

In Proximity

Michael B. Jordan and Ryan Coogler on SINNERS, Lore, and Filmmaking

Season 3 Episode 19

Final Transcript

Michael B. Jordan: And we talked about Smoke, you know, told Stack to tell you know Mary to get out of here. You know what I'm saying? Or he sent Stack to go—they went and tried to do another life together. You know what I'm saying? They were separate for a while, realized that wasn't working. And then they had to come back together.

Paola Mardo: Are you talking about the brothers were separate for—?

Michael B. Jordan: The brothers were separate for a minute. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Oh wow! I did not know that.

Ryan Coogler: I got to go back to that spreadsheet.

Paola Mardo: Can you pull it up?

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: I could, actually. It's here.

[0:31 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo, and today I'm talking to Michael B. Jordan and Ryan Coogler.

It's a big day on the podcast, and these two need no introduction. But for the sake of an episode intro, Ryan Coogler is the writer, director, and producer of *Sinners*, which stars Michael B. Jordan as the Smokestack Twins. Longtime listeners of In Proximity know that our very first episode featured Michael and Ryan. So I'm very excited to welcome them back on the show and super honored to be joining them in conversation about their work on this film.

Also, if you listen to the podcast but want to see these two in the flesh, check out the video version of our show on YouTube. Our podcast is, of course, In Proximity, and our YouTube channel is called Proximity Media. We'll also link to resources and other episodes mentioned in this conversation in the show notes or description below.

It's a special episode for us, so we wanted to kick things off a little differently. Ryan, for those who don't know, is a coffee connoisseur of sorts. So, we brought in an espresso machine into the studio and he made us some coffee—lattes, to be exact. We talked about how Ryan got into coffee and coffee-making specifically, how that influenced Michael in his espresso life journey. and how it all ties back to film.

Then we dive deep into Sinners, and specifically getting into the nuances of Smoke and Stack. Michael, as you know, played not one, but two roles, so he gets deep into his acting process on this episode. He talks about things like key phrases, how he built the characters and used journals to really create their backstories, and how Ryan, as the writer/director, brought these characters to life on the page and the screen and the timeline he created for his actors, including Michael, to learn a lot more about who these characters were before the movie even begins.

Finally, we get into some lore behind the Smokestack twins, how they came up, the romances with Mary and Annie, and what happened in Chicago with Al Capone.

Trust me when I say it's going to be a real ring a ding ding! So grab your cup of coffee and join me in my conversation with Michael B. Jordan and Ryan Coogler.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[3:00 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

Ryan Coogler: So, brought these from home, brother.

Michael B. Jordan: Red Bay Coffee.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. I'm like a sommelier. You know what I mean?

Michael B. Jordan: Where's that roast from? What are the beans from?

Ryan Coogler: Allegedly, Colombia and Kenya. Notes of passion fruit, brown sugar, toffee. Little espresso. We're going to pop the seal...

Paola Mardo: Well, before you go, or start, I want to say welcome.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Welcome to In Proximity, Ryan Coogler, my boss, and Michael B. Jordan. Glad to have you guys back on the show. You guys were in episode one of this podcast and talking about actually how you first met at a coffee shop. And now here we are.

Michael B. Jordan: We've gone full circle. Look at that!

Paola Mardo: Full circle. We brought the coffee shop to the studio. Ryan, for our listeners who do not see what we see here, can you talk a little bit about what's in front of us and what are you about to do?

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, so I got in my hand, I got espresso roast from Red Bay Coffee out of Oakland. Brought this down from the Bay. In front of me is a La Marzocco Linea Mini...

Paola Mardo: Espresso machine.

Ryan Coogler: ...espresso machine.

Michael B. Jordan: That's fancy right there.

Ryan Coogler: This one goes on the road with me when I'm out of town working. So this was in New Orleans with us when we did Sinners. I'll make coffee drinks for cast and crew when they come to the office. So it's been in storage in LA for a little bit. [TAPS MACHINE] I think it's going to move to this office maybe.

Paola Mardo: Probably right here.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, maybe right here. Yeah, I'm about to make some coffee for y'all. I'm a little rusty.

Michael B. Jordan: Hey man, go for it. It's all good. [RUBS HANDS] Mm, mm, mm, mm, mm!

Ryan Coogler: Don't judge my latte art. But yeah, am I good to...?

Paola Mardo: Good to go. Judgment-free zone.

[BAG SEAL OPENS]

Ryan Coogler: You my boss today, you directing this.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: What? Oof. Tall order.

Michael B. Jordan: Take advantage, take advantage!

Paola Mardo: Okay, I will, I will, I will.

Ryan Coogler: I'm going to get this in the grinder.

Paola Mardo: Yes.

[ESPRESSO BEANS POUR INTO MACHINE]

Michael B. Jordan: Okay. Whole bag!

Paola Mardo: Have you had coffee by Ryan before on set or anything like that?

Michael B. Jordan: I have. He's actually the reason why I'm slightly into this espresso life.

Paola Mardo: Okay.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah. I think my first real espresso made by him was on that machine right there in New Orleans in his office.

Paola Mardo: Oh wow. For Sinners!

Michael B. Jordan: For Sinners. Yep. Yep.

Paola Mardo: Okay.

Michael B. Jordan: And yeah, he was breaking it down. Similar to what he's doing right now. Got the weigh scale. When he pulled out the scale, that's when I knew it was serious business. He was down to the-

Paola Mardo: Right. And the machine. I mean, this is a whole industrial grade.

Michael B. Jordan: Big time. Big time.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: Industrial grade's crazy.

Michael B. Jordan: No, it is. It's industrial, commercial, you know what I'm saying? Restaurant quality.

Ryan Coogler: Hey, it's about to be loud.

[MACHINE GRINDS ESPRESSO BEANS]

Ryan Coogler: Industrial grade is crazy. It's for at home.

Michael B. Jordan: Coffee truck.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. At home. It's the at-home model.

Michael B. Jordan: But when you're working crazy hours, you know, hitting espresso definitely—it goes a long way.

Paola Mardo: Brings you to life.

Michael B. Jordan: Big time. We're shooting a lot of nights, you know... Coffee was our friend.

Ryan Coogler: I like it because it's nice to do a little act of service for the cast and for the crew. You know what I'm saying?

[MACHINE GRINDS ESPRESSO BEANS]

Paola Mardo: I mean, can you talk a little bit about that? 'Cause you told me you did not drink coffee growing up.

Ryan Coogler: I did not.

Paola Mardo: When was your first introduction to coffee, and how did you end up wanting to make coffee?

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. My first true introduction to coffee was at the Cannes Film Festival in 2009. So I was, like, early 20s. I think I actually turned 23 at that festival.

And before then, I didn't think of coffee as something that was... I didn't think coffee as something that was for me. It was something for, like, older people or, you know, like, the girls drank it. The girls drink—they'll drink a frappuccino from 7-Eleven or whatever. You know what I mean? But yeah, bro, I even had a homie—I was telling Paola I had a homie who used to drink it while we played football. We would make fun of him. We called him a grandpa. He'd come in the locker room with a thermos and he'd— [MAKES SIPPING NOISE] We'd be like, "Man, this little dude tripping."

But after that film festival, bro, I was jet lagged out there and they had a big sponsorship with George Clooney at the festival. So I was seeing George Clooney drink it all the time on the little commercials and pictures, and I was like jet lagged falling asleep in screenings. So I said, "Man, let me try it, bro." They had a free station in what they call the Palais where everybody—it's like the Grand Central Station, the junction for the festival. Went in there and ordered the strongest one they had on the menu and I've been hooked ever since.

Michael B. Jordan: Said, "Give me that one."

Paola Mardo: I like how your coffee story is film-related too. You had coffee for the first time at a film festival.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. It's totally tied to it. And then, you know, it's coffee culture on a film set, right Mike?

Michael B. Jordan: Big time.

Ryan Coogler: The camera crew usually is where the real coffee heads is at. They usually got some on their truck.

Paola Mardo: Camera crew, really?

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah. They got the secret stash on their truck. They're coming in with the special drip.

Paola Mardo: Oh wow.

Michael B. Jordan: And drip coffee.

Ryan Coogler: Our stills photographer on Sinners—who's real close with Mike, did Creed III and...

Michael B. Jordan: My boy, Eli.

Ryan Coogler: ...Wakanda Forever—he's super into it. He used to have a cafe, but they'll have a machine on the truck.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah, we take coffee—take it seriously now.

[MACHINE PULLS ESPRESSO SHOT]

[MILK FROTHS]

[TAPS PITCHER AND POURS MILK INTO COFFEE]

Michael B. Jordan: Ooh, look at that pour.

[OVERLAPPING CHATTER]

Paola Mardo: He's pouring the milk.

Michael B. Jordan: That artisan swirl!

Ryan Coogler: It was me and Mike— Y'all stop it, man.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: For listeners, he's pouring the milk, creating some kind of latte art.

Michael B. Jordan: Some personalized, uh... I don't know what that is in it.

Paola Mardo: It's a face of...

Ryan Coogler: I told y'all I was rusty, man. This latte art is subpar.

[TAPS MUG ON TABLE]

Paola Mardo: It's all good. It's abstract.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: It's like Jackson Pollock.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: Here you go.

[HANDS MUGS TO PAOLA]

Paola Mardo: Thank you very much.

[HANDS MUGS TO MICHAEL]

Ryan Coogler: Got it right here for you, brother.

Michael B. Jordan: Alright! Fresh.

Paola Mardo: Cheers. Cheers. Cheers.

[MUGS CLINK, ALL TAKE A SIP]

Michael B. Jordan: Mm-hm. Oh yeah, that's nice. Mm-hm.

Ryan Coogler: How'd we do?

[MICHAEL CLICKS, GIVES THUMBS UP]

Michael B. Jordan: Muy bueno.

Ryan Coogler: All right, bet.

Michael B. Jordan: Oh man, coffee's really good.

Paola Mardo: Well, cheers to that. Thank you, Ryan, for this coffee. It's very good.

Ryan Coogler: Oh no, you're welcome. Thanks for letting me make it for y'all.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah. The first thing came to mind, something you said earlier was like, which not to speak for you or whatever, but the acts of service. You know, like, doing things for people that you care about, you know what I'm saying? You're family when you're on set and cast and crew, and there's something intimate about that.

For me, it's cooking. I love cooking. And cooking for people, seeing them enjoy the food or having them try something that they—maybe they said they didn't like or they didn't, you know, never had before. And just having that shared experience, like one of those universal love languages, something that I found to be really, really helpful. Especially on set.

Paola Mardo: Do you cook for people on set?

Michael B. Jordan: Well, we had Jayme Lawson actually, we had a semi-game night. And first of all, I'm in a group—well, they had a group chat going...

Paola Mardo: I heard you were—

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah. I found out about it later.

[LAUGHTER]

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah, Mike's busy. He ain't never going to show up. Let's not even worry about it.

So they let me in on the group chat, which is... yeah. Yeah, I know who y'all are. But anyway, me and Jayme ended up cooking, you know what I'm saying? We had brought food over, but we ended up, you know what I'm saying, cooking for everybody and whatnot. But there is that feeling of having a family meal. You do cast dinners, like, cast table reads and stuff in the beginning to kind of set the tone. But whenever the cast can kind of get together on their own, outside of those set times and start bonding, it usually means that you're going to have chemistry and a vibe on set that's like second to none and really helpful for the project.

So the idea of making coffee, there's a certain ritual to it that's like, there's steps, there's process. Like you said, it takes time. You got to be hands on with it. So it's a similar feeling for me with cooking, but understand that what that does for the community, for the people you care about, is pretty good.

Paola Mardo: I love that.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. When it comes to the actors, like as a director, that's who you're really there for. You really are—once you're gone, you're really the only person that's there for them. And what's nice for me to be able to... Because these people are about to give me everything for a few months, you know what I mean? Their bodies, their minds, their emotions. So for me, it's nice to just do something for them that's just for them. You know what I mean? Like, make them a cup of coffee. Make sure it's nice and hot and freshly made, you know what I mean, right there for them to kind of set the tone.

Paola Mardo: Goes back to what you were saying about acts of service and just kind of a family vibe. When you guys are in the trenches with each other, it's nice to have sort of, like, that personal connection. Why not share over a cup of coffee or a meal? I feel like you guys could open a restaurant at some point.

Ryan Coogler: Be like The Bear.

Michael B. Jordan: Aw man...

Paola Mardo: If this doesn't work out. I'm just saying.

[LAUGHTER, OVERLAPPING CHATTER]

Michael B. Jordan: Yes chef! Yes chef! Yeah.

[12:26 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: So we have our coffees. Thank you very much. We have your cozy seat right here.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: We're going to talk about Sinners, and you guys.

Michael B. Jordan: Let's do it.

Paola Mardo: But first, I want to take it back to the first episode you guys did with us on this show. You were in post-production on Creed III.

Michael B. Jordan: Wow.

Paola Mardo: Ryan and I met you in some theater where you guys were editing the film, and you guys sat down for a conversation and talked about how you guys met at a Starbucks and decided to work with each other, among other things. But specifically about that conversation, you talked about how you had never been number one on the call sheet before.

Michael B. Jordan: Yes.

Paola Mardo: So I want to play a clip from that part of the conversation and ask you a little bit about that. There you go.

Michael B. Jordan: Okay. Oh, that's fun.

[CLIP: "MICHAEL B. JORDAN AND RYAN COOGLER" - IN PROXIMITY]

Michael B. Jordan: And then there was this thirst and this want to be a leading man. I didn't know if I was a leading man or not.

Ryan Coogler: I remember that. I remember asking you that in that meeting because I'd imagined, in my own, like, naivete—there was a film that you had done where you were the lead or a short film, and you were like, "Yeah, I've never been number one on a call sheet before."

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: I was like... I didn't really know that call sheets were numbered at the time.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: And then, it was a show, I think a pilot you were getting ready for. And I was like, "Well, are you the lead in that?" And you was like, "Well, that's kind of an ensemble piece, too." And I remember thinking in my head, "This is crazy. Like, you know, like, obviously this guy is really talented." I didn't know how to feel about that. It was a part of me where I was, like, really excited that I wasn't going to be working with somebody who, like, been there, done that.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah. You know what you said to me? You said, "Hey, man, look, I wrote this for you. I believe you a star. I know you a star. Let's go show the world."

Ryan Coogler: That's crazy.

Michael B. Jordan: And it was coming off the heels of this leading man conversation that we had.

Ryan Coogler: Wow.

Michael B. Jordan: And not feeling like—I've never been number one on the call sheet. You were like, "Hey, man, look..." And I don't know if that was director, you know, Coog coming through and just giving me the gem that I needed in that moment, you know what I'm saying? Because who would have known? But I carried that with me because I was like, "Man, this dude who just met me believed that I was a star and believed that I could do it," and that was the agenda. That was the goal, to go do that. Obviously, you know, with everything else around the movie, as well, but that's something that kind of stuck with me moving forward of, like, yeah, I am, and I could do that, too. And we continue to do that.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, totally.

[CLIP ENDS]

Paola Mardo: So on Sinners, you were number 1A and 1B, I believe, on the call sheet as Smoke and Stack. I have seen it.

Michael B. Jordan: I have seen it.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. What's it like to hear that?

Michael B. Jordan: Ah, man, perspective. I mean, I think since then, I've been on a few call sheets and I think it's... In hindsight, it's something that didn't matter. You know? I think, in the moment, it was so important to you, you needed it so bad, some type of validation on my journey. So I think it was necessary at the time for ambition, for me growing. But just for me and my perspective of listening to it now, yeah, I'm like, "Let's go get the work done. That shit don't matter."

Paola Mardo: Yeah. It's not about the hierarchy, right? It's like you set goals for yourself and like, yeah, you're 1A and 1B on the call sheet now. I mean, what can't you do? But it's really cool to see sort of how you guys have grown since that first film, Fruitvale Station, and even since that first podcast conversation.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Ryan, do you have any thoughts about hearing that conversation you guys had? That was about three-ish years ago, almost four.

Ryan Coogler: I think Mike just summed it up. I think it's interesting, but it's always nice to have perspective: where you were and your mindset before. So much of our work is like, "What's happening next?" It's interesting. We sounded young too.

Michael B. Jordan: Big time.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. It sounds like a lot happened since even recording that. Yeah.

Michael B. Jordan: And it's like number one on the call sheet really used to symbolize or should symbolize leadership and what that means to the rest of the cast and crew. You can't just talk a big game. You can't get number one on the call sheet and show up to work and not be a good guy, you know, or not treat everybody on set the right type of way or not encourage

community and like hard work, and ego. And all of a sudden that number one on the call sheet don't mean nothing. You know?

So if you're able to act like, or present yourself of leadership in a real way, I think that's the key, 'cause that's what that's really supposed to mean. Number one on the call sheet is supposed to mean you a captain. It's the head coach, you know what I'm saying, as the director. And then the number one on the call sheet, you're supposed to be like that coach on the field, and that's kind of how I look at it.

Ryan Coogler: I think Mike on a set has a mentality of somebody who's been at the quote unquote, "bottom." Like, knows what it's like to be a day player, knows what it's like to be somewhere in between. And at that point when we met at that Starbucks, you've been working for how long, bro?

Michael B. Jordan: 15 years maybe.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ryan Coogler: So he got a 15 year experience of not being that, and knowing what it's like when the person that is in that position is kind, is thoughtful. And so, I think that that kind of shaped him to be in a situation where it's a tone that's set from any movie where he's a lead, where it's going to be a tone of kindness, respect, hard work, and just treating folks like human beings, because a lot of people got their hands on movies. You see the "directed by", you see the "produced by" the studio, and somebody's face on the poster or what have you. But every time a movie's made, it's hundreds—sometimes many hundreds. In the case of *Sinners*...

Michael B. Jordan: High post.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, like international, all types of artists, professionals with their hands on the movie. And when somebody can establish such a kind and respectful way of working for the process, it trickles down in a way that's great. People not only give you their best work, they want to give you their best work, you know what I mean?

Paola Mardo: Yeah, I hear that.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, I like that. Game night is one thing that set the tone.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah.

[18:56 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Let's talk about *Sinners*. When you first got the script and read it, what questions did you have for Ryan, and what did you really want to get right about playing Smoke and Stack?

Michael B. Jordan: I think the first questions that I had was... maybe a little bit around the twins' backstory? There's a lot of questions of like what their life was like before page one. and

that's the juiciness. That's the stuff that I really, you know, I'm excited to dive into and figure out, because I know that's going to shape all the little micro decisions and choices of these characters throughout the whole film. I think the surreal montage was something that I read on the page that I was, like, kind of, like, asking questions.

Paola Mardo: Did you see it?

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah, you know, I'm a super imaginative person and love things like that, like those surreal—I love that in film. And yeah, I could picture it, but it's always—when I get a script from Ryan, it's reading it. And then it's almost like a game for me to try to figure out what he meant in certain situations. You know what I mean? "What'd you mean by this? Or like, what is that? Were you trying to do this? What were you trying to do over here?" So that is always a nice little inner puzzle that comes along with a Coogler movie, with a Coogler script.

Yeah. And it's always like, I don't know, for me, seeing how close I am to his instincts without him giving me a lot. And then once we start unpacking it, diving into it, getting real specific, sometimes it's like, "Oh, I wasn't even looking at it like that, but that's a perspective." Like, "Oh, okay. That wasn't what I was trying to do or say, but that's cool." You know what I'm saying? Let's figure out how to weave that in, if it comes to that or—

Paola Mardo: This is when you guys talk about it, at a rehearsal or on set?

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah, just from the time I read it to as we're actively shooting it, it's always some type of discovery of things, which is us always trying to get everything we can out of every moment. You know what I'm saying?

Paola Mardo: I love that because specifically for this film, the fans, when you say that, they picked up on so many details and I feel like they were craving to hear more backstory, but going back to what you were saying about the puzzle.

Michael B. Jordan: The puzzles?

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Can you name a scene or a character thing that...?

Michael B. Jordan: Well, when Stack and Mary are talking at the train station, all right, when he's talking to her about X, Y, and Z, like, okay, oh, her mom just died. Okay, okay. So what age did they separate? Did he send her? Where exactly did he send her to? And for what reason?

Oh, okay. Mary's mom was basically like their mom. Oh, okay, got it. Okay. So their dynamic was like Smoke and Stack wasn't really supposed to have—Stack wasn't supposed to have any type of romance or some type—that wasn't supposed to develop like that, but it just happened to develop like that. And Smoke always looked at it like forbidden, or that wasn't a good situation.

So things like that and those little nuances helped me play Smoke and Stack. Where Smoke's with Mary, where's that coming from? It's not like "You did my brother wrong" or "You betrayed him" or "You betrayed my trust." No, it's not even that. He's making a choice for the future. He's making a choice for future stability and safety. He's trying to be a protector. He's trying to protect himself for what he might have to do in the future. And that gave me a lens to look through Smoke as in all situations, you know?

And also Stack, the selfishness that he normally would have. "Alright, I'm going to put everybody in peril or in a dangerous situation because this is what I want and this is what I need to have for me." And then ultimately coming down to it, of like, "Ah, man, I can't do that, so let me do the hard thing. Let me lie, let me procrastinate, let me manipulate as much as I can to appeal my brother. But then also, what I know is true, too. So there's something I can't have."

[23:18 - "In Proximity Theme Stinger" by Ken Nana]

Paola Mardo: Smoke is—I think I've heard you say this, Ryan, Smoke is like the doer and Stack is like the dreamer. I mean, they both had traumatic childhood, right? Smoke killed their father to save Stack. Smoke lost his daughter and that had a big impact on his life as well. And then Stack had this forbidden relationship with this mixed race woman.

Michael B. Jordan: Yup. Mm-hm.

Paola Mardo: I read the script as well because I work here, but also when I watched the movie, I felt like I knew all that, even though I didn't see any of that. And a lot of that was the script, but a lot of that was also your performance. So yeah, what were those conversations like between you guys building that backstory, and can you share some of the lore, whether about the relationships, how they grew up, or what happened in Chicago?

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. For me, working on a script as a writer, it was a lot of math happening, like just figuring out how old these guys were. That was the thing. And it's interesting because with actors, a lot of times, actors—especially movie stars that we know—a quality of them is that they kind of can be ageless. If I was to ask Mike how old Delroy is, or like if he was to guess how old—pick that actor that you've been seeing in a long time, it becomes hard to place them and you realize it was kind of always hard to place them. You know what I mean? When Delroy was 40, it was hard to place how old he was, you know what I mean? And so Mike, Hailee, Wunmi, they can play like a standard deviation of like 10, 15 years.

And for me, it was, like, man, how old are these guys specifically? And I didn't want to think about how old Mike is. It's more like, what makes the most sense for the story?

And I knew that the movie would have to be somewhere around the '30s, because that's kind of the era of blues music I was interested in. And then I knew that these guys would be World War I veterans. And so World War I happened at a specific time, and the U.S.'s entry into the war was also in a very tight amount of time, and 'cause they were Black, it was a few all Black regiments that... So then it became like, well how old were they when...? So you kind of work backwards and forwards at the same time, and try to make some decisions based off of the dynamics as a writer. So then when Mike and the other actors came to town, I wanted to have enough specifics to, like—because your worst nightmare is to be asked a question you don't know the answer.

Michael B. Jordan: Ooh! Yup.

Paola Mardo: As a director.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. Well yeah, I'm a writer/director, right? So if I hadn't written the script and they asked me a question, I couldn't turn to the writer and say, "Hey, what's up?"

Paola Mardo: Yes, yes, yes.

Ryan Coogler: But also sometimes it's okay to, like, you learn through experience, and sometimes it's okay to say, "I hadn't thought about that yet." That'll give you a lot of room versus making some up on the spot, or—but yeah, you remember I had the spreadsheet?

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, I made it.

Michael B. Jordan: Big time, yep. Timeline.

Ryan Coogler: I made a little spreadsheet for Mike to show him where they were and what happened and how it went down. And the big thing for me was—and Mike really interpreted this through his performance—who did what for the other person was really, like, in many ways what defined their actions that you see in the movie. And Mike kind of like... I remember Mike would come to me with ideas, and that was when I knew it was like, alright, man, it's in this dude's hands now as an artist.

But I remember when we were trying to figure out the hairstyle, and Mike was kind of like, "Hey, I think Stack does Smoke's hair, 'cause I don't know if Smoke cares enough about what's fashionable or if he should have a parter."

And then I was like, "Oh, that's a brilliant idea." Which would explain why they essentially had the same hairstyle and it is a fashionable one. It is one that you don't see everybody else with in Mississippi. So it was, like, oh, Stack's like a style guy. He's like cutting edge. So, if you watch Mike's performance—and it's not even something we talked about—but Stack is constantly adjusting his own clothes. Constantly. He's constantly fixing his suit and making sure everything is right and adjusting his hat, and you never see Smoke touch his clothes. Smoke is just—he doesn't care.

So that part, for me, was really interesting. And it's a choice that—it kind of reverberates, you know what I mean? And even like with the shaky hands, we wrote that in. But how did you do that, bro?

Michael B. Jordan: The tremors and shit?

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Michael B. Jordan: Playing around with a wrist versus, like, if it's coming from your elbow, like where exactly the tremor is coming from. And we talked to D'Lo a lot.

Ryan Coogler: Now D'Lo works here.

[OVERLAPPING CHATTER]

Paola Mardo: I was going to say—so this is our D'Lo? Your D'Lo.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Ryan Coogler: So the idea for the tremors came from knowing D'Lo.

Paola Mardo: This is D'Angelo D'Lo Lewis. He's been in the pod, Proximity fam as well. Which character are you talking about, and what...?

Michael B. Jordan: We're talking about Smoke and we're talking about his hand tremors. And D'Lo, he had experienced those before. So he was somebody I had talked through, just kind of figure out, like, how often would you have him or, like, something that you noticed personally, or is it something that's so involuntary that you don't even know is happening, you know what I'm saying? And that has changed how cognizant and aware Smoke was in certain situations of when it's high stress. So coming from the war and being in those trenches and what they experienced and what they seen and what they escaped and been through, he would have some PTSD in a certain type of way.

So when Grace is going off on him a little bit in the juke, and questioning him being a soldier and him being a protector, and just questioning everything he is—it's a moment where he's trying to hold that together, so we kind of show the tremors a bit there. And then obviously at the end when it's high stress for him—but you always see him kind of flexing his hands every so often checking. He's like a guy that's on time. He likes timely things. He wants things to run smoothly. So he's constantly checking his watch and trying to hide the tremors a little bit sometimes with his hands.

[30:35 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: You played two roles, twins, for one film. And so, it's these little nuances and differences in your performance that were so interesting, that people picked up on, but also some of them were so subtle just like this. I feel like I'm going to have to watch the movie again, to really look at this. But can you talk about the preparation for that? You wrote—I have my notebook here—but you got journals, right?

Michael B. Jordan: I do. I do.

Paola Mardo: So can you talk about how you use journals in your process?

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah, journals for me is like—it's really just going back to the earliest memory to page one of the script, and it's really defining who these guys are, you know, who they are when nobody's looking, when nobody's around, how they think, how they look at certain things. So, I'll write things down from things that me and Ryan talked about, like mutually agreed things, like things that happened throughout their lives. Then it's like a day in the life of, like, what did you do today? What was it like when they were in Chicago going on this run?

And imagine this type of, like, he had to put a hit on somebody. How would they move in a certain environment? What was an interaction between Smoke and Stack that allowed them to get into trouble or get out of it? Little things like that. I would just imagine and play around with it and start writing things down. And then, as I start to find out more information around Mary or Annie, I would incorporate those things into it.

And then I'd play around with, you know, what was it like when he found out he was going to be a dad? Probably one of the scariest and happiest days of a lot of pain throughout his life. And then, oh man, consequences—what does that mean? What does that mean for my brother?

What does that mean for our lives moving forward? Hey, is Annie going to want this out of me? Is there an expectation for that? Now I got to go—got to tell my brother this. I got to tell—

Paola Mardo: So you wrote all this out? Wow. For each of them?

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah. These are things, like, these are different ways— Yeah. And that really just helped me always have a base of where I'm coming from. You know? And we talked about Smoke, you know, told Stack to tell Mary to get out of here. You know what I'm saying? Or he sent Stack to go—they went and tried to do another life together. You know what I'm saying? They were separate for a while, realized that wasn't working. And then had to come back together. It was, like, all those little nuances, like, that the—

Paola Mardo: Are you talking about the brothers were separate for—?

Michael B. Jordan: The brothers were separate for a minute. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Oh wow! I did not know that. Wait. At what point in their lives did they—

Ryan Coogler: Man, I got to go back to that spreadsheet. It's a three—

Paola Mardo: Can you pull it up?

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: I could actually. Here. But they killed their father, hid out at Mary's mom's place...

Michael B. Jordan: Correct.

Ryan Coogler: ...then went to New York and joined the military. Went to fight in France, came back, and they went back home for a little bit. While they were at home was when they came back and Mary was older. So that was when Stack and Mary happened.

Michael B. Jordan: And seen her in a different light, like oh man, this ain't a little girl.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. After war...

Paola Mardo: Sparks flew.

Ryan Coogler: ...and then that was when, because she was like a younger sister to them. Smoke and Mary's mom didn't love that. It was like a three-year run where the twins had basically broke up, where Smoke and Annie got their house, and Stack and Mary went to Little Rock.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ryan Coogler: And when they lost their daughter was when things got rocky. And then that was where they both basically left their partners in it, and moved everything to Chicago.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Wow.

Michael B. Jordan: And then from there, coming back, and then that's when you see them coming back is the beginning of our story.

Paola Mardo: Wow. Okay. This is lore. The young people call "lore." But wait, I got to ask about Chicago because they talk about it so much.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Did you guys figure that out? Did they meet Capone? How did they get that Irish beer, Italian wine situation?

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah. I mean, well, basically...that's a little loose, you know what I'm saying? And a lot of that stuff. But the key things from that experience for me, for Smoke and Stack, was—they were doing jobs because... They were doing jobs that Capone didn't want to do themselves because they would know it was from Capone. But if I use these guys from out of town and they're twins, you know what I'm saying? It's like a peculiar thing. Then, nobody's going to trace it back to him. So amongst that, they started to figure out who the major players were: Italians, the Hans and this, that. You hear them talking through the different types of gangsters that was running Chicago, and they figured out how to take advantage of the situation and get out of here and go start their own shit. And nobody's going to think it's them. They're going to think it's each other. Basically, they had them fighting themselves.

So that was kind of a little bit of that I used to kind of like root that conversation with Mary and Stack and then, them amongst each other. And then, when they're talking to Sammie, and giving him some game on what the world's like outside of Mississippi, and trying to keep him on the straight and narrow as much as we can. While Stack's giving him a little bit, like, you know, more big brother, little...

Paola Mardo: A little more.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah, uncle energy. You know what I'm saying?

Paola Mardo: Life advice!

[LAUGHTER]

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah, yeah. So, like, Stack's like the true uncle, and then, like, Smoke's like the dad out of every group.

Ryan Coogler: Or better yet, the grandpa.

Michael B. Jordan: The grandpa. Yeah. He's the old man. So that's how we played that.

Ryan Coogler: That was the most impressive thing about the performance for me, from Mike's standpoint, is, like, how much older Smoke feels than Stack. Because Smoke felt like—even in person—he felt like an old man. You know what I mean? Whereas Stack, in person, felt like a young man. Even on set, when we would cut the camera, Mike just had, like, this old "been

there, done that" stressed out energy that only an elder statesperson can have. So it was fun seeing my friend be an old man.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: Mike's a year younger than me. And like, our energy—our dynamic is like, I'm the older...

Paola Mardo: You're the Smoke of this relationship, in some way.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: But to see him just embody the art of somebody who's, like, been through so much more than the other one—even though they was basically in the same places at the same time—it was a profound subtlety there to his performance, but it was really dynamic.

Michael B. Jordan: Because one of the things we talked about with the twins was, like, alright, we liked the idea of other people didn't know which one was which at first from a distance, until they got up close. You know what I'm saying? Even with Slim at the train station, like, "Which one is you? Are you this? Are you that?" You know what I'm saying? Slim is, uh, "You Smoke or Stack?" You know what I mean? And then Mary, too, there is this bit of like, "Who's who?" And we liked that mystery to 'em, until you got up close and you hear them talking and then they put it together, kind of, like, mid-conversation. And we liked that kind of, like, people didn't know how to approach them.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. But what was crazy, what I will say though... So there was this script I wrote, and then there's the movie we finished with, and a lot of that shit we cut out and it actually worked better in that. Because we used to have, in the screenplay, Slim is like, "Hey, which one are you?" And that idea was a part of where I was aiming at, but, like, what I love is where we landed, now Slim doesn't ask that in the movie. And what it implies is that he and Stack are close, which I liked. I liked that Stack would be closer to this flawed—this extremely flawed man. Because I could see a world where Smoke and Slim are not as close. Because Slim's an alcoholic...

Michael B. Jordan: Lifestyles.

Ryan Coogler: ...like their father was, and a musician, like their father was, you know what I mean? I could see a world where Smoke was, like, more distant from Slim than maybe Stack is. So, it was, like, ever-evolving as far as, like, the movie and that's what's so interesting.

For me, I'm a writer/director. I'm writing these characters, thinking about these characters, before I even tell Mike I'm making a movie sometimes, 'cause I want to present it to him like a good cup of coffee, like, "It's ready for you." But there comes a point in time where the actor becomes the expert on the character, you know what I mean? The twins are his now, and the twins belong to the movie. What Delroy does, what Mike does, it becomes—it gets to the point where I can't force that no more if it's saying something that's different, you know what I mean? Even to... One thing we would talk about, bro, is Stack being a liar and Smoke always telling the truth.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah. Yup.

Ryan Coogler: Before Smoke would lie, he just won't say nothing. You know what I mean? And in those decisions, you could see, like, it's some questions that Annie might ask him that he won't answer 'cause it's, like, yo, instead of lying to you, I'm just not saying nothing.

Michael B. Jordan: I'm just not saying nothing.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: And for me, watching the movie, like—I'll never forget, bro, when you and Miles were improvving.

Michael B. Jordan: Upstairs?

Ryan Coogler: In the car.

Michael B. Jordan: Oh, in the car. Yep. Yep.

Ryan Coogler: In the car.

Michael B. Jordan: With Stack.

Ryan Coogler: Bro, brilliant, brilliant improvisation from him as Stack. Miles is great. But your improvisations as Smoke and Stack, a lot of Smoke's improvisations were nonverbal. I remember the choice you made where David Maldonado as Hogwood calls Smoke the N-word while they both are dying, you know what I mean? And Smoke, 'cause you're asking for a light—and the moment felt empty. And then Mike as Smoke was like, "Yo, I would just do this." And he just reloaded. He just reloaded. [HITS HAND WITH FIST]

Michael B. Jordan: Oh, for real? Okay, okay.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, and I'm like, "Oh, that's a Smoke play." And if you watch the movie, he doesn't even blink. He's just staring at him the whole time, and it looks like he's loaded this thing a thousand times. He don't even have to look at it, which is actually a difficult loading mechanism. But he was so in the pocket of his performance that it's just like toss, load—you know what I mean? And that was improv.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ryan Coogler: But nonverbal.

Michael B. Jordan: And those are the few times that I actually could, especially when they're by themselves. I could improv a lot with other actors, which is great. Whenever the twins are in the same scene, that's when the improv gets a bit challenging.

Paola Mardo: Because you had to pre-plan sort of your choices.

Michael B. Jordan: Because I'm acting off of something that I haven't done yet, and those responses are kind of baked in, depending on what take we decide we're going to marry ourselves to. The ability to just try to premeditate and pre-set choices that I think are interesting,

from one brother's perspective versus Smoke, versus Stack, would have to talk Percy Bell, my twin double. He would have to watch me kind of almost dry-run the other brother, Stack, of where I would loosely be blocking-wise, and kind of what I'm thinking and inflections and just in choices, whether it's... The toughest thing is looks, if I want to connect eye contact or subtle moments between the two of them. To line that up was probably the biggest challenge. But if I did something on that side that I liked, or if I did something on Smoke's side that I enjoyed, I would always clock it, for me, where I would do it at, and I would try to line it up on the other side. And a lot of times, more times than not, it was either narrow, narrow misses or spot on, like, "Okay, that worked."

Paola Mardo: What way you look is like a big conversation, sometimes?

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah, because if I want to match like when they're at the door, when Remmick pulls up, and it's like when they start playing, it's, like, sometimes a subtle look between—Stack's kind of enjoying it a little bit.

[LAUGHTER]

Michael B. Jordan: Stack's kind of finding this shit interesting, and Smoke's like, "Nah, get the fuck up out of here." So there is a look between the two of them where they kind of have, like, subtlety that I thought worked well for the moment. It kind of defined both of them and their personalities. So yeah, so the improv was something that I had to dry-run, have Percy kind of lock it in loosely, and then I would jump back as Smoke, rehearse that, and get everybody on board, get decisions and choices that we would make, shoot that as Smoke, you know what I'm saying? Lock in those choices, pick the take that we like, and then I'll switch over to Stack and then try to reflect off of and mirror those choices. And if I could fit—and if I was looking at the take of Smoke, if there was something I did or, like, subtle things or just something super small, when I did go to Stack—when I switched over to Stack and I knew that was the one to complete the scene, I would try to match it on the back-end. I would try to connect something to Smoke on the back-end and then I could actually make it work.

Paola Mardo: It feels like a lot of mental gymnastics—or I just had a lot of coffee right now.

Michael B. Jordan: Big time.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: Good.

Michael B. Jordan: That means it's working.

Paola Mardo: It is.

[45:28 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: You had a lot on your mind to think about to play these two roles, and their backstories, and how they react to certain things, how they react to each other. Can you talk a little bit about that preparation process? Were there—I've heard there were like some key

phrases, or things that you sort of came up with when you were developing Smoke and Stack. Can you share a little bit of that?

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah. As we were working through my dialect coach, Beth McGuire, she's—worked with her for years and...

Paola Mardo: And she worked with the cast as well on their dialects and performance. The rest of the cast.

Michael B. Jordan: Big time.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. We've been working with Beth since Black Panther One.

Paola Mardo: I heard.

Ryan Coogler: And she got introduced to us through Lupita Nyong'o and Danai Gurira. She's a professor at Yale. So she did dialect work for us on Panther One, Panther Two, and on this.

Michael B. Jordan: So on and so forth. I worked with her on Mercy, certain things, so she's somebody that knows the family well and definitely helps out. And this one needed that kind of work, especially with some of the physicality, the way they walk, which I said a few times. But, like, Smoke wore a size too big shoe, and Stack wore half size too small because I needed him to, like, to move around and feel different just in his steps and his fidgeting. As Coog was saying, Stack's always fixing his shit, always moving, but he's always kind of, like, in the process of moving to the next thing, so the smaller shoes helped. And Smoke, with his shoes being too big, it kind of makes you not want to move too fast in any direction. You're a little more planted and surefooted when you're stepping, and that was important to have in their bodies. But when it came down to working on chakra work, and where their childhood trauma came from, and how they projected their voice, Smoke was in a much lower register and Stack was in a higher octave. When we had choices of who would go first, we always strove to have Stack go first, depending on the scene.

Paola Mardo: I find that interesting because I'm the oldest of my siblings, and Stack is younger than Smoke. I would go first, but yeah. So tell me about that.

Michael B. Jordan: Stack had more energy. Stack just had more energy. So for me, just like stamina-wise throughout the day, if I started off with more energy, I could start off with Stack and I could lay into that. So by the time I started smoking the cigarettes and your voice—it naturally, like, brings it down and, like, you know what I'm saying? And my energy would be a bit lower.

Paola Mardo: More Smoke.

Michael B. Jordan: More Smoke. So it would be easier for me to do Smoke second, but it depended on the scene—

Ryan Coogler: It was counterintuitive. I remember that I thought the same thing because Smoke's the leader. Yeah, and y'all did that chakra work, too. But he would say, hey, if we do a whole 12-hour day, it's harder for him to turn around and be this high-energy guy at the end of the day, and the voice—because Stack's voice was at a higher register.

Paola Mardo: That's true.

Ryan Coogler: The cigarettes—the cigarettes would knock his voice out.

Paola Mardo: Get it all raspy.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. And so it was hard for him to do—for him to sound like Stack if he had smoked a bunch of cigs.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Sounds about right.

Michael B. Jordan: But depending on what twin had the most agency, the other rules would override that. Like okay, cool, if whatever twin went first kind of set the boundaries for the second twin—kind of like what I was talking about, the improv stuff. So that would trump the voice register and the fatigue—

Paola Mardo: It depended on the scene or the moment that they were in.

Michael B. Jordan: I had a preference and then I had, like, alright, what's the best way to get this scene done in the time we got? And that always overruled. But the key phrases, that was super helpful for me to get their dialect and more of their cadence.

Paola Mardo: Can I just pause for those who aren't professional actors? What is a key phrase? What does that even mean?

Michael B. Jordan: Oh yeah. Key phrase is like a phrase that you would use to help you, your muscle memory of your voice and your vocal cords to get into register, to get into a cadence of my character. So for Smoke, we started finding late '30s audio, and there was a few videos that we kind of used of...because we were blending these—it's really hard to find, like, dialect from that era, enough for me to really latch onto, so we kind of Frankensteined something to make it feel of that generation. And Smoke and Stack, I found this older Southern woman. So yeah, they used some key phrases, and she was talking about flowers, and that felt very Stack, you know what I'm saying?

Paola Mardo: Do you want to play it?

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah. You got them?

Paola Mardo: Okay. We'll play it real quick. Yeah. So oh, here we go. Stack?

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah. So Stack's key phrases was ...

[CLIP: "PLANTIN' FLOWERS" - MADE IN MISSISSIPPI]

Mississippi Woman: I been duggin' flowers all my days. Plantin' flowers, from a lil' chil' on up, I like flowers. An' I don't like no flowers that don't bloom. I want it to bloom.

[CLIP ENDS]

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah, like Stack—Stack had that energy to him. So I used those to kind of have in my head that I would listen to as I'm switching from one twin to the other, or in between takes and stuff when I need to drop back into it. I listen to those, and Smoke's is a bit more...

Paola Mardo: Should I play it?

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah. Yeah, go for it.

[CLIP: "NEVER BEEN IN NO TROUBLE" - MADE IN MISSISSIPPI]

Mississippi Man: I ride horses, chop cotton and plow, hootin' and holler, cut summerset, do all that stuff. I come up the hard way. Been on a farm all my days. Never been in no trouble.

[CLIP ENDS]

Michael B. Jordan: The phrase was like, "I never been in no trouble," you know what I'm saying? But I switched it to, like, "You always gettin' in trouble." So there's little tweaks in there. Yeah. So those were super helpful, you know what I'm saying? And it was good to hear a bit of that dialect from that era, and just how fractured a lot of their speeches were, and their cadence.

Paola Mardo: That's incredible. It's like you're playing fictional characters, but you dug into—much like Ryan did for the story—you dug into, like, real people, real history to bring them to life.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah, 'cause it's our history, you know? My mom's side of the family's from Hope, Arkansas. My dad's side is from Shreveport, Louisiana. So being down there, and understanding that we come from our ancestry, sharecroppers, and thinking about our grandparents, my great-grandparents, great aunts, and all that good stuff, that was their reality.

Paola Mardo: Do you guys talk about that, your family?

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah. Yeah. We dove into a lot of that. I mean, me and Coog, our families are similar in a lot of ways, and understanding that migration that a lot of us have been through that's in our history, just kind of talking through a bit of that and how we personalize it, you know what I'm saying? How we could take those similarities and put it to the page and to the characters as much as we could. And yeah, it turned into a love letter for—as much as it is for his Uncle James and his family with his connection to blues music and that history—for me, my grandparents and great aunts, uncles, it's like a love letter to them.

Paola Mardo: Love that.

Michael B. Jordan: They were in their late 20s and 30s, trying to get it, trying to find their piece of relief, and to find something that's theirs in an era that told you you couldn't have it.

[53:27 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: I just want to talk about one scene. It's sort of a scene, it's like—maybe it's not as flashy as the vampire scenes—but it's a scene when Smoke gets to town, parks the car,

teaches this young woman how to basically negotiate, because he pays her a little bit to watch his car.

[CLIP: "NEGOTIATION" - SINNERS]

Smoke: Can you tell time? And I'ma pay you 10 cents for every minute that I'm gone. Would that work for you?

Teenager: Yes, sir.

Smoke: No, ma'am. See, we talkin' numbers now, and numbers always gotta be in conversation with each other. You understand? You gotta negotiate. Now, 10 cents just won't work for you. Talk another number back to me.

Teenager: 50 cents.

Smoke: 20 cents. Best I can do. We got a deal? Good. Jump in.

[CLIP ENDS]

Paola Mardo: Can you guys talk about that scene? Because it's—I feel like it reveals a lot about Smoke, and it kind of comes back later when they're counting money in the juke joint.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah, it's one of my favorite scenes because you see so much of Smoke in that small bit of time when he parks and pulls up. And he had just had a discussion with Stack about if they was going to remember him or not. And I think Smoke's fear was going there by himself without the other brother and everything being completely different, and not really getting the respect that he thinks—that presence that he needed to have. And so when he asked the girl, "Have you heard of the Smokestack Twins?" and she's like, "Yeah," that's when, "I'm Smoke." He's kind of testing his own lore a little bit, you know what I'm saying? To see if he still got it.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Yeah, still does apparently.

Michael B. Jordan: And then I think it turns more parental. I think foreshadowing a bit of the loss of his daughter, you know what I'm saying? And maybe his daughter might have been a little bit younger than that at the time, but also giving her the game—the tools—to negotiate. That's what you got to do down there. You can't just take what somebody gives you, or what it offers you. You got to fight for what you think you deserve, what you want.

So that moment with just time, "Can you tell time?" and "I'ma give you 10 cents for every minute"—and all that stuff was just beautiful, kind of a softer side of him that you haven't seen. And then you're getting ready to see him negotiate and put that to work, and then you're going to see him actually be the muscle, all in this little shorter bit of time. So you understand exactly who Smoke is really fast, and then you understand who Stack is, too, what's going on with him at the train station. So yeah, that scene between the two of them was special. Yeah, it was good.

Paola Mardo: And you've often worked with Mike on characters that were kind of like hungry, like you need to prove something, or like Creed, or Killmonger, really need to get the crown, and they're hungry for something. Smoke's a bit different. Different role. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, no, for sure. And I think that it was a fun character to write, but it was a really fun character to see Mike play. Because Mike is very much like those other characters. That was kind of where he was at in his life, and the energy required, but it's also kind of who he is. He's a very, very ambitious person, and energetic, and optimistic. So it was interesting to see him play somebody who's the opposite of all those things. And Smoke—the idea behind Smoke is that he's not out to prove anything. He doesn't care what people think of him. He's just going to get what he feels like he deserves, and that's the end of it. And the idea was, if it wasn't for Stack, he would be in that shack with Annie, you know what I mean? He would be there until he dies, but he has this other part to him that is hyper-ambitious and is saying, "Hey, what if we did this? Or what if we did that? Or we could go do—" And so he's going along, kind of begrudgingly, but because he is a realist, he's going in a place that's hyper-aware, and we would talk about them as being fully baked.

Paola Mardo: What does that mean?

Michael B. Jordan: Like, they're not evolving too much. They are who they are.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah exactly.

Paola Mardo: As people.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, like, this is who they are, and the other part about it, too, is like, these are very bad men, you know what I mean? That's the part, like they're murderers, they're robbers, they—Stack's a pimp, you know what I mean? You see these dudes cross the street, but yet still, they're still human beings. There is still a depth to that humanity, and an innocence that's been lost a long time ago, but it's still remnants of it. And so, that part of it was really exciting for us to play with Mike, because he is an actor who, I think—like a Tom Hanks, where you put him on camera, you're going to like him. He has that part of you going to give him the benefit of the doubt. So it was like, yo, how bad could we make these dudes?

Michael B. Jordan: Let's test that.

Ryan Coogler: Let's really put it to the test and see what happens, you know what I mean? Not just let them—just see in their backstory, but actually see them do it.

Paola Mardo: Physically.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. All of the—you see Stack's lying constantly. He sends this woman that he loves, he sends her out to go...

Michael B. Jordan: Live this other life.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. Smoke kills a bunch, murders a bunch of—

Paola Mardo: But he also just shoots some guy on the street. It's like—

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, I'm telling you, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Two!

Ryan Coogler: Who he knows!

[LAUGHTER]

Michael B. Jordan: Who he knows, exactly!

Paola Mardo: Did Mike do anything unexpected? Because to me, that was for Smoke as a character, you empathize with him with that girl teaching her that, and then a scene later, it's like, boom.

Ryan Coogler: Every day. Every day. I think a big thing for him, like, Smoke, I would say, was the most distant from who Mike is as a person, much more distant from—Mike's not a pimp, he's not doing none of the things that—he never knifed nobody that I know of. You know what I'm saying?

Michael B. Jordan: "That I know of" is crazy.

Paola Mardo: That you know of.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: But you had a life in Newark, bro, you know what I'm saying? I ain't going to assume...

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: Statute of limitations.

Michael B. Jordan: Statute of limitations.

Paola Mardo: Lore. Lore.

Ryan Coogler: But I think his energy, his charisma, his friendliness, and the fact that you meet some people who've been through a lot of shit and they wear it, and it wears away at their friendliness. It's a type of person who's seen so much that they aren't friendly anymore. They're not saying, "Hi, how you doing?" They're not making any effort towards making you feel comfortable. And Smoke embodied that in such a way that was so impressive. It is Mike's natural thing as a person. He'll come to set. He'll say "Hello" to everybody. The person that mic's him, he's going to make sure it's a pleasant interaction. You know what I mean? It's a real solo thing. He'll offer things. When he was Smoke, none of that happened.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: It would be, like, a chill that kind of came with him in the room, and even in his improv, and how he would move, how he would look at people. And it's a military thing. They said in the military, these guys, they're constantly thinking about how they would kill you if they had to, and that's where Smoke is with everybody. He's looking at Hogwood like if I had to kill this dude, which gun would I use? Which one would I pull? Would I do it here? Would I do it in there?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Ryan Coogler: And as—that first scene with Hogwood and the twins, as it's bubbling to the surface, Stack is realizing, "Oh, Smoke's about to kill this dude."

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Michael B. Jordan: That was fun.

Ryan Coogler: His whole thing is like, "How can I keep Smoke from fucking this deal up? If he kills this dude, my dream's going to evaporate. My dream of this juke."

Paola Mardo: Yes. Bone and money. Yes.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, and then Hogwood continues to disrespect him. So Stack the whole time is like, "Hey man, I'ma knife him if I have to, but let's get..."

Michael B. Jordan: Let's try to find a little deal.

[LAUGHTER]

Michael B. Jordan: And we messed around with it. So Stack's circling him to kind of—so Hogwood can't get eyes on both of them. So as Stack beelines around to get his blind spot, Stack's just waiting for the final decision from Smoke, if he's like, "Do I get the word or no? What are we doing?" You know what I'm saying?

Paola Mardo: Yeah. What do you want me—? Yeah.

Michael B. Jordan: And there is that thing that we kind of discussed of—Stack's going to, he's going to talk to you, he's going to get you going. And then while that is happening, Smoke is figuring out how to kill you. And that's kind of, you know, one of the mindsets that I always had with both of them, and we apply it to every moment when it's just the two of them and somebody else.

Paola Mardo: That's amazing. It's like split personality.

Michael B. Jordan: A little bit.

Paola Mardo: But still some kind of hive mind between the two?

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah! And that was fun. That was fun to blend those and find opportunities to show that contrast, but then that solidarity also between them. So it was a blast, man. So much fun.

[1:04:12 - “Prox Recs Theme” with Ludwig Göransson and Ken Nana]

Paola Mardo: I want to wrap the conversation with a segment we call Prox Recs.

Michael B. Jordan: Okay.

Paola Mardo: So, this is where each guest—includes you right now too...

Ryan Coogler: Uh oh.

Paola Mardo: ...recommend something for the audience. It could be about your process as an actor, as a writer/director. It could be a book, a movie, a technique, anything that's sort of useful in people's kind of art, and craft, process as they listen to this and kind of absorb what you say. So who wants to go first?

Ryan Coogler: I don't. I actually forgot about the rec, so I got to think about it.

Paola Mardo: It's all good.

Michael B. Jordan: I would say journaling. I'll give that up. I think, in your own personal life, I think it's really good to journal and write down your dreams—your literal dreams and your dreams that you have. You know what I'm saying? I think it would be good to journal as a whole. But when it comes to character-building and acting, I feel like it's a good tool for me. An analog way to burn that into your memory, you know, into your subconscious of writing it down from your earliest memory as that character to page one of the script, is helpful for me. And I would recommend that to any actor that needs—or just in general for any project, I think it's super helpful. And it also gives you a time capsule. You can go back and reflect on your process five years ago, 10 years ago, where was I at? How was I writing? And then see how it evolved over the years and how you've grown from that.

Paola Mardo: Journaling. I love that. It's a great rec. What about you, Ryan?

Ryan Coogler: I've drank a lot of coffee and oat milk during the filming of this episode.

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: Yeah, I'm going to recommend the cortado as a drink.

Paola Mardo: Hey, I love a cortado.

Michael B. Jordan: What's that?

Ryan Coogler: The cortado is—

Paola Mardo: I couldn't tell you. I've ordered it though.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah.

Michael B. Jordan: Okay.

Paola Mardo: He'll know.

Ryan Coogler: The cortado is an equal parts espresso and steamed milk. It's lovely. It's a lovely way to have a little bit of calories with your espresso, but not completely overpower it. I wish I had made one today. I did not. But yeah, like, big shouts out to all the coffee-drinkers out there in the world, all the coffee-drinkers that listen to In Proximity.

Paola Mardo: Hey.

Ryan Coogler: Hey, give the cortado a chance. You know what I'm saying? Give it a shot.

Paola Mardo: Give it a shot.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. Give it a shot. Boom.

Michael B. Jordan: Ooh, I like that!

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. That's my Prox Rec.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: That is. Great way to end it!

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Well, yeah, thank you Mike. Thank you, Ryan.

Michael B. Jordan: Thank you! Great job as always. Thanks for having me.

Ryan Coogler: Yeah. Thank you. Thank you.

Paola Mardo: It's a pleasure.

Michael B. Jordan: Yeah.

[1:07:18 - "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 is by Ludwig Göransson.

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

Ken Nana is our sound designer and mix engineer.

This episode was edited by Patrick Epino.

The production team includes Celine Mendiola, Joy Woo, and Alexandria Santana.

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