Episode Book

EPISODE #5989

Twenty Tiny Beats That Make a Podcast Stick

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SYNOPSIS

What makes a recurring bit actually work — and when does it turn into an hour of contextless jingles? Drawing on structure-as-co-host thinking and the cautionary tale of trigger-fired jingles, this episode pitches twenty brand-new recurring beats: late corrections to an unbooked ad, an unearned pre-close apology, a stinger nobody explains, a doorbell no one answers, listener audio instead of listener mail, and a character who exists only in the show notes. Every pitch carries the same four specs — what it is, how long it runs, where it sits, and why it can't swamp the topic — plus a running debate over the difference between a beat that adds context and one that just adds noise.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Twenty beats. That's what Daniel wants. The show runs a few little comic features already, Hilbert's turn near the end, Jim's call, Larry's unbooked ad. Daniel's framing is that these aren't the main show. They're nudges. And he wants us to pitch twenty brand-new ones. Stranger the better, but every single one has to be novel. Nothing that's a reskin of something we run or something we've floated. And every pitch carries four things: what it is, roughly how long it lasts, where in an episode it sits, and why it works without swamping the topic.



Herman

Twenty is a lot of pitches.



Corn

Twenty is the ask. And we each pick a favourite at the end. So before we start throwing things at the wall, one question. What actually makes a beat work?



Herman

Recognition. That's the whole mechanism, and it's almost embarrassingly simple. Ears are connected to brains, and there's nothing brains like better than recognizing things. A callback, a running bit, a jingle that fires on a trigger, it tickles that exact neuron. You hear the first two notes and you're already there.



Corn

So the comfort is the point.



Herman

The comfort is the point, and the paradox is that it cuts both ways. A recurring segment is comforting because you know what's going to happen. You know it's time for the red-chair story. And it's exciting because you do not know what the story is. Same slot, same setup, completely open payload. That's the trick. It's also why recurring segments connect one episode to the next — they make a series feel like a series instead of a pile of files.



Corn

Give me the concrete version.



Herman

A show where every guest gets the same closing question. If you could go back and speak to your thirteen-year-old self, what would you say. One small decision, applied without exception. The host of that show reckons it made the whole thing about twenty percent better. Not from the answers. From the fact that it was always the same question.



Corn

I'd have said something stupid at thirteen and regretted it for the rest of my life on somebody else's podcast.



Herman

That is the risk you take.



Corn

So the second thing, and this is the one that matters for a show that isn't a comedy show. Beats are scaffolding, not content.



Herman

Multitude's Eric Silver puts it better than I can. The structure of your show is another co-host, another person at the table. Structure does the work of what do we do next, so that the hosts can concentrate on being funny or informative. You write down the order of segments, how long they are, what happens in them, and then you're free.



Corn

And you can break the structure.



Herman

You can, but it has to be for a reason that's entertaining to you and the audience. Breaking it for no reason is just a mess with good intentions.



Corn

Here's the failure mode, and it's the thing every one of these twenty pitches has to survive. Three Bean Salad, which is a very good show, got accused by its own listeners of being an hour of contextless jingles.



Herman

It's a brutal line. And it's not wrong, exactly. Their jingles fire on triggers. Flightless bird zone whenever a flightless bird comes up. The Regal Zone on any mention of the royal family. Neil, on any mention of any Neil. And Bluebell, which is a full song about Henry Paker's cat, on any mention of the cat. Benjamin Partridge says he usually fades it after thirty seconds, but sometimes he holds his nerve and plays the lot, completely torpedoing the flow of the podcast.



Corn

He knows. He's doing it on purpose.



Herman

He's doing it on purpose and it works, for that show, because that show is built on in-jokes and previously established jingles and meandering lukewarm banter. Ours is built on answering a question. So the test for every one of these twenty is simple. Does it add context, or does it just add noise.



Corn

That's the rubric. Let's pitch.



Herman

First five live in the show's own furniture. Structural moments that already exist. An ad break, a midroll, a cold open. Because those are the cheapest beats in the world. They attach to a moment that already happens, so they cost nothing in topic time.



Corn

One. The ad that was never booked, but arrives late.



Herman

Say more.



Corn

Larry reads his unbooked ad, right, and then thirty seconds later, after we've moved on, he comes back. Same oily voice. He's just received a correction from the client. The client did not exist when he started reading. This one is fifteen, twenty seconds, it sits immediately after the existing Larry slot, and it doesn't swamp anything, because it's over before the topic resumes. It's a postscript. And a postscript can't swamp a conversation.



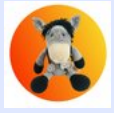
Herman

Two. The metadata cold open.



Corn

What.



Herman

The show's own RSS metadata as a character. Every episode already carries a title, a description, a duration. Imagine the episode opens and somebody reads the actual description field, deadpan, and it does not match what the episode is about. Not wildly. Just slightly. Like the description was written by someone who was told about the episode in a corridor.



Corn

Ten seconds. Top of show. And it doesn't swamp, because it happens before the topic starts.



Herman

Three. The word we cannot avoid.



Corn

Every topic has one. Say the topic is drill bits. The word is bit. We cannot get through the episode without saying it. So the beat fires on it.



Herman

And what does it do.



Corn

Nothing. That's the beauty. A two-second sound. A click. Whoever says it first gets a click, and that's it, we carry on. It's like the Three Bean Salad trigger jingles but stripped to a single nonmusical noise, and it's for a word that's going to come up forty times, so it becomes clockwork by minute six.



Herman

Four. The midroll that isn't a midroll.



Corn

Explain.



Herman

A beat that treats the midroll as a found object. There is no ad. There's just a pause where an ad would be. Four seconds of dead air, and then a host says, sorry, that was the ad, it didn't arrive. Twenty-five seconds, midroll, and it costs zero topic time because the midroll was never topic time.



Corn

That's five with the postscript and this. Do the fifth.



Herman

Five. The pre-close apology that hasn't been earned.



Corn

Two. Cold. Two. Cold. Wait. I've got one.



Herman

Go.



Corn

A recurring apology for something that hasn't happened yet. Thirty seconds, in the pre-close slot, just before the closing, and one of us apologizes, sincerely, for a specific thing we are going to do in a future episode that we have not planned and will not do. It plants a promise that never gets kept. Forty-five seconds maximum. And it sits in a slot that was already filler, so it's free.



Herman

That's novel, I think. The apology is a promise and the promise is empty and the emptiness is the joke.



Corn

Nobody laughed. Let's do five more.



Herman

These next five are sonic. No words at all. And there's a real gap here. Almost every podcast bit is verbal. An in-joke, a catchphrase, a fake character. But audio drama has been doing comedy with sound alone for decades. Stingers, foley, music beds. A beat can be a sound.



Corn

You are about to get very excited.



Herman

I'm aware of it. Six. The stinger nobody explains. A two-second piece of music that plays at a specific moment and is never acknowledged, never named, never referred to. It just becomes part of the texture. And here's the discipline. We never explain it. Not on the show, not in the show notes. If it works, listeners start building theories, and the theories are the reward.



Corn

Five seconds. Anywhere, best as punctuation between topic sections. And sonic beats are the cheapest beat that exists, because they take zero conversational real estate. The topic is not even interrupted. The sound happens over the top of it.



Herman

Seven. The cut that lands wrong on purpose.



Corn

Say it.



Herman

The show's own editing, audible. A hard cut that arrives half a beat early, so it clips the last word off a sentence. A recurring, deliberate, badly-placed edit. Ten seconds, once an episode, at the point where we change sub-topic. And the anti-swamp argument is airtight, because you cannot derail a conversation with a thing that happens in the edit.



Corn

Eight. The sound only one host can hear.



Herman

Which is a joke about the format itself.



Corn

Herman reacts to a sound that isn't there. Every episode, once. I don't hear it. The listener doesn't hear it, because there's nothing to hear. He just stops mid-sentence, looks off to one side, waits, and continues. Eight seconds. Anywhere, but best in the middle third. It costs no topic time because his reaction is inside a topic sentence.



Herman

Nine. The music bed that changes.



Corn

Meaning.



Herman

Every episode has a quiet music bed under the last ninety seconds of the main discussion. Same bed every episode. And over the weeks, it gets slower. By episode twenty, it's half speed. Nobody says anything. It's just there. And the anti-swamp case is that a music bed is already under the discussion. We didn't add anything. We only changed something that was already happening.



Corn

Ten. A doorbell that never belongs to us.



Corn

A doorbell sound at a fixed point, say the eighteen-minute mark, and neither of us ever reacts to it and nobody ever answers it. Ten seconds of the subject continuing over the top of a doorbell. It's the same cost as the music bed. Zero. Because it's not a segment, it's a sound that arrives while we're talking.



Herman

That's fifteen. The next five are the ones nobody seems to be doing. Which is either an opportunity or a warning.



Corn

Start with the one you liked from the research.



Herman

Eleven. A running gag that is also a genuine information-delivery device. I could not find a single show doing this as a discrete recurring beat. The closest thing is the comedic expert interview, The Infinite Monkey Cage, No Such Thing as a Fish, which blends education and comedy in the whole format, not in a beat.



Corn

So what is it.



Herman

A recurring character whose entire function is to deliver one true fact per episode, badly, and in a way that forces us to state the correct one. Sixty seconds. Back half, after the main technical section, where a wrong fact can't derail the argument, because the argument's already been made. And the anti-swamp case is explicit. The beat delivers information. It cannot swamp the topic, because it is part of the topic.



Corn

Twelve. Listener audio. Audio.



Herman

Right, and this is the second gap. Every recurring mailbag in podcasting is text. A listener writes in, a host reads it out. Nobody seems to have built a recurring slot on listener-submitted audio.



Corn

So the beat is thirty seconds of a listener's voice, unedited, on the topic, at the exact point in the episode where the topic reaches their contribution. Thirty seconds. Insert position varies with the topic. And it doesn't swamp, because it is the topic. It's the discussion being handed to somebody else for half a minute.



Herman

Thirteen. A recurring character who only exists in the show notes.



Corn

Say that again.



Herman

A character with a name and a personality who never speaks on the show. Never appears. He or she only ever appears in the written show notes, doing things. Waiting. Becoming more specific over time. But the character never gets a voice. Thirty seconds, doesn't even take audio time, because it isn't audio. It's entirely in the text field.



Corn

Fourteen. A game with a permanent loser and no prize.



Herman

What's the game.



Corn

There is no game. There is a loser. Neither of us knows the rules. There is no prize. Fifteen seconds, top of show, and it cannot swamp, because it's a verdict with no mechanism attached. The listeners start keeping score.



Herman

That's uncomfortably good.



Corn

Fifteen. Which is where I stop, because I have spent four minutes on this and we said each pitch gets about ninety seconds.



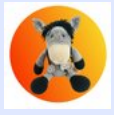
Herman

Before the favourite, one craft constraint, applied to all twenty. PodRewind's warning. Too many segments feels scattered and the core identity can get muddied. And their advice on evaluation. Give a new segment at least ten episodes before you judge it. Audiences need time to anticipate a recurring bit before it can possibly land.



Corn

That last one is the honest one. Nobody's judging any of this after one episode. Least of all us.



Herman

The other model is placement. Look at a late-night show. Theme song, monologue, variety segment, guest, a game, a musical performance, goodnight. The bits aren't scattered. They're at predictable points. That's why a late-night show gets away with fifteen different elements without feeling like static.

G

Gloria

Excuse me. Standards and Practices.



Corn

Gloria.

G

Gloria

A formal clarification. During this segment, one host described an unbooked advertiser as, quote, oily. The advertiser in question has not been consulted, does not know he is unbooked, and has filed a complaint through his representation. Policy seventeen dash four. Prior review of all disparaging descriptions of unbooked advertisers.



Herman

He's unbooked. He's not even a sponsor.

G

Gloria

That is not a category with a policy exception. Please do not describe an individual as oily on air.



Corn

I'd like to note for the record that Larry is fine with it.

G

Gloria

Larry has filed separately.



Herman

Twenty pitches, twenty slots, and one regulatory filing. Back to the pitches. Sixteen through twenty are the risky ones, so the anti-swamp argument has to be made out loud, every time.



Corn

Why are they riskier.



Herman

Because every one of them is close to a beat we already run. Sixteen. A future version of the show correcting the current one. Thirty seconds, in the back third. The show two years from now has heard this episode and objects to something we said, and the objection arrives as an insert. That's close to Hilbert's turn, so the difference has to be audible. Hilbert is a person in the room. This is a version of the show that has not been made yet.



Corn

Seventeen. The transcript read back.



Herman

The show's own transcript, read aloud, and found wanting. Forty seconds, back half. We quote ourselves, accurately, and it does not sound like anything a person would say. And it cannot swamp, because it's a comment on the show that lasts forty seconds and ends. Three Bean Salad has the template, the editor phoning the episode to comment on what he's hearing, meta upon, but in the service of being as correct as possible.



Corn

Eighteen. A listener complaint answered by the same listener.



Corn

A complaint comes in, we respond to it, and then the same listener responds to our response, and the second audio is very obviously the same person putting on a different voice. Back half, and it only works there, because a beat in the first ten minutes does derail the topic. That's the real anti-swamp rule. Beats belong late.



Herman

Nineteen. The show's own advertising history, audited.



Corn

Meaning.



Herman

Once a month we read out what listeners actually bought from a sponsor's landing page. Just the list. No joke attached. Forty seconds, epilogue slot. And here's why it works. MBMBaM have been doing this for years, sponsor songs, involvement in advice bits, reading what people bought. The ad-read as a bit is a proven tradition, so we're not inventing a category. We're extending Larry's premise instead of retiring it.



Corn

Twenty. And this one is my favourite.



Corn

A sound designer who is credited but never appears. Every episode, the credits mention a designer by name. There is no designer. The name changes only when you'd least expect it, and the design of the show never changes at all. Ten seconds, very end of the closing. And it can't swamp anything, because it's after the show is over.



Herman

So that's twenty. Now the favourites. Mine is number eleven, the running gag that delivers real information. It's the only pitch on the list that makes the episode better at its actual job.



Corn

Mine is twenty.



Herman

Of course it is. The credits.



Corn

It's on brand.



Hilbert

You want a beat with a trigger, a duration, and a slot. I've had one running since before this show existed.



Corn

What's the trigger.



Hilbert

Tuesdays. Half past six. The neighbour gets a delivery. I timed it. Seventy seconds of a van idling outside my window and then the gate, and then the gate again because it doesn't catch. And I play, over the top of it, a recording.



Corn

A recording of what.



Hilbert

Of the same van, from August. So the show's got a beat and the trigger's my street and the duration is seventy seconds and the slot is dinner. I don't count it as swamping anything because I'm not talking.



Herman

You've been doing this since before the show existed.



Hilbert

Since October. I've got a log.



Herman

You're not even doing anything.



Hilbert

I'm doing plenty. The log's got the times. Nine hundred and something entries. Every Tuesday, the arrival time, the gate, whether it caught. The first four months it's my handwriting and then it stops being my handwriting because I gave the book to the man at number nine and he's still got it.



Corn

He has your log.



Hilbert

He has the log. He wanted it because the van's actually his son-in-law's and nobody's told him. I've been keeping the wrong man's log for nine months and he's been keeping it back.



Herman

So it's not your log.



Hilbert

It's partly mine.



Corn

What's the beat, exactly, from a listener's point of view.



Hilbert

There isn't one. I'm telling you how I run it at the house. You asked for the four things. Trigger, seventy seconds, Tuesday, dinner. That's the four things. And it doesn't swamp the dinner, because I finish eating first.



Herman

You eat before you play the recording.



Hilbert

I eat during it. That's the whole reason I play it. Otherwise I'd be eating in silence with a van outside. I'm not a maniac.



Corn

Open all night.



Hilbert

So, of the twenty pitches. Which one gets tried.



Herman

Honestly. Most of them won't. You write twenty and two survive, and even those two need ten episodes before anyone can tell whether they land. That's not a failure, that's the normal rate.



Corn

One thing the episode proved. A beat is scaffolding, not content. The test isn't whether it's funny. It's whether it adds context or just noise.



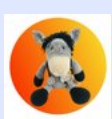
Herman

Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



Corn

If this was your kind of episode, go back for episode eighteen sixty-one, Emergency Prep You Can Sing To; episode ninety-one, The Story Behind the Show; and episode seventeen fifty, Herman's Music Showcase. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want to send us a prompt, send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Herman

We'll be back soon.

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