

In Proximity

Mike Carson

Season 3 Episode 17

Final Transcript

Paola Mardo: You were part of the Super Bowl Halftime Show.

Mike Carson: Oh, yeah. So I was a co-creative director and production designer on the show, worked alongside Kendrick and Dave Free from pgLang. I've worked with Kendrick now the last four years on his live stuff, so, like, the tours and performances and TV shows and stuff. So, like, it's kind of like, you know, a 12-minute music video, if you will.

[0:21 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo, and today we're talking creative direction. [BELL DINGS]

So, when we first started planning this new season, one of the first people I called was Mike Carson, and with good reason. He's a director and designer who's had his hand in so many big moments and events, including one of the biggest cultural moments of 2025, Kendrick Lamar's Super Bowl Halftime Show.

Mike came up at a time when multi-hyphenates finally became mainstream. He grew up in Chicago and got his start with III Roots filming music videos and later working alongside his mentor, Virgil Abloh, the ultimate multi-hyphenate creative and creative director. In fact, at one point, Mike Carson found himself filming a behind-the-scenes documentary of Jay-Z and Kanye West during their iconic Watch the Throne tour.

Today, Mike's collaborators include Kendrick Lamar and pgLang, Usher, Temz, Janelle Monáe, and his longtime collaborator Big Sean. And on this episode, we talk about what it was like to co-creative direct and production design Kendrick Lamar's Super Bowl Halftime Show, what he learned working alongside Virgil, Kanye, Jay-Z, and Big Sean, the art and business of directing music videos, and how to thrive and stay creative as a multi-hyphenate. Here's my conversation with Mike Carson.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[1:55 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Mike Carson, welcome to In Proximity.

Mike Carson: Thank you for having me.

Paola Mardo: Thank you for—

Mike Carson: I'm excited to be here.

Paola Mardo: Super excited. I feel like you were one of the first people I hit up, honestly, for this.

Mike Carson: Yeah. I'm glad we made it happen.

Paola Mardo: Yes. We really did, and we're going to talk about your process and your work. I mean, you cover music, live space, I mean, so many brands, so many different things. But I first want to ask, you call yourself a creative director, but also, I think, on your website, it says multidisciplinary creative.

Mike Carson: Yeah. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: How would you describe to someone what you do?

Mike Carson: Yeah. I am a director first and a designer, I would say, second. So I think the elevator pitch is, like, you know, I kind of occupy a few different spaces whether it's short-form, media, whether it's commercials, music videos, and then also, like, designing for, you know, live and in-person experiences so concerts, TV show performances, experiential events. Taking a lot of the things I've learned from the process of filmmaking and just in different mediums, I think that's where the creative director side of things comes because that is, like, the title for that.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I mean, we're speaking in later 2025, but earlier this year, you were part of a big global event, the Super Bowl Halftime Show. It's arguably the most-watched halftime show ever in the history of the show, which is kind of incredible: 133 million views.

Mike Carson: Wow.

Paola Mardo: I don't know if they're counting every single view across every channel. I'm sure it's way more than that by now. Yeah. What did you do on this show?

Mike Carson: Yeah. So I was a co-creative director and production designer on the show, so worked alongside Kendrick and Dave Free from pgLang on, like, the design and overarching story and execution and then, you know, with the NFL team and Jesse Collins and Bruce Rodgers, those guys, on, like, bringing it to life.

Paola Mardo: That's awesome. I mean, to be perfectly honest, I learned about your work because of that show. I think a lot of folks who aren't in the music or fashion worlds did. And I guess I never really thought about what it was like to produce something like that.

Mike Carson: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: So, like, hearing your name and learning about you, it's like, oh, there are people who do this!

Mike Carson: Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: So, I mean, that show, you know, that could be a whole other podcast episode dissecting that particular show.

Mike Carson: For sure.

Paola Mardo: But I think I'd love to know, and maybe our listeners and viewers would want to know, like, what does it take to actually creative direct and to production design something that is meant to be seen by a live audience but also for, like, television and the internet and so forth.

Mike Carson: I think it's one of those moments where, like, the multi-hyphenate can really shine because it's like, you know, I've worked with Kendrick now the last four years on his live stuff, so, like, you know, the tours and performances and TV shows and stuff. So, like, me, him, and Dave have, like, a language now that, you know, is derived from their overall language on their, like, on the pgLang project. But, like, we now have a shorthand where we kind of know how to, like, present in these different—in these different mediums, so whether it's a stadium or it's an SNL stage or it's a, you know, arena.

So, like, that part of it wasn't hard. I think getting the call to be like, "Hey, we're doing the Super Bowl," was definitely, like, a shock to me, but not a shock given, like, the year he had.

Paola Mardo: Can you pause right there? Like, what was that call like?

Mike Carson: What was the call like?

Paola Mardo: If you can remember.

Mike Carson: It's funny. I was on another job in production rehearsals, and I got a random call from Dave. And he's like, "Hey, we're doing the Super Bowl." I was like, "Okay."

[LAUGHTER]

I was just—you know, I had shot, like, a commercial the year before at the Super Bowl for Apple. So, like, I was there but, like, didn't think I'd be back. I knew I would eventually be back, just manifesting it, but, like, I didn't think I'd be back that soon. So it was, like, a really nice surprise. And, like, I kind of cleared—you know, after I wrapped that thing I was working on, I

kind of like cleared everything off of my schedule just to be like, let me lock in on this for the next few months and, like, only work on this, which is, like, something I haven't done in a while.

And, you know, just from there, just a lot of talks with Kendrick and Dave, and, like, we were just talking and talking and, like, started to have some version of, like, a rough idea. And then, from there, we would, like, meet up and, you know, had a large piece of paper with 100 yards on it, and we'd just draw and, like, you know, I'm on my laptop in Logic putting songs together just like—we're just playing. I think that's the beauty of working with people that—like, where you have that freedom and, like, that shorthand and, like, the space to create. And you don't always have to be, like, overly buttoned up because you can just, like, think freely and, like, the ideas come.

You know, I think my best ideas come in collaboration. Like, I think I have good ideas by myself but, like, way better ideas when I'm around people I think that are better than me or, like, just, you know, forward-thinkers as well. So, you know, at the end of the day, it's a football game and, like, that's the most important thing. And, like, the field is the most important thing.

But, like, you know, we're here for the show, and we're here to, like, present something beyond just the 60,000 people there but, like, you know, the 100 million after. So you have to kind of prioritize the camera, at least, you know—sorry—in a film, but it's like, I think it lives way further than the moment of, you know, the people that are there.

So, as directors, we were able to be like, you know, with our director brains, like, "How do we want to present this thing in a nontraditional way?" It's not about it being a concert. It's more about, like—it's kind of like a 12-minute music video, if you will, and that, like, it just happens to be in a live environment. It's like, I think when you think about it like that, you will probably make something a little bit more special than, like, if you're just playing a concert and shooting it. So that was definitely our thinking and then, like, putting things like Sam Jackson in it to be like, you know, "Let's show people this is not just 12 minutes of rapping." That was, like, a conscious choice to have a theoric element and, like, using dance and, like, using sound design and production design as all arms of, like, a story. So I think it's, it's kind of where the film part of it comes into play.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. That's cool. I never thought about it as, like, a 12-minute music video.

Mike Carson: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Because now that you say it that way, it's like, yeah. So I guess, can you just walk us through, like, what your process was specifically? You—I mean, creating renderings and drawing. You said you were playing around with Logic.

Mike Carson: Yeah. To speak, like, about the process, like I said, it always starts with a conversation and, like, sitting and talking with Kendrick and Dave and, like, seeing, like, okay, what do they want to get across? What are the themes? I think Dave and Kendrick were really,

like, keen on rudimentary shapes being a part of this, just, like, simple, childlike things. And then, from there, we, like, developed more, developed more. Like, I started sketching some stuff in 3D and then, like, I have a limit there, so then, like, working with much better art directors and render artists who, you know, actualize the idea a bit more. But it definitely started with just, like, sketching on paper, just, like, drawing a little circle, square, X, like, where do they go?

Paola Mardo: Yeah, the game symbols?

Mike Carson: Yeah. And they were like, "Oh, this kind of looks like a game controller." And, like, it just would flow naturally from there. And then, yeah, I think, like I was saying before, just working with people that are better than you in certain capacities or fields is really an important to, like, collaboration. So it's like, my 3D skills are good enough to get us in the door, and then, like, when we need to really present it to somebody, it's like, working with amazing artists that can, like, really draw and, like, actualize the idea a bit more, and then, you know, revising, refining, going back and forth 100 times until it's ready to be, like, initially presented to, like, the powers that be, and then refining, refining up until the moment of the show. And then rehearsing in L.A. during the fires was, like, when we—

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Mike Carson: We started right before. So we like—and then the fires happened. So we had to, like, stop rehearsing. And just credit to the team and, like, choreographer Charm La'Donna, who just, like, brought it together really fast but, like, given the circumstances of us, like, having to stop rehearsing and then, like, we would go to another location, and it's like, it's a fire there.

Paola Mardo: Whew.

Mike Carson: You know, so it had to come together quickly with, like, really brilliant minds. So, yeah, we rehearsed a lot in L.A. We had, like, little mockups of the stage so we could just try different ideas. Kendrick was, like, "I want to try new songs." And we eventually, you know, landed on what we landed. And then you're in New Orleans, and you only have a limited amount of time on the field because, like I said, it is—at the end of the day, it's a football game, and, like, there's—although the Halftime Show is a huge part of it, it's, like, a small part of, like, a very big thing.

Paola Mardo: Right.

Mike Carson: So, like, we have very limited time. They have to take care of the field. Luckily, we came in really prepared because we, like, rehearsed and, like, down to the science of, like, how many people does it take to—like, when you see the American flag, which, to me, is, like, my favorite part of the performance, like, Humble, that was, like, a real math equation to, like, figure out, how do we create this flag? But, like, these guys have to get over to the other end of the endzone in time for the next song, but, like, it needs to be symmetrical. And, again, that's where, like—

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Mike Carson:—brilliant people come into play whether it's, like, Charm, the choreographer, or, like, you know, costume designers or, like, camera—just the directors, Hamish and Dave. And, like, we always put our minds together to, like, get to it, and, like, I think that's why I think it's great, is because everybody just was like—it was no egos, like, how are we going to get to the end goal here?

Paola Mardo: I love that. What was it like—where were you during the show, and what was it like watching?

Mike Carson: I was on the field, which is funny because, like, looking back, I'm like, maybe I should've been in the truck. But, like, I just wanted to be out there to, like, experience the—like, just all of it. And I'm glad I did just to, like, watch it on the jumbotron. I'm, like, not even looking at the field because on the jumbotron is, like—they're showing the actual program cut of, like, how it was being shot. So I'm like, really on making sure that they're shooting it how we planned.

And, like, again, preparation is such a huge part of it. Like, every night that we would rehearse, we would go to, like, an editing trailer and, like, edit, like, the pre-vis, the—like, kind of the mockup of it until 2:00, 3:00 a.m. and, like, with the director, Hamish, with the assistant director, Hayley, and, like, the editor guy. And, like, they would take the rehearsal footage, and we would say, "This shot does not work here," or, "This shot works here," and we're like—

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Mike Carson: And I think that's where, like, that—again, like, the multidisciplinary of it all comes in because it's like, knowing how to communicate in an edit as an editor. Also, it's like, for however-many years, 15 years, I edited all my own stuff. So it's like, I know what it's like to sit in that seat. I know how tough it is to have people sit behind you. So it's like, being able to communicate in an effective and efficient way is really important. So.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. In three days or less.

Mike Carson: Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

Mike Carson: It's crazy, but I like the pressure. I think too much time, like, it allows you to overthink sometimes.

Paola Mardo: It adds a little fun.

Mike Carson: Yeah.

[13:37 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Well, we'll take it back to the early days. I mean, director first, designer second.

Mike Carson: Yeah. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: But you've also worked with someone similar to you, who was a director and designer, DJ, all sorts of things.

Mike Carson: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Virgil Abloh.

Mike Carson: For sure.

Paola Mardo: And I want to make sure I get all his credits right because he's done so much.

Mike Carson: Yeah, the GOAT.

Paola Mardo: But visionary designer and creative director, he's best known for his work with Kanye West, his own label Off-White and then for leading Louis Vuitton's Menswear. But you knew him early on in Chicago. He owned a store.

Mike Carson: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: And I think your friend Mike worked there.

Mike Carson: Yep. Yeah, our—

Paola Mardo: Can you tell us how you guys met?

Mike Carson: For sure. My friend Mike Waxx worked at RSVP Gallery. So I would just go to the store and just kick it. And, like, eventually, we were meeting more people in the store, Don C., Mark, and I always had my camera with me. So I just started shooting stuff, you know, just was always around, soaking it up and, like, being available and, like, you know, take the train from, from my dorm to RSVP and, like, was just doing that a lot. And then, from there, like, Virgil—I think we did a Big Sean video called Too Fake. It was 2010. We just, like, shot on the rooftop. We were, like, doing weird Blend Mode stuff in, like, Final Cut 7 at the time. And—

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Mike Carson:—I remember Virgil sent, like, a email. It's like, he's like, "This is sick! Keep doing this, and you'll have to drop out of school or something." And then, lo and behold, I got a call a

few months later to, like, come to New York and, like, film Kanye as he was, like, releasing his Dark Fantasy album. And, like, kind of the rest is history.

Paola Mardo: Wow. So Virgil saw that in you, saw that talent and that drive.

Mike Carson: Yeah, for sure. True visionary.

Paola Mardo: And you have an email, you know, as proof.

Mike Carson: Yeah, I have the email. I still have it if you guys want it.

Paola Mardo: That's dope.

Mike Carson: But, yeah, and, like, from there, just being able to, like, watch him, me and Mike, just watch him up close and, like, be a part of a lot of just, like, different cultural moments within that 2010, 2011, 2012 time, so Watch the Throne. The 2010s, in general, you know, I thought was really special, and it was definitely, like, my school, my college, 100 percent. So credit to him. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: That's awesome. For most folks who know, Virgil passed in, I think, 2021.

Mike Carson: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: But you wrote a really beautiful tribute on your Instagram account.

Mike Carson: Thank you.

Paola Mardo: I just wanted to bring up some of the things you wrote. You said, "Thank you again for changing my life," and you also said that he made the "multi-hyphenate mainstream and attainable."

Mike Carson: 100 percent.

Paola Mardo: Can you talk a little bit about that?

Mike Carson: Yeah. I think with Virgil, like—and, obviously, there have been multi-hyphenates and creative directors and things before him. But I think for, like, me, especially as, like, a Black kid from Chicago, and a lot of people I know that look like me, and they're just inspired by a lot of same things, I think he was showing, like, "Hey, I'm an architect, but I'm also—I design T-shirts, and I also direct videos. I also design stages. I also creative direct for Kanye West. I also have my own fashion line. And, like, so for me, it was like, seeing that up close, especially at, like, a really young age, that was, like, a really big example for me to be like, all right, you can do it, you know, hone in on your craft, be really good at one or two things, but then also, like, once you lock in and, you know, do your 10,000 hours, you can expand to other things and

just, like, always staying curious. I think that was, like, his—you know, his superpower outside of just being, like, a really kind person and, like, a visionary in the sense of, like, being able to see things early. I think he was really curious and, like, you can see that in his work. And, like, he wasn't—I mean, I don't think he was—he wasn't afraid to just try different things. So, you know, I think that's really important. And, to me, that is, like, kind of what the multi-hyphenate encompasses. So yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. That's really cool and, honestly, super inspiring. I mean, are there things you take away from that time period that you still, you know, use in your practice now?

Mike Carson: Yeah. I think, first and foremost, like, just how to treat people and, like, you know, it's a lot of—we all work in, like, high-pressure environments and—where it's crazy, and I've been around, especially him, in, like, really crazy times and never seen him lose his head. I think that's definitely one. Looking out for, like, the next generation is another big one. And then, I think, like, not being afraid to get your hands dirty and, like, doing the work yourself is another one. Like, I—Virgil was always on his laptop whether it was, like, designing or making artwork. I have vivid memories of him, like, doing the Good Friday artworks, like, on his laptop an hour before they come out.

Paola Mardo: Wow, an hour?

Mike Carson: Yeah. Like, when he did a—you know, there are obviously other designers and stuff to—that, you know, they could tap into. So, yeah, I'm, like, glued to my laptop to a fault, I think. And, like, I still love mocking stuff up myself and, like, designing. So.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. So I know you shot—was it a documentary or something for Watch the Throne?

Mike Carson: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Like, the making of the album and the tour?

Mike Carson: Unreleased stuff, yeah.

Paola Mardo: What's the update on that?

Mike Carson: Oh, no. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: But more importantly, what was it like running around following Jay-Z and Kanye and, and Virgil during that time?

Mike Carson: It was crazy. Yeah. It's wild. Like, in hindsight, it's like, I—like, we should not have been there. We were, like, way too young and, like, inexperienced. They could've had anybody, but—

Paola Mardo: How old were you at that moment?

Mike Carson: I was 19.

Paola Mardo: Okay, 19.

Mike Carson: Yeah, 19. But it was amazing. And, like, you know, in the—you're in the room while they're recording, like, these records. Like, and there's sometimes where you're, like, just in a room with Kanye or just in a room with Jay-Z. You're like—you know, it was—it was nuts. But for me, it was like a crash course in, like, a lot of great people putting their minds together. And, like, you know, you're seeing—one day, Riccardo Tisci is coming from Givenchy to do the art. And then, like, another day, Spike Jonze, and another day, like, Chris Rock is there. You know, it's just like—

Paola Mardo: Was your mind blown, like, everyday?

Mike Carson: Yeah, it was crazy. It was—it was wild. And, like, I don't want to say you get used to it, but, like, you know, after a while, with anything, you kind of get used to it. And then, like, when you take yourself out of it, you have to, like, really be like, yo, this is insane. So that was, like, some of the best experiences of my life, to be honest.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. It sounds like way better than film school.

Mike Carson: I think so, yeah. But, hey, to each his own.

[LAUGHTER]

[19:53 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: We got a special surprise Voice Memo question.

Mike Carson: Okay.

Paola Mardo: I know you're an actual listener of In Proximity. You've told me before.

Mike Carson: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I'll play the question.

Mike Carson: Okay.

Paola Mardo: You're going to guess who it is, and you'll answer it.

Mike Carson: Okay.

Paola Mardo: So here we go.

[CLIP: SURPRISE QUESTION]

Big Sean: Yo, Mike, what up, dog? Before I get into the question I have for you, I definitely just want to say that Mike is a creative mastermind genius. You know, Mike is somebody who is just—he can take your idea or even come up with a idea and just make it grow into something beautiful that, you know, pushes the envelope forward, pushes careers forward, takes them to new places and, by the way, is a very sweet guy, you know? He stands up for himself. He's a family man.

So my question for Mike is, throughout every single project, they're all so different. You know, you can see Mike working with Usher. You see him working with myself. You see him working with Kendrick. You see him working with all of these incredible artists. How are you able to stay inspired enough to execute on such a high level with each project? Like, what type of intense deep-diving does it require, and does it charge you up as a person, or does it take away from you? You know, do you feel drained after these projects? Because you wear so many hats at once. So I just wanted to know, where is your well at? Like, do you feel full when you execute something creatively? Do you feel empty? Do you need to, like, refill that, and, if so, how do you do that?

All right. I know that's a long question, but shout out to my brother, Mike Carson for life, 92 boys, I'm talking since III Roots days, you know, and, man, [EXPLETIVE] know, man. They know what's up, man.

[CLIP ENDS]

Mike Carson: That was really cool. I appreciate that.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. For our listeners who didn't see the visual or who may not recognize the voice, can you tell folks who that is?

Mike Carson: That was Big Sean, somebody I've known since I was 18, and I'm 33 now. So.

Paola Mardo: Wow, long time.

Mike Carson: Yeah, long time.

Paola Mardo: Long time. And you guys work together, a long collaboration.

Mike Carson: Yeah. No, I feel like I—

Paola Mardo: As his creative director?

Mike Carson: Yeah, for a really long time. And I feel like it's where I, to be honest, sharpened my sword, you know, figured it all out, if you will.

Paola Mardo: Dope.

Mike Carson: He was, like, my first guinea pig, muse, if you will.

Paola Mardo: Muse, brother.

Mike Carson: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Okay. So thank you, Big Sean. Shout out!

Mike Carson: Yeah. No, I really thank you. Appreciate it.

Paola Mardo: And did you get the question? I can re-say it.

Mike Carson: Yeah, can you re-say it? It's kind of long.

Paola Mardo: He had so many great things to say about you. The question was: How are you able to stay inspired in order to execute at such a high level? And it's sort of a two-parter. That's the first part. And the second one is: Does it change or take away after a project? Do you feel full? Do you feel empty? Where's your well at?

Mike Carson: Every project is so different. I think just in general, you know, to his point, I do a pretty deep dive before I start anything. But, like, in terms of just, like, inspiration, it's generally—it generally comes from, like, a conversation with said artist or brand or collaborator just to, like, get a sense of, like—you know, because it is a collaboration, and they are kind of forward-facing, it's like, what do you want to get across? Do you have any goals? Do you have any references, anything?

And from there, I kind of, like, one deep dive into them but also, like, I'm just a student, and I'm a researcher just in general so I'm always filling my brain with things whether it's books or museum exhibits or movies or music or whatever. Hopefully that answers that.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, it does. And can I ask about, like—because I think I've heard where you say you do, like, a brain dump.

Mike Carson: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Is it, like, a Google Doc? Is it a Notes app? Is it a notebook?

Mike Carson: Yeah. It's like—it's usually, like, a Keynote or, like, a Google Slides or something. And, like, depending on who it is, it could be 20 pages, and I think I just did one recently that was like 100 pages. And it's just, like, me getting a lot of things out of my head, but, like, with context and, like, you know, pulling referential imagery or asking questions or sometimes just type or, like, you know, statements just as, like, to say, "This is what I'm thinking. Are we on the same page?" And then from there, refining that to, like, a, you know, executable idea. So yeah.

Paola Mardo: That's really cool. And then, what is your well like at the end? Does it charge you up, or are you depleted? And what do you do at the end of a project?

Mike Carson: A little bit of both. I can't lie. I think, like, you know, as creatives, we put so much into, you know, our work. And, like, I know, at least for me, like, I'm trying to find that balance of, like, obviously caring about everything but not giving it all of me so that I am not drained, just having a bit more of a balance. But there's definitely been, like, moments and projects where I've been, like, toast after. But for the most part, there is a sense of fulfillment, especially, like, working in a live space or, like, concerts or something where you can get, like, the instant reaction or instant gratification, which is I think why I like the medium, is you work, and you're up all night, and you do all these things, but then you get to, like, see people react to it. I would assume it's, like, kind of similar to, like, a director sitting in a theater and, like, seeing people react to their stuff.

[25:18 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: So music videos—I mean, we live in an era where music videos honestly live on so many platforms now.

Mike Carson: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: You used to just watch them on television.

Mike Carson: On TV, yeah.

Paola Mardo: What were some influential music videos for you that made you want to do this?

Mike Carson: That's a good question.

Paola Mardo: Or even directors.

Mike Carson: Yeah. I think—I can start with directors. I think Hype Williams, of course; Chris Milk; and then, like, after the fact, coming back to it is Spike Jonze. The videos, I feel like, that shaped my taste were probably, like, Mark Romanek, 99 Problems, Jay-Z. It's a really—I think it—to me, it's the best rap video ever.

Paola Mardo: It's a good one.

Mike Carson: And I think, like, a lot of stuff Chris Milk was doing with Kanye like Touch the Sky where he was, like, Evel Knievel or, like, All Falls Down. And then, like, going back on it, I think, like, what Spike Jonze was doing and just kind of disrupting, like, this very glossy industry is really inspiring. I think I'm really inspired by it right now. And then Hype just, like, setting the tone stylistically and just, like, creating, I think, the blueprint for, you know, rap and R&B videos. And then eventually, like, they were copied for pop videos. He's the best. So yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah, I feel like each director you mentioned just had a very specific vision and aesthetic and style—

Mike Carson: Yeah. For sure.

Paola Mardo:—that, honestly, people kind of—

Mike Carson: They still do it.

Paola Mardo:—emulate now because—

Mike Carson: Yeah. I mean, even I do. It's like—it's like, I take little things from especially Hype and, like, apply to, like, how we light people onstage.

Paola Mardo: Oh, yeah.

Mike Carson: It's like, oh, okay.

Paola Mardo: I can see that.

Mike Carson: Because it's kind of theatrical. So it's like, how do you light Kendrick onstage? And we're taking, like, things that he might have did in, like, Belly or something. So yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Can you talk about your first big-budget video?

Mike Carson: Big budget.

Paola Mardo: Like, how you navigated that.

Mike Carson: Yeah. I think—like, looking back, it was not a big budget, but at the time, it was, like, the most money ever. It was Big Sean—just him, at first, Big Sean. At the time, the song was called Dance (A\$\$) and there was no Nicki Minaj on it yet. And the song was taking off. And I remember the label was like, "We need a video." We had been—you know, me and Mike had been just shooting, like, a bunch of just these running videos with Sean. So they were like, "We're going to give you a budget." It was like \$30,000, and at the time, like—

Paola Mardo: Huge, huge budget.

Mike Carson: This was crazy.

[LAUGHTER]

So, like, you know, which is—like, in hindsight, I look back, and I'm like, "Why did they think we could produce this?"

Paola Mardo: These 20-year-olds.

Mike Carson: Yeah. Like, not to say we couldn't direct it. But it's like, we—I think they were like, "Hey, here's the budget." So, like, we were just buying, like—we were like, "We're going to shoot this on a 5D," and we just kind of, like, buy all the gear. And then, eventually, they were like, "You guys need a producer," like, very last second. So we shot in Atlanta. It was just him, and to be honest, like, I don't think we had enough for a video.

And then I think Nicki got on the song. And then they were like, "We need to shoot Nicki." So, in my head, I'm like, we have to obviously shoot Nicki, but, like, we need to make up for all the stuff we did not get. So we wrote a bunch more ideas, crammed a bunch of stuff to what became that video.

Paola Mardo: That's awesome.

Mike Carson: I think a pretty iconic moment in both of their careers. At 19, so yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, very iconic song, as well, for that era.

Mike Carson: Yeah, crazy.

Paola Mardo: Can you—like, I don't know, what did that teach you as, like, your first big-budget video?

Mike Carson: Yeah. Looking back, I wish I could—I wish I knew what I was thinking at the time. But looking back, it's, like, the importance of a great team. And, you know, I think DIY is great, but it definitely has a limit if you're kind of new in the game. And, like, when you do have that opportunity, like, you know, make sure you make some money, but also, like, make sure you're well-staffed and well-prepared for the opportunity because more will come to you, I think.

Paola Mardo: Right.

Mike Carson: And then also being confident in your abilities. It's like—I think by the second time we shot, you know, it was more of, like, a bigger crew and all this, and we were just young, but we had confidence. And maybe it was, like, weird to some people that we were, like, this young

directing, but, like, I don't think it would've worked if we didn't have some sort of, like, delusion, if you will. So yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, and it's a little important, actually.

Mike Carson: Yeah. I'm trying to get back to that. It's like I'm not delusional enough.

Paola Mardo: Bring back the delusion.

Mike Carson: Yeah. I think that, like, childlike curiosity and, like, enthusiasm and delusion is, like, really important. And, like, I think that is also, like, the Virgil of it all. Like, that was, like, his whole thing. He's like, "Oh, I'm going to DJ," and then got good at DJing.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I feel like the higher up you get in your career, the older you get, it's not that you become less—we just get older. You just get more used to the way things are. But I hear you, and, like, I miss that sort of early excitement and energy—

Mike Carson: For sure.

Paola Mardo:—and, like, kind of naivety almost because you don't know what you don't know. So you just kind of dive right into it. I think I know too much now.

Mike Carson: Yeah, I think—

Paola Mardo: I want to unlearn some of that.

Mike Carson: For sure. And I—it's kind of strange, like, I think, with, like, being in the Information Age because everybody knows everything now. And it's almost like a hindrance because you can, like, see everything. You can see how everybody's doing everything, and it might deter you from getting started because you're like, "I don't have this thing."

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Mike Carson: So that's why I always am, like, very grateful I came up in the absolute perfect time because, even though things are easier now and more accessible, it's way more scrutinized and, like, easier to overthink. Like, I wasn't—I never thought about, like, an algorithm at 19 or, like, views or things. And, like, the things—

Paola Mardo: Wasn't that nice not to think about that?

Mike Carson: Yeah. So I, like, feel for, you know, people that are 19 now, and it's like, I want to say it on record. It's like, just create. Just, just make stuff. It'll click.

[31:13 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: I think we can switch over to the process section of this.

Mike Carson: Yeah, yeah. Cool.

Paola Mardo: And you brought something to highlight your process.

Mike Carson: Yeah. I brought my laptop. I was trying to think of, like, some cool, artsy thing to do to, like—or, like, an old archival thing. But I'm like, to be frank, everything starts with my, like—everything starts with an idea but, like, and then I'm just on my laptop, whether it's in Notes or Notion or whatever and then, like, boarding stuff and then sketching and then, like, 3D and talking to designers. So, like, yeah, I brought my laptop. It just—

Paola Mardo: I feel like we should—we should grab your laptop real quick.

Mike Carson: Yeah, let's do it. It's really dirty.

Paola Mardo: Let's just do it. We're going to cut real quick.

Mike Carson: I'll probably need, like, a wipe or something.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: We won't zoom into it! Yeah. I mean, this is your tool.

Mike Carson: Yeah. It's—it is, like, my baby. It's beat up and dirty but, like, I have it with me everywhere because it's the easiest way for me to do things. Like, I'm slow on the phone. I think I have big thumbs. But, like, even, like, typing text messages is so much faster for me on a computer.

So, like, I'm always writing on my laptop. I'm always, like, on some weird forum grabbing old film stills that are, like, reference images, or I'm on here editing and, like, whether I'm editing something that's going to be seen by the world or editing something, like, for internal purposes, to, like, mock up an idea or putting songs together and, like, to talk to an artist and be like, "What if we do this sequence of songs?" So I love the laptop. To me, it's like the gateway to the world.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Are you—I didn't mean to chuckle at the big thumbs. I do—I hate—

Mike Carson: No, no, I have—

Paola Mardo: I think my thumbs are messed up now because of phones.

Mike Carson: I have big thumbs. Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Are there things you wanted to talk through or show or—because I have some questions about how you use your laptop, too.

Mike Carson: Yeah. So, like, I'm usually—maybe we can, like, screen record this. Like, I'm usually just writing things. That way, I can just, like, get it out of my head. And then, from there, I'm like, all right, if there's a reference image or something that exists, because I have just a crazy library of things.

Paola Mardo: Oh, that's great. And this is, like, a Google Doc? Or—

Mike Carson: Yeah. It's, like, a mind-mapping software, like a—

Paola Mardo: Okay.

Mike Carson: There's, like, Figma or Miro or, like, things like that. So.

Paola Mardo: Oh, gotcha. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Mike Carson: I'm, like, just dragging and dropping stuff in here just to, like, zoom out and see, like, is there a common theme here? And, like, then from here, this is like my internal brain dump where I'm just dumping, dumping. And if we're, like, really close in terms of, like, a collaborator, I'll just share my screen and, like, "This is the idea. This is"—you know, "This is where I'm at. You take this now," and then, like, from the—you know, on a sense of collaboration, I'm like—that's usually where, like, renders and things are getting made. So, like—

Paola Mardo: That's awesome. And what was this one? Because I'm seeing images. There's, like, keywords.

Mike Carson: Yeah. I just dropped a bunch of stuff in here, but, like, this is from a few different projects. Like, some of it's from the Super Bowl. Some of it's from, like—

Paola Mardo: Okay. Cool.

Mike Carson: Like, a film thing. And then, like—then I have, like—and just talking about the Super Bowl.

Paola Mardo: Oh, sick.

Mike Carson: So, like, some of the renders that our art director did. If I'm designing something, I'll probably do, like, a really crude, rough mockup of the thing. And then sometimes it's good enough to sell the idea, but in the context of, like, the Super Bowl, you know, we wanted to be

on our Ps and Qs, so, like, creating a brief and collaborating with, like, an art director or a render artist to, like, create more actualized renders to, like, communicate the idea.

I think it's really important in the context of something like the Super Bowl where you have to communicate to hundreds of people, and they all have to get it. And there can't be, like, "Well, if you kind of look at the square like this." It's like, I would rather work with someone that's better than me to get the idea across so that—you know, for the end goal. So.

Paola Mardo: Right. So it's really clear. No matter what department you're in on the production, you know exactly what the vision is.

Mike Carson: Yeah. And just having such a limited time on the field or, like, a limited time in person, you have to like, to the shot kind of storyboard, you know, in the same way in a film, you would storyboard. It's like, some directors storyboard and draw themselves, but, like, nine times out of ten, there's, like, a really amazing storyboard artist that they're working with.

Paola Mardo: It's like an extension of your brain, it seems like.

Mike Carson: Yeah. For me, it's like, obviously if I'm at, like, a rehearsal or something and, like, I'm walking around. I'm not walking around with my laptop but, like, in the context of, like, creation and ideating. And, like, for me, it's just way easier than being on the phone. The phone is kind of like, secondary.

Paola Mardo: That's so cool.

Mike Carson: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: That's so—it was cool to see a little bit of, like, how words and, like, random images can turn into, like, something real.

Mike Carson: A bigger thing, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Like a production.

Mike Carson: For sure. I think that's, like, the, the beauty of just being in your house sometimes and just thinking and, like, it's like, it doesn't have to be fully formed. Like, most things people see from me are, like, version 10 of something because it's like, you know, get it out your head and then, like, self-edit. Like, don't edit before you get it out your head, I think is really important.

Paola Mardo: How many versions did the Super Bowl get to?

Mike Carson: Oh, man, I don't even want to know. You don't want to know. It's a lot.

[36:26 - "Prox Recs Theme" with Ludwig Göransson and Ken Nana]

Paola Mardo: So you are a listener of the podcast, so you know we're getting to that moment we call Prox Recs.

Mike Carson: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: What's your Prox Rec?

Mike Carson: All right. Let me make sure I'm getting this right. So there was a DVD box set that was gifted to me probably like 2009, 2010-ish. I lost it, but I re-bought it, and I've been watching it over again. It's called Directors Label. It was a series. They did a bunch of them with, like, different music video directors. So they are, like, box sets.

So, like, one of the box sets is Spike Jonze, Michel Gondry, Chris Cunningham. And it's great. It's, like, a DVD of their best work or, like, not even just their best work, like their work from, like, their first video up until like—I think the DVD came out in like the mid-2000s, so up until that point. And there's tons of behind-the-scenes stuff as well as, like, booklets of, like, you know, sketches that, like, Gondry drew of certain storyboards or, like, behind-the-scenes images.

So, like, you're going to have to go on eBay and find it and find a DVD player. But, like, there is so much out there if you're, like, interested in the medium. And, like, for me, I'm just—I love just learning and soaking up stuff. So, like, being able to, like, watch your heroes in their element and, like, see the behind-the-scenes of these, like, iconic things that probably aren't online is like—yeah, that's my rec.

Paola Mardo: I love that this conversation has brought back the art of the music video.

Mike Carson: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Because there really is an art to it.

Mike Carson: It is.

Paola Mardo: And, like, people need to revisit that.

Mike Carson: It's a lost art. It's funny because we're in the like—we're in the age where it's like, "The music video doesn't matter," but, like, one, I do think it matters because a great video, whether it's one or ten a year, like, they always cut through. But, like, in this era of content and, like, short-form content and stuff, people are only engaging with videos. So I think it's, like, one of the illest art forms because it's, it's usually low-budget in the grand scheme of like—you know, if you think of, like, features and things like that, it's like, you can kind of see who's a really dope creative who has a mind. It's where you can kind of get—you know, get your hands dirty and, like, learn the craft, you know, on the job. And, like, it's fast-paced.

So I do think it's a really great resource for directors to, like, tap into. Like, start at home. Shoot with your friends. Shoot local rappers for free. Like, just learn and just try, and then, like, I promise it is the best practice.

Thank you.

Paola Mardo: That's great advice and a great rec. Thanks, Mike, for—

Mike Carson: Thanks for having me. It's a honor to be here.

Paola Mardo: Amazing to be—an honor to be In Proximity with you.

Mike Carson: Thank you so much.

[39:09 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media.

The show is hosted, directed, and produced by Paola Mardo.

Executive producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, and Sev Ohanian.

Theme song and additional music by Ludwig Göransson.

Patrick Epino is our co-director and director of photography.

Ken Nana is our sound designer and mix engineer.

The production team includes Brittani Brown, Isabella Miller, and Alexandria Santana.

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[VOICEOVER ENDS]