

# BEN SCHWARTZ

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To call Ben Schwartz a hidden gem or a best-kept secret in comedy feels like an undermining of his artistry — he is far from hiding in the shadows, and he doesn't shy away from having his name in the mainstream conversation. Schwartz exists, really, in his own category of notoriety; he carries a career packed with triumphant milestones that define him as a creative, but confidently self-proclaims his ability — with laughter — to “walk down the street and nobody gives a fuck.” It's an equally comfortable and impressive duality, allowing for Schwartz to exist business-as-usual in pajama pants on press calls while he pushes himself to the forefront of some of the most buzzed-about titles of the year.

In other words, seeing his name in lights (or, in Sonic's case, larger-than-life film posters) isn't solely what fuels Schwartz. The fact that people connect with his work keeps him soaring to new heights, even if it's sometimes under the radar. The man behind Parks and Rec's Jean-Ralphio isn't necessarily identical to the one playing The Afterparty's Jasper, as growth would suggest, but Schwartz is clear about his unwavering appreciation for the opportunity to take on every project, whether 12 years in the past or on the horizon just months ahead. “I feel so lucky that anybody cares,” Schwartz says.

Perhaps it is introspection that makes the heart grow fonder as Schwartz unpacks the career moments that helped to shape who he is as an artist. From the monumental DuckTales to lovelorn Happy Anniversary, and just-released blockbuster Sonic the Hedgehog 2 to the upcoming monster flick Renfield, Schwartz has found deep fulfillment in living between the live-action and animated worlds over more than 20 years in the industry. He admits that he still enters rooms under the impression that the people in them are unfamiliar with his work, but the time in which Schwartz no longer needs to introduce himself with his resume feels imminent, if it has not already arrived.

Schwartz's passion for his art speaks for itself in unadulterated enthusiasm and efficacious quality; really, it is as if he has been hidden in plain sight.

Schwartz takes a deep dive with 1883 Magazine's Logan Potter into his decades-long character development (both on-and-off screen), maintaining a healthy relationship with the internet — while continuing to update Rejected Jokes, naturally — and the unimaginably fruitful doors that his recent roles, including Sonic the Hedgehog, have opened.

**I was reading this interview of yours from MTV News in 2020, and it asks, “Is 2020 the year of Ben Schwartz?” But I think that 2022 might beat it; you have The Afterparty, Space Force: Season 2, Sonic the Hedgehog 2, and you're filming Renfield.** That is true, and I'm touring with Ben Schwartz and Friends in a little bit, too. So, it's very surreal. That's so funny, I remember when 2020 happened because that was the Billy Crystal movie, my improv specials, Sonic [The Hedgehog] and Space Force: Season 1 all at the same time. And I was like, “Oh, my God, this is insane.” And a version of that seems to be happening this year as well; I feel very lucky.

**This really is your marquee year. How do you define what a great year is? What is your measure of success for yourself?** Oh, what a great question. There's two different versions — if we're talking personal life, it's when the people that I love and care about are doing well and we're all supporting each other and being good to each other. If we get through without any major medical incidents, it's a big year for us. Business wise, it's if I'm in some projects that I really am proud of, and I'm really proud of all those projects. It feels like a very fun year. I'm always a little bit worried; I feel like ever since I started doing anything in this industry, it's like, “Oh my goodness, but what about next year? Did I do everything now? What am I gonna do next year?” But I'm very happy.

**Because it feels like you're always looking to next year, do you feel like it can be hard to live in the moment and feel excited about what you have going on right now?** Logan, that's a real thing! At the very beginning, I was very bad. It's funny because my improv is all about living in the moment; you can't be an improviser unless you're literally just responding to what's happening in that exact second and saying yes to your scene partner to build something. I was always terrible at enjoying what was happening. It was three or four years ago [that] I got way better. I remember when I was at the premiere of the first Sonic movie, I went to England to do press. I had never been to England to press for, [and] I was very cognizant of, “Whoa, this is happening. This is bananas. This is so special.” When I was filming The Afterparty, we were all very cognizant. When I'm in things, I'm better at enjoying them now and not worrying about the future.





**You have a really great mix of live action and animated roles. I feel like when people see you in The Afterparty or when they're rewatching Parks and Rec, the first thing that they consider is not that you're also taking on these blockbuster voice roles, which is really interesting. How does your process differ in developing and connecting to your character for a voice role rather than a live action role, or vice versa?**

It starts the same; I usually read the script and read whatever's going on and say my lines in my head or say them out loud — either way — and try to figure out how I think my character talks or their demeanor. When I read the Sonic movie for the first time, I was like, "Oh, this is a kid. It's a kid who's so excited and doesn't have any friends and is finally getting his first friend and can't wait to talk and can't wait to show off all the things that he does and be funny." I like to show the heart in the character. So even with Jean-Ralphio, he always thinks he's nailing it, and he is very rarely nailing it, but he always thinks he's nailing it. He thinks he's doing something great. He never thinks he's being inappropriate or weird. He thinks he's crushing it. And everybody's like, "Oh my god, look at this guy." Amy Poehler used to say that it's like talking to an adorable puppy, and that even if he psses on the rug, you're like, "Aw, Jean-Ralphio!" You're not gonna yell at him, because he doesn't even know what terrible thing he just did. So, I do give my characters this piece of heart so you care about them when they're doing something good or bad. It's something just a little bit deeper than what they're putting forward on the surface.

**The Jean-Ralphio puppy analogy is really excellent. Do you feel similarly when it comes to character connection when you're moving across genres in the live action space? Would you say that you connected to your character in Happy Anniversary in a different way than your character in The Afterparty? The same way that you develop and connect to your characters differently in live action versus animation, how does that process differ when you're moving across live-action genres?**

God, these are great questions. There's characters that I play that I could see myself pushing to extreme versions of myself. I feel like with some good characters or some fun characters that people play, you can see extensions of themselves; they're not those people by any means, but you can see like, when I'm really happy and excited, it's kind of like when Dewey is enthusiastic and excited on DuckTales. That's kind of how I play him. So, with Happy Anniversary or Standing Up, Falling Down, I try to find myself in normal moments, but also bring a feeling of almost sadness with them where they go. I remember with House of Lies, I always thought my character, Clyde Oberholt — I thought during work, he pretended he was the man, but he didn't have any friends when he went home. When he goes home, he's all by himself. You never see it, but he orders food by himself and he has nobody to talk to. I try to layer my characters like that a little bit. For Happy Anniversary, I tried to play [Sam] pretty realistic. It was based off of Jared [Stern], so I got to hang out with the director. I played someone who felt like he was really in love and figured it out and was kind of blinded by the idea. It's not at all and his partner doesn't think that this is it, so I liked that idea of someone who wants to be in love but something is getting in the way.

It's extensions of yourself. You find the baseline of your character and then you can play the extremes of it and in more realistic pieces, you never push too hard. You never feel like you're a caricature. Then when you have roles like Jean-Ralphio or even aspects of The Afterparty when there's a musical episode about myself, I'm pushing as far the extremes as I can.







It's really cool. I've also made it my personal goal to mention Happy Anniversary as many times as I can in this interview. I'm not just saying this: it is my favorite work you've ever done, ever. It is one of my top five romantic comedies of all time, and I've seen them all. I'm so happy you did, you're the first person ever to! I thought that movie was so cute and well put-together. Noël Wells is amazing, Rahul [Kohli]'s amazing in it. I'm really happy you did... What did you connect with?

I've been in a five year long relationship. The ending is very full of hope while the whole film is ultimately very bittersweet. I think it's just a beautifully done depiction of what a real-life, long-term relationship looks like when you're young and you're figuring it out. I think it's great. I love that. One of the reasons why I said yes to that was it felt real, the whole thing felt real. Like this is messy, two people in a relationship, they're talking and connecting with each other in real ways and trying to figure it out in real time. I feel like all romantic comedies are so grandiose and not realistic and everybody's so beautiful. You know what I mean? Noël is obviously beautiful, but that movie is not the picture perfect "Will these two? Oh my god, they are!" It's more like these two are starting here, and they're starting to deteriorate and they're clawing their way back to figuring out if this is even worth it. Is it worth it? It's confusing, and it's real, and it's what real human beings go through as opposed to the "my neighbor is a kindergarten teacher who's also a model." It's a very different and realistic view of romantic comedies. I loved making that movie. It was about all of us wanting to make a fun romantic comedy, because Jared is so smart.

Well, let me tell you, you did. Thank you for humoring me. Is the rom-com genre something that you envision yourself gravitating toward more? Or are there any other sub-genres in the comedy space that you're excited to explore? It's been fun. I think after Standing Up, Falling Down then after The Afterparty, I'm getting more opportunities to jump outside of the comedy space, which is turning out to be very lovely and fun, and I really enjoy it. But within that comedy space, I love a good romantic comedy. I sold one to Universal as my second movie ever sold, called No Hearts Club. I wonder if one day I get to a place where they're like, "Hey, do you want to make this?" I'd be like, "Yes, of course I want to make this!"

... To get more opportunities like that, to get to lead a movie or to be a two-hander with someone I really love and respect could be amazing. I mean, I love an action comedy. One of the pilots I tried to get going was an American version of The Wrong Mans. I'm developing a new TV show that Rawson Thurber is a part of that I'm not really allowed to talk about yet, but that's very exciting to me. It's a show that I sold and I'm very excited about, so I'm playing with that. But to play in this space and to keep playing with people I respect — how lucky am I that I work with people like Amy Poehler and Don Cheadle and Kristen Bell and Billy Crystal? To keep playing with people that I feel like I'm learning from and having a good time with, and directors like Chris Miller. Man, I can't tell you how good he was. So to keep on this path or to even stay on this level, wherever I am, would be lovely.

On the note of sub-genres, let's talk about animated comedy — how does it feel to transition into this Sonic sequel knowing that you're the voice behind what is now a whole generation's Sonic the Hedgehog? What a great sentence. It is so cool. The first movie was just like, "I hope anybody cares, please!" Now, they show that they do care and made a huge movie for Paramount, and now it's like, "Okay, we're gonna give you more of what you want. We're gonna blast it out even more. We're gonna give you more action. We're gonna give you more CG characters. We're going to get Idris [Elba] and Colleen [O'Shaughnessey] involved." It's a little bit less pressure than the first one because the first one was, "I hope people dig this, I hope they like what he looks like. I hope they like the chemistry between Jim Carrey and everybody." Now we know that there's an audience that likes that, so it's "How do we make it bigger and better?" and "How do we get people in the movie theater?"

I think we developed and created a film that people will like, and they announced that they're already in the process of making a third. How exciting that when people are watching it, we're creating a universe. I'm very excited, and it takes a little bit of pressure off because we did it. The hardest part was to get it off the ground, and now it's all these cherries on top. I'm all about it.



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**I love that. You're kind of a hidden gem in this voice role, because audiences watching Sonic might not know who the voice behind the icon is. What's that like?** It is a very interesting thing. Some people will be like, "Oh, I love Sonic. Where were you in it?" And I go, "I play the — I'm 'the guy.'" It is funny to be a part of something that's so big, where you don't ever see my face. My friends will be like, "My kids are obsessed, can you send a voice note?" If I send a video over, it's confusing and weird, so I only send voice notes now. All my favorite animation characters growing up, I was the nerd that would hunt down who was in what and follow their careers, so I'm sure there are people just like me out there that are following that version of me. And then there are some people that think this is the first thing I've ever done voice over-wise and they're like, "Why are they using this guy?" And I'm like, "Oh wait, I've been doing this for a long, long time!"

**And on the flip side of that opportunity, you have a lot of major, recent live-action work — you play F. Tony in Space Force, a social media manager. I was reading this Junkee interview from 2015 that you did called "Life After Jean-Ralphio." You were talking about how you've been updating your Rejected Jokes website for years... I was actually looking through it while I was preparing for this. How do you feel like your relationship with the internet has evolved over the years?** Logan, you're asking great, unique questions. This is so great. Sometimes you do junkets and you get very similar questions over and over again. I always love having conversations with humans, and I just — I appreciate that. I think that it has changed. I started

RejectedJokes.com when I was freelancing for Letterman and SNL writing jokes... There weren't a lot of videos; YouTube wasn't enormous yet. It was there, but it wasn't CollegeHumor and funnier digest funded. I hadn't come out yet. CollegeHumor just came out, FunnyOrDie hadn't come out yet, so comedic videos on the internet we're just starting, so I saw it as an opportunity. At that time, nobody was, really.

I wanted to have something that I could send to people in LA, and be like, "Hey, I know you can't come to my shows, but this is stuff that I wrote that I think is funny," or "This is a short film I did." My short films got enough people caring about them where now people were paying me to make them. So, at the beginning, my relationship was, "Help me, please," to the internet. Send these out there and have anybody care.

... then my relationship with Twitter was, "I can use this as a forum to connect with fans and also to get my stuff out to more people." Or if I have shows, I could tell people directly who want to see my shows, "Hey, I have a show in New York and Philly." So it has evolved. Twitter is very different now, but I try to use social media as a place to be positive, to support friends. I'm trying to be as supportive as I can to as many people as I can, and try to interact with fans in a positive way as best I can. At the beginning, it was like, "Please, anybody care about any of this," and now it's me trying to pick people up who I think are great and supporting the projects that I'm in in ways that I think are hopefully unique.







Rather than asking people to care, now you’re connecting with all of the people that do care about your work — what do you think some of your major growth points have been in the last decade of your career?

You’re forcing me to look back on stuff, which I’m not good at, and this is great. The first big one was Jean-Ralphio in Parks. That was a major milestone for me. I think another big one was getting to be a lead on a television show that went. My first pilot was Undercovers — that was a big deal, and that had two Black leads [Gugu Mbatha-Raw and Boris Kodjoe]... I felt so lucky to be on that. It’s not a mistake that I choose some of the projects that I choose — the idea of House of Lies being a generational story of an African-American family following Don Cheadle and my first show going with Boris and Gugu, two black leads on a major network, which is a big, big deal. I play the best friend of Aziz [Ansari] on Parks and Recreation. All these things I find to be very special to be a part of.

... A big one for me was getting my improv special on the air. That was a huge thing to get Middleditch and Schwartz on a network, to show that long-form improv can be on a network and we’re just not in small little black box theaters that have no windows. That was a huge one for me. For me, DuckTales was enormous and Randy Cunningham was enormous... This Is Where I Leave You shows that I could be in a studio movie, and then Happy Anniversary is big, it means I could be the lead of an independent movie, I could be a lead of a rom-com. All these things that I’ve done kind of have little things that have helped. And then even Renfield — this is another big step for me where I’m one of the leads in a big studio movie. It’s all these steps that hopefully keep leading me towards things that are exciting

... How did you learn about any of this stuff? Where were you proud of me, Logan? [laughs]

I was actually exposed to Parks and Rec through my dad when I was 12 or 13, and I’m 23 now.

So since you were a kid! In Judaism, you become a woman at 13... I say that because, when I was 13, that was when I was starting to find the things that I liked on TV. It’s not just “my parents watch it,” I like this. So, I feel like those were big years of me trying to find out what I like creatively.

I think that’s why I’ve continued to be such a big fan of yours, too. That sounds so corny, but I mean it. When Happy Anniversary came out, I was like, “He can do romance and comedy and drama really well.” I also love DuckTales; I watch a lot of animated TV as an adult. I \*loved\* The Afterparty. How do you feel like you’ve refined your craft across each of these projects? What are you doing differently?

This is a decision I made throughout. I took House of Lies because I wanted to strengthen my dramatic muscles. I want to be around Kristen [Bell] and Don [Cheadle], and I want to do dramatic scenes. I want to get better at that. I wanted [to know] that, if there’s a role that has that, I can handle it. So that’s exactly what I did. I’ve been doing so much [comedy] for my whole life that it feels a little bit easier for me to do because it’s situations that I’ve been in so many times in the past. With improv, I’ve done thousands of shows now... I feel way comfortable there.

... It’s always kind of an idea of putting myself around directors, writers or actors that will push me and make me grow and be better and handle things that maybe I haven’t had as much experience with. But I feel like I think I can be pretty good at that; I could get better and make people proud in a way if I apply myself to it.

I feel like, as you watch my career, you can kind of see the growth hopefully. It’s almost like an athlete’s career. I’ll watch a professional athlete from college all the way through the NBA, and I’m rooting for them the whole way because I saw them in college before anybody knew them. And then for comedy, I’d be going to UCB and I see people nobody has ever seen in their entire lives, and I know that they are the funniest people in the world, and nobody knows it yet. I’m watching them, rooting for them. So, for you, maybe you see CollegeHumor, maybe you saw Parks and Rec — and I’m just a little guest star on that — [and you’re] like, “I think this guy’s funny. I’m gonna watch where he goes.” You kind of feel a sense of pride of knowing he’s doing well, and I could feel that in a bunch of my fans, which is lovely, because I have that same feeling for other people, comedians and athletes

Sonic The Hedgehog 2 is out now

Interview **Logan Potter**  
Photographer **Daniel Prakopcyk**  
Stylist **Sonia Young**  
Groomer **Abby Roll**  
MUA **Jessie Yarborough**