

The Hamilcast: A Hamilton Podcast

[Episode #80: No one has more resilience or matches my practical tactical brilliance](#)

Host: Gillian Pensavalle

Co-host: Ashley Graffeo

Guest: James Monroe Iglehart, Hamilton on Broadway

Description: James Monroe Iglehart is a kind, funny, generous, amazing bolt of energy and I am so proud to say that he is my guest this week. Fan favorite [Ashley Graffeo](#) is my co-host, making this episode extra special. James tells us what it's like to play Lafayette/Jefferson in Hamilton on Broadway, how the role compares to his Tony winning portrayal of Genie in Aladdin, meeting the Freestyle Love Supreme crew, the wonderful night that was The American Songbook performance at Lincoln Center (he played Hercules Mulligan!), and he even gives us a never-before-heard Burr's Corner. Plus, we talk about The Muppets, The Blues Brothers, Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt, and more!

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The Hamilcast's Transcribing Army

Ok, so we are doing this . . .

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Gillian Pensavalle and Ashley Graffeo: Sibilance...sibilance..

JMI: Sibilance

G.PEN: [Singing] *Wayne's World, Wayne's World...*

James Monroe Iglehart: Your next word is Syzygy ...

(Laughter)

G.PEN: [singing] *It's party time. It's excellent!*

Opening MUSIC: Alexander Hamilton (instrumental)

G.PEN: Hello, everybody, welcome back to The Hamilcast. It is me, Gillian. Today I am joined by (gasp)...

[*Here Come the General* music]

G.PEN: Ashley Graffeo.

A.GRAF: Here I am. Hi, everybody.

G.PEN: Here comes the General.

A.GRAF: Ah, the General is here.

G.PEN: You know, we got an email that said that they miss that I'd started... I didn't do that anymore, so I'm gonna...

A.GRAF: I'm actually insulted that you forgot about it.

G.PEN: Well thank you so much for being here even though you're fuming at me. Hey guess what? James Monroe Iglehart is also in my living room.

JMI: I am so happy to be here, I am so, so happy to be here finally to be a part of Hamilcast.

G.PEN: Me too. Thank you for that. We are in the eye of the Heat Dome. I wish it was a hurricane 'cause it would really help with the temperature.

JMI: Yeah, yes. We are.

G.PEN: Thank you so, so much...

[crosstalk]

JMI: Please, I am here. You are so very welcome, thank you.

G.PEN: You are spending your night off with us. I appreciate it more than you know. You are a lovely human. We spent about 25 minutes gushing over the Blues Brothers.

JMI: Yes, yes we did because I'm a huge Blues Brothers fan.

G.PEN: If I knew that, the cocktail maybe would've been a little different. But the cocktail-slash-mocktail that we have tonight looks... pretty pretty, if I may.

JMI: It's very pretty.

G.PEN: I've been talking about the name of this cocktail to you over a month, I feel. I was just like, *It's so great. I'm not going to tell you the name of it.* There's no chill and then there's me. It's horrifying. It is called *I Can Show You the World Turned Upside Down*. Bah-da-bum!

JMI: Nicely done!

G.PEN: And it looks... it's like a bluish-greenish kind of... there's a hue involved...so, because you are...

[Overlapping comments]

JMI: Yes, it is...I love it.

A.GRAF: It's like a nice ombré color.

G. PEN: Yeah.

A.GRAF: I like it.

G.PEN: Right, yeah... Because in case you guys just came out from the rock under which you live and don't know who James Monroe Iglehart is.... You are the Tony-award-winning genie from *Aladdin*.

JMI: Yes I am.

G.PEN: And you are currently Lafayette/Jefferson in *Hamilton*.

JMI: Definitely, I definitely am and I'm very excited about that. Genie was one of the best experiences of my life and now being a part of Hamilton has also just been... Actually, this past Friday was officially two months onstage as Marquis de Lafayette-slash- Thomas Jefferson...

G.PEN: Congratulations!

JMI: And so it has been so much fun and the cast is so good and I'm having the best time ever.

G.PEN: I've been lucky enough to see you twice in those two months.

JMI: Thank you.

G.PEN: Which is as insane for me to say as is that it happened. But, both those times I was in standing room.

JMI: Yeah.

G.PEN: And when Lexi Lawson was on the first time she saw *Hamilton* ever, she was in standing room.

JMI: Yes.

G.PEN: And she was explaining how... and we've talked about this on the show a lot, that the walkaround, it's obstructed view.

JMI: Completely.

G.PEN: So I say, do standing room, cause you can move and dance.

JMI: Yes.

G.PEN: And like really go all out, but you do have to, you know, duck and move around. I... again with the no chill, *What Did I Miss?* is I think arguably the best opener to a second act...

JMI: I'll give you that, yes.

G.PEN: ...ever.

G.PEN: I was like, I'm not missing a single...I was contorting... I was, I'm not gonna miss a single solitary second or image of your entrance.

JMI: Thank you.

G.PEN: And my God, my god. I just quoted you to you.

JMI: Thank you, Yes, I heard it. I loved it.

G.PEN: So yeah, you're fantastic, and I feel like... would you say that the Genie and Lafayette/Jefferson... they have similarities?

[crosstalk]

G.PEN: They're showmen...

JMI: There are some similarities to Jefferson and the Genie, yes. Jefferson is definitely a showman.

G.PEN: Not just the purple.

JMI: No, not just the purple. There are so many places to go with that. Purple's my favorite color. Black, purple, and pink are my favorite colors. Excuse me, and also blue. Those are my four favorite colors in the world, so to be able to wear sparkly blue in one show and then to come out with a silky-shiny type of purple in the other show, I am so excited. And that jacket is also... the first jacket... The *What Did I Miss?* jacket is my favorite thing in the world right now. I love it, because it also takes me back, because part of me just doesn't want to sing *What Did I*

Miss? I kinda just want to stop and then just look at the audience and go, 'never meant to cause you any trouble' but know that that'll probably get me in trouble.

(Laughter)

[Music excerpt: *Purple Rain*]

JMI: Because with the shirt I'm wearing and the coat I'm wearing...

G.PEN: Yeah, they're kind of strict over there at *Hamilton*.

JMI: Please don't do other people's music.

G.PEN: Sir James, Sir.

JMI: I also don't want the Prince Foundation to come crashing in on me through the ceiling.

G.PEN: They just live everywhere. They're just omnipresent.

JMI: They just live everywhere. Prince can hear. Once he passed away he's kinda like the force, he's like stronger now. 'Now that you've struck me down I've become more powerful than you can possibly imagine.' And so Prince is just around.

A.GRAF: That sounds accurate.

G.PEN: Yeah. Do you know that he had... his whole house was wired for sound?

JMI: That does not shock me.

G.PEN: Yeah. In case you just wanted to be Prince. Yeah, he's in the kitchen, I'm Prince. Like he just always wanted to have things recorded.

JMI: Yeah, because he's Prince. That probably explains all those women sounds that are on his albums but we won't talk about that.

A.GRAF: Ooh.

G.PEN: I love it.

JMI: No, but that jacket and to do that entrance is so much fun and I'm so glad they let me do it, and the way they let me do it is fun.

G.PEN: I know you're a fan of wrestling...

JMI: Yes.

G.PEN: You do a little bit of a Hulk Hogan...

JMI: Yes.

G.PEN: ...ear... You guys this is not official...

JMI: Yes, I do the Hulk Hogan: 'wave, wave, wave, put it up to my ear.'

G.PEN: Right.

JMI: To get the crowd. 'Cause what's funny is when I come out... when Diggs came out, Digg would come out as if like (gasp) 'oh, there's an audience...'

G.PEN: Yes, 'oh oh, you're in my house...'

[cross talk agreement]

JMI: I come out knowing there's an audience and I expect a scream and also in my head... I hope I'm not giving too much away... I don't want the fans to be upset. I always have fun with the Hamiltons ... because it's written for Jefferson to lose.

G.PEN: In the cabinet battles.

JMI: In the cabinet battles. So...I've taken the introduction as a professional wrestling introduction which is why I come out, throw my hands in the air, look at the audience, you know, smugly, and then I do the Hulk Hogan thing to get them to scream, but in my mind, which I've told the Hamiltons, I'm like 'I know you're going to win, so my job as Jefferson is to do my best to win, knowing in the back of my mind that I will lose.' So as a villain, or as a heel, in wrestling terms...

A.GRAF: I was just going to say, I watch *GLOW* so I know that term.

JMI: So as a heel, to do my best to antagonize Hamilton to do his best.

G.PEN: Cause Hamilton needs more encouragement. [laughing]

JMI: That's the thing...to push. All the Hamiltons know the lyrics, but if I do antics that get them amped to make them even put more into it ... you can see more of the battle and that's what I love about it. So it's definitely a pro wrestling moment for me and I have so much fun doing it.

G.PEN: Let me say, you and Javi, during those battles... Here's the thing. Again we've said this, I'm like a broken record, you're encouraged to ... Like when you walk in as Jefferson you're encouraged to cheer and especially in the cabinet battles.

JMI: Definitely.

G.PEN: I mean it's like George Washington is even...he's talking straight to the audience...

JMI: Right, he's the announcer...

G.PEN: And you and Hamilton are just trying to amp up your side. And the thing about that is... well, first of all ... some would argue that you win *Cabinet Battle Number One*. In a sense, cause you're doing the 'ha, ha, ha ha.' You're kind of like, 'all right 'run along.'

JMI: What's funny is that...

G.PEN: I was gonna say, you and Javi, the way you guys, the way you say the 'try and tax our whisky' can you do your little take on it? Are you not allowed to cause it's Monday and you're off?

JMI: It's not that I can't, I don't want to cause I want people to hear it when they're there.

A.GRAF: Totally fair.

JMI: When they see it.

G.PEN: And it might change.

JMI: Yes, cause it may change. You know It all depends on what it is, because, like, when I first started, I did a sing-songy thing at the beginning. Actually at the Second Battle and I switched it to the First Battle because in my mind, the first battle I do lose in my mind. The Second Battle I feel like I won but because Ham's got Washington on his side, that's how he wins. You know as an actor you have to find reasons to do stuff. And in my mind as the actor, I feel like everything Thomas Jefferson is saying is completely valid and completely is right. We should go help France. I'm glad we didn't, history's now shown.

G.PEN: I was going to say, to him, it's totally right.

JMI: To him as a character, it's totally right. And I won that battle because what I said actually... I had facts, I had figures with me, to win. And he does a little stunt...

G.PEN: Yeah.

JMI: You know 'we've got a king whose head is now in a basket.' I'm like, you took a stunt to win AND you had help. Washington never had any intention of letting me win. So my opinion, I won the battle, so I get mad serious in the other one. So it's kinda fun to play that.

G.PEN: Yeah.

JMI: My inspiration for that was Rocky in *Rocky I* and *Rocky II*. Like *Rocky I*, Apollo is very playful and he's always like 'It's a show, it's a show, it's a show.' And in the second film he's like, 'No shucking, no jiving, just business.' So that's what's going on in my head when I was rehearsing. And when I got out there and did it, they were like, 'Yeah, it's good. Keep going, that's fun.'

G.PEN: And you were like, 'Okay, Creatives of *Hamilton*. Sure.'

JMI: And Javi and I, we play it very serious, both battles, you know.

G.PEN: So aggressive.

JMI: Yeah, and that's what I love about it. We actually get to go at each other and have a good time doing that. And the audience gets into it.

[Instrumental clip: *Washington on Your Side*]

JMI: In the second one, it bridges into *Washington on Your Side*. So the minute the battle is over, the energy that I have, especially with... actually with all three... I have different energy with all three, with Javi, Donald and Jevon. But there's a certain way I play it with each one when I say, "Did you forget Lafayette?"

(Gasp)

JMI: There's a different way. It all depends on what energy they give me.

G.PEN: Right.

JMI: And if we're really aggressive...it can get aggressive. I think Jevon and I have gotten the most aggressive.

G.PEN: Really?

JMI: Because we're pretty close. I think Q, J. Quinton Johnson, one time said, "Dude, I thought y'all was about to throw bowls..."

(laughter)

JMI: And we laughed so hard. We thought... he's like ... he had no idea that we'd actually said before the battle, we said, "Look, let's just go at each other tonight and see what happens."

(Gasp)

JMI: And we swang, and it was aggressive and it was fun, and when we got offstage we were like, "Damn, that felt good."

A.GRAF: They were aggressive. They did not like each other! It's fun to see that energy that you know these two probably had for each other. Like disdain, and like, mockery. "I think I'm smarter than you." "No, I think I'm smarter than you."

G.PEN: Yeah.

A.GRAF: And just to see that play out, it makes it more palpable.

JMI: Two writers who are great at what they do, at the top of their game, and then you add to the element that you've now put them in this arena of hip hop and so we just GO, you know, the First Battle is there to... they're feeling each other out...and Hamilton goes for the jugular, Jefferson's not ready, so when they get to the Second Battle, Jefferson's like "Oh no, we're not playing this time." And that's how I feel about it. And it's fun, because I think I'm, at least on Broadway, I'm one of the first baritones to play Jefferson. So to able to use that part of my register, my voice, to use that on Ham is also fun. Because I can see the look on people's faces when I start the Second Battle, they're like 'Oh, damn, something happened.'

G.PEN: So is that...

A.GRAF: Yeah. It's an intimidation tactic.

G.PEN: It's called a lightning bolt of energy and it's amazing.

JMI: Thank you very much.

G.PEN: Something in the Ham Fam community is, it's hilarious that the person who was just playing Lafayette is saying "Did you forget Lafayette?"

A.GRAF: I love that.

JMI: Oh that's one of my favorite moments. And the fun part is for those of us who are follicly challenged, they put a headband on us, so it's like, "Did you forget Lafayette? I was wearing a headband just about an hour ago."

A.GRAF: It's like when the nerd girl takes off her glasses and now she's beautiful.

[cross talk]

JMI: Now she's sexy, yeah.

A.GRAF: 'Do you remember me? I just had glasses...'

JMI: Which is so funny because I am that kid from the 80s who wanted her to keep the glasses on.

G.PEN: Glasses are great!

JMI: I've always thought glasses were sexy and I was like, 'She took them off.' I'm like, 'And now you're gonna run into something.'

G.PEN: Oh, boo.

A.GRAF: Like does she have contacts?

JMI: Cause you never see her put contacts on. You just see her take the glasses off and walk straight.

A.GRAF: How are they magically able to see everything?

JMI: You know damn well that she walked out of the house and she was hit by a car with the corsage on. She's like, 'he's going with ... \*boom\*'

[laughter]

G.PEN: This is not a Disney movie where there was some magical "Now you can see."

JMI: No, she just took her glasses off and put a dress on and walked outside.

G.PEN: Fell down the stairs.

JMI: She should've fallen down the steps.

A.GRAF: She took her hair down, don't forget, she took her hair down and/or got a cut. And now she's a better person.

G.PEN: We're just talking about the movie *She's All That*.

JMI: We are so talking about the movie *She's All That*.

A.GRAF: She took off her taco hat and she's gorgeous.

G.PEN: And she's now Rachel Leigh Cook. That's just what happened.

JMI: I love you all, and I love that tangent we just went on of *She's All That*.

G.PEN: Freddy Prinze, Jr, you should be so lucky that you get Laney Boggs as she was.

JMI: Because you know damn well when she had children, she put those glasses right back on her face.

G.PEN: Absolutely.

A.GRAF: How was she going to see all the things they were doing wrong?

JMI: Thank you.

G.PEN: And she's an artist. She needs those glasses.

[cross talk]

G.PEN: And her father is... who I love... Kevin Pollock, can we please... as the father, you should say, "He should love you for you."

A.GRAF: What a great movie.

JMI: I got to work with him.

G.PEN: Really?

G.PEN: I love him.

JMI: I did a film last year and got to work with him and it was a lot of fun.

G.PEN: Can you tell us a little bit about...

JMI: It's a film called [The Three Christs](#) based on the book *Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. In the film was Bradley Whitford, Richard Gere, and Peter Dinklage, and Walton Goggins....

[reactions] Oh, that's amazing!

JMI: So when it comes out, I hope people dig it, but there was a moment where Kevin Pollock was there and I got to talk to him on set and it was like really, really cool.

A.GRAF: You know it's weird that I also worked with Richard Gere. I was his daughter's camp counselor when I was 14, maybe? So it's like...

[laughter and cross talk]

G.PEN: I thought you were doing a bit. "I was in *Officer and a Gentleman*..."

A.GRAF: That's an actual thing. I saw him walk past me once, so it's kinda like we're best friends.

G.PEN: You know who else walked in front of you? ... Is that him? He's texting you. Can you please turn your phone off?

G.PEN: We were in the presence of a Beatle, Paul McCartney.

A.GRAF: Oh that's right!

JMI: Yes, Wow!

G.PEN: He didn't know that we were there...

G.PEN: We snuck in...That sounds really creepy. I should clarify.

JMI: 'He didn't know that we had gotten into his dressing room, we were sitting in a closet.'

A.GRAF: Which is fine. He's fine, everyone.

G.PEN: And then he heard us singing in perfect harmony, and he was like, hey, "join the Beatles. I'm going to remake the Beatles."

JMI: And he was like, "I should sign you."

G.PEN: Or join Wings.

G.PEN: Anyway, Kevin Pollock does the best Peter Falk/Columbo impression in the world.

JMI: Oh my God, yes.

G.PEN: I love Columbo and Peter Falk. I mention this as often as I can on the podcast.

A.GRAF: Because that's what you can do when you have your own podcast.

JMI: I wish...I have a friend of mine named Brian Gonzales, one of my dearest friends, he plays Babkak in Aladdin. Not only is he one of the greatest actors I've ever seen in my life, literally

one of the most talented guys, he's one of the funniest and he literally wears... he literally dresses like Columbo.

G.PEN: What?

JMI: And his Peter Falk is quite amazing. And actually for a short Latin guy, he also does an amazing Ving Rhames as well.

[laughter]

JMI: And as the black guy in the room, I'm always like "Do Ving Rhames, do Ving Rhames."

G.PEN: Do you want to hear my Columbo?

JMI: Please do.

G.PEN: [as Peter Falk] You know what's been boooooothing me?

JMI: Would you please say "as you wish" for me?

G.PEN: [whispery] As you wish.

G.PEN: [still as Columbo] You know James, just one more thing...

[laughter]

G.PEN: And you guys thank you so much, this has been the Hamilcast.

A.GRAF: ColumboCast, everybody.

G.PEN: So you actually... Segue, not smooth segue at all... I follow you on Instagram, as do, I think, everyone that is listening. You hurt your back yesterday.

JMI: I hurt my back Saturday, actually.

G.PEN: Saturday.

JMI: During the matinee.

G.PEN: Are you okay?

JMI: I am...okay.

[Sound clip from James' Instagram: *Everyone give it up for America's favorite fighting Frenchman...*]

JMI [from Instagram]: Hi, this is James Monroe Iglehart and welcome to another edition of *Burr's Corner*. Today we're gonna talk about *Guns and Ships*, or as I like to call it, *Gibberish and Ships*. Yes, let me give you a little backstory. Yesterday, I hurt my back during the show but I came to work today because that's what good actors do, as you've heard, the show must go on. So I'm out in the middle of the stage, dressed like the beautiful Marquis de Lafayette. I jump on the table, and a white-sharp pain hits my back! Whoo! And all the words fall out of the sky and onto the floor, like puzzle pieces. So what should have been: "*I'm taking this horse by the reins, making Redcoats redder with bloodstains*" came out "*I'm taking this up diddy bup dit abba dup it's and I get and I'm eh never gonna stop until I make em jump and put em scatter the remains!*" Ahh! Yes. Complete gibberish. [end of Instagram clip]

JMI: People saw *Gibberish and Ships*... what they didn't see was later on that night I had another *Burr's Corner*. I just didn't do it because I didn't have time. If I was gonna do it, I wanted to do it with Nik Walker, but since I'm here, I'll do it. I was like, well, I got through *Gibberish and Ships*, the rest of the show was great. I got through all the Cabinet Battles, I got through *Washington on Your Side*, all of the fast things you have to do that seem to be the hardest things in the show to do.

G.PEN: Right.

JMI: And we just got through *Quiet Uptown*. And I'm walking down the steps and I know exactly what I'm going to say. I'm supposed to say "Can we get back to politics?"

G.PEN and JMI in unison: "Please!"

JMI: "Every action has an equal, opposite reaction. John Adams shat the bed, I love the guy but he's in traction." But instead, somehow, there were two paths in my brain, and instead of going to the right I went to the left and said, "Can we get back to politics..."

G.PEN: "Please!"

JMI: "Every action has its equal, opposite reaction. Thanks to Hamilton our cabinet's fractured into factions. Try not to...try not to crack...with this crap we're breaking down like fractions" And I look at Nik Walker and I say "You know what I mean?" And he goes "Aaron Burr ..." And I say, "Aaron Burr with his own faction." It just happened to rhyme and we went right on with the rest of it.

G.PEN: You said onstage "You know what I mean?"

JMI: No, actually, I said, "You know what I'm saying?" I said, "Every action has its equal, opposite reaction. Thanks to Hamilton our cabinet's fractured into factions. Try not to...try not to

crack...under this stress we're breaking down like fractions," and I looked at him and said, "You know what I'm saying?" "Aaron Burr" "With his own faction." Now, it rhymes with the line before and we went right on as if nothing happened. And here's the great part. We finished, walked offstage and the whole cast was like 'that was amazing!'

[laughter]

JMI: 'How did you?' And if there's one thing I am known for... I am not known for messing up but I am known for, if I do mess up, I can always bring myself back.

G.PEN: Sounds like that was a hell of a save.

JMI: I always can bring myself back. Don't get me wrong. If mine was a lob, it was spiked by Nik Walker, and I was able to \*click\* pick it back up and we were able to play volleyball again.

G.PEN: Would you say it was like 'click boom' probably?'

JMI: Yeah, 'click, boom.' Yes, exactly. And it was one of those wonderful moments where you're looking onstage and you just kind of go ... 'my partner's with me.' But it was just one of those days where I walked offstage and people were like, 'it's okay, we're almost done.' Cause I was like, 'this has been a SHOW!'

G.PEN: I don't know if you know. There are a lot of words in Hamilton.

JMI: A lot of words.

G.PEN: And you as Lafayette/Jefferson, you have a lot of them.

JMI: And what's funny is, most of the time, I am good. When I'm on, I am one hundred percent on. And if I'm off? I'm about 95% off. I'm never 100% off, cause I'll always bring myself back. When I do mess up, now they look and they go, 'Ah, James'll bring it back.' I have not messed up a lot in the two months, I've actually been pretty good. But in those three *Burr's Corners* that I did, they're like, 'yeah, he's fine.'

G.PEN: That was Nik Walker's debut as Mulligan/Madison.

JMI: First time as Mulligan... He was on point.

G.PEN: That's awesome that even on his first night he was like, "Oh, no, James, I got you."

JMI: Yeah, he had me. And what's fun is that we had each other. There were moments he looked at me and I was like "I got you," so you know.

JMI: Yeah, he had my back. And I have to give much credit to Nik Walker. He made that save and it was so fun but when we walked offstage he looked at me, he was like, “Dude, I was trying to figure out how you were gonna get out of it, but when you threw it to me, all I said was Burr,” and he goes, “you picked it right up.” I was like “All I needed was for you to click my brain back into action”... and that was good.

G.PEN: And the thing is, the audience is just so effing excited...

A.GRAF: They're just happy to be there.

JMI: And the fun part is, if the audience did notice, they didn't say anything.

G.PEN: What are they gonna say?

[Crosstalk]

G.PEN: *Rewind?*

JMI: But did you hear about the fly incident though?

G.PEN: No.

JMI: Okay, So a couple nights ago. We've had these flies. There's a couple flies that live in the theatre and they decided to attack.

[laughter]

JMI: Me and Burr. And they loved me. I don't know why they loved me so much.

G.PEN: Attack you and whoever's playing Burr at the same time? Or just throughout the show?

JMI: No, during *Washington on Your Side*. They'd been flying around... they decided to make like a beeline for us.

G.PEN: Flies, this is a very important moment in the show.

JMI: I'm looking at Javi and I say my line to Javi, I say, “Oh, Daddy's calling,” and he walks off. And I've already swatted a fly, and two ladies in the front row are like giggling a little bit. Then we get into “It must be nice, it must be nice” so I get to “every action has an equal, opposite reaction” but while I'm doing it, my friend offstage said, ‘Looked like you were voguing’ cause I was... “Every action has an Eee, opposite reaction”

JMI: My voice... you can't see me as I'm swatting a fly away, and then the fly hit Burr.

G.PEN: Who was playing Burr?

JMI: Brandon. And Brandon begins to swat, and it gets to a point where we are swinging so much that the audience begins to clap for us.

G.PEN: They're rooting for you.

A.GRAF: They wanted you to get the fly.

JMI: They can see that now it's not one fly, it is two very large horseflies who've decided that we need to die.

A.GRAF: Oh, horseflies... That's nice of them.

JMI: And they come at us, and it was so great because then we never missed a beat, we never dropped a line, but we got back into it and then centered when Mulligan came in and we finished the rest of the song. People were like, "those flies were coming at you guys!" It was so hysterical.

G.PEN: So you even were okay during the 'I'm in the cabinet, I am complicit...'

JMI: Yeah, totally.

G.PEN: And then, when everyone comes in after the 'southern, motherfuckin' ... And then you guys do that awesome puffing move that makes me amped even thinking about it, then the whole the ensemble comes in... I think if somebody clapped in the air, nobody would notice. 'I got it!'

JMI: I think once the flies realized there was more of us, they left us alone. But there was two and two of us, and they were like "we can take 'em".

A.GRAF: 'They brought reinforcements.'

G.PEN: You guys, this is the Richard Rodgers Theatre. Flies.

JMI: Ah please, it's summertime, we're in New York City. Every theatre has flies. I got attacked by a fly during Genie. See with that character, I can wave my hands as much as I want. They're like, 'James is having a great time.' I'm like 'Get away from me!' They're like, 'Look at him create stuff!' I'm like, 'Look, Al, I just want to tell you....'

[laughter]

G.PEN: Ah, the perks of being the Genie.

JMI: It was beautiful. I loved every second of it.

G.PEN: Is there glitter everywhere still?

JMI: Not anymore.

G.PEN: Good!

JMI: It's been finally exorcised from the house.

G.PEN: You were somewhere else today. You've had a busy day off.

JMI: Yeah, I've had a busy day off. I was at BARS workshop in New York City

G.PEN: Can you tell our listeners all about that?

JMI: Actors, as well as poets get together to have a place to be able to not only work on their projects but also work on a giant project together, but they have these amazing master classes and also other classes to put their pieces on its feet. It's a great place to just be able to create. Sometimes you just need a space...

A.GRAF: Right. Totally...

JMI: ... where you can create, and the Public Theatre and BARS have created that. It was created by Rafael Casal and Daveed Diggs who are two of the best lyricists in the world.

G.PEN: I've heard that.

JMI: So you have two great lyricists who have put in their place where people who love to write have a place to articulate their art... And it was great to be there and do like a little master class, talk about my life and what I've done, impart some sort of wisdom hopefully, they took some away from what I've done and what has happened to me over the years.

G.PEN: That is...

A.GRAF: That sounds fantastic.

G.PEN: I love that.

JMI: It was a lot of fun.

G.PEN: Yeah, it's all about having a space for artists and I love that is what Daveed is doing. And I know that that's been a big part of his life.

JMI: Always. And he and Rafael have been best friends for years.

[sound clip of Daveed and Rafael performance]

JMI: They're always coming up with something new and innovative to do with words and places for people to create things with words, so I love it. I thought it was great and I got to be there and they were like "You ready to freestyle?" I'm like, "I'm always ready to freestyle." So we did that too, that was fun. That's awesome.

G.PEN: I'm so glad you mentioned freestyling because I wanted to talk to you about Freestyle Love Supreme.

JMI: Yes.

G.PEN: Shockwave was over.

JMI: Love him.

G.PEN: He... I say this so loosely, taught me how to beatbox...

JMI: That sounds like Shockwave

[Overlapping talk]

G.PEN: In the sense that he...started...

A.GRAF: He just taught you the basic rules...

JMI: Boots and cuts...

G.PEN: Boots and cuts

G.PEN: Which Mike and I just like do around the house so it's very, very limited. I'm not...When I say taught me how to beatbox I mean that Shockwave did an example of the first thing that you do, and then I just do that over and over again.

[Laughter from JMI]

G.PEN: And he was so lovely. And he came over and brought the binder from the American Songbook.

JMI: Of course.

G.PEN: I want to talk to you about American Songbook because you played Hercules Mulligan. And I want to... I was so nervous when I asked Shock to teach me how to beatbox because it was something, I was like, there's no way I could do this. The idea of freestyling, scares me.

A.GRAF: It terrifies me.

G.PEN: It's not nerves.

A.GRAF: Terrifies me.

G.PEN: It's scary. And Ash, I'm not gonna to take you down with me, you do not have to go down with the ship.

A.GRAF: Yeah, no I'm not...I'm not doing it.

G.PEN: And I know that freestyling isn't something that can be taught the way that Shock can say 'you do Boots and Cuts' and you found that part in your throat. But I am terrified at the idea of freestyling, because it does not compute.

JMI: You can! You can... But it's a practice thing.

G.PEN: Like how does it...

JMI: I've been doing it since I was ten years old,

G.PEN: What?

JMI: Yeah.

A.GRAF: Well that'll do it.

G.PEN: That's not true..Really?

JMI: Yeah.

G.PEN: That's awesome.

JMI: Well, because I when I heard... I'll make this story quick... I heard my first, my first real rap song, or I was asked about a rap group...I had heard a rap song, I had heard, you know, [Rapper's Delight](#) by the Sugar Hill Gang and I had heard, you know, Melly Mel and the Furious Five, Grandmaster Flash, but I would remember, in elementary school was the first time I was asked had I heard a rap album and it was Run DMC and my friend asked me had I heard it, and I distinctly remember my answer. I said, "No, who is DMC and why is he running?"

[laughter]

JMI: I'll never forget that as long as I live. And he was like, "No, man, Run DMC's a rap group" and I'd say "huh? what?" And so... that summer I went to Bakersfield, which was where my family was living, I should say where my mother's family was living -- my cousins and grandma all lived down there. And my cousin Sean played Run DMC for me, and I played it on my little Sony Walkman over and over and over and over again.

G.PEN: And me.

JMI: And I wanted to rap, so I started writing my own raps when I was around ten. But, boys are stupid and boys take everything and make it a competition.

G.PEN: I wish I could correct you but...

A.GRAF: Yeah, I was gonna say, I have nothing to add to that.

JMI: And so everybody wants to battle so I realize, I'm writing raps and you only have your piece of paper.

G.PEN: Right...

JMI: And all of a sudden, I'm done with my paper, and every kid was still going. And so after it was all over, when everybody was gone, I was like, "How did you have that much written?", and he said, "I'm not writing, I'm just making it up." And I said, "What'd you mean, making it up?" And he said, "Well, I'm making it up." We at the time didn't realize it was called freestyling. Freestyling was also dancing, too, a style of breakdancing.

G.PEN: Right.

JMI: And I said, "Well how do you do it?" and he said, "You just practice. You know, take one word that rhymes with the other, you know: *I'm a car, I go far, or I go this, and I move this and you do that...*" and so, over the years, and I'm forty-two now, and so to just freestyle, I did it every day, and I still do it every day. I can't help myself, it's just a part of who I am. So I'll just be by myself and I'll... I have on my iPod... I have just beats, and I walk on the street, just turn on the beats and I'll rap to myself with what I see around the city, just to keep myself...

A.GRAF: That's awesome.

JMI: Now I'm not the best writer in the world like, you know, Daveed Diggs can write bars for days. But I love to freestyle because that just keeps my mind quickly going. It's fun.

A.GRAF: Like you're always testing yourself.

JMI: One of our creators at Freestyle Love Supreme [Anthony Veneziale](#) who's basically Two Touch, who is our host, who I love dearly too, he has this exercise which helps people freestyle like: You tell a one minute story about yourself. Like I would give you a topic and I would say...oh, any word, any word at all. For you it would be special, I would look at you and say 'Rent', and have you tell a one minute story, just a one minute story. I say that only because I know how much you love *Rent* and how prolonged that could probably be.

G.PEN: It could go long.

A.GRAF: It could go long.

JMI: And you would tell a one-minute story about *Rent*. And some word in that story that would be special to you, whether it would be something ... 'camera'... or 'guitar'... or 'candle'. Then you would tell me to tell a story about 'candle', and then I would tell a true story about 'candle' and then we would stop. Shockwave would usually be there, and he would do a beat, and you would have to tell your story over the beat. Now it doesn't have to rhyme but you would tell your story over the beat. And those are exercises that help you do it because after a while there's certain things you might say which might rhyme, and it's just an exercise to help you let your mind create over the rhythm. And you'll start to find yourself flowing over whatever the beat is ...

A.GRAF: You start thinking that way...

JMI: You start thinking that way...

G.PEN: I was gonna say, it's the flow of just telling a story to whatever the beat...

[overlapping conversation]

A.GRAF: I guess I know what I'm doing on my car ride home.

G.PEN: Clearly.

A.GRAF: I'm so...

JMI: Of course, yes...

G.PEN: To *Rent*, obviously/ Do you want me to, I'll record a *Boots, Cut*

A.GRAF: Could you....right before I leave?

G.PEN: Professional beatboxer now, I'm a professional. Shockwave taught me how.

G.PEN: Well, tell us about...Speaking of Shockwave, cause he brought over his binder when he was here, for the American Songbook. Cause that was... that was 2012... So Lin called you....

JMI: Lin called and said, “hey we’re doing this concert at Lincoln Center and I have this character who is kind of... like a Busta Rhymes type of character and what do you think? I want you to play him,” and I said, “Sure, for you, man, let’s do this, it sounds like fun.” I didn’t know what it was. So we get there and it’s like Hercules Mulligan, and there is Jon Rua and UTK and Chris Jackson and Mandy and Rebecca and all these people, we’re all there, and Lin and Tommy and Shockwave and Bill and Alex Lacamoire were all there and we just started working on stuff and we got to do the first Cabinet Battle. And it was really a fun concert, because the first part of the concert was Lin telling the audience all of his influences as far as hip-hop was concerned. And I got to do the verse - I wish I could remember - I got to do... one of Biggie’s verses and Pharcyde, *She Keeps on Passin’ Me By*. We got to do a verse from Big Pun. It was just so much fun to do.

G.PEN: A mixtape.

JMI: Such a fun concert and then we got into just a couple of songs from Hamilton. And to hear these songs, the way you’d never heard them before... the electricity in the room was crazy... when Gavin Creel came out and sang *You’ll Be Back*, people didn’t know what to do.

G.PEN: Yeah, that’s not on YouTube.

JMI: No, none of it...Almost none of it is.

G.PEN: YOU are on YouTube.

JMI: I am on [YouTube](#) doing *My Shot*. But Mandy’s on YouTube

[Sound clip from *My Shot*/YouTube American Songbook concert]

JMI: It was just one of those moments where it’s like it... literally, you needed to be in the Room Where it Happened. We are there at the Lincoln Center Jazz Center. What’s that..

G.PEN: Columbus Circle.

JMI: Columbus Circle’s in the background, and we are just flowing, and it was just so much fun. And we knew then... we were like, this show’s going to be something. We didn’t know it was going to be the phenomenon it was, but we knew that it was going to be something. And they did *Dear Theodosia*, that was there.

G.PEN: Who sang *Dear Theodosia*?

JMI: It was actually, I believe it was Lin and UTK.

G.PEN: Wait, what?

JMI: Lin and Ut. Cause Utkarsh...

G.PEN: And Lin was Ham?

JMI: Yeah, and Utkarsh played Burr.

A.GRAF: Stop it, that's adorable.

G.PEN: What!

A.GRAF: I want to see it.

G.PEN: Also, everyone who's been mentioned has an open invitation, I hope you know that. I say that every episode.

A.GRAF: Every time, but they all do.

G.PEN: So tell us just real quick, and then we have questions from our Patreon Peeps that I'm gonna get to cause I know we don't have your forever, unfortunately. Cause I could just put on the Blues Brothers....

JMI: That's true...

G.PEN: Just saying...

JMI: Just do the whole lyric... every lyric...

G.PEN: For sure. Again, Cause we listened to *Shake Your Tailfeather*...

JMI: I can't help it, I love that song.

G.PEN: So could you just tell people, cause I know people are dying to know, like how did you and Lin become friends and then how did this journey happen between you and Lin and then Freestyle Love Supreme, and then you being Lafayette/Jefferson?

JMI: I met Chris Jackson in California around 2004 and we were doing a show in the Bay area in Marin, and we were both laughing about the fact... sadly laughing about the fact that we really were hoping these two shows we were about to do would go to Broadway. He had been working on *Heights* and I had been working on different versions of *Memphis* and we were hoping they were gonna go to Broadway but at the time we were doing this show in the Bay area and he was like, "I just ...also I'm part of this group called Freestyle Love Supreme" and I was like, "Well that sounds cool, what is it?" and he explained to me and I was like "oh, I freestyle" and me and Chris were laughing about the fact. "Nah, man, you don't understand. My boy, Lin, is like dope!"

And I was like, “Well I feel I’m dope,” and he said, “No, you don’t understand, Lin is like DOPE!” and we were laughing about it and so... one day we’re ... doing something and I start freestyling and he was like, “Oh, you got skills.” “Look, I told you I got skills,” and he was like, “You should come and audition,” and I said, “Cool, no problem.” We talked about it for about the next couple of months and I got into *Spelling Bee* in San Francisco. When *Spelling Bee*, our cast transferred to Boston, that was about the time that *In the Heights* was about to go to off-Broadway, and they needed people to step in for Freestyle gigs. And that night, two people auditioned, well actually four people auditioned, two people got in. Those two people that got in were myself and Utkarsh. So Utkarsh and I auditioned on the same night. And we were in this room and Bill was there and there was Shockwave. They started beatboxing. Chris was there, Lin. They were all there.

G.PEN: Is that when you met them all?

JMI: That’s when I met Tommy. I met Lin and everything. So I met them that night, and I said, “what’s up?” and everything. And Chris was like, “Look man, just be cool, be yourself, do your thing, don’t worry ‘bout a thing” and I said, “Cool, I’m ready, let’s go!” And it was one of those fun nights because I remember... when you usually do an audition, you’re done, you go outside, and they tell you later. So we’re rapping and playing all these games and having a good time, and next thing you know, Tommy says, “All right man, that’s cool, we’re gonna have a little meeting. Utkarsh, James, just have a seat. Thanks guys!” ...They close the door, just turn around and start having a Freestyle Love Supreme meeting. And I looked at Utkarsh and I said, “Yo, are we in the group?” And Tommy says, “Oh, yeah, y’all in.” They were having a meeting like, “we have some shows to do...”

[laughter and overlapping reactions]

JMI: They just started shooting the shit...

G.PEN: They never said the words like, “you’re awesome...”

A.GRAF: “Hey, you’re in...”

JMI: No... they were like, “Okay” ... and I was like, “Are we in?” ... “Oh, yeah, yeah, you’re in.” So all of a sudden I walk out the room and they were like, “So when can you get back to New York?” And I’m like, (singsongy) “I don’t live in New York, I live in California.” But what happened was when *Spelling Bee* made it to... it was already in New York, our cast became the Broadway cast. And that was only like two months later... and I was in New York for something, I forgot what it was and I ended up doing a part-time moment with Freestyle Love Supreme.

G.PEN: Okay.

JMI: So I would rehearse with them and then they would call me up to do like two games, then I would sit back down. And then when I finally moved to New York, I became a full-time part of

the group. And it was great because when Lin and Chris were in *In the Heights*, Utkarsh and I were in those spaces and then one night at Ars Nova, which I think is the last time *everybody* was together, it was like Wu Tang Night. It was like every member of Freestyle Love Supreme was there.

A.GRAF: 27 members of the States...

JMI: And it was the coolest, craziest, most fun moment to be able to sing harmonies with Chris Jackson while we were doing it, and Utkarsh and Lin...

A.GRAF: Sounds like the worst. [laughing]

JMI: We would have Utkarsh on one stool and Lin on the other and they would do foundations of freestyle and Arthur and Chris and I would sing together while the boys would rap. It was wonderful.

G.PEN: Okay... That sounds awesome.

JMI: And to finish your question, what happened was, when you're with those guys, I got to see *In the Heights*, I got to see what they were doing, then I got into *Memphis* and they came over and saw the show. Then Chris Jackson joined *Memphis* when one of our guys left. So we were always around each other and watching each others' shows. And then, the Lincoln Center thing came up, he asked me to be a part of it, but what was funny was I had just done *Aladdin* in Seattle and we hadn't heard anything about it, and that same night as the Lincoln Center concert, Casey Nicholaw was in the audience and so was a couple of folks from Disney, and Casey sends me a text that says "Hey, just letting you know that *Aladdin* is still floating. So I'm letting you know, to get yourself ready probably in the next month or two." So when it came up for *Hamilton* to come up, I said, "Guys, look, I just went to Seattle and did the Genie. I must see what happens. I'm gonna stick with this Genie thing." They said, "Totally, we totally understand. You do your thing." They went off and made *Hamilton* the great thing it is, I went off and did *Aladdin*, not thinking that I would ever have a chance to do *Hamilton* again, and three years later, *Hamilton* opens. We opened in 2014, they opened in 2016? I believe. 2015, sorry. I win the Tony, they all came to see the show, we were all laughing about it. I go to opening night of *Hamilton*, it's great. We're like "Oh my god, it's so cool what you guys are doing." We're all laughing at each other's success. Then all of a sudden I get a call, "Hey man, you want to audition for *Hamilton*?" I was like, "Are you joking?" They're like, "No, we're serious." I'm like, "Are you joking?" Like "No". I was like, "Ah, I guess so." Couldn't think I was gonna get it. I love those guys, but I didn't think I was gonna get it, and next thing you know, here I am.

G.PEN: My jaw was on the entire... I'm sorry I was gaping at you like a trout, like a fish with my mouth... I'm sorry, that's a fantastic sorry.

G.PEN: So I know I can't keep you forever, like we said, I'm gonna get to our Patreon questions if you would be so awesome.

JMI: Cool, not a problem.

Natalie asks, "what's been your favorite *Hamilton* experience so far?" If you've already answered, that's cool.

JMI: Oh, it was around my third week. It's really small, but I was onstage and I was in the middle of *My Shot*, and we had paused for a (singing) *Rise Up, Rise Up*, and we were going around the circle and I was like, Oh, Snap, I'm in *Hamilton*!

A.GRAF: There's that moment...

JMI: Because your first time on stage, you're like, "[panic sounds] What am I saying! Oh my god! Please be in the right place. Don't hit nobody. Okay, cool... things will be.."

G.PEN: That's a really good impression of me.

JMI: Then three weeks in it, 'Oh, I'm in it, I got it, Cool! I actually know what I'm doing!' And then I sorta, you know, playing and having some fun and doing things, and that was the moment. I think the other moment was, I got to meet... I'm a huge professional wrestling fan as I said and this just happened. Every show I've ever done, some wrestler has come to see the show... And recently I got to meet one of my favorites, he's new in the company, he's only been there about three or four years. His name is Kevin Owens. And Kevin Owens and I are very similarly built. In the WW usually there's a bunch of muscle-bound guys, and Kevin looks like me. And to see him do all the amazing things he does in the ring and then for him to come to the show with his wife and to love it the way he did, it was really really cool. And I've gotten to meet some really incredible people. My wife loves People's Court, I got to meet Judge Milian.

G.PEN: What?

JMI: I got to meet Judge Milian, which was awesome. You know, for Bradley Whitford to come to the show and talk and say, "Hey man, I just had to come see you, bud." And also one of the great moments was when Daveed Diggs came. When Daveed came and told me, he's like, "Dude, you're doing it," so to have him give his seal of approval was nice.

A.GRAF: That's awesome.

G.PEN: Yeah.

JMI: And also, my niece and nephews love this show, and when they heard I got in they told me afterwards, "You know we were a little worried 'bout you doing it." I said, "Why?" They were like, "we know you could rap, but we've never heard you rap that fast. We've never heard you do a French accent. We didn't know." I said, "Well, how'd I do?" They were like "YOU WERE GREAT, OH MY GOD!" They flipped out. I was like "Okay, cool. My family likes it. I'm good."

A.GRAF: Yes, You passed muster.

G.PEN: You didn't solidify the cool uncle role as the Genie?

JMI: You know what's funny, when you're the family, it's just what uncle does. We helped raise money ...so for them this is just uncle's job. All of a sudden, Uncle's in *Hamilton*, they're like "Hold up, what?"

A.GRAF: 'This is a different kettle of fish. I am obsessed with *Hamilton*.'

G.PEN: I love that they were like, 'honestly, I was a little worried.'

A.GRAF: 'They were a little pitchy, dog, a little pitchy.'

G.PEN: Thank you, Randy.

G.PEN: They did not hold back, I love that. Well, that's family, right?

JMI: They're very truthful. I tell them to be, please.

G.PEN: Stef says, "Was it a difficult transition from Genie to Lafayette/Jefferson?"

JMI: Not really because I talked really fast as genie as well. The hardest thing joining, I've said this before, but the hardest thing about joining *Hamilton* was the steps.

A.GRAF: And the lack of glitter

G.PEN: The steps like the Jefferson, or just the choreography?

JMI: No the physical stairs on the show. The first act is a Stairmaster's show. Don't get me wrong. There are some beautiful bodies on Broadway but the best asses on Broadway belong to *Hamilton* because of the doggone steps. Everybody's gluts are amazing...

A.GRAF: I can imagine...

JMI: ...because of the doggone steps we have to run up.

G.PEN: And then you get up there and then you have to react!

JMI: Yeah, we have to dance, act, then run down. Then run back up.

A.GRAF: ...and act like you're not winded each time.

JMI: And in between, *Satisfied* and um, Eliza's song

G.PEN: *Helpless*...

JMI: And so between *Helpless* and *Satisfied*, I have to run up the steps four times in a row. And we just crack up laughing.

G.PEN: You guys are like 'hey.'

[Music: *Helpless*]

G.PEN: Payton says, "James has played some extremely intimidating roles on stage I'd love to know if he was more intimidated by recreating a Robin Williams character or the characters in *Hamilton* which is such a success and has such a huge hype still associated with it?"

JMI: They were both daunting, but for different reasons. *Aladdin* was daunting because there are millions and millions of people who know Robin Williams, and Robin Williams was still alive and he's a legend. And the film is so iconic.

JMI: I am a super Disney fan, super comic book fan, super sci-fi fan. I am a self-proclaimed nerd and I totally wear that badge with honor. And no one one in life is more critical than a nerd of whatever genre you like... I say nerds of whatever genre... There are nerds in grunge, there are nerds in hip hop...

G.PEN: And you don't want to piss them off, ever...

A.GRAFL Don't get on their bad side.

G.PEN: They'll get on Reddit and rally against...

JMI: And also, they don't like you from the moment you're called.

A.GRAF: Yeah, because you're not the original...

JMI: You're cast as this person. (imitating) 'Well I don't like them because they can't do it.' Well, they don't know if you can do it or not.

G.PEN: Well, you're not gonna mimic it.

JMI: Right, of course.

A.GRAF: You can make it your own.

JMI: When *Aladdin* came out I was nervous, but the great thing about it I was given an out. I know I've told this story as well. Both Jonathan Freeman and Alan Menken told me that the great Howard Ashman had originally wanted the genie to be like Cab Calloway and Fats Waller, so that's what kind of gave me the out. What gave me the out for this one was actually the man himself. I called Daveed and I said, "Yo, I want to do this but dude you've laid some serious groundwork," and he said, "Look, don't be me." He said, "You have a swagger all your own" ... He always says this, he goes, "People don't know you rap the way I know you do." He goes, "So just do that. Do that same swagger you do when you are freestyling as Lafayette and Jefferson."

G.PEN: Do you.

JMI: Yes. "Just do you"... First of all, "Stop listening to the soundtrack. Make your own way." So I have not listened to the soundtrack for a good three months. No, longer than that. February when I left I was in the middle of *Aladdin* and Daveed and I saw each other. Actually, right at February first, around that, when we saw each other and I haven't listened to the soundtrack since then. Because I didn't want to be influenced so I just did my own thing.

G.PEN: Yeah and a lot of people when the first year contracts started and the OBC people started leaving, there were a lot of people who at least on the internet, which, take it with a grain of salt, were upset.

G.PEN: And i think, you never know who you are going to get. And I saw Greg Treco on the street before I saw *Hamilton* last time and he said, "Oh, I'm not on." And then I look at my insert and Greg Treco is my Burr.

JMI: Yeah and what's funny is what you have, that people need to realize, is that the material that was written by Lin, the great Lin-Manuel Miranda, and the wonderful music that was put together by Alex Lacamoire and the direction by Tommy and of course Andy Blankenbuehler. What they put together, if the material is so good, if you're even a halfway good performer, you can't jack it up. And if you are a good performer, you just add something to it and so that's what made it fun and so was it daunting to take both roles? Yes, but do I enjoy it? Yes. And has it been a challenge? Yes. Have I accepted the challenge and gone forward? Yes, I love it.

G.PEN: And have you killed it? Yep.

JMI: At least that's what people tell me. And I will say this though, for different reasons... Like I said they both were daunting, but I will say the one crazy thing was at least auditioning for Disney, I'm auditioning for one of my favorite companies in the world so that was scary, and I auditioned for Alan Menken and that was nerve-wracking, especially because I auditioned for him first and totally bombed an audition for *Sister Act*, completely bombed it, hit the worst notes I've ever hit in my entire career. So when I went back for *Aladdin*, I was like I'm gonna show this man I sing even if I don't get the part. This time, I'm sitting in the area waiting to audition and I realize, 'oh my god, I am auditioning for my friends.' So I walk in the room... as long as we're

outside the room, everything is copacetic. Get in the room, and you know, they have to be the guys behind the desk. And you have to be the actor.

G.PEN: Yeah, you have to separate it.

JMI: You just go in and just do your thing...

G.PEN: You guys are at work right now.

JMI: Right, and that's exactly what I did. And then once it was over, "Aw, that was good." Then we're back to being boys, just slapping hands and doing dumb stuff....

JMI: 'Hey bro, we loved you, we're not gonna give it to you though.'

G.PEN: That's funny.

A.GRAF: 'We're gonna go in a different direction.'

G.PEN: Your impression of people's voice, it just gets a lot deeper and I love it.

G.PEN: Dinai asked, a little related, "What is your go-to Disney song?"

JMI: Oh, gosh.

G.PEN: It doesn't have to be *Aladdin*.

JMI: No, the sad part is, my go-to Disney song is (*singing*) *A very merry unbirthday to you...* Cause I have a serious serious serious craziness for *Alice in Wonderland*. I love that film.

G.PEN: That was three seriouses.

JMI: Yeah, I am that guy who at Disneyland or at Disneyworld will walk past the teacups and sing the lyrics because that's the song that's going on. And people are wondering which nerd is singing it. So when they see this 6 foot 2, 195-pound bald black guy singing *a very merry unbirthday*, they're like a little freaked out. That one or my other favorite song which I sing at the end of my solo shows, *When You Wish Upon a Star*.

[Sound clip of James singing *Wish Upon a Star*]

G.PEN: Robb asks, "How awesome had it been to perform twice with Kermit the Frog? And he says, "Thanks for the tears at your rendition of *I'm Going to Go Back There Someday*."

JMI: You are very welcome for the tears. That is my favorite Muppet song of all time. And what's funny is the guy that Rick, Rick Reynolds, was working on it and doing it, he said that's not

Kermit. Because he created a puppet that looks like Kermit because he always knows that Kermit is Jim Henson, so he created an homage to Kermit...

G.PEN: My heart is...

A.GRAF: That just hurt my heart a little bit.

JMI: He created an homage to Kermit but his Kermit is very good. And we got to sing together and it was an honor and we talked and told stories. I've got to meet a couple people who got to work with Jim Henson and I just kind of sit back and just listen to them talk. And it's so funny because...Fans say "You talk about Lin and Chris Jackson like they're just normal people." And I'm like "cause they are." But when I was talking to Carrol Spinney who is the voice of Oscar the Grouch and Big Bird and he's like, "well, you know one time I was watching and Jim and Frank walked..." And I'm like, "When you say Jim and Frank do you mean Jim Henson and Frank Oz!" [riffs on gushing]

JMI: "Do you know who he is?" He's like "Yeah, I know who he is, boy owed me five dollars, you know. Just kidding."

JMI: It's like that kind of stuff. So it was fun to do this, but when they asked me to do it, I said, "Is anybody singing *I'm Going to Go Back There Someday*, and they said no, and I said, "I want to do that."

[Music clip: *I'm Going to Go Back There Someday*]

JMI: That song just speaks to me and I love Gonzo.

G.PEN: I do too.

JMI: He is the most fearless Muppet and one of my favorite Gonzo moments in the world is something so stupid. It is in the Muppets... *The Great Muppet Caper* and they're in New York City. And I always wanted to do this but I don't want to do it in real life so I'll get killed.

JMI: They couldn't get a taxi. Kermit's going "Taxi," Fozzie's going "Taxi." Gonzo goes, "I got it. TAXIIIIII!" And throws himself in the middle of the street. He literally launches himself in the middle of the street. And stops to get a taxi. And he goes, "Are you okay?" "It's fine, I landed on my head!"

JMI: And I was like, that is the greatest, because sometimes so many taxis go by I just want to "TAXIIII!" and jump in the middle of the street. And whenever I need a laugh I will find that clip and just cry. And also I love that particular moment in the movie because that's also when they're singing *Oh, a Movie* and you hear Sweetums go "Is there anyway to stop it?" Because crap just keeps happening to him. Don't get me started on the Muppets, I could be here for hours.

G.PEN: They are so perfectly self-deferential.

A.GRAF: My father actually was just making fun of me this weekend because my first job that I wanted a child was to be a taxi driver because on an episode of *The Muppet Show* Kermit the Frog drove a taxi, so when my family would ask me what do you want to do when you grow up, I'd be like, drive a cab like Kermit.

G.PEN: Like Kermit, obviously.

A.GRAF: I was going to be a cab driver and they were like, okay, let's maybe think bigger.

G.PEN: Can I be like a real angry film critic?

A.GRAF: Then I'll be Kermit the Frog everybody, relax. He shaped my life.

JMI: There are so many Muppet moments but I had so much fun singing that song because I remember seeing that movie when I was a kid. I remember where the theater was, it was in Fremont, California, it was called the Fox Theater. My mom took me to I think a 10:00 or 11:00 showing. I was obsessed with that film. But the two moments in that film were the Electric Mayhem singing *Can You Picture That*. And that's been my dream. I told the Disney people too, I said "Look guys, all I want to do is sing. I don't have to sing with Kermit. I understand that's a certain level of stardom. But I want to sing with the Electric Mayhem. I want Doctor Teeth, I want Zoot, I want Janice, I want Animal, and... I need Floyd to look at me. I need them there."

G.PEN: Did you watch the Muppets when it was on ABC?

JMI: Oh god yes.

G.PEN: Okay, here's the... one of the hardest times I've ever laughed, ever is Pepe the King Prawn who Ashley and I...

A.GRAF: 'I need the monies, okay?'

[Sound clip of Pepe: *Dead Bear Walking*]

G.PEN: 'Dead Men Walkings.'

[laughter]

JMI: For me it's at the end of a movie, an interview that they did as a DVD extra where Pepe is interviewing Kermit and he says, "Kermit, I want to ask you a question. Kermit, why are you a frog?" He says, "What?" He says, "You could be anything and you... why are you a frog?" And

it's the fact that he asks Kermit the Frog, "Why are you a frog?" As if he had a choice. And it just took me out.

A.GRAF: Yeah, as if he had a choice, but also as if he could defend it too. "Why are you a frog? ...Why are you not a shrimp?"

JMI: I won't tell the whole story because I don't...yeah, I will.

A.GRAF: Do it!

JMI: My nephew's gonna kill me. When my nephew was a kid. He's sixteen now.

A.GRAF: He's still a kid.

JMI: Yeah, he's still a kid but he's taller than me, and he's my heart and he knows it. He ran into the room, he was still a toddler and says "I'm Megatevid" and I'm in New York and my wife and his sister are there going, "What is he saying?" And no one knows what he's saying and no one gets it. And finally they call me, and I'm in New York and I say, "Babe, what's going on?" she says...

G.PEN: Cause we speak Disney, Muppets.

JMI: "Marvin Junior is" ... also, when you have a little brother or little sister, the older kid usually understands what they say. Finally Monique has no idea what this boy's saying, and I hear it on the phone, and... this is one of my favorite moments of our whole family history... "I'm Megatevid," "We don't understand you." Just screaming. And I said, "What is happening?" And Dawn says, "the boy says he's watched something on the Muppets and we don't know what he's saying." And I say, "put him on the phone, what are you talking about?" They're saying, "He was watching the *Muppets Wizard of Oz* and he keeps going "I'm Megatevid" and I was like, "Babe, I know what he's saying." She says, "What? You know what he's saying?" I was like, "Yes, I know what he's saying." Ashanti's Toto was a pet, was a prawn. When they got to Oz, it turned into Pepe, and Pepe gets up and goes, "And I'm naked, okay?"

[laughter]

JMI: So the term Megatevid, in my house now means naked.

G.PEN: (with accent) 'I'm naked, okay.'

(all riff on Megatevid)

JMI: So, we always say, "y'all don't be comin' out of the bathroom Megatevid!" It cracks me up because Megatevid has become this thing. And our friends know it...

A.GRAF: I follow Pepe on Twitter ... just letting you guys know.

G.PEN: I do too. And what's hilarious is that they made him like a ladies' man. 'This is what I'm wearing for my date tonight, okay.'

JMI: They've made many Muppets. But sometimes a Muppet just hits.

A.GRAF: There's something about him, He just clicked.

G.PEN: And he has a necklace that weighs more than he does you can tell, and he wears it well.

JMI: And I love it.

G.PEN: And I also loved it because Rolf. I'm a dog person. Love Rolf.

JMI: I love Rolf.

G.PEN: But Rolf, in the ABC version of the Muppets. Kermit was upset about something. Something was wrong. And so he went to Rolf's bar and Rolf said "this always makes me feel better" and he handed him an old shoe. Because when dogs need to feel better, they chew old shoes. And Kermie was like, "Hey, thanks."

JMI: Arsenio Hall when he was in his height, he had Jim Henson on. And he asked Jim to bring out two of the Muppets and he brought out of course, his first Muppet which was Rolf, or I should say the one he became famous with on... I can't remember what the show was, it was that black and white show where he became famous with Rolf, and then of course he brought out Kermit, but he brought out Kermit, but Rolf second. And he puts Rolf on and immediately gets into character, but when Rolf turns he goes, "Hey Rolf." He goes, "Hey Jim... Arsenio Hall! Son of a bitch!"

[Laughter]

JMI: And he goes, "Can you cuss?" And he goes, "Yeah, yeah, with me that's a term of endearment."

[Laughter]

JMI: And I was like, that is the coolest thing for the Muppets to cuss, but also the smartest way. It was so clever.

A.GRAF: Such a genius.

JMI: It was just perfect. Move on, move on, we'll be here forever.

A.GRAF: Can I ask you a question about *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*?

JMI: Yes you can.

G.PEN: Oh, yes, and also, I have to say Molly is going to ask the same question, basically what's it like to be on *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*?

A.GRAF: I was going to ask how much fun was it to be on the show, but also, in the last season to dress up to basically be the man who plays one of the children in *Matilda* when they go to school.

G.PEN: On Wednesday matinees...

JMI: What's really funny about that particular thing is that when I auditioned for the show I kind of saw how the character... what seemed to be on the page. And I went, 'I want to do that but I want to do something different.' Cause I knew if I got it I'd be playing opposite Titus. And I was like, 'what is the opposite of Titus?' Cause Titus is so nice, and I was like, 'what if I played him as the most tight-ass, conceited...' one of those actors that all of us who are in the arts...

G.PEN: Hate...

JMI: ... See

JMI: Yeah, it's true. You see these actors who think they're actually acting.

G.PEN: Right, so for those of you who don't know, you play Titus's like, rival.

JMI: I play Coriolanus Burt.

A.GRAF: Coriolanus Burt. 'The man whose name I won't mention, Coriolanus Burt.'

JMI: Who seems to be getting jobs, but there's always something off.

[overlapping]

G.PEN: You're like his main competition... You're full of shit.

JMI: Yes, I'm his main competition... I'm totally full of it. And what's funny is there's always something off about the jobs that Coriolanus gets. He's on Broadway, but he is in the matinee playing a child in *Matilda*.

[cross talk]

G.PEN: On his knees...

JMI: On his knees.

A.GRAF: It was the high waisted skirt...

JMI: When they brought the costume to me, actually, when I read the script I fell out. But when they brought the costume, when they showed me the wigs.... There were two wigs they had. We put that one on first and we went, 'Nah, that's it.' There was no need to... ...There was no need to put on another one.

JMI: There was no need to change.

A.GRAF: God, it's so good.

JMI: So the first time I'm on, you know, there was 'too many Spidermen', and I was ... And the second time I'm on, I was doing a one-man show where I turn myself into a cat. And the...

G.PEN: Onstage...

A.GRAF: Turn your back...

JMI: What I love about it, it's not me in that scene. I love the fact that I turn into a cat, and you see that one person in the audience walk away.

A.GRAF: Just get away!

JMI: So basically, there's only one person in the audience, and that person gets up and walks out. And that is one of my favorite moments. But when they talked about the *Matilda* moment, first of all, I am a huge huge fan of *Matilda*. When I saw the show, I lost my mind, because I could not believe that they did all of those... that one song with every letter of the alphabet started a word...

A.GRAF: Oh my god, That was ridiculous! I've never seen anything like that, that was so cool.

JMI: And also, Lesli Margherita is one of the most talented females in the history of LIFE, and I also feel that there is not a stage big enough, there's not enough scenery for the two of us to be in a show together because we would chew it so much if they would allow Lesli and I to be together. We are always in a show together, but never together. Because they know, NO ONE is going to follow ... I don't give a damn ... I'm serious, I don't care who it is. You put Lesli Margherita and myself on a stage and no one is following us unless they are Audra McDonald and Brian Stokes Mitchell because we are going to eat up that stage.

A.GRAF: That sounds about right.

[crosstalk]

G.PEN: Then the world would explode.

JMI: She is also a big Muppet fan. She loves Miss Piggy. Miss Piggy is one of her favorites... You get her on Miss Piggy, you will be here all night. And I love it and I was like... to let that character, Coriolanus Burt, even be around that world of *Matilda*, was awesome. And also, when they said *Matilda*, I was like that is so perfect because it was one of those great physical comedian moments of the juxtaposition of me being as big as I am and being in that little outfit.

G.PEN: The sneakers were...

A.GRAF: I think my favorite part of it was ... I had recently seen *Matilda* just before it closed and I was like super impressed by all of it. But then I couldn't just stop picturing you on the swings.

JMI: That's the thing... I laughed so hard...

A.GRAF: And that's all I could picture as I'm watching you kneel ... across the stage.

G.PEN: And then they yell places and you just walk faster...

JMI: And I want to say to the fans, thank you, because I knew it was funny, and everybody when we were recording it, we were filming I should say, everybody was laughing, and I really hoped that the audience would dig it and literally I am in one scene of that season and so many people have talked about that.

A.GRAF: It's so good

JMI: And I say thank you. So yeah.

G.PEN: Well, that's what you do. You bring joy to so many people all the time. You really are... I'm not bullshitting you, really. You are a literal ray of light. You are ... everything you do, you do a hundred fifty zillion million percent and thank you so much for doing everything you do. And thank you so much for coming here...

JMI: Of course...

G.PEN: And hanging out. We had the best time. We're gonna turn the AC on.

JMI: All right!

G.PEN: We're gonna take some pictures.

JMI: Sounds good.

[overlapping]

G.PEN: Thank you guys so much for listening. So long Heat Dome.

JMI: (laughing) Heat Dome!

G.PEN: Peace out, dude, Team Winter.

G.PEN: Hashtag #OctNovDec

JMI: That's so funny.

G.PEN: Anyway... Ashley, thanks. And we'll talk to you soon. I am G dot Pen

A.GRAF: I'm A dot Graf.

JMI: And I am JMI.

Music: Instrumental, Yorktown plays in the background

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