

A photograph of a forest stream with a fishing rod in the foreground. The water is clear, reflecting the surrounding green trees and foliage. The stream flows over rocks, and the overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

FAR

A year ago, RACHEL MADDOW negotiated a staggering

FROM THE

multimillion-dollar annual deal *not* to be on the air five nights a week.

MADDOW

In her first interview since stepping back, she talks *V.F.* through her next act

CROWD

By JOE POMPEO

Photographs by ANNIE LEIBOVITZ



FISHER OF ZEN
Rachel Maddow, fly-fishing on her property
in Western Massachusetts, July 1, 2022.



"THE ONLY REASON you'll ever need this is if you fall through the ice," said Rachel Maddow, standing beside her pickup truck at an empty boat launch on a cloudy winter's day. She tossed me something that looked like a cross between a bike lock and a telephone cord and told me to put it around my neck: safety picks. In a worst-case scenario, you're supposed to pull apart the orange handle things, stab the ice in front of you, and claw your way back onto solid ground. "There's 20 inches of ice out here, you're not gonna fall through," Maddow promised. "But just in case."

It was a Monday in early February, on Maddow's home turf of Western Massachusetts. We met up in the parking lot of a frozen lake rimmed by low-slung mountains, Maddow in buffalo plaid, a baseball cap emblazoned with the logo for YUM fishing baits, and tortoiseshell Coke-bottle glasses that the folks at home don't get to see when she's all made up for the cameras. The temperature had plunged to something like 12 degrees over the weekend, but now it was in the mid-30s, ideal for our piscatorial excursion: more than enough ice to minimize your risk of a frosty death, warm enough to keep your hands from falling off. Maddow lives for this stuff, even as someone who grew up in

sunny Castro Valley, California. Before we set off, she showed me the cozy lakefront fixer-upper she'd purchased weeks earlier with her longtime partner, the photographer Susan Mikula, about 30 minutes from the couple's 164-year-old farmhouse. We dropped by her go-to bait shop, in the garage of a home boasting tattered Trump flags, where Maddow stocked up on rosy red minnows and medium shiners. Then we squeezed into our snow pants, strapped medieval-looking spikes over our boots, and trekked out onto the lake with a sled full of gear. "It may be a little slushy," she said, "but I promise it's fine."

One week earlier, Maddow had knocked the wind out of her 2.4 million viewers. "I am going to go on hiatus for a little bit," she said, broadcasting on a laptop from home as opposed to her nearby studio because she'd just had a COVID-19 exposure. (It was to Mikula, who'd already had a frightening run-in with the disease in the fall of 2020.) Maddow said she had several projects in the pipeline outside of her nightly duties—including a Ben Stiller- and Lorne Michaels-helmed adaptation of her 2018 podcast series, *Bag Man*, about Spiro Agnew's Nixon-era bribery scandal—and

that she needed time and space to work on them. She said she'd pop back in with special coverage as warranted, like for the State of the Union or "other big news events." (The largest European ground war since World War II, which would briefly disrupt Maddow's hiatus, wasn't what she had in mind.)

A few days later, on a Thursday, Maddow signed off from *The Rachel Maddow Show* for the last time until her planned return in mid-April. That Friday, she called me with an invitation to go ice fishing. And on Monday, out on the lake, as we drilled small holes and fiddled with our tip-up traps and Vexilar transducers—it's a more high-tech sport than you'd think—it occurred to Maddow that this was the first Monday in 13 years that she wasn't about to be live on air five nights a week, with no end in sight. "Today's day one," she said.

Maddow was embarking on a new chapter in her career, a foray into the wilds of our multiplatform media future, in which her success and influence would no longer be so neatly quantifiable. Over the next few months, we would talk a lot about what was at stake—for her health and well-being and career trajectory, for her continued cultural relevance, and for the network that has long depended on her massive nightly audience. But right now, there were fish to catch. We reeled in the first one before too long. "*This*," said Maddow, holding up our trophy, "is a pickerel. This is, like, a typical-size, perfect pickerel." She released it back into the hole. "Bye! See you! Ahh. That was *great*. God and country, thank you very much."

MADDOW'S HIGHLY RATED 9 p.m. show—long the crown jewel of MSNBC prime time, if not the entire network—debuted on September 8, 2008, with a handoff from then superstar Keith Olbermann, whose subsequent defenestration elevated Maddow to queen bee status. The program, known as much for its historical wonkery and sweeping monologues as its lefty bona fides, was immediately successful. But it also proved to be a massive slog. Maddow is exceptionally hands-on, and the opening of each show—the "A-block," in cable news parlance—requires an intensive level of preparation on a tight deadline. (Someone described it to me as being like

“a bunch of people holed up studying for finals every night, like in a library, panic researching.”) Throughout the years, Maddow has usually written the A-block monologue herself, on the heels of a full day’s worth of research. In October 2010, after a particularly rollicking broadcast from a historic Delaware tavern, where the *Maddow Show* was covering a Senate showdown between Chris Coons and Christine O’Donnell (remember her?), an exhausted Maddow remarked to a colleague, “A person could only do this job for five years.”

As if: Maddow, at 49, has been behind the desk for almost a decade and a half. She’s been doing the job long enough that it supremely messed up her back, which now has seven herniated or bulging discs that she manages with physical therapy. Long enough that when she had a melanoma scare within months of Mikula ending up on death’s door with COVID, it sunk in that she didn’t want to be working 60 hours a week until she retires. Long enough that she had begun to worry, as she explained to me between nips from the pickerel down below, that she was “losing the ability to be able to sort of have the energy and the intellectual bandwidth to do other kinds of work.”

And so Maddow decided it was time for a change. Last fall, she negotiated a mega-deal that left jaws on the floor—a reported \$30 million annually *not* to be on the air five nights a week. Starting at some point in 2022, she’d get to do a lot less gabbing about the news cycle and a lot more premium long-form projects: podcasts, specials, documentaries, film adaptations, etc.

Such is the might of Rachel Maddow that it was better for the company

to lose her four nights a week than not to have her at all. The industry chatter is that NBCUniversal gave Maddow an enormous raise only to cede her in the key prime-time block that remains incredibly vital to ratings, advertisers, and cable subscriptions. Words thrown around in my conversations with industry hotshots—most of whom think Maddow’s great, by the way—include “ridiculousness,” “so nuts,” and “stupidest deal ever.” NBCUniversal News Group chairman Cesar Conde strongly disputes those characterizations, telling me in a phone interview, “We only do things that make sense for us strategically or financially. The primary focus for us was, how do we come up with a structure of what we need and want from Rachel, and also what she needs going forward.” Phil Griffin, the former longtime president of MSNBC, who remains one of Maddow’s closest advisers, acknowledged it was hard to lose her every night but said, “The way she works is so demanding, we were lucky to get 14 years out of her.”

After Maddow’s nine-week sabbatical, she returned to *The Rachel Maddow Show* on April 11 and made it official for her viewers: They’d have her four nights a week through the end of the month, and then, starting in May, “I’m going to be here weekly. I’m going to be here on Monday nights.” Thus began the next act of Rachel Maddow, whose power was undeniable even to her naysayers—of whom there are many. As Maddow critic Erik Wemple observed on his *Washington Post* blog, “Rachel Maddow can do whatever she pleases.”

IT’S HARD TO overstate Maddow’s value to MSNBC over the past 14 years. In the wake of Olbermann’s firing, she became the face of the network’s prime-time roster, “the touchstone of everything we do,” as her colleague Joy Reid puts it. MSNBC’s other crown jewel, *Morning Joe*, is the network’s power center, commanding influence within the establishment corridors of New York and Washington. Maddow, you might say, sets the network’s ideological agenda, a signifier for the entire MSNBC brand. Her broad progressive appeal and singular approach to anchoring—story-driven monologues that run as long as 30 minutes, connecting dots you never knew existed and dragging viewers down any number of rabbit holes—have made her MSNBC’s number one celebrity and perennial ratings champ, the only figure in non-Murdochian cable news who can play in the same sandbox as the fire-breathers at Fox. She has at times eked out wins over rival Sean Hannity while keeping CNN’s rotating cast of 9 p.m. hosts in third place—often distantly—ever since *The Rachel Maddow Show* started to regularly trounce *Larry King Live* more than a decade ago. During the first week of her hiatus this past February, the 9 p.m. audience plummeted 26 percent and stayed down for weeks before soaring back above 2 million upon her April 11 return. According to data from MoffettNathanson, Maddow’s ratings share in 2021—11 percent of MSNBC’s total ratings—was higher than that of any other solo host in all of cable.

This popularity has, naturally, made her a target. On the extreme end of the spectrum, there’s the hate mail and death threats, which she says haven’t abated even though she’s no longer on TV as much. Then there are the requisite recriminations from the right, which regards her with the same contempt that liberals harbor for personalities like Hannity and Tucker Carlson. But even among non-enemy combatants, it’s not as if Maddow is universally beloved. Typical criticisms are that she can be snarky, obnoxious, pedantic. On a practical level, her thoroughly complex monologues simply aren’t for everyone, and the payoff doesn’t always justify the windup. In March 2017, Maddow took blowback for hyping what seemed like a holy grail-level scoop about Trump’s taxes, which she teased

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Rachel Maddow. **IT’S MSNBC.**

out in a suspenseful 20-minute opener. She finally revealed a single federal payment from two pages of Trump's 2005 return, obtained by her guest that evening, the journalist David Cay Johnston. (The much-maligned segment, to be fair, was the spark that ignited a landmark *New York Times* investigation that *did* manage to unearth the mother lode of Trump's tax returns, as *Times* reporter Susanne Craig explained during an appearance on Maddow's show the following year.)

Whatever her detractors think, Maddow remains a sui generis star in the media firmament, which explains the breathless interest in her career machinations. Intrigue began swirling last summer with leaks that Maddow was thinking about leaving the network for new opportunities. Before long, news broke that Maddow, after months of discussions quarterbacked by her superagents at Endeavor, would be sticking with NBCUniversal after all. She'd secured a new multiyear contract to pursue projects in a wide range of formats, from documentaries and streaming specials to movies and books, all under the banner of her newly minted independent production company whose name I can now reveal: Surprise Inside. Maddow would conceive the projects and NBC would get first right of refusal. *The Rachel Maddow Show* would eventually go weekly and she would continue to do specials for the network, but she would have a lot more flexibility. It was the Daily Beast that pegged her annual compensation at \$30 million.

Maddow wouldn't comment on any of this ("I'm legally restrained from discussing the terms of my contract"), other than to dispute the reported \$30 million. (Someone else with direct knowledge of the matter told me Maddow's full package is worth more when you add a separate overhead and development deal.) She also specified that she hadn't yet signed the new contract when news outlets reported on it. Through my own reporting, I was able to piece together how it all went down. The story begins about two years prior, when Endeavor CEO Ari Emanuel and president Mark Shapiro began actively pursuing her. They'd wanted to sign her for a while, and they were even more motivated to do so after *Bag Man* became a hit. Maddow was willing to hear them out because her beloved longtime agent, Jean Sage of the much smaller Napoli Management

Group, had signaled her intention to retire. Emanuel and Shapiro first met with her in November 2019 at an apartment on the West Side of Manhattan, where they gave Maddow the hard sell on working with them to grow her career across the media spectrum. She wasn't ready to make any moves just yet—super loyal to Sage—but Endeavor kept in touch, kept talking, and eventually, as the expiration of Maddow's contract began to poke out over the horizon, the stars aligned. Sage was ready to take a bow, and Endeavor promised to do the right thing by cutting Napoli in on any deal they struck.

By now it was mid-2021. Shapiro started taking meetings all over town, a couple of which Maddow joined. They talked to Netflix. They talked to Amazon. They talked to Spotify, Showtime, CNN. Jeff Zucker, president of CNN at the time, toyed with the idea of hiring Maddow for the network's ill-fated streaming service, CNN+. The brass surmised that having Maddow, from a liberal network, and Chris Wallace, from conservative Fox News, would give the platform a certain range. But Maddow's agents balked at the proposed salary, in the \$10 to \$15 million range, according to people who know the numbers. There was a much bigger opportunity on the table: SiriusXM was poised to offer Maddow closer to \$40 million plus a first-look deal, sources told me. (Sirius had no comment.) The idea was that she could do a weekday talk show and still pursue all of her other creative projects. This wouldn't free Maddow from the daily grind, but it was a tempting proposition. She had a lot to think about.

Amid these flirtations, Conde had two options: give Maddow the freedom she craved or risk losing one of the company's most important talents. Someone plugged into the talks assured me that before NBC landed on a number, they "worked through the economics and finances of it," in terms of the output they could expect from Maddow in her new multiplatform role, and what that would mean to the bottom line. The talks unfolded in two stages. First Conde reached an agreement on the specifics of what Maddow's job would entail. Then Jimmy Horowitz, who oversees global dealmaking for NBCUniversal's film and television portfolio, negotiated the salary.

Once the deal was a fait accompli, Maddow's colleagues breathed a sigh

HISTORY MAKING

Maddow in her home office, where she's polishing a new World War II-era podcast series expected to debut this autumn.



of relief. "I'm just glad she's staying in any capacity," says Reid. "We all felt that kind of pit-in-the-stomach panic." Ditto Chris Hayes: "The fact that she's not leaving makes it feel less seismic. If it was like, Oh, now she's at CNN, it would be different."

By all accounts, working for the *Maddow Show* can be extremely demanding. It's a tight-knit and deeply loyal staff. Going from five days a week with Maddow to one day must feel like a bit of a bummer. Maddow's longtime executive producer, Cory Gnazzo, who will continue to shepherd her live MSNBC



appearances, acknowledged, “It’s a challenging time. Change is difficult. We’ve been doing this, most of us, for many years. We’re used to producing for Rachel. So it’s a challenge for us to produce for someone else.”

Maddow opened up about the whole process while we fished. It wasn’t “some sort of, like, hostile, heated negotiation with NBC,” she said. “What I asked for, and I realize it’s a really hard thing to ask for from a big corporate entity, is flexibility, fluidity, and forgiveness. Like, I want us to handle this in a way that we don’t have to map every second of it. And I want

my staff to all stay employed, and I want them to be able to shift between different types of projects, just as I am.”

Did she think they would agree to all of that? “No,” said Maddow. “I don’t know anybody who’s ever asked for it.... It’s potentially higher risk, higher reward, right? I think, writ large, if they ended up with, like, a hit award-winning podcast, and a hit movie, and a docuseries, and a serial TV show, and I’m covering the State of the Union, and some of the time I’m doing *The Rachel Maddow Show*, that’s probably a better deal for them long-run than me just doing *TRMS* and killing

myself and not being able to do anything and, ultimately, having a shorter career because I’m burning myself out. Like, I’m not becoming a painter.”

Nonetheless, you can see why Maddow’s retreat from the nightly schedule is a pickle for the suits at 30 Rock. In late June, the network announced that Alex Wagner would take over Maddow’s crucial hour Tuesday to Friday starting August 16, making her “the only Asian American to host a prime-time cable news program.” Wagner had hosted a daytime MSNBC show before it was canceled in 2015, but she made a comeback

with gigs at CBS News and Showtime's *The Circus* with John Heilemann. Wagner rejoined MSNBC this past February as a senior analyst and substitute anchor, which positioned her for the elevation to 9 p.m. To say she's got a tall order would be an understatement, but MSNBC president Rashida Jones doesn't see it that way. "The universe is very different from when Rachel joined the cable news spectrum. My focus is less about: How does this one hour perform in this one space?" she tells me. "It's a huge change. But in this environment, where we know the cable universe is changing, this allows us to get more Rachel in more places."

Changing indeed: With viewers increasingly unmoored from their traditional cable packages, MSNBC's linear television business was in a dicey position even without the headache of losing a ratings powerhouse four nights a week. In the words of one cable news veteran, "Remember when print was dying but online was not quite yet what it is now? That's where cable news is. So the existential question is not Rachel Maddow. It's MSNBC."

Maddow's view of the industry is less fatalistic, if a bit jaded. "It has sort of been like *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* the whole time I've been doing cable news," she told me. "Stuff changes at the executive level, and stuff changes in terms of who's up and who's down, which network's winning, which host is hot. But ultimately, does anything really change that much?" I noted the lack of an obvious successor, whereas Maddow had been the natural successor to Olbermann. "That's how it works in retrospect," she countered, "but in the moment, it's much harder to see. Like, Tucker's doing great right now"—as in Carlson of Fox News—"but look at Tucker's career. The first show I worked on was his 11 o'clock show on MSNBC that nobody remembers. But he was always kicking around the business and has always been talented. It just—this turned out to be his moment."

It may surprise people to hear Maddow speak so matter-of-factly about someone whose views are abhorrent to her. But Maddow has never shied from respectful engagement with her ideological adversaries. The early days of her MSNBC program featured amiable debates with Pat Buchanan. She was friendly with Roger Ailes, who blurred

one of her books. She told Stephen Colbert in 2019 that she had "a lot of respect" for Sean Hannity. It was Carlson who gave Maddow her first paid TV gig when she began appearing on MSNBC's *Tucker* back in 2005. Carlson spoke admiringly of her in a 2019 *New York Times Magazine* profile, and when his name came up as we fished, Maddow recalled bumping into him at an event for the first time in a long time. "It was really nice to see him," she said.

A few months later, I asked Maddow what she thought of the *Times*' recent series that unpacked how Fox News Channel's number one host "weaponizes his viewers' fears and grievances to create what may be the most racist show in the history of cable news." What Maddow found "most interesting" about the series, she told me, was an interactive analyzing Carlson's rhetoric from 1,150 episodes of *Tucker Carlson Tonight*. "For me," she said, "more than the issue of, you know, how dangerous are Tucker's ideas, and how do they interact with the growth of the authoritarian right in the Republican Party, more so than that question, which is obviously what the central thrust of the reporting was about, I was interested in how they deconstructed why it works."

Rather than engaging on Carlson's politics, Maddow talks about him and other cable news rivals as fellow practitioners. "If you think about baseball players," she said, "who are extremely competitive and who are fighting to win and who have rivalries, and some of those rivalries are bitter rivalries, that doesn't mean you don't study the pitching technique of their star pitcher. It doesn't mean you don't appreciate whatever they're doing in terms of, you know, where they put their shortstop in order to give them a better defense. There's a sort of, like, respecting the game, in terms of people who are doing well and people who are good at it. I mean that was the basis of my professional friendship with Roger Ailes. I wanted tips from him about how to be better on TV. And he was willing to talk to me about what I was doing well, and doing poorly, to help me get better."

Of course, Maddow being great on TV can't neutralize Trump conspiracy theories or save democracy. The stakes of this competition are significantly higher than a World Series ring.

MADDOW HAD BEEN in the business for about a decade by the time she truly began to cultivate an audience. This was back in 2008, when Griffin gave Maddow her own show. Nine years earlier, she'd retreated from

London to Western Massachusetts to finish her dissertation for Oxford, where she'd been a Rhodes Scholar. Since her teen years in California's Bay Area—filled with volleyball tournaments and swim meets and the "emotional cliff dive," as Maddow put it, of coming out at 17 during her freshman year at Stanford—Maddow had been a passionate and driven activist for the AIDS crisis, the subject of her doctoral research. If you'd have asked anyone from her inner circle back then, that's where they thought Maddow was headed professionally. Then, on a whim, she won a contest to host a local radio show. "It was just hilarious," says Chuck Bayliss, one of Maddow's oldest friends. "None of us could have ever guessed this trajectory."

Local radio led to Air America, which led to regular appearances on MSNBC, which led to a political analyst gig, which led to substitute hosting for *Countdown With Keith Olbermann*, and, finally, just two months before Barack Obama's historic election, Maddow's own hour as Olbermann's lead-in. "In our very first show meeting, she said, 'I wanna do a 15- to 20-minute opening,'" recalls Griffin, who's now working with Maddow to build *Surprise Inside*. "And I went, 'Whoa! That's radical.' So I said, 'Okay, let's see if it works.' She did that first day, she beat Larry King—virtually unheard of at the time—and she created something brand new."

Those epic openers continue to distinguish Maddow's now weekly show. In a 17-minute, 26-second monologue that kicked off the May 16 episode, two days after 10 African Americans were gunned down by a white supremacist inside a Buffalo supermarket, Maddow gave viewers a long and winding history lesson that stretched back to the 1940s, when a fascist mob set upon Black workers in Detroit and Theodore Bilbo embraced the now ubiquitous "great replacement" theory during his Senate reelection campaign. "It is not a new concept," she said, her voice rising as she peered into the camera. "It's not even a new pretext, a new justification for violent racist terrorism. It has

“2024 is gonna be, you know,
NOT A DRESS REHEARSAL. This is the playoffs.
Like, this is high stakes, really important, and
DETERMINATIVE OF OUR FUTURE as a country.
And that’s not a fatalistic thing. I feel like I’m on the
edge of my seat, and I’m convinced
of the **IMPORTANCE OF THIS MOMENT.**”

long been so. It is right now being newly popularized, newly mainstreamed by the biggest names in conservative media, and even by the leadership of the Republican Party in Congress. But it is an old idea. It is an old and stupid idea. It is an old and stupid and dangerous idea. Old, stupid, and dangerous in equal measure.”

During Donald Trump’s presidency, when Maddow became a bellowing soothsayer for the anti-Trump resistance, her monologues delved into the spy-novel-worthy esoterica of the Russian-collusion saga and the Christopher Steele dossier, the credibility of which took a hit last year when one of Steele’s main sources was indicted on a charge of lying to the FBI. If you’re looking for a whiff of controversy around Maddow’s journalistic record, this would be it. The critical takes of her Russiagate coverage didn’t just come from Maddow’s tormentors on the right. Slate’s TV critic diagnosed a case of “Conspiracy Brain.” The *Post*’s Wemple, in a blistering series about media coverage of the unverified dossier, excoriated Maddow for “a pattern of misleading and dishonest asymmetry.” Michael Isikoff, a longtime Maddow guest and fellow Russiagate chronicler, asked on his podcast, “Do you accept that there are times that you overstated what the evidence was?”

By mid-2019, as I reported back then, Maddow had become too hot for the newsroom management of *The New York Times*. Aside from her Russia coverage, they viewed her as a raging partisan, and the paper indicated that its reporters should steer clear of doing her show. “The fact that it didn’t last long,” Maddow told

me of the informal ban, when I paid a second visit to her neck of the woods, “and they just quietly changed their minds without ever saying why they changed their minds was, to me, sort of just sad on their part, and telling.”

It was three months after our ice fishing trip, and I was back in Western Mass, this time sitting with Maddow on her screened-in porch, eating sandwiches on a rainy spring day. We talked about pretty much everything—her spirituality and Catholic upbringing (“I one hundred percent believe in the power of prayer”), her history of depression (“very much a chemical and biological process,” which she manages with “exercise and sleep”), her media diet (no physical publications or, no joke, cable news; lots of digital subscriptions and *The Great British Baking Show*). We also got into a back-and-forth about her dossier segments. “Trying to turn the Russia scandal into the dossier, or trying to turn the dossier into the Russia scandal, is a revisionist history designed to intimidate people out of covering stories like that in the future,” she said, “and to try to obscure the seriousness of what Russia did, and what the Trump campaign’s relationship was with what Russia did.”

I suggested that Maddow’s coverage may have given viewers a false sense of hope that Trump was about to get taken down, not unlike how, say, viewers of Newsmax may have been led to believe that the 2020 election was about to be overturned. At this point in our conversation, Maddow did something very

Maddow, reaching back into the past to make a point about the present.

“Do you remember what the Dan Rather scandal was about?” she said, referring to a 2004 controversy in which the legendary newsman’s career came to a screeching halt over a *60 Minutes* segment based on allegedly forged documents that CBS News failed to authenticate. “There was a document that was involved. He was reporting on, like, how *did* George W. Bush avoid going to Vietnam? How was his National Guard service arranged? Why did he get this coveted spot in this group that wasn’t gonna be fighting? The story of George W. Bush getting a sweet gig in the National Guard so he didn’t have to go fight in Vietnam was true. Somebody giving Dan Rather a forged document, so he had a screwed-up news story about it, is fascinating, and it’s an interesting thing about CBS News. But it doesn’t mean that the National Guard thing about George W. Bush was *not* true! It just—it neutralized it. Like it made that go away. And the whole thing became a Dan Rather scandal. That’s what’s going on with the dossier.”

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HE PROPERTY WHERE Maddow and Mikula live spans 12 acres of woods and streams, lots of room for their two black Labs, Francis and Charms, to run free. There’s a duck pond, a swimming hole, a beautifully

tended garden, and a veggie patch bursting with asparagus, garlic scapes, lettuce, and a gazillion herbs. When Maddow first came to Western Massachusetts in September CONTINUED ON PAGE 157

Far From the Maddow Crowd



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 103 1998, it was almost a fluke. She needed a place to hunker down and finish her dissertation without any distractions, and she knew someone who had a spare room in a former B&B. “I had no interest in New England, no interest in the country, no interest in winter, no interest in snow,” Maddow said. “I figured, Oh, that’s perfect. Like, I’ll be totally miserable and that’ll make me want to get outta here!” But Maddow fell in love, first with the landscape and the seasons, which she had never experienced growing up in California, and then with Mikula, who had hired her to do odd jobs in the same house where they live to this day. (They keep an apartment in Manhattan.) “I fell in love as soon as I saw her. I didn’t end up doing much work.”

Showing me around under a steady drizzle, Maddow talked about the project that had been consuming most of her bandwidth, a historical-narrative non-fiction podcast in the vein of *Bag Man*, except this time set in World War II-era America. She led me to a second-floor annex that doubles as Mikula’s art studio and Maddow’s home office, with stacks of archival documents neatly arranged on the floor and a whiteboard scribbled with plot points.

The podcast, scheduled to debut this fall, was her first pitch under the Surprise Inside umbrella. “It’s an American history, underappreciated story,” said Maddow, “that has resonance for all these things we’re dealing with today—the threat of authoritarianism and the question of whether or not criminal law is the appropriate venue, and has the right constitutional powers, to handle those kinds of threats. It’s about journalism and journalistic ethics, and the ability of powerful people to manipulate American systems.” (She sold an accompanying book to Crown.)

Maddow’s other projects include another podcast, another book, “two potential movies and two potential TV shows,” one

of which actually sounds a little more than potential. “It revolves around a group of women in post-World War II America in Washington, D.C.,” says Susan Rovner, the NBCUniversal executive who oversees the company’s television entertainment portfolio. Rovner said there was a decent chance the show could air in 2023 on NBC’s streaming service, Peacock, which, to be honest, could use a high-wattage period drama if it expects to tussle with HBO Max and Netflix.

In this new multiplatform realm, the measure of success for someone like Maddow is not as cut and dried as in the traditional cable universe, where you know how successful you are based on how many people watch your show every night, which is in turn a measure of how many brands want to advertise during your commercial breaks. For years, millions of people tuned in to *The Rachel Maddow Show* as nightly appointment viewing. Will her future projects inspire the same loyalty? What will success look like for, say, a long-form Rachel Maddow podcast, or limited series, or film adaptation? Is it the number of streams? Critical acclaim? Box office numbers? “This is gonna be a disappointing answer,” she says. “But for me, success is doing work that I’m proud of. It’s about feeling like I am free to do what I want, and to say what I want, and to talk about things that I think are important, and to contribute something that wouldn’t necessarily have been contributed had I not been the one working on it.”

Back on her porch, Maddow talked about the physical toll her work had taken over the years—schlepping back and forth between Manhattan and Massachusetts every week, feverishly toiling at a desk 10 hours a day, every day, with bad posture and a dash of scoliosis. In March 2017, as she was settling into middle age, it all finally caught up with her. “I was underneath my desk trying to plug in the laptop,” she recalled. “And I just felt—it felt like a balloon burst inside my back, a wet popping feeling that was absolutely disgusting. I collapsed on the ground and I could not move.” A couple months later, Maddow’s doctor diagnosed herniated discs in her thoracic vertebrae and gave her an injection for temporary pain management. After a day or so, she began to develop a severe rash and swelling so bad that it puffed her eyes shut. She went to the hospital, where they determined she was having

a rare, potentially life-threatening allergic reaction. “That was super scary,” she told me, “but it resolved, and I started doing a new kind of physical therapy that ended up being really effective.” She said the new work routine has been a significant life improvement. “It doesn’t mean this is easy or idyllic, but it is different, and that’s what I needed.”

Maddow’s withdrawal from the nightly news cycle comes at a moment of alarming upheaval. The world is on fire—figuratively and literally. Americans’ rights are being rolled back. We’ve lost a sense of collective truth. Maniacs and racists massacre innocent people, innocent children, and our leaders are too polarized, or too feckless, to take any meaningful action. Extremists are ascendant, authoritarianism is en vogue, and with two years to go until the 2024 election, our system of government faces arguably its biggest crisis since the founding of the republic. “2024 is gonna be, um, you know, not a dress rehearsal,” Maddow said. “This is the playoffs. You know what I mean? Like, this is high stakes, really important and determinative of our future as a country. And that’s not a fatalistic thing. That’s an edge-of-my-seat kind of thing. That’s how I feel. I don’t feel fatalistic about it. I feel like I’m on the edge of my seat, and I’m convinced of the importance of this moment.”

Depending on how it all shakes out, viewers might end up seeing more of Maddow than they think. The last time she and I caught up before my final deadline in mid-June, it was the thick of the January 6 hearings. Maddow was back in New York, back on the air, coanchoring nightly prime-time recaps from MSNBC’s studios at 30 Rock. It was a big moment for the network, and Maddow was fully in the game, not off burying her nose in historical research for some project that wouldn’t see the light of day until months or years down the line. Perhaps that’s why she so firmly rejected the premise of my follow-ups about staying relevant and her legacy and all of that.

“I’m still working! I mean, I know 49 is old,” she said with a hint of sarcasm, “but I’ve just done, like, eight hours of live prime-time television in the past week. I’m going back for another two tonight. I’m gonna be here every night working for the next few weeks or so.” I reframed the question: What does she want her legacy to be? Her answer, this time, was short and to the point: “I wanna be proud of my life.” ■

FAR FROM THE MADDOW CROWD

VANITY FAIR | SEPTEMBER 2022



Reprinted from the Vanity Fair Archive

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