

GATEWAY TO THE MIDWEST

Guest: Mike Draper
Interviewer: Joshua Dolezal

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MD: 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. 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: Mike Draper is the founder and owner of RAYGUN, a Des Moines-based T-shirt store that opened in 2005. Then it was a screen-printing shop, and Mike was its only employee. RAYGUN has since grown into a regional powerhouse with locations in Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, Kansas City, and Chicago. RAYGUN is beloved by Midwest natives for slogans like “Des Moines: Hell Yes” or one of my favorites: “Iowa: 75% Vowels, 100% Awesome.” But its designs also cut with a sharper edge. One T-shirt shows Mt. Rushmore with the faces of Hillary Clinton, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Elizabeth Warren, and Michelle Obama above the caption: “Mt. Nasty.” As Mike told me about his Iowa roots, I was surprised by how early he began to question his Midwest birthright. As a kid, Mike heard his Connecticut relatives speak about Iowa to other New Englanders as if it needed defending. He later felt that difference more keenly at an Ivy League university, where his peers saw him as a mystery, a guy from a blank spot on the map. And others were certain that “Iowan” was just another word for “racist.” RAYGUN thrives on the double voice that came alive in Mike's childhood when he began to see himself and Iowa through others' eyes. Like Mike, the store is an irresistible blend of opposites: playfulness and defiance, the classic and the chic, slapstick and satire. RAYGUN warms the hearts of Midwesterners near and far. But it also challenges the myths that continue to define Middle America on the coasts.

Mike's story is the first in our debut season of Middle Ground. Throughout this season we follow eight native Iowans who left the Midwest and came back to stay. We ask them all what drew them away and what pulled them back, how they were transformed by other regions and how they contribute now to a changing Midwest.

I'm Joshua Dolezal and this is Middle Ground. This episode contains language that might not be appropriate for all listeners.

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: 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." 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.

JD: Let's talk a little bit about high school. And trying to keep our focus on Iowa or the Midwest. So, 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: 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 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: 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: 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 your 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 Pittsburgh and Las Vegas and where anything could be happening currently.

JD: I'm going to 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. It's like, Oh, OK. 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: 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 opportunity had panned out?

MD: 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. Which, 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, I didn't 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 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 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.

JD: Did you bring these inside jokes that you knew, I 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 store 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 I was 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 with an even hand – their parody of other people. You get some examples of how your products, some of them were critiquing this 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 don't accept, 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 saw 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 artist 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. It's 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: You told me a story once about one of those very first relationships where you met someone who taught you how to 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 hair 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. I said, “Where’d you go to high school, man?” 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.” You’re like, “Oh, well. You’re a great guy to hang out with now.”

JD: Maybe just print some shirts.

What do you think of cutting the segment below? If it doesn’t work, could cut all the way to 32:12. I like the riff on the “best and brightest.” But I wonder if it grows redundant.

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, yeah, 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. 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, man I 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.

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 there are 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 you think 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. You don't want everything to be, "It's cool for Des Moines. And where are you from again, Toledo? I'm sure everything in Toledo is so much better than here." Gong Fu Tea isn't cool for Des Moines. Gong Fu Tea is cool wherever you put it. It is one of the best tea shops in the country, just hands down. 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 Potemkin 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.

JD: Just be a great city on your own terms.

MD: 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 experienced 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: You've told me that the Midwest is defined by certain opposites in tension, I think is your phrase, so why do you think that is? Understanding Iowa or the Midwest means 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 built in the world, and you look at Fox Con now that makes iPhones. Proportionally to the side 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. Breathtakingly 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 Louis 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: 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: 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 elusive 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: 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: 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.