

***We Are Family* Season 2 Episode 22: Maggie Baird**

Maggie Baird:

Hi, I'm Maggie Baird and to me, family is everything.

Julia Dennison:

Hello and welcome to *We Are Family*. I am your host, Julia Dennison, and I am here with Maggie Baird, actor, screenwriter, and theater teacher. But of course she's also mom to the one and only multiple Grammy award winning singer, songwriter, Billie Eilish, and her brother Finneas. Also a multiple Grammy award winning musician. Maggie has written and co-starred with her son Finneas in the 2013 film, *Life Inside Out*. And in 2016, she edited her daughter, Billie's music video for *Six Feet Under*. She was also a member of the Groundlings improv school, the likes of Will Ferrell, Kristen Wiig, Melissa McCarthy. Maggie, thank you for coming on *We are Family*. We're so happy to have you.

Maggie:

Thank you for having me. I'm laughing at the editing because that was literally, Billie shot that herself in our backyard and then went off on a choir tour to Japan and needed to talk me through what she wanted.

Julia:

Oh my God.

Maggie:

So, I literally just edited that in iMovie. It was supposed to be a temporary video until they made a real one, but it was kind of cool. So they never made one.

Julia:

So they kept it. Well, listen, it gets you that IMDB listing. There you go. That is really funny.

Julia:

Well, so yeah let's just start, since we're a podcast here about family and parenting and you are a mom to two superstars, holy cow. Can you talk us a little bit about what Billie and Finneas were like as kids and what their personalities were as they grew up when you were parenting them?

Maggie:

Well, let's see, they were very funny, first of all, very, very, very funny together and separately and funny in different ways. Finneas is four years older than Billie. So, both kids were very spirited, when you read the parenting books, they were high need babies and spirited children. Those are the terms that they give you, which are very nice loving terms. So very high need as babies, Finneas always wanted to be carried in a sling at all times, was literally seemed like the happiest baby child in the world, as long as you were holding him, carrying him and moving. And then if you put him down for two seconds, he was in agony, just like crying and miserable.

From the very beginning, we just were like, okay, that's what he needs. And so that's what we did. And Billie had similar, but different sort of, very much wanted to be carried and with you and in your sling. So that's what they were like as little babies. And then, Finneas was always Finneas, he spoke really, really

early and he was very communicative but he was also kind of highly tortured, high need, had a lot of sensitivity issues, very creative and very alert.

And Billie was very strong willed and really had this vision of what she wanted, would tell all the other kids, make movies from the very earliest age and music videos and direct them all and tell everybody what to do. So, looking back, you could definitely sort of see the seeds of who they would become. Somebody told me like, what you have at 3 is what you can have at 13. And I have to say it was very true in our house.

Julia:

That is good to know. I have a five year old, and a very spirited five year old. So this gives me hope that maybe one day she might be taking home a whole bunch of Grammys, who knows. Of course they collaborate a lot now in their music and I know Billie's written about Finneas in her songs and they seem very close. What was their dynamic like growing up? Has it always been that way?

Maggie:

It really was from the very beginning, aside from a like typical period, I think when Finneas was like maybe 11 years old and she was 7, 8, like there was a 11, 12 there was a like, Ugh, irritated by the little sister period. I think that's very common. But very much until that time and then shortly after that time, very close. We live in a small house, we homeschooled our kids or unschooled our kids in a large community of homeschoolers, unschoolers. But, meant they had a lot of time together. So they just really got up to creativity and fun, in the house and in the yard and with very close friends that we had too. So we had like a little, a posse of families that were always around. And I think that helped them be very, very close. And they have this sense of humor. I think that's key and they had similar interests, they liked dance and they liked making things with tape and boxes and all that kind of kid stuff.

Julia:

I love that. Can you talk to me about the difference between homeschooling and unschooling and what your kind of decision was behind homeschooling or unschooling them?

Maggie:

Yeah, our decision was sort of surprising, I think. We were older parents, I think I was 36 or 37 when I had Finneas, Patrick was a couple years older and we really waited and we really couldn't wait to be with our children. And so it sort of started out, it started in two different ways. I think Patrick read an article, believe it or not about Hansen. And he was like, "Hey, they're homeschooled. This sounds interesting." I don't know, nothing to do with like being musical. It was just the first time I think he'd heard of it. And I'm going to be honest. I was a little bit, I'm from Colorado originally. Then I lived in New York, but when Columbine happened that really rocked my world. That just really tore me up as it did everyone. So kind of planted the seed in my brain.

Like, I don't know if I want them to go away all day. And then, because Finneas was, he had these sort of challenges and he also had this really active, amazing brain. And we were like, I don't know, this is going to be hard in regular school and we certainly did not have the money for any kind of private school or special anything. We just thought, it's not going to be easy and we're going to spend so much of our time dealing with trying to make it better for him when we could just spend that same amount of time nurturing in our own way. If that makes sense.

Also he went to an cooperative nursery school. And the cooperative nursery school, I did so much work as you do at those. I was so involved and I was doing all these things with the kids and all these activities.

And I learned to be a music teacher so I could teach and all he liked there was the sandbox and lunch. So I was like, well wait, if I'm going to be a big volunteer, I might as well be a big volunteer for what he really loves to do. And then Billie was tiny at the time. And so we found this amazing homeschool community in California. We're super lucky, there's lots and lots of homeschoolers. And so there were activities and park days and field trips that were organized and just so much community to get involved with. And so I just started volunteering my time there.

So I'd lead the book clubs and I'd lead a field trip and we'd have people over to our house every Friday, we'd make crafts and we'd talk about the history of the holidays. It just was very organic and kind of made sense in our lives to kind of follow their lead and what they were interested in. And find the kind of missing gaps in different ways, like a homeschool co-op that we were involved in where, there was this amazing mom who was this genius teacher, and she taught the most wonderful geography class and it was so fun and the kids loved it. So it was sort of just like parenting in general, kind of following where your kid's journey is taking them and adjusting.

Julia:

I love that. That's so beautiful. And so a lot of people have these ideas in their head around homeschooling. Like it can sometimes isolate your child socially, but it sounds like what you had there was a real cooperative with lots of children. And I suppose, the difference between unschooling and homeschooling, I guess. Homeschooling doesn't always have to be at home, I guess. Right.

Maggie:

Well, there are homeschoolers who do, kind of do a more rigid sort of school structured day. We did not. So we were really out in the world, like world schooling, like, the science center's pretty empty on a school day. It's the perfect day to go there. When Finneas turned 13, we went to the Grammy museum, unbelievably every week because he loved music. And so they had these wonderful classes on like music of the civil war or how to use Ableton beats or something.

There's a big community. And also, listen, kids who go to school, that's all great too. And there's wonderful schools and that works, but there is a lot of time at school where you're not really allowed to visit with other people. Whereas we were like always with other people, they had friends all the time. They were constantly doing activities with their friends and these fun field trips and stuff. So it's kind of whatever you make it. I think if you lived in a community where there weren't as many people doing it, so there weren't as many kids available during the day, it might be harder, but also you're not limited to just what you do. Both kids did the Los Angeles children's chorus. And they met tons of friends there, both kids did the revolution dance center in Montrose, which is near us. And they loved dance and they loved choir and those were huge parts of the, they played ultimate Frisbee in the rec league.

Julia:

You obviously have this background in theater and passion for music yourself. Did you always know that they would work at entertainment or when did you first kind of have that inkling, if ever.

Maggie:

No. Well, first of all, we're actors and as working class actors, in other words, kind of job to job, hoping you'll make your health insurance every year kind of a life. We lived in a world where being talented did not necessarily equate with success, lots of talented people are very successful. Lots of talented people are not. Lots of not very talented people are also very successful. It's a weird industry, it's not really necessarily driven by hard work and talent. And so we are very indoctrinated in that world so never in a

million years, did I just assume that they would be rewarded for something. I was really more just like excited that they had things they love that I figured they could make a living at, in some way.

I taught this little songwriting class at the homeschool co-op. Not that I'm like the greatest songwriter in the world, just like, I know the basics. And if you have the basics. So I taught a songwriting class, started with like, "I Want to Hold Your Hand" by the Beatles, like here's a good song structure. And right away Finneas just, he got it. Like, he just got it. A light went off and he went, "Oh, I get it." And he started writing songs and every song I'd be like, "Who wrote that song?" He'd say "I did." It was crazy and much the same, Billie did the same four years later when I taught the class again. So it wasn't because I wanted them to be songwriters or musicians or anything. It was really just, Hey, I find this a fun thing to do. Maybe you'll think it's fun too.

And we always knew Billie had this unbelievable voice from the time she was tiny. And she never stopped singing. She sang everything. She sang before she talked, she loved singing. She'd say to me, "Mom, what should I play in the car?" And I'd be like, "Just sing to me." So it was really just a passion thing.

Julia:

So, I wanted to circle back on what you just said about being a working class acting family and kind of living paycheck to paycheck. I feel like you were able to give your kids so many great opportunities, but you didn't always necessarily have the resources. How did you make that all work?

Maggie:

We bartered a lot. We did a lot of things like my husband did handyman work at the gymnastics gym Billie loved her gymnastics class. We couldn't afford it more than like one session. And so he would do handyman work there and just fix whatever was broken. And I did some cooking in exchange for singing lessons from their singing teacher. I kind of everything. A lot of volunteering, some scholarships, financial scholarships at the choir, being the super involved parent, the one like, I'll organize the class if I got into aerial circus with my kids and they loved it.

I said, "I will organize a homeschool class." And she said, "Okay, great. So then you won't have to pay for it." So it was really just a lot of kind of working it out and there's a lot of opportunity. Listen, there's privilege in just having the time to do that. And so I always want to acknowledge that, even if we didn't have that much money, we had the privilege of not working two jobs a piece all day, not everyone can do that by any means. So we made choices to kind of keep our life small, have a small house, have a small footprint, have an old car and spend what we could and at what time we could. And also the one thing about being unemployed actors is you do have a lot of time.

Julia:

That's a focus on your kids.

Maggie:

But I think there's something to be said for, my son said once on an interview, when he was younger about homeschooling, he said, "All kids really want is your time and attention, and it's not about what you buy them and how nice their house is. It's your time and your attention."

Julia:

I love that. That is so very, very true. So what's your family dynamic like now? With Finneas and Billie traveling all over the place, going on tour. How much time do you spend together and what's that like? Because Billie's still only what, 19.

Maggie:

She's 19, but we've gone on every tour with her.

Julia:

So you're always there together.

Maggie:

We're always there and Finneas is on his own solo tour now. That's really been sad for us because it's the first time when he's really been away. I actually just went and saw him in New York and it was amazing. But in general, we see each other all the time. We're so lucky and I'm going to be honest, like I made a conscious decision. Like we're going to live in a city where our kids might stay. I grew up in a little town in Colorado. I love that town, but there wasn't anything for me to do in what I wanted to do and so I moved away, right away. And I've lost both of my parents, both of my parents did not live to be old.

And it was sad to not live near my family. So I feel quite lucky that we live in a city that I think they're basically going to be in. And at least so far Patrick works on Billie's crew. And I work with Billie, just kind of helping in all kinds of regards, a lot of it's just trying to help a lot of decisions. It's a kind of overwhelming career and it takes a giant army of people to work it all out. She has managers, but I just kind of work with her to take a little bit of the strain off of all the decisions that have to be made. So we are pretty much together. We travel on the tour bus, we have so much fun sleeping in the bunk and, it's a fun life.

It's hard to be away from home and come home with 12 suitcases that are all over your little house and unpacking and repacking. I mean it's definitely highly stressful at moments and challenging, but there's real elements of fun and joy and seeing your kids on stage, I mean, it's just mind blowing, to see them do what they love. And I love the fans. I love all the fans. They're so lovely. I never really was a hardcore fan of something. I loved Pink Floyd, I loved The Beatles, but I wasn't like hardcore fan. And it's really fun to be a fan, I've realized. It's so much better than being a hater to have something you love. And I love seeing these young people doing that, it's great.

Julia:

Yeah. But also teens aside, I mean, Billie Eilish has just such a huge universal appeal and her lyrics are so sophisticated and I'm there like getting ready for bed, listening to her music as a 39 year old. And it's like, yes, it's hitting home and I'm getting so emotional. And I think, oh my gosh, how is that possibly coming from somebody who's 19? She just seems so very sophisticated in her creativity.

Maggie:

I think she has a real vision of, it's really interesting to watch creativity, isn't it. It's interesting when it happens to you, when you sit down to write even a letter and you're like, what am I going to say? And then your brain starts putting it out. It's an amazing phenomenon. And watching them, I was so lucky through the first album, they made all that album here in this house and Finneas's bedroom. And they made the second album in his little studio in his house that he lives in with his girlfriend now. It's amazing to watch that creativity and to see that from such an early age.

Teenagers, children have feelings, they have deep, deep feelings and they think about deep and sometimes dark and sad and profound and moving things. I think they mostly all do. And the ability to then express it is so fortunate, first of all, so fortunate to have a way to express yourselves. And I know Billie often says she doesn't know what she would've done without the ability to write music. And of course she has Finneas as this partner and they write everything together and they have this, he has this beautiful way with her of just being there to support her, like letting her have vision and letting her have the whole... He writes and produces with a lot of people and he has his own project and they're wildly different, wildly different. He has an ability to really let the artist shine and she just has a real point of view and comes across in the way she thinks. And it's fun to be there when she starts to make connections. Her brain starts to shoot stuff out. And it's fun to watch.

Julia:

Yeah, I remember reading about Happier Than Ever, which is just one of my favorite all time, favorite songs, generally just being very therapeutic for her and yeah. And I think you make an excellent point. Often we have this higher, there's hierarchy in society between parents and kids, like parents always know better. And it's like, yeah, kids are humans too with their own feelings, their own personalities, their own emotions. And it's really important to respect that. And it feels like you do a really good job of that.

Maggie:

Billie always says that, a lot of the times, I mean, people have done incredible things at those ages forever, remembering it's the first time and the first time you fall in love, the first time you learn about global warming, the first time, those can be very powerful times. You can be full of passion and rage and anger that maybe a bit later, you kind of like, okay, we live in this world, it's complicated, but we have to cope, right. And so I think the passion of youth is really something to be listened to because it's fresh eyes.

Julia:

Yes, absolutely. And so also both your kids have been spoken about as being eccentric and weird, but in a good way, which I think is awesome. I think your husband Patrick has said that Billie has "no tolerance for people she's not interested in and doesn't give a shit whether you like her or not." I feel like we all hope that our kids will have this feeling of self-belief and this just sort of like disregard for conforming the way that your kids do. What's your secret? Was that something you helped foster from a young age in them?

Maggie:

You know, listen, this is one of the things that was nice about not being in school. I'll be honest, we didn't have the kind of peer pressure, all their kids clothes were from hand me downs or target or thrift stores, they didn't have any judgment about that. All their other friends were doing the same. There wasn't a lot of judgment. And we also surrounded ourselves by a lot of people had those same philosophies. So I don't like to take too much credit because I think sometimes kids are just who they are and they have very strong-willed people with very strong and listen, I'll tell you this, those kind of things that are hard when you have a five year old and they're super strong-willed, you remember that. That's going to keep them from peer pressure later.

They're going to make their own decision. Because that's that same quality. And I will say sadly that the idea that she never cares what people think isn't, sadly social media is brutal and she bears the brunt of

that. Like everybody who's on it and that can be extremely painful and it's extremely painful to have to become a person who has social media always in your face, but you really can't look at it. You cannot look, I can't even do it. I can see the nicest article about Billie and I have to force myself not to look at the comments, not look at one comment because so much hate is out there. And people take such joy in just hating for any reason. And they have no idea you're going to see it, like whatever they don't care, but you have to be very careful. And so that is definitely, she feels that. I think what's really just true is her style, her sensibilities, how she's going to live her life. She doesn't care what people think about that for sure.

Julia:

How do you support her through all that or both of your kids, when they have those trolls and they have those negative comments and that's affecting them mentally?

Maggie:

That is really hard. That's been one of the hardest things. I know Mel C who Billie has met a few times, we've all met. She's so wonderful. And I remember she pointed out that, when the Spice Girls were happening, they didn't have that at all. You know Eddie Vedder is like, they got a bad review once, maybe from a paper, that's like as bad as it could get. And now you've got every single person on earth able to say what they think in a comment. It's a crazy thing. So it is very, very hard. When it first started. I remember it very well. We were in Germany. I think that was the first time she started really feeling it. It was a bad time.

I mean, it was a very dark time and it's sort of just being there and lending that other perspective of, what can you do? Encourage people not to read them, let them know how much you love them and give them some kind of context for it. I wish I had a better strategy, I personally do. I know we're all pioneers in this. I felt that way parenting even Finneas in the beginning with video games, it was like the first generation of hardcore video games at young ages. and then Billie, with social media. Parenting books that I read when Finneas and Billie were little are almost obsolete now because this challenge is so great. And I don't think the definitive book has been written about it, because we just don't know how it's changing people's their brains, how it's changing their self-esteem and we know it's hard.

Listen, I will say my biggest tip, if there's any tip, is that when you approach the teen years, as hard as it might be for you personally to do this, don't think of the teen years as the time when, "Oh, my kids are teens, I can go do whatever, not be home." It is the time where your kids need you the most. Somebody told me this and it was a great parenting tip. They just want you around. They don't want to talk to you. They just want to know you're there. And sometimes they want to talk to you at two in the morning and you got to take that opportunity at two in the morning, whenever it is. And it's not the same kind of rewarding, like when they're little and they hold your face in their hand, they're like, "I love you. You're the most beautiful mom in the world." that kind of thing. You don't get that kind of payback.

You just need to know that they need you more than ever. And they need to know that you are there supporting them, there at a moment's notice, whatever they want to say, whatever they need you to do. It's a rough time, I would also say and listen, I'm in therapy and I was late to get to therapy, but you have to be aware that those teen years take a toll on your own mental health. And you got to take care of that too.

Julia:

Yes, Lisa Damour is a child psychologist and she talks about potted plant parenting with teens. They want you to be a potted plant in the corner, and we've talked about this in the podcast before, but just there,

they know you're there. They don't necessarily need any interaction from you, but they know that you're there if you need them.

Maggie:

So true, I've heard that potted plant phrase and I didn't know that's who, I love it. It's so accurate.

Julia:

It's so true. But of course, you still have to be a mom too. And again, Billie is 19 and there are things like getting enough sleep and eating properly and all those parts of raising teens and raising kids. How do you kind of navigate that? Are you still kind of in the weeds, making sure she's eating, making sure she's sleeping.

Maggie:

I am and I was a real broken record on sleep and I drove my kids crazy, especially Finneas because he would be in the studio across the hall from Billie's room. I happen to be in Billie's room right now. It's a little house so you could literally like reach your arm out, there's the other room. And he would be up, I'd get up to pee at four in the morning, he'd be still awake working. And I was a broken record like, please go to sleep, please go to sleep. You can't force someone to sleep. And we always had this policy, like when you were younger, like if you're making music, you don't have to sleep, because you're creative. Right. And I know what that's like, it's hard to, you don't want to turn that off, but at four in the morning I'd be like, please go to sleep, you know and... I will say Finneas kind of later came to it on his own that he did better if he slept more and Billie to some degree too. I don't know, I walk that line of like, how do you balance telling them the things that are important for them to know, and also letting them make their own decisions as they get older. For a long time I was a broken record in the green room, "Please everyone stop talking to her. She needs to sing tonight. Please let her rest her voice." Just a broken record that nobody seemed to listen to. But now she's taken that on herself.

Now she's like, "Hey, I'm on vocal rest. I'm warming up my voice." Again, it takes a lot of effort and you're not usually appreciated for it. And that's the worst part about parenting teens, the hardest part. You have to just go like, "I still have to do it. It's my job, but no one's going to thank me for it. No one's going to like me for it." And give them lots of space and lots of choices and same as little kids, would you like this or would you like this? Can I help you with this? Or can we do this?

Julia:

Universally, parenthood is about not always being appreciated, but trying to do the best thing for your kids.

Julia:

So now just generally a question we always ask everybody, what are your hopes and dreams for your little family, for the future?

Maggie:

I hope that they just continue to check in and see that what they're doing is true for them and that they always keep in mind and as part of what I try to do, help them keep in mind. That your legacy is not just a hit song, your legacy is what you do as human beings for the world, to better the world. What you give back, how you use your superpower, which is this platform that you've been given. So I hope that they

continue because they've actually been quite generous in that regard and they do really care. So I hope that they continue to be able to do that and make music in a way that just gives them joy. And that the pressures that may seem to be put on artists to keep doing something a certain way or whatever, that they can just be true to themselves and continue to love making music and making art.

Julia:

Well, I love their music and thank you for being an awesome mom and raising two really amazing kids who are clearly making a huge impact on everybody here across the world. So Maggie, thank you for coming on *We are Family*. This has been such a great conversation.

Maggie:

Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it. I love family. I love being a mom. And so I'm feeling positive love toward everyone out there and just hoping they just are taking a moment to think how wonderful it is to be a parent.

Julia:

Thanks so much for listening to my conversation with Maggie Baird. Next time you'll hear from singer, dancer, dad of 3 and Backstreet Boy, Nick Carter.

Be sure to follow *We Are Family* on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you listen so you don't miss an episode. And we'd love your feedback. If you could rate this podcast and leave us a review, we'd really appreciate it. You can also find us online at parents.com/wearefamilypodcast.

We Are Family is presented by me, Julia Dennison, and produced by Sam Walker. Editing is by Vincent Cacchione and thanks also to the rest of our production team at Pod People, Rachel King, Matt Sav, and Danielle Roth. We'll see you back here next week for more *We Are Family*!