

**Lex Fridman Podcast #465 - Robert Rodriguez: Sin City, Desperado, El Mariachi, Alita,  
and Filmmaking**

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**Lex Fridman**

The following is a conversation with Robert Rodriguez, a legendary filmmaker and creator of Sin City, El Mariachi, Desperado, Spy Kids, Machete from Dust Till Dawn, Alita, Battle Angel, The Faculty, and many more. Robert inspired a generation of independent filmmakers with his first film, El Mariachi, that he famously made for just \$7,000. On that film in many sense, he was not only the director, he was also the writer, producer, cinematographer, editor, visual effects supervisor, sound designer, composer, basically the full stack of filmmaking. He has shown incredible versatility across genres including action horror, family films and sci-fi with some epic collaborations with Quentin Tarantino, James Cameron, and many other legendary actors and filmmakers. He has often operated at the technological cutting edge, pioneering, using HD filmmaking, digital backlots and 3D tech, and always through all of that, he's been a champion of independent filmmaking, running his own studio here in Austin, Texas, which in many ways is very far away from Hollywood. He's building a new thing now called Brass Knuckle Films where he's opening up the filmmaking process so that fans can be a part of it as he creates his next four action films. I'll probably go hang out at his film studio a bunch as this is all coming to life. His work has inspired a very large number of people, including me to be more creative in whatever pursuit you take on in life and have fun doing it. This is the Lex Friedman Podcast. To support it, please check out our sponsors in the description. And now, dear friends, here's Robert Rodriguez. Has there been a time when there was one take and you only have one take to get it right?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Oh, all the time where you're just like, or just how long it'll take to reset and you're just, but then you know what? You got to just work with what you got. You got to work with your results.

**Lex Fridman**

Do you get nervous or no in that moment?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Oh yeah, you're nervous going just, "I hope it goes off because then to fix it, I'll have to go do a bunch of other steps, which we don't have time for." But a lot of times I've just learned that if something happens, it's just meant to be that way. And I got used to doing things in one take and just living with it. It didn't bother me. One movie, it was even a low budget movie, they had rigged a car to implode because I was going to throw a guy at it, so we needed the car to implode and then we were going to throw them and marry it together. The car guy goes, "Yeah, we're going to have three cars rigged." "Three cars? Why you..." "Well in case one doesn't work, and then we have a second way throwing away." "We don't have all night to go shoot take after take we're doing Just give one car and if it doesn't work, we'll figure it out," because you don't have time to do it again. Sometimes it's such a long setup. So I go, "No, I'm good with just going..." In Grindhouse movie. They only had one take. So that'll make it more authentic.

## **Lex Fridman**

When it all goes to shit, when it fails you just, what's the next thought?

## **Robert Rodriguez**

So I'll tell you, two things happen on Dusk Till Dawn. First was, okay, you know how those explosions when somebody walks away in slow motion from an explosion, that's become kind of even that started with Desperado Desperado's the first, if you look at all the montages, Desperado's first. That's right. That's right. That is the meme because it was an accident. It was just supposed to be, it was just two grenades, not a nuclear bomb. It throws them over the side and I just wanted some body parts or something to fly up some shrapnel. It literally says shrapnel and my effects guy was so running so ragged. We get to there and I go, "Do you have any body parts and stuff we can throw up or something you can shoot up." "I didn't realize it's so high to get past that second floor." And he's like, "No, I don't. I can give you a fireball. I can give you a nice fireball with propane, but it burns away really quick." "Like how fast?" "Like that but it'll be big and orange." "Okay, we'll shoot it in slow motion so it lasts a little longer because it just goes poof." So I told the actors, I know how big this fireball is going to be, but just walk really fast and just look real determined and then just keep walking. Don't stop and turn around because you might get your eyebrows singed. So they take off and it goes, and in slow motion, it looks great, right? I remember showing to Jim Cameron before it came out and his hand went up. He'd never seen that before, six months later Dusk Till Dawn came out. So I liked how much it looked so much that in Dusk Till Dawn, I did it again. So those movies came out within six months of each other. That's why it turned into a thing because people saw it. And so I thought, "How about for the opening of George Clooney and Quentin walking out of the gas station that we have the whole place just blowing up and they just keep talking like it's not happening. Take it another step further so I'm not just doing the same thing. Okay, that one, it's like, "Okay, you're going to walk out and it's all in one take. So we're only going to do one take. We're going to blow the thing up. We're going to start with just some smaller explosions. Then when they're further away and it's safer, then we'll do the big fireballs." So we're going and you're nervous if one of them trips up a line and the pressure's on them, it's not just you that's nervous, you're nervous for them. They're the ones who got to walk out, do that whole speech, get in the car and drive away. What if the car doesn't start? There's a lot of things that could happen. Well guess what happens? The thing you would not expect, they go in, they come out, they start talking, shoot it perfect, great, we can move on. And the camera guy goes, I don't know what happened, but just like you had a little snafu here he goes, we have an auto-focus on the Steadicam. We have a focus thing. It just went like this, I felt it go whack all the way out of focus and whack for a second back. It just reset itself. We don't know why it did that because it's radio-controlled and we can't tell because we're shooting film. So we're like, "Oh, shit. Let's watch the dailies. Sure enough, let's see if we can, maybe I can scratch the film right there." No, it goes completely out focus and back in focus within a second. Now we got to res-hoot it. So we had to wait till we're back in that location. We rigged it for two more takes just in case. So that thing that was supposed to be the one take is three takes.

The other thing that happened was the front of the Dusk Till Dawn bar, that same guy that did those explosions, he packed a bunch of explosives behind the actors. When the actors come running out of the bar at the end of the movie and there's an explosion through the door because all the vampires are blowing up. He didn't put like 10 times the amount of stuff. It blew out, you see it in the movie. You see this huge fireball going up and if you watch closely, you see it already start to catch the whole place on fire. The whole front of that, which is foam, is catching on fire, and I cut just before you see that it's on fire, and that was the first shot at that bar because we weren't going to start shooting the other stuff till night. So first shot is that, and the set's ruined, burned to a crisp. The neon lights blew up. So we couldn't even, Cheech goes, "Well, I guess I'm not doing my speech tonight," but right away, this is what happens. My first AD, Doug Arnikowski comes over to me and I go over to him. Guys came out with the fire hoses. The fire hoses weren't even any water. The thing was just scorching. The whole production design team was in tears because they had just spent weeks building this thing and it was up in smoke and charred. I said, "Let's just keep shooting. Let's just keep shooting because it looks really kind of cool like this." Yeah, they're going to have to come repair it and we'll have to come back, but it's all black and charred. That's why that whole scene with George Clooney and Cheech and the building's black, we didn't go over there and touch that up. That's real flame that burned and it ended up looking great. So then the next week when we came back to shoot that other shot that didn't work, we came back and they had repaired it and we shot all the night stuff, which is the majority of the stuff in front of it. So sometimes you got to roll with it and look at the blessing you get because of there's a mistake. You probably actually got a better take by doing it later with them. And then you had this incredible look for the end of the movie that looked apocalyptic. If it had looked just clean, you would've actually seen that it was kind of a foam set. This made it look better. So I kind of let the universe push you where you're supposed to go.

### **Lex Fridman**

Just roll with it.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

You got to roll with it because you don't know what the grand plan is. You have your plan, just know it's probably all going to fall apart. It's just like the movies, you come up with your plan of what you want to accomplish. That's like your script. Then you go scout your location and figure out what your project's going to be and you go try to make it as bulletproof as possible. Then you go to do your project and just like with our movies, you watch it all fall apart. You watch this thing blow up, you watch this thing not work, everything just falls apart in front of your face. Then that's when you roll up your sleeves and creatively figure out a way around it. You turn chickenshit into a chicken salad and by the end you have a result that's better than what you saw it out. But that's the process and that's life and that's wash, rinse, repeat the rest of your life. That's what everything's going to be like. It's just like a movie because when you think about it, you're writing a story for a film and you're also

writing the story of your life at the same time. How are you going to react to things? Well, how do you make your character react to things? You make him kind of super human. Why don't you just make yourself that way? You're writing your own story and you start really seeing, the more you get into storytelling that life imitates art and art limitates life. But the process is also the same.

**Lex Fridman**

So you write the story, the script, and then you have it collide with the chaos of reality. And in that moment when you said you see the chickenshit, you have to be able to keep your eyes open.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You have to do that.

**Lex Fridman**

The notice-

**Robert Rodriguez**

You have to do that.

**Lex Fridman**

Wait a minute, okay, stuff changed. It's discipline. Where's the, not to be cliché about it, but where's the silver lining of this? Where's the path to actually make something good out of this? And that's a skill, right?

**Robert Rodriguez**

I call it, and it's one of my favorite stories. I was doing one of these talks and I said, come talk about creativity. I go, I understand because a lot of people read my book, Reels had a crew and told me, "Ooh, it made me be a filmmaker. But a lot of people said it helped me start my own business because they just see how you can go be entrepreneurial like that and go where no one else is going, and I'm giving all this talk about this kind of positive stuff and this one woman goes, you're real positive. But what do I tell myself when I just wasted a year and a half of my life doing something that didn't work? I was like, that's a real negative way to ask that. Can you just rephrase the question a little more positively before I even attempt to answer it? Because already her point of view is exactly what you're saying. She's not looking at all. She's just concentrating on what didn't follow her plan and not seeing the gift of everything else that's there. So she goes very reluctant. It was so perfect. I wish we had filmed it. She goes, "I learned a good lesson the hard way," and I said, "That still sucks. I say, when you follow your instinct, if you follow your own instinct to go start a business or go make this movie, or it wasn't someone saying, go over there and you'll make a million dollars. It was your instinct and you fail sometimes. The only way across the river is to slip on the first two rocks. You fail. You have to really sift through." It's like the silver lining, but I call it

sift through the ashes of your failure and you'll find the key to your next success is in there. But if you're not looking for it, you don't find it. I'm going to tell you one, and I tell them the four room story. I said, I made a movie called Four Rooms. It didn't make any money. When Quentin asked me, Hey, do you want to make a movie with me and two other filmmakers? It's an anthology. It's on New Year's Eve, it's in a hotel. You have to use the bill. We're not going to know what each other's making and we make it and we put it together. The hand went up right away, just instinctually. That sounds, yeah, I'll do that. I'll go make that with you. Now, should I ask the audience, I like to throw it to the audience and her. Should I have not raised my hand that quick? Shouldn't I have done a little studying first or should I just go blind instinct? Or should you do instinct with some studying? Okay, well, I could have gone and studied and I would've found that anthologies never work. Even when it's Coppola, Scorsese, Woody Allen, they bomb because people can't quite rip the hand. What is this Twilight Zone? I don't want to go see that, but that's not, I still said, "Yeah, I think I should still go by instinct." So my instinct was to raise my hand. We go make that movie because I love short films. I made bedhead and short films and I thought, oh, here's aw . If this works, I can make short films in anthologies and I can have the best of both worlds.

### **Lex Fridman**

And by the way, anthologies is when there's multiple, multiple one story in one movie, one story, yeah, one movie. So if you did the research, you would know that

### **Robert Rodriguez**

Very few

### **Lex Fridman**

.People

### **Robert Rodriguez**

Ever Got that to work. Yeah, the audience can't quite wrap their end, and then it feels like the movie's starting three times. So I make that movie, it bombs. Now I could feel real bad about that, but if you really think about it, you go, "Well, why did I sign up for it? Did I raise my hand because I thought it was going to go be this big financial success? No, I did it to work with my friends to do something creative, to try something, but that's still not good enough. I need to really sift through the ashes and if I looked through the ashes of that failure, I find two keys to my biggest successes in there. While I was on the set, they said, it has to be new. So I thought, I'm just going to do like bedhead. I'm going to have two little kids that are running around in this room and we have to use the bellhop as a babysitter. Well, it's New Year's. Let's dress everybody in tuxedos because it's New Year's. They're all going to go out, but the parents leave without them. When I saw Antonio and his wife, I thought, wow, they look like a really cool international spy couple. What if they were spies and these two little kids, one of them keeps falling asleep on the set. He's so young, they barely tie their shoes. They don't know. Parents are spies. They have to go save them. Okay, there's five of those

movies now. The other one was, I really love making short films. I really want this anthology thing to work. What if it's three stories, like a three-act structure, not four, same director, not four different directors. I'm going to try it again. Why on earth would I try it again? Well, because I had already done one and figured out how I could do it better, and that's Sin City. Those are by far two of my biggest successes that came directly from that failure. So I always say, follow your instinct. If it doesn't work, just go. Sometimes the only way across the river is to slip on the first two rocks. So where's the key in that? The ashes of the failure. Because if I had an instinct, that means I was on the right track. I didn't get the result I want. That's because the result might be something way bigger that I don't have the vision for, and the universe is pushing me that way.

### **Lex Fridman**

By the way, a lot of people that look back to four rooms see a lot of creative genius in there. So you say it flopped,

### **Robert Rodriguez**

It flopped financially.

### **Lex Fridman**

Financially, but there's so many ways to measure a fiscally" totally success movie.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

But like I said, I would say, "Well, it was successful because even Roger Ebert said, Hey, you furnished my favorite room. I was like, Hey, I could take that, but now. I think there's something else still there. I keep sifting and it's like, oh yeah, two big successes came from. That's amazing lesson to have because it makes you feel better about failure. Think of the thing by John Carpenter. You put that movie out the same weekend as E.T. I think bombed critics were calling it pornography because of all the weird special effects and audiences didn't go either, and he thought he made a great movie. So it makes you question your instincts. Well, 10 years later, it turns out, oh, it's a classic. So sometimes it takes the audience a while. So if you have some kind of failure on something, you don't let it knock you down. Just go. Maybe in 10 years they'll think it's great. I'm just going to commit to making a body of work, a body of work. Some will succeed, some will over-perform, some will underperform. It's not your job. You just want to be a creative person. Just create, stop thinking about movie per movie and worrying so much about each one or project to project. If you're a business person, just commit to making a body of work like an artist would do, and you don't know what the masterpieces are going to be or which someone's going to come and say, "Oh, that one that bombed there is some really creative stuff in there." It's not for you to decide. You just go and do it.

**Lex Fridman**

Sometimes I think it takes some time to process the failure to make sense of it, at least for me, don't rush making sense of what didn't work, what lessons do I take from it, how do I sit through the ashes? As you said, it takes time. You have to sleep on it a bunch of nights.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Sometimes it's right there and then sometimes you come back, revisit it later. You might not have had some information you have now that makes you look at it a lot differently. When I did, I just did the audiobook for *Rebel Without a Crew*.

**Lex Fridman**

Which I thank you for that, by the way.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I hadn't read it since I wrote it, so I didn't remember a lot of the details.

**Lex Fridman**

And you actually, it's voiced by you.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I voiced it so I was reading it real time.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, I highly recommend people because you comment, you add additional commas to it. It's great.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Most of the time I'm laughing because I can't believe how crazy that story is. I forgot a lot of details. And when you're younger, when you're 21, 22, six months feels like six years. I didn't realize how short that window was until I reread it and how impossible most of that is. But you see some places where a setup falls in my lap and then pays off immediately in a big way like magic over and over again. It's clear I don't know what I'm doing. It's clear the universe is just pushing you places so you can't fight it. Because I remember I was really disappointed and it says in the diary, I'm really bummed that I go home that Christmas, not having sold it to the Spanish home video market, which was my goal. I walked home penniless and I was like, "Merry Christmas. I feel like a freaking failure." Good thing I didn't sell it then. With time, you look back and you go, wow, I got an agent the next month. He wasn't even going to help me sell it. He said, "Oh, if you can get \$20,000 for it, take it." I chased those people down for those contracts, Spanish market for months, and they never answered me back. And then Columbia ended up buying it for 10 times as much, and we released it and did a sequel and did another sequel. If you look back in time, good thing I didn't get my way. My way had this for revision and it needed to do that, which you would never know. You don't know that going



through. So just if you don't have the answer right away, or even in 10 years, go, well, maybe it's coming in 20 years. Don't let anything slow you down. Just keep plowing forward. Committing to making your thing happen. Don't get shook up by something that you might not have an answer for.

**Lex Fridman**

Every aspect of your journey is super inspiring. We'll talk about it. Let's go to the beginning because there's a few technical things that are fascinating about your beginning. So you started making films when you were very young with an old Super 8 camera and you were editing on a VCR.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You see, I've met a lot of filmmakers who they start a certain way, but then they finish another way. They get to be big filmmakers and all that. I still do it that way. I like doing things that way. I have a new company called Brass Knuckle Films where the audience can actually participate by being investing investors in these movies that are done the same way. They're action films like we did with Mariachi, but 10 to 30 million. It doesn't take a lot of money to start a billion-dollar franchise. John Wick only cost \$20 million, the first one. Second one was 40, third one was 80, fourth one was a hundred because the audience kept growing and growing.

**Lex Fridman**

By the way you say \$20 million, it's not a lot of money.

**Robert Rodriguez**

It's not for an action film.

**Lex Fridman**

That's right. But also we should say that El Mariachi, the film on which the book Rebel Without a Crew is a \$7,000 dollar movie. So let's put it all in context.

**Robert Rodriguez**

But you're going to hire bigger actors. You can get a big actor like Keanu Reeves for a \$20 million movie. I asked Jim, I said, Jim Cameron, I said, "Terminator cost \$5 million." And he goes, "I wish we had that much." He had less than \$5 million for that. So you can start a billion-dollar franchise using these methods, and with the audience investing, they get to make money on them. And what I'm going to say now about how I started, you see that DNA of how I give out. I want people to know how I did things with Rebel Without a Crew or with these methods that I started with. You see, that's how we kept going. Hollywood spends way too much, and when you can make stuff for less, your profit margin is much better. So when I first started, I didn't have any money, so I still play like I don't have money. So I had Super 8. My dad had a Super 8 camera, but I couldn't afford it. I shot two rolls that you had to buy the

film, shoot two minutes. I shot two rolls of that. It's another same amount of money that it cost to buy it, whatever that was, 12 bucks or whatever to develop it. You get it. There's no sound. Most of the shit's out of focus. But then my dad, who sold cookware, had a VCR, one of the first home VCRs for the market that he would play his sales tapes to his salesman. And it came with a camera attached, like this cable you got coming out. Imagine if that had to go into your VCR for you to even see what it's shooting. It's this old camera manual focus, manual iris and twelve-foot cable. And I would start making movies with that instead. Now I have for \$8, I have a two-hour erasable tape of sound and picture. So I got into digital basically really early I was doing, which was really frowned upon back then and continued to be all the way to when I was using it for real in the early two thousands before everyone realized, "Oh, that's the future."

### **Lex Fridman**

Yeah, that's fascinating. You were a rebel in that way too, using digital.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah, well, because of the means and the democratizing of that, the elite didn't like that you could just go make a movie like that. But I started practicing and it's much easier to practice when it doesn't cost any money. If you want to be a rock star, if you want to learn how to play guitar really well, you're not going to just jump on stage and be able to play. You have to practice till your fingers bleed. Well, the same with movies. You got to keep telling stories and cutting them together, and you just can't afford that on film. Nobody can with a two-minute roll costing as much as a two-hour tape. So I doing all these movies. First I would cut in camera and that VCR, that old VCR had a really great pause button that they stopped making that when you hit pause, it stopped right there and it stopped with a clean cut. It didn't have all this color bars like the later ones had, and it had an audio dub feature where you could add another second soundtrack to it. So if I have people talking, I could hit audio dub and add sound effects so I could have two tracks on the same one. So that was my filmmaking kit for a while until I needed to start doing real editing and my dad bought a second VCR for his business. I stole his other one, and I found that if I hooked him together, I could play on one and used that pause button on the second. And this was the limitation. This is what taught me how to edit in my head, is that if I shot a bunch of footage, I needed to shoot very little footage so I could find it because sometimes you shoot out of order, so when I cut it, I have to cut in linear order because if you push pause, it's a nice clean cut, but it only holds for five minutes. You have five minutes before the machine shuts off. So you got to find your next shot within five minutes and do that. Otherwise, if you have to start the machine over, it added all these color bars and it would be all screwed up. So I'd have to sit there and not move for all day while I cut knowing what the next shot was. And once I had it cut, I would then add some sound effects to it. Remember, because I have the audio dub function, but now if I want to add music, I take that tape, which has two tracks now into the first deck and put it into the VCR. Again, one generation of loss, but I have a little cassette tape player with the music, and I do a Y splitter so I can add the music and just like that,

that's being resourceful with what you have. And I made award-winning short films that way on video. There were some festivals that would allow video, not many, but they would always win. And there were always funny, as I stumbled upon Spy Kids that way, I wanted to make these action movies in my backyard. But when you're a teenager, you don't know anybody who can come be your action star, and if you just bring your high school buddies, well, they just look like high school kids. So I used my little brothers and sisters because one of 10, third oldest, they're just sitting around watching cartoons anyway, and I made them the action stars just to learn. And I found those things would be a winning formula. They'd win every festival I'd send them to. So Bedhead was my first time using a film camera. It was a windup film camera. I got in film school. I went to film school for one semester and realized I already knew more than the film students because they taught you a whole other outdated way of doing it. So I thought, I'm just going to use that film camera to make a low budget movie, a definitive film version that I can send to all film festivals of these action kids, which is a precursor to Spy Kids bit. Bedhead's a precursor to Spy Kids.

### **Lex Fridman**

And we should say that Bad Head was an award-winning short film. That was probably a big sort of leap for you that probably opened the door to you to then make El Mariachi.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

It opened your brain especially because those video festivals, I would win a trip to New York and a director's chair with a video shorts that I would put in festivals, but I knew the film festival, if I could get into film festivals, I could send that all over the world. So I made that little short film, sent it, and it was winning all the festivals. And I thought, "Wow, I made that with a wind-up film camera, filming just one take each shot, just no slates because I'm the editor and that costs \$800 bucks and it was eight minutes. I bet I can make 80 minute movie for \$8,000 if I'd use the same method. So that movie I did six months later, I was making Mariachi because it opened up my mind that I could try it in a feature.

### **Lex Fridman**

Can we actually pause on that because I think Bedhead has a really great, really unique story shot in a really unique way. I think what I'm trying to say is it is very important to write the right script, write the right story.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

So let me tell you the trick to that. And Mariachi is the same way, and this really helped people. Even Kevin Smith from Clerks said, "Wow," Robert said, when Mariachi was success, I talked about how I did it. I said, "I looked at everything I had. What do I have? We have a pitbull, we have a turtle, we've got a bus that Carlos' cousin owns. His brother-in-law has a bar and he owns a ranch. So the bad guy lives at the ranch. The fight scene's going to be in the bar. He's going to hit a bus at one point, the girl's going to have a dog and a turtle is going to cross the road. It gives you all this production value, so you write backwards. So for

Bedhead, I even did that with a camera. So I've been shooting video all this time, and one thing I wished I could do on video, I never could. Was slow motion or stop-motion even. So when I got that crappy World War II camera they gave us in film school. I was so pissed. Like, this is the camera. I've been trying to get my hands. I could have bought this for 50 bucks at a pawn shop. Old Bell and Howell wind up, you couldn't even see through the lens you were seeing through an approximation of the lens, but you could shoot slow motion. I could do reverse photography. If I filmed upside down, I could do, because if I do a fast push into her, I'll never get the focus in. So I started with it in focus, went back, pulled backwards on a chair, and then reversed it, flipped it, and now it looks like it stops on a dime in focus.

**Lex Fridman**

The number of times I've seen you shoot backwards is incredible. To achieve a certain feeling, a certain experience, a certain effect, sometimes shooting in reverse plus the sound effect layer. You can create this reality that's surreal, that then results in the story that you wanted. You have to be functioning in some kind of different space-time continuum. You have to morph time.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You start putting it together. So I've got this different camera. Well, what, now I go, I don't want to shoot the same kind of movie. If I got a camera now that can do that, I can do stop-motion. So that's why there's an animated title sequence at the beginning because I go, "Wow, I am a cartoonist. If I set the camera up here, I can slow it down enough. It's not a frame by frame, but if I get it down like two frames a second, I can just tap it and it'll maybe get one frame off." So I did 300 drawings by hand for that opening title sequence.

**Lex Fridman**

Holy shit. That was you doing it by hand?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah. So you watch that, and this is a throwaway title sequence, but I really want this thing to win awards.

**Lex Fridman**

Okay, hold on a second. Again, how long did that take to draw that? That's a lot. That's a lot of work.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I drew it over, well, I was a daily cartoonist by then, so I was pretty fast. But still, that's why it's only penciled. It's not inked, but it looks great. The camera's going around and all kinds of crazy stuff, but it's just all fake by paper. It took me all night to shoot it because I remember I walked into the film school the next day, all sleepy, and I told one of the fellow students, "Wow, I was up all night doing this animated title sequence." And he went, "Why are you

putting so much work in this? They're not going to grade you any differently." I was like, "Grades? Get an A walking in here. I'm trying to get out of this town. I'm not doing this for fucking grades." I want people to see what I can do now and I want to see what I can do now with this. So a lot of the story came from the limitations or actually the freedoms of that camera. I couldn't have done that story on video. So when I saw, wow, okay, I can do reverse photography, I can do stop-motion. She has to have special powers because if she has special powers, then I can utilize, I can really milk this camera for all it can get. This is one of my shots I love the most is where she's standing there and the chair, she makes a chair come all the way up to her and it goes all the way up to her face. Now, if I did it normally, where would I even put the strings for that, right?

**Lex Fridman**

To pull the chair, yeah, yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

So I start here with the camera upside down. I have the strings in the back. So you're not going to be looking at the back. And as it goes back, you pull it back and then when you reverse it goes and it looks so good. You can't spot the, if you look close, you see the strings are in the back, but your eyes not looking there.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, that's fine.

**Robert Rodriguez**

So I did stuff like that, and then just her getting the hose, and then I just do stop-motion for the hose turning on, the faucet. That's why I gave her special powers so that, and it made the story better. So sometimes the limitations you have with equipment or location, you can use it to take chickenshit, turn it into chicken salad. Take this camera that everyone was like, "What's this?" And I go, I can do so much with this. But I tell you today, I look at that camera, I can't believe I ever made a movie with that thing. It's so ridiculously primitive. I'm just like, "How did I even think I could get anything done with this? And it even exposed and Mariachi the same way. You have to think about it. I shot Mariachi on film with a bar of 16 millimeter camera. I didn't know how to use it. I called up a place in Dallas that rented that kind of equipment and I said, "I have an AR-16s here, two motor looking things. One has a 24 and one has a bunch of numbers." "Oh, that's a variable speed motor. That means you can do different speed." "I can shoot slow motion with this? Oh wow." "Do you have a torque motor?" "I don't know." "What is that?" "Is there something on the side of the magazine?" Yeah, now you can just look up on YouTube and it shows you how to use it. I was doing it by phone that way, and then I went and shot the movie right then and I didn't know if any of it was exposing or if the film camera was working until I finished the whole movie. So imagine you have to go down to Mexico, shoot for two weeks, come back, send it off to the lab. You want to talk about being nervous?

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Just hoping something exposed. And when I saw it come back and the tape, they transferred it to a tape so I could edit it deck to deck again. I was so relieved. Some things didn't come out, but I can cut around that's like, oh yeah, I'm doing everything right here. You're doing everything. Imagine if you forgot to stop down and it's open all the way and one shot is blown out. I'd have stuff like that because moving fast and I'm doing it all myself.

**Lex Fridman**

Wait a minute, you shot El Mariachi the whole thing without knowing if some of the footage is damaged, wrong?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Without any of it. That's why I only did one take. So my idea was this.

**Lex Fridman**

How gangster is that?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Wow.

**Lex Fridman**

It was a test film, right? Right.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I thought it was going to be a test film. It's the only movie in history ever made where the filmmaker did not think anyone would see it and expect it and even set it up that way. Why would I make an action movie for the Spanish market called, basically, the Guitar Player. Promises no action. No one's going to watch it. But I thought if someone actually picks it up and has the balls to watch this thing, they're going to be surprised. I put a lot of action in. It was just to learn from, I just needed to make it for as little as possible, see how much I could sell it for. If I could double my money, great. I can make another one and just get more practice. It was just, I was so intrigued by this idea. You've heard advice about screenwriting. I heard a revise back then that I thought was ridiculous. It said, "It's going to take you a long time to be a good screenwriter. So write three scripts and throw them away. The fourth script will be the good one." I was like, it's so hard. ... and throw them away. The fourth script will be the good one. It's like it's so hard to write a script. Who's going to write three full scripts knowing they throw them away? Wouldn't it be better if you write three scripts and then shoot each one and be the cameraman, be the sound guy, be everything? Because that way you're learning, not just writing, you're learning how to make a movie. So

that was my idea. I'm going to make three of these, hide it on Spanish video, but make money back. That's like my own film school paying me, paying me to learn. So the first one I thought, let me just shoot it, one take each, because my friend Carlos lives in Mexico. If we shoot two takes, most of the cost is to film. I've just doubled my budget, so let me just shoot one take. Some of it's going to not come out, but I'm not going to know what, I'm not going to shoot a safety one. That doubles my... Let me see. Some things might come out. I expected like 70% of it to maybe be okay, but 30% I might have to come reshoot, which is fine. I just drive back there and then I just reshoot just those shots, right? So I just went, "Let's shoot." We stop, we come back. Then I send it off to develop, because we're shooting two weeks consecutively. To get film shipped back and forth from Mexico to see if it came out, you just couldn't do it. I just had to double down on it, do it. One take everything. I remember one time I was telling the actor, "Man, I told you to run through that shot." And he goes, "Oh, let me do it again." "No one take, dude. Just think about it. Next time, do what I say." I didn't think anyone was going to see it. And because you don't think anyone's going to see it, you end up doing something remarkable, which is, "Well, I'm just going to make something for myself." Because if I was making a movie that was going to go to Sundance, I wouldn't have made that movie. I would've thought, "Okay, I got to get serious." But because I made this movie that was just entertaining myself, like *Bedhead*, it entertained audiences. So that naivete is really important when you're starting out or at any point in your life. Be naive about what things going to, and just do something for yourself. That taught me a very valuable lesson. I didn't want anybody to see it. I just thought, one take, one take. When I got back home, a bunch of stuff didn't come out, but I'm like, "I'm not going back to Mexico. I'll figure out a way to edit around it and make the movie shorter and that's just going to be the movie." And then that's the one that won Sundance.

### **Lex Fridman**

That was your first feature film. That's the one you made for \$7,000. You mentioned your friend Carlos. That's the star of the movie. Everything one take. And I highly recommend people go back and watch that movie. It's just an incredible movie. It's fun and it's an action film, moves really fast. The story is really interesting, so the script is really interesting. All the actors, you could tell they all kind of stepped up and played their own roles.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

They weren't actors.

### **Lex Fridman**

That's right.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

They were just friends of ours, which is why... And because, and this was the magic of not having a crew. They didn't feel like they were making a movie. It's like this, we're just here, me with my one camera. In fact, the gal, Carlos said, "This one girl, I forgot she's in town."

Maybe she would work." Because we tried to get a soap star and she backed out. So we got [inaudible 00:38:00] she goes, "But I don't know how to act." And I said, "Here, let's watch. I want to show you something on Mexican TV." A telenovela was on and you see someone, you know, all over acting. I said, "That's acting. I don't want you to do that. I want you to just talk like you're talking about-

**Lex Fridman**

Wait, wait, wait. The love interest? The woman in that, that's who you're talking about?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah.

**Lex Fridman**

That's who you're talking about.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah.

**Lex Fridman**

She's amazing.

**Robert Rodriguez**

She's amazing. Because I got video of her. I said, "I want you to just do this one line. Pretend like you're just talking to your boyfriend." And I showed her the video. That was cool. Because I couldn't show her the film because you'd have to develop it. But I showed her a video test of herself doing it and she saw herself doing it, she suddenly had the confidence. We went through her closet, "This red dress you can wear in that," and everyone just brought their own clothes.

**Lex Fridman**

She really had a sexuality, a tension, like a romantic tension that was real. It was in part a great love story that I mean, as ridiculous that it is to say, and a dramatic love story [inaudible 00:38:54].

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah. The idea was that I thought a guitar player, really what I wanted to do was a Road Warrior. I said, I want a guy with a guitar case full of weapons going from town to town like Road Warrior, but that don't have enough money for the first one to do that. That'll be the second movie I do. How will we do a genesis story, how he became that guy? So let's do Mad Max, basically, how he becomes that guy. Maybe he is a guitar player. So you start writing it out. I was going to show you my writing method. I write on index cards and I carry one of these, a little packet of index cards. I keep one always in my bag. And I smile when I run



across it because I go, "I've made a million dollars with one of these before." It's like this is the key to your next success, cards. Because when you go see a therapist, you're not going to them for the answers. You're going to them for the questions. You've got the answers inside. What you don't have are the questions. A lot of times we ask ourselves very unempowering questions like, "Why am I such a loser?" I can think of 10 answers right now, but if you go, "What three things can I do today that'll not just change my life, but everyone around me?" Take steps of that. Take out your cards and start writing them down. You won't come up with three, you'll come up with 15. I'm like, well, how? Because you're asking yourself and you'll see them. So when I was doing that movie, I thought, okay, he's a guitar player for real, and he gets mixed up with the guy with a case. So how about he walks into a bar? So I write down that, he walks into a bar, bar, trying to get work. Bartender looks at him, "We don't hire mariachis, get the hell out of here." So he leaves. After that whole scene explaining who he is and what his story is. Then the shooter comes in with a guitar case full of weapons. He's also dressed in black and he shoots the place up. Now if that was a short film, that's how you'd start a short film. But this is a feature movie, so shit, I got to figure out how to tell a feature. I'm going to need a few more cards before that. So I'm going to need, well, who's this bad guy? How about he's in jail? I had read a story, this crazy story about a guy who was in jail in Mexico, and he was running his drug business from the jail as protection. He could walk out anytime, but it was to have the cops be his enforcers basically. So introduced that guy, he's in jail making phone calls and someone puts a hit on him. So we have action right away. There's a hit on him. He kills those guys because it's his operation. He's not in jail. All the cops are working for him and he tells that guy on the phone, the main bad guy, "I'm going to come to town. I'm going to kill all your guys and I'm going to come kill you." So then he gets in his truck and you see them bring him a guitar case full of weapons. He passes the mariachi on the way to town, and now it's his story. The baton gets turned to mariachi. Mariachi is doing a voiceover. It's easy to shoot. We can do the voice later. We don't have to do sync sound. There was even a scene when he walks into town where we saw these coconuts, a guy cutting coconuts and we, "Oh, let's go film over there." So we filmed the guy giving him a coconut with a straw in it, and he walks out. I'm like, "Shit, man, you forgot to pay the guy." "Well, let's shoot that." "No, there's one take. I'll just put in the voiceover that they give away free coconuts in this town," and for years, people in other countries would go, "They really give away free coconuts?" No, it's because we forgot to show him paying. Little happy accidents. So now look, you're already building a movie. So it's like now he goes in the bar. Now he's mixed up and the bad guy says, "Find the guy with a guitar case full of weapons." Then he goes and meets the girl. So you just start your movie, visually, you can start seeing your movie. And I've used this for business things, I've used this for ideas, for manifesting stuff.

### **Lex Fridman**

It's brilliant. Are you doing this alone usually or are you-

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah. And it comes so fast. It's like free association. Well, maybe I have the ending. Oh, I know I want his hand shot. He's going to get his hand shot because he's a musician and those ballads are always really tragic. So the girl has to die. The girl has to die because if it's going to be a tragic song for his songbook, each movie should be like a tragedy. That's going to be over here. Now you got the ending, and then your brain starts filling in the rest. Because you're asking yourself these prompt questions that you already have answers for, from a past life, from a vision you had that you don't even know are there. This prompts it.

**Lex Fridman**

It's kind of a puzzle that you're figuring out. What happens if you get stuck? This doesn't make sense, like some aspect of this structure doesn't make sense. [inaudible 00:43:18]?

**Robert Rodriguez**

You leave all there. Yeah, you just start writing in the ones you do know. Like okay, I know at some point she's going to betray him or he's going to think she does. She betrays him. Okay, that's in the middle somewhere. The other ones will come.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, those are all crossroads for the story. How do you know she has to die? Can you change your mind about that?

**Robert Rodriguez**

I can, yeah, but for now, I felt like if I really want... The story's telling me now what it is. I didn't know I was going to make a genesis story. I wanted to do the Road Warrior guy, but the Road Warrior, he lost his family. So really, to propel him to become a guy who has guitar case full of weapons, he has to lose everything. So he needs a ghost. So this is a genesis story of a character. Well, look, Bruce Wayne lost his parents. You could say, well, does the parents have to die? Well, no, but it's not going to propel him, it's not going to drive him like that thing. So it's just coming to me. So this is my other trick and this is the main thing you got to learn about, if you take any way, this isn't me doing it. I totally believe it, because when you start doing this, you go, "Where are these answers coming from? I'm asking the right question, but how come the answers just keep coming like this?" I believe, because I do so many different jobs, I've learned this over the years. When I was in 2002, I was like, "How is it that I'm the production designer, the composer," which I don't even know how to read or write music, and I'm writing orchestral score and I'm doing the editing and I'm doing the cinematography. I haven't been trained for any of these. I never went to school for these specifically. Must be something about creativity. So I went on Amazon, it's 2002. I look up creative books. Anything that has creativity in the title, I just ordered it. And I've got a bunch of books on creativity, and I was reading them through. One of them was really speaking to me. "Yeah, that's it." That's the process. And then it says gels and mediums, and I'm like, "Oh, this is a book specifically about painting," but it applies to music, editing, cinematography,

writing, it's all the same. So that's when I realized that creativity is 90% of any of those jobs. The technical part of setting up the cameras, of writing a script in format or reading or writing music, that's 10% of that. How many musicians don't read or write music and they're fantastic? It's because 90% what they do is creative. Now I believe that that same person, even if they only do music, could literally jump from job to job creatively and do a superior job than most technicians.

**Lex Fridman**

And there's also something to say there about the learning the technical aspects of an art. You collide with the experts. What happens is, I've experienced this a lot with using cameras and so on. I don't know shit about cameras and you roll in and then there's all the experts almost talking down to you and telling you how things are supposed to be. Everything is wrong. I talked to somebody about soundproofing a room and they said, they gave me prices that are insane and the amount of effort is insane and the geometry-

**Robert Rodriguez**

Well, yeah, they're selling you something.

**Lex Fridman**

... the dynamics of this room are all wrong. I'm like, "Why can't I just fucking hang up some curtains? It seems like that kills most of the echo. I don't understand." And they're like, "No, this is all wrong. The corners are going to have some..." And I'm like, fuck it, I'm just going to try. I'm going to see what it sounds like. A and B. Okay, here's audio with curtains, here's audio without curtains. Seems like this is fine. Move on to the next thing. I think when you say creativity, some of that is being a rebel, not listening to the experts.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah. Or you're going on your creativity, which is, what is that? That's like, do you consider yourself a creative person? I think you play guitar.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, guitar, piano, yeah. Everything.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You play piano? Okay. But would you call yourself a creative person?

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, I think so.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Good. You should.

## **Lex Fridman**

I think that's a positive way to phrase it.

## **Robert Rodriguez**

I would just suggest to anybody, is just own it. Own it and just say... Like when I do so many different jobs, it sounds crazy when they would introduce me, "Hey, Robert Rodriguez, he does this, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And I was like, I get tired just hearing that list. But when I think about it, there's really only one thing I do and I live a creative life. And when you live a creative life, that means anything that has to do with creativity, whether it's filming or piano or guitar or sculpting, you can do it. You can take it on and do it because it teaches you more about your main job. I become a better director by doing all those jobs. Because when somebody just does one job, they barely know that job. You have to do more to learn about creativity. And this is the main thing I learned was that I'm writing music for an orchestra. I'm like, "I don't even know what I'm doing. Why is that coming out?" I don't feel like I'm doing it. I feel like I picked up the pen. I feel like I had the idea to do the cards, but then when everything just starts coming out so quickly, like that's how fast I wrote that movie. I go, I really feel like something else has taken over. So this is what my belief is, because I hear it in different realms. You ask Keith Richards, "How do you come up with these riffs?" He goes, "I don't. I don't. They're floating around the sky and I pull them out first." You ask Jimmie Vaughan, "How do you play guitar, those solos?" He goes, "It's like a radio. Once you get a tune just right, you can't even believe what's coming through." So I believe, I call it the creative spirit. There's a spirit assigned to all of us that's creative, that doesn't have hands. It needs you to pick up the pen, pull out the cards, and then when you start getting in the flow and you're like, "Whoa," it's writing. That's that. And if you can have that mindset, you take your ego out of it and go, "All I need to do is be a good conduit for this thing. Be a good pipe and it's going to come through." So you don't ever have to get hung up on that question you had. Well, what happens when you can't come up... It wasn't me to begin with. If it's not coming out, it's because I'm blocking it and if I were to do this and I'm flowing, and if I were to say, "Wow, I just wrote 10 cards. I don't know if I can write more. How did I do that?" You just shut the pipe because your ego got in the way. You just clogged it because it gets pissed off that you think it's you. It's not you. It's like, "Dude, just open up. Let me through, pick up the fucking pen." And I learned this when I was 19, when I had a daily cartoon strip. I had to draw a comic strip every day to get paid. And I would be like, I'd have to draw one drawing and draw another drawing. Then it's like, okay, these kind of go together. It was a process, and sometimes I just felt like I wish I could just envision it, sit back. I'm going to try that method. I went home and I would sit back and just try to get in sofa, try the sofa method. I'm just going to try to picture the comic strip, and as soon as I got on that thing that's funny, then I'll just go draw that, right? Be done in a half hour. Why waste three hours? I'd sit there and sit there and sit there. My deadline would be coming up, got like 30 minutes. I'm like, "Oh, shit." Got to go sit and draw it out. And it's like, "Oh, okay, I got this drawing. Oh, this kind of goes with that. If I make another drawing, I have my strip." That's the only way to do it. If you don't get up, the creative spirit, ain't going to

come visit you if you're doing this. It needs your hands and it's not going to fucking reward you for sitting there, waiting for... You have to jump in and do it. And people, when they say, "Oh, well, I'm not ready," how pissed off is that spirit now? It's waiting for you to feel like you're ready. It's not you. Just start doing the action and it's going to come through and the ideas will come and the answers will come because it's not you. And if you can take your ego out of life, you'll be blessed with this never ending flow of ideas because don't take ownership for it and know that if it's not coming out, it's because you're just clogging it because this thing's got endless ideas.

### **Lex Fridman**

And you give that same advice for making films, which is don't plan. If you want to be a filmmaker, don't plan the movie. Don't think about making the movie. Just go in and start.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah, I would meet a lot of people who introduce themselves as aspiring. "I'm an aspiring filmmaker and I wonder, what would you tell an aspiring filmmaker?" I'd say, "Stop aspiring. If you call yourself that, you are that, and you're always going to feel like you're not ready." And you just jump in before you're ready. You don't feel like you're ready until... I didn't feel like I was ready to do *Mariachi* till I was probably in my last few days of filming. You became ready as you went. You didn't know all that stuff... I couldn't have figured all that out in advance. When my kids worked with me on a project that we did similar, by the end, they realized... They did an interview with my son who, after just two weeks of doing one of those projects, you're a different person. He's suddenly waxing philosophical about the creative processing going, "I never knew how my dad did *Mariachi* until we did this project together." And I realized he didn't know either. He didn't know how he was going to do it. He figured it out day by day. Every challenge that got thrown at him, he had to figure it out. And that's the biggest lesson. Most people never start, and that's the biggest thing. Don't wait till you're ready or that'll be on your tombstone. "Here lies so-and-so. He was never ready." And you don't want to be that guy. Jump in. Know it's not you, you just got to be the hands and that relieves a lot of pressure from you because then you don't have to ever have to do anything really. You just have to be the hands.

### **Lex Fridman**

Can you talk through some of the hats, some of the many hats you wore with the *El Mariachi*? That's an interesting case study and you've done the same thing over and over in completely different innovative ways in all the films, but *El Mariachi* is such a radical leap for you.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

That was crazy that thing's held together with scotch tape and rubber bands because of the camera I borrowed.

**Lex Fridman**

You directed, you did cinematography, you did the sound.

**Robert Rodriguez**

It's better to just say what I didn't do. I didn't act in front of the camera. Everything else I did. Everything else, I was the whole crew. It's just like you're doing here except you've got sound recording right onto the cameras, right? Or do you have it to a system?

**Lex Fridman**

Separately, but it's synced. I mean, all the modern technology-

**Robert Rodriguez**

But it's synced, yeah. So I didn't have synced camera, so I had a camera that, it was not a sync camera, and the thing was it was so loud, I would've had to blimp the out of it, which I didn't have a blimp and then I would've needed a sound guy.

**Lex Fridman**

Just to be clear, so people don't understand this. You're shooting basically no sound.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Because the camera sounds like this. It sounds like all your money's going away, first of all. So I would go like this, "Action." You'd start running and I shoot my edit, "Cut."

**Lex Fridman**

Yep.

**Robert Rodriguez**

They're still running. I'm only using this part and there's no slates. There's guys holding up their fingers at the beginning of role, like this is reel seven for just a few frames so I know which reel it is. And then that 10 minutes of film is just one shot after another, and I use almost every frame of those shots because I was cutting in the camera. Now, after I shoot, like let's say, tell me your name.

**Lex Fridman**

Lex.

**Robert Rodriguez**

What's your last name?

**Lex Fridman**

Fridman.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Where do you live?

**Lex Fridman**

Austin, Texas.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I would do the whole scene then I would get the sound. Bring the mic in close like that. Say it again.

**Lex Fridman**

Lex Fridman. Austin, Texas.

**Robert Rodriguez**

That'll probably sync. Now if you were going on and on, there's a place where it'd go out of sync. I hate rubbery lips, so I would cut away to the dog or to the knife or to the girl, and then I cut back when you're back in sync. And since these were non-actors, they say everything the same way each time.

**Lex Fridman**

[inaudible 00:54:28].

**Robert Rodriguez**

They would say their line just like they weren't performing it to where they didn't remember how they performed the day before. They were just talking in their own rhythm. So a lot of the times it's... Anytime you see anyone on camera talking, they're in sync with themselves and as soon as it cuts away, they're out of sync. And it created this really fast cutting style that I probably wouldn't have had on such a low budget movie, but it was the only way to keep things in sync. So when I would shoot two people talking, I would make sure I'd film a couple shots of the dog or a stuffed cat or something just so I'd have something to cut away to get them back in sync.

**Lex Fridman**

That's so brilliant.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I call it, it's just resourceful. It just being very resourceful.

**Lex Fridman**

And you allow it to get maybe a little bit out of sync sometimes?

**Robert Rodriguez**

I didn't allow it, but oh yeah, I would let it if I just didn't have a way to cut away and I would try to sync it as best I could.

**Lex Fridman**

But we as the audience, do you understand where the threshold is, where we notice something?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah.

**Lex Fridman**

It seems like you can get away with a lot.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You can get away with... I just don't, I'm just particular about that. I just don't like seeing a dub movie where it just feels canned. It makes you not believe in it anymore. So I just cut away where the lips are just way off. I just didn't want any of that. I just felt like, I wanted it to just be believable and they could be really believable if they were in sync. But I didn't shoot two takes of film or even two takes of audio, just one take. And what was cool is that because I just had them go through the whole scene again, so I would go ahead and record them, like grabbing the bottle or any action they did, opening the suitcase. I'd have all the sound effects too. I just had to sync it by hand. That's a lot of work for me, but I got great sound that way. Because if I had had a sync camera, the mic would've been so far, we would've had to go get new sound effects, but because the camera's off, I could record everything close up, so there was some blessing to that.

**Lex Fridman**

You and Quentin Tarantino had a great conversation about a lot of topics, but one of them is how to bring out the best in the actors. In that *El Mariachi*, how do you bring out the best in these non-actors? And then maybe what's the thread that connects to your future work too?

**Robert Rodriguez**

What really helped for those non-actors was that they just look across and it's me filming. They didn't feel like they were... So they're being so natural. The guy who played the bad guy, I met him in the research hospital where I sold my body to science. He was my bunk mate. And I said, "Dude, you look kind of like Rutger Hauer. And then it's like, we saw another movie, "Man, you look like James Spader. You should be the bad guy in my movie and it'd be cool to have you as the bad guy." He goes, "But I don't speak Spanish. Well, that's okay, I'll write and I'll teach you it phonetically and you're going to wear sunglasses," and if you look close, he's holding the lines here and he's looking at the lines like that and just smiling. Couldn't believe he was getting away with this. He's smiling and he's got the sunglasses on.



**Lex Fridman**

I read that somewhere in the pool, there's a scene in the pool-

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah. In the pool, he's like this, "[inaudible 00:57:11]."

**Lex Fridman**

With the sunglasses on, oh man. [inaudible 00:57:13].

**Robert Rodriguez**

But he was doing it phonetically. And I tell you what, he was so great, that guy, right?

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

When we do Desperado, I brought him back. Didn't even have to do any dialogue. Watch that movie. When he shows up in the opening scene when Desperado, he's playing the guitar and the opening with the credits, to tie it into the first movie, he shows up again. And all he has to do is light a cigarette. And you see this, because he's so nervous because now there's a crew behind me. Now it's real. Before it was just me and him and it didn't feel like a real movie. So everyone gave a great performance. So how do you recreate that later, on a big movie? Is just building a rapport, making a safe zone for your actors. Quentin once told me, we're talking about directing, he goes, "Yeah, sometimes being a great director is just being a great audience. Being a great audience, because you're taking the place of the audience for the actor." They try something and if you're enjoying it, they know that the audience is going to enjoy it or if it makes you cry, so sometimes you don't have to tell them a lot sometimes. And if you do have something very specific to tell them, they usually go with it. But I always just like to see what they do. And a lot of times they just are in the zone, because again, they're getting that flow too. You create the right environment, everyone's getting this inspiration that's all tied together that you never could have directed. It's just like you just create that space where we're all going to be open to it and it's going to drop in our lap. And I'm going to point it out when it does, because you may not feel like you know how to play this role yet, but I say not knowing is the other half of the battle and the more important part. That's the part we're going to discover, and when it happens, I'm going to point it out and it's going to be like magic and we're just going to go, "Okay, we're accepting it," and we do it. And it gets people in that kind of headspace, and then we're all open to it, to where the character's supposed to go, what it's supposed to sound like, instead of me being very manipulative to get a certain thing. I don't know, it's just whatever feels good.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, there's such an intimate connection between the actor and the director. I've seen some of the behind the scenes footage with you. You are just a fan enjoying the scene when it's done well. But I think there's an aspect, if I were to put myself in the headspace of the actor, they want you as the audience to earn that happiness. Because when a director approves...

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah, when you're a performer and there's no other... It's not like a live show where you get the approval of the audience and you're like, "Oh, wow, they like that joke. Let me do more." Really, the director is it. And a lot of times the director's way behind a monitor somewhere. That's why I still like to operate the camera, because when I'm operating the camera, it's like this. We can have a hundred people here, we wouldn't know because they go away. It's just us. They just disappear when it's the camera guy is the director, and we're going, "Let's do that again. Let's do that again." There's a shot in... I'm lighting Sin City myself. I have my crew setting lights and I have this great shot of Clive Owen and where he's holding down Benicio's head in the toilet. Benicio's not there. It's just a close up of him at this point, and I'm practicing my shot. I'm zooming in slow in his face and people are still walking behind him on the green screen setting lights, and I'm like, "I'm rolling. We're ready to go. We're getting this. I can already tell we're already in the moment. What you're doing right now, just keep holding that look. Now one jolt, like he's starting to fight back, but you don't even flinch. Cut. Okay, nevermind. You guys can stop moving that shit. We already got the shot."

**Lex Fridman**

Holy shit.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Like that.

**Lex Fridman**

Wow.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah. It's like that because you're so lucky.

**Lex Fridman**

That's a great scene, by the way.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Great, right?

**Lex Fridman**

Holy shit.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Because you could feel it. It's like if I wait for these guys, this moment will be gone. And then another one was Mickey Rourke. He had so much freaking dialogue. He had just done this whole big dialogue scene. He had another one, I said, "Let's go ahead and start with a wide shot," where the two actors, if I'm the camera, Mickey and Elijah are here. Let's get a two shot and we'll come around on Mickey, close up. We'll turn Mickey around for the close up, but let's start with the wide thing, get used to the lines, and most of it's going to be sold in a close up. We sit down, Mickey starts delivering the take. I'm like, "Hold on, hold on a second." I brought my camera over. Zoom in. "Just adjust that light real quick," because I'm the DP. Because if I had another director of photography, they'd be like, "Oh, no, no, we have to relight," and all this stuff. It's like, "No, no, let's just do this. Let's go. He's doing it right now." And I go, and that performance is just right then. And so you can feel that when you're also, you're operating and you're the camera guy and you're the DP. It's like high-tech guerrilla filmmaking. Yeah, we're on a green screen, but it's like all the crew needs are marching orders. "Just put a light back there, hitting them harder. This is a 5K, make that a 10K. It's got to be stronger." They don't need to know that I'm going to make that a lamp post later. They just need marching orders for the moment so I can just kind of tell people, "Do this, do this, do that," and then I know what I can accomplish with the actor and then everything else falls into place later because I'm going to put all that in later. Once you know how to do a lot of jobs like that, you can just move at the speed of thought, which is where the actors love being, creatively. Because nobody knew what green screen was back then. They're like, "What is this again?" So I explained it as, "Well, it's kind of like doing theater, but instead of a black curtain behind you with a prop, it'll be a green curtain and you might just have a cup or just a steering wheel, but it's just you and the other actors just like this and everything else will be painted in later. We're just talking. We're locked in. If we stay locked in, we'll look great when there's rain coming down and we're on a ship later." But it comes down to this, right? It was so fun to do those kind of movies.

**Lex Fridman**

So to this day, you try to be close to the action, connected with the actor that's performing.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Because it's like a dance. You end up-

**Lex Fridman**

That's so cool to hear.

**Robert Rodriguez**

... like remember on Dusk Till Dawn, Michael Parks in the opening scene, he's talking about the two guys that are running around killing people just before he gets shot. And I just start doing this slow zoom. I remember it was take eight, start doing this slow zoom on him. And I'm like, I hope I get all the way up to where it stops zooming when he finishes that speech, because there's no set way, and I don't know how he's going to say it. But you're just locked almost telepathically. And has he delivered? There's no edits. He's just going, "Yeah, they killed four rangers, two hostages." It's just like, wow. And you're just so pulled in. I'm just like, oh my God. And then it stopped. It's like I ran out of zoom right as he finished that speech.

**Lex Fridman**

So how can a director, because there's a lot of great directors that stay-

**Robert Rodriguez**

In the bag. I don't know, it's hard.

**Lex Fridman**

... in the back of the battlefield.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You know, they just trust that whatever they get from their crew, they just accept it. Just like you would get a take to-

**Lex Fridman**

There's so much intimacy to that connection.

**Robert Rodriguez**

But I like that intimate connection because I could not be behind a monitor. Even if I had communication with my cameraman, "Okay, now start zooming in." You're not going to know. You have to feel it. You have to be in there. It's like a dance. It's like trying to do a dance with a partner and you're across the room. It's like, no, you got to be there up close, feeling the energy and it's the creative spirits whispering to you both. It's not your own idea. It's, you're capturing a moment that's magic, and there's true magic that happens on a set, and that's what brings you back. Because you know, I didn't direct that and they didn't act that. That came through us, and we just had the cameras rolling and we captured a ghost.

**Lex Fridman**

Just like you said though, you had the pen in hand and you were there.

**Robert Rodriguez**

It's like that.

**Lex Fridman**

It just came through.

**Robert Rodriguez**

It's crazy. It's crazy.

**Lex Fridman**

All right. Your friendship with Tarantino is just fascinating. And just the whole timeline, the history of movies and the two of you collided and met is just a fascinating part of the story. You first met him in 1992 at the Toronto Film Festival. Can you just talk about meeting Tarantino?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah. We both had films at the same time, first films, guys in black, action, violence. In fact, I had seen his movie already. My first film festival was a few months before that, the Telluride Film Festival and Reservoir Dogs was there, but Quentin couldn't be there. He was at Sundance earlier that year, and the guy who became my agent, he saw it. He said, "Hey, you're going to like this guy, Quentin Tarantino. I told him about you, you're going to meet him. He's going to be in Toronto." "Oh, cool, cool. Okay." So I went ahead and saw his movie in Telluride and I was like, "Holy shit." Guys in black again, just like the mariachis dressed in black and action. I said, "Oh, we're going to like each other's movie. He's going to like the movie when he see it." So then in Toronto we met and we met first on a... Because I knew I was going to be doing a panel discussion with him. They asked us to do a panel discussion about violence in movies in the '90s, even though it was only '92. So we're on a panel together, and that's where I met him and he's like, "Hey, you're Robert Rodriguez, your agent told me about you." And I was like, "Yeah, I saw your movie Reservoir Dogs." And he goes, "Oh, well you got to come to my screening, and I'm going to come see yours." So he came to Mariachi and I videotaped the audience reactions because they were insane, insane reactions to it. But I have the first screening he saw of Mariachi sitting next to me laughing. He's laughing at everything. He was just the best audience. I have his recording of the first time he saw Mariachi.

**Lex Fridman**

Oh no, really?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah, because I taped the whole thing.

**Lex Fridman**

That's so cool.

**Robert Rodriguez**

He's so loud because he's right next to me.

**Lex Fridman**

Well, just like you, but even probably even more than you, he's a fan. He watches... He just loves movies, right?

**Robert Rodriguez**

He loves movies. In fact, the next time I heard him laugh that way was at his own premiere for Kill Bill. We're watching Kill Bill, and he's laughing like it's somebody else's movie. He still enjoys the movie. He loves what all the actors did. And it's like, that's the kind of energy you really love. But I'll tell you what happened. I'm a very shy person, very shy. I'd have to go talk. I'm sure you probably feel like you're not an orator or anything, just have to go do it. I thought, well man, I'm going to have to introduce my film and talk about it afterwards. I'm afraid of that. What am I going to do? I don't remember talking in front of more than five people before. So I went to see this other movie and it was good, and I was watching it, and then the director comes up at the end, he goes, "Yeah, well, that was my movie and here's the writer." And it's like, oh man, I don't like the movie anymore. This guy's kind of a dick, so I cannot do that. I'm going to have to go be who they imagine made that movie. So I wrote out my whole intro. It was like a 20-minute intro. Because no one had ever heard of anybody making a movie for no money, much less without a crew, much less, the way I did it was just very new. Nobody knew it was possible. So my whole intro is like, "You'll see the Columbia logo slapped in front. It probably cost more than the whole movie." And then I go through, "This is how I made it with a wheelchair for a dolly, a turtle. I wrote around things I had," I mentioned the turtle, the pit bull, the bus, the ranch, all that stuff. So then when they see the movie... In fact, I think my wife was in the audience, she said, "At Sundance, people are laughing so much at your intro, they just wanted to hear a story like this so badly. I heard someone next to me say, 'I'm going to vote for his movie.'" They hadn't even seen the movie yet, just because the story was so good, they wanted that movie to be great. And when they see the turtle, big cheers. When they see the pit bull, big cheers. When they see the school bus, cheers. But then when they see how we use it and he slams into it and falls in it, they fucking lose their minds because they know how I put it together. They know that the rubber bands and the popsicle sticks, because I already set it up. And so that's why that audience, I just taped the reaction, they're so with it. The context is so key. You can watch Mariachi and go, "Hey, yeah, this looks like a \$7,000 movie," but if you know the story behind it, suddenly... I was curious. I hadn't seen it in a long time. I was watching it for the 20th anniversary, we did a screening. And the first few shots come up and I'm like, "Oh yeah, well, it looks like a \$7,000 movie." And then it keeps going. And once we're in the jail cell and the shooting's happening, and I realized, oh my God, we had these blanks that only fired one shot and it would jam. So I had to show it going, use the sound effect, cut to the other guy, cut back, have another one go. I'd have to do these editing tricks and then repeat a few frames so it looks like a machine gun. All these stuff that I'm start sweating as I'm watching it going, "I

can't believe I made this movie with that freaking camera." I don't know how I did. I couldn't even see. I'm there with this long lens pulling my own focus. When I finally had to do a real movie, I was operating the camera on my first real movie with a crew, and I get the camera and a guy comes over and he focuses for you. You go, "That's your job, you focus? Shit, I had to do my own focusing on the last movie." I was so hard. You're trying to focus on a guy while you're filming. You don't know where you are, and it's just, I couldn't believe how much easier it is when you have a crew.

### **Lex Fridman**

It's extremely valuable to know that the pain of that, the spectrum of creativity that's allowed within that, even just the focusing, like how focusing fucks up on older cameras and newer cameras, what are different artifacts that come up. Just to know the battlefield. In order to be a great general, you have to know how to be a soldier on the battlefield.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah, yeah. It's good to know all that stuff. But it's like at the end of the day, you could shoot something on a phone, and if you have a great story, no one's going to even notice. They'll be, "Oh, you shot that on a phone? I didn't notice." So sometimes people get caught up on what kind of camera should I have?" It's like, it's not the camera. That's just the tool. That's just the pen. That's just like, yeah, you can have different paint brushes, but you can go, "I'm going to limit my palette. I'm only going to use a fan brush and a detail brush, and I'm going to make a painting." Do you think that painting's going to suffer? – and a detail brush and I'm going to make a painting. Do you think that painting's going to suffer? No. It's going to take on an identity that you wouldn't have had if you had all the other tools. So sometimes the limitations help you because when you can do anything, it can be crippling. When I knew I could only use those things for Mariachi, it's like, all right, well it's very simple now. Let me show you how cheapskate I was, I did not spend on anything. So when you see him walking around with a guitar case, it's a shitty cardboard one I got from home. I had to get a heavier one to put the guns in. So we borrowed one, but it had this material ripped off the top so you could see the wood. It was just the wood on top so it didn't match the other one because it wasn't all black and I was too cheap to paint it black. I didn't want to spend money on paint. So you see that cardboard case, he puts it down and when he goes to open it, I cut to the other one. Once the wood is...

### **Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

Watch the edits, you'll see it open. Now it's a completely different case with the guns. And when he goes to cut it and close it cuts to the other one and he goes out. That's how I did that whole movie. Again it was a practice film. I don't want to waste any money on it. I don't know if it's going to be, I won't be able to make five bucks from it.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, but you're one of the few great directors where both the movie's genius and the process of making it is creative genius. It's like fun to watch both, to know of both.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You know what I believe.

**Lex Fridman**

Right. It's from somewhere else.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I have to say that thing is freaking... I didn't get in it's way basically would help. And people say that, "Don't get in your own way." This is a little bit easier to understand. It's like keep the pipe clear. Don't block it with your ego. Don't say you're going to be shocked, but don't ever say, "Oh, shit how do I do that? I don't know if I can do that." You didn't do it to begin with. Accept that it just came through you and try to get back into that head space, especially when you go to make a second film or a third film or follow up a success. That's when artists get really crippled because sometimes they start tiptoeing around as an artist going like, "Oh shit, now it's my second film. My first one did really well. They might not like my second one so much." That's not the head space you were in when you made the first one. You weren't hesitant like that. You're just... So try to keep that very naive and that's why I say commit to a body of work. I know a lot of filmmakers get stuck on their second one and then go further because they get crippled by the success of the first one and they start asking, "Oh shit, how did I do that? How can I do that again?" And you get deeper and deeper in a hole you can't get out of.

**Lex Fridman**

I think you've spoken about that filmmakers, especially early on in their journey, critics and the audience can destroy them, meaning it creates too much of a burden, too much, just wear them down to where they're almost scared to be creative. Can you just speak to that how to ignore the critic?

**Robert Rodriguez**

I'll tell you something that my best advice ever got early on, I was so fortunate, from an unlikely place because he's such, he sounded like Clint Eastwood when he said it, it was funny when you said that. But I got, I did Desperado and had Antonio Banderas, I brought Antonio to be in it from Europe, big action movie. And so Spielberg saw it and he said, "Hey, I want you to do Zorro with Antonio." So we're working on it for a while, I was working on the pre-production, got to work with Spielberg doing that. It ended up stalling because there was two studios involved and Amblin was moving or it was some weird thing where, but I got to work with him for about five months and I started getting really nervous because it's like, oh shit, you start thinking about, even movies of his that people would say, "Oh, Temple of



Doom is not as good as Raiders." Have you seen Temple of Doom? I would kill to fucking do that movie. If I can make Zorro as good as that one, the one that people said, it's like people don't know how good they had it with that guy. But I started thinking, I even said, "Man, I just rewatched Temple of Doom last night. I don't know how I'm going to do the Zorro movie. I've just never done anything like that." You start getting afraid because you go, the second thing he said, "Oh Rob, you're going to do fine." But then I started thinking, this guy, at that time, you may not know the era, but this was like mid-nineties, he was making the biggest, best movies of all and people would shit all over this guy. They would throw so much, they were so jealous. Press, audience, everyone was just hits at them, just throwing rocks at him for everything.

**Lex Fridman**

Spielberg?

**Robert Rodriguez**

You can't imagine it now. You had to been at that time. Now everyone has respect for him, but they made him run a fucking gauntlet and they were like, "Jurassic Park, meh." You can't even imagine it now, but you should have seen the climate. It freaked me out because I'm like maybe I should just stay under the radar where I've been, not poke my head out so much.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Because this guy has his head out and unwarranted. You can't even fathom it now because you weren't here at that time. It was crazy. You would never even think of him that way. I'm glad it changed because back then was just, it made people not want to be successful and it made me be worried, maybe I shouldn't be go making a movie that has his name on it, that's going to put my head out in a whole different realm of filmmaking at a studio level. Because even if I make a good movie, if I make a great movie, he's making great movies and he's getting this dog shit. I don't know if I could take it. So I asked him, because you don't know how resilient you can be, so I said, "Man, how do you do it? What do you do when people just throw rocks at you all day long?" He goes, "Oh, Robert, you just don't blink." And I was like, whoa, now I see how he got through it. Just don't blink. Just like you know what's coming, don't blink. And to him say it is like a Clint Eastwood line, right?

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

But it was like you could see he was telling the truth and you could see that's how he did it. He just avoided all criticism by just not blinking. It's like it's designed to make you blink and you're just not going to blink because you're committing to a body of work. He just keeps cranking out movies. Whatever he feels like doing, he does. And that was the most power and it never bothered me again. I just always kept in mind, I tell that to my actors, I tell that people, that story has traveled. I even had some little actors who were starting to get up and I said, "Remember, tell you a couple of things. Some people have told me you're never as good as people say you are and you're never as bad either." George Clooney told me that one, so I remember that. And then the second one, Spielberg, "Don't blink. Don't blink."

**Lex Fridman**

But there has to be a kind of vision for yourself of what you're reaching for, what you're trying to do.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Again, yeah, I think if you just told me what would be my vision for the future, just committing to a body of work, which I've just kept doing. That's about as far as you can see.

**Lex Fridman**

Do you have a sense, do you have a vision of the body of work you'll make in the next 20 years?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah.

**Lex Fridman**

Or is it just this fog?

**Robert Rodriguez**

I did. I did. I wasn't sure because you don't always know with the... You might not have the vision yet because you don't have the information yet. So if you just commit to a body of work, you'll start figuring out more reasons to keep doing that body of work. So when I turned 50, I was like, I guess I could just keep making movies. I mean, I guess that's been good for me. I guess I could just make more. I kind of done that already, but it's always fun and it's always new and I guess I could make, but it wasn't a lot of drive, right? It's like, well, I guess I could just keep doing that but, that's not as much as I can't wait to keep doing another season. But I didn't know how to get to that point. So I thought, you know what? I got to this job so early, I was in the early twenties. I bet there's some other job out there that exists that I don't even know about because I don't know other jobs. So I looked up, you're not going to believe it, but I literally bought Jobs for Dummies.

**Lex Fridman**

Nice.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I was just like, I don't even know what basic job even out there, turning the page, oh yeah, don't want that job. I don't want that job. I don't want that job. It's just going through and it gets to filmmaker and there's a little icon beside this job, this icon is a guy like this. Literally you look it up and it says, "This is the best job ever. You get to just be creative with your friends, sit back, watch the money roll in, across the desk." And it said, "But 99% of film students don't get this job, so give up that dream." So I was like, I guess I got the best job. But then I started working with my kids when we did, I had a TV show called Rebel Without a Crew based on that, where I found filmmakers who had only made a short film that hadn't made a feature. I picked this diverse group of filmmakers, gave them \$7,000, and we documented them making a feature two weeks like I did. You can bring one person. I had Carlos Gallardo, the producer and star of Mariachi, "Bring one person, can be your cameraman or you can be your sound guy, whatever. But it's only that for the shoot and you'd have to do the whole thing." And I saw those guys by the time they're like, "I don't know how we're going to make this movie." By the first week of shooting, they're already talking about their next feature. They became so confident because their idea of what impossible is drops really quick when you take it.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, anyone interested in unlocking their creativities, they're not even just filmmaking, I highly recommend that show and I highly recommend kind of the follow-on show, which is where you make Red 11.

**Robert Rodriguez**

So that's the one I did. So then it came time for me to do one. So I made a movie called Red 11 based on my experiences in the medical hospital, but I'll turn it into a sci-fi thriller just to use that so that I can use somebody getting stabbed in the eye. So I'm still going to have more elements to show how you can do camera tricks and stuff with no money. And the old days make it for less than \$7,000, which I think were like \$5,000 mainly because I had a lot of actors I wanted to pay, but the movie itself can make it for nothing. But I brought my son aboard as my number one who hadn't been working with me in a while. He wrote Sharkboy and Lavagirl when he was seven, but then he hadn't really been working on my crew, so he didn't know how to operate the sound equipment, the separate sound system and all that. I didn't show him until the day of filming because I knew we're documenting it would make a better tutorial. So by getting them working on the movies together, they came to me super excited. By the end of the day I thought for sure, oh, they're going to hate this even though it's only two weeks. They've got other interests. They don't want to be filmmakers. I thought they were going to be like, "All right, I'm out of here," after one day. But instead he came to me and his brother who acted in it and he went, "Dad, the actor didn't show up after the first

day. The location didn't match the script at all. We asked you how we were going to solve the problems and you're like, 'I don't know, figure it out.'" We thought Dad's stumped for once, is he stumped finally? But then by the end of the day, his eyes were all wide. We figured it out. They went, oh, they don't realize this is the creative process. Every day is like that. And in life too, every day you don't know if your machine's going to not work or you're going to get a flat tire or you get fired that day. So life is very unpredictable, just like a movie set. So I realized I'm going to make them all work on my movies now because it's teaching them about life. I'm teaching them very little about the film make, it's about life lessons, about how you take on something impossible, turn chicken shit to chicken salad and make it work. And that's the strive, that's life, that's the process of life. So many people say, "Well, I'm not ready to make my projects." You're not ready for life either. You're like this all day, you're dodging shit that's going on. How come art has to be perfect? It's like it should be the same, life and art should be the same.

**Lex Fridman**

And I think filmmaking in general is full of unpredictable things. So many-

**Robert Rodriguez**

And its short little microcosm too. Within one project you've got a whole blueprint for how you're going to solve life because you've just done it on a creative level.

**Lex Fridman**

I think of all the art forms of all the art mediums that it just has so many different components.

**Robert Rodriguez**

A lot of components to it.

**Lex Fridman**

And so there's so many ways to fuck things up, to learn from fuck-ups.

**Robert Rodriguez**

But any of the disciplines, if you add those to it, I teach my actors to paint in-between takes. We'll go and I'll take a picture of them in character. I show them a canvas, I show them paint. You don't need to know how to paint. This is to show you the brush is going to know where to go, you just got to pick it up. Pick the colors you want. Doesn't matter how crazy they are, whatever's speaking to you, you lay it down. I'll show you some of the pictures. You're not going to believe the masterworks these actors did in a day.

**Lex Fridman**

Nice.

## Robert Rodriguez

They just start doing it. Lady Gaga had her fingernails in there, Josh Brolin's doing his thing. Then I take a picture of them in character, do a line drawing of it, we project it on top, and mostly it's the painting coming through, their line drawing with a little bit of their eyes painted in. You're not going to believe these things. They couldn't believe it, but it teaches them that thing about that the creativity is going to come through. So even though they're already acting, they're already being creative, we're already making a movie. Like you said, that's already a really great creative endeavor. When we would sneak off and paint, you could tell it's firing a whole other part of their brain. It was funny, I think Josh Brolin's girlfriend said, Josh said, "Hey, my girlfriend just said," she said, his wife now, but at the time, "Are you guys doing drugs? You leave the set and you come back and you're all excited." and I go, "No, we're painting. We're painting. But that makes sense that you say that because when you get your creativity firing, it's more powerful than any drug." And we would come back and he'd be on the set going, "Is it bad that I'm still thinking about the painting?" And I'm like, "No, I think it's good. I think it's all good." But you can tell it's opening a whole other part of their creative brain. So you can be doing acting in a movie and the painting's still going to tap, it shows how much untapped potential your creative brain has. So the more you can do, the more you're firing off. And it was so cool. I remember we did one with Joseph Gordon-Levitt was painting. We came in and the table was like this and they said, we have a problem. You want him to throw the cards out, the playing cards out, but it's so slick they go sliding off the table and we both look at it and we both got the solution at the same time. Oh, just have them throw them, wherever they go and then we'll place them. And then digitally, it's even better that he looks like he gets them all perfectly laid out to show what a card shark he is. But that's what we have to do because we not going to, we'll be here all day if we're trying to get, if we're going to worry about where they go, just go bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, and then we'll place the cards down and everyone will pick them up and then we'll marry the two in post. You just come up with creative solutions better, easier because you were just solving crazy creative solutions in the other one, what paint medium do I use? What kind of gel am I going to use? So when you come back to your main job, which is filmmaking, you're like, "Oh, I can figure this out in two seconds." So it helps you creative problem solve. So that's basically working with my kids made me realize, oh, now I know exactly what I want to do for the next 10 years. I only want to make movies with my kids because I'm mentoring them, but they're teaching me shit the age I was when I made Mariachi and Desperado. And their ideas are really sharp. So the mentoring goes both ways and it's like the greatest parenting you can do because you're building a project together and in the same boat together, figuring it out and it's family time. You're like checking all the boxes. So I thought my filmmaking going forward is going to be checking all the boxes in life. So I'm not not spending time with my family. We're actually giving them lessons that they can go do, anything they want in life because they're going to have different interests. But now it's kind of like going to college and this college is like the best college because it pays you to learn, you get to do these crazy skills. My son is conducting the orchestra, the James Bond Orchestra in London for the Spy Kid score, the score he wrote, because I can't write at

his level because he was always our best piano player. And you get the charge out of working with him. And then by making a label, there's this weird phenomenon that happens if you guys want to take your game to another level, I stumbled upon this idea. My son, that was my counterpart on that movie, Racer, he was my sound guy, like I said, came up with Sharkboy and Lavagirl when he was little, he became my writer, co-writer, co-producer, he had come to me and said, "I want to do VR type movie." And I said, "Oh, well let me show you," as an example of creativity and manifest, I said, "Let me show you how it works. Let's make a company. We'll make a company called Double R, Double R Productions." Because we all have double R names, all the kids. So if anyone ever wants to do anything, we can use our company. So let's make a logo and I'll make t-shirts and notepads and stuff because once you have a company, you now have to make things for that company. Just like the advice I gave to people, stop aspiring, make a business card that says writer, director, cinematographer, I did, editor, because then now you have to conform to that identity. So now if I create a label like Double R, we're going to come up with ideas. We'll call up VR companies and say, "Hey, we have company, a VR company. Would you like us to make you a film for you to sell your headsets?" So yeah, they gave us a budget. They're dying for content. They gave us a budget. We shot a 20-minute action movie we call The Limit with Michelle Rodriguez and Norman Reedus where you're in an action movie with them. And it was killer. They made us a big Double R logo, animated logo. Later that year we did Red 11, same logo. That movie went to Directors' Fortnight and Cannes. Festivals were paying us to come talk about how we made that movie. That's when we're doing the cards, throwing the cards out, because they wanted their audiences, they knew they would love that. So we could have had a whole gig just continuing to get paid to go to the Fed. Usually you pay to Feds, go to the Feds, you don't get paid. That's what a success that was. But then we had to make We Can Be Heroes. So we had to stop, but We Can Be Heroes was a Netflix movie where they asked me to make a Spy Kids type thing. And so I thought, oh, okay, I'll just do it with superheroes, that's there I wrote it with my kids, based it on some of their personalities. It's the most watched and rewatched movie in Netflix history. Like nothing can touch it because kids just keep watching it over because it's kids with superpowers, no one's ever done that before and they couldn't believe it. I'd heard anecdotally that's how the Spy Kids where people said, "Oh, that kid's watching over and over on video." But you can't keep track of that. You can on Netflix because their thing is people completing a movie, a lot of people don't complete a movie and it still counts as a view. They may watch five minutes and change the channel. So do you complete a movie? That's really where they really value. Not only do they complete, but re-watch, re-watch, re-watch per household so many times and nothing can touch it.

**Lex Fridman**

Wow.

**Robert Rodriguez**

That one has a double R logo as well. And my kids are like, "Dad, that really worked." I was like, "I know better than I thought." I didn't know that me manifesting that company was going to turn into that and we just keep making stuff. So I want to do that with Brass Knuckle films now with the audience because it works. So I said, as soon as you have a logo and a company, your brain starts coming up with all kinds of ideas and it's a filter. Like I said, sometimes the freedom of limitations is all freeing. When I had to do Four Rooms and it's like we have to use one hotel room, oh well then there's going to be a dead body, there's going to be this, you can do a lot with limitations. If they said you could use the whole city, it would've been harder to come up with something. Brass Knuckle Films has a filter, only action, action movies because that's the stuff that there's always an appetite for. If you ask Netflix right now, what do you need more of? They'll say, "Action, action, action. We don't have enough action. The last regime didn't leave us enough action. We need action." They'll pay a premium for an action film that we can make at a lower cost. A \$20 million action film is very cheap. Studios don't know how to make them that cheap. That's why they'll pay for an independent to go do it. And right now that's the key is to be independent because a lot of studios that can't even green light anything because things are so expensive they don't want to lose their ass, but they need action films. So let's make something that everybody needs and let's make it at a price and we'll make it in my studio because I got my own studio and I can keep all the costs down because we have all the costumes and props and sets from 25 years of filmmaking to keep the cost down and we'll have the audience gets to invest. It's not crowdfunding or Kickstarter, you are actually an investor. Anyone who puts money in can pitch their idea for an action film to me. And I'm going to make one of the four films in that slate from one of those ideas because I want the audience to win. I want the audience to win and be a part of it because the audience is an afterthought in Hollywood. They make a movie, they show the audience the movie, "Go tell your friends now so you all spend money on our movie." Well where's your cut of that? So I want them to be successful. So if any of the movies in the slate do well, they make money off that one and then sequels or anything. But they're all going to do well because everyone needs an action movie or we're going to keep the cost down.

**Lex Fridman**

Can I actually ask you just to focus in on action, you've created a lot of epic action films, what makes for a great action film?

**Robert Rodriguez**

It comes down to the character. If you think about what are the best action films, what are your favorite films? Die Hard, he's a cop so he's still capable, but he's not Superman. The fact that he's in over his head and you're rooting for him, that's a great character. John Wick, he is Superman, but he's retired and now he's pissed off and he's going back into a job. So it comes down to the character really being very important because the action will then have a character to it.

**Lex Fridman**

I think Leon: The Professional.

**Robert Rodriguez**

That's a character.

**Lex Fridman**

I mean that's all about character.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I mean that's all character. Now that, when I say we're going to do action movies, I mean movies that are really action first. There's some movies that are more dramas that have action.

**Lex Fridman**

Where's the boundary? So John Wick is action.

**Robert Rodriguez**

That's more action, but it has character in it, but it's action driven.

**Lex Fridman**

What about Predator?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Predator is a sci-fi action film. So that's kind of a hybrid, which I like but sometimes it's hard for the audience to know what they're buying into.

**Lex Fridman**

Got it.

**Robert Rodriguez**

They focused a lot on the action in the trailer and then they felt there was some other worldly thing, but you didn't really know. But it's a great movie.

**Lex Fridman**

So Die Hard is a good example.

**Robert Rodriguez**

It was a good example I can think of right off where there's a character that really made the difference and then everyone repeated that for a while. It was Under Siege, I was like a regular guy who's really actually has some training on a ship now and then on the bus you've



got a cop, he's a cop, but he's not super cop. So that's why you root for him. That became an element that people repeated a lot.

**Lex Fridman**

What about Taken?

**Robert Rodriguez**

That's a great one. That's a great character who is superhuman, who's also retired. There's like a superhero type character in an extraordinary circumstance, now his daughter's taken, right? And then there's ordinary people like the Terminator, that's a great character, not the Terminator, he is a villain. But Sarah Connor, who is a waitress, doesn't think her life's going anywhere and she finds out she's the mother of the guy who's going to save the human race and she's got to train him. Suddenly she has to become someone else. Those are cool movies because it's a genesis of a character and you see a character go from waitress to revolutionary.

**Lex Fridman**

They step up. Yeah. What about mob movies? I mean some of them are like Godfather is really not about, it's not action-

**Robert Rodriguez**

Not an action movie, drama that has some action in it.

**Lex Fridman**

I mean John Wick is a mob film in some sense. Goodfellas, I mean there's a lot of dynamic action, but there's really not action first.

**Robert Rodriguez**

That's really a character type piece. Great, freaking amazing. And it feels like action by the way he does it, it's just like that. It's like fast pace, fast talk and fast moving. Like Escape from New York's one of my favorites since I was a kid because every movie, you'll notice this now that I tell you, even a romantic comedy, there's a timeline. Every movie has to have a ticking clock. So the audience knows this story's not just going to take over a period of years though. Suddenly someone in the movie around 20 or 30 minutes in will say, "We've got to go find the groom before the wedding this weekend." It'll be just like that. Escape from New York has the best example of a ticking time clock because he's literally got bombs in his neck and he's got a watch that shows him, he's constantly clocking it, how little time he has and he gets you so like, oh my God, is he going to make it? That's the best use of that. And no one's ever topped that ticking time clock. All the other ones seem artificial in comparison. Aliens, we got to get off this planet now because this whole thing's going to blow up. There's a timeline, it's already urgent, but now there's an extra timeline on it. This is what happens.

**Lex Fridman**

As you're talking, you're just making me fall in love more and more with action films. Sometimes you forget how much you love action films.

**Robert Rodriguez**

A really good action film.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

In fact, like The Terminator, oh my God, the original Terminator just came out in four cam and I've been watching it again. It looks like better than most movies look today, and that's a \$4 million movie. It looks incredible. You can see every bead of sweat in this movie. I was watching it again with somebody, a female and there's always a point when you're watching that movie where she'll turn and say, "I love this movie." A point that is, it's a point where Michael Biehn tells her, "I came across time for you, Sarah. I love you, I always have." And you're just like, oh my God. There's like a real emotional love story there that he put into Titanic, that he put into Avatar, he figured out that thing that makes those movies work.

**Lex Fridman**

By the way, I should say that, I mean there is an aspect of El Mariachi that is the love story to me.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah, there was a love story.

**Lex Fridman**

I don't know if you see it that way, but when I just rewatched it, I was like a-

**Robert Rodriguez**

A tragic love story.

**Lex Fridman**

But I was heartbroken that she's dead.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I got heartbroken twice. Let me tell you the second time it happened, one that you're making that and you go, okay, this is how it has to go. But then now you're invested in this person, you go, "Oh man, she has to die. It's going to be really sad." In fact, the studio, even when they said they were going to remake it, good thing I put that ending on, that's the only reason they showed it to an audience. We're going to remake it, they weren't going to put

that movie out. They showed it, they said, "We need to show this movie to an audience because they might not like the fact that we killed a girl before we remake it." All right. They showed it to an audience. The audience liked it the way it was. So they said, "We're going to take this movie to some film festivals." And I was like, "No, not this movie. This is my practice movie. No one's supposed to see this movie." And they go, "No, no, you got something." "No, no, dude, if I knew anyone was going to see this, I would've shot it completely different. Give me \$2,000. I'll go reshoot half of it," just knowing people are going to see it I want something. And the head of the studio is really smart. He said, "You don't know what you have here. It's something really special. Let's just take it and tell you what happened." Tell you what? Toronto did great, like I said, it won Sundance. So now we had to put it out, but I was like, I would've said, "Don't show that movie." But they also questioned the ending and didn't come into play because we ended up making Desperado. The girl in Desperado doesn't die. We didn't do that. We didn't kill Salma, but that's what needed to happen in El Mariachi. Quentin called me one time. People would always say like, "Oh, Reservoir Dogs. He borrowed from this movie Hong Kong actually from called City on Fire about these guys they're all criminals and they kill each other, whatever." And he said, "Hey, they're showing a double feature called East Looks West and West looks East. They're showing Reservoir Dogs with City On Fire, the one they say I borrowed from. And they're showing Mariachi with a Hong Kong film called Run where they ripped off Mariachi." They just took the whole story. It had two Chinese actors in Mexico with guitar cases. Ones, they just followed it beat by beat. So we're watching it and it was like scene by scene. They just remade it without even getting the rights or anything. It was so fun to watch. So we saw Mariachi first, then we watched that one and I'm like, "What's this big brothel scene though? This isn't my movie." Oh, the bad guy, oh, there's a scene in my movie where the bad guy has two girls in bed with him and they figured that was a whorehouse, but it was just this apartment. So they got this whorehouse, they reinterpreted it and they have helicopter shots and all kinds of big thing. And the action was awesome. But then the girl's really good. And then midway through the movie I'm like, "Oh shit, she's going to die because I killed her in mine. I don't want her to die. I like this actress. It's really great. And they have a really great love story." I go, "Well, I hope they changed that part." No, they kill her. So I felt bad twice because I sealed her fate. I sealed her fate, because...

### **Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

I have a line in Spy Kids 2 because I started thinking when you create stuff, you start thinking, I wonder if that's how our creator is. He's like, oh shit, I just kind of threw that in a memo and now that whole town's going to get wiped out. I didn't even think about the implications of that because there's a line I was making a character that Steve Buscemi plays in Spy Kids 2 and he's a creator. He just wanted to make a little miniature zoo for kids. And then he thought, well, what if I put some together like a lizard with a snake and it's a

slizard, or you have a spider monkey, which is literally spider legs and a monkey top. So he makes that, and then he thought, hey, why don't I make them a little bit bigger for kids that have big hands? And it got out of control and they turn into these huge creatures and now they're trying to eat them. So he's hiding. And the kids find him hiding and he says this one line that people keep coming, it's on the internet a lot. This meme about this, "Why is this line in this movie?" It's so wild. I thought I wanted Steve to come up to the camera and he's lost in his own creative world. And he says, "I can't even go outside because my own creations are going to eat me." And he comes up to the camera, he goes, "Do you think God hides in heaven because he too lives in fear of what he created here on Earth?" it's really just for a moment, this thing. And it's like, because you feel like that way when you're creating stuff, you're creating something and then now it's taking all life on its own. And it's like, oh no, now this character has to die. I didn't want that. This domino effect of creation. And you start thinking, well, this must be what creation, maybe he is hiding up there because look, he didn't expect all this shit to happen, giving us free will and all that.

### **Lex Fridman**

I mean this particular context that you are the creator of this story and it for some reason makes me feel good to know that you feel the pain of this character dying.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah, absolutely because if I'm writing it but if it's not coming from me, I'm as surprised sometimes. And Quentin would say that. He'd say, "You just get two characters talking when I'm writing my script and then suddenly they're just talking to each other." And I was like, "What does that mean?" And now I know what that means. It's like he just gave them life and now the dialogue's coming through him.

### **Lex Fridman**

Let me just ask you, you're the perfect person to ask about the genius of Quentin Tarantino. What makes him special as a director, as a creative mind, what do you see in him that's beautiful, that's brilliant?

### **Robert Rodriguez**

Since I met him, he was just like this brilliant ball of energy. And if you see him, I walk around his house and I'll see a few sheets of paper all handwritten out. I'm like, "What's that?" He goes, "Oh, that was something I was starting to write, not going to finish." I'm like, "Can I take these and go turn it into the whole trilogy of films?" What he throws away, all us mortal men would kill for, you need people like that. I tell people, your parents say, "Watch out who your peers are," when you're younger that means one thing but once you get older, surround yourself around people who swing much farther than you. But that's really true. I mean, just by being around him and working with him, you get, by osmosis, you learn stuff and it just ups your game because they're just swing way beyond you. Jim Cameron was like that. So when I first met him, I was trying to impress the hell out of him because I was such a big fan.

I was about to go do this *Desperado* and I went, "Hey, I just took a three-day Steadicam course because I can't afford a Steadicam operator, so I'm going to operate Steadicam myself on this *Desperado*." Now if he was just my peer, he'd say, "Oh, I did the same thing and I'm going to do the same thing." That would be hanging out with somebody of your ilk, but you want somebody who's above that. You know what he said? He goes, "I bought a Steadicam, but not to operate it, I'm going to take it apart, design a better one." Us mere mortals trying to learn how to operate the camera. He's designing all new systems. That's the guy you want to hang out with, not someone who's doing what you're doing. So surround yourself by those kinds of people. And that's when you learn things like don't blink. Somebody who's really swinging for the senses and accomplishing so much. And Quentin was like that. So I met him at the festivals. He saw *Mariachi*, he loved it. We came up, we talked, and he said, "You're going to like my next film I'm writing right now, *Pulp Fiction*." So I thought, "Man, I'm going to put this guy, he's so fun. I'm going to put him, I'm going to write him in my *Desperado* script, which I was writing." So that was before *Pulp Fiction* and all that when I had cast him, I didn't know he was going to go become such a household name. I just was drawn to his energy and I'd already written him in. And I met Steve Buscemi there, and I was like, "I'm writing a character for Steve Buscemi." But then I went back to the Sony lot where I was working on *Desperado* and Quentin and I ended up having offices right next to each other on the Sony lot by accident. I didn't even know that. I just met him. And I go back and he was, because originally *Pulp Fiction* was for TriStar because Danny DeVito was a producer and he was going to make it for TriStar. So he was there writing *Pulp Fiction* and I was writing *Desperado*. So I'd go show him storyboards from *Desperado*, he'd come act out scenes of *Pulp Fiction*. And we got to be really good friends that way. We'd go eat lunch at Versailles across the street, the Sony lot. And then Sony passed on *Pulp Fiction*. It's too weird, it's too long, \$ 8 million movie or 7 million, "They're like, ah, we're going to go make the next *Pauly Shore* movie instead. People don't understand this thing." And Miramax got it. And they'd just been bought by Disney. So they produced, their first film was *Pulp Fiction*. And then that thing went to Cannes and it was a whole thing. But what I loved about his story is that when he made *Pulp Fiction*, he had a director screening, he showed it to some directors and I wasn't able to go. But anyway, I had dinner with him once, and it was in my journal because I keep a journal, at 2: 40 AM after I dropped him off at his house, I said, "Oh wait, how did your movie come out?" *Pulp Fiction*, he just finished it and he went, "It's done. It still feels like a movie Quentin would make. It doesn't feel like a real movie." And I was like, "That's fine. What do you mean?" "It feels like one of those movies I would make, like *Reservoir Dogs* doesn't feel like a real movie." And I was trying to be the supportive friend going, oh man, he was so excited about this movie, now he's bummed about it. And I was like, "Well, it should be different. Should be like..." He's like, wouldn't have it, drove off. So I thought, oh, I guess that wasn't the one. So I went home and I called some of the directors that were at the screening and they go, "Yeah, this isn't the one for him." None of them saw it. None of them saw it. But I know you're surprised.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

But that happened with George Lucas too, with Star Wars. Everybody saw that movie and was like, "Poor George." They showed it to all his director friends, "Poor George. What did he waste all his time with this for?" Only Spielberg was the one who said, "It's naive and it's going to do really good because it's naive kids will like it," but everyone else was like, "What's he doing? We're artists. We're making art films. What's he doing this garbage for?" Because nobody knows. It shows. No one knows anything. Not even the filmmaker. When you're being groundbreaking, you don't know what groundbreaking is. Not you or anyone around you except maybe one or two people. So he said, "There's one person." I go, "Oh yeah, who is your Spielberg?" Goes, "Kathryn Bigelow. Without a doubt she's the only one who said there's something here." No one else was saying that." He said, "In fact," because he remembered suddenly, he'd forgotten the story but if it wasn't in my journal, I would've forgot it too. He goes, "In fact, one of my friends even said, I want to sit you-" ... "that, too. In fact, one of my friends even said, 'I'm going to sit you down and tell you all the things that are wrong with your movie, but I'll wait till you get back from the Cannes Film Festival.'" Then he goes and he wins the Palme d'Or. Then his friend's like, "Oh, what the hell do I know? I've only made one movie myself, so never mind. I guess we were all wrong." So even he didn't expect that, at all, so that was a shock, even to him. So, think about that.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

That means, what do you do? Commit to a body of work. Just do that. Because you don't know. You don't know what's going to be a Pulp Fiction, and what's going to be a Jackie Brown. What's going to be... You don't know. And you'd like to think they know, but they don't know either. They feel it. Like I asked Jim Cameron. I said, "Do you see your movie really clearly? Can you see it with hyper focus? Because it seems like that." And he goes, "It's really far, and it's out of focus. And as you work on it, and you work on it starts coming." I said, "Well, okay, good. So that's normal." I thought maybe he had laser vision, or something. But no, even him, he doesn't really know, but he feels that he can make decisions and he understands what a creative drive is, and how to just keep being relentless about it. But it's not like they have all the... Proximity is huge. Proximity will change your life. Did for me. Just being around those guys. They didn't teach me, "Hey, I'm going to teach you how to make a movie." Just being next to them, being in their world, just ups your game. And you're able to do things you weren't able to do before. You get ideas you didn't get to do before I did. I'll show you one of my painting things. You're not going to believe this freaking thing. I had a painter friend in Germany, Sebastian Kruger, he gives a workshop once a year. I said, "I'm going to go there, and I bet I'll learn more about directing by watching this guy paint, than I

will by watching another director." Because that's just, now, I know how creativity works. You're going to learn lessons outside of the box by doing that. And I tried to practice before going out there. I was doing a Danny Trejo, I'll show you the before and after. You're not going to freaking believe what you see, but it really tells the story of how important proximity is. So I do this painting, it's like, "Ah, it fucking looks garbage." I'll show you, it looks like garbage. I can't do paintings that are just like... See, you never should say, "I can't," because you just cut your leg off. But I couldn't at the time paint, just paintbrush into paint and then right on the canvas like that, without using some kind of medium. Which this guy Sebastian Kruger would do. So first I did a digital painting of Danny Trejo, just to get the framing and all that

**Lex Fridman**

Nice. How was that created?

**Robert Rodriguez**

That's like on a Wacom tablet. But then I did it with paint, and it's like, "Ah, it's all cruddy, and it's too thick, the paint. It just looks..." And I just gave up right away. I was trying to pre-practice so I wouldn't be a total buffoon there, because I was going the next week. And I thought, "He's using a different brush," obviously, "he's using a better paint. This stuff just is clogging up, and it's crap. I'm sure when I get there..." So I get there, and he's doing a Mick Jagger. And he starts with a mid-tone. He starts blocking in the face with a little tiny drawing of where the face goes. He starts doing that. He starts adding some highlights. There's the photo, his reference. And I'm like, "Why are you concentrating so much on the cheek first?" And he was like, "It's different every time." Every, and I go, what paints are you using?" And he's like, "It was regular acrylic paint." "What brushes do you have?" "Regular brushes?" And I'm like, "How come mine doesn't look like yours?" "Well, let me try what he's doing. You start with a mid-tone. I'm going to do that Danny again, start with a mid-tone. I'll start adding some highlights." And I did that, and everybody kept coming over going, "Did you just do that?" And I was like, "Yeah, I don't know how," but it's very cartoony still. He's doing a very realistic Mick Jagger. Look how real that is. And you're just watching, and he doesn't teach you anything. He just starts painting. So this is the photo he had as a reference, but then this is his painting. Right?

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

And because I'm there, he's not teaching you how to paint.

**Lex Fridman**

Through osmosis, you're learning, somehow.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You're seeing that there isn't a trick.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I thought he had a trick, and that's why I couldn't get any further. He's using the same brush and the same paint. Well, how come I can't do that? And you go, you do it. And I go, "I'm going to try and do something realistic." I've never done realistic before, because I'm a cartoonist, and everything. I was cartoony, and that was just easier for me, because I thought I would need too much training. I did another Trejo, I started doing a realistic, I finished out just one section of his face. And put the pen down, because I did that.

**Lex Fridman**

Shit.

**Robert Rodriguez**

The same day.

**Lex Fridman**

Nice.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I got out of my way, because seeing him get out of his own way, I think that's why sometimes people need to go to school for stuff like that. Because then now, "Well, I just did four years of school, so now I must know." Now you've given yourself permission. But you could give yourself permission right away, and it's going to come through.

**Lex Fridman**

And drawing Danny Trejo, of all people is like, there's so much going on there. It's like he's so expressive.

**Robert Rodriguez**

He's so expressive, and so much-

**Lex Fridman**

I mean, you've worked with him a lot, and he's one of the most badass humans on the screen. You've created that. Can you just talk about what it's like, creating those characters?



**Robert Rodriguez**

What was exciting about Desperados, I went to go make it, and there were no Latin actors working in Hollywood. Because no one was creating roles for them. So I thought, "Wow, I got to go create my own stars. We'll bring Antonio from Europe, because they kind of know his name from the Almodóvar movies, and I saw him in Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!, when I was in the hospital writing Mariachi. We were watching TV while I was a patient, and there's a scene where he headbutts Victoria Abril. He just gave her headbutt. But he goes, like that. I was like, "Whoa. I bet that guy would want to be in an action movie. He's got something inside." So I called him when we were doing Desperado and I said, "Would you ever consider doing an action?" "Oh man, I'd love to do action." You know, he said something... So I said, "Well, I got a movie for you. I got a movie for you. It's the sequel to Mariachi." And so, Salma I found in Mexico television. She couldn't get work in the U.S., because of the roles that are [inaudible 01:51:05]-

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah. How did you find her? I mean, this is one of the greatest-

**Robert Rodriguez**

It was a crazy story-

**Lex Fridman**

... actors in the world.

**Robert Rodriguez**

... one of the best stories. I was really determined to hire a real Latin, especially Hispanic, and then she's Mexican, actress, to be the Mexican character. That's as authentic as you can get. And there was no one who was getting any jobs, because no one was creating any. So there was no one that had any movies under their name, because there was no one, it was a whole systemic problem. This was '94, '93. So I was watching a Paul Rodriguez show on Univision, because I was trying to practice my Spanish, because I was having to do all these Spanish interviews. Because Mariachi was in Spanish. That was the other part I didn't tell you, I didn't speak Spanish when I made that movie. We didn't grow up with it. So I left that part out of the Mariachi story, because I thought, people already didn't believe I made the movie by myself. If they knew I made it in a language I didn't speak? I should have said it, because it'd be even more inspiring.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, that's inspiring.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Like, now you have no excuse. I wrote the English subtitles, basically.

**Lex Fridman**

Holy shit.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I wrote the titles, what became the subtitles, and then we'd take it to the actors, and the actor would translate it for me. And I was like-

**Lex Fridman**

That is so inspiring.

**Robert Rodriguez**

... I'd be like-

**Lex Fridman**

Holy shit.

**Robert Rodriguez**

... I would try to speak Spanish. And say, "[foreign language 01:52:13]," like, "Let's record." And they'd be looking at me like, "What the fuck?" That means, "Let's remember." The [foreign language 01:52:19] doesn't mean record. That means [foreign language 01:52:22]. Now I know, back then, I didn't know. So I'm watching Univision, and then there's Salma as a guest, and she's a big soap star down there in Mexico. And she comes out, she's beautiful, she's funny, everyone's laughing. She's Salma. Everyone that we know, now. And she starts talking about, what I gather from what she's saying, that she's having trouble finding any work in the U.S. because of her accent. And then Paul Rodriguez says, "Well, say something in English." And she says, and she sounds just like she does now. And he goes, "That's great." And she goes, "I know, I know." And I went, "I think this is the girl." So I called her in my office, and I videotaped our first meeting together. So I have that somewhere.

**Lex Fridman**

Oh, that's awesome. That's so awesome.

**Robert Rodriguez**

And it's Salma. It's Salma. It's her, with her energy, with her passion, and funny. She became instant friends with my wife. Before they walked over, "Your wife and I are best friends." She already was like part of the family. She's a godmother to my kids. And I thought, "I'm going to help you, and you're going to help me. I need to have a Mexican actress in this, and you're going to be phenomenal. The studio didn't see it. They were like, "What? She hasn't done anything. Why don't you just hire somebody else, who already has a name?" I said, "Well, if we just give her one movie, then she'll be someone who's in a movie, and then you can keep casting." So I made a whole nother movie with her in English, called Road Racers. It was my second film for Showtime. A really cool little Rebel Without a Cause type movie. And I gave

her a role in that, so we'd have an example of her doing English. And they still were like, "We need a screen test. We need to have a screen test with a bunch of other actresses." So I said, "Sure, let's do that." So I went over to her house the night before the screen test, and we worked on the scene, which is the best scene. Where she's operating on his arm, and they've got all this chemistry. And I was just directing her through it completely, down to, "When you pick up the water, and you hand him the water, don't scream, "Oh, hot water!" Just be like, "Hot water," while he's spitting it out, and it's going to be a big dramatic action with a very light delivery. And so, we got it down to a science. The next day we, show up, Antonio does a scene with all the girls who come in. He does it with her. Clearly, they've got amazing chemistry. She just nails it. He's great. He loves her, too. Studio's like, "Okay, you can hire her." Reluctantly, like that. But once they saw the footage come as we were shooting, and they saw it on the big screen when they were watching the dailies, then they were like, "Oh my God." And then they saw it. Then they saw what I saw when I met her. But sometimes, like you say, what do you do when people are like, "Hey, how come you're using these...?" Just know that not everyone's going to see it. You may have the only vision, just keep going. There's an instinct that tells you to keep going that way. You'll get proved right or wrong, or maybe you're slipping on the first two rocks, or whatever. But follow your instinct, because everyone's going to have an opinion, and it's not necessarily the right one. And when you're an independent filmmaker, you can make those decisions that change people's career, that changes the world. And that's why you want to remain independent. That's why what's happening now in the industry is great, because I have to make movies like the way I started, which is what I've always liked to do. Which is just doing it where we create our own destiny. We go, "Hey, we're going to make a movie. We're going to make it for this budget, so we can make it. And the story's going to be so character-driven and cool, we're going to be able to get big actors to be in it because they're going to want to be in it." So, Danny Trejo, you asked me about Danny Trejo. It's great story.

### **Lex Fridman**

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

Okay, Danny Trejo. We're doing Desperado now, I'm casting all kinds of people. Now, I have this character that I want to have a bunch of knives. He opens up his vest, and there's a bunch of knives. So, "Bring me all the coolest looking Latin actors we can find." And before he even walked in, there's a picture of him, he already looked like the guy, but he was younger. He always just played prison inmates. It was a picture of him as an inmate, in a prison. "I want to give him a cool role, whoever this actor is." He walks in, and I see him. It's Danny Trejo. He sits down, and I had the prop knife already made. And I say, "You need to have this in your hand and look like you sleep with it. Just practice flipping it around in your hand." And I gave it to him. "You got the role, just start practicing with that." And he gets up, and he walks out. He didn't have to say anything because there's no dialogue. He walks out, holding the... We get to the set, and he kept saying, "Put me in, Coach. Give me a line, give

me a line." It's like, "No, no, you're such a nice guy, you're going to blow the whole mystique. I want this guy to feel like the most evil, scary guy of all. And you're such a nice guy." I didn't let him talk till *Dusk Till Dawn*. But one thing I noticed was that the town we shot in, the Mexican town, which is the same town I shot *Mariachi*. We went back there, because I wanted to pay back the city. So we had this big movie there. And they didn't really know Antonio, because he was in European movies. Salma hadn't come to the set yet. But they saw Danny Trejo there in his vest, looking like a Mexican icon. They would go like this. Everyone thought he was the star. And I just know magnetism when I see it, and I went, "This guy's got something." So I went to him and I said, "I got a movie we're going to do someday." This was '94. We didn't make this movie for 15 years. "Machete. You're going to be machete." I had an idea for Machete then, it wasn't the same story. I had seen a story, actually, the guy from *Mariachi* sent me this funny story. He said, "Hey, look at this story," that the USDA, and FBI sometimes, would hire a Mexican federale to come do a job for 25 grand that they didn't want to get their own guys killed on. I said, "That's Machete. The guy that they pay," but he's not doing it for the money. It turns out he has to get this guy that escaped Mexico, and that's the twist. So that was the original story I had. I said, "We're going to do this someday." And we talked about it for years, and never did it. Never got around to doing it. So when I did *Spy Kids*, I put him in *Spy Kids* and I said, "Hey, let's pay tribute to that character we never got to make, and you'll be Uncle Machete." He's a gadget guy, but he's got a mysterious past. But then a few years later, Quentin and I were doing *Grindhouse*, and he'd already done *Dusk Till Dawn* with me. I was building my own Latin star system. Salma showed up in a bunch of my movies. Cheech shows up in every movie. Danny shows up there. I brought Cheech out of retirement, put him in my movie. I needed to create my own Latin star system, because all my scripts... Because when you write in your own voice, you're going to write, probably somebody that's Latin. So you need to have a star system that matches that, so that you don't have trouble casting. And people are like, "Well, you can't hire this person." So I built up my own star system. So Danny was one of my stars. So after we're doing *Grindhouse*, we had to do fake trailers for *Grindhouse*. And I told Quentin, "I know what trailer I'm going to do, for the movie I never got to make with Danny called Machete. That'll be so fun to finally get that out of our system." And doing a trailer is so fun. It's two days of shooting, just still being that resourceful guy, we asked this company that had a digital camera we wanted to use, "Can you send it to us for a couple of day screen test? I mean, camera test. Instead of shooting a camera test, we shot the trailer. So we got a free camera, shot the trailer with him, and it's just the money shots. Him opening his vest full of machetes, him aiming that gun, him in a waterfall with two gals. And I just came up with this really funny trailer, and we shot it. People were screaming at the premiere, you couldn't even hear it. They just wanted that movie so badly, because there was blaxploitation in the '70s. There was never mexploitation. It felt like this should have existed, but it didn't. So a Mexican superhero, they'd just never seen anything like that. Now, you know. But even his mom calls him Machete. He just became this guy, and of 250 movies that he's been in, Machete is most famous one. So for five years, five years, people would come up to us and say, "Where's Machete? When is that movie coming out?" And we were like, "It's not a real movie, but when

it looks real, we want to see that movie.” So we finally made the movie because people just asked for it. And I was adamant about, being resourceful again, “All those shots that are in the trailer are really great. I got to reverse engineer the trailer into a movie, so that I can use that shot that’s in the trailer. Like this girl in the waterfall. Why would this girl be in the waterfall?” Thought of a really clever way that he gets the bad guy. “Her face is kind of covered by this hair. We’ll cast Lindsay Lohan, there.” Or, “The senator, we’ll switch it out for Robert De Niro.” Well, I just reversed engineered it, so every time there’s a shot in the trailer, it’s in the movie, but I shot all the footage around to lead up to it. That’s another fun creative exercise, is to reverse engineer something you just did like this, on the day. You just threw a bunch of cards out, basically, with that trailer. And now you got to go make a movie using all those cards. That’s a creative exercise that I thought so satisfying, so fun.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, that was beautiful. You’re actually known in part, maybe you can correct me, but to do pretty unexpected, surprising, kind of interesting casting. So Robert De Niro is an example of that, and that’s just a great role. The second aspect of that, I heard the story that, you can just get an actor in and out in just a few days. Really fast. The Robert Rodriguez experience, as they call it. How do you make that happen? Can you just tell the story of Robert De Niro?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Well, I’m the editor, I’m the cameraman, I’m the DP. And so, when I call him and say, “I’ve got you as the villain in this whole movie, but I swear, I’m going to shoot you on four days. You come down in four days.” In fact, there’s a scene where he’s in the hospital. He’s just smiling, he’s having such a good time, because he couldn’t believe it. I said, “Guess what? When you wake up from your hotel room at the Stephen F. Austin, you just cross the hallway, that’s the set. The room next to yours, we turned into the hospital set. So you’re just going to come lay in there, in your pajamas.

**Lex Fridman**

Really? That’s what you did?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Well, yeah, we had to save time. We only have four days. So everything had to be very thought out to be like boom, boom, boom. Let’s shoot the money, get him out of this. We don’t have to spend a lot of money on him.

**Lex Fridman**

Book a room in a hotel, set it up to look like a hospital room.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah, that's our set. And it's real, you don't have to dress it, and it's just right there. All you do is put a little tube there for his IV, and then you have a couple of nurses, and it looks like a hospital.

**Lex Fridman**

That was genius. It was Robert De Niro.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Resourceful, resourceful. Next door. But I said, "You're going to think about me when you're on your next Meet the Fockers movie, and you're on there for six months, where they have you sitting in a trailer. I don't like to do that." You know, I gave a Lady Gaga her first two movies. Because after Machete she said publicly, she said, "I saw Machete, and my song Americano should have been in Machete." I thought, "She saw Machete?"

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

So I called her up and I said, "Hey, I'm making a sequel, and I would certainly use your music. But have you ever thought about acting? Because you're an amazing performer, I think you'd be..." I've worked with a lot of actors who are also musicians, and they're always great. Because they already know how to be a persona, be on stage, be in front of a bunch of people, which most actors can't do. And she said, "Actually I studied acting before I became a singer." Said, "Well, you'll never be able to be in a movie, because you know what? They don't know how to shoot people out. They'll want six months of your time, and you're always on tour. But if you come, be here, I have a part for you. I can shoot you out in half a day, this whole section of a movie, and I'll shoot your movie poster."

**Lex Fridman**

It's incredible.

**Robert Rodriguez**

She's like, "Okay." So she shows up. I had all the sets like a conveyor belt, right next to each other. Shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot. She's in the car. That's why she had me do her music video for Rain On Me, later. She said, "We should just go to Austin. Robert, put me on a grease," that was throughout that whole movie. I don't know how we did that. It was half a day. She was there half a day. I did the same for Sin City, too. I was like, "I have a set here, waiting for you. If you're on tour in Houston, just drive in to Austin, I'll shoot you out in half a day. You get to be in a scene with Joseph Gordon-Levitt." "Sure." She came down.

**Lex Fridman**

So wait, how do you take Robert De Niro, how do you take Lady Gaga, and solve the puzzle of all the scenes they have to be in? How do we shoot them quickly, efficiently, conveniently?

**Robert Rodriguez**

You have to edit your own movie. I have this analogy, a food analogy, that works really well. The script is like your grocery list. Filming is like grocery shopping. Getting the best performances, getting the best meat, getting the best ingredients. Right? Editing is like the cooking. Too much of this, and not enough of that, you fuck the whole thing up. So, so many filmmakers do not edit, and they give it to some other guy. Who might look at all your ingredients and go, "Well, this is all great, but I'm going to go make a fucking souffle." And he makes something else. So by doing that job, I mean, I've worked on some big stuff. And I realized finally, after many years, because I've always edited. I realized, "This is why movies cost so much." There could be 150, 200 people on the crew, and I swear not one of them knows how to edit. Not one. So they're getting the wrong stuff, they're having to reshoot shit. The editor is in a room somewhere, useless. Calling after the fact, "We still need to get this close up," or, "You got to reshoot that, because it doesn't match," because no one knows editing. So if you just know that, you're already miles ahead of 99% of Hollywood. But that's just how I learn, by accident, so I kind of stumbled upon it. And I realized that's what the problem is, because across the board I'm watching them going, "That's not going to match. You guys are just spending money, sending crews out, shooting stuff for this. It's a clusterfuck. Let me show you." And that's how, in Sin City, Bruce Willis. Nine days.

**Lex Fridman**

Whoa.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Brittany Murphy's in all three stories. One day. Benicio del Toro, three days. It's just like, you're just shooting their stuff. Mickey Rourke is in a sequence with Rutger Hauer. We shot eight months apart. I didn't have Rutger Hauer until I was doing Sharkboy and Lava Girl. So I just shot Mickey acting with me, and then I shot Rutger acting with me, and I just cut them together.

**Lex Fridman**

Wow.

**Robert Rodriguez**

What's weird is, editing exercises are like, I used to do these editing exercises where I would put two of my VCRs together, and I would cut my movies. But sometimes I would just cut a music video. And I cut a music video once, because I was a big fan of Rutger Hauer, and a big fan of Mickey Rourke. So I said, "I want to make it look like they're in a movie together." So I cut this music video together, so it shows lightning on Rutger and The Hitcher, and then

lightning on Mickey from Rumble Fish. But Rumble Fish is black and white, so I made the whole thing black and white. I was like 19. I was 19 years old when I did that.

**Lex Fridman**

Wow.

**Robert Rodriguez**

And then years later, I'm making Sin City. I shot Mickey not knowing who the other actor was going to be until I cast him eight months later, and it was Rutger. I'm cutting them together to look like they're in the same movie, and it's in black and white. And I'm like, "I've done this before. I must have done this before."

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

"Oh my God," I found that old video, it was like, "Oh my God, I already made a movie of them in black and white." Now, that's some weird shit, right?

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

That's the magic of creativity. It's like, sometimes when you have a vision it's not clear, but it's coming to you from the future. So you got to just follow the voice. No matter what anyone says about your curtains, just follow the voice you got in your head, because you don't know, and you're not smart enough to know. And you don't need to know. You just need to do. You just need to be the hands. So this is like, what you can do with no time or money, when you know all those jobs. It's the benefit of knowing those jobs. Like I said, the more you know those jobs, the more you know your main job. Which is being creative, on the day, thinking on your feet. So I'm going to show you this test. Okay, so for Dusk Till Dawn, the TV series, I would always shoot the first episode and the last episode of a seven or eight episode season. There was three seasons. By the time we got to the third season, I was doing Alita, so I couldn't do the big finale episode, and my actor who plays the George Clooney character, D.J. Cotrona, he's somebody who wanted to be a writer, and was writing. He wrote Fight and Flight, it's this movie that's going to come out, with Josh Hartnett. That's his, he wrote it. After doing this. He was like, "Man, hearing you talk, you know what? I got..." This is what I love about, you inspire people, the feedback loop inspires you back. He said, "Man, hearing in your talk for Red 11, and the cards. I've got a script that's partially written, I'm just going to go crank it out in... I'm going to cut off the phone in three days. I'm going to finish that thing in three fucking days."



**Lex Fridman**

Fuck yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

And he came back and he said, "I finished the script." And I read it and I go, "You wrote it in three days?" And he goes, "Well, I wrote some of it before, but I just kept thinking I wasn't ready. And then you told me the thing about not being ready, and you said that, it really resonated. I went and I finished it in three days." I go, "Man, I'm going to do that. I'm going to go do the D.J. Method." I call it the D.J. Method. I have a bunch of half-baked ideas that I'm just going to go turn off the phone, and finish the thing in three days. And I'll fix it later. But those three days, there's going to be pure pipe. It's just going to be coming through, because you're just going to be picking up the pen." So anyway, he came to me with this idea. He said, "Oh man, I was hoping you'd do the last episode of Dusk Till Dawn, because I had this great idea for a scene. We're in a zombie town, a Western town. We have one of those guns where you have to pull the hammer back, before you can fire." So I thought, "What if I have a gun that's empty, and I got bullets in the other hand? And I bump into a zombie, the bullets go flying, I jump and I catch all the bullets, and shoot the guy before I hit the ground." Okay, that's kind of a real cool, Desperado type thing. But dude, this is a seven-day shoot, for these episodes. Everyone on the crew will have a different idea on how to do that. A stunt guy will put you on wires, because you have to do all that action. Or, the DP isn't even operating the camera. It's a camera guy. The director doesn't know how to shoot. He's not operating the camera. Your editor is in a room somewhere. VFX guys aren't there. You're not going to be able to ask them how to do it. But I am my own VFX, I came up with how we did all the shots in Sin City, and all the Spy Kids movies. "We need one guy to come do it. I'll come do it for you. I'll come do it, because I'm already going to be there, because I have to shoot a second unit fight scene for the other actor who wanted a cool fight scene." So I was already doing that. "And when it comes to your scene, we'll switch places, because it's got to be done quick, because... You got to shoot it in 20 minutes because you got a ton of other shit you got to shoot, and you'll just never get it. You won't even get it in a film schedule, in a regular movie schedule. It's just too crazy. You need somebody with a vision to do the whole thing." "So this is what it would look like if you were on the set. I'm going to show you the footage, and I'm going to show you the scene. I'm going to have to show it to you a couple of times, because you're not going to believe what you're about to see. So if you were on the set, this is what it would look like." So I get there, they say, "We're ready for that scene." So I get over there to the set and I go, "Okay, where are you coming out of?" And he goes, "This building." "Where are you getting the bullets from?" "That body." "Okay, bring that body closer. Okay, stunt guy, bring a pad over. I want to see you just jump, and start to twist as if you're turning. I just want to see how much air time you can get to get any action in, before you hit the pad." He starts to jump, he barely starts jumping, he's already hitting the pad. So I was like, "Okay, that ain't going to work. You get out of here. D.J., you're going to do it." I have no idea how I'm going to do this. I hadn't thought about it before, but now you're there-

**Lex Fridman**

This is so awesome.

**Robert Rodriguez**

... and now the options are very limited. You're very limited. Look at the sun. You're going to see the sun not move. You see, that's the point where the sun starts getting lost. I have to shoot this in 20 minutes. "You're going to do three jumps, and I'm going to cut it to look like one jump. All the bullets are going to miss, only one's going to go in. So here, just follow what I'm saying, because we don't have time. What cameras do we have? What's on the A camera?" "A long lens." "Oh yeah, that's my camera. I'll operate that. What's on the B camera?" "Steady campaign." "Leave it on steady cam. No chance, no time to fucking convert it." At one point, I wanted to lower it so, "Just flip it upside down. We'll flop it later. Give me the main camera. Okay, D.J., start running towards that bullets, and grab it, and pretend like it gets shot out of your hand." I shoot it in a slow motion, but I'm showing you how it would look on the set. Okay, now the bullets are flying. Now I'm going to add those digitally, and I'm going to hold the bullets up to the light in each angle, so that they know what it's supposed to look like, so they can match that. Otherwise it'll look phony. "Now, first jump, I just want you to commit to just jumping out, and just look at the barrel. Just look at the barrel on your hands, when you're jumping, because that'll look like you're looking at the bullets. And just don't even think about that you're going to catch a bullet, don't think about that you're going to start turning. Just stretch your body out. Get a really graphic..." Look how cool that looks.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

And then the side view, shot this at the same time. You can already tell it's going to look like bullets are missing, right?

**Lex Fridman**

Mm-hmm.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Okay. Now I need this part, though. I need the part where he's catching the bullet, this little window there. How am I going to do that? With a lens that long, it's going to be all out of focus. It's not going to be slow motion enough. He even knows me, and he's like, "What the hell am I doing?" So, "Just lay on the pad, and rock up and down. And as you're coming down, that'll look like you're falling, as I'm zooming in." Because I'm operating the camera, and I'm cutting this in my head. And I'm saying, "Just do it again." He's like, "What is it?" "Rock up, and then as you go down, it's going to look like you're falling--"

**Lex Fridman**

Well done.

**Robert Rodriguez**

... and make it look like the bullets. Okay? So now-

**Lex Fridman**

Well done.

**Robert Rodriguez**

... "you've caught a bullet. One went in."

**Lex Fridman**

Yep.

**Robert Rodriguez**

"Now, second jump. When you do the next jump, as if we just passed those other moments, you've caught a bullet already. So now you're going to snap it closed. And start your turn, it's all you'll get before you hit the pad." Snap, turn, right? So like, "Okay, I want the cameras to feel like they're dropping with him, that'll give you more of the sensation. So let's actually lower that steady cam shot, flip it upside down, and get a low angle." See, I look and the sun's right there, hasn't gone behind the building yet. That, and then my camera, I lowered my camera down, and I got that.

**Lex Fridman**

Good angle, good angle.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Right? Okay, now, last jump. I bury a thin... I said, "Just bring me a thin mattress," because I want him to do all the stunts. I don't want a stunt guy. Because he does this, himself. He just did it in three jumps. But the audience won't know. They'll just be like, "We believe that this guy could do anything." "I want you just to finish by turning, and cocking the hammer back, and firing before you hit the ground." I'll give you two takes for that. Almost gets it there, and then we do a second take. Boom. Nah, the other one was probably a little better, even though you don't really see it. I've got to go do everything now. I got to cut it. I got to add the sound effects myself, I got to put the music in myself, because music guys would just end up filling it with music and ruin it. Sound effects guys would just fill it full of sound effects, and ruin it. I want all the sound to drop out, so as he's jumping, all you hear is the wind in his jacket, the clinking of the bullets as they're bouncing off. So you have this breathless moment, no music, cut the music. And that moment you cut it, so that you're like, "I wonder if he's going to make it," right? So I go home, I cut it. Before I even have the visual effects in, I just cut it that night, because I cut my own sound effects. I cut my sound effects in. You can

already tell it's going to work. You can already see, even with the bullets not there, you can tell by the sound where they're going to be. It's going to work. I call them up and said, "Dude, this is going to work great." So then I go to the effects guys and I go, "Okay, there's the bullet in this frame, and the next frame is here," because I used to animate. "And the next frame, it's there. Then it hits the barrel, and then it starts bouncing this way. I want it that clear so we can follow that a bullet was supposed to go in, and that it bounced way over there. And then this bullet bounced way over there." And they send it back, and a bunch of bullets come down. "No, guys, listen to what I say. I'm going to show you again. I'm going to draw it to you again. Just the sound will play like there's multiple bullets flying. I don't need to see all those bullets, or the eye's not going to know where to go." So then they got it right-

**Lex Fridman**

Brilliant.

**Robert Rodriguez**

... and then, check this out. I'm going to show it to you twice, because you're not going to believe it.

**Lex Fridman**

Wow.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Changes direction.

**Lex Fridman**

Wow. Wow.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Crazy. You know-

**Lex Fridman**

Well done.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You don't even see that in a feature film, much less a TV show.

**Lex Fridman**

Well done. Just as a director, well done.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Oh, thank you. Here. Just, one more time.

**Lex Fridman**

Well done.

**Robert Rodriguez**

And I'll show you something you didn't notice, both times.

**Lex Fridman**

Just amazing. Just those decisions coming together perfectly, it's just-

**Robert Rodriguez**

Coming together-

**Lex Fridman**

... really well done.

**Robert Rodriguez**

... and like this, you got minutes.

**Lex Fridman**

Just moving the camera you decided to do, really worked really well. The bouncing of the mattress, whatever, that worked well.

**Robert Rodriguez**

And it's not like you have this whole plan figured out ahead. You're literally, in the moment, it's coming through.

**Lex Fridman**

But you're seeing it, though-

**Robert Rodriguez**

It's coming through you.

**Lex Fridman**

... right? In your head.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I'm seeing it because I've done it enough. That's why, you really want to learn all those jobs, because you come to a moment like this when the shit's fucking hitting the fan, you got to know how to pull it out. You could have gotten all those people together, and they never would have figured that out. One person had to see it all the way through.

**Lex Fridman**

You're seeing the bullet, how it's going to go in the result.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I've done enough times to know that if you don't do it just right, you're going to lose the image. You're not going to know where to follow, and you'll miss the point.

**Lex Fridman**

And also, yeah. I love that you're thinking about where the eyes of the audience will go. I feel like too many people might think about some more general concept of a scene, versus the audience, where's their eye?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Where's their eye? Well, you're drawing it through sound, through picture. I'm going to show you, if you notice, without the sound. You don't really see him click that thing back. Watch.

**Lex Fridman**

The sound is so essential here, right?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Watch this. You don't really-

**Lex Fridman**

Right. I thought I saw it.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You think you saw it, but you hear it, and so you feel like you see it. But watch it. It's actually, he's already finished. You don't really see him do it, but you swear you saw it in a close-up, because the sound is in a close-up. I put the sound in a close-up. Now here's another thing you didn't notice. He hits this ground in the first shot. Watch. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. You didn't even notice it, because I didn't play the sound there. So if you don't hear it, you don't see it. And if you don't see it, but you play a sound, you hear it. And you see it in your mind, right? So check that out now, with the sound on, and you'll see both those parts play completely different now. Right. Now you hear it. Right, see? Like, I know you can get away with that, because I know editing. And if I don't play the sound, I can go ahead and milk that shot as long as I want. I'll make him be in the air longer, even though he's actually touching the ground, by not playing the sound. And that comes from, you said directing, but it's not. Directing, people can direct and say, "This is what I want." But to actually execute it, you need to be a craftsman. And to be a craftsman, you have to learn all those crafts.

**Lex Fridman**

And not just with the visuals, but with the sound.

**Robert Rodriguez**

With the sound, too.

**Lex Fridman**

Sound.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Sound is so important. Sound is half the picture. And if you cut sound, you realize how important sound is. I would learn so much by doing those movies like Desperado, action movies where you go, "Wow, the sound. I can add an extra sound effect of an extra punch he didn't even throw." And it sounds like he's beating the shit out of this guy. And you only need to see one or two hits, and you can hear five. You know where you can push your limits, because you've done it. You've done it, and you've got the experience.

**Lex Fridman**

It's so amazing that you can use sound to make a person believe they saw something that wasn't actually there on the screen.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah, your brain fills it in.

**Lex Fridman**

That's crazy.

**Robert Rodriguez**

And that's why that's so important, because if you don't know that, you'll be on the set shooting 10 takes of that. Because you're like, "No, he didn't, I didn't see him click it back. I didn't see him click it back. That's really needed." "I can do that with sound. Let's just go. Let's just keep moving."

**Lex Fridman**

And when you say sound close up, what does that mean? So like, is that-

**Robert Rodriguez**

So all the other sound dropped away, and all you hear is, like the mic's right on that thing. So that you hear it so big in your ear, that you swear it was in close up too, but just the sound was close up.

**Lex Fridman**

Sorry, just to give an insight into that process of sound design. Are you listening to the sound, and just experiencing the feeling that creates, and then you're like, "That's just right"?

**Robert Rodriguez**

I'm playing in post a lot, so I have a whole library of sound effects from all my movies. So I can pull up the gun sound we created for Bruce Willis in Sin City and use that, and mix it with Antonio's gun from Desperado. I remember in Four Rooms, there's a scene where the bellhop goes into the hotel room. Jams his key into it, and clicks it. And I used all gun sounds for the sounds of the key, instead of key sounds, because it wasn't sound closeup enough. So if you listen to it, you hear... You hear all these sounds from a gun, to do the key, because that conveys the sound better. I'll use different kinds of sounds that just have impact. Because it's like that conveys the sound better. I'll use different kinds of sounds that just have impact and put it somewhere like when he hits the ground. So I like playing with all that in post when I'm editing because it makes my editing job easier. Sometimes it's like, oh, the sound is covering me. I don't need to keep trying to massage this. The sound is actually selling it, and so I keep those sound effects into the final movie. So it's just all part necessary. It's like being a chef. You're there cooking and you're going, I know the recipe says this, but I think it really could use jalapenos and some extra pepper and maybe a little more salt and then needs an acid of some kind so I'm going to add some lemon juice.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, you made me realize, I'm not sure where I saw that, but you were talking about making sort of almost home films for fun and I think you mentioned how exciting you can make a very mundane scene by just adding sound. I think there was-

**Robert Rodriguez**

My little kid with his car. He had one of those little [inaudible 02:20:53] but I added a motor sound to it and it's like, wow.

**Lex Fridman**

And it sounds realistic somehow. I don't understand why my brain is doing that.

**Robert Rodriguez**

And then we're playing with these little cars, filming ourselves playing with the cars. But then I replaced it with real car sounds [inaudible 02:21:08] and it just, your brain links the reality of the real thing and you realize how unimportant the visual is and how important the sound is actually. Sound is everything. That's what I was really lucky in Mariachi that my camera didn't work for sound because then I got really good sound that I would've gotten with a shitty mic out of frame. Because that's the first telltale sign of a low budget movie is bad sound. Bad sound right away, you can already hear all this hiss and all this mic was too far and you're like low budget movie. Before your eyes even tell you, the sound gives it away. Isn't that amazing?



**Lex Fridman**

The audio is first. Sound is first really, even though it's a visual medium. That's so crazy. Just what's the plan with the four action films? What are the next steps?

**Robert Rodriguez**

I'll probably direct more than one because there's already several that I want to do, but I'm going to direct at least one, but I'm producing all three, all four there at my studio.

**Lex Fridman**

It does draw you in.

**Robert Rodriguez**

It draws you in and it makes you go now think of ideas you never would've thought of for mainly because it has a filter. Well, now I don't have to think of all these ideas. I actually have, like me on that set, there's only very few things I can actually come up with that are just action driven first, when they have a great character. You'll get to it a lot faster with a filter. That's the beauty of a filter is that now you've just shrunk your target and now you can hit that target and people are coming up with ideas because now they've got proximity and they've got a reason to come up with the idea and they've got a deadline, which is the best thing you can do is have a deadline because when you have a deadline, you can freaking move mountains. I had a Spy Kids in the theater every year, three years in a row not being pre-planned. Every year there was a Spy Kids. Now the third one was the biggest one, biggest cast, mostly green screen, video game and the first digital 3D movie ever. So getting visual effects companies to make that, we realized, oh, I shot it with two cameras. That means each effect shot has to be done twice from a different angle. So I went to the studio midway through that and said, "There's not going to be a movie in the theaters in time. You're going to have to push the date back." And they said, "Okay, we've never heard you panic. We'll push the date back for you." They called back 10 minutes later. I was like, oh, thank God. Because it's really complicated. I didn't know it was going to be this complicated, but I wanted a challenge. And they said, McDonald's will sue us for \$20 million if you move the date. You have to have a movie in the theater. We started shooting that movie in January of 2003. It was in 3D in theaters by July. That's the fastest any effects movie has ever been done.

**Lex Fridman**

That's insane.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Because you had no choice. So deadline makes you do things and make decisions really quickly and it was the biggest of the three. Deadlines are good and it's hard for us to self-impose a deadline sometimes because we know it's a bullshit deadline and your brain

knows it's bullshit. But why do deadlines work? Because when the deadline's coming up, what do you do?

**Lex Fridman**

You start to put the pen to the paper and it starts just flowing.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You have no choice. You have to get out of the way and open the pipe and it just comes out and you're shocked. You're like, oh my God, I should do everything at the last minute. Well, no, you don't have to. But if you just learn how to open that pipe earlier, you wouldn't be in a rush, but you had to get out of your way because your deadline was up and you had to come up with it. So many people are going to come up with all these extra great ideas at the last minute. It looks like everyone who's already signing on because it's cool they don't know when the deadline is. They keep writing in saying, when is the deadline for this? And we say, well, when we close the funding in May, but we didn't say when still. So I think that gives them a sense of a deadline like shit, it might be May 1st or maybe May 2nd, so we better get my idea going. So I think that works in your favor because then you come up with stuff. And you're going to feel so enriched by doing the idea that you're not going to care if it gets picked or not. You're going to love this idea so much it could turn into 10 other things you never even thought about. That's the beauty of doing a project. Nothing ever goes to waste. So many ideas that were sitting around that I'd come up with and put a lot of time in are now like, oh, I can do these now. I know how to finish it now.

**Lex Fridman**

I have to ask you about Alita. So you've done so many incredibly innovative projects. This is one of them. It turned out to be this visual masterpiece. There's a bunch of complexity, beautiful complexity about it in that it started out as a film that James Cameron was supposed to make. And then you started to collaborate with him on it. And then these two, I would say brilliant directors, but with different styles like you were talking about. And so plus there's the complexity of for people who haven't seen it, you're putting this artificial creation, this beautiful photorealistic, artificial creation of a human being into a real world. So you have to capture the performance, not just the motion, but the performance of this actor, put them into this, with the power of technology, into the real world. So convey all the emotion, the richness of the human face. Can you just speak to the process of bringing that world to life?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Sure. I mean, one, I never would've attempted if it wasn't Jim, because Jim has figured all of this out. So just to get you again, remember like I said, "Hey Jim, I'm operating a steady cam, what do you think of that?" "Well, I'm designing a new system." That's always how it is between him and I. So when I went to show him Desperado when it was done, he said, "You might not want to sit through, if you don't want to sit through it while I'm watching it, it's

fine. Do you want to read any of my scriptments, my treatment scripts?" They're called scriptments. Sure. He goes, "I have Spider-Man and I got Avatar." So this was in '95. He was showing me the scriptment for Avatar, which there was no technology for that. He was already doing stuff that didn't exist. And I was reading it going, this is a great story. He was like, I don't know how the fuck he's going to do this. It's impossible. He'd just done Terminator 2 a few years before. It's like that was state of the art. So Alita was going to be the movie he did first to prepare for Avatar. And so he had already done some prep work on it. It was based on a manga. But before they did that, they just started doing some tests for Avatar. And then as they got deeper into the test for Avatar to prepare for Alita, they went, I guess we're making Avatar first. So Alita got kind of pushed to the side and they ended up doing it, which ended up becoming such a journey to make that movie, to get the technology to build it, to make it, because I remember visiting him on the set. I mean I've known him so long. I was on the set of Titanic. That's how long I've been around this guy. I was on the set of Titanic. I was on the set with Sarah Connor and Arnold Schwarzenegger and Eddie Furlong for the 3D ride he made for Universal a few years later. So I mean I feel like I've been around him a lot of his career. And to be able to visit the set of Avatar and remember him showing me artwork they did, very photorealistic and he goes, "Curious to see how photo-real it will be when we're finally done with this process." Because you don't get to see it until it's almost done. And I was like, wow. He's just shooting blind. Talk about me shooting Mariachi, not seeing the footage. He's making this whole movie, not even knowing what the end result's going to look like at all. Because you're not going to know till you get there. And when you get there, if you don't like it, there's not a lot you can do. So just seeing him do that and have that success really made it easier for me to do Alita because then it's like, okay, we don't know. Again, we don't need to know. We know we'll get there, but we don't know how we're going to do it. We're going to start. And anything that I would come up with on this movie and his team, because he had all his Weta people working on it. He had them all working on it, too. I do a fast version of his process because a lot of live action. Avatar is mostly CG. I have live action sets. You have to come to my studio. I still have the whole Alita city in my back lot.

**Lex Fridman**

Well here, the Troublemaker studio?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah.

**Lex Fridman**

That's where it was-

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah, it was shot here. So when you go see my city, I built it very resourceful. This is weird. It looks just like the town from Mariachi, but it's in my backyard. I'm like, it looks better than

the town from Mariachi. 90,000. It's the biggest, largest standing set in the country because sets are always mowed down for the next movie. But I just kept it there. So we usually to shoot it all the time for Mexico or South America or Europe or whatever. It's seven streets and we added digitally above it. The ceilings are 20 feet high, you got to come see. You don't believe that it's here. It's unbelievable.

**Lex Fridman**

Where is it north of Austin?

**Robert Rodriguez**

It's where the old airport was. So it's like on 51st street. It's really close to town.

**Lex Fridman**

I would love to visit.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You got to come see, you're not going to believe it. All my props, all my stuff from all my movies. So people who are investing in Brass Knuckle, that's why I say it's like a Willy Wonka movie because they're going to get to come check out all that stuff and be in proximity and see, oh, like me with that painter. It's not a trick, it's just doing it. Then you realize you can do it, too. But we thought let's shoot mostly live action and we'll just replace her. But we still have to figure her out. You have to cast the right actress. And when I saw Rosa Salazar, she was just amazing. She made me cry in audition for the first time. I was like, oh my god, this person has something. If we can capture even a fourth of her facial expression, it will bring so much life. And they got it one to one. And it really helped Jim on the next Avatar and Weta because they got to try on a bunch of things. That's why the second Avatar water looks so much more refined than the first Avatar because of that middle step of doing Alita. It was training ground for them.

**Lex Fridman**

Can you actually educate me on the Weta process? Is this like a performance capture technology?

**Robert Rodriguez**

I have her in a suit for capturing her body movements but also facial capture. It's a performance capture of all her performance, all her emoting, and we have witness cameras around everywhere to pick up where she is and everything else is real and we're just replacing her but with someone even smaller in size, so you have to erase everything behind her. It's like a bunch of technical things you to do, but the idea is to, whatever performance she gives, she's such a great actress, is to capture all of that because then this character that doesn't even exist will feel very emotional and you have to be tied to it. You have to feel its heart. She was the heartbeat of it.

**Lex Fridman**

So she's acting with all this.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Acting with all that, but it just disappears, it's not even there. We don't notice that this is here. It's like that. She can just perform through it.

**Lex Fridman**

What were some interesting, unique, challenging things about you directing her performance in this kind of world?

**Robert Rodriguez**

I just knew she had to be her. It was going to be just so easy with her. She's just so great. Everything was just so real and everything was like she's that character. She becomes that character who's seeing this world for the first time. No special effects going to help you with that if the performance isn't there. So it was all about getting the performance and casting the right actors. That's why you get Christoph Waltz there and you get Jennifer Connelly, these masters are all on the set. Mahershala Ali, you've got an amazing cast of people. And that's really the heart of it so that the technology kind of goes away.

**Lex Fridman**

How hard is it to get the actors to act when the full world is not around you?

**Robert Rodriguez**

We put so much of the world around them. When you see the city, we put a blue screen way in the back to just make the city keep going. But we built the sets there, the town, we built the real set. So everything was very tangible and real and that way she had to fit into that world and be as real as that because if it was all done in CG, well then now you can fudge everything. But if you put her in a real environment, that's a real challenge and that really helps them an Avatar because that whole place has created an Avatar. You could get away with a lot, but they wanted to commit to that kind of detail. And on the next Avatar, that's why it just feels like you're really there. It's just stunning and you get there by having something to work on like this to take the technology to the next level. So it was cool to be able to help, knowing that you're being helpful to him in his process and not just distracting him, but then also he liked that his artist had something else to work on besides just Avatar, to just work on something different to freshen up their perspective on things and methodology. And so yeah, that was a really exciting movie to work on, and that we got to shoot it here, a Jim Cameron movie here in Austin. That was the best, having him here and my whole crew who's worked with me 25, 30 years, everyone had an extra spring in their step because they're like, wow, we're working on a Jim Cameron movie. I mean that's just like a high bar of achievement for everybody working on it.

## **Lex Fridman**

Since we talked about a few the directors, can you speak to the genius of James Cameron? What makes him special? You talked about some of the difference in your approach and his. He's created some of the most special movies ever also. What's behind that? What would you say is interesting about the way his creative mind works?

## **Robert Rodriguez**

I think that any of those guys, George Lucas, him know John Lasseter when he did Pixar. It's a mix of, and I always got really lucky. My first job was a photo shop because my dad had a friend who owned a photo shop. He said, your summer job. And I was 16, go work for my friend Mario. I go to Mario's Photo shop and I'm developing pictures or develop photos from film. And he said, here, take this camera home. Gave me one of his cameras. Take this camera home and some film. I need you to learn how to use the camera so you can help me sell the cameras. So I went home and I have a bunch of siblings, so well the stars are bed head taking all these pictures of everybody. I take it back and he looks at the pictures when he develops, he's like, "Whoa, these are really creative. You're a creative person." So when sometimes people tell you something that you can't unhear. And he goes, "That's a gift. But now you need to become technical." Because most creative people need technicians and technicians always need creative people because they're not usually the same. You're born with creativity. It's against your nature to be technical, but you can learn if you apply yourself. And if you're both technical and creative, you'll be unstoppable. And I was like, stop. Wow. So here, I want you to learn zone photography and I want you to learn the technical part of it. So that's why I didn't take a crew on Mariachi. I knew if I'm just the creative person and I need a crew to go actually technically make the movie, I'll always need something. And when you want to really change your life, you want to get your I need list down to little is possible. Because if you're like, well, I want to shoot my movie, but I need a cameraman and I need somebody who knows how to light it, your I need list keeps growing. That's further and further and further you will be from what you need to accomplish. So I kind of went down there without any help so remember that script analogy where the guy said, throw away three scripts. I said, no, I'm going to write three scripts and then shoot each one so I get better at each one of those jobs so I can learn to be technical. My technical capability was so little, I'm literally calling the guy on the phone. How do I use this camera? That's how little I knew about it. But I knew by doing the job, I would learn. By being both, that's really the key. So Jim Cameron is like that. Jim Cameron, when you think of those guys, George Lucas, very technical and very creative. John Lasseter, very technical but very creative, Pixar. Jim Cameron, very technical, very creative. Putting those two things together is really what sets you apart from other technicians and other creative people. And it's very, very powerful and a lot of creative people, again, it's against their nature to be technical. They don't want to do it. Make yourself do it. Read the manuals, take the lessons. It frees you up because then you can go do like I just showed you in that demo, you are able to now be a technical person and creative and then you're unstoppable. He's one of the best at it and he just knows how to craft a story. He's very analytical as well. We bounce off each

other in a funny way. He goes, man, he came down to visit my studio before he did Alita. And he went, "You only surround yourself with people who are like you. You exude creativity from every pore and so does everyone at your studio." And I go, "Yeah, I didn't hire them that way on purpose." But I think if you're not that way, you don't belong there and you kind of leave. And then I went to his studio and there were a bunch of Jim Cameron's there. They're like, oh my God, they're all very technical. You can't get all kind of fuzzy with the logic or you can't get really creative with physics or anything. They're like, no, that's not how it would work. It would be... And they're just, wow, super great at what they do. Bar is sky-high and they're all like that. Because yeah, you're not like that, you can't hang with those guys. You can't hang with him very long.

### **Lex Fridman**

I heard a story where the guitar case being a rocket launcher, where, to you, you create this real world where everything is possible, the magic feels real. And for James Cameron, he has to know how a guitar case would work that would actually be up to double as a rocket launcher.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

When I showed him the trailer for Grindhouse and he sees the machine gun laying and all that, he just goes, "Whoa, that's unbridled filmmaking from the id." It makes sense only the second you're watching it, not a second after, but the second you're watching it, you believe it. But he's really interesting in that he's so prolific. I walked into his writing studio and it'd be like one of the tables, you have those papers there. Imagine them that thick, that thick, that thick, all script, script. What are these? He goes, "This is a whole space opera version of this movie. We're not making that one." I was like, he's just cranking out all this stuff. Again, can I take this and go please? But yeah, we bounced off each other because I loved his analytical part of his brain. I'm not that analytical. I'm just kind of like, hey, I'm really creative feeling. I'm like, woo, I'll go this way and then woo, I'll go that way. And he likes that about me. But I think about things too much like you think about things like what makes a movie a billion dollar hit? What are the elements that you need? And I'm going to analyze that and I'm going to make sure my movie does that. And he engineers a submarine that can break the world record. He engineers a movie that can break the world record. He has that engineering mind, but the creative part, that's very rare. So that's very rare and he's capitalized on both. He had this submarine model like this big on his desk, the one that he broke the world record for. And just seeing it and knowing him and having kids and stuff and a wife and I'm like, weren't you afraid going down there with something had happened? No, I wasn't afraid. Why not? Because I designed the escape vehicle. Yeah, if I was any other bozo, I'd be afraid. But he designed this escape. That kind of confidence, that's him. He just knows if some other bozo had designed the escape vehicle, I would be afraid. But total confidence because he did it.

**Lex Fridman**

The confidence of extreme competence. That's brilliant.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Just to get you excited about how creative this stuff is, so Desperado was the only movie on the Sony lot being edited digitally. Not only was I editing on a computer, I was editing in my house, which in 1994 was just unheard of. So I'm there in my house and they made me cut in LA because at first I told the studio I want to edit Desperado myself. It's important that I edit it. And they go, no you can't. Why not? We've never had a director edit his own movie here, so we don't want to set a precedent in case they thought it would give you too much power. I said, this is the power of precedent. I said, well you bought Mariachi and I edited that. So they said, "Okay, but you're going to have to edit in LA so we can watch it. We don't think you know what you're doing. We saw the footage and the shots are really short. It's too short." I was like, shots are too short. Oh, because I was shooting my cuts. They're used to seeing footage of Antonio walks into the bar and it's going to be a dialogue scene. They expect the whole thing done from a wide shot. I would shoot the wide shot. He walks in, cut, move the camera, let's get over here because we wanted, because I'm not going to use it for the rest of the scene. I know we're going to get into coverage. I've already cut it. So I was like, huh, that's interesting. So I cut the first scene. Have you ever seen Desperado? The first scene is the best scene. Steve Buscemi is telling a story. He's talking about the myth of the mariachi. He's doing all this crazy-

**Lex Fridman**

Oh yeah, great scene.

**Robert Rodriguez**

It's crazy.

**Lex Fridman**

Great scene.

**Robert Rodriguez**

So then they come over. I say, "Hey, you come see my first scene." So they come over to my house, they watch it. Okay, you know what you're doing. They leave. But I was cutting Desperado in my house that I rented there and then we shot Dusk Till Dawn at the same time. So I was cutting Desperado four rooms and Dusk Till Dawn myself. I'm the editor. I don't have an editing team other than the ones who import it into the machine. So Del Toro came over, Soderbergh came over. Can I borrow for it Schizopolis? Then no one had heard of somebody having an Avid in their living room. Jim comes over and he goes, "I hear you have an Avid in your living room." And I go, "Yeah, come check it out." Just like I roll out of bed. It's like seems unremarkable because this is what you do right now. But back in '94 it was unheard of. I'm cutting three movies at the same time myself. I roll out bed, I come here, I



can cut Desperado, I can cut Dusk Till Dawn. Anyway, that's it. I hate working with editors. When I was doing Terminator 2, they wouldn't even let me put the Bad to the Bone song in Terminator 2 because they didn't think it would work and I had to sneak into the edit room at night on the weekend to cut it in and then show them the next day. He is like, that's your own movie. You can't give that kind of power to people. He said, "I hate working with editors. I'm going to do this. I'm going to tear down a wall in my house. I'm going to put it in Avid. I'm going to cut my next movie." And he did. He got an Oscar for editing Titanic. He had two other editors, but now no one ever took him for a ride like that again. He edits on every movie. He has other editors, but he can go do his own cuts. When he shows me footage, he's showing me himself on his own machine and it's like, again, it gives you all those tools to be able to really find your vision that you're looking for because you can't always explain it to somebody because you don't always know yourself. You kind of come up with it as you do the process.

### **Lex Fridman**

Just a small tangent about the different software and the technologies involved. So you mentioned Avid, there's Premiere Pro.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

Premiere was still in its early stages then. I think Soderbergh looked at it and it said, "Yeah, I can't afford an Avid for this movie. I'm going to go do it." Because I think he started cutting on Premiere, but I'm sure it's all better now. I just have always used an Avid because I just always rent it back to the same production. I think I don't have to buy a new one, but there's lots of good I hear about all kinds of systems. I just use the same one.

### **Lex Fridman**

I guess that's the question I have for you. It's just interesting for people. It's very interesting to me just the details use Avid. What do you like? Multiple monitors? One monitor?

### **Robert Rodriguez**

I have a couple monitors and then one big monitor to watch it if I'm watching the scene back because the monitors are still a little wacky. I mean if I were to design my own system, I'd probably design it differently, but I'm literally, I've worked on that thing since '94. I still don't know all the shortcuts and all that shit. I still use it like my tape deck, play, rewind, pause and I can cut so fast with that just I don't use the mouse for shortcuts. I'm just like-

### **Lex Fridman**

So you found your way, preferred way, the workflow of using it and now you can sort of let go of the technical and then be creative?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah, just be creative. It's just a tool. It's just a tool and it's like it doesn't matter which system it is. It's like if you can get it to work for you, great. There's a lot of problems I have with it that I know are probably fixed on another system, but that they'll have a whole other set of problems. So it's like, well, why bother with that? There's limitations I think that it has that would need to be fixed but not for what I'm doing. I mean, I can still do what I need.

**Lex Fridman**

It feels like part of the artistry is every system has limitations and you learn how to work around those limitations. I mean that's every single thing.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Oh, yeah. My first VCRs, those things were, I was always known for taking what little basic equipment and milking the shit out of it, pushing the boundaries of what it can do. And now it's flipped. Now you're working on a program and you can spend 10 years on this thing and you're scratching the surface of what it's capable of. It's totally flipped the other way. I'm not milking anything anymore. I'm barely getting the smallest capability of it because I would have to spend a lot of time to figure out all the stuff that it can possibly do, and I'm sure it's all great, fantastic stuff, but what a different world than when I grew up where it was like, okay, let me splice these two sound things together and it was so hard to get it to do. People would be like, you got that movie out of that equipment? Where now it's the other way around. It's like all this equipment is great. So when people come to me and say, "Well, I've only got this camera." I was like, "That camera is 10 times better than anything I had for my first 15 years of filmmaking." You have no complaints. This is like you can just start now and just start making stuff.

**Lex Fridman**

I have a lot of friends who are huge fans of your movies, so one of them asked me that I absolutely must ask you, do you know if there's sequel of Alita coming?

**Robert Rodriguez**

We're working on it. We're definitely working on it. Jim and I both want to make it. That's usually when we meet, we talk about it. I gave him something to read. He's a little busy with his Avatar movie, but I'm going to see him again soon and we'll see where it's at. But we would love to make another one. We have ideas on how to do it because it was always built to be a trilogy and he sees that there's a lot of love for it. It was just weird because it was Fox movie and they got bought by Disney and then so they weren't really making Fox movies because they had enough work with their Disney movies, but now they're starting to make some Fox movies like they did Deadpool and some Fox movies are starting to get made, so time might be right for us to come back and do Alita.

**Lex Fridman**

No, I hope you do soon. But I mean you do so many different kinds of movies, that's a whole different kind of puzzle, right?

**Robert Rodriguez**

No, but it's not a bad one. It's a good one. It's a cool, it's one of the few. Usually I made kids' family kids movies or R-rated action horror movies and that was the first time I got to do a PG-13 movie, which was kind of like, it had a lot of action but it was for families could watch it too and it was kind of like the best of all worlds.

**Lex Fridman**

Have to ask you about Sin City, one of my favorite films of all time. It was a visually stunning world. What are some maybe interesting detailed aspects about you creating that world?

**Robert Rodriguez**

This is why you just got to follow your nose and go do something. Jim and I were both into 3D early on. I visited his set for the Terminator 3D ride. Dusk Till Dawn, I wanted to be 3D. Actually when they got to the bar, if you've watched from that point on and everything's kind of set up for 3D, everything was shooting into the camera and all this, but the cameras they had for 3D and film were those old shitty ones that were so bad that I went, "Okay, we can't do it." But I really wanted people to have to put on glasses when they got into the bar and it was going to turn into a 3D different movie. I got to do that on Spy Kids 3D. So when I did Spy Kids 3D, I thought, oh, if I get Jim's cameras that he's done for these underwater 3D documentaries, I can make the first digital 3D film for theaters. And so I did and it seemed like the easiest way was to utilize that when you put on the glasses, when you go into a game world, so there's a green screen and we shot all the actors on green screen for all the game stuff and we could do a lot of 3D stuff coming at kids' faces when they're reaching. My 3D is not like the kind they have in theaters where it's very polite. Mine's like theme park 3D where kids aren't doing like that trying to grab, that's why it was such a big hit. Nobody does 3D like that, but I wanted that. I wanted shit falling in people's laps. So you go, okay, this is why I'm wearing the glasses. I'm wondering why. And when I went to go make my next movie, so this is how crazy this is, we shot Spy Kids 3D, remember actually how fast they came out. That was in the summer of 2003. Few months later, Once Upon a Time in Mexico came out. Two number one movies, both were finishing trilogies of mine and each one starred Antonio, Danny Trejo, Cheech Marin. When I was editing those at the same time, you'd be like, whoa, one movie. They're killing people and the other ones are with the kids going like, yay, family. So it was really fun. It's easier to do very different things than to do two action movies or two family movies at the same time. But I was like, okay, what's my next movie going to be? Oh, shit, how crazy is this? Okay, so Antonio is on the set. I'm going to shoot him out in half a day for Spy Kids 3D. He's only in the last scene on the green screen. Shoot him to lunch. Okay, now go away, put on your Desperado outfit because we owed some shots for Once upon a Time in Mexico on the green screen. He finished two trilogies in the same day.

That's got to be a first, if ever. No one's ever finished two trilogies in the same day and it's just kismet. It is just how it happened to happen that day was just luck or the universe or whatever. But I needed to make up something new now. So I was looking through my bookshelves of inspiration and I picked up my Sin City books, which I've had. I used to be a cartoonist and I always loved how I drew that. Every time I'd see a different edition, I'd buy it, go home and go, oh, I already have this. I got three copies of this already. It would just always grab me by the throat and I liked that he was a writer/director in a way because he not just wrote comic, but he drew it too. A lot of times it's a different writer or a different comic artist. He's like a real kinship. This is someone who writes and directs his own thing. But I was looking at it and I went, oh, shit, I know how to do this now. I just did it on the green screen. If I shoot this on green screen, the actors on green screen, I can make the backgrounds look just like this and I can contrast up the actors and I could get this very graphic look, which sometimes for a window it's just a white box. So it's even got a sliding scale for budget. If I run out of money, just put the actors in black and white, just put a white dot behind them for street light and that looks just like the book. So I'm going to bring the book to life. So I'll show you how fast we go from development at Troublemaker. It was October. Once Upon a Time in Mexico had come out. I was like, oh, shit, I know how to do this now. Sin City, I'm going to do a test. Went to my green screen here in my studio, you'll see my green screen where I shot all these movies and I shot my sister, myself, put it black and white. Looks just like the comic, but it's moving. So I call a comic book artist friend of mine, Mike Allred, and I said, "Do you have Frank Miller's number?" And he goes, "Yeah, I do." Okay, I'm going to call him up, so I called Frank Miller. "Hey, it's Robert Rodriguez, I have a test I'm going to show you for Sin City. I'm going to be in New York tomorrow." He's like, "Tomorrow? Okay, yeah, sure, come by. Meet me at this bar." Okay, book a flight for New York. I didn't have a flight. I fly up there, have my laptop just like this. I go to the bar, I show him what looks like an image from his comic and it starts moving. And he's like, "Wow, how did you do that?" I said, "I got my own studio," and all this. And then I started telling, man, let's make this movie because no one had the rights to it. He never gave the rights to a studio. A lot of comics, oh, Warner Brothers bought this a while back or then you got to go through the studio. He still owned his own rights. In fact, he'd gotten burned by Hollywood so many times as a screenwriter that he said, "Fuck it, I'm going to go back and draw a comic that's so raw that can never be made into a movie." So of course I call him, "Hey, let's make a great movie." I show him how we can do it and I go, I know you don't know me and I have to earn your trust for you to give me your baby, but we can make this right away. And he's all excited for about two seconds and then he goes, "Oh no. Then we got to write a script and then the studio's going to have notes." All that shit he's been through before and it's not like that. I have a whole different setup. I got my own studio in Austin. This is how it's going to be. If you like this idea, you're not going to have to take any risk. Let me take all the risk. I'm going to go write the script myself next month. It's going to be unremarkable because I'm going to write it right out of your book. I'm going to edit through the stories down. I'm going to just take stuff out really. Might add a few things to connect it, but I'll write the script in December myself, no money involved. Then we'll call some actor friends of

mine. We'll have them come to my green screen. We'll shoot the opening scene as a test, but it's also the opening scene. I'll do the effects myself. Do the sound, do the music. I'll do fake credits. We'll watch it together. If you like what you see, we'll make the movie. You give me the rights then. If you don't like it, keep it. It's a short film to show your friends. It's be really cool. So he's like, all right. There's nothing on him to do. It's all on me. I write the script in December. January, Josh Hartnett, Marley Shelton come down, fly Frank in. Shooting for 10 hours on my green screen. We shoot that opening sequence.

### **Lex Fridman**

Incredible opening sequence.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

Record his voiceover, right then in my little voiceover booth. Marley Shelton comes up. Why did I hire him to kill me? I don't know. Let's go ask Frank. He's right here. Let's go ask Frank. I want to know myself. So he tells her and he's like, I want to do this movie already. I was like, "I tell you Frank, I used to be a cartoonist. It's the same thing." You're already a director. You're just using a pen instead of a camera. The performances you get out of your paper actors are phenomenal. The shots you do are beyond any DPs ever done. And the visual look, we've never seen that. I want to just take this and make it move. I just want the comic to move. Any other studio would just go make it look like any gritty crime movie and they would miss the point that the visual is half of it. I want it to look just like this because it would be the boldest movie anyone's seen because that's how it reads when I read the book. It's like, if this was moving, it would be the most phenomenal movie. In fact, I asked him, do you ever feel like directing any of these short ones? I thought about directing *The Big Fat Kill*, maybe as a short film. You should come direct that one. Shit, you should direct all of them with me because I'm really copying it right out of a book. You should direct it with me. All right, let's go. So then January, okay, so remember I met him in November. I wrote it in December. January, we shoot the test. Took me a couple of weeks to do the effects. He loves it. I make a meeting with Bruce Willis, show it to Bruce Willis. What's so cool about doing that opening scene is that any actor I show it to now, I show him the book, which is awesome. You'd be playing this character, but look at this test. Let me show you the book, what it looked like before I turn this test into a test. Watches it, Josh Harnett, voiceover, music, titles come on. First name on the screen, Bruce Willis. And I go, "Hey look, you're in the credits. You have to do it now." Manifesting it, right? He's like, "Shit man, this is great. I'm in." Go get everyone else from that was just easy to get. And we were filming the movie. So February, right... So February, building the few little sets we had, like the bar, I told Frank, "We don't need to build a bar, but I'm going to go ahead and build a bar so we have a place to go have script meetings. Everything else will be green screen. We'll build fake steps and things out of green." So we're doing that and I'm casting the first one. We're shooting the movie by March, the beginning of March. And I remember because my son was born March 3rd and I was in LA for his birth because I was also recording the orchestra for the score I wrote somehow in the past few months for *Kill Bill* two. That's how much stuff was going on.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

That's like when you just let it flow, you're just riding the wave, you're not doing any of that. So by staying in that urgent, there's always, the deadlines are just pushing you to create stuff. And we shot the movie so fast, the record time. Now, not only that, I shot a whole other movie that year. I shot *The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl with Kids* that came out two months after *Sin City* the next year. Within less than a year, *Sin City* was out.

**Lex Fridman**

You're shooting that in parallel with *Sin City*. That's hilarious.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Is that... Yeah. Sometimes we'd be shooting with the kids and then the afternoon Rudger Hauer would come and some of the *Sin City* girls to finish shooting stuff that we needed to film. It was just insane how fast we had to move. I was doing it, I was editing. I just edited it. And then I would scan the artwork into the computer and I would edit the storyboards with the sound effects and I would do the voiceover. I would imitate Mickey and I would imitate Bruce and lay out how fast it was going to move. And you were like, "Wow." So now we have a template with the real drawings and the lighting on how we're going to do it. It was funny because I can do a pretty good Bruce Willis because I've known his career for so long. We were doing his voiceover, and he would hear my guide voice for the timing and he'd be like, "Is that me or is that you? Can't tell." It's like, "Oh, that one was me, but just do that." He's like, "All right, man. It sounds like me."

**Lex Fridman**

First of all, why haven't films like that been made?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Well, it's a very specific look because it went to that comic. The first piece of music I wrote for that was the main title and I called it *Descent*. I wanted the notes to descend because it felt like you were descending into this dark world and you don't come out till the end of the movie. You're just in this world where all these layers of unreality... Water doesn't photograph that way. Snow doesn't photo... But it's there and you're seeing, you're seeing the actors, so you're just really, it's a dream world.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

So I was really into it and I did test for the most difficult shots first. Like, how do I get his tape to glow in the dark like in the comics so it's still in the shadow? And I realized, oh, use fluorescent tape and a fluorescent light. That way I can keep it, we can still key it. I started just doing my own visual effects like that early on because I knew technology was changing so fast that I would need to just know how to do it like a magician. Shooting digital, nobody wanted to touch digital back then. DPs were all afraid of digital. They didn't want to have to learn something new.

**Lex Fridman**

That's so funny.

**Robert Rodriguez**

So I had to DP it. So me photographing it, I'm like so [inaudible 02:57:58] to cut because to light, you have to have that light out frame right now. But I could bring the lights in right here as long as they're not crossing it. I'm just going to take it out of the green anyway so I could have the coolest lighting on everybody. Cool edge lights. You could have an edge light back here, an edge light back here, a fill light here. [inaudible 02:58:16] going to erase him. I just take him out.

**Lex Fridman**

Can you educate me and people curious about this, what is the power of light when you're telling a story, when you're creating a feeling, an experience? What's the artistry of that?

**Robert Rodriguez**

Well, if you look at the drawings too, sometimes it's the absence of light.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, darkness. Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You would see this face, but then this would be completely black, but you would still see my eye, which is impossible, right? But you believe it when you see it because it's there. So things like that were a lot of the tricks I tried first because I liked that about it. It's like you have a guy completely back lit so there's no light on his face, but yet his glasses are glowing white. So we'd put fluorescent tape in there, hit that with a light, then we could turn it white later. The black and white really helps. And then just upping the contrast. But it's just something that you have a feeling for, but you're able to try it. In fact, when I took it to George Lucas, George Lucas said this to me early on because we were the only guys shooting digital. He said, "Man, it's so good you live in Austin. That's why I'm in Marin County. Because when you live outside of this box of LA, Hollywood, you think outside of the box automatically. You're just going to stumble upon innovations." And he was right. It was like,

"Yeah, why aren't we shooting digital? Let's shoot digital. Why aren't we shooting digital 3D? Let's do that. Why don't we just use green screen for the background?" You just start innovating because you're away from any [inaudible 02:59:31] saying, "Hey, you can't do it that way." Which they would say if I was in L.A. So we just came up with a whole other method. So I took him to Sin City to check out the first thing I was going to show at Comic-Con. He said, "Now this will really show people what digital is capable of. This really shows how avant-garde you can get with that shit. That you could never have done that on film." And so by me versing myself in that technology early, I was able to make a movie like that and then everyone had to play catch-up. So you should always just follow your, that's why people say, "Don't use those curtains. That's not going to work." Just blow past those guys. Go innovate your own thing because sometimes not knowing is better. Being too naive to... "Don't you know you shouldn't have been able to make that movie that way?" People would say that all that time. "How did you make *Mariachi* for \$7,000? You know it's impossible." It's like, why do you keep using that word? Because it can't be impossible if I did it, because I'm not that smart. And it's like saying, "How did you get to the top of Mount Everest? It's impossible. Well, I just kept walking. I didn't realize it was at a slope. I didn't really realize it was going up that high."

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah. You've talked about a big part of your approach to filmmaking, to life is manifesting, manifesting the reality you want. In fact, I should comment. I would love to ask you about manifesting. You asked me at the beginning of this conversation, "Do you consider yourself a creative person?" I should reflect on that because I was very uncomfortable answering that.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah. I noticed a little bit. And I was like, I'm going to free you up so that you're never uncomfortable again.

**Lex Fridman**

It's scary to say that about yourself, to allow yourself-

**Robert Rodriguez**

Because you think there's a lot of people that go, "Well, you're not an artist. You're not a creative." But you're not saying, "I'm an artist. I'm saying I'm a creative person." But that's an artist too, isn't it? Artist isn't necessarily a guy with the French mustache and the funny hat. That's not necessarily what an art... Artists are regular people.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.



**Robert Rodriguez**

And regular people relate to art that's imperfect. If you can make art that's perfect, no one will relate to it. So when you think about it like that, you go, "Well, I can make imperfect art. So yeah, I am an artist." And if you have doubt, you're an artist. That's an artist. Real artists always wonder if they're good enough. So you are an artist. Just by the fact that you were uncomfortable saying it, you're a real artist.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah. And there's some degree, I don't know if you could speak to this, but there's a fear of creating shitty things. I've created a lot of really shitty things in my life and I always feels like that's really important to do.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Okay. But you're judging something that you have no business judging.

**Lex Fridman**

Right.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I have so many people, that's why I like making movies on purpose that have less money and less time. On purpose. The biggest movie I said of all time on Netflix is We Can Be Heroes. I told them, "I don't want to spend more than \$50 million. I know you all want to give me 80, but I want to be a hero and come in at 50 because one, it'll make it better. And then two, you'll make three of them instead of just one. I don't want to just go spend the farm." And not many filmmakers will do that. Don't try to get as much money as they can. But when you're spending less, it's a win-win situation. You have more creative freedom because they're going to leave you alone. You can do whatever you want. So I like the creative limitations that come from less money. That's why I like Brass Knuckle Films. We're going to make them for less so that they are better, not to make them shitty. So many people have come up to me and said, "You know what part I love in your movie?" And they'll tell me some scene. And I'm like, "Oh, well, that's because we ran out of sun and we had to do that jump with just him jumping on a pad three times," or whatever it is. It's something that you fumbled together and that's what they're drawn to. They're drawn to that imperfect thing. And so I wouldn't judge it because somebody, if you called your movie, that's like John Carpenter saying, "Yeah, nobody liked The Thing and it's a shitty movie and everyone hated it, so it must not be good." Then 10 years later, it's a masterpiece. So don't judge it because words we use on ourselves are very powerful. So if you say, "Well, I'm kind of an artist sometimes. I make a lot of shitty stuff," well, that's going to be your lot in life. I'm in pretty good shape for a director. It's not because I'm operating the camera, because I work out. But I always hated working out. I was not into sports. I was a filmmaker. I was a cartoonist in high school. I was really tall. They would say, "Come work, come be in our team. It's a small school. We need you." And I'm like, "I don't know how to play any of these things. I'm an artist." There's a line in The

Faculty that was my line to coaches when they would say, "You got to come run with everybody." I would say, "I don't think a person should run unless he's being chased." I gave that to -

### **Lex Fridman**

Good line.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

The Elijah Wood character because that's the guy I identified with. He's there with this camera and that was me. So I hated it. And then because I was a cartoonist drawing like this for hours, four hours, my back would go out. Out for a month. It would just go out from being so tall and crunched over. And then when I started making movies, operating the camera and doing steady cam, every year it would go out to where I would need cortisone shots to get up again if I'm filming or just be out for a month. And on Spy Kids 2, Ricardo Montalban had bad back surgery that went wrong and he was in a wheelchair. So he's in a wheelchair and I'm in a walker and he's like, "I'm 84. What's your excuse?" And I was like, "I don't know. I just was operating steady..." He goes, "You have to work out, Robert. You have to work out." And I was like, "Shit, okay. Yeah, I know, I know." And so then I thought, okay, next year I'm working with Stallone. I'll ask Stallone. I'll ask Stallone. "How do you get in shape? Because I need to get in shape. My back's always going out." He goes, "Get the trainer. Anyone who ever saw in Hollywood got in shape, they had a trainer." I say, "Even you?" [inaudible 03:05:03] go, "I need a trainer." He has a trainer. [inaudible 03:05:04], "No, I need a trainer. I can't train." I was like, well, shit, if you can't even train on your own, and what do us mortal men have? So I got a trainer. Guess what happened? Hated it. I would feel sick when he was coming over because I hate working out. And then some years of doing that, I can't stand it. I know it's good for my health. So the desire is there. So if you can't accomplish something in your life, it's not a lack of desire. If you want to be more creative, it's not a lack of desire. It's a lack of identity. The fact that you went, you were comfortable about saying creative, it's because there's a lack of identity there. You have lots of desire. You got to get the identity up and then suddenly you're making shit. So a friend of mine from Mexico, she comes over, "I have to stop smoking. My doctor said I have to stop smoking for my health so I'm not smoking right now." Said, "I've been smoking since I was eight years old." I said, "Well, you're going to go back to smoking because you just told me your identity is a smoker. So right now you're a smoker who's not smoking. What's going to happen? Eventually you're going to [inaudible 03:06:04]. You have to say, 'I'm a nonsmoker.'" Just that lesson I've forgotten. "You have to say, 'I'm a nonsmoker. I'm a nonsmoker.' What does a nonsmoker do? If you believe you're a nonsmoker, you hate smoke. Start choking at the smell of smoke." "Okay, I'll try that." She walks off, I go, "Shit, I forgot about my own... I wonder where my life I got to apply that. Working out. Of course. My God, I hate working out. No wonder I am so miserable. I'll tell my trainer and anyone who will listen, 'I can't stand working out. I don't understand sports.'" So that day I said, "I'm an athlete. I'm an athlete."

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

That's the last thing I would ever call myself all through my entire life. This was 2012. "I'm an athlete." By the next day, not only did my life completely change, and it's easier if it's opposite day, if you're just doing it by degrees, that's bullshit. You got to go complete opposite. Because if there's a donut, if you say, "Well, I'm going to only eat half of it." You got to go, "No, I'm going to get an apple." Opposite day is much easier. Not only did I change my life working out, I didn't ever need a trainer. I have not had a trainer since all those years. Because I'm an athlete, I'll just do it.

**Lex Fridman**

Because you're an athlete.

**Robert Rodriguez**

What does an athlete do? An athlete loves working out. An athlete will make-

**Lex Fridman**

Brilliant.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Time to work out and they'll eat right. I would never be the person that would call themselves an athlete, but that's how much it can change your life by changing your identity. So if you want to be more creative, you've already got that in that desire. You've got enough of that. You don't need more desire. You need more identity. So you got to say, "I'm a creative person," with a straight face.

**Lex Fridman**

With a straight face and believe it.

**Robert Rodriguez**

So when I say, "Hey, are you a creative person?" You go, "Yeah." Because then if you say that, what do you do? You're going to do more creative stuff because that's what a creative person does.

**Lex Fridman**

It doesn't make sense to me how manifesting works, but it does seem to work. Basically visualizing a path towards a certain kind of future. I guess everything around you, everything within you makes way for that. Makes way for the possibility of that. It's weird.

**Robert Rodriguez**

It's weird, but it's nice to know that you can do that. But you have to just have that conviction and just say, start with a label.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah. The RR. Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Start with a label. The double R or the label you just gave yourself.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I changed my label. My label was I hate working out.

**Lex Fridman**

Now I'm an athlete.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I'm an athlete. I'm not a non-athlete anymore. I'm changing my label. And you get so inspired because now you know what to do because you can't help but conform to your identity. You're always going to conform to your identity. So just change your identity and you'll change your life. And it's not that hard. I didn't have to go get hypnotized or anything. It was literally, I just told myself if I could do that, go from a guy who doesn't want to work out, hates it, hates it... I had the desire. I was already hiring the guy. I lacked the identity. As soon as I changed my identity, boom.

**Lex Fridman**

Well, one of the things for me like that is probably music. Just playing guitar.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Are you a musician?

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah [inaudible 03:08:56].

**Robert Rodriguez**

Look at [inaudible 03:08:56]. You paused. You're pausing.

**Lex Fridman**

I would definitely not... I'm going along with it now, but if we're honestly, if we're just in the [inaudible 03:09:02]-

**Robert Rodriguez**

You wouldn't have said that.

**Lex Fridman**

I wouldn't have said it.

**Robert Rodriguez**

But I heard you rip on fucking guitar.

**Lex Fridman**

And I've heard you play amazing in all different kinds of contexts.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Oh, but I should be freaking Santana by now because I've had a guitar in my hand since I was a kid, but since I'm not a full-time musician, I don't get to play it that often. So I'm not as good as I should be. But when you apply yourself to just rehearse for a couple shows, you book some shows... Look at this. This was me just playing our first arena show opening for George Lopez. That was crazy to be on the stages where your heroes, that you saw them. Now you're seeing what their point of view was. It blows your mind. You need to get on stage. You get on stage once and you'll see that it's not as bad as you think.

**Lex Fridman**

You're not terrified? Because you're playing pretty complicated things. I've seen you play live.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah. And I mess up a bunch of times-

**Lex Fridman**

[inaudible 03:09:50].

**Robert Rodriguez**

But you don't want to focus on that. And you just go, "Okay, I got to do it." Because when you're up there, it's not that you're screaming, nervous, but your hands will just won't work anymore. Something will happen. But that happens to everybody. If you really watch even the best in their live performances, watch really close and you see they screw up a couple things, but you just wouldn't notice.

**Lex Fridman**

[inaudible 03:10:07].

**Robert Rodriguez**

They just go right through it.

**Lex Fridman**

[inaudible 03:10:08].

**Robert Rodriguez**

It's about the live performance and that's how you know it's real.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

So I think if you could really just lean into it more, really work on the identity part because you've got the desire. You want to play guitar. But as soon as you say, "Yeah, but I can't play live," you just chopped off your leg at the start of the race. If you say, "I don't know," you just chopped off your other leg.

**Lex Fridman**

Yep, yep, yep.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You're doing this to yourself.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You're literally doing this to yourself. I'm not meaning just you. I mean anybody who's-

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah. Broadly speaking. Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Who pauses, who hesitates. You don't have to have doubts. Why would you have a doubt? Because you know the process now. It's like if I don't know how to do something, I know how to figure it out. I didn't know how I was going to do that scene with him jumping and flipping. I didn't know that. But do I have doubt that I'm going to go in there and be able to do it? If you say that you do, now you're a doubtful person. That's how powerful that is. But if you say,

"No, I don't have any doubt because I know I'm going to figure it out when I get there..". Somehow it'll fall on my lap. I trust the process. You don't have to know. So if you trust the process that you'll figure it out.

**Lex Fridman**

But here's the thing, sometimes you fail and there's audience.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah. Then you get four rooms. Yeah.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah. But then-

**Robert Rodriguez**

And then what happens?

**Lex Fridman**

[inaudible 03:11:20]. Right? Don't blink.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Don't blink, and then you go sift through the failure.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah, exactly.

**Robert Rodriguez**

And you go, "Wait a minute, what did I get out of that?"

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah. I've done that a bunch. It was great.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Look, what's the worst that can happen? You go on a stage and you bomb. It's not going to be the first stage. And it's one of those you can talk about so that when you do the next one... And sometimes they all go right. I've had a couple shows, we did a couple shows where we had video cameras set up for the second day. I said, "Let's not film the first day because we're going to be fucking just finding our feet. Let's film the second day." First day it was flawless.

**Lex Fridman**

Of course.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Flawless.

**Lex Fridman**

Of course.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Because no cameras.

**Lex Fridman**

Of course.

**Robert Rodriguez**

You just go.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Second day we weren't as into it as we had just done it. It felt like the second take. It just didn't have the magic. And that's the one that's recorded and we're like, oh, kicking ourselves. We didn't film both nights. We should have filmed both nights.

**Lex Fridman**

I love how much of a mess this human existence life is. You've talked about the importance of journaling because -

**Robert Rodriguez**

So important.

**Lex Fridman**

Living is-

**Robert Rodriguez**

Reliving.

**Lex Fridman**

Reliving. I love that phrase.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I came up with that because it's like, wow, I see so many people who get after you for filming a concert and they go, "Live in the moment." I'm like, "Dude, counterintuitive." The moment



goes by like this. We're not going to remember any of this. The fact that we taped it, thank God, because later on it's going to be a file photo of me remembering you... Three pound meat computer. All I'm going to have is a file photo of you may be in a suit and you picturing me in maybe a black T-shirt. And the metadata narrative is going to say, had a great talk about, if we remember, creativity.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Your brain doesn't remember. But when I pull up old home movies, I show my kids that I just found and they're like, they don't remember it. I don't remember filming it. And it's like new adventures of. It becomes iconic and it sticks in our head. And all our jokes are based on old things that we used to do and say. So living is reliving. So keeping a journal is very important. Because I found that anything that passed 15 years, it's like I'm reading someone else's journal. I'm like, "I didn't even know that's where I got that guitar. I thought I bought that guitar. It was given to me? It's like a \$10,000 Santana... It was given to me my birthday by the studio that I made that movie? How did I not remember that?" It's crazy what you don't remember. And the brain is very, it's not a very reliable computer. It's made out of fucking butter.

**Lex Fridman**

That's a really profound idea that so much of our life is lived through replaying our memories and then watching stuff is one of the ways to refresh, give some more texture and details.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Makes it iconic.

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah.

**Robert Rodriguez**

It makes it iconic in your life and part of your life. Otherwise, it just went by. It went by. I'll ask people, we just had a really, "What did we do last week? What did we do last Wednesday?" And they're like, [inaudible 03:14:04]. I can tell you because I wrote it down, but I'm not going to remember. And then when you go through your journal, I go back and I find, wow, life-changing thing happened Friday. Another life-changing thing I didn't know at the time until now I know that that really set me on a new... Happened Saturday. And another big freaking thing happened on Sunday. They come in threes sometime. You start being able to predict the future a little bit because you see the patterns and it's pretty wild to do that. And I swear I've talked to people, big group of people, 500 people. "How many people here journal?" Two hands, three hands. I couldn't believe it. It's like, man, if there's

anything I can impart on you, is journal. Your life is way more interesting than you think because it's not going to feel like anything while it's going by. But in retrospect, you look back. I can just go through, I keep a journal, one file per year. So I started a new one in 2025. If I'm going to look up, I'm going to do a Director's Chair episode. I look up Michael Mann, Michael Mann, Michael Mann. All the conversations we had since '94 that I wrote down that I felt and it was like, "Oh my God, I can't believe we said that." That's how I knew about that thing with Quentin. I'd forgotten about that story with Quentin saying, "Ah, Pulp Fiction." I'd forgotten that because from the moment I asked him that question to the success at Cannes was very quick. So it was a lost moment in time where I had it recorded down to the time, down to the hour when I asked him that question. And he thought it wasn't, he didn't think that was the one for him.

### **Lex Fridman**

Yeah. And there's a, I don't know, when it's private journaling, there's an honesty, there's an innocence about the dreams you have about the future, the conceptions you have about the future. That's what this thing is a journal.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

It's just a journal. It's like-

### **Lex Fridman**

But the profundity that comes out of it. Right?

### **Robert Rodriguez**

You look back and it's crazy. Yeah. And so much I figured out [inaudible 03:15:50]. I'm talking like a professor by the end of that. I have people come up to me and they're asking me all these questions about stuff I wrote in there and I'm like, "I wrote that in that book? Shit, I was smart back then. What happened?" I don't remember half of that. But I think that it's the same thing. When you go to teach someone, your mouth opens and stuff comes out. I am always taping myself when I go to give a talk because that's also the pipe working. Someone else is talking through you sometimes. So the act of sharing, that's why I've always liked to share information. Because the feedback loop is insane. Me inspiring [inaudible 03:16:24] DJ to go write. He writes the script in three days, comes back, tells me, "Now I'm doing that method." And it's like, wow. People come back with their version. And I love telling my kids stuff that I learned that I wish I could tell myself, but I can't take a time machine. The closest thing is telling your kid because then they can take that information to process. So many times they've come back and said, "Wow, dad, the lesson you taught us about this, it's really become big in our minds." "Yeah, what was that?" And they tell me. I'm like, "I never told you that." They say, "Yeah, you told us..." "Well, I told you maybe 10% of that. All the rest you added." "Oh yeah, well, we embellished it [inaudible 03:16:59]." They turned it into something else. And it's like, wow, that's so cool. But yeah, that thing about reliving, that was one of my favorite ones. Just my mom turning 75 and not wanting to do anything for her

75th birthday. I said, "Why not?" She goes, "The whole family's going to... You have 10 kids. They're all going to want to do something for your 75th birthday. Nothing can top my 65th." I was like, "What did we do on your 65th?" I didn't even remember even. I'm the one who orchestrated it all. She goes, "Oh, you flew everyone in from all over the country. You gave me a car." I got to have a journal of that. I'm sure I have video. I go back 10 years, I see what tape I had it on, find the tape, pop the tape in. Forgot about all this stuff. So I cut together a ten-minute version of it, showed it at her 75th birthday. Just watching the old one. Everybody was like, "Oh my God, look how young everybody was. Look how small the nieces and nephews were." She starts bawling as soon as she gets the key, the gift of the key in the video, because she realizes now what it's going to mean that she's going to get this car. And so it's like, wow, let's just play the old tapes. We don't even have to do anything anymore. We banked so much amazing stuff that we've all forgotten. That my kids just love watching their old home movies. They hardly remember any of it, but even a VHS to them is virtual reality. Because compared to our memories, it is virtual reality. They're leaning into the screen to see what's around the corner and they're remembering the place and the sounds. And they say, "Oh, we left the living room. It's like we're there." It's like, wow. I was always afraid they would see this old footage and go, "Ah, this is dog shit. What kind of camera was that?" The limitations of it. You put up one of those files on your screen, it's this big on your laptop now. That's how low-res shit was back then, but that didn't matter. It's like compared to our memories, that stuff, living is reliving. Pull up that, shoot as much as you can, take as many pictures, but write the journal because you'll have a picture. Swear. You're not going to know what it's from even 10 years from now, you won't know what that picture's from. You read the diary, you go, "Oh, that's what that is. Oh my God." You can piece together all these things that are important to you or that become more important with time, actually, and you know what's important later compared to what's been happening at the time.

### **Lex Fridman**

To add on top of that, so journaling is a raw, or home films is a raw projection of what's going on in the moment. I think what's also really powerful because I've done that, is to do a high effort description of where your life is just for yourself. So sometimes journaling is low effort.

### **Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah. Sometimes it's just, I just want to mark that we had this conversation. I had to go do something at five. I did that. Met somebody that, I know last night I met somebody that's going to be life changing. I'm going to write a little bit more on that because I could just, now I know, but I'm going to just record it so later if I look it up.

### **Lex Fridman**

So one of the cool things you could do is, for example, somebody, Jamie Mr. Beast does these videos, which are great. I think it's a great exercise to do for yourself, which is a video he records for himself that he doesn't look at to be published 20 years from now. "This is a

message to myself 20 years from now. Here's where I hope you end up." You're basically a younger version of yourself speaking to an older version, and then you get... Time flies and you get to a point where it's like, holy shit, it has been 10 years, it has been 20 years. You get to listen to a younger version of yourself. It would've been hilarious if you shot videos like that to yourself because of just the incredible journey your career has been on.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I know.

**Lex Fridman**

And just to think about that, the delta, the difference between what your dreams were and where you ended up. Usually you outdo yourself in many ways. Sometimes your life goes in a totally different trajectory and the result is kind of funny. It's a nice illustration of the non-linearity of life.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I would film stuff like that with my kids. I couldn't do it, but I would film my kids saying, "Hey, turn to the camera now and say, 'Hey, Rebel, it's me Rebel talking to Rebel in the future.'"

**Lex Fridman**

Yeah. So you have shot stuff like that.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah.

**Lex Fridman**

Cool.

**Robert Rodriguez**

And then they show them-

**Lex Fridman**

Cool.

**Robert Rodriguez**

That 10 years later and they're like, "Whoa," to see it talking to them and saying. And I would do this thing where I would film them watching it and then pan off so that 10 years later I could get, "Hey, Rebel," him reacting, pan off to the new Rebel watching it. It just keeps going. So I have one like that where it just-

**Lex Fridman**

Love that.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Keeps panning and they're -

**Lex Fridman**

Love that.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Watching themselves within the movie, within the movie, within the movie.

**Lex Fridman**

[inaudible 03:21:29].

**Robert Rodriguez**

It's like an ongoing project. It's just so fun to just play with memory and make you realize how fast time moves and to go, they go, "I kind of remember that, but I don't remember being that tiny when I had that memory. It's wild how time moves." And it makes them feel much more precious about how quick time moves and how important every little moment is because you see the fragility of it too.

**Lex Fridman**

Does it make you sad? Does it break your heart that the number of memories we get to create is finite, that this life ends? Eventually the story is over?

**Robert Rodriguez**

I had this theory. I'm going to put this in a movie. I don't think I've ever said this before. Because I woke up from a dream and it was like trying to remember it. You're like, "God, it was so real." If you don't write it down right away, it kind of fades away. But while you're dreaming it, it's really real. And it's like you can almost see the walls. By the time I went to go tell somebody, it's like, shit, I forgot most of it. I wonder if that's what it's like when you wake up in your consciousness after you die. You wake up in your next consciousness getting ready to move into whatever your next body is and you're like, "Wow, I was a filmmaker? I had five kids? And oh well, I'm go be a fish now." It's like a dream. It's like that, gone that way. And it's like that's what past lives are. They're like distant memories, like a dream that's faded away. That's why you barely feel remnants of it. Do I feel sad about it? When I tell people they flip out when I tell them that. I say I want a character to be like that. He's dying. He's like, "I don't want to forget this dream. I don't want to forget. Let me wake up. Don't let me wake up."

**Lex Fridman**

But you forget, especially the moment you try to tell somebody.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah, [inaudible 03:23:15].

**Lex Fridman**

You tell the next fish over.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah. The next [inaudible 03:23:16] going to be a fish next. But yeah, yeah. It feels like I'm almost sad about it. But then it just makes you even more double down to be precious about the life you're in now.

**Lex Fridman**

What do you think is the meaning?

**Robert Rodriguez**

And record it. Record it.

**Lex Fridman**

What do you think is the meaning of this whole thing of life? Why are we here?

**Robert Rodriguez**

[inaudible 03:23:35] why we're here. I really feel like my kids and I were just talking about this last night. We were just blown away. We did this Asterion astrology thing, which is the oldest form of astrology. It just nails each person. And it's like, yeah, because when you have a kid, you realize right away, "This isn't my kid. This is not my... I'm just in charge of him. It's a completely different soul. He's a different soul that ended up in my hands." There's physical characteristics that get passed on because of just how biology works. Even sometimes posture and movement is the same, but the actual person is somebody else. And all the kids, I have five kids and I had nine brothers and sisters, they're all different. And you realize we made a pact in a past life to gather together because every time it's like, it's so good you were born in this family because you were given free rein to go find who you're really supposed to be and you find out everyone is doing what they were supposed to be doing. But what's cool, almost like this clarity you get by just saying it. They now know that they were always supposed to be this creative person and now they can double down on it because they know that's who they were supposed to be. They don't have to have any doubt anymore. They don't have to wonder, well, am I supposed to be more business minded or can I be creative? Doesn't that sound kind of frivolous? Is that a real job? Can I do that? Now they realize, no, you're supposed to be doing that for these, these, these, these reasons, and now they can double down. You can skip all that and just decide I feel like I want to be that person, so I'm just going to declare I am that person. And as soon as you say it, you are that, and tomorrow your activities will conform to that. That's how powerful that decision is. So when you walk out of here, it's going to be with a complete commitment, "I'm a technical and

creative person." Like my first boss. I'm unstoppable because my boss told me that and he was right. I became technical and creative and you're just unstoppable. You can just keep going and just go, "I'm unstoppable." That doesn't mean you're going to use your powers for bad, but you've just changed your life by just declaring that. And I'm also a creative person who lives his life creatively. I'm going to find creative ways to use that technology. If somebody says, "You're not the same kind of artist I was expecting," that's their own opinion. Don't blink. Just keep going. All these things that you've learned that people were supposed to tell you along the way, they're telling you for a reason. Anytime you got pushed, if you go back to your life at your really critical moments in your life where you went that way instead of that way, there was probably somebody there who said something to you that kind of pushed you. There was one guy when I was in high school. It was senior year. I wrote a paper. And I wasn't a great writer at all. I wrote a paper for a Latin American studies class, gave it to the teacher and he said, "Wow, you're going to be rich and famous in four years based on what I read." I was like, "Really?" I'm 17 or 18. Four years later, I did *Mariachi* and I went to him later at a reunion and I said, "You called it. You said I was going to be... Why did you say that?" And he was like, "I said that? I [inaudible 03:26:49]." He looked like he would never say that to somebody. You'd think he would own it and say, "Oh yeah, I knew and I told you." No. He looked like he didn't even know who I was. He was acting like he never would've said that in a million years. So again, sometimes things come out of our mouth that's not us, that comes through us. So if you think of it that way, why are we here? We're here for a reason. We're going to get nudged along. Listen to the signs. Own who you're supposed to be because you are that person. Don't let your human doubt get in the way. That's like the guy closing the pipe. "I don't know if I'm really creative. I don't know if I'm really a businessman." And you're just closing the pipe. You're not going to let it flow. Just be a good pipe. Just say, "I just want to be a good pipe. Clean, open." And then that's when the magic happens.

**Lex Fridman**

And no matter what, don't blink.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Don't blink. No matter how many... That dude was getting so much shit thrown at him. I wish you knew that time period, because then you would go like, "Yeah, that's right."

**Lex Fridman**

It's incredible.

**Robert Rodriguez**

It was unbelievable. I can't even convey. There was no internet and stuff back then. This was literal press, reviews, public. It was like, why are they targeting this guy? They just did not like, he just had unprecedented success and was a really great guy and was making amazing shit. So it was the triple threat of make people jealous and pissed off.

**Lex Fridman**

Well, he's one of the great artists of all time. So are you. It's a huge honor to talk to you. Thank you for everything you're doing in the world, for creating in the world and for inspiring millions of people to also be creators in the world, and for your new project that's bringing people in. Robert, as I told you, I'm a huge fan.

**Robert Rodriguez**

I appreciate that.

**Lex Fridman**

It's a huge honor to talk to you, brother.

**Robert Rodriguez**

So great talking with you. Great questions. Here you go. Change your life.

**Lex Fridman**

Thank you, brother. Million dollars.

**Robert Rodriguez**

Yeah. Right there.

**Lex Fridman**

Thank you for listening to this conversation with Robert Rodriguez. To support this podcast, please check out our sponsors in the description. And now let me leave you with some words from Alfred Hitchcock. In feature films, the director is God. In documentary films, God is the director. Thank you for listening and hope to see you next time.