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[upbeat music]

LAUREN: Hello, and welcome to this episode of the Talks at Google Podcast, where great minds meet. I'm Lauren, bringing you another episode with renowned photographer, director, and mountaineer, Jimmy Chin. Talks at Google brings the world's most influential thinkers, creators, makers, and doers all to one place. Every episode of this podcast is taken from a video that can be seen at youtube.com/talksatgoogle. In this conversation with Googler Jonathan DiBlasi, Jimmy Chin discusses his most recent project, National Geographic Documentary Films' "Free Solo." This stunning documentary provides an intimate and unflinching portrait of free soloist climber Alex Honnold, as he prepares to achieve his lifelong dream, climbing the face of the world's most famous rock, the 3,000-foot El Capitan in Yosemite National Park, without a rope. And now, here is Jimmy Chin, "Free Solo."

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JIMMY CHIN: Cool.

[applause]

JONATHAN DiBLASI: So, we're chatting earlier. So, I wanna start from the beginning of where "Free Solo" kind of came to be, right? I wanted to see-- oh, man, I didn't hear my own phone ring.

[laughter]

So, where did the beginning of "Free Solo" start? Tell us kind of the story that actually set in project-- into motion, the project.

JIMMY CHIN: Well, first of all, I just wanted to say thank you again for coming out, and it means a lot to see everybody here and so enthusiastic. I didn't necessarily make films because I think about who's gonna see them so much, but to see you all here is very heartwarming, so thank you. I did want to ask real quickly, how many people here have seen "Free Solo"?

[laughter]

Okay. That's pretty good. Yeah.

00:02:13

Oh, some people twice, that's great.

[laughter]

Awesome. Well, yeah, so this project, or the film, I guess, to give everybody some context, was originally an idea that I came up with about, you know, three, four years ago after a film I made called "Mehru." And, just out of curiosity, how many people here have seen "Mehru"? Oh, that's pretty good, too. Okay. So, I-- it was really just a character portrait of Alex, and really, his accomplishments, even before he free soloed El Cap, were already easily worthy of making a film about. And really, Alex, as a character, was always very interesting to me because, you know, I've been filming and shooting in the mountain world and kind of in the vertical space, and Yosemite for 20 years.

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And also outside of that, in the ski and snowboard world, base jump, you know, a lot of the different, what people call extreme or adventure sports. And, you know, many of the top athletes at

the top of their careers over the last 20 years-- so I've seen a lot of different, incredible athletes, and Alex is-- was just, you know, an anomaly, really, among like, a peer group of anomalies. And he really, really stood out in the sense that what he did was almost like he had a superpower, you know. Like, there are athletic feats that are due to talent, and training, and discipline, and, you know, people might be predisposed to excel in that particular or respective sport, but what Alex was able to do mentally, just seems not from this world, you know.

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And so I really kind of wanted to examine his motivations and take a deep dive in his-- in-- as a character.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah.

JIMMY CHIN: We didn't talk about making it about El Cap.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Uh-hmm.

JIMMY CHIN: Alex came to us with El Cap, and my wife and directing partner, Chai, was essentially hanging out with Alex because I knew him very well, I had been traveling and climbing with him for ten years, but she didn't know him very well. So she kind of was just, you know, meeting with him to get a sense of his character and if he'd be a good subject for a feature documentary. And he told her, he's like, "Oh, that's-- like, I'm interested in making a documentary, that would be great because I'm thinking about free soloing El Cap." And my wife is not a climber, and she, you know, she's from Manhattan and she's like, "Oh, yeah, that sounds great."

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[laughter]

JIMMY CHIN: "You know, we really have something to anchor the film," and all this stuff. So I called her that evening, I was out on a shoot somewhere and I was like, "How'd your conversations with Alex go, what do you think?" She's like, "He's a very interesting character, and it's great. He's gonna go free solo El Cap."

[laughter]

And I almost fell out of my chair because I was like, "He said what?" And he's never spoken to his friends about it, you know. And we were-- we didn't even really talk about it amongst ourselves just because it seemed like-- we didn't even want to put it into the ether because we could kind of tell that everything he was doing was leading to-- I mean, he basically free soloed everything else that was of significance, except for El Cap.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah.

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JIMMY CHIN: So it was kind of out there, you know, and we didn't even really want to talk about it. But so then when he presented it to us, you know, we actually had to take six months off. We stepped away from the film because we weren't sure we wanted to make that film.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah, maybe you can talk about that a little bit more. During those six months, I mean, some-- is some of that the moral side of it? Should we really film him? Maybe talk a little bit about that.

JIMMY CHIN: So, you know, for those of you who have seen it, part of the film kind of tries to tackle the ethical issues around the making of the film. Because-- and it's really, in some ways, a dilemma, that documentary filmmakers kind of have to address no matter what. It's-- if we are supposed to be these objective observers, when we bring a camera into a situation, it necessarily changes what you're observing.

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And I think it's called the Hawthorne Effect, you know. By observing something, you change the dynamic within what you're observing. So in this case, the issue was a little more serious because we were worried that we could potentially either push him into doing something he wouldn't normally have done, as some of us call "Kodak courage," like, "Oh, someone's got a camera, I'm gonna jump off this cliff into water that's too shallow," or whatever, I mean-- he-- or, you know, even worse case scenario, while we were filming, something would happen in which we ended up killing him.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Uh-hmm.

JIMMY CHIN: And so that obviously took some time to digest. And we really had to look at a few big questions, and I talked to a lot of my mentors, in particular, Jon Krakauer, the author, he's a good friend of mine, someone I look up to.

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And he has a very good perspective on life. So I asked Jon about it and he said, "Look, is he gonna do this? Even if you don't film it?" And I said, "Yes. He very likely will try to do this even if we're not there." And he said, "Do you think this is an important moment, should it be documented if he does do it?" And of course, as a filmmaker, we're-- I said yes. And it also came down to, "Do you feel like you're in the best position to do it safely?" Because if someone else, you know-- do you feel like-- yeah, if you feel like you're the best to do it. And you're just spending ten years with him, and really getting to know him and having a really good working relationship, and trust between each other, you know. I know his decision-making process, I understand his process in general when it comes to free soloing.

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He's very methodical, you know, he's not-- you know, people always assume he's a daredevil, like he is just pulling off a stunt. That to him is totally unacceptable. To him, it's a craft. It's, like, it's something that deserves the attention and discipline of, you know, craftsmanship, like, fine, fine craftsmanship. And I know that he doesn't climb for the camera, you know, and you certainly don't become a climber for the money and the fame.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yes.

JIMMY CHIN: You climb because you love it. And, you know, I know that he doesn't care about being famous at all, you know, I mean, he's-- he just wants to climb and do his thing. And so having that kind of pure intention is also really important.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: No, that's great.

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So obviously, last 30 minutes of the film is him actually climbing, right? Going up the route, you're following along with him. And when I first watched it, probably most people, you know that he makes it. Like, that's not a surprise. It probably would be terrible if you didn't know that going into it, right?

JIMMY CHIN: Now, you know, what? I've heard that people have gone into this film, not knowing the ending, and I'm like, that would be horrible.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah, yeah. But so with that, I think that takes a very-- a certain touch on the editing and filming process to still be able to build that tension and excitement of, we know the outcome, but my hands are still sweating, I still feel like I want to throw up. Maybe talk about the actual postproduction and filming side of it. What went into setting it up to be what it is?

JIMMY CHIN: So I think-- a couple things. I mean, we went into the film knowing that we wanted to make a verite film, which, you know, just to bring people into the moment, you know.

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The scenes aren't constructed. Verite filmmaking is really challenging because you have to really spend so much time filming, and you're there constantly, to the point where your subjects eventually just kind of surrender to the camera and they don't care anymore, you just kind of disappear. And that's kind of like the best-case scenario. But you know, you film with two-- film with someone for two years, so you're just kind of compiling these moments. And the reason I'm talking about it because it does come back to your question, is that, in that kind of filmmaking, you are really trying to connect people with your subject. I mean, films really, for me, are about creating empathy, and it's also about transporting people into a world that they might not know of. In some cases, it, you know, allows clarity on misperceptions of a subject or a topic. So these are all things that we hope for, but ultimately your hands aren't going to sweat as much if you don't care about your character.

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And so really, making the film into a cinema verite film was to really get people to, you know, really empathize with this character who-- you know, Alex is this, you know, he was-- essentially, he was this very shy, scared kid who was more scared to talk-- to ask for a climbing partner than he was to go free soloing, you know. And that always struck, you know, Chai and I, you know, about his story. It's not like he doesn't feel fear, and it's not like he's completely unemotive. Like, inside somewhere in this person is, you know, the same beating heart we all have, and has the same kind of fears and challenges that we all face in our lives. And I thought that, you know, really getting people to understand he didn't just become the superhero that could free solo El Cap.

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Like, he worked through all of these fears methodically, you know. I mean for those of you that have seen the film, there's this part where he's like, "I was scared of different vegetables, I didn't want to eat them. But then I made myself systematically eat every vegetable until I could eat vegetables." He says, "I didn't know how to hug people. I was 23 or 24, and nobody ever hugged me, but it seemed like people enjoy hugging each other."

[laughter]

"So I decided to go out and figure out how to hug people." And I was there for a lot of that process. I met him in his early twenties, and he used to come up and be like.

[laughter]

And you'd feel like, his fingers in the middle of your back just like, tapping you?

[laughter]

And you'd be like, "Alex, Alex, no, no, no, no, no. You got to bring it in, like, you got-- like, heart-to-heart, double hand, like."

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And he's just-- you know, I think it's really a beautiful story about this person evolving. And then he meets Sanni, of course--

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah.

JIMMY CHIN: -- And falls in love, while we're in the middle of this production, so.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah. I mean, the whole film feels so intimate as you're watching, and Sanni, as she's leaving for the last time, she's crying in the car, I mean, when I was thinking about that, I was like, "Man, that would be terrible, is that the last time you're ever going to hug him?"

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah. I mean, those are heavy conversations, when people are talking about someone that they love and maybe not ever seeing them again. And those are very real conversations that were captured, but again, back to your original question, you know, it really was about building disconnection with Alex so that when he got there-- and then of course, you know, we built up the climb, all the kind of sections of the climb that are important to the narrative, like the Freeblast and the Boulder Problem.

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And if you-- for those of you that have seen the film, I mean everybody knows that there's a thumb hold on the Boulder Problem. It's very scary.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah.

JIMMY CHIN: But you have to kind of give that a certain treatment as well.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah. So as I said, very intimate experience for the viewers and for the crew. And also, I think, an intimate experience for you and Chai with free soloing. So maybe prior, I think you maybe had free soloed before, right? You free soloed some things? After filming this project, how has your views on free solo maybe evolved or changed, or are they the same?

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah, so I guess, really, it's about, what are my views on risk, ultimately? You know, I have two small children, two and five, very cute, even though they jump up on my-- jump up and down on my head in the morning when I haven't had any sleep.

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But they-- really it's-- the film didn't necessarily make me change my evaluation or assessment of risk for myself or my crew. I think that happened years ago, before I had children. Because a lot of people say, does having children change, you know, your outlook on risk? And really, I think I had my outlook on risk change in order for me to have children. So I feel like I'm pretty conservative, even though most people look at what I do and think it's not conservative. But I also think risk is a relative thing. So you know, what might look very, very scary to someone, to me-- you know, if I'm doing something, it could look very scary to someone, but for me it feels very in control and easy, so.

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JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah, so there's a scene in the movie, it's like two minutes long, where Alex is talking through each pitch, kind of shows him training as he's practicing, pitch one, talking about the Freeblast Slab, going all the way up. So he has it memorized, right? He has it written down,

every single move, every single thumb hold that he has to do. And you also hint at a little bit in the film around the performance that yourself and the film crew had to put in. So I'm curious if you can share what did-- what was your version of that, you know. Were you--

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Okay. Yeah.

JIMMY CHIN: Well first of all, Alex not only knew all the moves perfectly. On a lot of sections he would purposely do them incorrectly, so that if he ever did make a mistake it would feel at least familiar.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Uh-hmm.

JIMMY CHIN: You know, so that's how detailed he went into it. He wore the same clothing the entire time we were filming.

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You would think it was because of continuity as a filmmaker, but it's really because he knew that that's what he was gonna wear the day he was gonna solo it, and so he never wanted to have to deal with that variable of, well, waking up in the morning being like, "do I want to wear the green shirt or the red shirt?" Like-- or, you know, on the climb, he'd be very familiar with what he's wearing. So he really loved to, like, kind of reduce any sort of variables on any sort of level. But in terms of our crew, you know, the first criteria on this-- the-- to be on the high angle team, was that you had to be an elite, professional climber. And, you know, just the kind of volume of work that we were going to be doing at high angle terrain meant that I just couldn't ever have to worry about them making bad decisions up there. And so the other criteria, of course, they had to be great cinematographers, meaning there's like three people in the world I could call.

[laughter]

All of which I've known and worked with for many years as well. They're kind of like my crack team, like, go-to if we have, like, a really heavy, high-stakes shoot. I-- I'm sure when they see my name come up on the phone they're like, "Oh, boy."

[laughter]

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JONATHAN DiBLASI: "Not again."

JIMMY CHIN: Because we've done-- we've been all over the place. But they are, in a lot of ways, like Alex, you know, in kind of, the upper echelon of climbing. It's all about the details, it's all about anticipating problems, it's all about, you know, making hard decisions when the stakes are high and staying very calm when things are very tenuous. So, the team, the makeup of the team was hugely critical. And they also were Alex's friends, so that it had these-- there's an emotional layer to it that was also challenging, as well as a technical layer. The technical layer obviously being that we had to move very quickly all the time. They were professional climbers, meaning that not only were they very fast, but we've all spent time on both sides of the camera so we're very sensitive of what it feels like when someone else is filming you, how that works, and what we hate about bad, slow camera teams.

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You know, so we were always fast and on time, and never had to have him wait. It always felt very natural for him whenever he was moving because we know what it's like to be on the other side. And essentially he practiced for two years to climb the route, and we spent two years practicing shooting the climb, so by the time he went for it, our choreography for how we were going to shoot it was pinned down and tight.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah, there's a part where he's talking about the Boulder Problem, he says "Autopilot."

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: And that was probably the same thing for you guys.

JIMMY CHIN: It was the same for us because, you know, you can't let your mind wander into the what ifs. There's so much to think about. You've got all your climbing equipment, safety systems, and you're changing lenses on the wall, like, you know, you're pulling focus, double checking batteries, you've got-- you know, I mean, and you're coiling all these ropes, right? So when you're filming climbing, you can't have ropes in your frame.

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Which means that as he's climbing up and you're moving up, you're hauling ropes. So if you start filming 1500 feet down the wall, and he's-- and you're moving with him as he climbs up that 1500 feet, well, you're carrying 1500 feet of rope by the time you get to the top of that, which is a lot of weight. And so, you know, everything has to be clipped off carefully, because if, like, one end of the rope starts to unravel the whole thing can shoot down the wall and potentially knock off Alex. So there's just tons of stuff to think about. And the directive was that you just stay focused on your job. Don't let your mind wander. Don't forget to press record.

[laughter]

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah.

JIMMY CHIN: And Which totally happens. It totally happens. And that's-- so that was kind of the technical side. But the emotional side was that we had to be totally neutral around Alex.

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You know, because you couldn't be encouraging or discouraging. You know, you are-- we are-- we had an obligation as a filmmaker to kind of maintain a neutral space for him, but still be his friend.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah. So there's also a part as he's preparing to actually do the final one where he succeeds in doing it, where you're talking through if something goes wrong, what we do? And someone says, just call 911, tell them what you know, climber. Did you have discussions as a team, or between Chai and yourself, or with Alex, you know, maybe it's pretty morbid, but I'm sure people are wondering, if he had fallen, was it, we're going to scrap the project, never release this, never tell anybody or is it, tell the story?

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah, you know, I mean, we had to address this before we launched into the production. So these conversations were happening three years ago. You know, what happens in the worst-case scenario? You know, we didn't necessarily have a clear answer, but we've addressed it. And the issue is that you can't really know what you're going to do in regards to this situation until you're in it, because I think there'll be a lot of inputs that tell you whether or not it's appropriate or not, and it's very sensitive to a lot of different people, stakeholders, his family.

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And, you know, Alex would just be like, "Oh, you guys should just make it."

[laughter]

You know, because you would've wasted all this time shooting and there wouldn't be-- you might as well make it. You know, I mean he's very practical. I think people who have seen the film understand he's very practical. Pragmatic. And he-- so, I think, you know, it would've been a very difficult film to make, but we would've probably made it. And I certainly wouldn't trust anybody else with the material. But that being said, we had-- if we had anticipated that he was going to fall, we would certainly never have been in the project. The whole idea was that we trusted that he would either turn around or decide not to do it before he would ever go up there and, you know, try to force himself to do it and fall off. You know, if I ever felt like that was the case, I would've run away from the project.

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JONATHAN DiBLASI: Uh-hmm.

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah. So, your other projects, like, Mehru, the other things that you've worked on, I feel like the risks are obviously still there. No oxygen, very cold, but it feels potentially less immediate than something like an incident with free soloing. And I think the motivation behind a film and the people in Mehru climbing that, it seems different than Alex's motivation. And or is it the same? Maybe you can go into that.

JIMMY CHIN: I mean, I think there are certainly similarities, in the sense that, you know, these are both, like, free soloing and Alpine climbing in the mountains at altitude in the cold, like, you know, they're just not what most people kind of imagine being really fun, something that you'd really want to pursue and spend your life, you know, doing. But, you know, sometimes you don't get to choose, you know, what, you know, your passion is.

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Some-- sometimes it chooses you. And if, you know, you're lucky, then maybe you are a doctor, or a lawyer, or I don't know, hedge fund manager. Certainly not a climber, yeah.

[laughter]

But, well, not certainly. I have other opinions about it. But when you find something that gives you meaning and purpose, and it's something that you-- that moves you, and you-- and there's nothing else that can really feed that, like climbing can, then in that sense, they're very similar. They're just what you love and what you get meaning out of. So, you know, to what degree should we be pursuing that? I mean, that's probably up for debate, but it is deeply satisfying and, you know, we call it "conquistadors of the useless," you're like, chasing this thing that probably doesn't do much for the world.

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JIMMY CHIN: But it is about the pursuit of perfection and excellence and dreaming, like, the outside of what you think is possible, and really pushing yourself in ways that you might've been afraid of doing before.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah.

JIMMY CHIN: So it's a lot about exploration, as well.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah. And there's-- when Alex first tries on the Freeblast Slap, he bails out after he's talking to Peter Croft. And he's like, "You know, I bailed" and then Peter's like, "No, it's the best thing you could've done." But you can tell on Alex's face, he's so disappointed in himself and he says, "It sucks. I just need it to end." You know, like, it's this goal that he feels like he can attain, but it's still so far away and it's like a year until he actually did it. Is that something that was tough on your end to see?

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah, that was a very difficult scene to film because you're so--we're also his friends.

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You know, the film aside, you know, we care deeply about Alex. And when you see someone who has a great dream and they've put so much into it, I mean really he's been putting years and years. In the back of his mind he's been thinking about this and to have him really try and fail, I mean that's always hard as a friend to see. And so we felt a lot of compassion for him, but yeah, then we had to separate yourself as a filmmaker and, you know, film this awful moment, you know, that he's just kind of really distraught. And you can see it in his body language, you know, he's all--

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Hunched over.

JIMMY CHIN: Hunched over and disappointed. So those moments were always difficult-- that was a very difficult because none of us wanted to film it. I was really happy that our verite DP was there filming you because we all wanted to hide, you know, But those are the moments where you know it's an important moment, you have to capture it.

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JIMMY CHIN: And it plays in the film, you could-- you know, that's like a classic verite moment where you can feel the moment. Nobody has to explain to you that he's disappointed or anything like that. You can see it. And that's like, one of those, you know, beautiful moments I think about with verite filming.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah. You know, that was something that when I was watching it felt like seeing like, a little kid going up to someone they really looked up to and it's like no, I couldn't live up to it.

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Like, that was tough.

JIMMY CHIN: And it was the worst that Peter was there, the guy that he, like, looks up to the most. That just is, you know, and him-- and Peter saying, "You don't ever have to go for it." You know, and he's like, "I know."

JONATHAN DiBLASI: [inaudible] you're just like, "You just don't have to go."

JIMMY CHIN: He's like, "I know, I just need it to end." You know, and I get that too because sometimes it makes a lot of sense, these big objectives, and then sometimes you step back and you're like, what am I doing? You know, I think that those are probably existential questions everybody runs into occasionally, but he kind of perseveres and pushes through it.

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JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah, I think that's maybe something everybody's asking. I asked you when we were getting lunch, what's next? But is there something like that for you? Maybe not necessarily

so like, tortured soul, "I need this to end," but is there something for you and Chai that you're kind of striving for on a filmmaking or climbing sides or something like that?

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah, I think we just want to make great films, you know, and tell great stories, and really kind of connect people. And, like, I think-- I can't-- I already said this but, you know, a friend of ours calls films empathy machines, you know.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Uh-hmm.

JIMMY CHIN: You're just trying to create a connection between the subject and the viewer, and transport someone, and hopefully bring to like documentaries in particular, you know, they can really bring to like a lot of different political, environmental, social issues that are important to highlight these days.

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And the long format seems to be having a moment right now, documentaries this year, there have been more kind of bigger box office documentary releases this year than we've ever seen before. And I can't tell if it's just a product of the moment, kind of our news cycles being so, you know, wildly fast, and people not being able to keep up with it, and then having this kind of long form journalism in a way making a comeback because people want to see depth, and, you know, connect with something that actually has some weight

JONATHAN DiBLASI: I mean I know that's-- it's probably typical film in general, but it feels like an escape from something, like you said, the news cycle, just everything going on now. It's so crazy and to get to see something like Alex free soloing this, it's so far from, at least to me, something that seems normal and you get to experience it in just such an intimate way, so I think that.

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JIMMY CHIN: Yeah, I also think it's nice to see something a little uplifting these days and to see someone actually doing something. Like, there's like a very real physical challenge, there's very real mental challenge and, you know, someone trying to do it, and doing it. You know, it's very-- it's a little bit more tangible than a lot of things that come up. So I think that's why it's having a moment and have it.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah, definitely. So we were also talking at lunch about kind of the types of people and the types of climbing that they like. And obviously climbing is very quickly growing in popularity, very popular here, look at all these people. But how have you personally seen in your own climbing career through making this film, kind of, climbing evolve and what your thoughts on that, where do you see it going?

JIMMY CHIN: I mean, I started climbing because I loved being outside, I love the adventure, I love the movement, I love the kind of physical, you know, problem-solving, mental problem-solving of it.

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And but the main part being wanting to be outside. But it's funny now, there's so many climbing gyms and everybody's climbing inside, which I actually love doing, I went and climbed for a few hours this morning. The movement is still amazing, but I've always tied it to like, exploring the world and going on these wild adventures. But I don't know, I think climbing-- I mean I love the fact that people are enjoying climbing and that it's becoming more of a mainstream activity, I guess. I think it's fun to-- it's a good way to hang out with your friends. It's a good way to kind of go out and literally be able to interact with an environment or landscape. As an activity, I think it, at least for me, it opened my mind to try and go out and seek these places where I could go and climb. So it's been like a great vehicle to do a lot of fun stuff with my friends and my family.

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JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah.

JIMMY CHIN: So I think it's great.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah.

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Now, so, you talk about climbing outside. What are some of your other projects? I know with Alex actually you had that Expedition Antarctica coming up, right?

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah, well Alex and I went on an expedition to Antarctica last winter, last December. And Alex is still climbing a lot, he broke the speed record on The Nose this spring, you know, a lot of people are wondering what he's going to do next. And I think he-- there's just a lot of different expressions of climbing. You know, climbing isn't just for him, free soloing and there's sport climbing and bouldering and all these different types of climbing. And, you know, I think we all enjoy all the different aspects of it. And part of the other thing about people climbing and getting people to really enjoy being outside is I find that people are much more in tune and, you know, with the environment and environmental issues when they love being outside.

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And I think that that's a really good thing. I think that there is potential for more environmental stewardship just because people are-- you know, you want to protect what you love. And I think when people get out and spend a lot of time under the blue sky or under the stars or in the wilderness, that's like a good wilderness therapy for everybody, which I think we all need.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah. I mean, last thing, I guess, before we go to that. What do you have to plug? What-- I mean, obviously Free Solo, but what else going on with you?

JIMMY CHIN: Not much, I mean--

[laughter]

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Can you tell us about the whole-- because I don't know if many people know, like, what actually happens when you release a film.

JIMMY CHIN: Oh, yeah. I've been-- I'm essentially on, like, the press junket or tour, which is like, four months long. You know, so I haven't been home since the end of August, and I've kind of just been-- and it's in support of the film and it's-- it can feel tedious but of course, you know, the film has done very well and we couldn't be happier.

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So just trying to feel grateful and roll along with it. Obviously, I really appreciate people enjoying the film and connecting with the film. It's definitely gone far beyond what I ever imagined it would do, so we're just very grateful for it, yeah.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Great. Okay. I guess we'll do some audience questions now. Just take it in the front because that's an easy one

PERSON: Hi. Thanks so much for being here.

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah.

PERSON: [inaudible]

PERSON: And, you know, climbing is a pretty esoteric sport and it's very rare that it kind of breaks into the mainstream. And so I think like, Tommy's climb of Dawn Wall or Alex's climb, or a few of those occasions, what do you think the impact of the success of your film is going to have on the future of climbing? Like, what people do, how many people get into the sport, what risks they take?

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah, I think-- I can't tell if, you know, it's the chicken or the egg thing. I can't tell if the film's doing well because there's been this huge surge in the interest in climbing, but certainly with this film coming out, it's definitely hit a broader audience than we've ever seen before. And I feel good about people wanting to climb and being interested in climbing for some of the reasons I said.

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But, you know, it's also about beyond climbing, I hope people get something out of that story, you know. About taking, you know, facing their fears and really trying to achieve what they never thought would be possible before. And I think that he embodies that in such an incredible way that that's more of my hope with it. Beyond climbing. Yes.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Great, we're gonna take-- we'll switch between Dory so that people that weren't able to make it in person. So, when you can see it up top. But when editing this together, were there creative decisions made around portraying this solo as dangerous as to not oversimplify the act of soloing? Do you worry about the repercussions of newer soloers upping their game after seeing this film?

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah. So we really just, in some ways our kind of M.O. is always restraint. And we certainly didn't have to make the free solo seem more scary than it already was.

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Because, you know, you try to be objective, you try to-- as a filmmaker you try to tell the story as it is, you want to give an honest representation of what it is. So we were very restrained on how we covered it. I mean, my crew, when they saw the film, were all like, "That is so restrained," compared to like, what they think it is."

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Should they not think it is?

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah I mean, it's hard to cover a 3,000-foot climb. Like, the number of difficult moves on that wall that aren't in the movie. I mean, that climb is in some ways notorious and terrifying to think about, even as a professional climber, even with a rope, you know. I mean, when we were filming on that last week, before he did it, there was a team from Germany sponsored by Adidas and they were-- they spent five days on the wall, and they never climbed every pitch clean.

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Meaning that they fell multiple times on several of the difficult pitches, and never climbed some of those pitches clean without falling. And they spent five days doing that. Like, he climbed it in three

hours and fifty-six minutes. Okay. So it's not like-- I mean, it's just beyond. So in some ways it's very restrained. I think we give people the sense of the magnitude and that's what we really tried to do. In terms of like, worrying about repercussions of newer soloers. You know the way Alex-- you know, I have-- I didn't worry about that as much just because free soloing is kind of a self-regulating activity. You know, you can be like, "You know what? I want to go free solo El Cap," and then you go to the base of El Cap and then you look up it and you're like, "Whoa." And then you climb like, 15 feet up off the ground and you're like, "Wait, I can't actually physically move up any further."

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And this is really scary and I'm gonna go back down." So I mean, there's like, self-regulating in a way. But I have thought about-- a bit more about, you know, if people are gonna push themselves as free soloists. I just hope everybody-- yeah. I shouldn't say the Darwin awards, but there are certain, you know, activities that might happen that you just can't be held responsible for.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Do you have any plans to actually release the full four hours-- do you have all that?

JIMMY CHIN: People have asked about that. We do, because we have-- we certainly have the whole thing shot from the long lens. And then pieces all up and down the route. But people have asked us like, "Are you guys ever gonna?" Maybe someday you'll see it released on Netflix, four hours.

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Pure climbing porn. Maybe it would do well. Maybe we'll release that.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: If it happens, it's because of this room of people, right.

JIMMY CHIN: Yes, it could. This is a very influential room.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Cool. All right. Audience question.

PERSON: So my question is about actually "Mehru" and your first attempt. So, you mentioned that there were several times where you-- the team, near the top, you guys set several lines, and then proceeded to cross those lines several times before finally turning back. How do you go about making those decisions, setting those lines and deciding which ones you will cross and which ones you will not cross?

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah. That's a good question. Because some of it feels-- t's hard to articulate, like, specific guidelines, but I mean, that's what experience comes from, I think, and you really have to follow your instincts.

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A lot of it--a lot of those instincts also come from knowing that you have to step outside of yourself. It's certainly the ego plays a role in making sometimes bad decisions. So you really have to kind of step outside of yourself, be objective about the actual variables or inputs that you're getting. I mean, the thing about it in the mountains and in life, I guess. You know, there are variables you can control and there are variables you can't control. And a lot of it is identifying which is which. And you know, our assessment-- you know, that's always very important. And that meaning that when

you identify the variables that you do control, that you, you know, take great efforts in, you know, managing those variables the best that you can.

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In terms of crossing those lines, it's kind of an ongoing assessment of the risks. And, you know, sometimes you set a line and when you get to it and you look around and you are being objective about the inputs that you're getting, often times they're telling you, to turn around. But sometimes you get to that line and you're like, "Oh, actually, we still have some margin." And we'll now set another line as kind of a marker, whether that's-- yeah I guess it would be sometimes it's a physical line or an intellectual line, but you know, and then you kind of take the necessary steps to get to that next line and then you make another evaluation. I think it's hard because people sometimes assume that we-- you draw the line then you're breaking, you're doing something that you don't want to do or shouldn't be doing by crossing the line, but it's actually because you've got to the line, made another evaluation, and then decided to move forward.

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Eventually you get to the edge of that line, or you get to the edge, you get to that next line, and you look at it again and you think, "Okay, this is a turnaround moment, so."

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah, I remember there's a part in the film where you say, "Alex is constantly pushing the edge and eventually he could find that edge." Right?

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: That's kind of a--

JIMMY CHIN: And that's something that you deal a lot in the world that I live in. But it's kind of hard to articulate all the different reasons why and when you turn around. And clearly it's based on the risk/reward or if the stakes are too high. But, you know, those are evaluations that you're making, you know, all the time.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah. All right, we'll do another Dory question. Another high-stakes scene. So at one point in the film, Alex said he didn't want cameras on him for the Boulder Problem. I think he said "No one needs to see that." Obviously that part was filmed, and it was epic. Is that something you discussed with Alex prior? Did it take some convincing?

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah.

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Well I'm glad people are paying attention to the movie. It seems a very-- it seems like everybody that works here pays very close attention. It is. But yes, he does say that he doesn't want anybody to film it at one point. Then he goes up, he fails on that one attempt, and his realization and learning from it is that, okay, if I'm gonna climb in front of my friends, that just means I have to be way better prepared. In the film, it's kind of portrayed that he turns around because of too many people around and the cameras and stuff but he actually just wasn't really ready. His ankle was still swollen and it was really cold that day, he couldn't feel his toes. But he did realize look, I do just have to be better prepared. Which we all thought was great. So as he got closer and closer in his training to the day that he actually went for it, you know, it was a very ongoing, open conversation.

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The thing is, I was never pushing for it because I didn't need to push Alex and say, "We really want a camera there." He knows exactly what I, you know, what this is all about and that of course, you know, if possible, we'd have a camera there, but if not, that's fine. That's the whole neutrality thing where you could never let the needs of the film, you know, outweigh the needs of Alex and his experience, which is how we went into the film. We were very clear with him and with the crew and with our executive producers and with the studio that the film, so you understand, the needs of the film will never outweigh his safety and his experience. So eventually we had that conversation he was like, "Yeah, definitely. That's fine. It's not going to bother me. But I don't want a person there." So we put remote cameras there and it was fine.

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And the reason being that clearly he didn't, you know, if he fell, like, he didn't want his friends to see it. But he knew that he wouldn't be stressed, but we would be projecting fear onto him, which would then change how he was feeling in the climb. And so that's why we had to fix the cameras.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah, throughout the film, generally when you were shown, you were kind of really stressed?

JIMMY CHIN: I was really stressed?

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Very stressed. Understandably, but you were, at least for his final attempt where he succeeds, you were at the top. You weren't really filming. Were you kind of just directing there?

JIMMY CHIN: No. I was actually-- it does look like I was at the top because I was actually filming the Enduro Corner. But I-- so I was also shooting a National Geographic assignment for the magazine during the two years we were producing and directing this. So I had a still camera bolted to the top of my film camera, and so after I filmed him on the Enduro Corner, I was shooting stills simultaneously.

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Then he goes up and he traverses, but we didn't have enough cameramen to shoot. I had one on the top, basically my verite DP went shot him going to the base and then ran all the way around and up to the top. Yeah, it's a long ways. But that's like the basic expectation now that you have to be able to move like that. But I didn't have a still photographer up there and obviously if you're shooting a two-year assignment of Alex free soloing El Cap you have to get him topping out. So I was-- as soon as he crossed above me and over on the traverse, I had to put all the camera equipment away and jog up to the top, but it's like, close to 1,000 feet or 800 feet. And so I'm just going as fast as I can and he's around the corner. I can't see him. But the whole ground crew was watching in the long lens, and they said we were like, going the exact same speed.

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And they're like "Go Jimmy, go go go." And then the lines intersected at one point, so right when I got to this one anchor, I looked down and Alex is like, scampering up the rock and I was just like "Alex. Just give me 60 seconds." And he pulled out his phone, he looked at his phone and he just said, "I'm about to break four hours." And we didn't say another word to each other because I knew what that meant. I was like, Alex does not want four hours and one minute. And so I just turned around and jogged as fast as I could to the top. And that's why I'm like sweating profusely.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: I thought it was the stress, but--

JIMMY CHIN: No-- well it was that, too. Clumps of hair falling out. No, but, so I had to get to the top and shoot the photos of him topping out. I beat him by like, a minute or something.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Good work.

JIMMY CHIN: Yeah.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: All right. So, we probably have time for one more in-person question.

00:52:25

PERSON: Hi there, thanks for coming. My questions are two-part. One is, how has your relationship with Alex changed since the, you know, the filming process and ending this with him? And maybe more philosophically, how do you think Alex's relationship with climbing changed after he's finished this climb?

JIMMY CHIN: Well my relationship with Alex is about the same. Like, we-- he likes to throw me under the bus every so often, I like to throw him under the bus every so often. No, but we've always had a very good relationship and I think Alex-- actually I think we are closer. I mean, through the process, certainly has brought us closer. I also think that he is really appreciative of what the film is because he didn't ever really care about the film. He cared about free soloing El Cap. He knew that we were doing our thing. But I think he's been surprised at how well it's been received and that people really feel inspired by him or connected to him.

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And, you know, I think he enjoys that. He loves going to watch the end of the film because he's like, "Oh, I get to relive the best moment of my life on this huge screen with all these people all the time now." But his relationship to climbing though and free soloing, I mean, he is still gonna climb as much as he possibly can because he loves climbing. Is he going to be pushing for huge free solos? I don't-- you know, I don't know. You know, I think he's just like most climbers, you have to be kind of motivated and inspired to climb something, to really go after it. But I think that he has, in soloing El Cap, I mean, there isn't like the whole-- there isn't whole lot else where you can go with it. He's free soloed El Cap.

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So I think he'll probably, you know, focus his energy in all the different expressions of climbing that are out there and enjoy his moment. And he's really-- his whole thing too is like, fame is useless unless you can use it for good. And so he's pivoting a lot of the attention towards his Honnold Foundation, you know, which does solar projects around the world, and that is something that he, you know, really believes in. So.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Yeah. That's great. So I think that's probably all the time we have for questions. I mean, with the remaining few minutes that we have, anything you want to plug, pitch?

JIMMY CHIN: No, not really. I mean, I just hope you all, you know, enjoy the film, and I really appreciate again that you follow the work and that you're going to see it and that you came out to see me today. That's awesome. So thank you so much. Yeah.

JONATHAN DiBLASI: Thank you.

LAUREN: Thanks for listening.

00:55:28

If you have any feedback about this or any other episode, we'd love to hear from you. You can visit G.co/TalksatGoogle/PodcastFeedback to leave your comments. To discover more insightful content, you can always find us via YouTube.com/TalksatGoogle. Or via our Twitter twitter handle, @GoogleTalks. Talk soon.