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CULTURE

Caleb Hearon Loves to Put Cheese Where It Doesn't Belong



By Katja Vujić, a writer at The Cut covering culture, news, wellness, and style.

NOV. 28, 2024

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TASTE TEST

What is “good taste” anyway? Allow your favorite actor, musician, celebrity, or comedian to let you in on what they’re watching, reading, and consuming.

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Fresh off a Citi Bike and fashionably late, Caleb Hearon and his Midwest essence immediately put me at ease. “Who do we love? Who do we hate?” he asks, taking a seat across from me at a café in Fort Greene. “New York is so sexy and fun,” he says. “When I’m in Kansas City, I’m walking in the park. I’m seeing my mom for lunch. I am reading books into the night. I’m relaxed.” But L.A. wasn’t fun enough. So he moved to New York.

Before he got here, though, Hearon was a staple of Chicago’s comedy scene and began going increasingly viral on X for exaggerated yet accurate impressions of characters that the average 20-something has both known and been. (The “pov you’re my coworker” series, which began in late 2019, was particularly inspired.) He has spent the years since getting as offline as possible, performing stand-up across the country; goofing and gabbing on his podcast, *So True With Caleb Hearon*; and having scene-stealing cameos in projects like the *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* series reboot and the box-office hit *Jurassic World Dominion*. In *Sweethearts*, a Thanksgiving rom-com about a pair of college freshmen who each decide to end their high-school relationship mid-fall semester, he plays Palmer, best friend to Jamie (Kiernan Shipka) and Ben (Nico Hiraga). Palmer is returning from a stint in Paris to throw an official coming-out party complete with canapés and Ernest Hemingway’s favorite absinthe cocktail. A sweet and surprising story ensues.

For Hearon, this is just the beginning of some big plans ahead: He has co-written a movie, *Trash Mountain*, that Lilly Wachowski will direct; he’s got multiple TV shows in development; and he is more than prepared to film a comedy special. “I’m just trying to make fucking cool stuff with my friends. I’m unique in that way,” he jokes.

I love that *Sweethearts* hits all the satisfying rom-com beats while also breaking the rules. Palmer isn’t just a sidekick; he goes on to have his own journey. How involved were you in creating him, and how do you feel about the “gay best friend” trope generally?

I love when I *see* gay best friend. I love *being* gay best friend. I’ve gotten to play gay best friend on-camera a couple of times, and I will play gay best friend for the rest of my life and have zero qualms about it. The writers of this movie took this thing that has existed in such a flat way in many types of media and gave him his whole own arc.

Where Kiernan and Nico’s characters are so stressed out and in their shit, every time you’re getting fed up with hearing about their melodrama, Palmer pops up being fabulous and so fun. I really stan Palmer, and I had a big role in helping create him. Any project ever, if you’ve got a comedian on set and you don’t let them improvise, you’re missing out. We always did these takes on set called “Bonus Jonas,” which was our throwaway — like, “We definitely got one that we could use; now do whatever you want,” and those were always my favorites.

In the movie, Palmer’s romantic ideas about big-city life for gay people are quickly dispelled. You grew up in Missouri, spend a lot of time in Kansas City, and show love to the Midwest regularly. What are your favorite cultural elements of the Midwest?

“Midwest nice” — I love it. A lot of people are like, “Oh, they’re nice to your face and mean behind your back.” That has not been my experience. Midwestern people are genuinely nice. I fucking love when I’m in Kansas City. People hold the door for you. They say, “Hey, how are

you doing?" They really mean it. They really do want to hear about your day. It's part of the reason that I still have a home in Kansas City, because I literally need it.

And I love that midwestern people will just put seven foods we're straight up not supposed to eat on a platter and be like, "This is dinner." A casserole is such a fucked-up concoction. You shouldn't even be doing stuff like that in the kitchen, and I actually need it to live. I love cheese where it doesn't belong. I love four kinds of meat where none was called for. I love an appetizer sampler. I love a big chili with cinnamon roll. You ever heard of that? Chili with cinnamon roll. That shit's happening in the Midwest. The Midwest is our cultural capital in the United States — I don't care what anyone says.

What's your favorite holiday movie?

A Christmas movie that a lot of people don't think of as being a Christmas movie is *Stepmom*. Julia Roberts, Susan Sarandon — you know it? You'll sob for three days straight. It's one of the saddest movies ever made. It's so fucked up. Julia Roberts is peak-'90s Julia: She's wearing leather jackets like it's her job, and in many ways, it is. She's wearing a little beret, sunglasses. She's looking chic as hell, and she is the stepmom and Susan Sarandon is the real mom, and there's a Christmas element to it. It makes me sob, and it's one of my mom's favorite movies.

You're hopping in an UberXL. You can bring five celebrities, dead or alive. Who's coming?

I'm gonna go with Natalie Maines, lead singer of the Chicks. That is my girl. I love that band. John Goodman — I love him in everything, and he went to my college, Missouri State. Shout-out. Go Bears. Back in the day on *Roseanne*, OG fat John Goodman was so hot and so funny. And then, of course, *The Big Lebowski*. Who else am I gonna put in there? Frank Ocean — I need to understand what's going on with him. I love his music. He's sort of in a space where he's refusing to put any out. I want to be his friend — or more if he's open to it. Frank, hit me up.

I would have loved to have had a conversation with Betty White, specifically because back when she was young, she really stood her ground and she integrated her show, and I think at that time, as a woman, particularly, that was such a risky, ballsy move. I would love to talk to her about that decision. It's so easy to look back on those things now and be like, *Of course that was the right thing*, but in the moment, I bet she had real fear around whether or not she would ever work again. And then Mo'Nique. Mo'Nique's *Queens of Comedy* set is so iconic. She walks out onstage in this sexy leather jumpsuit, and she immediately is like, "Every fat bitch in here should be standing up and clapping right now. I'm up here doing this for y'all." It's funny and audacious and powerful. That'd be a crazy car to be in — I'd be like, "Turn the music off. We're all chatting."

Frank would be on the aux, though!

His music is so fucking good. *Blonde* is maybe one of my most-listened-to albums of all time, because I always listen to it at museums. If you're having a day where you need to feel something, go to any museum, put in headphones, and play *Blonde* from beginning to end while you look at stuff. It'll stir something.

What's the best Thanksgiving food?

I'll tell you the most overrated Thanksgiving food first: turkey. It's just fine. Ham is superior.

My aunt Ashley makes this incredible sausage-and-cranberry stuffing from scratch. She tears all the bread herself and dries it out — it's sausage and four kinds of bread and then cranberries and onions. I think about it five times a day, every day of the year. Something that's underrated and people feel too comfortable shitting on is pumpkin pie. Pumpkin pie is a banger. She's been steady, and she's been with us, and people like to go, "Oh, it's fine." She's that Thanksgiving girl.

What's the worst thing to do at a Thanksgiving dinner?

Not offer to help. I've seen this a couple times from relatives of mine or people who were invited on the fringes, because now I host Thanksgiving for my family and I've invited people that are not family. People get real bent out of shape about coming empty-handed; I don't mind that. You can bring a bottle of wine if you want to, but I don't drink, so I don't care. Honestly, bring a pack of joints instead. But offering to help is actually so much more beautiful, and it's the spirit of the reason we're getting together, because, of course, we're not honoring the original spirit of Thanksgiving.

FMK: Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, National Dog Show, Thanksgiving football.

I'm gonna marry Thanksgiving football. I love and am interested in football, but I also think the nice thing about Thanksgiving Day football is it gives me something to talk to men about. My grandpa's pretty cool, but we can *really* talk about football, and it's low-lift for both of us. I like talking about his life and his ideas on the world, but I can tell it's strange for him. When we just get to sit there and he can be like, 'Why the fuck would they run it?,' I can be like, 'I know.' That's fun. I'm gonna kill the dog show — I just don't care about it. We're judging the dogs. We made the dogs get their hair done. The owners are intense. The way they hold the leash while they run makes me really stressed out. They're very scary people. They give their dog a blowout; it's insane. I'm gonna fuck the parade because the parade, while I don't care about it, will sometimes provide the most psychotic image of a Minion looming over a city, and that can be really fun.

What's your pre-performing ritual onstage?

It's really simple. I have a Diet Coke; I have a big water. I usually try not to eat a meal before a show because I don't want to risk any tummy stuff. I try not to stress too much. I try to think about the goal, the outcome, what I want people to feel. I set intentions. If you're in front of a room of people who are choosing to listen to you, it's caretaking. It's a real responsibility to make sure that people feel like that person knows what's going on.

Otherwise, it's just an exercise in ego. People paid money; they got babysitters — it's very serious to me. As silly as it is that I'm up there talking about a bad-sex experience I had or whatever, I am in control of someone's night, and we only get so many nights in a lifetime. I try to always — before, during, and after a show — remind myself of the immense privilege and responsibility it is that people chose to spend the night listening to me talk. There's a responsibility when you have people's attention.

What's your comfort rewatch?

20th Century Women, by Mike Mills. I watch it constantly. Also, *The Lobster*, randomly. It's so stilted and weird, and people would find it strange to hear me say it's a comfort movie, but the way that they talk and the way it's paced and the sounds are nice. I'll throw it on while I'm responding to emails. Yorgos Lanthimos is a genius. *The Favourite*'s another one I like to

rewatch. That's not really a comfort, though. I always pay attention when I watch that. I'll put on *Superbad* or any of those big dumb comedies.

You have a podcast. Do you listen to any, and if so, what are your favorites?

I don't listen to a single podcast — they're not for me. I hope people listen to mine, but I don't like when other people are talking and I don't get to pitch in. I think it's really upsetting. People are talking in my ear, and I'm like, *I have something to say about that*, which I guess is why I have a podcast.

What's the best piece of gossip you've ever heard?

I get some good gossip every once in a while. I'm a vault; I don't tell. You can bring me the gossip, and I'll keep it. Put this out: If you are somebody who's interested in getting good gossip, learn not to repeat it. The best gossip I ever hear is about celebrities that are secretly gay that are pretending to be straight. And for very obvious ethical reasons, I won't say which ones. But, man, isn't that the best?

What's a book you couldn't put down?

Recently, I've been reading a book called *Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth*. It's by a writer called Sarah Smarsh. She's a Kansas City writer, and I picked it up in a cute little bookstore in Lawrence, Kansas. They had a section called "What to Read Instead of *Hillbilly Elegy*." It's chronicling her family through the decades in the middle of the country, working-class people, and what's happened there with work and power and political alignment. I think it's deeply prescient.

You've done a lot of work with the Kansas City tenants union, right?

I love it. It's the only thing that's inspired me politically in the last eight years. I'm deeply concerned about the price of rent. I'm a very political person; it doesn't make me uncomfortable to talk about. This past election, if we look at Missouri as a case study, Missouri elected Donald Trump by 22 points — something like that. They elected Josh Hawley by 14 points. They elected a Republican governor by 25 points. And in one of the deepest, reddest states in the country, they passed abortion by three points. Missouri passed the most restrictive abortion ban in the country and then Missouri voters voted to bring it back. Three points sounds small, but it's huge in a place like Missouri. They passed raising the minimum wage to \$15 by 16 points. Two years ago, they passed legalized weed by seven or eight points. It's easy, as people on the left, which is where I find myself, to despair and be nihilistic, but the fact is our causes win.

What's the best advice you've received?

I had a history professor in college, Dr. Jeremy Neely, at Missouri State. I wrote a paper for him, and I was a very pretentious writer when I was younger — just used as many big words as I could think of. I wrote very inaccessibly, and I think I was a little elitist. It's funny because Palmer, my character in the movie, is going through something that I went through. You experiment with elitism when you're coming out in a red state because you're like, *Am I better than everyone?* My professor sat me down in his office and was like, "You don't need to work so hard to prove that you're smart. You just are smart, and good writing is actually accessible. If a regular person can't read your writing and understand it, you're doing a bad job." You don't need to write something brilliant; you need to write something relatable and understandable.

What’s your favorite piece of art you own?

The only piece of physical art that I’ve ever commissioned is from a painter called Anthony Hurd. He does really pretty queer southwestern portraits. He did a custom piece for my house in Kansas City of two cowboys embracing.

What would your last meal be?

Some brown-sugar baked ham. Fried chicken, hot sauce, banana pudding. Dr Pepper *has* to be there. And shrimp cocktail. People don’t know this, but the Berry Chantilly cake from Whole Foods was the best cake in America, and they changed the recipe. They thought I wouldn’t notice, and I did. I need the people in charge of Whole Foods to get back in the kitchen and get back to basics and fundamentals on the Berry Chantilly cake. The original Berry Chantilly cake would be in my death-row meal.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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