

In Proximity
Episode 16: Ryan Coogler and Pete Nicks
Final Transcript

[Music/Old Radio Sounds by Ken Nana]

[VOICEOVER]

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

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

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Pete Nicks: But it's like that thing, like, and that's kind of how I've always operated, which is almost like a naive audacity.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Pete Nicks: You know, like not really knowing what I'm get—getting into.

Ryan Coogler: Totally.

Pete Nicks: I'm—I'm just going to jump because I feel something. I feel something, really, in my bones, you know?

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: Today, we have a very special episode. Directors and Proximity co-founders Ryan Coogler and Pete Nicks sit down to talk about directing fiction and non-fiction films. They answer some listener questions and share insight on collaborating on Proximity's latest releases, directed by Pete and produced by Ryan and our partners. *Stephen Curry: Underrated*, a remarkable coming-of-age story about one of the most influential, dynamic, and unexpected players in basketball history. Out now on AppleTV+ and select theaters. And *Anthem*, a musical journey across the US, experimenting to reimagine the national anthem. That's streaming now on Hulu.

By the way, Pete and Ryan met on Ryan's first feature film, *Fruitvale Station*, which was released in theaters ten years ago this month. Their conversation starts there.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Pete Nicks: I'm Peter Nicks, I'm a producer and director of documentary films and one of the co-founders of Proximity Media, and I run our nonfiction division.

Ryan Coogler: I'm Ryan Coogler. I'm one of the founders of Proximity Media, and I'm a writer, director, and producer of motion pictures. And I'm here with my good friend, Pete Nicks.

Pete Nicks: Ryan, I was trying to remember how we met. There's some controversy over this because I can't—I'm getting old so I forget stuff.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. Me, too, bro. Like, I have a memory of meeting you at a cafe or a restaurant. I know Michele Turnure-Salleo, who used to run the Kenneth Rainin Foundation for the San Francisco film society, was who linked us up. And my memory of meeting you was like across a table with either food or coffee.

Pete Nicks: My memory is different.

[LAUGHTER]

My—because I just tie it to *The Waiting Room*. I just remember we were at a theater. I believe it was the Kabuki in San Francisco.

Ryan Coogler: Yes.

Pete Nicks: And, I mean, this was, like, my first sort of independent film, and I remember you there.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. I feel like we met before that.

Pete Nicks: We did.

Ryan Coogler: I feel like Michelle told me about your movie, and she linked us up. And I think we were linked before I saw your film. I think.

Pete Nicks: I think you're right.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Pete Nicks: So *The Waiting Room* is the first in a trilogy of films, all of which are now streaming on Hulu, *The Waiting Room*, *Homeroom*, and *The Force*. I made *The Waiting Room* because my wife Vanna, that was, you know, her first job out of grad school as a speech pathologist, was working at Highland Hospital. And, you know, the stories that she brought home about her patient population inspired me to want to tell the story.

It's a heavy movie. It's also beautiful. There's a lot of beauty. There's a lot of beauty in that. And one of my favorite reviews of it said something like, "I wish it would never end." You know?

Ryan Coogler: Oh, wow. Yeah.

Pete Nicks: These little anecdotes, these moments of humanity where you're sort of dipping into these moments where everybody's joined together in this sort of common experience.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, no, for sure. I remember CJ, the nurse.

Pete Nicks: Yeah, CJ. I remember taking her to the audition for Fruitvale.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, yeah. That was crazy, man. Yeah.

Pete Nicks: She was so nervous.

Ryan Coogler: Man, she was nervous, bro.

Pete Nicks: I was like CJ, like—like, just be yourself.

Ryan Coogler: I couldn't believe how nervous she was, man. I was thinking because she had done it with the documentary camera, she'd be good.

Pete Nicks: Well, you were blown away by her just being her in a documentary. And I think you were casting—you needed to cast a nurse.

Ryan Coogler: I needed a nurse at Highland Hospital.

[Juno Arp Stinger by Ken Nana]

Pete Nicks: I remember distinctly—I don't remember the exact model, but you had this, like, kind of like truck.

Ryan Coogler: The car I had?

Pete Nicks: Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: It was a Ford Explorer.

Pete Nicks: And you were driving around, and you seemed to me—I was trying to, like, figure you out because you seemed, like, totally, like, scattered and like, overcommitted.

Ryan Coogler: That's funny.

Pete Nicks: And I was like, does this guy, like, have it together? Has he got control over the situation? I wasn't completely sure. But I remember we were pulling up to Highland, and I was talking about a lens or something. I said something, and you corrected me. And you were—you were right, and I was thinking, "Oh, okay, this guy, he's like—he's like a little bit of a geek, a nerd, like a gear nerd." And that's when I knew—that's when I knew I got to, you know, keep my eye on this guy.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. I think both things—both things are true, bro. I was definitely in over my head on that movie and especially at that time because the reason that we got introduced, Michele Turnure-Salleo, who was supporting emerging filmmakers out of the Bay Area, her and her program had been very generous with grants for Fruitvale, you know? And I had run into a little bit of static trying to get access to Highland Hospital. And then she said, "Yo, a filmmaker we supported who's great, Pete Nicks, you need to meet him, he just finished a film about Highland." And I was asking away, asking away, and I got denied. And I remember—like, in a—in a sec, we were sitting in the office of the president of the hospital.

Pete Nicks: Right, right, Lassiter.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Pete Nicks: Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: And you kind of—like, kind of laid it out for him, "Hey, this is what's going on." And then he was like, "Let me—let me try to get this done for you." All of a sudden, we just had, like—we had the green light to whatever we needed in the hospital. It was fantastic.

Pete Nicks: You know, it's interesting because, I didn't—I was just following my instincts and just trying to, like, you know, make connections. After Wright met you, he was, like, moved by you. I think he read the script.

Ryan Coogler: Right, right.

Pete Nicks: He met you, and he told me—I don't know if I ever told you this—but he said that you reminded him of himself as a young man.

Ryan Coogler: Oh, that's crazy.

Pete Nicks: He had aspirations, you know, and, obviously, at that time, he was, you know, the head of—the CEO of this hospital. Now he's gone on to lead huge hospital systems. And he was moved by, you know, seeing a reflection of himself in—in you, and I think that had a lot to do with, you know, why he said yes.

Ryan Coogler: That's incredible. The reason it's hard to actually go back and figure when—when the time was that we met, for one, it's been a while. But for two, it feels like—it feels like we got close quick, you know, in a way where things start to blur.

Pete Nicks: Yeah. Well, I think—what happened to me, which is, I think, what happened to a lot of people, was they saw a spark or something, an authenticity in you. And I remember each person I introduced you to sort of had that same reaction, and, you know, my feeling about it was a little bit like Wright's, which was, like, you know, I had a lot of these aspirations when I was younger, but my life was a mess, you know? It took me, you know, a long time to sort of work through a lot of that—a lot of that stuff. But when I was your age—I think you were 26 at the time that we met—you know, I was not long out of prison. I was just sober, and I was trying to sort of, you know, get my life together.

And so I think there's some kind of vicarious thing that was—that was happening there, that I was drawn to your potential. I was drawn to your, you know, your wit, your creativity. I saw a short film that you did, Locks, which, to this day, it's one of the most—I was crying, you know, watching that short, which was about a brother in solidarity with his younger brother who had cancer shaving his hair off, you know? But the way that you laid it out in the misdirection and the mood and the setting, it was just beautiful, and—and I knew at that point, I was like, however I can help this guy, you know, achieve what he's trying to achieve, I'm there.

Ryan Coogler: I appreciate that, man. But I felt the same way with it when I saw—when I saw Waiting Room. Like, you know, and we connected on a lot of different levels, but I think the big thing for me was, just like, you know, I was at a time where I needed a lot of help just in general. I was—I think we met, I might've been sharing a room with my baby brother, with Keenan, trying to mount this movie that was the biggest I had ever done at the time, but it also had a lot of

pressure on it in terms of representing the Bay Area, representing a person's life, you know, family.

And I was definitely—I think you were picking up on me kind of being in over my head, me trying to grab some and get my life together at the same time. But it was actually nice to have something to focus on, you know, and something that could bring me in contact with other people who were actually doing it, you know what I mean? And by doing it, I mean just executing on their vision, you know, executing on getting these ideas that they have made, be it a program that helps support independent filmmakers or having the idea to make a film about the waiting room at this particularly impactful hospital in Oakland. You know, it kept me going in many ways, man. But I was fresh out of film school, bro. I was probably close to 200 grand in debt, you know what I mean? You know, trying to make a movie in Oakland. It was nuts, bro.

Pete Nicks: But it's like that thing, like, and that's kind of how I've always operated, which is almost like a naïve audacity.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Pete Nicks: You know, like not really knowing what I'm get—getting into.

Ryan Coogler: Totally.

Pete Nicks: I'm—I'm just going to jump because I feel something. I feel something, really, in my bones, you know?

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Pete Nicks: And I felt that the first time. You know, I didn't just make *The Waiting Room*. You know, Vanna works there, and she—you know, she's a refugee from Laos, and she would come home with stories about her patient population. And I just immediately understood that there was a story to be told here, not fully understanding because I'm not—you know, I wasn't born and raised in the Bay, but, you know, I've lived here since '97, so now it's my adopted second home. I've lived here longer—

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, probably been here longer than anywhere else.

Pete Nicks:—than anywhere else. But there was an instant recognition, you know, for me, for my own story, for sort of, you know, raising my kids and sort of what that—the reflection. And I remember when I was at Howard, my roommate, Ed Parks, who's from Bakersfield, we decided to drive out from D.C. to—and I had never been out to California before. And he's like, "We're going to stop through Oakland." And I remember feeling, like, it had this vibe like, ooh, Oakland. And it's so interesting to think back to that moment because my perception of it was, I think, what a lot of people's perception of it, which is, oh, it was the city, it was dangerous, it was, like, off the grid. It was, you know, stereotyped, misunderstood, and that always stuck with me.

And when I first started getting to know the folks at Highland, not just the staff there, CJ and Wright and everybody, but, like, the patients, many of whom were, you know, not stereotypical—they were, like, you know, white folks who just lost their job. They were people in bands. They were entrepreneurs. But, yeah, they were also drug addicts, they were homeless people, unhoused, they were people who were having a really rough go at it, people who'd

just pissed on themselves. And every conversation I had was a revelation, and that really sparked it. That really sparked it for me.

Then, when I met you, it was like you were coming out of that, like, from a different angle, you know that I had never seen before, and that's—that kind of fascinated me because I had never really done fiction or sort of worked through that process of rendering, you know, an idea or a theme. But the fact that, you know, Oscar was a person, flesh and blood; he was a story; he was somebody that we had all heard about—and I didn't know at the time that he was born at the Highland.

Ryan Coogler: At the hospital, yeah.

Pete Nicks: I found that out later. CJ actually told me that.

Ryan Coogler: Wow, yeah.

Pete Nicks: Because she remembered. She remembered when he was born.

Ryan Coogler: Wow.

Pete Nicks: And I remember her telling me that, and I was just, like, blown away by that.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. Nah, I didn't know that, either. I didn't know that he had been born there until his mom told me when I was—when I was interviewing her for research. She shared that, and I was like, ah, man, that he was born and ended up passing away in the same place. But he wasn't from Oakland. He was—Oscar was from Hayward, you know, so it was interesting that for him to have been born and passed away in Oakland, I thought it was—it made more sense to shoot the film there, you know, if that makes sense.

Pete Nicks: Right, right. How old was Oscar when he passed away?

Ryan Coogler: We were effectively the same age. He was murdered the first day of 2009, I believe. You know, so he would've been like—he would've been like 22 years old. Yeah, 22 years old if my math is, if my math is right. And you talk about getting sober when you were 25, me—you know, you met me when I was 26, just given a chance to make a film for the first time, feature film for the first time. So, for me, it was always something that I thought about a lot. You know, what if somebody took my life when I was 22? You know, how much would I not have had a chance to accomplish? How much would I not have known about what type of person I was going to end up being?

And that, in many ways, motivated me in terms of, like, finding a theme for the film, you know, this theme of self-discovery, self-determination. You know, the whole film, he's trying to figure out what kind of guy he's going to be. And that's something that the film kind of taught me, that idea that every—you know, every day, you kind of get the opportunity to choose, you know, what type of person you're going to be today, you know?

Pete Nicks: How did you know how—in terms of communicating that theme and that feeling that you wanted the audience to have or how you wanted the audience to relate to Oscar, to his family, like, it being your first film, like how do you know it's going to work? Or, like, how do you know—

Ryan Coogler: You don't, man. Yeah, you don't. You never know. Each time I manage something, I don't know if it's going to work, you know? I got more confidence in your movies than I got in my own. Like, when you say, "I'm going to make Anthem," I'm like, yeah, this is going to be great. Pete's got it, you know what I'm saying? Or Underrated. But, like, for myself, I'm—I'm, you know, usually pretty, like—pretty unsure, you know?

Pete Nicks: Because you're relying not just on your words, like the script. You're relying on, like, you know, actors.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, there's a lot of variables.

Pete Nicks: You're relying on a cinematographer. You're relying on—

Ryan Coogler: A lot of variables. Yeah, but it was things where there was so many unknowns in terms of just my cast and crew. What I try to do is, like, focus on what I do know and, like, what my strengths are, focus on that and didn't focus on the weaknesses, like—like, put the energy on those things. And what I knew with Fruitvale was that I knew I wanted it to be a one-day movie. There's a long history of one-day movies being really good, really effective. So I knew that, and the more research I did, the more it made sense because there was a lot of irony in that day, in the truth of it. So I was sticking to that. So what I did was I found every one-day movie that I—that I could find that was good, you know, and I tried to find the common things that they did in those movies.

Pete Nicks: That seems like an obvious thing, but that was one of the first things, actually, that you taught me, or that I realized that you really focused on, was comps, like movies—

Ryan Coogler: Comps, yeah, yeah.

Pete Nicks: Like, what's in the zone of this?

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, the comp thing is helpful for studio speak. It's helpful for people who don't process film language like a filmmaker. Their relationship with the language is audience. You know, very—comps are very helpful for those type of people. You say, "Oh, it's this mixed with that mixed with this," and they get it better than they would if you gave them a deck, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? I try to find comps for the making side of it, you know what I mean, like for the structural side of it. You'll find that with all makers, right? People who make clothes, they're looking at, you know, what clothes worked and inspired, and what are they trying to do? Chefs, right? There's a great episode of The Bear. Like, it's been in the second season. Bro, I mean, it's not a spoiler, bro. Like, it's an episode where the chefs, they got to go eat food all over the place just to—just to—

Pete Nicks: Yeah, it's like Anthem.

Ryan Coogler: The process of making something, you know what I mean? You got to be—it's not enough to just be an expert in the craft overall. You got to kind of like make yourself an expert in the exact thing that you doing.

Pete Nicks: There's something extra. I love to cook, but I'm a terrible cook. I mess stuff up. Like, the first two or three times of me cooking something is a disaster.

Ryan Coogler: You got to make kind of a bad pancake.

Pete Nicks: Yeah, and with a movie, there's a lot more at stake. I guess you could mess it up, but, like—

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, but this ain't your first movie, though, like, you know what I'm saying? You're several movies in. The first things you ever tried to make, those were probably bad. You know, like, that's been my experience, you know?

Pete Nicks: It gets philosophical, like what's your first film because you kind of tell stories to yourself in different ways, right?

Ryan Coogler: Totally.

Pete Nicks: And I think that's kind of how you got launched on your career. I think you were—was it at St. Mary's? Or you were in a class, or you were writing something, and one of your professors was like, "Hey, this is not bad."

Ryan Coogler: I had a credit writing assignment, and, yeah, she was like, "Yo, you should write screenplays," you know, from some prose that I wrote. But what's crazy, Pete, is, like, I tell that story because it's the truth, but I got homies I grew up with who had to remind me that whenever we would have, like, a class assignment, I would try to do a movie for it. I forgot about this. This would be like third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade, you know what I'm saying? I didn't own a camera. It was my boy who had a camera who had to tell me, "Hey, you would always partner up with me. We would make a movie," you know what I'm saying? I'm like, oh, yeah, I did used to do that.

Pete Nicks: It didn't—it just didn't click. You were already on your journey.

Ryan Coogler: I had forgotten about it, you know what I mean? Like, honestly.

Pete Nicks: Same thing with me. I forgot. It was when I made my first technical film, *The Wolf*, my autobiography, I had all this footage of me when I was 12, of me doing *The Pete Nicks Show* at my family reunion, interviewing, like, all of my family members. I was like, oh, shit, this is—that's where it began.

[KN 9 to 5 by Ludwig Göransson]

Ryan Coogler: Jumping ahead, you know, it's basically like 11 years after we met, and you were talking about opening *The Waiting Room*, which I know had a theatrical release. It played at some major festivals. But we on the—we sitting here right now, you know, having been running a company for some years now, and this is the year where you're releasing two movies that you directed, back to back—*Anthem*, which is on Hulu now, premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival a few weeks back, and it's out now. Anyone who has access to Hulu, has a Hulu subscription, can watch the film. I'm getting text messages from people who are watching it at different times and being moved by it.

And we also are—are, you know, a few weeks removed from what I think could be our biggest release on something that we worked together, which is *Underrated*, the Stephen Curry story. That is coming out on Apple TV+ as well as a limited theatrical release, you know, about the best shooter to ever play the game of basketball. What's it like, man, like, you know, having that breadth of styles of work, you know, in such a limited time?

Pete Nicks: I'm learning, you know? You know, it's funny. We first started working together, actually, on *The Force*, when I was making the second film in my trilogy because, again, going back to my kind of naïve audacity, like, just jumping into stuff I maybe didn't have any business doing, you were one of the first people I called. And I was like, "Hey, man, I'm thinking about doing this film"—well, I wasn't thinking. I had already gotten access, and I think I called you up, and, you know, you gave me a very sobering kind of insight into your feelings about the police, your relationship with the OPD. And you were—you were worried about me, and that really began our sort of collaborative—because I was paying very close attention to what you were saying. Whether you knew it or not, a lot of that found its way into the movie.

Ryan Coogler: Right.

Pete Nicks: It was a very difficult thing that I was trying to do, which was step into a police department without, you know, an agenda, without passing judgment, and just sort of try to document this department trying to change. And I'll never forget, you said, "The police department's functioning just the way it's supposed to," you know, that—that the problems that are inherent in the police are built into the history of—going back to slave patrols. And that always stuck with me, and that really—you know, that carried over, obviously, into *Homeroom* when I decided to sort of—I always knew education was going to be the third piece in the trilogy. I think this was before you approached me about, sort of, *Proximity*, but I wanted you to be involved in some way. And then that—that sort of just—sort of dovetailed.

But it was, like, this notion of when you're an independent, especially a documentary filmmaker—and, you, you know, you definitely experienced this, too, with *Fruitvale*—you're just scraping for every little buck you can, you can get, trying to raise money, trying to hustle. Nobody really knows who you are. The notion of having, you know, support is powerful, and at the time—you know, flash forward to when *Homeroom* was coming out, you had made, you know, *Creed*, you had made *Black Panther*. You know, the idea of sort of collaborating alongside you gave me a ton of energy, gave me a lot of energy, but also the recognition that what we were doing wasn't so different.

Ryan Coogler: No.

Pete Nicks: You know, in terms of the themes that we explored in our work and the stage from which we told our stories from and the Bay and how those found our—its way into the characters and the ideas, just felt natural to me. So I was just, you know, grateful. And obviously, when we met, and you had approached me about *Proximity*, we had lost my daughter, Karina, who you knew really well.

And I don't think I would've said yes to anyone else who had come calling from Hollywood—no offense to Hollywood. You know, that was a big reason, you know, why, you know, that felt comfortable for me. When I'm going through a difficult time in my life, I turn to sort of the things that energize me, and storytelling, filmmaking is one of those things where I'm going to be learning for the rest of my life.

Ryan Coogler: Right, right. I couldn't agree with you more in terms of how much our work had in common, man. Like, that was never lost on me. In *The Waiting Room*, I remember, I remember you know, I remember seeing this in the film, you enabled them to claim their humanity just by being honest with the camera, being honest with you. And for me, that was

what it was always about, for claiming humanity for people who are often denied it. You know, very often, through media, they're denied it, stripped of it.

You know, you did it again with the trilogy. Each time, you're looking at these things, and it might be stories that you would dismiss or write off. Through the language of cinema, often cinéma vérité, you invite the audience, "Let's look a little deeper at this. Let's look a little deeper at this system. Let's look a little deeper at these—next generation," you know what I mean, that everybody's ready to write off, you know.

Pete Nicks: It's so weird, like, the coincidences, but *The Wire*, you know, love it or hate it or ambivalent, it had an influence on me in terms of looking at an American city.

Ryan Coogler: How could it not?

Pete Nicks: And sort of how all these systems were connected. And one of the first, one of the first people that I met at Highland was a young girl. She had been shot outside of Edna Brewer, and she was 12. And she wasn't in school, getting her education and dreaming big. She was stuck in the waiting room at Highland Hospital getting treatment for a gunshot wound. And that's when I began thinking about sort of the—the connections, you know, between the agency of a young person, the agency of a community and how the systems connect to that whether it's the healthcare system, access to healthcare, criminal justice system, education system.

And how that trilogy unfolded in ways that were surprising, *Homeroom* was supposed to be—it wasn't supposed to be about a group of kids removing police from their schools to reallocate the money, to basically defund the police. It was supposed to be a film about the emotional lives of young kids of color, like my kids. And I grew up watching *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty in Pink* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. Those were my favorite movies growing up. These were all white kids in the suburbs, you know?

Ryan Coogler: Right, right.

Pete Nicks: And I wanted to sort of step into that space in Oakland. And what happened happened. Like, the pandemic broke out. You know, we lost Karina. There was so much loss that was happening. In the wake of that, these kids found their voice, and I could not help but think about sort of Oscar and think about what—you know, this—what these kids are doing represents what was lost. And that's why we tell these stories, and so that sort of connection was really profound. I think now I'm evolving, and I still have a strain of my intention. I want to go hang out, you know, with people who might be quote/unquote "vulnerable," but, you know, I think we have an opportunity to expand, sort of, the notions of storytelling.

And you think about Steph Curry—I remember when you first came to me about this idea, it—I had to pause on it, to be honest, because it's, like, a celebrity. This is the exact opposite of the work that I've been doing. You know, this guy is anything but vulnerable. But there was something about the more I thought about his story and the more I thought about his connection to the Bay and, you know, the more I learned about sort of—you know, even though he was the son of Dell Curry, he grew up a privileged kid, he faced a lot of doubt, people sort of not believing that he could do it, people not really validating him.

And he had to find a way of pushing beyond that, and that sort of clicked for me, that, man, there's a way that we can tell these stories in a big way. They're going to engage audiences. I call it the Trojan Horse, and I think you did this brilliantly with *Black Panther* because I tell this

story—more than once, I've told this story. When I was in Utah, when Karina was in treatment in Utah, we saw Black Panther in a theater full of white Mormons watching Black Panther.

[LAUGHTER]

And to me, that was like, talk about, you know, subversive. That's powerful, Trojan Horse. And even what you did with Creed and perspective, reimagining the Rocky franchise, which I think, you know, Stallone was ready to shut that down. And you reimagined it, and you pitched your perspective. So that's really powerful, and that, I think—what I'm hoping to do with our nonfiction slate is to sort of take that, that spirit and that ethos, and get as many people as we can, sort of engaging these ideas and, you know, maybe sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly.

Ryan Coogler: But it's—it's always bold ideas, Pete, and the ideas always contract in a interesting way. It's there in the—in the trilogy that's set here in Oakland, but it's also there in Anthem, and it's there in—it's there in Underrated. Just inside of Steph, his story has all this contrast. You know, it's all of these unknown things that you got to kind of look closer at. That idea of self-doubt and the voice that's in your head, that idea of—because that film, Underrated, is, it's about Steph, but it's really—I think it's like a intergenerational love story, you know what I'm saying?

Like, it's him and his coach, him and his college coach, who, in that film, is a person who believes in him and doesn't have any reason to—no ulterior motives, you know what I'm saying? Just, "I believe you can be a great basketball player for this team. You know, I believe we can help each other." And that—that was all, all that guy needed, you know what I'm saying, like, at the point that he was at.

Pete Nicks: He saw himself, you know? That's the same thing with Wright, Wright Lassiter. When he met you at Highland, and he saw, you know, a younger version of himself, he wanted to help you. And, you know, Coach McKillop, very similar story. He was an undersized, scrappy player, had to fight, had to, you know, take, you know, what's yours. You know, when you're the underdog, you have to take what's yours, that mentality. And so, when he saw Steph, he recognized it. And that's exactly right, the way you describe it, like this intergenerational or this sort of different aspects of family or mentorship. And the Davidson community itself is part of that story as a reflection, to some degree, of the Bay, how the Bay is kind of misunderstood, underrepresented.

Ryan Coogler: Totally, totally.

Pete Nicks: All those themes were strong, came through very strong.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, like Underrated, you know, and that question about, how can this dude who's got all these championships, all of these accolades, and came from this family, how can he be underrated? And the film answers the question. You know, I'm proud to be a part of it. You know, I can't wait for people to see it and be moved by it. I'm glad it's getting a theatrical release, too, because it's a—we saw it at Sundance, man. It's a movie for a crowd, you know?

Pete Nicks: Oh, it's fun with a crowd. It's fun with a crowd.

Ryan Coogler: It's—it's great.

Pete Nicks: And I love it because I'm a—I feel like I'm underrated, man. Documentary filmmakers—for years, I've been telling people, "Documentaries, they're under-marketed. There's an audience for them. People love them." But we're always scraping, you know, trying to get every little bit of attention, every little dollar, marketing dollar. So I actually, you know, deeply related to that on a personal level, but I also knew that, you know, this was a universal idea, that many of us at some point of our lives have had that moment where we've been misunderstood or whatever. And also, you know, for those of us who have achieved great things, that you can usually find someone in your life that's not a parent, like a teacher, coach, a mentor, somebody who's made that difference.

Ryan Coogler: There's been several for me. You know, we talked about it, like, you know, with my professor, Rosemary Graham, from St. Mary's College. And it was there with Forest Whitaker, you know, "Me and Nina Yang Bongiovi, with our production company, take the chance on you and this story." It was there with you. You know you could've—we could've met, whether it was at the screening or at—whether it was getting coffee—we could've met, and you could've said, "Yeah, you know, good luck, kid," you know? But you didn't.

You said, "I want to help you. Let me help get you access. Let me get you, you know, what you may need." And it's something that we glossing over, the ending of the film that we shot after we were accepted into Sundance was shot at the Fruitvale BART station at the event that they do every year, you know, in Oscar's memory. And I wanted to capture it to end—to end the film, like when I update. And you, Paolo, Karina, y'all came out, you know, boom poles, the equipment.

Pete Nicks: That was the first time I met producer Sev.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, that was the first time you met Sev.

Pete Nicks: And he was like, "Pete, Pete"—he's like, total Sev, he's like, "Yeah, we're going to shoot. Can you get the—can you"—absolutely, man.

Ryan Coogler: But I loved—this is before Zinzi and I were married, before we were parents, and I love how you pulled up in the car with your kids, bro, and was like, "Yo, this is my boom pole operator right here. This is my—this is my gaffer," you know what I mean? And I was like—I was like, "Yo, I love this dude." Man, like, what you don't know is I'm looking around, trying to figure out, like, what my life is going to look like in—in five years, ten years in this crazy job. I'm asking myself, yo, can I have a family and do this? You know what I'm saying? And here you are pulling up, and your kids bounce out with you. They're holding the equipment. You're like, "Hey, yo"—I'm like, "Ah, yeah, this"—I'm like, "Yo, I could—I could do this," you know what I mean? Like, it was great.

And, yeah, we shot it, man. We shot—we got some really moving material that made a lot of sense for the film. It made the film better, and that was kind of our first time really working together. That was my first time kind of seeing you in the field in action right there at the BART station.

Pete Nicks: That was special. I remember that.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, but it was great, man. Yeah, I think people are really in for a treat with these—with these movies, man, both Anthem and Underrated. So, by the time this episode

comes out, Underrated will be out on Apple TV+ and possibly in a theater near you in its limited release.

Pete Nicks: I can't wait. It is kind of a pinch-me thing for me to have this stage, to have your inspiration, you know, the company, the people that also believe in our company, what we're trying to do, who are being incredibly supportive, the importance of the notion of what we're trying to do, which goes back to that perspective, you know, we talk about not just proximity to often-overlooked subjects, which is part of what we talk about. The perspective is really important because you can tell the same story,—you can put an orange on a pedestal and give three filmmakers a camera, tell them to make a film about that orange, and you're going to get three different films, you know?

Ryan Coogler: 100 percent.

Pete Nicks: They're going to be meaningful in different ways, and I think that's the power—part of the power of what—what you're trying to build here. And so I'm just grateful to add my piece.

Ryan Coogler: Man, we lucky to have you, bro.

[Good Times by Ludwig Göransson]

Ryan Coogler: Okay, so at this point in the episode, we're going to play some questions from some listeners out there, and I believe they are about directing, which me and Pete do often. Yeah, probably too much.

[LAUGHTER]

Pete Nicks: I'm curious. I want to—I want to hear these questions.

Ryan Coogler: We're going to try to answer them. So the first clip is from Dorsey.

[CLIP: DORSEY]

Dorsey: My name is Dorsey Richmond. I'm from Chicago, Illinois. I'm 19 years old. And my question is basically, how do you deal with criticism and dealing with being a perfectionist if you are? Because I think it's easy for people to say, like, "Who cares what people think? Don't worry about that," and just stuff like that. So I'm curious, as a person, do you take deliberate actions on blocking out the noise? Or, like, what do you do personally or tell yourself?

[END CLIP: DORSEY]

Pete Nicks: Boy, Dorsey came right into my world because I've just released a film. I think that anytime you put your heart and soul out there, it's an opportunity for growth, is what I say because somebody's going to have an opinion about that. That opinion may not be what you want to hear. It may be the thing—the very thing that you want to hear. But, you know, Vanna, my wife, is—is the first person I go to whenever I release a movie and I've seen, like, a review that I don't like or that—that plants that seed of doubt. Did I fuck this up? Like, did I just spend the last three years of my life, you know?

And she brings me back to the perspective of the intention of what you've done, and also a reminder that art is going to move and reflect and bounce off of people in different ways based

on their own life experience, based on where they've been. And you cannot control that. For me, it's always an opportunity to be mindful and remember why I, you know, embarked on the endeavor and that, you know, just releasing a movie is not the end.

Ryan Coogler: No.

Pete Nicks: I can't tell you how many people have come up to me and said, "I became a doctor because I saw *The Waiting Room*," "I became a cop because I saw *The Force*, and I wanted to, you know, try to make a difference," "I became a teacher because I saw *Homeroom*," and to me, that's what it's all about.

Ryan Coogler: I think that's a—I think that's a brilliant question. There's no one set answer. I think that, to be a professional maker of things, you have to be comfortable putting your stuff out there and knowing that somebody's going to say things about it that could hurt your feelings. It's a natural part of the process, and there's not one thing that's been made that everybody loves. One thing can't be for everybody, right? I try to make things that have universal themes and that can work for as many people as I'm trying to reach. I like things that are going to be consumed by the masses. Those are the things that used to reach me when I was—when I was coming up. You know, when you make something that's for the masses, you got to be ready to get a lot of opinions, you know?

There's people out there whose job it is to give opinions, and a lot of times, when somebody like that comes down on what you're doing in a way that you maybe don't agree with, it can affect you. But that said, ruminating on people's negative comments about your stuff is unhealthy for you. You know, you got to find a way to step away and protect your own mental space, your own health so that you can continue to do work that's honest, so you continue to live a healthy life. But up until release, you know, criticism is, I think, you know, really helpful, and it can be helpful after release, as well. But I think that going and finding people who can give you an honest opinion about your work, that can be incredibly valuable.

And I think Pete's right, you know, about intention. You got to always remember to keep in mind what your intention is. What are you trying to do? Like, who are you trying to reach with this film? What are you trying to say? And I think, as long as you're bearing all those things in mind, I think, you know, you can move with some purpose.

Pete Nicks: All right. Our next clip is from *Harlem*.

[CLIP: HARLEM]

Harlem: My name is Harlem Banks. I'm from the Bay Area. I grew up on Stanford's campus. I'm a freshman at NYU in the film and television production program. And I was wondering how you balance between, like, creative output and creative input because I'm trying to do a lot of writing and make short films and get a lot of work done. But at the same time, I want to keep my well full, and I want to kind of read a lot. And, yeah, so I was just wondering how to balance between, like, writing and making things and reading.

[END CLIP: HARLEM]

Pete Nicks: Oh, man, input is so important. Before I shoot a documentary, I don't just start rolling the camera. *The Waiting Room*, I spent months just hanging out and talking to people without shooting anything, and that input was so vital to me sort of building a cultural

competency, building a familiarity, building trust. It made the movie better. If you're going to be making movies, I think you need to be watching a lot of movies and find out what turns you on, like what—it's going to give you ideas. And you're going to—you're going to copy some of those ideas. You're going to make some of those ideas your own. You're going to innovate. So that input is so important.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. You sound like you in school like right now, Harlem, but I'll tell you, man, now is the time to just, like, spend every waking hour—you know, you should either be asleep, reading, watching, or making. You know, making includes being on set and writing because I can tell you, as a man approaching 40, it don't get easier. You'll get other commitments, you know what I mean? Spouse, children, responsibilities. Your windows will shorten. So I think right now is the time where you just, you know, be almost religious about it.

I remember when I was in film school, man, I spent all my money at the ArcLight Hollywood. I was watching whatever'd just come out. If I liked it, I was watching it twice, three times, four times, trying to get to the bottom of why I liked it. If you're hoping to produce art for an audience, you know, you kind of got to stay up on what the audience is taking in so that you can have a shot at speaking the language that's current.

Pete Nicks: And diversify. Don't just, like, absorb the obvious thing. Really try to force yourself to open your input. You want to be a filmmaker. Don't just watch films. You know, expose yourself—if you're mindful, your goal is to become a filmmaker, all those experiences are going to sort of, you know, be in your subconscious.

Ryan Coogler: The other thing I love to do, and I miss doing this, man, with the pandemic, I always like to just kind of go sit and just listen to people talk. You know, we call it "ear hustling" where I'm from, but just listen to how people talk to each other. One of my favorite things is, like—and New York would be great for this—is, like, to randomize conversations, like when you just catch a snippet of what somebody's saying when they're walking by. Sometimes it's so interesting, you know what I mean?

Pete Nicks: That happens to me all the time, and I'm saying, "Ooh, that'd be a great piece of dialogue."

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

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

Ryan Coogler: Prox Recs segment, I'm going to recommend a movie called Hearts of Darkness, a behind-the-scenes film about the making of Apocalypse Now directed by Eleanor Coppola. She's just documenting the process that Francis was going through, you know, trying to write and direct Apocalypse Now. It's a beautiful film. And I'll always like watching it because it's—as a filmmaker, you know, maybe you'll never be as good as Francis Coppola, you know what I'm saying? But you see him just really, really struggle, you know, and it's a reminder of how hard it is but also, like, you know, the film that they made is pretty fantastic.

Pete Nicks: I'm a cinéma vérité guy. I love cinéma vérité. There's a film that I often talk about, which is the one that got me—you know, Hoop Dreams is the one I usually talk about. But today I'm going in a different direction, and we're going to go Paris is Burning. This is a 1990 documentary directed by Jennie Livingston. It was—it was about a community that was often overlooked. It's a very Proximity kind of idea, beautiful rendering of humanity, surprising,

intimate, in there, authentic. And I recommend, if you haven't seen it, definitely go check that out.

Ryan Coogler: Thank you, Pete, for joining this episode. Thanks, Paola, for setting it up. And thank you, y'all, for listening. It's Ryan Coogler signing off.

Pete Nicks: Thank you, Ryan. Thank you for inspiring me and helping me grow and leading the way.

[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. Audio Editing for this episode is by Judybelle Camangya. With Production Assistance from Courtney Archerd. Artwork and social media by Alexandria Santana

Special thanks to the whole Proximity Media team and to you for listening to In Proximity.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[MUSIC STOPS]

Ryan Coogler: Chefs, right? It's a great episode of The Bear. I don't know what number it is but in the second season...

Pete Nicks: I'm not in the second season yet. So we're going to stop talking right now.

Ryan Coogler: You got to, you got to get that down, bro.

Pete Nicks: I'll get back to you with that.

Ryan Coogler: You got to get that down, bro.

Pete Nicks: I know, man.