

COMEDY

Drifting Off: On His New Podcast, Joe Pera Digs Deep Into the Details



IMAGE COURTESY OF ADULT SWIM

Joe Pera brings his genial, soft-spoken aura to Drifting Off with Joe Pera, a new comedy podcast featuring music from frequent collaborator Ryan Dann.

By **NATHAN FRONTIERO**

TURNERS FALLS — The charm of comedian Joe Pera is in how he inspires both hearty laughs and a deeper appreciation of the beauty in the everyday.

Whether he's exploring the legacy of iron mining in Michigan, diner breakfast options, or ways to relax for a sound sleep, Pera, 34, approaches his subject matter with curiosity, earnestness, and a gentle, beyond-his-years cadence. His humor is a kind of respite, as often soothing as it is surprising.

In the three-season run of his live-action Adult Swim series *Joe Pera Talks With You* and the preceding animated short "Joe Pera Talks You to Sleep," Pera's mild-mannered delivery on simple subjects blends seamlessly with contemplative music from composer Ryan Dann.

Following the TV show's cancellation in 2022, Pera and Dann have continued their collaboration in *Drifting Off with Joe Pera*, a monthly comedic sleep podcast to help listeners lighten up and settle down. The podcast's 15-minute format layers Pera's jokes, stories, and

phone calls with friends over Dann's calming mix of synths, pianos, drones, and curated sound effects.

In phone interviews with the *Montague Reporter*, Pera and Dann characterize the podcast as a natural extension of their prior work.

"I was walking home with my friend Nate Fernald one time," Pera says. "We did stand-up together. And I guess I always kind of had a slow pace on stage, kind of soft-spoken. So he said, 'You should do a sleep cassette!'"

That conversation inspired Pera to workshop stand-up material that would eventually become the initial animated short. With the TV series, Pera "tried to do one episode each season that was subdued and had a sleep intention," he says. The podcast offered another step forward.

"Ever since the animation came out, people have been telling me that they'll use it every night to go to bed and that it works for them," Pera says. "I've always felt a little bad that they were listening to the same one over and over, so Ryan and I always threw around the idea of doing more of them. But we finally had the time now."

"You can talk about a million different things, and there's a million different ways to be relaxed and to

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create relaxing environments and relaxing music,” says Dann. “Why not just keep exploring?”

Dann accompanied Pera for a portion of his stand-up tour, which included a stop at Northampton’s Academy of Music Theatre in January. Toward the end of Pera’s set, he and Dann performed a comedy-and-music bit that had become part of his stand-up routine shortly after the TV show’s cancellation, and loosely inspired what they eventually created for the podcast.

“Joe pitched the idea of a sleep bit, in line with what we’ve done in the past,” Dann says. “I guess we drew from what we did in his live show while we were making this first [podcast] episode, as sort of a template. They’re sort of connected, but it wasn’t super explicit when we were doing it.”

A Natural Pace

The first episode of *Drifting Off with Joe Pera* focuses on soup. As with Pera’s televised output, the single focus per episode serves as a springboard for observational humor, historical asides, and personal anecdotes.

Pera’s writing ritual is built on a foundation of inquisitiveness about a specific topic. The story and humor grows from there.

“I like to write by hand because it allows me to go at the pace of my thinking,” Pera explains. “I don’t know where it’s gonna head when I start. I guess my approach to storytelling is by starting with the detail and trying to connect it – finding and figuring out what’s important about it, and seeing the narratives involved in that.”

“The soup one is a good example,” Pera continues. “We barely scratched the surface. I could have done a couple of movies about soup. Really. The way that it’s one of the oldest foods, the nutrition, all eras of soup – it could go on forever.

What types of people make different soup, eat different soup. Soups that connect different regions of the world. It connects a lot more than you realize.”

At one point in the episode, Pera reflects on the trope of a good broth resuscitating a character on the verge of death. As Dann’s accompaniment swells with sentimental synth and strings, Pera subverts the stakes of the moment with his punchline: “They regain their strength and win the beauty pageant. It’s a food that can bring about immediate change.”

Pera points out how he and Dann complement each other’s creativity.

“The timing of his music and the jokes themselves is pretty connected,” Pera says. “My notes for him will have to do with that and he knows how to write for the way I write now too.”

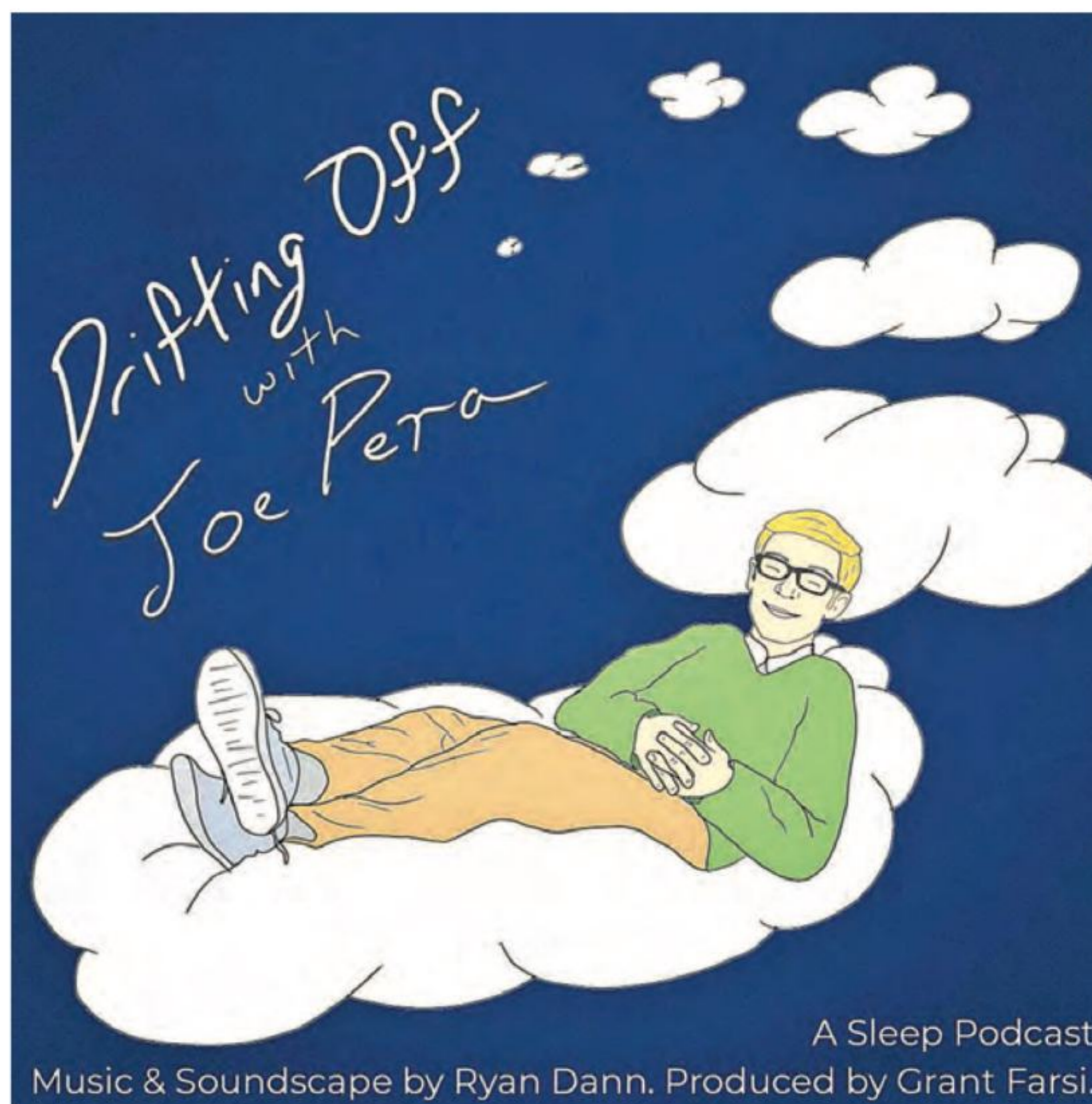
Later in the same episode, after recounting how milk soup momentarily stopped a war between Catholics and Protestants in 16th-century Switzerland, Pera lands another big laugh as he imagines the thought process of a member of the fighting factions: “Do I want to run my neighbor through with a halberd because he’s performing mass in vernacular, or am I just hungry for bread and milk in a pot?”

In addition to “being attracted to more natural characters,” Pera says he is “also attracted to a more natural pace” than the brisk, scene-jumping style he generally sees in today’s media.

“We don’t ever really experience life at that fast of a pace,” Pera says.

Focusing on one topic at a time and “letting things develop at a slower pace,” as Pera describes his TV narrative style, both map well to the sleep podcast.

“Especially before bed, it’s about slowing down,” Pera says. “The more you focus on one thing at a time, the easier it is to slow down and relax.”



New episodes are released on the first Sunday of each month.

A Flexibility of Format

On *Joe Pera Talks With You*, Pera played a fictionalized version of himself, a Marquette middle-school choir teacher whose thoughtful commentary dovetailed with wholesome, awkward, and amusing narrative arcs in his tight-knit Midwestern community.

Drifting Off..., by contrast, is “more between me and the listener,” says Pera, who is based in New York City and originally from Buffalo. He adds that the format switch is “almost taking a layer of fiction away,” but that right now the exact delineation is yet to be determined.

“We’re still figuring out what the podcast is,” he admits.

One key difference is the freedom an independent audio production allows Pera and Dann compared to the television format.

“I feel like the audience is more a participant with the podcast than the TV show,” Pera says. “We can take as much time as we want with

things. On this new episode we’re working on, with bell tones and the largest bells around the world, it’s neat to let them ring out in their own time. It feels like that’d be hard to justify in a television show, but it’s really neat inside of a podcast – we can build the space, and sit longer in moments. Also let the audience use their imagination in a way they weren’t able to before.”

Working in an audio-only format has also made Pera and Dann’s collaboration more direct, since it’s no longer happening between filming and editing footage.

“There’s been a lot more back and forth,” Pera says. “[Ryan will] pass me a piece, and I’ll write to it. And then that’ll hopefully get him to laugh and inspire another piece of music. The writing process is happening simultaneously for both of us – he’s involved in everything, right from the beginning.”

For Dann, who also releases music under the solo project Holland

Patent Public Library, composition is often about intuitively following the direction of his own creative tools.

“I’ve heard sculptors talk about how they get a big square of clay and then at some point the clay speaks to them or whatever, and I always thought this was kind of funny,” he says. “But that is sort of how it works for me with music. I’ll find an instrument and the instrument just sort of tells me, ‘This is what I do well, this is what sounds good, this is a melody that works well.’”

A sequence in the soup episode features Pera chopping vegetables for minestrone, and Dann points out that finding the right sound is more time-intensive than it might seem.

“You think looking up the sound of chopping is easy, but there are 50,000 different sounds of chopping and not all of them sound great,” Dann says. “So, finding the one that really feels like it’s close – it’s not abrasive, you get a nice thud and you feel the juice of the vegetable that you’re chopping – it takes time to find that sound.”

Pera and Dann aim to release a new podcast episode on the first Sunday of every month “for at least a year,” according to Pera, a schedule that gives the pair the flexibility to continue work on other projects and alternate between in-person and remote collaboration as needed. They’re also interested in tapping musicians they admire to guest score future episodes.

Pera calls the podcast “a jump in a different direction,” and says he hopes that new ideas and new approaches will keep the project interesting.

“There’s a lot to cover,” Pera says. “It’s hopefully sustainable for a very long time.”

Drifting Off with Joe Pera is available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and YouTube. Listeners can also support the podcast on Patreon.

