

50 MPH: EPISODE 18

“LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION”

Transcript (00:37:37)



KRIS TAPLEY

This is *50 MPH*!

[INTRO MUSIC]

DENNIS HOPPER (as “Howard Payne”)

Pop quiz, hotshot!

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

Alright, here we are. Cameras are rolling on *Speed*. However, we are going to ease into production just a little bit. The next several episodes of *50 MPH* will focus on every facet of production, every section of the movie, every step of the way. So, here’s a voice we haven’t from heard yet. This is Bob Hoffman, the film’s unit publicist, expressing, in broad strokes, what this phase of the podcast is set to explore.

BOB HOFFMAN

It was so diverse, I mean, the physicality of it. The bus stuff was mostly compressed. I think it was six weeks. So, that’s, like, its own separate movie. But then you move downtown to, you know, that high-rise building, and so, you’re working in downtown Los Angeles and streets are getting blocked off. And then, you know, you went from the 105 and you went to the airport, which was completely — for my way of thinking — was completely insane. How can you fucking possibly make this movie at LAX? How can you do that? I mean, I’ve gone in and out of LAX a million times and I never would have even imagined that you could do something like that. And then, you know, the sets – the elevator set that they built. So, it was a very, very, very physical production. And having grown up in LA and being able to, you know, get this kind of perspective on all these different places, for me, that was a lot of fun, too.

KRIS TAPLEY

That last point is what we’re going to key on today. Before we dig in and start hearing from all of the wonderful filmmaking talent about the craft of *Speed*, before we really get out there on set — what is the set? You know, when I think of *Speed*, I have to be honest. My first thought isn’t a bus. It’s not Keanu Reeves. It’s not Sandra Bullock. My first thought is Los Angeles, my adopted home. And *Speed* is one of the great Los Angeles movies, which is a sub-genre, by the way, that we will thoroughly excavate next week. But it’s a film whose very backlot was the city that played host to its drama and was, in many ways, inseparable from it. Here’s director Jan de Bont.

JAN DE BONT

This movie is a little bit like a city opera. Some cities are, wherever you go, they're all the same. And if you go through LA, every area is different and every area has a different tempo or a different excitement or is slightly dangerous or slightly funny or is entertainment. It's a little bit like the music, for that matter, in the title credits, where you have this kind of a – the intro of a city opera. *Speed* the opera. To me, it's like a mish-mash of different cultures that you see in this particular city, and you don't see that many times in other cities.

KRIS TAPLEY

Moving outside of the film's cast and crew, let's hear from, well, one of the smartest cinema minds we have. Here is Oscar-winning filmmaker and *Speed* fan Guillermo del Toro.

GUILLERMO DEL TORO

The beauty of *Speed* is that it takes place in LA, where everybody knows, at some point or another, your vehicle will stop. If it was another city, it wouldn't work. Not the same way. The best possible action movies have a really good sense of time and place. If you think about *The Rock*, obviously rooted in Alcatraz. And you think about *Ronin*, Frankenheimer, set in France. And, you know, they dictate the idiosyncrasies of the action, and the idiosyncrasies of *Speed* is it's going to take place in the city of gridlock, in the city of freeways that move really slow, and that alone makes it absolutely delectable.

KRIS TAPLEY

Guillermo, by the way, was for a time developing *The Meg* with Jan set to direct. They actually came up with the shot that's apparently in *The Meg 2* where the Megalodon shark bursts out of the water and gobbles up a T. rex. I guess the folks making those movies finally got around to working that in. Anyway, one more point on this is I just wanted to bring this comment back around from *LA Times* film critic Justin Chang. It seems only fitting that the local paper have a voice in here. Justin, you'll remember, was our first guest way back in June.

JUSTIN CHANG

There's a joyous sense of spontaneity to this movie. The fact that so much was made in reaction to just the topography and the landscape of Los Angeles, as it was. The freeway that was not completed and so how that informed the plot of the movie and led to the famous bus-jumping sequence. 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, about – 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

And that's what we're going to talk about today. The locations of *Speed* and how the film used Hollywood's own backyard to frame a kinetic action showcase. Let's hear, for the first time, from the film's unit production manager, Ian Bryce, who was also the

executive producer of the film. Ian has gone on to have an incredible career, producing movies like *Twister*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Almost Famous*, Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man*. He's also hot-shot director Michael Bay's secret weapon, as it were, having produced *The Island* and then the *Transformers* movies, as well as *6 Underground* and, most recently, another amazing Los Angeles movie, *Ambulance*. *Speed* was the movie that sent him hurtling into that career, but at the time, he was still doing unit production management. As producers go, this is the individual who really and truly and practically has to pull all the strings together. But here I'll just let Ian explain his duties to you himself.

IAN BRYCE

It was a process of, you know, how to make the movie, where to make the movie, when to make the movie and getting into all of those logistics, but, you know, in terms of the physical making of the movie, which was, you know, sort of my expertise, if you will, or experience, what the movie needed out of somebody like me was somebody who had done, you know, practical filmmaking of that kind and could assemble a team that could come up with all of the ideas and the stunts and the effects and the cinematography approaches that, you know, all came to be. And it was all done fairly quickly. I think I came on to that movie and, you know, within four months, probably, we were shooting. But for what it was and shutting down freeways and cars and stunt drivers and extras in cars and moving locations, I don't know how we did it, honestly.

KRIS TAPLEY

So, let's get into it. Again, we'll break down all of these elements separately over the next several episodes. But today is just going to be a bit of a jaunt through the whole movie. *Speed* begins in downtown Los Angeles. Bomber Howard Payne has rigged the emergency brakes of an office building elevator full of passengers to explode if his ransom demands are not met. The building in question is actually the Gas Company Tower, which capped off a decade of development in the Bunker Hill district in 1991. So, this is two years later. And by the way, it's only used for the exteriors of the sequence when Jack Traven and Harry Temple come roaring, *Bullitt*-style, onto the scene. Once they get inside, into the lobby area, that's actually the lobby of Fox Plaza over in Century City. You'll know Fox Plaza better as the Nakatomi Tower in John McTiernan's *Die Hard*. So, that's Jan going back to the well there. And just to mention, the elevator shaft and the hallway and whatnot, that's all a constructed set on the Fox lot. We'll come to that at a later date, because that material was actually shot toward the end of production anyway. But regarding the downtown of it all, let's hear from the cinematographer of *Speed*, Andrzej Bartkowiak. This is just a quick hit. We'll get to know him better in a couple of weeks.

ANDRZEJ BARTKOWIAK

We want to capture LA. We want to capture the feeling, the new buildings. So, you see, a lot of those low-angle shots they added to show this, because, as you know, anamorphic, it's widescreen. It's hard to show the architecture and height. I don't know if you remember *The Devil's Advocate*. I did the same thing there, camera extremely low,

to see – that’s the reason the camera is low, to see the buildings and stuff. So, basically, we wanted to show as much new downtown as possible and make it feel LA.

KRIS TAPLEY

We’ll talk more about the look and aesthetic of *Speed* as we go. Now, one unfortunate note here is that the location managers on *Speed*, George Herthel and James McCabe, are no longer with us, and I would have loved to have talked to them about the logistics of securing all the stuff we’re going to talk about today. But I still wanted some kind of perspective, so, on a whim, I figured I would call FilmLA here in town, which is the local film office that handles all of the permitting required for location work in LA County. I was just hoping for someone who could speak generally to the concepts. I almost didn’t bother calling. But let this be a lesson: always make the call. Because as it turns out, there is someone at FilmLA who was not only around for *Speed*’s production 30 years ago, but who handled a lot of the permitting herself. Her name is Donna Washington and she’s the vice president of operations at FilmLA. She’s literally been dubbed the Permit Queen and she’s had a front-row seat to Los Angeles film production for three decades. Here’s Donna with some thoughts.

DONNA WASHINGTON

I remember *Speed* being very easy in the sense that the location manager, or location managers, were so good at their job that I didn’t have to worry about them not having checked every little box. But we were constantly, I remember, having conversations about the stunts they were trying to do, making sure that they did their due diligence about talking to everyone that would be affected, and it was multiple jurisdictions working in tandem to make all this work. Downtown is a hub of people and trying to button up something like that is huge. You know, you have to not only close down the street and deal with all the property owners, you have to figure in people who may just be coming into downtown for whatever reason, and so they would have to have what we call these sandwich boards out for a bigger radius. They would have to button up the activity on the freeway, which was nearby, which was a state permit. And so, there was a lot of coordination happening between just not the city, but with state agencies.

KRIS TAPLEY

We’ll hear from Donna a couple of times today and it’s a different perspective on all of this that I hope you enjoy. But another early sequence in the production calendar was when bus driver Bob, played by John Capodice, met his untimely end at the beginning. You remember, Jack gets his coffee, he forgets his muffin, Bob heads out for his shift and boom, his bus explodes. Then there’s the phone call from Howard Payne and, well, I don’t think we need to run that soundbite again, but he hits Jack with the news that there’s a bomb on another bus. This all took place on Main Street in Venice, right around the border with Santa Monica in front of The Firehouse restaurant over there. A fun fact here is that all of this happens roughly half a mile south of the intersection of Ocean Park and Main, which Payne specifically calls out on the phone and which is literally the exact location where they shot Sandra Bullock getting on the bus. That’s just diabolical. Like, Bus 2525 might have passed by Jack as he was getting his coffee. And I would say for the most part, with some exceptions, the movie does a good job of

shooting its locations for what and where they actually are in the narrative. Anyway, regarding the Venice/Santa Monica bus explosion, Donna didn't handle those permits because that was actually before FilmLA was created in 1995 and consolidated the LA city and county film offices. She worked for the city at the time. But there was an interesting result from that explosion. Here is the first assistant director of *Speed*, David Sardi. And again, we'll get to know him better in two weeks.

DAVID SARDI

What happened was, you know, the spot where the bus blows up was right outside, I think it was Chiat\Day ad agency, the building that looks like binoculars. The bus blew up right outside that building. And, I mean, that bus burned for a good 15 minutes. They really had a hard time knocking the fire down when it blew, and we completely smoked out that Chiat\Day. I mean, they literally had to evacuate the building. It became a whole thing, right? And, you know, after that, you know, Santa Monica was, like, "Oh, we've got to have a moratorium on filming," and all of that sort of stuff. So, it turned into a debacle. But it sure looks great in the movie.

DONNA WASHINGTON

It probably, maybe, did have that kind of repercussion. It wouldn't surprise me. I've had people call me from other jurisdictions where they've had that kind of situation, where they didn't know what they were getting themselves into. And they were like, "If we had known," and I'd say, "You know, you need to call us. Even though we're not partners, we don't do permits, we're a resource. We've done everything. Please call and say, 'I'm looking at a special-effect permit that has primer chord and gasoline and all this stuff. What should I expect?' And we can say, 'Oh, you're going to see it for at least, you know, four blocks and hear it for at least seven.'" That's the thing, you know, we're trying to make sure that everyone is well-informed and educated, and we welcome other jurisdictions to call and ask us about our experience with dealing with productions because we do this all the time, you know? It's typical for productions to ask for that kind of activity here.

KRIS TAPLEY

Back to Jack Traven – from there, off he goes chasing the bus down as it pulls out onto the 10 freeway heading east into the LA skyline. However, they're going to actually be shooting on the 105 freeway, which was still under construction, with an October 1993 ribbon-cutting on the horizon. At the time the most expensive roadway in the nation's history, it would serve to connect the suburban communities of south and southeast LA county with Los Angeles International Airport over near the coast. And, frankly, it was a saving grace for this film that there was a stretch of freeway running through the landscape of Los Angeles that they could utilize. All the stuff on the freeway was largely shot up front in the production schedule. Here's Ian Bryce again.

IAN BRYCE

What you normally start with, with the location team and the production design team, and also, you know, Jan and me, particularly, you know, is, "OK, well, what's available?" You know, you start there and go, "OK, we need X amount of physical geography. Like,

X number of miles.” Because you’re – you know, a chunk of the movie is on that freeway or in the surrounding area and the streets leading to and coming off the freeway and all of that. So, you know, that’s a big jigsaw puzzle. You know, so, you look at, you know, “OK, are there any unused freeways? Are there any quieter freeways?” Like in Long Beach, for example, where you might get some control.

KRIS TAPLEY

Let’s hear from producer Mark Gordon on all of this.

MARK GORDON

We were thinking that we were going to have to shoot the movie in Texas or someplace where we could actually close down a freeway.

JAN DE BONT

That was the biggest question. That was the biggest worry we had. So, there were a few situations where there was a section of a freeway that was – we could film, but it was only, like, a mile and a half and it was in the hillside. “Wait a second, it’s in the hillside. You’re never going to see LA.”

IAN BRYCE

As it turned out, you know, we’re all aware that the 105 freeway is under construction. So, after we kind of look into it and examine all the options, we go, “Well, if we could get that, like, that would be, like, the coup.”

JAN DE BONT

I knew that they were making that freeway from the airport towards the east, and they were working on that for years, but it was totally not finished. But I thought, if we could film on that freeway, it would be perfect, you know? Because you would see the background. You would see the city all the time. We finally got a deal with them that we could get a section, like, whatever, eight miles or so. Without it we would have been in big trouble.

IAN BRYCE

We had to coordinate with, you know, all of the different subcontractors, not just Caltrans and the city and all of the bodies that had jurisdiction and decision-making jurisdiction, we had to then deal with all of the subcontractors. You know, the lane strippers and the train-track companies and, you know, everybody who was working to complete the freeway at that time, you know, we had to, you know, work out our situation with them and figure out location fees and, you know – and it was very complicated and ever-changing.

KRIS TAPLEY

So, six or seven weeks of shooting on the 105 to start getting all this material. And by the way, they shot things kinda, sorta in sequential order. Not always, but according to Jan, they tried to make the movie as the story progressed to maintain continuity of the damage to the buses and whatnot. Yes, buses plural. But put a pin in that for now. Back

to the freeway, Jack commandeers a Jaguar, Glenn Plummer tells him to take the damn phone and there he goes, jumping valiantly to the bus as it hurtles down the freeway at 50 miles per hour. We'll come back to the 105 in a second, but you'll recall things then get a little hairy as traffic begins to back up. Very relatable in LA, to Guillermo del Toro's point. So, they've got to get out of dodge. Annie implores Jack to tell her to stay on or get off, they get off. They get off, plow through some cars on an exit ramp and they're out and onto the grid of LA's city streets. However, this is one of those examples of shooting elsewhere, because most of this city stuff was shot down in Long Beach. Probably to Ian Bryce's point, there was just more control down there. Although the heart-stopping baby carriage scene was shot on Pico in the Mid-Wilshire, Mid-City district. I know I'm bouncing around here. Before long, as Jack tells Lieutenant McMahon, played by Joe Morton, they're boned, and so they have to get out of the city. Tracking from the skies above, Mac, as McMahon is affectionately known, charts a course for them to enter the 105 freeway. So, this will be the 105 actually playing itself, as opposed to the 105 playing the 10 earlier. You still with me? OK, where they have that harrowing turn onto the 105, Donna actually remembered walking that area with location manager Jim McCabe.

DONNA WASHINGTON

There was the one scene where they were making that sharp right turn and it's on Imperial and Broadway, and I remember closing that down in the middle of the day. Luckily, it was a section that was right by the 105 and it wasn't a section that was necessarily heavily traveled, so it was easy to do.

KRIS TAPLEY

This is a bit of a cheat, by the way, because the hard right turn is actually onto the 110 north, not the 105 west. But it's all there in the same area. If you pull up that intersection on Google Maps, by the way, it doesn't look like it's changed one bit. Go figure. And not to go too far down the rabbit hole here, but this location is the exact same place where Michael Douglas shoots the bazooka at the construction site in Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down*. One more for good measure: Andrzej Bartkowiak was the DP of *Falling Down*. OK, now, this whole sequence with the helicopters and everything – you know, Donna was actually good enough to go back and look at the film again to spur some memories, and she was sort of stunned at that amount of air traffic. Let me have her explain, and she's talking about location manager Jim McCabe at the beginning here.

DONNA WASHINGTON

He was really good about calling and saying, "Hey, we've got this stunt we're going to try to do. We've got – you know, we've got three helicopters in the air." And I'm like, "So, there are certain things that you should know. When you're filming in LA city, you know, we're trying to do a situation where we're making sure that all the stakeholders are involved and notified so it cuts down on the phone calls." Because when people see helicopters in the air, they're like, "What's going on?" Especially if they see a number of them circling around. Even though we don't control the airspace, we work with the FAA and then we make sure that people are notified. But it was amazing to me. I kept forgetting – when I was watching the movie, I was like, "Oh, yeah, we used to have" –

they had, like, one helicopter that was filming the other helicopters, and in certain scenes, you'll see two and three helicopters. And so, they had a bunch of ships in the air, which I forgot about. It takes a lot to get that coordinated and they did that with ease. I don't know if they could pull that off now. That's amazing now. I mean, everything is done by drones and, you know, obviously it's safer and cheaper and all the other stuff, but that helicopter activity that worked, you know, that would be really a big feat to pull off now, I think. With all the stuff that's in the air and all the restrictions and guidelines and, you know, people flying all kinds of drones, it would be hard.

KRIS TAPLEY

Alright, we're back on the 105 stuff. One interesting point here is the fact that they were up against a clock on this. Let's go ahead and meet the film's stunt coordinator, Gary Hymes. We'll hear a lot more from him in the coming weeks, but he can set this scene.

GARY HYMES

The reason we started on the freeway, we had an exit date to be off the 105 freeway. You know, they opened it, literally – we were still wrapping gear as they're doing the opening ceremony and pulling off the freeway. So, it was right down to the wire.

IAN BRYCE

We jumped around. You know, we had to go to different parts of the freeway. The jump, as you probably recall, was down I think at the intersection of the 110. I can't remember. That section was – you know, it was wide open for us, and that's where we did the big ramp jump, which took a mile of run-up and then hit a ramp.

JAN DE BONT

I was also really interested in showing LA in a nice way, in a pretty way. And I didn't want graffiti, which was everywhere at the time, an abundance and visible everywhere, because that would go, to me, against the story I was trying to tell. Because when you have all that kind of negative signaling around you, it distracts from the story completely. But we had to finish the freeway, meaning, there were no lineage on the road. There was graffiti on every new bridge, and they definitely didn't want a new freeway to be shown already completely destroyed. And so, we had to really make all the lines. We had to – basically got crews in to finish all the lines and change it and signaling, and sometimes the berm in the middle wasn't finished, wasn't there, or the rails weren't there yet. So, we had to become, like, road builders, for a while.

DONNA WASHINGTON

That would not surprise me. The industry is phenomenal. If there is something else, you know, that can be done, and if companies have the budget, sometimes they volunteer to help out, clean something up, finish something. Maybe they had a little extra cash that they were able to help the state finish something.

IAN BRYCE

It was ridiculously complicated. I mean, just as an example, you know, when I mentioned the various subcontractors. If you've ever built a house or put an addition

onto your house, you know what it's like just trying to coordinate the subcontractors. Well, imagine magnifying that by, you know, quite a lot. That was part of the 105 conversation. But, for example, one Saturday morning, we were due to shoot on this one section, I forget where it was. And I get a phone call first thing in the morning from the location team saying, "Well, we didn't know, but the lane striping is due to be there, you know, this afternoon to start striping the section that we were going to shoot on." Which was, I don't know, a mile, mile-and-a-half, two miles, whatever it was. And, you know, he can't not do his work, right? And I go, "Well, OK, what do we do?" Because we've got everybody else lined up, and we're going to go shoot there, right? So, I said to the location team, "Is it possible that he could put down, you know, temp stripes, and do that?" Like, it was in the morning, and maybe we were going to shoot there in the afternoon or the next day. I don't remember what it was. But, you know, there was time enough for them to – you know, to temp stripe, but not to permanent stripe that section of the lanes. So, we worked out a deal where the guy said, "Yeah, I can do that. I can temp stripe and then you can shoot tomorrow. It'll be dry, and then I'll come back and clean it off and do permanent stripes next week." You know, so, we had to compensate him for doing his work twice and for all of that. And, you know, that's just an example of the types of things that could come your way when you're in the middle of a very complex piece of real-estate construction.

KRIS TAPLEY

Along the way we lose Helen, Beth Grant's character. RIP Helen. There's a gap in the road up ahead. It's big. It could be an incline. Floor it. Over the gap we go and Jack has an epiphany.

[SPEED CLIP]

KEANU REEVES (as "Jack Traven")

Get off.

SANDRA BULLOCK (as "Annie")

What?

KEANU REEVES (as "Jack Traven")

Get off this. Now, now! Get off this!

KRIS TAPLEY

And we're off to the airport. But the bus's final stretch didn't always happen at LAX. Here's Mark Gordon to explain.

MARK GORDON

In the original script, the bus was going around Dodger Stadium. We scouted. We couldn't get Dodger Stadium. They wouldn't let us use Dodger Stadium as a location. So, we were going from, you know, "Should we do a loop around downtown?" We went to race tracks. We came up with all kinds of ideas as to where we could have this bus keep going around, and ultimately, we found that we could use the airport. But we were

heartbroken that we couldn't get Dodger Stadium. But, if you think about it, the airport is a much more interesting and visual idea than Dodger Stadium.

KRIS TAPLEY

OK, I want to introduce a guy here who is kind of a badass. His name is Randy Peters and as the transportation coordinator on the film, he was a crucial contributor. You know, the job of transportation coordinator goes far beyond getting cast and crew from base camp to set, particularly on a movie like *Speed*, where everything on screen pretty much falls under the category of transportation. Anyway, Randy is a blackbelt. He used to work for Chuck Norris before Norris was an actor, training students at one of his LA-area studios. He used to hang with Steve McQueen, who got him into the business. He's the guy who drives Optimus Prime in the *Transformers* movies. He's the guy sitting in the backseat of the F-14 in *Top Gun* who blows the hatch when Goose ejects. The guy has stories, let me tell you. More importantly for the purposes of *Speed*, he knew people all over. And you'll soon see how those connections would be imperative to the production, but I bring him up now because he actually claims credit for throwing out the idea of using the airport for this sequence to begin with. Here is Randy Peters.

RANDY PETERS

And then when we were doing the scouting and went out to Santa Anita and looked at it – and so, every time we're scouting, we're in the bus, in the people mover, and I'm in the back, I'm, like, going – I'm going, "Airport. Airport. Airport. Come on. Let's shoot at LAX. Airport." I said, "It's perfect. It's right off the 105. It's perfect." They're all, "Shut up, Randy," you know? And I'm, like, "Airport!" I knew guys at LAX, so I ended up – like the shot with the 747 where they're towing it and the bus goes flying in, so I knew one of the guys that ran a ramp place over there. It was called Ontario Aircraft Services. He's still a friend of mine now, Steve Nevius. He has a charter company for Rocket Air. So, I would go over there and I'd go, "Steve, I need a 747 to do this shot." He goes, "You know, so and so's freighter's coming in tonight, Kollita. We can pull it into the shot." And I said, "How much, man? What do you want? A thousand bucks? What do you want?" "Yeah, we'll do it for that." So, I'd go to Ian and go, "I need \$1,000 to pay this guy off." So, same thing, I go grease the guy off and next thing you know, you've got a 747 coming down a taxiway and we're fucking flying by it.

JAN DE BONT

It would be great if we could go to the airport, because at least what we can do is you have a great way to get the cast off the bus, and you could get the bus to go in a circle on the runway, because you can get speed. And we got permission to do that, which is also absurd. I was, like, totally, like, "Whoa, wait, really? Really?" I mean, there were planes going by nonstop, landing right behind us. And the audience believed it right away, because it was real, you know what I mean? You have to make an effort to really then show what you have, what situation you they're in, and we were able to show the bus and the planes all in one, which is really rare.

KRIS TAPLEY

Yeah, to echo Bob Hoffman at the start of this episode, it really is kind of incredible that they were able to pull this off. And by the way, the big explosion was not filmed at LAX. That would happen out at Mojave airport, but still, being able to do loops out there and set out all this set dressing and equipment – and specifically this was the Bravo Tango runway, which, ironically enough, was a remote area used for suspected bombs on planes. They would take them over there to inspect them. I mean, shooting amongst all of this is certainly unthinkable now in a post-9/11 environment, but it was eye-popping even for the early-90s. Here's Donna Washington again.

DONNA WASHINGTON

As we all know, LAX is super busy. I think they had a section that was not necessarily in use, because it's such a vast piece of property at the time, and I think they were developing it, you know? Major deal for LAX, especially with planes taking off.

KRIS TAPLEY

One other location to mention here is Howard Payne's house out in Playa Vista, overlooking the runways at LAX. You know, where Harry Temple meets his fiery end.

DONNA WASHINGTON

I know that for that particular location, that whole area was completely cleared out. Like, they asked the neighbors to leave when they did that explosion.

KRIS TAPLEY

But I don't want to drill down too much there. There's a fun story I'd rather save until we get there in the production episodes. After that, finally, the bus goes out in an absolute blaze of glory, again, out at Mojave airport. But we're not done! Yeah, the third act of the film is probably the weakest element, and the movie is basically over when Jack and Annie come flying out from underneath that bus, but I love the subway sequence all the same. It's such a specimen of filmmaking craft, for starters, but in keeping with the spirit of this episode, it was this new thing in LA getting its Hollywood close-up. A subway in Los Angeles! The first operational underground public transportation in 40 years! Here's Mark Gordon.

MARK GORDON

The subway was – and I think it was open, but it had just opened. It was new. It was clean. We had to shoot in the subway at night, during the hours that the subway wasn't running, I believe, and we shot from, like, you know, ten o'clock at night until six o'clock in the morning, on the real subway, and then we, you know – on the top of the subway and some of the other stuff we shot on stage and in a warehouse. It was just a logistical nightmare, between the insurance, between the city, what we could do, what we couldn't do. And it's always like that. I mean, I don't think that our picture was any more complicated than other movies that require assistance from the city or the state or the federal government. It just took us a long time to get them to agree.

KRIS TAPLEY

The scene where Payne comes into the subway, guns blazing, with Annie held hostage was shot at the Pershing Square Station downtown. Again, remaining true to the story of the movie, because you'll recall Payne's lair overlooked Pershing Square. And a fun fact here is Jan had shot this location a couple years earlier when everything was still under construction as the DP of *Lethal Weapon 3*. He also shot the freeway chase from that film on the 105, come to think of it. Anyway, Jack and Payne duke it out on the top of the subway car. This was not, unsurprisingly, shot on a moving subway train. It was actually filmed in a big open space at an aviation factory down in Downey using rear-screen projection. And massive rear-screen projection, at that, to make it immersive. I'll get into the nuts and bolts of that at a later date, but the movie is called *Speed*, so, of course, it had to keep living up to that reputation. Payne loses his head, Jack is taller, Annie remains handcuffed to a rail inside the subway car. Jack speeds it up to make it jump the track. Bada-bing, bada-boom, epic miniature sequence for the derailment and then the grand finale: a full-size subway car bursting out of the tunnel and onto Hollywood Blvd. Well, it was actually another bus outfitted to look like a subway car, but anyway, epic stunt. And one that Donna Washington actually remembers vividly.

DONNA WASHINGTON

The very last stunt that they did that I permitted was the one where the MTA train goes up and onto Hollywood Blvd. During the day – normally you can't close down Hollywood Blvd. during the day, but we did it for multiple days just in case they needed to do it, you know, for another extra day. Right now, the process is different. There's different channels that are in place to get things like that. You can still get it approved, but there's a Hollywood closure committee that you have to talk to now, besides dealing with the council office and all those different city departments that we still deal with, and so there might be a little more time to get something like that accomplished. I remember our offices were in a building right across the street from the Mann's Chinese Theatre, so we were able to see the activity as it was going on. I remember the location manager running up to our office the day that they were shooting that last scene in the movie, and he's, like, "I'm coming in here to get my permit." And we were buttoning it up, and I was like, "OK, this is what we're doing, right? Because I see down on the street and I just want to make sure it's all there." And he was like, "Yep, we've got the stunt set up." And he was like, "Are you going to come down?" I said, "I'm going to stand here and watch. Because, like, I have a great, you know, point of view looking down on the street." And we were able to watch it, and it was fantastic. And then, you know, it's funny because there were a lot of tourists on Hollywood Blvd., and so, they were kind of, just letting people kind of just watch, you know? And people were just kind of, like, "Oh!" It's funny because at the very end, when it comes up and it ends, you know, people start crowding around, I think there are also just tourists coming to take pictures. And so, what's the best thing? You know, you're a tourist, you come and you're like, "Hey, I get to see this movie being filmed and I can see the stars and take pictures of them!" I remember Jim saying to me that they needed to do it in two takes because they only had two trains, and, you know, once they did the first one, if it was all messed up, they only had one more that they could use. But they did it, I think, in the first try, which was amazing.

KRIS TAPLEY

After all of that, Jack and Annie base their relationship on sex and scene. Cue the Billy Idol. Sigh. How's that for a whirlwind trip through this movie? I might have to start a Speed tour. I think I could pull it off. Anyway, as I said, I never spoke to location managers George Herthel or James McCabe, but I'd like to dedicate this episode to them and their work. By all accounts they were two respected guys in this business and they certainly earned their marks on this movie. The other location personnel included assistants David Kaufman, Sam Lunay – I hope I said that correctly – and Ed Lipscomb. Mr. Lipscomb has also passed. I did have a brief email exchange with uncredited location scout Marino Pascal, but he only worked a couple of days and frankly had zero memories. It happens. But I'm so happy to have added Donna's voice to this mix and, again, let it be a lesson to pick up the phone. You never know what door it will open. So, once again, Speed is truly one of the great Los Angeles movies and I hope we did a decent job covering that aspect of the movie today. And if it happened what your appetite for more discussion of the LA movie canon, well, you're in luck!

[OUTRO MUSIC]

KRIS TAPLEY

Next week on *50 MPH*...

KRIS TAPLEY

With our backdrop set, let's celebrate the City of Angels on film. Tribune Publishing film critic Katie Walsh joins me to count down our top 10 Los Angeles movies.

KATIE WALSH

So, I think when you see the city on foot or by public transportation, it's a vastly different experience than seeing it in a car, and that's what I loved about *Tangerine*.

KRIS TAPLEY

This is a great choice. I mean, this is one of the few movies where I've, like, gotten on Google Maps and been, like, "Wait, where did John Connor live? What's the address?" And go and look at the street view and be, like, "Oh, it's still there!"

KRIS TAPLEY

From movies that best capture the spirit of the city to others that serve as a great road trip through it, we leave no stone unturned.

KATIE WALSH

I think I put this on the list just for that sequence where all the neon lights turn on. Clearly a filmmaker just being, like, "I love these spots."

KRIS TAPLEY

PTA, as you say, a consummate LA filmmaker and this one, to me - it's my favorite PTA movie, and it has something to say about connections between people and it feels like it could only have been in LA.

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.