On finding your way to the hea

Filmmaker Kevin Wilson, Jr. discusses art that makes an impact, the tough mentorship of Spike Lee, and showing up to set dressed in the way he feels best.

May 30, 2025 -

As told to Isa Adney, 2069 words.

Tags: Film, Politics, Family, Beginnings, Process, Inspiration, First attempts.

On your Instagram bio I noticed it says, "Make movies not war." What does that mean to you personally as an artist and director?

Bob Marley is one of my favorite artists and he says, "Make love not war." Love is connected to your purpose here. It's connected to what we're supposed to be doing. For me, that's to make movies. I used to engage in a lot of bickering with folks, particularly around politics, and it never really got anywhere. I felt like I wasn't really making an impact going back and forth with people. But if I put my perspectives in the form of a piece of cinema or crafted it in the form of art, then the conversation opened up a little bit more. "Make movies not war" is a reminder to myself about the impact I can have if I'm focused on what I'm supposed to be doing.

When did you realize you would become an artist?

I don't think there was ever a time where I didn't think I was going to become one. I was raised in a pretty artistic, creative family. My dad is a guitarist and was on the road a lot when I was a kid. He and my mom divorced when I was five because he was always on the road. The only times I would see him were like, backstage at concerts or on tour buses. He and my mom actually met [because] she's a singer. My grandmother was a concert promoter in Queens, and they met at one of the concerts my grandmother put on. So I was just surrounded by creativity; there was never a moment where I felt I was going to be anything other than an artist.

Although there was a time where I had to kind of push back against my mother's advice. She was a creative person but she became a paralegal, as a sacrifice, really, to raise me the way she wanted to raise me. Her advice to me was to find a job doing something that could make me money, because that's what she did and that's what worked for her. So my first [college] major was business management, to make her happy. [There] was a year where I wasn't on the artistic path; that was the only year in my life where I felt like I was trying to please someone or make them happy. And I realized that's not gonna work out for me.

What changed in that year? What brought you back to the artist path?

I wasn't doing well, and I realized I wasn't doing well because I didn't care about the classes. So then I was just like, alright, I'm gonna change my major [to television production], because I wanted to do something that would give me access to cameras, because I fell in love with cameras when I was 15. And that was the beginning.

What inspired you to create your short film *My Nephew Emmett*?

I did a play about the murder of Emmett Till when I was in college. And then when I got to NYU as a graduate student I wanted to tell that story because I had just become a parent.

What did it feel like when your hero Spike Lee threw your first draft of that film in the proverbial trash?

So what happened was, I wrote a draft and then he basically tore it apart. He was like, "You gotta figure something else out." So I went back and wrote something else and he read it and he threw the *other* one in the trash. It was motivating, though, because he's the kind of person that really doesn't accept laziness. He doesn't accept anyone coming up half-stepping. If you say you wanna make movies and you care about the craft, then you should commit to being the best that you can be.

I always love those stories of mentors who are really hard on their mentees, and teachers who are hard on their students. I think it just shapes you into a better artist. And the reason I went to film school was to find mentors who could do that. I moved to New York [to be] exposed to people, artists from around the world… Spike [would] tell you, "This isn't good enough. You can do better"—but only if he feels you have that potential. And so the fact that I was receiving that from him made me realize that there was something there. So it was encouraging.

Is there anything you learned from him in particular through the drafting process?

He and Kasi Lemmons, who is a very great director as well, [played a big part in] where [the script] ended up. There were a lot of scenes and moments in the script that really pulled us away from the emotional anchor of the story. They taught me how to kill those darlings and only really focus on what we need to focus on to tell this specific moment of this particular story.

What was your creative process for the *Chef's Table* episode you directed?

There were big expectations, but we were working with a really challenging budget. It was exciting, though, because I've always been a big fan of *Chef's Table*. And so I wanted to be a director who contributed to that and elevated it and didn't bring that reputation down. So I was thinking about all those things as I was trying to find the story.

How did you find the story?

Usually my heart guides me to the story. I usually go in having an idea of what the story could be, but for me, as a director, the things that are most compelling are the ones that really move you emotionally. Something that really can really tug at your heart. You don't really find that until you spend time with the person, until you spend enough time with them to see how they behave when they're vulnerable. How they behave when they're afraid. Or when they're nervous or anxious or happy, once their guard is down a little bit.

So when I signed on to do it, I called Kwame [Onwuachi] and was like, "Hey, let's hang out. Let's figure out what this is gonna be." So we just rode around the Bronx and walked around his old neighborhood, went to his old spots… That's usually the biggest part of my process: to find my way to the heart of a human being. And if we can connect at the heart level, then I know how to tell the story.

I'm guessing those days were no cameras, right? It was just you two doing background research?

Yeah, no cameras.

Right now I'm filming in a maximum security prison in New York. When I was approached about the project they were like, "We're gonna go in and start shooting," and I was like, "No, you gotta hold off. We gotta spend time with folks, you know? We gotta gain their trust. We gotta get to know them beyond just their status as an incarcerated individual." So we spent four or five days with them all day, seven hours a day, just hanging out with the guys. And then you realize, "Oh, he's a grandfather and he actually talks to his daughter every day. She's an artist, so he's becoming an artist as well." So you really get to know people whenever they start to trust you. So that's what we did with *Chef's Table*, too.

Was there any particular moment of your *Chef's Table* episode that stems from the background research you did, something that you wanted to ensure made it into the episode?

The biggest one is in the cold open, when Kwame is putting his durag on. I was raised to believe that you're supposed to present yourself in a certain way. You have to wear certain kinds of clothes, you have to walk a certain way, you have to talk a certain way, otherwise you're never gonna get anything. We're often taught you gotta wear a Brooks Brothers suit. You gotta wear Stacy Adams shoes. Kwame was asserting himself as a human being and as an artist and businessman who is successful in a durag—in some spaces, people would call him a thug, you know?

So that moment where Kwame's like, "This is my space, this is a space I've created for myself as a creative, and I'm gonna exist in it the way that I want and gonna show up the way that I want"—that really was inspiring for me. That's the way I'm able to show up now. When I go on set, I wear what I wanna wear, play the music that I wanna play. I put incense on, I put candles on. I show up as my full self now, and I'm very grateful to be in that space.

There's a moment in the episode where Kwame and his sister are walking on the streets of New York and she playfully kicks him, and it all happens in slow motion. I'm curious what choices you made to achieve moments like that.

I always felt that the beauty of Kwame's story was his relationship with his sister… I just told them, "Hey, walk down the street and whatever you wanna do, just do it." And that's what they did. There's also a moment where they're cooking together with their mom. Those moments are really important for me, because when telling these kinds of stories, sometimes people like to focus on the drugs and the negative aspects of the Bronx. Like, the Bronx is the hood and [has] gang activity. Those things do exist, but there's also a lot of beauty in the Bronx. There's actually a warm household in the Bronx where people are making gumbo inside and you can smell it in the hallway. And there's playing out on the street, and double dutch, and tag. That's the kind of neighborhood I saw when I was growing up. That's how I saw the hood when I was growing up. I didn't see the hood the way Hollywood saw it. I saw it the way I tried to present it in the episode.

I think you achieved that. And my dad was born in the Bronx, so I really loved how you portrayed it.

What has your experience been like as a Black artist in America in these current times, and what do you wish more people knew?

When Donald Trump was elected president the first time, it really reshaped the way I thought about art and creativity, and it really kind of redefined what I wanted to do as an artist. I really want to speak to the things that are happening in our world right now because it's having a significant impact on so many different communities. And the only way I know how to make an impact and really say anything meaningful about it is through my work.

I guess that speaks to our purpose as artists overall, or the way that I see artistry. We're here on a mission. We're not just here to fulfill our own creative ambition. It's fine to have ambition, to have creative ambition, but I would like to support artists who see their role as an artist as a way of service, you know?

Kevin Wilson, Jr. recommends:

The Creative Act by Rick Rubin (should be required reading for anyone who wants to do anything creative; I'd suggest reading this somewhere in nature or in a quiet space alone)

The First Rule of Mastery: Stop Worrying What People Think of You by Michael Gervais

A Love Supreme by John Coltrane (Deep listen to this album. Turn off your phone; sit in a dark, quiet room; and listen to this album… on vinyl if possible!)

The Sweet Flypaper of Life by photographer Roy DeCarava with poetry by Langston Hughes (demonstrates creative authenticity, compassion, and empathy for the people and their communities)

Tokyo Story by Yasujiro Ozu (I have many favorite films, but this one has been the most transformative for me)

Name

Kevin Wilson, Jr.

Vocation

filmmaker