What’s the Frequency, Jesus? An Interview with Atheist Apocalypse Podcast, A Podcast for Those Left Behind

By Meggy-Kate Gutermuth

First off, tell us how this project came together. What was the birthing process for a podcast series about complete and total annihilation in a post-capitalist world? What’s it like to be a fly on the wall during the writing process?

I wanted a fictional show that would make me laugh.

I’ve been writing fiction since I was about 8 years old and, I’m not kidding, I was in the middle of moving another wheelbarrow full of dirt and it dawned on me, “Atheist Apocalypse.”

The concept was immediately clear; I just needed a team to help build it, because I knew it would be a massive undertaking and I wanted more than just my voice in the project.

The neat thing about living in the age we do is the inter-connectivity we have. We can talk to just about anyone anywhere in the world at any time. That’s embodied in Atheist Apocalypse; we have writers, actors and comedians from the East Coast to the West Coast, to France and down to Australia. It’s great to bring in so many voices, literally and figuratively, as well as so many different perspectives. It really enriches what we have to offer.

With every benefit comes an associated cost and for us the distances that make our collective voice unique is also our greatest challenge. But it wasn’t something we couldn’t overcome.

Paul: I’m a creative person, always thinking and always pushing the envelope on my own thoughts. I was going through a bout of depression and doing a significant home improvement project, there’s just something about manual labor that gets my creative juices going, and I was thinking about skepticism and what I see as a de-acceleration of our progress and what might be causing it.

I realized I was over-exposed to atheist-friendly media and hearing so many similar voices was compounding my depression. At the same time there was nothing out there entertaining me. Everyone was pretty much saying the same things the same ways and I needed a break; I needed to laugh.

I needed to escape.

Escape from all the pain and heartache that atheist podcasting and personalities spend so much time on.
Technology is a beautiful thing for collaborators; we leveraged Skype, Google Hangouts and Google Drive as collaborative space and work in a mix of synchronous and asynchronous settings.

The most fun is the private group chats and our readings; when you get about 10 funny people together to get a task done, a lot of “funny” happens.

Paul – It’s rumored (pun!) you lived in the south for a short while. Might that be your inspiration for Ms. Negapositive? Is there any hope for her, a lobotomy perhaps?

There are many facets of the show that living in the Deep South inspired; more than just characters too. I think anyone who identifies as a “freethinker”, secularist, humanist or even an atheist, who has also lived in a conservative, maybe religiously-fundamental area, knows what that type of environment can be like.

We all react to our environments differently but for me living in the Deep South was suffocating. Yes, in more than just the humidity! I never felt free to be me, to speak my mind or even share my secular-leaning opinions. In my experience and opinion, places like Montgomery, Alabama are incredibly unfriendly to people who can’t, or choose not to, squeeze into the mold that type of community endorses.

I was frustrated, stressed and depressed because everywhere I turned I saw things I didn’t like, unlike any other place I’d lived – and I’ve lived in 4 countries and 9 different States in the US. Most of the people I ran across in my time there lived life by a script, whether or not it made them happy.

I truly feel that anyone who has lived in a place like the Deep South will be able to identify with and pick up on the lingering frustration I have with the “expected” Southern mentality. They may even find themselves wondering if we’ve used their hometown as inspiration.

The people and the places I came into contact with during my time in Alabama will forever live on, at least in the digital realm, and there are parts of Nellie that the audience has met, and hasn’t yet met, that got their start right there in the towns surrounding Montgomery.

Nellie came to life when a friend of mine, Stephanie Jones, and I were talking about our mutual frustrations with a segment of the freethought movement. We pondered why that segment wouldn’t change their vitriolic tactics to serve the greater good and a population of the voiceless and Stephanie reframed a certain point I made. It was an honest attempt to put a positive spin on the topic but it fell short, because the residual message was still negative—and thus Nellie was born. In fact, many of the characters were born from my conversations with other atheists, which may come as a surprise when your readers listen to a few episodes and meet the people of the Tri-Counties.

As for Nellie, she brings a unique spin to the lives of the people of the Tri-Counties and we are glad to have met her. I don’t think she’s going anywhere anytime soon.

What is the tri-county area this show is set in? Will that be a mystery we’ll learn later or is it generic? Who were the people in charge (mayors/governor(s)/president(s) who ultimately caused this catastrophe? Will we meet them in any upcoming episodes?

One of the beautiful elements of the show is that the Tri-Counties can be Anywhere, US. It could be set in New York State or it could be Florida, Toronto, Vancouver, Texas or the middle of Wyoming. I’ve lived in multiple countries and met people from around the world and the one thing I learned is that people are people. It doesn’t matter if we’re talking about the small farming hometown I grew up in or the middle of Asia; there are good people and bad people everywhere and we’re more alike than I think most of us realize.

I think your readers who give the show a listen will fall in love with the town through their relationship with the people of the Tri-Counties, whether it’s the news crew at KUSA 9 News at 9 or the various personalities we run across as the crew chases the latest hot story.

The Tri-Counties is a mysterious place, where one’s
`one’s imagination can be fully realized, and part of that mystery is what was the catastrophe and what, or who, caused it.

Many themes of this show tend to draw from life, from the concentrated but dangerous sheriff force towards the contaminated water supply and the controlling of the free press through their radio news programs. In both the context of the storyline as well as in real life, would you say these problems were created by radical religious leaders and that it’s up to the Atheists that have survived to save it?

Perception is reality.

I can’t speak for all of the talented writers on staff, but I can say the way I see the world is reflected in many of the show’s storylines. Religion and politics have been intertwined since humankind constructed the respective concepts; there are examples all across history of how religion influences politics and vice versa, and each has their own ends they want met. That leads to decisions that are, at least somewhat, selfishly motivated and people see what they want to see in other people, in situations and even in our leaders.

I wouldn’t say that it’s up to any one group to save anything and, at the risk of sounding tacky, since the community is impacted, the community must come together to find the common ground upon which we can all peacefully exist. At Atheist Apocalypse we have the medium to experiment with what happens when certain motivations influence decision makers. It’s like a big game of “what if” in each episode. Who knows, maybe we can become the ‘social science lab’ for the world?

In the last half decade I think we’ve witnessed what happens when secularists gain a voice. As many problems as we still have, the world has definitely changed for the better. But the conversations can’t stop; we need to keep talking and we need to keep challenging the status quo. There’s nothing wrong with making people uncomfortable and challenging assertions. In the end we may still disagree but if I got you to think as a result of that conversation then I count that as progress.

With Atheist Apocalypse we get to do that across the board and I think that’s very, very important. We all have our biases and blind spots; I’m just as guilty of that as anyone else. I honestly believe we all grow, as people, as a community, if we are open to having those biases and blind spots challenged. I enjoy doing that with the characters of Atheist Apocalypse, it gives us a chance to explore grander social issues in a safe space, while entertaining people.

A question for each cast member (who would like to reply) : Would you agree that in the upcoming elections of 2016, the place of religion in both the presidential nominees and the electorate will play a significant role in election results? Pew Research Center released results of a study in tracking the decline of religious affiliation in the current generation. It would seem the GOP is clawing at the bits to hold on to what they think they know to be religion though it has no place in the political sphere, constitutionally.

How do you feel this will play out in the next year? How much of this current electoral climate do you draw from (or will draw from) for the show?

Steve Bateman: I think the GOP clawing to hold onto anything is a sign that they don’t have much of anything. I’ve always thought that the problem of religion over logic would always fade generationally, but it will never entirely go away. What we need are people for whom religion informs their worldview as opposed entirely replacing it. Unfortunately, election systems as they are, the people for whom new ideas are anathema are also calling the shots.

As far as using it for the show, I work with a diverse lot, and I’m not keen on distancing them to make a point. So maybe taking a jab at Trump might crop up, but as far as any deeper issues, well, it depends on my team and what they’re into.

Paul Sating: Politics, and the American approach to it, disturb me. Any time you have just two voices in a conversation you’re always going to get a “he said, she said” result. We’ve seen that progressively get worse in our cycles since the 1980s yet we keep at it, never entertaining the fact that we have other options.
Paul: So as long as the American public continues to play this game I don’t see an end to the distancing we are seeing happening on so many important issues that affect all of us. Without that critical third or fourth or fifth voice you get what we have; a segment of the voting public who simply will not align themselves with progressive candidates because they feel they can’t support critical elements of the platform. So what’s their real option? They stick with what they’re comfortable with and a candidate who screams “I identify with you” and what better way to do that than through the common threads of nationalism and/or religion? It doesn’t matter if you’re from Seattle or San Antonio; if that type of message appeals to you and you feel you have no other option, you go with what you’re comfortable with. We’re creatures who enjoy the path of least resistance; we’re going to take it.

I am not looking forward to the marathon that is the American Presidential race, I’m really not. There’s nothing enjoyable about it and I outgrew watching candidates, pundits and the public mud-sling the other side years ago. It’s all so tribal. The next year will be just like every 12 months leading into the election; everyone already has their side chosen, they just don’t have the name filled in. I draw on the entire farce for a lot of inspiration; both for characters and for storyline. How can I not? I have to answer my international friends on why American politics are the joke that they are; I’m responsible to them. But, seriously, I’ve got a never-ending source of inspiration and material to draw from, so I guess, in a twisted way, I should be thankful that it’s the mess it is.

Can you give us a preview of what listeners can expect in episode four? How and where can we find out more?

Well, we were able to get David Silverman, yes, of American Atheists, to do a bit for us, so that’s something we enjoyed. But this episode also launches the listener into the next level of the story with some subtle hints into what is going on and what these survivors are really facing. So it adds a layer of depth to the story. There are also some new subplots that will really expand on what’s going on in the Tri-Counties. With this being only the fourth episode there is still some world-building and character development being done but everyone is really starting to gel and we recently added a group of Improv comedians, headed by Steven Bateman, from Spokane, Washington who will be coming along later in this first season and have really added a new feel and element to what Atheist Apocalypse will offer. It just keeps getting richer all the time.

We’ve also scattered secret messages throughout the episode, some obvious, some not so obvious, so it’s always interesting to see who, if anyone, can pick up on them.

Thank you so much for doing this interview with us! Anything you would like to add?

Thank you for giving us time to talk about this new project. We’re very excited about this venture and hope your readers will give it a chance. Readers who are interested can go to atheista-pocalypse.com for more information about the show and about us as creators. They can subscribe to the show via iTunes, Stitcher, Spreaker, YouTube or the RSS feed via the site or by searching for “Atheist Apocalypse” in any of their favorite podcatchers.

Atheist Apocalypse Actors/Writers are:
Paul Sating – Creator of Atheist Apocalypse, Writer, Editor, Actor
Brian Bristol – Writer, Editor, Actor
Deborah Mc Taggart – Writer, Actor
Jay Crofutt – Writer, Actor
Nick Morgan Moore – Writer, Actor
Steve Bateman – Writer, Actor
Jeff Venoutsos – Writer, Editor, Actor
Dan Cocolla – Writer, Editor, Actor
Donna Shell – Actor
Joseph Schomburg – Actor
Will Gilman – Actor
Natasha Vargas – Actor
Annica Eagle – Actor
Courtney Graham – Actor
Adam Tucker – Actor
Jason Comeau — Music
Lucy Dee — Art Director