

In Proximity

Cord Jefferson and Ryan Coogler on Writing, Directing, and What They're Doing Next

Season 2 Episode 1

Final Transcript

[Music/Old Radio Sounds by Ken Nana]

[VOICEOVER]

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

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Cord Jefferson: If the question is, like, how do I get where you are? It's like, then you shouldn't be doing this. If—you shouldn't be doing this if the end goal is to be—like, win an Oscar, right? Like, you just need—you need to find value in the work itself. You need to find meaning in just the making of stuff, even if it doesn't become successful, even if you don't end up making a bunch of money off of it. Like, you just need to find value in that pursuit.

[00:32 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

You're listening to In Proximity. Writer/director Cord Jefferson met our founder, Ryan Coogler, last year at a film festival screening of Cord's directorial debut, *American Fiction*. The satirical comedy starring Jeffrey Wright and based on the novel, *Erasure*, by Percival Everett, premiered at Toronto International Film Festival about a year ago before it went on to win several awards, including the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. Before his peers on the Oscar stage, Cord implored the industry to take more creative risks. He said, "Instead of making one \$200-million movie, try making 20 \$10-million movies or 50 \$4-million movies." It was an incredible speech, and just weeks after, Cord and Ryan met over a video call to talk about the movies they've made as directors. While their budgets were varied, the lessons they learned were very much the same.

In this conversation, Cord shares his unique career path, insights from the set of *American Fiction*, what Cord and Ryan are working on next, including tidbits from Ryan's next movie, which he was preparing to shoot during this conversation, and finally, why a love of the process, not awards, is the key to success in this business.

Heads up, as part of our new season, we're kicking off every episode with a fun new icebreaker segment called Get Reel. That's Get R-E-E-L, like a film reel. Get it? It's where our guests

answer surprise questions hidden in film canister reels. We film most of them on video, so you can check them out on our social media. We're @proximitymedia on Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Ryan Coogler: Hey, this is Ryan Coogler with Proximity Media. I want to give a warm welcome to Cord Jefferson, incredible filmmaker, writer, director, most recently of American Fiction. Cord, you want to say what's up, bro?

Cord Jefferson: Yes. Hello, hello. Thank you so much for having me. It's such an honor to be here.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, and it's our—it's our second time sitting down, in like an interview-style conversation, bro.

Cord Jefferson: Yeah, man.

Ryan Coogler: I feel—I'm starting to feel like I'm a journalist now, you know what I'm saying?

Cord Jefferson: I appreciate it. I mean, as you said, you interviewed me first for Interview Magazine, where we kind of talked to each other, and the thing that I told you there was that I interviewed you a decade before that interview for Fruitvale, which is crazy. So this is, like, a full-circle moment again.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, it's pretty great, man. It's pretty great. Thank you for pulling up on our show, man. It means a lot to us. And what we do now, on this season, is a Get Reel segment. I haven't seen these questions. You know, so I'm usually even more surprised than the guests are.

Cord Jefferson: Ooh. Ooh.

Cord Jefferson: "What was your go-to childhood TV show/film?" Oh, man. I had—I had so many. Do you have a specific one that was just—was on repeat for you?

Ryan Coogler: It was—I watched a lot of them, man.

Cord Jefferson: Me, too.

Ryan Coogler: Like—um, I would say like, I could think of one that was, like, my go-to for any era.

Cord Jefferson: What's that?

Ryan Coogler: It was—it was probably Batman: The Animated Series.

Cord Jefferson: Yeah. Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: I remember watching the pilot. I remember always loving it, and then when I got older, I would go back to it when they—when they put it out on, like, a DVD box, I bought it. When I was in college playing football, I would watch them. Couldn't believe how good they still were. So that—that would be my pick. What's—what's yours, bro?

Cord Jefferson: Mine would probably be The Simpsons. It was the first thing that I can remember finding that my parents didn't like, you know? Like, like your first exposure to art when you're a kid is stuff that your parents give you. And so my parents fed me a lot of the stuff that they were really into, but The Simpsons, I sort of remember getting into, you know, probably when I was eight or nine, and my parents didn't like it. So I felt like I found something that was mine alone.

It was really maligned when it first came out by, like, parents groups who were mad that Bart was saying, like, "Eat my shorts!" and was kind of, like, rude and irreverent. And people thought that it was this really gross and crass show, but when you watched it, it was—Homer, like, always made the right choice in the end. Like, he always made the right choice for his family, for his children. Everybody always did the right thing. It was actually, like, a very—it's a show pretty—pretty steeped in, like, good morality. And I think that so much of my sense of humor comes from—comes from just binge-watching The Simpsons over and over and over.

Ryan Coogler: That's amazing, man. So the second one is, "Favorite hometown restaurant or meal." You got a—you got a answer for this one, Cord?

Cord Jefferson: This one's easy. I'm from Tucson, Arizona, and I don't know what Oakland was like, but we had this—did you ever see the Peach Pit on Beverly Hills, 90210?

Ryan Coogler: No. No, I didn't. I—I never seen that show. I never seen that show.

Cord Jefferson: So—so—okay, so I'm a little bit older than you, I think. So Beverly Hills, 90210, there was, like, a hangout called the Peach Pit, and it's, like, where all the kids went to hang out, and so our version of the Peach Pit in Tucson was this place called Nico's Taco Shop, and it was like—I don't know if it was open 24 hours, or if it was just, you know, open until like, 6:00 AM, but it was just the place that my friends and I would always end up, like after parties or after games or just sort of—we had a half an hour for lunch, so we'd sometimes try to—we'd sometimes try to make it there in our cars and back in time, which was always cutting it close.

But Nico's Taco Shop, and specifically—I don't eat meat anymore, but when I ate meat, it was the grilled chicken burrito with extra lettuce and extra sour cream, which is, oh, my god. The one that we used to hang out at doesn't exist anymore, but there's, like, several locations throughout Tucson. Shout out to Nico's.

Ryan Coogler: That's amazing. That's amazing. Yeah. For—for me, we had—you know, the Bay is a trip, bro, because it's, like, not a lot of—specifically in Oakland, there's, like, not a lot of chain places, you know what I'm saying? Like, it's kind of like a—

Cord Jefferson: Which is great, yeah.

Ryan Coogler: It's kind of like a anti-establishment place. It's crazy that we had our sports teams as long as we had them. And a lot of heartbreak when I think about this because I've been there my whole life. A lot of the places that I would frequent, you know, a lot of them are gone now, you know?

Cord Jefferson: Yeah, of course.

Ryan Coogler: But, but we had a spot that sounded like—that sounds like Nico's. It's called Nation's. And, and it's a few of them, you know, basically throughout—throughout the Bay Area, specifically, like, the East Bay, your Oakland, your Berkeley, your Richmond. It's like a diner.

Cord Jefferson: See, that sounds great.

Ryan Coogler: They used to serve a grilled cheese sandwich. When you would order the grilled cheese sandwich, they would ask, "Do you want that with everything?" And I used to think that was, like, a ridiculous question. I'm like, man, that's crazy. Why you ask me if I want everything on a grilled cheese sandwich? I just want—you know, I want the bread and the cheese.

Cord Jefferson: Yeah, exactly.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: Like a—like a normal human being. And one day, I was with somebody who wasn't from there. They ordered a grilled cheese. They said, "Do you want everything on it?"

They said, "Yeah, give it to me."

So I was—I was like, yo, that's a crazy thought. And then they got it, and it—it was a grilled cheese sandwich, and it had, like, mayonnaise and, like—and, like, big-ass onions and tomatoes and—it was falling off.

Cord Jefferson: It's probably so good.

Ryan Coogler: Yo, bro, it looked fire. It looked fire! I was looking, I'm like—shit, I'm like—I'm like, man, I was like, "Next time I come back, I'mma order that." So I—I went back like a week later and ordered that, and, like, to this day, that shit is, like, the best sandwich I ever had in my life, you know what I'm saying? So if you ever—if you ever in the Bay, and, like, you go to Nation's—

Cord Jefferson: I'm 100 percent trying it out next time I'm there.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, order—yeah, order that, bro. It's—it's a—it's, like, outlandish.

Cord Jefferson: I love that. No, it sounds fantastic.

Ryan Coogler: Okay. Here you go.

Cord Jefferson: Okay. "Most memorable interaction with an audience member who saw your film."

Cord Jefferson: Ooh. That's a good one. Um, well, I will say, firstly, you know, the—a real spiritual predecessor to American Fiction, in my mind, is this film called Hollywood Shuffle, which I loved. It meant a lot to me when I was—when I was a young man.

And so I got to, over the course of promoting the movie, got to do a screening with Robert Townsend, who sort of was—is just a hero of mine.

And Robert, the first time we met, he gave me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek, and he said, "I'm very proud of you." He said, "I love your movie, and I love you." And it was—it was sort of—brought a tear to my eye. It still does sometimes when I think about it. It just sort of felt like a full-circle moment.

That was—that's been the nicest part of it all. Yeah, I—I love everybody seeing the movie, but it's just—there's something special about meeting your—meeting your heroes along the way. Did you feel that same way when you were—when you first started putting your work out there?

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, big-time, man. Yeah. I think um, for me, when I really think about it, bro, it was probably, like, when I was in film school, bro. We had to make these short films within the first few weeks of getting there. And it was this—and it was this woman who was in class. She was a Critical Studies major. Her name is Leah Aldridge. I don't know where Leah is now, man. You know, she was, like, a professor already, and she was, like, in, like, a critical studies master's or something, and they put her in this class, you know, and she had, like, a kid that was probably, like, not much younger than I was. It was a really smart, really fun to be around, you know, kind of reminded me of—of my family, like some of my aunts and some of my older cousins.

And we had to show, like, the first thing we were working on.

Cord Jefferson: Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: I remember I went last in our presentations because I was really nervous. I was, like, hustling up to finish it. She was sitting next to me in class, and when it went off, she hit me, you know what I mean? Like, as, like, a—as, like, older Black women will do, you know? You know what I'm saying?

Cord Jefferson: Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: Like, she—you know, she hit me, and she kind of gave me this look that was like, without words, it was like, "Hey, kid, you got something," you know what I'm saying? Like, "You surprised me."

Cord Jefferson: That's amazing. Yeah.

[10:23 - Good Times by Ludwig Göransson]

Ryan Coogler: Well, my recollection of our initial meeting was when we met at the Mill Valley Film Festival. And I just heard the most amazing things about your movie coming out of Toronto. So then I was like, "Yo, I got to go see this movie," when it's at—when it's at Mill Valley. And we—you know, we met there, caught up a little bit, which—and, you know, the movie blew me away in many ways.

And, and a big thing that I'm curious about because a lot of times, that first feature film feels like a—just ginormous bet, both on yourself but then, because movies are expensive, and they require a lot of capital and also energy, time, resources, attention, you find yourself in a position where you have to not only bet on yourself but kind of, like, lobby people to bet on you as well, you know?

Cord Jefferson: Exactly.

Ryan Coogler: When was the first time somebody took a chance on you, you know? I got to imagine it was even before *American Fiction*.

Cord Jefferson: So I moved to L.A. right after college in 2004, and it was this crazy feeling of living in this city. It was kind of like living sort of, like, just outside the walls of, like, Wakanda, right? I'll sort of, like, put it in that, or, like—or just living right outside the walls of, like, Oz. It's this—you know that something magical is going on sort of, like, just on the other side of this wall, but, like, you don't know how to get in. That's how I felt.

I was like, I'm in the center of the universe for film and television, but I didn't know anybody who worked in that. All my friends were musicians or architects or therapists, you know, and I was a journalist for about eight or nine years right out of college and did that for a while.

And then, one day, this guy named Mike O'Malley, who's a writer and an actor and a director, as well—when I was a kid, he used to host this game show called *Guts* on Nickelodeon that I was obsessed with.

Ryan Coogler: Oh, yeah. Love that—love that show.

Cord Jefferson: So Mike just reached out to me one day in 2014, and he said, "Hey, I've read some of your journalism. I think it's good, and I would like you to come be a staff writer in my writers' room for this TV show that I'm creating called *Survivor's Remorse*." And *Survivor's*

Remorse was based loosely on the life of LeBron James. LeBron was one of the executive producers of it.

So it's hard to sort of go back in your life and—and find the sort of, like, places that your life really changed. But that was, like, the first hard right turn in my life, where I can remember, like, somebody saying, like, "I'm gonna sort of, like, grab you from this one thing and put you in this—in this world that you have no experience in and sort of see if you can sink or swim."

And I remember him saying, "Maybe you'll hate it. Maybe you won't be good at it. Maybe we won't get along." And he's like, "But we'll see, you know? But maybe you'll love it, and maybe this will be great."

And I told him. Like, that man literally changed my life. I've told him this many times, and he's always humble and says, like, "No, you did it on your own." But I think that anybody who has success, it always annoys me when anybody with, like, success doesn't acknowledge the role that luck has played in their success.

Because, like, yes, I worked really hard. I put in my time and, and improved myself and got better. But I was also very lucky. I was also very lucky that this guy reached out to me, of all people, and said, "Do you want to do this?" I just feel very fortunate. That was the—that was the first big, and then, you know, once I got into TV, then I was able to get into film, but that was the first real big breakthrough for me.

Ryan Coogler: Man, describe it to me, man. Like, what was it like?

Cord Jefferson: I went in there, and I was—I was—so I—because I had to quit my old job, too. So the day job that I had, I was still a journalist, and I had to quit that job.

Ryan Coogler: Where were you at?

Cord Jefferson: I was working at this website called Gawker. I was the West Coast editor of Gawker from 2012 to 2014, and they—the Survivor's Remorse room was only going to be 13 weeks. That was all they could guarantee me, and I was going to be making less money than I was making at my day job. So I was sort of, like, taking a pay cut, and it was only going to be 13 weeks of work with no guarantee for anything to come after that. And my day job was like, "Sorry, you'll have to quit because we'll need to fill your role by then." And so it was—it was a leap for me because all of a sudden, it was like, take a pay cut, and after 13 weeks, you'll have

lost the job that you had, and there's no guarantee of getting a second TV job. So it was sort of like this leap of faith.

Ryan Coogler: How did you—how did you make the decision, bro? Like when you—once you—once you realized that you were going to have to give up something that—you know, something, like, you worked a lot of years to do.

Cord Jefferson: Yeah, man. I was 32. I was 32 years old by then. I had been out of college for a decade. I was—sort of had, had this footing. I think that, just for me, I'm a very sort of nervous, anxious person. I have a lot of fear, but probably the quality that has been important for me so far in my life is my ability to overcome that fear.

Ryan Coogler: And do you remember that first day at work on Survivor's Remorse? Like, do you remember walking in the—

Cord Jefferson: Yeah. I almost passed out.

Ryan Coogler: In the writers room?

Cord Jefferson: Yeah. I almost—literally almost passed out. I was so nervous.

Ryan Coogler: So you saw spots, bro? When? Like, like in the room or on your way to work or—

Cord Jefferson: I was—no, I was sitting there. Mike was discussing what he wanted the show to be. And I was sitting there, and I started sort of like feeling like I was—like, like my vision was going black. I was like, "You can't pass out."

[LAUGHTER]

Cord Jefferson: I was like, "You can't pass out on your first day."

Ryan Coogler: Let me ask you this, bro. If somebody was looking at you, would—they would have known, or are you pretty good at hiding it?

Cord Jefferson: Oh, no. I'm very good at—I'm—I've always been very good at hiding what's going on inside. That has never been a—that has never been a problem for me. Probably too good. If you ask my therapist, I've been too good at hiding what's inside. And so that—so I was always—I was always able to keep a straight face, but, yeah, inside, I was like, "If you pass out

on your first day, man, you're never going to hear the end of this." And so I was like, "You just gotta stay upright." So I just forced myself to stay upright, and I did some breathing.

Ryan Coogler: Bro, I'm trying to imagine everybody going around the room, and all of a sudden, boom, you know what I'm saying?

[LAUGHTER]

Cord Jefferson: I walked in there incredibly terrified, but the thing that put me at ease immediately was everybody was just so nice. You know, everybody, like, to a person. Like, all the other writers were so eager to help me learn. Mike was eager to help me learn. It was like—it was like people weren't just tolerant of my inexperience. They were almost excited by my inexperience, enthusiastic about helping somebody learn and get into this industry.

And I think that that is—that is a response to sort of inexperience that is not constant. Like, there's certainly people who aren't like that in this industry, but I've found that, more often than not, like, the people you want to work with and the people you want to stay with are people who are, like, really enthusiastic about, like, helping somebody tell their story.

Ryan Coogler: That's beautiful, man. Like, the value of kindness—

Cord Jefferson: Oh, god, yeah.

Ryan Coogler:—I think is, like—is, like, so um—it's just not talked about enough especially in a industry like ours that's known for being extremely cutthroat. Because you walked into a kind writers room, you know what I'm saying? Like, like, that probably set us on a path to get American Fiction when we got it, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying?

Cord Jefferson: It was the best-case scenario for the first job.

Ryan Coogler: I think Ludwig might've done the music for it, too.

Cord Jefferson: He did?

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, Ludwig did do it, bro.

Cord Jefferson: Oh, wow.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. Yeah, so that's two people on that show I was, like, directly connected with. That's pretty crazy, man.

Cord Jefferson: Yeah, man, it feels nuts! I mean, because it feels fake. I still feel like so much of this stuff, it still feels surreal. It feels surreal to me to, like, go to, like, the Warner Bros. lot or to go to, like, the Paramount lot. It feels crazy for me still, and I'm kind of glad about that. I don't ever want to become this jaded guy who doesn't—who doesn't sort of, like, realize how fortunate I am to be doing this stuff and how—you know, what a privilege to do our jobs.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Cord Jefferson: And so I think that just, it felt like, my god, I'm standing—I'm standing in here with the guy who used to host Guts. Like, I was obsessed with him when I was a kid, and now it's like, I'm sitting here in front of him and working for him. It felt nuts. And so I don't pass out anymore, but I also try to not lose that sense of wonder and joy at it all.

[19:00 - KN 9 to 5 by Ludwig Göransson]

Ryan Coogler: Talk to me about that first day on the set of American Fiction, day one.

Cord Jefferson: Almost passed out again.

[LAUGHTER]

Cord Jefferson: That's not a joke.

Ryan Coogler: So describe it to me, man. What scene did y'all shoot day one, bro?

Cord Jefferson: We shot an exterior where we just shot Monk walking across this college campus, and we ended up not using it. And then the second thing we shot was the classroom scene, which became the first scene in the film, and that went well. But then we shot two other things.

Like, three of the four scenes we shot on day one got cut out of the movie. It tells you sort of, like, I was still learning. I was still getting—Jeffrey was still sort of, like, finding the character. Jeffrey and I were still finding our rapport. And the real sort of difficulty for me was like, I was like, who am I to tell Jeffrey Wright what to do? That was—that was how I felt, you know?

I was like—I was like, this guy is a legend. Like, this dude was in Angels in America on Broadway, you know? This dude has worked with Mike Nichols. This dude has won a Tony. This dude was Basquiat. This dude's in Batman and 007. Like, he's literally in the biggest movies and TV shows in the world. This is a dude who has worked with the best of the best for his entire career. And so I was like, man, who am I to go in there and sort of, like, tell Jeffrey Wright what to do?

And then it was like—you know, we were like halfway through the day, and one of the producers came up to me. And he was, "Look," he was like, "I know that you think that you are doing Jeffrey a service by just sort of, like, letting him do what he wants to do." But he was like, "He wants to collaborate." He was like, "He wants you to go in there and talk to him after takes and sort of like make adjustments and discuss the character and discuss the scene." He was like, "This is a collaborative environment. And, like, I know you think that you are honoring and respecting him by—by not sort of getting in there all the time," and he's like, "but you got to get in there. Like, you got to get in there and talk, and you've got to get in there and sort of take control of things."

And so, once he said that, and I started talking to Jeffrey, you realize, like, oh, this—all this is is collaboration. Like, all a good film set is is, like, it's just creative problem-solving with a group of individuals. It's like the greatest, most expensive group project ever, right? It's like—that—that's what it is. It's like, you need to be able to get in there and work together. And not only do you need to, it's sort of—it makes everything better.

I think that you can tell. Now, when I watch stuff, you can see when the people assembled weren't making the same movie, and sort of, like, the people who came together to make this were on different pages the whole time.

Ryan Coogler: Right. And who was the producer that came up to you and said that?

Cord Jefferson: His name was Nikos Karamigios. This was his, like, first film, like not assisting somebody else. There was two guys on the ground every day. One is Ben LeClair, and one's Nikos Karamigios. They're both from T-Street. But Nikos was Ram Bergman's assistant for a long time. So he did work on the Knives Outs, but sort of like underneath Ram. This was the first thing that he was doing that was just kind of—

Ryan Coogler: On his own.

Cord Jefferson: On his own, yeah. So—but Ben's been doing it for a long time. Ben's been an independent film producer for a while. Those guys are just great. They're just truly—you know, there's always that joke in this industry about, like, what do producers do? But I saw those guys, and it's like, the answer is they do everything, you know? Especially an independent film, like, they do everything.

[22:58 - Juno Arp Stinger by Ken Nana]

Ryan Coogler: How many days did you guys shoot?

Cord Jefferson: Twenty-six.

Ryan Coogler: Wow. Wow, 26 days.

Cord Jefferson: Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: And I ask, like, do you remember what your last setup was?

Cord Jefferson: Yeah. So you remember in the movie when it's the rom-com ending, and he runs out of the—he runs out of the building, and he runs underneath those sort of, like, lights on the marquee, and he runs past those—sort of, like, those posters that are up, and it's like—

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Cord Jefferson: Yeah, so that was the last one. We were shooting it in a—it was downtown Boston. It was the last of the night, and we had to get that shot because I think there was a Michael Jackson musical playing at this theater right next to where we were shooting, and we had to shoot before the musical let out because it was going to let out, like 3,000 people were going to come out and, like, stream into the street.

And, like, we got it right before it let out. And I remember there's, you know, those posters on the wall that say "Fuck," and there's this—this woman comes out of the theater, and she looks, and she goes, "It says 'fuck.' It must be some kind of protest." And she just walked away.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: Oh, man. Somebody that just watched Michael Jackson?

Cord Jefferson: Yeah, somebody from the Michael—

Ryan Coogler: That's great.

Cord Jefferson: "Says 'fuck,' it must be a protest."

Ryan Coogler: That's great, bro.

Cord Jefferson: And it was—what was really nice is we had—there was, like, some film school there or maybe, like, students, film students who were, like, at a college there. But, anyway, they were, like, watching the entire thing, too. So we finished there, and, like, some film students came over, started talking to Jeffrey. Jeffrey popped this bottle of champagne that a friend had sent me. It was really lovely.

Ryan Coogler: Wow. That's amazing, man.

Cord Jefferson: It was fun.

Ryan Coogler: And what'd that feel—what'd that feel like, like knowing you had wrapped your movie?

Cord Jefferson: It felt insane. You know, it felt—so I just felt so relieved because I—because I was told, you know, the way that the industry's been, like, nothing is guaranteed. Like, I've had friends who started shooting their movies, and then it's like, two weeks into it, they're like, "Actually, we're not doing this anymore. It's over." And it's like, what?

I have a friend who was shooting a TV show, she was writing on a TV show, and they were shooting the last episode of the series, and the network called him and was like, "Actually, we're not going to air this series, and—and we're killing it." And they were shooting the last episode, you know, of, like, a 10-episode series, and they were like, "Yeah, we're done with this."

Ryan Coogler: Heartbreaking.

Cord Jefferson: I know, man. And so, to me, there was—like, every day, I was like, I'm not going to believe that it's actually done until we're done because I think that—I've seen, we've all seen projects fall apart at, like, various stages of coming together. And so, to me, just making it to the end without having a COVID shutdown ever, without having sort of, like, any scheduling issues with the actors, like, just the fact that we were able to do that in 26 days, in that limited amount of time, was—I mean, I just—I just felt over the moon that we were able to do it. You know, I knew that there was a lot of work ahead with post. But just—just getting over that hurdle

was—man, it felt—yeah, it felt like flying. It felt like my god, again, just so surreal. I couldn't believe it.

Ryan Coogler: And correct me if I'm wrong, Cord. Was this movie your first time directing anything?

Cord Jefferson: Yeah, yeah. I'd never directed anything before this.

Ryan Coogler: So when did you know that you had it? Like, how did you—how did you know—like, how did you know to move on?

Cord Jefferson: Well, generally because we could only do, like, three or four takes max because we didn't have time.

Ryan Coogler: Timelines.

Cord Jefferson: Yeah, so it was just like, when we were doing that first shot, there was these birds that I really wanted to get the birds in the shot. And I was like—Jeffrey actually came up to me because I was like, "I want to get the birds, like, flying right when you walk past."

And Jeffrey was like, "Have somebody throw a pebble toward the birds right when I'm walking past."

And I was like, "That's a great idea." And so we did that, and it worked perfectly, and the birds sort of, like, soared right past his head right when he was—it was—it was so perfect, and then we ended up cutting it.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, I mean—

Cord Jefferson: But—but I think that—

Ryan Coogler: But you got what you wanted.

Cord Jefferson: Yeah. Yeah, we got what we wanted, but once I got into it more, and once Nikos had told me, like, "Get in there," then I started to trust my own creative instincts and my own taste more, and I was like, oh, yeah, get in there and just say, like, "We need to hit this joke

a little bit more. Like, this line reading is a little off. Here's what—here's what I think sort of like, Monk is thinking in this moment.”

Once I started to feel more comfortable with that, then it was like—then I felt comfortable getting it in, like, you know, four takes. But I feel really lucky that we got the cast we got because everybody was just such a pro and came in and knocked it out and was really prepared, and they worked really well together. It was—I was very lucky in that way.

[27:53 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

Ryan Coogler: So, Cord, man, congratulations—

Cord Jefferson: Thank you.

Ryan Coogler:—On all the praise, man, you know, and the Oscar for the screenplay and just—in every way that you can track, the success of that movie has been just that, but for me, the most important metric is just that people love it, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? And congrats on that, man.

Cord Jefferson: Thank you.

Ryan Coogler: And this is—here, here comes the dreaded question, right? You know what I'm saying? How are you going about deciding what's next for yourself? What's—you know, what's been your process?

Cord Jefferson: That's a great question. So it sort of goes back to a thing that I was saying earlier about fear in that making this movie and directing was a real scary thing for me. Sort of like, any time I'm able to move through that fear, there's—the best things in my life have always been on the other side of that terror. And for me, I want to do something that scares me again.

So the two movies that I'm working on right now, one of them is an erotic thriller, and the second one is a Western, kind of a noir—contemporary noir-ish Western. And both of them have some similar themes to American Fiction but just through, like, a totally different lens. And sort of like, both of them are much more—you know, there's a lot more action. It's, like, you know, car chases, shootouts, like, things like that that I am—have never done before and things that—that I'm interested in. That will be next on the film front.

And I'm—and I'm writing this legal thriller show with John Wells from ER and West Wing fame for Scarlett Johansson to star in.

Ryan Coogler: That's amazing.

Cord Jefferson: Because I have a—I have an overall deal at Warner Bros. for television. And so I really want to get better at visual storytelling. That's another thing that I've been thinking about, is, like, I think that, you know, American Fiction is a very talky movie, and that's because, you know, with my writing background, I feel very comfortable in the world of language. I feel less comfortable in the sort of, like, world of just visual, purely visual.

You know, I've been watching a lot of Jonathan Glazer movies. I think that what he does with just sort of like letting just the camera speak and the actors, without saying a word, speak is truly inspiring. I've been watching a lot of Denis Villeneuve. I had never seen Sicario until early last year, and I was like—and that's one of the reasons I wanted to do a cowboy movie. I'm from Tucson, Arizona, so I'm from the American Southwest.

And I was watching Sicario, and I was just like, man, the American Southwest is so cinematic. It's so beautiful. It's like—it, it looks incredible. It doesn't look like anywhere else. And also, on top of that, the movie that I'm writing is—centers Black characters, and it's like, that's another—you don't really see Black characters in the American Southwest, you know? It's not really—it's not really a place that people tell Black stories despite the fact that there are Black people there.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, we there.

Cord Jefferson: Yeah, exactly, man. I know. There's not a lot of us, but we are there.

Ryan Coogler: Have you seen Incendies?

Cord Jefferson: No.

Ryan Coogler: That's my favorite film of Denis'.

Cord Jefferson: Really? I'll check it out.

Ryan Coogler: It's—it's heavy. It's emotionally heavy, but—

Cord Jefferson: Really?

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, but really, really strong, bro.

Cord Jefferson: That's your favorite of his.

Ryan Coogler: Yes, sir.

Cord Jefferson: I'm going to watch it today. I'll check it out.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Cord Jefferson: How about you? What are you thinking about for your next project?

Ryan Coogler: Well, I'm working on it, and it's very different from anything I've done before.

Cord Jefferson: And does that scare you?

Ryan Coogler: Yes. Yes, but it's the good fear, you know? It's the good fear that you talking about. A lot on the line with this. I would say, you know, I feel myself—I feel myself getting older, not in a—in a mortality way, but in a way of, like, just being limber, you know what I'm saying? Kids getting older, parents getting older, you know, I'm starting to feel that feeling of me being able to just run around, make things wherever, whenever, maybe that stage of my life is kind of going away, you know?

Maybe it's a good thing, you know what I mean? Like, you know, but feeling like I'm making something, like, that I would be satisfied if I—you know, if I never made anything else again.

Cord Jefferson: Interesting.

Ryan Coogler: You know, I've been working with incredible co-writers the last few—the last few projects, and this one's alone, working with my company, Proximity, you know, as producers on this thing, and I'm really, really excited working with Mike. He's pretty far out of his comfort zone, you know, which is exciting, like, it's a road unlike anything he's done before.

Cord Jefferson: I love that. Do you feel, having had the success that you've had and the career that you've had, at this point in your life—because you're still a very young man. Do you feel at this point that you are just making work to please yourself? Do you feel like, "I don't need to prove that I can get box office. I don't need to prove that I can get good reviews?"

Like, you've done that. So are you—do you find yourself at a point in your career where it's like, "I'm just making stuff to challenge myself and to please myself?" Or do you still feel the need to get those external things, as well?

Ryan Coogler: Man, that's a great question, bro. Even when I was first starting, how I always looked at it was, like, there's only one of those things I can control. You know? Like, like if you were to break it down into, like, your own self and then the critical benchmarks and then audience benchmarks, which—which I think correlate to box office. Every time you make something, you want to satisfy all of those things, right?

But there's only one of those things that you truly know, you know what I'm saying? And that's what you like, what you want at that time. The other things are kind of moving targets. There's no way to really know, especially because movies take so long, you know what I'm saying? Like, you might be—you might say, "Oh, yeah, here's the moment for this," and by the time it comes out, it's a different world out there, you know what I mean? So, you know, I'm always—each time, I'm trying to make something for myself, that works for myself.

But I do know that I have—I do have popular tastes. Most things that—most things that do well critically, I generally like those things, you know what I'm saying? Like, most things that do well business-wise, if I check it out, I'm like, "Oh, yeah, this was pretty good." So you asked, like, am I—am I trying to—do I feel like I have anything left to prove? Man, I always do, bro, you know what I'm saying? Like, I feel like I got something to prove every day. Just being a—a member of Black culture, I think we're going to have a permanent chip on our shoulder, right?

Cord Jefferson: Absolutely.

Ryan Coogler: Because society's spent so much time, specifically through the film and television mediums saying, both artistically and—and through business analysis, how it doesn't work.

Cord Jefferson: Absolutely.

Ryan Coogler: It's been so many years, and so I think that chip, for me, will never leave, you know, no matter what the film does. And I feel connected to that—I feel connected to that community. So each time one of us does well, you know, it feels like all of us did. You know, all of us did well each time one of us knocks a door down.

You know, that's a big part of the reason why I pulled up to Mill Valley. They didn't invite me. I just went to Toronto. Let me see if I can touch him, you know what I'm saying? Telling you, "Man," telling you, "Man, good job. Man, we here—we here for you." And I'm knowing—I got that excitement. Man, I think this film is going to work for me even before I see it. I read the synopsis, "Oh, yeah, man, this is—I think this—I think I'm going to be enjoying myself." That's what I'm doing it for, you know, and I don't imagine that is ever gonna—that's ever gonna change for me when I sit down to make something, you know?

Cord Jefferson: I feel the same way. Yeah. I'm always going to have that chip on my shoulder. But I think that that is part of what helps keep me motivated because I feel like, as you said, it's so hard—making things is so hard. It's—it's such a hard thing to do. It takes so long. It takes so many resources. It takes so many levels of bureaucracy to say yes to you. You're like, why would I ever do this again? This is—like, this is taking years of my life. It's like, why don't I just go do something else? But sort of like, path of least resistance.

And so—but, yeah, I think that that—that is one of the things that I think helps—helps me say, like, okay, I want to get up and do it again despite the fact that it's so hard.

Ryan Coogler: And, let me ask, bro, like, for folks at home, man, like—like, and the people who listen to this, they tend to be at that stage you were at when you first moved to Los Angeles, you know, are at that stage you were at when you first walked into that—that writers room, or they're actively trying to get there. You know? Like, I've—I've found—what were you doing, like when you weren't in the room, when you weren't on set? How are you sharpening your skills, bro?

Cord Jefferson: I tell everybody, like, from now on, watching movies and television is like work for you. Like, it's like you need to start being, like, an active viewer. So if that means you want to go in and just sort of, like, watch *Dune 2* and let it wash over you the first time and not think about anything, then that's fine. But then you should go rewatch *Dune 2* and start thinking about the ways in which it was constructed and sort of like the decisions that were made and stuff like that. Like, that—people ask me, like, "Do you get the same joy out of watching things that you used to?" And it's like, no, I don't.

But—but there's like, a different kind of joy because now my mind's working in different ways, wondering, like, oh, this is an interesting choice, and that's an interesting shot. So I was doing that, but secondly, I was always writing. You know, my first job was I worked at a used clothing store called Buffalo Exchange, actually, right out of college. Moved to L.A. and had no idea what I wanted to do.

And then my second job was I was a communications coordinator at this small nonprofit in Venice Beach. But every day that I would come home, every single day that I would come home from those jobs, I would sit down and write. It was my passion, you know? And I—and I never knew how I was going to make it as a writer, but I just—I don't even love to write. I actually—writing's hard for me, but it's just something that I had to do.

And I understand that it's, like, easy to say from this position, right? Like, it's easy to say this once you've been able to make a movie and once you've had some success. But I tell people, like, if you can't find purpose within the creation, you shouldn't pursue this career, right? Like, it's like—I've—there's people who say, like, "How do I get to where you're at?" And the thing that I tell them is, like, you need to sort of like be interested in doing the thing even if you never get to where I'm at. If the question is, like, "How do I get where you are?" it's like, then you shouldn't be doing this. You shouldn't be doing this if, if the end goal is to be—like, win an Oscar, right? Like, you just need—you need to find value in the work itself. You need to find meaning in just the making of stuff even if it doesn't become successful, even if you don't end up making a bunch of money off of it. Like, you just need to find value in that pursuit.

That's something else that I tell young people, too, is, like, artists are not athletes. Like, as long as you have your brain, and you're able to articulate your ideas, you can be an artist. And that means that your art is only going to get better because you're going to read more, you're going to watch more films, you're going to learn more about the world. You're going to go through new experiences yourself. All that stuff is going to be additive to your craft, and you're going to—and you're just going to get better and smarter and wiser, and you're going to build and build and build.

And so, to me, I say, like, just take your time, too. Like, I'm 42, man, and I just made my first movie. There's time. Give yourself some grace, and just find beauty and find joy and find—find value in just, like, the making of the stuff. Otherwise, you're going to be very disappointed, I think.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, a love of the process.

Cord Jefferson: Exactly.

Ryan Coogler: Like finding satisfaction in the doing of the thing.

Cord Jefferson: Exactly. Like, say Fruitvale hadn't popped off, and you'd never gotten Black Panther or Creed. Do you think that you'd still be making films?

Ryan Coogler: I do.

Cord Jefferson: Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, no question. Yeah. I don't know what else I would be doing, you know what I'm saying?

Cord Jefferson: Exactly. Me, too.

[39:49 - Prox Recs Theme by Ken Nana and Ludwig Göransson]

Ryan Coogler: Prox Recs. This is the section of the interview where we—where we recommend something, like either a song or—or a movie, book, TV show, quote. It could be—it could be absolutely—be absolutely anything.

Cord Jefferson: You go first. I'll follow your lead.

Ryan Coogler: Okay. This is crazy. My recommendation is going to be the song 400 Degreez, not the album but the song 400 Degreez by Juvenile.

Cord Jefferson: Yes.

Ryan Coogler: You know, it's a—it's a great song, and you just had me kind of thinking about it when you said that, that artists, we not up against the same things as athletes are—are up against. And I think it's, like, very ironic because I do feel like music and athletics do have, like, something in common when it comes to Black people, where sometimes they have like a window of success, you know what I'm saying? Specifically, like in hip-hop culture, a lot of times, there's an expectation that somebody can be hot, and then they can fall off. And you see that a lot with rap music, as well.

Juvenile, who's, like, one of my favorite—one of my favorite artists, he released a video for this song, 400 Degreez. He didn't shoot a video for it when it dropped, and this song came out like 25 years ago.

Cord Jefferson: Wow, I didn't know that. Are you serious? I mean, I knew that song. I didn't know he just released a video. That's amazing.

Ryan Coogler: Some of my homies sent me the text of it, you know, and—and I thought just the act of that was beautiful, you know? You know what I mean? Like, like, and it made me think about, like, what you were saying about how we kind of owe it to ourselves as artists to look at the long game, to not transpose any kind of, like, conditions on ourselves that aren't there, you know, to not feel like we got to race against the clock to get something done because that adds so much undue pressure. You know, but if you a fan of gangsta rap, it's good music, man. Go take a listen to that—to that 400 Degreez song.

Cord Jefferson: Young Juvenile is—like, his Tiny Desk concert is one of my favorite Tiny Desk concerts in a very long time.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, it's great.

Cord Jefferson: Okay. So I will, in keeping with that same spirit of recommending something based on our conversation, it's not going to be a piece of media. It's going to be an activity, and I would say I recommend going out there and doing something that scares you. Maybe it's, like, cliff-diving, and you're afraid of heights, and you go to sort of, like, a place where you jump off of a 20-foot cliff and go into the water.

Maybe it's hang gliding. Maybe it's trying a food that you've never tried before because it looks gross to you or you've heard bad things about it. I think that those kinds of little things, taking those kinds of little steps toward, like, bridging the gap between you and your fears, sometimes it helps you leap in the—in the bigger sort of like, places in your life and sort of like when it comes to those bigger decisions. So try something that scares you. That is a recommendation, just to—even if it's the smallest little thing.

Ryan Coogler: That's awesome, man. Cord, bro, thank you.

Cord Jefferson: No, thank you, man. It's always such an honor. It is—your friendship and generosity has been one of the greatest parts of this—of putting out American Fiction. So thank you so much for having me. It's lovely to talk to you.

Ryan Coogler: Right on, bro.

[43:14 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

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To learn more about us and read episode transcripts, head to proximitymedia.com. In Proximity executive producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, Sev Ohanian, and Paola Mardo. That's me. Our theme song and additional music is composed by Ludwig Göransson.

Caitlin Plummer is our Producer. Celine Mendiola is our Associate Producer. Our editors are Cedric Wilson and Judybelle Camangyan. Ken Nana is our Sound Designer and Mix Engineer. Isabella Miller is our Production Assistant. Alexandria Santana is our Social Media Coordinator.

Special thanks to all the other folks who help make this show possible, the whole Proximity Media team, and to you for listening to In Proximity.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Ryan Coogler: You know, Ruth Carter knows way more about clothes than I can ever—

Cord Jefferson: Absolutely. No.

Ryan Coogler: I was talking to her the other day about four-finger rings, and I realized, oh, yeah, I'm talking to the person who made the Radio Raheem rings, you know what I—you know what I mean?

Cord Jefferson: Are you serious? I didn't know that.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. Oh, yeah, she designed—

Cord Jefferson: Whoa. The "LOVE" and "HATE"? That's incredible.

Ryan Coogler: Well, she designed that film, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying?

Cord Jefferson: Yeah. But I didn't know she—that's incredible. Whoa.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, so I'm talking to her about it. She's like, "Oh, yeah, I went down to this shop," you know what I'm saying, "in Manhattan, and that's who was doing them all at the time."

Cord Jefferson: Wow.

Ryan Coogler: “You know, fitted the actor, got—you know, we got him to flatten out 14-carat”—and I’m—and I was—I was just like—and here I am. Bro, I can’t make shit.

[LAUGHTER]

Cord Jefferson: Absolutely.