

EPISODE 18

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:02] AD: I was a publicist. I decided on my Christmas vacation I was going to try to make a film. It was a story that my mom always told, that I remember being a part of, that when we were little and she depressed, the three girls that she would grease us up with Vaseline all over, make our hair pretty, put us in pretty dresses, have us all matching and take us to the store. She did that at a time when she was very depressed, because she knew when she walked around with her three beautiful greased up, hair slicked-down girls that people would say, “Oh, my gosh. Your girls are so pretty. Oh, my gosh. You’re doing such a good job with those girls,” and it was a boost for her at a time when she really needed it. I made a short about that. That got me hooked.

[00:00:54] LW: Hi, friends. Welcome back to another episode of At The End Of The Tunnel. I am extremely humbled honored to have this week's guest on the podcast. When I first started this podcast in June of 2020, I envisioned a list of people that I would love to interview. To be honest, this week's guest didn't make that list. Not because I didn't think she'd be a great guest, but mainly because I was trying to be realistic. I just thought, there's no way I would ever be able to have her on my podcast so quickly.

But as they say, the universe is always conspiring for you. I certainly believe that. Other people may say, if you build it, they will come. I don't know. Pick your axiom, whatever divine forces were behind this conversation happening, I am forever grateful to have on my podcast the incomparable, Miss Ava DuVernay.

If you watch the Criminal Justice Documentary *13th*, or if you saw *Selma*, which is a film about Martin Luther King and the Selma March, it got an Oscar nomination for best picture. If you saw Disney's *A Wrinkle In Time*, or the Netflix show about the central park five called *When They See Us*, then you my friend have experienced the work of Ava DuVernay. In addition to those amazing works of art, Ava also created and now oversees the production of her critically acclaimed series on Oprah's network called Queen Sugar and she's got her own grassroots film distribution company, which I'll tell you more about in a second. I've been a huge fan of Ava's for

a long time. In fact, after George Floyd happened, I was telling all of the white people who kept reaching out to me, saying they wanted to understand systemic racism I said, just watch the documentary *13th*, by Ava DuVernay.

Speaking of which, if you haven't seen it yet, definitely add it to your queue, so that you can watch it as soon as you're done listening to this interview. As you'll hear in our interview, Ava grew up in South Central Los Angeles. She studied African-American history at UCLA and then she went on to work in PR for a very long time. Then after an emotional loss of a close relative, she decided to take a leap of faith into directing and she started by making some documentaries and two feature films, all of which she shot on a shoestring budget in her off-time and she talks about the process of doing that. She also talks about how she didn't even pick up a camera until she was in her 30s.

Clearly, Ava was on a mission to become a storyteller through film, but specifically, she wanted to tell black stories. She talks about how she had to downsize and sell off some of the things that she owned, she closed her company, and all of the other sacrifices that she had to make along her journey to create the opportunities that she had in film and to have the impact that she's been able to have as an artist.

Since *Selma*, Ava has received tons of nominations and awards. In my opinion, the biggest statement that Ava DuVernay has made is that it's never too late to do what you're feeling called to do. Once you make it, so to speak, it's your job to use your talents and your voice and your notoriety to help amplify the voices of those coming behind you, which Ava has done since the very beginning with her non-profit film, arts and advocacy collective called ARRAY, that she started in 2010, which focuses on distributing films by people of color and women.

Okay. Are you ready to hear Ava DuVernay's full backstory on *At The End Of The Tunnel*? Me too. Let's do it. Without further ado, I am thrilled to introduce you to Miss Ava DuVernay.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:04:53] LW: Ava, thank you so much for joining the podcast. I really love having you here. I'm excited to share your origin story with my listeners and with the world. As always, I like to

start these conversations off talking about childhood. My question to you is, thinking back to little Ava in Lynwood, California, what was your favorite toy or activity as a child?

[00:05:19] AD: It's easy. Light, first of all, thank you for having me. Happy to be here with you. Hands down, Barbies. Now, let me clarify. Not just any Barbies, all the Barbies, all their cars that we would make ourselves. We had one car. I have two sisters. There were three of us. My mother could only afford one car, one Barbie Corvette. I'm the oldest, of course I got it. But I can't leave my sister's Barbies without cars.

We would create cars out of shoes, because they make great shoes and then we graduated to skates, because they had wheels. We thought we were geniuses. We were like, "Does everyone know that you could put the Barbie in the skate and roll her around?" We would cut their hair, dye their hair, put makeup on them using ballpoint pens, create more mascara, full stories. As I look back, it was really intricate storytelling. All day, building the worlds, building the sets, rehearsing the stories. I mean, nuts. A lot was going on. Shout out to my sisters, Gina and Tara, who were my first crew as we played Barbies all day long.

[00:06:28] LW: What's the age difference in you and your siblings?

[00:06:31] AD: It's so funny you ask that, because I was just talking to my mother about that yesterday, 24 hours ago. My mom said she was looking at some old pictures during quarantine and she said, "I forget how much older you are than them, because in these pictures they're little littles and you're a girl." I said, it just never felt like that was that big of a age difference, but it's actually – and I said, "Oh, so is it three years?" "It's not three years. It's five years."

[00:06:55] LW: Oh, wow.

[00:06:57] AD: I thought it was three years. I said, "Yeah, we're three years apart." My mother said, "You're not three years apart from Gina. You're five years." I said, "No, we're not." We got out calculators. I said, "That's not true." Literally, she said, "Ava, I had you. I understand you know a lot of things, but I know when I had my children and you're five years apart." We're four and a half years apart depending on the month, but there was a big difference. Then my

brothers, actually had them when I was 15 and 16. It's a big, big difference between us all. In your family, you don't feel those differences.

[00:07:29] LW: Were you a typical oldest sibling, where you took a leadership role and taught them the ways of the world and all of that?

[00:07:37] AD: Yes, we were latchkey kids, me and my sisters. My mother before she met my father, he was not my biological father, but he was my spiritual father, my father. Before she met him when I was I think maybe eight, she was a single mom and we would walk home from school, literally with the key around my neck. I said to my mom, "What was the thing with the key around my neck? Latchkey kid. Couldn't a kid keep it in a backpack? Do they have to be so typical?" She said, "No. Everyone put the key around their neck at the time."

Anyway, very stereotypical latchkey kid. Key around the neck. I would walk my sisters and I home and open the door we would clean up until my mom got home, maybe three hours later. That just instilled in me the leadership quality, whether or not I wanted it or not. Yes, I was very much the typical older sister. I fell into the tropes.

[00:08:31] LW: Did you and Gina and Tara all go to St. Joseph's?

[00:08:35] AD: I love St. Joseph. We went to St. Joseph's. Was the homecoming queen, student body president at St. Joseph's, overachiever. Gina went, lasted one quarter and was like, "I hate this place. I'm not going." That's Gina.

[00:08:46] LW: But you know why? Because everybody compared her to you. That was my experience with my brother.

[00:08:52] AD: Really? Oh, you're not the oldest?

[00:08:53] LW: He's 11 months older than me. I was always in his shadow. I hated it.

[00:08:57] AD: Well then, you two are like Gina and Tara, because they are 11 months apart and they're like twins. They're so –

[00:09:03] LW: Irish twins. Yeah.

[00:09:04] AD: They really are. With me and Gina, by the time she got to that, she lasted – Some some kids would go in and suffer through that whole experience. She's so clear-minded. Within the first quarter she said, "I'm out of here. I'm not going here." Ended up going to another public school, which was a big thing in the family, public school, because my mother worked so hard where we lived. She felt the Catholic schools would protect us a little bit more and was really worked hard to make that happen. My sister Gina broke from tradition and it was a family scandal.

[00:09:42] LW: What was she afraid of? What was your mother afraid of taking it from?

[00:09:44] AD: Just our neighborhood. Our neighborhood. Just felt like her girls would be watched more diligently by nuns and she was correct. It was a strict environment and that's what she wanted for us and that's what we did.

[00:10:00] LW: What are you thinking about in terms of what you want to be when you grow up and all of that? Because I know, I read somewhere that you got a special gift when you were graduating from the 8th grade.

[00:10:09] AD: My godmother, Charlene, gave me a briefcase. I apparently wanted it. I apparently had asked for a briefcase for my birthday when I was in 8th grade. That's challenging for me to wrap my head around that that was what I was asking for. I have to admit that that's I guess who I was, a super nerd. I asked for a briefcase. Yeah, I always laugh and say, I really, really thought it was a few short steps to the courtroom. I had the briefcase. What else do you need? I'm clearly knowledgeable about the law and I'm going to make this work.

Obviously, I was in the eighth grade. I knew nothing. I really thought law was for me at that time. That lasted, I don't know, maybe a couple more years. I think I was really just interested in helping people and winning.

[00:10:55] LW: The fact that this is basically the Los Angeles area, I know a lot of people who grow up in the hood, or wherever that's away from Hollywood, sometimes they never go to that part of town, or they never go to the beach. What was your experience like with Hollywood at the time?

[00:11:11] AD: Oh, nothing. It was as a film lover. My aunt Denise was a huge, huge influence in my life; was a woman who worked at night as a nurse. She would work at night, so that during the day she could do what she wanted. She was one of those people who didn't live to work. She worked to live. She loved plays and she loved movies and music and concerts and poetry and museums. We would go out in her little red Volkswagen through the city and explore things. She wasn't a big beach nature person. She was big into the arts and culture.

She grew up, born and raised in Compton in South Central, but loved a good opera and a beautiful exhibit in a museum and really opened up the world to me in that way. I remember, I think my biggest memory of going into LA from Compton and Lynwood was going to the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. It was at that time, just this grand theater space. I remember walking up the steps and thinking, "I've never seen anything so beautiful." Tell you what, there was no space like that where we were from. It was just for art.

I remember the velvet seats and the curtains opening and just all the pomp and circumstance of that, those were my experiences at that time. Yeah. I mean, Los Angeles and if you're living in Compton, you're living in Compton at that time for me. My family wasn't also going to LA at all. When I went to UCLA, it was a big like, "Whoa! What's been happening over here? Westwood?" I didn't know Los Angeles. It's a sprawl. I think people around the country don't understand what a sprawl LA is. If you're in Compton, or you're in Orange County, you're not really in LA every day.

[00:12:50] LW: You and your aunt would have had a more special bond than any of your siblings, because you were the oldest. I know, having nieces and nephews, I'm much closer to the first one that's born. I know she also exposed you to two things particularly, that ended up, I think, rippling throughout your life. One was a movie, one of your favorite movies, and the other one was a music group. You want to talk a little bit about that?

[00:13:14] AD: Yeah. The movie was *West Side Story*. I remember the day. It was a rainy day and she had to work that night. I guess, I was talking a lot, or something, or she just needed to do something with me. I was spending the night, or spending the evening at her house or something. I remember, I was turning the channels and saying, "Oh, great. This is great and it's long. It's three hours. If you watch this, really watch it, Ava, and tell me what you think afterwards." I was like, "Okay."

I remember it was raining and her refrigerator wasn't working. I don't think I ever tell this part of the story, but she would put Coke cans, because she loved Coke, or Pepsi on the window seal when it was cold, it would get cold. She said, "Sit there and put this Coke can here. After the sixth commercial, it'll be cold." After the sixth commercial, go ahead to the window and get yourself a Coke. I was like, "Come on. This is great. This is fantastic."

I don't know if it was a combination of the rain, the Coke I was waiting for to get cold, but I fell in love with this movie and the brown people and Maria and Tony and the dancing and the colors. It feels like the first movie – I mean, it wasn't even in a theater. It was on the television. I mean, I had seen movies before at the movie theater. I wasn't that young. I don't know. It was something about it. It's one of my favorite movies of all time. I've seen it now all over the world. I've seen it in planes, trains, automobiles. I've seen it done live with orchestra music. I've seen black and white color, film, digital, all of them are beautiful.

[00:14:49] LW: What about the music group?

[00:14:51] AD: Oh, U2. You know what? I have to tell you a story I haven't told anyone about this, because it just happened. I don't even know how to put it into words, how I feel about it, but I love U2. It was my Aunt Denise who introduced me to U2. Growing up in Compton, Lynwood, Long Beach, U2 is not what people are listening to. I listen to all kinds of music, but the U2 piece of it she got me into it, because she took me to a, I believe it was my first concert. It was an amnesty international concert and there were a bunch of people performing and U2 was the finale.

I remember going to amnesty international concert and getting a little booklet. I still have it somewhere, of human rights. It listed out the United Nations agreed upon human rights,

Amnesty International Book of Human Rights. It's a little booklet they were giving away for free at the door. I remember thinking, "Wow. What is this?" First of all, it's free. This is fantastic. Secondly, I don't know these things. Reading it through and thinking, wow, these are the things that no matter who you are, we should all have in common.

Just trying to think about it, it was such a huge moment for me. Then I'm watching all these groups and my aunt had taught me one U2 song. The reason why, just the way she got me into it is because it was about Martin Luther King, Jr., she told me. She's like, "Listen to the words of this song. It's called 'Pride in the Name of Love' and they're talking about Martin Luther King." I was like, "They are? These white boys are talking about Martin Luther King?"

I listened to the song. Fell in love with the song and went to that concert and then I was a goner. I took a deep dive into U2. This is slightly before they became mega famous. I think it's right before Joshua Tree, which is their landmark album. Cut to I've seen them over 40 times live, it's ridiculous.

[00:16:38] LW: You've met them.

[00:16:39] AD: Well, I'm getting to that. Got to go through all the years when I'm just a pure super fan, knowing everything, loving everything. My first feature film, I named *I Will Follow*, which is a famous U2 song. I couldn't afford, because I made that movie for \$50,000, which is the amount of craft services, which is the food table at most movies. I made a whole movie for that amount. I couldn't afford the song *I Will Follow*, so I had somebody make a song called *I Will Follow*.

Anyway, I remember there was a LA Times review that said, "This movie is pretty good, except it has an unrealistic character trait of a black woman who loved U2." I remember, I was so hurt by that, the minimization of our world view in the article. Anyway, love U2. Went through the whole thing. Finally, was able to meet Bono. I met a lot of people. I acted a fool. Acted a fool. I need to be a publicist. No one faces me. I remember meeting President Obama and feeling the weight of it, but also being able to hold myself together.

I mean, I wasn't acting a fool. I met him, that was it. It was done. My love of him and that group, it was never how some little girls or boys, they like a group because they think, "Oh, this would be my boyfriend or something." I love them, his voice and what he said and represented. When I met him, it was tied to my aunt who had since passed away. It was tied to my childhood, my growing up. When I'm sad, I listen to U2. When I'm happy, I listen to U2. Him standing front of me, it was a full circle moment.

But wait, there's more. I started to get an occasional e-mail that would go into my filter folder, into my spam, because it had letters on it. It was weird. There were these e-mails in my filter folder. One day I go in and there's six. I'm like, "Who is this?" I'm reading it and it has his real name, initials. Not Bono. It's Bono. He's been e-mailing me and months have gone by. All the blood drains out of my face. Your hero, your artistic, your emotional rock of music has been e-mailing you and you have not responded.

Anyway, I fixed that. I explained. Now we have an exchange. This is the final part of the story, because Light is like, "This answer is long." This is it. Last week, Light, this Tuesday I talked to him on the phone, because he had sent me an e-mail asking if he could interview me for U2 Radio and Sirius Radio, and that he has an occasional series where he'll interview people that he's interested in. I was like, "What is going on?" I mind blown, I'm sitting on a Skype going up like this on a Zoom, talking to Bono. He's asking me questions about my life, my work. Literally, brother. It happened six days ago.

I say this to say, the cycles, I'm starting to, at this age and in quarantine, really pay attention to the cyclical nature of life and how things that I'm experiencing now will land in a certain place that is beyond my control, but can be within my observation. That now, things that were seeded in years ago on multiple levels, seem to be coming back around; lessons, things I've said, things I've experienced, things I've observed. That was just a huge one. Who gets to meet their heroes? If you do, you're lucky if they're who you thought they were. That's turned out to be the case here and I feel so fortunate.

[00:20:32] LW: I love that story. I want to fill in the gaps for people who don't know about that film, *I Will Follow*, and just all the other things that have happened in between now and then. A couple questions for you. Was there a griot in your family? If so, who was that person?

[00:20:51] AD: I think it would be Denise. It would be Denise. I think that that's why the connection with U2 and Bono and Denise, in the first film, which is about her, is all tied up in a very emotional place for me.

[00:21:04] LW: How did you inherit your work ethic? You mentioned you were class president and homecoming queen. I'm assuming you did well in school. Where did that come from?

[00:21:13] AD: Well, definitely not wanting to disappoint my mother, as a base line of fear. I say this and if you meet my mother, she is – her voice is like this. She has a voice like a little girl. When I was growing up, bill collectors would call the house and you see how my voice, because my voice has always been like this. She would answer the phone and say, "Hello?" They would say, "Can I speak to your mother?" She said, "I am the mother."

This happened so many times and she would hand me the phone and she would tell me what to say and I'd say it in this voice. My relationship with my mother, we're 18 years apart. Me having to stand in proxy for her as an adult on the phone often because of her high-pitched voice. Her being a single mom and taking care of my sisters, all that contributed to a responsibility. I think the work ethic really came in with my father, Murray Maye, who like I said, she met and married when I was eight, nine, something like that. Was just a hard-working man.

He would wake up every day, put on his work boots, put on his work clothes and go out and make away from himself in the world with his truck and his tools. He had a carpet and flooring business. He had let morals guide him in terms of his work. He would talk about things that people would do and what he said back to them. Things that I even try now, because to think about what my father would do in tough situations when people don't treat me well, he would always turn the other cheek. I get emotional talking about him. I miss him. Yeah, definitely the work ethic from him, the sense of responsibility from my mother.

[00:22:53] LW: I grew up in Montgomery, as we talked about before. Obviously, that's the cradle of the confederacy and the genesis of this modern-day civil rights movement. That conversation was constant in my family. I've read that your family was more of a black panther, black power lien. I'm wondering, how prevalent was that conversation as you were growing up.

[00:23:17] AD: That wasn't in my family. That was in my neighborhood. My family is very apolitical. It's interesting, and I wish we had time to talk at a different, because I have questions to ask you. If you're in Montgomery and you know the history of Montgomery, that is a place of radical black politics.

When I say radical, it doesn't necessarily mean that we're talking about black panthers. Non-violent protest was radical. It was all birth there in so many ways. Or not birth, but demonstrated there in a national way there. My father at the time of a lot of the activity in Montgomery was a kid, was a little boy, and he came from Lowndes County, Alabama, where there were a lot of people who were very political and very grass-rooted and they're organizing, but there a lot of people who were afraid.

He came from a family who was more afraid of that involvement in the movement and was rightly so. I'd seen murder and had seen bloodshed within the family, and so didn't really traffic in that too much. My mother growing up in Compton, they were both in the middle of movements that they never really were involved in. She was right in the middle of the black power movement in Compton in South Central and never was really a part of it. Just tangentially, I said, "Did you guys march? Did you?" They're like, "Yeah. No, we just were observing from the side."

It's interesting, but where I grew up, the black panthers and black liberation movement were epicenter forward, and so I heard a lot about it outside of my home. What was interesting to me that there's a family like yours that actually was talking about that in the house as you're growing up, that wasn't my experience.

[00:25:01] LW: Wow. Yeah. That was a big conversation.

[00:25:02] AD: That's interesting, because when I think of you, I think on the surface, I think these states kinds of shows are nice. I don't know you at all, but from what I know from the gram. Someone might look at me and think, "Oh, she probably came from a highly political family, where they were organizing and marching." I didn't. You did. You know what I mean? Like in different routes. I saw a picture of you online with Rosa Parks.

[00:25:29] LW: Yeah. My family, they were friends with her. They were there during all that time. My grandmother were very close friends. It's one of those things where I didn't have an appreciation for it, as much as I do now. Obviously, if I had a chance to go back and with my awareness now, I would be asking her non-stop questions and wanting to hear everything. I remember taking that picture at the time and just thinking, who's this old lady? You've heard about her. Actually, I grew up on Rosa Parks Avenue.

[00:26:07] AD: But you never at that time, you're just a kid. You're not thinking about that.

[00:26:10] LW: No, I wasn't really thinking about it. Again, I had surface level knowledge. Like we talked about, there are high schools in Montgomery named after confederate generals and the confederate president and to this day, that's Montgomery, Alabama. What's interesting, I'm sure from your perspective, and we'll get to shooting in Montgomery, but you don't have to really do much, because it looks almost exactly like it looked in the 1950s.

[00:26:34] AD: Totally.

[00:26:34] LW: There's no production design that you need.

[00:26:36] AD: There wasn't a lot. We just had to put the people in the right clothes and have them – There's no – I like to be going down this one highway in Montgomery and it's like, Confederate White House, one mile ahead. Really? Is that the sign is? You go and it's there waiting for you.

[00:26:53] LW: Right. How would you describe your childhood? Would you describe it as a happy childhood, or was it struggle?

[00:27:00] AD: No, very happy. I mean, I think of it as happy. What a fortunate thing that is. You know what people have gone through. I've never really done the work of going back and looking at my childhood from an adult lens. I think why. Right now, in my mind, it was happy. For me to apply my current politics, or my current world view to that, I'd rather just remember it as a half time and leave it there, because it's very positive. I grew up on a street that I thought was

beautiful. I went back maybe about 10 years ago, was in the area and drove through it and I was like, "Wow." That's how it always is. Wow, it's small. Wow.

[00:27:42] LW: It's so small.

[00:27:44] AD: God, that house is so small. Wow, was that across the street? I remember this being different. In my childhood mind, I remember the tree and I remember the lawn and I remember the good. Yeah, it was very happy.

[00:28:11] LW: Why did you choose UCLA? I would imagine you'd be going to somewhere like Spelman, or Howard.

[00:28:16] AD: I didn't get in.

[00:28:17] LW: You didn't get in?

[00:28:18] AD: I did not get into Spelman College.

[00:28:21] LW: Wow. Their loss.

[00:28:24] AD: I never went to school. I didn't get accepted. I did get accepted to UCLA, and so that's where I went. I really thought I was going to Spelman. That's where I wanted to go. I want to be a Spelman sister. I wanted to do the whole thing. Didn't work out for me. It was good. I loved UCLA and I learned so much there and really became a part of the black student community there, writing for the black student newspaper, black student union. That's where really, I think my political world view began in a way that is informed so much of my work and what I believe now. It all worked out.

[00:28:58] LW: The one thing I want to touch on first is you had to show up at UCLA a month early as a freshman. Did you understand at the time why that was happening and what that meant?

[00:29:09] AD: They had a thing called the freshman summer program. FSP, where it might have been a month and a half, they brought black kids early, and brown, up early to get oriented. I believe it was something that came out of previous black students, saying that kids who have no context for what this is going to be like, the university should spend some time helping them be prepared.

It was like a summer camp before college with a whole bunch of black kids. Lifelong friendships, but also a preparation so that when everyone else came, we didn't feel we were not on equal footing. Not so much intellectually, but just in terms of resources and structure of a school like that. The assumption was most black kids from certain areas were coming from schools that did not have that formality and needed a little help. I don't even remember ever talking about this anywhere.

[00:30:08] LW: At the time, had you already started going down to the Good Life Café?

[00:30:11] AD: No, no. That was later in my freshman year.

[00:30:16] LW: You're in college now. You're studying African-American studies and English. That's your double major. You have a job at Aunt Kizzy's Back Porch.

[00:30:28] AD: I'm done. I'm leaving this podcast. What are you talking about?

[00:30:33] LW: You're having to drive down the Marina Del Rey to do that. You're driving over to exposition in Crenshaw to rap on stage. Your group, Figures a Speech, with your hit song, 'Don't Get it Twisted.'

[00:30:48] AD: Oh, my god. This is crazy. Wow. I'm blown away.

[00:30:58] LW: Then UCLA is in Brentwood, basically. Or Bel Air, actually. It's a lot of driving. Plus you double major.

[00:31:08] AD: I was a double major. That is so great. Thank you for the research. What a wonderful person to know all that and to find all that. One thing that I'll say about that time with

all the driving, which no one's made that connection, my mother just on Wednesday of this week said, because she wanted a screen door. She's been talking about the screen door, the screen door. She wants a screen door, so she could have the – “When do the doors open?” I said, “Mom, use the credit card. Get the screen door.” “I don't know. I don't know.”

I said, “How much is it?” She said, “It's a lot, but I've saved a little.” I said, “Well, how much is it? It's a screen door. How much can it be?” “But it needs to be custom.” I said, “Okay, mom. How much is it?” “It's almost a \$1,000.” Very worried about it. I said, “Mom, it's okay. Consider it a gift, an early Christmas gift. Get the screen door on the credit card.” She gets the screen door and she's really beat up about it. I said, “Mom, let this be payback for all the parking tickets.” She laughed and laughed. That goes back to your question. All that driving, I'm telling you, I had a warrant for my arrest, for parking tickets. At Westwood, everything's metered, okay. I couldn't afford a parking pass, a student parking pass, so I had to park far and walk, so when I'm coming home from Aunt Kizzy's I didn't want to walk, so I would just like, “Aw, get out before they come.” I'll get out at 7 in the morning and I'll move the car. Didn't. 57 parking tickets. That turned into a warrant.

That turned into me not being allowed to go to school until I paid parking tickets on campus, the city had parking tickets off campus. I had parking tickets in Marina Del Rey. I had parking tickets on Crenshaw and my mother somehow with working a small job, paid those tickets. I said to her just three days ago, the screen door for the parking ticket. She's been going, “How about my house for the parking tickets?” She said, “How about my house also for the parking tickets. Everything you've ever done that I'm doing for you now is because of those parking tickets. Because if you didn't, those could have took me down.” When you really look at it, that could have taken me out of school, taken me down, and so she saved me. Anyway, I did a lot of driving.

[00:33:19] LW: You did. You did a lot of performing.

[00:33:21] AD: I did. That was the first time I was an artist. I was trying to – not even trying to be. I just loved that vibe. I made my very first documentaries about it and it's called *This is The Life*. I was just going down as a kid listening to music.

[00:33:38] LW: I watched you perform. When I saw you performing, what I saw was hours and hours of rehearsing and memorizing and practicing your stage presence. Is that just my imagination, or were you really – I mean, that's a part-time job right there.

[00:33:58] AD: It was so fun. It was a joy. It didn't feel like a job. It was a joy. That was our scene. Those were our people.

[00:34:04] LW: Yeah, like a purpose. Like you were on a purpose.

[00:34:06] AD: We were all trying to impress each other. Yeah. We were trying to impress each other. There was a rigor applied to it to get up on that stage. You couldn't get up messy. You respected everyone who was getting up, and so you want to do your best. No cursing allowed. There was so many things that weren't allowed. You have to work within the limits and be creative. It was probably the best – I mean, I've had some beautiful, creative experiences, but I would say it was the best creative community I've ever been a part of.

[00:34:33] LW: What did you learn about entertaining people from that experience?

[00:34:39] AD: The interesting thing is I never felt that work was about entertaining people. I felt it was about saying something. That's interesting, now you help me make a connection. Because even in my work now, I don't think about keeping people entertained as much as I think about what am I saying here. That was what the Good Life was about, was meaning. Everyone gathered, cared about the meaning, and so therefore were entertained, but it didn't start from an entertaining place. It started from a place of is this worth saying and how are you saying it?

[00:35:14] LW: It was also a genesis of conscious hip-hop, or rap. Did you ever see Digable Planets, or Arrested Development, or any of those guys there?

[00:35:24] AD: We love them.

[00:35:26] LW: Pharcyde.

[00:35:27] AD: Pharcyde were regulars and I'm impressed by your hip-hop knowledge. Very good. Pharcyde were regulars. They were always –

[00:35:35] LW: I wasn't always a meditation teacher.

[00:35:38] AD: No, no. You're not a meditation teacher. Everywhere you see online about you, it says meditation guru.

[00:35:45] LW: Guru. Teachers are more humble.

[00:35:47] AD: This day, I'm a meditation guru and everyone, but that's the word around meditation, guru. What does it take to go from teacher to guru? If I would have this podcast idea with this question. Yeah. No, it was a beautiful time. Yeah, met a lot of great artists there.

[00:36:03] LW: Going back to college, you're studying African-American studies. Did you have a mentor in that area, or did someone give you an idea of what the future could be like?

[00:36:15] AD: I mean, there were a lot of wonderful professors. I think the biggest piece of it was just the other students. There was a woman named Monique Matthews, who was a few years above me, who really helped me so much at that time as a young black woman on campus and learning about myself. There was a gentleman who ran a lot of the black student life on campus; Mandla Kayise, who really took me under his wing and helped me with reading and what to read and what to be listening to and thinking about during that time.

It was really the student life was the most impactful for me at that time. UCLA has such a rich black student history. I mean, from Angela Davis, this professorship there, to how the African Student Union was formed to even two black panthers being shot and killed on campus. It was a lot to learn and to embrace and was a beautiful place.

[00:37:19] LW: Did you have an idea of where you were going to work after college?

[00:37:23] AD: I thought I was going to be a publicist. Well first, I thought I was going to be a journalist. I got a very prestigious internship with the CBS Evening News and I was a part of the

OJ unit. I've been working all that time to produce broadcast news. I got to CBS Evening News national desk in LA with Connie Chung and Dan Rather and I thought, a few short steps to my career. I hated being on the OJ unit. I was digging through people's trash cans, out of a juror. I was doing things.

This is when I feel news start to become a lot more tabloid in nature and I was right there for that. I'm grateful for it, because I was able to move out of it before I put too much time into it. Then I got into publicity, because I loved movies and I thought, "I can write. I love movies. I'm interested in media." Instead of being the press, why don't I pitch the press? I got into publicity.

[00:38:19] LW: Did you have friends in publicity at the time?

[00:38:21] AD: No. I don't even know how I fell into it. I had no friends in publicity at the time. I truly believe that so much of what people become in life from college is based on what the open positions are at the career center. I'm telling you. I mean, it's like, "Oh, I can do that. I think I can do that." You fall into a job and it's 20 years later and that's what you are. Thankfully, I was able to get into publicity in the movie industry, which I loved from Denise teaching me about movies. I thought I had the best job in the world.

[00:38:52] LW: Once you start working in publicity, I know you spent some years working for 20th Century Fox and then you open up your own agency. What did you become known for in the industry? If your name came up in a conversation, what would be the associated reputation?

[00:39:06] AD: Yeah. Black or young. I was 27 when I started my agency. I got anything that was for kids and young people, 27, but I was the youngest doing it. They're like, "Oh, she's closest to knowing what the heck you can do with kids and black films."

[00:39:25] LW: What about more on a personal level? Were you easy to work with? Did you have a reputation for being thorough, or hard worker?

[00:39:32] AD: I think so, thorough, hard worker. I was just saying to someone on my ARRAY team the other day, we have to be – actually, someone I was interviewing. This is a non-black woman who I was interviewing for a job at ARRAY, which is my current company. I said, "As a

black woman-led company, our work has to be more excellent than everyone else, not because we want it to be, or we just like it that way, but we don't get second chances like our white male counterparts, so that's the way that we work. Everything is buttoned down. Every e-mail is spell-checked. Everything is better than everyone else is the way that we try to work.”

I recognized that I have to do that from an early age when I opened my agency at 27 as a black woman, just to be even taken seriously. My stuff had to be better than everyone else. That's how we work. I think it's unfortunate. I think we should have the opportunity to be sloppy and half-assed, like everybody else.

[00:40:29] LW: Chris Rock has an interesting – you've probably seen his interview, or a bit about this. He was saying that major league baseball didn't become less racist, until black players didn't have to be perfect anymore. They could have mediocre players and it was okay. Before that though, everyone had to be the pinnacle of excellence.

[00:40:51] AD: Yeah. That's good. Very true. Yeah, I was a victim of that, but embraced it and I see though that that is what that's cost me in terms of the extra time, the extra stress, the extra diligence, when that time could have been used for life and other things. I think in some ways, a lot of good came from it, but it's unfortunate that we feel we have to do that and perform in that way.

[00:41:21] LW: What were your sources of balance at the time? Had you taken up meditation? Had you done yoga? What were you doing to release the stress?

[00:41:32] AD: I was just working. It hasn't changed much, to be honest. I mean, I am more thoughtful about it and I create a bit more room than I did before, but I was talking to a friend who's known me for a while and says, “You're getting better. You're getting better than you used to be.” I think I'm on a journey towards just living life differently. I'm not there and I didn't do it for a long time.

People always ask me, that's always a big question at the end of quick interviews. How do you create – for the women's magazines, Glamour, Harper's BAZAAR. Tell me about balance. Sometimes, I'll be honest and I'll say, I don't have any. Sometimes I'll say, “Oh, I hike and I do

whatever.” Really, the truth is I have not lived a balanced life. I’ve embraced my work, because I’ve loved it so much and I felt like this makes me happier than anything else, so why do I have that balance? It’s not balanced if I’d rather be at work than be at home.

What I wasn’t doing is trying to understand why didn’t I want to be at home. Why didn’t I want to be with myself? Why was it better to be in control, in charge on a set and not be home? Those are the things that I’ve been working out over the past few years.

[00:42:44] LW: There was a life event that happened around 2003 that slowed you down a little bit with your aunt.

[00:42:50] AD: Denise. Yeah. Denise was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer. Nothing changes your view on life than being in the room with someone when they’re told, “There’s nothing else we can do.” Really, went about trying to make her as happy and comfortable as I could in that final – it was supposed to be four months, it turned out to be a year and a half.

[00:43:12] LW: You all moved to the beach or something like that to that?

[00:43:14] AD: Yeah. We went to the beach. She always wanted to live – She had lived in Buena Park at that time, which is no disparaging of Buena Park, but it’s not by the beach. Sounds nice. Sounds great. Buena Park, California, but it’s inland, it’s not the beach. I was a publicist at that time and didn’t have a whole bunch of money, but I took what I could and I rented this house that I couldn’t afford by the beach on the street. I don’t know. I don’t know if men are into this. I know that’s a gender stereotype, but some ladies like to drive around and look at houses and neighborhoods and be like, “Oh.”

There was a street that she loved in Long Beach that we would just throughout my life, we would drive around and we just love this area. I got our house in this area. We rented it and yeah, it was near the beach. Those last months were there. I look back now and I see all the things I did wrong. It was less about where she was, even though it was really nice and more about the conversations that I should have been having with her to help her prepare. I didn’t know I wasn’t equipped to have those conversations. I just thought, let me do what I can and it was really all material. Let me make sure she has the best food, the best apartment, the best

view, because I was lacking in the other areas. You do the best you can at the time. Yeah, that was a few years of focusing on her and then trying to put life back together after she moved on.

[00:44:44] LW: Well, it was also during that time that you found yourself in that Michael Mann set, on that fateful day, where you had a vision for yourself. You want to talk a little bit about that?

[00:44:54] AD: Yeah, that was before. She was still alive when I was writing *Middle of Nowhere*, which ended up being my second film. He had a completely different story. It's funny. I remember, it was towards the end and I remember, I was starting to write the script and she was excited about the script being written. By the time it was finished, she was really, really sick and couldn't really engage with it.

Yeah, I was a publicist and I was working on a set of a movie called *Collateral*, which I really love that movie. He was shooting in east LA, which wasn't far from areas that I knew and would be around growing up and so forth. It was a Tom Cruise movie with Jada Pinkett, Jamie Foxx and Javier Bardem and Mark Ruffalo. There's a lot of black and brown people before that movie.

I remember, I'm shooting with these new cameras, I was like, "God, what is this camera?" It's digital camera. I was, "God. This is so fast. Wow, this picture's so clear. What's going on?" He's one of the first people to be shooting with these specific cameras and he had all these black and brown people on the set and it was in East LA. I thought, I'd never seen a movie set in a place like that with so many black people using the top cameras with a big movie star. I thought, gosh. I don't even know what I thought, but I somehow thought, "Let me try it." I did. That was the first time that I can recall being interested in being the storyteller.

[00:46:19] LW: Did you get the Syd Field book, the classic screenwriting?

[00:46:22] AD: It's right on my – I read every book to try to figure out how to screen right. None of them worked.

[00:46:31] LW: You based that character, the main character off, she was a registered nurse.

[00:46:34] **AD:** Yeah, yeah. She was a nurse.

[00:46:36] **LW:** Was that after your aunt's position as a nurse? You also mentioned Maxwell Air Force Base in that movie, which I thought was really cool. They were from the "The Gump." I caught that.

[00:46:51] **AD:** You watched the movie.

[00:46:52] **LW:** Of course.

[00:46:54] **AD:** Then you saw the Montgomery references.

[00:46:56] **LW:** I loved it. Yeah.

[00:46:58] **AD:** Only someone who knows — from The Gump will recognize The Gump.

[00:47:02] **LW:** Of course. Of course. Of course. Around Christmas holidays 2005, you decided to make a film.

[00:47:11] **AD:** Did I? I'm like, what happened? What did I do?

[00:47:15] **LW:** For \$6,000 you decided to make a film.

[00:47:20] **AD:** That was *This is the Life*? What is it?

[00:47:23] **LW:** That was *Saturday Night Life*, after your mom's. Yeah, the mom's trip to the 99 cents. That was your first film.

[00:47:35] **AD:** Okay. Listen to me, sir. Those listening to this podcast need to hear me and say, this might be one of the most thorough interviews. See, I'm skipping. I'm doing my normal. This is my first film, this is my —

[00:47:49] **LW:** Right. That's not your first film. This is your first film.

[00:47:53] AD: I know. Yes, yes.

[00:47:55] LW: Because I want people to understand, you didn't just start off making these big films. Everyone that I've interviewed, they start off little small, little baby steps. I'm going to try this. I'm just going to invest a little bit of my time here and there and working really hard and they're doing it while they're busy.

[00:48:11] AD: Yeah. That's important to share with people, so thank you. Yeah. I was a publicist. I decided on my Christmas vacation, I was going to try to make a film. This is a story that my mom always told that I remember being a part of, that when we were little and she was depressed, the three girls, that she would grease us up with Vaseline all over, make our hair pretty, put us in pretty dresses, have us all matching and take us to the store.

She did that at a time when she was very depressed, because she knew when she walked around with her three beautiful, greased-up hair, slicked-down girls, that people would say, "Oh, my gosh. Your girls are so pretty. Oh, my gosh. You're doing such a good job with those girls." It was a boost for her at a time when she really needed it. I made a short about that. That got me hooked. I remember getting into my first film festival, The Palm Springs Short Film Festival and I thought, "Oh, my gosh. I'm in a real film festival."

I was a publicist. I had done Sundance in Toronto, the biggest festivals in the world. Getting into that little film festival with my own film that I wrote and tried to figure out how to direct was literally, I don't know when I've been as happy. I remember taking off early on a Friday, driving down by myself to Palm Springs to show my short at the Palm Springs Film Festival. It's those little moments. People want to talk about, "I want to direct, or I want to act, or I want to do whatever." They want to be what they see, but the best moments are the moments when you're packing your car to drive to the Palm Springs Film Festival by yourself to show your first film.

If you don't have those moments, then it doesn't feel as great when you get to the place that you see. You've got to embrace the steps. I value the conversation, because you're reminding me of my steps. You've got to embrace those steps and go through them and revel in them as you're going through them. Hear my voice in telling you, that is the good stuff. When no one's looking.

When no one cares that you're driving to the film festival. Because those are the moments when you can truly be free. When you're on the mic at The Good Life and it's just a bunch of kids rapping and nobody cares, except you. All that stuff is getting you to the place that you need to be, or will be. Emotional thinking about it. Yeah, those were good times.

[00:50:53] LW: You did a series of other shorts, documentaries. I guess, you were learning the craft and investing a lot of your own money over those years. You were also still working, still had your PR company, up until 2011. You decided, "I'm going to close my company." There was an interesting for making that decision based on your mom. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[00:51:22] AD: Yeah. My mom changed careers. I thought I could too. I made several films, but I still ran my PR firm. When I won Sundance in 2012 or '11, I thought this is my opportunity. I'm either going to make films full-time, or I'm going to keep doing this hybrid thing and I'm never going to quite be able to get to a place with the film. My mother had set the precedent, because later in her life, she had switched careers from working as a hospital administrator to a preschool teacher.

She always wanted to be a preschool teacher. I saw how happy that made her to make that change. She was in her 30s when she did it. I thought, okay, there's some precedent in my own life for seeing that you can make a radical change from one thing to another as an older person.

[00:52:12] LW: You moved houses. You moved from Sherman Oaks to Beachwood Canyon?

[00:52:15] AD: Yup. I went from Sherman Oaks to Beachwood Canyon, trying to live that artist vibe. Just started to try to – but to downsize, because I was going to be a filmmaker now, not a PR firm owner and just had to live with less to try to pursue the dream.

[00:52:31] LW: You had a whole thing going. You had a very successful company. How difficult was it to make that choice, to leave that behind for this vast landscape of unknown possibility and potential in filmmaking?

[00:52:45] AD: It was very easy as I look back, because I had taken the steps and prepared myself. I didn't do it in one full swoop like, "I want to be a filmmaker. Give my things away and let me live small." I take in all the steps. I had made the other films. I had worked hard at my job.

[00:52:59] LW: You've won some awards.

[00:53:01] AD: A job. Yeah. I got into a place where I thought, I can take a chance at this. I'm not a really things person. It was okay for me to be smaller. People always say about my cars. They're like, "Ava, why don't you take your car to the – You have a nice car. Why don't you take it to the car wash?" I'm like, "Oh, yeah." You know what I mean? Because I don't take pride in it, you know what I mean? Or, it's like, don't you want some new clothes?

If you ask them, they'll send it to you for free. I'm like, "Oh. Yeah. I can." I just don't think of those things. The downsize was not hard. Then just to be a full-time filmmaker, that was the scary part, the creative endeavor of can I support my family? Can I support myself? Is this going to work? Are people going to laugh? It was those things I had to get over more than the material things.

[00:53:54] LW: You had a really unique and you'd even say, unfair advantage over other filmmakers. Not only were you an excellent filmmaker, right, in my own personal opinion, having watched several of your films, but you understood what happens after someone completes their film. In doing so, you were able to create a distribution collective, which was a game changer for you as an independent filmmaker. You were able to position the film, even small budget films to optimize their box office potential. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[00:54:32] AD: I didn't believe anyone would distribute my work at that time. There's no Netflix. There's no none of that. It was just the big studios and they weren't making small films about black women's hearts. I decided to try to figure out how to distribute it myself and was able to with a group of people, come up with a model that we call Firm, that's now ARRAY. We've continued to just distribute small films, like the ones that I was making early on in a very grassroots, community-oriented way. We're 30 films in.

I remember doing the first one thinking, "Will this work?" Now it's 30-plus films and filmmakers that have gone on to make bigger films. Yeah, it was just about embracing independence and working outside of the existing systems. Not because you wanted to, just like I was saying before. I wish I could be messy. Wish I could just give my film in the studio and it gets distributed. Knowing that those structures were not really viable or available to me, you have to come up with another way, so that's what we did.

[00:55:32] LW: You're also making and selling your own DVDs, because you didn't want to license anything. You wanted to maintain ownership of everything. That was a different approach as well.

[00:55:40] AD: Yeah, that was a different model at that time. It's been harder and harder to stay independent in that way as you're making bigger things. Whenever I make a movie, I'm responsible for millions and millions of dollars. It becomes more difficult than my earlier work, all of which I own. When you make something for Netflix, you don't own it. Having to come to terms with your work and who owns it.

I was talking to some friends who are fine artists. They said, "How does it feel to have your stuff hanging in someone's house?" You know what I mean? You worked hard. Like this beautiful painting behind you. Someone made that. It's theirs, but it's not because it's behind you in your house. How does that feel? The fine artists said back to me, "Well, how does it feel to make something and then it's in homes and on phones and on planes and is it still yours?" Really got me thinking about the only thing that's mine is making. After that, it leaves you and it becomes something else.

[00:56:37] LW: You've done a bunch of films, the budgets had increased, marginally \$50,000, \$200,000. There's this whole other subplot with David Oyelowo, where he sits next to an investor from *Middle of Nowhere* and he's the investor recognizes him, because he's happily watching his DVD. Can you talk a little bit about that story, leading up to *Selma*?

[00:57:02] AD: Leading up to *Selma*. Crazy story. David had been in my film *Middle of Nowhere*, which was the one that broke me out one Sundance. After that, I had no job offers. A famous story of other white male filmmakers who had won different things at Sundance that

year, who got immediate job offers won a pal named Colin Trevorrow actually got offered *Jurassic Park*. I couldn't even get an episode of television.

Ultimately, I got an episode of *Scandal* and was able to do a little short for Prada. Somewhere along the way, David tells me to go after *Selma* and that I could really get this job if I could figure out how to do it for the amount of money that they had. Because all the directors were saying, "We can't make that for 20 million dollars." I was like, "How many million dollars?" My last film was \$200,000. Literally, all the big filmmakers were like, "We can't make a film about Dr. King for 20 million. It's not possible." David was like, "She can, because we had just worked together." 20 million dollars to me, I thought, who cannot make this film for 20 million dollars? 20 million dollars? It goes fast. It goes fast. I wrote the script. We made for 20 million dollars. Yeah, we did this thing. It changed –

[00:58:18] LW: He starred it. I think what's –

[00:58:20] AD: Before that, the story that you're talking about is on the plane. We're in the middle of nowhere, which was a \$200,000 film. He was on a plane with someone. I didn't even know David; who asked him, "I've been asked to invest in this \$200,000 film. You're a black actor, because I recognize you from this other show. You're sitting next to me in first-class. Do you think I should invest in this?" He said, "Well, what is it?" Says, "This black woman filmmaker. This woman named Ava DuVernay." He's like, "Come on, guys. I just saw on CNN talking about her new model for distributing films. Let me read the script."

David reads the script, calls me. Says, "Not only have I told this guy to invest in it. Can I be in your movie?" That chance meeting on a plane in first-class with this guy that he had. I did not know David. Turned out for him being in my movie, him introducing me to Selma people and that chance encounter, is it chance? I don't know.

[00:59:17] LW: Is it chance? That's the question.

[00:59:19] AD: Yeah. No, is the answer. Changed everything.

[00:59:24] LW: You were the perfect person, even though you were eighth in line or something crazy like that as a director, you were the perfect person, because you had enough naïveté to think you could do it for 20 million dollars. Everyone else with sense said, “There's no way we could do that. Period. Peace.” You had a track record of having to do films in 15 days and five days. This film had to be done in 32 days to be released by Christmas. You were familiar with the area. I mean, it's like, it couldn't have been more perfect. It was inevitable, but there was a snag. There was a small little snag.

[01:00:08] AD: What? What Light? What was the snag?

[01:00:12] LW: That damn script. You weren't going to get credit. That's a big deal as someone who's operating at that level. You have to come to terms with that.

[01:00:24] AD: Yeah, that's hard. That was really, really hard. That might be my biggest professional disappointment. Many people don't know about that. I don't know what you've been reading, but you're really good at research. Yeah, I don't talk about that a lot, but it really hurt me that someone would take credit for something that they didn't do, especially because I put so much of my heart into that script and so much of my family to that script, because it's from where my father is from and my knowledge of Selma, my love of African-American history, my trying to make King a real person, who smoked and was chubby and who acted a certain way when his friends talked about death and who didn't want to disappoint his friends, all things I knew about him and that weren't in the script. I put all my blackness in that.

[01:01:13] LW: You brought women into the script.

[01:01:15] AD: I brought women into the script. Both of those things are very important pieces of me, my identity, my family, my history. For that to be stolen, where when that film at the end of it, I always turn it off. I don't watch it a lot, but now and then the amount of screening or something, I walk out right after my name. That's really sacrilegious, because I always stay and watch all my crews' names, because we made it together.

Right after my name is the man who stole the credit on the script's name, and to this day, I'm not over it. Not over it. I don't know when I'm going to get over it. It hurts me. It hurts my feelings. That was what happened there.

[01:01:57] LW: You talked about desperation. There's two ways to go with desperation. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[01:02:04] AD: Yeah. I think desperation is — I call it a smelly coat. It repels people. People don't want you to be desperate. They want you to be passionate. There's a thin line between the two. Passion is propulsive. It's magnetic. It draws people to you. It's positive energy. It's an intention, but it's surrounded by positivity. Desperation is the same intention. You want the thing, but it is drawing a negative energy.

Even if I go even further, it's actually not the same intention, because I think desperation is more self-focused and passion is more about the place where you're trying to go. Regardless for ourselves, we have to discern whether or not we're in a place of desperation or passion. I remember when I was trying to be a filmmaker, I was so wanted so, so badly that I found myself being so desperate that people didn't want to be around me. They didn't want to engage with me.

I mean, we've all come around people — people come around you and it's just, the need that's coming off of them is pulling at you that you don't even want to be around it. That doesn't attract people that want to help you. When you're passionate, where it's not a need. It's a want. It's a desire. It's a wow, this person is going to get there. Let me help, or let me at least encourage them, or pray for them, or whatever. That's what you want to try to open up for yourself. That is not just in career. That is in relationships. I've seen that again and again with I have a good friend who just wants to be married and have a baby so bad. I mean, she wants it for herself so badly. She's becoming a certain age. This is her dream. It's not happening.

She's just too desperate. She's out there and people can feel it. It's like, it's too much. It has a negativity around it, as opposed to just opening up and living life and accepting what comes. I just think in general, we just have to watch this test, because I think our culture leans towards promoting a sense of desperation. You know what I mean? Promoting a sense of you need

these things to get to where you want to go, as opposed to stopping and saying, “What do I have? A, how can I be happy right where I am?” It doesn't mean you can't have a dream, but how can I be happy right where I am? How can I revel in the steps? Enjoy the steps. How can I take my time to get there and just have a more passionate relationship with yourself as you're going through it towards the dream?

[01:04:36] LW: I feel like it's magnified in places like Los Angeles too. I'm so happy that you said what you said about the best part of your whole journey, or one of the best parts was driving out to Palm Springs by yourself with your film to submit it to this festival.

[01:04:52] AD: Wait, wait. I can't let you knock LA.

[01:04:55] LW: I'm not knocking it. I'm just saying, I think it's magnified. There are a lot of beautiful things about LA, but just in terms of desperation in my experience, there's a silent judgment around what can you do for me in that scene, that industry scene in Los Angeles. I think, people have to almost actively protect themselves from that. That's why you have all these mansions far, far away from every place, because people want to control their environment who comes in and makes sure the people that are – they surround it with art like that, or maybe sometimes they want people like that. I don't know.

[01:05:32] AD: I think you're right about that. I think also, one of the things that – I know we're wrapping up, but one of the things about LA, just to say. I don't know if it's LA. I think the culture of the industry.

[01:05:46] LW: Entertainment. Yeah.

[01:05:46] AD: — lifestyle and all that. I've had to really come to a place where whenever I'm interacting with – It happened early on in my career, where I would be disappointed that I think I'm interacting with someone from a real human place, but they really just want something. You know what I mean? When that happens to you enough and I think that's happened to so many people, when it happens to you enough, then you start to not give yourself to – you meet someone new and the exchange is, “Oh, they're going to want something.” As opposed to, let me just talk to you.

I think that that, especially when what I did as a publicist, what I do now as a director, I have very few conversations in the industry where someone doesn't specifically is not talking to me because they want something. How do you bifurcate that from real life when the industry's your real life? It's interesting being in a place where people want something from you, instead of you wanting something from them. When that change happens, there's some adjustment there.

[01:06:51] LW: Now that you're on the other side, what's the takeaway from that? Say someone meets someone who they would naturally want something from. What's the move?

[01:07:01] AD: What do you have to offer? That's what I say. "I need your help. Can I get advice? Can I have a coffee, so you can tell me this? I would love to talk to you for a few minutes." Every time I read that, that's a line that I hate. That's a pet peeve. "I would love to take you to coffee?"

[01:07:18] LW: What's in it for me? Right?

[01:07:21] AD: I would not love for you to take me to coffee. A, I don't know you. B, I'm busy. C, what is the conversation going to be? D, who are you? Part of the people that I like to work with is I observe them working and doing their thing and I want to get in there and know more about it. I'm interested. Be on your own train. Do your own thing. That attracts people to you and then people want to collaborate and then they do want to do it for you, because you're doing something for yourself, or you can give them something not material, but a good conversation, an anecdote, a story, some energy, some life, a laugh, some poignancy, some exchange.

When you're just trying to draw from people, people back up and just think about that in your own life. Not from your career or whatever, but folks listening, just think about your best experiences are sitting at a table with a friend, having a conversation over a meal. That's an exchange. You're giving something. They're giving something. It feels good. You walk away full. If you're not able to do that, even as a person who's trying to get somewhere, every time you go into a job interview, you don't try to get the job. Try to give yourself to the job. What are you giving?

Our society, our culture is so get, get, get, get, that it's like, what do you have to bring to yourself? It doesn't have to be, what do you have to give of yourself to whatever the experience you're inside of? Or else, you're not inside of it. You're outside of it, just trying to claw your way in. I think that's the biggest thing. I say that a lot with job interviews, where I say to people, I didn't realize until I started hiring. When I wake up in the morning and I'm doing interviews to hire, how much I want that person to be the right person. I want them to come in and tell me what they can do to help me, because this is a job. This is a job to help me. People go into a job like, "Help me get this job."

When they should walk in like, "Ava, this is what I can do to help you by filling this job." No, they'll go in and be like, "Well, I can –" They're groveling and they're unsure of themselves and they're scared. It's like, "Well, you're not going to help me do the job I need." You don't want to have this job. It's just a posture and a perspective and a point of view. I hope if anyone hears any of this, from this story of all these arcane facts that Light has pulled out from my life –

[01:09:48] LW: I have more. We just don't have time to get into all of them.

[01:09:51] AD: All of those led to this moment of need to say, don't be desperate. Focus on the experience that you're having and you want people to have with you and try to move through these spaces with that and see what happens.

[01:10:20] LW: Final question for you. How are you defining success these days?

[01:10:24] AD: That's a great question. As we're in the middle of a pandemic, revolution, recession. I'm going to tell you the truth.

[01:10:31] LW: Every day, I turn on the news. I'm looking at you've gotten awarded with something, you're offering something.

[01:10:36] AD: Those aren't success. Those aren't success. You know what's success?

[01:10:38] LW: That's why I want to know, because people would look at that and think, "Oh, she sees herself as a success." How do you define success for yourself?

[01:10:45] AD: I do see myself as a success, but I'll tell you why. For the first time in 20 years, I've been home for longer than a month. There are places in my house that I am seeing — like what that corner looks like at noon, when the sun hits the plant. The other day I was in the house. I was like, look at that coming through the window. Let me sit there. Let me sit in that part of the yard. I have not cooked for myself like I've been cooking for myself over the past — but cooking, enjoying the slicing of the arugula. You know what I mean? Just taking care of myself in a way that's not rushing from place to place.

This quarantine time has been challenging. I've had a death in my family. Early on, I've had real challenges, but I've also had beauty and joy of spending time alone. I feel so successful in finally giving myself some time. That's how I know you, because I don't meditate until two months ago when I picked up that damn book. Someone told me about it a long time ago. I was like, "I ain't got no time to meditate. My mind can't stay still." The first pages of your book, everything that came out of my mouth. You've heard it a million times.

The thing that made me literally, I dropped the book and I shed a couple tears at a point early in the book when you write. The reason why is because I just said this to my sister, Tara, the week before from my own revelation. I feel like I've never heard it before. I thought it. I said, this is going to be my new way. I said it to my sister. She's like, "Wow. We should do that." A week later, you said the same thing in the book. You know what it was? Can't guess?

[01:12:42] LW: No idea. Now the role is reversed. I have no idea what you're going to say.

[01:12:45] AD: You have that many jewels that you're dropping in your book? You said, to not think about the fact that you have to do something, for the fact that you get to do something. As an overextended person, who over and over always hears, "I have to do this. I have to go do this. I have that meeting. I have that. I'm on this deadline. I got to go get this. I got to go get that. I have to tell mom. I have to communicate this on the set where it's 13 departments and I have to serve all of them." For me to say, "No, you don't have to. You get to." You are the one who gets to do these things.

That was such a big game changer for me when I thought it out of my own mind. Then you write it down in real black and white on a real book that I'm holding in my real hands. I put the book down and I thought, when those cyclical things happen you think, okay, this message is for me and this is a truth that you need to embrace.

I feel very successful in having some time to think, some time to cook, some time to clean. I mean, I'm just really enjoying doing my laundry. This is so nice. Usually, I send it out. Now I get to fold my own clothes and just spend time with myself. For someone who's been on the run for the last two decades, I feel very successful in the quiet and the solitude and my baby steps into meditation, which are horrible, but they'll get better.

[01:14:12] LW: Have you given it a little test run yet, the meditation practice?

[01:14:15] AD: Yeah. I'm still theorizing though. I've read the book a couple times and I've been listening to – that's so funny that you know that people don't just jump in after they read it.

[01:14:26] LW: No. Yeah.

[01:14:27] AD: Yeah, I'm still thinking about it. I'm scared, because I don't want to fail. So crazy. I've read the book a couple times now. I've been listening to the podcast. There's another thing you do a meditation thing. It's online. I found it on Instagram. Trying to get there. I'll let you know when I when I hit it.

[01:14:52] LW: Awesome. I want to offer some reflections about some of the things you talked about. This is probably the most direct correlation between someone's favorite activity as a child and what they're doing now, in the sense that you actually have a Barbie doll.

[01:15:09] AD: That's right.

[01:15:11] LW: How does that –

[01:15:12] AD: I told you, cycles. I told you –

[01:15:14] LW: You started playing with Barbies and now there's an Ava DuVernay Barbie Doll.

[01:15:18] AD: I know. I'm telling you that when I say cycles, I really see them. It wasn't just a cool thing to have a Barbie. I know a couple other people who have Barbies. They're like, "Oh, it's cool to have Barbies." When I'm telling you that, I loved Barbies. I have one in my likeness. I'm looking at it right now. I just want to rip open the box and play with her, but that wouldn't be appropriate at my age in the house by myself.

[01:15:42] LW: Also, what it represented, you playing with your sisters, you creating and basically, storytelling and improvising, making it work, using shoes, using whatever was there to tell that story. That's something that obviously has shown up now in your life, where you've created this life for yourself on the basis of improvising and being innovative. I didn't know that you read my book. I didn't know that. It makes a little more sense now. Yeah. I actually didn't know how we connected.

[01:16:19] AD: The 'gram. Everything happens through the 'gram.

[01:16:22] LW: You're big on Twitter. I'm not on Twitter at all and I've been thinking about getting bigger, going on Twitter more just from –

[01:16:27] AD: You have a Twitter account.

[01:16:29] LW: I do have a Twitter account.

[01:16:30] AD: Automated. It's horrible. I'll show you.

[01:16:33] LW: I don't know it and I want to know more than I do. I'm inspired by that. Anyway, I find you to be incredibly gracious, especially with everything you have going on. All of our exchanges have been very, very lovely. I've seen a lot of your interviews and videos and even when you're in rooms doing Q&A with 10 people. You're just always like, "Thank you very much for that question. That's such a great question." The grace is just – and it's authentic. It's not like Hollywood grace. It's like, real I'm really happy to be here.

I think a part of that is because you've been in so many different aspects of the spectrum of being an admirer and a fan, to being a creator, that you have an appreciation for people just showing up and just being there, and you never take that for granted. I think that's beautiful.

[01:17:29] AD: I am always surprised when people come.

[01:17:31] LW: I think that's beautiful.

[01:17:32] AD: I think that a lot of it has to be from finding – getting into it much older.

[01:17:36] LW: Yes, that's exactly what – I think that might be just an appreciation for it. The likelihood of it all happening, being so minuscule. The likelihood of a 32-year-old publicist who'd never gone to film school, ending up making films when a few years ago, I didn't even know how to turn on the camera. It's so unlikely that it blows my mind every day.

[01:17:59] LW: It's incredible. You've had clear angels in your life, which is also a common thing. Your Aunt Den is your guardian angel. She was the one that helped you recognize your path. I'm just curious, what do you think she would say now? If you got a chance to have a conversation like this with her, what would she say about everything?

[01:18:22] AD: I can't wait till that day. I feel like she's active in my life. I feel she's guiding me and making so much of it happen, her and my father. She loved movies so much. Sometimes when I'm on a set, or at a premiere, at a film festival, or wherever, I think, "Gosh, she would love this." She would be right there with me. I just have to always tell myself, she is right there with me. She's experiencing it.

I can't wait till the day we can sit down and have that conversation face to face. I know that she'd be loving it. She'd be giving me a lot of it. I wonder sometimes, what would she instruct me to do different than what I'm doing? You know what I mean? What would she say that maybe would have pushed me in a different direction, because I thought so highly of her opinion? Would she say, "Don't make *Selma*. Don't do that."

[01:19:11] LW: Can you imagine?

[01:19:12] AD: You know? Who knows? You never know.

[01:19:14] LW: Yeah. Well, I'm sure she'd be proud, nonetheless. While you're well known for *13th* and *Selma* and all that, I do recommend people go back and look at the earlier work as well, because there's such beautiful stories. I think some of the most beautiful stories are told before somebody is known for telling stories. I saw that a lot in your work.

My dad and my brother were in federal prison. My dad is still there. When I watched *Middle of Nowhere*, the scenes of her going to the prison, I never had that experience before they went to prison a year ago and it was so realistic. I was like, "She had to have somebody in prison." I don't know how you can imagine just the pacing of it. There's so much waiting involved when you're going to visit somebody. I have a lot of questions about that. We're not going to talk about that on here.

[01:20:06] AD: All those layers that you have to go through and the anticipation of each step.

[01:20:12] LW: Because you mentioned that it was not autobiographical, so I was impressed that you were able to conjure that up.

[01:20:19] AD: Research. Talking to a lot of people who've gone through it and they tell you how it feels each step and you hear it 30, 40 people, they're all saying the same thing. I got to put that in there. Yeah.

[01:20:31] LW: I love that. Well, Ava. Thank you so much. I really, really appreciate it.

[01:20:35] AD: I really had no idea what to expect. This is what I expected. I don't know. This is a nice person on Instagram. I've read his book. I had that moment with this book. Let me do this podcast. It'll be a fine hour. It'll be fine. This has been revelatory for me, because I'm not in therapy, so I don't really think of circles and cycles in life and have these kinds of conversations. It's been so helpful to me. Instructive and impressive. Also, I think that you can be a meditation guru/world-class interviewer.

[01:21:13] LW: I just started doing this and I've been accused in relationships before of asking too many questions, because I've always been so curious about the motivations and the intentions behind. I don't care about what you did, or what awards you want. I want to know why you decided to do that. Who was the influence in your life and how did you end up in the room with that person and all the back story? That's what I've been so passionate about my whole life. Now I've created a way to have an excuse to ask people those questions. I'm appreciative that you gave me that opportunity to ask you those questions.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[01:21:53] LW: Thank you for listening to my interview with Emmy award-winning director, Ava DuVernay. If you haven't already seen it, you can check out her latest series *Queen Sugar* on Hulu. Don't forget to hop on Netflix to watch her documentary *13th*, plus *Selma* and *When They See Us* and all of the rest.

You should also follow Ava on Twitter and Instagram. She's quite active on social media and her posts are always potent and inspiring. As you heard Ava's story of becoming a successful director was an unlikely one. She didn't go to film school. She didn't have any formal training. She wasn't the ideal color, or gender, or age, but she had plenty of resolve. Those are the stories that I love to tell on *At The End Of The Tunnel*; stories of hope, stories of underdogs, the hero's journey.

If you want to hear more of those stories, make sure you're subscribed to the podcast and check out the archive. I've got so many other interviews with amazing people who've overcome all kinds of crazy challenges in order to start their movement and follow their purpose. Even though the guests are all different, the common thread between every episode is how their obstacle helped to guide them to their movement.

My hope is that the people who listen to these interviews begin to see their obstacles as gateways to their path and their purpose. If you like what you hear, please rate and review the podcast. It helps other listeners discover these inspirational stories. As always, you can find everything that Ava and I discussed in the show notes, as well as a transcript of our entire

interview on my website, which is lightwatkins.com/tunnel. That's L-I-G-H-T-W-A-T-K-I-N-S.com/
T-U-N-N-E-L.

While you're there, make sure you sign up for my daily dose of inspiration email, where I send out short and sweet daily motivational messages every morning, just to help you start your day. If you have any feedback or suggestions, feel free to text it to me. I'll give you my phone number. Are you ready? Okay, 323-405-9166. That's 323-405-9166. Send me a message and make sure you put your information in my phone, so I know who's texting me and where you texting me from.

All right. Thanks again for listening to another episode. I'll see you next week with the next conversation from the end of the tunnel.

[END]