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Live from New York, it's Riley Donahue Podcast

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RILEY DONAHUE: We're usually there till, like, 2:30, 2:00 in the morning, wrapping things up, making sure everything's good to go and then making sure we have things planned out for Sunday. And then 9 times out of 10, we'll go to the afterparty. So, you know, I might not get home until 6:00 in the morning. You know it's a good night when you're walking home and the sun's coming up.

I'm Riley Donahue. I graduated from Clark in 2014, and now I'm the senior designer at Late Night with Seth Meyers and Saturday Night Live on the digital marketing team. And yeah, I think Clark was a fantastic place to just grow and achieve your dreams.

Andy Palmquist: Penguin Chats is brought to you in part by Gin Group, Schwabe, Williamson & Wyatt, Vesta Hospitality, Waste Connections of Washington, Arnerich Massena, and US Bank. Our corporate partners are helping make extraordinary things happen at Clark College Foundation.

RHONDA MORIN: Welcome to Penguin Chats, a Clark College Foundation production. I'm Rhonda Morin.

Clark alumnus Riley Donahue watches Saturday Night Live every week. In fact, he's live and in person from the Manhattan studio. That's because he's one of the digital content producers for Saturday Night Live and Late Night with Seth Meyers.

It's a job that keeps him up until the wee hours of Sunday morning, but it's a really exciting adventure for him. Riley also finds time to freelance, like a short film he created featuring actor Johnny Depp and rockers Alice Cooper, Nikki Sixx and Joe Perry. Yeah, those guys.

And Riley is an unassuming guy. In fact, he's quite shy. He's been that way for a long time. He remembers how shy he felt when he attended Clark. And now looking back, he wishes he had tried to break out of his shell as he walked the halls of the Penguin Nation.

Clark helped him realize his potential by encouraging him to do new things, like submitting artwork to a student publication. His confidence grew, and so did his willingness to take risks, like moving to New York City with a guitar case and 20 bucks in his wallet. Let's listen as Susan Parrish talks with Riley Donahue.

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SUSAN PARRISH: And just even a specific one.

RILEY DONAHUE: One of the coolest stories that I think I've had working at SNL was that I, literally on my first day, when I was getting my guest badge to get into the building, I was in 30 Rock, and I was just waiting in line. There was someone in front of me. And then that person turned around, and it happened to be Alice Cooper. And I was like, whoa, that's cool. I didn't expect to see that.

And then about two years later, I have the chance to actually work with him and use his voice talent. Not working with him directly, but getting to work with his voice. And he obviously had opinions and ideas for the Crossbone Skully project, as well. So there was some collaboration there on some of the visuals and just things that he thought might be cool for the video.

So yeah, I think that was kind of the full-circle experience, where, oh, I was a fan and I saw him, and that made my day, and then two years later, here I am working with him. He had ideas for the project and was

doing voiceover for it. And it was kind of crazy, but that's just kind of how it is with this industry. You never know who you're going to be able to work with. When it's someone you really look up to, it's definitely special.

SUSAN PARRISH: You mentioned you were a shy kid. And even at Clark, you were shy and didn't get involved as much as you might have now. What did you do to overcome your shyness?

RILEY DONAHUE: Hmm. Have I ever overcome my shyness? I'm not fully sure yet. It's still kind of hanging in there. But yeah, when I was at Clark, I was extremely shy. I think I really focused on just playing things by the book, and just really focusing on getting the good grades, doing everything right, and not really branching out and trying to meet new people and do things like that.

And I think the biggest thing for me to overcome that was just kind of throwing myself into situations that were kind of bigger than myself, whether that be submitting to the Phoenix or, hey, they're doing a show at the gallery here at Clark, why not do it. I think those were intimidating tasks at first, but that's kind of how the snowball kind of happens, is you just throw yourself into situations that are kind of uncomfortable, and you don't have a choice. If you're shy, you'd better get over it quick, because you don't have an option to be shy.

SUSAN PARRISH: What's your advice for Clark students who might want to follow a similar career path as you have?

RILEY DONAHUE: My advice for students that want to follow a similar career path to me is take every opportunity that comes to you. And kind of like what I just said with this previous answer, too, is there's going to be opportunities that come your way that make you uncomfortable, and you just have to get over it. Showing your artwork in any kind of public setting, whether it's two people or 500, it's nerve-wracking, and it's not really something you really get used to at any point.

But I think when I was a student, I just didn't give myself the time to process whether I was comfortable or not. I'm like sure, let's do it. And I still do that to this day. And I find myself saying yes to so many things. And then taking a step back, I'm like, oh wow, what did I just get myself into? But I think that's a really important way to just get into the industry, is being really ready for whatever comes your way, because it won't stop.

There will always be something new for you to try out. And that's something I can work on now, is kind of saying no to some things, because you can't do everything. And there's this constant snowball effect of you do one gig, and it turns into five more. And at some point, there's a limit, and you have to know your limit. But I'd say for anyone who's just starting out, every small opportunity will grow into something bigger if you really make it your own and give it 1,000% every single time.

SUSAN PARRISH: What have been some of the coolest moments working for NBC Universal?

RILEY DONAHUE: Some of the coolest moments working for NBC Universal is, I mean, honestly, just being in 30 Rock. Like, having a desk in that building is-- I don't think any of us on our team will really ever get used to that. I think that's a story we'll tell our grandkids one day. It's such a historic building, and it's like that's the one. And yeah, being a part of these shows, whether it's a small part or a big part, you're really part of it.

And you go downstairs to go on the set to do something, and that's the set that's where the show has always been. And I think that's just a surreal part of the job that you really never get used to. I've been there five years, and every day kind of has that first day feeling of like, wow, this is crazy. So I think just

being in a place where there's so much creativity and just fast-paced working every day, it's just cool to be a part of that.

SUSAN PARRISH: Tell me about a typical Saturday night working for SNL.

RILEY DONAHUE: Oh, man. A typical night working on Saturday while the show is going on is-- it's hard to define it. Some go really good. You know, my computer's working great. There's no hiccups. And other nights, all it takes is one tiny little thing. And we're on the social team, so we're not editing the sketches or anything heavy. But we're trying to make sure our audience gets the show on social just as soon as it goes out on air.

So we're really just playing this speed game of getting this content out as soon as possible. And literally if one little thing goes wrong, the whole night goes pretty quick. Usually, you get the cold open sketch done, and if there's an issue by the end of the monologue, that could be an extra hour that you're there. But it's fun, too. Really, you just have to create and problem-solve super quickly. If there's an issue, you've just got to communicate. And yeah, we have a pretty small team, but we're all pretty close because we've all seen some things on Saturdays, I guess is the best way to put it.

SUSAN PARRISH: What kind of hours do you work on Saturdays when the show is happening? Like, what time do you arrive and what time do you leave?

RILEY DONAHUE: Well, we usually typically get to 30 Rock around 6:30, 6:45. Dress rehearsal starts at 8:00. So we get in. We're all in like a conference room. And we just kind of set up, and then we set up the live feed so that we can watch the dress rehearsal feed in the room so that we're all watching it together. And then we're usually there till like 2:30, 2:00 in the morning, wrapping things up, making sure everything's good to go, and then making sure we have things planned out for Sunday. And then 9 times out of 10, we'll go to the afterparty. So, you know, I might not get home until 6:00 in the morning. You know it's a good night when you're walking home and the sun's coming up. So there's definitely that side of it.

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SUSAN PARRISH: What was one of the biggest changes moving from Vancouver, Washington to New York City?

RILEY DONAHUE: One of the biggest changes from moving from Vancouver to New York was-- I think everything was different. I don't think there was a single thing that was the same. Well, I first moved to Utica, New York. That's where I started going to school. And when I went to Pratt, there was two campuses. There was one in Utica, and then you do that for two years, and then you go to New York City, in Brooklyn, for the last two years.

So it was a jump from Vancouver to Utica, which was probably equally as strange. Utica, New York is much smaller than Vancouver. And I had no idea. All I knew was like, oh, I'm in New York now. It's going to be huge. And then I get to Utica, and it's like this one-street, little, tiny town. And I was like, I don't even know what I just got myself into.

I remember literally getting off the plane in Syracuse, and my sister and my mom drove me to Utica. It was like an hour drive. And I remember falling asleep in the rental car and waking up. And that's kind of how it felt. I was in Vancouver, and then all of a sudden, I'm waking up in a rental car in Utica, New York. And it's so much quieter than anything I've ever experienced. And I'm like, I really don't know what I got myself into with this.

SUSAN PARRISH: But then when you move from Utica to Brooklyn, tell me what that was like. And you were probably riding the subway and--

RILEY DONAHUE: That was a shock, as well. Moving from Utica to Brooklyn was a huge change because that was night and day. I think that was kind of the night-and-day experience that I thought I would have initially from Vancouver to Utica. But Utica and Brooklyn was night and day. And I remember I flew in. All I really had on me was my suitcase and a guitar case.

I flew in. I took some kind of free or \$15 bus from the airport to Times Square. And I was so intimidated and kind of scared of the subway that I walked from Port Authority bus station to Pratt, which was in Brooklyn, which is about an eight-mile walk. It took me all day. I was just like, I don't know where I am. I have \$20 in my wallet. Everything I own is in this suitcase and guitar case.

And I'm just like, all right, I'm just going to walk and figure it out. And I'm really glad I did that, because that actually ended up being my bike ride from Pratt to 30 Rock, because 30 Rock is somewhat near Port Authority. That was also another kind of full-circle experience, where I'm like, I don't even know where I am. I'm just going to start walking and figure out my life now. And then that route actually became my route to 30 Rock. So I thought that was pretty surreal.

SUSAN PARRISH: What are some of your favorite hangouts in New York, besides 30 Rock?

RILEY DONAHUE: Oh, man. There's this studio out in Brooklyn, kind of out in the middle of nowhere. It's literally just in this industrial area. There's not a lot of stuff out there. And there's this music rehearsal space called Battalion Studios. And this is probably the most random answer to this question because there's so many iconic New York hangout spots, and my favorite happens to be this literal, like, hole-in-the-wall space where you can just go play drums and record music as loud as you want.

That's the hardest thing about living in an apartment, is not being able to do those things. And that's my one place where I can just let it out and be myself. And yeah, every time I'm there, that's a good day, because I can really do the things I really love to do, and making music and just being loud. And that kind of goes against the whole apartment living. So it's always a blessing.

SUSAN PARRISH: Where do you get your inspiration for your artwork? I imagine that's many different things, but maybe even just a specific instance of where you got your inspiration for a specific piece of work.

RILEY DONAHUE: Where do I get my inspiration. I think it's interesting focusing on art and music at the same time. I think they inspire each other. There's a lot of internal inspiration in my head. I don't really look for other sources of it. I mean, I'll see things in the world that I really like, and I'm like, oh, I'll take a picture of that, or I'll write that name down and check that artist out later.

But I think the things that really get me going is, like, I'll record a song and then I'll be like, OK, I need to animate this for it. Or other way around, I'll animate something and I'm like, well, here's a song right here. So I think, for the most part, there's a lot of back-and-forth between those two things, and they kind of just fuel each other.

If I'm not really inspired musically, I'll take a break and draw something or make something, animate something, and then it just kind of brings it back. So there really hasn't been a dull moment for either of those two things. It's kind of like just that back-and-forth process of, when the music's going good, great, and then when I need inspiration for art, it's that back-and-forth.

SUSAN PARRISH: When do when one of your pieces, your graphic pieces or a video is done? Is it driven more by deadline or do you have enough experience to look at something and go, OK, this is done?

RILEY DONAHUE: OK, when do I know when a piece is done? Usually, 9 times out of 10, it's when someone is like, I need this right now. Yeah, it's rare to ever feel like this is done, I'm happy with this, especially with animation. Animation, it's endless. Like, I feel like I could go back and redo decent portions of a lot of the animated pieces I've worked on, just because you always can. You're literally creating a world within itself, so you can always go back.

But something I really appreciated with the Crossbone Skully project was I finished that thing in two months. It was due in June of 2022. And then we actually picked it back up in September. So I actually got to go back and make all the changes I wanted to.

And the reason I went back was so that we could include the voiceover of all those awesome people, but at the same time, I'm like, OK, we're going back to make that edit, but let me redo literally half this video. I was happy with it, but I knew it could be better. So that was definitely a case where, at one point in June, I thought that thing was done.

And then I look at it again and have another month to work on it, and I'm like, let me redo 50% of this, just because I knew I can make it better. And it definitely was like a night-and-day change for that video, really. I got to do all the things I wanted to do

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SUSAN PARRISH: We talked before you talked about saying yes to opportunities and kicking open doors. Have you ever regretted saying yes or kicking down a door?

RILEY DONAHUE: That's an interesting question because that's actually something that's starting to come up in my career, where saying yes to a lot of things has gotten me to where I'm at, but then you have to ask yourself, if you're saying yes to everything, what are you-- if you're saying yes to everybody else and doing everything for everybody else, does that mean you're saying no to yourself? And I kind of had a realization with that recently.

The person who managed Tommy Henriksen on the Crossbones Skully project, I've worked with him. He kind of represents me now as well, and we just kind of back and forth, and he knows about some of the personal projects that I'm working on right now. And I've told him about working at SNL and doing all these crazy things.

And then I think it was literally last week, I was talking with him, and he's like, that's great. You're doing all these awesome things. But you're not doing your work, your dream. And it's like, you say yes to doing a logo, you lose eight hours doing sketches and stuff. That's eight hours you could have used for this project that you keep talking about.

So I think when you're first starting out, saying yes to most if not all opportunities is probably a good thing just to get yourself out there. But I think there's an important element to your career where you got to be like, what's really valuable to me? And what is potentially getting in the way of it when these things that are getting in the way feel like success. When you get a gig, someone reaches out to you, that feels good. That's a good feeling. They're going to pay you. It's going to be a good project.

But then you hit a certain point when you're like, OK, what are some things I'm not doing? What's my actual dream? Is my actual dream just to be someone who supports everybody with their animation needs and things like that? Or is there some kind of bigger project that you want to do?

So I think that's kind of something I'm realizing right now in my career. I've had all these wins all these trophies, the SNL thing, and working with these companies and these awesome famous people, but then,

at the end of the day, you've got to look back and be like what's the real dream? Instead of a dream for everybody else, what's your specific vision?

And I think that's something that's happening in real time, I guess, right now. So that's something I'm kind of going back on right now and kind of just reevaluating my career. Do I want to just keep supporting everybody else or can I start fitting in my vision in with that work as well?

SUSAN PARRISH: I'm finally making time for my own work. I have a nice book I'm trying to finish, I'm going to finish, but I keep accepting all this freelance work--

RILEY DONAHUE: Exactly, it just--

SUSAN PARRISH: Because I have to pay the bills.

RILEY DONAHUE: Exactly, and there's just always-- yeah, there's that constant, like, I need to pay this and that. At this point, I feel like I'm definitely 100% working at least two full-time jobs with freelance and SNL. And yeah, there's no room for anything else. So it was really nice having someone who has heard all the stuff I've done, and it sounds good, it sounds really good to say you've worked here and did this and that. And for someone to be like, yeah, well, you're not doing your dream. He's like, I'm going to tell you something. Don't get offended. But you're messing up big time right now.

And I'm like, wow, I haven't heard that in a while. I haven't heard that I'm not doing something right for so long because like I said, even when I was at Clark here, I played the rules. I played by the book. I didn't do anything wrong. I worked hard and I knew that would get me somewhere. And it did. It got me somewhere amazing.

I don't know, it was really eye opening for someone to just say that after here's my list of trophies and stuff I've done and things that everybody would freak out over and have someone just be real about it and be like, well, I know what you're actually capable of, and you're not doing it, so you need to reevaluate some things. That was really cool. I needed that. I definitely needed that.

SUSAN PARRISH: The last thing I wanted to ask you is just as kind of a tourist in New York, tell us about some of the iconic New York places you've experienced. Have you hung out in Central Park? Have you have you kicked a ball around Central Park or taken a jog or gone to the top of the Empire State Building or what kind of-- seen the Statue of Liberty?

RILEY DONAHUE: In terms of some of the iconic places I've experienced in New York, my list is kind of embarrassingly short because I've been busy. I've been busy. But I mean, I try and go running in Central Park every night when I'm there. So I mean, there's that. It's a lot of just-- you'll see things within your own life-- I walk through Times Square every day to go to work. So that's how I experience it. I never just like went there to go see it. Oh, I'm sure I did before I started working at 30 Rock, but yeah, even like the Brooklyn Bridge, I used to jog that every night when I was at Prep, just because it was somewhat close and I wanted to see it.

So I think that's something that's kind of cool about living there is that you get to see these places kind of in your own natural setting. Well, I don't know if I can see anything iconic outside my window, but everything's so close to where I'm at. I'm literally, like, two blocks from Times Square. So that's right in the heart of everything. But yeah, I think that's something that I always kind of hold on to is just experiencing all these classic touristy places just within your own life.

Like the 30 Rock Christmas tree, I've only seen that because I had to find my way through the thousands of people looking at the tree just to get to work. So it's like I saw the tree, but I also experienced the

crowds to-- I've got to get through that. That's always a nightmare every year, honestly. But yeah, you just get to see all of these things, and it's just part of your daily life, which is kind of crazy.

I mean, out of all the people-- I mean, you see people in 30 Rock all the time. Literally everybody's there, always, because that's just where they are, whether they're on Fallon or SNL or something else. There's just always someone walking around. And that was by far my favorite one.

SUSAN PARRISH: So like Colin Jost, because he's like-- I love Colin Jost.

RILEY DONAHUE: Yeah, I've seen him. I mean, especially going to the after parties, you see everybody there. And yeah, it's pretty surreal, but it's weird to kind of get used to it. It's like, oh OK, I'm in the elevator with Colin Jost or Michael Che or something. And it is just kind of like everybody's there to work. And I mean, I don't really have those like fangirl moments just because, I mean, everybody's just there to work and do their thing.

And that's kind of how it is at the after party too. You don't go run up to people. They're celebrating their hard work. They just did this week. Every week is a nightmare of its own. So they're just chilling out.

That's what I'm doing. I don't have the energy to start a conversation with someone I don't know by that time too, so everybody's in the same boat by Sunday at 3:00 in the morning.

SUSAN PARRISH: Well, just the last season on SNL, they said goodbye to some really key players-- wasn't it just last year that quite a few left? And now their names escape me.

RILEY DONAHUE: Oh yeah, it was a long list. And weirdly, it's getting longer for some reason of rebuilding. It seems like--

SUSAN PARRISH: I'm thinking, why can't I think of that really talented petite blonde actress who played--

RILEY DONAHUE: Oh, Kate McKinnon.

SUSAN PARRISH: Yeah, Kate McKinnon.

RILEY DONAHUE: It was Kate, Aidy, Kyle, Pete-- I think that was it for last year. And then some people left early this year too. That's kind of the cool thing too is seeing it season by season. Like season 43 was my first season, and just seeing how the show has changed within five years is kind of wild too.

Even the work that we're doing is extremely different from my first day there. And every year, it's such a different game. It's hard to even know it-- you can't even really predict your work for the next five months, even. Where will you be in five months? I don't even know because I could be working on something completely new. Yeah, I mean, we're just kind of keeping up with the pace of popular culture in a way, and that moves quick, especially these days.

SUSAN PARRISH: Yeah. Now what about during the early stages of the pandemic, during the lockdown? There weren't any shows happening, were there? I mean, was everything just--

RILEY DONAHUE: Oh, there was. Yeah, SNL at home was something. That was definitely wild.

Everybody's in their apartment and just shooting stuff, sending it to editors.

Yeah, I mean, they still-- I think it was like March 12 or something was when we all went home and they were like, oh, just bring your computer home and make sure all your gear works, and then we'll come back on Monday, and then two years went by. We never went back into the office. And I mean, it was the same case for everybody on the show. They sent out green screens and stuff, and everybody just kind of tried to do it over Zoom like we were all doing, just trying to figure out what they were going to do.

And since we were on the digital team, we were kind of one of the few teams that could just operate as normal. So we were still able to post the show as it was happening on air, and that was kind of the

moment where digital was the only place. People were watching it in the sense that-- it kind of became a digital-first show for the first time with these new obstacles of everybody's at home.

So that was kind of cool to experience, just because we've been this supportive role as a digital team that's just supporting what happens downstairs on the set, and that's never changed, but it was really cool to be like, oh, now we're the ones kind of bringing this to the world. I mean, it was still on air and everything, but like I said too, that's just kind of how the job is. It redefines itself every season and there's something new. We can just make more things and do more original stuff with the show.

And since we're like-- our team's NBC. We're part of NBC, and then there's this show, and there's kind of this separation there, but I think each season, we kind of get closer and closer, and we're able to do more and more with the show. So that's been really cool to experience over time as well. When I first started, it was somewhat closed off. We were doing some things, but there was some friction there just because we were two separate groups that didn't really know each other.

And then, over the years, you kind of just get to know each other a little better and just be like, well, hey, we can help you out with this too and we can support you in these ways. And now we're doing a ton of original stuff with talent and things like that. So it's super cool to see how far we've all come and you know everyone's really come onto our team and really defined their roles and who they are and how they operate. So yeah, I love everybody that I work with. Everybody's really just locked in to what they're doing. And they all do it really well.

RHONDA MORIN: Read the full story about Riley and see his short animated film featuring Alice Cooper, Joe Perry, and others on our website, clarkcollegefoundation.org. Well, that does it for this edition of Penguin Chats. Thanks for listening. I'm Rhonda Morin.

ANDY PALMQUIST: Penguin Chats is brought to you in part by Ginn Group, Schwabe Williamson and Wyatt, Vesta Hospitality, Waste Connections of Washington, Arnerich Massena, and US Bank. Our corporate partners are helping make extraordinary things happen at Clark College Foundation.

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