

Sheeple Chase
Episode 5 – “Episode 56: Coke-Conspirators”

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**SFX: A TACKY, MYSTERY THEME, FULL OF SYNTH-Y
THERAMIN**

1. INT. TWO URBAN FLATS

CELIA and GEORGIE are both recording remotely, badly.

GEORGIE

**Hello and welcome to Sheeple
Chase, the podcast where I, Georgie
Barker, take a deep dive into all
things conspiracy-**

CELIA

**And where I, Celia Ripley, stand by
with a bullshit detector and twenty
CCs of liquid scepticism.**

GEORGIE

**Now before we get started with
today's episode, I think I should
probably address something.**

CELIA

Ah.

GEORGIE

(Awkward)

**I know some of you have seen
Melanie King's socials but for those
of you who haven't, I sent her a DM
inviting her to guest on the podcast
and she then posted a screenshot of
the message with a caption about
how she hates "legitimate
paranormal investigators" like
herself being lumped in with "vapid
grifters with misinformation
podcasts."
Now I'm not here to rehash anything
but just to let people know I am**

taking a break from social media after all the ghost-hunters came at me for being a flat-earth, illuminati cult leader. Which, if they'd actually listened to our episode on the illuminati, doesn't even make sense!

CELIA

At least she cropped your name out of it.

GEORGIE

Yes, but people still figured out who it was from! And when people called her on it, she said she didn't think anyone to figure it out because my audience is so tiny.

CELIA

Tiny and dedicated.

GEORGIE

That's right and thank you to everyone who's defended me online.

CELIA

Yeah, sorry again, if I had socials I would have used them.

GEORGIE

It's fine. I can hardly blame you for not sharing my poison.

CELIA

Tell you what, why don't we have a word from our sponsor?

GEORGIE

Sure.

FX: Ad Jingle

GEORGIE

As a dog owner, I know pets are family, which is why I made sure to find a vet that really understands Captain Barker. But what do you do if your little critter has a few less teeth and a lot more legs? Why, you go to WebsMD!

WebsMD are number one for arachnid veterinarians. Their specialty makes them true experts in spider care, health and behaviour so if your little spider buddy is looking a little under the weather or racked with ennui, WebsMD can sort them right out with no treading incidents since 2021!

WebsMD: it's not a bug, it's a creature.

FX: outro jingle.

GEORGIE

So, with that out the way, which conspiracy are we covering today Celia?

CELIA

It's actually your suggestion from last week.

GEORGIE

What's that?

CELIA

Last episode, you said I could pick "something mundane like New Coke," so guess what I've picked?

GEORGIE

Oh right.

CELIA

It's New Coke!

GEORGIE

Eurgh.

SFX: Unnecessarily spooky sting

CELIA

(narrating)

This is a cautionary tale about arrogant marketing departments. It's 1985 and Coca-Cola has slipped from being the undisputed king of cola to fighting an almost neck-and-neck race with Pepsi. New CEO Roberto Goizueta now has one job: beat Pepsi at any cost. And it's time to shake things up.

GEORGIE

Yeah, you really shouldn't do that to fizzy drinks...

CELIA

Which is why he throws out the 100-year old recipe that made them an international sensation and replaces it with a new one!

GEORGIE

What a great idea! I assume it was a roaring success!

CELIA

Yep, it went great, everyone loved it, end of episode!

GEORGIE

Really!?

CELIA

You wish.

GEORGIE

Boo.

CELIA

Jokes aside though it wasn't as crazy as it first sounds. Baby boomers had historically been huge Coke drinkers-

GEORGIE

Such cokeheads-

CELIA

-but, as they aged, they were switching to low sugar alternatives, while younger drinkers were all in on Pepsi.

GEORGIE

So, what were baby boomers switching to?

CELIA

Diet Coke.

GEORGIE

Wait, wait, wait, so they were still drinking Coke?

CELIA

Of course! Coca-Cola was still making money hand-over-fist but one of their bragging rights was possibly in danger!

GEORGIE

Gosh, that sounds like a real capitalist crisis, someone might even lose a bonus over it.

CELIA

Right? So, they had no choice but to release a new even-sweeter recipe, and it worked! In taste tests almost everyone preferred the new Coke recipe to Pepsi or old Coke.

GEORGIE

So far, this doesn't sound much like a conspiracy. Hey, is this what it feels like to be you!

(bad Celia impression,)

Nothing suspicious here!
Coincidence! Coincidence!

CELIA

(bad Georgie impression)

But that's what they want you to think and then New Coke made Ronald Reagan kill a guy!

GEORGIE

(enthused)

Oh wow, really?

Beat.

CELIA

(flat)

No.

GEORGIE

That was mean.

CELIA

I know. So, anyway, despite having the winning recipe the New Coke launch didn't go quite as planned.

The first problem was the press conference announcing it. Goizueta came out with the confidence of ten mediocre white men: crowing about the success of a product that wasn't even on sale yet and even worse, Pepsi had allegedly paid off reporters to ask hostile questions like "is this change an admission that people like Pepsi better?" and "does this move represent the company's break from traditional American values?"

GEORGIE

That last one can't be real!

CELIA

Oh yeah, somehow the idea that new Coke was anti-American was a bafflingly common complaint and some southerners even framed it as a continuation of the American Civil War.

GEORGIE

(baffled)

I... What? What? Why?

CELIA

Because Coca-Cola's based in Atlanta, and Pepsi's based in New York. So, people from southern states were calling to complain that Coke was surrendering to the Yankees.

GEORGIE

I mean, I almost respect their dedication ... but mostly I'm just confused.

CELIA

Yeah it's actually fascinating. It turns out when they did the focus groups, although most people preferred new Coke, about 10% of people hated it, to the point they felt angry at the thought of it replacing old Coke and they were so vocal that they completely skewed the vibe and convinced other participants *they* didn't like it, even after already saying they did.

GEORGIE

I would have thought the people who liked it would have just peer pressured the rest into going with it?

CELIA

I don't know what to tell you. Apparently only haters are contagious.

GEORGIE

That shouldn't surprise me. So I'm guessing when the haters escaped quarantine they infected the whole population?

CELIA

Possibly. Or that 10% were just so unbelievably loud that they drowned out everyone else. New Coke did increase sales at first but then sales started to plummet, Coca-Cola received 40,000 complaint letters and

their hotline calls shot up to over 1500 per day. And these calls weren't just saying "I liked Coke better the old way." People were really emotional. Coca-Cola even hired a psychiatrist to sit in on some calls, and they said callers were showing textbook signs of grief as if they had lost a family member.

GEORGIE

You can't be serious?

CELIA

Oh just you wait. I've got quotes.

GEORGIE

Oh no...

CELIA

Quote: "At first I was numb. Then I was shocked. Then I started to yell and scream and run up and down"

GEORGIE

Okay bit of an overreaction but could be worse.

CELIA

Oh yeah? How about: "I couldn't have been more surprised if someone told me I was gay."

GEORGIE

Why would- I- what? Actually, you know what, buddy, me too. I would also be equally surprised to be told I was gay, as I would to be told a soft drink's recipe was changing slightly.

CELIA

Okay, how about: "There are only two things in my life: God and Coca-Cola. Now you have taken one of those things away from me."

GEORGIE

(laughing)

Okay that one is funny.

CELIA

Then you'll love this: "When they took old Coke off the market, they violated my freedom of choice. It's as basic as the Magna Carta, the Declaration of Independence. We went to war in Japan over that freedom."

GEORGIE

Okay we went through funny and back out into scary.

CELIA

The backlash was so bad they brought back original coke as "Coke Classic" after only 79 days.

GEORGIE

I mean, that is suspiciously quick.

CELIA

And this is where the conspiracies come in. The main one is that Coke put out new Coke knowing it would flop, just to remind people how much they loved old Coke.

GEORGIE

I could believe that.

CELIA

Goizueta always denied it famously saying "we're not that smart, and we're not that dumb."

GEORGIE

Nice quote.

CELIA

Yeah and there's no real evidence for it other than how quick they went back to the old formula.

GEORGIE

But did it work? Did people buy more old Coke afterwards?

CELIA

Oh yeah. Most market analysts think the big advertising push Coca-Cola did around bringing back "Classic Coke" won them the cola wars.

GEORGIE

The Cola Wars?

CELIA

Yeah, that's an actual phrase taught in business. And honestly, I'd say people cared about it that much. People were buying hundreds of cases of Coke to hoard the old formula and, when it came back, they were so thrilled they kept on buying it.

GEORGIE

Hmm pretty plausible. So what other conspiracies you got?

CELIA

I'm so glad you asked Georgie. How about: new Coke was intended to derail complaints from Coca-Cola's bottlers.

GEORGIE

Go on...

CELIA

Okay, so technically, the Coca-Cola company doesn't make drinks.

GEORGIE

Bit harsh. They're not good for you, but they are technically potable.

CELIA

Fair. You see, they actually make syrups, which they then sell to bottling companies who add carbonated water and package up the drinks or venues that use them in soda fountains.

GEORGIE

Hang on my capitalist bullshit detector is going off...

CELIA

Yeah so it's not a good deal for the bottling companies who have to sign a contract saying they'll *only* bottle Coca-Cola products in order to get access to the syrups, the recipe and, of course, the branding.

GEORGIE

So a monopoly with extra steps?

CELIA

Essentially, so in 1985, Coca-Cola was in the middle of a mass dispute with its bottling companies. They said that Coca-Cola had always charged more for the old Coke syrup than their others, on the basis that it was more valuable for being so established and unchanged.

Now with New Coke they argued that it was too hard to sell after years of marketing Coke's consistency with slogans like "Still the Same Great Taste" and some said they were even being ostracized by their friends and family because of their association.

GEORGIE

Yikes...

CELIA

So naturally they said "Well its changed now, so lower the price you greedy pricks."

GEORGIE

Oh no, I see where this is going...

CELIA

Yeah... by arguing that New Coke syrup was worth less *because* it had changed, they were seen to accept that old Coke syrup was worth the higher price.

GEORGIE

So, people think new Coke was bad on purpose just to bait the bottlers into tanking their own court case?

CELIA

Yeah, and there's some weight to the allegation since after the suit was dropped, Coca-Cola went and bought major stakes in all their biggest bottling companies.

GEORGIE

Of course they did. Well, I think I might need a new conspiracy to wash the taste of classic conspiracy out my mouth.

CELIA

Say no more. How do we feel about claims that Coca-Cola made big temporary changes to their recipe to hide smaller permanent changes.

GEORGIE

What, like taking out the Cocaine? That would explain a lot of the 80s...

CELIA

Close! That was actually in 1903, back before people decided giving piles of cocaine to children might be a bad idea. No, this alleged change was the swap from cane sugar to cheaper high fructose corn syrup with new Coke being deliberately sickly sweet so that the corn syrup would taste better in comparison.

GEORGIE

But I thought most people preferred new coke?

CELIA

Oh yeah if Coca-Cola had planned on releasing an unpalatable drink they

absolutely beefed it would have been pointless since high fructose corn syrup had already been phased in for 5 years.

GEORGIE

Celia. I have a theory.

CELIA

I'd expect nothing less.

GEORGIE

Okay so, you said Coca-Cola stopped using cocaine in the early 1900s, right?

CELIA

Yeeeeees.

GEORGIE

So what if they never took the cocaine out at all!? They just said they did but they were secretly still making good old fashioned cocaine-a-cola all the way up to 1985.

CELIA

Sounds... expensive.

GEORGIE

Not if it was just a itsy-bitsy teeny, tiny, child-friendly amount of cocaine.

CELIA

Ah right, well that's different.

GEORGIE

-but then in the 80s, Reagan's all-in on his war on drugs and it's just too risky to keep it up any more so you finally need to change the recipe and

take it out so you cover it up with a bullshit recipe change-

CELIA

I hate that this almost makes sense...

GEORGIE

-People love the new taste but, for some reason, it just hits different than old Coke and they can't figure out what's missing. It must be the American values, they think. That's why they're craving the old recipe so much: this one's unamerican!

They demand you change back to the old one so you switch to the original formula, minus the cocaine, and hope it's close enough. A few people notice but, luckily, you've already started mixing in garbage sugar syrup so you can pass it off. Then hey presto you're out of the drug game *and* your share price is up, all in less than three months.

CELIA

Okay, couple of questions.

GEORGIE

Shoot. I'm on a roll.

CELIA

So it's true that Coca-Cola does have a special license to use coca *leaves*-

GEORGIE

They do?! Oh my god, I'm right. I've cracked it!

CELIA

But they have a special supplier,
Stepan Company, who imports coca
leaves from Peru and Bolivia and
then "de-cocainises" them-

GEORGIE

Unless they're paid to do a rubbish
job -

CELIA

Sure, but even then it doesn't make
any financial sense. A can of Coke in
1985 was what 25 cents? But I'd bet
cocaine was a *smidge* more
expensive.

GEORGIE

It's Coca-Cola. I'm sure they'd be
getting wholesale prices.

CELIA

Even with that, they'd have to be
using absolutely miniscule
portions...

GEORGIE

But that's what I'm saying! It just
needs a little kick. A baby kick.

CELIA

Babies can kick quite hard.

GEORGIE

A puppy kick, then. From a baby
dachshund. They've only got tiny
little legs.

CELIA

I'm not convinced. That's a lot of risk
and expense just to for a soda.

GEORGIE

**But all is fair in love and soda-war
Celia!**

CELIA

**I mean if you could categorically
prove they were somehow getting
massive amounts of cocaine for
cheap-**

GEORGIE

In the 80s, not impossible...

CELIA

Not *completely* impossible.

GEORGIE

**I'll take it! Vindication! Very, very
partial, conditional vindication!**

CELIA

Oh just do your ad and get on with it!

FX: Jingle

CELIA

**Wow, Georgie, I can't believe Mia Hill
from the Manic Pixie Scream Girls
came to your birthday party.**

GEORGIE

**Oh, Celia, you're so gullible. That
was just a lookalike. I was impressed
with you having step-dad-who-
works-at-Nintendo at your barbeque.
That was really hashtag-relatable.**

CELIA

**Haha, I don't even have a step-dad.
That was a lookalike too!**

GEORGIE

What? But Celia, how can you hire a lookalike for someone who doesn't exist?

FX: peppy music

CELIA

With EveryBodyDoubles, of course! At EveryBodyDoubles, you can hire a lookalike for any overly specific, but still normal-looking character you can think of.

Maybe you need to pretend to colleagues you have a girlfriend who's allergic to dogs, or you need an overly authoritarian personal trainer to get out of running with a friend? Maybe you just to want to hang out with a retired para-sailer. We've all been there! Whatever and whoever you need can be found at EveryBodyDoubles.

(conditions)

EveryBodyDoubles agents are untrained professionals incapable of performing impressions or basic tasks.

FX: AD OUTRO

GEORGIE

Well, that's about it for this week. But we'll be back next time with more tales of collusion and cover-ups!

CELIA

You doing anything exciting before then? Any more bungee jumping dates?

GEORGIE

I do have another coffee date with the instructor but I'm not getting my hopes up.

CELIA

What's wrong now?

GEORGIE

(small voice)

Their tortoise hates me.

CELIA

I'm not even going to try to unpack that. Thank you everybody for listening and remember, if you think something tastes funny don't worry they haven't removed all the cocaine, the manufacturers just hate freedom.

GEORGIE

(aside)

I might need to cut that for the sponsors...

SFX: tacky theme tune.

ANNOUNCER

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