Comedians have a long history of adapting their talents to emerging technologies. From the earliest sound recordings through film, radio, long-playing records, television (network and cable), social media, and now streaming, comedians have enthusiastically embraced these new opportunities. In June 2005, Apple updated its iTunes interface to version 4.9, allowing users to easily download, subscribe, and submit podcasts.

Comedian Marc Maron, along with his producer Brendon McDonald, joined the podcasting game on September 1, 2009. Maron first utilized the facilities of a Manhattan radio studio that had been the home of a failed radio network called Air America. The comedian had dabbled in radio for years and was extremely comfortable behind the microphone. They called their weekly podcast “WTF with Marc Maron” and their first guest was a short telephone interview with stand-up comic Jeff Ross.

The show eventually evolved into a long-form interview format with Maron adding an extended introduction/rant at the top of each episode. Maron moved the show to Los Angeles and insisted on face-to-face interviews. No more phoners.

Maron’s mission was simple: candid, unfiltered conversations. He wanted to connect. He wanted authenticity. Podcasts allowed unlimited time without interruption. This provided a creative freedom for both guests and hosts that was difficult to achieve on commercial radio or television.

The bread and butter of “WTF” were Maron’s chats with his fellow stand-up comedians. Maron possessed an uncommon ability to extract revealing, confessional moments from the lives of these performers. And the episode that solidified “WTF’s” place in early 21st century culture was episode #67, his 2010 interview with comedian Robin Williams.

To state it bluntly, this episode put “WTF” on the map.

Maron was determined to get Williams for his podcast. This would be the biggest, in terms of fame, interview of his career. It took lots of wrangling and “jumping through hoops” to convince the
stand-up legend and Oscar-winning actor to participate. Most guests on “WTF” would travel to Maron for their interview. Not so for Robin Williams. Maron got in his car and drove up to San Francisco.

They recorded at Williams' massive home in the upscale, coastal city of Tiburon. There, the two comics chatted for nearly an hour and the results were a revelation. No one had really heard Williams speak so casually and candidly about his life.

Williams was world-famous as a wild improvisational comic who could rifle through multiple characters, accents, and impressions at breakneck speed. That’s what was expected of him, and he always delivered that public version of Robin Williams. This interview would be different.

A good portion of the conversation centered on Williams' stand-up career: why he still performs, starting his career in San Francisco, working with Richard Pryor, bombing, the pressure to always deliver, why he didn’t like hand-held microphones, improvising, and his quest to find spontaneous comedic moments. Maron also got him to address the long-standing allegations of his joke thievery. But that was just the tip of an iceberg.

Williams also spoke with great candor about his divorce, depression, open-heart surgery, alcoholism, parents, bitterness, leaving L.A., insecurity, and his devastating relapse after 20 years of sobriety.

I believe one of the primary reasons that Maron was able extract this revealing version of Williams was because it was just the two of them in the room. Maron handled the recording equipment himself. There wasn’t a producer or assistant or handler to distract Williams or coax him into performance mode.

Also, it’s important to note Maron’s own well-examined relationship with drugs and alcohol. Although he has been in recovery for years now, Maron’s first-hand understanding of that struggle often aids him in facilitating empathetic, vulnerable, and honest conversations. Exactly what he hoped to capture when he started the podcast a year earlier.

One of the many joys of “WTF” is its access into the world of stand-up comedy. Listeners get to hear how comics talk to each other and about each other.

The list of fellow comics whose names were dropped throughout the Robin Williams episode ranged from the legendary to the obscure: Richard Pryor, “Freaky” Ralph Eno, Sam Kinison, Dana Carvey, Paula Poundstone, Dom Irrera, Bill Cosby, Bobby Slayton, Taylor Negron, Sandra Bernhard, A. Whitney Brown, Jeremy Kramer, Paul Mooney, Lenny Bruce, Argus Hamilton, Richard Belzer, Chris Rock, Steve Pearl, Rodney Dangerfield, Lenny Schultz, Andy Kaufman, Gilbert Gottfried, Larry David, and Rick Overton.

Toward the end of the interview, Williams launched into a disturbing yet brilliant improvised dialogue between himself and his “conscience” over thoughts of suicide:

“First of all, you don’t have the balls to do it…. I mean, have you thought about buying a gun?
“No.”

"What were you going to do? Cut your wrist with a water pick?"

“Maybe.”

"That’s erosion."

Today “WTF with Marc Maron” remains enormously influential. The podcast has become a destination not just for comedians but also actors, directors, musicians, writers, composers, and even a sitting a United States President.

Just four years after his “WTF” interview, Robin Williams committed suicide. An autopsy later revealed he suffered from a brain disorder called Lewy Body Dementia. He was 63 years old.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*