Episode 1,503: Dave Smith Week Begins: The Making of a Comedian and Libertarian

Guest: Dave Smith

WOODS: I want to get into who the heck Dave Smith is, because for a long time, there wasn't any Dave Smith on the libertarian scene, and now it's like I don't know what the hell we'd do without you, basically. I was just reading your — geez, your Twitter feed today. I think it was from today. Somebody was reporting on the figures for how much money separates how much people should have paid in taxes and how much they actually did. And it's some huge astronomical number. And the person is saying, "Can you believe people would steal trillions of dollars from the government?" And your response was?

SMITH: Oh, I said, "I know, I can't believe they would steal this hard-earned money of the government's, and I've actually heard stories of draft dodgers stealing their own lives from the government. It's terrible."

WOODS: [laughing] Yeah, "stealing their own lives," Oh, my gosh. All right, so follow Dave on Twitter @comicdavesmith. You've got to do that. You'll be thanking me. So let's go back now into the mists of time, Dave Smith. Are you a native New Yorker?

SMITH: Yes, I am. I'm born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. This is great, by the way. I've never done a podcast on a topic that I'm actually qualified to speak on.

WOODS: [laughing]

SMITH: So yes, this is really my expertise. Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York.

WOODS: Okay, all right. So what about your schooling, your upbringing? Would we recognize the Dave Smith of today if we were to meet the youngster Dave Smith?

SMITH: Well, even very early in life, from what my mother tells me, I was always a performer of sorts. I always was funny, and I always liked to make people laugh. I always kind of liked a crowd. I liked to kind of be the center of attention. So I'm sure there are some things that were just intrinsic to me, that are still there now.

My early schooling life, you know, I read Murray Rothbard say that he had this experience once, or that he had this experience. And this this is probably, I think, my first libertarian experience ever, is that I went to both public and private school, and it was very easy to size up, as a kid, the difference, and that public school was really quite bad and private school was overall pretty decent. I mean, I had my problems with the private school that I went to,

but I went to PS 107, which was in those days, a little bit of a rough school. And I went there for first, second, and third grade. And it was like, I mean, kids got in fights, teachers threatened you. There was all types of just horrible things that happened, and I didn't learn anything the whole time I was there. And then I went to Berkeley Carrol private school after that, and it was like everybody was nice and smart, and everyone could read. And it was like, wow, there is a real difference here. Even as a fourth grader, it was impossible to miss.

WOODS: I hate to ask such a hackneyed question, but were you the class clown?

SMITH: I was one of the class clowns, I think.

WOODS: Okay. Okay, all right.

SMITH: There were there were several of us. I mean, the group that I hung out with in middle school and high school, all throughout, were all really funny, really funny kids. Jerry Seinfeld, I remember once he was asked in an interview, and I thought it really rang true to me, but they said, "Were you the funny kid in school?" And he said, "We were all funny, and then everybody else got jobs." And that's kind of how I feel. Like the adult world just transformed everybody else, and I basically decided, I was like, no, I'm going to keep doing the funny thing.

WOODS: I know that when I talked to magicians, they get an intense pleasure from fooling people, from doing something that seems impossible. And just the look of bafflement on people's faces fills them with an intense pleasure. And I guess a comedian's supposed to feel that way about making people laugh. Was there a distinct moment where you said, "I like this. I like getting that response, and I want to keep doing this?"

SMITH: I remember — this is weird, and I don't remember what it was that I said, but I remember in the third grade, saying something, like calling out — which I did quite a bit — but calling out in the middle of a class and saying something that made the whole room and the teacher laugh. And I remember just the rush of euphoria from doing that. I was lying in my bed that night, like when I was going to sleep, and just thinking about that moment over and over again, and how awesome it was to just make the whole room laugh. And I just very vividly remember — I don't remember what the thing I said was. I'm sure it wouldn't hold up. But at the time, I thought it was really funny, and the rest of the room did too. And I just remember thinking that was such an amazing feeling.

WOODS: Now, I know that you found out about Ron Paul, like a lot of people did, but did you have any political views that you felt strongly about before that time?

SMITH: Well, I got somewhat — I mean, I was always kind of interested in having a political view. I don't know that I necessarily had very strong views, but like my mother and my stepfather, they would have the news on a lot, and they used to watch *Crossfire* all the time. Like, this is back in the day when *Crossfire* had Pat Buchanan on, and it was actually like somewhat of an intelligent conversation with interesting guests. And I would watch it sometimes with them, and I always kind of liked that.

But we were all kind of, not raving mad leftists, but definitely left-wing, and pretty much all of my views in high school would have been things that were just kind of run-of-the-mill left-

wing views. Like it was just obvious stuff that you didn't really have to think that much about, like, obviously, the rich people should pay more taxes, and we should give more of that money to poor people. I mean, what are you, a terrible person? Obviously, rich people have more money than they possibly need, and these poor people could use the money, so it's kind of that simple, you know? And I remember thinking that it was really wrong — my first job that I got when I was 13 or 14, and I worked at this bagel store — how's that for a Jew's first job?

WOODS: [laughing]

SMITH: I worked at a at a bagel store, and there were a bunch of Mexicans who worked there, who were all getting paid under the minimum wage. Now, I was getting paid under the minimum wage too. All of our jobs were off the books. But you know, I was a kid. It just didn't matter to me. But these were like grown men who were making like the same four bucks or five bucks an hour that I was. And I remember thinking, man, that's just really wrong. And like, there should be a minimum wage. Of course, there was a minimum wage; they were just paying them off the books, as still goes on all over the place.

But that was something that I really like — I was always kind of bleeding heart in that way. And I still am as a libertarian; I just understand markets better. But that's always been something that kind of pushed me, like I'm not a libertarian because I have this kind of Randian, like, *Well, I think the businessman is so great, and the people who build the great buildings are so great*, and you know, like the makers versus the takers type thing. I mean, there's some truth to that, but I've always been a libertarian, because I'm like, man, I feel for the people who die in these wars. And I feel for the people whose lives are crushed by the income tax or, or people who lose their job because they got arrested and had to spend the night in jail over some stupid drug charge, that they got caught smoking a joint or something, and they spend the night and central bookings and miss work, and then they get fired.

So I still have a lot of that, but I guess what really got me political at first was George W. Bush. I mean, I lived in New York through 9/11. Where I lived in Brooklyn was only a few more miles away from where the Twin Towers used to stand. And after that, I was very interested in like, whoa, we're at war. And I was 18, maybe 19 when 9/11 happened, so I was right at that age, where I was like, oh, if we're going to go to war, I'm in like prime drafting age. I know my mother was really scared about that. She was really scared that I could get drafted, because none of us knew what was going to happen right after 9/11. But I was really pissed off. I mean, I was really pissed off that these terrorists who hate us for our freedom and awesomeness would come over and kill all these people, all these innocent people.

And then through the George W. Bush years, I got more and more turned off by what was transparently this guy using our pain to get people to support the wars that had nothing to do with the people. I mean, it didn't take a genius to figure out that like Iraq, Iran, and North Korea had absolutely nothing to do with 9/11. And then I remember the moment when George W. Bush was asked, it was like, years after 9/11, and he was asked: well, what about Osama bin Laden? You said we were going to get him dead or alive. And he was like, I really don't think about it that much. And I really had a moment where I was like, man, I hate this guy. I hate this guy. This is terrible what he's done. And so I was primed for the Ron Paul message.

WOODS: By the time you left high school, did you have an idea of what you were going to wind up doing?

SMITH: No. No, not at all. I was a terrible student in high school, and I barely graduated. I remember one of my teachers came up to me after a final, and I saw him in the courtyard outside of our high school, and he was just grading the finals, and he goes, "Well, you passed by the skin of your teeth." It was something like two points that I would have been shy of failing the class and not graduating high school. And he was saying it like so disappointed, like his thing was always like, you're a smart kid, and you're not focused, you don't work enough. And he was so disappointed, and it was like a moment out of *Tommy Boy*, like I literally almost started breaking out in tears, and I was like, *Yes, I'm going to graduate! This is amazing*. And he didn't seem to have the same attitude. But I barely graduated. I got into some crummy college, Hartwick College, that was pretty easy to get into. And I was pretty aimless. I just wanted to go to college and have some beers and try to meet some girls, and , I had no idea what I was going to do.

WOODS: And then you decided not to finish. So what was going on in your mind then?

SMITH: Well, I was already not — I didn't like college. I found it kind of boring and dumb. I mean, it's like you went to like Harvard and Columbia and these schools. I'd imagine, even though there's some dumb stuff that's taught there, there's a lot of really smart people at those schools. But if you just go to one of these like crummy private schools that pretty much anyone can get into, it's like really, really dumb. Nothing there. There were like one or two classes that I ever got really interested in, and pretty much everything else was boring. It was in Oneonta, upstate New York. I hated the area. I hated being up there. I was a city kid, and now I was in this tiny little town. I didn't have a car; I had no way to get around. It was cold for like 90% of the school year. And I just hated it.

And then I got a job over the summer, promoting for this comedy club, it was Comic Strip New York. And it was like a whatever job, and I made a little bit of money, but you could go to the comedy club and watch the shows whenever you wanted to for free. And you'd kind of hang out in the scene, and I just thought it was so cool, and that's just what I wanted to do. So I was just like, well, I'm just going to leave school. I mean, I'm not doing well anyway. I was on the verge of flunking out anyway, and it seemed ridiculous to me. I was taking out student loans. I was like, I don't care about any of this. So I just left and started working. Got a job, again, working for the promotion company. And then little by little, it took me a long time, I hung around the comedy scene for a long time before I ever worked up the courage to start doing it. But that was the direction I went in.

WOODS: Now, on the New York City thing, born and raised, and you still live in New York City. I've had some people say, why does he still live in New York City? It's so statist, and there are terrible people in charge and all that. And I have my own — because a lot of people ask me, how come I go to New York so much? Because you know, you see me there on a fairly regular basis, and I even considered actually having an apartment in New York that I could have for when I'm there. I decided against that recently, but I was considering it. And people just thought, why, of all possible places would you do that? So they want to know how come you haven't moved away, so I do want to know how New York fits into your story?

SMITH: Well, I think you kind of already know the answer to this, because you come up here all the time, and you lived in New York for years when you went to Columbia. And it's like, look, we're libertarians and anarchists. We basically believe pretty much all the stuff that we're opposed to shouldn't exist to begin with, so I certainly don't enjoy paying the high state income taxes of New York, and there's certain things, there's policy things that are wrong. But

I mean, I'm not going to make that the entire factor in my life. I mean, I know one of the reasons you love to come up here is because of the theater and the museums and the things like that. It has very little to do with the government, and it's just really great culture. I love the city. This is what I'm used to. And I have family and friends who are here and things that are more important than whether I'm paying 8% or 4% in state income taxes — even though, believe me, I'd much rather be paying the 4%.

That being said, now that I have a wife and a kid, I wouldn't be surprised if in the next couple years, we try to buy a house in the suburbs, or something like that. But I love New York City. There's so much going on. There's so many people. It's a real interesting place to live. There's always something open, always something to do. And maybe it's just what I know, but I love New York City.

WOODS: Well, I feel the same way, and I feel like I'm not going to let the terrorists — by that, I mean the government people — take it away from me. Why should I deprive myself of pleasure because of these people? And I was talking about this to a mutual friend of ours the other day, who made a point that had never occurred to me about, that it could well be that precisely because New York is such a desirable place, because there's so much going on and it's so vibrant, they can get away all the more with taxes and onerous regulation and stuff, because they know how much you desperately want to be there, and it's a lot harder to get you to leave. I mean, I don't know why I never thought of that.

SMITH: Yeah, that is a really good point. And I think there's something about that relationship between the market and the state in general. I mean, one of one of the main reasons why I'm an anarchist, is because, like the whole story of America — and you see this happening all over the place — but if you have a somewhat restrained government and some degree of a free market, it ends up just meaning that there's much more of a tax pool for the government to extract. And it's not a coincidence that this country was formed with all of these really brilliant people who had really thought about checks and balances and the role of the state and what the state couldn't do and that we had this whole Bill of Rights, even after the Articles of Confederation, like even the Bill of Rights and things like that. And now you look around, and it's the biggest, most powerful statement ever existed. And it's like, yeah, that's not a coincidence. The more vibrant an economy is, the more the government can get away with. And so yeah, I'm sure there's something to that in New York, as well.

WOODS: So tell me when the first time was that you actually did standup.

SMITH: So it was Luis J. Gomez, who's been on the show, who's just a force of nature and an incredible human being, me and him became very good friends, and he started standup. And for the first year, he always tried to convince me — like, we were just really funny people together as friends, and I hung out in the standup comedy scene. He was like, *Dude, you love standup comedy. You're hilarious. You should be trying to do this. What else are you doing?* And I remember, I always thought to myself — which is so backwards now that I know, looking at it — but I used to think, I was like, I will try standup, but I've just got to really sit down and think and come up with really hilarious material, and then by the time I start, I'll already be like a really great comedian, and I'll just go from there. I'll just take off. And then I just kept using that as an excuse and sitting around and not doing it.

And then Luis started running shows, and at a certain point, he was like, *You're doing this. You're going to come on my show, so you'd better get ready*. So he brought me to this open

mic, and I agreed to go do it. And I had like nothing, like nothing prepared. And it went bad. The open mics in New York City are just brutal. Like no one cares. You're performing to other comedians who are just waiting to go on themselves. But I do remember, I hit one laugh. Something I said got a laugh in the room, and that just felt so great. And then the second I got off, I was like, *Oh, I've got to do that again. I've got to do that again. I can do better*. And then basically, after that, that was all I did.

WOODS: I could save this for the comedy episode, but I'm too high time-preference. I need my answer immediately. I want to know, because there's only been one time out of all the comedians I've seen, where I've observed a comedian outright bombing. And you know that is just a painful thing to observe. But what's fascinating to me is the psychology of the audience, that it's like after he fails, it's like they turn against him. It's like they hate him now, and there's no way back. Like, it seems almost impossible, no matter how good he is after that, once they've concluded that he's just a loser or something, you can't get them back and they're rooting against him. It's a crazy mob mentality. Now, not necessarily in your own act, but have you observed that same kind of phenomenon, number one? And secondly, is there a way back for a comedian once he's started to bomb?

SMITH: Yes, I've observed it. I've lived it. I've done thousands and thousands of comedy shows, and so yeah, I mean, I've seen all types of brutal bombs. And there is technically a way back, and I've seen people pull themselves out of it, but it gets very, very hard. And with everything that doesn't hit, it gets like exponentially harder to get the crowd back. And it's a real interesting social, psychological dynamic, where it's very hard for a comedian who's famous to bomb when people came out to see that guy and bought tickets. I mean, that I've actually never seen firsthand. I've heard stories about that, like comedians who have drug problems or something like that, like they come strung out and they just can't deliver their jokes, and the crowd's like, *Oh, we're not getting our money's worth*. So it can happen.

But it's different when you're just going to a comedy club, and there are random comedians there who you don't know who the comedian is. And there's this immediate tension, where, it's kind of like everyone else in the room is going to shut up and you're going to get on stage and talk. And right away, it's kind of like, well, you've got to prove that you're worthy of that, that that makes sense. And when a crowd doesn't know who you are, you go up there, and it's like the first thing they say, it's like, the whole crowd's attitude of: is this guy funny? That's their question. Is he funny? And if you go up there and get a laugh right away, it's almost like you just establish: hey, people, I'm the funny guy. You're listening to the funny guy now.

And if you go up there, and you get a big laugh, and then you tell a few jokes that get laughs, and then you tell one joke that doesn't get a laugh, it's like, eh, the funny guy kind of missed with that one. What else you got, funny guy? But if you go up there right away and tell something that bombs, the attitude is generally like, oh, this guy is not funny. And then with every other joke, you tell another thing that doesn't get anything, now we've confirmed that this guy isn't funny. And more and more, you just dig yourself into that hole.

So it's a real interesting dynamic. It's interesting to see what it does to the comedian, because it's very easy, especially at first, like when you're new in comedy, it's one thing to get used to people laughing at you. That's fairly easy. But to get used to people not laughing at you is very, very difficult. And that was always one of the things when I was a new comedian, when I'd see pros handle that situation, where the first thing they say doesn't get a laugh, the second thing they say doesn't get a laugh, and they can just kind of pull the crowd back.

That's what it really is to be a professional comedian. To be able to have the first two things you say get nothing, and that has zero effect on the third thing you say. You still deliver that just as well. You still are just as confident in that thing drawing laughter out of the crowd. That's a really amazing thing to watch. But yeah, I've had some rough ones in my day.

WOODS: All right, I've got to follow up again with this, and then I want to get to Ron Paul, and then we'll wrap things up. But on this, suppose you have a routine that you just kill with it, no matter where you go. This routine is just perfect. It's great. You know where the laughs are going to be. You know how intense they're going to be. It seems almost like it would be impossible to bomb at that point, right? You have this battle-tested routine. So are people bombing because they're trying new material? Like what's happening there?

SMITH: Sometimes they're bombing because they're trying new material. Sometimes they're bombing because they don't have something that's that tried and true and great material. And then sometimes people bomb with the great material. It's weird. Like there's a lot of different dynamics that go on. A lot of things happen. Maybe the crowd's in a bad mood. Maybe the last three comics haven't done that well, and they're kind of over the show. Maybe their bills came out, and they're pissed off that the drinks are too expensive. There's like a lot of different things that happen.

And once people — you know, a lot of times, a big chunk of material is kind of like a journey. Like you're going to come with me on this journey. And if people aren't into the journey, then step two, step three, step four don't necessarily fit so well. I've had a chunks of material that I'm really proud of that I think are really strong, that have just bombed in comedy clubs. And then I've done that same material in theaters, where people are like, dying laughing, giving standing ovations, and it's really wild to see that. It's like the same thing. Now, I'm sure there's some part of that is maybe I'm not delivering it exactly the same way when I know that there's a crowd who's loving it. Like, there's something you've got to examine yourself there, as well.

But it's very strange that the same way — but I would say just think about it like this: there might be some point that you could make to a libertarian audience, where they would be like, *Obviously, this is completely correct*, that if you delivered to some other socialist audience, they'd be like, *That's the most evil thing I've ever heard in my life*. And so people, people are like that with comedy too. Different areas, different groups have different responses.

WOODS: All right, finally, because we could not have a discussion of the life of Dave Smith without getting into the libertarian period. I know the story about you saw Ron Paul and debates, and you started Googling, but I really want to know what that looks like, because a lot of people did that. What does that actually look like? You sat down at your computer, you typed in "Ron Paul," and a bunch of things popped up? I mean, what actually happened?

SMITH: Well, it was like, as I mentioned earlier, I was really ready for an antiwar message. I mean, I was invested. You know, I'm to some degree still steeped in ignorance, but I remember in 2006, I was really happy that the Democrats took the House back, because I was like, *Good, now they're going to stop George W. Bush*. I mean, these wars are as good as over, because the House is just going to defund them, you know? Because I mean, that's what they were all saying. They were all saying they wanted to end these wars, so obviously, that's what they were going to do. They were going to defund them. And then when nothing really

changed from that, that was like a little bit of a lesson, although I don't know if I really learned the lesson fully.

But so when I saw Ron Paul in the Giuliani moment, I was like, Oh, this — you could just tell the difference right away. It was like, *Oh, this guy's really antiwar*. He's no joke, and he's taking it to a whole other level. He's really breaking down what's going on in foreign policy. And so I was really interested in that. And I started looking into Ron Paul more and more.

And then the economy crashed. We had the financial crisis of 2008. And when that happened, I was like, *Whoa, Ron Paul has kind of been talking about this stuff, too*. And that was really something to me, and I started looking back at the fact that he had kind of predicted that this bubble was going to burst. And so I was just really fascinated by, like, what is it, free market economics? I mean, okay? And in some part of me, I was like, this has to be wrong. Like, this can't be actually the answer, and nobody's told me about this my entire life.

So I was doing comedy at the time. I had a lot of free time on my hands, and I started just being like, I'm going to really learn about what this guy's saying — probably my mindset was to disprove it, to figure out what the holes are. And in the course of looking up Ron Paul, I found Peter Schiff and this guy Tom Woods, and I started reading your guys' stuff and listening to you guys. And it was all so fascinating to me and so interesting, that I just got lost in this rabbit hole.

And one of the things that I think a lot of people who get introduced to Austrian economics and libertarian philosophy and all of this stuff, one of the things that really jumps out at you is that, like one of the — you know, Lew Rockwell always says the big advantage is that we have the truth on our side. And one of the things is that, unlike all the other things that are taught to you, libertarianism and Austrian economics has this big advantage that it makes sense. Like, it just makes sense. People start saying something, you go, *Wow, that really makes a lot of sense*. I mean, if the fundamental moral paradigm is like, don't hit people and don't take their stuff, it's kind of hard to argue against that. Like, yeah, that does kind of make sense. That does seem to be the right thing to do.

And I just had Peter Schiff on my show the other day, and it the first time I ever had him on, and it was it was cool because he had a big influence on me, as well. But I remember this one time hearing Peter Schiff, when it was after John McCain had said the fundamentals of the economy are sound, and Peter Schiff said: how could the fundamentals of our economy be sound? Our economy is completely based off consumer spending and borrowing money that we have no way to pay back. And just thinking about it, you go, that is a pretty good point. Like how would that make sense exactly, that that's a sound economic system?

And so the more and more that I just dug into it, it was also utterly logical. And then once I found Murray Rothbard, because I heard you talking about him quite a bit, and I started reading him, it was like, there was no turning back. It was the nail in the coffin.

WOODS: Why don't we end with you telling people about the *Part of the Problem* podcast, how they can listen to it, when you started with it, what it is? Whatever you want to tell us about it.

SMITH: Sure. Well, I started with *Part of the Problem*, I guess it was years ago at this point. It was like back in 2012 when I first bought a microphone and started recording out of my apartment. And I wasn't very consistent with it, and very few people were listening, but I was just so interested in these ideas, and it was almost just kind of my own therapy. Like I just wanted to rant about these things. And so if 100 people were listening, okay, here, I'm going to rant about why I think Ron Paul is so great and why I think Barack Obama is a complete fraud and free market and libertarian values and stuff.

And I always felt like I kind of knew right away what my role was in the liberty movement. And back then, we still really had a thriving liberty movement, and I was very optimistic about the future of the liberty movement. It just seemed to me like we have all the young people, we have all the intellectual energy, we're right about all of this stuff, there's no way they're going to be able to stop this. And Ron Paul's kid Rand Paul is going to run for office, so obviously, he'll be the next Ron Paul, and I was very optimistic on the liberty movement long-term.

And I always knew what my role was. It was obvious to me. It was like, there are all these academics and these brilliant people in the movement, and that's not me, but I can kind of decipher what they're saying and explain it to normal people. And I'm somewhat verbally talented. I'm very passionate about these issues. So it was like obvious to me that I can be funny with it. I can explain this to people, and I can kind of be like that conduit, like, I can take the Tom Woods and explain it to the Joe six-pack. So that that was obvious to me.

And then I just kind of kept going with the podcast. And then in my comedy career, some things started opening up, and I started doing other big podcasts, because I would have these conversations with other comedians. And then like my friend Ari Shaffir would want to have me on talk about this stuff. Then Joe Rogan heard me on there, and he wanted to have me on, and then all these other avenues, and I started getting gigs on Fox News and stuff like this. And so what happened was, little by little, the audience just kept building and building and building. And then all of a sudden, *Part of the Problem* just became kind of a show that I'm actually making good money off of and a lot of people are listening to and has had an impact on a lot of people's lives.

And I basically just I am me. I'm an anarchocapitalist libertarian. I'm a comedian. And I talk about what I believe and the news of the day, and I try to have fun and be entertaining with it. And it's really a lot of fun. It's my favorite thing that I do in my professional life, and a lot of people really love it, and I'm grateful for that.

WOODS: It really is tremendous. So GaSDigitalNetwork.com is where you should go. That's the central hub, but you can go to Apple podcasts or Stitcher or anything, just type in "Part of the Problem," and you'll find it. Well, Dave, this I think is an excellent inaugural episode for Dave Smith Week. And tomorrow, who knows what we're going to talk about, but it's going to be equally good. So thanks a lot.

SMITH: All right, can't wait for tomorrow.