

GATEWAY TO THE MIDWEST  
Full interview transcript

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Interviewer: Joshua Dolezal

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JD: I just wanted to throw out this, we've kind of talked about this in passing, but on the wall of all your stores, or at least two that I know of, you have "The Greatest Store in the Universe." Why do you call Raygun the greatest store in the universe?

MD: Ooh, why do we call it the greatest store in the universe? It's the initial impetus for it came from driving past the world's largest truck stop in Walcott, Iowa, where if anybody who's driven along interstate 80 sees this sign and it's like world's largest truck stop and when you see, you're just kind of like, "Is it? Is this really the world's largest truck stop?" But, you know, "world's largest" is kind of like you can say whatever you want, or "greatest." We had thought, in that vein, what we would call our store, and we had actually tinkered with calling it World's Largest Clothing Store, but then we thought to go even crazier, we would move beyond the world and encompass the universe. Kind of our way of saying even if we find life on Mars, our clothing store is still gonna be better than their clothing store. So it's kind of hedging our bets for life outside of Earth. So, the greatest store in the universe – that's kind of like a long explanation for how we came up with the tag name. It's meant to sound ridiculous.

JD: On the surface it's arrogant, but it's so arrogant it just can't be taken seriously?

MD: It kind of does tie into the Midwest. The Midwest has tons and tons of world's largest, for whatever reason, we've really locked onto that. World's largest ball of twine, world's largest hand-dug pool, world's largest crucifix, world's largest rifle, I mean these are all things that are kind of spread around. And so, I'm not sure. For such a modest region it's interesting that we have this obsession with what is the largest of something. I think Lorenze, Iowa or West Bend is world's largest stone – small stone grotto? I think it's called The Grotto.

JD: How many of those are there?

MD: Yeah that's the thing.

JD: Nobody knows.

MD: Yeah, you're just gonna – I'm not sure anybody's challenged them on it. I can't imagine it's actually the world's largest, but who knows.

JD: Well, it seemed like the Neil Smith was touted as the largest restored prairie at one time, but I don't know.

MD: Ooh, yeah, man. That seems like – yeah, I don't know. It's kind of like whenever Des Moines is like "We're the best! (per capita)." What was that last part? Oh, per capita. It means

“Oh yeah, we’ve only got seven and New York has sixty-three, but per capita.” The Neil Smith restored prairie – I’m not sure how’d they measure that. You’d think there’s some stretches of Kansas or Nebraska or even South Dakota and Montana that I would think would have – I mean, it’s not that big.

JD: Or Canada. Possibly.

MD: Yeah, definitely Canada. But then you start treating states how people treat Iowa. I mean, surely there’s a bigger one in Kansas. Western Kansas – I’ve never been there. Anything could be there, for all I know.

JD: Well, I wanted to tie this overstatement back into something else that you’ve written about in your book about the Midwest that was actually – so you’re taking a different extreme to the opposite extreme because understatement is usually the rule, and so you give some examples of this. In the South you get sweet tea whether you like it or not. In the Midwest you get unsweetened ice tea with the sugar and the lemon and you can do what you want with it.

MD: Oh, yeah.

JD: And you talk about state mottos that are ambitious in places like New York and they’re very modest in the Midwest. Do you think Midwesterners are usually trying to avoid seeming superior to other people with that kind of understatement? It does seem in conflict with the world’s largest claims you mentioned.

MD: Yeah, I mean, I think that the U.S. – the Midwest is so comfortably modest that the world’s largest has kind of the jokes built into it. David Letterman, when he’d deliver monologues, would sometimes say “Oh, boy, you people are in luck tonight. We have put together what I would say might be the greatest Tuesday night in the history – in the history – of television.” And so, it would be – it’s not as funny as if Jay Leno had said it, but when David Letterman delivers it with this kind of Indiana-schtick, there’s this kind of jokiness built into it. I feel like the world’s largest stuff almost plays right into this modest part of the Midwest. World’s largest ball of twine. It’s hard to know if that’s bragging.

JD: It negates itself.

MD: Yeah, it’s kind of a, yeah if you wanted to spend the time to put together the world’s largest ball of twine – and I think that one’s in Kansas, maybe Nebraska – also in Kansas is the world’s largest hand-dug pool. Oh, boy, it’s almost kind of like we had the time to dig it by hand. And so there is this built in modesty but the kind of “aw, shucks” humor. Weirdly enough, we can get down to bragging and it still sounds modest when we do it. Although it just sounds sad when Des Moines is like, “Number one city for young professionals! says Forbes magazine. Like man, up from number three, then next year we’re number four. This is a red-hot race.” So that stuff’s kind of sad. The way over the top bragging is kind of our MO.

JD: Would you say that, kind of along with this modesty, there is kind of like you were saying about prairies in Kansas, there’s sort of a myth about the Midwest as a nothing place, and so this

bragging seems to fill that space. You think there's nothing here but stone grotto. Where do you think that myth comes from of the Midwest as just empty or blank?

MD: I don't know if it's so much empty as it is mysterious, anything could go on here. It starts with the question everyone asks us – what is the Midwest? Is Ohio Midwestern? Is South Dakota Midwestern? We're kind of one of the only regions that can't quite decide where exactly we are. The other regions have the handy feature of one of their borders is an ocean. So, there's the South, the Northeast, the West – one side is full-stop, never gonna be inhabited by anybody, except the Pacific standpoint, a giant pile of plastic garbage. But it's not gonna be a state. Nobody's gonna live on the pile of garbage. The Midwest is – since it's landlocked – the Canadian border and the Great Lakes is kind of your northern border, but we don't actually have any hard features like the Rocky Mountains or the Appalachians or the Confederacy from the Civil War to kind of divide what's Southern versus what's Midwestern. I think part it starts with you don't even really know where the Midwest is. Not only the Midwest can always agree where the Midwest is. The geographic uncertainty of it kind of underpins everything of where is it. The geographic uncertainty also gives way to this shared non-history history in that part of it was the original northwest territory and then part of it was the Louisiana Purchase and it doesn't really have this same history that hangs together the Northeast or the South or even the West. There's not a shared story necessarily or a shared place. So, from a marketing standpoint, we've got a lot working against us. I mean even the name of the region – it sounds like a direction, but it's not a direction. Northwest, Southeast – those are all actual directions. Midwest, you would never say outside of describing this part of America.

JD: Go two blocks Midwest.

MD: Drive Midwest. You know, with a friendly attitude and a pitchfork.

JD: Would you say Kansas City is one of those weird places that has Southern qualities but is Midwestern? Or do you think of it as quintessentially Midwestern?

MD: I mean Missouri in general is kind of like the South of the North. It's hard to know if it's Southern or Midwestern, so Kansas City and St. Louis are both of these culturally a lot of connections between the African-American South and then the Midwestern. So, Kansas City was actually arguably the birthplace of southern jazz and then blues kind of mixed with northern ragtime and produced a new sound, from Charlie Parker to Benny Goodman. But at the same time, it's the gateway to the West. But then St. Louis is also the gateway to the West, they've got the gateway arch. But then Fargo is like "We're the gateway to the West!" and Omaha's like "We're the gateway to the West!" and I think Geneva, Wisconsin is the gateway to the lake districts and Indiana is the crossroads of America. Indiana's whole selling point is like "You're gonna go through it at some point when you're going somewhere else." Even in our slogans of gateway to the West, we promote another region when we're trying to promote our own city. It's like, "Oh, you can go through here to go somewhere!" "Where?" "Somewhere else." It's not like it's the gateway to Missouri or to the Midwest. Pittsburg is not the gateway to the Midwest and Denver is not the gateway to the Midwest. Like, if you keep driving east, you'll get to Nebraska! So, you're never going east, but even when you're going west, nowhere is the gateway to the Midwest. Louisville, Kentucky is not the gateway to the Midwest. Memphis isn't the gateway to

the Midwest. We're always trying to get people to go somewhere else. It's kind of your standard Midwestern passive-aggressive mom, like "I'm sure you've got to get going. Let me get your coat, I don't want to keep you here. You probably got somewhere else to be." And you're like "Oh, do you want me to leave, or..."

JD: So, it's like a purgatory.

MD: Oh, yeah, I guess it's like purgatory. You're not in heaven or hell. I mean, it's a great purgatory to raise kids in, I suppose.

JD: Well, I was thinking that all those gateways you mentioned probably do have valid claims to being gateways to the West and, I'm sure, prairie scooters who went through those portals to different parts of the West. But like you were saying, it doesn't work the opposite direction.

MD: Independence, Missouri and St. Joseph, Missouri were kind of the jumping off point of like Oregon Trail and so if you played that video game on an Apple 2 computer in school, you'd start in Independence and so you were in the Midwest before you died of dysentery somewhere near – well, I guess, no, because you started somewhere near Carney, Nebraska and would eventually die of dysentery after you shot some squirrels.

JD: That's what John Price says in *Man Killed by Pheasant*, that Midwesterners have always been killing themselves in the West. Well, you're a historian by training, another lifetime ago.

MD: Yeah, I've got an undergraduate degree in history. I think the Secretary of the Interior, Zinke, took geology as an undergrad and he says he's a geologist. So, by that logic, I'm a historian. By the actual logic of you need a PhD to be a historian, I am not a historian, but I do read a lot of history. I got a PhD in life.

JD: I know that you've thought about history in the Midwest. A lot of your book makes reference to that. Your products do also. We've talked before about this idea of the myth of a blank Midwest as sort of a marketing strategy I think you were saying for homesteading, and you felt like the idea of empty space or blank space was kind of false or kind of deceptive from the beginning.

MD: Yeah, I mean it's not even just the fact that there were Native Americans in the Midwest before it was settled by the Northwest Ordinance. And it's not even that the Northwest Ordinance was the first settlements. The oldest Midwestern settlement was Sioux St. Marie, kind of at the tip of Michigan where Michigan meets Canada. It was a lot of French trappers mixing with Native Americans and so by the time the Northwest Ordinance went into effect, a city like Detroit was actually majority mixed race. So it wasn't even that the Native Americans were here, it's that this range of people had settled here and intermixed. At the time, that was pretty complicated for America to get their head around. Racial mixing wasn't all that big. It was the very beginning of the ideas of Manifest Destiny, and what's our destiny to go into this desolate, uninhabited area. And it would have been too tough to say, "Oh, there could be this new society of people who respect one another and mix together on equal footings." So, it was essentially what the English did to America, the quote-on-quote Americans did to the Northwest territory,

“Oh, we’re just gonna go in and imprint our legacy onto this region.” There’s a book called *The American Colony*, which is about the settling of the Northwest territory and how it’s a little like our Americas colony and how it treated why are there the states there are? When Jefferson outlines the Northwest territory, there were twelve states. So, I think the upper peninsula was Sylvania or something like that, and a lot of them had Greek names. But then you run the math, and you’re like “Oh, nuts. There are only thirteen states at the time.” Which means that this Northwest territory, if it became twelve states, would be as powerful in the Senate as the rest of the country. So, then it’s like “Oof, no! We’re gonna scale this back, big time. Now you’re only gonna get four states.” So, even the way the borders were drawn, there was control in mind. He didn’t want this area to start to exert itself nationally. He wanted it to answer to the east coast establishment. You don’t want it to sound too conspiratorial, but it was developed in the very beginning with a strategy of control in mind.

JD: Interesting. When you were talking, I was thinking about the Puritan view of New England as everything beyond Plymouth Bay or Plymouth Colony or Massachusetts Bay was the howling wilderness.

MD: Oh, yeah.

JD: But that’s still something, it’s scary, it’s howling, and this was sort of a welcoming space to be inhabited. At least, I’m not recalling, even thought it was, as you were saying, a sort of frontier space with Native American nations and other sort of mountain or outdoors people, rugged people, inhabiting it, it doesn’t seem to have been pitched that needed to be tamed, it was sort of already.

MD: There were definitely huge assets to it. After the Revolutionary War, the government gave George Washington, as a thank-you gift, several thousand acres of Ohio. It’s like what everybody wants. And whenever you come over the hills and it’s this endless bounty of cultivatable land. So, it’s not like you’re wandering into the Australian outback, and it’s not even like you’re going into an area west of Lincoln, Nebraska where it’s kind of getting into high desert. It’s just plow up the fields, start growing things, everything’s great. Yeah, there isn’t the wild desolate nature of the Southwest or the Rocky Mountains. I just think it’s hard for us to, back then, when it was more acquisition based and winner-takes-all, to the victor goes the spoils, writing history, all that stuff, it was difficult for us to take the American vision and blend it with the vision that was already there, in terms of these descendants of Native Americans and French trappers and runaway slaves and essentially runaway Americans that, by the time of the Northwest Ordinance, had been there for a hundred and fifty years, it’s crazy to think about how long, moving forward, some of these people would have been established in this region. But you come in, grid the whole thing, mark out where the cities are gonna go, and that’s that.

JD: Well, if we were to start over, get rid of that mythology or some of the stereotypes of the Midwest as blank or empty or just welcoming, what do you think a more accurate premise would be to start from if we were, as you said, defining this illusive place? How should we start with that?

MD: Well, I mean if you were coming if, if you were gonna rewrite, you'd say this was an area where there'd been a flux of people for years before, even the Native Americans weren't static, not one group sat in one spot forever. They kind of moved back and forth. And then to the French traders, Spanish coming up, British coming over, again there'd been this shifting of people. And then there's this big movement of Americans, a lot of Northeasterners that come into the ole Northwest Territory, start settling that. But then there's also the southern migration of southern blacks into the Midwest. And so, I think a lot of times, we get kind of trapped in the notion that the Midwest is somehow America's museum, that it's frozen in time and we're these folksy, unchanging people where American values still hold true. Kind of the heartland, middle of America type, and it totally ignores the dynamic nature of the fluid population and how people have treated each other and not only have Midwestern people throughout history not treated other Midwesterners nicely on the negative side of it, on the positive side you have this really cool melding of either jazz to rock 'n roll to writing comedy to movies, plays – the Midwest has produced this unending trove of Americana that some of the most American things – whether it's the car, the plane, rock 'n roll, jazz, Anheuser-Busch, Wonder Bread – these are all Midwestern items, but they're almost too American that they're co-opted by America. I think it's false to push the idea that the Midwest is this homogenous, non-changing, milk toast and rhubarb pie kind of place, and it'd be more helpful for us to get not only a better understanding of where the Midwest has been, but also what's possible to really a full picture of who lives here, why, how has the region developed, cities developed, because this narrative of shrinking cities – Detroit, oh, Detroit is shrinking, St. Louis is shrinking – yeah, the population of Detroit proper has indeed shrunk. But the population of southeast Michigan, where Detroit is, has exploded. If you take a city the size of Houston, and Houston's the fifth largest city in America, take their geographic border size, lay that over southeast Michigan, and call it Detroit. Well, suddenly, Detroit is the sixth largest city in America. It's enormous. Detroit hasn't shrunk because the Midwest has shrunk or everybody moved out and you're just waiting for someone to extinguish the tire fire, Detroit has “shrunk” because it was frozen in place by essentially race-based development. They wanted to keep Detroit black, and then the immediate suburbs like Gross Point or St. Claire Shores were the white cities. And so, Detroit has shrunk because of policies that didn't allow it to grow. Whereas new cities, like Houston or Phoenix, have obscenely grown on paper, but that's because they've come out in an area where it's no longer acceptable to just draw out a border and say, “All the black people live here.” And St. Louis the same way. So, there are certain, even quote-on-quote problems in the Midwest that we look at and say, “Oh, well, it's economic. That's why Detroit has shrunk.” Well, but there's more people in southeast Michigan, so it can't be economic, because southeast Michigan isn't shrinking. And so, I think understanding history helps you actually solve problems and you discover what is the actual problem, is it actually economic? Or is it social? And a lot of times it's a mix of both, but we often just totally overlook the social side of it.

JD: I wanna come back to that because I know you think of Raygun as having a kind of social, maybe not mission, but there is a dimension of the products that you sell and through your presence in the world that has that social and ethical sensibility and that's part of how you've reflected on the Midwest. If I can just kind of say back to you some of what you've heard. So, the Midwest you see as really a dynamic place that has been in flux from the beginning, that is always changing, so you're at least agreeing on some level with our premise for this series – that the Midwest is not a static place, but that it is a changing Midwest. You listed off all these things

that say to me that one aspect of this definition might be creativity. The Midwest is sort of an unusually innovative place. Would you agree with that?

MD: Oh, yeah. You kind of think to yourself, if you were gonna pick an image of the Midwest, like if you were gonna take this series and say, well, what image do you put on the front of it? It doesn't matter what's it's called, but what is the one picture that somebody looks at and says, "That's Midwestern." We kind of perpetuate the stereotype by usually picking a picture of a farm or something. Then we get all upset when people just don't understand the region, well, yeah, jackass, probably because you take pictures of farms and keep calling it Midwestern, even though a vast majority of people here don't live on a farm. It'd be like if you talked about the West and it was a picture of a mountain. Most people in the West – Los Angeles, San Jose, San Diego – don't actually live on mountains. But I guess the mountain is a defining feature of the West. Whereas if I was going to take a defining image of the Midwest in general, it would probably be a painting by Thomas Hart Benton, who is this artist out of Kansas City, part of the regional movement and he was in there with Grant Wood, and his stuff had classic working-man themes, but one student and acolyte of Thomas Hart Benton was Jackson Pollock, so you don't really get to modern art without the regionalism of Thomas Hart Benton. So, he's this real blending of traditional with a foot in the modern, and it's still understandable for people to get. His stuff is still popular. It's not as far out there as Jackson Pollock. But there's enough of a connection to Jackson Pollock that you can link them through. So, it's hard to find these images that tie the whole thing together because it's kind of self-contradictory in certain senses of this traditional way of forward thinking, and that's always hard for somebody to wrap their mind around.

JD: Well, and some regions, say the Northeast, sometimes will be symbolized by a historical artifact – it could be the pilgrim figure, for instance, or the Statue of Liberty – something like that for the Midwest could be an airplane.

MD: Yeah! When you think of a typical Midwesterner, would it be someone like Amelia Earhart? Where not only do you have the airplane, which came out of the Midwest, but this kind of, well, it's a new world, women can fly airplanes if they want to or are challenged to circumnavigate the globe, that sort of thing. It's a hard question to answer sometimes.

JD: That's a good run at it, anyway. Maybe we'll back up a little bit and just talk about your childhood, as awkward as that may be.

MD: Yeah, why not?

JD: Tell me a little bit about Van Meter. I know you grew up there, were you born and raised there?

MD: Pretty much, yeah. So, I was born, technically, at Lutheran Hospital, which is like six blocks from the store on the east side of Des Moines. So, geographically, I have not come very far in life. My parents had just moved to Iowa, so they rented a house in Booneville, which is just east of Van Meter and then bought a house in Van Meter outside of town when I was like one. So, yeah. And they're still there, today. Van Meter from essentially age one to eighteen. I went to

Van Meter schools, K-12, graduated in 2000, so the first eighteen years of my life, I was fairly static in that I was located in just one spot, just west of Des Moines. But, Van Meter is a little town in that it's 900 people, I graduate with thirty kids, so Class A football teams, you'd play football and you'd also do theater. Almost every guy in the school was on the football team. However, a lot of the Van Meter population commutes into Des Moines. So it's not what you would call a rural small town, it's more like an exurb.

JD: And what do your parents do there?

MD: Both of them worked in Des Moines. My dad's an attorney and my mom's actually a mechanical engineer.

JD: So they were commuting?

MD: They would both drive into downtown Des Moines daily, and even sophomore and junior year I went to Central Campus, so I'd drive into Des Moines for part of my day. My senior year, I took some classes at Drake University, so I'd drive in. So, you're in a little town, your social life revolves around people in this little town, but you're in Des Moines, through high school, pretty much every day for something. Walk around the mall, go to Dairy Queen.

JD: Can you compare or contrast your sense of Van Meter when you were a kid to how you view it now? Is it more or less the same?

MD: I guess it's still the same. How I viewed it was fairly accurate in that Des Moines is kind of the sun that everything revolved around. So a school like Roosevelt or Valley were kind of the big men on campus in terms of high schools, so we were a lower school lower down on the rung, but in terms of Class A towns, we always thought, "Oh, we're one of the best. We're not just some redneck town in the middle of nowhere, we're like a little town next to Des Moines so we're very cultured." That's always how we viewed it, growing up. We were really conscious of how our little town is pretty much better than every other little town in the state. Believed that, through and through. But I mean, I think you can make a pretty good argument for it. I think Van Meter probably still thinks the same, although I'm not as in touch with the day-to-day operations of the school. I live in Des Moines now; my kids go to school in Des Moines. Friends of mine from Van Meter still live in Van Meter. Once you have your own kids it's like, I wasn't that interested in other people's kids before I had my own kids, and now I'm not interested in their kids at all. So, how my friends' kids are doing is not a real concern to me.

JD: Speaking of kids, how many siblings did you have?

MD: I had one older brother, so it was just my brother and I. My mom is from an Irish-Catholic family. Both her parents are from small town Iowa but she grew up in Michigan, where my grandpa eventually got a job. My maternal grandparents met at Iowa State in 1952, got married, and had seven kids. My mom was the oldest. By the time my mom decided to have kids, she was tired of raising kids that she just wanted two. She didn't wanna stay home with kids all day, so she had the two of us and kept working. My older brother is, like my mom, a mechanical engineer, also. He was three years older than me and went to Cal-Berkley for engineering and

rugby and then also lives back in Des Moines. Both of us have these bizarrely similar lives in that we both played rugby in high school, both played some in college, although I was less serious, both lived in the UK for a little while, and then both married girls who are from the UK and we both live back in Des Moines and have four kids each, and our kids all go to school together. And we're not best friends or we're not in some sick competition with each other, it really is just this odd coincidence.

JD: Yeah. Thinking about how you grew up, did you have any awareness of yourself as – was your role as the younger brother sort of the prankster, the jokester? Did you see yourself as someone who'd be a comedian later?

MD: A little bit. From an early age, I don't think I was ever doing it on purpose, but the thing that I always got from the youngest, even at six years old in first grade, the most descriptive word people would use often, whether it was teachers or other kids, was, "Man, you are weird." I was always kind of an odd man out. I remember on the bus, some of the older kids were like, "Are you adopted?" Because my parents were both pretty professional, buttoned-up people, and I don't remember myself as being particularly off the wall, but I was pretty jokey. Jokier than my parents or brother, but all of us were fairly independent, I mean, my mom was sporty, my dad wasn't. My dad is from the Northeast, so he didn't look like he was Iowa when I was growing up, and still doesn't. He wears belts with boats on them and stuff. I went and saw John Carey, the senator from Massachusetts from a distance and I thought he looked familiar from a distance, like, is that my dad's brother? Oh, no, that's John Carey. There's something foreign about him. My parents were both pretty professional people, although my mom, from a large, Irish-Catholic family, humor was pretty valued. They would get together and they're all jokey people. I was just a little bit zanier than them, I suppose.

JD: So they had the cliché about comedians – I know you don't do stand-up, necessarily, your shirts are kind of like stand-up for sale at times.

MD: It's a similar vein to stand-up comedy, what I do. It's just way more job security, so. It's not that I couldn't hack it at stand-up, it is just not a lifestyle that warrants itself to having money or a stable family. You don't wanna just casually get into it.

JD: Right. Well, the cliché about comedians is that they're damaged, somehow. It doesn't sound like you had some sort of traumatic experience.

MD: For me, I always just, I think John Stewart who also had a totally normal upbringing in New Jersey – I can't remember what his dad did, but his mom was a teacher – he just said, "Oddly enough, I only really felt comfortable if people laugh every so often. If there's a long stretch where people aren't laughing, I think I better say something funny." And I thought to myself that I've always felt the same thing. It's more comfortable for me if people are laughing. When my mom's family would get together, they were all pretty jokey, not necessarily like slapstick humor, but had a really funny way of looking at things and I always just enjoyed it more. It's not necessarily that laughing is a defense or to cover up my inherent sadness, it's just that I actually like it when people laugh. I'm drawn to funny things. If I'm watching TV, I'd rather watch comedians or comedy, I'd rather watch funny movies. It's not necessarily a

counterweight to sadness, but it's kind of why I'll never be able to write a particularly interesting memoir, because it's, "Boy from stable, upper-middle class family whose parents were normal, professional, cared for him, who enjoyed his life growing up and got a good education from a solid public school in a community that cared about him and hoped he would do the best, and was sent to college accrued no debt along the way, came back and opened a store and succeeded in the face of everybody assuming he would succeed in doing it." There's no real tension there. It's, "Boy given every opportunity to succeed, succeeds!"

JD: I guess that could be a reason for comedy. You create the conflict.

MD: Yeah. At a certain point, the one thing I will say is that there's a certain part of comedy that's born out of not necessarily frustration, but dissatisfaction with things. Whether it's politically or societally or even socially, it's sometimes just meant to be jokey – just joking around, saying something. Often times it's frustrated with a situation and kind of making light of it is your natural fallback on the issue at hand. I've always found it more effective to frame things in a humorous way. The reason for that being, it kind of takes it from column A of Serious Political Thing and when you're making it funny, it's got to be related to something else. This situation is kind of like this situation and that's what makes it funny. But it's also handy to think about it in that way because you get so locked into the political way of thinking about a political problem that then when you relate it to something else, like grocery shopping, it sometimes helps you to figure out a solution to it because you're like, "How would I solve that situation in the grocery store?" And maybe I apply that lesson too. So, it's partly dealing with it but I think there's a lot of great ideas that come out of comedy, plus people are more receptive to ideas in general when they're laughing about them. There's lots of stuff we have in the store that if you just said it to the average person on the street, especially in Iowa, they would not be receptive to. But when you put it into this humorous, everything's just fun store, it's amazing what people will look at and not be offended by in the store, but if it was just that one individual product and you showed it to someone just cold turkey on the street in Des Moines, it would have a totally different reaction.

JD: So, humor sort of de-fangs it, in a way.

MD: Yeah, there's always this kind of, "I'm just joking! I'm just joking!" There's sometimes where I'll write in emails, JK, pretty much, kind of, but not really, but I am joking, but I am still a little bit serious.

JD: Let's talk a little bit about high school and trying to keep our focus on Iowa or the Midwest. Van Meter was this town that was better than all the other small towns by way of association with Des Moines.

MD: Pretty much. There was just like a high culture to it that you wouldn't find in Guthrie Center.

JD: Okay. But you didn't get really a sense of the Midwest from either of your parents.

MD: My mom's family was all from Iowa, essentially, but my grandpa was from Lorenze in northwest Iowa and his family had a farm up there. My grandma's family – her dad was a banker in Chariton, in southern Iowa. Growing up, we would see some of our extended family in Iowa but just by geographic quirks and where everyone ended up living, my mom's family was all in Michigan. Her brothers and sisters and parents were in Michigan and a lot of my other aunts and uncles had moved out, so we didn't have that much family in Iowa. You grow up in a little town in Iowa and my mom is from Michigan so you knew the Michigan fight song by age three. I still don't know the Iowa fight song. We wouldn't sit down and watch Iowa football. We'd only watch Iowa if they were playing Michigan. So, you kind of had on the one sense, I was living in Iowa but the center of our geographic universe was Michigan. But then my dad's family was in Connecticut and we'd go out to Connecticut twice a year. And that was kind of where you'd get the first inkling of us being way out on the prairie. He grew up in Connecticut, went to boarding school out there, college out there, lived out there, and then moved to the Midwest. Almost all his relatives were still in the Connecticut area. I remember my aunt describing where we grew up to some people in Connecticut. She said, "Well they live in Iowa, but where their house is, it's surrounded by trees. It's just like Connecticut. It's not what you would think of as Iowa." We grew up in a little valley and it's ten acres of trees. So, I thought that was my first, "Hmm, interesting."

JD: That's how the other people think of us.

MD: Oh, there's trees there! I never thought of Iowa as a prairie. I knew of it as fields, but I was living in this wooded valley in a town that's down in a wooded valley outside of a city and my parents both work in skyscrapers. But apparently, a wing of the family viewed it as a sod house somewhere and I was going out to fetch water from the well, barely educated. I'm not sure what they thought. That was kind of, growing up, the inkling that we were living somewhere else that people didn't live. You slowly got the idea that success meant leaving here, so you were like, oh, the people who made it in Van Meter were the people who weren't there anymore. Like, where's Rob? Oh, Rob's in Illinois. Good for him, wow! It sounds nice. I wonder what he's doing. And he might have just been working the night shift at a warehouse in Peoria, but you just thought he's made it! Illinois! So, I had never expected to go to college in Iowa or to stay in Iowa. My older brother, as I mentioned, went out to Cal-Berkeley. I went to U Penn, and I when I got out to U Penn, it was mission accomplished. I'm gone. I'm not there. I've arrived to wherever this is.

JD: That was just part of Van Meter culture, was to push your...

MD: In general, you were growing up in Iowa in the nineties and everyone couldn't wait to get out of there. Kind of everybody thought we should leave. Even teachers, if you were a really bright student, said you should go somewhere. And I don't know if anybody really meant it that way, but there was think kind of unspoken, "Oh, if you're still here when you're thirty, something has gone wrong." And so, I think this underlying – a little bit from my town, but also from my parents' experience that they had both lived other places – there was this idea that I had potential and I should take it to where it's valued. The east coast somewhere, where everybody runs faster and jumps higher and has interesting conversations. It's nice to leave, because you get out there and realize not everything is what you had thought it was gonna be. I didn't really think that much about the Midwest seriously until I was living in Philly with pretty much all non-

Midwesterners. My first two years, all my roommates were from the east coast, and then I went to the UK for a year and then my fraternity that I lived in senior year, the vast majority of the house was from either the east or west coast. There was one guy in the house who was from Ohio, and that's about it.

JD: Before we shift to U Penn, can I just ask, were there not any experiences in high school that were sort of foundational experiences where you saw this is Iowa, or this is Iowa history, or this is why you should be proud to be an Iowa? It seems the emphasis in your family and even in those school settings was all that the real stuff is somewhere else.

MD: There was a little bit with my dad's family, but when you're so far inside of it, it's hard to view it – I would live with my grandparents every summer in Michigan, but they were from Iowa. My grandpa still owned a farm, so he'd wear Pioneer hybrid stuff, they'd get Iowa magazine, and we had some shared things in common like Iowa State or Des Moines. I don't know, if you're from here, live here, there wasn't a lot of, "Here's another interesting thing about Iowa." The topic never really came up as much because there wasn't really anything to compare it to. Even up in Michigan, where my grandparents were, we were Iowans, which was slightly peculiar there, but it's mainly downstate Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, and these were all shared primarily through sports. The Big 10 stitches the Midwest together from traditionally what had been Iowa on the west to Ohio State in the east. You kind of had this unspoken bond with people from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, mainly through sports. Some recreation of vacation in those places, but I always thought athletics stitched together states more thoroughly because of these rivalries passed down from generation to generation that you wouldn't have with a state with New York. It would have been difficult for me in high school to name five colleges in New York. Whereas you could easily rattle off five colleges in Ohio.

JD: Interesting.

MD: Because you would never come across Northeastern schools all that regularly.

JD: There was nobody who was, "Don't forget where you come from. Don't forget those Iowa roots"?

MD: Oh, my history teacher in Van Meter, Drew Sitner, would say, "If anybody strikes it rich, just send me a check." That wasn't a "don't forget where you come from," but you really were, not so much Iowa based, but Van Meter in particular, there was this, not even unspoken – it was directly spoken – that your actions represented the town in general. If you went to state track, you weren't just you, you were running for Van Meter. If somebody was in state track, you could have an excused absence from school to go watch them at state track. An entire school, in theory, could turn out to watch one person who represents the school, and the school represents the town, and so our football coach would regularly say don't do anything to disappoint yourself, the team, or the town. It was, if you're caught drinking, it's not just you that looks bad, it's the team, and now the town looks bad. It makes it seem like those kids from Van Meter are shifty. From that standpoint, there was definitely a thing where you are a reflection of the community. But again, you're so town-centric. Central Iowa, where we were, was a whole different world from Iowa City, Cedar Rapids. We'd never play those schools in sports, you'd read about them in the

paper but you didn't go there all that regularly, so in the littlest sense, it was Van Meter before all else.

JD: We'll come back to that also, because it seems like the community identity was at least a positive thing there, even if the impetus was to encourage people to fulfill their potential elsewhere, there wasn't the kind of tribalism about Van Meter. There was at least a sense of pride in the collective. As long as you were there, you were connected to other people.

MD: Yeah, it was a definite purpose in attaching to history, and it's a little more imagined communities – there was a sociologist, I can't remember – if you graduate from Yale in 2004, why do you feel a connection to someone who went to Yale in 1864? It's a real different experience, but there are a couple, you went to the same buildings, you walked on the same streets. With Van Meter, Bob Feller was kind of the most famous resident who pitched for the Cleveland Indians in the 40's, 30's. His school, Van Meter, was the school I was in. In pictures he's on the baseball field that was still there when I was in school. In the background, is the same building that I was in, it had been added onto a little bit. There was this real connection of being part of this long lineage of people from here. It had been a real famous person dry spell from the 1930's when I was there in 2000 and still going on today. It's not like it was this esteemed prep school type where we've got six supreme court nominees and five presidents. It wasn't a real high bar, it was one famous resident, but you were more cognizant of everybody being from Van Meter than Republican or Democrat or what they did for an occupation, necessarily.

JD: At least it wasn't Herbert Hoover, right?

MD: Yeah. What was he, West Branch, I guess? Although, God, if we had Herbert Hoover, we would have loved him. If you were famous, you were ours.

JD: I'd assumed, wrongly, that at UPenn you came up against some of this culture prejudice or just ignorance about the Midwest for the first time, but you'd already had that seed planted with your father's family.

MD: A little bit. We were only in Connecticut two weekends a year. It wouldn't come up that much because you were seeing family that were used to it. But at Penn it was this torrent of, "What do you parents do? What do they do in Iowa?" And you're like, "My dad's a lawyer, my mom's a mechanical engineer." "In Iowa? Wow!" It was then that you're just kind of the mystery to people. It's just totally laid bare that this was an area that was somewhere between Pittsburg and Las Vegas and anything could be happening currently.

JD: I'm gonna read a quote from your book that kind of captures that. This is from "The Midwest: An Introduction to Heaven." "This country-within-a-country situation gives us a foreign-ness, a mysteriousness, a sort of *je ne sais quoi* (as we'd say in our native Midwestern language) that has been used countless times in popular culture. Mysterious Midwesterners are everywhere, from Don Draper to Jay Gatsby, Jason Bourne to Magnum P.I., James T Kirk to Superman." It seems like you felt a similar kind of mystique – or, is mystique the wrong word? – mysteriousness?

MD: Yeah, and it's the perfect kind of mysteriousness because it's non-threatening mysterious. When you would say you were from Iowa, people were automatically nicer to you. I think part of it is they're like, oh, you're not from New York. You're not an asshole. Even if they're from New York, people from the city are assholes. And then two, it's like you're not gonna be smart enough to swindle me. And so, it's this simple-ness is the word that kind of defines us in general. On the positive side, the simple-ness of a Superman, he's out there saving people just because saving people is the right thing to do. Superman can really only be from Kansas if you wanna make it the shorthand as untrammelled goodness. Batman is the more kind of conflicted – he's from Gotham City. It'd be a little weirder if Batman were from Kansas, because it's like, what went wrong? You had everything, great public education, loving parents. The plotlines of both of those tie into the geography. The downside of simple-ness is the clinging to guns and religion kind of thing, of oh, he must be racist, or he must be an evangelical Christian, probably not a lot of nuance in his thinking.

JD: There was some of that too?

MD: Yeah, people would literally, and this is verbatim, "Oh, you must be racist if you're from Iowa." And at the time I was like, "Hmm, I never thought about it. Maybe I am. This person seems pretty certain." When I went to the UK for whatever reason, gayness is geographically specific. Sometimes Americanness, when translated into Europe, came across to European women as gay, and a lot of people in the UK were convinced that I was gay, so much so that I thought to myself, "Maybe I am gay." I tried to think gay thoughts, and it was, "No, I'm pretty sure I'm straight." And I think when you were out east, people would say with such authority, stuff about the region that I never thought about, like, "Maybe I am racist." And then you start breaking down, "Well, what do we think?" And is everybody culturally aware here, and is nobody racist out east? And then you spend enough time out there and you're like, "Ah, it's not nearly as simply as they make it out to be."

JD: Were there moments, and I'm speaking personally, because I had a similar background in Montana, where nobody was encouraged to stay. We had a fantastic public high school, great graduating class – small, 52 students. Nobody was considered a success if they stayed there. And yet, later on, I found things in this town I was supposed to move away from were really useful to me elsewhere. Experiences or values I had gleaned from that upbringing. Do you feel like there are parts of your Iowa upbringing that really proved valuable at U Penn?

MD: Yeah, and I wonder if it was Iowa upbringing, but there was a little bit more of an emphasis on not self-reliance, but part of this was from my mom being an engineer, her first car was a car she rebuilt. A lot of my relatives are in the auto industry. You can change a tire or change the oil or work on a toilet. There wasn't anything you just thought the staff was gonna do. One time I was surprised when I was in the dining hall and I just got food, as I had done every day. And I didn't usually make casual chit-chat with anybody in particular, but I was like "Hey there, how's your day going, Janet?" And the woman was like, "You know, you are the nicest kid at this school." And I was like, "Oh, really? Thanks." And I don't know what it was about, you know, I'm not sure what I was doing, but you do just naturally carry yourself in a little bit of a different way. I think part of that is in my town, not everybody was gonna go to a four-year university and so there were friends of mine whose parents were nurses or teachers or worked at Wells Fargo,

somewhere in jail, and others were in the food industry, others were in the military, and so you never really looked at any of those people as an other that you wouldn't associate with. You kind of had a greater understanding of how regular people lived their lives. And I think you inherently then treat more people with just a natural respect right off the bat than an, "Oh, I am here at U Penn and service workers down here in service worker land." You kind of felt more of a connection to other people in general rather than a dark division between top to bottom.

JD: If she was being genuine, she wasn't using nice as code for simple-minded or non-threatening?

MD: I don't know, even the fact that she would initiate conversation with me was a sign that she felt comfortable saying something, because a lot of the kids at Penn could be so prickly that the university staff wasn't gonna say something to them for fear that they'd complain to the dean about being harassed, like "I'm being accosted by the staff! Is that what I pay for?" And yeah I found that even in the UK there was just kind of something about, not necessarily even people like me but just people from the region that were more approachable.

JD: So, your four years at U Penn ended with an ill-fated plan to study in Europe. Can you talk a bit about what those plans were and what kind of life did you envision for yourself if that kind of opportunity had panned out?

MD: I did my junior year abroad in Scotland, after the summer my freshman year I did a program in Germany, so I lived in Germany and took classes in German. That made me realize I'm not good at foreign languages and if I was gonna go abroad again, I should go somewhere that speaks English. So, I picked the UK, got a scholarship to go to Scotland, met my girlfriend in Scotland, and then was thought I'd go back to Penn for a year and then come back here and get a master's degree, and I'll find a program to pay for it. And there was a program that was gonna pay for me to get a master's degree in Scotland, so I'd just go back, get a master's degree, live with my girlfriend, and my senior year thesis was on the EU, which I was particularly interested in, and specifically the EU's first quote-on-quote army, where they put together a military force called the EU army to help quell civil war in Macedonia in 2001. And believe it or not, it was like the biggest news story in the summer of 2001. And then September 11, 2001 happened and it kind of fell off the map. At the time this was a big event, and the US wasn't gonna be involved because we didn't wanna be involved in nation building, according to George W. Bush before September 11, FYI. So, the Europeans had to step forward and find a solution to this issue without America, because we had taken a big step back from the world stage. A totally different time from 2002-2003. So, anyway, I was particularly interested in the EU, figured I'd go get a master's degree, possibly get a PhD or work as a consultant, live in Brussels or London. And you look at Brexit now and I often wonder what would've happened if I was working for the EU, living in London, with a family and would I have to move out now, but I don't have any of those questions in front of me because I got rejected for that fellowship. So, instead of having this group pay for me to go over to the UK, I then had the next six decades of my life free because I made no other plans post-graduate. I didn't take the GREs, I didn't take the LSATs, apply anywhere. By February of my senior year, I had post-graduate years wide open, so I decided to start selling t-shirts when a friend suggested that we sell a t-shirt, and I've essentially just done that for the last fourteen years.

JD: So, you started selling t-shirts as part of putting all your eggs in this other basket that somebody took away, or you didn't have to begin with, and that brought you back to Iowa. How did you feel about coming back to Iowa? Can you take us back to your Mike Draper self then and what you were thinking and feeling?

MD: When I first started selling t-shirts, I was in Philly and I stayed out east, so I would travel from Boston, New York, Philly, and I'd just sell shirts on busy streets, college campuses, that kind of thing. You realize the shirts that did well were, if I was on Columbia's campus, a shirt about Columbia would sell well. Part of you is like, no shit, but a lot of people think business idea first and then customer second, whereas if you think customer first, well, of course, kids who are Columbia have all that in common and they want to buy stuff that's about the thing they have in common. So I was thinking of what's a niche market, where would I open a store, how would I print the shirts myself, what kind of demographic would I target? And a friend of mine from Des Moines who was living in New York, I was talking to her about this, and she was like, "You know what you should do? You should move back to Des Moines and open a clothing store and make t-shirts on the east side." And I said, "Really?" And she said, "Oh, yeah, my dad said they're renovating all these buildings by the capital." So, you get some advice at the right time and you're like yeah, you know what, I'm gonna do that. Because there was this light bulb of man, there's no other stores that do what I want to do in Des Moines. It's 500,000 people, and I'm privy to all these inside jokes. It's like this huge niche market. It's exactly what I was looking for. I need like a college campus, but a city size. Everybody's got this one thing in common, they have a shared identity, but it's not a shared marketable identity; it's not a college town. There were no colors to the city, there's no one sports team everyone's behind. It was this big market you could help actually build a shared identity using knowledge gained growing up here of what the shared identity is already. I didn't think of all that back then, I've only kind of filled in the eighty percent of it, but the initial thing I got was, I know all the inside jokes, and more importantly, I could live for free with my parents, a buddy of mine from high school could teach me how to screen print, and real estate is cheap AF. Those things probably were the main drivers, and then it turned out later to be an actual good move in terms of design and content.

JD: Related to that, your book, *The Midwest: An Introduction to Heaven...*

MD: *God's Gift to Planet Earth*.

JD: *God's Gift to Planet Earth*, yeah.

MD: Can you remember the whole title, though?

JD: I think *Introduction to Heaven* is in there somewhere, though. Am I confusing that with something else?

MD: "Introduction to Heaven" is chapter three, but it's *The Midwest: God's Gift to Planet Earth, An Illustrated Guide to the History and Culture of the Galaxy's Most Important Region*.

JD: So that came much later?

MD: Yeah, I think that was 2012, which would have been – I opened the store in the fall of 2005 – so the book would have been seven years later. It was a long road up to writing a book.

JD: Did you bring these inside jokes that you knew, I'd assume, from growing up, did you bring any other perspectives from having been back east?

MD: Not really. From an aesthetic standpoint, not necessarily. It wasn't necessarily that I went out east and saw exactly what I wanted to do, and was like well, I'm just gonna do it in Des Moines. It wasn't like sushi's popular in Manhattan, I'm gonna move back to Des Moines and start making sushi. The story has always had a kind of unique voice. The one thing I really gleaned from U Penn that I saw that was lacking in Des Moines was this totally unplaced confidence. You realize it's not the people out east were that much smarter or better experienced, or more talented. They were just brimming with confidence. So, it wasn't necessarily bringing something that Des Moines was lacking in a physical or human sense, but it was making an adjustment, personality wise, and being like you know what, instead of this kind of modesty, but pride – we're modest, but we feel really good about where we live. There's this Iowa modesty. But this legitimate belief that the town I was growing up in was better than all other towns. Measurably better. And so there is this unspoken confidence and pride. So you think, why don't you just take that and project it onto shirts? But at the same time, joke about the city in general. So, "Des Moines, hell yes" was one of the first shirts. It's on its face, a positive slogan about Des Moines. But, deeper, this kind of joke. Well, yeah, you're excited about Des moines, but nobody should be that excited about Des Moines. Somebody from New York gets the joke, and somebody from Des Moines likes wearing it. "Iowa is 75% vowels, 100% awesome" is kind of on the other end of it. A bit positive, more playful. And then "Des Moines: let us exceed your already low expectations" is kind of this – some people say they're jokes about Des Moines, but that's not a joke about Des Moines, that's a joke about somebody who thinks Des Moines doesn't have buildings or indoor plumbing. The joke is about people who come here and they thought it was gonna be a shithole. But I mean, it's not as bad as you were expecting. Like, thanks, man, yeah I live here.

JD: That's what I was getting at I guess, that you brought some of that perspective from having been in Pennsylvania and having heard people say these things.

MD: I mean "Iowa: wave the next time you fly over" is not a joke about Iowa as much as a joke about people who think it's fly-over country. I got not so much ideas from out east that I could one-to-one stick in Iowa, but I got a perspective of how to start making jokes about Iowa at east and west coast residents' expense. We weren't reinventing the wheel, just adding a hubcap to it.

JD: Saturday Night Live says they're equal opportunity satirists, that they spread an even hand – their parody of other people. You get some examples of how your products, some of them we're critiquing, is bogus confidence that people outside the region have, or baseless claims they're making about the region. Is there anything about Iowa you're also critiquing in that playful, yet somewhat serious way? Any prevailing attitudes or cultural norms in the Midwest that you're trying to unsettle?

MD: I don't know if there's naturally any cultural norms – most of that stuff we'll do a little bit more seriously as far as getting involved in actual policy, if that's trying to get the city to be more welcoming of immigrants and refugees and even making the most of the immigrants and refugees we have here currently. In that sense, the what we have to teach Iowa in general, but it's not just Iowa, just kind of America. The store itself is that. It's this boost of confidence where we sell confidence as lacking, but not a false confidence. It's a cool store, and the stuff is funny and it's well-designed and well-made, and we take that side of it seriously. We're not real estate developer from Manhattan kind of bullshit types, we actually believe it. But at the same time, there's people who are gay, transgender, minority – our manager in Cedar Rapids, his parents were Laotian war refugees, one of our managers in Des Moines, his parents were war refugees – and so the composition of the employees and the product itself is kind of our message to Iowa, of this is the new Des Moines, this is the new Iowa, this is kind of what modern America in general looks like, with this welcoming culture, slightly more egalitarian. A lot of the content is jokey, and some of it is at east coast expense, but our main goal is to just sell stuff to people in the Midwest. But the store itself is what I consider the message to people elsewhere. The absolute tip top of that message is that Iowa needs nobody else. You could seal it off from the rest of the country and we have all the talent we need here currently. Its not lack of talent, it's lack of motivating talent. And it's not that I'm this savior who swooped in from New York. I'm from here. Moved away, and the lesson I learned moving away is that I don't need anything they have. I can move back here and do what I wanna do. Almost the entire company is run by Iowans, and the entire company is run by Midwesterners. We want people to understand that it's not that we need to bring something else in, it's that everything is here already. It's just about allocating resources.

JD: Let me challenge that a bit with – so you also do things like “Dear America, sorry about Steve King” or Chuck Grassley. Everything isn't here, quite, right?

MD: Everything is here, just even the bad stuff. That's why I say it's the allocation of resources. We've got too much allocated to the Steve Kings. We need to dial that down. We're certainly on the progressive politics side of it, and that's not necessarily a critique of Iowa in general as it is one specific Iowan – Steve King. And it's more this mystery of, “I wonder how this white supremacist keeps getting elected?” It's an honest mystery to me. He doesn't reflect the opinions of, certainly, a majority of Iowans, and I would argue not even a majority of his district. Something else is at play there. Some of those progressive sides, it's less general as it is extremely specific issues. We have weighed into things like water quality or progressive politics, which are certainly pretty clear-cut messages. Like, Iowa, is there poop in this water? Which, I mean, that's a pretty good question. The answer is yes. Those are less subtle tongue-and-cheek as they are pretty much just mouth.

JD: I want to get to the new Des Moines, you just mentioned that. I don't want to give Raygun the short shift, so I know a lot of this is on your website. Is there anything you'd like to cover in this forum about your benchmarks, growing a business, how you started off with Smash and then Raygun?

MD: The original name was Smash and then we changed the name in 2009 when a company called Smash in California threatened to sue us. I try to explain to people because you read about

these start ups and oh, this CEO from this start up got an investor from this place and now they're scaling up this fast. We don't have any investors, there's no board, I'm not the CEO because there's no other officers. I'm the OO. I'm the only officer. It's just me and the bank. So, we are an extremely traditional business in the sense that it's like a guy, I leverage product to borrow money from the bank to expand. It's not like a company with a million dollars in sales and net losses of \$400,000 gains six million from investors and is scaling up really fast. We've grown slowly but surely. The first two years, '05 to '07 it was just me. '07 I hired an employee, 2008 I hired two more employees. We expanded the store a little bit from 1300 square feet to 2800 square feet. The store we're in currently is 10,000. I started in this tiny box where I'd print all the shirts, ring up every sale, open, close the store, stock, fold, clean, unclog the toilet after you clogged the toilet – you know who you are. Opened Iowa City in 2010, wrote the book in 2012, opened the Kansas City store in 2014, moved into the current space we're in, from E. 4<sup>th</sup> to E. 5<sup>th</sup>, in 2015 and then opened Cedar Rapids in 2016. We hope to continue growing, but it's been just a slow and steady march. We've never had a viral hit, we've never had one shirt take off where money isn't a concern anymore. We're always leveraging and swinging from rung to rung. There's almost always risk in that sense. We run out of money every 12 to 18 months, roughly, and those are the times where you're like oh god, what do I do this for? If I ever don't do Raygun, the constant back of your mind drum beat of cash, cash on hand, cash coming in, cash coming out, is the one thing I will not miss at all. It's exhausting to run a little company and to be just so cognizant of money all the time. If somebody asked me to rattle off the top of my head monthly credits, debits, starting balance, ending balance, and expenses coming up next month, that's the stuff I could verbatim plow right through, which is sad in a way, but that's how a little business is. You have to take the good with the bad. There's a lot of downsides to it, but the upsides outweigh the downsides. For me, the upsides are the creative aspect of it, control over the product, control over how the product is sold, vertically integrated company, the system, the employees, everything about it. It's nice being able to create your own little world.

JD: Part of start up culture is that sense of being in a relationship. I was just speaking with Megan McKay, who was one of the founders of Peace Tree Brewing Company, and those stressors you're describing of keeping the place afloat is not just can I avoid bankruptcy myself? It's all the people on the payroll you care about, your actual friends that you're worried about. Is that fair?

MD: Yeah, it's this knowledge that literally where Raygun is not, physically, at E. 5<sup>th</sup> and Grand in Des Moines, had been a parking lot for 60 years. Everything about the place has come out of thin air in the last decade. The store, the content, the building, and all the people who work there, me included, have been pulled into this thing that now exists. If it's gone, everything about it is, too. The building will still be standing, probably, unless, god, who knows. Then everybody else has to leave, too. We'll all be out of work. I'll have way more paperwork than other people who work there, as far as personal guarantees, loans, leases. You do kind of feel a deep connection to everybody at the store, but just the store in general. The only thing that comes close to running a little company is raising children. You don't really understand until you do it. There's this deep bond to it, but also the knowledge you don't have total control of it. Your kids are your kids, but you don't really dictate their personality or interests. It's also kind of like being assigned roommates at birth that you're in charge of. There's this mysterious element to their interests and their nature that you realize you're not in control of. The business is like that too. You run it, you

own it, you kind of know why people like it, but you don't know why they like it that much, or why they don't like another thing not that much. There's this mysterious element to it that means you're along for the ride with everyone else, just hoping it keeps going.

JD: You told me a story once about one of those very first relationships where you met someone who caught you at a screenprint, but it was someone you might not have otherwise partnered with. Can you take us back to that?

MD: The guy who I learned to screenprint from was a guy who was a year ahead of me at Van Meter, his sister was my year, and one of the first guys who printed with me part time was someone I only met because he came in and was like, "Oh, I know how to screen print, I can print for you sometime." I was like, "Yeah, cool!" He printed at a place on the east side. He was about my age, same haircut, color, both white dudes from central Iowa so we both looked similar. He'd come in and screenprint occasionally part time, great guy, we both like Tool, Slipknot, like metal from the 90's. One day a friend of mine from Van Meter was in and we were talking about this guy who prints here part time, and then I realized I'd never asked him where he went to high school. He said, "Oh, I didn't graduate from high school." "Oh, really?" "Yeah, I got into methamphetamine, dropped out of school, was part of this landscaping crew, then the owner went to jail, two of the other guys went to jail for a little while, and I got clean." Like, "Oh, well. You're a great guy to hang out with now."

JD: Maybe just print some shirts.

MD: And he's still one of my good friends and you just kind of realize when you're in the small business world, it's a much much much different world from the academic world, in that the academic world – being in college was so cloistered and so detached from reality that everything could be built around resumes because nothing had consequences. Who knows where the money comes from? Who knows where the building come from? The building are just here and we're the people in the buildings and then we build all the rules. A business, you're taken from that and just dropped onto the ground, and it's like fucking make money. You don't make money, you don't pay your bills, you get a job doing something else. Suddenly, people's resumes, their background, none of that means shit to you. Zero. Where their parents come from, what they do, how much money they have, you need someone who shows up and works and produces, because you have to produce stuff to sell to make money to pay your bills. It's taking your perspective on the world that everybody is what their resume says they are and flipping that 100 degrees to everybody is what they are doing right now for me. And you just need somebody to show up and help you. In another life, I'd never give this guy the time of day. But in the life I've been in, you just realize you need people who are dependable, and I value their time if they value my time, and my loyalty is to those people who put the time in. My loyalty is not to somebody who's had a red-hot resume or is the Michelangelo of screenprinting. Running a business has changed my perspective of lots of things – what makes a great person and who the "masters of the universe" are, was that Woolf who said that about the investment bankers where he called invest bankers masters of the universe, though I think he meant it sarcastically. But then Harvard was like, "We're making the masters of the universe." And it always kind of makes me chuckle, because Heman was the masters of the universe. Who is the best of the best? Oh, the Ivy League is getting the best of the best. We need the best and the brightest! What a crock of shit! How are

you defining best and brightest? Is it by loyalty? Is it by dependability? There are some real-world talents that you need to succeed, and most of them don't fall under best and or brightest. The best and the brightest from the Ivy League can often succeed when they're in this teeny tiny hyper controlled environment where the competition is controlled and the rules are controlled and it's run by a gatekeeper and the gatekeeper determines who stays and who advances. There're no gatekeepers in a small business. You're at the mercy of the general public. How you set up your whole operation is different.

JD: Let's go back to your description of your employees. You've described the diversity you have in your staff and your store community as the base of the new Des Moines. Some of that is cultural background, some of that is sexuality, all those things are part of how you define these new faces of Des Moines. I'm assuming you're not just hiring those folks in spite of all those diverse characteristics because you're a creative enterprise, that diversity actually helps them be more productive for you. How have you seen that come out? Someone's surprising background being actually helpful to your business mission.

MD: Yeah, I think we've ended up with a diverse crowd because when you have an alternative or progressive or welcoming message, a certain segment of society is gonna feel more comfortable working at the store than they would at a major corporation. It's just these unspoken signals that are given. I think a lot of people from minority segments of society have been more attracted to the store because it seems, on its face, a more welcoming environment for people. Once they're working there, they'll bring their friends there and it's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy. You need people who appreciate what the store does more than anything. We need dependable people. I honestly have not put that much stock in people's backgrounds. You're inherently attracted to people who have a similar background to you. I kind of noticed that in myself and then the first few employees in the company when it was me doing the hiring where other people from small Iowa towns who were into hard rock in the 90's. You end up attracting other people similar to you, but then we've been aware of making sure that the people who are doing the hiring for the store staff kind of cycle through different types of people in the store. You want different faces in charge of the store and you know they'll start hiring people who look like them. But if you keep rotating through who that hiring person is, it kind of keeps the staff changing and then it helps build a motivated staff if the upper management is a diverse cross section. The unspoken signal to anybody working there is that anybody can move up. Whereas if you look at the upper management and it's all one type of person, the unspoken signal is that only that type of person advances. I've always been cognizant of that since my mom was a mechanical engineer, which is rare for women to be mechanical engineers. When they moved to Iowa, she was one of three female mechanical engineers in the entire state. And so, she would get a lot of times people saying women shouldn't be engineers or women aren't as good as men, women can't do math, can't do science, should take care of her kids. She said, "Oh, this guy I'm working with, this real asshole says that women shouldn't be mechanical engineers." And I said, "Oh, wow, why is that?" "Probably because he's a shitty engineer." The idea being that if you're so worried that your position is so tenuous that just introducing the added competition of female engineers is gonna drop you off the ladder, well you probably shouldn't be on the ladder. And if your whole situation is on lockdown, you have nothing to worry about, you welcome all new people as a possible benefit to the operation. I think deep down that side of me has been engrained mixed with my experience running the store. It's not for me to say, based on

somebody's past experience or background if they'll succeed. Only they can prove that over time.

JD: In your store, you illustrate some of those changes in Des Moines. I know you've told me other times you don't think Des Moines has changed that much. The East Village is often held up as this crucible of innovation and hipness, but you don't think that's really changed?

MD: Des Moines hasn't changed all that much numerically. It has from two different sides. People often say the 90's were the brain drainers when everybody left. Now it's so much different. From a brain drain standpoint, Iowa is not much different than it was in the 90's. We still lose the same amount of people now as we did 30 years ago. In that sense, the state is the same. However, numerically, Des Moines Public Schools is a majority minority. The state and the city are more racially diverse. There're two sets of numbers there. The city is more racially diverse, but it's not like we're bringing in this whole new crop of people from the outside. It's still an Iowa-centric city. You can ask people where they went to high school, and a vast majority of the time, their high school is in Iowa. The major employers here have always been the major employers. Nationwide was Allied Insurance, basically the same thing. ING was equitable, Meredith, Wells Fargo was Norwest Bank, Principle, but it's not like the Bay Area where some of the major employers now didn't even exist in the 90's. In some senses, the city is really similar to what it used to be, but there's this change in attitudes of progressive attitudes, can-do attitudes – there's an energy to the city that wasn't here in the 90's. You do kind of wonder what is it? If nobody moved here from the outside and people are still leaving here, what is so different? IT's kind of nice, it's this mysterious element in that there's not one thing you could do or that another city can do to match it. Well, you gotta do this, or you need this employer, or you need this industry or you need this college. There was one of these top 10 lists of hip neighborhoods for every state, and the East Village was the hip neighborhood for all of Iowa. You read that now and you think of course it is. It's got Raygun, it has the gay bars. If you had told me in 1895 that the hip neighborhood in all of Iowa would be in Des Moines and not downtown Iowa City, that in and of itself would seem crazy. But then you look at that list, and a majority of the hip neighborhoods in every state were college towns, whether it's Madison, Wisconsin, Austin, Texas, and so Des Moines is even more of an anomaly in that. You've got this hip energy without the main ingredients of hip energy. Without a college, without a major tech company, without some sort of band that's drawn people in. I think that is one of the most interesting things about Des Moines – not that it's changed the game numerically, but it has somehow developed this new attitude that makes the city so much more livable.

JD: Isn't Slipknot from Des Moines?

MD: Oh yeah.

JD: But they're not bringing in groves of people.

MD: Corey, Joey, Shawn Cran, those guys are all still around. But it's not like they created a metal scene like Soundyard and Nirvana kinda ushered in this Seattle music scene, and it's not like a Nashville where the modern Nashville has drawn in Jack White from The White Stripes

now lives in Nashville. We've had some blips, but it hasn't been much. You have Slipknot, then we've been under a bit of a drought in terms of Top 40 talent from Des Moines.

JD: Do you think Raygun is changing Des Moines?

MD: I would like to think that we play a decent sized part in that change in attitude and energy of this self-deprecating humor coupled with a boost of confidence. A lot of it is a little bit how you carry yourself and it's just when you would bring your friends into Raygun and it's jokes about Des Moines. Self-deprecating humor is always gonna endear yourself to other people in that you're automatically non-threatening, but it also shows this self awareness where you're more comfortable telling that person things because they obviously don't take it that seriously. They can see both sides of it. You want this self-deprecation so the city doesn't always have its guard up. It's less of saying this is cool for Des Moines or we don't need our guard up, we just don't have anything to prove. You don't need to be this great city to visit. I don't wanna live in a great city to visit, because I fucking live here! Cities that are great to visit are expensive and crowded and have tons of other people visiting them. I live here because my house is cheap, the people are friendly, my commute is only 11 minutes. You wanna build a city that's great to live in and then people who visit and enjoy it, enjoy it from the sense of enjoying what visiting a real city. It's not a show or put together this village of a downtown to demonstrate to everyone how awesome it is. It's not festival driven. It's a great city to live in and people who visit it respect that. It's trying to get Des Moines to take what it does well and recognize what it does well and to really own those things that it does well. The stuff that it doesn't do well – like being a world class city for the arts – it's never gonna do well. New York, LA, have those locked up and will never lose them, ever. It's like saying Rice is gonna be the number one university on U.S. news, worlds, and reports. It's never gonna happen. It's always gonna be Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford is near the top too. Never, ever, ever, ever, ever is it going to be one because that's not how the game is played. It's not that you say don't shoot to be a great city for the arts because it's unattainable. You can be a great city for the arts. You're not gonna be the "great city for the arts" as dictated by the New York Times. They give themselves that award.

JD: Just be a great city on your own terms. Confluence Brewing, I'll put Des Moines IPA up against anything that Stone makes out in California. Some of those things are just objectively quality.

MD: It's not even just intimidating, but it's also inspiring, like a quiet confidence of somebody who knows what they want. It's not like I'm in Des Moines because I can't find the exit, or I've lost the lottery of life and I'm required to live here, or I'm taking care of an ailing parent and I dream of elsewhere. I've been elsewhere, and I like it for these reasons. It's the confidence to say I've experience A-Y and I'm here at Z and I like it for these reasons but I like A-Y for these reasons, I just choose not to be there. That's a lot different than projecting that you're just stuck here and would love to live somewhere else. A lot of the people who run stuff in Des Moines currently help project that quiet confidence that I think people find inspiring.

JD: We've talked in other contexts, circling back to our opening about how to define the Midwest, and you've told me that the Midwest is defined by certain opposite in tension, I think is your phrase, so why do you think that is? Understand I am one of the Midwest people that's

holding opposites in tension, and what are some of those opposites you think of when you think of Iowa?

MD: You kinda have everything at least sometimes combined. The agrarian to the industrial. The traditional rolling hills, American Gothic style, family farm. But also the Henry Ford driven Crayola mass production. Steel plow, the Forest River Rouge plant at the time was the biggest factory in the world, and you look at Fox Con now that makes iPhones. Proportionally to the size of the state at the time, the River Rouge plant was even bigger than that. They're taking ore from Minnesota, turning it into steel, and then turning that steel into a car in one set of buildings. Breath-takingly huge, but you don't think straight away of heavy industry when you think of the Midwest. You do, but you think of the rust belt – Chicago, plus Iowa. There's lots of these opposites you hold in your mind. It's twangy, but it's also jazz, it's also rock and roll. You don't think of high art when you think of the Midwest, you think of the Farmers' Almanac, which I think is from New England, though. At the same time, the first Nobel Prize in Literature is Sinclair Lewis from Minnesota. The great American novel, *The Great Gatsby*, was pretty much about three Midwesterners and a girl from Kentucky who lived in New York. Is that a great American story? Is that a Midwestern story? The great American movie, *Citizen Kane*, is written and directed and stars a guy from Wisconsin. People who "created" rock and roll, Sister Rosetta Tharpe out of Chicago or Chuck Berry out of St. Louis, the phrase is coined by a DJ in Cleveland. On the one hand, it's like all the information is in front of you as far as what we put out there. On the other hand, it's almost like there's so much stuff out there, it's hard to get your mind around. It is holding opposite views at the same time. Are we traditional, backward, or is this cutting-edge literature?

JD: Earlier you were saying a Midwest comedian, like David Letterman, is able to bring a certain edge through this Indiana schtick of understatement and overstatement that's clearly not meant to be taken seriously. Do you think holding onto this tension is another secret to Midwestern humor?

MD: It's certain things. For Midwestern humor, there's two sides of it. Gene Sheppard was this writer from Indiana who wrote the short story and the movie "A Christmas Story," which plays for 24 hours a day on TNT. He said the Midwesterner is a born audience member. Part of it is this deep seed in your psyche that you're growing up somewhere, you're observing other people. Everything's going on around you. You're natural inclined toward observation from a distance. Your whole being means you've removed yourself from the equation. Even when you're in the center, you're David Letterman in New York or Johnny Carson in Los Angeles, you still have this observational tendency. You'll have a better wit, because the first step of any great comedian is to turn the lens on yourself. You have to break yourself down before you break anybody else down. I think being the audience member takes that center of attention element that makes for a bad comedian off the table to begin with. Secondly, is how you're perceived by other people. David Letterman, even though he's living in New York, his whole Indiana thing, and he calls his mom, and he talks about the Hoosiers, and he has his C-student at Ball State scholarship program, even when he's being a dick, you're not really sure if he's being a dick because he's from Indiana and everybody there's so nice. You also have people's perception working in your favor. They perceive you as this friendly guy and so your humor can be a little more biting and get away with it because you're balancing these two sides, this "aw, shucks, I'm just this little

old guy from central Indiana, what do I know, here in the big city?” And you can lull people in. One of my favorite interviews, I even showed it during the Clinton/Trump campaign was when Letterman had Trump on, like “How, how are you doing? God, that’s such a nice tie. You just love America don’t you?” And he’s like “Oh, yeah America’s number one.” “I mean these ties, where in America – where is this made? Let me look here.” He gets on his glasses, he’s like “Hmm, that looks like China. This is made in China.” And it’s just skewers but reels him in, and it’s not like any sort of gotcha journalism. It’s this perfect example of “Aw, shucks, let me just check out the label here. By golly, it’s made in China! How about that?” It even sounded like Trump was kind of, like Chinese gotta work too. Even when you’re inside of it, you’re not really sure what’s going on. There’s the natural tendency towards being this audience member and also how other people view you. A lot of stuff we say at the store, we can only really get away with because we’re in Iowa saying it. If you walked into our store and you saw some of the progressive slogans, if this were Portland or Austin or Brooklyn or LA you’d be like, “Oh this is what I’d expect. Just snowflakes out east telling me how to live.” Your guard is up because you’re in one of these progressive havens. Whereas when you’re in the middle of Iowa, those same slogans don’t seem nearly as threatening, for whatever reason. It’s kind of like, well, there it is. You don’t really know what to make of it. Both things give us a natural disposition towards observation but also this geographic advantage of what people will let you get away with.

JD: Nothing can be too threatening.

MD: People’s guard is gonna be down if you say you’re from Iowa. Then if you’re mean, they’re approaching it from where their guards already down. There’s this interlude where they ask if this person is being mean to me. But, they’re from Iowa, they can’t be! Everyone from Iowa’s nice. So you can say all sorts of things. Ronald Reagan, Illinois native, was a master of this kind of stuff. Self effacing and some of the policies could be so cruel but you didn’t notice it as much because it was delivered in this real folksy way. He was another one of those guys that got away with more just because the way he carried himself. George H. W. Bush was his vice president but could never pull that off. He was a scion of a political family, from Connecticut that made money in Texas. Both him and Reagan were in politics but there was something about Reagan that was relatable which is bizarre, a twice married actor from California is your typical American, but it was the whole he’s from Illinois and he worked on the radio in Iowa.

JD: I hate to rush things but I want to make time for some of our big picture, less serious questions about the Midwest. We’re asking everyone these kinds of things to wrap up. And I know you’ve read quite a bit, but what are some types of movies, books, or any type of art – I know you mentioned a painter – about the Midwest that you would recommend or that you think are significant?

MD: Yeah, for painting I find Thomas Hart Benton one of the most interesting guys personally, but also the subject of his stuff with the bridging of traditional themes. The more you look back on it the more you’re like, “Yeah, this guy was the real Nexus of the twentieth century American painting.” From that standpoint, Thomas Hart Benton. In terms of books, I still consider *The Great Gatsby* to be probably the quintessential Midwestern book because it’s all Midwestern themes but takes place in New York so it also deals with that theme of leaving. Other books that have taken place in the Midwest – Jonathon Franzen’s *Freedom* and Louis St. Clair’s *Main*

*Street* are all Midwestern settings. I'm not sure great Midwestern filmmakers would have to be the Kellen brothers. I've tried this but have never really discovered the answer to a great Midwestern rock and roll album. I mean, *Nebraska* was written by Bruce Springsteen from New Jersey. Slipknot's *Iowa* is not nearly as good as Slipknot's self-titled album, but I've never really figured out what would be a quintessential Midwestern rock album. I'd have to think about it. The Beach Boys are seen as southern California culture and Bruce Springsteen from New Jersey, but I'm not sure if there's a rock album that's Midwestern.

JD: Country albums?

MD: Yeah, I don't know, I'm just trying to think of theme-wise, it's harder to think of a rock album that's geographically placed as much as the books, paintings. The people in *The Great Gatsby* are from the Midwest, so.

JD: One of my friendly scholarly rivalries is with Fitzgerald because I'm a Cather scholar, so I would throw *My Antonia* into the mix there. Interesting that you picked *Gatsby* because it's the Midwesterners elsewhere. *My Antonia* is narrated by a lapsed Midwestern, Jim Burton, who has left and followed his Classics professor to Harvard and then spent a lifetime on the railroad, passing through gateways to everywhere else and he's just remembering everything about his childhood. He goes back to visit, he isn't really a Midwesterner anymore. How about some historical figures from the Midwest that are interesting to you? Significant?

MD: Some of the most interesting historical figures of recent memory, I would put Michelle Obama near the top as kind of the – I guess both of the Obamas are kind of high – this modern Midwesterner of similar vein of communication as Ronald Reagan, so have some of those similar elements but from different rings of the political spectrum, just in general. Some of the fascinating – the Koch brothers from Kansas aren't necessarily Midwesterners I admire, but certainly like, God, what makes these guys tick? And on the other side of that it's somebody like Bob La Follette, the father of progressivism out of Wisconsin. It's hard to pick that many – there are just so many on the table of Midwesterners I would pick from. David Letterman I find interesting from the comedian side. Richard Prier is another Midwesterner I find fascinating.

JD: Kanye West?

MD: Speaking of Midwestern modesty, Chicago's Kanye West. Detroit's Eminem. There's almost too many to pick from to really narrow it down as the quintessential one.

JD: When you think about the most surprising changes in the Midwest in the last ten years, what would some of those be? If you can project any changes in the next ten years, what would those be?

MD: I think the Midwest has gone through what a lot of America has gone through with three generations of cities. One of the interesting things is this idea of mega cities, that cities are just gonna get bigger and bigger and bigger. I've actually thought the exact opposite. At a certain point, a city is collecting a group of people together, and those collected people can share the burden, swap ideas, and as soon as you hit a certain size, the city is so big that it makes meeting

the other people in the city not nearly as easy. The city almost starts losing its advantage at a certain point, it hits its peak. I think mid-sized or smaller cities, especially with the Internet, you're able to do more than you were able to do 20 years ago. I think the next big trend in America will be the rise of mid-sized cities as points in a constellation where you're all kind of tied in. The Midwest kind of holds the key to what does the post-industrialized economy look like? It was the center of American industrialization, and so a lot of the development in the cities are going from a city that produced steel, like Gary, Indiana, with 10,000 people, it still produces the same amount of steel but it only uses 1,000 people. What do you do with all that space? How do you tool a city that was meant for a certain number of people? How do you re-tool it for the new number of people? I think that's kind of the mystery that the Midwest will have to crack. Is there a way to set up these cities slightly differently in the future? We're still pioneers in a certain sense, but you're pioneers in this, you've been thrust upon a new economy and how do you set up these cities that were built for an older economy to succeed in a new economy?

JD: Maybe an easy one, do you have a favorite Midwestern food?

MD: I am disgustingly stereotypical in that I really like ranch dressing. I actually do like rhubarb pie, which is also a real Midwestern thing.

JD: Ranch is Midwestern?

MD: Yeah, I think ranch has always been thought of as a Midwestern thing. Rhubarb pie is your quintessential Midwestern desert, which is looked at oddly from the east coast because rhubarb is a vegetable, it's not a fruit. So you wouldn't put vegetables in pie. A lot of east coast people would question that.

JD: Alright, so, no walking tacos, or? My wife has a podcast about food and her co-host lives in New York and the co-host and the producer were talking about lunches that my daughter has in school, walking tacos. They don't walk anywhere with it. And nobody else from New York had heard of a walking taco.

MD: Yeah, we were talking about that at the store just the other day, the walking taco, where it developed and we discovered it is Midwestern. I guess, tenderloins, pork tenderloins, are something that I actually really like, which are midwestern. And I never realized they were all that Midwestern until a friend of mine from San Francisco was like, "I'll take the brown breaded pork sandwich." And we were all like, "What? Ohh, right, a tenderloin." I think surprisingly little about food. Food is something I need to keep me alive, so I literally eat the same thing for breakfast and lunch for months on end. I've never been somebody that gets really wowed about what I'm eating, I just do it for specific reasons. I'll run the numbers on calories and nutritional value of certain meals. I just don't wanna dedicate that much brain power to what I'm gonna eat every day.

JD: It's like the gray t-shirt for Zuckerberg. Simplify your life.

MD: Yup.