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**Conversations #240**

**Gene Edwards:** Hello again, I am Gene Edwards and tonight on *Conversations*, one of Mississippi's treasures. The boss queen of the Sweet Potato Queens, author Jill Conner Browne is here to talk about her sassy new book called *God Save the Sweet Potato Queens*. She is joined by film maker, Jim Dollarhide who followed the queens around town capturing their true essence in a hilarious light-hearted documentary. Glad to have you with us. We don't let three months go by without having you on the program. In fact, we are about to include you in the credits all the time.

**Jill Conner Browne:** Very good. Very good.

**Gene Edwards:** Glad to have you back here.

**Jim Dollarhide:** It's good to be back, thanks.

**Gene Edwards:** Is this just so surprising to you?

**Jill Conner Browne:** It really is. You hope for the best, but there is just no way to predict.

**Gene Edwards:** The first book came out two years ago?

**Jill Conner Browne:** Yes, March of 1999.

**Gene Edwards:** And the first printing was how many?

**Jill Conner Browne:** Oh, it was only like three or four thousand.

**Gene Edwards:** And then what happened?

**Jill Conner Browne:** Reprint, reprint, reprint.

**Gene Edwards:** Leading to how many?

**Jill Conner Browne:** So far, the last count I heard was 300,000, but it's selling more all the time, and I'm so happy.

**Gene Edwards:** why? What is it?

**Jill Conner Browne:** It's funny and people will buy it and send it to their friends and it has just taken off. It has struck a chord.

**Gene Edwards:** It is word of mouth.

**Jill Conner Browne:** Yes. It is totally word of mouth, which I am very grateful for. The chord that I think it has struck, the books and the parade, everything, is the need that we have to play, that we don't ever out grow that. People have just really responded to it and there are groups of people all over the country, all over the world. The *Irish Times*, the largest paper in Ireland, is coming to cover the parade this year and they are going to make a presentation to the Sweet Potato Queens from the Irish Potato Queen.

**Gene Edwards:** And here you are, stumbling around, and what happened?

**Jim Dollarhide:** Well, I have known Jill for 20 years. Over the years I haven't been a big participant in the parade, although I was in the first one in my green MGB. In film making, doing this project or that, I have filmed the parade a bunch, so I of course knew about the queens from that.

**Gene Edwards:** You were working on the documentary about Mississippi and...

**Jim Dollarhide:** Actually, it was *Through Our Own Eyes*. It was the city of Jackson film, so I was filming the parade for that and I got on the float with the queens and I went, "Oh, this is fun." I wound up shooting a lot more film of the parade than I would ever use. Carol Daily, who I went to high school with, started hitting on me going...

**Jill Conner Browne:** She's a queen. She's also a queen.

**Jim Dollarhide:** Right. She's a Sweet Potato Queen. She said, "Jim, you've got to shoot the parade and do us. Do the queens." I said I would do it and the day of the parade, she called me at 6:00 in the morning and said, "Get up."

**Jill Conner Browne:** Just to make sure.

**Jim Dollarhide:** "And get down town." So I go down town and it was like 8:00.

**Gene Edwards:** This was last year?

**Jim Dollarhide:** Yes. It was like 8:00 in the morning and my office is on Capital Street. I came down to the office, I had to get my camera, and I came out of the office and there were these women already lined up at 8:00 in the morning. So, I turned my camera on and I started talking to them and they were the Sweet Potato Queen fan club from Midland, Texas.

**Gene Edwards:** They came all that way.

**Jim Dollarhide:** So, I shot a little of them and I left and I said, "Thanks a lot." I started heading up towards Hal and Mal's and they said, "Well if you think we're fun, you ought to go down to the Edison Walthall." I went, "What's down there?" she said, "Just go check it out." So, I walk down there and I walk in the lobby and there are hundreds of women from Florida, Texas, Oklahoma,

New York, West Virginia, just everywhere, and they are all in these get ups, and they are all having a lot of fun.

**Gene Edwards:** Had you already called it The Million Queen March at that point?

**Jill Conner Browne:** We started last year. You know we have a web site, *sweetpotatoqueens.com* and I answer every e-mail, and I get plenty. It takes hours every day. So, I started inviting everybody that e-mailed me to come and be in the parade. Time passed and more and more of them were going, "We're coming, we're coming." We told the Walthall, we told everybody, and I don't think anybody really...

**Gene Edwards:** Believed you.

**Jill Conner Browne:** Believed how big it was going to be, but we knew. So we said, "It's The Million Queen March." This year will be The Second Annual Million Queen March. That's our part of Mal's Saint Paddy's Day Parade. Total credit to Malcolm.

**Gene Edwards:** We have some clips from your documentary that we are going to share with folks. Tell us about this first piece.

**Jim Dollarhide:** This is the opening of the video and I am talking with Jill and she just kind of sets up how the parade has started and where it is now.

**Gene Edwards:** For those people who are just tuning in at home wondering, "What are those people talking about?"

**Both:** Right. Right.

**Gene Edwards:** All right, roll tape and watch. Here we go.

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**Jill Conner Browne:** In 1982, we rode in the back of a pick-up truck with hand lettered signs proclaiming us to be the Sweet Potato Queens. The queens will tell you this, from the very first moment that I sat in the back of the pick-up truck, I smiled and waved and threw sweet potatoes I said, "Somebody will pay me to do this, because I like this more than anything." My heart was singing, and here we are, 200,000 books in print, 70 to 80,000 people at the parade.

For the first few years of the parade, we would allow anyone who wanted to be a Sweet Potato Queen to be one. There were not as many takers as you might think for this outstanding opportunity, until I came up with the idea for the Outfits. Once we got the outfits, it became a closed society and the requirements have gone way up. Everybody, literally, and their grandmother wants to be a Sweet Potato Queen, and it's too late.

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**Gene Edwards:** What does your daughter think of all this?

**Jill Conner Browne:** She loves it, of course, she was born into this, literally. From the time she could sit up, she has ridden in the parade as a Tater Tot.

**Gene Edwards:** And Malcolm White who started this parade all those years ago has become the beneficiary of all of this national attention.

**Jill Conner Browne:** Yes. I always say that everything I got, Malcolm gave me. Jackson really owes Malcolm White a tremendous debt of gratitude because he is such a visionary and he sees-- I mean he just saw in 1982 that we didn't have a Saint Patrick's Day parade and said, "I think we will."

**Gene Edwards:** And the nice thing is that he did it all for charity.

**Jill Conner Browne:** Right. It all benefits the children's hospital at University Medical Center and it has just grown and grown and grown. But there are any number of things like that in Jackson that we wouldn't have if it weren't for Malcolm White.

**Gene Edwards:** So, you didn't bring your whole crew out to shoot this parade. That's kind of an interesting way for you to do it, isn't it?

**Jim Dollarhide:** Well, no. Most of my career I have worked in 16 and 35 millimeter motion picture film, which usually entails large crews and truck loads of equipment, a small army of guys, so I did this with much relatively new technology: digital video, they call it mini-dv and the camera is this big.

**Gene Edwards:** That big.

**Jim Dollarhide:** No, no crew. Just me and a hand-held camera. That part was liberating.

**Gene Edwards:** Did you find that the queens were more willing to talk to you then?

**Jim Dollarhide:** I just literally kind of stumbled down Capital Street and started shooting and I didn't know what I was going to do with it. Once we started looking at the footage it was so funny and we said, "Let's get together and do some interviews and kind of weave the story together." So I interviewed three or four of the Sweet Potato Queens and just kind of started putting it together. It was a lot of fun.

**Gene Edwards:** And the queens?

**Jill Conner Browne:** Well, of course we love it.

**Gene Edwards:** Well, their lives have been changed, haven't they?

**Jill Conner Browne:** Well, we have always taken ourselves very seriously so we just only consider that it is our rightful place.

**Gene Edwards:** We are going to go back to the tape and see a little bit more of some these folks, the "Million Queens," who have come from all over America. It's just amazing. Roll tape.

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**Jill Conner Browne:** I invited everyone in the universe to come to the parade dressed as the queen of whatever they chose and march with the "Wannabe Wannabes." A great many of them took me up on that offer. They came from 22 states and we were thrilled that they all came. We called it The Million Queen March because they came from everywhere. It was just astounding.

**Man:** Happy St. Patrick's Day.

**Women:** We're from Salem, North Carolina.

**Camera Man:** You're from where?

**Women:** New York City.

**Camera Man:** Where are you from?

**Women:** Memphis.

**Woman 1:** The Turnip Green Queens from Birmingham, Alabama.

**Woman 2:** The Tennessee Trailer Trash Queens.

**Woman 3:** Birmingham.

**Woman 4:** El Dorado, Arkansas.

**Woman 5:** New Orleans.

**Woman 6:** Tampa, Florida.

**Woman 7:** Birmingham.

**Woman 8:** We're from Memphis, Tennessee.

**Woman 9:** Charleston, West Virginia, yes sir.

**Woman 10:** Yes, we're the Too Too's from Louisiana.

**Woman 11:** Missouri, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas.

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**Gene Edwards:** Who were they?

**Jill Conner Browne:** They were the Missouri Ozark Raspberry Queens. There were what, 14 of them?

**Jim Dollarhide:** They were the first ones I stumbled into at the Edison Walthall that morning. I wound up going to their rooms and they were out on the pool on the deck doing practices. It's hilarious. It's what her books are about and it's what the parade's about and it's what this video is about. It's just a lot of fun.

**Gene Edwards:** Does it surprise you that they are all ages?

**Jill Conner Browne:** They are. It crosses all lines. There's ages, gender, sexual orientation, race... What other lines are there? Everybody comes and has a great time.

**Gene Edwards:** Who were your favorites?

**Jill Conner Browne:** Besides us, of course?

**Jim Dollarhide:** Besides the sweet potato queens, of course.

**Gene Edwards:** Besides the originals.

**Jim Dollarhide:** I don't know their names but I know what their costume was.

**Jill Conner Browne:** Oh, they were the Bama Bikini Babes.

**Jim Dollarhide:** The Florida Navel Orange Queens also rated pretty high.

**Jill Conner Browne:** They had a motto: "Keep your navel queen."

**Jim Dollarhide:** They also had oranges they were tossing out.

**Gene Edwards:** When did you realize that you had a video?

**Jim Dollarhide:** As soon as I walked into the Edison Walthall. I went, "Gosh, this is going to be fun." I knew it right then.

**Jill Conner Browne:** And it's going to be good.

**Gene Edwards:** How important was it to have something like that to do at that point in your life?

**Jim Dollarhide:** So much of my film making is fairly serious, you know, economic development films. I am very passionate about that type of work, but it was not a lot of fun, so to speak. But this was fun. It came at a great time.

**Gene Edwards:** But nobody was writing a check saying, "We're going to underwrite this."

**Jim Dollarhide:** I had no idea where it would lead to or what would happen.

**Jill Conner Browne:** A leap of faith.

**Jim Dollarhide:** Now I'm just waiting on her to get on Jay Leno or Letterman and hold up a copy of the video and say, "It's available on our web site, *sweetpotatoqueens.com*."

**Gene Edwards:** Let me just hold up a copy now. It's funny, funny stuff. We are going to show another clip in another couple of seconds. This second book, then, becomes the natural progression. How did you have time to write it?

**Jill Conner Browne:** I don't know how I had time to write it because I was promoting the first book.

**Gene Edwards:** This has been your life.

**Jill Conner Browne:** I was promoting the first book for the last two years. I just quit touring on the first book in November of this year, so I don't know when I wrote this second book. I'm amazed that it got done. I just negotiated a contract for book three. I don't know when I'll write that.

**Gene Edwards:** You are going to have to sit down and write that. I am curious about that writing process. What is your process, or do you know? Do you keep notes?

**Jill Conner Browne:** When I am any where and something funny happens I have to write it down. I have to make detailed notes now that I am old because I'll have one line down and I'll come back six months later and say, "I know that was hilarious, but what does it mean?" So I have to write more detailed notes than I used to. One thing that is unusual about the way that I write is that I write one time. I sit down and I write and that's it. JoAnne Prichard Morris is my editor. The first book, we took it to Cancun for a week to finish and she said, "We will do the edits and the re-writes." I said, "I can retype it." In the whole book, the first book, there was one word out of the entire book that she had changed and I said, "Nope, this is funnier," and I changed it back.

**Gene Edwards:** What was that word?

**Jill Conner Browne:** Launched.

**Gene Edwards:** So when you write about things like the joys of marriage and remarriage and all those other issues that you talk about, those are first time experiences, first time writing experience.

**Jill Conner Browne:** As a rule. I write it one time and I'm done. A lot of things in the second book *God Save the Sweet Potato Queens* are a result of the website, *sweetpotatoqueens.com* where people have written to me and told me their hilarious stories and were gracious enough to let me include them.

**Gene Edwards:** What was your favorite? Other than the recipes, what's your favorite?

**Jill Conner Browne:** Helen Harlow from North Carolina that was in Wal-Mart with her three children and for some reason they were acting up. She had read the first book in which I have some child rearing tips and she thought, "What would Jill do?" She immediately burst into song singing "Jeremiah Was a Bull Frog" at the top of her lungs with gestures and dance steps. She said people were gathering around looking for the cameras thinking this must be some kind of deal.

**Gene Edwards:** Like this is Candid Camera or something.

**Jill Conner Browne:** She said one of her children fell down, one of them knocked over a display running backwards to get away from her, and one of them just burst into tears. But, she has never had another-- she only has to hum a bar of "Jeremiah Was a Bull Frog," if there is any unruly behavior anywhere there. So, I proclaimed her mother of the year.

**Gene Edwards:** Perfect. The recipes are important to the book aren't they?

**Jill Conner Browne:** Yes. They are death-defying recipes.

**Gene Edwards:** Why is it so important? Why do these other queens around the country feel it is so important to share these recipes?

**Jill Conner Browne:** They're funny. They all have a funny story attached to them.

**Gene Edwards:** For things like Twinkie pies.

**Jill Conner Browne:** Twinkie pies—sort of the theme of the recipes is that is the worst thing—where it is really easy. Everything has Velveeta or cream of mushroom soup or something like that in it which is hilarious. The funny thing is that the food is all really good. A lot of it is funeral food, southern things. Death chicken is my favorite in the new book, which is Maggie Wynn's recipe. You start by lining a pan with bacon. I mean, it can only get better from there.

**Gene Edwards:** Tell us about this clip that we are going to see, this last clip from the video.

**Jim Dollarhide:** How can we show some segments of the video without actually showing the queens doing their thing and the parade? So this is kind of like towards the end of the show and this is a little bit about the parade.

**Gene Edwards:** This is that great moment when the float pulls up in front of the reviewing stand and the announcer does his thing.

**Jill Conner Browne:** Yes. He is Dr. Jimmy James from Jackson State and you know he does that fabulous introduction for the Sonic Boom at all the football games. I go to all the Jackson State games with Michael Rubinstein, my favorite sports caster and that's our favorite part is Dr. James doing the introduction. It's the best part. It's the best idea I've ever had in my life. I called him and I said, "if I edit this a little bit to make it be about The Sweet Potato Queens will you do it?" He said, "Sure." It was just fabulous.

**Gene Edwards:** Does he come down and do it live every time?

**Jill Conner Browne:** No, it's taped. Although we might could get him down there live now.

**Gene Edwards:** I bet he would. It's just a great moment. Well, you are going to hear just a little of it. Roll tape. Here's just a little bit more from The Sweet Potato Queens's video.

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**Woman 12:** The crowds have changed over the years. When the Saint Patrick's Day Parade started, it was literally a hand full of people getting off work in downtown Jackson wondering, "What is going on here?"

**Woman 13:** Well it got bigger and it got bigger and our costumes got fancier and smancier and all of the sudden there were these huge crowds. The crowds got bigger every year, but when the book came along, I looked up Capital Street as we turned the corner right at the first of the parade and I felt like an astronaut. I've never seen that many people in my life.

**Woman 12:** Forty, fifty, sixty thousand people lined the street. They come from all over the country, of course to see The Sweet Potato Queens.

**Jill Conner Browne:** We stopped the entire parade-- the judges stand is in front of the Governor's Mansion. The judges, the bucket heads, headed by Peyton Prospeir, set up right in front of the Governor's Mansion. We stop, stop the entire parade and we go inside our float which this year had the cover of the book.

**James:** The contemporary sounds and maneuvers, the summa cum laude of womankind... Jackson's own titillating assets... The incomparable Sweet Potato Queens!

**Jill Conner Browne:** The cover of the book opens and we come out. The people are just driven mad.

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R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to me

R-E-S-P-E-C-T, take care of T-C-B

**Woman 13:** We are the parade. It was the million queen march this year.

I like to say it was *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* for middle aged women.

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**Gene Edwards:** I think that is just the greatest line.

**Jill Conner Browne:** It is.

**Gene Edwards:** I think that is really what it is all about. How do you top this?

**Jill Conner Browne:** He's got big plans. Big plans.

**Jim Dollarhide:** I think this year I am going to rent a lip-stick camera system, which is appropriate, and mount them all over the float.

**Gene Edwards:** As long as it's pink lipstick.

**Jim Dollarhide:** So I will have multi-camera coverage of the float and I won't have to be there, because they're un-manned cameras. That will free me up to go shoot all of the millions of wannabes.

**Gene Edwards:** What's going to happen this year? Is it going to be the two million...

**Jill Conner Browne:** There is just no telling. There is no telling.

**Gene Edwards:** It's just topsy isn't it?

**Jill Conner Browne:** it is going to be so huge. The Cross Haven Books in Birmingham that brought a bus load last year over-- I was just there last week, and they already have 80 people signed up to come this year.

**Jim Dollarhide:** Just from Birmingham.

**Jill Conner Browne:** And that's just them. There are a whole lot of people that won't be on those buses. The deliberate literate book store in Memphis is bringing, they are coming on the train. Amtrak is doing special Sweet Potato recipes. Southwest Airlines is offering discounted air fares for Wannabes for people flying in for the parade. There is a number on our web site, you mention that number and you get a discount for flying in.

**Gene Edwards:** To come on in.

**Jill Conner Browne:** To come down and play.

**Jim Dollarhide:** What's so wild is that all these women they come to Jackson, Mississippi and they dress up funny and walk down the street.

**Jill Conner Browne:** Everyone of them that Jim interviewed and that the newspapers interviewed, to a person, they all said that it was the most fun they had ever had in their lives. That's one thing about the parade. You know how you will do something and it is just the most fun you've ever had in your life and you go back and try to recreate it the next year and it just kind of falls? This will be the nineteenth year and it is absolutely fabulous every time. We are just giddy, it is so much fun.

**Gene Edwards:** But, this is also just the most fun you could ever imagine, isn't it?

**Jill Conner Browne:** Absolutely, yes.

**Gene Edwards:** For what is happening in your life.

**Jill Conner Browne:** I worked for Frank Mestrinarti a hundred years ago at Sears and he was a positive mental attitude junky. I've heard every word ever said by Zig Ziegler, W. Clemetstone, Norman Vincent Peale, all those people. One thing that they all say is that "You should do what makes your heart sing and the money will follow." That's why the comment from the beginning of the clip, I said from the first time it ever rode in that parade, "Someone will pay me to do this, because this is what makes my heart sing." And here we are.

**Gene Edwards:** And this is fun and exciting and this is funny, but it also touches your heart doesn't it?

**Jill Conner Browne:** I get letters, as I said, and I have one from a woman in Nashville that had to put her favorite Aunt Mary in a nursing home, and she said, she would go to see her everyday and they would run out of conversation by the time they covered "I can't breathe. I can't sleep in here. My foot hurts." so, she started taking my books in to her for her to read and they were just hysterical and all the other people in the nursing home would come in to listen and the staff would all come. Aunt Mary is now the most popular person in the nursing home. Aunt Mary is 99 years old and her niece wrote and said, "I just hope the good lord will let her die laughing. P. S. It is a distinct possibility." Then, I got a letter from a woman in Kentucky who took the book to read to her sister who was undergoing her umpteenth round of chemotherapy. She had battled cancer for 11 years and she would read a few minutes of it to her every treatment until she would fall asleep. She said, "I wouldn't read ahead. That wouldn't be right. I wish I had a happy ending to this, but I read the last chapter to her the day she died." And that, "We weren't there this year, but we are coming next year in honor of Debbie."

**Gene Edwards:** So, she will be here this year.

**Jill Conner Browne:** That's pretty powerful stuff. Uh-huh.

**Gene Edwards:** What do you get grief about? What do people say like, "Oh my goodness, you can't write about talking vaginas." But you do.

**Jill Conner Browne:** Well, you know my mother's initial reaction after reading the first book was, "I don't know why you have to talk like that." It's like we've said, "The worst thing you can do if your from the south is embarrass your momma, unless it happens to end up making a lot of money, in which case all is forgiven." The one thing that saved me as far as my mother is concerned is that Willie Morris loved the book. JoAnne would work on it in the day time and Willie would work on it at night. Mother adored Willie and vise versa and if Willie liked it then it must be okay.

**Gene Edwards:** How many languages is it in so far?

**Jill Conner Browne:** So far just German.

**Gene Edwards:** Just German. But more to come?

**Jill Conner Browne:** Absolutely.

**Gene Edwards:** How many copies in the first printing of the new book?

**Jill Conner Browne:** The new book? One hundred thousand.

**Gene Edwards:** That's amazing. That's just big.

**Jill Conner Browne:** I am very grateful. I am totally grateful.

**Gene Edwards:** Here's the book. It's *God Save the Sweet Potato Queens*. Here's the video. It's a lot of fun. It's great fun to watch.

**Jill Conner Browne:** You can get them at the web site, *sweetpotatoqueens.com*, or of course at Lemuria, the only book store we ever really liked.

**Gene Edwards:** Thank you.

**Jim Dollarhide:** Great. It's been a pleasure to be here.

**Gene Edwards:** This is fun. Thanks. Good luck.

**Jill Conner Browne:** Thank you. I appreciate it. Y'all be particular.

**Gene Edwards:** See you in a few weeks?

**Jill Conner Browne:** Yes, at the parade.

**Gene Edwards:** See you for the parade. And thank you. See you next time.