

Ron Howard: The Past, Present and Future of Entertainment (EP.19)

- Jim: Well, hello everyone. It's Jim O'Shaughnessy and Jamie Catherwood with another episode of Infinite Loops. And I am so excited today to have my good friend, Ron Howard, who really needs no introduction. Academy Award winner, famous actor, famous director. My God, Ron, is there anything left for you to do?
- Ron: Well thank you. Plenty. Plenty to do. And always a challenge to kind of, to keep trying to do it well. And so I'm still really enjoying the whole thing. Documentaries has been an area that I've just entered into in the last five years or six years and and I really found it interesting and additive. It's turned out to be a really good business for Imagine Entertainment, not led by me, but by the people who we've been able to partner with, Justin Wilkes and Sarah Bernstein. And so in fact, you and I always like to talk comparative business angles and sort of the world and what's going on.
- Ron: It's been really interesting for Imagine because in the last three years or so, it's been the first time that we've had some capital to work with and that's not tied to a studio and not tied to a network. And so essentially we've really been able to branch out and it's been exciting to have a kids and family division that's growing. This documentary group, a branded group, all areas that Brian and I, Brian Grazer, of course, and I have always been interested in and occasionally dabbled in, but we literally get our hand slapped when we make a documentary or do some branded work because the company that was paying our overhead would say, "That's not exactly what we had in mind, guys. And where's the next a Liar Liar, or Beautiful Mind, or Empire. We're still trying for those big titles and those broad appeal projects, but it's so exciting to be able to narrow the focus in new ways.
- Jim: It's really interesting because I watched your documentary about the Beatles. And as you know, I'm a Beatle fanatic. I love the Beatles. A, that must've been an incredibly fun to make.
- Ron: Incredibly. Well, incredibly scary before it became incredibly fun.
- Jim: I bet.
- Ron: Because when I signed up for it, it was only my second documentary project. But the producer who put the whole thing together is this guy, Nigel Sinclair, who was a famous entertainment attorney, he's a producer, he's run entertainment companies, bought and sold them, but he loves rock and roll. And he's also produced. And later in his life, he's really putting his focus behind making some really great documentaries. He put the George Harrison movie together that Martin Scorsese made. A Bob Dylan doc, that was great. One about the Who that was fantastic. And he brought this to me because he had been connected with the movie Rush. And then he had seen the first doc that I did, which was behind the scenes look at Jay-Z's initial iteration of the Made in America Festival in Philadelphia. And that had sort of fallen in my lap.

Ron: And Brian had sort of said, "Well, would you ever want to do that? It's only two weeks from now, but they're interested in pulling something together and just sort of cover the festival and see what comes of it." And I was pretty terrified, but I'm on the board of a great organization, Jacob Burns Film Center in Westchester County. And on that board is Jonathan Demme, was Jonathan Demme. He passed away a couple of years, sadly, because he's a great guy. But he did Silence of the Lambs and oh, Married to the Mob, so many great, great scripted movies, but also a fantastic documentarian, both about political docs, but also music.

Ron: He did Stop Making Sense with the Talking Heads. He's really great. And I asked him about it and he said, "Oh, just take the leap. Just go into it, go for it. Put together a plan and then just know that everything could flip upside down. In fact, it should. And you just ride the wave and see what the real story is." And he was just, and so I did. I did it. That worked out well. It wasn't great, but it was pretty interesting. And I put a lot more of myself into the Jay-Z doc than I ever expected I could. Nigel Sinclair, he really liked it and brought this idea of doing the Beatles documentary to me. Not as a sure thing, but would we want to make a pitch? The Beatles were interested.

Ron: This was a Beatle sanctioned, sponsored, I think even largely paid for documentary. But they only wanted to do the tour years. And at first I thought, well that's a limitation I'm not sure that I should tackle, but I began to think of it and went in. And I had my meeting, not with Paul or Ringo or the family, any of the family members, but just with executives there. And I said, "Well, I saw the Jay-Z documentary, kind of like the movie Nashville. Let's look at this event from a lot of different perspectives and see which stories jump out at us. I see this as Das Boot. Now Das Boot is a movie about a bunch of guys, Germans, U-boat company.

Jim: I love the movie, it's a great movie.

Ron: It's a great movie. A great war movie and it's trying to get from here to there. And all you know is kind of what you can hear or what you can pick up on the radar. Or if you surface and pull out your binoculars and that's it. You're incredibly limited. But you have your purpose and you have each other and that's about it. And I thought, well that's kind of the Beatles during this touring years era, the more I read and the more I talked to. And so that became my guiding principle around that. I kind of do, so far doing that sort of, apply a scripted movie framework to the thematics of a true story and sort of see how they reconcile one another. And anyway, I'm making this into a tremendously long story, sorry. But I took it as a lark, as a creative experience.

Ron: I knew I would get to meet. I've met Paul and Ringo a couple times, but I never had real conversations. This is going to be fascinating. Yoko Ono and Olivia Harrison we're all equally fascinating in a lot of ways. But as soon as it hit the internet, I realized, holy crap, these people really care about a Beatles documentary a lot. It's kind of like don't F it up Ron, is sort of the hidden message I'm getting. The undercurrent here, the subtext of all of this. And I began to feel a lot of anxiety about finding our way to a story that would both honor the true fans who really, really knew, but also inform people of our kids' age, generation, who grew up with it, know the songs, but they don't know what they meant. They cannot know. They didn't feel it. And that's what I went for.

Jim: What's interesting about that is I had two thoughts when I was watching it, the first thought, which I'm going to ask you your next question. But the second thought was I turned to Missy, my wife, and I said, "I don't think that they'll ever be able to be another Beatles. That one group that's so changed society. We have so many different venues now. We have so many different things. I don't know, maybe I'm wrong. What do you think?"

Ron: I don't. Yeah, I don't think so. Look, people come on and they have moments that are pretty seismic. They'll make a statement, they'll create a song or a movie. Donald Glover, whenever, is it last year or the year before? This is America. You know what I mean? What a moment. And it still didn't make him the Beatles, but everybody was talking, everybody was looking, everybody had an opinion. And I think that happens. But, it was a moment of absolute transformation. If ever we were ripe for like that, it would be now.

Jim: It was that time.

Ron: Well that time and possibly now, because we're undergoing another version of a revolution, a cultural revolution. But I still feel that with the internet, with 500 channels and all the outlets, that it's sort of would be impossible to capture everybody's attention in such a powerful way, all at once. And by the way, I think that's kind of a good thing, all in all.

Jim: The other thing I thought was I've known you for a long time and we've been together, we met through our kids' chess program. And so Ron and I became buddies and did a lot together. And so I wondered whether you had a certain affinity for the Beatles, because come on, you've been famous all of your life from when you were a kid, literally. And I grew up watching Happy Days and then all of your movies and everything and I am always incredibly impressed by the way you deal with it. You are so elegant.

Ron: Thank you.

Jim: Watching you interact with fans is, when you're on family time, it's family time, but did that play in to your making of the movie?

Ron: Well I'm not at all encyclopedic about the Beatles and no one's ever been as big as the Beatles so it's not like that. I don't relate on that level. There was a little moment of time when Happy Days first broke and you would sort of say Henry was like McCartney or something. Henry Winkler, it was just, or just unbelievably popular. And we actually had moments out on the road where you would equate it to being like a boy band. We said, "Well, this is a little like Beatlemania." Now it didn't go on and on and on to the point where we couldn't even really be on the road, which is really what happened to the Beatles.

Ron: The reality is, and we couldn't really get this into the movie, but my opinion is that we couldn't get into the movie because no one would say it. And of course it's a documentary so unless somebody is really willing to say it or if it's a kind of a Michael

Moore type of a documentary where you're basically editorializing the whole way, which we weren't doing with that film. And I probably would never do with a film. But I do think that the fear of assassination honestly, really did help push them off the road. Now nobody wants to cop to that. But apparently George Harrison was only like 22, 23 at this time.

Jim: That's incredible.

Ron: And his parents were really frightened. When they started burning the Beatles records and sending them death threats and especially to Lennon, but to all of them. And there was suddenly, they were in the middle of a real cultural divide and a frightening one.

Jim: I can say, a shit storm.

Ron: Yeah, a shit storm. Wasn't sure where your podcast, where you wanted the language. But they were dying for him to get off the road. And George was the first one who said, "Hey guys, I've had it." And Paul did say that. But they never said why. They would never admit why. That fear factored into it at all, but hell, it was dangerous. It was. And how good can security be in a situation like that? And of course, not very good. I'm sure that that factored into that. No, I'm not encyclopedic about the Beatles even now, but I was fascinated by it.

Ron: And Jim, that's kind of what I get out of a lot of these movies, whether they're based on real events or not is I'm particularly drawn to subjects that I don't feel I know everything about. And so it satisfies my curiosity and I do feel like there's something that freshens it up if it's kind of a story being told by somebody who's a little bit amazed by what's being under covered or what's being discovered here and can share that. Has a real appreciation for it and a more of an audience, a general audience's view of a subject. I try to make myself as expert as I can and I try to surround myself by experts, whether it's formula one or NASA or mathematics with A Beautiful Mind, or physics with The Genius and Einstein.

Ron: I was in conversations all the time and kind of just about getting to the point where I could understand the nuances, but I couldn't tell you now. It's like cramming for a test and then it's gone. It's kind of what it's like for me when I'm directing one of these things.

Jamie: With the documentaries, what were some of the biggest things that you learned going in as someone who wasn't with the Beatles encyclopedic, but you had a good understanding?

Ron: Several defining moments, three or four ideas that were really, that I really came to understand. And some fans will know this certainly better than I did. And I made the discovery and tried to share it. One was just a thing that Paul McCartney said to me on the phone, I had my usual creative controls and he knew that and respected that, which I really appreciated. At the same time, I think he understood the kind of story I wanted to tell and it wasn't salacious, it was really this story of this collective and what they

achieved over this period of time and what it meant to them, what the reverberations were positive and negative. But he said two really interesting things.

Ron: One I did relate to, he said, "First of all," he said, "it's only honestly been in the last few years that I felt that as an individual away from the band, I've accomplished enough, that I could actually look back at the band with affection and not feel like I had to prove something beyond the Beatles. And so it's enabling me to be able to really enjoy and reminisce and talk about it in a way that I would do in the past but it wasn't really a thing I wanted to talk about. I really wanted to talk about what I was doing next as an individual."

Ron: I did relate to that because for a long time, I felt that with Happy Days and the Andy Griffith Show and in recent years that I am with him, that's not really the case. Now I love talking about that stuff because I've been able to have the kind of career on my own that I always dreamed of. And so I feel grateful for that and recognize the incredible meaning, the value, the lessons learned and the opportunities gained through having been on those shows with real perspective and wisdom.

Ron: But the other thing he said, "At the time that we're covering with this story right now, John and I were really close. We were writing partners, we were friends, I looked up to him, there was no power struggle going on at all. There was no question. It was our band, not anybody's singles band." And he said, "I still feel the baggage and resentment of the way the breakup happened. And I haven't even gotten over that entirely myself but I would love for the people who watch this movie to recognize that before that, there was this thing that was really special, this connection that was love." And so I thought that was really interesting.

Ron: The other thing was the power of the collective. They were great writers and Shakespeare's, the play is the thing, if you listen to all those songs, you begin to realize for any mood you might be in, there's a song they wrote that speaks to you very immediately.

Jim: Incredibly true.

Ron: And that blew my mind.

Ron: Immediately.

Jim: Incredibly true.

Ron: And that blew my mind when I began to understand the range of sort of the ideas, the themes, the subjects, the feelings that they were able to convey through their pop music, the rock and roll music. And so that kind of knocked me out. I'm not a part of telling this story, but I also cease to lament them breaking up because I recognized that they were so powerful creatively, that they just had to. It would have been them kind of subverting their talent, and creative ambitions and personal appetites for the world and what was out there creatively, whether it's in music or in [inaudible 00:19:02] Python

and just other things. The last two things that really came to mind was a kind of casual sense of purpose and what is right and wrong.

Ron: And not everybody's going to agree with their lifestyle choices, and their drug experimentation and whatnot, but in terms of the big picture choices that they made as individuals, refusing to play segregated concerts in the South. So then that was just a quick casual, "No way, man. Why would we do that? That doesn't make any sense." So they didn't agonize over these things too much. They had a pretty good compass for what they thought was right and wrong. And I tend to agree with most of the decisions that they made. And the last thing that, again, we never got anybody to say it, but I just recognized it. And frankly, even as we were promoting the movie, I heard a couple of stories.

Ron: I'd still think, "Damn, I wish we knew about that. I would've put it in the movie." But I experienced it myself through Ringo. Now we all know Ringo was the oldest. He was the real pro that joined the band. And McCartney says that's when we really became a band was when Ringo came in, but then there are a lot of wise cracks like John Lennon saying, "Well, is it Ringo the best beat drummer in the world and he's not even the best drummer on the beat in the Beatles." And I think he might've been talking McCartney, or maybe he's talking about himself or maybe he was just giving Ringo shit, because they did have that Liverpoolian [inaudible 00:03:06], and they still have it.

Ron: And Ringo really has it with the comebacks. It's as good as any comic. And that guy hasn't lost a step. I once saw him in Happy Days. He wandered on the set with Keith Moon and they were both four chics, eight chics to the wind. I don't know what was going on in their blood system, but whatever it was ... they were functioning, but I don't ... Ringo kind of remembers it. But 35 years ago, he stopped all that and he's fit and really remarkable, but here's the point I wanted to make. And I piece this together because he was talking about one of my movies. I won't say which one, but it was one of my movies that sort of wasn't an award winner and didn't make the top 10 in the box office.

Ron: It was kind of, still a movie that was solid movie, but had some few problems in it. And he said, "Oh, I saw such and such a movie." And I said, "Oh, okay, great." He said, "It wasn't very good. Was it?" I said, "Well ... and Paul was standing right there. He said, "Well, your problem was the casting because you had this bloke and this [inaudible 00:22:25]." And he just kind of decimated it, but in a very ... it wasn't wasn't mean, it was just kind of conversational. And then there was kind of a pause. And I said, "Well, I think a few critics probably agree with you." And McCartney said, "Well, we certainly know the absolute truth about that movie then now because Ringo just told us." And it sort of tried to cover for him, but Ringo would always cut to the chase.

Ron: And I found out that at their very height, even as the band was kind of insecure with one another and everyone thought they were the odd man out, and maybe they should quit the band, all of them, they all felt like everybody loved each other, but they didn't love him. It just turned into that at a certain point. But even at that point, when The Beatles were too big to talk to, really even George Martin, they just wouldn't hear from anybody, their producer record label, anything, Ringo was the one that could come in

and they'd start to play the songs. Usually it was Paul and John, sometimes it was George who would say, "Okay, here's the song I've been working on." And they'd play it. And they had this habit of within an hour or two, they were recording it.

Ron: They could just put it together so quickly. But Ringo was the one who would say, "Well, that's kind of crap in there, isn't it? And they'd argue about, "Really?" And he'd say, "Well, to me it is because I think I've heard that a million times." Or whatever he'd say. And then he'd sort of walk away because he was never much ... he wasn't really the writer outside of a few songs. And they'd all look at each other and they'd get to work on it because they always respected that he was the guy that was going to tell them the truth and that he knew something. And I wish we could've gotten that in the movie because I really admire ... I could see it in him and I admire that about

Jim: I totally agree with that. And I've been reading about information theory and things, and one of the things that I really light it on because I see it every day. And that is, as you rise up the hierarchy, the number of people who are willing to tell you the truth declines. So when you get up to the tippy top, there's virtually no one who will tell you the truth. And it's in every industry, it's not just in entertainment, or asset management or politics. It's everywhere. And if everybody could have a Ringo-

Ron: You bet. You bet. I use the test screenings, but especially these friends and family screenings of which you've been through many. And I use it not only for myself, but I also always have the editors, the producers if they're around, the writer if he or she's around, to also participate, because I feel like that if somebody says something that in their group ... and you know how I am. I'm really urging people to try to tell me what they think. And everybody's always polite though, which I appreciate it as well. But if it unlocks a conversation, if it opens the door for a conversation for a member of our team on the inside to either galvanize an idea or gain confidence in a criticism, so that even though I'm very welcoming and open and not tyrannical I hope, about things I'm still like, "I'm directing and directing is kind of like a dictatorship." Ultimately, the buck stops there and the director always gets to say yes or no. And that's sort of the way it works, certainly at a level when people have final cut and those kinds of controls.

Ron: But I feel like those conversations after a test screening open the door for people who are really living and breathing the movie to either change their mind about a moment and understand it and be able to kind of come back and talk about a solution or to be able to have the confidence to be Ringo and say, "You know what that person said, I've been thinking the same thing and let's see if the next screening of somebody." Even if I say, "I don't buy it, I'm not changing it." At least begin something and if it comes up again at the next screening, they have more and more footing to sort of get behind something that really could matter.

Jim: So I still remember the Nixon and Frost because I'm fascinated by it. I was 13 and watching the Watergate hearings. So I love that movie in particular, but I can't remember, you might remember it. There was a particular moment where everybody was saying, "I don't get this character." But I do remember when I saw it after you released it, that it was fixed. So obviously you're pretty good at that. And it's really smart that you have that ability to get that feedback.

Ron: Well, with anything you're in the middle of this swirl, you're making a lot of decisions and you wouldn't execute it the way you did if you didn't believe in it. With live action production, sometimes you're trapped into a compromise and you talk yourself into hoping that this will go through and work. And that the shocker of that is the majority of times it not only works, there is another percentage where it actually elevates you because it knocked you out of your sort of linear thinking and you came up with something else, which is another thing that I like about working on the documentaries.

Ron: I just finished directing a movie, Hillbilly Elegy based on J. D. Vance's memoir, and an adaptation to that. A very tricky adaptation because his book is sort of sociopolitical and a lot of ways. And then he comes back, he uses his family story and history and his own story as a kind of a springboard for conversations about America. And we don't do that. I was only interested in the memoir and that's was the movie story. And so we narrowed it down and focused on it, but it was really an interesting one to work on. And at the same time, I was directing, overseeing the Rebuilding Paradise documentary, which was just released and it comes out on Nat Geo in another month. And definitely, I was editing both simultaneously. And it was really interesting to me because I know that a few scenes and some late additions, some ideas, found a way into Hillbilly Elegy that were sort of stylistically and tonally influenced by my documentary experiences and particularly the paradise, but also the Pavarotti, which was, I look at a life. That was interesting to work on too.

Jim: Well, I'm going to switch gears here because if I could have you the whole day, I would keep you. So where do you see your business going? We see this from an investment point of view, we're fascinated with the streaming distribution, with what's happening because of COVID, shutting down the movie theaters. What's next? What do you think?

Ron: Well, it continues to be a great time if you're really just a creative purist, if you're trying to get projects made that you care about. There are more doors open today than ever. That doesn't mean it's going to feel a whole lot easier to people, but just having lived through both, sort of the kind of beginning in the '70s on through each decade, you have opportunities to shine, you have more narrow, specific audiences who have been proven to be viable as a market so that you can make niche programming that actually if you make it for the right price, is a real business. So somebody wouldn't be an idiot to invest in it, a company or an individual-

Jim: I asked for your advice, if you remember about a year ago, the micro budget film.

Ron: Yes. Yes. Right. And so there's that. I think that for companies, it's tenuous difficult time, highly competitive, definitely the streamers are taking the lead and it's understandable. It's making it all more accessible, it's cheaper market, it's cheaper to distribute and audiences speak. Markets will tell you and audiences want access this way. Is it the death of movies and big screen experiences? No. But those were kind of waning anyway. The Death is sort of ... Cheryl and I, our whole dating life and romantic life is kind of geared around going to the movies as much as you can think. And to be honest, we haven't gone as much in the last couple of years, even prior to COVID as we did before, because there's so much that's great on television.

Ron: And therefore, the definition of what you will go out to see has just shifted. And as [inaudible 00:33:10] says, "Hey, there was a time when you had to hand crank, put a nickel in and crank a bunch of still photos to see a moving picture show." And it's always changed and it's going to continue to change. But I don't think the experience of seeing a story unfold with an audience together on a great venue is going to totally evaporate. I think it's going to focus and ... well, they have to work out. And here's the part three of the whole thing. On the one hand for talent, it's becoming a bit of a throwback to old Hollywood. Now, it's not that everybody's under contract, but some of the streamers are putting talent under contract.

Ron: It's not quite as exclusive as it used to be in the, in the old studio contract days. But in terms of controlling what you make, what you participate in as an artist, as an actor, writer, director, producer, or what the economics are, that is still quite it's different today than it was then where you were locked in, you were in contract, you were more or less told what to do, you could advocate, but basically, if they told you to play second base, you played second base, whether you thought you were a center fielder or not. And there was no back end. So there was no engagement with the long table, the library value of a project.

Ron: Now, then for about 20, 25 years, talent gained that , access to that. In fact, it was sort of tipped to the point where they were both paying them and us. I caught a good moment, paying up front and also a big backhand. And that was just what the market allowed 10 years, 12 years. But that's being diminished because no one knows the library value of projects for streamers really is. Even they don't really know. But that's going to begin to appear. So the one thing is, right now ... for a minute, and maybe the minute is still with us, maybe we're 55 seconds and counting, but streamers have occasionally really been forced to overpay, to try to get project, a talent engaged because it would drive subscriptions or drive the profile.

Ron: I engaged because it would drive subscriptions or drive the profile of the company. But as these companies become more and more established, and they're not all established because there are new streamers coming on, so there's still competition. But eventually they're going to be able to squeeze that talent. And they will, because that's what they're supposed to do for their company.

Ron: And talent and their representatives are going to have to figure out where the leverage lies and how can they participate. I'm told that musicians and bands and so forth are just beginning to come back out of those economic doldrums. That streaming and so forth is beginning to offset the loss of CDs, which forced everybody into really just having to tour.

Ron: So it's yet to be seen, but it's going to be very interesting over the next five, six years, because all these shows that Netflix and Disney Plus and now Amazon and Apple and others will join, peacock their own version. Comcast, AT&T. Well, they probably won't just want them to exist on their service for all time. They will want to monetize them at some point.

Jamie: Right.

Ron: And so I suspect there is library value. And can talent find its way back into somehow participating in that in an entrepreneurial way? And of course, a lot of high-powered entertainment, attorneys and agents are thinking about it, but it really boils down to, as you know better than anybody, what does the market allow for? And where's the leverage?

Ron: And it's yet to be seen. But if what you do is you want to make a living, you want to be able to sustain yourself, telling stories you care about. I think it's a great time on that pure level. It's just a tricky business moment.

Jamie: So do you think there will be a move similar to like Jay-Z and Tidal, which was designed to give artists more power in the new streaming world compared to Spotify or Apple? Do you think there'll be, down the line, something similar for actors and the people creating films, or they'll launch something of their own with a team?

Ron: I think it's so expensive to make these shows and they take so long to make, that talent still needs to actually be paid to make it, otherwise they can't live. And also all the people involved need to actually be paid something. And so it's a huge difference from what a musical artist can do at home to create something that is 100% viable in the market.

Ron: And yes, you can take a Canon 5D and you can edit on your laptop and you can do some pretty amazing work, but you can't make Tom Hanks's latest movie, Greyhound, that way.

Jim: Which was a great movie, by the way.

Ron: It really was. It really was. And he was hoping he was going to be on big screens. COVID came along. Sony sold it to Apple, but Tom recognizes that a lot of people are seeing it that way. It's not the format he would have dreamed of. He wrote the script as well. It's a labor of love project. But he also recognizes that they got to... The movie had already been made, but that a lot of people are seeing it and continuing to see it.

Jim: Yeah. Well, two things it reminds me of when we visited you on the set of the Da Vinci Code in Italy. Remember?

Ron: Yes.

Jim: I met Tom who was really, really funny.

Ron: Yeah. He's a funny man. He's a great guy.

Jim: Really enjoyed him. And again, like you, exactly what you think he would be like, that's what he is really like.

Ron: Yeah. Yes.

Jim: And he was really funny and just keeping me entertained. But what I thought was really interesting was I was, and I visited your sets a couple. With the one with Jim Carrey with the Grinch, that was posed. But this one was in a Roman square right.

Ron: Yeah.

Jim: But the number of times you do a shoot, it's like... So this feeds into kind of like my question that we talked about before we started recording. Which is, so I watch a lot of stuff with my grandkids. I know you have grandkids.

Ron: Right.

Jim: And so, Pierce is six and Mave is four. And they just love watching his new stuff. So there's this thing, this frog video, I don't know the name but it's hysterically funny.

Ron: Right.

Jim: And anyway, the question I have for you is, what do you think would happen if the creatives of yesteryear, okay, so like an Orson Welles, just as an example.

Ron: Right.

Jim: Had access to today's technology. Do you think... I'd like your opinion.

Ron: Well, it's interesting. If it's a little bit like, could the great athletes of 40 years ago compete today? It's similar.

Jim: That's a good one.

Ron: I feel like that Chaplain, Orson, Welles, Mary Pickford, any of these really entrepreneurial, dynamic artists who were so multifaceted, I think they would look around for about five hours of a tutorial and be in absolute heaven. I think they'd be all over it. And I think it would take no time to say, "I can look at all the takes, all at once and pick the best one? Oh my God, this is great. You mean I can keep rolling? I don't have to reload film?" Or, "Wow. I don't have to build a giant set? You can digitally make it look realistic? Wow. I don't have to let a real train hit me? I can have a fake..." If you were Buster Keaton or Harold Lloyd.

Jim: Right.

Ron: So, I think they'd be all over it. I think that the one thing that we're fueled by, that's an X factor in all of this, that they'd be behind the curve on and have to do some catching up, would be the creative melting pot that the world has become. And there are so many influences. Because you go on YouTube, you'd look around and there are people everywhere doing really interesting stuff. And it's all a little different, it's culturally specific. And what all artists do, as Chaplain is famous for saying, "90% of genius is knowing who to steal from."

Ron: And I think our aesthetic today, we don't even realize how influenced it's been by the rest of the world. And sensibilities that might have nothing to do with the froggy video that you're getting a kick out of, or your grandkids a doe. So I think they'd be behind that curve. And I think that's sort of a secret weapon as the world gets smaller and smaller. Look, that creates a lot of aggravation for a lot of people and a lot of question marks and tensions and so forth.

Ron: But for artists, it's fuel, it's constant fuel. And so the combination of the technology being easier to deal with and cheaper and more advanced technology available to people at a younger age. My grandson, the little videos he makes on his iPhone blow my mind. And he cuts them together and gets some music. And he's developing an aesthetic and a sensibility that he doesn't even realize what he's learning. But it's just kind of happening.

Ron: So there's a democratization of visual media that is really influencing things, it's almost by osmosis. People are a lot more cinematically sophisticated than they ever were. And, again, you don't have to be as regimented about the kinds of stories you're going to tell.

Jim: Well, I think that's also what's happening everywhere in business. Right. Because in our business, the younger generation, and now it would be the Zoomers. Right.

Ron: Right.

Jim: These kids are digital natives.

Ron: Right.

Jim: They breathe it, unlike people like you and me who had to learn it.

Ron: Right.

Jim: Right. Well your grandson, perfect example. Right.

Ron: Yeah.

Jim: And so, I've always been an optimist. Right. But I'm incredibly optimistic about the creative things. Because it's at the end of the day, I think creative is like you, for example. You're judged on your ability to tell a compelling story.

Ron: Right, right.

Jim: Because that's it. If you are not telling a compelling story, it doesn't matter how good all of the whizzbang stuff that-

Ron: Right, that's right. Over and over. By the way, I showed my grandkids, you're talking about sharing movies, Back to the Future the other day. Which my 13 year old grandson

had seen, but Bryce, her daughter hadn't seen and one of my other grandkids. And I hadn't seen it in decades and it was just so good.

Ron: But Bob Zemeckis, who was always a director whose very cutting edge about using visual effects, but in a very human, relatable way and in a warm accessible, entertaining way. But always trying to push the boundaries visually in his own way. He said about 10 years ago in an interview, he just said, spectacle is gone. You can't dazzle an audience alone. You can only dazzle them when the narrative takes them all the way there and then the visual completes the feeling. You can't just throw the image up on the screen and have people's jaw drop. And it's over. It's back to story is king. Story is everything.

Jim: Missy and I just re-watched Patton. And that opening scene is still iconic.

Ron: Yeah.

Jim: But as we're watching it, we're like, "Oh my God, they took so long to get anywhere."

Ron: Yeah. Yeah. Well, pacing is different. Pacing is definitely different.

Jim: But I like your comment because I think it's right. It's that, again, the story is everything and you're really good at that. And so, it's so interesting to me because the way it progresses.

Ron: Well, that's everything. It's like, is it a page turner. And more than ever, whether it's watching videos or making them. When you talk to YouTubers and people who've built careers that way, they're really interested in what the communication is. And one of the things that they say that was very telling to me, goes back to that thing that the Beatles naturally had. Which was a kind of integrity, a kind of recognition of your voice.

Ron: What the YouTubers will say, the most successful ones, is you have to be true to yourself and people can smell it if you veer from that. But within that there's this intersection where you're actually giving your audience that part of you that they most like. And you're finding ways to repackage it. You might experiment and extend a little here and there and just see how it goes.

Ron: But the ones who grow are the ones who are acutely aware of their ability to actually keep people entertained and engaged, whether it's a conversation about making a cake or an outrageous joke or a bit, or some opinion about something. They have to be able to do that.

Ron: I think part of what I like about the Jacob Burns group is that they have this educational program which is all built on media literacy. Yeah. So on the one hand, they're a great film society and they really bring a lot of great cinema to their membership and the community. But they've also built these programs, which are really about kids early on, understanding, not just that there are images out there that are fun and cool, but how those images came together. And why they communicate what they communicate. And they characterize it as media literacy.

Ron: Because I think the trap that we all fall into as the endorphins fire is that we have been taught to learn or naturally do learn, based on our wiring, through narratives. Right. And what holds our attention the most is conflict within a narrative.

Ron: And so, again, this is one of my fears about society, is we're jonesing for the conflict, whether we know it or not. It has this subversive effect. And so people who want to get things done, for noble reasons or selfish reasons, if they need to move society's attention one way or another, they know that the only way to really do it is to stir up conflict.

Ron: And suddenly the whole world becomes like the way you promote wrestling, or cable news with its panel of guests who have to argue with one another. I get it. That kind of conversation is important on the one hand. In the realm of having to hold people's attention to generate earnings or to gain power and hold a position, it's a little frightening that we've lost this.

Ron: Now, I don't have a solution for this because I'm in the conflict business too and I want to entertain people. But there does need to be a division between what's entertainment and how do we really make decisions in society about the way we want to live and what's important.

Jim: Yeah, boy, I mean, I literally stopped watching all cable moves more than 10 years ago, just because, well, you know me. I was just like, no, I'm not going to let them push my buttons.

Ron: Yeah. Yeah.

Jim: I realized, but I think about that [crosstalk 00:52:08].

Ron: We were way ahead of the curve. More and more friends are doing a version of that. And I haven't gone all the way to cutting it off. So how do you get your information, if you're not watching the cable news? But how do you do it?

Jim: I read endlessly.

Ron: Yeah. Yeah.

Jim: And I read from very disparate sources.

Ron: Right.

Jim: So I read a lot, I do watch clips that people post on social media and things like that. But you got to do it. I kind of take it as a job because I want to stay informed. Right. And I've just got to the point where the TV news is like wag the dog.

Ron: Yeah. Yeah. It really is. The one person I will say, I'll put in a plug for somebody who I barely know. I've met him once or twice. I do like Fareed Zakaria's show. I think he's

really great. And I feel like he's calm and he has a viewpoint. He editorializes, but I think he-

Ron: Editorializes, but I think he makes a lot of sense, for whatever that's worth.

Jim: But the thing is, he's admitting that he's editorializing, right?

Ron: Yes. Oh. Sure. Sure.

Jim: I'm all for that. Just in my own industry, how much financial TV has changed. By the way, you were the guy who I went to before I had my first appearance on... Do you remember?

Ron: Oh. Yes.

Jim: On CNBC? And you f-

Ron: Oh. I forgot about that.

Jim: ... And I was like, "Ron, what do I do?" You just told me two things. You said, "Don't look at the monitor, because it'll make you look shifty."

Ron: Right.

Jim: Look at the person. And I did it, and people watched it, and they were like, "You look like you did that forever." And so thank you.

Ron: Well, you're a great communicator, and I knew you wouldn't have any trouble if you just didn't freak out that it was a show.

Jim: But the point is, just watching it from when I was really active... I used to be on CNBC all the time because Mark Haines was a three hour show. You gave people time to actually... It's kind of what podcasts have become. But now, it's like ESPN, in my opinion. [inaudible 00:55:06].

Ron: Yeah.

Jim: You're going to be on for two minutes. And it's like, "What's the point?"

Ron: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Jim: So I-

Ron: Well-

Jim: ... I don't want to keep you forever. I know you've got a very tight schedule, and I really appreciate it, but-

Ron: ... Well, it's fun to catch up with you a little, anyway.

Jim: ... Yeah. Absolutely. I have two things that I want to close with. The first is, what project right now that you don't... Maybe you can't answer this. What project right now that you don't have yet that you just like, "Oh, man. I want to make that movie."

Ron: Oh. Geez. That's a really great question. Well, I have it, but it's really tricky to make, and it's actually, this kind of sounds strange, it's the biography of the Chinese pianist Lang Lang.

Jim: Oh.

Ron: And-

Jim: Wonderful pianist.

Ron: ... Great pianist. Very charismatic. I've gotten to know him, and his story is really fascinating. He did come to America. That's part of the story that I would tell, but he's very Chinese. He loves his country. He likes America, too. He's kind of a guy of the world.

Ron: But he's not a rebel in any way, shape, or form, but a great artist. And I really want to tell the story of he and his family and his father. It's very particular and very powerful and emotional.

Ron: And also, his sensibility around his music is something that I really relate to and admire. I can't do it quite, but the way he uses his imagination as a form of expression is kind of beautiful and amazing, and the way he came to that.

Ron: But the movie, of course, would be about 75% Mandarin, and so I'd be learning a thing or two to try to tell that story. But I really hope I get to make that movie.

Ron: I'm working on some others that I really can't talk about. There's some great documentary subjects, and if they're listening, perhaps they know. I really hope we get to tell their story. And there's tricky stories, and people are not always sure they want their lives to be explored in that way, and I certainly get that.

Ron: But there are a number of stories that our documentary team and Brian Grazer and I are really passionate about telling. But the subjects are alive and with us and have to allow us. I think the more good work we do, the closer we get to telling these stories that we're really excited about.

Jim: Fantastic. I love documentaries. [Missy 00:58:01] and I love them and watch them all the time, and you know how I feel about music. I was chair of CMS, the Chamber Music Society [crosstalk 00:58:09] forever, and musicians blow me away. They communicate in a way that is literally beyond words, and I-

Ron: Exactly. Exactly.

Jim: ... I am so impressed by what music can do. Anyway, final question.

Ron: Yes.

Jim: It is-

Ron: Oh, by the way, can I just say one more thing?

Jim: ... Of course.

Ron: I'm working on a documentary right now, and I can talk about it. We're just beginning, because COVID has slowed us down to an extent, but not entirely. And it's about the World Central Kitchen and Chef Jose Andres and the work that he's doing to... in terms of just on his own, now his group, and he's got an organization that supports him, rallying people, chefs, restaurateurs, people with food trucks, whoever they might be, and to sort of get to these hot spots, get to these danger zones, and get people fed. And it's-

Jim: Wow. That's so cool.

Ron: ... the simple thing he understands. But he does it in a way that is so courageous and kind of bold, that it's really, truly inspiring. And so we're beginning to work on that film, and that's something that I know I'm going to learn a lot with.

Jim: That's fantastic. I look forward to seeing that one.

Jamie: I had one question.

Jamie: I was curious. I'm 24, and I was wondering what advice would have worked and been good to give to a 24-year-old who wanted to be a director when you were starting, but that today, you would probably not give that person anymore if they were starting in this day and age?

Ron: Oh. Interesting. Interesting. Yes.

Ron: I think then, I would have said, "Start working within a company, like a television company, or try to get in as a PA with a studio, even if you wind up working for an executive."

Ron: Keep writing. I always think that whether you think you're a writer or not, that's the one thing that any of us can do, is sit down, write story ideas, write scripts. It doesn't matter if they're ever shot or not. It's the one thing you can do to take command of your creativity and continue exercising it, because again, story is king.

Ron: But I would have said, "Get in the system of Hollywood," because when I was beginning, it was still pretty closed, and you did need to know people. They had to kind of trust you. The idea of being Steven Spielberg and sort of making a short film and getting a

letter on Sid Sheinberg's desk and getting started was such an anomaly, such an anomaly. I would have said, "Get in the system so you have advocates. You have people who know you, that you want to ultimately rise to the ranks of being a director."

Ron: Now, I would say, "Do whatever you have to do to make a living." And that might be working on films and other jobs, and that's okay, because experience is valuable.

Ron: But now, I would say, "Don't just write. Be shooting. Be editing. Get in a group. Form a collective. Find actors who will act in your short films, and start doing it, because you'll develop the language." It's not very far away.

Ron: Look, the difference between what you get in the frame lines with your iPhone or a Canon 5D or whatever you're shooting with and... That's not any different than if you're shooting with an Arri or Panavision camera or the RED system. The only difference is eventually, you're going to have more people in the crew to help you tell the story.

Ron: It's so similar that I think more than ever, it's get out there and start making content so that you don't have to explain your aesthetic to people. It's apparent through your work.

Jamie: Yeah. That's really interesting. Thank you.

Jim: Final question, Ron. This is kind of a fun one, and it is this. I get to wave a wand, and I'm making you dictator of the world, a benevolent dictator-

Ron: Okay. Okay.

Jim: ... of the world.

Ron: We won't hurt anybody.

Jim: You're not going to hurt anybody.

Ron: Right.

Jim: But you get to promulgate two things, two rules.

Ron: Okay.

Jim: And nobody gets to say, "No, I don't like that."

Ron: Right.

Jim: You get the two rules, and then-

Ron: Oh.

Jim: ... the world abides by them. Which two are you going to wave your wand over?

Ron: Only two, Jim? Come on. If you're going to wave a wand-

Jim: [crosstalk 01:03:36] I know. No? I'm only giving you two.

Ron: ... Damn. All right. Well, okay. I'm focusing a little bit on the US, because we are where we are, and we're in the middle of what we're in the middle of. And I do feel like that America, whether it kind of likes it or not, remains kind of an example to be followed. It can also be an example to be laughed at or disappointed in, but it's going to be judged. It's going to be judged.

Ron: One thing that I think would help, and we could do it worldwide, why not, is I would get rid of any kind of campaign advertising that is-

Jim: Boy, I don't know anyone who would not agree [crosstalk 01:04:29].

Ron: ... Well, now, I'm not saying all campaign advertising. I would say get the directors and Madison Avenue out of it. I think it's okay to advertise, but I think it should be in front of a flag, with no music, and the candidate talking to the camera.

Jim: Wow.

Ron: And if that's worth investing in, then let's understand who this candidate is, how expressive this candidate is. Of course, it's going to tilt the scale toward the charismatic people, so there's a flaw in that, in a way.

Ron: But let's get people like me out of the picture, editing together cool montages and catch phrases and slogans that are shocking, and let's get that off the table. And let's have the leaders talk to us, and that's all you get. Or debates are okay, still, but I'm talking about paid advertising.

Jim: Yeah. I love it. Okay. That's done.

Ron: Okay. We did that. The other thing is, and this is, it's really hard, because I think education is so vitally important and all that, but let's, since we're in a political season, let's stay, we'll stick with politics. I really, really believe it would be great... and I don't get to say make everybody vote like they do in Australia, or fine them. Okay. I'm not going to say that one, because we have a good example to draw on there.

Ron: What I am going to say is, I really think when you're talking about national leadership, an executive office or prime minister of a country or any elected official, I really do think you should have to have... There are going to be a litmus test, and it ought to have been you must have been elected to a lower office and served.

Jim: Huh.

Ron: So that-

Jim: Interesting.

Ron: ... I don't believe in amateurs doing it.

Jim: Yeah.

Ron: I once just jokingly said to Tom Hanks, "Hey, Tom, do you ever seriously think about running?" For 20 years, people have said, "Tom Hanks should run for president." And he said-

Jim: He would win.

Ron: ... He could. He said, "Why? Because I know how to read a speech?" Well-

Jim: [crosstalk 01:06:37].

Ron: ... I love his humility, and I-

Jim: I do, too.

Ron: ... agree. Look, I don't agree with Donald Trump and his approach, but I see a thing in it that I understand, which is CEOs, film directors, people from the business world, they are kind of dictators.

Jim: Absolutely.

Ron: The buck stops there. Maybe they have to answer to a board of directors, but a lot of them are people who say something and expect everyone to do it. So it's confusing when suddenly, you're in a government system. And I really feel like it's important for people, for our leaders, to have that experience behind them before they tackle these vitally important jobs.

Jim: I love that one. It's like people ask me sometimes, "Why don't you go into politics?" And I'm like, "Oh, my God. Are you kidding me?"

Ron: Well-

Jim: I follow the General Sherman, "If nominated, I will not run. If elected, I will not serve." But the point is, I love that, your idea, because my brother-in-law ran for mayor of his local little town in Minnesota, and one of my cousins actually is the mayor.

Ron: ... Right.

Jim: And when you have to deal with those kind of problems, it gets you set up for an understanding of-

Ron: Of-

Jim: ... how government works.

Ron: ... how government works. And I just think, for these highest offices, that I just think it's fair to society to demand that people have something on their resume that actually relates to the job. Mayor's fine. I don't think it has to be 20 years of service or any kind of... that means it has to be hardened professionals.

Jim: Right.

Ron: Anyway, it's just a thought.

Jim: Fantastic. I love both of those answers. Well, I cannot tell you how pleased and happy I am to see you. It's been-

Ron: Oh. Yeah. Well.

Jim: ... This whole COVID thing-

Ron: I know. I know.

Jim: ... has been tough. My [crosstalk 01:08:54].

Ron: Say hi to Missy.

Jim: And my love to Cheryl, and thank you. Thank you so much.

Ron: You bet. A pleasure, Jim.

Jamie: Thank you so much

Ron: All right.