

**EPISODE 367**

[SPONSOR MESSAGE]

[0:00:32]

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[INTRODUCTION]

[0:01:23]

**FT:** Hey everyone, welcome back to So Money. I am really excited, I am going down memory lane today. I've invited back on the show, I've invited my friend from college. I haven't talked to him honestly, probably since I was like 21 years old. Mike Still is here. Mike Still — you're all going to know Mike Still.

He's going to become a household name very soon, I promise you, so this makes us all the more exciting but we have him on the show now. Let me just tell you a little bit about Mike, going back 14 years, back to college, Mike was and probably is still is, this very charming, cute, smart, people person I remember.

We both were in the honor's college at Penn State, we're both also in a theatre club and he was a phenomenal actor but also super talented in many other ways. He was great in school, he was

a great public speaker. I remember he was also a really great leader. He just was somebody that you wanted to hang around.

He had good vibes, he was a good person and honestly, I wouldn't have been surprised if 10, 15 years later someone said, "Hey, remember Mike Still? Yeah, he's a neurosurgeon now?" Or, "Remember Mike Still? He runs General Electric?" Or, "Remember Mike Still? He's running for politics." But interestingly enough, Mike pursued his deepest passion, acting and of course, became very successful in that because that's who he is.

That's how he's hardwired, whatever he wants to do he becomes successful. I remember actually seeing him after graduation, not on person, not on Facebook but in an IKEA commercial I believe, or maybe it was Verizon? Or maybe it was both. He's had a very successful commercial acting career and also, television and probably some film.

I haven't IMDB'd him recently but he's been very busy and most recently, I saw him in an article in Fast Company Magazine and I quote, calling him "The Next Lorne Michaels". Yes, the next Lorne Michaels. Mike is now the artistic director of the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre in Los Angeles. It's an improvisational and sketch comedy training center.

It's the only accredited improv and sketch comedy school in the country. Lots of SNL stars got started at the Upright Citizens Brigade, which is why I believe that Fast Company is calling Mike the next Lorne Michaels because his job is to find the next stars and to incubate them at the Upright Citizens Brigade.

People like Amy Poehler, Matt Walsh, Rick Roman, Horatio Sanz all came from UCB and so Mike is in a pretty powerful position, I have to say and all the while, he's still trying to work at his own acting career. So we talk about that reconciling those two worlds, what he thinks is the "It factor" right now as people are trying to breakthrough in comedy and acting. Since he's on the forefront of that, what's his take?

Here is Mike Still.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:04:19]

**FT:** Mike Still, welcome to So Money.

[0:04:22]

**MS:** Hello Farnoosh.

[0:04:23]

**FT:** Do you remember me?

[0:04:25]

**MS:** Of course. How can we forget these days back at Penn State? The honors college, we're so wide eyed and optimistic about the world.

[0:04:32]

**FT:** I know, you're still not? I am.

[0:04:35]

**MS:** Yeah, I think I am. I think I am.

[0:04:39]

**FT:** And don't forget that we shared many theatrical engagements together. I don't know if we were actually together in the same play but we were in the same, I guess performance club, No Refund.

[0:04:50]

**MS:** Yeah, oh my God. No Refund Theatre was just the best. I went back to a No Refund Theatre reunion last year and it was the most fun thing.

[0:05:02]

**FT:** You did? I wasn't invited. What?

[0:05:04]

**MS:** What? You need to get on — there's an NRT Facebook Group, you need to get on it and there's also an alumni listserv. I'll forward that.

[0:05:12]

**FT:** Oh there's a listserv, oh my gosh.

[0:05:14]

**MS:** Yeah.

[0:05:14]

**FT:** Okay, I think I'm in the Facebook group but the first reason I'm not getting updates, very good to know. So Mike, I have to say going back and down memory lane in college, I always remember you fondly and so friendly, so charming, so smart. You were one of those people that, I don't know, you could have become a doctor, you could have become president, you could have become an actor, you could have become a lawyer.

You are currently the artistic director of the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre in Los Angeles. I believe it was Fast Company that said you're the next Lorne Michaels. Is this — do you feeling doing what you're supposed to be doing or you're more or less fallen into this because for whatever reason, life happens and this is where we end up?

[0:06:01]

**MS:** I'll tell you what, I really like where I'm at with this job and career and everything and I feel like it is where I'm supposed to be. I feel like I've always been someone that really loves doing creative things, making things happen. I love communities and it used to be theatre just has a huge vibrant wonderful community.

And I think that it's something that every job has a community with it. But what's really cool about acting and writing and this created community, is that it remains that. It remains a community, people don't like to winnow off and become disconnected and just focus on their career. There is just a mixing of career and life and everything and I do love that. I love that a lot.

[0:06:55]

**FT:** Tell us what you do actually though? What is the artistic director — what are the responsibilities that you have?

[0:07:01]

**MS:** So as artistic director, the main thing that I do is create the schedule at our theatres and we have two theatres in Los Angeles. We also have our New York theatres where I cut my teeth back in my 20's. We have UCB Franklin, which is our original space. It was originally the Tamron Theatre. It's been there for 11 years now and Franklin Hills in Hollywood and now we have UCB Sunset which is a beautiful building, beautiful complex that has training center classrooms in it, café, studio production space and our theatre.

And my main job is to put things on those stages and it's a bit of a collective. We like to think of it as a creative collective. I'm not centrally creating every single show that goes up there. People are pitching shows to me. People have ideas for shows and I work with them to make sure it fits for theatres and it fits with our style and it fits with the level of talents that we want to develop there.

And then in addition to that, I'm also in charge of the house teams and the house teams are the show's that we put together. So it's eight improv teams that we called Herald teams and they're just full of the most funniest, newest, greatest performers and our sketch teams which we call Mod teams.

That's our little joke, it's the Herald and Mod teams and the sketch teams create — there's eight teams. They have six writers and six actors on them each and they do a whole new 30 minute sketch show every month and yeah, that's my main job, but UCB is such a big community. We always talk about the talent page and that reflects the people that are performing currently at the theatre.

That alone is 400 people or so and that's just the hosts and the people that are the show creators. That doesn't even include people with smaller roles on shows and all the people helping out and the people that want to get in stage so it's a lot. It's a big community.

[0:09:12]

**FT:** Do ever get bribes?

[0:09:15]

**MS:** Oh my God, no. You know what? I don't. I wish I got more bribes.

[0:09:19]

**FT:** I mean why wouldn't you? I'm thinking you are the gate keeper because let's be honest, UCB is home to the — many famous people have gone through the ranks there, Amy Poehler, Will Ferrell, a lot of the SNL cast mates and so you're...

[0:09:37]

**MS:** Well, not Will Ferrell.

[0:09:38]

**FT:** Not Will Ferrell?

[0:09:39]

**MS:** He's a Groundling. He was Groundling but he's wonderful and his partner in crime on so much stuff. Adam McKay was one of the original UCB, back when UCB was just a sketch and improv team in Chicago, he was involved. So he was involved with them back in the day but he wasn't involved in theatre but yes, so many ones.

[0:09:57]

**FT:** It's a powerful role that you have though. How do you identify with somebody that you'd see and say, "Okay, this person has it." What is "it" right now?

[0:10:07]

**MS:** Well, you know what? I think the way that I think about that and there's not any one specific thing that I'm looking for or that UCB is looking for and I feel like my job mainly and where UCB has excelled in New York over the last almost 20 years now in New York and here for over 10 years, is in creating space for people to figure out what it is on their own.

I'm very involved in the Mod teams or the sketch teams I should say. I'm very involved in making sure that the quality is high but I'm not getting in there being like, "You need to do comedy that's like this or you have to do comedy that's like this." We have to think of it as a laboratory in terms of what people are going to make, what people are going to find funny and we're basically providing them with a stage that's low cost of entry. The shows are mostly \$5 and they've been \$5 since we've opened or they're free if you're student.

So we are giving people a way to connect with an audience and we're giving them space to figure out what is funny and what works and what their voice is. In terms of trying to figure out

what the next thing is or what the thing that is “it” is, I feel like I don’t need to worry about that as much because as long as I create a space that, were people feel that they can explore their creative voices, then they’ll figure that out on their own, you know?

[0:11:38]

**FT:** And you are also an actor. How are you balancing these two worlds of you trying to build your own presence in the acting world and getting parts and then you’re also curating the next actors, the next famous people that could go onto credit you for their stardom?

[0:11:59]

**MS:** Totally. It’s such a balance and I think the way that I have done it is just to continue to make sure that I’m making things. I was thinking about this the other day, that sometimes it can feel as though it’s like, “Oh I’m so busy. Why am I busy? Oh, I’m doing things but am I making things?” And what I’ve been finding over the two years of doing this is, as long as I’m making something.

As long as I am making something that this is a thing that I’ve made that I can show the world that expresses something that I find funny or something that I find interesting or something that I’m passionate about, then I feel happy with my own creative voice and creative side of things. Then I try to let the community and the folks that are working so hard to get on stage and to stay on stage and to be vibrant on stage kind of inspire me to keep on doing stuff.

I’d like to think about this job as kind of being like among peers, right? Like try to keep it pretty flat in terms of any sort of hierarchy and it’s easier said and done because I remember coming up through New York and just having such awe and respect for the artistic director there who was Anthony King and he was awesome. Now, he’s a writer on *Playing House* and has done so many great things.

He used to work on *Broad City* and stuff, but I think that the important thing is not feeling as though there’s this extreme hierarchy because comedy abhors a hierarchy. That’s kind of the death of comedy as soon as it’s like, “Well this is the — you can’t. Here’s the ladder that you have to climb up to be funny.” It’s like, “No.”



We're funniest when we feel like there are no sacred cows that we can make fun of everyone too. So I think keeping that balance has been like making sure that I am making stuff and that I'm not just doing stuff because being busy can be a kind of fools gold sort of thing, yeah.

[0:14:10]

**FT:** I want to talk about money with you. Do you often talk about money? I don't think you're probably in tune.

[0:14:17]

**MS:** It's interesting, in the last year I've been like, "I want to get a financial adviser," because I think one of the hardest things on a personal level for me, outside of UCB, is if you're an actor and you just have all these different sources of income and that's trying to figure out how do you piece it together?

There's some years where you're like, "Oh, I did great," because I've done a lot of commercials and you know commercials up a lot and you don't know what you're going to get until you get the residuals and then the other years where you don't. It is a fascinating topic. I don't really talk about it a lot.

[SPONSOR BREAK]

[0:14:50]

**FT:** Are you still making trips to the post office? Why, when you can get postage on demand? With Stamps.com you can print your own postage at your convenience. I'm serious! Buy and print official US postage for any letter or package using your own computer and printer and unlike the post office, Stamps.com never closes. So you can get postage 24/7.

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[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

**FT:** Before I ask you about your own personal finances and I get really nosy, I'm curious about one more question about acting because I also flirted with the idea. It was a five minute thought and then I was like, "Wait, that's really scary," because there's a lot of rejection. I think for women too, just a lot of bad self-esteem problems.

[0:16:13]

**MS:** Yeah, absolutely.

[0:16:14]

**FT:** You know, the parts going to the prettier girl, the thinner girl, it's could kill essentially and so have you found your grounding in all of that? Because I'm sure you, in your own way, have experience rejection, experience low points. How do you keep going?

[0:16:34]

**MS:** You're completely right. There's nothing like acting. I was making the joke, I just got two cats and they're adorable and I have a laser pointer toy, right? And they chase this later pointer and then it disappears as they're about to grab it and I was thinking like, "You know what? This laser pointer toy that they'll ran at and then there's nothing there, it sometimes feels like now they know what having a career in acting is."

You'd just run at this thing and there it is, and then it's just gone. So you feel like in acting there is just so much, there is constant rejection and there's the desire to take it personally. And I think that the way that I've dealt with it, and it is still hard. I don't want to say that it's not hard not to figure it out, but the way that I have dealt with it is just reminding myself that it's not personal.

That there's this giant machine. Hollywood is an industry. It's an industrial complex that is created, systems that are created to churn out entertainment. Entertainments or pieces of entertainment that is our product, right? So the actor is just one tiny, tiny piece in that. One very small piece. So reminding myself not to take it personally.

Then the other thing that has been reorienting myself over the past couple of years to not only being an actor that is sitting, waiting for sides, waiting for my manager to call me and tell me that I have an audition, you know that's great. You have the audition and you get to prepare for it and you get to show people what you got but realizing that you take what you can into your own hands.

You create what you can and it goes back to the making thing. Don't sit around waiting if you're an actor. Just make something. Even if it's small, even if it's personal, even if you don't show it to that many people. So that's been a way for me to deal with that and cope with what can feel very personal and feel like a very rejection oriented career. Just take it into your own hands.

[0:18:48]

**FT:** Well, I think what I'm hearing is that you have to be entrepreneurial in anything that you do. Really have ownership in what you're doing and not take a passive approach which it's easy to take the approach that, "I'm going to just let the world dictate what I'm going to do. I don't have control," but you actually do have a lot of control. Maybe you don't have the control to get the big part in the big movie but you can still be very much practicing your craft and enjoying what you're doing.

[0:19:18]

**MS:** Absolutely and getting to be in the producer side of things now for a couple of years in terms of UCB and interacting with the industry so much is you realize that no one knows what they're doing, right? Everyone is just being an expert and they are experts but also, you can be an expert and not know what you're doing.

I don't mean that in a bad way. I mean it in a way of, "Hey, yeah you have an idea? Great, let's hear your idea too." Most people are open to that because most people just want to do their job, go home, spend time with friends and family.

[0:19:54]

**FT:** Play with your cats, yeah.

[0:19:55]

**MS:** Yeah, play with your cats, get out the laser pointer and if you can just say, "Hey, I have this idea or I have this thing that's fun," and obviously, you have to have the people that can help you get in front of the people that can do things for you in terms of getting budget and getting money behind something but if you have those things, then it's like, "Great." People are happy to hear your ideas. They're happy that you're a maker.

[0:20:21]

**FT:** Absolutely. Good point. I hate saying absolutely. I feel like that that's a crutch.

[0:20:26]

**MS:** Absolutely, I say it a lot in things.

[0:20:28]

**FT:** Do you say it too?

[0:20:29]

**MS:** Yeah.

[0:20:30]

**FT:** Sorry people but I was with you the whole way Mike, this wasn't just a throw away absolutely. Let's do some money questions. So tell me a little bit about, you grew up in Lancaster which is actually where my husband is from as well, Pennsylvania. Does anyone ever ask you if you were Amish? People ask my husband that all the time. I think they're being funny but it's not funny.

[0:20:50]

**MS:** No, sometimes people are being funny about it but some people are seriously like, "Oh were you Amish?"

[0:20:56]

**FT:** Did you leave the Amish people? I'm like, "No" so it's just a part of who lives there. But growing up in what is a rural part of the state, somewhat. I mean Lancaster is pretty hot and hip and it is hot to try.

[0:21:13]

**MS:** It is, it's becoming cool. It's becoming a cool place to live.

[0:21:15]

**FT:** It is, what was your foray into finance? Let me ask this more simply, what's your biggest money memory as a kid growing up?

[0:21:25]

**MS:** I think my money milestone as a kid, I remember my dad going with me to open a savings account. I spent the early part of my childhood in Wilmington, Delaware which is still down by there in the mid-Atlantic and I remember my dad and I going and opening a savings account at Wilmington Trust. I think he put like \$20 of it but it was a moment.

I was like, "Okay, yeah, that's my money," and then, now I am thinking about the branding of Wilmington Trust, which was brown and white and yellow or something, tan. I don't know why I remember that but yeah, the power of bank branding.

[0:22:12]

**FT:** The things we remember. I remember that my bank had lollipops, that's all I remember.

[0:22:14]

**MS:** Oh yeah, definitely lollipops but yeah and then those tubes man, I miss those tubes.

[0:22:21]

**FT:** I know, they don't have those anymore.

[0:22:24]

**MS:** No because no one is depositing checks like that and everyone just uses their phones, ugh, we need more nomadic tubes just everywhere. And then my other money memory was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. I remember saving up to get a Super Nintendo and being very proud that I saved up the \$200 to do that like all summer.

[0:22:46]

**FT:** That's a lot of money for a kid.

[0:22:48]

**MS:** It was, it was. Yeah, I think I just — yeah.

[0:22:53]

**FT:** I like that story. So are you a pretty good saver now as an adult?

[0:22:57]

**MS:** Yeah, you know I try to be. I think the thing that's — what's tough is how much are you supposed to save? I always think about, in terms of financial advice like having been an actor for 10 years, 12 years, if I just put my income out in front of someone for 10 years or so, how much should I have saved? Would they be like, "Oh you could have afforded a house by now," or, "You could have done this by now."

[0:23:33]

**FT:** Well, see the trick is to first, if hopefully 10 years ago you're like, "I want to buy a house," and this is what's going to cost. That's why your money is meaningless and you don't know how much you're supposed to really save until you identify your goals because then suddenly you have direction.

[0:23:48]

**MS:** Right, without a goal, it's like, "What?" It is meaningless.

[0:23:51]

**FT:** It's just paper and if you don't know what you need, then you just buy things you don't need and that's the problem with a lot of people run into but the good news is that to really know what to do with your money. Don't think about money. Think about what you want to do, goals, achievements and then those carry price tags and so you save accordingly.

[0:24:12]

**MS:** That makes so much sense and I think that one of the things that, you know, I've been in LA now for almost five years, a little over four years. And I think that living in New York for most of my 20's, you have a different priority in terms of what the material things that you do want out of the world. And so you get here and you're like, "Oh, yeah houses. That's what I forgot, it's the thing that everyone wants."

[0:24:38]

**FT:** Yeah, yeah so do you think you'll be in LA for the long haul at this point?

[0:24:42]

**MS:** I see myself being here for a good amount of time. There's an interesting, the eckter kind of handcuffs are New York and LA, it's like one or the other which at first is great. They're great cities. Living in New York was the time of life and LA a beautiful city. California is just so wonderful but so I see it the long haul, yeah.

[0:25:09]

**FT:** All right, let's ask another money question, personal money question. What's a failure that you experienced with your money that you're willing to share and maybe you want to share because you can talk about how you work your way through it?

[0:25:22]

**MS:** Sure, what's a money failure? Something that — oh you know what, I don't know if this is a failure but I will say something that's its unexpected which is like, "Oh okay, yeah, that's an extra expense." I love cars and that's something that you get to do in Los Angeles is you get to have great cars or get to see cars all the time.



People are like, “Ah, I’ve got to drive everywhere.” I’m like, “That’s great. You’ve got to drive everywhere. You get to have this cool machine that’s out of sci-fi but we all just take it for granted because we’re spoiled.” So last year, I leased a car which I’m so excited about. It wasn’t that much more than the least I had before and I was like, “Oh great.”

But then I forgot that — so it was a sports car, a Mustang, which they’re great. The new 2015 Mustang, beautiful, redesigned, echo boost engines so it’s not crazy on the mileage. But I forgot that insurance goes up so much when you have a sports car.

[0:26:31]

**FT:** When you have a sports car, yeah.

[0:26:32]

**MS:** I went from a little hatchback to a sports car and I was like, “Oh my insurance like double.” And in terms of thinking about all of the dimensions of what something would cost, all the hidden costs of something, I kind of like overlooked it. I was like, “Ah man.”

[0:26:49]

**FT:** Do you still have the Mustang now?

[0:26:50]

**MS:** I still do and I feel fine in terms of financing with it — finances with it. It’s all worked out and everything.

[0:27:01]

**FT:** Tradeoffs, what did you tradeoff for that? Is there anything directly that you traded off?

[0:27:06]

**MS:** In terms of that car? I think that for that car specifically, you tradeoff roomy backseats. That's the tradeoff.

[0:27:15]

**FT:** This is like, insurance is \$300 more a year or whatever so I'm going to eat peanut butter and jelly more often.

[0:27:22]

**MS:** Oh, yeah. I would say that in terms of tradeoffs for that, what did I do with that? I think that I just tried to make more money.

[0:27:31]

**FT:** Yeah, good answer.

[0:27:32]

**MS:** I was just like, "Make more money."

[0:27:33]

**FT:** That's a really good answer. We talk a lot about this on the show, there is a limit to how much you can save. There is really not a limit to how much you can earn.

[0:27:40]

**MS:** Yeah, yeah that's interesting. That's true. You can adjust how much you're putting away but yeah, there's no ceiling when you're working.

[0:27:48]

**FT:** No. As an actor, how do you negotiate your pay? Is there any wiggle room?

[0:27:54]

**MS:** There absolutely is and I think the thing that I always tell people or the advice that I always give is just like, "Make sure you're getting paid and make sure you pay yourself and make sure that you value yourself rather." There is wiggle room, you start out, you're doing non-union jobs because you're not in the union and non-union jobs they don't pay well and they're bad.

Something that you need to do as quickly as you can, there's no reason to put it off. People say, "Well wait until you have some credits under," that's bull crap — to sign myself. Get in SAG-AFTRA as quickly as you can. It's the main way that actors have leverage in terms of negotiations because with SAG-AFTRA, then you have this great union that works very hard for actors making sure that you are getting paid. You have money that's going towards health care, it's a really wonderful union.

Because if you don't have it, if you don't have SAG-AFTRA, you the actor, can't stand up to Viacom at all. You can't do it and Viacom and all of these major corporations are doing everything they can to push non-union projects. So you're a young actor, great, a \$1,000 a show sounds great. \$2,000 a show sounds great. It's like, "Okay, well in the past people used to make 30 times that," right? So the quickest thing an actor can do to have leverage is to get involved in the union. I feel very strongly about that.

[0:29:35]

**FT:** Well, this has been such an eye opening conversation. I never have talked to anybody with your role ever on the show and I hope that's my goal for this year, is to really expand the roster of guest for this show. So it's not just people who have insights into the financial world but people from all walks of life who are doing amazing things. Tell us what 2016 has in store for you and for the Upright Citizens Brigade?

[0:30:02]

**MS:** I'll tell you what, on a personal level, I'm really excited, we're talking about making things. I have a show in the works. I can't announce it yet, but it will be announced soon-ish. Now, that sounds stupid. That's like one of those Facebook statuses where people are like, "I have something I want to talk about but I can't yet."

So what else is in the works at UCB is we're still excited about UCB Sunset and its potential as a space. It's been open for a little over a year at this point and just really excited to keep seeing it grow and keep seeing a generation of performers coming up through it. Right now UCB, I'm so proud of how diverse things have gotten at UCB.

Our house teams are 30% people of color and it's something that I love bragging about because seeing as like what happened at the Oscars this year and I really think that even though the Oscars don't reflect Hollywood, Hollywood has been working super hard to make sure that the product, the entertainment product that is being produced really reflects our country. Let's see what else? I have a new podcast coming up too.

[0:31:27]

**FT:** No way, whoo!

[0:31:29]

**MS:** Yes, yes, yes.

[0:31:31]

**FT:** That's exciting. I'm going to totally subscribe.

[0:31:33]

**MS:** Totally, please do. It's called Hard Nation and it's on the Earwolf Network and it's me basically, me and my buddy, Paul Welsh, it's a political podcast where we have people on doing

impressions of politicians and stuff. The first one, which I think it just dropped today or I don't know when this is released.

[0:31:51]

**FT:** All right.

[0:31:52]

**MS:** Yeah, it's Anthony Atamanuik as Donald Trump, very funny. I play a super conservative guy on it.

[0:32:02]

**FT:** Oh my gosh Mike, this is so great. I love hearing this, you're out there creating. We need more Mike Stills in the world, what can I say?

[0:32:12]

**MS:** I mean, hopefully not in the casting rooms.

[0:32:15]

**FT:** No. Mike, thank you so much. We're going to keep an eye out for that every new show that you're not telling us what it is but we'll figure it out soon enough.

[0:32:22]

**MS:** All right.

[0:32:23]

**FT:** And your podcast, thank you so much. It's great to reconnect with you.

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**MS:** You too, Farnoosh.

[END]