[00:18:37] SC: No. It's just a regular –

[00:18:37] LW: – a regular school.

[00:18:39] SC: – school. Yeah, it was a public school. Public elementary school.

[00:18:42] LW: You discovered your love for acting. You did some plays, or started going to the Folgers Shakespeare library?

[00:18:52] SC: Yeah, in high school, I did that. I did a lot of Shakespeare. Yeah, just loved performing.

[00:18:59] LW: Now, I heard you say you were going to the library often, but it wasn't very close to Rockville, Maryland. How did that work?

[00:19:06] SC: I would leave school early and take the Metro and go down to DC and then go there and basically, just study amongst the ancient texts.

[00:19:19] LW: The Metro that never caught fire, because your dad, obviously, saved the day.

[00:19:23] SC: Yup. Then yeah, had free Metro cards.

[00:19:28] LW: Did you really? You had free Metro cards?

[00:19:29] SC: Yeah.

[00:19:30] LW: Okay. Did you feel like you own the Metro, because your dad worked at the Metro?

[00:19:33] SC: Kind of. Yeah. I was like, “My dad owns this thing.” I love the Metro. We would get our parents to drop us off at Wheaton Mall and we would be like, “Oh, yeah. We’re hanging out at the mall,” but the Metro was connected to the mall. Then we’d get on the Metro and we would go to the cemetery, we would go downtown, we would go everywhere. Then we would go back to the mall and our parents would pick us up and they’d never know that we were all over.

[00:19:59] LW: They never figured it out?

[00:20:00] SC: No.

[00:20:01] LW: That’s funny. Tell me more about the Shakespeare aspiration. Did you see yourself going on Broadway, or what was the acting – Move to LA? What was that like in high school?

[00:20:11] SC: Yeah. I mean, I wrote a little contract with myself that I would go to LA and try to be an actress and I would try it for 10 years. My dream, I told my teacher, I was like, by age 30, I’m going to win an Oscar. I just had all of these aspirations for it. I feel like, I was more in love with the glory of it than the actual acting. I didn’t really like practicing so much. Every time my acting teacher would be like, “Let’s practice the monologue.” I’d be like, “I don’t want to practice the monologue. I just want to do the monologue.”

I feel I didn’t have the best work ethic when it came to it. Giving it up, because my parents were like, “Hey, that’s never going to make you money,” wasn’t that hard, because there were so many things about it that I didn’t like. I didn’t like the practicing of it. I didn’t like the movement and the voice work and all the stuff that you really have to do to be a good actor. I didn’t really enjoy it that much.

[00:21:12] LW: Where did you get the idea of contracts and affirmations and those kinds of things?

[00:21:17] That's a really good question. I have no idea. I have absolutely no idea. I have no idea why I wrote up a contract. I had my sister witness it. I signed it. She witnessed it. It was like, "Why am I doing this?" I can't tell you. If there's a TV show that I saw or something, but I just – I was like, I have to promise myself. I have to do something to promise myself that I will not give up on my dream. Maybe it was just because I felt I was being told to give up on my dream that I had to do something that would actually just make me feel like, "No, I still have some control. I can promise myself and I can do this for myself. Even after school is over, college is over, I could still do this."

[00:22:03] LW: Was that one of the dominant life philosophies that were echoed in your house? Or were there any other sayings that your parents would say to you all about what to do? Own your own business and always work for yourself and never rely on a man to take care of it? What stuff was being said in your house?

[00:22:21] SC: Yeah. I mean a lot of that stuff. I remember going to homecoming and my dad giving me money for dinner. I was like, "I think Alex will pay for the dinner." My dad was like, "Don't ever let any man buy any food for you ever." I was like, "Okay, dad."

It was all about being independent, being financially independent, being able to take care of yourself, own a house, have a good job. All about security. That's what it was all about.

[00:23:08] LW: You're in Rockville, Maryland. DC Metropolitan area. We know you heard about Howard University, but you chose to go to University of Maryland, College Park. Why?

[00:23:19] SC: Yeah. Well, I got a scholarship.

[00:23:21] LW: Okay. Did you apply to Howard?

[00:23:24] SC: Oh, no.

[00:23:28] LW: That point you just made is a moot point. You have to apply to a place to get a scholarship.

[00:23:35] SC: Yeah, true, true. Nope. Didn't even think about applying to Howard.

[00:23:38] LW: Talk a little bit about that. Well, why University of Maryland? You just want to stay home, or be close to your parents?

[00:23:45] SC: It was my safety school. I applied to Cornell. I applied to UPenn. I applied to NYU. I applied to UNC Chapel Hill for some reason. I applied to those five schools. I got into all of them and got a partial scholarship to University of Maryland. That's where I went. I mean, that's pretty much it.

[00:24:09] LW: Did you ever go to Howard? Did you ever go to the campus homecoming? Nothing?

[00:24:12] SC: Nothing. No.

[00:24:14] LW: You know, Drew and I went to Howard. You knew that, right?

[00:24:17] SC: I just remembered that.

[00:24:22] LW: That's why I'm so passionate about it.

[00:24:23] SC: I know, I know, I know.

[00:24:25] LW: This Howard thing.

[00:24:27] SC: Yeah. Why did you go to Howard?

[00:24:30] LW: I went to Howard, because I decided, in high school, that I wanted to go to an HBCU, Historically Black College University. Howard is the Harvard of HBCUs. Then I went to DC to visit with my dad for the first time. I just loved DC. I mean, I was coming from

Montgomery, Alabama. To me, DC was like Shanghai. It was the biggest city I'd ever seen in my entire life. Yeah, I just liked the idea of being around a lot of other Black people from a lot of other places around the world and seeing what that experience was like.

[00:25:03] SC: I was around white people my entire growing up. I was always the only Black person in every class, in every situation. There was Black girls at my high school, but they hated me. They bullied me. It was awkward growing up and being Black, but then people constantly being like, "What are you? What are you?" Which is a question I got all the time.

I just never felt I really belonged. I won't say that I belonged with white people, but I never really felt I belonged with Black people either. I just felt I was in some limbo. I think, when I was thinking of applying to schools, I was applying to places that I thought were prestigious and other people were talking about in my school. No one ever said, "Why don't you apply to Howard?" No one ever said that to me. Probably, I wouldn't have, because I didn't have a lot of Black friends. I just didn't. If I had a Black friend, they were Jamaican. They were family, probably.

[00:26:09] LW: Yeah. You were obviously being teased, because you weren't Black enough. Or you sound like you're trying to talk white, or whatever people say in school.

[00:26:18] SC: Yeah. It was some of that. It was so stupid. It was like, "Oh, Sarah has good hair." That was the thing. I was like, I had great hair. The Black guys were all like, really, all about me, because I had good hair, which I didn't even know what that meant. Then all the Black girls hated me, because I had good hair, which I didn't know what that meant. I know what it means now.

[00:26:46] LW: You finished up Maryland, three and a half years with an economics degree?

[00:26:51] SC: Yep, an economics degree. Yep.

[00:26:54] LW: What the hell were you going to do with economics?

[00:26:57] SC: I have no idea. Literally. I was a theater major for a little bit and then my parents were like, “You should really do something in business.” Because then I was going to do theater/business. Then I was like, “This is too much work.” I was just like, “I’ll do business.” Then I went over to the business school to see what that was like. It was so schmooze and fake. I don’t know. I just didn’t feel I really liked it. Then I was like, “Well, I could do economics,” because economics is the nerdy business. It’s good enough for my dad, but it’s not – I felt like I could do – I could sit there and do problems, theoretical stuff, but I didn’t want to actually be in business. I just wanted to get the degree. It’s really more about just like, how can I get this degree, make my parents happy and move on with my life? Because I know, I’m never going to do anything in economics.

[00:27:53] LW: What was your idea of success like, back then in college?

[00:27:57] SC: I think being famous.

[00:27:59] LW: Being famous.

[00:28:00] SC: I think I always wanted to be famous. Yeah. I just had this vision of walking down the street and everybody knowing who I was. In my head, I was like, I’m going to do something big like that. I didn’t know what it was going to be, though.

[00:28:16] LW: Not necessarily for acting. Just in general. Like, you could be famous for anything?

[00:28:21] SC: Yeah. I think in my head, I was going to be a movie star and that’s what I wanted to do. It was just this idea of being a movie star. Then it would come and go. I’d be like, “Oh, I want to be a movie star. You know what? I just want to have kids and settle down. Now, I want to be a movie star.” I just want to have a normal life, if I just went back and forth between those two modes.

[00:28:40] LW: What did you discover about yourself through the college years, now that you’re removed from your parents a little bit, from their influence? Now you get to see the real Sarah emerging.

[00:28:52] SC: I don't know. I really didn't know what I was doing. I think I did very well with my classes, as again, a teacher's pet. Again, it was like, looking back, I would say, I focused very much on the grade and the outcome. I didn't make as many friends as I could have. I certainly didn't keep in touch with people as much as I could have. I was teacher's pet and the fact that I was able to do everything on my own. Did I make friends with any of the teachers? Did I stay after class? Did we have good conversations? No. It was more about just getting the grade and getting out of there. I think that was my – my mode was just getting the grade and getting out of there.

Then, I had a group of friends and I was dating this guy. We were pretty serious for a few years. We were going to get married. Then it all fell apart, because I think I just – It wasn't my idea of happiness. I was like, "No, I have to be on my own. I have to be true to myself." I remembered that contract I made with myself, "I can't settle down. I have to let go. I have to pursue my dream," and all this stuff.

I think I just was very self-centered and very – I didn't really know what was going on around me, because I was just like – I felt I had blinders on, basically. I made a lot of mistakes with – in terms of relationships. I really didn't focus on relationships as much as I wish I would have.

[00:30:15] LW: It sounds like you're very disciplined.

[00:30:17] SC: I was very disciplined. Yeah. Yeah. I wasn't one of those who went off to college and all of a sudden, didn't do my homework anymore. No. I was very much doing my homework and working hard.

[00:30:28] LW: How'd you end up at Georgia Tech?

[00:30:30] SC: My last semester of Maryland, I took a multimedia design course, and just fell in love with Photoshop and Macromedia Flash and designing things. It was something that felt technical, but creative. It satisfied both of those sides of me. After I graduated, I told myself that I was going to get a receptionist job at a graphic design studio and worked my way up to be a graphic designer.

I became a receptionist. I was a terrible receptionist. Terrible at ordering supplies and answering the phone and doing all the things. I was reading a magazine, a graphic design magazine; in the back of the magazine was an ad, for some reason, for this program at Georgia Tech, which was a pretty new program at the time, for information design, which was something that I knew I wanted to do, based on that multimedia design course. The deadline had already passed. It was three weeks passed, but I was like, "I'm going to apply anyway."

[00:31:35] LW: I'm just going to call them. I'm going to call them and work it out on the phone.

[00:31:37] SC: Yeah, literally. Actually, yeah. The deadline had passed, but I said, "You know what? I'm going to go down there." I took a trip down to Atlanta. I met the professor. I said, "I really want to do this." I told them that I was going to be in Atlanta, no matter what. Even though that wasn't true. Yeah, I got into the program.

[00:31:58] LW: You talked your way into it. That's awesome.

[00:32:00] SC: A little bit. Not really. A little bit.

[00:32:04] LW: Did you take out loans, or was that a scholarship thing as well?

[00:32:08] SC: I think my parents helped me with a little bit and then I was a teacher's assistant, so that helped a little bit.

[00:32:14] LW: For someone who doesn't identify heavily with Black culture, you keep picking these really Black cities. You're in DC. Now you're in Atlanta. Atlanta has a different quality of experience from DC. You have that southern culture mixed in. What was that like for you?

[00:32:33] SC: I think, Atlanta was the perfect place for me to go, because I never really felt lost there. It was a big city, but it also felt like a small city. I guess, that's the southern thing. I never really went and partied in DC, but I felt like I partied in Atlanta and I didn't feel – I don't know. I just felt comfortable there. Maybe, just because it was – I don't know. There's only a few buildings downtown. As soon as you could look up and see the one building, okay, that's south.

Now I know where I am. I don't know. I felt very comfortable there. The first place I stayed was in a converted dorm that used to be a hotel, right across from the baseball stadium. I mean, it was fun.

[00:33:27] LW: When I lived in New York, I was hanging out with this guy named RD Fuqua. He introduced me to this guy named Godfrey, who's a comedian. We were hanging out at the Comedy Cellar one night. It was empty. It's maybe a few people there. I think, Godfrey was hosting or something. It was a Monday. It was an off night. I had been a casual fan of comedy. Godfrey came over and sat at our table and talked to us. Then, he started egging me to go up on stage.

I didn't know at the time that doing stand-up comedy was a whole – you write jokes, and you rehearsed them, like an Easter speech at church or something. You go up and you perform them, as if you're thinking about it for the first time. I was very, very close, very tempted to go up, but I elected not to. I'm glad that I didn't go up, because I would have really been horrible.

I've always had an affinity for stand-up, but I've never really had enough of a desire to go up. You obviously took the plunge. You went up on stage in Atlanta. Talk about that first time. What preparation did you do? What was your inspiration? Where was this? Who was around you?

[00:34:43] SC: This is a very personal story between you and me.

[00:34:46] LW: Okay.

[00:34:47] SC: You know this story?

[00:34:48] LW: No, I've never heard it.

[00:34:49] SC: You know that your brother was the subject of my very first stand-up set?

[00:34:53] LW: I was going to ask you. That was my next question. How did you meet my brother? Let's get a twofer.

[00:34:59] SC: I couldn't remember if I told you this.

[00:35:01] LW: Did you date him or something?

[00:35:04] SC: Did I not tell you any of this?

[00:35:05] LW: No. I had no idea.

[00:35:06] SC: Has he not told you any of this?

[00:35:08] LW: No. Never talked about it.

[00:35:09] SC: Oh, my God. I guess, the statute of limitations is good, so we can talk about it. I was trying to be an actress again, doing graphic design on the side and trying to act. I got a brilliant role as an extra in an ESPN commercial.

[00:35:35] LW: Is this a casting couch story with my brother as –

[00:35:38] SC: No, not necessarily. I was on set as an extra in this house. We're shooting a super – I want to say a Super Bowl commercial or something. There's a party and everybody's hanging out. Anyways, I'm standing there, waiting for anything to happen, because you're just waiting on these sets. Your brother walks by. I hope this isn't awkward, but I fell in love with your brother. I was like, "That's the most beautiful man I've ever seen in my life." I was like, "Oh, I guess he's an actor." Then it turned out, he was the director of the commercial. I don't know what happened, but I ended up going on a date with him. It was a complete disaster. It wasn't a complete disaster, but –

[00:36:24] LW: What is that like to go on a date with Drew Watkins? I have no idea what that would be like.

[00:36:29] SC: Okay, I'll tell you.

[00:36:31] LW: I can imagine, but I have no idea what –

[00:36:33] SC: I took him to my favorite restaurant, Houston's.

[00:36:36] LW: Okay, in Buckhead.

[00:36:38] SC: In Buckhead. I'm sitting at a booth and Drew's sitting across from me. Above my head is a television with a game on. Most of the date was spent watching him watch the television above my head. It was – for someone who had a little bit of an ego, it didn't feel great. Yeah. I mean, it didn't really work out with me and your brother. I wrote a stand-up bit about it.

[00:37:15] LW: How old are you? You're 25, 26 at the time.

[00:37:17] SC: I was actually 30.

[00:37:19] LW: You wrote the story. You didn't envision yourself going up on stage and delivering this joke anywhere. Then an opportunity, obviously presented itself.

[00:37:28] SC: No, I was trying to act and I really was like, not – I was auditioning. I wasn't getting anywhere. I wanted to try stand-up as a way to get better at acting, because I was really finding that I couldn't be myself. That's really what acting is. You think it's being a character, but it's really more about being as authentically you as you possibly can, which I still haven't figured out.

I thought, if I could get on stage and be myself in front of an audience that it would help me be a better actor. I knew I wanted to try stand-up. Then I just figured, "Oh, this is a good story that I could tell on stage."

[00:38:01] LW: Where was the place to go for someone who wants to try stand-up in Atlanta?

[00:38:06] SC: That was Laughing Skull Lounge on Peachtree, which is every street is named Peachtree. The main Peachtree.

[00:38:14] LW: South Peachtree. North – Yeah. You walked in the first day, you had to sign your name on some list, or how did it work?

[00:38:23] SC: Yeah. I got there really early, because I'm an A student. I got there really early. They were like, "Do you want to practice before the actual show?" They let me get on stage and I practiced my story. I was talking a mile a minute. I was like, "Okay, I need to slow down, and I need to get drunk." I had several beers. Then it was just so fun. I actually have the video of it. It was crowded. It was the owner of Laughing Skull was hosting the mic. He called my name up, "Sarah Cooper is next." I went up there, shook his hand, and I was really drunk. Yeah.

[00:38:58] LW: What was the intro? Because normally, "So and so, you'll recognize from this TV show, or that radio spot." What was your intro?

[00:39:06] SC: I mean, my intro was probably, "First time here at the Laughing Skull Lounge, Sarah Cooper," or something like that, because he'd never seen my name before. There was a good audience, but everybody on stage was new.

[00:39:18] LW: Right. Well, normally at those situations, people will bring their friends, so their friends will root for them.

[00:39:24] SC: Yeah. I had my friend and he was recording for me. Yeah.

[00:39:27] LW: How'd it go?

[00:39:28] SC: I mean, it went really well. I mean, I was drunk, but I really enjoyed it. I ended up doing – I was only supposed to do five minutes. I think I did seven. They were like, "Get off the stage."

[00:39:38] LW: Yeah. They don't like that very much at comedy clubs.

[00:39:40] SC: No, no, no. No. I really enjoyed it. There are two things I learned. The one was, it's so much more fun to make people laugh than to make them cry, which is Shakespeare is like, make people cry, drama. Make people cry, cry, cry. Then I was like, "Oh, actually, no, I like

making people laugh,” which is true to who I am as a person. I hate making people cry. That's the worst feeling in the world. I really found that and then I just found that I liked writing my own lines. I liked dressing as myself. I liked telling my own story. I think those are the two things that I discovered.

[00:40:18] LW: It sounds like, you had a little bit of beginner's luck, in the sense that you were brand-new at this thing. What did you do well, that you didn't even realize you did well that first time?

[00:40:28] SC: I responded to the audience. I think that's probably a mistake that people – the first time you go up, it's natural to just be like, “Let me say what I have to say and go.” I took my time. People were yelling stuff and I responded. I think I was just comfortable in that way.

[00:40:50] LW: Were you working at Yahoo at this point, or were you still at Georgia Tech?

[00:40:53] SC: I was freelancing at this point. I had left Yahoo. I moved to Atlanta twice. I left Atlanta, I moved back to Atlanta, and I was freelancing. I was just working on my own and auditioning for *Vampire Diaries* and *Army Wives* and all kinds of shows that shot in the south. Then taking classes and just trying to get better. That's when I tried stand-up.

[00:41:17] LW: What was your day job?

[00:41:19] SC: I was doing freelance design.

[00:41:22] LW: Websites and, “Hey, you need a flyer done,” and that thing?

[00:41:26] SC: Yeah, yeah. Mostly just websites and designing apps, designing home pages. Just anything online.

[00:41:35] LW: Front-end, or back-end?

[00:41:36] SC: All front-end. Yeah.

[00:41:38] LW: You're using Dreamweaver.

[00:41:40] SC: Oh, no. I was Photoshop. I just make it look good.

[00:41:46] LW: Got it.

[00:41:47] SC: That's basically what I was doing. Yeah.

[00:41:49] LW: Okay. Then what was the next evolution in your stand-up comedy career?

[00:41:54] SC: I left and went to New York shortly after that. I think, I was still thinking I wanted to act and I had gotten – I gotten a small part on a show and I figured, maybe now is the time to really go for it. I moved to New York just for a summer. I got into an acting conservatory, Stella Adler Acting Conservatory for a summer. Was just going to go for a summer, but then I really liked New York, so I ended up staying here.

[00:42:25] LW: Did you have to sing as a part of the audition process?

[00:42:27] SC: No, thank God.

[00:42:32] LW: Do you know the Alabama Shakespeare Festival Conservatory?

[00:42:36] SC: No.

[00:42:37] LW: It's a really prestigious acting conservatory in the south. It's in my hometown, Montgomery, Alabama. When I was living in New York, I auditioned for it and I had to sing. I had to do a monologue. I mean, I was modeling-ish, acting, but I'd never had any singing training whatsoever. I was a terrible, terrible singer. I decided to take a leap of faith. I went in there and sang 'Onward Christian Soldiers', which is the only song that I halfway knew from my old church days in Alabama. I've never been more self – Well actually, I've been more self-conscious in one other period, which we won't even talk about. It was one of my most self-conscious experiences in my entire life.

[00:43:20] SC: It's the most vulnerable thing to me. People are like, "Oh, stand up is so hard." I'm like, "Singing is so hard." I feel it's in all of us. I will tell you, to this day, I still – Five years ago, I was taking singing lessons. It's still something I want to do. It's still something I wish I could do. It requires such vulnerability personally. I commend anybody who does it in public.

[00:43:45] LW: You're in New York now and you took a job at Google? How did that work?

[00:43:50] SC: Yeah. I mean, I basically was in New York. I was barely able to afford living here. The freelance design stuff was drying up, because I wasn't doing a good job of promoting that as a business, because I was obsessed with acting and doing stand-up. I got to a point where I was like, in a lot of credit card debt, \$20,000 in credit card debt, and just wanted to stay in New York and just figure, the only way I could stay was to get a job.

I had a friend who I went to Georgia Tech with who was working at Google here in New York, and she said, "Do you want to apply for a job here?" I said, "Yeah, I do." I applied. It was a very bittersweet thing, because I was giving up on my dream yet again. At the same time, I really didn't have a choice at that point, if I wanted to stay in New York.

[00:44:43] LW: It's interesting, because now you're like a stand-up comedian working in the office. Even though Google's a lot more progressive, and probably Yahoo is as well. The thing about that I've observed about communities is that they're very observant people. They notice everything that most people just don't even realize. You started keeping this little notebook when you were at Yahoo.

[00:45:10] SC: Yeah. I was always writing things down. Yeah.

[00:45:13] LW: Yeah, making these little notes about these oddities that you would see in these conference rooms and meetings and stuff. Do you remember the first note you'd doodle about your observations, your weird observations?

[00:45:27] SC: I think, the Venn diagram was the first one. Then someone translating percentages into fractions was the second one. I think the Venn diagram, someone actually got up and drew a Venn diagram that really made no sense. It's weird that this actually happens.

People actually get up and draw things that make no sense and nobody ever says anything about it, because they're just like, "Oh, I guess we should try to make sense of this thing that makes no sense."

Everybody's so polite in corporate America. They're so like, "Oh, okay. Yeah, let's figure this out." I wrote that down, because the person who drew it was obviously not paying attention. I think also, because I'm an immigrant, I just was always like, "What's the norm here? What's everybody doing? How can I do that to fit in and make it?" Because this was like, from when I was three, always, how can I fit in?

I think in corporate America, a lot of my notes were like, this is what people are doing, this is what I can do maybe to fit in even. Even when I worked at an ad agency, I was noticing, my creative director would walk around and he would always have this look on his face, like he was never impressed with anything. I thought of that is an act. I was like, "Oh, maybe he's just pretending to not be impressed, so he can get more work out of us." I was always just noticing things like that. I think, yeah, that Venn diagram. Then I never did anything with them. I just put it away.

[00:46:47] LW: Was it preparation for a stand-up comedy bit, perhaps?

[00:46:50] SC: No. Not at all. I didn't think it was anything. I mean, when I started actually blogging, I think that's the first time that I was like, "Oh, maybe I could turn it into a blog post." I never thought, "Oh, I could turn this into stand-up."

[00:47:07] LW: Then, you had your whole other stand-up preparation, where you were –

[00:47:11] SC: Yeah, I was taking classes at Comedy Cellar, just talking a lot about my Jamaican family and dating, because I was a single girl and those were the subjects. It was separate for a while. I think, towards the end of my time at Google, I started to do some more Google stuff. It was so specific to Google and people really didn't know what it was like to work there. The jokes worked on my co-workers, but they didn't work very well on most people.

[00:47:37] LW: But they could. You just had to figure out a way to bridge that gap. Ultimately, you started incorporating those. I saw a video of you, I think you were in San Francisco, or something like that. You've been doing a bunch of the office jokes.

[00:47:50] SC: Yes. I mean, and a place like San Francisco will definitely get it. Yeah, there's a little bit more setup that you need to talk about that stuff. Also, I think people are just much more familiar with these companies too and what they're like, because of 'Silicon Valley', the show and all those kinds of things. It's weird being like, "Oh, I have this thought. What is it? Is it a blog post? Is it stand-up? Is it a video? Is it a cartoon? What is it?" That's the awesome thing is that some of these things have been all of those things for me. I've been able to do all of that with it, but it's just a lot – has just been a lot of experimentation. You have an idea and then you're like, "How do I bring this idea to life? What's the best way to do it?" That was fun for me.

[00:48:42] LW: At this point, we're 2012, you and I cross paths. I'm in New York teaching meditation and I guess, since you're in a relationship with my ex –

[00:48:57] SC: No. I was never –

[00:49:00] LW: Since you were in an imaginary relationship with –

[00:49:01] SC: Imaginary. Yeah, imaginary. Sure, let's go with that.

[00:49:05] LW: Talk to me about your path to mediation.

[00:49:07] SC: Does Drew listen to this, by the way?

[00:49:09] LW: No, he doesn't listen to it.

[00:49:10] SC: Okay. Because I feel really bad. Well, it was weird, because I don't know how I found out about your meditation practice. I think it must have been through Facebook. Maybe it was because I was connected to Drew that I saw it.

[00:49:21] LW: I do remember you mentioning to me that you knew my brother and that's how you found me. What inspired you to even look at meditation? Or were you following me on Facebook or something? Then I posted about meditation. Were you thinking, even thinking about meditation outside of that?

[00:49:39] SC: I honestly feel I'm so influenced by other people that have success that I want. I feel like, probably was somebody who I admired talked about meditation. I'm not sure who it was, but I think that's what happened. I was like, that's what made me want to try it.

[00:49:55] LW: You came, you learned the meditation, you start meditating.

[00:49:58] SC: Yeah. I was meditating in the nap pods at Google. There's this library on our floor. In the back of the library was the shelf. If you push the shelf, the door would open and there was this hidden place where you could hang out. I would meditate in the morning and the afternoon, 20 minutes, after I took your session.

[00:50:19] LW: Okay, so how did that inform your trajectory?

[00:50:24] SC: It helped me just accept things more. I think that it was like, I was bored at work sometimes, I was frustrated, there were other things I wanted to do with my life. I think meditating helped me take it in, instead of forcing things as much as I had been. I feel that's what happened. It was just something that I did, and it helped me be just more present at work. I wasn't sitting there like, "Oh, let me try to come up with jokes." I was really just trying to be in touch with whatever that inner thing is. I was trying to just get in touch with that.

Perhaps it was a comedian who inspired me, because that's the thing that I've always struggled with on stage is just being myself and not really caring so much what the audience thinks or laughs at. Just having the confidence to know that I'm talking about something important. Who cares if this person is yawning, or this person is on their phone? I'm going to do my thing. I feel like, I didn't want meditation to come up with ideas. I wanted it to give me that confidence. I wanted it to give me that central confidence, that feeling inside that like, what I was saying was enough, and I was enough and I didn't have to keep pushing and trying and forcing things.

Because forcing things for me has always led to bad things. I think that's what it helped me with is just, I stopped forcing things.

[00:51:46] LW: You got the inspiration as well to do a Medium post about these '10 Tricks for Appearing Smart in Meetings', which ended up going viral. I think, at the end of the day, it got over 5 million views and all of that. Was that something you did on a lark?

[00:52:01] SC: Yeah, it was. I moved in with my now husband and I came across that notebook from Yahoo. I came across that Venn diagram and the percentages. I said, "Oh, I should turn this into something. I should make this into a blog post, maybe." That's when I finished it, seven years after I'd initially written that. I actually shared it with the world and that's what happened. It was a lark. I didn't think anything was going to come of it. I thought, "Oh, this is pretty funny." I put it on Medium. I wasn't thinking it was going to change my life.

[00:52:32] LW: How did that feel when it went viral?

[00:52:34] SC: It was really exciting. It was July 4th, it was around July 4th of 2014. Jeff and I were on vacation. I just remember my phone blowing up. It was just so exciting. That was the first time I'd gone viral doing anything. I loved it. I just loved seeing people share it. I love seeing people talk about it. I love seeing people comment on it. I loved it all. It was great.

[00:52:59] LW: Were you obsessed? Were you checking it every 10 seconds?

[00:53:01] SC: Oh, yeah. I was obsessed. I was obsessed. I was like, trying to like everybody's comment, just on Twitter, or whatever. Then Jeff built this add-on that would automatically like all of the things that I wanted to like for me. Then my Twitter shut down, because of it, because it was like – I don't know, whatever. We were both really excited about it.

[00:53:21] LW: Now you're thinking to yourself, "Okay, maybe this is it. Maybe this is the time to take the leap of faith. Leave Google."

[00:53:31] SC: Yeah. I mean, I discovered an audience of people that loved what I wrote. I'd never had that before. I was also taking a guitar and singing lessons at the time to still try to sing

and. My teacher said, “One thing you need to focus on is getting people who don't know you, who aren't your friends and family, to want something that you've done. To come and see you, to buy something. People that don't know you at all that like what you do.” That's what happened with that article. I finally had people who wanted that. That gave me the confidence that I didn't have before, that I could maybe be a writer, or actually try it.

[00:54:11] LW: Did the book deal come to you, or did you seek it out?

[00:54:15] SC: That was a long process. I tried to quit Google. I mean, I tried to quit. I did quit Google. My manager was like, “Do you have a book deal?” Because I told him I wanted to be a writer. I said, “No, I don't have a book deal.” Then I started researching book deals. I started putting together a proposal, that never would have happened, the cold calling, all that stuff, it never would have happened.

What happened was I decided I wanted to draw, and I wanted to turn this '10 tricks with your smart meetings' into a cartoon. I did that. Then it went viral again, six months after it went viral initially. That's when I started to actually get publishers writing to me. Once I had a publisher interested, then I was able to use that to get a literary agent, who Susan Raihofer, who's my literary agent, who I still have to this day. It all happened, because I've kept just putting myself out there.

[00:55:10] LW: Yeah, you were one of the early adopters to the iPad drawing phenomenon with the pen and all of that, right?

[00:55:16] SC: Yeah. Jeff got me a little Wacom tablet. I didn't know how to draw freehand. I started tracing stock photos. Because I knew Photoshop, and everything was pretty easy for me to figure out how to trace it and turn it into a JPEG and put it online and stuff. It worked really well, because it was so cheesy, and the articles are just a cheesy article.

[00:55:41] LW: Speaking of putting stuff out there, for people who don't know you, I'm sure that's the moment where you start getting bad reviews and people who don't necessarily get what you're trying to do and all of that. How are you with that?

[00:55:54] SC: Not great. I mean, negative comments – It's like, positive comments wash over me. Negative comments, I bury in my heart, in my mind. I remember them constantly. I don't know why. I remember a newsletter, I put out a newsletter and got negative comments on it and negative comments on my YouTube videos. The thing that I thought was fun was people not understanding that it was satire and being like, "Why are you trying to appear smart in meetings? You should just be smart." I was like, "That's the joke." That was funny. I like when people don't get it.

When the book came out and people started shitting on the book, that was hard. Because I was really proud of it. I was really proud of myself for writing and putting it out there. Then when you have people saying it's not good, I just start to doubt myself. I'm like, "Oh, I thought it was good, but I guess I'm wrong." I guess, that's the thought that comes in your head. That's the hardest thing about putting yourself out there is the people that are just so mean. People can be really mean.

[00:57:05] LW: Yeah. Well, particularly if what you're doing hasn't really gotten traction, it can definitely cause you to doubt yourself. I feel in my own experience, I've put out a few books now, a couple books. I have a third one coming out. You have three or four books and a coloring book and all this stuff. You get to a point where you just – it just washes over.

[00:57:25] SC: I had a book, had negative reviews. I moved on. I wrote the next book. Thought there was going to be so many negative reviews. It's almost weird, when you have – You want a bunch of attention. You want it to be a bestseller, but then you just get some negative reviews, you get some positive reviews, it doesn't become a bestseller, and people just forget about it. It's almost worse than if everyone just hated it and talked about it so much. Because then you're just like, I worked so hard on this and it just was a blip.

I really thought being an author and putting out a book, I thought I was going to be a millionaire. I thought it was going to change my life. I thought I'd get to that thing and it didn't happen. It was just so anticlimactic.

Then with everything that I do, I feel it's not like, it gets easier. It's still hard, because I keep going into these different mediums. I did a Netflix special, which received the meanest reviews

I've ever seen in my life. That was a new level of self-confidence killer. My skin is a little bit thick and I just have good days and bad days. Some days, I'm just like, "No. I'm shit. I don't know what I'm doing." Then I have some days and I'm like, "No, I did that. That was good. I'm proud of myself." I think it just goes back and forth.

It never is just like, "Oh, I'm going to read a review and who cares what people think?" I wish I could get to a point where I'm like, "Who cares what people think?" But I do care what people think. When you make something and you want people to enjoy it and they don't, you feel bad.

[00:58:54] LW: Right. That's probably why Trump blocked you in 2017, because he felt like he was making something that was good and you didn't necessarily like it.

[00:59:02] SC: Trump and I have a lot in common. Yeah.

[00:59:06] LW: What did you say that made him – that made Donald Trump block you in 2017?

[00:59:11] SC: I literally just said that he wasn't fit for office. I mean, it was just a nothing tweet. I'm just like, "Donald Trump is not fit for office." I think it was just because it was starting to get likes and retweets, that he saw it and then he blocked me. It was crazy. I remember going to his Twitter feed, and it was like, "Donald Trump has blocked you." I was like, "What? The President has blocked me? That's so weird."

[00:59:33] LW: That's like a badge of honor, though, huh?

[00:59:35] SC: It was. I mean, I did that on stage. I said, "The president blocked me." I got Cheers. People were happy. Yeah.

[00:59:41] LW: You were an avid Twitter user at the time?

[00:59:43] SC: Yeah. For a long time.

[00:59:46] LW: You had given yourself a deadline for this comedy thing to take off?

[00:59:52] SC: Yeah, I was hoping at the beginning of 2020 to have a Late Night set, because I just felt like, why have I been working on stand up for eight years now, on and off, and I don't have anything, like a real accomplishment with it to show? I just felt, that was my goal; get on Late Night, do a Late Night set. If it didn't happen in 2020, then I was just going to maybe go back to Google.

[01:00:18] LW: Were there any uncomfortable conversations with your husband during this time? Like, "Hey, I'm not really making as much money as I was before, when I was working at Google, when we got married. Now, I'm trying to do that." Was he very, obviously very supportive of –

[01:00:33] SC: He was really supportive. I mean, he was like, "It's fine. It's no big deal." I think, maybe, I don't know if this is old school, but he likes being the breadwinner. He likes taking care of me. He kind of liked that role. He never really felt like, "Why isn't Sarah pulling her weight?" He was always like, "Oh, it's okay. I'm supporting you." My mom was like, "He's going to leave you." Because I don't cook either. My parents would be like, "So wait, he brings home the bacon, then he also has to cook the bacon?" He does everything. I felt bad about that. I felt bad about turning 40 and just thinking about, "Where am I going to be in 20 years? Do I have retirement? Who is going to take care of my sisters?" They both have disabilities. Neither of them are married.

I just started to feel like, what is my long-term plan? At 40, that was the first time I was like, what am I doing? What's my community? What's my support system? How am I going to take care of my family and survive this, so that I can live a long life and be happy and comfortable and healthy and all that stuff? I just thought, going back to Google might be a good option, because I'd have a consistent paycheck, I'd have a place to go. It's a great place to work. I love writing a lot more than I loved what I did there. At the same time, it wasn't hell. It's Google. Free food, nap pods. Why wouldn't I just go back?

I told Jeff that and he was like, "No, you're not going to go back." I think we had that conversation pretty much every year. I was like, "Maybe I'll go back to Google." "No, you're not going to go back." I always thought of it as an option to go back.

[01:02:10] LW: Was it your brother's son that taught you TikTok in the summer of 2019?

[01:02:14] SC: Yes. It was my nephew, Tyler. He's super into, like YouTube. Now he's into Twitch. He has a whole green screen setup that's better than mine. I was like, "Tyler, I want you to teach me TikTok." It was the weekend before their classes had started again. I just went down to DC. I was in New York, and I just went down to DC to hang out with them for a weekend. Which was rare. I never did that before. That was the first time I'd ever just been like, "Yeah, there's no reason I'm down here. I'm just here to hang out. We're not going to do anything. We're going to order pizza, watch TV." It was great.

I was like, "Yeah, teach me TikTok. I want to know what this TikTok thing is all about." "Aunt Sarah, you're too old for TikTok. No, I'm not going to teach you TikTok." I made a few videos, but then I was like, "Okay. Maybe I am too old for this."

[01:03:02] LW: Did you really want to learn it? Or were you just looking for something to do with him? Because that's what I've done with my nieces is like, "Yeah, show me TikTok." I didn't see myself being a TikTok star. I was a little bit mildly curious about how the app worked. I knew that they knew it well.

[01:03:17] SC: Yeah. No, I really wanted to learn it. I did. I didn't think I was going to actually do anything with it, but I really did want to figure it out and figure out why it was so much fun, because everybody was on it. He was talking about it all the time. He said that there were people there on TikTok that were way funnier than me. I was like, "What?" I was like, I need to figure this out.

[01:03:39] LW: You mentioned later on when your guest hosting, was it The Tonight Show or the Jimmy Kimmel Show? You mentioned that at the beginning of the pandemic, you were doing stand-up at a pizza place in New Jersey. Was that real?

[01:03:53] SC: I mean, it was a pizza place in Williamsburg. Yeah, it was a pizza place. It wasn't a few people. It was more than a few people, but I definitely performed for three people late at night several times. Yeah.

[01:04:08] LW: When the pandemic hit, and we couldn't gather any more, well, how were you seeing your stand-up career?

[01:04:16] SC: I just decided that I wanted to make videos online. I was like, I've made stuff online before. I've gone viral before. Why don't I try to do that again? I think I just decided that I was going to make videos and I started making them. I was just experimenting, trying to find a format that I liked, trying to find something that I thought was fun to make. I was just playing around.

[01:04:39] LW: I've written before about how when people do things that are noteworthy or remarkable, they end up retelling the story of that first time they did it. That day they woke up and you had no idea this was going to be the day that is going to launch this new thing. What was that day like for you, where you did your first Trump impersonation on TikTok? How long did that take? What was the lead up to it?

[01:05:08] SC: The very first one, bored. Very bored. Trump had just given a talk, where he was just talking about – Literally, he was listing companies. He was just listing all these companies that supported him. I was like, “This is so stupid.” I grabbed the audio and I was just like, I don't remember the names of the companies, but they were just so stupid. I made the video. I shared it. People were like, “Oh, this is funny.” It didn't go viral, but it was fun to make. It just felt like a stupid thing to do. It was just out of boredom. Total boredom. Also, frustration with the fact that we have a president who is just listing off names of companies and wasting our time during a pandemic.

[01:05:48] LW: He was really under your skin. He's under a lot of people's skin, but you reached out to me once, I remember. You emailed me, because I think you wanted some perspective, or you wanted a suggestion about something. “I've been struggling with the political climate. I want to stay engaged, but being exposed to anything Trump does makes me so angry, I fall completely apart.” This is on January of 2017. This is probably right before he blocked you.

[01:06:13] SC: Yeah. This was before he was even inaugurated.

[01:06:19] LW: Yeah. We went back and forth, and a few emails, just to talk about the, I guess, meditation perspective on all of this. It's interesting that the thing you finally became, you went viral for.

[01:06:31] SC: I was trying to avoid.

[01:06:36] LW: Right. What about the video that you went viral on? Do you have any idea that was a possibility, or was going to happen? Or were you thinking that that –

[01:06:44] SC: No. I was like, I'd given up doing the lip syncs, because I think other people had started to do it. I was in the mode of that email. I was in that mode, again. I told Jeff. I was like, "I don't want to watch any more of these daily briefings, because they're so frustrating and they made me so angry." Jeff was convinced that at any moment, Trump was actually going to say the N word. He was watching everything he said, because he wanted to be there when it happened. He was watching them pretty religiously.

He saw the clip where he was talking about – I think, Jeff actually saw it live, where he was talking about putting Lysol into your veins and all that stuff. He was like, "Sarah, I know you don't want to see this, but you have to see this. You have to watch this. This is crazy. This is absolutely bonkers, what he said." I listened to it. I just thought it was so funny. Because I saw in my head, I saw in my head taking a thing with a spray bottle and putting it in your veins. I saw that. I was like, "That's hysterical. It's crazy what he's saying right now." People are just being quiet. Not a single person is getting up and being like, "What the hell are you talking about?" No one. I was just like, "I have to make something with this, because it's just so ridiculous."

[01:08:04] LW: Which just like, what happened with the Venn diagram. No one was saying anything.

[01:08:07] SC: Right, exactly. No one is pointing out how completely ridiculous this is. I had to point it out. Yeah.

[01:08:16] LW: What was the process? Did you have to go on YouTube, convert the video into audio, upload that to TikTok, rehearse it a 1,000 times? What did you do to get it?

[01:08:27] SC: Yeah. Yeah, I've been playing around with TikTok a lot at that point, so I knew how to grab the audio, put it on TikTok, use the audio with my video that I wanted to make on top of the audio. Yeah, grabbed my blue blazer for some reason, not even sure why, and just started making it. I had a little tripod and I just put the tripod up on the kitchen counter and just played it over and over and over again, until I got the lip synching as close as possible.

[01:08:59] LW: You had multiple cuts too, which makes it way more engaging for the viewer. Was that something that was conscious? Because I'm sure maybe the first version was just you staring straight into the camera, right?

[01:09:10] SC: No. Because of the lip synching, it's really hard to do a long take of lip synching. It helps in that way, because you have to edit, because it's like, I've only memorized this much. I'm just going to do this six seconds and then I'm going to do another six seconds and then I'm going to do another six seconds. That really drove the editing a lot, is just my inability to memorize large chunks.

[01:09:39] LW: Was that the old '10 things to be smarter' meeting days, when they went viral and you started looking at it every 10 seconds and people sharing it and just going crazy and all of that?

[01:09:49] LW: Yeah, it was really awesome. My favorite is that people have been following me. I had about 60,000 followers at the time, and people who have been following me for a while from the book and all that stuff. I posted it. I think one of the people had been following me for a while said, "Not bad." Literally commented, "Not bad. I thought it was okay." They were less like, whatever about it. Then it went crazy viral and I was like, "Not bad? You thought it was not bad?" Yeah. It really took off.

A few weeks later, I did another one. I think when '10 tricks' went viral, I tried to recreate that. It was very hard. I never did it. I just had the same perception with this that like, that was really good, but I'm never going to be able to do that again. I'm probably just going to have to move on, because that was a great – I went viral. Great. Now I moved on. Then he just kept saying

ridiculous things. I was still having fun doing it. I made another one a few weeks later, and everyone that I made just got millions of views. Thanks, Trump.

[01:10:56] LW: Did you feel pressure doing any of them? Or you felt you were more – you're more confident in doing this than anything else?

[01:11:03] SC: At first, I didn't feel any pressure. It was just me, alone, making them. Then people started to get addicted to them. Then I had people writing me like, "You have to do this, you have to do this." Sending me clips like, "You have to do this. Why haven't you made a video?" It became this prison that I've created for myself. Then I got an agent and they were looking at what I was making. It all became a lot more pressurized. It all became a lot more like, "Oh, I have –"

Then I hit a million followers. It just felt this snowball of just, now everybody's looking at me, waiting for the next thing I'm going to do. He just had this crazy thing. Is Sarah Cooper going to do it? It just turned into this phenomenon.

[01:11:45] LW: Was there pressure to increase the production value? Because you kept the production value – I'm in my living room with this blazer on and have a little bit of eyeshadow on and that's pretty much it.

[01:11:55] SC: A little bit. I mean, I think towards the end, I started to get a little bit more creative. I started actually doing them without TikTok, and started making them on my own and editing them myself. Yeah, a little bit. I think that's still the beauty of that first one that went viral, is that it's so low-fi. There's really nothing about it. I didn't know what I was doing. I think that's the beauty. It's like the first time I did stand-up. When you don't know what you're doing, you just find things that, if you were trying really hard, you wouldn't have found, because you just were like – I don't know. Just that ignorance of what it is you're making, just makes it somehow more special.

[01:12:39] LW: Your agent calls you one day and says, "We've got off the phone with Netflix. What do you think by doing a special?" Is that how it went down?

[01:12:45] SC: No. Actually, my agent said, “Let's do a meet and greet with your fans.” I did this like, a chat that I invited all of my Twitter followers to just to get to know me better. My agent was watching the comments. He was concerned that as much as people were saying they liked hearing me and hearing about me, it was just as much how much they hate Trump.

There is this fear that these people weren't my fans. They were just people who hated Trump. You know what I mean? It's like, how do you create an audience out of people, when it's all connected to this guy, who is a complete jerk? I had an idea initially for a special, where it was just going to be completely lip-syncing Trump. It was going to be the story of Trump. I was going to do all of these audio clips and all of these different locations.

They were like, “No. Actually, I think maybe you should do a special where you do some Trump, but then you do some other things, so that you can bridge the gap between the people that hate Trump and like you, and the people that hopefully will you even after Trump is gone.” I was doing a lot of general meetings with a lot of people. I did a general meeting with Maya Rudolph and Natasha Lyonne, which was amazing and just pitched them this idea of doing a special.

[01:14:00] LW: Your special, *Everything is Fine*, which came out in October, right?

[01:14:03] SC: Yes.

[01:14:03] LW: It was awesome. It felt like, I was watching an improv show, even though I know it was scripted. Was that the original intent? Where did it start from in relationship to where it ended up? Because I imagine, you can go so many places. Like Andrew Schultz, he was doing those long-form videos on Instagram. Then he did a Netflix show, which was basically a series of long-form videos. I imagine that people were like, “Okay, do we want to see Sarah imitate Trump for 45 minutes?” Or how did you arrive at what we saw?

[01:14:36] SC: Yeah. I mean, I think that we always knew we wanted to do the access Hollywood bus scene. That was like, okay, we're definitely going to do that and maybe we'll do a few other Trump things. Then I just had all of these ideas of sketches that I want to do and just pulled a bunch of stuff together. This idea of the morning show host, who loses her mind in COVID. I think Natasha, she directed it and she really drove the editing a lot. I think that a lot of

the freneticness of it is because of the editing and because it feels a very fast-paced and you're not really sure what's happening and you're losing your mind as like, I'm losing my mind.

I think, that was a lot of her vision with it. I think my initial vision was something pretty close to something that I could do at home, because that's just where my brain was like, "Oh, this will be on a green screen. This will be this." then Natasha comes in. She's like, "Oh, no. We're going to do a dolly shot. We're going to do this. We're going to be on a golf course." I'm like, "Oh, okay." It's like, that kind of thing. That's the level that she took it to.

[01:15:38] LW: For a kid who loved playing make-believe, to have that opportunity, I mean, that's like that's a dream come true, I imagine.

[01:15:47] SC: It was whiplash every day and was like, "Oh, now I'm standing next to Jon Hamm and I'm standing next to Jane Lynch. Now I'm standing next to Winona Ryder. I'm standing next to Dame Helen Mirren." It was beyond surreal. I'm in the mode now, where I feel like, I won the lottery and now all the money is gone. You know what I mean? It was this amazing burst of just everything you could ever possibly want. All these people that you work with, everything you could possibly want to do. Now it's like, okay. Now what?

[01:16:22] LW: What's ironic, is also tied to your nemesis, the person that prompted you to reach out to your meditation teacher to talk to you off the ledge is the reason why you have all this fame and specials and whatnot. I do want to mention one thing about that, you had a writer's room for your writers' room. When I wrote my first book for myself, I got to write whatever I wanted to write, format it however I wanted to format it. It was mine through and through, from beginning to end.

When I wrote my first book for my publisher, they had all these ideas. This is how the publishing industry works. This is what sells. This is what people want to read, blah, blah, blah. You get hit with all that and you don't know, because it's your first time working on that level, so you give him the benefit of the doubt. Then later on, maybe you discover, "Well, actually, my instincts were not off completely. They were actually correct."

What was your experience like doing those, because you did skits on your own back in 2013, and 14, which were pretty good, and now you're working with the big boys, and you have your own instincts. What was your experience with that, when they're trying to ram these ideas down your throat?

[01:17:32] SC: I mean, it was really difficult, because I think – a lot of it was my inexperience in terms of knowing what my taste is and knowing what tone I wanted to hit. Just not having any experience on a set like that, where I'm – Natasha calls it number one on the call sheet, which means, if I'm not there, it doesn't happen. There's 60 people, they're all wearing badges, the badges all say, “Sarah Cooper.” It's just like, it's all on you.

I had a writer's room and I had a good idea of what I wanted to do. Then things weren't really working. When you write for yourself, it's like, it should feel very natural. I was reading things that just were like, “Oh, no, That's not exactly my taste. That's not exactly what I like. That's not exactly what makes me laugh.” After a first three weeks of that, then there was another writer's room with Natasha, really like – it was like, well, let's get some new writers in and let's do another session and really hone in on what the tone is that you really like.

We have a similar sense of humor, so she got it. She totally got it. I think, I drove a lot of people crazy, is basically what I'm saying. When I got on set, I think there was a lot of that of just – there's so much technology. When you get on set, there's all these cameras, there's all of this crew, lighting, sound, all of this stuff going on. You really do feel like, let them do what they know how to do, because I really don't know what's going on. I just learned a ton. I just learned so much about how a director works with the cinematographer.

A lot of these scenes, like the scene with Ben Stiller, he shot that separately and then I shot my part and then I had an earpiece, and the earpiece wasn't working. There's a lot of that thing that had to be worked out. I just learned so much. I learned so much about myself. I will say, the one thing to your point, is that I do think something was lost with the bigness of the production, because I think there is something very charming about not a lot of costumes, not a lot of set, not a lot of anything.

If I could go back, I probably would have scaled it back a little bit. I would have been like, “No, actually my taste is very simple. It's not a lot of things going on.” At the same time, it was just awesome to be able to come up with a Karen on set who just totally matched, trying to get into my apartment in San Francisco and a woman being like, “Do you live here?” Being a morning show host and being like, “Do you work here? Do you belong here?” Always feeling like, there was always someone like “Do you belong here?” Being able to bring that to life within weeks. Having the idea, then bringing it to life and putting it out, it was really awesome. It was just an awesome experience.

[01:20:25] LW: Now you're known for, I guess, because you were imitating Trump and you did sketches about Karen's, now you're known as this woke person. Plus, you're pretty prolific on Twitter about your opinions about all those things. You're turning your books now into television shows. You're going to go back and bring some of that into your office stuff?

[01:20:47] SC: Yeah. I mean, *How to be Successful Without Hurting Men's Feelings*, the title is pretty – it says it all. It's so fascinating, because I have a Facebook group that's just a private group, where I just share ideas, and my friends and family, 50 very close friends and family just give me feedback.

I remember coming up with like, *How to be Successful Without Hurting Men's Feelings*, everyone's like, “Oh, my God. That's great.” Then to have it be a book and now to have it be, hopefully, a television show is amazing. I think the thing that's really cool about it is being able to create characters and then have characters have different perspectives. Because that's how I've always felt. I felt I could always see another side. I could see a point of view. I could see where people are coming from. Then being able to tell a story where like, yeah, I experienced this in my progression. Somebody said, “Oh, we need you to do this, because we need diversity.”

A person being like, “That's okay. I guess, that's fine.” Then having someone else be like, “No, that's actually really offensive. You're not here for diversity. You're here, because you're smart.” Having someone else be like, “Well, yeah. But you don't want this to define you.” Having all of those different perspectives is just really exciting, because I think that's what has been missing for me is being able to say like, there's no one right way to deal with racism, or micro-aggressions, or sexism. We all experience it and we all deal with it in different ways, and let's

just talk about it. Let's just share how we deal with it and share maybe how we can deal with it better next time. Let's just be more aware of it. That's what's really exciting for me about bringing that to life, with characters and stories.

[01:22:25] LW: I love that. Last couple of questions for you. You're in your 40s now, you've had your experience of fame, which is what you dreamt about as a child. How are you thinking about success these days?

[01:22:36] SC: You caught me at a weird point, where my mom is like, "You were fine before the fame. You'll be fine after." My sister is like, "You're always going to be able to do something else, would be great." There's this part of me that she's like, "Oh, my God. What if that was it?" I feel right now, success is proving that that wasn't it. Success for me right now is showing that there is a lot more that I can do and there's a lot more that I can say and there's a lot more that I can make and share.

I always put pressure on myself. Right now, there's this extra pressure of just, I always feel I have something to prove. Now, I really feel I have something to prove. I feel I have to prove that I'm more than my Trump impression.

[01:23:23] LW: Now that Trump is gone, what happens with your TikToks?

[01:23:26] SC: It was a season of a show and the show has been canceled. That's how I look at it.

[01:23:33] LW: All right. then last question. If you are going to give your 19-year-old self a life advice, what would you tell young Sarah?

[01:23:45] SC: I would say, stop focusing so much on trying to meet a man. I spent way too much time trying to meet a man. I wasted so much time on dating sites. I wasted so much time. I mean, I guess it eventually all worked out. I really wish I had focused a lot more on figuring out who I am, versus figuring out how I can get into a relationship.

[01:24:11] LW: I love that. Well, Sarah, it was a pleasure getting deeper into your story and understanding, especially the part with my brother. I had no idea, that he plays such a pivotal –

[01:24:21] SC: I can't believe that too. It's so funny, because I remember messaging him that I was going to be taking your meditation. He said to me, "Don't feel like you need to tell him you know me or anything like that." He literally said that. I was like, "Oh, okay." Because I think he wanted us to have our own relationship outside of him, which I thought was actually very sweet of him to say that. He's been so supportive. He bought my books for his co-workers and stuff. He's really awesome.

[01:24:50] LW: Yeah. He is an awesome guy. Anyway, I want to acknowledge you for just – I think one of the things that I've noticed in your story is you just kept showing up. You just kept showing up over and over again and again and again, staying innovative, staying creative, taking the blows. I don't know if you've read Steven Pressfield's book, *The War of Art*. Have you read that book?

[01:25:10] SC: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

[01:25:12] LW: Yeah. He talks a lot about his rejection stories and the negative reviews. Some of them are laugh out loud, funny. He's actually coming onto the podcast soon, I'm really excited about that. Yeah, your story reminds me a lot about the resilience you need to have to resistance, because it's there and it's – I think it's a filtering, or screen of sorts to tease out the essence of what's truly there. I think that's what you've done and we celebrate you for that. Thank you very much for sharing your story so openly and honestly.

[01:25:49] SC: Thank you so much, Light.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[01:25:50] LW: Thank you for listening to my conversation with Sarah Cooper. I highly recommend following Sarah on Twitter, @SarahCooper, and make sure to check out her Netflix show, *Everything's Fine*, as well as her book, *How to be Successful Without Hurting Men's Feelings*. She's got a few other books as well and a coloring book.

If you feel inspired by Sarah's story, I'd really appreciate if you could take 10 seconds to rate the podcast. Just look down at your screen, click where it says 'At The End Of The Tunnel' in purple. If you don't see it, it's probably because you're listening to this on another platform. If that's the case, just look for a button that says "Listen on Apple Podcast". Then once you get to the Apple Podcast, scroll down, get to where it says ratings and reviews and just tap on the star all the way on the far right and you've left a review.

Thank you very much for that in advance. I really appreciate it. You can also get a transcript and the show notes on my website, lightwatkins.com/tunnel. While you're there, sign up for my daily dose of inspiration email, which is a short and sweet daily motivational message that I've been sending out every morning for almost five years now. It's even been turned into a book called *Knowing Where to Look*, which I'm super excited about. It's going to come out in May of 2021.

Thanks again for listening to this podcast and for sharing it with your friends and your followers. I'll see you back here next week with another amazing story from the end of the tunnel. In the meantime, keep trusting your intuition. Keep following your heart. Peace and love.

[END]