

50 MPH: EPISODE 8

“NEXT ACTION HERO”

Transcript (00:33:32)



KRIS TAPLEY

This is *50 MPH*!

[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

Hello and welcome back to another episode of *50 MPH*, your personal tour through the making of a movie I love. Now, where were we? Ah yes, *Speed* has a director, Jan de Bont, whose career we dug into last week with film critic Bilge Ebiri. The movie is a go, but, well, it still needs a cast. Most importantly, it still needs a Jack Traven, the LAPD SWAT officer at the center of the story, whose heroics get him onto the bus, and even under it, as he attempts to rescue the other 19 individuals on board, each of them held at the whim of madman bomber Howard Payne. An early draft of the screenplay describes Jack as, quote, “30, good-looking, athletic. He usually has a great smile, but right now he's not smiling. He's trying to talk someone – unseen – from jumping, and he's trying not to fall himself,” unquote. It’s sort of a riff on the Martin Riggs jumper scene from *Lethal Weapon*, and the unseen jumper Jack is talking down turns out to be his aunt’s chihuahua, a bit of shenanigans before he gets called off to deal with the elevator situation. So, this is who they’re trying to find. Keep in mind, there isn’t a big budget to work with here. So, even though swings will be made, the industry’s top stars are, like the industry’s top directors, mostly a pipe dream. It’s a movie business, in the early 90s, dominated by guys like Arnold Schwarzenegger.

[TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY CLIP]

ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER (as “T-1000”)

Hasta la vista, baby.

KRIS TAPLEY

Sylvester Stallone.

[CLIFFHANGER CLIP]

SYLVESTER STALLONE (as “Gabe Walker”)

Remember, shithead. Keep your arms and legs in the vehicle at all times!

KRIS TAPLEY

Bruce Willis.

[DIE HARD 2 CLIP]

BRUCE WILLIS (as “John McClane”)

Yippee-ki-yay, motherfucker.

KRIS TAPLEY

Mel Gibson.

[LETHAL WEAPON 3 CLIP]

MEL GIBSON (as “Martin Riggs”)

You have the right to remain unconscious. Anything you say ain't gonna be much.

KRIS TAPLEY

And, same as it ever was, Tom Cruise.

[TOP GUN CLIP]

TOM CRUISE (as “Maverick”)

I feel the need. The need for speed.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, all of those guys were way out of this movie's league. And others, like Harrison Ford, Chuck Norris and Steven Seagal, along with Schwarzenegger and Stallone, had forged a sort of middle-aged mold for this kind of star that more reflected the audience that Fox was looking to entice with *Speed*. Here's former Fox executive Jorge Saralegui on that particular point.

JORGE SARALEGUI

OK, think about who the action stars were, and by that, I mean literally every single action star. It's a guy who was at least 40 years old. And again, that was the heyday of the action movie. In the aughts it became the superhero movie, right? And it's been that ever since, right? But that era, the '80s going into the '90s, was the action movie time, and all of those guys were, like, men or men-plus, you know what I mean? Getting older or whatever. So, that's who you're looking for. That's who the movie is for.

KRIS TAPLEY

That having been said, the guy who was at the top of Jorge's list didn't exactly fit this criteria. Do you remember who that was?

[TODAY SHOW CLIP]

CHARLIE SHEEN

Guys, IMDb, right there, 62 movies, and a ton of success. I mean, come on, bro, I won Best Picture at 20. I wasn't even trying. I wasn't even warm.

KRIS TAPLEY

That's right, Tiger Blood himself.

JORGE SARALEGUI

The first, top name on our list was Charlie Sheen, who didn't want to do it.

KRIS TAPLEY

We set this up in a previous episode but Charlie Sheen was, and is, of course, one of Hollywood's princes, the son of actor Martin Sheen who had achieved great success right out of the gate in films like Oliver Stone's *Platoon* and *Wall Street*. By late 1993, he had pieced together a somewhat eclectic movie-star career. I mean, he had worked with directors like John Sayles, Dennis Hopper and Clint Eastwood and he had shown comedic chops in stuff like *Major League*, *Men at Work* and the *Hot Shots!* movies. He had dabbled in action movies, too, from polished military swagger like *Navy SEALs* to the Brat-Pack western stylings of *Young Guns* to made-for-TV shlock like HBO's *Beyond the Law*. Fox was riding high on the summer box-office success of *Hot Shots! Part Deux* in 1993 and the studio had Sheen and co-star Kristy Swanson's road-trip action comedy *The Chase* in the can as well, set for a spring 1994 release. Jorge and others were big on him for the Jack Traven role in *Speed*, but, like virtually every other star in town, he would turn his nose up at the project. Here is producer Mark Gordon.

MARK GORDON

Charlie Sheen. Billy Baldwin was at the top of the list, I think. Bruce Willis was at the top of the list. There were other people that we talked about who weren't interested. But there was a long God damn list. Everybody pretty much passed. I was afraid that they weren't going to make the movie. At the end of the day, we got so many passes that I thought, "How am I going to pay my mortgage?"

JORGE SARALEGUI

We were going to meet Michael Madsen. *Reservoir Dogs* might have just come out. It had just come out. We were going to meet him - this is further down the line. We're not getting who we want. And he's more - he's like, a somewhat younger version of the classic action-looking kind of guy, right? OK, and so, we are going to have a meeting with him, you know, meet him to discuss it. And it's me and Tom Jacobson and Peter Chernin. You know, I don't remember if it was the way he was dressed. It wasn't anything too crazy, but it wasn't what you expected. But it was his vibe. But the vibe was such that Peter Chernin, totally seamlessly takes over and starts talking about how we want him for the bad guy role, and it was really funny, because he came in for the lead, and he didn't - who knows if he was confused, or if he thought, "I thought my agent told me this," who knows what? And so, the meeting went smoothly, and no, he didn't want it. And there's no way he would have gotten it, but it was a way to get out of the meeting. And he might have thought he actually wouldn't be a bad bad guy. He

didn't do anything or say anything crazy, but honestly, I don't remember. It was just, you got the feeling, "Whoa. This guy. We do not want to be dealing with this."

KRIS TAPLEY

And while we're at it, I should probably use this as an opportunity to bring up *The Perfect Weapon* himself.

[THE PERFECT WEAPON CLIP]

TRAILER NARRATOR

Paramount Pictures presents international Kenpō star Jeff Speakman.

KRIS TAPLEY

In a number of interviews over the years, martial artist and former action star Jeff Speakman has said that, when *Speed* was in development at Paramount, it was in fact being developed with him in mind as his second film at the studio. I did ask former Paramount exec Don Granger about that, who we heard from a few episodes back, and he said it did not ring any bells whatsoever. His words, for whatever that's worth. Then again, who knows what kinds of desperate conversations were happening in the hallways of Paramount as the film was heading into turnaround over there? After all, as you heard Don previously say, his last-ditch effort was mounting the film as a *Beverly Hills Cop III* script. Anyway, let's hear from screenwriter Graham Yost for the first time this week.

GRAHAM YOST

Casting Jack was difficult and the line I heard was it was a kid of someone at Fox, one of their children said, "What about Keanu Reeves?" And the thing that went through my mind was, I had seen *Point Break* and thought it was a little – it was OK. But it was *Parenthood*. He was great in *Parenthood*.

JORGE SARALEGUI

Keanu Reeves, for the first couple of months that we're trying to figure out casting, he's too young. In other words, we won't even talk about him. He's just plain off the list. He's not a "pro" and "con" guy. He's just, "No." He's a kid. And you can't have a kid in the kind of movie that we just talked about a minute ago. And so, at some point, we've hit so many people – like Woody Harrelson is a name that just came into my head right now. But, I mean, it was a million people. So, we eventually have a list that actually has Keanu on it, but of course, everybody thinks he's too young.

KRIS TAPLEY

Jorge keeps hitting this note, that Keanu Reeves was too young. I think that's funny because Keanu is, in fact, a year older than Charlie Sheen. And William Baldwin, for that matter. It just goes to show what the industry's perception of the 28-year-old actor must have been at the time. But talk about an eclectic career. So, yeah, let's finally get into Keanu Reeves here. It was short-sighted and kind of bone-headed, 20/20 hindsight or not, to have overlooked what this guy had been up to. By 1993, Keanu had already

been earning a paycheck in front of the camera for a decade. He started out in commercials, hawking Coca-Cola, MTV and Corn Flakes on TV screens across the land. He took on his share of dreamboat boyfriend roles but also mixed in bleeding edge material like Tim Hunter's disaffected-youth drama *River's Edge*, which would, incidentally, mark the first time he would share the screen with Dennis Hopper, albeit briefly and in a movie where their characters never interact. Most have likely never familiarized themselves with pre-90s Keanu Reeves, but when you look at his early work in movies like *Babes in Toyland*, *The Night Before* and *The Prince of Pennsylvania*, it's difficult to really pin down what kind of a career he's going for. And I mean that in the best possible way. By the time he's a last-resort choice for Fox to play a cop in their B movie about a bomb on a bus, he's worked with Kathryn Bigelow, Gus Van Sant, Francis Ford Coppola, Kenneth Branagh and Bernardo Bertolucci. But in the eyes of most, he's just... Ted.

[BILL & TED'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE CLIP]

KEANU REEVES (as "Ted 'Theodore' Logan")

I believe our adventure through time has taken a most serious turn.

MARK GORDON

Listen, Keanu had been really good in *Point Break*, but who knew? He had charisma. He was like, "Is this guy movie star or not? Who the hell knows?"

JORGE SARALEGUI

We eventually get to the point where, "OK, fuck it, Keanu." And, you know, it's kind of, like, I mean, based on what? *Bill & Ted* and he had just done, I think, *Private Idaho* or something like that, I think, and I think he was going to do *Little Buddha*. Oh, no, no, no, no, he had just done the Shakespeare movie, whatever that was. And so, we talk ourselves into going, "Yeah, he could be the action guy. OK."

KRIS TAPLEY

Here is former Fox production president Tom Jacobson.

TOM JACOBSON

Just like some of the stars, just like the Tom Cruises of the world, were just like, "Sure, we would love Tom Cruise to star in this," but the decision to – and I think we took a couple of swings, always, in casting. "Let's take a swing or two with the obvious name." But we wanted to make the movie, and that's another thing back in the studio days. You know, what studios are actually still good at is when a studio decides to make a movie, yeah, you've always got to cast. You've always got to have someone that, you know, someone will approve. But for most studios, it's the movie that they want to make, rather than the package. The independent world, it's like, "Who's in it? Can we sell that person overseas?" The independent action world. But that's how, like, in the independent action world, even if you had the money, you would have never gotten this movie made with Keanu. Because he had no comps. He had no history in this. You know, people knew him from *Bill & Ted's*. He'd been in *Parenthood*. And even now thinking about it, I'm like

like, why did we, you know – he came in and pitched himself – why did we decide to hire Keanu? Good for us! I don't really remember how the decision was made.

GRAHAM YOST

We said we'll meet with him. So, he came over to Disney, where Mark had his office and drives up on a motorcycle and he's six foot whatever and he's lean and he already had a cool haircut, and we could talk about Toronto. So, that just felt right immediately.

JORGE SARALEGUI

So, we go out to Keanu Reeves. He passes. He has no interest in it. It's not who he is, OK, he says. So, now it becomes, "How do we get him to say yes?" And Jan got him to say yes in a one-on-one in which he told him he could do his own stunts, by the way.

GRAHAM YOST

So, I had never heard that until this moment, and that says a lot about Keanu. When you see his ethic in the [*John*] *Wick* movies, the training he goes through. I remember him making the jump from the Jaguar to the bus and people were scared shitless.

[SPEED CLIP]

KEANU REEVES (as "Jack Traven")

I've got to get on that bus.

GLENN PLUMMER (as "Jaguar Driver")

You've got to... Yeah, yeah, you get on the bus.

JORGE SARALEGUI

And he did – not all of it, obviously – but he did a lot of that, kind of, like, skateboard-type thing that he was on under the bus. He did a lot of that, too.

[SPEED CLIP]

JOE MORTON (as "Capt. McMahon")

We won't be able to hold this thing steady for very long.

KEANU REEVES (as "Jack Traven")

I just need a few minutes. If I can't do it by then I can't do it at all. Harry, you with me?

JEFF DANIELS (as "Harry Temple")

Yeah. You be careful, Jack.

JORGE SARALEGUI

And it's actually one of the things that worked well in the movie was how much Jan actually – because there were some things that we actually could have done digitally that Jan wanted to do practically, and we did. And some of them were, first of all, they were probably illegal back then. Some of them would be illegal today. You couldn't do a

lot of it today, but a lot of it happened – well, the stuff with Keanu, anyway – a lot of it happened the way that it did partly because he was told he could do it in order to get him to say yes to do the movie. So, he says yes. In fact, I think he even said yes in my office. Literally, there was room for my desk and a small couch. So, I stepped out while Jan worked on Keanu, the two of them sitting on my couch, right? I kind of, like, a big closet. And then I came back and he was in the movie. Or, he left and then Jan told me he was in the movie.

KRIS TAPLEY

So, this thing about Keanu agreeing to do the movie if he could do his own stunts would seem to go a little against the record that director Jan de Bont has established over the years. Often, Jan talks about having to convince Keanu to do his own stunts, not that it was a prerequisite for Keanu signing onto the movie. It's usually his way into talking about how he, Jan, would have to demonstrate some of these stunts before his star would even attempt them, and you get a lot of language about adrenaline and not being scared and, frankly, the kind of stuff that keeps that wild-man aura burning around Jan. Here's how the director put it to me.

JAN DE BONT

I had to talk about it a long time, and also about stunts. He never wanted to do his own stunts. He was completely against it. He said, "No, no." He was afraid of everything. He didn't want to do anything. And that's why I did the whole showing-off to him, doing them first myself, and I only did it when he was there, so he could see it. And did it again, and of course, he still didn't trust me. But then once he started to do it, he started to realize that actually, it's kind of fun to do. I mean, action is fun to do for actors if you open yourself up to it. And then they realize, also, their adrenaline level goes up. It shoots up like hell, because doing acting, that never happens. You have to create it mentally. But real adrenaline, you can get so overwhelmed by it that you want it more. You can get addicted to it, really, and that is a little dangerous. But it took a good couple of weeks, you know? And after that it became really easy and he would do even the things that I thought he would have big trouble with, like under the bus, for instance. And hanging upside down in the elevator. I mean I hated that, too, myself. I had to do it, too. All the blood goes to your head. It influences your acting, which, in a way, is good. After a while he did it multiple times. I was surprised he did multiple takes.

KRIS TAPLEY

I'm not entirely sure where the truth lies here, because Jorge is conveying a story secondhand. That Jan told him that Keanu agreed to do the movie if he could do his own stunts. But that seems unlikely for a guy who came into the meeting, according to Jan, not wanting to do stunts. Reading between the lines of my own reporting and what everyone has said over the years, I get the idea that Jan convinced Keanu that this would be an invigorating endeavor, that, as Jan said, stunt work can be fun for an actor. And then maybe he inflated that sales job to Jorge and the studio by saying, "Oh, I got him to say yes by letting him do his own stunts." Or maybe I'm just getting lost in the muck of semantics, but since these two stories are seemingly at odds, I wanted to fill the gap as best I could. Anyway, back to Jan.

JAN DE BONT

It really was hard to convince him, to be honest, and I think he was so worried about his *Bill & Ted* look and what he considered his audience to be in his life. But I told him, “Actually, this will only help your career. The last thing an actor should do is establish himself as one type of actor that can only do one thing.” It will kill you, because at one point you’re going to get stuck and nothing will come your way anymore that is interesting and you’ll end up remaking the same movie for a long time, and nobody likes that, and also it never works out. But in the end, I think he learned a lot from this movie for the rest of his career.

KRIS TAPLEY

There’s only one guy who can clear all of that up about the stunts, and I’d love to ask him more about it. So, here’s the thing as it pertains to Keanu Reeves and this podcast. I have one interview with Keanu that I conducted a decade ago for the 20th anniversary of *Speed*. It was very brief, and not at all wide-ranging, but it’s something. So, for now, that’s going to be the best way I can bring his voice into these proceedings. But I certainly hope as we forge ahead that an opportunity will present itself for us to sit down and discuss this film and his experiences in more detail before this project draws to a close. So, you know, call your congressman, I guess. But for now, from 10 years ago, here is Keanu Reeves, first recalling how Jan struck him in that initial meeting and then how he eventually came around to the project and the role.

KEANU REEVES

I think, you know, for me, what I was really struck by was his passion, his energy, his focus. Also, for him it was more than just taking care of the action. The way he took care of the dialogue and the characters and wanting people to have real reactions and the humanity of it. So, it was technical, but it was also emotional and he told a story. So, for me, I think he really shined in that project. I had done one action film before then in *Point Break*, which I had a great experience in. And, I mean, certainly, a bus that’s going to explode if it goes under 55 miles an hour is funny and fantastical. But that being said, that was part of its charm, too. And I really liked the character of Jack Traven. You know, I really felt like he was a guy who, you know, he wanted to save people. He wanted to be the hero. He’s someone who came alive in a heightened experience. You know, that’s how I thought of him. And he has a vulnerability. You know, he runs out of answers, you know? And I liked the partnership that he strikes up with Sandra’s character, Annie, you know? They kind of support each other - they end up supporting each other in making it through the day.

JAN DE BONT

I wanted him because I thought he was a very unlikely action actor. I didn’t want the typical, cliché, big macho guy. I wanted it to be more like an accidental action hero, somebody who just happens to run into it and has to deal with it. And that, to me, is always more interesting than so many action heroes, like even *Die Hard*. He’s, like, you know – he’s built. It’s all about his physique. And this movie had nothing to do with physique. It should never be about physique and about strength. It should only be about

smart and intuitive and quick-responding and experiencing all that, let the experience happen to you, and use it as a way to perform. And that is much more effective.

KEANU REEVES

I mean, even with, like, the costume and stuff, the jacket that I wore I went out and found at the costumer. So many – the pants, all of the costume that I was wearing, I worked with the costume designer to kind of have this beach guy who, you know, by day he's a kind of easy-going guy, and then when he puts the kit on, it's "go" time.

KRIS TAPLEY

Speaking of which, I've got you covered. Here's costume designer Ellen Mirojnick.

ELLEN MIROJNICK

Jan de Bont was very clear that he wanted to create a new action hero. And what I mean by that is, at that time, I seem to remember the action-hero archetype looked like Bruce Willis or Arnold Schwarzenegger and it was in jeans and a tank top and a leather jacket. That was the look of the action hero in film at that time, and Jan wanted something totally different for Keanu. I would say, actually – this is in hindsight. This is not an image that anybody had going, you know, at that particular time, and that was, he was closer to Steve McQueen than he was anybody else, and I say that because Keanu had a presence about him that he didn't really need to speak. He held a particular persona that was strong and accessible and handsome all at the same time, and I don't think that we had seen that before at that time.

KRIS TAPLEY

Alright, so, Keanu signs on. And if you're wondering what his price tag was, I did discover that. Keanu Reeves was paid \$1 million to star in *Speed*. And just like that, we have ourselves an action-movie vehicle taking shape! But you hire a guy like Keanu Reeves, you get the dedication of a guy like Keanu Reeves. Pretty face or not, he's not there to phone anything in. And one decision was about to trigger the studio's pucker factor.

TOM JACOBSON

So, and then Keanu just threw himself and got the part, and then went off on his own without us knowing anything about it, and just hit the gym hard and turned into this guy. And I remember Jorge calling me one day into the office and he said, "Hey, Keanu is visiting me. You want to come talk about the script? And just warning you, he looks a little different."

KEANU REEVES

Once we got into it, you know, once you say, "Yes," you go for it. So, I think I had longer hair and, you know, going into the role, you start the physical training, you start working with the SWAT. And for my take on Jack, I wanted to have – you know, the influence of the military is strong at that time, and still, on the LAPD SWAT. And so, I went and got a military haircut and, you know, I came back with like a one on the top and a fade on the side and I was a jarhead, LAPD, gum-chewing, badass motherfucker cowboy who

wants to save the day and ain't afraid. Young dumb and you know how the rest goes. But then, when they saw that, I didn't think it looked that bad, but it freaked some people out. I don't think they were expecting flowing locks but I don't think they were expecting seeing, like, kind of, like complete shave to the side of the head. That guy. But I like the place where it ended up, you know?

KRIS TAPLEY

We're now going to hear from screenwriter Paul Attanasio, and I'm jumping ahead a little bit by pulling him in here. Paul would ultimately do some eleventh-hour revisions on the *Speed* screenplay, and that is a whole other story that we'll get to soon enough, but I just sort of thought his perspective on this event was kind of funny. Here's Paul.

PAUL ATTANASIO

It was, like, three weeks out of shooting. He had as little hair as you could have without being bald, and he came in and he said, "I just thought this was really forward." That was the word he kept using. "Forward." And Jan's trying to – you know, Jan's there to take care of Keanu, right? So, Jan's trying to not say anything and calculating, "OK, how long will his hair be when we actually start shooting?"

KRIS TAPLEY

While we're on Keanu's work ethic, let's hear from actor Jeff Daniels for the first time on this podcast. Jeff would star as Harry Temple, Jack's SWAT team partner who is working to find mad bomber Howard Payne on the ground while Jack does his thing on the bus. We meet the two of them at the very beginning of the movie when they burst onto the scene downtown to thwart Payne's original attempt to extort the city of millions of dollars with his elevator plot. So, here's Jeff's memories of that.

JEFF DANIELS

He did something that no other actor has done, and I didn't know what the fuck he was doing, but now I'm going, "Oh, OK. Alright. Yeah." You know, the first scene I shot with him is early in the film, and we're coming up over that hill in the car and screaming into a parking spot and jumping out of the thing and running into the building. So, we back the car up. We're back up over the hill. So, it's a long shot of the car coming over the hill and coming in, and we're sitting in there. He's driving. And, you know, "It's nice to meet you and glad you're here, great, alright. Ready?" "Rolling!" And he goes, "What's our rhythm?" "Our what?" "Our rhythm. Maybe something like..." He starts drumming on the dashboard. And I'm going, "Um, yeah, sure. Yeah, it's a good rhythm." I don't know. He's the star. What, am I going to go, "Can we try a different tempo?" No, we're not going to do that. But that was how – it's like, here's the adrenaline. Here's the thing. Here's the heart rate, kind of, you know, think of it as a drum. Bum, budda-bum, budda-bum, budda-bum, budda-bum, budda-bum bum – "Action!" – bum, budda-bum, budda-bum, budda-bum. And that's still going in his head, and whether it was going in mine, because I was still trying to figure out, "Rhythm? What are you talking about?" Boom, and we're going. But it was a cool thing to do. It was a great - it's a way to externally kind of change yourself, so you're now, you're not sitting here getting coffee at craft service and getting in the car and going, "Alright, what are we doing?" You're actually – you're coming from

somewhere that gives you that rhythm, that roll, that heartbeat, that adrenaline. That was pretty good. I thought that was pretty good. And I'd never heard an actor do that or seen an actor do that or offer it to me, but it was also a way to connect, too, you know? It was nice of him. It was great. He was great. He was all in.

KRIS TAPLEY

And as we start to wind down this week, I wanted to bring in casting director Risa Bramon Garcia. We're going to hear a lot more from her in upcoming episodes, but here's what she had to say about bringing Keanu onto the film.

RISA BRAMON GARCIA

I mean, Keanu is not a very chatty guy, but he's a good guy and I went into this movie, like, with my eyes rolling, going, like, "Keanu Reeves. What is this?" And realized that he's such a deeply sensitive human being and misunderstood and much more complex a human than people ever gave him credit for. I don't know if he knew what to do with this part, but he ultimately – it happened, and, you know, what's a movie star? A movie star is somebody who, you know, the camera loves. And the camera loves him.

KRIS TAPLEY

In the end, Keanu would level up with this project, whether it's a role and a movie that flummoxed him or not. And maybe it still does to this day. It definitely gave him a level of exposure that I don't think he was comfortable with, and I'm sure he finds it mind-boggling that there are guys like me so obsessed with this movie and fired up by it. But, and I've said this before, he was exactly the right kind of actor for this role because he's basically just playing a guy who does his job for two hours. It's a highly observational performance, because he's a cop, reacting to a series of events. There's no huge arc to convey, and it's not like he doesn't the chops to convey an arc, but it's a role perfect for someone who we want to just watch put the pieces of a puzzle together. And of course, he was right for all the reasons we've heard here today. He was unexpected. He was more down-to-earth as action heroes go. He was part of a new breed of movie star being forged in a new decade, and, it goes without saying, this would be the movie to launch the global superstardom that Keanu Reeves enjoys to this day. I mean, the *John Wick* movies have made \$1 billion worldwide, and I feel pretty confident you can rest all of that on his shoulders. The *Matrix* movies have made nearly \$2 billion. This credible action star profile does not happen without *Speed*, which would soon become the first film Keanu would make to cross \$250 million at the box office. We're going to get a lot deeper into all things Keanu Reeves in next week's episode, but I wanted to close this week with this observation from *LA Times* film critic Justin Chang. You'll recall it from our longer chat about the film a few weeks back.

JUSTIN CHANG

What happenstance to land Keanu Reeves, you know, who at that time had come off, like, Little Buddha or something, and 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, 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. Everything that is

wonderful about Keanu Reeves is there on screen in that performance. I mean, there's this tremendous freshness, this sweetness, this kindness. I love his performance in this.

[SPEED CLIP]

KEANU REEVES (as "Jack Traven")

Tell me again, Harry. Why did I take this job?

JEFF DANIELS (as "Harry Temple")

Oh, come on. Thirty more years of this you get a tiny pension and a cheap gold watch.

KEANU REEVES (as "Jack Traven")

Cool.

[OUTRO MUSIC]

KRIS TAPLEY

Next week on *50 MPH...*

KRIS TAPLEY

Now that we've filled the role of Jack Traven, it's time to put Keanu on the couch.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

He's like a film nerd. Bertolucci wants you, like, you say yes, no matter what. Like, the guy made *The Conformist*. Like, forget it. Like, you're just going and doing it. You don't ask, like, "Am I right for this?"

KRIS TAPLEY

I talk to author and journalist Alex Pappademas, whose book *Keanu Reeves: Most Triumphant* examines the actor's impact and persona across four decades of work.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

What they demonstrate is, like, almost the range of applications of Keanu. Like, what type of movie you can put Keanu into.

KRIS TAPLEY

Of course, we spend a lot of time analyzing his presence in our bomb-on-a-bus movie and how it marked a pivot point, not only for Keanu Reeves, but for the action movie genre.

ALEX PAPPADEMAS

He's becoming, like, less of this person who is the cop identity, and more of a human being who's part of a community. You can see movies exploring what the future of screen masculinity is going to be through the way that Keanu is used in this movie.

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. If you dug the show, please like and subscribe and do all the things. We'll see you next time.