Alumni

Super Freak

Stephen Dubner ’90SOA, coauthor of the popular *Freakonomics* books and host of two hit podcasts, wants to tell you a few things you don’t know.

By
Rebecca Shapiro
|
Spring/Summer 2018



Stephen Dubner (Audrey Bernstein)

It’s a Saturday night in New York, and best-selling author Stephen Dubner ’90SOA is onstage at Joe’s Pub with Columbia linguistics professor John McWhorter and Columbia engineering professor Mike Massimino ’84SEAS, discussing a delicate matter: how does an astronaut on a six-hour spacewalk go to the bathroom?

The conversation is a part of Dubner’s podcast *Tell Me Something I Don’t Know*, which is taped in front of a live audience at different venues around the country. For each episode, Dubner chooses a cohost (this week it’s McWhorter) and a

professional fact-checker (the *New York Times* opinion editor and writer Bari Weiss ’07CC). Then, in a twist on the usual quiz-show format, Dubner challenges his guests to tell *him* an interesting fact or idea on a topic of their choosing. At the end of the night, the audience votes for their favorite contestant based on three criteria: whether the information was something they really didn’t know, whether it was worth knowing, and whether it was demonstrably true, as affirmed by the guest fact-checker.

The stakes aren’t terribly high: there’s no prize money, so the winner only takes home bragging rights. Still, the guests are impressive — a mix of academics and professionals, all experts in their fields — and they present a pleasing potpourri of miscellanea. CUNY history professor Jordi Getman Eraso tells the story behind Spain’s wordless national anthem. Carol Willis ’79GSAS, the curator of Manhattan’s Skyscraper Museum, talks about the “skinny skyscraper,” a kind of building unique to New York. Harvard researcher Georgios Pyrgiotakis, who works in nanotechnology, explains how water can be used to fight bacteria. And Massimino, a veteran of two space-shuttle missions, takes the audience through the intense training regimen required for a spacewalk — including how to pee in a spacesuit (the answer: a sophisticated diaper, known at NASA as a Maximum Absorbency Garment).

Integral to the show’s quick, informal style is Dubner, an affable, inquisitive host, who banters with his guests in a way that makes their often esoteric knowledge seem entirely relatable. It’s clear that this isn’t for show — offstage, too, Dubner is chatty and always eager to learn more, the kind of person you might initially dread as a seatmate on a long plane ride, before inevitably succumbing to his charms.



Photo by Anthony Washington

“I actually came up with the idea for the podcast on a plane,” Dubner says. “I was traveling a lot and would get to chatting with the people sitting next to me. I found that asking a simple question — what’s something I don’t know about what you do? — yielded the best conversations.”

Dubner has built a brand around his ability to ask the right questions. Along with University of Chicago economist Steven Levitt, he is the coauthor of the wildly successful *Freakonomics* books and the host of the *Freakonomics Radio* podcast, all of which use data and economic theory to explain everyday phenomena. As of 2017, the three *Freakonomics* books had sold over seven million copies worldwide (or as Dubner says, “more than one copy per every thousand people on earth”), and the podcast gets eight million downloads per month. If Levitt is the mad scientist of the operation, Dubner is his translator, a journalist uniquely gifted at breaking down complex information.

Dubner says that curiosity has been a constant in his life, though his natural proclivity for probing questions wasn’t always encouraged, especially in an unconventional family with an unusual past.

Dubner grew up the youngest of eight children in a small town in rural upstate New York. His parents, born Solomon Dubner and Florence Greenglass, were both raised in pious Jewish households in Brooklyn. As young adults, though, each converted to

Roman Catholicism.

Such conversion was basically unheard of in the postwar Jewish diaspora, but the Dubners approached it with rigor. Florence — who was a first cousin of executed spy Ethel Rosenberg — changed her name to Veronica; Sol morphed into Paul; and all eight Dubner children were named after saints. The family never missed Mass at their local church, and they kept a shrine with a wooden crucifix on top of the bookshelf. But their Christian piety also meant fully relinquishing their Jewish past; Dubner's maternal grandmother visited occasionally, but his father's parents had disowned their son when he converted, even sitting shiva for him.

"As the youngest of eight children, I naturally knew the least about my family's past," Dubner says.

His father died when Dubner was a teenager, and once his brothers and sisters had left for college, he grew especially close with his mother. He excelled at math and science and also worked on his high-school newspaper, but he was more focused on writing music for his rock band. When his mother suggested selling their old farmhouse and moving to North Carolina, Dubner was happy to follow, and he earned his undergraduate degree at Appalachian State University.



Photo by Lusy Sutton

After college, Dubner toured briefly with a band called the Right Profile — "a sort of mash-up of blues and Rolling Stones–style rock and punk — this was the early

eighties, after all.” The band was moderately successful and even wound up getting a record deal with Arista. But Dubner realized the lifestyle wasn’t for him; he decided to quit music and go to graduate school. “I loved music, but I didn’t like touring or making records,” he says. “Writing always came naturally to me. So I figured I should take the thing that I was good at and get better.”

Dubner applied to Columbia’s MFA program in fiction, initially thinking he wanted to write novels (“top-tier education wasn’t really a part of my early life, so I was just knocked over and thrilled when I got in,” he says). For his thesis, he started work on a novel based on his family’s unusual religious path. But as he started doing research, his journalistic instincts kicked in.

“I kept wanting more facts, more information,” Dubner says. “So I started interviewing my mom, and my dad’s estranged family. And I realized that I was good at getting stories out of people.”

Dubner completed his MFA but abandoned his novel, and eventually got a job writing for the *New York Times Magazine*. In 1996, he published a feature on his family and his subsequent decision to return to Judaism. Two years later, he turned the article into his first book, a memoir called *Turbulent Souls*. Then he got an assignment that would change the course of his career: a profile of Steven Levitt, a young economist who had recently made waves for a paper linking legalized abortion and decreased crime rates.

“I went to Chicago intending to meet with him for three hours,” Dubner says. “I ended up staying three days.”

Dubner found that Levitt was looking at economics in an entirely new way, using his research to ask questions about everyday life. How does a baby name affect that child’s future career? Do real-estate agents have their clients’ best interests at heart? Is sumo wrestling fixed?

“I remember calling my wife from the hotel room and telling her, ‘I have no idea if anyone’s going to be interested in these things — in sumo wrestling and baby names,’” Dubner says. “But I didn’t care. Every time I asked a question that I thought I knew the answer to, Levitt would totally upend the way I thought about it.”

As it turned out, people did care. The article got an overwhelming reader response, and Dubner’s literary agent suggested that he and Levitt collaborate on a book.

“I was actually hesitant at first,” Dubner says. “This is not how book deals usually emerge — I was the journalist, and he was the subject. But we worked well together. Levitt has this incredible way of looking at the world, and I was able to frame that in a way that people could really grasp.”

The original *Freakonomics* book was published in 2005, debuting at number two on the *New York Times* bestseller list. But while plenty of books have a stint as a bestseller, momentum for *Freakonomics* built exponentially. By 2009, when Dubner and Levitt published the sequel, *SuperFreakonomics*, sales of the first volume were over four million. Dubner explains the success in a way that feels plucked from the pages of the book.

“It’s called the blockbuster effect,” he says. “It’s impossible to go from small to big. But to go from big to really big is not actually that hard with something like a book, which thrives on word of mouth.”

In other words, the book went viral. Dubner’s publisher, William Morrow, was one of the first to tap into the blogosphere, circulating galleys to bloggers and other people who might be inclined to spread the word on social media — people who would today be called “influencers.”

Dubner and Levitt picked up on that digital success and launched a website. Then, in 2010, long before podcasts had become mainstream, they started *Freakonomics Radio*. For the last eight years, it has consistently ranked as one of iTunes’s most downloaded podcasts.

“I’ve always liked radio. Growing up in a small town in upstate New York, it felt like a connection to the broader world,” Dubner says. “I’m sure Levitt won’t mind me saying that the podcast is really my project; he does it as a favor to me. But I do think that it’s given us room to tackle so many more things than we’d be able to do in books, which can be very slow.”



Photo by Anthony Washington

Over the course of 314 episodes, the podcast has examined everything from the economics of sleep (people who sleep better make more money), the question of tipping in restaurants (what happens when you eliminate tipping and raise menu prices?), and whether boycotts actually work. They've had an economist edit the online-dating profile of a hapless twentysomething and tried to determine the most efficient way to exercise. Some topics expand on concepts introduced in the book ("people are always very interested in baby names," says Dubner), but most are new, and the podcast format allows them to tackle more timely issues, like what Uber can teach us about the gender pay gap.

Dubner says that he's been pleasantly surprised by the direct impact that some episodes have on people. After an early episode called "The Upside of Quitting," for example, Dubner started hearing from listeners who had finally quit a bad job or left a toxic relationship and credited the show for giving them the final push. A story about Al Roth '71SEAS, a Stanford economist and Nobel laureate who is using an economic principle called market design to help people who need a kidney to match with a donor, has inspired several organ donations.

“I had people coming up to me for years telling me that they got a kidney because of that show,” Dubner says. “I’m a pretty analytical guy, but the mushy side of me was very moved by that.”

While each episode of *Freakonmics* is scripted, with a hefty dose of reporting involved, *Tell Me Something I Don’t Know* is far more casual, which Dubner welcomes. “I think there’s something about the live format that just encourages good conversation,” he says. “People are spontaneous. When it works well — as it did in the episode with Mike Massimino — people forget that we’re recording a podcast. It’s like a great dinner party, without the dinner.” Still, he hopes that listeners leave the episodes having learned something and curious to learn more.

And if Dubner were a guest on his own show and had to tell you something you didn’t know about being one of the world’s most successful authors, it would likely be the same thing he would say about being a podcast host or a magazine journalist.

“I’ve been surprised to find that whether I’m writing an article or a book or hosting a podcast, for me the work is actually very much the same,” he says. “You find interesting people to talk to. You don’t ask any yes-or-no questions. And you don’t try to pretend that you’re smarter than you are or that you know more than you do. It’s that simple.”

Read more from ***Rebecca Shapiro***



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >
Read more from ***Rebecca Shapiro***