

IN PROXIMITY
Episode 4: Tunji Balogun and Archie Davis
Final Transcript

[Music/Old Radio Sounds by Ken Nana]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're listening to P-R-O-X.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Archie Davis: Is the 2023 version of Tunji, looking back at that 2010, like, first getting the job, first getting a shot, right, were there ever aspirations to be running a record label at that time?

Tunji Balogun: Yeah. I mean, honestly, I just wanted to be Jay-Z. So I wanted to be the best rapper and, like, the greatest executive at the same time. So that was the whole goal.

Archie Davis: Wow, so to be at Def Jam is interesting.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're listening to In Proximity.

Tunji Balogun is CEO and Chairman of Def Jam Recordings. Archie Davis is Proximity Media's co-founder and co-head of music alongside Ludwig Göransson, and he's chief creative officer of Def Jam Recordings.

But 15 years before landing in the C-suite, Tunji and Archie met as a young assistant and intern, respectively, at Interscope Records where they cut their teeth in the music business working with then up-and-coming artists like Kendrick Lamar and Schoolboy Q. Tunji actually got his start as a rapper before moving into music marketing and A&R, signing artists like Childish Gambino, SZA, and H.E.R. Archie was a leading architect on the Black Panther soundtrack, the award-winning Wendy's We Beefin? EP — which you should really check out — and the Judas and the Black Messiah soundtrack and Academy Award winning original song "Fight For You" by H.E.R.

On this episode, Tunji and Archie share lessons on navigating careers in the music industry, specifically in marketing and A&R, working on the Wakanda Forever soundtrack and bringing Tunji's Nigerian connections to the project, and what they consider their top 5 albums that define the human experience.

[END VOICEOVER]

[MUSIC STOPS]

Tunji Balogun: My name is Tunji Balogun. If I was in Nigeria, I would say my name is Tunji Balogun, but, you know, when I'm in America, Tunji Balogun. I'm the CEO and chairman of Def Jam Recordings.

Archie Davis: I'm Archie Davis, co-founder of Proximity Media, oversee music with Ludwig Göransson and chief creative officer of Def Jam Recordings alongside my creative partner, Tunji Balogun.

Tunji Balogun: Yes, sir.

Archie Davis: Live from Santa Monica, California, Def Jam Recordings studios in the building. It's kind of cool to get to do — like, this is kind of like I'm working, but it feels — it doesn't feel like working. I think that's why we've been able to do this for so long together.

Tunji Balogun: Absolutely.

Archie Davis: So we both got started in A&R, and I know, to a lot of people, that term may be so gray, and it may be like that is the coveted job of the music business. Like, everybody wants to be in A&R whether they admit it or not, but a lot of people don't know what an A&R is or does. Can you explain the definition and the job?

Tunji Balogun: Yeah, absolutely. So it's a term from the '50s that stands for artists and repertoire. It comes from an era where labels would sign artists — really, they would sign singers and just kind of pair them with music that they already had that was written by other people. That music would be the repertoire, so that job title got shortened to A&R. I would say, in this era, it's very different, but a lot of the principal elements of, you know, where the job started remain. It's really about discovering and breaking artists.

And I always talk about three stages of A&R. That's discovery, development, and delivery. The discovery is obviously, you know, having ears and knowing how to identify something that feels special and signing, bringing something into the company. Development is all the things that you have to do to get the artist to live up to the vision that you have for that artist. So that's, you know, helping them make better music, connecting them with other creatives that can enhance what they're already doing. And then delivery, breaking the artist, actually helping to tell the story, working with the rest of the label — whether that's marketing, publicity, digital — to impart everything that you know about the artist and their vision so that they have the information to go out and find those champions outside of the building that can get behind the artist and give them opportunities to break.

Archie Davis: Let's talk about 15 years ago, Interscope Geffen A&M. Tell us what you were doing.

Tunji Balogun: I mean, the way that I snuck into the building was there is a woman named Niki Benjamin, who I'd worked for previously at Warner Brothers Records. I was a marketing assistant under her and another marketing director at Warner. And then she ended up leaving to go to Geffen sometime in 2006. I stayed at Warner. And, you know, I got laid off from Warner, slept on couches for about eight, nine months.

And then I remember it was like the day before Halloween in 2007, Niki called me, and she was like, "Hey, I don't have a job for you. It's not really a job, but I can hire you as a temp. So, like, you're not going to get benefits or anything, but you'll get paid, and you can work, and, like, let's get back in." And I'm like, "Yes, I'll be there on Monday." So that's how I got into the Geffen Interscope space. For people who don't know, Interscope obviously is a label that was started in the late '80s, I think, maybe, or early '90s.

Archie Davis: I think early '90s.

Tunji Balogun: Yeah, early '90s, my bad — by Jimmy Iovine, Ted Field, and Tom Whalley. We worked in the Geffen imprint under Interscope, but it all kind of rolled up to Jimmy Iovine. And we got to witness, I would say, the last five years of his reign at Interscope, which was just sort of like a masterclass of seeing a legendary executive telegraph his vision to the world. You know, we saw Lady Gaga come in as, like, "Oh, who the hell is that girl from New York?" And then, six months later, she was the biggest star in the world.

You know, we saw Eminem come back, you know, the Recovery album, the Relapse album.

Archie Davis: Soulja Boy.

Tunji Balogun: Saw Soulja Boy blow up. Just, it was a lot, so, like, very much like a front row seat to mid-2000s industry. And shout out to Niki Benjamin because she got me into that, into that world. And, yeah, I remember meeting Archie. Archie was in the A&R department. I was in the marketing department, which is ironic because we later switched.

Archie Davis: Yep.

Tunji Balogun: Yeah, we definitely ended up sort of making our names in the vice-versa department. But it was very amazing to just observe and watch and learn. I was already a massive, massive music fan and an expert in my own way because of my fandom. But —

Archie Davis: And your rap ability.

Tunji Balogun: Oh, god.

Archie Davis: Let's not — let's not skip over that. You were — you tried it.

Tunji Balogun: Oh, man. Okay, yeah, that was happening, too. I was rapping a lot. That was definitely the era where I was still actively working on my artist stuff. And honestly, that's the cornerstone for everything that ended up happening as far as my A&R career, was all the relationships and the knowledge and the instincts that I had from being an artist, you know? Knowing how to be in the studio, knowing how to work with producers, knowing how to pair people up to make certain types of songs. All that stuff was definitely the building blocks.

Archie Davis: Do you think that level of empathy, like, as an artist and a creative first kind of helped you — I guess it would be just kind of nurture your relationships as you would grow with kinda some of the artists in their careers because you've helped quite a few artists from kind of like 0 to the 65 to 125-mile-per-hour place time and time again, and in a short period of time, relatively so.

Tunji Balogun: Fifteen years, though, when you look at it. But, nah, it's all — it's all connected.

Archie Davis: Right.

Tunji Balogun: It's all the same kind of muscle or, you know, reflex just because that's the world that I came from, seeing all these kind of outsiders become stars on their own terms, whether it was Lana or Soulja Boy —

Archie Davis: Kendrick

Tunji Balogun: — or Kendrick or Lady Gaga. That was just a masterclass in, like, oh, okay, you can actually sign something and identify something that's really, really different, build it up to a place where the whole world appreciates it, but protect the magic and not lose any of the taste level and quality. You know, you don't have to go quote/unquote "pop to go pop." You know, can actually still be a real artist. So that became the blueprint for everything that I did. And I'm sure, you know, it was the same way for you, but —

Archie Davis: Yeah.

Tunji Balogun: — yeah, I mean, going back to those days, those early days, you know, I feel like it was just, like, trying to become indispensable to the process in whatever way in our respective roles, me in the marketing space, you in the A&R space. It's just, like, going above and beyond. It's like, I need to keep my spot in this building, so I need to be so nice with, like, booking travel, doing expenses, answering whatever requests are needed for these artists, dealing with managers. You know, and then also, like, when I'm not in the building, when I'm out running around, just really making connections and being a part of that young creative hustling scene and community that all feeds back with good information and opportunities for the artists and the people in the building. So that's what we were trying to do. I feel like we worked on that for like three, four years.

Archie Davis: I'm going to take it a step further, though, because I was there with you at that time. But I also was fortunate enough to be there with you when you kind of like were coming back into the building as the CEO and chairman of Def Jam, right? You named a lot of different departments and people, but the people that I saw a lot of excitement from were the security guards that still work at that building —

Tunji Balogun: Yeah, man.

Archie Davis: — the guys that still park the valet. And it was almost like this, you taking this step and moving 15 years later into this role, 14 years later into this role was a win for them, as well. And I think trying to be indispensable is one thing, but I think it's also just treating people with kindness and care. And not treating the relationships as transactional, I think went a long way.

Tunji Balogun: No, absolutely, and I — you know, I would say that goes back to just coming from a Nigerian family and being taught to be very much polite and treat people with respect no matter what position or "status," quote/unquote, they occupy, like, and move with integrity. And in a business where people don't expect people to do that, sadly, I very much — like, I vowed to myself that I wouldn't compromise my values in this industry and that I wouldn't do anything, offer money, or just to, like, rush the process. I told myself that at the beginning, and somehow that actually works.

So yeah, I mean, I don't think anything, any of this would've happened without all of the things that happened at the beginning which were unplanned and, for the most part, pretty organic. So, from getting into the Interscope building in '08 as a temp, it took me three years to actually get a real permanent, full-time job. And I ended up temping in every department, you know, whether it was publicity — I did business development for a long time. I was in royalties, like anyone who needed someone who was knowledgeable of the system, which was basically like, "how do you

book travel and do expenses?" which every executive needed someone who had those basic skills. And, you know, once you became, like —

Archie Davis: And answering the phones.

Tunji Balogun: And answering the phones and keeping the schedule, you know, making sure the schedule was on point. But, yeah, we became experts at that. It became sort of like second nature, but we were also creatives, man. So we were always, like, trying to get to a creative job, even though we were doing the logistical assistant, you know, job, and also trying to contribute creatively with ideas and insight wherever we could. And then, as days go by and turn into weeks and months and years, people start to notice and recognize, "Oh, okay, this kid actually is contributing in whatever way that is."

Archie Davis: There was an interesting shift in the music business in general, but, like, I was able to have bosses that would trade the responsibility to do more creative things with just making sure that the logistical stuff was handled. And as long as I can handle the logistical stuff and just the scheduling and the basic stuff of the job, that was when more of the creative responsibility started to show themselves.

[MUSIC FADES IN]

Tunji Balogun: It was like, "Master this, and then I'll give you access to show me your other talents and skills."

[KN 9 to 5 by Ludwig Göransson]

Tunji Balogun: So that lasted from 2007 to 2010. At that point, I was also doing a lot of, like, digital stuff on the side because I was an artist, and I was a nerdy internet kid. So I was connected in the — in the blog world. So many of the artists who ended up coming to define the era, this era of rap, exploded out of this blog era during which the blogs were almost, I would say, similar to like a playlist nowadays, or getting on Rap Caviar or maybe something like that. If you could get your music posted, you could really build an audience because that's where the fans, the growing amount of fans online, were going to find new music. Artists like Kendrick, Drake —

Archie Davis: Cole.

Tunji Balogun: Cole, Wale, Cudi —

Archie Davis: Big K.R.I.T., Dom Kennedy.

Tunji Balogun: Wiz Khalifa.

Archie Davis: Wiz, Curren\$y.

Tunji Balogun: Dom Kennedy, Mac Miller.

Archie Davis: ScHoolboy.

Tunji Balogun: ScHoolboy Q, all the TDE stuff, Joey Bada\$\$, A\$AP, Ferg and Rocky.

Archie Davis: All the A\$AP.

Tunji Balogun: Like, the whole A\$AP Mob, like — oh, Future. I would even throw The Weeknd in there. Like, all these artists initially emerged during this blog era, and I was really tapped into that world, and I had a lot of good relationships with the blogs. And I — at one point, I was a blogger myself. So I was somebody that people would, like, hire to get their music posted just because I would send out email blasts, and I had good relationships. And oftentimes, if I emailed 30 blogs, four or five would post it because, at that point, they grew to trust me, like, "Oh, okay, this kid has good taste and is always sending us good music."

So a lot of people were trying to hire me for, like, digital marketing jobs during that three-year stretch of me temping, but at that point, I was like, "You know what, I really want to do A&R. I'm not going to settle for anything less than that. I'll stay as a temp and learn the system and, like, figure it out until I can get an A&R job." So I was applying for A&R jobs and turning down digital jobs and marketing jobs, still hustling and doing my digital stuff on the side, for sure. But, yeah, I didn't get a real, actual job in the A&R department until 2010 when Shawn Holiday, Tubby, hired me as his assistant. I was 27, and I was still rapping but sort of like starting to figure out, like, "Hmm, maybe this executive thing, maybe I could really go crazy as an A&R if I really put my mind to it." So, yeah, that kind of became my focus.

And I think, around that time, you had moved into marketing, too, 2010? So what was your transition from A&R into the marketing space? Because I don't even remember that. I just know that one day you were a marketing person.

Archie Davis: So they made some department changes at Geffen, and my role was eliminated. I left for about three weeks, and the guy that gave me my internship at marketing, Chris Clancy, who went on to —

Tunji Balogun: Wow.

Archie Davis: — manage Odd Future and manage Mac Miller — I leave A&R. He's going to start Odd Future and about to make his transition, so Andrew Flad, who worked under him, was moving up, so Justin Dreyfuss was moving up.

Tunji Balogun: Yup.

Archie Davis: And it was like, "Hey, we have an opening over here. We want you back." But since I had only been gone for less than two months, I was still in the system. So I was able to maintain this dual A&R and marketing role.

Tunji Balogun: Got it, yeah.

Archie Davis: So that's why the projects that I A&Red when I was still there at Yelowolf working with Rock City loosely, then I was able to still work on those things as a marketing person and a coordinator as I came up.

Tunji Balogun: That makes sense. Yeah.

Archie Davis: Then there's Top Dawg.

Tunji Balogun: Yes, I was going to say 2010 is also the year that —

Archie Davis: The year of the Dawg.

Tunji Balogun: It was the year that K.Dot kind of transitioned into being Kendrick Lamar, and started to really heat up in LA. And then there was also just the whole LA rap scene at the time, which was very much connected to that blog scene that I was just talking about.

Archie Davis: And NikeTalk, don't leave out NikeTalk.

Tunji Balogun: And NikeTalk, and the blog, the message boards which I was heavy on the message boards too. I wasn't really on NikeTalk like that, but I was on a couple other ones, heavy. And yeah, I mean that whole era of LA rap from Pac Div to Dom to U-N-I, Blu & Exile.

Archie Davis: Early YG.

[LAUGHTER]

Tunji Balogun: Early YG, Tiron and Ayomari.

Archie Davis: Jay 305 –

Tunji Balogun: Jay 305, Diz Gibran. There was just a lot of really, really special dope local rap. And it was getting a lot of attention on the blogs. And I had actually met the TDE guys when I worked at Warner in 2006, because Naim Ali, who works with us at Def Jam, signed Jay Rock in '06, Kendrick was K.Dot, and it was Punch, Dave, Top at the time. I think Top was going by Dude Dawg, but I don't know if I should say that on a podcast. You might want to edit that out.

[LAUGHTER]

But, yeah, so I met those guys really early in '06 and the stuff I talked about, the blog stuff I was doing, I was helping those guys with all their music releases. And K.Dot was always really, really special. Really, really dope rapper. I remember when I was at Warner, ironically, he got a development deal with Def Jam, and everybody was like, "Yo, K.Dot."

Archie Davis: Through Jay-Z. Through Jay-Z, right?

Tunji Balogun: Yeah. Jay-Z gave him a development deal and everybody was like, yo K.Dot's about to go. Fast forward from 2006 to 2010, Overly Dedicated comes out. A lot of really special projects came out that year. I didn't mention Overdose too. My bad. We got to shout out Overdose too. They were making great music.

Archie Davis: Shout out to Overdose.

Tunji Balogun: Shout out to all those guys.

Tunji Balogun: But yeah. 2010, man, that was a pivotal year for me because I got my real job. You know, I got benefits. I could go to the doctor now. I can go to the dentist. Incredible.

Archie Davis: For the listeners that may want to explore the music business, in that defining period for you when you got your first job and you were watching how Interscope is

developing these artists, what were the — I would say more so, values that you kind of would pass on to somebody else that you kind of held on to as, like, that guiding light to be able to maintain yourself through this, you know, weird business at times?

[LAUGHTER]

Tunji Balogun: Yeah. I mean, I would say resilience and persistence because the bigger things that happen later when you find success are all built upon the unspoken about hard work moments at the beginning. And it's like you actually have to keep pushing in the face of closed doors. You know, I got fired from Warner, similar to the story where you got let go from Interscope and came back two months later. The same thing ended up happening to me in 2011, I think. So I definitely, you know, lost my job a couple times, slept on couches, got the call from Mom, like, "You sure you don't want to go to grad school?"

And I just continued, you know, woke up every day, and I was like, I'm going to figure this out. So it sounds very cliché, but it's actually a true thing that you can manifest things, and you can kind of point your life in the direction that you want it to end up and just put in the work daily. And, you know, specifically for the music business, relationships are everything, and your reputation is everything. So doing good work with good people will yield good things. And, you know, it's a creative industry, so you actually have to be a part of creating things that matter to people and that matter culturally, and that becomes your calling card to get you into the next door. It's like, oh, I worked on — I was a part of this thing that mattered, so now I have this opportunity to work on something else that might matter. And then you look back, you know, 15, 20 years later, and you're like, "Oh, shit. We were there. We saw good kid, m.A.A.d city debut. We were there. Literally."

What was it like for you? What's your perspective on that, and how would you explain your process in dealing with all that?

Archie Davis: You know, I credit a lot of that to my, my tribe and my village and my parents and my grandparents and the values that were instilled in me early and my faith in knowing that the things that were meant for me I would have, and the ones that are not, I'm okay with because I'm okay with who I am and I'm okay with the place that I'm in and truly what was meant for me. I think so often, like, we get caught up in, like, looking at people's steps and trying to follow their path so closely that we sometimes get lost in the fact that, well, there's something a little bit different about me that actually may be my gift, and I may be able to navigate it a little different.

And I think I've always just tried to be a part of the things that I haven't seen before. I think it's changed now as I've had a child and gotten married, and, you know, the younger me would've said a different thing. But, you know, I'm living for — of everything I've ever created in my life, I never made anything that could love me back —

Tunji Balogun: Real.

Archie Davis: — until my son. So to me, this is a gift to be able to make these things and create with people that I care about on a daily and — but I do it for him.

Tunji Balogun: That's real.

[Good Times by Ludwig Göransson]

Archie Davis: So let's fast-forward. So, like is the 2023 version of Tunji, looking back at that 2010, like, first getting the job, first getting a shot, were there ever aspirations to be running a record label at that time?

Tunji Balogun: Yeah. I mean, honestly, I just wanted to be Jay-Z. So I wanted to be the best rapper and, like, the greatest executive at the same time. So that was the whole goal.

Archie Davis: Wow, so to be at Def Jam is interesting.

Tunji Balogun: Yeah, that was — and, obviously, like, it's interesting because I grew up — you know, I grew up on the west coast, but I went to high school on the east coast. So, being in high school from '96 to 2000 and the albums that came out on Def Jam during that era, the DMX, the Jay-Zs, the Foxy Brown, the Case, The Nutty Professor.

Archie Davis: Ludacris.

Tunji Balogun: All that stuff. Being on the east coast for that time, I grew to really, really appreciate the Def Jam brand and, like, what it stood for. You know, the Def Jam execs were the first execs that I even knew existed, that I was like, "Oh, I know who they are," you know? Because there was so much culture around what they were doing at the time. But having grown up in California, I was also, like, the biggest Dre and Snoop and Pac fan. So Interscope and Def Jam were always, for me, my favorite labels and the labels that I really felt like were iconic brands. And I felt like I understood what they meant. You know, I understood what an Interscope artist was, and I understood what a Def Jam artist was.

I was also, like, you know, a massive underground/backpack fan. So it's like, you know, on my mood board of labels, I would also put, like, Stones Throw and XL and some of those other kind of indie labels like Warp, you know, things like that, and labels that are a little bit more scrappy and build in a different way than the majors do. But I was the kid that was, like, going to the underground shows and working at the label, you know what I mean? And, like, making underground raps but, like, marketing big, mainstream radio rap.

So I was always kind of like living this dual citizenship of, like, I'm the one that can pull these worlds together. I want to pull kids that are, like, from the underground and figure out ways to make them get into the mainstream tastefully, or I want to, like, find something that's a little bit more rough around the edges and add a taste level to it and make it make sense. So — because I was always kind of living between those worlds, you know?

Archie Davis: Do you feel like that's kind of what has attracted you to some of what some would consider the left of center, but more so now has been deemed mainstream?

Tunji Balogun: Yeah, I mean, the funny thing is the left-of-center stuff always and eventually becomes the mainstream if it's given the right opportunity to grow and, you know, really scale up. But, yeah, I would say the blueprint was being at Interscope and watching these artists that didn't really make much sense become global stars and also seeing, like literally seeing Kendrick from day one and watching it grow without losing the magic. And I was like, that's what I want to do, you know what I mean?

And also, growing up in the Bay and, like, hearing a lot of different types of music growing up — my parents are from Nigeria. I grew up with them playing a lot of Nigerian music and African music mixed with R&B and soul music. And then, when I would go to school, it was all rap and,

like, Tupac and Snoop. So I had a really great foundation of great music to build on not only as an artist, but eventually as an exec. All of that stuff added up to, okay, when I actually have an opportunity to sign something, it's got to be something that lives up to all this stuff that I love. I want to, like, really bet on special — special Black artists and make it sense to the rest of the world, you know?

[In Proximity Theme by Ludwig Göransson]

Archie Davis: Let's talk about the Wakanda Forever process. Where should we start?

Tunji Balogun: We can't talk about Wakanda Forever without talking about the first Black Panther album from 2018, right?

Archie Davis: Correct.

Tunji Balogun: Which you worked on because you were working so closely with Kendrick, doing all the marketing for Kendrick's projects. And then, at that point, I had actually left Interscope, and I was at RCA. You were still at Interscope. We were still talking, obviously. We were still close. And the first soundtrack was just so special and, you know, I think a really amazing moment not only for Kendrick but all of the artists that ended up being on the soundtrack. And it was a really great mix of — the kind of new era of Afrobeats was peppered onto the project, but it was also a lot of young stars from America. And I remember working on it a little bit with Dave. Like, Dave would call me. I didn't even know what the hell he was working on, but he was just like, "Yo, I need to, like" —

Archie Davis: Dave Free, right?

Tunji Balogun: Dave Free, yes. Sorry, Dave Free from pgLang now. But, yeah, he was calling me, and he's like, "Yo, I need, like, a bunch of dope singers from Africa." And I'm like, "Okay," and I just sent him an email with a bunch of stuff. "Yo, I need a bunch of rappers." I'm like, "Okay," so I sent him, you know, some Nigerian rappers, some South African rappers. And then, a few months later, you know, I find out, oh, man, there was like — this Black Panther movie is coming out, and there was going to be a soundtrack.

That project and that film were just so impactful and, you know, I think really just important culturally. And as someone who ended up signing a lot of Afrobeats artists years after that, that album was really, really impactful in the sense of, like, just being a part of a cultural moment that made people around the world appreciate African culture in a deeper way. I would say especially, from what it felt like to me, Black Americans, I think, were able to kind of like take a moment and breathe in the culture. And then, you know, as things happen, you ended up at RCA.

Archie Davis: Yep.

Tunji Balogun: And you did Judas and the Black Messiah.

Archie Davis: We did Judas and the Black Messiah.

Tunji Balogun: Yeah, I did a little bit, but you — that was you, bro, you and Dash. You guys killed that.

Archie Davis: We won an Oscar for H.E.R.

Tunji Balogun: Won the Oscar for H.E.R. I mean, I played a small role. I helped a little bit.

Archie Davis: The Nipsey/Jay-Z song.

Tunji Balogun: The Nipsey/Jay-Z record. And then we both came to Def Jam, and 2022, it's time for another film, and it just kind of made sense. I remember I met Ryan Coogler at your wedding. We had a great conversation about both being from the Bay and being young creatives. And, "Yeah, we got to figure out something to work on one day." And then fast-forward, Wakanda Forever's coming out. We just kind of just got to work. I don't even remember how it started. I feel like you were like, "Yo, this is happening." And I was like, "Oh, okay." And then one day it was like, oh yeah, we're doing this.

Archie Davis: Well, I think it was the Nigeria conversation. It was like, look, Ryan and Ludwig are going over to Nigeria, and I need someone that we trust that we feel very confident in and that we know can handle the nuances of all of this work. And you said —

Tunji Balogun: I said Seni. And the funny thing is I was like, "I wish I could do it." You know, I was like, man, I want to get on a plane and go work on some records in Nigeria right now. But it was three months, or three or four months into year one of Def Jam, so I was like, "Well, I can't go." And luckily, you know, in the years since the first film and in the years since Interscope, I had really immersed myself in the Afrobeats scene. I signed Davido. I signed Wizkid. I signed Tems. All of that stuff was at RCA before we came to Def Jam, but in working with those artists, I had built up a great network of people and had built a lot of great relationships, especially in Nigeria. And when I was in Nigeria in 2019, I'd connected with Seni.

Archie Davis: Seni Saraki.

Tunji Balogun: Seni Saraki through Anthony Saleh, who, ironically, now manages Kendrick. Then it turned out that I had actually met Seni 12 years earlier because my family is friends with his family. And at one point, him and his grandmother and his whole family had come to L.A. in like 2008, and my mom flew down from the Bay to visit this family and took me and my then-girlfriend, now wife to go visit this family. And I was like, "I don't even know who" — I'm like, "Mom, who are these people?"

Archie Davis: Wow.

Tunji Balogun: I was like, "Mom, who are these people that you're making me go visit? I don't even know them." And then, you know, years later, I meet Seni, and I'm like, "You were that kid from that house, randomly. I didn't even know who the hell you were." But we ended up becoming really good friends after we met in 2019, and I was really impressed by him because, number one, he had great relationships with every artist, and, number two, he created The Native magazine.

Archie Davis: The Nigerian CNN.

Tunji Balogun: The Nigerian CNN. I mean, yeah, basically the premier publication that covers African culture, music, fashion. They're getting into sports. I would compare it to, like, what The Fader was at its peak. That's what The Native means to the Afrobeat scene. And, you know, Seni and his partners and his team built that. So we became really good friends. And, you

know, when you called me and you were like, "Yo, we need someone on the ground who knows everybody and can connect the dots and is organized and can actually work as a creative partner with Ludwig and Ryan," I was like, Seni.

And I hit him, and he — I don't think he actually believed me. I don't think he actually, like, thought it was a real thing until he started talking to Ludwig. And he was like, "Yo, they bought their flights. They're coming. They're going to be here in a week." I'm like, "Yeah, man, let's — let's do — get the studio ready. Like, start putting the schedule together." And, you know, I remember texting him and telling him, "Hey, man, if you just really focus on this and deliver, this is something that could change your career and change your life."

And, you know, none of us really knew what was going to happen, but he was able to get not only the traditional musicians from all over Nigeria who are experts and play, you know, all of the traditional local Nigerian instruments and know all of the traditional Nigerian ways of singing, but he was able to get all of the young stars and contemporary artists that are, like, blowing up the Afrobeats scene. So he was able to get Burna, Tems, and Rema and Fireboy and CKay and, you know, and also —

Archie Davis: DBN Gogo.

Tunji Balogun: DBN Gogo from South Africa and Busiswa, and, you know, also introducing new artists like Bloody Civilian. And, you know, he really, like, had a bunch of sleepless nights and delivered. I also have to shout out Lady Donli, who is another amazing artist who kind of showed her A&R skills in pulling together a lot of the great talent that ended up on the soundtrack and in the film. So, yeah, I mean, it's funny how us meeting in 2008 as assistants just hustling, trying to keep a job end up 14, 15 years later with having the opportunity to help people change their — change their lives and really give people opportunities to grow their own careers. And, you know, people are nominated for Oscars, and we're going to awards shows and doing cool panels and just celebrating the culture that we're building together, which is really the best part of doing this work.

Archie Davis: And just to add to that, I don't think — I don't think we could do this work if it felt transactional. I truly think there's a sense of obligation to one another and a kinship and a bond to make sure that we're showing up in ways that we know are our gifts uniquely to kind of add to the greater good of whatever the task at hand may be, whether that's running Def Jam or creating Wakanda Forever or — to your point, all of these things in our lives kind of lined us up.

Tunji Balogun: Yeah, there's another connection, too. Like, I met Ludwig in 2011 or 2012 because I was trying to sign Childish Gambino, and he was Gambino's producer, and still is. And they were working on, I think the Camp album. I remember he had his own — he had a solo project that he was working on, and he was just super talented, really energetic guy. And we remained friends, and then, eventually, I was actually able to sign Gambino when we got to RCA, so we worked, you know, on that stuff, as well.

So a lot of connections that started way, way before any of the Wakanda Forever stuff happened. Kind of just coalesced at the right moment, whether that was Ludwig, Ryan, Seni, like, people that I met in totally different spaces across a totally — like, across basically a decade, you know, and obviously our relationship, which goes back hella, hella, hella far, so —

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

Archie Davis: Okay. So most people would ask, like, if you're stranded on an island, right? I'm going to say if you're in a spaceship, right, and you have to put five albums into orbit for another species to discover to understand what our human experience is, what are those five albums?

Tunji Balogun: Wow. The first album would be What's Going On by Marvin Gaye. The second album would be Off The Wall by Michael Jackson. The third album would be The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill. The fourth album, let's go with the White Album, The Beatles. Yeah. It's hard to pick a favorite Beatles album, but that one, that's a pretty good — it's a pretty good example. And then fifth album, I might go with a Sade, I might go with, like, a Love Deluxe. I don't know. How do you pick a favorite Sade album? Like Diamond Life, Love Deluxes —

Archie Davis: You just say Sade. It's fine, yeah.

Tunji Balogun: Yeah, just, like, a — the best of Sade, the Sade compilation, or, like, the Sade — This is Sade playlist.

Archie Davis: Yeah, that works.

Tunji Balogun: But, yeah, I feel like that's a pretty cross-section. I didn't — I didn't name any rap, though.

Archie Davis: The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.

Tunji Balogun: Oh, yeah, there was a lot of rap on there. Okay. We'll take that. All right, so — so same question for you, though. What are your five essential space albums?

Archie Davis: "Ambitionz Az a Ridah," Tupac; Michael Jackson, Thriller; Kendrick Lamar, To Pimp a Butterfly.

Tunji Balogun: Classic.

Archie Davis: Phil Collins, "I Don't Care Anymore."

Tunji Balogun: We love Uncle Phil.

Archie Davis: And "Hey Ya!" by Andre.

Tunji Balogun: Yeah. You can't miss with a — with a Outkast pick. Like, Outkast is never wrong.

Archie Davis: Yeah.

Tunji Balogun: You can never go wrong with Outkast, seriously.

Archie Davis: I want to take six and add "Lift Me Up" by Rihanna.

Tunji Balogun: Yeah, shout out to Tems on that pen.

Archie Davis: Oh, my god.

Tunji Balogun: Yeah, the greatest.

[Prox Recs Theme with Caution to the Wind Music by Ludwig Göransson]

Archie Davis: So with everybody that we bring on to the In Proximity podcast, we do a Prox Recs segment. And I want to ask you, are there any book recommendations, artists that we should be watching, a quote, anything that you would want to leave us with to kind of also dig a little bit deeper into?

Tunji Balogun: Artists that you should be watching, I can name 50 of them.

Archie Davis: I actually — I like that for you. Let's talk about some artists that we should be watching and that you feel are on the cusp. Yeah.

Tunji Balogun: Yeah. I mean. the the first one I'll mention is someone whose music is on the soundtrack and who's featured in the Voices Rising documentary piece that's on Disney Plus now. Her name is Bloody Civilian. She's a singer, songwriter, producer from Abuja, Nigeria. I would describe her music as urgent and powerful. The best description, I think, that I've made to compare it to anything that you might have heard before is maybe if MIA was from Nigeria, I would say.

Archie Davis: Wow. Yeah, that's accurate.

Tunji Balogun: There's another artist from Nigeria who's a veteran who's been around for a while. His name's Atakune Gold. A lot of people call him AG. I'm excited about him. He's making an incredible album that comes out this summer that I think is going to go crazy. There's a kid from the UK named Elmiene, E-L-M-I-E-N-E, really, really special vocalist of Sudanese descent. He is from Oxford, UK. I'm excited about everything that he's working on. He's really, really dope. I could go on for a really long time.

Archie Davis: Two more.

Tunji Balogun: Two more, okay. A singer from Atlanta named Chase Shakur, who has a really, really dope tone and a dope pen is making some really, really cold R&B. One more. I'll say Coco Jones. Shout out to Coco.

Archie Davis: Coco Jones.

Tunji Balogun: She's having a banner year, triple threat, singer, songwriter, actress, performer, dancer, whatever you need her to do. I think she's going to be one of the biggest music stars in the near future. So I'm excited about those five. I could name 10 times as many as that, but that's a good place to start. Okay, so what about you?

Archie Davis: My recs?

Tunji Balogun: Yeah, book, song, give us a quote, something.

Archie Davis: Malcolm X quote, "Education is our passport to the future. For tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today."

Tunji Balogun: Bars.

Archie Davis: I'll also add a book recommendation, which is What the Heck is EOS? And EOS is based on Employee Operating System and just kind of how we start to manage the time in a day and how we communicate to our team and maintaining the human element of it. Another book is The Immutable Laws of Branding.

Tunji Balogun: Right.

Archie Davis: Incredible book. I probably refer to that weekly. And I'm sorry you all can't have it, but I will also recommend my grandmother's peach cobbler, which is so fire. Tunji, I want to thank you for joining us today. This has been a pleasure. I really hope that, you know, for our listeners, they're able to take something away with this. And, man, just wishing you the most success in all of your endeavors in the future, bro.

Tunji Balogun: Likewise, man.

Archie Davis: Thank you.

Tunji Balogun: You're involved in all my endeavors, so that includes — that includes that includes your success.

[LAUGHTER]

But, yeah, no, this is a pleasure. This is amazing. I'm just, you know, super glad to even be a part of this.

Archie Davis: Cheers.

Tunji Balogun: Cheers.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media. If you like the show, be sure to follow, rate, and review it on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite podcast app and tell your friends and loved ones to do the same. If there's someone in your life who you think might like this show, send them a link.

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The show is produced by me, Paola Mardo. Executive Producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, Sev Ohanian, and me. Our theme song and additional music is composed by Ludwig Göransson. Ken Nana is our Sound Designer and Mix Engineer. Polina Cherezova is our Production Assistant. Audio editing for this episode is by Cedric Wilson.

Special thanks to the whole Proximity Media team and to you for listening to In Proximity. Meet you back here next week.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[MUSIC STOPS]

Archie Davis: You just really showcased your Bay —

Tunji Balogun: Yeah, I have to.

Archie Davis: — with that "hella" back there.

Tunji Balogun: Wherever I go.

Archie Davis: You had to do that.

Tunji Balogun: I wish my — I wish my accent — I wish I had a Bay accent.

Archie Davis: Is that an accent?

Tunji Balogun: That's —

Archie Davis: I don't think — I don't think Californians have an accent.

Tunji Balogun: That's because you're Californian. You don't hear it.

[LAUGHTER]