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WYATT CENAC INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON TWO

Wyatt Cenac, Writer & Producer
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Interviewed by: Ari Fishman
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START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Presents

WYATT CENAC:
I have the odd distinction of being the first Black writer in a few writers' rooms. It's a very weird thing, and it's one of those weird things that I feel like I always have to state. Because if I don't do it, nobody else will. In history of The Daily Show, there were only three writer correspondents, only three in the history of The Daily Show. Most of the correspondents were just there hired as correspondents. But in history of the show, it's Stephen Colbert, it's John Oliver, and it's me. We're the three. Two of them — life is great. I'll let you come up with whatever conclusion you want to about that, but—

ON SCREEN TEXT:
The Thread
Wyatt Cenac
Writer & Producer

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INTERVIEWER:

So, let's just dive in, just starting in your childhood?

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WYATT CENAC:

Sure.

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INTERVIEWER:

Where you grew up and—

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WYATT CENAC:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I was born in New York City. My mother and my father split up when I think I was maybe around a year or so old. My mother remarried. My mother. My stepfather and I moved to Texas when I was about four. I got to travel a little bit as a kid and and see things that maybe in some ways, I don't know. I wonder now how that affected the way that I see, I see things because, yeah, growing up in Texas, I think it's very easy to see things as just from that perspective. And I just remember going back to Texas after summer trips and being like, basements are the most amazing thing because we didn't have those and I was just like, one day I'm going to have a basement, which is not a — it's a very creepy goal for someone to have.

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INTERVIEWER:

I've watched a lot of your comedy, and you often talked about comic books and that sort of thing. Was that something as a child you got into?

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WYATT CENAC:

As a child, I did get into comic books. I grew up watching cartoons, and the *Superfriends* was one of those cartoons. I gravitated towards *Batman*, and I really connected with *Batman*, in part because he'd lost his parents to murder, and I'd lost my father to murder, and I felt like there was a connection there as a kid, just trying to make sense of something. I had this one thing that if I ever met Batman, I'd be like, "Oh, I see you." That was my initial entry point into into comic books. And then, when I was in second grade, there was a kid who'd moved to town from Cleveland, Ohio, and, his name was Brian Vaughn, and he and I were in the same class, and his mother had reached out. She said, "Oh, would you like to come over? And my son has Transformers and comic books." And I said, sure. And so Brian became another entry point into comics for me and his family kind of became a second family to me. They were all really interested in movies and things like that. And, and so as they were interested in that stuff, I was also interested in that a lot of credit. I feel like I have to go to-to Catherine Vaughn, Brian and David and Molly's mom who really was this, this sort of cheerleader for our imagination and our creativity and she made space for me as well, and maybe I had gotten there on my own, but she definitely helped me see that it was possible, and that extra support was support that I'm grateful for because I

do think it-it helped me realize, oh, if they can do it, then yeah, it's possible for me to do it too.

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INTERVIEWER:
Do you think that was the kernel of you wanting to do something in like the arts or performance at a young age, or do you think that was just like a positive experience that sort of shaped who you are?

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WYATT CENAC:
I think it was, I think it was a piece of something. I think having the influence of the Vaugn family was a piece of that kernel of what would eventually blossom into, "Oh, I want to make television and stuff like that." As a kid, I remember seeing, you know, Eddie Murphy on SNL when it would run on Nick at Night. And I remember watching The Cosby Show and thinking, I think I want to be a doctor. And then realizing, oh, no, I want to do that — I want to be a performer. I want to be a comedian. And then trying to figure out how to get there because it's not like...from Texas, there was a straight line to that, and I think a lot of it was seeing other Black people doing it. "Oh, wow. Okay, Whoopi Goldberg can be in movies and be funny." And I'd see the promos for her with Billy Crystal and Robin Williams, and it felt like oh, there's space for her, so maybe there could be space for me, or I'd see Eddie Murphy or Richard Pryor or any of these people that told me I might be welcome here.

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INTERVIEWER:
So, getting into like, where you decide you wanted comedy, you were like, kind of like that side of it.

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WYATT CENAC:
Yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:
Maybe you could talk a little bit about the beginnings of you wanting to be a performer, you know, being interested in comedy and that sort of thing.

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WYATT CENAC:
Sure. I didn't go to college because I had big dreams of going to college. I went to college to escape home. Plain and simple. It was — I'd wanted to run away since I was 12, and I just didn't have the courage to do it. And then college became the way to run away. And so the furthest I could get away from home was where I tried to go initially. I wanted to go to Syracuse, and I settled on the University of North Carolina, in part because I was able to get in-state tuition. And it was far, but I always knew at that point I wanted to — I wanted to perform. And I think at that point seeing Eddie Murphy, he was someone that I thought, oh, I'd love to do...I'd love to follow a path like his. And I knew that he had gotten SNL at 18: 17/18. And so by the time I got to college, I was

actually kind of disappointed in myself because I was like, I haven't done it yet, and I'm behind. And I was trying to figure out how...how am I going to get to SNL. And that was the goal. That was it. That was what I'd had my sights set on. I wanted SNL like Eddie Murphy, but I also want to do Weekend Update. That was something that I thought would be really cool. I wanted to...I wanted to host Weekend Update. And so I wrote a bunch of sketches, and I wrote a cover letter and I sent it to SNL. I said, "Hi, my name's Wyatt, and I'd really like a job as a writer and a cast member on your show. Here's some sketches." And that summer, they sent them back. There was a note that said we can't read these legally. And I didn't understand it. And, you know, there's a whole thing about like, copyright. And they-they were like, look, you said you were interested in an internship. If you're really interested, this is the person you should talk to. I'll never forget the person who reached out to me. His name was Matt Estis, and he was one of Lauren's assistants. And then I went to New York, and I interned at SNL. And because I wasn't in school, I could be there every day and all the time. And I lived with my grandmother, and it was great. It was a really wonderful experience and was this experience of, oh, shit, I can do this. I'm closer than I ever was. This didn't feel fully attainable when I was in Texas, and now here I am. And everyone I went to school with my friends...when I left, they were like, oh, you're not coming back. You're gonna go and they're going to love you. And yeah, we'll see you on TV. And so, you know, it was very much like local ne'er do well doing well, proudly going and going to New York and yeah, I thought, all right, I'm back on track. I'm on the Eddie Murphy track, and I did my internship. When it was over, needless to say, I went back to school. I was not....if you're wondering why you never saw me on SNL, except for one time in a holiday episode as an

extra, that's why. I had to go finish school. But then a few years later, after I graduated, I threw myself into performing and I was like, I have to be the best at this. I started to get back into standup again. Then Second City opened up in LA and I started doing stuff there and they wanted to have like a troop that would do like best of Second City shows. And I auditioned for that, and I got into that and started taking classes at Groundlings, and I was really working my way up. I'd gone through like levels one and two and three at The Groundlings and was — there are four levels, and there's a waitlist for level four, and I was on the waitlist and I was doing this best of show at Second City, and I was on an improv team at Improv Olympic that was considered, you know, one of the top improv teams there that had like a standing Friday time slot. And then I was writing sketch shows and doing sketch shows and just trying to do as much as I could. And, and so I really just threw myself into that. And, every year once I started doing stand up, there was there was a guy who worked at Comedy Central's name was Bart Coleman. And Bart would always go to standup shows, and I was just like, oh, I got to have a good set, Bart is here. And Bart saw me one time and he was like, "You should do like the Daily Show. I feel like you would be good for the Daily Show." I was like, "I would love that." Because at that point The Daily Show was like, oh, that's Weekend Update. That was a thing I wanted to do. He was like, yeah, you, I want you to audition. And every year there would be auditions for The Daily Show. And every year I would go, and I wouldn't get it. But my manager was like, you should do it. This time is different because they want you to write something. And I was kind of like, I don't know, I don't want to — I don't want to write anything. I don't give a shit about politics. And I got to give my manager at the time, Dave Roth, a lot of credit for this. And he was

like...because they were like, you know, "The primaries are going on." I was like, I don't give a shit about the primaries. And he was like, "Write about that." I was like, okay. And so I wrote about, yeah, I care more about what's on television right now. And Lost is the big show. And these primaries, they need to compete with Lost. Lost has a polar bear. Where's the polar bear? And so that's what I wrote. And I went in and I auditioned with that. I auditioned with John. And I think I improvised something. And he laughed. And when I was done, he was like, "When can you start?" And I was like, "Haha! Funny joke." And then a week later, I was on The Daily Show.

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INTERVIEWER:
You were the first Black writer at The Daily Show, and probably amongst many of those late night shows.

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WYATT CENAC:
That's right.

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INTERVIEWER:
Talk about what it was like being in the writer's room for that show and for other shows.

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WYATT CENAC:

Yeah. The Daily Show had won an Emmy for best writing, and John's acceptance speech joked about diversity and the lack of diversity and made what to me feels like a really shitty joke where he was like, people talk about, you know, the lack of diversity, but you know, I've got tall Steve and short Steve and there's that Steve over there and this other Steve. And, whether that was a self-deprecating like, oops, I know I'm not doing as well as I should when it comes to this, or I don't really give a shit about diversity. It's still — it's still not doing the work. And so I...so, yeah. So I got hired maybe a year or two after that. When I was hired and brought into the room, I was told, you know, we want you for your voice and....you are a correspondent who is Black. And I wasn't just the first Black writer. I was technically the first Black correspondent, like full time correspondent. Larry Wilmore was a contributor. You know, before that, William Stephenson was technically the first Black correspondent contributor on the show, but that predated John. And so, yeah, Larry was a contributor who would just travel in. I was — I relocated there, I was there every day. And so I held this distinction of being the first Black correspondent and the first Black writer. At that point in my career, I'd had one other big professional job. I was a writer on the animated series King of the Hill. When I got hired at King of the Hill, it was shortly after the NAACP had done a study about the lack of diversity in Hollywood writers rooms, and they put a lot of pressure on the studios to change. And so the studio's response was to go to these shows and say, "Hey, you need to do better. These rooms shouldn't just be all white dudes. You know, maybe a woman, maybe one person of color." And to incentivize television shows to do better, the studios said, "If you all can hire a person of color, we, the studio will pay for their salary. It won't go against your show's budget. It'll come out

of the studio's pocket." And even with that, most shows still couldn't be bothered. I knew this because one of my bosses made a point to tell me this all the time. To tell me that I was a free writer. That I cost the show nothing. And I think for him, he saw it as this amazing thing that I was some sort of coupon and that it was to be celebrated. What it felt like was, I'm not really a part of the show. I'm only here because someone else is paying for me to be here, that you're not that invested in me. I have a value. If you don't see my value and all my value is to you is that I don't cost anything...that I'm free labor to you, that doesn't feel good and doesn't feel particularly good as a Black person, to have someone — to have your white boss say, "Your greatest attribute is that you're free labor."

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INTERVIEWER:
Maybe we can just briefly explain, like what happened in the Daily Show. What made you feel bold to come out and tell that story?

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WYATT CENAC:
John had done something on the show that I found offensive, and as it happened, other people found it offensive too. But it was one of those things that Fox News kind of ran with and, in his defensive posture Fox News was saying, "Hey, this, you know, liberal icon isn't as you know, he isn't as progressive as you thought he was." And, I think that was getting to him. But there was a part of it that was like, I don't know that they really believe what they're saying, but this thing did bother me because you're also the same

white guy that's always doing rap hands and kind of mocking the music I grew up with in this way that you think it's funny and doing "yo yo yo" —using black vernacular as a way to make a comedic point, with no respect and appreciation for it and not recognizing that, oh, what you're actually doing is you're making fun of me, and you're making fun of my friends and my family and the people I grew up with. And you don't care. And I'm in the room and you're doing it to me, and you're doing it around me. And it's never...it's never resonated with you. And I've watched you do that a lot, and I've watched you do a lot of other things, and I've watched this show do a lot of other things. Where it's felt like my race or the races of other people, the cultures of other people have become a punchline in this ironic way, and it was a time when — that was also a particular moment in time when ironic racism and ironic sexism was the, you know, it was the soup of the day. You know it was....there are a lot of there are a lot of white comics who felt they could say the word because they were like, you know, I don't mean it. And I think to me, I personally found myself feeling sick of it. And not just as it related to Black people, but across the board. I didn't really enjoy seeing straight white dudes make jokes about gay people. I didn't enjoy seeing them make jokes about women about, you know, Asian people. Like it all started to bother me. And, the bit that John wanted to do was this bit where his response to it was that everything I do is racist. It just felt like this is not — I don't think this is the answer. And so I voiced a concern, and in voicing concern, John got really defensive. He lost his temper and started to say, "What are you trying to say? There's a tone in your voice." And started picking out things like that. "There's a tone." And, as I tried to, you know, I tried to be diplomatic about it. And eventually it was kind of like, look, it

bothers me. I — when I heard you do the bit, it bothered me. It sounded like Kingfish. It sounded like Amos 'n' Andy. To which he — because he was doing an impression — to which he got up and was like, "F** off, I'm done with you." Stormed out of the room. Repeated "F** off. I'm done with you," a few times. I, in that moment, didn't know if I'd been fired or not. I thought I'd been fired and I didn't know what to do. And everyone's just stunned. And I followed him to his office because I was kind of like, if I've been fired, I need to find out. And, he then screamed at me for a while and I tried to defend myself as best I could. And, but he sort of attacked me in these ways of, like, "You've never had a problem with my Chuck Schumer voice." And I was like, "I don't know what you mean. Like, we're talking about this and you're now bringing it to something else." And it was kind of like, well, I'm not — I'm not Jewish. I don't know if you're like...I can only represent the community that I represent. And he was kind of like, "I don't give a shit about your community." And I know he was coming from a weird defensive place, but the reality is that defensive place was a place he'd been in for a long time, because so much stuff that happened at the show that like, maybe under the surface he was feeling anxiety about and this thing keyed in on it. And then me, as you know, the one Black person that is in the writer's room that he sees on a daily basis. That I — that it's bothering me. He's not seeing my pain. He's just feeling his own because I'm perhaps both a symbol of him trying to progress and a reminder of how little work he's done. The Daily Show was a dream job to me. I hadn't looked beyond that. I was kind of in my head. Oh, this is it. This is where I wanted to land. This is Weekend update. This is the thing I wanted to do. I'm happy here. And I think in my wildest dreams, I thought maybe one day Stephen decides to move on and maybe I could take over that desk. And

so I think at that moment when I left the show, I think there was a part of me that felt lost that that wasn't, you know, that like, oh, yeah, that didn't....that's not what happened. And I think a part of me that wanted to maybe help explain why. I think to some people they saw it as me against John. And I think for me it was more me pointing out a culture that isn't a culture to be emulated and that this world that I love...making television and comedy and late night...that the reason that I'm not there doing the thing I love is because this culture is f***ed up. And it's this culture that made it untenable for me to be there. A lot of those late night shows, it's one person who is the face of it. It is their vision. You know, at its best, it's a benevolent dictatorship, but it is still a dictatorship. And there are some people who maybe lose sight of that and get very comfortable with the dictatorship element of it. And so I think in that way whatever change there is like, it's not just about one person. It's about the industry, and it's about everybody who walked through those doors. And it's about looking inward and saying, okay, how do we build something better, so that even if those moments happen; yeah, that we can do better by one another.

END TC: 00:27:43:00