

**In Proximity**  
**Jon Else and Pete Nicks on Documentary, Truth, and Oppenheimer**  
**Season 2 Episode 4**  
**Final Transcript**

[Music/Old Radio Sounds by Ken Nana]

[VOICEOVER]

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

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

**Jon Else:** You know, you introduced me to Ryan Coogler, said, "You know, there's this guy making this movie. I think you ought to meet him. He needs a little bit of 16mm shot."

And Ryan came to—it was great. Ryan came to my office at Berkeley, and he had a—I think either a VHS or a DVD in his hand. And it was a rough cut of Fruitvale Station. And, you know, I put it in. And Ryan went over in the corner, and he did paperwork for an hour and a half while I watched this rough cut.

And I was fucking floored because it was not at all what I expected from the story of Oscar Grant. I expected the story of a victim, and it was the story of a family.

[00:39 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

You're listening to In Proximity. Jon Else is an award-winning documentarian, cinematographer, and McArthur Genius Grant recipient. He's made films about the San Francisco Opera, California water politics, and, over 40 years before the release of Christopher Nolan's Oppenheimer, Jon directed the documentary film, The Day After Trinity, which told the story of Robert J. Oppenheimer and included interviews with Manhattan Project scientists and declassified archival footage.

For almost two decades, Jon led the doc program at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, where he met then-journalism student, now documentary filmmaker, Pete Nicks. Pete considers Jon a mentor, and they have worked together many times over the years. Pete actually introduced Jon to a young Ryan Coogler when Ryan needed a second unit DP on Fruitvale Station, and Jon executive produced Pete's documentary, The Force, which won the prize for Best Directing at Sundance.

For this conversation, Jon and Pete met up at a studio at Cal to deep dive on craft and careers in documentary film.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

**Pete Nicks:** Welcome, Jon Else.

**Jon Else:** It's great to be here, Pete Nicks.

**Pete Nicks:** How are you doing?

**Jon Else:** You know, when I'm at the Journalism School with you, I'm always doing well.

**Pete Nicks:** I love it. We're going to have an amazing conversation, but first we're going to start with the Get Reel—

**Jon Else:** Okay.

**Pete Nicks:**—segment of our podcast.

**Jon Else:** Let's Get Reel.

**Pete Nicks:** Okay. Ooh. I think I might know how you might answer this, Jon. What was the oddest job you ever had to do?

**Jon Else:** Oh, let me count the ways. I did a lot of very, very weird stuff to earn a living early on, and probably one of the weirdest jobs is the very first paying job I ever got.

**Pete Nicks:** I know where you're going with this.

**Jon Else:** Well, you may or you may not. I got paid to film people snoring.

**Pete Nicks:** I didn't think you were going to say that.

**Jon Else:** Yeah, I did. Yeah. They had a research lab at Stanford University where they studied sleep disorders, and there were two things that I filmed there. One was narcoleptic dogs who would compulsively fall asleep when they got excited. They would just collapse and fall asleep.

And the other is that I would go into the lab, you know, like at 9:00 at night, set up my camera with super-fast 16mm film, and I would film people snoring for studies of sleep apnea. So that was my—I had just finished film school, and I was going to be like the—you know, the new Fred Wiseman, the new Jean-Luc Godard. I was going to be, you know, what Ryan Coogler turned out to be and you turned out to be. But instead, there I was, filming people snoring.

**Pete Nicks:** Oh, my god. Narcoleptic dogs. Jon, I did not know this story.

**Jon Else:** Yeah, yeah.

**Pete Nicks:** I thought you were going to go with the—editing the porn.

**Jon Else:** Oh, no, no, no. Oh, no. I processed porn when I was in film school. I was working at a film lab, and in those days, what we now think of as porn was illegal. So it was what we called "girly pictures." And it was a laboratory that, during the day, processed, like, educational films, upright, righteous stuff for, like, NASA and the government. And as soon as the sun went down, they brought out all these giant film cans that were full of this soft-core porn.

**Pete Nicks:** We're on a roll.

**Jon Else:** Yep. How about you?

**Pete Nicks:** Oh, man. I mean, I've had so many different jobs. I'm trying to think of—the oddest job. Might be cleaning the quarters of the generals of the West Virginia National Guard at the Morgantown Federal Correctional Institute where I was incarcerated for a year in 1990.

**Jon Else:** That sounds like something out of a Kurt Vonnegut novel, you know? I mean, who gets to clean the general's floor when they're locked up?

**Pete Nicks:** On to the next question.

**Jon Else:** Okay.

**Pete Nicks:** Okay. What is your go-to question to make a subject feel comfortable enough to open up?

**Jon Else:** Have you ever killed anyone? You would be surprised at the answer to that.

**Pete Nicks:** I need more information. I need at least one anecdote.

**Jon Else:** You know, in the course of doing *The Force*, which you and I worked on together, about the Oakland Police, you probably encountered more people who have killed another human being than I have. But I've done a lot of films about opera, and a lot of operas, a lot of people get killed. So that's sort of always sort of an opening question.

**Pete Nicks:** Oh, it's interesting. Could be almost a metaphor of sorts.

**Jon Else:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah. How about you? What's your go-to question?

**Pete Nicks:** Man, I don't know if I have one at the top of my head because I think, for each person who I'm interacting with, I try to sort of vibe off of them. And I tend to try to interact with a lot of people before rolling the camera. Like, with *The Waiting Room*, I spent a ton of time just,

like, actually sharing my story, and whenever I share my story, it opens other people up. I wouldn't say I have one question.

**Jon Else:** Yeah. That's really wise because your story tells people that you have nothing to hide, tells people that you, yourself, who are asking them to be open and honest are yourself open and honest.

**Pete Nicks:** Yeah. All right. Moving on, what's the most important lesson you learned from another filmmaker?

**Jon Else:** Oh, wow. Hats off to whoever came up with these questions. Well, I've learned a lot from you about handheld shooting and about patience. You know, the world will take care of itself out there in front of the camera.

**Pete Nicks:** Danny and the Scatman.

**Jon Else:** Yeah, as in Danny and the Scatman. Danny and the Scatman was Pete's thesis film here at the Journalism School, and it has a now-famous shot in it. It's a film about a young man who stutters. And you had the presence of mind to understand that stuttering is a realtime phenomenon, and if someone's locking up and having a stuttering moment, you have to keep rolling.

And there's a scene in that film in which the young man is in conversation with a teacher in the hallway, and Danny tries to answer the question and can't get the answer out. And he's sitting there trying and trying and trying to get a word out, and the teacher actually walks away, goes back into the classroom to deal with the other kids, who are being rowdy. And you keep the camera rolling on Danny, and about 25, 30 seconds later, the teacher comes back out, and Danny gets the words out.

**Pete Nicks:** On a wide shot, and that's what it's—

**Jon Else:** On a wide shot.

**Pete Nicks:** And it's so funny because you had to be in a wide shot because you had to see the cacophony of life happening around this moment where this boy is trying to communicate with this teacher. And you had to see the kids coming and going, going into the room. You had to see the teacher turn and try to deal with these two kids fighting, all while Danny is trying to get this one word out.

**Jon Else:** Yeah, yeah. It's all about thinking. It's all about knowing what the movie is about. You know, Ricky Leacock said, "A closeup is all about what's not in the frame." And in this case, a closeup would have erased all that storytelling that's just outside the frame. Now, the emotion will take care of itself, you know? All you're going to do if you zoom in is to wreck it.

**Pete Nicks:** You taught me something very early on, which is a very simple—and I've repeated it many times as, like, a—"It's always the battery." It still kills me, Jon. I'm like, "Goddamnit, I didn't charge the battery, and now I'm, like, in the middle of nowhere without a battery charger, and the camera will not work."

But that sort of evolved into the idea of preparation, that the artistry of what we do is nothing without practical preparation, craft, really a discipline, habits. That really has saved me so many times. In Proximity, Get Reel. Well, we just got real, Jon.

**Jon Else:** We just got real. Doesn't get any realer than Proximity.

[08:48 - Good Times by Ludwig Göransson]

**Jon Else:** You know, walking in here today, you and I shook hands and gave a little hug in the hall on the very spot where we met—when was it, 25 years ago? Something like that, in the Graduate School of Journalism at Berkeley.

**Pete Nicks:** 24, I think.

**Jon Else:** Yeah, 24. Yeah, close enough.

**Pete Nicks:** Yeah. Let's just, you know—

**Jon Else:** Yeah. I don't want—

**Pete Nicks:** Every year counts.

**Jon Else:** I don't want to push your age any more than I have to. But I met you before I met you because I was on the admissions committee at the Graduate School of Journalism, and I was running the documentary program. And the admissions committee was always, like, the prime committee to get on because you get to read all these applications.

And, you know, we were getting mostly things like, you know, these kids who had degrees in semiotics from Brown, but they'd never done anything. They'd never had any real life experience. They'd never—they didn't know what it was to be in a real mess.

And this application came through from this guy from Howard. And, you know, he looked like an interesting guy. He worked on the student newspaper there. And I looked at his transcript, and the transcript told an incredible narrative because the first couple of years or year and a half at Howard, you know, there's a whole lot of As. In fact, I think the first year, it was almost all As. And then the grades started to go down. You know, there were Bs and Cs and Ds, and I think there were maybe an F or two.

**Pete Nicks:** It was more than a couple.

**Jon Else:** Okay. And so you thought, "Wow, something's going on here." And then there was a gap. It was a two-year gap, at least two years, I think, in the transcript from Howard. And then the transcript lit up again, and, you know, it ended up with straight As again. And it was like a three-act structure, right? Whoever this guy was, terrible jeopardy at the end of the first act, goes off into the wilderness, we didn't know where, although I think you had mentioned incarceration briefly, and then came back, and, you know, it was the hero's quest. Here was the guy. He was a fully formed, wonderful human being.

**Pete Nicks:** Yeah. It was actually five years.

**Jon Else:** Five years, okay.

**Pete Nicks:** Because I think I dropped out—well, I was—I was arrested the summer of '89, but I dropped out before. Got arrested, and then I went back to finish my degree in '95. And so there was a pretty big gap there where I didn't even know if I was going to be able to get back into school.

**Jon Else:** Well, what you don't know is that there was a big debate among the faculty of the Journalism School, and the assistant dean, in one of these meetings, said, "We are about to admit a felon." I just thought that was—

**Pete Nicks:** Oh, man. Was that the first, or was I the first?

**Jon Else:** That was the first. You were the first felon.

**Pete Nicks:** Wow.

**Jon Else:** We had a guy with a very, very similar life story the following year who applied, and we did not admit him. So, you know, I just remember looking at this transcript and thinking, "Man, there has got to be a story here." And sure enough, you made a film a few years later that is that story, you know, about exactly those set of years when you got caught up in the War on Drugs and were incarcerated and the effects on your family and—

**Pete Nicks:** Well, you know, and what preceded that, of course, was, my final year at Howard, I thought I was going to be a writer, like a creative—maybe a novelist or maybe a screenwriter. I wasn't totally sure, but I was doing a lot of fiction writing, and I had to take a minor, and I minored in Journalism. And we had this professor, Bob Asher, who was a reporter at The Washington Post, and I had to do a project for one of my classes, and I decided to do this little documentary about this tiny, hole-in-the-wall news service called the Hispanic Link. So I went out, and I rented a S-VHS camera, some, like, hot tungsten lights—

**Jon Else:** Yup.

**Pete Nicks:** And then I found this thing called Media 100, which was one of the first nonlinear editing systems. And I, like, made this documentary. I lost the film, Jon. I submitted this to the J School. We have to find it. And I didn't—

**Jon Else:** It's like—it's Pete Nicks' lost masterpiece.

**Pete Nicks:** Seriously, we got to find that. If anybody's listening at the J School, and there's, like, a closet or an attic of all of those VHS tapes that were submitted, if it's there, can we please find it?

**Jon Else:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Pete Nicks:** But that's where it began for me. And then I—I researched, and I was like, okay, where do you go to study documentary film? And I learned that Northwestern had a program at this place called Medill. I heard that NYU did it, and then I heard about you. And I know—I think I heard it on the radio or something, and it was like, yeah, this guy Jon Else is coming over from Stanford. He was a series producer on *Eyes on the Prize*, which I, you know, loved, and I remember seeing that on TV, the seminal civil rights series, which was produced by Blackside, Henry Hampton, in Boston. I'm from Boston. So I was like, "I got to go here." And that's why I applied to Berkeley.

**Jon Else:** I remember the first time we actually met after all my adventures with your transcript. You came bounding up the stairs in the J School. And Vanna was with you, and you had a little Bolex with you.

**Pete Nicks:** Oh, yes.

**Jon Else:** And I had to break the news to you that we were not shooting 16mm film, that we were all video now, unfortunately. So you had to live in a world of nothing but video.

**Pete Nicks:** What about you? Like, how did you—how did it begin? And I know your father was an artist. What set you forth on this path of cinematography and documentary filmmaking?

**Jon Else:** Well, you know, when I was coming up, you know, going to a public high school and going to college, documentary filmmaking was not a job choice. You know, you took those aptitude tests, you know, you want to be a chemical engineer, you want to be a musician, you want to be a bus driver, want to be a nurse. There was nothing about film there. So I think I was probably way out of college by the time I realized there was such a thing as a documentary filmmaker. I was working in—for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee at the national headquarters—

**Pete Nicks:** SNCC.

**Jon Else:**—in Atlanta, Georgia. And one day, there was this super nice, friendly guy who came through who was making a movie about the civil rights movement. It was a guy named Haskell Wexler, who ended up, I found out, was one of the great, maybe the greatest cinematographer in the history of American filmmaking.

And Haskell, you know, we went out to lunch, and he had all this equipment with him, and we started talking about what he was up to and what he was filming. And I suddenly thought, "Whoa, wait a minute. There is this thing called filmmaking, documentary filmmaking." And I had been exposed, as a kid, in—

**Pete Nicks:** How old were you at that point, about?

**Jon Else:** Oh, I was probably—I think I turned 21 when I was working there.

**Pete Nicks:** Oh, man.

**Jon Else:** Yeah. I mean, nobody was making historical documentaries at all until the late 1950s, early 60s. I remember seeing a film about the Spanish Civil War called *To Die in Madrid*, and then there was Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog*. I mean, those were just profoundly inspiring.

And I think it was around that time that I decided, "Oh, you know, I've been working at this film lab in Palo Alto. Stanford's right down the road. Yeah, maybe I'll apply to Stanford," you know, not because I was terribly ambitious but because it was right down the road. I applied. They gave me some good scholarship.

And I went there, and not knowing whether I wanted to get into feature filmmaking or documentary. And so my first film was filming those people snoring. That was—that was my introduction. And as time went on, you know, I got to work on some narrative stuff, you know, B movies. I got to work with a couple of good directors. Roger Vadim, French New Wave director, I shot a film for him. Stan Lathan, wonderful African American director and producer—worked with some good talent, Ron Howard, Shelley Duvall. Levar Burton, shot a film with Levar Burton.

But I realized there were two problems. One, I don't think I was going to make it on the—the feature DP tenure track.

**Pete Nicks:** But you—you were heading in that direction, right?

**Jon Else:** I was heading in that direction, yeah.

**Pete Nicks:** And then what was it that started to draw you to the frame, that, you know, sort of see life through the frame in your camera.

**Jon Else:** Well, I'd always—I'd always lived in the frame. My dad was a painter. You know, if you grow up in the home of a painter, you grow up with the smell of turpentine, and you frame



the world constantly. It drives my wife nuts. We'll be in a restaurant, and I have one eye closed because I'm framing up the couple. And then I'll move one inch to the right or I'll move one inch to the left.

So I had always lived in the frame. I didn't walk away from feature filmmaking. Feature filmmaking walked away for me. And I, like you, made a lot of choices along the way. There were a lot of times when my family was more important than the film. But also, you know, I was shooting a lot of crappy scripts. You know, you do 15 takes on a crappy line of dialogue by a well-meaning, C-list actor. And the real world was just so much more interesting.

And with doc—you don't get 15 takes in a documentary, you know? I mean, the fastball is coming, and you got to swing at it. You know, life is unfolding in front of you, and, you know, you can't ask the ship to go back and turn around and come by the harbor another time. You can't ask the kids on the street to, you know, go back to the beginning of their basketball game for you. You got to get it when it comes.

And I just love the—you know, there's a sense of being alive about that. There's a sense of alertness about that, and there—once in a while, there's something unfolding in front of you. And if you're shooting with earphones, as I do now, you're not only seeing the frame, but you're also hearing the movie.

And it's like a fever dream. You go down in this rabbit hole. You're inside the movie. It's only happened a few times with me, but it's just, ah—I've never done magic mushrooms, but it must be like what magic mushrooms are like. I can't make up imaginary worlds that are better than the world in front of me.

[19:00 - Interstitial Music by Ludwig Göransson]

**Pete Nicks:** If you look at the art from then until now, in terms of the films that we were making, the nonfiction films that were hitting the culture, who you were as a filmmaker then, who you are as a filmmaker now, what are the films being made today? How do you sort of articulate the change and the shift that's happened, or how do you tell that story in a quick, little arc?

**Jon Else:** Well, you came in in the middle of that arc. You know, documentary as we know it sort of started in the '60s, and it was this wildly exciting, especially with—when cinema verite came along. I mean, is now a better time than 1969 to make documentaries? Boy, you bet. I mean, there were no institutions. There was no—there was no funding apparatus. I mean, forget about something like Netflix that's spending millions of dollars a year.

Even PBS hardly existed when I started, and I mean, it's still a fucking struggle to get the money to do the idiosyncratic films. You probably did 500 proposals to get your Oakland Trilogy done. I did 130 proposals to get my film about Wagner done. But it's—I mean, it's like the third golden era that we're living in right now.

You know, the technology is—that question is interesting because when I was coming up, it was both a curse and a blessing that what you shot was what you got. I mean, you could not change something after it was shot. You know, you could make it a little bit brighter, a little darker, you could shift the color. This is shooting on 16 film and even 35mm film.

So there was a precision in our thinking and a precision in our craft that was demanded because of that. You know, when you shoot an interview, Pete, you know, like a major interview for a film, like for, you know, Anthem, how much video do you roll? How much time do you roll?

**Pete Nicks:** I was just getting at that because with 16 or with film, you have to sort of be really intentional about when you start and stop, and even with the edit, when you make a cut, when you're editing on a Steenbeck or flatbed or something, like, you have to make the cut, literally splice the film together, look at it, roll it back. Okay, you didn't like that? Try again, but you're going to be very—you know, it's like Walter Murch, In the Blink of an Eye, that sort of process. And now you can just record a million hours. You can basically hit the camera and record the whole day.

**Jon Else:** Yeah.

**Pete Nicks:** And then bring that back into post. Somebody's got to look at that.

**Jon Else:** Yep. Somebody's got to look at that.

**Pete Nicks:** And—and—I do—that's always in the back of my mind, like, "Wow, what if you had less footage? Would that change your process?"

**Jon Else:** You know, I think the last 16mm I shot ever was on Fruitvale Station for Ryan. You know, you introduced me to Ryan Coogler, said, "You know, there's this guy making this movie. I think you ought to meet him. He needs a little bit of 16mm shot."

And Ryan came to—it was great. Ryan came to my office at Berkeley, and he had a—I think either a VHS or a DVD in his hand. And it was a rough cut of Fruitvale Station. And, you know, I put it in. And Ryan went over in the corner, and he did paperwork for an hour and a half while I watched this rough cut.

And I was fucking floored because it was not at all what I expected from the story of Oscar Grant. I expected the story of a victim, and it was the story of a family. It was this profound story about a man's self-discovery, his family's self-discovery. So I went out for, I don't know, two or three days as a second unit with Ryan, just Ryan and me and an assistant. And it was just a couple of glorious, liberating days. We had this little, tiny crew. You know, we could just go have lunch whenever we wanted. Ryan took us to a great taco stand right near Fruitvale Station. It was wonderful.

[23:10 - Juno Arp Stinger by Ken Nana]

**Jon Else:** One of my favorite filmmakers is Lourdes Portillo and Errol Morris, both of whom are just—

**Pete Nicks:** Mess with the form.

**Jon Else:** Masters of messing with the form, and her films are full of recreations, and Harold's films are full of recreations. I love that shit. What I love also is you know what you're getting. It's entirely about transparency. I mean, I love animation in documentary films. I love weird sound design in documentary films. And, as long as—as long as the audience knows what it's getting, that's, you know—I, boy—

**Pete Nicks:** The contract.

**Jon Else:** Go for it. My sort of Constitution and Bill of Rights and Old Testament for all this is that when the lights come on or when you close your laptop, what the audience believes to be true should be true and that what the audience believes to be real should be real.

I did a film about the Los Angeles water system, you know, the City of Los Angeles taking water from Owens Valley.

**Pete Nicks:** Cadillac Desert.

**Jon Else:** You know, the film was broadcast on PBS nationwide, had great ratings, and, boy, the pushback from Los Angeles against me was astonishing. I was just not ready for it. I just thought, "Everybody's going to love this movie. Boy, I'm the greatest chronicler of, you know, the history of the West there ever was."

And there were these blistering editorials in the L.A. papers about this television series. And I remember Bill Drummond, who teaches here at the Journalism School, you know, I saw him in the hall. I mean, Bill's been at this a long time, one of the founders of National Public Radio.

And he took me aside, and he said, "People are not always going to like what you do. You just got to be ready for that. You got to be ready that if you do your job right, and you're doing anything investigative, somebody's going to get pissed off."

**Pete Nicks:** That is so true. And, you know, I think about the arc and our arc together, you know, that second year, I believe it was '99, you were—you came out with your film, Sing Faster: The Stagehands' Ring Cycle, which was about the—Wagner's Ring cycle from the perspective of the stagehands who have a running poker game backstage where they basically tell their version of Ring cycle. That went to Sundance. We drove out there. It was me, Kristen Mack, and a bunch of other people—

**Jon Else:** That's right.

**Pete Nicks:**—across the tundra—

**Jon Else:** That's right.

**Pete Nicks:**—from Berkeley to Park City to see you hoist what was then known as the Filmmakers Trophy. And we were like, "That's Jon. He won!" So—and at that—I got the—I kind of got the bug at that point, like, ooh, like, people love your work, or you're celebrated for your work. And then, crazy enough, 18 years later—

**Jon Else:** That's right.

**Pete Nicks:**—you executive produced my film, *The Force*, which won the Director's Prize at Sundance. And, you know, and that arc is profound to me, and I think about that odd coincidence, or maybe it's not a coincidence. It's part of—I don't want to call it fate, but it's just interesting how that happened. And that film was—was at once celebrated and also really harshly criticized by some in these walls.

**Jon Else:** Oh, yeah.

**Pete Nicks:** Like, at the Journalism School for maybe being too cozy with—with the police, and some of the reviews were—were really harsh. But it was the expression of the truth as we saw it in our approach to dropping into a police department without judgment and just documenting what we saw over this remarkable two-year stretch as Black Lives Matter was emerging. And so I—you know, I think that that's really something that is an important value of mine, to realize that, hey, you got to say what you need to say and be prepared, but not everybody's going to necessarily vibe with that.

**Jon Else:** Yeah. And as long as you vibe with it, as long as you feel comfortable, as long as you know that you have not told a lie on the screen.

**Pete Nicks:** Yes.

**Jon Else:** Yeah, and that was an extraordinary experience working with you on *The Force* because you had done *The Waiting Room*, this—you know, this real breakthrough film in every sense about Highland Hospital, about a big public hospital, and it was time to move on to the second part of your trilogy. And I remember going over to meet with the police chief of Oakland, Sean Whent, to see, you know, can we have access here? And, you know, we have to tell you, Mr. Police Chief, that you cannot have control over this film because we don't do that. We don't give control of our movies to the people who are in them.

And I remember standing in the lobby and debating with you whether you should tell him that you had been incarcerated. And there was a lot of reasons not to tell him. You know, we were afraid it might just kick the stool out from under the whole project. And then, in the end, you did.

**Pete Nicks:** I think we were worried because they were going to do background checks or something like that.

**Jon Else:** Yeah, they were going to do—we had—I had been busted also. So we both had to be forthright about it. And then, boy, it was a tough film for you, for all of us, but for you. I mean, partly, you had to spend months on the street with the cops, and you had to just live in a world of societal dysfunction, you know, sometimes on both sides of the badge.

**Pete Nicks:** Yeah, wearing a bulletproof vest and seeing—being at protests, seeing friends of mine chaining themselves to the flagpole at the OPD.

**Jon Else:** Yeah. I—I remember it was—there was a—I think there was a lot of conflict for you. And it was—it was also tough because we started the film, and we—I think we kind of felt that it would be a film about a routine year in the—you know, in the life of a troubled police department. And all of a sudden, in the middle of all that, was it Michael Brown?

**Pete Nicks:** The officer who had shot Michael Brown, it was—it was his acquittal—

**Jon Else:** Yeah. Yeah. It was his acquittal, yeah.

**Pete Nicks:**—that touched off—

**Jon Else:** Yeah, so everything exploded on the street. And so you dealt with that, and then the film was done, basically. The film was over, and all of a sudden, a big scandal erupted around some sex workers and, you know, questions of official misconduct, and I really felt for you because you had to open up the whole damn film all over again.

**Pete Nicks:** We had to cancel. We were going to the Edit Lab at Sundance.

**Jon Else:** Yeah, that's right.

**Pete Nicks:** We had to cancel at the last minute because we just had to finish—finish the film for—for Sundance.

**Jon Else:** Yeah. Yeah, but it, you know, won at Sundance, got picked up by—somebody picked it up, I remember.

**Pete Nicks:** Netflix.

**Jon Else:** Netflix.

**Pete Nicks:** Yeah. Well, it was ITVS. It was a public television quick presale. And so ITVS had the public television rights. But Netflix did acquire the streaming rights, which was, at the time,

very unusual. And then we got the rights back, and now the whole trilogy is actually on Hulu because we finally finished the trilogy with—with Homerom.

[29:48 - In Proximity 90s by Ludwig Göransson]

**Pete Nicks:** So what would be your advice, then, for let's say nonfiction filmmakers coming out today? Like, what—what would you leave them with, you know?

**Jon Else:** I would ask them for advice because I'm—it's been quite a while, right, since I've been actually, you know, in the thick of things, in the mosh pit with what's really going on. You know, I think back to what I wish people had taught me in film school, and one thing is, if you're going to do cinema verite, especially, there's an incredible athleticism and physicality about it. I mean, you and I both work out.

**Pete Nicks:** I was at the gym this morning. I'm trying to hold on, Jon.

**Jon Else:** There you go. I'm trying to hold on. I swim laps every day. I mean, my body's all fucked up. My collarbone's deformed from holding these 10, 20, 30, 40-pound cameras on the right hand side. My right elbow's—you know, I can't really move it, right? My back's a mess. It's like embarking, in many ways, on the same trajectory as becoming an athlete in all senses of being an athlete, you know, the physicality of the body and the alertness, the strategic thinking in the moment—you know, where's that ball going to go? You know, where's that next character going to pop out from behind the scenery?

I also—you know, if you're going to do your own projects as a prime mover, as a producer or director, you gotta make a living. You gotta eat. And there's nothing wrong with doing day jobs, you know, as long as they're ethical. Hell, I did all kinds of crap stuff. I shot waterbed commercials, and I filmed people snoring, and I did—you know, I did a lot of commercials to put my kids through college so I could work on things like, you know, Cadillac Desert and, you know, Eyes on the Prize. I did commercials I probably should not have done, a lot of stuff for, like, sugared cereal that was, you know, promoting an epidemic of obesity that was then addressed by films like Food Inc. that I shot later on. I mean, there's this weird feedback loop.

But don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to do anything that's ethical, you know, that—that strengthens your craft, that exercises those muscles. It's like playing scales, or it's like a musician that's playing bar mitzvahs and writing jingles. That's okay.

**Pete Nicks:** I talk about that all the time, and we're now in a time where there's lots of opportunities to do branded content. I think there's a pretty great opportunity to make money, practice your craft on the periphery. Keep that thing close to you that you're passionate about, and be ready.

**Jon Else:** Yeah. But, you know, one thing we haven't talked about is failure. And I don't know about you, but I've had a lot of failure. I have had far more films fail than reach fruition,

successful fruition. And, you know, if you're lucky, they fail early. They fail in the development stage. They fail in the idea stage. If you're not lucky, you know, you get up to where you've been spending somebody else's money, and something goes wrong. You discover you don't have rights to this guy's nonfiction story. You discover that you're making a film that the executives really don't like, and they're not going to listen to this bullshit about art and about, you know, letting the audience sort out the clockwork of the cinema verite.

It's something I wish they had told me, and it's going to be crushing. You know, you're gonna fail and you get terrible reviews. But at least you've got a finished film, then. And I—I just think it's really important to be ready for that. And as long as you know that you have not made a big mistake, that you haven't knowingly told untruth that got you in trouble.

**Pete Nicks:** Or being able to recognize it. Like, maybe you did make that big—big mistake, but having the insight to sort of recognize it or being open to—you know, and I'm not advocating that we read all of our reviews, necessarily. But sometimes, there are lessons in sort of how the culture holds your work.

**Jon Else:** Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Pete Nicks:** I—I'm a big proponent. I talk to my son about this all the time, you know, in terms of taking that chance or putting yourself out there. To me, it's about vulnerability, that, you know, you can learn from your—your process. People aren't going to understand, always, what you're trying to say, but you are developing something, a muscle, a spiritual point of view, a style, a value system for living, you know? These are all things that we are so privileged to be able to experience because of the nature of the work that we do, interacting with people and telling our own story and telling other people's story. That's really unique.

**Jon Else:** And when we are making films for other humans, you know, for a nation, I take the very, very long view both of failure and of what our films do. Our films actually can change policy. The Day after Trinity, which is like a fossil—I mean, it's this dusty old movie from 40 years ago. I have a record of who purchased prints and then who has purchased DVDs of that, and it's just astounding.

I mean, this is a film about the making of the atomic bomb. It's the first film ever about Robert Oppenheimer. We thought of it at the time as sort of an anti-militaristic, anti-atomic-bomb movie. The CIA bought the first print of it ever, the Army, the Air Force, the Quakers, National Headquarters for Nonviolence. We found a record of a young Steve Jobs buying the movie, the White House, I mean, dozens of federal agencies. It was required as screening in high schools in California at one point. I mean, people actually see these things. There's a screening room in the White House.

We know that Joe Biden watched Oppenheimer on his vacation. Does that affect nuclear policy? I would hope so. You know, for the record, those of us who have made films and written books about Robert Oppenheimer, you know, we were ready to hate Chris Nolan's film. You know, I

mean, what's this guy doing stomping on our territory, this Brit coming in, telling the story of the American who built the atomic bomb? Come on, this is our territory.

And I was pleasantly surprised. I really liked the movie. I mean, God bless Chris Nolan for making a three-hour popcorn movie about a really serious subject and getting the notion of nuclear weapons back into the national conversation where it belongs.

[36:19 - Prox Recs Theme by Ken Nana and Ludwig Göransson]

**Pete Nicks:** That is a perfect segue into our closing segment. We call it Prox Recs.

**Jon Else:** Prox Recs, okay.

**Pete Nicks:** And this is where we—well, we want to recommend something that inspires you as a documentary filmmaker. It could be a book, movie, TV show, podcast, quote, anything. And so I'm gonna—I'm gonna—

**Jon Else:** Go for it.

**Pete Nicks:**—jump right out the gate.

**Jon Else:** Jump.

**Pete Nicks:** And I—I knew that my Prox Rec, coming into today's conversation was gonna be the movie *The Day After Trinity*. You go watch this movie, especially if you saw *Oppenheimer*. This is Jon Else's 1981 opus, nominated for an Academy Award, and I believe, apart from *Eyes on the Prize*, the first thing that I watched of yours.

**Jon Else:** Oh, really?

**Pete Nicks:** It's a remarkable portrait of a complex human being with a massive issue underlying it, and I had never seen anything like it before. So I am recommending to you all to immediately go watch *Day After Trinity*. Jon, it's your turn.

**Jon Else:** Well, let me just follow up on that for a minute. You know, I think you—you hit on what—what is a—sort of a formula for success for us, and that is to find an endlessly riveting personality who is tangled up with an endlessly massive issue. I mean, if Robert Oppenheimer had invented radar, or if Robert Oppenheimer had invented the internet or better bullets instead of the atomic bomb, we would not be talking about him today.

If the atomic bomb had been invented by some bland civil servant, we wouldn't be talking about him today. So those are those two wires that we try to cross when we're embarking on a project. You've done it on all your films.



**Pete Nicks:** That's brilliant. I'm actually gonna note that because I'd never really thought about it in that way, but that's perfect.

**Jon Else:** Yeah, it's true. Think about all—you know, and it—it doesn't have to be someone—it doesn't have to be Dr. King. It can be CJ, the triage nurse in *The Waiting Room*. Well, you know, this sounds like this ridiculous love fest, but my recommendation, watch any film by Peter Nicks. I mean, this is ridiculous. We shouldn't be doing this, but we are, and it's from the heart.

If you're going to watch one of Pete's films, watch *The Waiting Room*, his very first major film. And it's this extraordinary, honest, heartfelt, and utterly engaging, often funny story of life inside a big public hospital. And it's full of tragedy and redemption, and it's just—it's a—it's a great way to spend a couple of hours.

**Pete Nicks:** 82 minutes.

**Jon Else:** 82 minutes.

**Pete Nicks:** It's very, you know—

**Jon Else:** Oh, feels like a—

**Pete Nicks:** That's the thing. Movies—

**Jon Else:** Feels like a blink.

**Pete Nicks:** You know, movies are getting too long. I mean—

**Jon Else:** They are. They're way too long.

**Pete Nicks:** No shade, 82, it's nice and pithy but full of so much.

**Jon Else:** Yep. My last film was 73 minutes.

**Pete Nicks:** Oh, you want it to be—

**Jon Else:** It's exactly the right length. Yeah, yeah. Let me recommend, also, you know, something that's not a film, but something that inspired me early on is George Orwell's book about the Spanish Civil War, *Homage to Catalonia*, which is this short book about these idealistic young people who went off to fight against fascism in Spain. And it's an utterly riveting account of the internal battles between all these factions who were trying to defeat fascism. And they finally failed. You know, I think when a lot of us read that book as young people and were inspired to go to Mississippi and Alabama to try to fight white supremacy down there, we didn't realize the struggle in Spain had failed. So, yeah, *Homage to Catalonia*.

**Pete Nicks:** Homage to Catalonia.

**Jon Else:** Yeah.

**Pete Nicks:** The beauty of the capitalist engine means that I can get on my phone, like right now, and press a button, and that book will be at my house by the time I get home.

**Jon Else:** Damn you, don't do that. Peter—

**Pete Nicks:** Don't do it?

**Jon Else:** Go to your local independent bookseller.

**Pete Nicks:** Go find, like, a used book.

**Jon Else:** Don't—don't ever—

**Pete Nicks:** That's a Prox Rec. Perfect.

**Jon Else:** Go in and buy Homage to Catalonia and a couple of newspapers, and then ask them if they have any films by Pete Nicks.

**Pete Nicks:** There we go. Jon, with that, I think we have landed the plane.

**Jon Else:** We have landed the plane safely.

**Pete Nicks:** All right. We need to continue the conversation, though, over lunch.

**Jon Else:** Yeah, yeah. Yep, over lunch. Yep.

**Pete Nicks:** Okay.

**Jon Else:** As we often do.

**Pete Nicks:** It's great to see you.

**Jon Else:** Yeah, likewise, buddy. Thanks for being my teacher.

**Pete Nicks:** And you.

[40:58 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

**Paola Mardo:** In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media. If you like the show, help us spread the word. Send a link to your friends and loved ones. Follow, rate, and review In Proximity on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite podcast app, and follow us on social media. We're @ProximityMedia on Instagram, TikTok, Twitter.

To learn more about us and read episode transcripts, head to [proximitymedia.com](http://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]

**Jon Else:** You know, I thought those were really intelligent prompts, by the way.

**Pete Nicks:** Yeah. Well, you're dealing with intelligent people, Jon, you know?

**Jon Else:** You know, it's funny. I thought, "You know, I think I probably ought to listen to one of these Proximity podcasts." And so I—you know, I dipped into almost all of them because they're so smart.

**Pete Nicks:** Yeah. No, they're great combos.

**Jon Else:** And so—yeah, they're just—it's just incredibly smart people, and they're so full of good energy. Oh, we have producers. That's right.

**Pete Nicks:** Hey.

**Jon Else:** Hi, guys. I don't know if you heard me. I was just going on and on and on to Pete about how smart and intelligent and great your podcast is. I didn't know you guys were—

**Pete Nicks:** They heard that.

**Jon Else:** I didn't know there was somebody listening.

[LAUGHTER]

**Pete Nicks:** Yeah, we're going to use that in the promos.