

# On shaping culture in a positive way



Filmmaker, interviewer, and Track Star host Jack Coyne discusses growing organically, the beauty of simplicity, and storytelling as a vessel for hope.

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As told to Jeffrey Silverstein, 2565 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Culture](#), [Social Media](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Inspiration](#).

## **When did your love for stories/storytelling begin?**

I've always been a fan of entertainment. As a kid, I loved watching TV and movies. At some point, probably in high school, it clicked for me watching *Goodfellas*. I was like, "Yo, somebody's job is to make this." I realized not only is it their job, but there are artistic choices that are going into it. The end result is this thing that makes me happy. I thought that that was very noble. The idea of having any sort of job where you're adding some value, some good in the world.

My dad was a doctor, one of the most altruistic jobs you can have. When we had his funeral, there were thousands of people there that had been his patients. It's incredible that he was able to have this impact on so many people's lives by taking care of them. He was like, "Don't ever be a doctor. It's not a good industry." But I think there was an element of, "What can I do that adds a little bit of value and positivity into people's lives?" And I was like, "Oh, I'm getting so much out of watching this movie. It makes me happy. It cheers me up."

When I was in college, I was an Economics and Film major. I did this paper on the economics of movie theater going, and it was during the Great Depression that movie theater attendance was at its all time high, which is kind of surprising. But people, with whatever money they did have, they used it to get that sort of escape that gave them hope. That's sort of how I justified it to myself, this is the thing that I'm interested in and want to do. I had to figure out how to do this as a career.

When I was introduced to the [Neistat brothers](#), Casey and Van, and their old TV show, I was like, "These guys are just picking up a little camera and making something." It became accessible. Working with Casey, he was like, "You're in New York City. There's a thousand stories that just punch you in the face every day." It was that kind of mentality.

## **Were there other 'guy on the street' shows or accounts you took cues from?**

Right around the same time that we started, [Subway Takes](#) started, Caleb was doing apartment tours, going into people's houses. That started around the same time that we started doing New York City Trivia and it just exploded. There were other things, but a lot of them that were standing out were prank videos from that earlier YouTube era of people going up to someone on the street and almost making fun of them. We knew there was a lane to do this in a positive way, and that's what we found appealing.

**It felt like a turning point was realizing the limitations of only focusing on NYC trivia.**

My goal from when we first started was, if you're going to do a man on the street type show, you've got to talk to people. It was always a turnoff for me seeing these interviewers that would just run up to someone with a camera in their face, and so that wasn't appealing. Then you're kind of shy and you're like, "How do I get this person to stop and talk to me?" So you need something appealing to get as many interesting people as possible interested in you and saying, "Okay, I'll spare 10 minutes or whatever to do this thing."

At first, New York City Trivia, win a hundred bucks, people were like, "I want to do that." It was just the hit rate of someone who could actually have an interesting conversation to answer those questions. A lot of times people would just be like, "I don't know that much about New York. I'm moving on." So probably two months in, three months into doing it, we were getting a lot of great people. It took a lot of time.

I started thinking, what about music? What does this look like? We tweaked the format a little bit to make it even more eye-catching and grab your attention. I knew because of doing the other thing that more people were going to stop. There was no question in my mind, but it wasn't about making a show that was going to be viral or talking to musicians. It was literally just about standing on the corner, catching people's attention.

#### **How do you make people feel comfortable with you quickly during interviews?**

Getting reps in is the big thing. I see a lot of interviews where people aren't really paying attention and it's like, "Why the fuck are you asking this person a question? I can see you're thinking about the next thing, you're not even listening to them." Pretty early on that was an unlock for me. When I started talking to people, I knew I had to be present.

Outside of the content thing and outside of work, it's just this valuable life lesson that if you tap into that vein, you can get something special out of it. Standing face-to-face with someone, talking to someone for real in real life is something that's more and more rare and precious. That's the thing that we're latching onto. When I was a kid, my grandfather, we would hang out and he would talk to everybody. He would just be chilling somewhere. We'd go shopping with my grandma and we'd be sitting outside the store and he would just talk to everybody. "How are you doing? What's going on?" It was natural. There was probably a lesson there. Openness and kindness unlocks a lot.

#### **What are net positives/negatives of the algorithm having "figured out" Track Star?**

Especially with Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts, there's a pretty low barrier to entry. If you have a formatted idea that you're able to do consistently, you'll learn quickly whether or not that has traction or is appealing to people. The algorithm can help tell you that. If you are making something that's formatted that's consistent, but that just isn't interesting, then it's not going to show it to people. If it's working and it's appealing to people on a small scale, the algorithm will share it with more people and it'll be able to grow, and you'll be able to learn from that thing.

I think it's very easy to get a good idea out there. I think we're at the tip of the iceberg. There's lots more shows that could exist like this on social platforms, and I think they need them. It makes sense for these platforms to say, "Hey, this dude is putting something out every day at the same time, and puts out a video that people like. We should keep showing it to more people. That's good for us, more people engaging with our platform." There's a big opportunity because of the algorithm, but also it narrows in creativity a little bit, makes people try and be more and more similar to the other stuff, but I don't know if that wasn't always true. Before algorithms, there were human versions of algorithms like record labels being like, "Hey, make the same song that you made last time because people like that one," instead of taking creative risks.

#### **There is comfort in consistency.**

How different is it from *Jeopardy*? Okay, I'm home from work. It's six o'clock, *Jeopardy*'s on. You know it's going to be there, the same as "Oh, open Instagram at whatever time, there's Track Star." Is it that different? There's so much of the stuff that I think, was like our comfort food, is gone. *Wheel of Fortune*, same thing. *Price is Right*, same thing. Some of these classic shows have not changed at all, and they're still equally entertaining.

**What's the approach when someone wants to come on as part of their new album or movie, etc., rollout?**

The thing that makes the show great, the thing that people like about it is hearing an interesting person talk about music and share their love of music. It's not reliant on celebrity, whereas the publicists and the movie people and the music people think that we need them. There's a power dynamic that's a little bit misunderstood. I don't have to do the show with celebrities, so I have to want to talk to LeBron. It's like, "Oh yeah, of course I'm going to talk to LeBron. That's awesome. That's going to be cool."

The reason I could do it was because of Beats. So I was like, "You know what? We'll give a shout out to his new headphones sort of thing," because I'm willing to make that exchange of values there, even if it probably hurts the entertainment value of the show. Whereas I can just go out in the street and find an interesting character and make an episode that's going to be more viral and more people are going to love. That's what I have to remind myself of all the time. That's what makes the show special, that's why people want to be on it. So I don't have to choose to do those things.

I'm not going to just promote a movie that I've never seen for no reason, but I am interested in speaking to an artist who has an interesting perspective. As a consumer, you can click on their profile. You can be like, "Oh, this person looks interesting." And then it's almost like you feel like you discovered them instead of having it being force-fed to you. People are pretty smart that are consuming this stuff.

**Tell me about your newsletter, podcast, live series, etc. How do they all fit into the Track Star universe?**

It's back to my personal curiosity and interest. The more that I've been doing this show, the more I've been learning about music, the more interested I am, and talking to people who can teach me more about music. Let's do a podcast where we dig into something a little bit deeper and let that person explain something. The audience is like, "That was cool. I learned all this new stuff I didn't think about before." Or like, "Oh, there's an opportunity for..." I obviously love music, so there's an opportunity for an artist to come and perform and play a show in our office. That's really cool. The way to make it sustainable is to have it be consistent and have people watch it over a lot of times so we can find sponsors or whatever. It has to be a good product. That's incentivizing us or encouraging us to make a product that people want to watch, people click on and pay attention to.

Ultimately it just comes down to, I think it would be cool to have someone play a song at my office. So let's run with that. It all stems from the things that I'm interested in. We do these videos on Public Opinion that are like, what's the point of making a video about the horse track? It's like, well, I went to the horse track three years ago and was blown away by how weird and interesting and different it was. In the back of my mind, I'd love to tell that story, not because I think that it's going to go viral or win us an award, but because I want to dive into this thing. The thing that makes me excited is figuring that stuff out.

**What are some current challenges you're up against?**

In order to make this sustainable, you always have to be growing, otherwise you can become stagnant. So we're always adding new people to the team and bringing in their creativity and helping them shape what we do. Everything has happened organically, and now it's like we're actually starting to think about this more as a business so that we can create this type of work on a larger scale because we do truly think we can change the media landscape.

I used to work at CNN, and I thought that the way that they did things was kind of stupid and broken. I thought I had better ideas of how to do that, and I still want to figure out that thing. It's never going to be the monoculture level of CNN and TV, whatever, but I do think you can make interesting video work and share it with people at a larger and larger scale. You can move and shape culture in a positive way.

**What have you learned about yourself through making these videos?**

I realized when we started this company that I could use myself as a host, as a tool for storytelling, that's just the same thing as editing. That's the same thing as the type of camera you use, graphics, whatever. I think of it from a distance. I do a little bit of reflection sometimes, where I see, "Oh, I guess I saw myself there." For the most part, what I'm trying to do is be as present as possible. I'm not thinking about myself, I'm thinking about the story and the way that I sound as a piece of the story. I don't insert myself into it that much. My life story is not really in it. My personality is, my vibe and my tone, but I'm not talking about myself that much.

#### **What makes for a "good" question?**

For me, it's simplicity. Just like in anything in life, the simplest things are the most elegant and beautiful. How simple is the question that you're asking, but how thought-provoking can that simple question be? That's what's appealing to me. What is this song? Who is this? Why do you like them? What happens when you flush the toilet?

#### **What's bringing you hope and joy right now?**

Obviously the thing that's bringing me the most joy is my son who's two months old. It's just a constant reminder that life is this beautiful, precious thing that we get to be a part of. It's definitely a life reset where you're like, "Okay, let me refocus my priorities to a certain extent." I'm such an optimistic person and I tend to just see the good in people and everyone, probably to my own fault. As someone who spends a lot of my time talking to strangers, I see a lot of positivity in the world, and I think I see the good. And so I'm less scared, I think, and I'm less like the world is going to shit because I see all these people on a daily basis who are good.

#### **Jack Coyne Recommends:**

*Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys...: A Memoir* by Vivienne Albertine

*Everybody's Fly: A Life of Art, Music, and Changing the Culture* by Fab 5 Freddy

*Imitation of Life* (1959) dir. Douglas Sirk

Dove Ellis's album *Blizzard*

*Peaches!* album by the Black Keys (check out their session in our office)

#### Name

Jack Coyne

#### Vocation

filmmaker, co-founder of Public Opinion, creator and host of Track Star

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Henry Kornaros