

## 50 MPH: EPISODE 2

### “IS *SPEED* A MASTERPIECE? (with Justin Chang)”

Transcript (00:53:55)



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**KRIS TAPLEY**

This is *50 MPH*!

[INTRO MUSIC]

[INTRO MUSIC]

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

Pop quiz, hot shot!

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

There’s a bomb on a bus.

**JEFF DANIELS (as “Harry Temple”)**

You’re deeply nuts, you know that?

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

Once the bus goes fifty miles an hour, the bomb is armed.

**SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)**

Stay on or get off?

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

If it drops below fifty...

**SANDRA BULLOCK (as “Annie”)**

Stay on or get off?!

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

...it blows up.

**ALAN RUCK (as “Stephens”)**

Oh, darn.

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

What do you do?

**KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)**

You have a hair trigger aimed at your head. What do you do?

**DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)**

What do you do?!

**KEANU REEVES (as “Jack Traven”)**

What do you do?

**KRIS TAPLEY**

I’m your host, Kris Tapley, and you’re listening to an oral history of director Jan de Bont’s 1994 summer blockbuster, *Speed*, straight from the people who made it happen. Now, don’t forget to fasten your seatbelts. Let’s hit the road!

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yes, let’s do that. Welcome back to the first real episode of *50 MPH*. You know, I thought I would start this entire endeavor with a good overview of *Speed* to set us on our way. As you know, the film itself starts with that wonderful opening credits sequence in the elevator shaft accompanied by a suite of Mark Mancina’s score. It’s sort of a musical journey reflective of the narrative journey that the audience is about to take. You know, like, all of the bits and pieces of the movie are in there, and I’ll dig into that with Mark and Jan de Bont in due time. But I wanted to do something similar here and kick things off with a sort of holistic discussion of *Speed* and all its moving parts. Who better, then, to help contextualize this movie and its place in the canon than with our preeminent film critic — and I swear I’m not just saying that because he’s a friend of mine.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Justin Chang is a film critic for the *Los Angeles Times* and NPR’s *Fresh Air*. He’s also a regular contributor to KPCC’s *Film Week* and he was formerly the chief film critic at *Variety* where we were colleagues. He serves as the chair for the National Society of Film Critics and the Secretary of the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. Oh, and he’s also a fellow Trojan from USC. Good football team lately. Fight on. Anyway, don’t trust my bona fides, obviously, trust his. Justin knows what he’s talking about. And I think he’s the perfect person to have this discussion with because, not only is he a huge fan of *Speed* — and certainly he’s of the generation that finds it seminal in some ways and simply nostalgic in others — but he’s not a dismissive mind. He’s willing to dig into something that might just be waved off as a pop culture curio and just to have the conversation.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

So, let’s go ahead and bring him in here. Justin, you know, *Speed* is an interesting case, because when you embark on something like this, with a movie like this, the question is why? How was it revolutionary? How did it change things? And it’s sort of

hard to go there with *Speed* because it was made — and I do love it for this — at the height of a number of filmmaking techniques that were either on their way to becoming antiquated or were certainly evolving well beyond that place. It was sort of the peak of something, as opposed to a watershed that explicitly influenced things that came after it. Although there's nuance and debate within even that broad analysis, and I'm only just talking about the craft there anyway. But the point is, that doesn't mean it's any less worthy of being in the cannon. So, let me just put it to you. What is *Speed's* place and the modern context, and just jump off from there and take it wherever it takes you.

### **JUSTIN CHANG**

I think, building off what you were saying — I'll just say it's funny, because I watched the movie again last night, and it hadn't been that long since I'd seen it. I think I watched it again — like, I revisit it every so often, just purely for the pleasure of it. But I think last night was the first time I watched it all the way through in a while and, you know, I'm usually very, maybe, suspicious or dubious of the “they don't make them like this anymore” argument or sentiment, but I really got that sense from it watching it last night. And it was hugely emotional, actually. It's like, after watching *Speed* I just kind of want to cry, partly because of just the incredible adrenaline workout that it gives you, even after all these years. I mean, just the level of preparation, of craftsmanship, of, as you were saying, use of miniatures, of practical, real, in-camera effects, pre-CGI, or very minimal CGI. And that's, of course, what Jan de Bont is all about. And of course, [John] McTiernan, just that era of action directors, blockbuster directors. It's funny, too, because this movie was not made to be a blockbuster. The studio had very, from what I understand, fairly low, you know, just kind of reasonable expectations for it. “Oh, maybe this will be” — and then it became this sleeper and then it became this smash.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

They were focused on *True Lies*.

### **JUSTIN CHANG**

Yes! And were not expecting that *Speed* would actually compete with *True Lies* at the box office when all was said and done, and is maybe the one of the two, even, that we remember more fondly, perhaps, which is saying something. Exactly as you said, Kris, it feels like the peak, like the apex of something, which is remarkable, too, considering it is Jan de Bont's debut feature as a director. I think there's something about that, too, the fact that this movie was, you know — it's just, like, the greatest B movie. And those were the expectations for it, and so they put someone who was a career cinematographer, first and foremost, directing for the first time. And, I mean, there's a whole conversation you could have, of course, too, about cinematographers turned directors and what they bring, and how so many — I know de Bont has said this, too — about how disgruntled many cinematographers are in wanting to tell their own stories and actually being as good as directors and doing a huge amount of the work of a director, but never getting the credit. And so, I think the fact that he was attached to this after, I guess, countless other directors had passed on it, and what he brings to it — it's funny, because the movie is not showy in the way that you might expect a cinematographer directing a movie to bring to it. But as I was watching it, there was

always a sense of, like, “Oh, this camera is just in the right place the whole time in this movie.” It’s just, every moment of it feels — this feels like a very reductive thing to say — it just feels real. I’m getting away from your original question, but I do think it feels evermore like the last, yeah, the last gasp of something. I mean, it’s not like it was the very last of its kind and was, you know, mid-90s. The 90s were, of course, a terrific decade for action cinema. But it was pre-CGI glut, pre-, you know, certainly, superhero mentality where that was all that Hollywood was doing, or what really captured the world’s attention the most. I also think, as far as legacies go, it’s one of the great romantic movies of its kind. I just think that Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock, who were both sort of, you know, perhaps fairly new and undervalued at the time, and the fact that their screen pairing is just, one of the things that when I talked to Jan de Bont about it, he wasn’t even sure — he knew they would be good together, but I don’t think anyone would have expected that it would become this sort of iconic pairing. That’s just one of the happy byproducts of it, but I also think it’s very central to the great appeal of the movie as well. I mean, this movie is just the definition of firing on all cylinders, you know, juggling a hundred things behind its back and it’s just-

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah, and with ease, too. Like, I feel — and sorry to jump in — I feel like it makes all of this look easy. You know, they did it for \$28 million officially, and that creped up eventually, but that’s insane to think about. And that’s not nothing, but still. And let me throw a couple of points out here. First of all, regarding Sandra, if there’s any broad legacy, it’s her, right? Because it made her a movie star. You know, you talk to people on the movie, to a person, everyone fell in love with her. And she was necessary, as it turns out, for the camaraderie of that cast. And what I find compelling, just in terms of how it works, is that it shouldn’t work. And I’ll come to this a number of times along the way, but as it exists on the page, *Speed* violates every single rule. There’s no character arc. He learns nothing whatsoever. She learns nothing whatsoever. No one changes in any classic sort of way. So, you literally just watch a guy do his job for two hours. And part of it is the breakneck nature of the movie, of course, and that’s what Jan de Bont is able to bring to it as a world class cinematographer, as you say, knowing exactly where to put the camera for maximum impact. But on the page, it should not work, and I think everyone kind of felt that in the critical community, but they didn’t care. Like, they understood that this was a movie that cooked, and that it was a specimen because of that. I mean, look at that Anthony Lane review in *The New Yorker*.

### **JUSTIN CHANG**

I was just re-reading the Anthony Lane review today. And he lays it out so nicely. He says, “Its characters are no more than sketches. It addresses no social concerns. It is morally inert. It’s the movie of the year.” And I just remember, too, Kris, because I saw this movie — in ‘94 I would have been, like, 11 or 12 or something. I remember just the excitement with which people were talking about it. And there was a high-concept thing to it, because it was, like, “Oh, it’s the movie that’s all set on a bus.” And it’s funny because when you watch it, actually, it’s not all — of course — it’s not all set on the bus. There’s a very, you know — I don’t know if you’d call it a clean three-act structure, but it’s, like, elevator, bus, subway, you know?

**KRIS TAPLEY**

You get three movies out of it. You get a lot of bang for your buck.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

And the way the movie even plays with time, too. If you call it, like, a one-location movie, which is ridiculous because it's all over Los Angeles, of course, but the one-set or the one-vehicle location, there is something that feels high-concept in a way or feels like, "OK, here's this restriction we're placing," but at the same time, I think that that actually goes to the sort of classic appeal of a lot of movies like this. Not quite like *Speed*, because, of course, what it did was very unique. But seeing men, especially — because in this movie, Sandra Bullock's presence notwithstanding — seeing men do their jobs. Seeing work being done. And there is this sort of, I don't know if it's like a Howard Hawks-ian kind of vibe to it that I get. I'm not sure if I'm making that comparison-

**KRIS TAPLEY**

It's kind of Michael Mann-ish.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

Michael Mann-ish, too. It's a great process movie where you're seeing people work. And this extends, kind of perversely, to Dennis Hopper's character, too. The pride that he takes, the very kind of disturbing pleasure he takes in bomb-making and when he talks about the satisfactions of that. Oh, there's something almost just kind of existential about it, because it is just one thing after another. This thing that Lane does say in his review, which I do agree with, I think he says something about it, like, "Oh, it's mindless, but that's great, because a mind would have just gotten in the way." Of course, he's not saying that movie is stupid. It's an incredibly intelligent movie. But he's saying that the movie — it's not that it doesn't give you time to think, but it gives you time to think just enough, because you are so immersed in the experience. And in the very well-structured screenplay with its one-after-another timing. If you've seen it as many times as we have, you know what's coming. You know what's literally around the bend. But it's like, "OK, now it's this part of the movie. And now it's this part of the movie. And the bus jump scene, and oh, the..." — the layering of comedy and just lightness and, "Woo-hoo! They made it!" And then Beth Grant gets dragged under the wheels. This puts you through the wringer. It's a beautifully structured movie, I think, and that structure is key to why I think it gets around what seems like a hurdle or an obstacle of, you know, "Oh, how do you make a movie that is just this?" I'm sure you've talked to Jan de Bont about this, and devising that elevator prologue. You know, giving you all the character development and all the character set-up that you kind of need through that. I'd be curious. It'd be interesting to see a version of *Speed* that actually was just the bus, whether that would be shorter or longer. But I think it's just, in kind of how it was received, culturally, that whole "oh, it's all on a bus" thing. And I'm just speaking to my experience of what I remember, because I think everyone agrees that's obviously the best part of the movie. It's the midsection and it's the longest and richest. It's obviously

the heart and the meat of the film, and that is what people remember. And so, what feels like, “Oh, something I would not necessarily want to see,” or, “How are you going to do that,” actually becomes the *raison d’etre* of the movie and what makes it so great.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah, and I also think, thematically, there’s some interesting things. I mean, look, when you’re as wrapped up in a movie as I am in this one, you start to see things that maybe aren’t really there, but, you know, you convince yourself of it. But I think about how the whole movie is in its most famous line, “pop quiz hot shot,” because I think it’s very much a movie about thinking on your feet. You know, snap decisions, hurried problem-solving. “Stay on or get off,” you know? “Everybody on this side of the bus,” or we’re going to tip over. “Floor it. It could be an incline.” Or, you know, “Get off this,” going into the airport. It’s an instinctive movie. So, anyway, yeah, I’ve just — I’ve always loved that idea.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

I mean, it’s funny, because that line and then to a lesser extent, you know, “Do not attempt to grow a brain.” Because he’s asserting to, like, “I’m the mastermind here.”

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

But, of course, the truth is that Jack Traven is also very, very good at it — he’s very intelligent, too, and very good at thinking on his feet and responding to each challenge.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah, for sure. Well, so, since we’re on it. Dennis Hopper. You know, I can’t interview him, obviously. He passed away in 2010. So, that’s a shame, and it’s unfortunate, too, because there isn’t a lot out there of him talking about this movie. Like, there’s the nominal EPK stuff around release, but no one was asking Dennis Hopper about *Speed* ten years later or whatever. So, it’s sort of my biggest regret, and I definitely want to get people talking about him, so let’s talk about him. And by the way, I’ll be digging into the many near-miss casting choices that almost happened with this roll in due time, but I find that he is such an interesting foil for Keanu Reeves. You know, there are a lot of neat “that only happened in *Speed*” things. One of them is Keanu’s look with the tight haircut. You know, he never looked like that again. And another is Dennis Hopper playing this particular kind of character. I mean, he’s played villains before, but nothing quite like this. I mean, here’s a guy who shared the screen with James Dean. You know, he’s Mr. Method Actor. And here he is opposite a guy who, quite unfairly, was pegged as this wooden actor who couldn’t act or whatever, you know? They’re just great foils.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

They are great foils. And it is funny, too, because I think in a way — to continue with my earlier point — he’s always sort of putting down Traven for his intelligence, as if he’s just, like, whatever, a set of muscle or whatever. And I think this sort of actually plays

into our — the culture has really come around to Keanu Reeves in a big way. And that is another great legacy. I mean, if you look back at this, too, it's like, I love his performance in this. But as you say, he never looked like that again. Keanu Reeves, as an action star, is now just one of those things we don't even question, but at the time, of course, this was very new to him. Keanu Reeves, although widely embraced now as one of our great screen actors, I absolutely believe, the idea, though — the perceptions that we have of, "Oh, Keanu can't act," or, "Keanu's dumb," you know, these negative perceptions we have of him. And it's funny to watch — this may just be a side thing — but, like, how Dennis Hopper is sort of playing — the way he puts down Traven, in a way, almost feeds into some of those perceptions, those stereotypes. And it's just an interesting dynamic that I notice now. With Hopper, in particular, it's funny, when you talk about Hopper's great villain roles, and, you know, you talk about *Blue Velvet* — which, I was obviously too young to see *Blue Velvet* when, at the age that I saw — it was many — I saw *Speed* before *Blue Velvet*, let's just put it that way, as, you know, maybe many people of our generation did. And *Blue Velvet*, he's just on another level of kind of psychotic derangement. He is so scary in this movie. Things that Hopper does in this film — and this is of course the script, not just him — but just the callousness of it, apart from just the maniacal brilliance of the bomb plots that he hatches, but just, you know, the random killings. Like, the killing of that — even when he just randomly shoots the subway driver in the back at the end, like, "Well, I'll take it from here." This is nothing new. It's like, this is what action movie villains do, but I think it goes to the next level because it's Dennis Hopper and he's just so good at being that scary. I've talked about just the pride that he takes, the need that he has for attention in this movie. And you realize it's tied to his identity as a disgruntled Atlanta police officer who never felt he got the credit. You know, we kind of can joke about, "Oh, yeah, the speechifying villain," or, "the monologuing villain," but Hopper plays, takes that cliché, and he believes it.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah, he's motivated.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

He makes you feel like every — like these flecks of spit that are coming out his mouth as he's like — the way he holds the little, the detonators, you know? He does a lot of that in the movie. And it's like, "Look at this!" He is just every atom of that character. He is in it.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

And this need to not just pull off these schemes and the need to sadistically kill people, because that's important, but he needs people to appreciate him. And these all sound like clichés on the page, and maybe they are now and maybe they were less — of course they were less cliché back then. But I really think that Hopper, it's one of his great — I mean, maybe in the scheme of his career it's one of the cheesier things he's done, but I think it holds up brilliantly and is absolutely brilliant.

## KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, and there's that line in the subway where Hopper calls Keanu a punk. And I love that, too, because if it's 1969 and the movie is *Easy Rider*, Dennis Hopper is the punk. So, it's this sort of passing of the punk torch to the guy who's going to become Mr. Cyberpunk with stuff like *Johnny Mnemonic* and *The Matrix*. So, that's just fun. And, you know, I just — I don't know if there would have been that same kind of meta-textual quality with someone else.

## JUSTIN CHANG

What happenstance to land Keanu Reeves, who, at that time, had come off, like, *Little Buddha* or something. There's just this freshness. Everything that is wonderful about Keanu Reeves is there on screen in that performance. I mean there's just this tremendous freshness, this sweetness, this kindness. This is the thing, too, about *Speed*, is, like, as ruthless as it is — I'm moved by it for many reasons. The fact that they don't make movies like this anymore and never will again is absolutely one of them. But I was just thinking about this the other day because, like, you know, Sandra Bullock, who would later go on to star in a much worse movie about, like, road rage and about, you know, LA and — talking about *Crash*, of course, which could be an interesting title for this movie, but, not to go off too [much] on that — I mention this just because, watching this movie again last night, this is the great LA movie about the great diversity of people who live in LA and who get around in LA, who take the bus. You know, this is that effortless melting-pot movie about Los Angeles.

## KRIS TAPLEY

Yep.

## JUSTIN CHANG

The fact that Keanu Reeves is half-Asian, too, which also, just, you know, we talk about representation and everything. This movie brings some of that, too. I mean, it was very understated at the time. But it's just one other thing. It's just one other small aspect of the film and something that I also find enormously appealing about Keanu Reeves, and why he is — you know, he is not the typical action hero, as people have said. You know, he's muscular, he's very fit, but he's not Steven Seagal, obviously. He's not bulked up and threatening in that way. He is this nice, smart guy who is just trying to help. He's going in there. There's this humility about him, this humility that is always very appealing about Keanu Reeves, and it dovetails with — even though he is a movie star and the actors on the bus are not, and the actors, many of whom, I believe, were just not professional actors, who spent several weeks or however long just on this bus every day. And that sense of camaraderie that develops among them. At the beginning, they are just, you know, a bunch of people who, just, "Leave me alone." You know, there's tensions in the script, and, you know, maybe some of that is a little overdone or just sort of trying to see these people who are kind of seething each other. And by the end, this sense of this little community, their lives have been changed, and something about Keanu and Sandra, they are just that — they are movie stars, they are on another plane — but they have that earthy, just — you relate to them.



### **KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah, I mean, it gets back to that word, “real,” which, you know, comes up a lot when you discuss this movie. And of course, he did a number of his own stunts as well. And that goes a long way to see your lead actor actually wrangling with some of these precarious situations.

### **JUSTIN CHANG**

And you think about how, like, now, someone like Tom Cruise, who prides himself on doing his own stunts, many of them, most of them, all of them? I don’t know. And that is so much more of an anomaly these days than I think it was back then. And the fact that Keanu Reeves, who, you know, not someone who was the first person to come to mind for action roles, but the fact that he wanted to do that-

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

And it’s interesting, I did this one interview, you know, I watched the movie with DP Andrzej Bartkowiak and first AC Vern Nobles. Like, that’s how we did the interview. We watched the movie together. And it was awesome. But anyway, Vern was constantly pointing at the screen saying, “We can’t do that, now. We can’t do that, now.” You know, like, just the low ceiling for those police helicopters, for example, or even something as simple as Keanu stepping from the bus onto the police SUV, you know, before he goes under to try and defuse the bomb. Insurance would just not allow for a lot of the things they did on this production nowadays. And regarding Tom Cruise, the anomaly on the acting side, yes. I guess on the directing side, it’s Christopher Nolan, who is sort of committed to that practical-effects wizardry, if you will. But with this movie, I like to say if they even bothered to try to make it today, it would be a bus, like, on a gimbal in a soundstage, surrounded by LED screens, and just that rush of reality would be totally drained from its veins.

### **JUSTIN CHANG**

And I’m trying to think, too. I guess Tom Cruise’s recent, Christopher McQuarrie’s recent *Mission: Impossible* movies, while pretty heavy on CG, I’m sure, are more invested in that kind of realism than many other blockbusters or action movies are. For me, I almost just think that there is some intangible. I don’t keep up with all of them, but, you know, watching action movies now, I mean, on the big screen or on the small screen, there is just this kind of — there’s just this detachment that happens. You know, it’s just very easy to detach. I try to always pinpoint what is it about movies like *Speed*, and *Speed* in particular, that — I don’t know, what is it? Is it just the amount of problem-solving, the same way that the movie is a constant problem-solving experiment? And as filmmakers, too, they obviously had to solve all those problems for how they were going to tell the story visually, in a plausible way. Because you just think — and I think that this is where Jan de Bont’s genius as a cinematographer comes in, because just the coverage, where the camera is placed, the fact that even a very untechnical person like myself can follow what’s going on. I mean, just the clarity of it. The editing, too. My God, we haven’t even talked about the editing, I mean, just how well-edited it is as well. Just the angles. I’m trying to think how you would make this movie with CG, and it just feels

like, well — and a lot of people will say, “Oh, why would you, even?” The things that it deals in are so mundane.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Let alone having eight miles of empty freeway in Los Angeles to work with.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

The realism. There’s a joyous sense of spontaneity to this movie. The fact that so much of it was made in reaction to just the topography and the landscape of Los Angeles as it was. Parts of the 110 or 105 or whatever it was, the freeway that was not completed, and so how that informs the plot of the movie and led to the famous bus-jumping sequence-

**KRIS TAPLEY**

And the subway was brand new, too. It was kind of this mysterious thing for LA people at the time.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

And some would joke still is, but how — no, and the fact that the movie is just a great LA transit movie. I mean, it is a movie about rush hour, it is a movie about all of those things, about road rage. And of course, every movie features, you know, high-speed chases, but this is one where, I mean — what other movie has so just deeply and comprehensively woven that into the fabric of the story?

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

That’s another reason for my great affection for it, too. I think we can both attest to that as Angelenos.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah, absolutely. And regarding that note about the camera placement earlier, Jan has a great line about that, which feeds into all of this. And that is he wanted it to be as if these things were happening and a camera just happened to be there. And it’s such a simple, maybe obvious point of view to take, but so much becomes informed out of that. And further to what you were saying about the CGI glut, you know, you always end up backing yourself into a corner with this discussion, because you don’t want to, like — there’s no dumping on the work or artistry of visual effects artists, right?

**JUSTIN CHANG**

Absolutely not.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

That is always to be respected. But nevertheless, and this is another Jan line — Bartkowiak said it, too — but he watches movies today, and he doesn’t believe what

he's looking at. And it's not because the work isn't great. It's because Asgard isn't a real place in *Thor*. You know that what you're looking at is not a reality. But when you watch *Speed*, it's like, "Holy shit, they did that." Like, "I'm watching it unfold." It's as simple as that for the audience. And it's good for the actors, too, I mean, they're watching Keanu go under that bus. It takes the acting out of it. I mean, I've talked to every single actor alive who was on that bus, and even a couple who have sadly passed away since, and everyone was like, "When we watched some of these stunts go down, we were not acting. We were reacting." And a quality comes out of the film because of that.

### **JUSTIN CHANG**

Absolutely, Kris. And it's not about knocking visual effects artistry at all. I would actually like to see more CG — you know, it's just part of the business of Hollywood — I would like to see more of that artistry applied to, perhaps, stories like this that are a little more intimate, where the stakes are more present and ground-level and tangible, you know? I do think you gain something by actually having the actors do this. By actually — it's funny, when I had my own interview with Jan, we started talking about this and talking about this idea of, you know, what was it, Jacques Rivette, who said, you know, every movie is kind of a documentary of its own making. And that's true to varying degrees, depending on the movie, of course, but I think with *Speed*, more so than with a lot of — I think, because of the unique problems that it posed, it's exactly what you say. It's like, "Oh, that is real. That is — they are enduring that." What he talked to me about — maybe he told you this story, too. I'm sorry if it's repetitive. But, you know, he talked to me about the scene when she's getting off the freeway, or she's on the surface streets and she's hitting car after car. And it's like, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." And he was like, "She was really doing that. Like, she was hitting car after car." And that is why — when he was talking to me, it was just all about, yes, capturing the actors' reactions. Having that camera be there as if it were just eavesdropping, and the work that it does take to achieve that. And that's why you have to put your actors through some of those experiences authentically. You can be as good an actor as you can be and yet there is something that you can't achieve unless it is actually, on some level, happening. And that was just very eye-opening to me. It's like, how so much of this is — it's the technicals of the bus stuff, but it's also just getting the actors, getting the scenario to feel lived-in to that extent and getting the impact, the physical impact of, yeah, of actually having a bus hit a row of car doors and sideview mirrors and all of that.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah, and going back to Jan's work as a DP. There's also a scene in *Lethal Weapon 3*, which Jan shot. It was actually his last film as a DP before becoming a director. And he wanted to shoot an explosion that they're running away from. They were just going to shoot it like you normally would, like, shoot the explosion as a visual effects plate and then film the actors separately. And Jan was like, "No, I want them to feel the heat. It's part of the reaction." And so, he just stepped into Richard Donner and Donner just totally agreed and they did it that way. I think it's actually the scene after the closing credits, when they're running away from that building exploding. So, in *Speed*, like, when that first bus explodes, just the fact that that's all one shot. I mean, there's a Texas Switch in there with the bus. It goes out of frame and then a different bus actually

blows up. But, you know, the camera comes around and the bus explodes and Keanu's reaction is just so amped up as a result of it being right here down the street, you know?

**JUSTIN CHANG**

To that, also, I mean, the explosions in this movie are just fantastic. Let's just say it. And with a movie where it's about a bomb on a bus, it's like, they damn well better be. But the second explosion, or the second bus explosion, when the bus actually blows up and it hits the plane. I keep watching that, too, because you notice he is so focused on the reactions of the passengers, who just got off and are on another bus far enough away to be safe, but they feel that impact and you look at their faces. You look at just the recoil. And first off, he luxuriates in that explosion, too. I mean, we see explosions in movies, but I think there's something kind of — you know, it's the money shot. There's something kind of orgiastic about it. Like, "Let's get it from every angle," you know? It's like, it is this great climax. And so, it absolutely is the right decision. And then you see them, just that recoil, where they're all just, like, you can tell. You can put yourself right next to them as if you were on that bus, watching what might have happened to them, feeling like, "I could have — oh my God." And I always think, too. If you were actually in this situation, maybe part of you is hoping or wanting to believe that it's a hoax, that it's just a scare. There's no bomb.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Suddenly it's real.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

It's real. And it has to be. They have to go through that in order to actually believe that they were in mortal danger.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

Like, it's actually this cathartic thing that needs to happen to them. And so-

**KRIS TAPLEY**

They all say they felt that, too, by the way, and the heat on their faces. And the explosion was bigger than they thought it would be, too.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

This is why I think that great action filmmaking, there is something that is so human about that. I mean, there's so much action filmmaking is so dehumanized, and because of that, the lack of any of that practical element, that great emphasis on realism that Jan de Bont and other directors of that era were so intent on capturing, I think that's so important. The other thing I talked to him about, too, was just my favorite sequence. One that gets me actually very teared up and I watch it constantly, like, almost on a loop sometimes. It's the scene right before the explosion when they're getting everyone off the bus. And this goes back to my sense of why I think this is a great community movie.

The way, when they put that, like, gang plank or whatever. And again, talk about insurance issues, right? I mean, that is one of those things where, like — and these are not trained actors. I actually asked him this, like, “They really did this? Because that’s, like, really dangerous!” But there’s something, you know, when you see them walking across, and I love those shots of them just walking across and everyone is helping and people who couldn’t stand each other and were angry at each other are helping each other, and when Alan Ruck almost falls and gets pulled up and he hugs him at the end. And just all of this combined with that great Mark Mancina score just surging along. It’s just — it’s just one of my favorite sequences in anything.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

It’s awesome.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

That is as big a payoff as anything in the film because it is showing you, just, the — it is actually showing you the felt value of human life, and people coming together and helping each other. Oh, and followed immediately by Keanu and Sandy, you know, making their daring escape, which is not only just thrilling, but one of the sexiest scenes, I think. It’s truly — there’s no there’s no sex in this movie. But that is the great romantic scene when they’re sitting on that thing and it looks like this giant surfboard.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

And the score explodes there, too. Like, it hasn’t gone anywhere near that big the whole movie.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

It’s just — it’s rhapsodic.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

They are hugging each other and they’re clinging for dear life, but it is just the embrace is-

**KRIS TAPLEY**

No, it’s great. And that’s a great shot, too, by the way. Naturally. We should talk about the score a little bit, though, since we brought it up. I mean, I’ve talked to Mark Mancina, and we’ll have a deep dive into the music with him down the line, but he’s coming out of Hans Zimmer shop at the time, and this is his first score.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

I mean, I love it. It’s got the little flourishes where it’s just kind of goosing it, you know, dun-dun-dun-dun-dun-dun, you know, which I remembered as well when I was listening to it again. But I think just the main — it’s what it does when the score explodes into that main surge, and it has this kind of — I keep using the word romantic, but I actually think

it's a very romantic score. And it has that kind of operatic quality to it that I think about when I think about, say — it's a weird comparison to make, but like the score from, like, *The Last of the Mohicans* or something, or *Romeo + Juliet*. It just has that kind of emotion to it. Just the dun-duuuunnn — you know, I'm not a musicologist, but I — it is just-

**KRIS TAPLEY**

It does things that you wouldn't expect. Like, it goes places it doesn't have to go. It overachieves, I guess, is what I'm saying.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

I mean, you know, it adds so much. And you can see a version of this movie working where perhaps even more — well, I don't know if it would work, because I wouldn't really change much about this movie at all. But if you think about, like, sometimes where it feels like the score is just drowning out or competing with what is already so chaotic and noisy on the screen, but this does not do that. I mean, it really — when I think about *Speed*, I almost think of overhead shots of the bus.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah, all that great second unit stuff.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

There's something about, just, this is a driving movie. And therefore, you want music for that and it is just — there is just something about the way the score surges that gives it such propulsive-ness. And sometimes I feel like it is also capturing something of, to bring it back to thought processes, it feels like — I don't know, this gets very interpretive and maybe even a little abstract — but I feel like it is just keyed into the cognitive, the firing of synapses in these characters' brains.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah. There is kind of a metronome quality at times, like a ticking clock.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

You can think of ticking clocks, and there's some of that, for sure. But it is also — I think it is keyed into that, which as you say, it is very much a movie about thinking and about problem solving and about trying to get — whether you're staying one step ahead or getting a step ahead of your next obstacle. It's great stuff.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Well, last thing here. And this is sort of a catch-all question. I guess the answer is probably everything we just said for forty minutes, but this movie is a perennial, I think. It's always there for a new home video format, kind of like Universal with *Jaws* or Warner Bros. with *Batman*. It hit 4K a few years ago. So, Disney seems to be taking some care of it. So, the question is, what makes a movie like this endure? And kind of conversely, why is it taken for granted so much? Why is it only when people come back to it, they go, "Oh, yeah. This movie kicks ass." As opposed to it's right there in the mix

with *Die Hard* and *Terminator 2* and stuff of its era that we never blink an eye at over being sort of canonized and undeniable?

**JUSTIN CHANG**

Yeah, you know, it's interesting, Kris, and I have a weird relationship to this movie because I — as great as those other movies are that you mentioned, they're absolutely indisputable, unassailable classics no question — but *Speed* means more to me than they do. I was revisiting this as part of my summer movie, you know, showdown feature thing that we did last year, and it is one of my favorite just, movies of whatever. Movies of the 90s or movies of any, you know, Hollywood entertainments, but especially summer movies. When we think about that particular category that we put some of these movies into. And you're right. *Speed* is somewhat undervalued, even though I don't think — I mean, I think it's a masterpiece. I really do.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

That's a big word, Justin.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

It's — you know, it is. I mean, I think people maybe are reluctant to use that about B movies or about, you know, movies that are nothing more or nothing less than thrilling entertainments, but it's not really a word I hesitate to use with this one.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

It doesn't mean it's easy to do it.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

That's the thing, too. I don't think that a movie like this can ever — for all we talk about the immense planning and care and brain power that went into it. When I talk about this kind of joyful spontaneity, it's like, it reminds me of a time when movies were made more by the seat of their pants. That is *Speed* to me. And of course, movies are still chaotic and difficult to make and you're always responding to the moment, and that's true. But I do feel that with the advent of CGI, so much of it is now worked out to within an inch of its life or test-marketed to within an inch of its life, that it chokes the life out of it. I think with *Speed*, because it was relatively low-budget. Because the studio — even though, yeah, sure, they were as exacting and controlling as ever — they did sort of leave the filmmakers to their own devices. It allowed them to make something that was just so much better than anyone thought, including maybe the people who were working on it. I think it speaks to, also, when you capture that kind of lightning in a bottle, and, you know — obviously, I know *Speed* had a sequel, which-

**KRIS TAPLEY**

No, it didn't.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

-to this day I have not seen.

## KRIS TAPLEY

There was no sequel to this movie.

## JUSTIN CHANG

We like to remember it that way. But, you know, you talk about — you know, *Terminator 2* is a fantastic sequel and it's not a knock on franchise movies. But I think, you know, it's probably one of the things that — I'm sure that divorced from *Speed*, *Cruise Control* is whatever. I doubt it's the worst movie ever, but I think there was something about *Speed* that was just so pure, of course you couldn't replicate it. Of course, you would not — I mean, you would want more movies like *Speed*, but you could not recapture lightning in the bottle in the same way. And so, I think it is just an extraordinary convergence of these right elements, these two actors, who are movie stars now. Maybe were not — of course, they were not nobodies. But this movie made them stars in a way that they had not known before. Jan de Bont, who I know is, you know, it is absolutely one of the highs of his career, and his career has had its ups and downs since then. But there was something a little bit untested about him, too, only in the sense of, like, this was his first feature as a director. So, a lot of extraordinarily talented people being trusted to play in the sandbox, you know, and make something, and they did, and it just exceeded expectations. I think there's something about that, about, you know, really talented people who were not household names yet being allowed to do something. I mean, I think there is something about that that is crucial to why this movie endures.

## KRIS TAPLEY

You think maybe that's part of it? That when you go back to it, you're reminded, because you're bringing with you the context of Sandra's career, the context of Keanu's action career, which is still going strong, and so now when you come back to it, it is seminal and you're reminded of that.

## JUSTIN CHANG

It absolutely is, for sure. And they have just such — I do think you rarely see that kind of electrifying screen chemistry that they have on screen. And again, it almost feels accidental, because they're just doing stuff. They're not, like — they're with a whole bunch of other people. It's not like they're isolated. It's like, they're just trying to fucking survive, right? And so, all this chemistry, it just feels like it is just completely organic. It just wells up naturally out of this. They have that line throughout the film. And it's funny, for a movie that is not necessarily prized for its dialog, "pop quiz, hot shot" notwithstanding, there are things about it that — maybe it's just because we've seen it so many times — but just stick with you. And the thing that when they said, like, you know, I heard that, you know, relationships born out of intense experiences don't last, and it's like, "Well, we'll have to base it on sex, then," you know? But I think that there is something about the kind of extreme circumstances of it that just, they just generate this kind of chemistry. You think about other actors, who maybe that would have been memorable, too, but there is something that is just perfect about them.



**KRIS TAPLEY**

Well, it's interesting, because he has such a passive quality as an actor, which really works for him playing a cop. Because he's just very observational, and she's kind of pulling things out of him, in a way, as far as the chemistry goes. So, it makes for this really interesting dynamic.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

It really does, and it's just the appeal, too. And he is not macho. He is not, you know, just some, like, "I know everything."

**KRIS TAPLEY**

He's not hitting on her at all. He's very respectful of her, of everybody, really.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

He's extremely respectful. He's calling her ma'am, ma'am. And finally, she's like, "Don't call me ma'am. My name is Annie," whatever, you know. Just, he's very — he's super respectful of everyone. He's just trying to figure it out. He's trying to keep everyone calm. And it's kind of funny. So, that — maybe that is the passivity of that character or just the kindness of that character, relative to a lot of just strutting male action heroes that were proliferating at the time.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

And then she is like this Rosalind Russell, you know, smart-talking, sassy actor, and they complement each other perfectly. But then she is also, like, "I'm just driving this bus," and she's not just some — she's doing, she is playing — there's also equality. This is a movie where there is equality between these two, where they are actually carrying the weight equally because she is driving the bus and she is doing this immensely physically challenging stuff. So, there is something also just very egalitarian about that, about the movie. I think in terms of race, I think in terms of gender-

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Yeah, it's sort of bulletproof for today. No one's coming for *Speed*.

**JUSTIN CHANG**

And it is true. I mean, we talk a lot more, maybe, about these issues now than we did back then. And here's a movie that just by dint of just wanting to seem real, wanting to actually reflect something about the character of Los Angeles and the people who live in Los Angeles, it's a very, you know — I mean, it's interesting, too, because we don't get to know those characters particularly well — but just by dint of who they are and what they look like, just normal, average-looking people. It goes to realism, and there is something that is representationally quite pleasing about that film that holds up 30 years later.

## KRIS TAPLEY

There really is, and along those lines of reality again — and I'll close with this — but there's this great special feature they put out several years ago on the big two-disc DVD set that they finally ported over with all of this other great behind the scenes material on the 4K. It's sort of a diary from production designer, Jack De Govia, who we will hear from in later episodes as well, and he's talking through his very eloquent reasoning for the design elements of the film. And it's just screenshots of text, well worth reading through, and there's this quote that I love. He's talking about the subway sequence, and by the way, the subway — the third act — is really what I tend to think about when I talk about the confluence of filmmaking techniques in this film, because there's this exquisite rear-screen projection for the backgrounds when they're on top of the subway car, and then there's miniature and model work to depict the actual derailment of the thing, and then, you know, an actual full-sized subway car crashing through onto Hollywood Blvd. So, anyway, Jack is talking about that sequence and he says, quote, "The process shots of the fight on the car roof were interesting. They used a combination of classic rear-projection technique and inspired cheating to produce an exciting sequence, which today would be done with boring perfection" — boring perfection, I love that — "in front of a green screen using computer-generated effects." And to me that really says it. You know, there's a shaggy-dog quality to this movie. There are shots — and I never would have noticed this if Bartkowiak hadn't pointed it out to me — you can see cameras mounted on the bus in certain shots. There are shots where the camera is cranked to make the bus look like it's moving faster than it really is, but in the background, if you look, people are, like, moving hilariously fast because of the cranked camera. But you're not looking there. Your eye is diverted. And it doesn't matter. You can see a cable towing the bus that explodes at the beginning if you're looking for it. And this idea of boring perfection is true, because — and this isn't true across the board, because I do think there's a certain skill set to, you know, throwing some dirt on it — but the pursuit is often all about just nailing it and getting it perfect. And there's just something about the desire to capture chaos and all its imperfection that makes this movie stand out. So, anyway, I just thought that was a great quote from Jack.

## JUSTIN CHANG

That is a great quote. And it's just, there's a rough-edged-ness to it. And I don't know if this is true of just a lot of — you know, when you watch older movies now. And it is funny to think that, "Oh, yeah, what came out in the 90s now qualifies as older and, in fact, from a previous era." There's something sobering about that. Because it doesn't feel like that long ago, and yet it was. And there's just — it's very reductive to say — obviously things just looked different. Whether that's because more movies were shot on film, but the texture of things looks different. And sometimes things of course look degraded and they look older and not as good quality, but something like *Speed*, there is just a vibrant kind of physicality, but it's a rough kind of physicality where it's just — I don't know. I mean, I think the Nolans of the world — you know, not making movies like *Speed*, but they are trying to capture something of that in their own way. I mean, you can't capture the exact same thing, but there is this pristine-ness about so much contemporary blockbuster-making, and it's beautiful in its way and it can serve the ends of those movies. But when you're telling a story like this, just to come back to the

realism of it, I mean, there is just no replacement for that. It's not like I want them to make *Speed* again, because there's just no doing that, but watching it again last night, I found myself very intensely nostalgic for it and wanting to see something that gets that kind of high. It won't be the identical movie, but something that recaptures something of that movie's spirit, where a movie that is about as simple as a bomb on a bus that can't drop below — it's just so ridiculous. I mean, it feels like the prompt for, like, a math question or something. And yet, you watch this movie and you actually feel like, just from a dumb thing like that, and they have just opened up amazing possibilities.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

I think it's as simple as — and I don't want to be glib or anything — but I think it's as simple as putting the budgetary confines on movies like that again, because they really don't have that bracket anymore. Either you're going for the tiny budget movie that you're hoping will bring back returns, or the \$150 million movie that you're praying is a home run. And I don't know, if you can just make another movie like this for \$30 million or \$40 million, this kind of stricture breeds creativity, and breeds a certain sort of energy.

### **JUSTIN CHANG**

It really does.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

I think it's as simple as that. I mean, I don't know what this business will look like going forward. Obviously, just in the last few years, it's vastly different than it was. But if we could get to a place where you're trying to hit these doubles and triples, I don't know. I mean, all I do know is so much of what I see in this space today, with a few exceptions, is absolutely numbing, and it's so odd, because *Speed*, by rights, should be numbing, but it's not.

### **JUSTIN CHANG**

No, it's not. It is the opposite. It is so — I mean, it's thrilling. But it does not get old. And it is a movie that heightens your perception and heightens your reactions, that makes you — I keep coming back to just the emotion of it. It makes you feel deeply. I'm deeply moved by *Speed*, I really am. And maybe that's a product, partly, of nostalgia, sure. But, you know, plenty of my nostalgia fetish objects, whatever, don't hold up, and this one does.

### **KRIS TAPLEY**

He's absolutely right, folks, and that's why we're here. That's Justin Chang, with the Los Angeles Times. So, hopefully with that you have thoroughly marinated in speed and you're ready to start cooking with me. Jesus, these metaphors will get out of control. And I apologize in advance. Anyway, this will certainly be one of the longer episodes of this podcast, but I thought it was worth it to tee us up for what's to come. From here, we're going to start digging into the making of *Speed* with its various participants. So, with that in mind.

**[OUTRO MUSIC]**

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Next week on *50 MPH*...

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Every story has a beginning. So where does *Speed*'s story begin? It begins on the page.

**GRAHAM YOST**

It was very much a concept-driven enterprise. It was an exercise in structure.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

I'll talk to screenwriter Graham Yost about conceiving and writing *Speed* more than 30 years ago.

**GRAHAM YOST**

I had met Allison Lyon and we were talking about this other idea I had about a crisis line and a sort of fucked-up thriller narrative from that, and she was interested and we were sort of developing it. And then I said, "You know, I've got this idea about this bomb on a bus."

**KRIS TAPLEY**

We'll talk about where he was in his career as a TV writer and what inspired him to conjure this crazy story of a bus that has to maintain speed in rush-hour traffic...or it'll explode!

**GRAHAM YOST**

It was fun to puzzle it out. How can I make it worse? How can I get them to almost succeed and then the bad guy has thought of something, and just keep on going at it?

**KRIS TAPLEY**

All of that and more, next week right here on *50 MPH*.

**KRIS TAPLEY**

Thanks so much for listening. *50 MPH* is written, produced and edited by yours truly, Kris Tapley. You can find us on Twitter @50MPHPod. I'm @kristapley. That's Kris with a K. You can also catch every episode and more at our website [50mphpodcast.com](http://50mphpodcast.com). If you dug the show, please like and subscribe and do all the things. We'll see you next time.