

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Keegan-Michael Key
Actor
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Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
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MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Keegan-Michael Key interview, take one, marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Keegan-Michael Key

Actor

Learning about Obama

01:00:17:01

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

I think the first time I became aware of Barack Obama would have been I guess around the winter of '07? And even—I had—I have small, kind of vague memories of the DNC, when he spoke at the DNC in Denver. And—but then when he was on the campaign trail in the beginning when he was kind of going against Hillary, that was the first time I was kind of really noticing and I'm going, "Oh, I guess this guy's got a chance." There's something that resonates with me in regard to who he is as a person. He was raised in a

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single parent home, he's—he's bi-racial, he's Midwestern. There's—there were all of these qualities that he had that really mirrored my own life and my own experience. So I'd say around 2007 right as—right as the beginning of that campaign was heating up, 'cause it was also the first time that we had seen the campaign trail really expanding and expanding and you're going, "This is taking a year and a half, this is really an interesting thing." So that would be the first time he really kind of came onto my radar.

Obama's 2008 election win

01:01:24:15

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

The thing that I remember the most was there was—I was at a party with a bunch of people when he was elected president, and there was somebody I knew who was walk—she was walking around our friends back yard after they had called it and she just kept on saying over and over and over again, "This is good, this is good. This is so good." She's weeping and she goes, "This is so good." She's just walking around. "This is so good, this is so good." She just kept walking around the back yard and I—I—I said, "My sentiments exactly. Feel free to physicalize my emotions." I felt—I felt a definitive sense of relief. I felt a definitive sense of change, or the fact that there could be change. The more cynical side of me thought, "Boy, people really care about their pocket books." So I was hav—I was very ambivalent, I was having a bunch of different feelings at the same time. 'Cause I couldn't get over the fact that I'm like, "Oh, people do care about money that much. They're willing to vote for a black man if they think he will help them save money." They

were—that’s how much people like money. That’s how much people like money. I said, “Now I didn’t vote for him necessarily for that reason, but I just gotta keep that in mind. I’ll keep that in mind.” So I’ll vote black if it helps me with the green is what— it’s the—it—it was the thought that kept on coming into my mind. But in the moment when they called it, there was, which I’m sure there were for many African Americans, a dreamlike state; almost a state of—it’s like blissful denial. We coul—I couldn’t believe it had happened. I ju—I couldn’t believe it had happened. It was one of those things like, that kept on hitting me three, four weeks, six weeks down the line. It’s amazing.

Code-switching

01:03:10:05

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

You know, it was interesting being able to take an opportun—take stock in the fact that we—we adjust our blackness. And I felt in some way justified that I—it’s something that was a regular activity in my life. There’s this term, code switching, which is that you—you adapt to the cultural environment that you are in at that moment. Your movements, your speech, the way you speech—the way you speak, syntax, everything. I felt some kind of justification when the leader of the free world was also doing it. And I—I felt that—I think once I saw Obama doing it, it put me in a position to go, oh actually, ya know, it’s interesting, everybody does it. It doesn’t matter if you’re white, or black, or Hispanic, or Asian, everyone does it. Everybody adapts to the situation they’re in. It’s part of—part of the wonder of being the human animal. And so seeing him do it was really, really—it gave me some

comfort in a way to go, ok, so he knows—oh, he’s been playing the same game I’ve been playing for—for—for his—for his whole life. It’s been an absolute treasure trove; this kind of cultural trapeze act has been a treasure trove for comedy, for our comedy. And in fact, we did a sketch on Key and Peele literally based on a video that somebody had taken of the president when he was visiting, I believe it was Oklahoma City. It might have been Oklahoma City at the time, I can’t remember. But he was visiting a basketball team and he was—the way he would greet the basketball players was different from the way he would greet the white coaching staff. And so we wrote a whole sketch about that. Jordan, every time he’d see a black person, he’d be like, “There he is, there’s my brother, what’s going on?” You know? And then every time he’d see a (Inaudible), “It’s a pleasure to meet ya.” Ya know. And then he sees me and I’m biracial and he doesn’t know what to do. He doesn’t know what to do and his aid leans over and goes, “He’s one eighth black.” And he went, “Good afternoon my octaroon.” It’s—it was really an ama—all we did was heighten the actual living situation by a skosh, and so—just a wonderful example of life imitating art.

Analysis of Obama for comedy

01:05:15:03

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

I think in regard to how we started using President Obama as a comedic subject was that there was something in the zeitgeist amongst the comedy community, which was, he seems so graceful and so competent, what is it that we’re supposed to do to lampoon him? And—and people were having a

really difficult time figuring it out. And I remember when I was on Mad TV, the only thing I could really wrap my head around was trying to figure out how to impersonate him. There's a little bit of Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson in the way that he speaks. It's also—I used to say he's almost a bit of a mix of Bill Clinton and Martin Luther King Jr. mixed together with a little more—the timber's deeper and less bucolic, for lack of a better word. There's this reedy quality to his voice. It wasn't until Key and Peele where Jordan and I were going, "Ok, if he's that reserved, what's happening on the inside?" We had to look outside of him to find the way into him. How are others treating him? In particular, how are af—how are white Americans treating him? How are white Americans in the other seats of power treating him? How are they blocking him? How are they trying to deny him? How are they trying to, for lack of a better word, emasculate him? And when that one Senator said to him during that State of—you know, "You lie!" Which has never happened in that august of an institution. A person would—during the State of the Union would say you lie? Would call a person a liar? That only happened for one reason. That only happened for one reason. You could think the president was an absolute buffoon and you wouldn't say that if he didn't have melanin in his skin. And Jordan and I said, if that—ok, so we can identify with that, how must that feel? What's the frustration that he's feeling? And for him to stand at a podium and go, "oh." That's all he did, that's all he did. Because you can't win. If I overreact, I'm an angry black man, if I underreact, I'm ineffectual. Couldn't win. As we sat and talked about it, Jordan was like, "Ya know, it's almost like—and then Jordan had this little idea. And he goes, "Remember when Garrett Morris used to do that thing on SNL when Chevy

Chase did the news and Garrett Morris—he goes, “And now from the society for the deaf.”” And he would tell the story and Garrett Morris would just scream. He would just scream the story, you know. The Garrett Morris thing translated in my mind to him being angry, and that’s where we came up with Luther, with—with—with him being able to express his anger and his dissatisfaction through a surrogate. So that—that’s the origins of how we figured out how to—it’s not an impersonation more than it is an account of how he’s living through the world and through a small piece of problem solving. We loved him so—he’s actually so dear to our hearts, how can we make his life easier? That’s where the comedy came from. How can we problem solve and make his life easier? Oh, I know, we’ll do the screaming for him and then you can’t—then you can’t say, told ya, see, look, uppity angry black man. But he’s not. Luther’s the angry, uppity black man. So it was a problem solving issue.

“Beer Summit”

01:08:41:07

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

I—I guess I felt from a racial standpoint I wasn’t feeling frustrated because I felt like he’s trying—he’s trying to do what I believe is the most revolutionary thing, which is be a human who’s governing in a competent way. At the end of the day, if others will allow you to do your job well, then everybody benefits. So I was more concerned about that than I was about the racial component. My thing about the beer summit is that, oh my gosh, god forbid we bring people to a table and have them actually talk about things. I—not

that I've—not that I'm practicing this all—every day of my life. But wouldn't it be nice if I found a person who disliked me intensely and I said, "Well, why don't you come to coffee with me. I'd love to hear what you have to say in a calm, non-reactive setting." And I felt he was trying to provide that for these two people. And I think what happens is, we get—we get very concerned about our agency within our race or within our—I have agency within my beliefs. Well actually you just have beliefs. So why don't we listen to other people's beliefs? You won't die. You won't become so unmoored that you get swept out to the sea of your own certainty. If anything, that will destroy you. Having a little uncertainty and going—going into—into another's humanity is what I thought President Obama was doing. That's what I would have done. And so I was actually more upset and frustrated about him getting backlash because of that. I'm going, well what would you have him do? He's trying to be—he's trying to be a person who's listening to both sides of an argument. Remember, we still lived in a civil time. We—a relatively civil time compared to the time that we live in now. So—so I would say that that was a lovely thing for him to have—an endeavor for him to embark upon. Then he gave that race speech which was—I really—I thought was thoughtful, insightful. But again, maybe not forceful enough for people. There's a place for fire and brimstone and then there's a place for utter diplomacy. And that is the world that he had to walk in. And so I feel like it's one of those things where you go, oh, well if I had the job—well then that makes you an armchair quarterback. You don't know. You'll never know. You'll never know. And anyone who sits in a seat of power like that is at some point in time, and I'm making this up symbolically, at some point in time is being like, handed a book: Here's

everything that's going on. Some—90% of this you're not allowed to tell anyone, but just want you to know, this is what's going on. Who are we to go, well now he's—do you know what's in that book? Trust me, you don't even want to know what's in that book. I do not want to know what's in that book, you know.

Luther, Obama's "anger translator"

01:11:38:21

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

We called Luther an anger translator as opposed to an anger expresser because I think what's happening is, we are translating emotionally what Obama's saying. So it's all subtext. So he's speaking in a very—with this very cool, graceful ariadition, and then you hear what his Id is saying, what his—what the raw emotion is saying. So it's translating it into anger. So no matter what he's feeling underneath or if he was seething, we thought that translation was the best possible word for it. As opposed to just expressing the anger, because there were times where there was a diplomatic vagueness about what the president was—says, which any president does, right? And so ya know, he'll go, "We find ourselves in an interesting time." And, what does that mean? What does, "We find ourselves in an interesting time" mean? You don't know what it means. But you can always—it's almost—what's the Mark Twain book? *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. That's what it is. That's—that's what we were doing. Luther came out of the blue. It must've been—I must've pulled it out of somewhere. It just sounded like a strong African American name. I would love to partic—pretend like I'm being very

erudite—this is coming from Martin Luther and the 99 Theses on the wall because he’s—it’s not, it’s not. It’s just—it came forward. It might—I think I was evoking a character that Eddie Murphy had played and it just came from the recesses of my memory, and it came out of my mouth and Jordan said, “Ok, Luther, sounds good.” And then we just went with that. I never really paid attention to a lot of the criticism. I think that way lie—that way lies madness. So, I—I—if there were alt-right winger people saying, “That is him, that’s him.” Like if that’s happening, which I’m sure it is, or was, I was not privy to it. What I was privy to was Republican family members and Republican family members of friends who would say, “Man I got to admit, I like the Obama thing, it’s fun. I mean I wish I had a guy like that.” That’s the—the thing is, everybody wishes they had an anger translator. We just applied it to this particular human being. Everybody wishes you had it. I wish I could do it so I could always come off smelling like a rose. Really, what Luther and Obama is, it’s just good cop, bad cop. We just found a new way to do good cop-bad cop. And so, I think we’ve heard a lot of people on the right say “clever idea.” They just said clever idea. I don’t know if I agree with what’s coming out of their mouths, but I agree it’s a clever idea. I could use an anger translator. Inevitably everybody always asks us, they say, you know, I’ll be walking down the street and a reporter will stop me like, “Hey shouldn’t you be Trump’s anger translator?” I’m like, “Trump already has an anger translator. It’s called Twitter.” He doesn’t need me. He definitely does not need me. He’s doing just fine in the anger translator department.

Navigating the racial divide

01:14:37:03

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

I think that the racial climate at the time of his presidency was volatile. I— certainly not as volatile as it is today, but I think we were seeing the beginnings of that. And I think we were—I would say certainly in certain movements like maybe—specifically maybe I'd say the tea party movement, we were—I believe a lot of— how shall I say—a lot of racial upheaval or frustration was being masked by an economic issue. The fringes are always people I find on this racial spectrum who live in a black and white world, so to speak. An—and I think that he was in—the beginnings of that were there, they were on the horizon, and I think that he—I actually believe he wasn't doing anything different than what he had been doing his entire life. You have to find the right groove in the tightrope. How much—how much, for lack of a better cultural term, blackness can I use with these white people. If I want these coal miners and these steel workers who are unionized to vote for me, how—how colloquial do I become with them, without betraying who I am? It's a constant shifting and I think he—I think that he was trying to manage a nation that we had seen in the past—in the past prior two elections, in '04 and 2000. We had not—we have not seen this kind of close division so far, and I think that he had to have been keeping an eye on that, even when he was a community activist in Chicago. This is something that was so prevalent in our society. I think back to my childhood. There was no doubt Reagan won. There's just—there was no question they wanted that guy to be the president. The majority of the cou—you couldn't deny the majority of the nation wanted that guy to be the president. And then you

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jump forward to 2000 and hanging Chads, and Florida this, and Ohio that, and 2004 the same thing. So you find yourself in this—we—we—I felt like he found himself in this great divide. It was right in front of his face. So thank God he had this skillset already intact from— intrinsically, intrinsically just because of who he is. So I think navigating this racial divide was very—I mean it was very difficult for him but I—I—because it also kept him from sometimes us being able to see the genuine person, or what the genuine person—again, it brings us back to Luther. Why did we—what was it about him and his persona that made us want to create Luther. It’s ‘cause it felt like he was caught between the Scylla and Charybdis.

Meeting Obama

01:17:25:15

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

I was in New Orleans and Jordan was in Los Angeles and I was shooting a movie. And he called me and said, “Just so you know, last night on The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon, the President mentioned our show.” I was like, “I’m sorry, what happened?” He said, “He’s on a tour, he’s on a college tour.” He was in North Carolina; he was at the University of North Carolina I guess, or—and he—and he said something to the effect of, “Jimmy said, “So, you know, is there something about—Mr. President, like you like comedy, are you a comedy fan?” He goes, “I am, I am.” And he said, “Is there—is there—is there anything you like right now?” He goes, “You know, there are these two guys, Key and Peele, and you know, they’re pretty funny stuff.” And so meanwhile, I’m running around the house that I’m shooting at, screaming.

Jordan and I had been thinking f—like months, for months, Peter, we had been talking about, does he know? Does he know? And if he does, how would he kn—you know, and how would—and I was—we were—I was at an NAACP event one time, luncheon, and somebody said, “Just want you to know, the President thinks what you all are doing is great.” And I’m like, do I know that this guy is really legit, and does he—does he know Obama? Like you know the thing, not all black people know Obama. And so we had no idea what was going on, we just really didn’t know what was—and then to get that confirmation that he—that he enjoyed the work was great. Then, a week later, Jordan called me again; it was one of these moments, literally a moment where a person says to you on the phone, “Are you sitting down?” And I’m standing in a wardrobe room, covered—you know, like there’s clothes all over the place and I’m hunched in the corner on the phone that he was going to come to Los Angeles and that we would be given an opportunity to meet him. He was on the campaign trail and he came to Los Angeles for a fundraiser at George Clooney’s, and he had this time in the morning. What the president likes to do—you can take this on good authority—what the president likes to do is he likes to thank all of the police chiefs and administrators who help set up the motorcades when he’s traveling in any given city. So he wanted to set aside some time in the morning at the hotel to do that. And so we talked to the leader of the advance team and he said, “Yeah, come by the hotel and we’ll get you set up.” So I’m—we’re standing in the corner of the hotel and I’m just sitting there going, “Oh my God, this is great.” And Jordan’s like, “You know, hey, it might just be like a hi and we’re gonna be done, you know.”

01:19:44:21

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

So he finished shaking all—he comes into the room and my heart drops, you know, I’m like, “There he is, there he is.” And—and—and he goes and he shakes all these people’s hands and they’re all kind of filing out of the room and he turns and he goes, “There they are, Key and Peele.” And he walks over to us and we’re both—you know, like, you’re trying so hard, every ounce of energy to play it cool, just like, “Hey what’s up buddy.” And then it’s just all hugs and he pulls you in, very tactile. It’s interesting because he comes across as such a very cool, calculated person, and there’s this erudition about him and so you feel like that’s how he’s going to be. But he’s very tactile. He brings you in, gives you a hug. And then I’m freaking out, I’m just like, if there’s a red—don’t put a red dot on me, he’s hugging me. He is—he is hugging me. I am not—ya know, I am not assaulting the president. And so he—he gave us both hugs and then we—I—I’m telling you, I’m telling you we spoke for ten minutes. Ten minutes. He really wanted to spend time with us and—and he sai—and he looked at us and he shook our hands and he hugged us and then he said, “I know it’s hard for a brother on TV.” That was the first thing he said to us. And then we talked. And then in the midst of it, he was gonna do a little fireside chat, one of these YouTube fireside chats that he had been doing. And so he sat down and the video team, the videographer and the crew, they were just like, “Keegan you should come back here and be Luther.” And I’m—I was too—it was too much for me at the time. And so he sat down and he started reading his—reading the prompter and when—when he

doesn't know a word or the prompter's going too fast—he goes (Clears throat)—he pretends like something's in his throat so they'll stop and then he can just reassess and then he'll pick up where he left off. But then he got something in his throat for real but then he did this bit, he did a comedy bit, which we were not expecting. So he's like, hold on, I need some water. So someone handed him the water, he takes the water and he goes like this. (Pretends to choke)—“I'm just playing, I'm playing.” And we're—we're like, “No, don't do that, do not do that.” And Jordan—I remember Jordan was so surprised, he was like, “He's over here doing comedy bits.” He's ju—it was—it was delightful. It was—it's—you know, one of the greatest moments of my life. It's not even that he's African American, it's that he's biracial. It's that he really actually represents me. That he grew up in a middle class home—in a lower to middle class home—with a white parent and is a person who has half of his DNA come from an African parent or an African American parent. That's me, that's Jordan. It's—I cannot describe the—that ex—the experience. I can't describe it. There's a closeness that I feel to him without sounding creepy. It's just a different kind of intimacy.

Performing at the White House

01:22:37:01

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

You know, I went to go perform at the White House correspondent's dinner and that was a very quick endeavor. It came together very fast. The—Jon Favreau, who's one of the speechwriters who I thought by the way did an exceptional job given what we had spoken about before, which is this sense

of in these racial times, in these electrified racial times, how do I keep the integrity of the man but also be inclusive to all Americans. You want to hear them, even if they're coming from a reactive place of fear. How do I hear them? How do I serve them and serve these other underserved people and people who are not being treated correctly or people who are being judged before they're given a chance to show their character? As well as be who I am and keep that intact. It's a lot; it's a lot to juggle. And he had an assistant by the name of David Litt. And David Litt was in contact with me, and they said, is there any way that you can come and play Luther at the Correspondent's Dinner? And I said, "Absolutely." I—I—my manager and I were talking about it and he said, I—he goes, "They're gonna write a script and send it to you." And the script that they sent—they were very—they were very—being very polite, very respectful. I mean, "Anything you want to change—"I'm like, "Well what are you talking about? You know more about what's going on in his life than I do." I might've made one change in the script, and then I was on my way. We were—like I was shooting a movie in Georgia and then I got on this plane and flew up to Washington DC and—and in my mind I thought to myself, well he's so busy, he's got a lot of things on his mind, a lot of things on his plate, so I'm gonna learn his lines and my lines just in case. Just in case he—he slips up, he's got a lot of stuff to do this evening. And so I—I learned the entire script, every word, both his and mine. And then I got—I got to the White House, I got outside the White House and I was wearing like a hoodie and a hat, and I called these people at the White House and I said, "So guys, I'm standing over here. I'm kind of looking like a terrorist. If someone could just walk me in, I would be really appreciative." And they walk me around the

side by the defense building and then we took in this back entrance and there was a—you know, there's a machine—there's a guard there with a machine gun and I walk up and I'm grabbing my license out of my pocket and he goes, "I know you." I'm like, "I know you? I know you? Are you allowed to do—I'm gonna show you my ID anyway. I'm—I'm not sure you should have a job." So anyway, they let me through and I go into the west wing. Everybody was lovely and I went to—I did a small tour of the west wing and I got to go to the White House situation room where they had—where they were watching the execu—where they were watching the operation to assassinate Osama Bin Laden.

01:25:23:12

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

It was really—it was actually very chilling and—and then—and inspiring in a way. And I wa—I was—I was escorted to the map room, which was FDR's favorite room, and there was a podium in the room, and I knew I was there for the rehearsal. And there I am in my ball cap and my jeans and in he comes, and he's like, "There he is." And he walks right up to me, and he gives me a hug. Right as we started rehearsing, he goes—he goes—he's looking at the script and he's going through his script because this is the one chance he has to go through his script for the evening. And there was this really interesting moment where he's reading the script and he said something about being gridlocked by congress. And he goes, "This isn't even a joke. Bullshit." And I was like, oh my gosh, there it is. I got to see just a skosh of Luther in there. And it was funny—it was funny to hear him use profanity too

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in that moment. But I—and so he says to me, he turns to me, and he’s very solemn and he goes, “Alright, now listen up Keegan. We’ve got to make sure that there’s no laughing here. We gotta be serious and do this.” I was like, “Yes sir, absolutely sir.” And he says his first line, he goes, “You know, so I thought I would bring my anger translator Luther to come help me do the speech.” And then my first line was, “Hold on to ya lily white butts.” And he bursts into laughter, he just bursts into laughter.” I’m like, “Come on sir.” He’s like, “You got me laughing now.” And he tried—and we just had the most wonderful time. And he ha—I’m telling you, the best straight man ever. Solid, knew the lines, came off the script sometimes and—and I felt the sense of security during the rehearsal. I’m like, oh we’re good, we’re gonna be good to go. And then he walked out of the room and then I—I kind of got my things gathered and he walked into the hall and then I walked into the hall and the team asked me, they said, “Would you like to go back to the Hilton in the motorcade?” No, I’m gonna take a cab back. Yes, I’d like to go in the motorcade. I’m gonna ride in the beast? Yes, I’d like to go in the motorcade back to the Hilton if you don’t mind. And so we get—we’re walking out in the grand hall to go to the—to go to the front, to get to the motorcade, the front of the house, the White House. And walk out of the thing and then he goes, “Hold on, Michelle. Here, come here, come here.” And so— ‘cause I did that bit with Michelle where I’m just like, “Yo, he crazy.” And I do all this thing. And so there’s Michelle in her finery looking gorgeous. It was interesting. The evening was kind of like a dream. I didn’t have any sense of what I was doing, or the import of it really until I was walking on the stage. So there was a— there was about a 15 foot space where I was walking past a curtain and I

went, oh my gosh, I'm doing this. Oh, this is happening right now. And then once you get out in the crowd, and the—it's a very cavernous room where they—where we were performing, and the lights are very harsh and so you can't see much. And then I had the—I got the Luther thing going and the eyes, and I—there was really not a chance or a time to be nervous or for me to calculate the enormity of the situation. There's an intrinsic quality about the president that makes you feel safe when you're near him and with him.

01:28:42:12

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

And I thought, this is gonna be great. And I felt the liberty to be able to touch him a couple of times. People would say that to me, you get twitter messages or emails from people like, you touched him, you touched him. But it—he's very—he was very, very accessible. You can have—you can have tons of strength and come across very cold, and you can have a lot of warmth and come across too mushy. He has this lovely balance of both, where you feel safe, you feel like you're safe in his arms in a way and also feel that he's listening to what you have to say. Or that he's gone through what you've gone through.

Portraying Obama through comedy

01:29:21:09

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

In traditional comedy, when one's doing an impersonation or an impression, what you're doing is trying to enhance one quality of the person. And one of

the more benign qualities that the President has is he has a glottal fry when he's thinking, so you get that, "We, as a nation—" you know, you get that thing. That doesn't necessarily shed any light on who he is as a person, and I think that's why we created Luther; we created this surrogate. When I was on Mad TV, a lot of the writing about sketches when he was still a Senator were—were about enhancement, and I thought for the most part very, very effective enhancement. Me and another cast member, we played Barack and Michelle and then the other two cast members played John McCain and Anne McCain. And—and so they were dancing, like you know, doing minuets and like, it was like, playing harpsichord, which made—which made John McCain older than he was and we were doing straight up hip hop popping and locking moves. And then they—they actually swapped me out, put a guy in, he's doing handstands and you know like, helicopter breakdancing moves. So that exaggeration was—was one of the most effective things I thought. And a lot of that had to do with the writers going, how do we—ok, he seems—given what we've just come from, when you have a man speak in front of a group of students and literally say, C+ average, not that bad—and then this guy, who—constitutional—studied constitutional law at Harvard—so how do you enhance that? We did another sketch where I was doing like a town hall and I'm playing Obama and I'm doing a town hall, and they started firing questions, everyone starts firing more questions at him and eventually he would say, you know, he would say, you know, the answer would be, "The theory of relativity." "Pi." "265 gallons." Like he—he had the right—like, "A little bit of lemon zeal—a little bit of lemon zest." Like he had the answer to every single question because his competence is at the level, I would expect a

president to have. So let's just take that to the nth degree. Let's make him all knowing, because comparatively speaking—let's make—let's make him all knowing. It's all about comparison and enhancement. It's always about enhancing a person's quality, it's—it—your—you're—its almost you're verbally doing it, you're verbally doing a character. Remember when we were kids and you used to draw a character. If a person had a very—as Jimmy Durant he would say, a prominent proboscis. If you had a big nose, then you make the nose the biggest things, or high cheekbones, you make them higher. If someone has really big eyes, you give them huge eyes. Betty Boop is a caricature of the silent movie star, Theta Berra. She had these big doe eyes and so they made Betty Boop, whose eyes are almost as big as her entire head. You're just doing that verbally and physically, and that's—that's the comedic technique. We did that more on—on—on Mad TV. Jordan Peele, his personality and the way he does comedy, comes through in regard to us doing Luther, because Jordan's a very prudent person, as is Barack Obama. They're both very prudent people and I think for Jordan, there was a sense of respect that once he was the president, I don't want to purvey him as goofy. I don't want us to be purveyors of a goofy president. There's nothing goofy about him. Let's—let's embrace the reality of what he actually is and work from there. In our comedy, in Key and Peele comedy, what we've always done is gone, don't start a sketch at 7. Start at 1. Go 3, 7, 12, 28, pi. If you g—if you start at 2,683, I'm already lost the second the sketch started, if it's too conceptual.

01:33:18:20

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KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

Start in a place everyone understands and move forward. And so I think we wanted to—we wanted to figure out, how do we navigate this quiet, thoughtful, prudent person, keep—and respect—respect who he is so that the enhancements are legitimate, for lack of a better word. And that—that’s how we came upon this idea, this concept of an anger translator. So he didn’t have to do the heavy lifting, somebody did the heavy lifting for him. Something doesn’t ring true if you see a sketch with Obama throwing things across a room or screaming at the top of his lungs. It—you—I would check out as an audience member. But that’s not what—that’s not what he’s like, he doesn’t behave that way. We did a great sketch with —where he was having a meeting with a bunch of republican leaders and what you realize—and he realizes in the middle of the meeting, that no matter what he says or does, they will do the opposite. So he goes, “I hate gun control.” You know what I mean, and so he started doing that and they’re freaking out because they can only follow the mandate that’s been given to them, which is, anything he says, do the opposite. He goes like, “Whatever we do, we should get rid of Planned Parenthood. Defund it immediately.” You know, and so—and—but it’s—there was always a glint—a glint in his eye, and so that was how—there was a devilish quality, that I’m the smartest man in the room but I would never say such a thing that Jordan gave to the character that I thought was delicious. You wouldn’t expect everyone to feel good or—or feel like we’re not victimizing anybody. It was a big thing for us on the show to always punch up. Always punch up. Don’t—don’t make fun of a victim. Now, there were some sketches where we went awry because I think what happens

sometimes is you try to make a point, and when you try to make a point, you exploit that which you are trying to condemn. I think some people think comedy is supposed to be mean-spirited. There's only—my opinion is, there's only room for one Don Rickles. Nobody else can do what Don Rickles can. But people think they can. When people meet me, very often they insult me. They don't mean to insult me. They just think they're being funny. They think they're being funny, but what they're doing is teasing. Teasing is below the lowest form of comedy. If a pun is here, teasing is here. It's not—it's not comedy, and we take—we take our comedy very seriously at Key and Peele. So we always wanted to—to try to again, start at a base that's real. We know he has to go to these meetings every day, we know people are being belligerent toward him. We know that people are ranting in the house with these bellicose points about this and that and the other thing just—just to derail some kind of program he wants to support, so how do you solve that problem? And I think the problem solving aspect is often the feel good aspect.

2012 election

01:36:28:00

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

During the 2012 election, we did a series of Obama-Luther sketches that were hot off the presses. They were happen—you know, ripped from the headlines. Ev—every week we would do one or two. Luther cries out, “You can't—you couldn't get rid of me, you can't get rid of me” is I think was if anything, a treatise on where a good part of the nation was at that time. They were like, “I'm not really concerned with the color of that guy's skin right

now. I'm just not concerned with it. I feel like something must be happening whether it's his responsibility or not." I'm speaking for like independents, not—not people to the far left. Independents would go, "Well, things are really not that bad. I can see that there are programs being put in place that—that could be advantageous to me, so why wouldn't I vote for him again." It was a way of saying, history is happening whether you like it or not. It's happening. The browning of America is happening. It's not gonna stop. If you're here in 2050, if you're a young person, and I don't wanna be too aggressive about this, but if you're a young racist and you live in our country right now and you're in your 20's, or you're one of those boys in that photograph that was taken the other day with all the heil Hitler signs, get ready because we're not going anywhere. We're making more of us and more of us and more of us, and those who aren't us who support us are right behind us. This is progress, you don't have a choice. This is the—this is what's happening. So, it was our—it was kind of us waving a banner in a way within the confines of the comedic game of that sketch to say, this is what we're—this is what's happening, I'm so sorry. You got Clint Eastwood over here talking to chairs and the candidate that he—that he's shilling for says that 47% of us are X, Y, and Z. Again, what happens is to me, to my estimation, people's true colors were being shown. I love when people get upset, "This is an outrage, they had a camera in there." What, a camera that just happened to be taping the truth? Oh, God forbid we see the truth about these people. That was the sense of that sketch, was that you couldn't get rid of me. It seems like it was a basic thing that part of the zeitgeist was thinking. Oh, this has to have been a fluke. It was just because of pocketbook voters

against McCain. Poor McCain—poor McCain inherited this terrible economy. We wouldn't be in a terrible economy if X, Y, and Z hadn't happened. You know, so it's all part and parcel, right?

Trayvon Martin

01:39:10:12

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

When the Trayvon Martin tragedy took place, I—I was not aware of how we would deal with it. But the Trayvon Martin thing shook all of us to our core. He was—it was—it was again, we're finding that—that this country—the country's bubbling again like it was in the 60's and the civil—civil rights era. And so I think we were in this place where we were going, how do we deal with that? Jordan started coming up with this sketch. He didn't tell anybody about the sketch. I was not aware of it until he brought it to a table read and I think I just—or maybe I even read it in my office and went, oh this is brilliant. It goes back to one of our tenets of how comedy works for Key and Peele. Problem solving. Ok, this is the world I live in, and the sketch is about a young man who's walking through a gated community and he's African American and wearing a hoodie, much like Trayvon Martin. And the next thing you see is the security guard for the community coming around and you're going, oh gosh I know—what's gonna happen? Very short sketch, very pithy, it's about a minute long. Jordan is walking and he's got his backpack and the tension's building and the guys pulling—the car is pulling up next to Jordan, it's pulling up next to Jordan. And at the last second, Jordan takes his hood and he pulls it up across his head and on the side of the hoodie is an

image, a profile image of a young, blonde, white boy. And so the security guard's driving past and he sees the side of the hoodie and goes, "Ah, ok." And then just keeps on going. And I remember the reaction at our live taping when we showed the video. It was a—it was like a shock and then—and then uproarious laughter. A very—a very short, sharp laughter and—'cause there was this relief, a sense of relief and release. A kid is being profiled right now, in America. A black kid right now is fearing for his life because he happens to be walking down the street. He's WWB; he's just walking while black. It was in response to Trayvon, but it echoes forward.

Obama's 2017 farewell address

01:41:02:13

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

In January of 2017, we did the last Obama-Luther, the farewell address, if you will. And I think a lot of people were still in this state of shock. I certainly was in this state of shock, and I was trying almost on a weekly basis trying to figure out what happened and why it happened. I was trying to be altruistic and say, what is it about people that they're not being heard? That they feel like, I'll do anything so I'll be heard. I'll even pick this guy over not—over feeling powerless. That was what I was trying to put into my mind because I just could not understand what had happened. I really thought, "Oh my gosh, we're going to go from an African American president to a fir—the first female president?" I was just 100% sure that was gonna happen, and I was not aware that there was gonna be cheating involved or that Russia was tampering with our election. I'm like, what's going on? This is like—this is a

Tom Clancy book, like what's happening in our world? And I—I wa—I—I—I was originally kind of trying to absorb and translate for myself what was happening in our world and what can I do to help, what can I do to help? And I think a lot of people thought one way to put just a dab of salve on this situation was to, let's—let's at least find closure somewhere. Let's lace up this shoe before we deal with this one over here. The end of the experience was mildly cathartic. It was mildly cathartic to do this sketch. I think a lot of it has to do with, if ever there was time when you were going to—where you thought maybe Obama would lose his mind, I would be watching the sketch for that. I'd be going, he didn't even need—he shouldn't even need Luther, he should just be—this is—this is redic—this is ridiculous. One of the big things we tried to put in is that people are voting against their own interests. When you vote for these people, they don't care about you. They just don't care. And this guy cared. He cared. He really cared. And so that was something that—that's the thing that still raises my ire, is that these people don't have any sense of—of—how shall I put it, any sense of like core decency for their fellow human. For—they're not putting a handout, it's all about the showmanship, it's all—I can't believe I'm saying it, it's all about the ratings. It's the ratings. And for this man who grew up in a world that's very similar to most of the people in the world or certainly in our nation, it's not about the 1%. It might've been a little prophetic because it's almost as if in the last couple of months before the midterms, I'm going, it's like we don't really have our eye on him, or we have our eye on him but we're not gonna do anything. And we did something. I think that the sketch was very—was very cathartic, yeah.

The dream of America

01:44:20:06

KEEGAN-MICHAEL KEY:

We're not holding on to the dream of America. That's the problem, is we're not holding onto the dream right now. It's something else. We're just—we're sowing these seeds of acrimony all the time and we're not—I think it's just—maybe it's part of the human condition. Maybe aliens need to come down here and then we'll all unite again. The last time I remember—this is so horrible I'm gonna say this, but the last time I remember feeling like an American was 9/11. But it's not for the right reason – oh, oh thanks I forgot, they're the enemy. No, it's not that they're the enemy. We should relish this experiment. We're all part of this experiment called America. We don't need an enemy to appreciate what we are and what we have. It's just really—it's hard. It's part of the human condition though, isn't it? When you go, you see a person who's handicapped and you go, "Phew, thank God I'm not handicapped. I'm grateful I'm not handicapped." It is better than saying, "The nation got attacked? Who attacked us? And I'm gonna roll up my sleeves, let's go kick that guys ass. Let's all do it, let's all do it." And then all that happened is we just shifted our prejudice. We just shifted our prejudice from black people to Arabic people. That's like, that's not who we are. This land is your land, this land is my land, is how we're supposed to be. It's interesting, someone said that to me years ago, why is that not our national anthem. Why is a war song our national anthem? Well, that's another part of the beauty of America is you're allowed to think anything you want here. So I'm happy, I'm

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very happy to be part of this grand experiment, and I'm happy that he was the lead scientist for eight years of this grand experiment.

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