

The Social Radars

S4: Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI

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Jessica: I'm Jessica Livingston, and Carolynn Levy and I are The Social Radars. In this podcast, we talk to some of the most successful founders in Silicon Valley about how they did it. Carolynn and I have been working together to help thousands of startups at Y Combinator for almost 20 years. Come be a fly on the wall as we talk to founders and learn their true stories.

Carolynn, today we have a very special guest. We have both known him for a very, very long time.

Carolynn: Yeah.

Jessica: Going back to 2005, I knew him because he was part of the first Y Combinator batch, and you knew him because you were his lawyer at Wilson Sonsini.

Carolynn: That's right.

Jessica: He was the CEO of Reddit for eight days. He was the president of Y Combinator from 2014 to 2019. He's the founder and CEO of OpenAI, makers of ChatGPT. Ladies and gentlemen, today we have Sam Altman on the show.

Carolynn: Welcome, Sam.

Jessica: Welcome, Sam.

Sam: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Jessica: Sam, I usually don't have an intro with such a flourish, but I just felt like it today. I just felt-

Carolynn: It's a festive podcast.

Jessica: Yeah, it felt very festive, so I had to do sort of like a SmartLess intro where I gave a little bit of your bio. Welcome, Sam. Nice to see you.

Sam: You too.

Jessica: So Sam, you were one of the first people I knew in Silicon Valley, honestly.

Sam: I remember so clearly that weekend of interviews at the Garden Street office of Y Combinator in Cambridge where we met.

Carolynn: Those interviews were longer, right? Wasn't it a long interview?

Sam: It was 40 minutes at that time.

Jessica: 40 minutes.

Carolynn: Oh my gosh, whoa.

Sam: It was 40 minutes. There were only eight companies that got chosen. There had been this plan that... this is right when Y Combinator started. Y Combinator was either going to say, "Yes, we'll fund you. No, we're not going to fund you. Or we can't quite tell, so we're going to invite a few companies that are on the borderline to Cambridge to interview with us." And Jessica will know, but I believe they invited everybody. They didn't accept anybody without an interview.

Jessica: No, we interviewed everyone.

Carolynn: I was going to say, I didn't realize you were going to do sight unseen.

Sam: That was the original plan, or at least that was what it said in the application form.

Carolynn: See, he remembers the application form.

Jessica: I know my memory might be spotty, but that's not ringing a bell because we literally interviewed everyone. But maybe on the application form we said that, that's possible.

Sam: I think you definitely interviewed everybody. That's my memory.

Carolynn: Okay.

Sam: But I think because the application form said, "We're only going to interview the close calls," we all showed up thinking we were not that good.

Carolynn: The close to the borderline, that you're on the bubble.

Sam: And then PG told us, "Hey, we decided to interview everybody." I think it was like that.

Jessica: Oh my gosh, that's so funny. I had no idea.

Sam: We were all stressed. We were all trudging in with our backpacks, and there were some real characters in the room.

Carolynn: Oh, for sure.

Jessica: Wait, before you even tell this though, we couldn't remember. You were at Stanford, you were working in an AI lab there. How did you even start Loopt? Were you a freshman or a sophomore when you started Loopt?

Sam: A sophomore, a sophomore.

Jessica: Okay.

Sam: And it was really barely. I mean, it was like a project. It would not have turned into a company without Y Combinator. It would've just been a dorm room project, and that would've been it.

Jessica: And had you known about Paul Graham from his essays?

Sam: I had, yeah.

Jessica: Okay, you had to have. Yeah.

Sam: I think that's how everybody at the time knew about Paul, through his essays. He had a real cult following. And then, I heard about it, it was called the Summer Founders Program at the time, which was posted sort of fairly late in the year. I think I'd already accepted an internship, but I heard about it from Blake Ross, who lived across the hall from me.

Jessica: Oh, Firefox.

Sam: Maybe downstairs in the dorm. Firefox, yeah.

Jessica: Oh, wow. Okay.

Sam: And this is where my memory gets a little hazy, but I think he posted it on Facebook, the Facebook at the time, as a link.

Carolynn: Facebook? That's right, I forgot about that.

Sam: And he said, "This seems like a cool thing," and that was that.

Carolynn: He didn't apply though, did he?

Sam: He didn't apply, but that was when I found out about it.

Jessica: So you had this sort of dorm room project, Loopt. You saw Y Combinator. You flew out. I won't drag in the famous, "I'm a sophomore and I'm coming," story because Sam, I'm going to admit it. You didn't actually say, "I'm a sophomore and I'm coming." You were much more polite about it. I saw the email and it said, "By the way, I am a sophomore, just in case some applications got confused."

Sam: It was a little more polite. I appreciate you saying that.

Jessica: Yes. So tell me about that weekend. So you show up for your interview, and it was just you, right? It wasn't you and Nick?

Sam: It was just me.

Jessica: Okay.

Sam: I did a red-eye the night before, I slept on a couch for a little bit in my friend's dorm room, and then I walked. It's a decently far walk from the T station.

Jessica: Did you tell your parents or no?

Sam: I must have.

Jessica: Okay.

Sam: I must have out of excitement, yeah. And I was trudging down the street, and it's a beautiful spring in Cambridge, and there's all these trees. It's very different from Silicon Valley. It's old in a really nice way, and I was like, this is pretty cool. And then you walk inside the Garden Street building, which is nothing what you'd expect from the outside or that whole neighborhood. It's beautifully done, but a really strange, unexpected space, but I thought it was awesome. It also was shockingly quiet. That's one thing I really remember. It's a very well soundproofed building-

Jessica: Yes. Now that you know Paul Graham, you know why.

Carolynn: Got the soundproof office because it was his office before we hijacked it for Y Combinator.

Sam: And there's all these people milling around and the four partners, although he had kept Jessica's secret at the announcement.

Jessica: Yes, I was the fourth member.

Sam: She's the mysterious fourth member. I think that's why your email address was X as I recall.

Jessica: That's exactly right. It was X at Y Combinator because I didn't want anyone knowing my affiliation yet, because I don't think I had quit my job officially. Like they would've known or cared. Anyway,

Sam: So we meet the mysterious fourth partner. We're in there talking with the other groups. It was 40 minutes, it was a shockingly long interview, especially relative to the 10 now.

Carolynn: What did you talk about for 40 minutes? Because Loopt must have been pretty early days.

Sam: Very early days. It was like a full-on office hour session. It felt more like an office hour session than an interview.

Carolynn: Okay.

Sam: There were some questions, but it was mostly brainstorming.

Jessica: And we were probably really psyched because you actually had something. You had formulated this idea and were actually building something. So it must have been...

Sam: Yeah, we had a demo to look at.

Jessica: Yeah.

Sam: And then you'd hang out with the other companies. It was more of an all-day event than YC interviews are now. And then went to dinner, and during dinner, PG called me. It's one of those moments that gets burned into your brain, but I remember I went outside the restaurant. I was standing on the street. I had this old Palm Treo, that's how long ago it was. And Paul was like, "We'd like to fund you." And yeah, that was definitely one of those life pivot moments.

Jessica: And you said yes.

Sam: Yeah.

Jessica: I remember. Okay, so that was in April.

Carolynn: So the April of your sophomore year. So you're a sophomore in college, but this-

Sam: I think Paul said something like, "If you need a few minutes to think it over, you can, but that would be a real disappointment from failing an intelligence test."

Carolynn: He said that to you?

Sam: You liked that.

Jessica: Are you sure? Are you sure?

Carolynn: That's much funnier than the sophomore thing.

Sam: It was nicer than that.

Jessica: Oh my gosh. Well, to be fair, even in the first batch, Carolynn, we sent all of the legal documents to the founders ahead of time. So the only question that they should have had was, "Yes, do I want to accept this offer or not?" They had all the details.

Carolynn: Well... Go ahead, Sam.

Sam: Also, at the time, there was not a fixed term, so there were different valuations. So he was like, "Ahead of time, you get the documents. You shouldn't have any other

questions except this one thing which we'll decide, which is the valuation we're offering. And so if you need a few minutes to think about that, you can, but everything else you should have known ahead of time." Anyway, I said yes right away.

Carolynn: Yeah, yeah, okay. And then you had to go cancel your internship?

Sam: And then I had to go cancel my internship.

Carolynn: Where was the internship?

Jessica: Yeah, where was it?

Sam: Goldman Sachs. It would've been horrible.

Carolynn: That would've killed things right there.

Sam: I had no real desire to do that, but I fell for the peer pressure. The investment banks were known as the cool thing. The hardest interview was what the smartest kids wanted to go do.

Jessica: That's so Sama though. That's so Sama to get an internship at Goldman Sachs, the premier investment bank.

Carolynn: It's still like that, it's still like that. Since I have two college kids, I can tell you.

Sam: Really? I would've thought now it's startups.

Carolynn: No. I mean, kids are still... No, we can talk about that offline, but there's still a lot of pressure to go to consulting firms and investment banks. They still have a vice grip on college kids.

Sam: I will say one thing I remember about that whole experience and what I can imagine explains some of the vice grip, is never in my life had I flown business class or stayed in a really nice hotel or anything like that. And then as an 18, 19-year-old, whatever it was, when they fly you to New York for your interview, they get you a business class ticket. You stay in this really nice hotel. They take really nice recruiting events. They take you out to these great restaurants, and you go into the office, and it's pretty impressive. And the whole thing, it really... I think of myself as someone who's not that affected by that stuff, and it still really affected me.

Carolynn: Yeah, and you're young. And I also think part of it is location. Kids want to move to New York. They want to live in big, exciting cities.

Sam: I had this whole fantasy about how I was going to have my New York summer, and I was going to go for a cult and the whole thing.

Jessica: Instead, Sam, you had your Arlington, Massachusetts summer.

Sam: Great memory.

Carolynn: Where's Arlington?

Sam: Kind of a little more towards Cambridge.

Jessica: Arlington is like on the outskirts of Cambridge, but it's like suburbs, Levy. It's suburbs.

Carolynn: Oh, okay, okay.

Jessica: That was a pretty brave decision to come by yourself, to live in Arlington, to attend this thing that had never existed before, Y Combinator. That's pretty cool, Sam.

Sam: See, Levy. Do you know why Jessica remembers that I lived in Arlington?

Carolynn: Did she deliver an air conditioner to you?

Sam: She delivered an air conditioner.

Carolynn: And she had to drive across some annoying bridge or go through some annoying tunnel.

Sam: So there was a crazy heat wave that summer, and Jessica hand-delivered giant window AC units to every founder in the program.

Carolynn: Everybody we've talked to on this podcast from that batch remembers the air conditioners. Jessica, that was active heroism for you to bring AC to these founders.

Jessica: Back when we were Hightouch.

Sam: It did feel like a crazy thing to do at the time. Obviously it was not, and I learned a great lesson about being calibrated on risk, and I think would've been way riskier in all the ways I care about and horrible for my life trajectory to have gone and done that Goldman Sachs internship. But at the time, it felt like a super risky thing. All of my friends looked at me with concern, not just like I was making a stupid decision.

Jessica: I was listening to an interview you did with Gary Tan on how to build the future, which you had started eight years ago and he's resurrected. And you said, "I don't identify as a formidable person." And that surprised me, Sam, because what I want to do, I want to figure out how Sam became one of the most formidable founders that we know. And there were some data points from that very first summer, Sam. Do you remember some of those?

Sam: When I think of the word formidable, I think of someone who's good at fights and confrontational and that you really don't want to screw with and does all of these aggressive things. And I would say I'm extremely not a fighter, anti-confrontation, so that's where it doesn't resonate for me.

Jessica: Okay. I think of formidable as different. I think of formidable as making bold decisions and doing things while others are looking at them like they're crazy and getting stuff done, making things happen, that kind of thing.

Sam: Yeah, I think there is something that feels very different to me about how I think about decisions that other people would think are very risky. I've never been able to put myself in what I think of as the standard headspace there. I don't feel like I'm doing a very risky thing. I'm like, why does everybody else think this is a risky thing? It seems like a risk-adjusted, very good thing to do.

Carolynn: So obviously taking the YC offer was risky. But when you look backward, this whole, "That's not scary, that's not risky," can you find examples of that in your childhood too? Have you always been this way?

Sam: Well, I'm pretty afraid of physical risk. I was a timid, cautious kid in that sense.

Carolynn: So you're not an adrenaline junkie.

Sam: I mean, I like racing cars and stuff.

Jessica: I was going to say, he races cars.

Carolynn: Oh yeah, that's right.

Sam: But I don't like playing sports where I'm going to get chucked against a wall or something, or get a concussion.

Carolynn: Crushed, okay. So you just perceive risk differently?

Sam: Well, I guess so. But it's more like doing YC didn't seem risky to me at all. What I thought was going to happen is I would try this for a summer, it wasn't going to work, I would've had a really fun summer, I would've learned something, and I would've gone back to school. I'm like, okay, I missed one high-brand internship on my resume, but probably I can figure out how to make up for that. I couldn't articulate what the risk was at all, but I do remember many friends thinking that was a crazy decision.

Jessica: So in that summer, here's my list of things that I remember that were formidable about you. You met with a bunch of carriers, one of which was in the Midwest. And you weren't even old enough to rent a car, but you met with the carrier, the CEO, raised money from Sequoia. You then launched your company and wound up selling it. You did all these pretty formidable things back in 2005 and 2006 and stuff.

Sam: I remember PG telling me very early on in YC, "You're going to have to get good at business. You can't just write software, you have to go do these deals, so you've got to learn how to do that." And I was like, "Okay, I'll learn how to do that." And I was eager to please, I'll do whatever the adults say, I want to just do well at this thing. And so for me, it felt like, okay, PG said I have to learn how to do business. I'll learn how to get good at

business. And it came easily to me, but it was just like... And I think most of the things that I ever learned, a shocking percentage of everything I learned about how to be good at business, I did learn that summer because I had to do those things you just mentioned, and it was this immediate trial in the fire.

Jessica: And you were so good at it though because we always put you in charge of giving fundraising advice to startups in subsequent batches.

Sam: I did turn out to just have some natural inclination for it.

Carolynn: Can I ask something? So I used to go to Loopt board meetings, as you remember.

Sam: Oh, yeah.

Carolynn: And so I would be sitting there and-

Sam: You and Paige Maynard.

Carolynn: What's that?

Sam: You and Paige Maynard.

Carolynn: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. But I would go a lot, and so one of your people would sit there and give the update on the carriers, and I would just get so freaking bored because it's boring. And I would look over at you, and I thought, "Oh my gosh, Sam looks so stressed out." But I want to ask you now, all this decade later, were you just bored too? Because that part of the business seemed like a horrible slog.

Sam: I was probably also stressed, but yes, I was incredibly bored by it. One of the things, we all probably overlearn the negative lessons in life, but one of the things I learned from Loopt is that I never wanted to do a company that was dependent on selling to a small set of other companies that had total control over your destiny ever again.

Carolynn: And that you had to go so deep into that and live it and breathe it. Yeah, it just seemed awful.

Sam: It was awful, but I learned not to do it again. I learned a lot about vertical integration and control of your own destiny from that.

Jessica: Just for the listeners who might not remember what Loopt is because it was a long time ago, it was like a geolocation app for phones before the iPhone. But weren't you up on stage when the iPhone launched?

Sam: Not when it launched, but the second year when the app store launched.

Jessica: That's so cool because I remember you had your double polo shirt.

Sam: Oh, no.

Jessica: With the popped collar.

Carolynn: Sam's like, "Please don't bring that up."

Jessica: But we were all like, "Sam is such a badass, he's up on stage giving a talk."

Sam: It was very cool. That felt like a career highlight.

Jessica: It's so cool. Had you met Steve Jobs before that?

Sam: A little bit before, and then also we had to audition in front of him to get to go on stage. He reviewed everyone.

Jessica: Were you nervous to be auditioning for Steve Jobs?

Sam: I hadn't thought about this in years, and I was just telling someone this story a couple of days ago. It is the only time in my life... I grew up with Steve Jobs as this really like-

Carolynn: An icon.

Sam: ... figure, yeah. And then we had this opportunity that maybe we're going to get to present on stage, and that was so cool. And there was this very intense prep of two weeks on the Apple campus where we made the iPhone app, and we kept getting feedback from their product design teams about, "We want this to change, we want this to change." And then there's some rehearsals with other executives, and then the final boss is Steve Jobs, and he's going to decide whether you get to present in the keynote or not. And it was in a very dark theater on the Apple campus. This is the old Apple campus, not the new circle thing. This is a very dark theater. He is sitting in the center of maybe the third row. The theater is dark except the stage, and you walk up on stage. And you know how he had those iconic too-round glasses?

Carolynn: Yeah.

Sam: He did. And the only thing you can see because of the light off the stage is his two glasses reflecting that light.

Jessica: Oh my god.

Carolynn: [inaudible 00:20:19], yeah.

Sam: And I froze. It's the only time in business that I ever felt this much anxiety. I just froze, and it was probably only 10 seconds. It felt like minutes I'm standing on stage. And this guy named James Howard, who did the demo with me, is standing there too, ready to go. My heartbeat is pounding in my head. I'm just like, I don't know what to do. I'm going to ruin my whole life and career right now. Finally, I get-

Carolynn: You were probably like 21, right? Were you 21-ish?

Sam: A little bit older. I think it was 2008 in my memory, so I was probably 23.

Carolynn: Okay, all right.

Jessica: But you pulled it together?

Sam: No, I did a horrible job because I was just like... I mean, it was not an anxiety attack but in that direction. So I did a horrible job, stumbled through it. I get my script wrong, whatever, and then I freeze again at the end. And Steve says, "Cool, thanks," and we walk off-stage, and I think it's just a disaster. I mean, it was bad, but in my head I think it's really, really bad. And I send an email to the woman who had helped us prepare and I'm like, "I'm so sorry for letting you down. I know I really screwed that up," whatever. And she was like, "No, it's just a bad presentation, but the content was good. The app looks great," but I'm convinced that they're not going to use this as one of the demos. And then we get a call the next day being like, "Oh, that was great. Come up to Moscone Center for final rehearsals."

Jessica: Wow.

Carolynn: And you never found out. They must've just been there like, "Oh, he'll pull it together for the real thing."

Sam: Something like that.

Carolynn: Did you have that anxiety when you got on stage for the real thing?

Sam: Not at all. None.

Carolynn: So it was just-

Sam: It was Steve Jobs, you know?

Jessica: By himself in the audience in a dark audience.

Sam: I think there were other people behind him, but it was so dark in those back rows that you couldn't see them at all. The only thing you could see looking out was the crazy movie theater movie scene. It's just these two glowing glasses.

Jessica: I did not know that story, Sam, I've got to keep things moving along because we have a lot of stuff to cover, and you've done a lot of stuff. I want to skip ahead because you were always sort of in the fold of YC, even when you were running Loopt and doing other things. You became a partner at YC in 2011, right?

Sam: A part-time partner.

Jessica: A part-time partner, but you were always advising startups even when you weren't officially a part-time partner. You were always in the fold. Then in 2014, we asked you to take over YC as president when Paul retired. And so it was 2014, which is now 10 years ago, my God. I remember one of the interesting changes that you brought was you started hand-recruiting startups for YC, and Paul and I and Robert and Trevor never did that. We could barely keep up with the inbound applications. Do you remember, what were some of the startups that you talked to back then, and how did you find them?

Sam: PG did hand recruit a little bit.

Jessica: Really?

Sam: I remember he would sometimes say that he'd see something on the internet, and he would email the founder or he would ask me to email the founder and say, "This seems really interesting." Replit was one of these actually where PG noticed it like, "This seems great. Can you go hunt them down?"

Jessica: Many years later. He had already retired though.

Sam: Yeah, yeah. But my memory is he did some of that early, or no?

Jessica: I don't think he did. I mean, maybe we'd meet some people here and there, but it really wasn't a concerted effort at all. Sometimes he'd be like, "Oh, you should apply to YC," but that was it. But you also brought in hard tech companies and biotech.

Sam: My memory of this is, it could be a little bit wrong, but PG said something like, "We already knew or were already connected to or proactively invited to apply." Many of the best companies that had gone through YC, they were friends of somebody already in the program. They were referred to us by somebody in the program. He had a story like-

Jessica: Yeah, that's true.

Sam: ... about the Collisons, and he said, "You should do more things like that." And also before I was the president of YC, one of the ways that I thought I could help the most was to just find the good companies and get them to do YC. Because as we all know, just getting their best founders is so much of the battle. And if you have great founders, they usually do great work.

Carolynn: One example, Helion in summer '14, I'm actually reviewing documents for them right after this podcast. So that's one that you brought in, right?

Sam: Yeah. Well, I was very excited about energy and fusion in general, and so as part of the recruiting push, I went to go visit all of the private fusion companies. I don't remember if it was the world or in the US, I think it was just the US, but there were only four. That's shocking. 10,000 photo sharing apps started that year and four fusion companies in existence. And I went to visit them all, and I thought Helion was by far the best and so

recruited them to do YC. But yeah, the idea was... They're doing great by the way. That's been really exciting.

Carolynn: Yeah, I know.

Sam: The idea was that if really it's the best companies that matter, then we should be willing to spend a lot more effort trying to go find them and get them into the program. And I really enjoyed that part of the job. That was always just fun to go out and do that.

Jessica: Yeah, Paul did not go out and visit companies. No way.

Sam: That seems very true.

Jessica: I have another question about this timeframe, and this is sort of a full-circle Social Radar moment, and it has to do with Parker Conrad, who came on the show and talked about his crazy story with Zenefits and Rippling and David Sacks and all of that. So you'd said earlier in our conversation that you didn't like to fight with people, but he called you out as one of his biggest supporters in the whole situation with David Sacks, and you basically finally went to talk to Marc Andreessen. But let me back up. One of the weird parts of being a Y Combinator president is that you sometimes do have to fight on behalf of a startup who's being maltreated. When did you become involved in the whole Parker Conrad situation?

Sam: For me, this general thing was the hardest part. It was the emotionally most taxing part of the job by far. A shocking amount of my time running YC was fighting with startups' investors on their behalf, and I think PG also found this one of the least pleasant, most draining parts of the job. But you end up doing a surprising amount of it, and you can sense that all of these other investors really deeply dislike you and think you have too much leverage in this situation. They do usually back down because you have this hammer of the whole YC community. But man, there are all of these ways in which much of YC is just this blur of being on the phone constantly dealing with someone's problem. John Levy, I feel like, is just on the phone 18 hours a day, fighting on someone's behalf, dealing with someone's problem.

Carolynn: Yes, yes.

Sam: A lot, a lot, a lot. I always wished people understood just how much YC partners do to fight on behalf of companies, most of which never go anywhere.

Carolynn: Thank you for saying that. That's such a good point.

Sam: I think it's a very special thing. More generally, one of the things, I mean, I think this is true for everybody who does YC, including now, but especially that early crew, it was like those first few years of YC were such an incredible tight-knit family and just tribe that the amount I have seen people from that era really go to the mat to fight for each other at their company's time. Even now when it comes up, it's like, "Yeah, we were kids

together. I'll cancel my day and I'll help you out of this mess," even if people haven't talked to each other in 10 years. I think it's such a deep and special part of YC.

Anyway, on the Rippling point, I don't remember exactly when YC really got involved, but it was in a bad place by the time we did. I remember that meeting with Mark, and it was like, I mean, crazy threats were flying. There was a thing that PG or Jessica used to say about YC, I forget who it was, but it was like, startups have all sorts of horrible problems. You can bring us your problems. It won't scare us. We're like emergency room doctors. If you come in with an arm cut off, we'll be like, "Well, you have the arm." And so we were used to a lot of really bad situations, and I felt very unshaken by them at this point. But I remember when Parker was explaining his situation, it was one of the few times in all of YC where I sat back at my chair and I was like, "Whoa, this is a tough one."

Jessica: Was it the worst you had seen as the operating doctor?

Sam: I think so. At least I can't come up with a worse one right now.

Carolynn: I would agree. I don't remember anything quite as dramatic and awful as that.

Jessica: So you said YC has got to step in and try to do something?

Sam: Well, I think we had either a regular partner meeting or an emergency one about it, and we were like, "What are we going to do here first?" And then we collectively decided that I would first talk to Mark, and other people were going to do some other things too.

Jessica: And what kind of threats were going on? Was it between you and Mark that there were threats?

Sam: No, I remember that Mark really wanted to solve it. But there was a bunch of messy legal action by this point, right?

Carolynn: Yeah, for sure. It was bad.

Sam: So those were a lot of the threats, but my memory of Mark is that he was very good and wanted to solve it and said, "Okay, this has gotten to a bad place. Let's see what we can do."

Jessica: But it stopped after that conversation, Parker said.

Sam: I thought it went on a little bit. Maybe it did.

Jessica: That was a pivotal moment basically, I think if I remember that right.

Sam: I think it did change the trajectory.

Carolynn: I'm sure it didn't resolve overnight, but yeah, I think that maybe Mark getting involved and you getting involved helped a lot.

Jessica: Carolynn, do we have any other questions before we move on to OpenAI?

Carolynn: Well, really quick, I just want to know. What are some of your fondest memories of your time as president at YC? What stands out? We just talked about the bad. What are some of the good?

Sam: I mean, it was mostly great. These are things that came together in a quick montage in no order. I think it was the first demo day after I took over, the first alumni demo day, either at the beginning or the end of it. I said something about PG and how thankful I was and how much he had done for all of us in gracefully doing this, and the whole room stood up and gave this big standing ovation that went on for a while. And then after, that night, I was at a dinner with a bunch of the founders, and everybody went around and were just like, "It was cool that you did that. Here's my PG story."

And I was very struck in that moment about how much we had been affected by all of the partners, but PG in particular had gone so out of his way to do things for each of us that were great advice or fighting with an investor or whatever. And I sort of said right then, okay, someday when I'm retiring from YC, I hope that there are people who go around and feel like I did something for them. The level of gratitude towards what YC had done for all of us was this special thing. So I was like, there's a lot of things that I can do at YC, but the one thing I really want to do is be there for founders like this. And then I still hear super frequently from founders that did YC while I was doing it about like, "Hey, you probably won't remember me. You won't remember this thing you did, but it changed my company, my career," whatever. For me, that is the most fulfilling part of being a YC partner.

The second best one for me is watching founders develop during the course of the three months of YC. It's like watching a child grow up in terms of how fast the development goes. You can watch someone that comes in, and they're so unimpressive at the beginning of YC and so impressive by the time it's done. And it's like, how can that happen in three months, and can we do that for a lot more people in the world?

Jessica: Can you call to mind any specific founders who you remember changed a lot in those three months?

Sam: Tim Ellis just came to mind, Relativity Space. They 3D print rockets, but he was in my group. He came in so helpless and was just such a force of nature by the end of YC. But again, it happens pretty often.

Jessica: That's a good example. Under the instruction of Sam Altman, he emerges.

Sam: Actually, I don't think it's the partners that do it. I think it's the peers. Yeah, I think a big piece of the magic of YC is that the peer group is so effective.

Carolynn: That's why it's so great that we're back in person because I think you just can't get that on Zoom.

Sam: I thought it was totally crazy when all of the companies during the pandemic, all the tech companies were racing to be like, "We're going to be remote. We're going to be even more remote. We're remote forever." I was like, I am confident this is going to get undone. This stuff does not work over Zoom.

Carolynn: Right, yeah.

Jessica: Okay, we've got to shift gears and move over to OpenAI because it's such a big thing now. OpenAI started as a nonprofit, and you started it as a side project to explore AI, but a lot has changed since 2016.

Sam: So I had been a computer nerd and particularly an AI nerd my whole life. The summer before doing YC, I worked in the AI lab at Stanford, and I thought nothing was working, but I still thought it was the coolest thing ever. And I wanted to be an AI researcher, but nothing was working. And I went down a different path for a long time, startups, investing, whatever.

And then in 2012, there was this real breakthrough called AlexNet that my co-founder, Ilya, helped to lead where we saw for the first time a neural network win at a competition. This happened to be image recognition. And then I think we all should have taken much more notice right then. It took a while for the world to really wake up to it, but we had this technology called deep learning that seemed to work. And more importantly than that, it seemed to get better with scale. You could throw more compute at it, and it just got better. And this felt really crazy.

There were other threads going on, and I had gotten pretty deep in the hole like AGI could be super dangerous if it goes badly, East Bay, whatever that thing was. And I felt like it was somehow worth exploring more, but it wasn't clear what to do. And also, it wasn't clear at all that it would ever be that there could be a company. OpenAI started as a research lab. We thought we were just going to write papers, or actually we weren't even really sure. We were going to just try to do research, and papers were what people knew as the object to produce. But we imagined that we would just be writing papers and maybe putting some open-source technology into the world, and a nonprofit seemed like the right structure for that, especially given that we had these safety concerns about how the technology could evolve.

We got to work, and we were a sleepy research lab for a while. And we did a bunch of things that were sort of impressive, but they didn't contribute to this artifact that we hoped to build someday. We made something that played video games really well, or one video game really well. We made-

Carolynn: Can I stop you there? Do you remember when you told us about the air hockey game? Is this what you're talking about? Maybe it wasn't air hockey. You told us about the arm, the arm that could play games.

Sam: Oh yeah, it wasn't air hockey.

Carolynn: What was it?

Sam: Something that was much slower. I don't remember, but it was not air hockey.

Carolynn: Well, so you were just chatting with me about it, and you said something that still creeps me out. You're like, "Oh yeah, last night, the machine, the arm, learned that if it's not winning, it can just pick up the table and tilt it a little bit." Do you remember telling me that?

Sam: Yeah.

Carolynn: It's still creepy to this day that it learned how to do that. Should I not be creeped out by that? Because I am.

Sam: Well, no, I think there is something. Something's coming full circle there. So we had this little simulator, and we would try to have it do all these things, and it would definitely occasionally learn that it could just exploit some bug, like flipping over the table or whatever. And that reinforcement learning where you have a goal, and it's just sort of randomly trying some stuff and then doing more of what works, that was a scenario in which you could see a lot of things going wrong. And at the time, this is before we discovered language models. At the time, the consensus view of how we were going to get to AGI was we were going to build this reinforcement learning agent and then put it in more and more complex environments until eventually it was living on a simulated island trying to survive and reproduce and rerun evolution or something like that. And the safety issues there are very easy to imagine. It could do much worse than flipping over a table.

Thankfully, we discovered a much better approach, which became the GPT models and chatbots and things like that where we just try to learn the themes of human output on the internet. Now, the reason I said it's full circle is we are again trying to take those language models we've learned from all of human history and do reinforcement learning on top of them. And this is where I think we have to be very careful about potential safety issues. And you should be a little freaked out, but we've got very smart people.

Carolynn: Well, I want to say that was like 2016-ish, is that right?

Sam: Seems right.

Carolynn: Yeah. And I was like, "Ugh."

Jessica: Can I ask a real dumb, dumb question? Sorry, Sam, I'm just going to apologize in advance, but I have some questions that you probably don't get asked because they're so idiotic. But the LLMs grew out of this Transformer paper from Google, and OpenAI figured out how to make it work on a large scale. Why were you guys at OpenAI able to get more out of it than Google did?

Sam: I think a couple of things. One, I think Google didn't realize the significance of what they had with the Transformer. Now, it would've been discovered at some point by somebody else, but a lot of people were publishing a lot of architectural ideas, and this was one really great one. But at the time, it felt like one out of many. And we had been looking at a previous generation architecture for language models for a while. So Google published this thing. We had been waiting for a much more efficient architecture and maybe had been thinking about related ideas for longer.

But a really important thing is, it was not at all obvious at the time, even though in retrospect it looks like it should have been, that you were supposed to put all of your effort into one giant scale up. You go to a place like Google, and there's a lot of smart researchers, and they all want compute. And the easy thing to do is to say, "We're going to give you each 1% of our compute, and you can run your experiments and find more breakthroughs." And it's really hard to say like, "Hey, actually we see this interesting property of scaling, so most of the researchers are going to get very little compute, and we're going to pick one team to get 80% of our company's computing power to do this one big training run." And I don't think Google could have gotten that done.

Also, the leadership of DeepMind really just didn't believe at all in this approach. So they were like, "No, this is not going to work," and they had a very different technical bet at the time. And in fact, not until the ChatGPT moment happened many years later and Google had their famous code red did they really get serious about language models, but they made the wrong technical bet.

Carolynn: So it's a big company problem plus a decision maker problem.

Jessica: But they were also pretty delayed on launching things publicly, if I remember correctly. And I remember hearing from insiders like, "Oh, Google's made so many advancements in AI, but they just haven't launched it yet," or whatever. Were they fearful, do you think, that they'd get some politically incorrect answer?

Sam: For sure.

Jessica: Or do you think that AI was at odds with the advertising business, their cash cow? What do you think it was?

Sam: I think it was those two things. So I think for sure they were a risk-averse big company where you had to go through, this is what I am terrified of happening to OpenAI someday. But you had to go through 17 layers of management, any one of which could say no from a risk perspective. There's going to be a bias issue, there's going to be a copyright issue, there's going to be a this, there's going to be a that. And I think all of those things happened.

And also, I believe, although that I've heard stories of, this next one is only speculation. I have no proof of it, but if I were Google's very senior team looking at this thing, I would say, "This breaks our business model." And I would maybe even subconsciously hope it just wasn't. I would want to believe it wasn't going to work. So I assume on speculation

that there was something going on like that. And then I actually don't think they were making great technical progress. I think they had bet on this wrong direction, and now they do have very great technology, but I think people were saying it because they had all of these other research directions they thought were going to pan out that just weren't that useful.

Jessica: Are there any queries that you use Google for at all anymore?

Sam: I stopped using Google. It's really weird.

Carolynn: No, I have too actually. I agree with that.

Jessica: See, Levy, do you only use ChatGPT?

Carolynn: Yeah, I do because it's the lazy person's. ChatGPT does all the work for you. Google gives you results you have to click on. I don't want to do that. I just want the answer.

Jessica: Right, you want the answer, not the web pages.

Carolynn: Right, exactly.

Sam: Yeah, we're trying to roll out search to our free user tier pretty soon. Right now, the really good search is only in the paid tier. But when we do, I would expect a lot of people to start using it that way. I also think we're still just scratching the surface. Yes, I think ChatGPT is better than Google search for most stuff. Not the effectively DNS queries where you're just trying to get to Facebook.com or whatever. Google's really fast at those, but for most other things, I think we're better. But I think we still haven't done the magic. We still don't have something that can go off and do the kind of web search that Carolynn would delegate to somebody on the legal team at YC and expect to take six hours of work, of searching the web and reading stuff and putting it together. And when we can do a search query like that, that's a whole new thing that is, I think, going to be really great.

Carolynn: Yeah, I can't wait.

Jessica: Sama, because we're the Social Radars, we've got to ask you. Will you talk about November 2023?

Sam: Yeah, sure.

Jessica: That crazy week when you and Greg Brockman got ousted by the board of directors. Will you tell us that? Because I remember that fucking week. It was so crazy.

Sam: You sent the nicest note or tweet right after in the middle of the craziness. I think it was the 17th that it started, and it was resolved by five days later or something. I don't know what to say about it other than it was totally crazy and surreal and felt like a dream. I

was caught completely off guard, and I really did in that first moment thinking I was having some crazy vivid dream that I was about to wake up from.

Jessica: This is when the board said, "Hey Sam, do you have a sec?"

Sam: When the board got [inaudible 00:47:17].

Jessica: I mean, how did they even tell you? Because first of all, let's just set the stage here. This was the board that was part of the nonprofit organization, correct?

Sam: Yeah. That was and is our only board. We only have the nonprofit board.

Jessica: And did they just one day say, "Sam, we need to talk to you, and you're out of here." What happened?

Sam: Yeah, I got a text message from Ilya the night before saying, "Can you talk tomorrow?" I said, "Sure." A few minutes before, he said, "Here's a Google Meet link." I was like, "Okay, let me go find a place to sit," because I was in a hotel and thought it was going to be a call, and then this happened. It was very strange. I couldn't get any questions answered, and then they just put out a blog announcement and turned off my email and stuff. And so I'm out of town, my computer just got deactivated, I have a phone, and I didn't think about what was going to happen next. I don't know if they did either, but it went crazy. It was national news for days.

Jessica: It was all anyone was talking about. Even over in England, geez.

Carolynn: I mean, the nerd Superbowl is what I heard people call it, and that still makes me chuckle a little bit.

Sam: And then the feeling of that afternoon was just this fog of war. I had no idea what was happening. The team didn't know what was happening. They were trying to get answers. I was trying to get answers. And it was nonstop calls. It started as like, "Sam must have done something horrible." This happens if you kill someone. In fact, I remember. So we were leaving, I was just on call after call. Microsoft's trying to figure out what's happening. I'm talking to a couple of board members, talking to the whole executive team. We're trying to stabilize things. It feels very crazy. And so I'm on these nonstop calls. Oli has packed up our hotel room.

The first time I had a minute where I was not on a phone call is as we were getting on the plane, and it was this very dramatic thing. It was in Las Vegas. It was super windy. We were standing right outside the plane. He had been overhearing some of the calls, and I had written him some notes, but it was the first time we really had a minute to talk. And as we're about to walk up the steps, he puts his hands on my shoulders, and he's like, "Sam, I'm with you 100% no matter what, but what the fuck did you do?"

Jessica: Wait, who was this that you're talking about? Who said this?

Sam: This is my husband.

Jessica: Oh, Oli.

Sam: He's like, "What the fuck did you do?" And I was like, "I don't know." And he's like, "Okay, I'm good," and we got on the plane.

Jessica: That's great.

Sam: It was great.

Jessica: Because the board of directors never clearly told you. What did they say to you? They said, "You're out of here because we don't trust you"?

Sam: Yeah, there were a lot of personal power issues. There were some legitimate AI safety issues that I really disagree with. I'm very proud of our safety track record, but I think other people have a different opinion on what we've done.

Carolynn: Well, it's clearly a very polarizing issue. I mean, it's understandable that there's this issue that comes up for you guys.

Sam: I will say, if you believe that AGI safety is an existential issue and that the company/me was doing it wrong or otherwise unfit, then I admire the courage of convictions to say this is the logical conclusion rather than I think what most people do, which is say, "Oh, AGI safety is this existential issue, and it's coming really soon. And what are we going to have for dinner?"

Anyway, by the time I had got back to SF that evening, we understood a little bit more about it. Not much, but it was like there was this dramatic thing where I had tried to get one of the other board members off in a way that I think I didn't handle well, and there were concerns about safety and who was going to be in charge of stuff and whatever. But more than that, I was just like, whatever. I love OpenAI. I wish them the best. What I want to do is work on AGI research. I can figure out some other way to do that. I can do it at Microsoft. I can start a new company, whatever.

The executive team had been trying to talk to the board, didn't get any answers, and people started quitting the company. So a bunch of us met up that night, and more of us met the next day. I had a call with two of the board members the next morning where they were like, "We'd like to talk about you coming back." And I'm not proud of this, but well, in my head, my first reaction was, "Absolutely not," because I was just hurt and mad and whatever, getting all excited and everything.

Carolynn: Yeah, of course. That's totally human.

Sam: And then my second thing was, and this is part I'm not proud of, I was like, "I will come back if all of you resign right now."

Carolynn: Power move.

Jessica: I don't blame you at all because it was a shitshow.

Sam: I think that was not a constructive thing. I think had I handled that differently and said, "We can negotiate some version of the board where I feel like I can have a chance to actually function," it would've been done that morning. But I responded with...

Carolynn: With emotion.

Sam: Yeah, I did. And then it kicked off this weekend of crazy nonstop negotiation, planning, counter-planning, whatever. I was mostly talking with Adam, who I think acted in good faith throughout it, but he was only one vote of several on the board.

Jessica: Adam DeAngelo?

Sam: Adam DeAngelo. But it seemed all weekend like I was going to come back and we were going to figure out a new board, and it seemed like things were on a good trajectory. And then Sunday night rolled around, and to my total shock, they're like, "We're going to appoint Emmett."

Jessica: Emmett Shear, also from the 2005 YC summer batch.

Sam: That was the angriest I had been in the whole time because I was like, the level of deception here... I was trying to keep things together. I was trying to tell the company, "Hey, this is heading to a good place. Don't go." Because all of our competitors, these vultures were circling trying to recruit whoever. But Mira had told the board that, because there were no good answers, she was going to just resign and not do this. So then they were like, "Well, we can't have Mira do this, so we've got to pick somebody else." And so they picked Emmett.

Jessica: Because she was appointed interim CEO immediately, I remember that.

Sam: Interim CEO. She was amazing throughout this whole process. She was really, really great. They put Emmett in there, and at this point, I'm just like, "What the fuck?" I'm ready to go to bed. Enough is enough. So I announced that I am going to join Microsoft and work on an AI research project there. I stay up for a couple of hours talking to people, and I go to bed. And I hadn't slept much in the last few nights.

Carolynn: Of course.

Sam: And I lay in bed, and this weird thing of very tired and still just angry and full of adrenaline, and I can't sleep. So I take a sleeping pill, and I go to bed at probably three in the morning, something like that. And then I'm rustled awake, and this time it really feels like a dream because I'm in a sleeping pill haze. I'm rustled awake, and Oli's like, "You need to look on your phone." And Ilya had said, "I regret my participation in this. I didn't want to harm OpenAI." He didn't say, "We should undo it," but something like

that. And 95% or something of the OpenAI employees had signed this letter while I was asleep saying, "This is a horrible decision. We're going to resign."

Jessica: "We're going to resign if Sam does not come back."

Sam: Emmett had also told the board, this was maybe later in the day on Monday, I don't remember, but he had also told the board, "I'm going to resign too." So finally, it still took a long time after that, I cannot believe how long the whole thing went. But finally, I think it was the Tuesday night, maybe the Wednesday night, whatever, one of those couple of nights, Tuesday or Wednesday, we finally finished everything and announced that we had high-level agreement and that I was going to come back, and the company got put back together. That part was all a crazy thing to live through, but honestly, you can do a lot for four or five days on a crazy adrenaline rush. The couple of months after were just miserable. I was just exhausted. I was in this stupor. I would walk down the hallways, and people would just avert their eyes to me. I felt like a patient with some really bad diagnosis because they didn't know what to say. They just felt bad.

Jessica: Because it was so weird.

Sam: It was just so weird. There was this air of, something must've gone horribly wrong. And until the investigation was done, everybody was just like, "Eh."

Jessica: Yes, because the overarching backdrop is, what the fuck did Sam do?

Sam: What the fuck? Totally. But the winter in SF is cold and dark and a little depressing, and that period, I remember it being very cloudy and rainy. And it was just a really tough time. It's like, all right, I felt like these people did this crazy thing, really screwed me, and now I have to pick up all the pieces. The justice of it felt really bad.

Carolynn: As if this job isn't hard enough because it's a big company, and it's a controversial thing you're doing, and then you have all this.

Sam: It's in everyone's crosshairs. Everybody either wants us to go away or wants to be us. It's just like we're the...

Carolynn: Yeah, relentless. It's relentless.

Sam: So it took a while to get out of the stupor there.

Carolynn: Actually, if I recall correctly, didn't you and Oli actually have a ceremony in January?

Sam: We did it in December, but then Oli posted photos of it in January, and then it became a big thing.

Carolynn: Oh, that's right because we were in Hawaii, and I thought you guys were there too because I saw the photos on Instagram. I'm like, "Hey, we're here together."

Sam: That was the only nice moment of normalness in that whole thing.

Carolynn: Yeah, I was going to say, there must've been some bright spots during that.

Sam: It was only our family, so it was just a really quiet, intimate thing.

Carolynn: Yeah, that's neat. Very cool.

Jessica: Do you think that that whole thing would've happened if Reid Hoffman had stayed on the board and not stepped off?

Sam: No.

Jessica: You do not think so?

Sam: In fact, had any of them... So there were three people that departed in pretty quick succession: Reid Hoffman, Shivon Zilis, and Will Hurd. Reid had a conflict, Will went to run for president, and Shivon had this issue where she had kids with Elon, and Elon was starting a competitor. So three people had to leave the board in pretty quick succession and that led to this.

Jessica: And had even one of them remained...

Sam: Wouldn't have happened.

Jessica: Gosh, if there isn't already a Harvard Business School analysis.

Sam: I mean, I hope people really learn an important lesson about boards from this and that it doesn't happen again.

Carolynn: Actually that and what happened in March of 2023. I'm just thinking in terms of what we will study later in decades, like the SVB crash and the OpenAI board issue.

Sam: The SVB thing was totally insane. I remember that weekend had a lot of flashbacks to me of the November weekend, but I remember talking to some people in the government. And I was just like, "You don't get it." They're like, "Oh, it's like a bunch of startups." I was like, "You don't get this." That felt close to a real disaster.

Carolynn: Yeah, it did.

Jessica: How involved were you behind the scenes, Sam?

Sam: Not that much. Ron Conway was a real MVP.

Jessica: Ron was the man for that, yes.

Sam: And he asked me to do a few things, so I of course did whatever he asked, but that was really him.

Jessica: That was crazy. All right, we are coming up on time here, but I just want to make sure that I have asked... Oh, Elon, he just came up a second ago. I have to quickly tell you, I have a photo that I took of your calendar from April 1st, 2015 and your meetings for that day. It said Elon, Tim Cook, Larry Page, John Doar. Do you remember this day?

Carolynn: That's quite a day.

Sam: Oh, I think that's when we were trying to get OpenAI set up.

Jessica: I bet it was, yeah. But I remember I was like, "Sam, I have to take a photo of this," because this is insane in one day.

Carolynn: That's just a normal day for Sam.

Jessica: Normal day for Sam Altman.

Sam: The original OpenAI fundraising was this crazy period because everyone was interested, so we could meet anybody or talk to anybody, but it was shockingly hard to actually raise money.

Jessica: Oh, yeah?

Sam: This was a lesson about our nonprofit structure too.

Jessica: But at the time, you had no idea that where AI would lead you was to all of this huge expensive compute time that you needed, right?

Sam: We had no idea. Well, that's not fair to say. We knew it was going to be expensive. We were probably off by a 100X from how expensive it was going to turn out to be.

Jessica: And you can't get that from donations. Come on.

Sam: Yeah. So again, had we known, we wouldn't have done that. Had we known we were going to make a product and actually be able to be a company and had we known we were going to need this much money, we would've of course been a different structure.

Jessica: And would that have changed anything that you did with the board makeup if you had been a for-profit?

Sam: We just would've been a normal company in general, which would've been healthier in so many ways. But I think it's often, if you're doing something really new, you have to feel your way through it, and you just don't know where it's going to go to a shocking degree. Jessica, I'm sure when you started YC, you couldn't really imagine that it was going to become what it became.

Jessica: No, no idea.

Carolynn: We have like 65 legal entities. It's a huge, huge thing.

Sam: And so I think that just happens, and it's somewhat unavoidable. But in our case, I think we made particularly bad decisions if we knew everything then that we know now.

Jessica: But Elon was involved early on. I just have a random question. I believe his superpower is that he's a genius engineer.

Sam: He is a genius engineer. He also is incredibly good at moving fast and motivating people and getting stuff done outside of just engineering.

Jessica: He has such a wide variety of companies. It's amazing that he'd have such good judgment in so many different directions.

Sam: It's super impressive.

Jessica: Do you think he bought Twitter to end wokeness?

Sam: I'm sure that was part of the motivation. I mean, even before he bought Twitter, my memory is he was just tweeting all the time. I mean, he loved the product, and I'm sure he wanted to end wokeness. He's the person that I imagine would like to sort of control the media platform that matters or whatever, so I bet it was a lot of things.

Jessica: Okay. Sorry, that was a random aside, but I'm now in the time of my random rapid-fire questions that I have. We've been through a lot since 2005, and I feel like when I finally write the YC book, I'm going to have to come to you to remind me of the crazy stories. Who did we used to think was the worst reporter ever?

Sam: Oh, man. Wow.

Carolynn: You have to go back to the Valleywag days.

Sam: Yeah, it's got to be someone from Valleywag, right?

Jessica: Yeah.

Sam: They were just really nasty to YC.

Carolynn: They were nasty, just mean, mean-spirited.

Jessica: And didn't care if they lied.

Sam: I was reflecting the other day. There were all of these people who made it their whole career or their whole personal brand to hate NYC. There were these people on Twitter that I used to think about all of the time, but they just got in my head, and they knew

how to do it. And they would just make up all this awful stuff or really just rev up over some little thing. It took up so much mental energy, and it felt like such a big deal, and they all faded away and were doing good things for the world.

Jessica: Do you guys remember Secret?

Sam: Yes.

Carolynn: That was a moment. Wasn't that a moment?

Jessica: Who did secret? Who did Secret?

Carolynn: I don't think we ever found out. Did we?

Sam: I think we did know who made it. It was a startup where you wrote mean things anonymously.

Carolynn: Oh, it was like you would go on and you anonymously say things about everyone else in the startup ecosystem. It was wild.

Jessica: Did they say bad things about us? I've probably blocked it out.

Sam: It was bad things about everyone in every direction.

Carolynn: I think they said bad things about everybody, yeah.

Sam: Anyway, but my lesson from that period is these people who make their whole thing about negativity and trying to tear you down, it probably feels easy for them in the moment, but they fade away.

Jessica: Yeah, I agree. I've garbage collected all of my hatred for these people, which was quite intense back in the day. All right, who was the craziest YC interviewee applying to YC? Do you remember any crazy stories?

Sam: Mostly I just remember the things where someone would come in with an obviously bad idea. You would early on, because you're always going into these interviews with hope and wanting it to work, you would try to suggest a way that it could be made better. And then you would go down this rabbit hole of they would just fight you for the remaining nine and a half minutes. "You are an idiot. You don't get why this is such a brilliant idea." And you would say, "Well, but there's this flaw." And those are the ones that I would think about at night, and I was like, "What was the strategy there?" I don't know. I think I've blocked out a lot of the really bad interviews, and I remember the really great ones. Interviews are like a slog, and then once every 10 times, that means you're like, this is so great. These people are so great, and it's super good.

Jessica: Who was your favorite one then? We'll end on a happy note.

Sam: Oh, that's a tough one.

Jessica: Or among your favorites.

Sam: One of the companies that I hand-recruited was Ginkgo Bioworks.

Jessica: Oh my gosh, yes.

Carolynn: Smart, smart founders.

Sam: I remember the first meeting. I think it was like a special one-off interview we set up with Jason and Reshma, and I was just like, this is so exciting. They're awesome. This is exactly the company I want to do. They're so smart. I remember, that was one that just came to mind immediately, I'm so enthusiastic.

Jessica: Sam, also exciting personal news. You and Oli are expecting a baby in 2025, right?

Sam: We are.

Jessica: Are you excited?

Carolynn: So exciting.

Sam: I have never been more excited for anything. I'm sure I'll get even more excited soon, but this is what I think about in the shower now, and I started buying all the baby stuff, and it's so cute.

Jessica: Oh, I love it. You're going to buy too much baby stuff though. I'm just going to tell you like it is now. You won't use half of it.

Sam: I had a bunch of friends tell me that and say, "Here's the things you actually need. Just get these."

Jessica: Just get onesies, just onesies.

Sam: But I had no ability to resist another cute onesie.

Jessica: Well, onesies are fine. Just don't buy outfits because the baby will only be in onesies. Well, we're so excited for you. Thank you so much for coming on the show and talking about all this stuff.

Carolynn: Don't you feel like a cane is going to come and pull them away because we've gone five minutes over?

Jessica: Yes.

Carolynn: And one of your PR people is going to be like, "Get out!"

Jessica: Your assistant who said a hard stop is going to give us a heads-up.

Sam: Well, we're going to go and launch this new thing.

Carolynn: Yeah, no, you have something. You actually have a hard stop because you have to go do something.

Jessica: And this will come out so much later, but it's like the 12 Days of OpenAI.

Sam: Yeah.

Jessica: Well, I'm sure it will be a huge success. So Sam, thank you so much for coming on. It was so much fun. It's going to be a great episode.

Sam: Thanks for having me.

Carolynn: Thank you, Sam. Great to see you. Bye.

Jessica: Bye. Carolynn, that was so much fun catching up with Sam.

Carolynn: Yeah. I'm really glad he had time to come on. It was great to talk to him about all that stuff.

Jessica: I know. He squeezed us in before the launch of the new product, which he's doing for the next 12 days. I mean, it's pretty cool that both of us have known him since 2005.

Carolynn: I know. I mean, yeah, it's, God, 20 years?

Jessica: I know. But he was always remarkable. Whether he agrees or not, he has his own little definition of formidable, but he's always been remarkable.

Carolynn: His definition of formidable is scary, which is probably what most people think. But I think the YC definition of formidable is someone who is not intimidated by anything and will run through walls to get what they need to get done. And so obviously we think he's the YC definition of formidable, always has been.

Jessica: I loved hearing the Steve Jobs story. I didn't remember that, the little glasses just shining in the dark.

Carolynn: And 5, 6, 7, 8. That's what I was thinking. It's like a chorus line. [inaudible 01:09:59].

Jessica: I thought the same thing of him being upstage interviewing for a part or something.

Carolynn: Yeah, yeah, and then he has to do this.

Jessica: 5, 6, 7, 8. Look, we started out with the giggles, and now we're ending with the giggles.

Carolynn: I know, I know.

Jessica: This is so embarrassing. Was it mean that I told him he needed a stylist for his Zoom background?

Carolynn: No, that's not mean at all. No. Well, so do I. Look at my background. I mean, who doesn't? There's very few of us who've managed to style our backgrounds.

Jessica: He's Sam Altman of OpenAI. He deserves more than bricks.

Carolynn: He deserves more than bricks.

Jessica: He looks like a comic, a 1980s stand up comic.

Carolynn: Yeah, yeah. It looked like a stage because those curtains that didn't have a window, the curtains had a brick wall. That was a little confusing.

Jessica: There was so much we could have covered. I mean, I feel like this was a lightning round of an interview with him because there's so much to cover. We never even asked him about when he was at Reddit.

Carolynn: Exactly. Yeah, there's that. But actually I think what would be more similar to what we've done with people, well, since you mentioned Reddit, like Steve Huffman and all the other founders we interview is actually just going deep on their actual startup. And Loopt, we did spend a little bit of time on Loopt and what he had to do to make that company work. But going through the whole trajectory of Loopt, there's probably tons of stuff in there that would be interesting to other founders, like how that company got run, what happened to it, all that stuff.

Jessica: So if we ever go on the road, let's get him back, and we'll ask him more questions about Loopt and for funny stories from YC.

Carolynn: Yeah, and then the whole Reddit story too.

Jessica: Yes, and the Reddit story because that was another. It's like Sam always gets involved with these crazy stories.

Carolynn: Yeah, it was crazy. A lot of people in this industry have crazy stories, but he probably has the most.

Jessica: But I loved that he shared them with us, and I had so much fun walking down memory lane with him.

Carolynn: Yeah, me too.

Jessica: I loved it.

Carolynn: Yep.

Jessica: All right, that's going to be a great episode.

Carolynn: I agree.

Jessica: I will see you next time, Carolynn.

Carolynn: See you next time. Bye.

Jessica: Bye.