

Send in the Clowns (4/23/22)

Picture this: it's 2016. You're in your car blasting 24k Magic by Bruno Mars. You're coasting down the street when you see... it. You turn your head and you think - no, no fucking way. It can't... is that.. Red nose, polka dotted suit, big shoes... Is that a fucking clown? And more importantly: is that a knife?

Today, you and I are gonna go over the wonderful Clown Sightings of 2016. So, for those who are coulrophobic, today is gonna get a little funky for you. We're talking about the answer to: Who's This Clown? And why are we so scared of that guy!

According to a very lengthy timeline of sightings, encounters, and a few attacks - This whole clown sighting phenomenon of 2016 officially started in Greenville, SC in late August. According to Elizabeth LaFleur of Greenville News (Aug 2016), it was just a week before Aug 30 that the first official story about clown sightings in the area came out. This event was later followed by more sightings and reports that eventually were closely followed by the police, who deemed these sightings as, yes, probably horseshit, but something they still needed to pay attention to.

At the time, Greenville Police Chief Ken Miller and his lads were very much careful when it comes to attending to these sightings, stating that they must "be careful that we don't create something that isn't there" and manifest the fuck out of something.

Obviously, Chief Miller spoke way too fucking soon. By Dec 22, 2016 - Stephanie Dube Wilson of Heavy.com was able to compile a long list of sightings from all over the U.S, stating that "At least 44 states have had strange clown sightings so far, and the number keeps on growing"

Send in the Clowns (4/23/22)

California could never escape its clown history. Even the schools in our hometown experienced a few threatening clowns. Ben, in your area - schools were just as targeted as they were over here. Lockdowns happened, clowns hid under bridges and the woods. Clowns were taking over and no one could wrap their head around it.

From my way, Brittany Brown of KRON4 reported about a clown trying to snatch a baby out of her mother's arms. Reportedly, the clown approached the mother and started having a chat and tried to take the girl away. The mother, with all her might, grabbed her baby and kicked the fuck out of the clown. Authorities arrived only for the clown to dip and run. No clown car in sight.

(BREAK: what do you think a Northern California based clown would drive? Miata? Supra?)

Now, our clown besties didn't just limit themselves to the U.S. According to Hilary McGann and Lauren Said-Moorhouse of CNN, this whole thing went fucking global. Neighbourhood Sergeant Mel Sutherland, which I guess is kind of like a person in charge or part of a neighbourhood watch, told them that he believed that this whole thing was a huge prank that had some danger to it, as it did genuinely scare people.

Clown costumes did end up getting banned in schools, due to the sheer panic they evoked in people; In Georgia, there is a report of a young girl bringing a knife to school in order to protect herself from these supposed clowns - this young girl was subsequently arrested and it's important to state that she was just eleven. She was a wean.

According to Aja Romano of Vox, "By the end of September, the New York Times was calling the clown hoaxes 'a contagion,'" . Police time was being taken up by these reports,

Send in the Clowns (4/23/22)

schools went on lockdowns or hired extra security, children were genuinely terrified for their lives, and it was an all around shit time.

(BREAK: I find it funny that this was the contagion of the time. I feel like even now we're riddled with clowns in contagions, with Miss Rona's Non-believers, huh. And we were just on the cusp of the November 2016 election so we were about to get the biggest fucking clown of them all served to us on a brilliant white dinner plate.)

Clown sightings were all over the place in how they were described: sometimes they would be in the woods, under bridges, down dark empty streets, in broad daylight and in unsuspecting bus stops. However, many were also specifically online based which is where you and I will come in Ben.

Sometimes, you didn't even need a physical clown. Sometimes, what you needed was a hypothetical clown coming to your school with a knife or a gun. Or for those of us with coulrophobia, just the thought of a clown was enough.

While there were physical clowns that chased people down the street or stood on street corners, for the most part, the Clown Sighting Phenomenon of 2016 was made up of hoaxes or online threats.

The clowns never really existed. It's like those hypothetical razor blades in your kids' candy scenarios. (sarcastic) Be careful of whose house you go to, you never know if they're sticking weed and used needles in your kids' candy. It's technically based on something that genuinely did happen, however, it eventually did get blown out of proportion and turned into the

Send in the Clowns (4/23/22)

phenomenon we know about now. This 'nightmare scenario' grew legs, a red nose, and big ass shoes.

Yes, there were some real events but it was mostly people dressed as clowns committing crimes, instead of clowns committing crimes, if you get what I mean. People did pranks, people tried to go viral, and (the least menacing but probably creepiest of them all) people stood in bushes, street corners, and dark alleyways and just... waved.

But I know what some of you are thinking: why did this happen? Why did it keep going? And, more importantly, why are we so afraid of clowns?

We can of course go back to the 1500s and Shakespeare's first use of the word 'clown' to describe someone who is a "foolish character in several of his plays", but the kind of clown we're all thinking of now, is 19th century and forward kind of thing.

If I were to give you a very brief memorable bitches only timeline of clowns, focusing on the 20th century tho, it would go like this: 1940s-60s we have Bozo the Clown, Ronald McDonald, and the Joker. 70s-80s, we have notable dickhead John Wayne Gacy's Pogo the Clown and Pennywise from It, 90s we have the Warren clown Shooting, then we have the 2000s where we studied kids in 2008 and found that they were terrified of them, then in 2012 we were like they're not actually that scared, and then 2016's Clown Town Phenomenon.

Clowns have a very long history, but were we scared of them this whole time? Mark Kennedy of the Associated Press notes that David Carlyon, former well rounded clown of Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey fame believes that the fear of clowns "is a relatively new phenomenon, born from the counter-culture 1960s and emerging as a popular force in the

Send in the Clowns (4/23/22)

1980s". He argues that coulrophobia is a reaction to the influx of positive/fun that clowns are associated with. They were too happy, we gotta find some fucked-upness to them.

However, Benjamin Radford, author of *Bad Clowns* which did come out in 2016 (a beautiful time for him) counters that we've always had a distrust for them as they "were never really good". If you start thinking about the purpose of clowns, they were always making some sort of joke, doing some sort of insane act, or just all around reflecting the kinds of things we considered funny at someone else's expense. A clown gets bonked in the head by a bat, gets smacked by a pie, gets squirted on by a weird flower and we go apeshit.

To look at some direct examples that Radford and Carlyon are familiar with, let's take a look at one of the most popular clowns ever: Ronald McDonald. First introduced in 1963, Ronald McDonald became the It Girl of McDonalds.

(INTERJECT: Ben, do you have any memories w/ Ronald McDonald? What's your impression of the guy? When's the last time you remember seeing him on TV?)

Eventually, though - Ronald McDonald was phased out - specifically due to criticism about the ethics of a fun clown enticing children to eat unhealthy fast food and later even more during the 2016 clown sightings. The guy's still around sometimes, I think he might even be at one of our local McDonalds that still has the playplace in it?

Let's go over other reasons why we might be afraid of clowns, or have distrust for clowns! We've got the good ole "fear of otherness" combined with "uncanny valley".

Send in the Clowns (4/23/22)

“Uncanny Valley”, coming from our friend Masahiro Mori of Tokyo Institute of Technology, is the idea that the closer something looks to a human, the more we are okay/at ease with it. However, there is a point (or a valley) where it becomes just a little bit off - a little too something else. We’re not comforted by it anymore and it no longer passes our ‘if yes, then human’ program in our head; we’re just plain old creeped out by it.

Some believe that clowns trigger our sense of uncanny valley and that’s what leads us to fear/distrust them. Imagine a painted clown’s face - it has the eye shape, the large mouth, the hair, and all - it’s a caricature.

In an interview with Wilson Korges on the Smithsonian Folklife Festival blog, Jeff Raz, founder of the Clown Conservatory in SF, explains that clown makeup is supposed to help exaggerate and highlight emotions. The big eyes, the big mouth, and the funky nose? That’s to make it all bigger so you can see them cringe, smile, grimace, and all that. For each clown, it’s different but it points to similar reasoning.

For those who experience uncanny valley with clowns, this makeup instead may trigger a fear of otherness. If we cannot determine what something is exactly, we become weary of it. How do we defend ourselves against something that’s so close to us but we can’t readily identify what they’re feeling and what they’ll do?

Now, I must come clean to our audience and to you Ben. I am terrified of clowns. I have a photo with a clown at McDonalds for a birthday party and you can see my genuine terror at being placed near a clown. My friend had a clown at her 16th birthday party and our friends had to shield me from her, though I’m sure she was really kind. I can’t say I hate them, but I just am

Send in the Clowns (4/23/22)

fucking terrified of them. I did this whole essay in bright light and I had the shivers down my back the whole time, but for the sake of this show - I did it.

I know I've said that the sightings are horseshit, but for the first time for me - I actually do have personal experience with a clown sighting. I am now going to read an official text from my college's police/warning alert system:

UC [redacted] WARN ME ALERT: "SUJBECT (sic) SEEN WEARING CLOWN COSTUME IN AREA OF WEST VILLAGE. SUBJECT POSSIBLY ARMED WITH A KNIFE. [REDACTED] POLICE SEARCHING THE AREA. IF SEEN CALL 911"

This isn't the exact event I was involved in, but I remember getting this text and thinking - are you fucking serious. Later, going on the class's facebook page, I would see that the clown eventually moved to our library and it was just absolutely insane.

My personal story though is this: When I was in college, I was coming home on the bus at night from a dance class and we were heading to the bus stop in front of our apartment. At the bus stop was a clown wearing red and holding a balloon. I contemplated not coming down at the stop and asking my housemate to come down and get me, however, once we arrived back at the bus stop upon making a turn, the clown was no longer there in that area. I just immediately ran to the apartment and told my housemates and they were freaked out.

So, while I do have this experience, I still do think it was a bit of an insane phenomenon that was definitely not entirely real.

But why did it keep going?

Send in the Clowns (4/23/22)

According to our friend Christopher Mele at the New York Times, it could be due to two things, supplied by two good ole professors. David G. Myers (Psych, Hope College, Holland, Michigan) points to mass hysteria. For those unfamiliar with the phrase:

“In a mass hysteria, people of a group start to believe that they might be exposed to something dangerous, such as a virus or a poison. They believe a threat to be real because someone says so, or because it fits their experience. Due to the threatening delusion, a large group of people gets collectively very upset (x)” [from Bagus, Pena-Ramos, Sanchez Bayon on timely article: “COVID-19 and the Political Economy of Mass Hysteria”]

This imagined threat of clowns roaming the streets kept the beat going. The more people knew about it, the more people talked about it, the more they became fearful of it. If everyone's talking about it and knows someone who has seen it or knows someone, who knows someone, who was stalked by a clown and all that - it must mean it's real. This spread of rumour and hearsay sparked a wave of clown sightings that may not have even happened.

Which leads us to Jason D. Seacat (Psych, Western New England University, Springfield, Mass) who posits that this spread b/c people just... wanted to be in on it. People wanted to be a part of something, even if they weren't actively part of it. If you're the only one in your circle that wasn't stalked by a clown, you... you have to at least know someone who knew someone, who knew a guy who saw a clown in a dark alley last week. Seacat further states that because this type of 'sighting' is hard to debunk, much like a Bigfoot moment, no one's gonna call you out and you can be as outlandish as possible. The need to be a part of something is what also may have kept it going.

Send in the Clowns (4/23/22)

Take it from Penn State students known for the Penn State Clown Riot. Students at Penn State gathered together in order to hunt down a clown, after a sighting was reported. It wasn't planned, just some folks hearing about a clown sighting and deciding to do what they felt needed to be done: GET THAT CLOWN. This 'desperate' search ultimately was just a congregation of random students who heard something was happening and decided to join in on it. Nothing came of it, other than being a random moment in your college history that you kinda wanna forget but will bring up ten years from now.

As beautifully stated by Michael Willis, Penn State attendee: "No matter where you come from, no matter your color, your religion or creed, no matter who you're voting for, we can all agree on one thing," Willis said, "f*** that clown."

Was anyone impacted by this? Well - on the non-clown side, folks were charged for making false claims, for actually going out and causing mayhem, schools went on lockdown and on the more extreme side - there is unfortunately one death in September 2016, reported by the AP: a 16 year old boy was stabbed. In this case, it was reported that someone attacked another person while wearing a clown mask, however in the final 'version' of events, it was found that the boy was stabbed and *he* was the one wearing the clown mask - pushed up over his face.

On the clown side of things, because we're bipartisan here: clowns did have a bit of an issue. In an article by Melissa Chen of *Time*, Jordan Jones (Snuggles the Clown, Haunted House) said that they fear for their life, as people start to think that clown hunting is 'cool'. In a response to WAPO's coverage of the clown phenomenon, David McCullough (Kornpop the Klown [with K's]) and other clowns have made sure to remind folks that they're nothing like their creepy ass counterparts. David told Ben that he has "worked very hard all my life to be a person that kids and their parents respect and can look up to." It didn't help that in the next year, Stephen King's *It* reboot came along in 2017. This caused further uproar in the clown

Send in the Clowns (4/23/22)

community, blaming job loss to the further fear stirred up by Pennywise. To which the *It* team just said: eh, fuck that.

With all this clownery, we do have a couple things to learn or remember from the Clown Sighting Phenomenon of 2016:

Fact checking really does matter. We need media literacy. If you listen back to our Momo episode, we have a really important discussion about fact checking, fake news, and the turmoil that failing to google something and verifying it can cause. We can *learn* from Momo, Slenderman, Clown Sightings, and all those dangerous games you think kids are playing all the time. All those times that we didn't just check in to see if something was real. In this, I saw that police departments and schools try their best to try and figure out if claims were real, but what can you do in the face of social media's wildfire and the insistence of various people that they *really* did see a clown in the forest.

In my claim, it's supported by everyone in that bus that watched that clown get smaller as our bus drove away. It's supported by the Davis Police Department verifying it, and all the random photos on facebook I saw that night. But if I didn't have that, how easily could you and should you believe me?

But also something to note - despite all the hullabaloo: Listen to children and what they fear; we as adults fear things that kids may not think are scary, because we have context of things they do not have. In turn, children have these as well, even if completely irrational to adults. We have to listen to why they're scared. We can help them not be scared or understand why they are. Just... no matter how absurd and contrary to what I've just said - listen to children.

[END]

Now that I've just become the leading expert on clown sightings in the U.S... any questions?

Send in the Clowns (4/23/22)

Source links, not in any educational format b/c I wrote all of this between 11am to 3am. I

apologise and I do get better after Episode 4, whenever I have more sources. I love you.

1. [Creepy Clown Hoaxes Lead to 12 Arrests in Multiple States - The New York Times](#)
2. [COVID-19 and the Political Economy of Mass Hysteria - PMC](#)
3. [BBC NEWS | Health | Hospital clown images 'too scary'](#)
4. [The Meaning of Makeup: Clowning and Its Larger Significance | Smithsonian Folklife Festival](#)
5. [Fast Food Giant McDonald's Introduces the US to Ronald McDonald - 4A's](#)
6. [Lonely Ronald: Why McDonald's Retired Its \(Creepy\) Clown Mascot](#)
7. [Coulrophobia: why clowns trigger our fear reflexes | Science | The Guardian](#)
8. [What Is the Uncanny Valley? - IEEE Spectrum](#)
9. [Why zombies, robots, clowns freak us out | CNN](#)
10. [The root of the uncanny: why are things creepy? - The Oxford Scientist](#)
11. [🤡Clown Memes Are Taking Over The Internet 🤡 - StayHipp](#)
12. [Why 2019 was the year of the clown](#)
13. [Explained: domesticated clown meme](#)
14. [2016 clown sightings - Wikipedia](#)
15. [The great clown panic of 2016 is a hoax. But the terrifying side of clowns is real. - Vox](#)
16. ['F*** that clown': Reliving the Penn State clown riots of October 2016 | University Park Campus News | collegian.psu.edu](#)
17. [The great clown panic of 2016: 'a volatile mix of fear and contagion' | Clowns | The Guardian](#)
18. [An Expert Explains Why You're Scared of Creepy Clowns and Other Horror Tropes](#)
19. [The 2016 clown panic: 10 questions asked and answered - The Verge](#)
20. [Everything You Need to Know About the 'Clown Attack' Craze](#)
21. ['Killer Clowns': Inside the Terrifying Hoax Sweeping America - Rolling Stone](#)
22. [Clown sightings have spread to North Carolina. Now police are concerned about creepy copycats. - The Washington Post](#)
23. [South Carolina community warned about reported group of scary clowns trying to lure children into woods - The Washington Post](#)
24. [Clown Sightings List: Which States Have Reported Threatening Clowns?](#)
25. [The psychology behind why clowns creep us out](#)
26. [On the nature of creepiness - ScienceDirect](#)
27. [i need a comeback for "look at this clown"](#)
28. [Cohen is a ghost Twitterren: "most cutting thing you can say is "who's this clown?" because it implies they're a\) a clown & b\) not even one of the better-known clowns" / Twitter](#)
29. [How 'Clown' Became The Insult Of 2020](#)
30. [Clowns in America: Timeline of scares and sightings](#)
31. [Creepy Clown Sightings](#)
32. [Creepy clown craze sweeps the globe | CNN](#)
33. [Cops plan to charge dad in scary clown mask who followed bus - Times-Herald](#)
34. [VIDEO: Concord clown attempts to snatch 1-year-old girl from mother's arms](#)
35. [Police Report: Resident Held at Gunpoint by Clown in Abilene](#)
36. ['Creepy clown' threatens plague Sac-area schools](#)
37. [Greenville clown incidents taken seriously, but sightings unconfirmed](#)
38. [No laughing matter: When exactly did clowns become scary? | AP News](#)
39. [NEWS BRIEFS: Diversity-Inclusion Plan Up for Review | UC Davis](#)
40. [Man arrested in stabbing death of boy with clown mask - pennlive.com](#)
41. [Real Clowns Are Pissed the Movie 'IT' Is Causing Them to Lose Work](#)
42. [New 'It' movie is scaring off work for clowns, but producers say that's 'absurd'](#)
43. [Professional Clowns Are All Kinds of Pissed About the 'IT' Remake](#)