

Keep It's Ira and Louis on loving Pride even when it's not for you anymore

EXCLUSIVE: They also dish on Taylor Swift, soap operas, and more to GSN



Louis Virtel and Ira Madison III of Keep It | Photo: Provided

28 June 2019 0:07 BST

Anya Crittenton

If you know the worlds of pop culture or podcasts, there's a chance you recognize the names **Ira Madison III** and **Louis Virtel** from Keep It.

As two co-hosts of the **Crooked Media** podcast **Keep It** and voracious Twitter users, they are consistently reliable with their takes on all things pop culture.

Keep It stemmed from Madison's use of the term on Twitter. It's a way to say 'no, thank you' to anything — a movie, a hot take, a celebrity's Met Gala look. Each week, Madison and Virtel discuss

a broad range of topics, pop culture and otherwise, with third host Kara Brown (whose last episode was yesterday).

I sat down with the pair to discuss their coming out journeys, how pop culture shaped their identities, where the LGBTI community needs to go next, and more.

‘Then he told the cast of Godspell’

Madison didn’t get to choose his coming out, his college friend did that for him.

‘I came out sophomore year of college to a friend – who told the cast of Godspell at a party,’ he says simply, before diving into why, even though the moment was taken from him, it turned out okay.

‘I was in the midst of the theater department in college and surrounded by numerous gay people. I told my friend and he sort of outed me. Once it happened, it was traumatic for me, but then life didn’t really change, because I was in theater in college. I was surrounded by a community that allowed that.’

Virtel came out at a younger age — after a ‘clandestine’ relationship with a boy at his high school ‘abruptly’ ended.

‘I didn’t know what to do,’ he explains. ‘But I’m a deeply extroverted person, so I had to tell my mom and then all my friends. So I sort of purged it without thinking of any repercussions.’

How passions shape identity

Listen to Keep It, look at their Twitter accounts, and you’ll learn both Madison and Virtel aren’t shy about their interests. Madison has a love of superheroes, of soap operas (especially Days of Our Lives), of musicals. Virtel, meanwhile, is a walking encyclopedia of Hollywood facts — the Oscars, Classic Hollywood, iconic Hollywood women, you name it.

For both, these loves are lifelong and personal.

‘My first superhero was Spider-Man, and superheroes sort of jumbled into my watching soap operas with my parents. What are superheroes but a sprawling soap opera?’ Madison posits. ‘I really became interested in figuring out who the characters were, learning their backstories and relationships.’

But it goes even deeper than that.

Madison continues: 'My family doesn't talk that much about family history and we're not really in each other's business. These characters allowed me to figure out their pasts where I couldn't with my own family.'

Virtel's love of Classic Hollywood also came from childhood.

'I think everyone goes through this phase. Around 7th or 8th grade you think, "I need to see all the Alfred Hitchcock movies,"' he says in a tone I can't explicitly promise is, in fact, facetious.

'I came to pop culture late, but my mom and I would go to the video store and get all the Hitchcock movies. They're full of ravishing and trembling women. I started to memorize it all — when they came out, what other movies the stars did,' he explains, adding that it tied neatly into his equally lifelong obsession with trivia.

And for the record, if Madison could put a single Days of Our Lives storyline into a time capsule, it would be when Marlena Evans became the Salem Stalker.

Is there a responsibility to use your voice?

'Growing up gay before you even know what that is, you can deduce your voice is unusual,' Virtel says. 'I had a docile coming out experience, and I live an ideal life as a gay man. So I feel behooved now to speak up — there's no reason for me not to, there's no risk.'

So, does every public figure have a responsibility to speak out? I ask them and Madison is clear: 'I don't think every public figure has to, and no one expects it of every person. There are some pop stars where I say, "I don't want to hear your opinions."'

I bring up Taylor Swift, whose every decision and public gesture is scrutinized, from speaking out on politics to her most recent music video, You Need to Calm Down.

'With Taylor Swift, her contemporaries were making political statements, so she stood out,' Madison explains. 'Maybe it was too much to expect her to talk about politics, but when it gets to a point of white supremacists using your name, it should move you to speak out.'

'She wasn't making mindless pop dance numbers like Paris Hilton – she made songs about feminism. She gave herself a platform and a message. Once it became a political time, that message necessitated talking about Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, and she sort of stepped back from it.'

Virtel adds: 'When it comes to Taylor Swift, she's always been committed to her message. So, when she added the gay rights to her platform, as a gay man, I have to ask: "Is this noble, is it manipulative?" You want to get to the bottom and determine if she's a proper ally, and I think she is. She's a good example of wanting to figure out who's on your team.'

Madison then acknowledges Swift comes from a different place of privilege, so her commentary is different than say, something like Keep It.

'As a queer person and a black person growing up in the Midwest, you're always seen as an outsider. You're able to form opinions very quickly to keep your bearings,' he says about how he approaches the platform of the podcast.



Ira, Kara, and Louis with guest Leslie Grossman at a live recording of Keep It in LA | Photo: Provided

‘Pride isn’t for me’

Madison’s first experience with Pride was in Chicago. He didn’t put it together as a whole month yet, he tells me. He saw the parade as a gathering of people who were ‘more out and comfortable’ than him.

‘As I grew older, it became a thing,’ he starts before stopping himself. ‘Listen, I’m a person who knows gay history and knows what was fought for, and I recognize that year-round. Pride Month is fun, it’s nice to be at events, but as a whole it doesn’t energize me. I do things with and for the community throughout the year.’ It’s the same for Virtel.

He compares it to a family reunion. You’re excited to see everyone, but ‘the picnic looked the same last year’.

Madison then touches upon an idea — Pride isn’t for him.

‘I’ve lived in places like New York City and LA. Pride is more meaningful in smaller communities. It’s for people who need visibility and so I love its existence for them.’

More important things

That visibility is something they both want to see change, both in storytelling and reality.

When I ask them what the LGBTI community needs to address, they agree: more stories and more intersectionality.

‘We should prioritize our internal relationship as an LGBTQ community. It’s a pleasure to have allies, mingle with straights, if you will,’ Virtel states. ‘But our thing comes first, selling it to straight people comes second.’

‘I was watching Pose and it’s so great seeing a show like that,’ Madison says of Ryan Murphy’s FX show. ‘When you think of gay, your mind still goes to the image of a white gay man. I think that’s what we need to work on.’

But for all his love of pop culture, there are more important things Madison thinks the community needs to pay attention to, beyond TV shows and Taylor Swift’s latest music video.

‘The murder of trans people, we need to be talking about that a lot more than we are,’ he says simply.