

On desperation as motivation



Writer and director Ben Berman on the highs and lows of making your first big film, the endless hustle of trying to get things made, and having a murky work/life balance.

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As told to Kailee McGee, 2120 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Adversity](#), [Beginnings](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Success](#).

You recently finished promoting your feature documentary, *The Amazing Johnathan Documentary*. How do you feel about the film now with it in the rearview mirror?

I feel fantastic about it. I'm very proud of it. It's absolutely in the rearview mirror, but we are also premiering in the UK in November. So, it's in the rearview mirror, but it's still present, and I'm still trying to utilize it for furthering the next project or getting other opportunities. It's always on my mind. I'm very proud of it, and it was such a long weird journey that the fact we were even able to finish it, in any sort of way, is an accomplishment.

How long has it been in your life?

Now? Let me do the math... Let's say three and a half years, which is not a crazy amount of time, but that's kind of a long time. The day I met Johnathan, we started filming, and then two and a half years after that we premiered at Sundance, and now almost a year later—that's something that's been fucking me up lately a little bit—all of a sudden it's Halloween, and then you see Thanksgiving decorations and you see Christmas commercials. All of a sudden, it's the end of the year. It happened so quickly, it's so disgusting. And, in my experience, the industry just shuts down roughly around now. So okay, we're at the end of the year, and it's October 31st, and what happened... What happened this year? Other than I went around and showed the movie to people, it's like, "Oh, fuck." What was supposed to happen?

Looking back at the whole process and adventure—from the first day of filming to your last Q&A—what was your highlight and lowlight?

Just all of Sundance—getting into Sundance, premiering there, selling there—that whole thing was the highlight. And there was a dinner the night that we got to Sundance, a dinner with my dad, Johnathan, and Simon [Chinn] who were all sitting together, and it was like, "What world does that happen in?" So that was nice.

And low lights... You see a lot of them in the movie, just the struggling. No one asked me to make anything, no one wanted this movie. No one wanted a movie from me, especially one about the Amazing Johnathan, and the fact that I just showed up and started doing it. And in the process of doing it—I like to think of myself as making art. I make art, and I want to make art. Films are art, and this film is art, I think. My art itself, while I was making it, was yelling at me saying, "Don't fucking make me!" Everything was against me, but you just keep on going. I don't know, in the face of adversity, in the face of no one wanting it, and the thing that you're making not wanting to be made, like, my god, you're up against so much. But the fact that you just keep on going, at times, is the thing that allows it to work out. Does that kind of answer the question?

It does. So, this film was your first time on camera in your work, right? Is this something that you're going to explore again?

Yes, and pretty much yes. Well... *kind of* and pretty much yes. Kind of in the way that I'm not a performer, but years and years ago, me and my friend Andrew Fitzgerald—my friend who I went to film school in Philadelphia with—every once in a while, we would just shoot these little two-minute funny videos in our weird voice, and he and I would be in them. We would just say weird things, and they're funny. We made, like, nine in total, over maybe seven years. And, we would just put them on Vimeo and share with our friends, and some people would like them. Nothing big. But, I think doing those videos was actually hugely important to me eventually feeling comfortable being in front of the camera in the Johnathan doc. But yeah, other than that, this was the first time I was in anything significant—anything that's been on Hulu, anything that the public can actually see, which is funny.

Moving forward, I'm just getting done pitching a doc series that would have me on camera... kind of a similar thing to the Johnathan doc, where I'm leading the audience through these explorations and doing weird things. So yeah, we'll see. We're going to go to Comedy Central later today to pitch, and I've been all around and maybe it happens. If it doesn't happen, it wasn't meant to happen.

Does that feel like the next thing?

Yeah, that's the only active thing. I would be bullshitting if I said anything else. I could reference the feature film that I've been working on for years that will get made at some point; it just has to. But, it would be kind of bullshit talk. But yeah, it's a doc series with me in it. Hopefully someone is interested. That'd be a cool next phase.

How do you decide to start a project?

You tell me, I don't know. Out of desperation. Out of feeling like a complete shit, schmock, which I'm getting there now. I started the Johnathan doc kind of out of desperation—out of just needing something to do and not having anything. So, I just started to fill my time filming him. Not knowing, not caring where it went necessarily, and just experimenting. That's not every project. I think the project that I'm trying to start now is off the momentum of the other one, and I don't know, I guess everything's different. That answer is different for different people, but for me, sometimes it's been out of feeling low and wanting to get high.

What kind of people do you surround yourself with creatively?

Andrew and Josh. Period. You should just put that, Andrew, Josh, and Jon Mugar. Period. Yeah, very few. My world is very small. I've shut out a lot of people and pushed a lot of people away, a lot of other opportunities and whatever. I don't think that's healthy, so I should broaden the amount of people and the type of people I hang out with.

But yeah, I hang out with Josh Cohen. He's cool. We're kind of writing partners to some degree. Andrew Fitzgerald, he's great. They're both cinephiles. They both are passionate about movies, and ultimately supportive of my ideas, and helpful. I don't know. I think I don't hang out with super successful people. I hang out with people who are as frustrated as me.

Are most of them artists?

Yeah. Well, to some degree. It's LA. Everyone's in the fucking industry. I wish I... I want a better answer for that. I love those guys, but I need a better answer. I don't think there's anyone I hang out with that's not an artist.

Any dentists?

I don't have any dentists in my life. Jon Mugar—he's the guy in my movie that I call for advice—he used to be a

writer and producer for *Tim and Eric*, that's how I met him. And since then he's gone and moved back to Boston, and he runs this basketball tournament. We talk all the time. I relate to him in industry terms, and we talk about stuff, comedy, whatever.

How do you balance work life and life life? Is there a separation?

It varies, how I do it. Not well, lately. I don't know, maybe there hasn't been much of a separation. I work on weekends. I don't know if it's a problem or if it's, like, "Oh, you're just a cool, hard worker; you're committed." There's not much separation. That's something I need to figure out. Sometimes it can definitely be a negative thing.

Do you ever take a day off?

Same question as, "Do you ever work a full day?" Today, basically I have two things I have to do: this and the pitch. And, I don't have to do anything else. I'm going to try. I'm going to send some emails and whatever else, but for me, that's a full work day. Very rarely do I take a full day off and just throw it all out and go to the beach. I went on vacation this summer, right before the Johnathan doc came out, and that was great. I don't know. If people are looking for advice, don't do it this way. Don't do what I do, which is like, it's all muddy and who knows if I'm working or if I'm not working.

Do you have a morning routine?

Kind of. My morning routine is, if I'm waking up at my place, I have a little dog, Lentil, and we wake up. Unfortunately, I get on my phone. Well, I let her out real quick, in the front yard to pee. She comes back, visits me back in bed. I'm on my phone and then eventually I make some coffee, probably bring that back into bed. Think, "What do I have to do?" I try to attack some emails pretty early on. Again, not healthy... This is actually a good interview because this is making me realize how much of my life is... I should meditate. I was thinking about that the other day. But yeah, it's really just kind of hit some coffee and try to respond to some emails and send some emails. I keep this to-do list on my phone, and I just try to hit it, hit it pretty fresh.

I do like the morning, because every morning you never know what's going to happen, and the morning is a good time to start seeing if there's anything. You could wake up to an email that's like, "Oh my god, this is the best opportunity! Where'd this come from?" Or not.

What is your relationship like with your phone?

Too much of one. It's almost like a cigarette, you know? It's like, okay, you work for a little bit. You can take a break. Check out the bullshit on there. Too much.

What does success mean to you?

It means a lot. I don't know if there's like a sentence or a word or a few words to boil that down, but success is something that I've been chasing. And, it's so silly to put a word to it. I don't know. What I do ultimately want—most importantly—is to be able to make projects like *The Amazing Johnathan Documentary*, not necessarily crazy docs, but just movies, or... I don't want to say the word content because content is empty, but projects that are meaningful. Things that are meaningful to me and that come from my weird brain and my heart and that other people can find something in, they can laugh, they can cry. I'm best when I can do my own thing. I have some other little work coming to me. Commercial jobs, or episodes of TV to direct. So, I feel like, "Okay, I'm in the mix."

I just want to feel comfortable. That's success. Making what you want and feeling comfortable enough. That's all I need. And, I don't have that comfort. I've made a couple things that I'm very, very proud of. Short films and this thing, but I want to elevate, to go a little bigger.

All right, we're going to end with a good one. What advice would you give your film school college self?

It's going to be hard, but it's going to be good. Maybe: it'll be good and bad. You can do it. I'll let you know when I get there. I really don't know. It's fucking tough sometimes, but then again, it's not *that* tough. It's not war, but life is weird. Life is tough, and it's just life. Keep on going. Try to stay positive, or if you can't be positive, use that to your advantage and get shit done. Period.

Ben Berman Recommends:

The book *The Obstacle is The Way* by Ryan Holiday

Shangri-La (Showtime) and *Abstract: The Art of Design* (Netflix) doc series produced/directed by Morgan Neville

Hi, AI, *Midnight Family*, and *Magic Life of V* - docs from this year that are great.

Guessing celebs email addresses and asking them to be in your projects

Walt's Bar in Eagle Rock

Name

Ben Berman

Vocation

Director, Writer

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