11/13/24 / when docs cry

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

NOEL: It’s Today, Explained. Martha Stewart is out publicizing her new Netflix documentary in the most hilarious way

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fl8YzPDjsDw)*> Tonight Show: Jimmy Fallon: “Are you happy with the documentary?” Martha Stewart: “Yeah. The documentary is fine. It left out a lot. So I’m going to go talk to them about maybe doing version 2.”*

NOEL: by telling Jimmy Fallon she low-key hates it.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fl8YzPDjsDw)*> Tonight Show: Martha Stewart “I don’t like going to psychiatrists and talking about your feelings and the director was so intent on delving.”*

NOEL: Powerful people like to control their image / and more and more often / celebrity documentaries allow them to do that. The Martha doc didn’t. Neither did a new - and very mysterious - documentary about Prince that, for reasons we’ll explain: you may never get to see. That’s coming up.

[THEME]

NOEL: I’m Noel King with Matt Belloni. He’s a founding partner of Puck and host of The Town podcast - about Hollywood. Matt is the proud inventor of the term “participation doc” - a type of movie that, like it or not, is ascendant.

MATT: A participation doc is a documentary in which the subject is also an active participant and that means they are typically a producer or they are contractually involved in the documentary and that is most of the celebrity-oriented docuseries you see on streaming services you will also notice that they are participation docs, they are done with the full participation of the subject.

NOEL: What do you think of them?

MATT: I'm not typically a fan of this genre of programming.

SCORING IN—SMASH HITS APM

I think that you sacrifice a lot when you get into bed with the subject of your film. I'm not saying there aren't amazing documentaries that are participation docs. However, there are so many of them these days that they have sort of morphed into another thing. And often those documentaries are simply vehicles for image brandishment by the subject. You know, name your pop star. They've got a documentary on streaming that A, they've been paid a lot of money to participate in, B, they have a producing credit on the film and C, they have significant input into the outcome of that project. So there's not going to be anything in there that is going to tell you something the artist doesn't want you to know.

NOEL: huh!

MATT: The Beckham docuseries, which was very popular and actually is one of the better-done examples of the genre, in my opinion.

*<CLIP>* [*The Beckhams*](https://www.netflix.com/title/81223488)

*Victoria Beckham: We were very working, working class.*

*David Beckham: Be honest.*

*Victoria: I am being honest.*

*David: Be honest.*

*Victoria: I am being honest.*

*David: What car did your dad drive you to school in*

MATT: That was a full participation doc.

*<CLIP> THE BECKHAMS: VICTORIA: “Alright its not a simple answer. DAVID: What car? VICTORIA: It depends. DAVID: no no no VICTORIA: OK in the 80s my dad had a Rolls Royce. DAVID: thank you…”*

MATT: They had sign off. They had, they got paid for it. They were very much involved in the final product. And I I'm not passing judgment. I get why the filmmakers do this because you want access. It's a tenant of journalism. If you want access to people you need to give up certain freedoms and in the documentary space, often that freedom is the freedom to tell the story the way you want it to be told. Often it has to be told the way the subject wants it to be told.

SCORING OUT:

Now there's a nuance here that often big-name filmmakers and I've debated this subject with some pretty big documentary filmmakers who say that what they don't give up is final cut. And sometimes these filmmakers will negotiate that they get final cut, the star and the producer, they can have input, they can decide what they want to say and not say in interviews, but ultimately the final cut will go to the filmmaker. And that's an individual conversation on each one of these projects.

NOEL: For a long time, I think people have assumed that documentaries are not participation docs. That some filmmaker who wants to approach a subject as, you know, a real person with flaws and also gifts, is going to do an honest take about them. Is that how it used to work? Like, how much of a shift is this?

MATT: It's not that big of a shift. It's just that today there are more of them. You look at the explosion in celebrity-fronted documentaries in the streaming age, the streaming services have enabled all of this because there's just a new market for it. They're willing to pay money to get these projects at a price that induces the artists who want to participate. I mean, we're talking tens of millions of dollars. Some of these big artists are getting. for these documentaries. And if you put a tile on a streaming service with a picture of Taylor Swift or Billie Eilish, you're going to get a lot of people to click on those tiles. So the streaming services have leaned on this genre for a lot of the most clickable content.

NOEL: Hey Matt, if I am watching a celebrity doc and I wanna know whether it's a participation doc or not, other than looking at whether or not the celebrity was the producer, are there certain kinds of narratives that I'm looking for? Is there a certain type of interview or interviewee that I'm looking for? How do I know?

MATT: Well, you can look at the filmmaker and see what that filmmaker's track record has been. If they direct the kind of films that tend to, uh, transcend the genre. Um, you can also look and see even if the celebrity is not a producer on the project, look on IMDB or elsewhere and see if that celebrity has a production company because the production company may have a credit on the film and the production company might have executives that run that company and they may be credited on the film. So it doesn't necessarily have to be the big star’s name on it. It could be people who work for them or their company.

NOEL: I care a lot about this because I'm a journalist and if something isn't journalistic, I'm suspicious of it. Do, do audiences care though?

MATT: The numbers suggest the audience does not care. I'm a journalist as well. And I tend to focus on this stuff. One of my favorite celebrity documentaries of all time is Amy, the Amy Winehouse documentary. And that was a famously a non participatory documentary.

*<CLIP>* [*Amy*](https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/amzn1.dv.gti.cea9f74c-1d40-b934-fa56-fc574943e6a7?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb)*: Amy’s blood alcohol level was 4 to 5 times higher than the drunk driving limits. Maybe the combination of her eating disorders and the alcohol just made her heart stop.*

Amy Winehouse's family did not like the film and didn't support it because it got into all of the demons and everything that ended up being her demise. And those are the kinds of films that, that, I tend to be drawn to. For most people, especially on the streaming service, all they're looking for is a little access to their celebrities that they like. So the reason why these tend to proliferate is because people like them. They just are looking to hang out with their favorite stars a little bit.

NOEL: And we know why these would appeal to celebrities, right? They make a lot of money and it's a chance to kind of burnish their image. So they tell us about celebrity. Do these documentaries tell us anything about the state of the entertainment industry?

MATT: I think that the, the, the overall narrative on these documentaries is just the, the fact that stars these days don't need the media.

NOEL hmm

SCORING—POWERPLAYS II

MATT: They have really controlled their own narrative. You don't need a big magazine or a big documentary and to turn over control to someone to tell your story. You can tell your own story and you can commission your own documentary and have an input in that. Sometimes if you're a big enough star, if you're a sports star or if you are a big music star, you can do multiple documentaries. You can do one for each tour. You can ladle out different levels of access for different prices. It's a whole economy of marketing yourself via documentary.

MATT: I was watching the Steph Curry documentary at Sundance a couple years ago….

*<CLIP>* [*Stephen Curry: Underrated*](https://tv.apple.com/us/movie/stephen-curry-underrated/umc.cmc.23v0wxaiwz60bjy1w4vg7npun)*\ Steph: you don’t anything in this life by yourself and you know that the confidence of the group is your superpower. And those 4 guys unlocked that for me.*

And I couldn't believe that this was being presented as a Sundance documentary because it was so clearly staged and scripted. I mean, he went back to his hometown and he was hanging out watching March Madness with his friends from Davidson

*<CLIP> UNDERRATED: “[MARCH MADNESS ON TV] SOME GUY: I never asked you this: what were your thoughts when Lovedale got the rebound? CURRY: Dude it was like fricking like a song started playing…”*

MATT: and they were presenting this as if it like happened all the time and I'm like Steph Curry doesn't hang out with his friends from Davidson. It felt a little bit like a fraud to me. Now I was sitting next to my podcast producer, Craig, who is the world's biggest Steph Curry fan, and he loved it.

NOEL: Ha!

MATT: He loved seeing Steph Curry, hang out with his buddies and go back and, and walk around Davidson. So for the fans, they don't really care. They just click on the tile and want to spend some time with their celebrity friends.

NOEL: Before we let you go, tell me what you know about this mysterious Prince documentary that many people, including yourself, have been talking about.

MATT: Yeah, the Prince documentary is a perfect example of the perils of doing a participatory documentary and trying to turn it into a journalistic enterprise. The people running the estate don't like the finished product. And they have essentially been holding up the release.

SCORING IN—ONWARD PROGRESS 2.

NOEL: Matt Belloni, host of The Town. Coming up: The Prince documentary. I haven’t seen it. You haven’t seen it. But we’ve got someone who has and she says it’s amurzing.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: Filmmaker Ezra Edelman won every award in creation for OJ: Made in America. It was a movie about O.J. Simpson and also somehow everything else.

*<CLIP> EZRA EDELMAN TALKING TO HOLLYWOOD REPORTER: “The story of OJ always was a story about the city of Los Angeles and about the Black community here and the LA police department. And so to me the interest in doing a story about OJ was connected to those interests.*

NOEL: A few years later, Edelman got access to Prince’s archives, which are controlled by the artist’s estate. And the deal was: he would make a six hour film for Netflix.

But he didn’t. The movie is 9 hours, and people who’ve seen it say it’s INCREDIBLE. Most of us can’t see it though. Because the estate said Edelman had violated the terms of their deal and they’ve stopped the release.

Sasha Weiss, a deputy editor at NYT Magazine is one of a handful of people who’ve seen this movie.

NOEL: Sasha, welcome! What was your favorite part?

SASHA: There's a great scene. It was on the night when Prince was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2004, and a bunch of great musicians got together to play While My Guitar Gently Weeps,

*<CLIP> WHILE MY GUITAR GENTLY WEEPS 2004: “while my guitar gently weeps…”*

SASHA: and Prince does this absolutely heartbreaking, virtuosic, incredible guitar solo

[*<CLIP>*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWRCooFKk3c) *: [Prince rips a sick fucking solo]*

SASHA: He's wearing a black suit, a red bowler hat. He looks beautiful and elegant. He just dominates everybody and they kind of can't help but shake their heads in awe.

*<CLIP> [Prince continues to rip solo]*

SASHA: But, really, the backstory is, as with everything in this film, much more layered and complicated and in some ways sad. So, the year before, Rolling Stone, which hosts this event, had made a list of the hundred best guitar players of all time and Prince was not on the list. So he was coming to an event hosted by the people who had left him off this list. I think there’s a lot of angst, and a lot of - even some revenge. And then I think when you watch the performance again with some of that knowledge of some of his childhood pain, his insecurity, his grievance, you know, his sense that he was never recognized enough by the rock establishment, by his parents, by the world, you can see that he's got pain on his face. You know, it's both. It's both dominance and insecurity. And I think that's a lot of the story of Prince, you know? And I would say that the film most of all is interested in this guy’s really complex psychology, and kind of holding all the contradictions at once.

What does it take to be this kind of musical genius? What does it take from the soul of the person who is the musical genius? And what does it take from the people around him who are supporting him, who are working with him? I think those are some of the questions that Edelman was interested in.

NOEL: What was the agreement between Prince’s estate and Edelman?

SASHA: The original agreement, which was struck in 2018, was between Netflix and Prince's estate.

SCORING IN— THE WAY FORWARD (APM)

When Prince died, he had no will, which is one of the, one of the vexing mysteries of Prince. Why did he not leave a will when he seemed to care so deeply about his musical legacy? So there was a lot of fighting and then, you know, a lot of legal fights. And then, and then for a time, the, the estate was in the hands of this bank called Comerica Bank. And that was when the deal was struck with Netflix, for, you know, according to my reporting, you know, tens of millions of dollars.

Netflix gained exclusive access to Prince's Vault, which is his archive, which lived in Paisley Park. Um, all of his master recordings, recordings of music rehearsals, uh, notes, and, and some diaries, and some photographs, and, you know, all of the archival material, When Edelman came onto the project in 2019, His understanding was that he and Netflix would have final cut and that they'd have exclusive access to the vault and that the estate had the right to review the film for factual accuracy, which Edelman welcomed because he's, you know, a very thorough journalist and he said, you know, great, you know, I want it to be right. So that was the, that was the deal that he understood he was entering into.

NOEL: What happened next?

SASHA: Prince's Estate changed hands in the middle of the process of Ezra Edelman making this film. So, when Netflix originally struck the deal with Prince's Estate, there was one set of people who were in charge. By the time the film started to come undone, there was a new group of people in charge, and they objected to the film that was made, so that was one thing. Another thing was that the Netflix executive, whose name was Lisa Nishimura, who signed on the project, negotiated the original deal, brought on Edelman as the filmmaker, was laid off toward the end of the process of making the film. So the film lost its most powerful internal champion at Netflix, its best negotiator with the estate, uh, the person who had the most clout to potentially bring about some better understanding and negotiation.

SCORING BUMPS AND FADES OUT

SASHA: In the summer of 2023, a full cut of the film was shown to the estate for factual review, and they responded with a 17 page memo demanding all kinds of changes. Um, and these were not fact changes. These were for the most part, editorial changes. So to give a few examples. They demanded for instance, that Edelman and his team reshoot Paisley Park because they didn't like the way that it looked in the film.

There's a scene, um, that talks about Prince's death in an elevator in Paisley Park and one of his bandmates points out that, the song Let's Go Crazy that has a lyric about an elevator

*<CLIP>* [*Let’s go crazy song*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXJhDltzYVQ)*: are we gonna let the elevator break us down? Oh no, lets go*

SASHA: and his bandmate is suggesting that it kind of presaged his death that maybe in some bizarre way Prince, you know, kind of orchestrated it that way.

NOEL: ah

SASHA: They demanded that they remove the song from that scene in the movie. Another example, uh, Wendy Melvoin, who is a very important bandmate of Prince’s in the revolution, a really huge collaborator of his, talks about Prince calling her up when he became very religious and asking her to renounce her homosexuality. They asked that Edelman take out one of his former manager's assessments that the Rainbow Children, his 2001 album, contained antisemitic lyrics. So, you know, things that were damning, negative, they asked him to, to take out. And Edelman was adamant that he wouldn't take out.

NOEL: When they told him, you need to make these changes, did they say why?

SASHA: You know, my read on that is that they felt that it would turn people away from Prince. That it would ruin Prince's reputation. That it would, um, besmirch people's image of Prince as a kind of secular saint.

NOEL: And so where we are today is this documentary is in limbo. It exists, but we can't see it.

SASHA: Yes.

NOEL: Ezra Edelman is a very respected filmmaker. He won an Academy Award for O. J. Made in America. It was a great movie. Everyone said it was a great movie. He's known for doing exhaustive research. Uh, not just for being a great filmmaker but for being a fairly serious person.

SASHA: hmm.

NOEL: Do you think he did his job?

SASHA: Absolutely. I think the film is really fair-minded. One of the, one of the complexities of the film that, that Edelman really engages carefully, um, and painstakingly is about Prince's relationship with women. I think a lot of us think of Prince as, uh, a promoter of women. He had amazing female collaborators throughout his whole career, kind of bolsterer of women and someone who embodied himself a complex. sexuality and embraced his own femininity in really, kind of flamboyant and beautiful ways that I think opened pathways for lots of people who loved him. Um, so, you know, I think Prince as a kind of, um, almost like a non binary person before the culture totally had that language, you know, he, he was a path breaker. He was a path carver. But it was also true according to the testimony of tens of women that Edelman and his team interviewed, that Prince could be abusive. That Prince could be exceedingly controlling, that Prince could, be demeaning, And even as Edelman presents this, and you know, he has a really, really upsetting interview with Jill Jones, who was a longtime collaborator and sometime girlfriend who talks about a moment where he, when he hit her in the face and really beat her up and it's a terrible story and, you know, she talks about what a blow it was to her ego and her sense of self for many, many years to be involved with Prince. and it's, it's harrowing. It's really upsetting. But he also includes testimony from a lot of other women who have a really different relationship to their time in Prince's orbit. Um, you know, some of his collaborators felt really bolstered by him, felt like he helped them find an identity, felt like being kind of molded and chosen and brought into his orbit as young women really shaped their lives in really amazing ways.

As a viewer, you know, you're sort of sitting and stewing in these contradictions. And we also are asked to hold all of that and sort all of that. So it's a very textured, multi layered, polyvocal account of his relationship with women.

NOEL: What is your understanding of what would need to happen for us to see this movie? If Ezra Edelman were to say, okay, I'm gonna take three hours out, it'll be the length that, that we said it was gonna be. Would this be on Netflix next week? Next month?

SASHA: I have a hard time believing that. Because I think the kinds of objections that the estate were raising were so, uh, numerous, were so detailed, uh, were so antithetical to the spirit of the film. I mean, how can you edit out three hours of crucial fact and still have a coherent film? I mean, not to mention the fact that, you know, even though it's nine hours, it's really, really layered and meticulously put together. It would be like unweaving a hand woven carpet. And like I said, I mean, based on the 17 pages of notes, you know, it's an objection to the project. It's an objection to this excavation of Prince. And I think what the estate wanted was something that was just much more straightforwardly celebratory.

NOEL: It does make you wonder if Prince's estate has the ability to do this and there are so many documentaries being made that are just Let's show you the good side. It makes you wonder if documentary has much of a chance.

SCORING IN—THE TALENT GANG A (APM)

SASHA: Someone said to me, you know, it’s almost like the better the documentary, the less well it fits into Netflix's system. You know, Netflix has become a factory for documentary series. Why should they spend all their resources on a deeply complexly reported film that takes forever to make when they could churn out 10 much cheaper celebrity docs. Why would they do that?

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Sasha Weiss, of New York Times magazine Our show today was produced by Zach Mack. Nothing compares 2 him. Miles Bryan assisted. Lissa Soep (SEW-EPP) edited. Patrick Boyd + Rob Byers engineered. Laura Bullard fact-checked.

You can see that Prince performance Sasha talked about by going to today’s show notes. Truly, this man had no equal. It’s Friday. Have a smoke and enjoy.

The rest of the team includes Haleema Shah, Avishay Artsy, Hady Mawajdeh, Amanda Lewellyn, Victoria Chamberlin, Peter Balonon-Rosen, Andrea Kristinsdottir, and my co-host Sean Rameswaram.

Our supervising editors are Amina Al-Sadi and Matt Collette. Our Executive Producer is Miranda Kennedy.

We use music sometimes by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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<< must cut this out for radio >>I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]