Maddow About You

Rachel Maddow, the host of MSNBC's white-hot The Rachel Maddow Show, has been an avid AIDS activist for years. Now, she addresses the topic on prime-time TV. Is Maddow our new Edward R. Murrow?

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Rachel Maddow first appeared on our pages when she was a freelance reporter struggling to pay the rent. For *POZ*'s July/August 2003 issue, she penned a piece on the advances in HIV prison care, a topic to which she has committed 15 years of her life—by serving as a health care advocate for those living with the virus behind bars. While getting her PhD at Oxford University she wrote a brilliant thesis on the topic (*HIV/AIDS and Health Care Reform in British and American Prisons*). Today, she is the instantly recognizable host both of MSNBC's *The Rachel Maddow Show*, a relatively new, nightly news portal that filters politics and culture through her unapologetically personal sensibility, and a radio program of the same name on the Air America network.

Her history as an advocate for people living with HIV informs her current work; she is an American broadcaster well informed about AIDS activism and public policy—a striking counterpoint to CNN's Sanjay Gupta, who reports mostly on the realm of pure medicine and epidemiology. Unlike much of America's mainstream press, Maddow and her show have not shied away from the topic of stateside HIV, indicting former President George W. Bush's domestic policy on AIDS and highlighting the recently reported statistic that at least 3 percent of Washington, DC, residents are living with the virus. On air, Maddow eulogized legendary treatment activist Martin Delaney, the great leader of Project Inform who died in January; she challenged president-elect Obama for considering a candidate for the position of director of National AIDS Policy who didn't support needle exchange (he was not appointed, and our current "AIDS Czar" favors needle exchange as a scientifically proven form of AIDS prevention); and she featured AIDS pioneer Cleve Jones the day after *Milk*'s Oscar splash. And yet, her program's AIDS-related segments, while estimable and often unreported elsewhere, typically differ in urgency, not in frequency, from those of the big-three networks. Despite her background as someone willing to fight for the rights of people living with HIV, Maddow is vigilant about distinguishing the job description of "activist" from that of "broadcaster"—and she bristles at any suggestion that her work as an AIDS activist confers an obligation upon her work as a prime-time pundit.

I've always thought broadcasting and activism are two totally different things," says Maddow, 36, in what has been described in innumerable media accounts as her everyday "13-year-old-boy" daytime uniform: jeans, white T, open buttoned-down shirt and sneakers. "And they've always felt

that way to me. I know that's grating to some people…I get a lot of pressure [from people in the AIDS movement]. I get a lot of talking points handed to me. I get that not only from the HIV world but also from anything that I've ever had any vague association with. So I get it on AIDS issues, I get it on gay issues, I get it on Massachusetts issues [she lives there on weekends], California issues [she was born and raised there] and on prisons and on lesbian health. And [because my] dad worked for the water company and [because my] mom's Canadian! [The suggestions] come in literally by the hour. And, of course, when someone overtly and publicly presents you with talking points, that guarantees that you will never use them. I am happy to take an idea from anyone. When Marty [Delaney] died, I got a heads-up from a very good friend in the movement who offered to hook me up with some information. But I opted to [take a different route]. I don't take talking points from the president, so I'm not going to take them from anyone else. That'd be the death of me."

Maddow insists that when she filed her story on health care for positive people behind bars (called "Time Out") for *POZ*, she had no master plan to conquer the American media. And yet she has exploded, with dynamite ratings, the paralyzingly hairsprayed, bogusly bipartisan notion of the typical American news broadcaster. Her sexual orientation and persona have been sliced, diced and julienned by the intelligentsia—including the professional thinker Daphne Merkin, who dubbed her the new "Butch Fatale" in a *New York Times* essay. And though, like her fellow left-leaning MSNBC colleagues Keith Olbermann and Chris Matthews—and her conservative FOX competitors Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck—she has crafted her show from her own political and moral DNA, she doesn't traffic in bluster. She triumphs by being the smartest one in the room and chooses to express her distaste for this drug policy or that White House alum with 13-year-old-boy vernacular ("Duh," "Riiiiight," "Nice!"). Maddow has a supernatural talent for explanation—for talking…and talking…and talking sans teleprompter—until even the most Byzantine Ponzi scheme has been simplified to the equivalent of "See Spot Run." That talent very nearly disguises that much of what she's actually saying is entirely her own opinion.

Her demeanor and idea of what, precisely, constitutes "news" are so atypically empowering that she has unwittingly become a pop-cultural hook upon which traditionally marginalized viewers and demographics—like women, gay people, smart people, prisoners, dorky-eyeglass-wearing people and HIV-positive people—may hang their hopes and agendas. They may project a personal connection to her that offers some comfort, and it is from that comfort, it seems reasonable to assert, that her success derives.

Did that same type of connection fuel her activism, too? "Activism is figuring out that there is something that you want to be changed in the world," she says. "A policy that you want to be changed, a person that you want to be freed from prison, even someone whom you want to be elected to office. Whatever it is. And then you figure out what would need to happen in the world so that change would occur. And then you figure out the connection between yourself and that trigger. And so it's whatever leverage, whatever powers, whatever things you can conjure from your own life and the other people who want this change to happen in order to pull the trigger to make that change happen. You know, it's a very cause-and-effect sort of thing. It's math! Sometimes it's a Rube Goldberg machine, and sometimes it's A + B = C. But depending on what

you're trying to get done, it's, 'I want this thing to change, how can I get it changed, let's change it, has it been changed, or has it not?' [Activism] is something where you can say, 'I've won or I've lost.' Consciousness-raising [how she views her broadcasting work] is, like, a different thing to me."

There's no disputing, however, that Rachel Maddow's journey toward her deeply personal and idiosyncratic position in the media universe—from the manner in which she interrogates her guests to her ethical philosophies on the civic values of journalism—is rooted in and molded by the AIDS movement. She will tell you repeatedly that what motors her through her 20-hour work days is the passion to be "useful" to society—the passion that drove her AIDS work—and that the cult of personality that has encircled her perhaps obscures what she considers her shows' intense concern with the American ideals of equity and civil responsibility.

On a recent show, she noted President Obama's strategy of media saturation, but she herself is no less visible. The openly gay, 6-foot-tall Rhodes Scholar, who lettered in three high school sports and favors dorky-looking, chunky black eyeglasses off the air, has become an object of desire. She is often a guest on other personality-driven shows, brewing carrot soup with Martha Stewart one night, mixing retro cocktails for Jimmy Fallon on another or sitting beside David Letterman and teaching him, with a bumper-car analogy, why the economy crashed. You can be sure she has won face time with Letterman and in layouts of *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* not because of her work as an AIDS activist but because she's a spectacularly entertaining, Neilsen-certified emblem of intelligence and accountability.

Maddow began her AIDS work in high school, in Castro Valley, California, an East Bay community near Oakland. "I'm trying to remember if I was 16 or 17…it was the summer before my senior year in high school, 1989, and I decided to volunteer at the Center for AIDS Services in Oakland. I think that it was [partly because] I was probably starting to figure out that I was gay, although that was all a very nebulous thing. But I definitely was moved by…and felt sort of an inchoate connection to the AIDS movement."

At the center, she doled out food, swept up, did child care—then went off to Stanford University, where her HIV efforts intensified. "I wanted to be helpful. I felt like [the AIDS movement] was a righteous thing that was happening around me that I had some connection to. And so that meant doing work in prevention and awareness. I ran the [campus] Ye Olde Safer Sex Shoppe! Which was soooooo fun. You'd go around to freshmen dorms; it was like doing stand-up."

Maddow wanted to be helpful after graduation, too. So she concentrated her studies around HIV. "I did a public policy degree with a concentration in health policy. At Stanford, they don't do minors, but I did an honors program in ethics. And I wrote my undergraduate ethics thesis, my honors thesis, on dehumanization and the AIDS movement. On how people can have a strict moral code about how other people ought to be treated and still treat people very badly—by virtue of the fact that they don't see the people who they're treating badly…AS PEOPLE!" She chuckles bitterly. "So therefore your sense of self-regard and your morals can be completely intact while you're behaving monstrously."

She pauses for the punch line: “So basically, it was a lot about Reagan.”

After graduation, in 1994, she went to join one of two ACT UP groups thriving in San Francisco—ACT UP Golden Gate. “I was very impressed,” Maddow says. “But I felt like I was way out of my league. It was a treatment-heavy environment, and I didn’t have the scientific background to be able to participate. So I went to ACT UP San Francisco instead, which was a hybrid creature, where it was the denialist guys starting to really feel their oats…and the Prison Issues Group. And there were a few other groups too. The Prison Issues Group, which I always lovingly called P.I.G., was a very different ball of wax. It had a very specific remit and was really involved in concrete policy stuff. It was not only trying to make cogent, build on and publicize the incredible work that was being done by activist prisoners who were HIV positive or who were HIV activists inside prisons…but also to just get these in-their-face, ostentatiously horrific prison policies changed.”

And so began Maddow’s involvement with HIV prison activism, which took her around the country, focusing on states with dire correctional conditions, such as Alabama, where she encountered, in the office of the legal nonprofit Equal Justice Initiative, a quotation on the wall. It was from the anti-death-penalty activist Sister Helen Prejean, whom Susan Sarandon portrayed in *Dead Man Walking*: “We are all [worth] more than the worst thing we have ever done.”

This became Maddow’s motto, too. It stayed with her at Oxford and upon her return to America in 1998, inspiring her as she finished her thesis after settling in rural western Massachusetts, a locale she thought would offer few distractions. And so, while working for the ACLU National Prison Project and the National Minority AIDS Council, she also undertook a series of odd jobs—yard work, coffee-bean roasting, freelance *POZ* reporting—and met her current partner, commercial photographer Susan Mikula. But it was her auditioning for yet another part-time job that would begin to lead her away from the world of AIDS activism. It was for local radio, *The Dave in the Morning Show*. Maddow was the “news person,” such as there was one: She has recounted to many an interviewer the morning-zoo tales of her dressing up as an inflatable calculator, of crafting a trucking-company jingle to the tune of Neil Diamond’s “Sweet Caroline.”

For a few years, the radio show was merely one job among many. But by 2004, when she was offered a full-time job at the newly formed Air America, she decided to take it. “I e-mailed or called everybody with whom I was working on the various AIDS-in-prison projects at that point,” she recalls, “and said, ‘I am going to have to take a few months off from this work, because I am moving to New York! Because I got a full-time job in radio, which has always been the secret other thing I did that you guys didn’t know about. And, uh, I don’t know how this is gonna go, I don’t know if this company is gonna last, I don’t know if I’m gonna last in this job, but I know that I have to sort of step out for a while.’”

Maddow maintains that she initially considered the job a temporary diversion from her AIDS work, which she’d return to eventually. She says she felt a bit overwhelmed by all the many jobs she’d been doing and wanted to settle, just for a little while, on one, to refresh. But she quickly changed her mind: “One day, I was an AIDS activist, and the next day, I was not.”

From the beginning, Maddow says, she had no plans to use radio as an extension of her AIDS work. “In broadcasting,” she says, “I’m not, like, getting people to ‘Call your congressman to get this thing passed!’ I’m not like a crusading broadcaster. When I’m broadcasting, I’m trying to explain the world. I’m trying to understand the world myself. And contribute to the overall level of discourse and debate on the subjects I am discussing. I’m not trying to change something or win something. You can’t say at the end of your broadcast day or at the end of your season, ‘Did you win?’”

The Air America gig soon led to guest pundit spots on Paula Zahn’s (now defunct) CNN program and guest fill-ins for Keith Olbermann. And then, on September 8, 2008, she arrived full-time on MSNBC.

Has her AIDS work in any way influenced her broadcast approach? “It definitely made me part of who I am,” she says. “But I think it’s pretty hard for animals to figure out how we became the animals we are. You know what I mean? Sometimes people ask me, ‘How does being gay affect the way that you see the world? And I’m, like, ‘I don’t know, I’ve been gay since I was 17!’ I’ve never not been gay and seen the world. So I’ve never been a broadcaster who didn’t have an AIDS activist background. So I don’t know how it changed me. I mean, it’s definitely changed some of my political orientation. I learned from the AIDS movement that people should speak for themselves. And I think that maybe manifests on my show…in that I do long introductions before I let guests talk usually, but then the payoff is that they get to talk without being interrupted.”

When it is pointed out to Maddow that her AIDS work was directly responsible for her telling a vast audience about Martin Delaney, she shrugs. “Every host,” she says, “to the extent they’re allowed, can take things from their own personal life and background that they think can help illuminate stuff for the country. For example, Keith Olbermann talked about his high school teacher. Not because anybody knows who his high school teacher is but because something about what this high school teacher meant to Keith gives him something to say…about the country. For me, talking about Marty was not only a chance to do right by people whom I know who have done good work but also to explain what was good about his work. I think that the AIDS movement is part of what more Americans should think of as a successful way to be a civic-minded American.”

In *Newsweek*’s December 1, 2008, issue, the writer Julia Baird declared: “The greatest media-created cliché about Maddow has been that her ‘meteoric rise’ has been almost accidental, that the truck-driving, yard-clearing, erstwhile activist became an ‘unlikely’ star once the MSNBC heads recognized her potential. That’s clearly a fiction.” Indeed, the activist part of the equation, whether Maddow acknowledges it or not, could alone dispel this myth. And it also gives her the background and perspective with which to judge other media coverage of HIV. When asked to do just that, she demurs—with another cliché, one popular among enlightened New Yorkers, though not among enlightened New Yorkers with their own television shows: “I don’t own a TV.” Really? “Yes! I have never seen a network newscast.” Not even Brian Williams’s? “No. I have a weird media diet, in that I don’t consume media. So I don’t feel qualified to judge other outlets’ coverage.” (A few days after this interview, though most likely not because of it, she relented and had one installed in her tiny Manhattan apartment.) But she adds: “I don’t think ‘manageability’ is the reason why AIDS isn’t

covered. It has always been a struggle to get AIDS covered, and manageability is one inflection among many." The others? The marginalization of the groups most affected, the perception that AIDS is an overseas problem, the proliferation of other diseases and crises.

So far, the reviews of Maddow's show have been largely favorable, with most of the criticisms focusing on her tendency to book guests who agree with her (though she has taken on former Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich and conservative stalwart Pat Buchanan) and that her show's overwhelmingly liberal tilt guarantees that it will be seen only by those who agree with her. Analyzing the show a few weeks after its debut, *The New York Times* reviewer Alessandra Stanley wrote: "Ms. Maddow has the character and political passion; what she doesn't have is a worthy opponent."

In her fight against AIDS, it would seem to us, Maddow has all three.

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