

Dean Robbins

Wisconsin Idols, 100 Heroes Who Have Changed the State, the World, and Me

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Host: Stu Levitan

Stu Levitan:

Hello again friends, and welcome to Madison BookBeat, your listener-sponsored community radio home for Madison authors, topics, book events, and publishers. I'm your host, Stu Levitan. My guest today is the very successful author, editor, and broadcast personality, Dean Robbins. His latest book, his first for adult readers, is Wisconsin Idols, 100 Heroes Who Have Changed the State, the World, and Me, from our good friends at the Wisconsin Historical Society Press. It's a collection of engaging short essays about 100 outstanding musicians, thinkers, actors, athletes, creators, and boundary breakers who are either from Wisconsin, attended the UW, or did something special here, and who had an impact on Dean.

For his part, Dean himself has had an impact, at least on the state and on me. He started as a freelance writer in 1983, became arts editor at Isthmus in 1991, where he graciously put up with me on a number of features, and 17 years later succeeded Mark Eisen as editor-in-chief. He moved to the UW in 2014 as communications director for the Division of Continuing Studies, and since 2019 has been editor of the alumni magazine On Wisconsin.

And beyond this award-winning journalism career, Dean has since 2010 developed a separate and even more honored career writing 15 children's nonfiction books, which we will make the subject of another BookBeat episode later this year. It is a pleasure to finally welcome to Madison BookBeat my friend and former editor, Dean Robbins.

Dean Robbins:

Hi, Stu. Thanks for having me on.

Well, thanks for being here. And first of all, congratulations on your first book for adult readers and for the WHS Press, no less. And thank you very much for putting me in the endnotes twice. I want to be clear, this was not the first thing I looked up, but yeah, I did look. So thank you for that.

You can't write about history in Wisconsin without going through Stu Levitan.

And Doug Moe, we have Doug Moe in there as well.

I think it's a given that any book that discusses the Onion and Aldo Leopold in back-to-back chapters is going to have an interesting backstory. So how did this book come to be?

Well, it probably started when I was a child, really, because ever since I was a little kid, I've had this pantheon of personal heroes. It started with Superman. I would draw Superman S's

on a piece of paper, and I would paste them to my undershirt, rip off my overshirt and fly off to help anybody who was in trouble. I moved on to Houdini, who was human but only barely more human than Superman, another kind of superhero. And I tried to emulate these people, which was impossible. I would have my sister tie up my hands with bandanas and ropes and I'd try to wriggle out of them like Houdini.

I moved on to people who were a little bit easier to pattern myself after, various scientists, artists, athletes, activists, a whole personal pantheon that I developed. And I always had this strong interest in getting other people emotionally invested in these people, too. I wanted my heroes to be everybody's heroes. And the best way to do that, of course, is through storytelling. So that led me to be a journalist and a children's author and now an essayist for *Wisconsin Idols*.

You mentioned Superman and Houdini? Did it occur to you at any point that they were both immigrants? One of those was a legal immigrant, the other was extraterrestrial. Do you think that factored into your appreciation of them?

You know, maybe subconsciously, my family was a family of immigrants. Of course, I didn't know at age five anything about this, but looking back, yeah, a lot of my heroes are immigrant types.

People may think what you just said about the S on a piece of paper on your undershirt is apocryphal, but I have seen photos. I have seen this photo of you as a child with the S on your T-shirt off to save people. What does it say about your childhood that you had that kind of fantasy?

Well, I guess I was just always attracted to people with extraordinary ability to make the world a better place and all the different ways that that could happen. You know, Superman is an easy example of that, but there are artists and performers who achieve the heights of self-expression. That always really appealed to me, somebody being the best that they could be, making the world a better place or just expressing themselves, maybe against all obstacles, to the best of their ability.

Are you disappointed there is no Superman connection in Wisconsin for you to write about in greater detail? I'm still searching.

You never know. Maybe Jerry Siegel passed through one time on a train to California.

There were a lot of surprises for me in my research.

Like what?

Well, you know, the fact that Jackie Robinson, for example, had a connection to Wisconsin that was worth telling a story about. Who would have thought? Duke Ellington, Harrison Ford, just turned up all sorts of interesting people who'd passed through and had a significant experience here with a story that was worth telling.

Sticking with Harry Houdini for a couple more minutes, what was it about being a magician and escape artist that appealed to you so much?

Well, you mentioned the immigrant quality. He called himself a self-liberator, and that really appealed to his immigrant audiences. He wasn't just a showman. He was freeing himself from bonds, and that was appealing to the immigrants who flocked to his vaudeville shows. And I think that appealed to me as a child. You know, you're beleaguered as a kid. You know, I had all sorts of various obstacles in my life growing up, and here was a guy that could bust out of safes and straitjackets and handcuffs. Why wouldn't that be appealing?

Calling oneself a liberator is an interesting identity for the son of a rabbi. Probably did a lot of big shows around Passover. Is Houdini still the hero who has had the greatest impact on you?

He's a major one. When I first came to Wisconsin, I knew that Houdini was from here, and as soon as I got here, I made a beeline for Appleton because I wanted to walk on the same streets where Houdini had walked. And you can find all sorts of interesting remnants of his life there, even though it was rather brief. He did consider it his hometown, but I think they spent four or five years there. Four years as a child. But this was formative for him. This is where he discovered magic and daredevil tricks. And you can see the spot where his family had lived, and they've built a beautiful statue there, which is one of my favorite statues of all time. He's turning ever so slightly. He's obviously trying to twist his way out of something, and you can just barely see that he's got a straitjacket on.

And the credit, the photo is in the book, and the credit on that photo of you and the Houdini bust is to your wife, Ann. Was she an eager and willing participant in all these journeys or a dutiful spouse?

She was a great partner in this whole book. She would come up with ideas. You know, I'm searching for ideas for who to put in the book, and she'd say, how about Ada Howey? You know, she would just kind of look around. This is a woman who was known as the most famous female farmer in the world, and she kind of revolutionized farming practices during the Progressive Era in the early part of the 1900s.

She would come along with me to various sites where significant things happened. That was a big part of researching the book. I went to the spot where Meinhard Robbe had grown up, the little person who starred as the munchkin corner in The Wizard of Oz. You can see his gravesite in this very obscure graveyard in rural Farmington, Wisconsin. We went to Mount Calvary, this tiny little town in central Wisconsin, where Viola Smith had grown up. She was the first female star of jazz drumming, known as the fastest girl drummer in the world. Came out of this little town that had a ballroom that was run by her father back when she was a kid in the teens and 20s. Even little towns had their own ballrooms, and she learned the drums there. She played with her sisters in this huge sister orchestra. They toured the state and then the whole region. It was so fun visiting spots like that with Ann, my wife.

So you've gotten so good at doing these interviews that you're anticipating the questions. I had a separate question here about what are some of the other places besides Appleton you've gone to. So you've given us two. What are some others?

Well, right here in Madison, of course, you can see the spot where Elvis stopped a fight at the very end of his life. East Washington and Stoughton Road, if you've never been there, there's a little plaque. I've been there an embarrassing number of times. I love to stand there and feel Elvis' presence in the middle of the night. He had flown into Madison for a concert. He was still wearing the sparkly blue jumpsuit from that evening's concert in Des Moines. He was less than three months from his death. So he was overweight. He was ailing. He was bottoming out. But the limousine that he was in stopped at a street corner, and he turned to his right, and he saw a bunch of juvenile delinquents beating up a kid who was a gas station attendant there. And for the last time, something stirred in him. I think we can say that. The last time. And he started to get out of the car, and his bodyguard said, oh, no, you don't. And Elvis said, oh, yes, I am. He strode out of the car, and he started throwing karate kicks and karate chops at the juvenile delinquents, and they froze in mid-punch. Here's the guy in a sparkly blue jumpsuit. It's obviously Elvis Presley.

They wouldn't have known it was Elvis. I mean, do you think they would have known it was Elvis?

They probably, we don't know for sure, but I think they recognized him. Well, they fled. So Elvis had saved the day, the last miracle of his miraculous life.

See, we have to track these punks down and find out what they knew and give them their shot of history now. And they can atone for beating up the other guy. Back to visiting Appleton that first time. Was that experience as meaningful as you had hoped it would be?

It absolutely was. They've got a museum there as well that has Houdini's stage equipment. And back then, they don't have this stuff anymore. The person who was leasing it to them has since withdrawn it. But when I first went, you could see his straight jackets and his handcuffs and his locks and his keys and the milk can that he escaped from. And what a thrill to actually be close to that stuff that I'd kind of fantasized about my whole life.

Yeah, I'm going to Tulsa in a couple of days. Tomorrow I'll be at the Bob Dylan Center, and I'll see Bob's harmonica and his harmonica rack, and I sort of get a sense of what you're talking about.

I feel like these people, to me, they're like family members and you're supposed to go visit your family, right? So that's why I make these trips.

The only commemorative trip I've made when I've been in Appleton was to its other most famous son, fighting Joe McCarthy. I did not act as respectfully towards him as you obviously acted towards Harry Houdini.

100 Heroes Who Changed the State, the World and Me. How do you define heroes?

Well, I think heroes are people who show humanity at its best, providing inspiration for the rest of us. And as I said, I think I have a sort of an expansive definition of that in the book. A lot of people wouldn't consider someone like Chris Farley or Carrie Coon maybe a hero. They were great performers. But to me, achieving the heights of self-expression is a heroic act and just expressing your individuality the way that they did. Athletes obviously have their own special kind of grit that we want to emulate:

- Jackie Robinson
- Eric and Beth Heiden
- Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

And then artists who help us see the world with new eyes.

Now, we listed the group, the categories. We've got thinkers, musicians, actors, athletes, creators, and boundary breakers. We, for the most part, don't have politicians. Abe Lincoln is in there, Vel Phillips, Ada Deer, but not for her congressional campaign. Obviously, there have been a number of Wisconsin politicians who have changed the state and the world. Is it that none of them changed you as well?

Well, the politicians who were in there, you forgot Belle Case LaFollett.

She's, I think, the other one. A politician who never ran for office.

Yeah, yeah. They tried to draft her as a senator, but she refused. I wanted it to be from the distant past. I was hoping that this would be a book that would bring people together. And if you get into partisan politics of recent decades, it starts to tear people apart. So I wanted this to be a book that people could kind of rally around and just feel good about the heroes in our midst who've made the world a better place.

We're talking with Dean Robbins. His new book is Wisconsin Idols, 100 Heroes Who Changed the State, the World, and Me, from our very good friends at the Wisconsin Historical Society Press. Are there heroes you've outgrown?

Well, there's heroes that you learn a little bit more about, and they're not quite as heroic as you think they were. There were a few essays that I wrote for the book that didn't make it in. I had one about Teddy Roosevelt surviving an assassination attempt in Milwaukee, which is a great story, very dramatic story. But Roosevelt had his good sides and his bad sides. But I started writing an essay, and I felt like there was something I had to acknowledge, like a dark side of somebody, and suddenly you're apologizing for it. That just didn't make for a great essay for the concept that I had for the book. So Roosevelt didn't make it in. I wrote a Neil Gaiman essay, the writer, and he's since been accused, I think credibly, of sexual assault. And suddenly he wasn't a great candidate for the book, so we pulled him out. Frederick March had been in something called the Ku Klux Klan.

Okay, let's talk about Frederick March, because you invite debate about some of your choices and your categories. And you've got Fred McMurray in as an actor, a Wisconsin actor. Frederick March, big man on campus, two-time Oscar winner, so progressive he was investigated by HUAC, was in the room advising Martin Luther King on the march from Selma to Montgomery. But as a youth, he was in the campus Ku Klux Klan. That's why he's not in the book?

Yeah, I think it wasn't that Ku Klux Klan. It was a fraternity. It was named after it.

It was guys like Walter Frautschi and Porter Butts and Philip Falk, who would become superintendent of Madison schools, Fred Bickle, who would become Frederick March.

Yeah, people, we don't know exactly what this thing was, but it was called the Ku Klux Klan. And that was an era when everyone knew what the Klan was and stood for.

So I started writing the Frederick March essay, and I felt like, well, I have to acknowledge that he was in something called the Ku Klux Klan. And I was trying to let him off the hook a little bit because he did do wonderful things later in his life. He was a progressive hero. But here I am apologizing in my book about heroes, and I just thought, you know, I can't include him. So we left him out with mixed feelings.

Okay. My question was about heroes you've outgrown, which I would characterize differently as heroes who have been dethroned because of bad stuff. Are there just heroes that were heroes to you as a child that now you say, eh, they don't mean that much to you anymore?

I think once a hero for me, always a hero. I mean, Superman, you think, oh, he's grown out of that one by now. No, I was with Superman last weekend, the movie, and I still put on my old Superman costume every once in a while when I need a dose of inspiration. No. I don't grow out of these things too easily.

You're kidding. You put that on? Seriously?

I'll show you the picture.

Has it occurred to you that you, over the course of your life, have accumulated a long list of heroes?

I have, and in fact, I wanted to include more in the book, and my editor just finally had to cut me off, you know, like a bartender at a bar, like, no more for you. This is plenty. So we had to leave a few on the cutting room floor.

This was Liz?

Yes, Elizabeth Wyckoff, my editor. Wonderful editor, yeah.

The fact that she survived you, me, and Doug Moe. That's an achievement.

I noticed, I counted, I think, four people in the book who I know or knew personally fairly closely or worked with. Did you keep track of how many people in the book were people you knew or know?

Well, some were people that I know or interviewed as a journalist or actually befriended. And, of course, the book is trying to be my vision of heroes with connections to Wisconsin. So, of course, there's going to be an idiosyncratic personal element to it. I can't say that this is the objective 100 greatest heroes of Wisconsin. It's my personal pantheon, and I'm sure it doesn't include a lot of people that some would choose, and it includes people that others wouldn't choose. But, yeah, some of the people that I've befriended are in this book, and it was really fun to write about them.

As long as they have blemish-free lives. I mean, that's the hard part is writing about friends who have occasional hiccups or...

Yeah, and, of course, I say this in the introduction, obviously no one's perfect, so there's no completely unblemished person here. But I had to develop sort of a personal sense of when did it tip over into I can't personally defend this person as an entry in a book about heroes. Laura Ingalls Wilder was one of those. I'm a big fan. I love her work, and I'm a student of her life, and I visited places where she's lived. But there was racism in her books. It was a different time, you could say, but I couldn't really defend it, putting her in a book about heroes.

I want to see if it's possible for you to assess in each category the hero who had the greatest impact on you. For scene stealers, no question, it's Houdini.

Orson Welles, another big one. I don't always remember the categories these people were in. It's a little bit, you know, you could fudge it. But if Orson Welles was in scene stealers, he's another big one. I had a record, an LP, as a kid of his War of the Worlds broadcast, and I was utterly fascinated by that production. My sister and I would sit there and listen to it. If people don't know, this was 1938. Orson Welles was a radio broadcaster, and he put together this production that made it sound like Martians had invaded the United States. And his stroke of genius was making it sound like an actual radio broadcast, where there was music and then there was interruptions with a news bulletin, Martians have landed, and people bought it all over the country and started fleeing their houses. And they'd hold up cloths to their mouths so they wouldn't breathe in the Martians' poison gas. I loved that as a prank and just as a piece of theater. So, Welles, Houdini, I'd say those are two big ones.

And Welles had an interesting sojourn in Madison for a couple of years. He did, and I know you wrote about that. That's the first time I ever heard about Orson Welles' experience at Madison Summer Camp, was in an article you wrote for Isthmus.

Were you the editor at the time?

I don't think I was, no.

For musicians, I've got to think that it's Woody Herman who had the biggest impact on you.

Well, the Beatles are in there, and Bob Dylan, so those are hard to beat.

But in terms of changing you, the way you talk about becoming part, the way he introduced you to big band music, and you write so evocatively about the harmony and the melody and the beat, it just seems that that... And you took up, you became a musician, you played in big bands.

Yeah, I was a trumpet player.

If we're choosing Wisconsin-born, Wisconsin-raised heroes, I would maybe choose Bunny Berrigan over Woody Herman. Bunny Berrigan was a tragic trumpet player. He was born in Fox Lake, grew up there, and went to school in Beaver Dam to learn about music. He was a trumpet prodigy. And as a kid, my dad had an old big band compilation record, and no liner notes or anything. It was just names on a track listing. And there was one by Bunny Berrigan called I Can't Get Started. And as a trumpet player, when I heard this the first time, I melted in my seat. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard, just the poignancy

of it and the pathos of it. The lyrics are about, which he sings as well, about a man who can't get anywhere with a woman. And his solo is just for the ages. It's one of the most beautiful trumpet solos ever played in jazz. I knew nothing about him. This is the pre-internet age, and I could only wonder who was this guy Bunny Berrigan. Ended up moving to Wisconsin and finding out who Bunny Berrigan was and a little bit about his life. He drank himself to death in the early 40s. But that song was so influential to me. And I could sing it for you note for note, nuance for nuance right now, the trumpet playing.

Do you still play?

Every once in a while, I'll pull it out. It's kind of hard unless you're doing it every day.

The embouchure is going?

Yeah. Don't ask me to do it here.

I still have a tenor down in the basement, so sometime we'll have, like, there's that group of writers out, you know, the big-time writers, Stephen King and those guys. They have a little garage band, Amy Tan. We can have a little Madison garage band of writers.

Or we can join theirs.

We'll see if they let us. For champs, I'm going to go with Jackie Robinson for that story you told about Ronnie Rabinowitz and their correspondence. Tell that story.

Oh, that's a wonderful one. Yeah, ever since I was a kid, I was utterly infatuated with Jackie Robinson, and I was so happy to find a Wisconsin connection for him. So there was a kid from Sheboygan who was eight years old in the 1950s, a white Jewish kid who idolized Jackie for integrating Major League Baseball in 1947 and standing up to death threats and discrimination. And his father wrote a long-shot letter to Jackie saying, hey, how about dropping my kid a line? He idolizes you. How many baseball players would write back? Jackie wrote Ronnie Rabinowitz back. And so father and son went to County Stadium in Milwaukee to see a game between the Milwaukee Braves and Jackie's Brooklyn Dodgers, and Ronnie called out from the stands, hey, Jackie, remember me? I'm Ronnie Rabinowitz. What major leaguer would respond? Jackie called back, oh, yeah, your dad wrote me a letter and I wrote you back. Stay in touch. And they started a lifelong correspondence. Back and forth, Jackie would share his philosophy of personal integrity and racial harmony. And to me, it's mysterious, like why would he do that? Why would he pour all that effort into a kid from Sheboygan and a white kid, no less, at a time of extreme racial tension? Kid from Sheboygan and a white kid, no less, at a time of extreme racial tension, again, the mid-50s. My theory was that he saw in this young kid a soul that was yet to be corrupted by prejudice. Here was a chance that he could maybe influence the next generation, since things weren't so hot with his own generation, with all the discrimination that he was getting. And maybe they'd go on to be a generation that would be more tolerant than his own.

What do we know about Ronnie Rabinowitz today?

He has died. He wrote about his experiences. That's how I know about them. I think it was a self-published book. It was obviously the formative experience of his life, and he stayed in touch with Jack until he died. So otherwise, you know, kind of just a normal guy.

There are many possibilities in the boundary breaker category of who impacted you the most: You've got Hans Christian Haig, Mildred Fish Harnack, Kay Clarenbach. But I'm going to go with our late friend Jeffrey Erlanger.

That's a wonderful story. I don't know if people know Jeffrey Erlanger, although his story has been told. It's been in documentaries about Mr. Rogers. There's a city award, the Jeffrey Clay Erlanger Civility Award that the city bestows. Yeah, he was a disabled boy. He needed some very serious surgery when he was very young. And his parents said, you know, make a wish. We'll try and do anything for you that we can in advance of this surgery. And Jeffrey said, how about if I could meet Mr. Rogers? Because he watched Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood and felt like, like a lot of kids, like this is a place where I could belong in spite of my differences. It's such a tolerant, accepting place.

Well, that was a tall order. So the parents asked his sister, who's a little bit older, to write a letter to Mr. Rogers asking if he'd be willing to meet with Jeffrey. And amazingly, Rogers pulled it out of the heap of fan mail and decided to come to Milwaukee and to meet Jeffrey at the Pfister Hotel. So they had a meal there. There's a picture of Mr. Rogers cutting Jeffrey's food. They obviously were bonding.

Well, they stayed in touch. And Mr. Rogers finally, I should say that Jeffrey survived his surgery. Mr. Rogers asked Jeffrey to come on the show and show his electric wheelchair. So Jeffrey rolled onto the set and the two just spoke spontaneously. There was no script. And Mr. Rogers said, "I wanted to introduce you to my friend, Jeffrey Erlanger. And I wanted him to show you his electric wheelchair." And Jeffrey speaks from the heart about what it's like having a disability. And, you know, there wasn't a dry eye anywhere in the country. He was so articulate talking about his doctors in Madison and all the things that you have to endure as a child with a handicap. It became one of the most famous episodes of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. And Rogers himself would often refer to it in speeches as a way of motivating people to overcome their own obstacles.

There's a coda to this story, which is that when Rogers was getting a big award in, I think it was 1999, Jeffrey came onto the stage. He rolled out in his electric wheelchair as a surprise and gave a little speech for his friend, Mr. Rogers. And it was one of the highlights of Rogers' life.

I knew Jeff a bit. His father, Howie, was my trust and estates professor. Sweet kid. He was just a lovely, lovely young man.

Along the lines of contacting people that you don't necessarily expect to hear back from, I want to talk about the cover for a moment, which started... You've got a blurb from the basketball legend and human rights activist Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who, of course, is one of the heroes you write about. Now, Kareem is not reclusive by any means, but, you know, he's in the pantheon. He's way, way up there.

With all due respect, I'm sure he never read Isthmus or On Wisconsin or listened to Wisconsin Life. So how did you get a full paragraph blurb from Kareem Abdul-Jabbar?

We're friends. You know, I used to beat him at horse. No. Well, you know, it turns out that these people are humans. They seem like gods. You can find an email address for Kareem's company out there. And I found it, and I thought, what the heck? And I wrote him, and I said, would you be interested in reading my book? And he said yes, and he provided this beautiful blurb. It happens. I mean, I won't tell you the people that I wrote that didn't write back. That happens, too. But occasionally you do hear back.

Wow, that's a good story. And sticking with the cover, there are seven figures on the cover:

- 1. The white male musician Bon Iver from Eau Claire.*
- 2. The white male comedian Chris Farley from Madison.*
- 3. The white female astronaut Laurel Clark from Racine.*
- 4. Ho-Chunk Mountain Wolf Woman from Black River Falls.*
- 5. The aforementioned black male athlete Kareem Abdul-Jabbar back when he was Lew Alcindor for the Milwaukee Bucks.*
- 6. Black male musician Richard Davis of the University.*
- 7. Oprah Winfrey, who defies categorization of Milwaukee.*

In terms of changing the state the most, I would say Alcindor, Abdul-Jabbar. For changing the world, I'd say Oprah. But which of these seven changed you the most?

Well, let's see. So you've got Richard Davis, who was one of the Wisconsin Idols, who was a friend of mine. And he was a huge influence, just such an eloquent person and a great artist. So that's somebody that I actually was close enough to to be personally transformed by. And his take on jazz, which is one of my great passions, was so revelatory to me when I moved to Madison in the 80s. He was playing around, and you could sit down in his class. You could befriend him. It's kind of amazing.

Otherwise, I think Oprah's story in the book, if I could explain that, is a really touching one. She was growing up in a struggling Milwaukee family and dealing with abuse and thoughts of suicide. She was dealing with teen pregnancy. So her life just felt utterly stuck. And when she was 12 years old, she experienced what she still calls to this day her best Christmas ever. Three nuns knocked on the family's door. Just when it looked like they wouldn't be able to have a Christmas that year because they didn't have enough money, three nuns knocked on her door with presents for the kids and a Christmas dinner. And Oprah credits it with turning her life around. She was so grateful that someone had remembered her and that she wouldn't have to be the only kid who'd say "I didn't get anything for Christmas this year." And she credits it with putting her on the path to her broadcasting career and also for inspiring her own philanthropy because, just like those nuns, she didn't want to be somebody who forgot kids in need. I find that such an inspiring story, you know, that your

life can change and that an experience like that can transform you. That's the kind of thing that I like to stay open to. So I could maybe pick Oprah from that batch.

You mentioned this briefly, but I want to get back to it. How important is it to you that your heroes become my heroes or our heroes?

How important is it? Yeah. It means everything. Yeah. I mean, why else be a storyteller? You know, you want to communicate your passions to somebody else and tell the story in such a way that they're compelled by it as much as you are. I've always wanted to do that.

It's an awesome opportunity, isn't it, to have the ability to – I mean, because lots of people have messages they want to convey to people, but very few have the opportunity to get it published. Say, yes, we will take your words and share it with the world.

Yeah. It's a big privilege, and to me the key to making people want to read your stories and to be affected by them is making them want to read from the start to the finish. Turning pages is the most important thing to me. I always use Scheherazade from the Arabian Nights as my model. She had to tell the king a story every night, and if he got bored, he would kill her. So to me, the stakes were that high for storytelling. And if you stop in the middle of my story about Hank Aaron, say, I feel like that's on me, and you deserve a refund. So you always want to keep people reading from one sentence to the next, and one paragraph to the next, until they get to the end and they feel like they've had an experience.

Or if you change the station in the middle of a Wisconsin Life episode. Now, a number of these, I think about 30 of these, originally were in Wisconsin Life. How has writing for occasional broadcast changed how you write for print?

You know, it's similar. It's very similar writing for broadcast or for print, for adults or for children. To me, it's sort of the same process. You just get seized by a subject. You feel a passion for it. You immerse yourself in the research. You want to develop your own perspective on it and then somehow convey that to another person, whether it's a child or an adult or a print reader or a broadcast listener. And that's not an easy thing to do, but it's just it's such a fun challenge to present the material in a way that you think actually might touch somebody. And I can't say that I'm always successful at it, but what a great challenge to keep trying.

I think writing for radio has improved my other writing. I write punchier, shorter, although I still read too much Proust in college and it shows.

That's corrupting.

That and William James.

Now, I consider myself fairly well read, but at least at least 20 of your subjects were completely unknown to me. I think they'll probably be like that for most people. You probably have a rough sense of who those unknowns were. A number of them were women. A number of them were more of non-European ancestry of the group as you imagine that to be the 20 or 25 that most people will not have heard of. Which are some of the stories you're happiest about people learning?

- Viola Smith, I think, is one of them who I mentioned earlier. The fastest girl drummer in the world.
- There's Har Gobind Karana, who was a biochemist at the university who won a Nobel Prize. I guess if you win a Nobel Prize, you're not tremendously obscure, but it's a name that not many people are familiar with. He grew up in India in extreme poverty. He would have to steal sugar cane from nearby fields and steal embers from other people's fires to be able to cook things. He had his education under a tree. There were no schools in his very poor town and his father tutored him just sitting under this tree. And pencils were precious objects. And for the rest of his life, he treasured pencils, and he would use them all the way down to a nub because they were just too precious to waste. His gifts became evident as he got older. He got a scholarship to an Indian university, and he rode out of town on an elephant to face his destiny. I love that story.

It's a pretty cinematic story. I mean, the riding out of town on an elephant.

... Yes.

You mentioned coming to Madison in the 80s. We both lived downtown in the 80s when Chris Farley was the ARC improv. I think I was probably your county supervisor for a period of time. I don't believe I ever went to see a show at the ARC. I know I never saw Farley. Did you ever go to the ARK and see him?

Yeah. It was such a tiny place on Bassett Street, just like a little closet, really. And Farley just had this enormous presence, and it looked like he was just going to bust through the walls. I tried to tell little-known stories in the book, and I'm not sure a lot of people know how he came to the ARC improv theater. He was drifting in his life. He'd graduated from college. He didn't know what to do. He was working for his dad's oil company as a salesman. He'd make the customers laugh. But, you know, what was his future going to be? He obviously had something inside of him that was different and special, but what? Well, he heard about ARK, and he showed up there one night, drunk, pounding on the door. I don't think there was anything going on. They opened the door, and he said, "I think this is what I'm meant to do. Could I work with you guys?" And they're like, well, I guess we could give you a tryout. So they gave him a tryout, and he was doing a bit and he suddenly just got seized by what looked like a heart attack and fell to the floor and was convulsing and everybody ran over like, oh, my God, what happened? Well, it was just part of the bit. I mean, that was the Farley commitment to the bit and to the joke. And he got his start there and he went on to Improv Olympics and to Second City and then to Saturday Night Live and the rest was history.

But you actually saw him at ARK?

Yeah.

Wow. And could you tell at the time of all these people on the stage, this heavyweight guy with the blonde hair, this is the guy who we might be hearing from in 10 years?

You know, ARC in that period was good. Joan Cusack also came out of ARC. There were a lot of good comedians who most of them didn't go anywhere as far as I know. So he wasn't the only talented person. But, yeah, you could tell there was something special there.

I should have gotten out more.

Too busy being a supervisor.

I'm going to read a list of some selected subjects in the book. Stop me when you figure out the connection. Start with Richard Davis, Duke Ellington, Lorraine Hansberry, Lynda Barry, Kit Saunders Nordeen.

UW people?

UW people. Do you know how many of the subjects have a UW aspect to the story, either as students or faculty or some unique connection?

I don't know how many, but obviously the UW is such a producer of great people and an attractor of great people to our state. So yeah, there was definitely going to be some big-time connections there.

In fact, I wanted to include the Zucker brothers and David Abrahams. They were one of the essays that I wasn't able to include in the book because my editor said, yeah, that's enough for you. No more essays. But that was another group of UW people, and she was like, I think we got enough of these.

The answer is 31.

Oh, okay.

And that's if you include Bob Dylan, who had no formal connection to the university but was here because the university was here. And as you can probably imagine, I have only one photograph of a non-family member on my wall. You can guess who it is.

I'm thinking it's Bob.

It's Bob. of course.

There's an essay about Nirvana and Butch Vig, who some of our listeners would have seen at that great Spooner reunion a week or so ago.

Something you wrote in that segment surprised me greatly. You wrote that you recognized, speaking about Nirvana and Smells Like Teen Spirit, you wrote that you recognized yourself in those, quote, four-minute outbursts of confusion and pain. In all the years I have known you, that is not my image of Dean Robbins as someone who identifies with confusion and pain.

I'm so happy that I passed. Yeah, you know writers are broken people. I mean, why else would I write a book like this, you know, if I didn't need heroic figures to figure out how to live? I have no idea.

Well, in that same vein, your tribute to Lynda Barry concludes, quote, chalk one up for us misfits. You have spent a career as a successful editor and supervisor, and you see yourself as a misfit?

Well, you know, the alternative press was a haven for people like me. You know, people who just couldn't figure anything out, and all we could do was, you know, write these stories because everything else was such a mess in our lives. Yeah. Complete misfit and loser. That's why half of the people in the book kind of come out of that tradition.

Well, I got to say, you've had us fooled for years, because you seem pretty calm and in control of situations.

I'm glad we've been able to straighten the record out here.

I mentioned Aldo Leopold earlier, and someone you came to understand and regard as a hero fairly late in your life. What was it that flipped the switch for you for Aldo?

Well, I come from St. Louis concrete. That's my heritage. There was no nature. I don't remember a single tree. And if there was a tree growing up in St. Louis, I was allergic to it. I had bad asthma. I was on inhalers and allergy shots. And so, you know, sticking to the urban area was basically where I come from.

I came to Wisconsin, and everyone is talking about Aldo Leopold and reading Aldo Leopold and naming things after Aldo Leopold. Just in my neighborhood alone, there must be a half-dozen things named after Aldo Leopold.

He lived in your neighborhood.

Yeah, he did. I don't read nature writing. I'm not interested in nature. And I just always figured he was someone who would bore me to death. And, you know, I finally thought, well, I'm living in Wisconsin. I've got to read a little bit of Aldo Leopold, or else it's time to move back to St. Louis.

And I was just entranced by his writing. He was a fabulous writer. You know, I was expecting stodgy prose, and no, he was just poetic and playful and funny. And you could kind of see him thinking through things in real time. He's willing to change his mind. All these qualities that I just love in a good writer. I became a fan.

His writing is so great. I mean, not only is it wise and insightful, it is so graceful. And it reads so well on the air.

Yeah.

Well, I'm glad you finally... What do you... You know, every March 4th, there's a thing at the arboretum every year on the Saturday that's closest to the day he signed off on the foreword to Sand County Almanac, where we read Aldo Leopold all day. And it's just one great essay and one great excerpt after another. You should come by sometime.

I visited his shack outside of Baraboo as part of the research for the book, and that was a thrill. Still there. You've probably seen it.

Yeah, and tell people what the environment is and what you can glean from being there. I mean, talk about the shack for a second.

Well, Sand County Almanac is his reflections on a year spent on this particular property, and it's still untouched. The shack is still there. It looks as rough as it did back when he was there, and you can just feel his presence still.

Are there types of places to visit that have greater impact? Do cemeteries have greater impact than childhood homes or offices where they worked? Is there a taxonomy of what has an impact when you visit it?

It's just completely internal.

I remember dragging my son down to New Orleans once. Louis Armstrong is one of my greatest heroes, and believe me, I searched long and hard to try to find an Armstrong connection for Wisconsin.

Oh, come on. He played the Orpheum twice in 1964.

Well, he played it, but you can't cheat that way. You know, a musician has a one-night stand. You could put anybody in the book. Couldn't find one, but anyway, I dragged my son when he was in high school down to New Orleans to see all these places associated with Armstrong, none of which survive anymore. They've all been torn down. The place where he lived, his neighborhood is basically not there anymore, but I dragged him to this corner that plays a big role in Armstrong's life and his autobiography. It's Liberty and Perdido Streets, and now everything that was there when he was around is gone. There's these big, anonymous-looking City Hall-type buildings, and we were standing there in the street corner, and I just said, there it is. And he's like, there what is? I mean, nothing was there, but to me, it all came alive in my mind's eye, and I could see where his little shack was and where the club that he used to go to was, and so it's just a completely internal thing. It was so meaningful to me and absolutely not to him. He'll learn, as long as he understands the music.

But speaking of actual musical moments, you write about some marvelous ones:

- Bob Dylan playing around town in 1961.
- You talked about the Duke Ellington week at the UW.
- The Beatles in Milwaukee.
- Butch Vig recording Nirvana.
- Skip James and Charlie Patton laying down the blues in Grafton.

Which of these would you most like to have seen and heard?

Well, it would be such a fantasy to think of being here when Bob Dylan was 19 years old and just starting to develop his own style, sounding pretty much like Woody Guthrie, not

very much like himself at the time. This is 1961. He had come from the University of Minnesota where he dropped out, and he thought, you know the story well, it's in your book. I'm going to try and conquer the Madison folk scene. He had tremendous confidence in his ability, unwarranted at that time, but he breezed into Madison and started playing around and just couldn't really capture anybody's attention. And after, I think, less than a couple of weeks, he just thought, oh, whatever, I'm going to catch a ride out to New York City. And almost immediately started turning into Bob Dylan, the Dylan that we know. I mean, the genius started flowing almost immediately. Came back to Madison, I think, three or four months later and played some of the same places that he tried playing before. And suddenly, jaws were dropping. I mean, what a thrill to have been there that semester.

If you could have been at The Pad in January or Grove's Women's Co-op in the spring or even on the Union Terrace, which wasn't the terrace that we know it today. It was mainly just grass and a little hill. Yeah, that would have been something. Are there other particular events that you write about that you really would have liked to have experienced?

I'm not old enough for Beatlemania. But when the Beatles came to Milwaukee, what a story that was. And they got jobbed and they got hosed. Yeah, you could consider that a one-night stand. And I told myself I wasn't going to put musicians' one-night stands in the book. But I think something significant really did happen there that kind of epitomized what the Beatles were. They flew into Milwaukee. It was the one and only time that they performed there. And the police worked things around so that they wouldn't land where all their fans had congregated to greet them during Beatlemania in 1964. The fans would come to the airport, and it was a big, fun scene. They wanted to see their heroes. Well, the police worked it so that the Beatles had to land somewhere else way far away from their fans so no one got to see them and the fans felt cheated. Well, the Beatles could have let it go, but they had a press conference where they called out the police and said, "We're not down with this. wasn't cool." And they also called out the journalists who were the mainstream journalists asking them stupid questions like, how long do you think it'll be before the bubble bursts? And they, you know, they gave snarky answers back to the journalists. But so they're treating the older generation with complete irreverence, which was uncommon at that time. Meanwhile, they're pouring everything out for the kids who got them, who are on their wavelength. And just the generation gap that you saw there, you know, we're going to do everything for our fans, and we've got nothing but contempt for the older generation who's utterly clueless. I think that's a great Beatles story.

We've got about a minute and a half left. Yeah. Going back to saying about the people you've interviewed, the people you interviewed who are in the book, were they all heroes before you met and wrote about them? Or is there something in the exchange that elevated them to a greater degree of importance?

They tended to be people that I sought out because I idolized them. Jim Lovell, for example, the astronaut. I loved astronauts as a kid. I grew up with the space program as they were making all their great advances. And I saw the moon landing as a, I think I was maybe 11 or 12 years old. And of course followed Apollo 13, the NASA disaster that Jim

Lovell managed to turn into kind of a triumph because he looked like he was a goner when a tank exploded 200,000 miles from Earth. And he managed to engineer one of the greatest recoveries in the annals of aviation. You know, when I learned that Lovell had a Wisconsin connection, he was from Milwaukee. He had gone to the UW. I just thought, I'd love to get that interview, even though he was in his 90s. And I managed to talk to him. And that was such a thrill.

Was there anybody who lost their status as a hero because their interview went poorly?

Oh, that's happened a lot. Not anybody in the book, but one of my first interviews as a budding journalist was Ella Fitzgerald, who was in such a foul mood and didn't give me a break in the slightest and just bit my head off one question after another. Yeah, she lost her heroic status for me then.

I'm afraid we're going to have to leave it there. That is all the time we have with Dean Robbins before my heart gets broken about Ella. Again, the book is *Wisconsin Idols, 100 Heroes Who Changed the State, the World, and Me* from our good friends at the Wisconsin Historical Society Press. I'll let you know when Dean comes back to talk about writing books for kids. Lisa Malawski will be your host next week in conversation with Betsy Korbinyr about her book *Time, Beauty, and Grief*. I'll be back on August 11th with Tom Alesia to discuss his book *Baseball As It Ought to Be*. It's about the Madison Mallards. And then on August 18th with our dear friends Bobby and Bill Malone, their new book is a biography of the country band Riders in the Sky. Until then, on behalf of news and public affairs director Nate Carlin, engineer Andrew Thomas, and the entire Book Beat Collective, I'm Stu Levitan. Now as Ben Sidran plays us out with a little bit of *Little Sherry*, please stay tuned for Alex Wilding White and All-Around Jazz. You're listening to W-O-R-T 89.9 FM Madison. Listener-sponsored community radio.