Opinion
NCR Voices



Marc Maron speaks at the 2025 South by Southwest festival in Austin, Texas, March 12. (Wikimedia Commons/Bea Phi)



by Daniel P. Horan

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Just two years after the release of the first iPhone, which launched a new era of "smart phones" and paved the way for the popularization of a new information medium called the podcast, the comedian and actor Marc Maron launched his now-famous podcast "WTF With Marc Maron." In 2009, Maron began recording interviews with fellow comedians in his Los Angeles garage-turned-studio with the help of his producer, Brendan McDonald.

Earlier this year, Maron announced that after 16 years and almost 1,700 episodes, the show was ending. The last episode of "WTF" was released Monday, featuring former President Barack Obama, who first appeared on the program in June 2015, becoming the first sitting United States president to appear on a podcast.

The list of those who appreciate and admire Maron's interview style is long. That includes eminent professionals in long-form journalism such as Terry Gross, the host of NPR's "Fresh Air," who has stated that his no-nonsense, vulnerable and personal interview style helped to make her feel comfortable to open up to him. In 2015, the famously private Gross said, "I couldn't look you in the eye and not tell you the truth."

Others, as The Guardian newspaper's audio producer Eleanor Biggs put it recently, have viewed Maron's twice-weekly podcast conversations as a respite from the tumult of life (especially at this moment in history) and have come to see Maron as something of a friend.

I'm not sure if I quite view Maron as a friend, but I certainly join the millions of listeners who are grateful for him while also feeling disappointment that the podcast we have come to appreciate, with the vulnerability and frankness of his personality that always came through, and the disarming and personal conversations that such a combination permitted with public figures, actors, politicians, activists, authors, directors, comedians, musicians and so many others, has now ended.

I don't recall when I first started listening to "WTF," but I can recount dozens of episodes over the 16-year run that have stayed with me. In addition to the podcast's first interview with President Barack Obama, there is the interview with Robin Williams in which the late comedian and actor discussed his own mortality, the Bruce Springsteen episode in which the two sons of New Jersey bonded in a way that seemed to surprise them both, and the discussion between Maron and fellow

comedian Louis C.K. about their estranged friendship and the feelings of jealousy that affected both of them.

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One of the most moving recent episodes featured the renowned movie director and comedy writer Judd Apatow. Apatow, who was an early fan of "WTF," wanted to select a series of excerpts from his favorite episodes over the years, play them for Maron, and discuss the experience. If you've never listened to "WTF" before and want to get a sense of what it's like (or, at least, what Apatow liked), that episode is a good recap.

There are hundreds of times over the years when I learned about an artist, actor, movie, music album or book simply because I happened to listen to a conversation between a guest and Maron on "WTF." While he often interviewed celebrities, it was equally the case that Maron would talk with a band member or producer or character actor who wasn't always in the limelight. Their discussions were always interesting and illuminating.

A person close to me whose opinion I deeply value never really liked Maron's style. She felt he departed too much from the traditional interview format, which would ordinarily place the emphasis on the guest and their story while the interviewer was meant to share little of their own experience or opinion.

Journalistically, her critique is correct. However, that's what the era of the podcast ushered in, for better and for worse: Although the format of a podcast is often like broadcast radio, it is not strictly a journalistic enterprise. This is still a new medium that can, at times, feel like an NPR interview program, but it is not constrained by those conventions.

Maron had his own style, and it included a big dose of his own processing, reflecting, confessing, forgiving, introspection and, at times, self-centeredness. He never shied away from any of that. In fact, he often said that he started the podcast in order to give meaning to his life and work when his career had reached a nadir. While he could overly center himself sometimes, I always appreciated that his conversational style was neither artificial nor unduly obsequious.

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I have always considered his show more of a recorded conversation between two interesting people than a formal interview. This type of conversation can move in genuinely surprising directions precisely because it's effectively two people having a respectful, intelligent and meaningful unscripted discussion. It is a regular occurrence for a "WTF" guest to have commented on their own surprise at sharing some as-of-yet undisclosed thought or experience on the show.

Maron's ability to create conditions of trusted sharing and sincere human connection comes from his own vulnerability and transparency. He has been in recovery for substance abuse and alcoholism for decades and was not shy about owning his past choices and mistakes. Nor was he hesitant about admitting his less-flattering attributes and tendencies — such as his proclivity toward envy and anger, or his at-times unhealthy relationship to food and body image (something you don't hear a lot of men discuss publicly).

Maron is certainly no saint — he would be the first to admit that — but I do believe he is a great example of the beautiful mess that each authentically human person is at heart. A mixture of good and bad, holy and sinful, confident and afraid, generous and self-centered, Maron unwittingly modeled what it looks like to bring yourself — your whole self, including the parts you may not like — to a discussion with another person.

Today, perhaps more than ever, we need this sort of model. We need examples of people who are not merely curating their "best selves" to social media audiences who are themselves constantly judging you, but people who can rest in their own experience, know what they think and own their truth. Only then is the table set for a real conversation, one motivated by curiosity and empathy and not merely a desire to "own" the other side, embarrass your perceived opponents or simply garner more social media likes and followers.

I'm grateful that Maron and his friend and producer Brendan McDonald had the idea to invite folks over to Maron's garage for a conversation and record them for us to hear. I can't help but think that this is an end of an era, one that signifies decency in discussion and sincerity in interest about others.

I hope others will learn from Maron's example and create new opportunities for this kind of program, a truly human endeavor and illustration of what good conversation can look like.