

NONNATIVE CREATIVE INTERVIEW
DAVID ELLIOT-JONES
(video transcript)

ALISHA

On this episode of Nonnative Creative, I'm here speaking with David Elliot-Jones. He's an Australian filmmaker, producer...and he's in town in Tokyo for the premiere event of his documentary Big in Japan.

DAVID

We're at a time where our culture - Western culture, I should say - celebrates fame like we've never seen before. As a reaction to that culture of celebrating fame, we really wanted to explore whether it's a good thing. Is it really worth all the hype?

ALISHA

What was it that inspired you to start making films?

DAVID

I was studying journalism at university. It came to myself and two friends graduating from university having done some work experience in journalism and sort of not feeling too optimistic about where that industry is going. So we decided to go in together with our finances and buy a cheap camera.

We were following the story of some international students who were facing all kinds of issues in Australia, and we decided to explore that from the source. And that became our first documentary. So, we went to India to see how Australia was marketed to Indian students.

We were able to receive some financial reward for our documentary, so we were able to invest in our own equipment and set up a production company, which leads us to where we are now, which is releasing our first feature documentary.

(Clip from Big in Japan)

Lachy: His name's Dave, he's 26 years old, and he's untalented. The mission is to make this boy here famous. It's not going to be easy.

David: We need to set up a framework, otherwise we're just gonna be some guys trying to make some dude famous on the Internet, and it could go on forever. Umm...

Lachy: Louis and I had an idea that we haven't run by you yet.

Louis: How about moving to Japan?

David: Yep.

Lachy: All right, so we're gathered here today to talk about how to make you famous, Dave. We need to take a more systematic approach, as well. So the first three I've got are probably like the typical ways people become famous.

You achieve something. You could like, invent something. You could cure a disease. I don't think you're gonna do that.

David: So...not that one.

Lachy: Being the best.

Are you the best at anything?

David: Umm...

Lachy: All right, we'll cross that one off.

[laughter]

Lachy: And do you have some kind of talent?

David: Well, that's a point, isn't it? I don't have any talent?

Lachy: Yeah, I think that's the point. Yeah, so the first three, we'll cross them off.

David: I think we need to think practically about this. What are the tools available to us? What are the platforms? And how can we build a fanbase?

Lachy: All right, so the next point is...I think it's the quickest way to become famous. It's the most effective way, and we don't really have to do much. It's to go viral.

David: We eventually hatched Mr. Jonesu, a wild and eccentric version of me. Built for the Japanese market.

Inspired by Japanese pop culture references, the Jonesu franchise included an obsessive nosebleeding tourist, and a daikon who would eat anything out of a blender.

But for our wildest creation of all, we took inspiration from the onigiri, a common Japanese snack made of rice and seaweed, to create Japan's weirdest superhero, onigiri man.

Dave: Oh no...

(clip ends)

ALISHA

In filming here in Tokyo and following kind of the lives of the people who are in the film, as well as doing your own thing, like, what was kind of the reaction from the people around you here?

DAVID

If you know Big in Japan you know it's got some pretty, uh...risqué material in there.

ALISHA

Right.

DAVID

The public, for the most part, were very amused.

ALISHA

Like, specifically your character?

DAVID

Yeah, my character, the public appearances.

ALISHA

When you encounter people who have seen the film and who are familiar with the work, do people have trouble separating between David Elliot-Jones filmmaker and Onigiri Man?

DAVID

Yeah, I think people who don't know me definitely struggle sometimes with that separation. Or they perceive me as that wild and eccentric online character.

But the people that matter, such as friends and family, they know who I am already, so for me I'm not really worried about my reputation in that sense, because I got to explore something in a really unique way.

It's the only way to really explore that topic from our perspective, otherwise we're just lecturing about something. We're not really experiencing it.

It would be a different documentary if we followed a whole bunch of people and then made judgments about what fame is. It's not fair. It's an old kind of documentary making to do that.

ALISHA

I think that's a really interesting thing to investigate because as more and more people are using these free platforms, like YouTube and social media, it's easy to create your own character, essentially.

DAVID

Oh, yeah.

ALISHA

And then people have trouble distancing -- or, people have trouble distinguishing, I guess I should say, that character that you can create from the person who's actually trying to craft something.

DAVE

Yeah, it's super interesting. You become known on Facebook for little quirks, like little comments that you make, and then these get reinforced because you get lots of likes for them, and then all of a sudden you find yourself being this person that comments on things in a certain way. You get pigeonholed that way.

We're in danger of being shaped by the platforms and living in an inauthentic way, which is harmful, I think. On the flipside, social media is great. Like, it's also a really great way to connect.

(clip from Tokyo premiere of Big in Japan)

[applause]

David: My name is David Elliot-Jones. I'm the producer, presenter of Big in Japan and the fame guinea pig. You'll see me doing all kinds of things to explore fame in this film.

It's been four years in the making, and this is our first ever screening, so I'm really excited.

(clip ends)

ALISHA

Was there something that you set out to really achieve? You've talked about how you wanted to kind of investigate the notion of fame. Especially in this world -- in this era where social media is like, the norm, and where there are these kind of zany characters, especially in Japan. Foreign characters, like non-Japanese people, are kind of like pursuing this idea of fame, but sort of, perhaps, in some cases, pigeonholing themselves into this character.

Is there something that you set out to achieve or something that you set out to learn more about through the film?

DAVID

Yep. I mean, the secondary goal of the film was to get a sense of what fame is all about. We didn't want to just say "no, fame is bad." Because obviously it's not bad. There are elements of it that are quite enjoyable.

Through my journey as an ordinary person trying to get famous, I get to experience some of the negatives as well as the positives of fame.

And we also meet three others who are at various stages of fame. So one person who has been famous for a long time, one person just getting famous, and one person just starting out.

ALISHA

If people want to watch the film, where can they see it?

DAVID

The best way to just keep on top of it is to just go to our website, biginjapandoc.com. So yeah, just go to our website and sign up. That's the best way to do it.

ALISHA

So, thanks very much for watching this episode of Nonnative Creative with David Elliot-Jones. Check out his film *Big in Japan* whenever you have a chance. Thanks for watching, and we'll see you again soon.

DAVID

Thanks.

(clip from Q&A at Tokyo premiere of Big in Japan)

Q&A Moderator: Did you ever come to a conclusion about what this "fame" that you were going for was?

David: I think it's becoming increasingly hard to define what fame is. In a way, anyone who is popular on social media is a little bit famous.