

In Proximity
Episode 6: Pete Nicks and D'Angelo "D'Lo" Louis
Final Transcript

[Music/Old Radio Sounds by Ken Nana]

[VOICEOVER]

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

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Pete Nicks: So when I applied to Cal for the film program, I didn't write about it in my essay in applying to the school, but I just noted it. And I just said, "Hey I've been incarcerated. Just want to let you know, FYI." And from that point forward I—I'm convinced to this day, that's why I got in because my GPA was horrific. It was like 1.3 when I had to, like, petition to get back into Howard because I was on academic probation just to finish Howard. And then, when I applied to Berkeley, I think it was with a 2.6 GPA. But I got in, and I felt that there was something about the act of me acknowledging, you know, who I was and the fact that you could see F's, F's, F's, D's, C's. And then when I came back to Howard, it was like straight A's.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah, just the arc. Like --

Pete Nicks: And the story. And then, from that point forward, I felt compelled to be open about my story, and I felt compelled to want to understand my own story.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're listening to In Proximity.

Today, we have a very special conversation between two colleagues at Proximity Media, Co-founder and Head of Nonfiction Pete Nicks and creative executive D'Angelo "D'Lo" Louis.

Pete is a director and producer whose award-winning films *The Waiting Room*, *The Force*, and *Homeroom* serve as a trilogy of urgent and immersive documentaries that explore health care, criminal justice, and education in Oakland, California. His upcoming documentaries, produced with Proximity Media, include *Stephen Curry: Underrated* and *Anthem*.

D'Lo got his start as an assistant on *Space Jam: A New Legacy*, *Judas and the Black Messiah*, and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*. Most recently, he was an associate producer on *Creed III*, and he works with our Music division on our soundtracks. Outside of Prox, D'Lo is also a writer, director, producer, and music manager.

Pete and D'Lo met through their friend and Proximity founder, Ryan Coogler, and they connected as creatives with roots in the Bay Area and the shared experience of incarceration. Pete spent a year in federal prison and has made films about doing time and about his drug addiction. D'Lo served an eight-year prison sentence before working in the entertainment industry.

On this episode, Pete and D'Lo sit down to talk about their experiences for the first time, including how they found their way to creative work and why it's important for them to share their stories.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[MUSIC STOPS]

Pete Nicks: I'm Pete Nicks, and I'm a producer and director, and I also run the Nonfiction division at Proximity Media.

D'Angelo Louis: My name's D'Angelo "D'Lo" Louis. I'm a creative exec at Proximity Media from the Bay Area, from Richmond, California.

Pete Nicks: I was born in Akron, grew up outside of Boston, came of age in Washington, DC at Howard University and then moved out west, came for film school. Been many stops.

D'Angelo Louis: Many stops.

Pete Nicks: Yeah.

D'Angelo Louis: I guess, well, we start how we first met. Our friend Ryan Coogler, and colleague at Proximity Media, he actually—he spoke about you a lot prior to us actually meeting, just talking about our similar experience, you know, back in the day. I don't know when you guys started talking about this.

Pete Nicks: I first heard about you—I'm trying to think because he would tell me that he had a friend who was doing some time and that he was corresponding with him, and he was recording the calls. He was having this sort of ongoing conversation.

D'Angelo Louis: So you heard about me while I was gone?

Pete Nicks: Yes.

D'Angelo Louis: Oh, okay.

Pete Nicks: And I'm trying to remember when that was. It must have been—because we met in 2012. When my film, *The Waiting Room*, came out, he was making *Fruitvale Station*. And at some point along the line, he told me about you. I feel like it was when he was making *Creed* that he first told me about you.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah, that was a while ago. I'm just thinking about, I was doing time according to his movies, meaning, like, I remember where I was at when he—*Fruitvale* dropped. I remember where I was at when I first heard him—he was saying, "I'm just making this little boxing movie." And I was like, "Oh, okay."

Pete Nicks: This little movie.

D'Angelo Louis: "Need some money on my books." All right? But, yeah.

Pete Nicks: And I think I told him. I think I told him about my—I had made a documentary. My first documentary was about the impact that my addiction and incarceration had on my family. It was sort of looking at more of a middle-class, upper middle-class Black family, which things like that aren't talked about openly. There's a lot of shame around things like addiction, alcoholism. And I was trying to—I had made a documentary about exploring the impact that that had on my family, but I felt like more needed to be said, so I was trying to adapt that documentary into a fiction piece. And I think that's when Ryan told me about you.

D'Angelo Louis: Ah, that's interesting.

Pete Nicks: But go back a little bit. How did you guys know each other in the first place? Like, what was your connection?

D'Angelo Louis: Me and Coog? We met each other—I'll say he was about seven. I was about eight. We were playing for the Berkeley Cougars, Pop Warner football team. I was a quarterback. He was a running back. It just happened naturally, like just organically. We—like, if I'm the quarterback, I'm the quote/unquote leader, and so I had to know all the plays, and I had to know where everybody was at. And usually, you know, as kids—we're eight years old—nobody remembers the damn plays. I used to have to—every time we broke from the huddle, it'd be like, "All right, bro, you got to go over here, you got to go over here." And Ryan actually—like, I didn't really have to tell him anything. He was one of the sharpest cats on the team. And I had other cousins and relatives that played on there, and they were pretty sharp, as well, but me and him just kind of just developed this relationship of quarterback/running back.

And I started going over to his house, you know, just to play video games and whatever. And the crazy part, he used to give me a pair of shoes every time I left, like, because I didn't really—my mom wasn't giving me Jordans or nothing like that. But I remember he used to bless me a pair of shoes every time I went. It was almost every time I went over to his house. And the thing is, my mom, she used to try to make me go to church on Sundays, and she was like, "You can do whatever you want to do if you just go to church with me." I was like, "I want to go over to Ryan's house." And that's how it started. We actually just kept in touch as we got older.

Pete Nicks: After that Pop Warner?

D'Angelo Louis: After Pop Warner, yeah. We just stayed in touch because, I mean, sports was always the thing that kind of like brought us together. We always played sports, but we never played on the same team again after that.

Pete Nicks: You were living in Oakland at the time or Richmond?

D'Angelo Louis: No, I was in Richmond.

Pete Nicks: Richmond.

D'Angelo Louis: He—yeah, moved from Oakland to Richmond. His parents had a house in Richmond. And as we went our separate ways, meaning, like, he went to a certain high school, and I went to a different high school, we just stayed in touch. Even when we started going to parties, his pops used to come pick me up, and, like, that would be my party partner. It'd be me and him battling against the whole party. But it just, you know, stayed the same throughout high school. And when he ended up going off to school, I was outside --

Pete Nicks: To college?

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah, yeah. He was going to college. I was outside doing everything not right.

Pete Nicks: Were you guys already—I mean, were you already, whatever, getting in trouble, so to speak? Or --

D'Angelo Louis: I was.

Pete Nicks: What was the thing that started sending you --

D'Angelo Louis: Down my path? I mean, I think it starts with everybody, or from around my way, like, the lack of funds, resources, whatever you want to call it. I remember distinctively that my mom was like, "I'm not giving Michael Jordan no more of my money." And I said, "He's going to get all of mine." And ever since then, I've been on one. I remember getting a job at—I think I was 14, and you have to be 15 to get a worker's permit. I lied on my application so I could get a job to get these pair of Jordans that was coming up. And two weeks into working, the dude pulled me to the side. He was like, "Hey, bro, all your stuff came back." He's like, "You're not 15." And I just stared. I didn't want to admit it or say nothing. He's like, "Man, I got to let you go," but they paid me my check, and that's all I needed. So I was good. But that's kind of like where everything started. When you trying to figure it out on your own, it's no real limits of what you'll do.

Pete Nicks: But it's like, like a hustle.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah, like --

Pete Nicks: Like a—like setting goals or having an idea, a vision for what you wanted your life to be?

D'Angelo Louis: I think you subconsciously setting a goal—but, no, it's not even that big yet. It's not even the sense of where, "Oh, I want a better life." No, I just want these shoes right now. That's it. That's all that matters. Nothing else. And I don't think you let nothing get in-between of that. As you grow and you start seeing what you don't have or what people, other people do have, I think that's when it starts setting in, like, "Okay, my mom works. She works, but he stands outside."

You start putting things in perspective of, like, what people do to create the life that they have. And it gets pretty tough because you start—that frustration starts to set in, like, "Am I destined for that? How am I going to deal with this? Because I want a nice house. I want a nice car. But why—why does he have it, but he's not going to work every day?" And you start questioning those things. And once I started figuring that out, it was more like, "Okay. I know what I'm willing to do, and I know what I'm not willing to do."

Pete Nicks: You were locked up. You did one stretch or multiple?

D'Angelo Louis: Well, I've been to jail when I was younger.

Pete Nicks: Younger.

D'Angelo Louis: Here and there, short stints, but this was my longest stint, like --

Pete Nicks: That eight-year stretch?

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah, yeah, because I fell in 2011 and didn't get out until 2018.

Pete Nicks: So you did that one big stretch. When were you locked up? What was going on in your life? Where did you go?

D'Angelo Louis: So this one big stretch that happened from 2011 to 2018, '19, I was living in L.A. at the time, and I ended up catching my case in L.A. So I had to go through L.A. County, did like a year in L.A. County, and once you get sentenced, you have to go upstate, which is state penitentiary. I want to say two different—like, you have state penitentiaries, and then you have federal penitentiaries. I believe you were in federal penitentiary, right?

Pete Nicks: Yeah.

D'Angelo Louis: I believe I was 23 years old. I remember it was March 16th.

[LAUGHTER]

March 16th, 2019, I had signed for 10 years. They were trying to give me like 20 years, but we all took a deal, which allowed two of us to get 10 years. One of us got four years, and then I believe another one got 16 months or something like that. We got—me and my—one of my closest partners, we got the longest stretch, and I remember—I actually remember signing for my time, and --

Pete Nicks: When you say "signing" for your time, what does that mean?

D'Angelo Louis: Basically signing your deal, agreeing that you take this 10 years for this crime that you saw committed.

Pete Nicks: Right.

D'Angelo Louis: Sometimes you're not even admitting guilt. But it was like, nah, you just going to sign this and say it, you know, to get this time up out of you. But we had to admit guilt. Basically, they asked us in court, in front of everybody to say what we were guilty of. And I remember they got upset with me because I was like, "Man, you already know what we did. Why you got to be sitting here repeating this?"

And I actually—they—I thought they were going to send me back in the bullpen with all the other cats, everybody talking, chopping it up. They put me in a cell by myself. And I just remember all I could think about was what I was doing 10 years ago and all that time from then all up until now, if I would've missed all that. And that was where my mind was at. And as I went on my journey, I stopped at several different prisons. I actually got sent out of state to Arizona, as well, because it was, like, an overcrowding situation in the California prisons.

Pete Nicks: Yeah.

D'Angelo Louis: They were sending cats to Mississippi, Oklahoma, Arizona, all over the country. And I bounced around, and I actually ended up towards the end of my sentence at fire camp. And then I actually went to, like, this halfway house where I was able to—like, so I

gradually got reacclimated into, like, being outside because fire camp helped me—like, your level one at your federal penitentiary --

Pete Nicks: Level one federal, yeah.

D'Angelo Louis:—had no gates. Same thing with fire camp. You could just walk straight off. If it's a road right there, you can have somebody pick you up and go. I had a few friends that walked off, but you can never go back to fire camp. You get a escape, and you'll never be able to be outside of --

Pete Nicks: They're going to ship you—they're going to—yeah.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah, yeah, 100%. So got there to fire camp, and then when I got to the halfway house, we had to wear a ankle monitor for like 90 days before I could --

Pete Nicks: Oh, we didn't have to do the monitor. I was in the halfway house for about six months.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah, but it was like a special—like, now, they have, like, these special programs because halfway—your halfway house was probably when you had paroled. Now they have ones where you can do the rest of your time at a halfway house. Like, I had 90 days left, so, like, you know --

Pete Nicks: Yeah. Ours wasn't parole. It was called Supervised Release.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah. Okay, yeah. Yeah, so we had option to that now because the overcrowding thing, they're trying to, you know, kick people out the prisons.

Pete Nicks: Right.

D'Angelo Louis: And so I was able—at the halfway house, I was able to go out because you had—when you—somebody went to look for a job or somebody went to school or whatever, they had to have a partner. So I was going out with everybody to --

Pete Nicks: Oh, got you.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah, so that was pretty cool. I mean, I was catching the bus and stuff, but you just still could be around out in the real world. And getting used to it, like you said, it was weird.

Pete Nicks: Yeah, I can't even imagine 10 years or 8 years because it was weird for just a year, just stepping back out. It was surreal.

[In Proximity Alternate Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

Pete Nicks: Did—at any point during that stretch, were you writing, or were you journaling? Or were you thinking, "I'm going to tell my story one day," or was that not at all part of your—

D'Angelo Louis: That still wasn't in my head, but I was doing a lot of writing. I wrote a lot of letters to—I mean, just to keep it PG, I wrote a lot of letters to women. I wrote a lot of letters. I mean, I actually got good telling stories about that because they were so vivid, and I didn't

notice this until they would tell me. Like, I talked to them, they was like, "Whoa." And I used to write, you know, family and people that wrote me, I didn't mind writing a letter because it was like, once I started letting the pen bleed, it just happens.

Another thing was—it started off with Benjamin Graham's *The Intelligent Investor*. I was in this stock market phase where I just wanted to know everything about the market. And what I did was kind of like summarized the entire book. And I sent it to Ryan and Keenan, and Ryan was like, "You just summarized the entire *The Intelligent Investor*." I'm like, "Yeah, I'm bored. I ain't got shit else to do." But --

Pete Nicks: But you sent it to them as—as, like, a pitch, as like --

D'Angelo Louis: Nah.

Pete Nicks: As just, "This is what I'm doing. This is what I'm up to"?

D'Angelo Louis: "This is what I'm doing right now." And once I'm invested, it's like I'm there. But after that, I think Ryan starting sending me like 10 books at a time. He'd be like, "Hey, I don't really got time to read these. Can you give me, like, a synopsis or whatever?" And I'm like, "Hey, sure. I'll knock the book out in three, four days."

Pete Nicks: But you were setting the foundation for—like in your mind, you were going to get out.

D'Angelo Louis: No, this is not—I had no clue. I had—nah. This was just me doing a favor for my partner. That was it. Like, that was all. I didn't think nothing of it. I didn't think it was going to become anything, not knowing it was coverage. I didn't know at all. But I also was taking college courses in there, as well, like business classes—but what really did it was I was at fire camp towards the tail end of my stint. I was there for like 18 months, really fought fires out there. I almost died three, four times.

But Ryan actually asked me—he was like, "Hey, bro, you think you can write about your experience?" I was like, "Nah, I really don't want to do that." Like, it just didn't interest me. I didn't want to think—the thing is --

Pete Nicks: Ryan asked you?

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah, he asked me. The thing is, like, once you do a day, you trying to get to the next day. I don't want to think about nothing that I went through at the time. But he actually was like, "Yeah, just write about your experience." And then, at fire camp, you work for 24 hours, and then you're down for 24 hours when you on a fire campaign. On the 24 down, you're taking a shower, eating, getting rest, and getting ready for your other 24 hours because you're going to spend the night on the mountain.

Pete Nicks: My version of that was in West Virginia, and I was at level one federal, so we had no wall. There was, like, literally just a chicken wire fence surrounding the compound, but you're still on the compound. You're locked up. You can't leave. And I—my job that I got was working for the—Camp Dawson, which was the National Guard base in West Virginia. And we would go over there, and we would buff floors, we would clean the cottages, we would cook for the soldiers. This is right at the height of the—this is '90, so this is, like, the first Gulf War.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah, okay.

Pete Nicks: And it was a plum job because you got to leave the compound. You got to leave the prison and be out in the world, and get on the bus and drive. So your deal was kind of like that.

D'Angelo Louis: Same thing, same thing. The only thing is, like, when it's time to go fight a fire, we might be gone 20, 30 days. But just to go back, when we were doing our 24 hours down, I remember he—he asked me like two days prior, and he was like, "Hey, just write about your experience." And I end up—just start going in. I wrote him a letter, and I wrote it in a letter form and then, that way, I just started just going.

Pete Nicks: Specifically about working on the fire line?

D'Angelo Louis: No, no, no.

Pete Nicks: Or just --

D'Angelo Louis: Starting from the day I got arrested to all the way up until now.

Pete Nicks: So thinking back.

D'Angelo Louis: Thinking back.

Pete Nicks: Was that your first time that you had to reflect on your journey?

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah. I mean, not necessarily reflect. That was the first time I recorded that reflection. I've --

Pete Nicks: You've thought about it. You had thought about it.

D'Angelo Louis: In prison, yeah. I thought about my life 100 times over, what I could've did, what I didn't do, what I should've done better, or, like, just how did I get here? Because, you know, it's just a culmination of events or—and decisions that you made that get you in this space. So it's like, I thought about it, yeah, but to me actually put the pen to paper, it was a different experience because I couldn't stop. Because I started—it'd start clicking. Like, when you thinking, thinking, thought goes, thought goes, thought goes. But when you write, you're like, "Oh, I remember that. Oh, I remember that," and it just start—my pen started bleeding, and I ended up with like 67 pages written front and back. It was insane.

You didn't write when you were incarcerated at all?

Pete Nicks: I wrote to my family. I wrote to my friends. Thinking back then, I was a young kid. I was like just barely 21.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah. Yeah.

Pete Nicks: I sometimes kick myself. I'm like, "Man, I should've, like, taken better notes, or I should've been writing a script, like, while"—but I was—I was a mess, and I—just being down and having that experience wasn't enough for me. I actually had a worse time after I got out of prison. I mean, my drug use accelerated. And, I mean, I was on the verge of getting sent back

for a much longer stretch because I was facing some serious time if I had gotten, you know, arrested again.

But it wasn't until later, you know, at some point, I decided, you know, I did want to make documentaries. And at a certain point, after my thesis film in film school, which was about a young boy who stutters—and my wife stutters. And I met this kid at—you know, she used to go to conventions for, you know, people who stutter, and it's kind of—I felt my closeness to her and my need to try to understand her and her perspective and what it's like for her to live with something like this where you're made fun of, and people finish your sentences, and literally people laugh at you when you try to say your name, and you hit a big block—that I wanted to understand that. And the way I—for me, it was to make a movie.

D'Angelo Louis: That's crazy, yeah.

Pete Nicks: So I made this documentary. The next movie after that was about myself and about—because coming from a Black family in Boston that was dealing with alcoholism, that was dealing with me being incarcerated, it wasn't something that the family ever talked about. So I wanted—I felt that it had to be expressed. But I knew even in making that documentary that I had more to say and talk about and that there was probably something that maybe had to be rendered through fiction because certain things are difficult in the nonfiction space. Not everybody wants to necessarily tell and engage that story. So that's when I began thinking about—and it began a process that continues today of me trying to somehow tell my story because, unlike your thing, I'm blocked on some level. Everything that I've tried to write—I've tried to write. I've tried to fictionalize --

D'Angelo Louis: Oh, okay. I see what you're saying.

Pete Nicks:—my experience into a character, and people who have read the script have felt a distance from the character, haven't felt like they understand the character in the world that I'm trying to express. I feel like it's there when I'm in the process of writing, but I'm rendering it through a fictional character. So the process has been a lot different, and I haven't shared it with hardly anybody. I'm very paranoid and afraid to share it --

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah.

Pete Nicks: I'm intrigued. This is the first, actually, I've learned about this letter. And that you're actually thinking about—I think I've heard about it, but that you're thinking about maybe doing something with it more. And I want to, obviously, talk to you more about it because I'm trying to kind of do a version of my story, which is not just my story, but it's the story of a Black family in America, which, you know, I think our experience is a lot different than yours.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah. You mention experiences. It's, like, where I want to say my creative becomes relevant because, for a long time, I struggled with, like, these writers that I'm coming across, these projects I'm doing, these people are freaking geniuses, you know what I'm saying? You know, I used to kind of doubt myself, and what I realized is, like, my experiences is where my power kind of lays.

[Trappin' by Ken Nana]

Pete Nicks: I've always kind of been compelled to tell my story because, at times, I lied—I don't know if I told you, when I got out, you know, I was on supervised release for a minute. And then I had been in college prior to being incarcerated, right?

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah.

Pete Nicks: All my friends were going to law school, medical school. And I went into a period where I was just, like, in denial that this had even happened. I applied for a job. I worked at this law firm in the mailroom. I applied to the job. When I got to the application part where they ask you, "Have you been incarcerated?" I checked no. Okay?

D'Angelo Louis: [GASPS] No.

Pete Nicks: I was working that job. Got out of there, and then worked at this elementary school, after-school program for the kids, you know, after school, a very well-known private school in D.C. where, you know, people, the important people send their kids, where I selected no on that question. That haunted me. And at a certain point, I decided—I kind of got shaken up out of that and decided, you know, I'm just going to tell my story. I'm not going to make it a big deal.

So when I applied to Cal for the film program, I didn't write about it in my essay in applying to the school, but I just noted it. And I just said, "Hey I've been incarcerated. Just want to let you know, FYI." And from that point forward I—I'm convinced to this day, that's why I got in because my GPA was horrific. It was like 1.3 when I had to, like, petition to get back into Howard because I was on academic probation just to finish Howard. And then, when I applied to Berkeley, I think it was with a 2.6 GPA. But I got in, and I felt that there was something about the act of me acknowledging, you know, who I was and the fact that you could see F's, F's, F's, D's, C's. And then when I came back to Howard, it was like straight A's.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah just the arc. Like --

Pete Nicks: And the story. And then, from that point forward, I felt compelled to be open about my story, and I felt compelled to want to understand my own story and that storytelling could be a vehicle, some kind of therapy for me maybe, but also that some of the movies that I felt moved me the most, that took me to an emotional place were stories that felt authentic, that I could just sense that the writer or the director was coming from a place of personal experience. And that's just something that I felt I wanted to do.

D'Angelo Louis: That's amazing. Man, that's great. I don't know how to follow that up. I mean, of course when you're incarcerated, you read a ton of books, and you read a ton of autobiographies. But, at that time, I felt my story wasn't important. Like, I didn't think it was that unique or worth telling at the time because, I mean, honestly, it's a thing that plays in your head that you became a statistic and you like the rest of these cats in here or something like that. And, and sometimes that's true, and sometimes it's not, but then you got to think about, if you don't have life, you still got a story to create.

And as my life went on, like going through prison, getting out of prison, as of recently, I started, like, doing a lot of panels. Like, I just talked to a—some cats at the juvenile facility. This lady asked me to come talk to them and, you know, just explain to them about what I do, where I work, what company I work for and what I do, like, on a day-to-day basis. And what I did was—yes, these are badass little kids, but I explained to them what I did, and I didn't even do this on purpose, really—I got hot. I run hot, so I took my jacket off, and they saw my tattoos, and

they was like, "Oh." They was like, "You blasted." They was like, "Where you get it from?" I was like, "Oh, I got it when I was locked up."

And so I kind of—that was kind of a segue into telling them, like, where I came from instead of—it's not just this Hollywood thing you see. And as I was telling them about it, they ate it up. And then when it came for Q&A for the kids, I was bombarded. I'm talking about they was asking some great questions just about my past and how I feel now. And then, once I talked to a lot of the directors of the program, they were like, there was kids that don't say a word that were super engaged. He was like, "I don't know how you did it." And I wasn't even trying to be super relatable. I was just talking to them like, you know, we was outside kicking it or something, you know?

Pete Nicks: I guarantee you one, if not more, of those kids is going to take that and do something with it.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah, I hope so.

Pete Nicks: I—I guarantee you that.

D'Angelo Louis: I hope so. It was one young cat, he came up to me. He was like, "Hey, man, I just got into Pierce College. I'm trying to take this film class." It was crazy. He was like, "It's crazy you came. We didn't know you was coming." And I just chopped it up with him. It was like—I can see the energy of what he wants to do. It's just where he's at now. And my best advice, I was like, "One day at a time, bro. Like, one day at a time, one assignment at a time, one lesson at a time. Don't overwhelm yourself with thinking you can take over the world or make up what you've done in, like, a matter of a night. It's not going to happen. Just got—just keep that same energy," you know? It was dope, though. It was amazing.

[KN 9 to 5 by Ludwig Göransson]

Pete Nicks: Well, it's funny because when I first heard about you, one of my first instincts was like, oh, man, like, you know, I want to—I want to talk to D'Lo because there was a character in one of my earlier versions of the script that was sort of like—like, the more I got to know you, it felt coincidentally like that was who you were to a degree. And an earlier version of the script was about these two young Black kids who were incarcerated, but from two different worlds, one kid from a more working-class kind of Richmond, you know, California and the other kid, suburban Boston and, you know, upper middle class. And it was a story exploring their relationship. I still think that that story's going to be told one day, but the film has evolved into more of an idea of exploring a Black family coming apart and, you know, at the center of that family being, you know, someone who is incarcerated and what that means and the ripple effect of that. And --

D'Angelo Louis: That's dope, though, because it's like I actually started writing a short , as well. But the thing is, it was just --

Pete Nicks: I read it.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah. It was just an idea of what I had in my head, and it's not—yes, it's a creative aspect to it, but it's also some of my experiences. I just had to get over the fact of not thinking I was creative enough to use my experiences to create a great story.

Pete Nicks: Well, you have to get past that narrative of—it's the imposter syndrome, right?

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah. Yeah, like—

Pete Nicks: You have to push—you have to push through that hard. I mean, but the reality is, like, there are so many inspirations in close proximity to us every day. Like, don't—it's a pretty remarkable opportunity. And when I read your script, I—you know, it was inspiring to me, exciting to me to see this example of this thing that you're trying to do. And I think it would be your first film?

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah, it would be --

Pete Nicks: If you shoot this thing.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah.

Pete Nicks: So that's exciting. So what do you think? Do you think—you're about to do this short film. Do you feel—like, what kind of stories do you feel like you are going to be drawn to telling? Are you going to stay in the space of trying to reflect and tell some version of your own story, or do you feel the urge to sort of move beyond—to move beyond that?

D'Angelo Louis: I accepted the fact that I think I can be the best at telling what I know about. So that's kind of like the lane I'm in right now. And the thing is, I start—once I accepted that and started thinking about that, and I started thinking about—for instance, I had this idea. My favorite car is the S 500 or S-Class or whatever. And the reason being is when I was 14—no, 13, one of our friends, he was like 16, and he had got one. I mean, we know how he got it, but he picked us up, and he just rode us around the neighborhood. And I'll never forget that. And the car's been my favorite entirely. And I was just like, maybe it's an idea there. And I—so I'm like, okay, I have a million of these experiences, so I might as well use those to, you know, create the content that I want to create.

And the thing is, it's like, you know, sometimes people work on projects they really don't want to work on. It's a check. But if you have the option to work on things that you love, that you are invested in, I think I should take advantage of. I think anybody should. So, yes, I would—I'm going to stay in this lane and until, I mean, the opportunity arises to do something else. I mean, you never know because I'm in a space now where I don't feel any door is closed. So I might drift off into something else, you know?

Pete Nicks: I think me and you, we might have to collaborate on this other idea.

[LAUGHTER]

Pete Nicks: Because I haven't seen—I haven't seen this movie that I have in my mind. And I think my film has evolved into being more of a story of a Black family, but I'm seeing very clearly this movie of two young Black kids, you know, coming of age, so to speak, in the system who come from two very different places. So I've always been obsessed and interested in this idea of Blackness and coming of age, identity. What does it mean to be Black in this world that we live in?

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

Pete Nicks: I think we're moving into the Prox Recs segment of our podcast.

[LAUGHTER]

D'Angelo Louis: You go first.

Pete Nicks: We're now in our—in the Prox Recs segment of our podcast. What inspires you right now, D'Lo?

D'Angelo Louis: I think inspiration comes from me being grateful right now and just realizing the opportunity that I have and just realizing the position I'm in, and not in survival mode, being like, okay, I'm living now, you know? And I'm—of course, I want to be way bigger than this and be more of a asset to this company, this great company that we're a part of, but just not being afraid or timid about, you know—and for lack of a better word, just put it all out there. I know I'm kind of late to the game. That's probably like, maybe what has me questioning things, like, "Oh, I'm in my 30s," dah, dah, dah, dah, "I should've been doing this." I have to, you know, talk myself out of that. But --

Pete Nicks: 30s? Bro.

[LAUGHTER]

D'Angelo Louis: I mean—I'm at where I'm at.

Pete Nicks: You have no idea how young you are, okay now?

D'Angelo Louis: I do, I do. But—nah, but that shit, sometimes that's that imposter syndrome, you know, just that voice in your head reminding you, like, all the bad shit. But then you got to kind of like buck up and be like, you know what, I'm in a good space. I'm breathing, you know? I mean, it sounds cliché, but things could be worse. You know, I've been there, done that, and it's like, I wake up every day with that attitude. Like, sometimes—I'm kind of programmed, too.

So, like, for anybody out there, I did a lot of time. So I can do the Groundhog Day type thing. Like, I can wake up, work out. Like, I stick to a program, and that helps because I don't have—there's certain things I don't have to think about that I'm going to automatically do. So it's dope to be able to get up and have a idea and share with a bunch of intelligent people. And they're going to tell you the truth, if it's good or it's bad, and then, if it's good, hey, we off to the races. Let's see what we can do, you know, to make this a reality, and that's kind of like what inspires me.

Pete Nicks: Right on. Right on. Man, my recommendations is a lot of movement from documentary to fiction. A lot of documentary filmmakers are moving into fiction, and a lot of fiction filmmakers are moving into documentary. But there's a couple sort of fiction filmmakers that I like to recommend just because they—I just love the messiness of their—or the chaotic nature of their form, which, to me, equals authenticity. So the Safdie brothers come to mind. You got to see Good Time, okay? Uncut Gems --

D'Angelo Louis: Of course.

Pete Nicks:—is another one, okay? And I'm also thinking about Sean Baker—

D'Angelo Louis: Oh, okay.

Pete Nicks:—who made this film called *Tangerine*, which utilized actual people, not really actors, like sort of nonprofessional actors, so to speak. And that's something I'm very fascinated with, is this idea of incorporating actual elements into potentially fiction movies, and I love directors who are—seem to have that skill. Chloé Zhao kind of did it with *Nomadland* in a really impactful way.

D'Angelo Louis: So, I mean, is it technically casting? They just get regular folks?

Pete Nicks: Yeah. I mean, even—even in nonfiction, you cast. I mean, you pick the people that, you know, you're going to interview, or you pick the people that you're going to follow. You have to have an instinct that they're going to take you somewhere and that they're in a place where they're going to reveal. I always say, with casting a documentary, and some of my movies, people talk about—like *The Waiting Room* is one. Like, "Oh, it felt like fiction," or, "It felt like people didn't know you were there. How did you do that? Or how did you film in a way that they weren't aware?"

And I tell people, whenever you step into someone's life, and they're in a crisis, that's the priority for them in that moment. They're dealing with the thing that's right in front of them. And so, if they agree to be filmed, and you're filming them, you quickly kind of fall back.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah, you let it happen.

Pete Nicks: And what's unfolding in front of the camera is someone dealing with facing a crisis or a moral question, and, through that, their character is revealed, and that is authenticity. And it's also what you try to write. If you're writing fiction, you want to write your characters into scenarios like that, and that's hard to do. I've been trying to do it, like, writing fiction, writing dialogue, writing—it's hard. It's hard to get into a place where those characters really start speaking. That's why I'm looking forward to you—bringing you into my world. We're going—we're going to get into each other's—we're going to support each other, D'Lo, okay?

D'Angelo Louis: 100%, yeah.

Pete Nicks: I read your script. We're going to talk more about it offline.

D'Angelo Louis: I'm ready.

Pete Nicks: But it's good, man.

D'Angelo Louis: Thank you. Thank you. I appreciate it, man.

Pete Nicks: Yeah. It's got a lot—it's got a lot of promise, and I sensed your—you trying to express something in there of you and of your world and connect out to other people.

D'Angelo Louis: Yeah.

Pete Nicks: And I think that you're going to be able to help me, too. So I look forward to that.

D'Angelo Louis: Oh, man, I'm with it. I'm ready. You got me juiced. I'm ready to get cracking.

Pete Nicks: All right. Let's go.

[LAUGHTER]

D'Angelo Louis: For real.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

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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 Cameron Kell.

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

[END VOICEOVER]

[MUSIC STOPS]

Pete Nicks: So when you wrote that out, what was that like? Like, did you edit yourself? Was it stream of consciousness?

D'Angelo Louis: Stream of consciousness. I just let it go. I didn't edit anything. It's funny because fast-forward, Ryan got it. We didn't think nothing of it. We didn't talk about it at all. We were on the set of Space Jam, and I was working as his assistant. And Ta-Nehisi Coates actually visited the set. He was like, "Hey, bro." He was like—he was talking about fire camp. We was talking about, you know, my experience and all. He was like, "I know you wrote about this."

I said, "No, I didn't." I blatantly lied. I was like, "Nah, I didn't write about this at all. He was like, "Bro, you can't tell me Ryan didn't have you write something." I'm like, "Man." I was like, "Yeah, I wrote a little something." But he was like, "Let me read it." And this is Ta-Nehisi Coates. I'm like, "Hell, no. You can't read nothing I write. Like, no. You're arguably one of the most" --

Pete Nicks: Why didn't you want him to read it?

D'Angelo Louis: I mean, it's just like people showing Ryan their first movie or something like that.