In Proximity
Jordan Peele and Ryan Coogler on Genre, Fear, and Filmmaking
Season 2 Episode 3
Final Transcript

[Music/Old Radio Sounds by Ken Nana]

[VOICEOVER]

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

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Ryan Coogler: I do feel like what you did and are doing is breaking down a door for a genre where maybe Black filmmakers aren't as taken serious, aren't as present, you know what I mean? I remember Tales from the Hood as a kid. I—I actually love that movie. I remember like, like, the kind of movies Black directors made when I was young. Like, I knew Spike, I knew John.

Jordan Peele: Anything from the Hood is a classic.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Jordan Peele: Leprechaun.

Ryan Coogler: Leprechaun in the Hood.

Jordan Peele: Tales.

Ryan Coogler: Fantastic. Tales. Yeah.

Jordan Peele: Boys.

Ryan Coogler: Boys, yeah. Jesus. Yeah. Hoodlum.

[00:27 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're listening to IN PROXIMITY.

'Get Out,' 'Us,' 'Nope.'

Jordan Peele is the award-winning writer, director, and producer of these groundbreaking films. With Monkeypaw Productions, he's produced movies, TV shows, and other projects that bend genres like horror and thriller. Before becoming a filmmaker, Jordan was a comedian and co-star and co-creator of Key and Peele.

He's here today with our founder — writer director producer Ryan Coogler, and we're so excited to bring you this conversation just after the release of the trailer for Ryan's upcoming film Sinners. You can watch the trailer on YouTube or on our Instagram page @ProximityMedia.

This conversation was recorded awhile back so they don't touch on the film here, but they do get into genre filmmaking, Jordan's early career which includes puppeteering and improv, writing and pitching Get Out, and the power of fear.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Ryan Coogler: What's going on? We welcoming the great Jordan Peele to the In Proximity podcast.

Jordan Peele: Thank you. So good to be here, Ryan. I'm a big fan.

Ryan Coogler: Likewise, bro. And we kicking it off with our Get Reel segment. There are questions in each one of these film canisters. Jordan, you can pull them up and—and read them.

Jordan Peele: Okay.

Ryan Coogler: I haven't seen these, so I'm—I'm a little nervous.

Jordan Peele: Okay, here we go. Here it is. So happy to be here. Okay. What is your favorite album of all time? Favorite album of all time.

Ryan Coogler: That is rough.

Jordan Peele: It's a—I mean, it's just—that's not a quick fire.

Ryan Coogler: Nah, nah, that's tough.

Jordan Peele: That's one you want to sit down and gnaw on.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, yeah.

Jordan Peele: Part of me wants to say 36 Chambers, Wu-Tang.

Ryan Coogler: Ooh.

Jordan Peele: But I'm going to go with Blood Sugar Sex Magik, Red Hot Chili Peppers.

Ryan Coogler: Man. That's—that's—

Jordan Peele: Savage.

Ryan Coogler: Man, I can't believe this one.

Jordan Peele: This is so hard. It's so—

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, like, like, there's so many—so many flashing, like, before my eyes. I want to say Speakerboxx/The Love Below, but I'm going to say Tupac, Me Against the World.

Jordan Peele: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, it's hard to do, bro, but I guess cathartic once you get it out.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. So—so we'll go.

Jordan Peele: All right, go to—

Ryan Coogler: The next one. I—

Jordan Peele: Well, here you go. Okay.

Ryan Coogler: That's a big—that's a 35-millimeter reel—

Jordan Peele: There you go.

Ryan Coogler:—it look like.

Jordan Peele: All right. What makes a good villain?

Ryan Coogler: Oh, my gosh.

Jordan Peele: See, I know you know what makes a good villain.

Ryan Coogler: Man, what do you—what do you think makes a good villain?

Jordan Peele: Can I just—let's talk about Killmonger for a sec, right?

Ryan Coogler: Okay, yeah.

Jordan Peele: One of the greatest cinema villains of all time. And, you know, the reason was because you refused to allow the character to be treated like a villain in the way you portrayed him and—you and Michael did. You treated him with the respect that you'd give a protagonist even though his scenes are cut different. And so I think that is the secret, is that the compassion is put, and the humanity is there.

Ryan Coogler: Man, that's—that's a good assessment.

Jordan Peele: Use your own shit against you.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. I mean, I like all of your villains, man, like Jean Jacket, know what I'm saying? Like, the family in Get Out and—is that her name, Adelaide?

Jordan Peele: Yeah, yeah. Adelaide, yeah, from Us. Or Red.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, yeah. Or Red.

Jordan Peele: Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. But, you know, you got the mix-up there.

Jordan Peele: Well, thank you. Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: But—but I—I think the rules that I try to follow, you want to try to make sure that the villain has the same—that they want the same thing the protagonist wants but for different reasons. You know, you could look at, like, Heath Ledger and the Joker, right, in The Dark Knight. Both he and Batman, they want control of Gotham, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? But they want it—they want it for different reasons. But they going after the same thing. So that's what I try to do when I'm going, I don't know if my villain is good enough, you know what I'm saying?

[LAUGHTER]

Jordan Peele: Your villains are good. Holy shit, your villains are good. Okay. This is the next reel. Here we go. Oh, there's a phone. All right. There's a cell phone in here. It says In Proximity. I'm—I'm assuming I'm supposed to—okay. There's a—there's a whole treasure hunt.

Ryan Coogler: Bro, this is wild.

Jordan Peele: Ready? I'm going to play the clip.

[CLIP PLAYS]

Daniel Kaluuya: Yo, what's going on? My question is: What discipline outside of film inspires your storytelling and sculpting of your vision?

Ryan Coogler: No.

Daniel Kaluuya: Love every time.

[END CLIP]

Jordan Peele: Nah. See.

Ryan Coogler: You know who that is?

Jordan Peele: We know who that is. I recognize this voice anywhere. I recognize it anywhere.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: And the smacks.

Jordan Peele: How did—I was about to say, how did you get Daniel Kaluuya to do a call-on?

Ryan Coogler: Bro. Listen to that voice, bro. That's—that's—

Jordan Peele: Yeah. Play that again.

Ryan Coogler: That's an impossibly sexy voice, bro.

Jordan Peele: You know what I'm saying? Play it again.

[CLIP PLAYS]

Daniel Kaluuya: Yo, what's going on? My question is: What discipline outside of film inspires your storytelling and sculpting of your vision? Love every time.

[END CLIP]

Jordan Peele: Why is he trying to—

Ryan Coogler: He got, like, R&B music in the background.

Jordan Peele: Why is he trying to, like, seal the deal?

Ryan Coogler: With us.

Jordan Peele: With us right now. It's like, that's not the—Daniel, you don't need to be—

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: That's not where that—that's not where that charisma should be aimed, you know what I'm saying?

Jordan Peele: That's not what my house sounds like, I can tell you that. Discipline, okay. I think I have an answer for this. All right, so there's improvising. I'm an improviser, but I have to say I grew up drawing. And drawing, that was kind of a version of improvising. I think everyone has to kind of find their own way of improvising, right, whether it's music or drawing or sports or whatever, to be able to kind of set your—your impulses free and have to kind of build the wings on the way down of whatever you kind of jump off of. And so drawing was that for me. And yet I still feel like my craft in filmmaking is very much based on this sense of— mistakes you can make can be more beautiful than the things you do intentional if you use it right.

Ryan Coogler: Wow. See, that—that tells me you a good artist. Like, you could draw well.

Jordan Peele: I think I could. I thought about it right. And the—the crazy thing is, there was a point when I became an actor, I started improvising, I stopped drawing. I started putting that into other things. But I remember right when I sort of hung up my pencils, so to speak, I did feel like, yeah, I could—I could draw anything. But more importantly, I've figured out how to draw everything. And that's what I've been here to learn. I'm not here for the drawings. I'm here for that lesson.

Ryan Coogler: Right. Wow. Wow. I think, for me, it's always music. I'm always trying to make movies that make people feel how great movies make me feel. But even more so—more so than that, how great songs make me feel. Like, I think about like a song like Fast Car, Tracy Chapman, how I hear that, and I cry no matter who's singing it, no matter when it's played, you know what I'm saying?

Jordan Peele: Me, too. Me, too.

Ryan Coogler: It is a jealousy thing. Like, I wish I could—like, I wish I could do that, you know what I'm saying? And I can't, but I can do this thing. But it's—it always comes back to music for me.

Jordan Peele: It feels like there's this thing where, you know, musicians want to be actors. Actors want to be, you know, directors. Directors want to be musicians. It's like this weird circle. Oh, and there's—everyone wants to be an athlete, but then athletes want to be—

Ryan Coogler: They want to be musicians. Yeah.

[08:01 - Good Times by Ludwig Göransson]

Ryan Coogler: So I want to give the warmest, most gracious welcome to the great Jordan Peele—

Jordan Peele: Thank you.

Ryan Coogler:—actor, director, writer, producer, and just incredible, incredible artist to our show, In Proximity. I want to first start off by how we met. We met at Little Dom's.

Jordan Peele: Right.

Ryan Coogler: You remember this?

Jordan Peele: Yeah, I do. And it was, I think I had maybe reached out to you online.

Ryan Coogler: Think so. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jordan Peele: And—and we just set it up, which is, by the way, proof you don't need agents. You can just—but—

Ryan Coogler: 2017, I think it was.

Jordan Peele: That's in Los Feliz, in—in California. And yeah man, it was just fans, like—

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, big time. My association with you, bro, like—like, is first and foremost through the show, Comedy Central. We were just going back and forth, bro, like deep cuts. Like, I've seen all of them. And I think, like, those sketches are so masterful. But I remember, like, where I was the first time I seen the trailer for Get Out.

And I—I had gotten to know Daniel because we were getting ready to put him in Black Panther. And I had seen him before in a few things. But I remember watching that trailer in the—in the offices at—at Disney while we were prepping, getting ready to go. And I was like, Jesus Christ, this looks good, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? And I couldn't believe it was—it was you who had made it.

And then, you know, flash forward to us being in Atlanta, shooting the film in the winter of 2017. Daniel was kind of telling us a little bit about it and his anxieties about what happens in the movie, what the—what his character's doing. And—and then it came out and just took the world

over. I was so moved by it, man. And I'm kind of like—you know, obviously, I'm freaking out because I'm seeing you in all the sketches, but I was so blown away by the film, too. And I was so excited to sit with you, you know what I mean? I remember like it was yesterday.

Jordan Peele: Thank you, man. I mean, that's good. It's so good to hear you talk about that whole journey with that movie. And I mean, hearing you talk about, you know, seeing that first trailer even, I don't hear a lot of people talk about that experience. And I remember when it came out, my fear about the trailer was that it was really selling the popcorn aspect of the film very hard and that it felt like a sort of typical horror film. And I thought I had—well, I've made this thing that's like, it's beautiful, it's elevated. And I—and so I felt scared because I felt like if the thing felt like a joke, you know, if it felt like Scary Movie and—well, it didn't feel like it was the timing for that, you know? We were coming off of the Trayvon Martin murder, you know, in general as a—as a people. And so this idea of finding any kind of entertaining spin or any kind of catharsis in that way—

Ryan Coogler: Right, right.

Jordan Peele: —through genre at what could be considered at the expense of us, I was like terrified that that could just send it on the wrong way.

Ryan Coogler: Right.

Jordan Peele: So I do feel like there were some initial reactions to it that felt like, "No, please, we do not need this Key & Peele sketch right now."

Ryan Coogler: Right. But it all came through, bro. Like, I—like, I think that's—I think that was the best version of the presentation, you know what I'm saying? Because I think what I really loved was—like, what you said in Little Dom's, bro, was how you realized that the movie was all of these things. Like, the idea of Get Out, and the Sunken Place being a movie screen that you scream at and you have no control over, and that being where you got your title from, and how Black people scream at the movie theater. And I saw the movie in Atlanta Station in Atlanta, bro, like week two, and it was the most interactive movie-watching experience I've ever had in my life, bro.

But when you said that you realized while you writing it that it was about how we go on about our lives while all of these Black men are incarcerated in places in America, and we act like it's not happening, but we know it is, man, it really moved me, you know what I'm saying? Like, at that time, one of my closest friends was still incarcerated, you know? And I was like, oh, that's what I was feeling the whole time that I'm watching this movie. When he's on the phone with—with Rel's character, and he's advising about a situation, I'm like, oh, yeah, that's me and my guy, like on those collect calls, talking about situations and what's going on.

And the fact that you were able to compare that to the cinematic experience, the feeling of powerlessness that can come with seeing things that are playing out on video screens and

screaming at the screen, knowing that you can't stop it, sitting in the theater, screaming at the screen, knowing that what was going to happen was going to happen, paralleling that with this concept of mass incarceration that's legacies of all of these other things that have haunted us as a community and as a—as a society, as a country, and to see you package it in a way that was so skillful and undeniable, what you guys were able to accomplish with that, I was like, I can't wait to see what he does next. Like, what's the next thing he examines?

And it was clear that, like, okay, his work is art. It's going to kind of be a mirror, you know what I'm saying?

Jordan Peele: Mm-hmm, thank you.

Ryan Coogler: Tell me, bro, like—like, tell me about, like, what you did before you got to the point of, you know, being a—a writer/director of feature films, bro. Like, I—I've heard, you know, earlier in the Get Reel segment, you talked about drawing. But, man, is it true that you went to school for puppeteering, bro?

Jordan Peele: Yeah. Well, you know, I was an odd kid, I guess. I wanted to be a filmmaker as a teenager. And I felt the ceiling, you know?

Ryan Coogler: When did you know? How did you come to realize this is what—this is what you want to do?

Jordan Peele: I think I was probably around 13 or something. I probably saw maybe Edward Scissorhands, okay? Edward Scissorhands would've probably been the one where I said, you know what, that movie—it has so much heart. It has—it left me with such a lump and such a beautiful fable, right? And the star of that motherfucker was Tim goddamn Burton. And you have—you have a lot of people firing off. Danny Elfman is doing perfect, Depp is going crazy, every department, but—

Ryan Coogler: It's a voice there.

Jordan Peele: It's a voice. So that was probably the moment.

Ryan Coogler: You, at 13, had the wherewithal to say—

Jordan Peele: Say yes. I felt like I love film enough that I could do that. But I also felt this ceiling. I felt like, no one's ever going to give me millions of dollars to make—I think I convinced myself it's just not—that's not meant to be.

And so anyway, puppetry, I was good at acting, you know, for a kid. And I went to Sarah Lawrence College where you sort of declare your own major, liberal arts college kind of thing. There was a sense of being able to say, I know what I need to learn, and I want to figure out what I want to learn. And so for me, you know, it's not like they have, like puppetry major, but I

was like, that's what I want to do. They had a puppetry class. They had, you know, theater classes, they had art classes, they had philosophy, they had—you know, right? They—you put together a little curriculum for yourself. And that was, I think, for me, a way of committing to what I loved, not to what I was going to be when I grew up. And—

Ryan Coogler: Wow.

Jordan Peele: And then, like—

Ryan Coogler: That's incredible, bro.

Jordan Peele: Yeah. Well, you know, to be fair, it was like—I left after two years because after two years I was like, okay, improvisational comedian, that's my new thing. It's this other step sort of back towards what I want to do. And throughout the time, I'm sort of learning all these tricks and these things that really are, like, putting together what's going to become a director.

Ryan Coogler: Bro, that's wild. And you never let go of it.

Jordan Peele: Yeah. I mean, it was always there, and I think I always felt like I would be good at it. Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: What was, like, your puppetry North Star, bro? Was it Burton still or—

Jordan Peele: Well, you know, what I would've said at the time is, I would love to end up in creature effects, probably.

Ryan Coogler: Okay. Okay. Like The Thing.

Jordan Peele: Like The Thing or—

Ryan Coogler: Alien.

Jordan Peele: Yeah, Alien. Yeah. That—that would've been what I said.

Ryan Coogler: So it was movies. It was like ILM. Okay.

Jordan Peele: Yeah. It was, like, back in movies. It was back in movies.

Ryan Coogler: Wow. Because when I think of puppetry at that time, I'm thinking, like, stop motion. I'm thinking Jim Henson. But you were—you were thinking like puppetry movies, special effects.

Jordan Peele: Well, I think in how I felt like I could monetize this thing later. But the passion, the way I spent that time was doing very different kinds of puppet shows, was doing sort of

experimental, you know, some rod puppets, shadow puppetry, all kinds of other weird things that were much more about the idea that you can tell a story with sculpture, essentially, with objects.

Ryan Coogler: Bro. So Sarah Lawrence, you discovered improv comedy. You're good at it, you know what I'm saying? And—and—so boom. Is it Chicago Improv?

Jordan Peele: Yeah. So there was one place that you're meant to go if that's what you want to do. And the route is meant to be, take Second City or ImprovOlympic, or you go to Los Angeles, do The Groundlings. And the whole idea is you want to ultimately get on SNL, want to get on Saturday Night Live.

Ryan Coogler: Got you. That's the pinnacle.

Jordan Peele: That's the—that's all there is. If you're an improviser or sketch performer, that's the route. So I went to Chicago, and I went with a friend, a comedy partner, Becky Drysdale, we did a two-man group called Two White Guys. It's an ironic title. Ultimately, I ended up going to Amsterdam—

Ryan Coogler: Oh, shit.

Jordan Peele:—where there was a group called Boom Chicago, still is, and that's basically Chicago style improv group out there. So for three years, I'm in Europe doing American-style comedy. So that was, like—I mean, if you can imagine doing comedy in Amsterdam, it's, like, you have audiences from all over. It's, like, it's a total tourist town. Basically your job is to get up there and make people with all kinds of different kinds of senses of humor laugh, and that whole thing of, like, honoring the audience and honoring this idea that a success is when you get the biggest percentage of the audience on the same page. That's how you measure success. And so that's how I look at my relationship with the audience, is I don't want to leave anybody behind.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. And so you're in Amsterdam. You come back to the States after three years. What brings you back?

Jordan Peele: So a couple of my friends, Ike Barinholtz, Josh Meyers, who had been out there in Boom Chicago with me, had gotten on Mad TV out here.

Ryan Coogler: So where's Mad at, like, in relationship to SNL?

Jordan Peele: Okay. So Mad is basically underneath SNL, right?

Ryan Coogler: Okay.

Jordan Peele: By the way, I've had—many people would disagree. There's a lot of people that are, like, "I like Mad, but I don't like SNL." But when you're a sketch performer, improv performer at this time, you're not trying to land on Mad TV. You're trying to land on SNL.

Ryan Coogler: Copy that.

Jordan Peele: But not everyone's going to get that. And you're very lucky to get a spot. And so that's what I was. I was very lucky to get a spot on television, and it was on Mad TV, and it was a whole different type of journey than I was ready for mainly because I had been just doing comedy in Amsterdam every day. And now it was—my momentum was ground to a halt in a way, by the—by the show.

Ryan Coogler: You were used to going.

Jordan Peele: Used to going. Now it's—it's wait. Maybe you'll get a—one sketch next week. So all of a sudden, I'm not working, and it's not—they don't even pay that well. And so it was a—yeah, it was a transformative era there.

Ryan Coogler: Talk to me from the time between Mad and getting your show.

Jordan Peele: Between Mad and Key & Peele, it was a very important time as well. So I—I came off Mad very sort of like bitter from, like, what I felt was, like, contractual bullying and this kind of stuff or whatever. I don't know if that—if that anger is justified, but I was angry, you know? And I don't have good places to put my anger in general except my work. That's kind of what I do. And so in this case, my thing was like, all right, convert this into strategy, right? I need to be a producer because what I felt like was the producing aspects of the show were making decisions that made it so that whatever work I put into my part of it couldn't sort of emerge.

Ryan Coogler: Right

Jordan Peele: Which felt suffocating. It feels unfair when you feel—especially when you feel like you're doing something good. So I felt like that's what you got to be. You have to be a producer.

Ryan Coogler: And it's interesting, like, when I listen to it condensed like this, you were a guy who, when going to college, wanted to author your own major. And it sounds like, you know, you in Amsterdam, you getting it out constantly. You come back, somebody putting a cap on it.

Jordan Peele: Exactly. And—and it's putting a cap on it, and it's supposed to be the moment when now, you know, everything you've learned, now you're going to get to go do this. And, like, I didn't want to live out in L.A. I love New York.

Ryan Coogler: So Mad is in L.A.

Jordan Peele: Mad is in L.A. So that's me here in 2003. I don't drive, but whatever. After, I started basically writing Get Out, and some—

Ryan Coogler: 2000—2000-what is this?

Jordan Peele: Around 2005. The initial idea was already there.

Ryan Coogler: Bro.

Jordan Peele: And it—and it felt like a—you know, a dumb idea, but one that I thought was funny, basically. And—and just to be clear, the writing process was sort of like an incubation for a while, you know, before I really got something. So in its first incarnation, what I had of Get Out, it was called Get Out of the House, Get Out the House.

Ryan Coogler: Get Out the House.

Jordan Peele: Get Out the House. And it was—you know, all I knew then it was about that notion of when you scream at the theater—at the screen, "Motherfucker, get out the house! What are you doing? Why you still there? Like, don't you know, we're in a horror movie?" you know, kind of vibe.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. The interactivity.

Jordan Peele: The interactivity. And so I—in that title, I was basically like, I don't know, like, this is a horror movie for black people to scream that and dah, dah, dah, dah. But I think I had it originally as a girl bringing a—her—her boyfriend back to her high school friends. So it was much more like not being in on the personal joke and thing.

Well, it was a couple of years later, I had the Guess Who's Coming to Dinner epiphany, that it should be the family, and that what Guess Who's Coming to Dinner did so well is it makes it so if you're Black, you understand this fear and this situation to a degree, in terms of the race of it all, but everybody can relate to this feeling and fear of meeting your in-laws for the first time.

Ryan Coogler: The awkwardness of the situation.

Jordan Peele: Right. So that kind of—that—that aligns everyone. So I was like, got to go that way. And then, yeah, that was—that was being developed for years, but was always a project that I always thought was, like, sharpening my tools. So when I—when I actually am writing—and then a few years later after doing like a pilot and a movie as an actor here or there, Keegan and I got together and sold the show.

Ryan Coogler: Life-changing?

Jordan Peele: Life-changing. Yeah. I mean, when—when Keegan and I sold that show, you know, you can imagine this feeling of, like, I didn't know that there would ever be a

real—another real opportunity for me to do my thing. You know, I felt like I'm not the kind of actor who—I have to think of a really fucking funny idea to have people watch my shit. You know, I can't just get up there and fucking Gosling my ass off.

[LAUGHTER]

You know, I got to be—

Ryan Coogler: Watch what you're saying, bro. You tripping, bro.

Jordan Peele: I got to convince a motherfucker to watch me. So, anyway, I don't know where I was, but when I—yo, so when—and I know Keegan is just the most dynamic and best sketch performer I've ever seen. So, when we sold that show, all of a sudden, you know, it was like, oh, shit, we get to do the thing and be the producers.

Ryan Coogler: Wow.

Jordan Peele: This is it. It's exactly what you're saying. Now, everything I wanted to do on Mad TV—

Ryan Coogler: You—you got your authorship now.

Jordan Peele: Got our authorship. And then that's why that exploded. And—and part of it was we knew enough when to be like, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, nope, that's not it. That's—been here, been done that, seen that. And this is why I'm the producer, so I can say no on that.

Ryan Coogler: Man. The first one I ever seen, bro, and I didn't even know what I was watching, somehow this came across my radar. But it's the one, I think it's called I Said Bitch.

Jordan Peele: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Ryan Coogler: That's the first one I ever seen, and I'm like—I'm like, yo, who are these guys? I couldn't believe, like, the specificity. Bro, I couldn't believe anything about it. But also, like, what actually blew my mind the most, because I was in film school at the time, I think, was the production value. As a filmmaker, I could feel like—I was like, oh, they're going for it. They're in a field with backlight, big wide shot. Oh, now these motherfuckers are in space, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? Like, oh, he's going to float out. He's going to float out in the spacesuit, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying?

And I was—I was like, yo, who are these guys? This is incredible stuff, bro. So talk to me about from that to Get Out. What was the moment when you knew Get Out was going to get made?

Jordan Peele: Well, you know, there—it was—by the end of Key and Peele, it really did feel like, you know, we've kind of done what we need to do, what we're here to do in terms of, like,

I've played everything I could want to play. So it did feel natural, even though in many ways it felt like the world was just kind of catching on.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Jordan Peele: But meanwhile, I had developed Get Out to a point where I thought it was possible that it was the best thing I had done, and I didn't believe it could get made. But the sort of practical joke of it was sort of continuing to go a bit. And I felt like, you know, because of this Key & Peele thing, maybe it would get made. It is just hard to—oh, and by the way, I didn't have the script. I had the—all the plot points. So I knew the whole thing.

Ryan Coogler: You were still—you were still in outline phase.

Jordan Peele: So I had an outline.

Ryan Coogler: And how did—how did you have it outlined out, like in Microsoft Word, in cards at the house? Like, how did you—

Jordan Peele: It was mostly, I probably had it in Final Draft at some point, but it was mostly that wherever I would go, I would tell somebody the whole movie. So I knew it.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, right, of course. And you a improv actor. Like, it was probably—you was probably giving the whole thing.

Jordan Peele: I had the pitch. I had the pitch moment-to-moment.

Ryan Coogler: Bro, how are you as a pitcher, bro?

Jordan Peele: Well, when it gets going, you know, I can—

Ryan Coogler: It's going.

Jordan Peele: Yeah. I'm a—I'm a good pitcher.

Ryan Coogler: That's—that's got to be crazy, like, to be an improv—you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? I think, like, all writer/directors are solid pitchers, bro. But that's—that just seems unfair, you know what I'm saying?

Jordan Peele: Well, you know what's—

Ryan Coogler: I would hate to—I would hate to, like, come in the room and pitch after you, you know what I'm saying?

Jordan Peele: You know what is my—the best use of sketch improv is before you get the actors in, you can do a read-through of the script, and you know how you do a read-through of the script with no actors? It's just dry. Things—things get missed.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Jordan Peele: I can do, like, the impressions of everybody.

Ryan Coogler: You do everybody. Bro.

Jordan Peele: So it really actually does help with all these little things, like, people—

Ryan Coogler: That's insane.

Jordan Peele:—not—not realizing how something was supposed to be, you know, what the vibe was.

Ryan Coogler: Bro, that's insane,

Jordan Peele: Yeah, that's fun. It's fun.

Ryan Coogler: I can't do any of my shit.

Jordan Peele: Well, look, I mean—

Ryan Coogler: It's like—it's, like, accents and—

Jordan Peele: People probably hate me by the end of it, but I do it.

Ryan Coogler: Bro, that's incredible, bro.

Jordan Peele: Yeah. But yeah, and, I mean, look, so then I went to QC Entertainment, this guy named Sean McKitrick, who had produced a film that Keegan was in. So Keegan sort of introduced me to this guy, and I went and sat down with Sean.

Ryan Coogler: This is not—so, like, this is not the QC, like Quality Control, the record label.

Jordan Peele: No, it is QC Entertainment, which was a—it's a film company. It's formerly Darko Entertainment. Donny Darko was how they started.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, yeah. Hell, yeah.

Jordan Peele: I—you know, I sat down with Sean, and I said, "Look, I've got a movie that's never going to get made, but I want to pitch it to you, anyway." Half believed that to be true. And by the way, that's the best—that's the best way to start a pitch.

Ryan Coogler: Oh, yeah. Lower the expectations, put them—put them in—put them in the dirt.

Jordan Peele: Yeah. Make it their—make it their idea, right? You know? So then—

Ryan Coogler: That's brilliant, bro.

Jordan Peele: But then at the end of that, he was like, "We'll give you some cash for that." You know, "We'll give you a little—some money, you know, just a little bit of money." But look, I was like, boom.

Ryan Coogler: You going.

Jordan Peele: He's like, "We'll do that. We'll make that movie for $5 million." Now, Ryan, in my head, I was saying, okay, now I got to go write it and someone's going to have to direct this thing. Ryan, I—it was not even in my mind that I would direct after all these years.

Ryan Coogler: Bro. Bro.

Jordan Peele: I thought, why would anyone let me direct something for my first time directing? You know, that stigma? I'm a first-time director. I start writing this. I get into the party sequence, right, where they start—

Ryan Coogler: The auction.

Jordan Peele: Yeah. Well, the early—

Ryan Coogler: Pre-auction.

Jordan Peele: Pre-auction.

Ryan Coogler: Before it goes off.

Jordan Peele: And they're—they're being creepy. And, yeah, and that—just that experience of being Black in a white space and feeling your Blackness radiate in everybody's fucking minds, that feeling. And so when I'm writing that, I'm like, ooh, I'm getting it. I'm nailing it. And then I realize, wait, a white director can't do this. Ryan Coogler doesn't exist to me yet, so who's going to do—who can pull this off? I'm the only person that can pull this off.

Ryan Coogler: Oh, man.

Jordan Peele: You can give it to Spike Lee, but he ain't going to do it, you know. So I called Sean, I said, "Look, I'm loving what's happening here, but I'm realizing I'm—I would have to—I think I have to direct it."

Ryan Coogler: What was—what was his reaction?

Jordan Peele: He didn't hesitate. He said, "Okay."

Ryan Coogler: Amazing.

Jordan Peele: And I think, in some ways, you know, obviously, it was just the right—the right move for a lot of reasons. But he—he's an experienced filmmaker, and, you know, I think he's sort of waiting for those moments where he—something works and something makes sense.

And my determination, the fact that I was not going to be expensive, and, you know, the inarguable, of, like, yeah, who the fuck else is going to do it?

Ryan Coogler: Love it, bro.

Jordan Peele: And then from that moment forward, it was like, wait, wait, wait, wait, I get to direct my own movie now?

Ryan Coogler: Just the realization of what you wanted to do at 13. Man.

I mean, I got to ask you about something, bro, before you move on. You know, I couldn't imagine, bro. I couldn't imagine making something that's that great and hits like that my first time out, bro. Like grand slam in every measurable way. And for me, in every way that you can measure a movie, you know what I'm saying, Get Out is just, like—is one of those things. And it also has the uncontrollable quality of feeling like it came out of nowhere, even though it didn't when I hear you talk about your life. How do you reckon with that, bro?

Jordan Peele: I mean, you know, I know exactly what you mean. And it's—so much of it, as you know, is, like—it's timing, right?

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Jordan Peele: I mean, that movie was a time, you know? Black Panther, it was a time. And so it's impossible to even remove the film from the time, in a way, because it was—it was something that was happening is all I know how to all I know how to—all I know how to put it.

Ryan Coogler: It was outside of you, it felt like, at a certain point.

Jordan Peele: Yeah. How do you—how do you reconcile that? Not every movie's going to do what that did. You may never have a movie that does what that did. Few people do. And I just—I'm, first off, very thankful and feel fortunate, and I feel like I crushed it. I put in that work.

Ryan Coogler: Oh, yeah.

Jordan Peele: But timing. And I guess what I mean by that is a week before my movie came out, there could have been some, let's say a police brutality incident that put us in an environment where—

Ryan Coogler: People didn't feel comfortable putting it out.

Jordan Peele: People didn't feel fun with that, right? That would've been a totally different journey for that movie to go on.

Ryan Coogler: And it's so outside of your control, as a filmmaker.

Jordan Peele: There's—there's some part of it that's so outside of your control. And so I'm fortunate enough that, you know, the movie that I made as a response to the racism I saw

existing in the Obama era came out when Trump took over, you know, and he beat Hillary. So the movie that was about this one kind of coded racism came out in this time when it was very much this loud conversation. That—that's such an alchemy that, by the way, involved, to be fair, the critiquing of white liberalism in the time when Trump is big.

Ryan Coogler: Right

Jordan Peele: So you've got a lot going on. And like I said, it wasn't Get Out. It was what was happening and—and that timing of it.

[33:57 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

Ryan Coogler: I want to talk to you about genre and, like, the concept of it. It's something I'm actually kind of, like, at odds with. Because we talked, bro, I'm a big music fan. I know that genres in music are mostly based in racism, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? Like, if I say blues, country, rock, bluegrass, hip hop, reggaeton, I'm subtly talking about race.

And I feel like it's so interesting with filmmaking because I don't think it's as obvious as it is in music. Film is a younger art form, but it is a little bit there, you know what I mean? Like—like, and I'm curious how you feel about—like, what's your relationship to genre as a concept, as a word?

Jordan Peele: Yeah, I think—I think it's evolving. I feel like I— when Key & Peele was—was going, I looked at the word genre of—as, let's see how many genres we can do. Have we hit all the genres? And so maybe I meant—I don't know what I meant, styles or worlds, but—

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. But it is a thing in film, right, like a classification. What—what's the main—like, what do you think of when you think of genres?

Jordan Peele: What I think about it is a genre is a bunch of things that you can expect an audience to expect if they think this movie is this genre.

Ryan Coogler: Like, almost like a contract.

Jordan Peele: It's a contract that you can break, and you can zag against, you can do whatever. But, you know, so much of storytelling is knowing where your audience is at. If an audience is watching a horror film, and they know they're watching a horror film, they'll yell, "Get out the motherfucking house!" If they think they're watching a romantic comedy, well, they still might, but they—you know, they're like—

Ryan Coogler: It's like, you know, "Kiss him, go with it!" Yeah.

Jordan Peele: Yeah, right. "Go, kiss him!" Right. So—

Ryan Coogler: "Go, go!"

Jordan Peele: So much of it is about, for me, audiences' expectations of what's about to happen. And if you're working with genre and using it, it's all because you're trying to feed future moments.

Ryan Coogler: Bro, I love this. Expectations.

Jordan Peele: It's expectations.

Ryan Coogler: Because I do feel like what you did and are doing is breaking down a door for a genre where maybe Black filmmakers aren't as taken serious, aren't as present, you know what I mean? I remember Tales from the Hood as a kid. I—I actually love that movie. I remember like, like, the kind of movies Black directors made when I was young. Like, I knew Spike, I knew John.

Jordan Peele: Anything "from the Hood" is a classic.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Jordan Peele: Leprechaun.

Ryan Coogler: Leprechaun in the Hood.

Jordan Peele: Tales.

Ryan Coogler: Fantastic. Tales. Yeah.

Jordan Peele: Boys.

Ryan Coogler: Boys, yeah. Jesus. Yeah. Hoodlum.

Jordan Peele: Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: But it was Spike and John. Eventually, like, Malcolm got in the mix. And each time that they would do something, I remember it would be this energy of like, man, what are they doing now? I remember Spike made a movie that had a bunch of white people in it. I think it was Summer of Sam, I think, and the trailer's a bunch of white people. Like, I remember my mom being like, "Hey, yo, Spike got a movie with white people in it," you know what I'm saying?

Jordan Peele: Right.

Ryan Coogler: You know, but—but that idea of like, if you can feel like the trail is being blazed, but us as filmmakers in the drama space, comedy space, science fiction, you know, horror, these other spaces, like a director or auteur, getting into those spaces and being taken seriously by fans of that genre. I remember when it was a lot of—of media coming out around the time that Get Out was released. They were almost, like, staging you like Hitchcock and Kubrick.

Some of this stuff was fan made, some of it was photo shoots, you know what I'm saying? Like, I remember thinking, like, bro, this is awesome, you know what I—you know what I mean?

Jordan Peele: Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: Were you cognizant of that?

Jordan Peele: Yeah. I mean, it was—it was all that crazy sort of dream come true, you know? I mean, it seems you've been there too. But for me, it was just a moment of great, like, appreciation, really living in the moment and—and understanding like, look, 2017, look what's happening here.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Jordan Peele: Birth of my son, I'm on my first film.

Ryan Coogler: Wow. Wow.

Jordan Peele: It doesn't get better, right?

Ryan Coogler: It's like you in the stratosphere.

Jordan Peele: I'm in the stratosphere.

Ryan Coogler: Did you feel present while it was all happening?

Jordan Peele: Yeah, I did.

Ryan Coogler: That's amazing, bro.

Jordan Peele: I did. I felt present. I felt like, you know, this is—if you—if you get past this, and you feel like you look back, and you didn't enjoy it, you fucked up. And so then I did. I did. And—and a lot of that sort of love and energy, I think, permeates in Monkeypaw, my company, where I feel like, you know, I'm—I've just—I've been fortunate enough to surround myself with just an incredible team who really, like, share this idea of pushing forward this notion that you're talking about, using the fact that we haven't gotten the opportunities to be in the genre space, the money making space, really, because our trailblazers have been in drama, you know, and so that's what we—we have.

And so when Get Out Happened, when Panther happened, I think the realization was that whatever the system, whatever fear has been keeping Black people from these positions where they could lead a ship to potentially make a whole lot of shit ton money for somebody, whatever fear put that system in place has probably fucked a lot of people out of a lot of money because—

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. Yeah, it's true.

Jordan Peele:—you know, something's happening here. And you can see something. You can see. You know, when I—it's just crazy. When I look at what you have accomplished with your films, you know, I'm always just like—well, I don't understand. Where did you—you went to film school?

Ryan Coogler: Me?

Jordan Peele: Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I did.

Jordan Peele: You went to full film school.

Ryan Coogler: I did.

Jordan Peele: So it does work.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: I went—yeah. Jesus.

Jordan Peele: Because motherfuckers said that it doesn't—you know, that most people go to film school, and it doesn't—they don't come out ready to make films or something. But you did.

Ryan Coogler: That's—that's—I mean, bro, it's a lot of film schools. It's a lot of people going through them. Filmmaking is—is incredibly complicated. It's a lot of gates that are being kept, you know what I'm saying? So I think it's like—it's a gamble. You know, even if you get accepted, it's a gamble, I would say, but it could work for you if it's—if it is right for you. It ended up working for me.

Jordan Peele: Do you have that feeling, it's only a matter of time kind of thing? I mean, you—

Ryan Coogler: For me?

Jordan Peele: You seem like you got your—it's—it's inevitable.

Ryan Coogler: Nah, I didn't have that feeling, man. Like, I was—I was—I nursed a lot of doubt, bro, and got a lot of rejection. Like, I got affirmations when I needed to. I did have teachers pull me aside, like early on to say, I think you got something, you know what I'm saying? But I also had, like, you know, every film festival in the world internationally say—say, "Nah, we'll pass on this—on this short," you know what I'm saying? "Nah, we'll pass on it." You know, I had success and affirmations peppered into massive piles of rejection, you know, and it was—just it would be just enough to keep you going.

Jordan Peele: You know, so—for so long, being an actor, it's like that. You know, there's a certain amount of torment you put yourself through and a certain amount of fear and pain that

you just live with, you go about. And then, when I kind of hung up the acting thing, for me, it felt like, nobody's trying to kill me anymore.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Jordan Peele: And I can do what I do, and I'm not under fire.

Ryan Coogler: See, that's the thing. Yeah, that's—that's the thing, bro.

Jordan Peele: I mean, fear does crazy things.

Ryan Coogler: Bro, what?

Jordan Peele: Fear does. Yeah. I mean—it's weird because, like, I remember when—when I was about to direct this thing, I met Ben Affleck.

Ryan Coogler: Before Get Out.

Jordan Peele: Before Get Out.

Ryan Coogler: That's amazing.

Jordan Peele: It was amazing. I wasn't, like, hobnobbing with Afflecks in general, but I made myself into this one situation. And—and I remember, I said, "Look, I'm just—I'm terrified." He was, like, hot off of Argo or whatever.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. Right, right.

Jordan Peele: He said—he said, "That's good. Use your fear." Like some Batman shit, "Use your fear."

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Jordan Peele: It's like, "That fear will guide you," you know?

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. That's amazing, though.

Jordan Peele: And it was good advice, right? Because, you know—

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. You leaned into it.

Jordan Peele: I leaned into it. I was like, okay, right. He's like, "If you don't have fear, then you should be afraid." I was like, okay. And that's the—that comes from the Project Greenlight guy. So we good.

Ryan Coogler: Let's go.

[LAUGHTER]

[42:36 - Prox Recs Theme by Ken Nana and Ludwig Göransson]

Ryan Coogler: So on Prox Recs, we recommend a thing that could be helpful or useful for our audience. When you picture our audience, bro, think about yourself at Sarah Lawrence, in Amsterdam, coming back. People who are interested in the industry in different ways and are—and are listening in trying to figure out advice and a way that they can guide their paths, you know what I'm saying? It could be a book, it could be a piece of music, it could be a technique, you know, anything.

For me, I'm going to recommend, since we talking about great directors that are also actors and improv and all these things you talking about, I read the Mike Nichols biography recently. Beautiful, beautiful, beautifully written book about, you know, one of the finest American filmmakers. Just made some incredible, incredible movies and worked with Nicholson a lot, know what I mean? Came up doing improv, acting, you know, in theater and then transitioning to making some classic American cinema. You got Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? You got The Graduate. You got Carnal Knowledge and all these incredible films. But, yeah, check—check out his book and his life path. There'd be some parallels, I think, with some of the things you talking about, Jordan.

You want to give a Prox Rec?

Jordan Peele: Yeah. Well, yeah, you know, I—first of all, I would say from a process standpoint, this thing that we've been talking about, like, I'm realizing more and more that my films, my stories, the projects so far really have been about focusing anger and fear. And I don't know why that is. I don't know if that's always going to be the case. But I would say to somebody, if you are angry, like I am often, and if you—you have an issue where you don't have that outlet, or you feel like it's a lingering problem that makes you upset, then that can actually be a good nugget to build off of in terms of your creative process. If you're passionate enough about your act, if you can convert that passion into your project, when you're done with the project, you'll be less angry about that thing. That's my theory. But other than that—

Ryan Coogler: Bruh. Bruh. That's beautiful, bro.

Jordan Peele: Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: Hey, to be—it should be expected, but that—that just blew me away.

Jordan Peele: Well, hey, that, and the last thing is I just read the—that Rick Rubin book. You read that?

Ryan Coogler: Oh, yeah, yeah, Art of Creativity, or is it—is that—

Jordan Peele: The Creative Act.

Ryan Coogler: The Creative Act, yeah.

Jordan Peele: Yeah, that—and that one, it broke me out a little writer's block, so that's a nice—that's a nice little tip.

Ryan Coogler: That's fantastic. That mean we back then. We got something coming. If you writing, bro, it's a good—it's a good day in the future.

Ryan Coogler: Jordan, bless you, bro. Thank you for this, man.

Jordan Peele: Ryan, man, thank you. Thank you. This was a blast, man. It's so good to hang with you.

Ryan Coogler: Right on.

[45:29 - 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.

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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: I showed it to Zinzi who runs the company with me. She was my—my girlfriend then. We got inside jokes based off them sketches, bro, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? Like—like, she'll say, "I'm the man of the house," like—like if—if she bossing me around or something.

Jordan Peele: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Wait, which one was that?

Ryan Coogler: That's the one, "I said, man, I'm the man of the house."

Jordan Peele: Oh, that's the, "I'm the man of the house."

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, yeah. But—but I think—I think our family, our all-time favorite one, bro, is the soul food one, when they ordering on a lunch break.

Jordan Peele: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Jordan Peele: "Dog face."

Ryan Coogler: Bro.

Jordan Peele: "Donkey teeth," right?

Ryan Coogler: "Donkey teeth." Yeah, yeah.

Jordan Peele: That's the original, "donkey teeth."

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, yeah. "Forget everything I said up to this moment right now."

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: "In a old Ebony magazine."