

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 10: Brian Koppelman

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Tim Ferriss: Welcome, Ladies and Gentlemen, to another episode of The Tim Ferriss Show. It was going to be The Tim Ferris Experience, but then Joe Rogan would think I was copying him, so it sounds even more egotistical, but it is The Tim Ferriss Show. The guest we have with us today is Brian Koppelman. Brian, how are you?

Brian Koppelman: I'm great, man. Just great. So pleased to be here talking to you.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah, it's been a while. I'm very excited to reconnect. I've been thinking a lot about your craft. I follow you on Twitter. Some of your exchanges are hilarious. It's kind of like half screenwriting, half Knicks, I would say.

Brian Koppelman: I try to dial back. I think most people who are engaging with me on Twitter probably want to talk about creativity in some way. And then there's this fanatical core of the people who were with me at the beginning who were there partially because I wrote about and talked about the Knicks a lot. So I try to warn people if there's going to be a Knicks rant for the next little while, so stay away.

But I think it's probably now like 90 percent about creativity and 10 percent about the Knicks.

Tim Ferriss: No, you need to support the core, the people who were there in the beginning. So we met quite a few years ago, I would say at this point. I remember our first in-person meeting was in New York City. For those people who don't know your work or they probably do know your work, but they're not familiar how you are involved with these various films, maybe you could just give people a very brief overview of some of the types of movies you've worked on and just the type of work that you do, if that's a sensible way to start.

Brian Koppelman: Sure. I am a writer, director and producer of mostly films and some television as well. Some of the movies on which I've worked in at least of those capacities are: Rounders, Solitary Man, Run-Away Jury, Oceans Thirteen, The Illusionist.

I have a TV show that we're going to shoot for Showtime called Billions. And, you know, Tim, there's IMDB out there. The folks can go if they want to –

Tim Ferriss: No, of course. I don't want to go line-by-line through your IMDB or the Wikipedia. I just think that what's always been so interesting to me – and we'll come back to sort of the genesis story in a second – is that you do not fit in one role. There are many people who attempt to do this, but very few that I've had personal encounters with who've succeeded at sort of threading the needle, starting as a writer, and then moving to producing and directing. I guess we met – how long ago would've it have been when we first started chatting?

Brian Koppelman: It was before – you were starting to write The 4-Hour Body the first time that we met. I also should say that, like you, I entered just a little before you the world of podcasting.

I have a podcast on Grantland called “The Moment with Brian Koppelman.” That's something I'm devoting a good amount of time to, as well. It's not just writing, directing and producing, I'm also talking [inaudible].

Tim Ferriss: He can also talk. I remember a stand-up comedian once –

Brian Koppelman: It all ties into, Tim, this idea when you asked – I think that there's a question behind your statement that most people you run across sort of end up in one thing. I think that what unifies every part of my journey is always lead with my curiosity or obsession or fascination. That's been something that I kind of codified for myself a long time ago so that I see it all as one big endeavor, which is chasing down that which I'm curious about and finding a way to satisfy that.

If it's storytelling and there's something that we should write, and I write most of it with my partner, David Levien, and make movies with him too. Sometimes that doesn't fully scratch the itch or the way we see the story and that means we have to find a way to direct it or produce it and then it's just a matter of figuring out what the tactics are to bring that about.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. I want to focus on a lot of the tactics in our conversation today. The first place I thought we might start, just as it relates to, obviously, pursuing your passion because similarly, I feel like many people chase happiness (and I put that in quotation marks in my head). Whereas, if they were to simply pursue what

excites them, the happiness, the wellbeing part often kind of takes care of itself. In your case, I saw a bit of an exchange that you pointed me to yesterday on Twitter about Rounders

I really enjoyed Rounders and I even more so enjoyed it having since now spent a little bit of time with poker players in the last six months. I wanted to hear a little bit about how that movie came to be, because it doesn't appear that everybody at the agencies and elsewhere were jumping up and sort of throwing confetti in the air when you first met with them. So I was hoping you could give some back-story.

Brian Koppelman: That's pretty true. Well the thing I tweeted – I'm @briankoppelman on Twitter – the thing that I tweeted was that the screenplay for Rounders, that my partner, David Levien, and I wrote was rejected by every single agency in town. When I say that, you may think that it's hyperbole or an exaggeration. But I mean CAA, Endeavor, William Morris, ICM, UTA, ATA, Ghosh Agency, every single agency rejected it within a span of four days because there was a young manager believed in it, so he was like, "I'm going to get you guys an agent."

You know when you're young and starting out – I wasn't even that young, I was 30 – you hold onto the words anybody who even has the most tenuous connection to the business. So he said, "You're going to have an agent," and so I was so hyper-focused and I would write down, waiting for the call that was going to be hey, they loved it! So I wrote down everything that everybody said. It's out of a Hollywood movie about the movie business because the first person would say, "You know, Tom at Endeavor says it's overwritten." I don't know what that means. And he would then say, "Spencer at William Morris says it's underwritten." Like I have this, I have the piece of paper somewhere.

Tim Ferriss: You've got to put the vowels back in, right.

Brian Koppelman: Right. So it was really dispiriting, man. And the thing was a labor of love. And I think something to illustrate this idea you were talking about what excites my curiosity, and that is when you said we met however many years ago, we met because I just out of the blue found you because I was really curious and fascinated by what you did.

I don't even know how I chased you down, but I somehow found you through people and I said, if you're ever in New York, I want to take you to lunch. By the way, I had no game plan, right? I just

wanted to meet you because I thought, I bet you in this exchange there's a way that both of us can come away with a little bit more knowledge and with a little bit of an understanding of a different world. That's always my North Star. So even on Rounders, I was in love with poker. I had become sort of a degenerate card player. I was 30 years old. I was unhappy with the life I was living when I went into this one poker club in New York City, heard the way that people spoke, saw the way they looked; I realized okay, that's a movie.

I'm obsessed enough with this world and with the idea of making movies that I'm ready to turn my life upside down. I went to my wife, Amy, and my best friend, Dave, and made a plan to be able to continue to work but to write this script in the mornings. Amy cleared out a storage space under the apartment we were living in. Dave and I at the time had no contacts in the movie business. We met two hours every single morning. We didn't miss a morning. I think we took Sundays off, but other than that we didn't miss a morning. We worked for two hours. He was bartending, I was going to my job.

That two hours in the morning, nothing else was going on. There's a slop sink in this little storage area. Room for one chair. I'd sit on the floor, Dave would sit at the typewriter most of the time. We had a stack of books that was reading material about poker and the language of the game. We'd sit in that room and write and at then at night, we'd go to these poker clubs and try to collect data. Lines that people said, stories that they told us, character traits.

With no thought that it was realistic or unrealistic. We didn't calculate any of it except how can we write a screenplay that we believe could be the basis for a movie that would be like Diner was for us. A movie that people – at time I was probably thinking about guys in their 20s – would, if it would get made, would want to just quote to each other. It would be like the thing that was their little secret, private movie. And that if we could do that, we'd succeeded. So we finished it and we really thought that we'd kind of captured it and then that initial wave of rejection was bracing, but I have to tell you it wasn't crushing because I'd lived through it in a prior life.

I'm happy to talk about it, but you know I was in the music business before, on both sides of it, being a seller and a buyer in the music business. And I watched experts be wrong over and over again. It taught me that there's a value in listening to the experts, hearing their reasons, but the step that a lot of people miss is a

dispassionate evaluation of the reasons. If you can dispassionately evaluate the reasons for rejection and find them with merit, you can address them; without merit, you can ignore them. I learned to think that way when I was in my early 20s.

So that although it always stings; it's always emotionally, as I said, dispiriting when you face rejection, if you can step back and make an analysis and a game plan, you can then find a path forward and that's what we did.

Tim Ferriss:

In the case of Rounders – I love these stories. And almost every single person I know in Silicon Valley, for instance, who seemingly had overnight success, and this is perhaps the clichéd counterpart, but they have an equivalent of the sitting in the basement story. And they have an equivalent of the experts telling them we either hate your idea, we hate you or both, or like, oh, that's an interesting company idea, we think it's terrible, but we like you so why don't you completely change the business and then maybe we'll consider supporting you. It's very common, actually. Love the team, hate the idea.

In this particular case, because this is something I've always found, and I quite frankly still find, so befuddling about entertainment is the roles and responsibilities of people with different titles. So in the case of a manager, because I don't have an entertainment manager and I've spoken to tons of them; I do not have an agent, I've spoken to many of them. But what I'm curious about is how did you decide to get a manager in the beginning?

Brian Koppelman:

Well, that was just a lucky – so David, my partner, when out of college, went out to LA and got a job as an assistant and was, I guess, planning to be a novelist and maybe a screenwriter. David who you know. He left LA after a couple years, realizing in his mind that working in the business would make it harder to break into the business; to get the time to really go do the writing he needed to do.

But he somehow met somebody who met somebody who knew a 24-year-old kid who basically hung a shingle that said “manager,” which is really an advisor. The kid – Seth is his name – had sold one TV movie or something. So like I said, that's why I said “any tenuous connection,” he was a guy who was starting out also. But one thing about Hollywood, it's a land of self-invention.

So if you decide you're a manager, you're a manager. You have to be committed to it. That's how it is. Read "What Makes Sammy Run."

Tim Ferriss: "What Makes Sammy Run," is that a novel?

Brian Koppelman: The Budd Schulberg book, which is all about how somebody – it's a legendary book about how somebody makes their way in Hollywood. But what I say is so this young manager, we needed an agent because really agents are the ones that have the contacts to be able to sell something. In the end though, the manager said, "I believe in this anyway," and he had known some people on his very low beginning level at a couple of production companies – producers – and he got the script to someone of those and we had some rejections. And then some producer tried to get us to option it to him for free. All along, we had to kind of keep our own sense of the project's merit, in a way.

What we felt it's intrinsic value was. But finally, the right producer came along and gave it to somebody at Miramax and then they were willing to step up and there was this great moment early on where they wanted to option it and I was in Las Vegas working – I was in the music business still with an artist – and there no cellphones and Dave couldn't reach me. David said no, you can't option it. He had just had a moment of clarity where he said, "You know what? You can buy it or walk away."

But he knew somehow that what we had was good enough that we should make them commit to buying it, which meant they had to spend a lot more money and would make it more likely that they would actually want to make the movie.

Tim Ferriss: Right.

Brian Koppelman: But my experience before that was –

Tim Ferriss: The suspense is killing me. So did that gambit work out?

Brian Koppelman: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: I like it, okay.

Brian Koppelman: In fact, he told me on a cellphone at Las Vegas airport. I was like, "You really did that?" He goes, "Yeah, I did it." So our guys are going back and saying you have to pay them real money. It was like six figures, which at the time for us was a fortune of money. It

would've been enough that the initial thing would've been we each would walk away with six figures or something. And then by the time I landed in LA, Miramax had already come back and said yes. And then we were really in business.

Tim Ferriss: How did you or the manager with the shingle get in touch with the producer who then got it to the right person at Miramax?

Brian Koppelman: Seth had networked in Hollywood, the manager.

Tim Ferriss: Got it.

Brian Koppelman: He was out there and he had done all the things of going to the right bars. Becoming an assistant in Hollywood is still a great way to make contacts. I think he had worked his way up in the mailroom at one of the places and met enough people that – look, he wasn't getting the script to top level folks, but ultimately he did get it far enough.

Tim Ferriss: Now from the music business – what I've always been fascinated by are writing duos. I want to come back to the process of making a movie, because quite frankly, it's something, like you know, I've been thinking about for a long time. But how do you work with David? Because I've met other writing duos, for instance, the Freakonomics guys. And there are these sort of Wonder Twins who put out really good work and I have no idea who I would ever work with a writing partner. Not because I couldn't do it, I just don't even know how you would even format such a thing. So when you guys were sitting down in the basement or the storage room, what did the process look like? What did you do over those two hours?

Brian Koppelman: That's a great question. It's shifted over the years the ways in which we've worked. What we did back then was we together outlined it. We'd gone to these clubs, and like I said, did a tremendous amount of research so that we understood who the people were. Then we spent a lot of time talking about the story. So we'd kind of tell each other the story. Do a bunch of work trying to say okay, who are these characters and how would they interact with each other? We want to tell it about the world of poker and then we kind of together in talking invented these characters.

Then I remember one of us – Dave and I never talk about who came up with what – but one of us came up with this notion of making the beginning of this movie, like making Rounders start

where *The Cincinnati Kid* ended, right? Where the end of *The Cincinnati Kid* – spoiler alert, skip 30 seconds if you don't know that movie that came out in 1963.

The Cincinnati Kid ends with Steve McQueen, a young guy, losing everything. So our idea was, well, what if we start this right there? This guy who loses everything. And so then we outlined from that premise every scene of the movie. So it was outlined in detail. Our rule from the beginning was, we can deviate from the outline anytime we have a better idea, but if we don't have a better idea, let's just stick to the outline because we can always revise, rewrite later. Then we knew what each scene was supposed to be about, so we would just talk it back and forth. Because writing the movie dialogue is conversational.

So we would just go back and forth. And if one of us had a better idea, all right – right those lines. I would say it and Dave would type it. Or he would get up and I would type. We really just kind of jammed it. Then at night in our separate worlds, we would each when we felt like doing it, read through a bunch of pages, make notes.

So we'd come in the next morning and right before we started, go "Hey, that scene we wrote on page 10, what if this happened instead in that line?" Because he and I have been like brothers since we were 14 and 15 years old, we have a shorthand. We don't have any bullshit between us. So that there has never been an argument we've had that's been about ego or about anybody feeling like the other guy doesn't value his contributions. That's the key to a collaboration. We are each, I think, keenly grateful for what the other person brings.

Tim Ferriss: No, and I'm so envious of this on some level. People ask me, for instance, are you working on a next book? And the answer is no because I find it so incredibly isolating to do it solo.

Even if I have a team helping with design and research and things like that, it can be a very, for me at least, psychologically traumatic experience. Like being locked inside –

Brian Koppelman: No, it's really hard. One of our movies, *Solitary Man*, starring Michael Douglas, I wrote that movie alone. Now here's the thing. David and I directed it together. I wrote it alone because when I'd written the beginning of it and read it to Dave, he said, "You have the voice for this. This is personal to you for certain reasons. You write the draft and then let's make the movie together." I felt he

was right because the 20 pages I'd written were very particular. It took me so much longer than it would have taken for us to do it together. Because we were making other movies along the way, but beyond that, not having him to bounce stuff off of, not having the benefit of his great ideas really made it a lonely battle.

But as I say, when I was able to finish it and then giving it to him and then getting the benefit of his wisdom to come be my partner and go make the movie was great and useful. And something either of us should do again because then you have the other guy coming in and all of his ideas can happen to take something that's basically finished and then take it to a whole other level.

Tim Ferriss:

Right. When I met with – we had sushi, the three of us – in New York City, I was so fascinated by sort of the state of the industry and distribution and we'll get to that in a second, but when did you become a producer and what does that mean in the context of the films that you've been involved with as a producer? Because I'm sure a lot of people, you see a film, you look at the credits and you're like, holy shit, there are 15 producers. I have no idea what all these people are doing. So in the context of what you do, when did you decide to become a producer and what did that mean in terms of how you related to the content and ultimately shared in the spoils or whatever? What shape did that take and what did it mean?

Brian Koppelman:

Well, sometimes it's a vanity title, so you're right to recognize that when you watch a movie. Sometimes it just doesn't mean anything. When we've been a producer on a movie, it's because we either had the central idea that made it a movie or we're able to connect people to one another. An example, and it's actually great because it's illustrative of a few different things, is *The Illusionist* which stars Edward Norton and Paul Giamatti.

Tim Ferriss:

Great movie, I love it.

Brian Koppelman:

Thank you. And that's based on a short story called *Eisenheim, the Illusionist*, by a brilliant guy named Steven Millhauser. Dave and I had that story – that story was in *Best American Short Stories* 1989. I'd carried that story around for like 13 years and then said one day – Dave and I were with Neil Burger, a writer-director, and we'd help him make his first teeny, tiny movie, called *Interview with the Assassin*.

And we were standing around outside his editing room and said, "Do you know the short story *Eisenheim the Illusionist*? That

should really be a movie.” He’s like, “I do know it. I bet you I could figure out how to make it.” Because Dave and I couldn’t figure out how to write that movie originally. We knew it was a movie and that we couldn’t recognize it. So we said to Neil, “Hey, if you want to try to figure out how to write it, we’ll produce it,” meaning we’ll acquire the short story, which we actually got for free for a year and half, then we paid a little bit of money to keep it going.

Tim Ferriss: That’s incredible.

Brian Koppelman: We said, “We’ll sit with you Neil so that creatively you have us to bounce your ideas off of and we will help you along to where there’s a script that we all think can get made,” and then we’ll go and try to attach other elements, meaning actors, financial partners and all that stuff. Now that movie has done \$100 million worldwide at the box office, not including DVD or video on demand. The real number is like \$97.5 million worldwide.

I’ll tell you, Tim, it was rejected at every stage by everybody in Hollywood. That’s why I return to this theme. I think it’s really important. When I say, again, every studio had a chance to see that thing at the screenplay stage and again at the final movie stage. Sorry, screenplay stage? They all rejected it. At the stage where we had attached Edward and Paul, they all rejected it. And then when we finished it, even though we tested it and it tested as high as a movie can test, one of the highest testing movies of all time, meaning that the crowds objectively loved it and it was repeatable. We tested it in various different places. They all passed again. And then it goes on to do \$100 million.

Tim Ferriss: That doesn’t make any sense to me at all. So how is it possible? What is the rationale that an exec would use for rejecting something after the stars are attached and you’ve had successful crowd testing?

I’m just trying to figure out, besides being completely incompetent, there has to be some logic, however perverse.

Brian Koppelman: By and large, they take comfort very often in decisions for which they can’t be fired. So passing on a magic movie set in Austria in the 1800s, that’s pretty easy to pass on.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. So it’s a “you never get fired for buying IBM” type of situation.

Brian Koppelman: Yeah, but you know, you buy *The Illusionist* and it fails, the guy under you says, “Well, that imbecile thought a movie with people in capes doing magic tricks was going to sell. I would never green that. I’ll make the next super hero movie.” So, by the way, I’m being very reductive, right? These are actually smart people and they’re thoughtful people, but there is group think.

There is shallow thinking sometimes and there is herd mentality. And listen, a lot of the time they’re correct. It’s very safe to say no. And I’ll just tell one more rejection story.

Tim Ferriss: Sure, please.

Brian Koppelman: And the reason I do is because I find that on – I’m sorry, so one other thing, which is Hollywood is always trying to remake what was successful today. They don’t understand that what’s successful, very often what’s successful today isn’t going to be successful a year from now.

Tim Ferriss: Right.

Brian Koppelman: And so it’s mavericks who figure that out and maverick producers or smaller movie companies or the occasional brilliant woman who’s the head of production, but mostly they forget that’s it’s a – what’s a technology term? Like a destructive technology?

Tim Ferriss: Disruptive.

Brian Koppelman: Disruptive. They forget that this is disruptive technology and that all the time – *Bridesmaids* was a disruptive technology, right?

Tim Ferriss: Yeah.

Brian Koppelman: The conventional wisdom was, you can’t put a movie with those women – a raunchy movie starring women doesn’t work. Now somebody at Universal realized that was a faulty premise somehow. And so then that becomes the disruptive thing that leads to – you hope – a bunch of others. And then, of course, you get to the point where that no longer is going to work because that appetite’s been sated, but believe me, they’ll make that mistake – they’ll keep going after that until there’s nothing left in it, for each kind of thing.

Tim Ferriss: And in the case of the short story, what was the approach that you used to – it sounds like option that for free for a year and a half. An option – just so I can clarify, is effectively a “no shop” agreement,

right? We have exclusive rights to try to develop this and do a film for X period of time.

Brian Koppelman: And sometimes on the B side, which is, and then we guarantee that if we develop it into a film, the author will receive a floor of X. And then for your protection, our protection you might say, and a ceiling of Y, and those numbers might be percentages of the shooting budget of the film.

Tim Ferriss: I see, got it.

Brian Koppelman: Do you want me to say it again? I know you understand it.

Tim Ferriss: I got it. You have the bare minimum the author is guaranteed and the maximum in sort of broad strokes as a percentage of the total production budget of the film.

Brian Koppelman: Exactly. And so sometimes you'll do that and sometimes you'll have to pay a little bit up front against those numbers. But we didn't. So here's what we did. At the time, I think we had made one, perhaps two movies. Two, we had been involved in two movies, Rounders and Knock-Around Guys. We certainly weren't as far along in our career as we are now. But one thing that really works in the entertainment business is genuine passion and enthusiasm and belief. And then some way of telling your story that gives people on the receiving end of it the confidence that you actually have the answer to the question that you're raising.

So we found that the story was controlled by, I think, William Morris; I might've been ICM – ICM. And found the name of the woman who was in charge of those kind of subsidiary rights, they're called, of short stories. And we figured actually that whoever was doing that was probably a little bit junior and was probably used to just getting faxes sent with requests. We thought, you know, I bet not that many people call her and if they can take her to lunch.

And so we were guys who'd made a couple of movies and we called and said, "Can we take you to lunch? We have some stuff we want to talk about." We took her to lunch and walked her through our vision for this movie and explained the truth – we're not really producers. We don't have development money. We don't have a fund. We don't have backers.

What we do have is know-how and passion and if you explain this to the author – and you know, we gave her this mission that she

then could embrace as her own mission, which was, I can go deliver to this author some great news, which is there are a couple of guys who, while you're sleeping, Steven Millhauser, are going to be doing everything they can to make something happen with your short story. And so she went away and I think she got us a year and then another six months for free.

At which point, we felt, because it was getting rejected and we were always rewriting, we felt like it wasn't even fair to ask for more time free. But then it was only like \$1,000.00, \$1,500.00. It took us years, but over those years, we then added a partner at some point when we thought we were maybe going to have to pay a little bit more. Neal Burger did all this work for free – wrote the script 15 times with our notes and going through it. But eventually everybody won.

Tim Ferriss: I love these stories. I do think there's perhaps one caveat that I'd love to get you to comment on, potential caveat. That is, there are people who could confuse getting rejected with being a solid indicator that their product is absolutely good. So just because you get rejected, doesn't mean your product is good, right? So I guess what I'm wondering is, what signals do you pay attention to? Or are there projects that you had rejected and eventually you're like, you know what? The signal is correct. This is not something I should pursue.

Brian Koppelman: I think the first thing I said at the beginning of this conversation about this area was, you must do a dispassionate evaluation. But I said there's this step. And the step that you try to take is, okay that's a body blow that hurts, my emotional reaction is anger and hurt. Now let me step back and, to the best of my ability, dispassionately evaluate the rejection.

Is there something in that rejection that hits home in the secret place where I know the thing is flawed? If it does, is that addressable? If it doesn't, are the fundamental things I believe about this still true? Okay, if they are, let's press on. If they're not, can we fix it? If we can't, maybe that rejection is right. But dispassion is really important because you have to know it's not a rejection of you and you have to be able to find a way to evaluate. But I will say, something I always think about and believe is it's a very fine line, for artists especially, between delusion and belief.

So many people believe, are deluded in the belief that they're great, the work is great and that everybody else is crazy. But

somehow the problem is that the artists who succeed also have that exact same narrative most of the time.

Tim Ferriss: Right, they're just eccentric and not crazy.

Brian Koppelman: So the final sort of story in this little area of rejection is – and I'll do this very quickly because I told it before – but when I was 21, really when I was 19, I was organizing a boycott at my college against investing the school's endowment into companies that do business in South Africa because apartheid was going on. In organizing this stuff, I stumbled upon a singer/songwriter I wanted to play at this rally and that was Tracy Chapman. Who, for a lot of your listeners I know are young and in their 20s, may not know Tracy became, for a time, the biggest singer/songwriter in the world.

Tim Ferriss: Huge, yeah.

Brian Koppelman: She sold like 13 million albums. I worked with Tracy. I produced her demos and worked with her. My father was in the music business so I knew about the music business and knew people in the music business. I had Tracy. We signed her. People would come up from New York to watch her. I was in Boston. People would come up from New York to watch her perform. I would watch record company executive after record company executive watch her, be personally moved by it, sometimes get tears in their eyes because what she was signing about was so important and her voice was so beautiful.

Then they would say, "Can I please meet her? I just want to meet her. What an amazing ...". And I could see they weren't bullshitting me, Tim. They had a cathartic experience watching her perform. I was at Tufts and I would walk them to their car in winter before they drove back to New York or their hotel, and they would look me in the eye and say, "Thank you for a night I'll always remember."

Then they would say, "Now you know we can't possibly sign her at Columbia Records." I was kid. I was 20 by this point probably, a junior at college.

Tim Ferriss: "I love you and I never want to see you again."

Brian Koppelman: And I would say, "Dude, I don't understand, man. I saw you crying." She was playing Talking About a Revolution and Baby Can I Hold You Tonight? And they'd go, "Yeah, but she's black."

She seems a bit masculine” is what they would say, right? And I’d say but didn’t you see like those 300 or 400 or 500 people who knew every word even though there’s no record out? There’s no internet, it wasn’t on the internet. They’d just say, “Yes, but it’s college. It’s bullshit.”

I’d go, “I’ve traveled,” and I had. This is part of how to answer your question of how you know. I had traveled all over New England with her and watched her perform. Any audience she performed to ended up on their feet and coming back again and again and again. So I knew these people were wrong.

Even though they were rationally correct, right? Because nobody like her had been successful. It was totally against what was going on in music at the time. So because they were on the inside, all the defenses they had up were actually valid defenses that usually you ought to have up. They just couldn’t understand that this was disruptive. Where I, because of my innocence, was able to understand that. But the lesson about – then when it finally happened and we finally got her signed, the record company she signed to even told me, “It’s not going to sell any records, but it’s the beginning of a career,” and all this stuff, even after playing them Fast Car.

Watching that happen and taking that ride – and by the way, I had a point on that album and so I made a lot of money as a young man. Certainly a lot of money for a 21-year-old. But watching that happen made my pretty indefatigable going forward when I truly believed in something because I just watched experts absolutely buy into conventional wisdom and absolutely be wrong. But we all have blind spots. I’ve been wrong. You’ve been wrong.

It’s just that I think there’s a likelihood that if were sane, if you are, and if you’re rigorous, if you’re rigorous in your own R&D in whatever your own area is and you do your own testing and you really stress test the thing that you do, I don’t know, I think that gives you a tremendous amount of inner fortitude when you come up against the monolith.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. I think that once you’ve seen it once, you recognize it a second and a third time. In the case, of course, The 4-Hour Workweek, that was rejected not even politely. I mean, very violently, in 27 cases or so.

Brian Koppelman: Fantastic, that’s fantastic.

Tim Ferriss: And then bought for a song, which they deserved because they were the only – that was the market price, right? I don't in any way hold it against them. They made a good decision and they got rewarded for it.

But I'd love to get your advice very selfishly, and this is because, for many reasons. No. 1, you're very qualified. No. 2, this is something that's just been a bug in my brain for a long time, and that is potentially turning The 4-Hour Workweek into a film. We've talked about this. I was inspired by our meeting in New York quite a long time ago, in between books to go to the story seminar with Robert McKee and I think that David might've recommended Save the Cat. I don't want to put words in his mouth. I think he might have.

Brian Koppelman: No, he wouldn't have recommended. I think you asked. I remember the conversation.

Tim Ferriss: I may have strong-armed him into a book?

Brian Koppelman: I remember what you asked. You said, "Is there anything that sort of talks about the conventional way you do it?"

Tim Ferriss: There we go, all right.

Brian Koppelman: Because I really think those books are pretty – all of that is pretty useless.

Tim Ferriss: Useless as they may be, I became fascinated by screenwriting, at the very least. And sort of put together a skeleton structure of what could become sort of an entertaining, funny movie with philosophical takeaways, not completely unlike Fight Club, but sort of tracking the story and the backstory of The 4-Hour Workweek.

Now the reason nothing has happened with that, there are many, but one of them is that I've been scared senseless by all of the factors that can derail a promising project. It's like you have Edward Norton attached and this and the audience loves it and still there are roadblocks and people who can derail the project. In the case of TV, for instance, I've been working on this TV show for the last year plus, close to a year and a half if you really add in all the contract negotiation and everything else. But when you're operating with a partner that is a large company like Turner, in this case, there are all sorts of internal dynamics that can lead to delays and postponement like the launch of this TV show.

It's been very frustrating for me, as someone who likes to create, to see this work that I've put my heart and soul and sweat and tears into, get postponed with no real light in sight at the end. So I guess what I'm wondering is, if you were in my shoes how would you, in this day and age, with Kickstarter and all these different options, think of creating a feature film? What would you –

Brian Koppelman: Threshold – you want to write it, yes?

Tim Ferriss: I absolutely would want to have a very heavy role in –

Brian Koppelman: Then my advice to you is pretty analog, which is, write it.

Tim Ferriss: Okay, all right.

Brian Koppelman: Because the power is – I'll tell you, so David and I, along with Andrew Ross Sorkin, wrote this thing Billions that we're going to make for Showtime and the standard way you would do it if you were in our position is – because when you've made some things, now at the sort of idea stage, we're not going to get rejected that often. The early stage when their only outlay is to pay you to write a script.

A few different times we've gone to HBO and made deals with them to write a script and then those shows didn't get made. We were trying to figure out the way to have the highest probability of – once we decided that we didn't care, it's great to get the money to write a script, but that wasn't primary. What was most important to us was the real chance to go make a show. That's what matters, right?

Tim Ferriss: Absolutely, yeah.

Brian Koppelman: So we realized that if we wrote it on spec – meaning speculatively, meaning without a deal in place – here's what we risked. We risked three months of our lives where we would've gotten paid a lot – certainly a really good amount of money in the fourth quarter of a year, right? And where opportunity costs were walking away from a lot of paying jobs, right? And we decided we're going to take three months. Or, at the time, I don't think we knew three months. It could've been any amount of time – a month to five months.

We're going to write this script on spec so that we can either not sell it and then we've wasted this time, although we can talk about

whether that's even a waste of time. I don't think any of that's a waste, but essential from a business standpoint, wasted that time. Or we would have leverage. Because if somebody wanted what was now concretized in an actual script, as they wanted it we could say, well that's fine, you have to pay us. But more than that, you have to commit to making it; if you're not committing right now to making it, we're not going to sell it.

There are people who get that without it, but it's very hard to get that without having the piece of material that's compelling. In your case, with the screenplay, a real screenplay that let's assume you write an excellent screenplay. You write it, you go to all your friends who do what I do, we all give you advice, you go take the notes, you make it better, make it better; here's a great script.

Now, the world is open to you. Why? Because now you can go get the one thing that's the most valuable, which is a piece of talent attached to it. Let's say you can get a movie star tomorrow to jump onto *The 4-Hour Workweek*, it's not a real commitment because the real movie stars aren't going to really sign on until there's a screenplay and they really see it manifested as a story. But if you can manifest it as a story and get a movie star, you have a movie. That's just binary. That's how that happens. Now, there are huge risks. The risk to that is to your time and your ego. That's all you're risking – time and ego.

For me, in your shoes, knowing – because over the years you've left my voicemail messages like three different times – “Hey, I'm working on a screenplay.” And then I don't hear from you again for five more months. “I'm still working. I remember our conversation. Really excited to show you.” Which is great, I love getting those messages. It lets me know you're alive and happy. And I picture wine. I always picture a lot of wine involved right before.

Tim Ferriss: Those are probably my drunk dials to you; my drunk texting. Oh, God.

Brian Koppelman: But I have to say that you want to do this, Tim. I can just hear the advice you'd give somebody else. It's like go write the script. If you had a screenplay, we could sit for an hour and a half and devise seven different ways, for real, five to seven different ways to figure out how to go from a finished screenplay to a made movie and how much control you could keep or would have to give up along the way depending on who and how you aligned different resources. But all of that starts from a finished screenplay.

Tim Ferriss: And to create that – no, this is exactly what I need to hear – to create that screenplay, I know you do not have a lot of opinion of a lot of the screenwriting books out there; however, I want to become good at the craft. I want to be educated, obviously. Is the best way to do that by reading –?

Brian Koppelman: Your story about how you get good at anything, or Waitzkin's story about how you get good at anything, it's like by going to the source and figuring out what are people doing or misunderstanding about it, right? How can I get better faster is your specialty. I would suggest that the ways in which people have written those books talk about it is at best archaic, and at worst wrong. Today I did on my podcast, on The Moment, I interviewed my friend, John Hamburg, who wrote and directed I Love You, Man and Along Came Polly and wrote Meet the Fockers and Meet the Parents.

He's one of the biggest comedy writers in the business and directors. And he started talking about his approach to writing scenes. I said to him, this is what everybody – John Hamburg, a guy who's had nothing but success doing this was talking about how he thinks about a scene and questions he asks himself before writing. I thought, why doesn't someone just put that in a fucking book?

That's worth a million dollars. That's incredible. And so I think what you need to do is, watch movies. I said to Hamburg, "How did you figure this out?" And here's what he said – he said, "I would watch a movie I loved like five times, taking notes the whole time. I would stop. I would watch individual scenes and try to figure out why those individual scenes work. What is it that makes those individual scenes work?" And he's like, "I would really grind on it and I would really take notes, and I would really try to figure out each part of it and then I'd do it again."

I think that is more valuable, especially for you, who are so good at looking at systems and figuring out where within those systems are the – where's the fulcrum? How does this turn? You're great at that. I think, if I'm you, that's what I'm looking at.

You know, I do this thing called call six-second screenwriting on Vine. The very first one I did was all screenwriting books are bullshit. Read screenplays, watch movies, and let them be your guide. I still think that's true. If you're writing a conspiracy movie, watch Network. But don't watch it once. Watch Network seven times. Watch Network enough that you can start to understand

where the seams are and start to understand where the craft exists and how it's built. By the way, I'm pretty extreme about this because I think there's a whole –

Tim Ferriss: You're a militant screenwriter?

Brian Koppelman: I just, yeah. Well, I wrote this blog post called The Con Men and the Screenwriting Instruction Industrial Complex.

Tim Ferriss: That is very extreme.

Brian Koppelman: Yeah, it's at briankoppelman.com. Because I decided that – I watch these people charging – a woman who wants to go out to Hollywood and try to become a screenwriter, you know, \$250.00 for that woman is a lot of money to give somebody supposedly to teach her how to write genre. And then that person has never even sold a screenplay, much less had a movie made. At least Robert McKee, I can't rip McKee because too many successful screenwriters, people I admire, say they got something out of his class. But I would say, at least McKee has produced credits.

Okay, there's a podcast by Craig Mazin and John August called Script Notes. Those two guys, between them, have 20 movie credits, hit movies. Those two guys know what they're talking about. They're in the trenches, making movies every day.

Tim Ferriss: This is a podcast, you said?

Brian Koppelman: Script Notes. John August and Craig Mazin. There are resources that are, and especially now, there are so many resources for people to look to that I think are more helpful than sort of maybe what used to be considered the things. You'd go to the Radisson and sit in some guy's seminar.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. And just as a starting point, are there screenplays that you recommend any aspiring screenwriter read? Or is it very sort of target specific?

Brian Koppelman: Well, I think that Tony Gilroy's screenplay for Michael Clayton is just state of the art. A state-of-the-art, platinum screenplay. Because what he pulls off in that movie is so difficult to pull off. That kind of flawed hero who is still heroic, those plot mechanics, caring about those characters and he writes like a dream. I would say that's a really great screenplay to read, for sure. I mean, Network, by Paddy Chayefsky, that's a great screenplay to read as well. Especially, watch the movie and then read the screenplay. I definitely think those things.

For you, I would read Jerry Maguire. I know you know the movie, but I would try to figure out – I would watch the movie again because there are very clear storytelling devices that Cameron Crowe uses. And you can't find someone who makes movies with more heart and soul than Cameron Crowe, but that doesn't mean that the craft isn't exceptional also. But unconventional in certain ways. So if I'm you, I'm looking at that movie and I'm watching it as often as I'm watching Fight Club.

Tim Ferriss: Right, cool.

Brian Koppelman: Because your story is sort of in between those things.

Tim Ferriss: No, definitely. Absolutely 100 percent agreed. I need to get on it. Well, that's good news. I'll be out in your neck of the woods on the East Coast, so you might get some more drunk dials while I'm watching these.

Brian Koppelman: Definitely. It's so funny, because when you called me to do this, I was calling you also to say that we should get together and talk about all this because I wondered what was going on. I've been so focused – I understand the side of it that you're talking about and why people are so engaged, but I love hearing you talk to people about how to maximize yourself.

I'm talking about how to maximize your internal life in a way that allows you to stave off fear long enough to do the work. I would suggest to you, Tim, that even you are probably afraid of failing at this.

Tim Ferriss: Sure, yeah. No doubt, absolutely.

Brian Koppelman: Because writing is uniquely, and especially writing fiction, even though it's based on your life, writing a story, a movie story, some part of ourselves really doesn't want to know that maybe we're not great at telling stories. It's so fundamental to our experience to be entertaining. The thought of not being entertaining is kind of crushing.

You are such a good storyteller that you've got to just find a way to get a discipline and a routine going. A bunch of people you talk to, as I do, do some kind of morning free writing. Do you?

Tim Ferriss: I'm sorry, can you say that one more time?

Brian Koppelman: Do you free write in the morning?

Tim Ferriss: I do journaling in the morning, which is probably not the same as free writing. Maybe you could explain exactly how you go about it.

Brian Koppelman: How do you go about it?

Tim Ferriss: Well, I'm really just journaling my plans for the day, observing myself as a mindfulness practice, but there's no real narrative, which I suppose is maybe antithetical to free writing, but it's mostly trying to just examine where I am psychologically and emotionally prior to starting the day and then setting sort of a framework for not completely self-sabotaging for the rest of the morning and the afternoon.

Brian Koppelman: That's a great practice to get in. What I do is really based on the Morning Pages by Julia Cameron in the Artist's Way.

It's three, long-hand pages where you just keep the pen moving for three pages, no matter what. No censoring, no re-reading. And I just have found that it's the closest thing to magic I've come across. That if you really do it every day in a real disciplined practice, something happens to your subconscious that allows you to get your most creative place. I'd say – and I know you've had this experience with other things you've given people – let's say I've given that book to 100 people and said, "I'm telling you, you need to do this."

Of the 100 people I've given it to, maybe ten of them have actually opened the book and done the exercises. Of those ten, seven have had books, movies, TV shows, made out successful. It's incredible. That book changed my life, even though it's very spiritual and I'm an atheist.

But the core ideas in it, the core tools in that book are kind of a companion to the War of Art because Pressfield talks about resistance and Cameron has, I think, the cure for it. And so I think they really go together and I think it would be useful for you if it turns out this is something that's important for you to do.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah. It's one of those things that won't go away in the way that would seem to indicate before my time on this earth is expired, I have to do it. I'm going to get into it. I'll dig in. I'm actually fortunate that I have some time opening up in the next few months to really dedicate to trying to really tackle it properly.

Brian Koppelman: But it never gets totally easy. Creating every day, I just want to say something that – I may sound glib about this stuff, but every day is still, for me, all of that stuff that you have and everybody has, the insecurity, the fear that you're not good enough, I have to wrestle with every day. Mediating, the Morning Pages and long walks. You have to – every day it's about building a practice that enables you to try to forget that you're afraid.

Tim Ferriss: Right, just like whipping the beast of burden, trying to get it to do what you want. Well, this has been really fun. I'm sure we'll end up having a Round 2 at some point. I'm sure my audience will probably ask for it. So I will put a bunch of links in the show notes where people can find more about you and your work, but what is the best place, if you could send people to one place to learn more about you, where would you suggest they go?

Brian Koppelman: I think Twitter, @briankoppelman. My blog is not that active. But Twitter kind of leads you to places. And my podcast, which is The Moment with Brian Koppelman, which is a weekly show every Tuesday through the Grantland network.

Tim Ferriss: All right. Well, this has been great. We'll actually have to meet up for another proper meal and maybe some wine or something like that.

Brian Koppelman: You bring the wine.

Tim Ferriss: I'll bring the wine.

Brian Koppelman: We'll definitely do that and you bring the wine because I have a whole bunch of things I need to ask you soon. Hey, come on my podcast.

Tim Ferriss: Sure, I would love to. Done deal.

Brian Koppelman: Great, I'll email this guy – however those people all get to you. I'm going to email them and we're going to set up the podcast.

Tim Ferriss: They'll throw the net on me. Thanks so much for the time and I'll talk to you soon, man.

Brian Koppelman: Thank you. Bye, Tim.

Tim Ferriss: Okay, bye.