



All the Best Podcast

Episode 98. The Making of “41”

98. Featuring Jeffrey Roth, Executive Producer and Director of “41”

Jeffrey Roth: [00:00:01] I first met 41 in 2008 when I was invited to show my documentary *The Wonder of It All* about the Apollo astronauts who walked on the Moon at the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum in College Station, Texas. I found myself in his living quarters with seven Apollo astronauts, five who walked on the Moon for a cocktail meet and greet with President Bush and former first lady Barbara. When he came into the room and said hello to everyone with whom he already knew his aide introduced us. He looked at me as the director and executive producer and said, you. I was expecting a wizened old guy out of Hollywood. And so it started.

George H. W. Bush: [00:00:39] I believe that character is a part of being president and life really must have joy.

Sam LeBlond: [00:00:45] This is all the best. The official podcasts of the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. I'm your host. Sam LeBlond. One of their many grandchildren here, we celebrate the legacy of these two incredible Americans through friends, family [00:01:00] and the foundation.

Sam LeBlond: [00:01:02] This is all the best.

[00:01:12] We're one big country nation.

George H. W. Bush: [00:01:16] I remember something my dad, Phil, he said, write your mother, serve your country, and he said, Tell the truth. And I've tried to do that in public life all through it. You are a human being first, [00:01:30] and those human connections with children, with friends are the most important investment you will ever make. We stand tonight before a new world of hope and possibilities for our children. A world we could not have contemplated a few years

Sam LeBlond: [00:01:44] Ago on behalf of our family and the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. This is all the best.

[00:01:50] We're one big country nation. That's right,

Sam LeBlond: [00:01:55] Jeffrey Ross directorial debut, *The Wonder of It All*, an award [00:02:00] winning documentary highlighting the Apollo astronauts that walked on the Moon was released theatrically and shown worldwide after screening the wonder of it all in College Station, Texas. President Bush agreed to allow unprecedented access for two years, leading to the creation of forty one and extraordinary revelation into the personal life of the 41st president of the United States of America, George H.W. Bush. Jeffrey's latest release, *President in Waiting*, offers a remarkable living history of the vice presidency for the first time together on film. President Barack Obama, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, along with Vice Presidents Mike Pence, Joe Biden, Dick Cheney, Al Gore, Dan Quayle and Walter Mondale, helped uncover the path of an inconsequential office to how the vice president evolved into one of the most powerful offices told exclusively by those who have served. We are very excited to welcome Jeff Roth to all the best today. Welcome to the show.

Jeffrey Roth: [00:03:06] Thanks for having me. Appreciate it.

Sam LeBlond: [00:03:08] Jeff, here on all the best, we take on the daunting task of promoting the legacy of George and Barbara Bush. You took that to the next level when creating forty one for HBO. Before we dove into the origin story of forty one, I would love it. If you could talk to our listeners about your journey in filmmaking up to that point.

Jeffrey Roth: [00:03:28] So I grew up with an uncle that's a director, and that's just something that I always wanted to do. And when I was a kid, I used to spend time at Universal Studios on the tram ride, just wishing I was over there, you know, and then you get to college and you go to film school. And but I always thought I would do film and then getting out of college, you try to figure

out what to do and then everybody's telling you, Well, you need it right, you need to get some actors and it never really stuck going that route. Even though I had an agent and all that stuff. Until I had a friend who came out to L.A. from Birmingham, Alabama, who is an oncologist, and they were having a Astronaut convention with at the time, there were Mercury guys, Gemini Apollo cosmonauts, and so he asked me if I wanted to go and I said, sure. And at lunch, we were just sitting at the hotel restaurant and we knew that there were some moon walkers next to us and we were trying not to listen to the conversation. But, you know, kind of peeking in and my buddy just remarked, he said, You know, it's interesting

Jeffrey Roth: [00:04:26] For everything these guys have done in our history that nobody in this room knows who they're sitting with right now.

Jeffrey Roth: [00:04:31] And he said it would be interesting to see a project

Jeffrey Roth: [00:04:33] About who they are. And so really, that's where the light bulb went off to, where I then shifted to documentaries. And what I found fascinating about that is you could still create characters, even though the real people and story and all that good stuff that goes with filmmaking. And that's where no pun intended. We launched into making the wonder of it all, which is about the Apollo astronauts that walked on the Moon.

Sam LeBlond: [00:04:55] Jeff, you first met my grandparents in 2008 in one of our favorite places in the World College Station, Texas, where you showed your documentary, The Wonder of It All about the Apollo astronauts who walked on the Moon. If you knew my grandfather, you knew he always had an affinity for the space program, so I'm not surprised that he was excited about your documentary. Jeff, can you talk about your first meeting with him and what do you remember from that day in College Station?

Jeffrey Roth: [00:05:22] Really, we were just asked to show the movie first at the library with nothing attached to it. And then before we knew it, we had heard that George and Barbara might be interested in hosting an event. And then, of course, we got excited, but they said it's going to take some time. And next thing we knew, invites went out to a whole bunch of astronauts and this event where I believe 3000 people showed up, they had two overflow rooms. And, you know, we're sitting there sort of right before going out and making the remarks up in his the living quarters at the library and with the astronauts. And he comes around and I'm just sitting there going, This is crazy. You know, five of the guys that walked on the Moon are sitting right here and the president of the United States and First Lady and I didn't really know what to do with

myself. And then next thing I know, you know, we're going into doing the remarks. And he gets up there and he starts talking about the astronauts asking them to rise and wave. And before I knew it, he was choking --What I thought was choking, but turns out to be he was tearing up and I thought, Oh my God. At the time I was standing off to his left, I thought, Oh my God, if they got to get him, they're taking me down to get to him. So I wasn't ready for that. And he said, Jeff, you got to come up here and finish because I can't. And that's sort of my first impression with him. We, of course, then went to dinner after and then when we walked out of there, I thought, Oh my God, that was great. I never expected anything to happen again. But sure enough, he asked us to. Sometime later, Gene Becker gave me a call and said, he loved your movie and we'd like you to bring it up to Kennebunkport to show friends and family appear. What would you be? Willing it was it, sure. So that's where we sort of got in the door, so to speak.

Sam LeBlond: [00:07:00] Well, after getting to know my grandparents through those screenings, at what point did you have the idea to film a documentary growing up with my grandparents, they were never ones to go out of their way to highlight their accomplishments. So when the family heard you were going to be filming, the one question that always came up was How did Jeff convince him to do it? So Jeff, what was your secret?

Jeffrey Roth: [00:07:22] I think I'm still trying to find the answer to that. What I could say is that when we went to Kennebunkport to show the movie, we were sitting there. They were gracious enough. They had us for lunch. We were sitting outside on the patio with the Atlantic Ocean right there and and we were just sitting there wondering, why hasn't any story been told about him by him from him? Because it's a fascinating story for everything that he's accomplished in his life. And we kind of milled it around. And then when we came back, I just asked Gene Becker. I said, Look, what is the possibility that we can even just ask the question, would he be willing to tell a story on camera? And she said to me, he'll say, No, I'll tell you that right now. But she said, because you were willing to come here, why don't you write something up and I'll present it to him? And I said to her, I said, OK, fine. But at the time, I was going to Australia for a couple of weeks to show the movie with the government invited me out. So I said, Look, I can't do it now. Can I do it when I come back? She said, Sure, no problem. But as soon as I landed back at LAX and I turned on my phone, there was an email from her just said simply, he's intrigued and I hadn't even sent anything yet. So next thing I knew six weeks later, we were in Kennebunkport and we started shooting. But I'll tell you, we were obviously excited. We show up on day one. We hadn't even rolled any cameras yet, and Gene Becker sat us down and she said, Look, he doesn't think he has anything

interesting to say. I thought, Oh my God, I thought before we shoot anything, we're done. And she said, Sure. She told us that, you know, she said, Sir, you know, they're here. They spent a lot of money. This is what they're trying to do. If you don't want to do it, pull the plug now. And he said, No, it's OK, we'll do it. And then I was like, Oh my God. From that moment on, you know, every time we went down the line, there were always nerves because there was no guarantee that he had to continue. So we were just trying our best to do what we believed in.

Sam LeBlond: [00:09:26] It wasn't long before you gain the trust of my grandparents and were a fixture at our family gatherings for what seems like almost three years. Jeff, how did you gain their trust throughout this process?

Jeffrey Roth: [00:09:38] I think it came naturally. I think the number one surprise to me when I showed up. Other than the fact that we weren't sure if we were going to shoot anything was that I was expecting, you know, a big sitdown with possibly lawyers and people just of like, OK, what are you doing? Here's what you can do, what you can't do. Let's just go through everything. But none of that ever happened. We just came in. We started shooting. But I'll say this. I think although it is never said to me, but I think what we did and how we handled the moonwalkers in that first movie that he liked showed what we could do. And I think that's where the trust came from. And I even asked him one point during an interview, I said, Sir, of all the people that you could have tell your story, why us? And of course, he says it with a joke, right?

Jeffrey Roth: [00:10:23] He says, "Gene Becker made me do it." So I never got an answer. But I'm still I firmly believe it was because of the wonder of it all.

Sam LeBlond: [00:10:32] All the best highlights the life of service led by my grandparents and documenting their life for almost three years. I'm sure there are instances of service that stood out to you. You know, service was a part of everyday life for those two, so I'm sure you witnessed many examples of their service in action. Jeff, can you share any examples from your time with them?

Jeffrey Roth: [00:10:53] Well, yes, I think what you come to find very easily is just how they are Simple, as I could say this, they are about others, right? Everybody comes in. They say hello. They ask how they're doing. It's not all about the Bushes. We at one point we were asked while we were shooting. They said, Look, this is not on the schedule. This is not anything we had planned. But if you're interested, you can come film this or like, OK, what's going on? And they had arranged to go to a local airport where some troops were coming back and just just to say hi and greet them and thank them for their service. And it

was never publicized. There were no media there. It was just something that they wanted to do on their own and shake hands with everybody that came off that plane. And that's exactly what they did and that you just in your heart and in your mind when you see that and you can never convince anybody of anything. But that moment just shows the real deal.

Sam LeBlond: [00:11:51] The documentary did an unbelievable job. Showing the real George Bush, many people had never been exposed to that side of my grandfather. Was that your goal leading into the project and what is something you learned about my grandfather that you didn't know previously?

Jeffrey Roth: [00:12:07] Obviously, the goal of the film was to show the life of the man who happened to become president, right? And to show what he was about, what he had done. But with his emotion, with humor, with his personality. And to me, the only way to do that was to have him tell the story, right? Because we don't use any pundits or friends or foes or allies. It's just for an hour and 40 minutes, strictly. George H.W. Bush telling his life story and what you do is you start putting this together. You start asking questions and you really have to learn the person. You can read anything that you want. But in that moment, when you're talking to him and you're face to face and you're trying to ask questions and to see what mood he's in, to figure out what questions to ask when is real daunting. But the humility, just the calmness of him, right? There is no ego that we could see. And I'll say this, that there was one time when he got the Presidential Medal of Freedom Award from President Obama. And so we were allowed to go to the White House to shoot this. And so beforehand they do interviews with the White House press, and I believe we were in the China room. And I didn't want to say anything to him or do anything. It's his day. We're just there to be a fly on the wall. So we were at the back of the room just with the camera in hand and kind of like Dark Shadow and Jim Appleby's wheeling him around in the wheelchair. And he's done with his interview and he spots me, and he asked Jim to bring him over just to ask how I was doing. And I said, Sir, this is your day. You don't need to come over to me, you know? But again, those are the moments that you can never prepare for or plan for, but prove just the real George H.W. Bush.

Sam LeBlond: [00:13:52] Jeff, one of the interesting parts of the documentary, was seeing the transition to a wheelchair for my grandfather. He was always an incredibly active person throughout his life, and I know being confined to a wheelchair was not ideal for a man who was always in motion. Jeff, you observed this transition firsthand. What were his feelings at the time about it, and did it even slow him down?

Jeffrey Roth: [00:14:17] It did not slow him down, but you could see in the beginning, I don't think he liked the visual of it because that's not what you know. He was such a busy man, whether sports or moving around or on the boat or golfing or anything. And I think on a personal level, that's where it bothered him. But for us, we originally planned like, OK, we'll do this in three months and we'll get all the interviews done at once. And it never came to be. Next thing we know, you know, three years later. But what we realize is that in the film, it allows and shows visually time going by in a sense, right? Because we started with him and he was basically pretty good, but he had a cane. And by the time we end up at the end of filming in the White House for the Presidential Medal of Freedom Award, unfortunately, he was in the wheelchair. But you could see this natural progression. But you could also see in real time how he was becoming more comfortable with it. And then he's zipping around, and I can't remember exactly, but he had like a motorized scooter, and I think they named it, and he's just zipping in and out of people and they were just having fun with it at one point.

Sam LeBlond: [00:15:22] Jeff, you were able to observe my grandparents in a way that no one had up to that point between the full access you were granted in the friendship that developed between you and my grandparents, like many people in my grandparents orbit. You became a part of the family. Is there anything personally, you will take away from your time together with my grandparents?

Jeffrey Roth: [00:15:42] I think as time goes on, if I can be sort of real and honest and I watch the movie again, or you look at photos, you hear stories or his passing and going to the funeral, you just. Or even more appreciative of the time that you were able to spend, right? Because when you're going through it, you're concerned about certain things, about getting the shot of the day or getting certain things for the story. And it's tough in the moment to take the realness from it and to appreciate what you're doing. But as again, as time goes on, you feel that when he would look at you and come up to you and just how are you doing for as big of a figure as he was, it was always the little moments that get you because that's where you could see the appreciation and for my team. He had nicknames for everybody. Although I never got a nickname. Right? But I never I never got a nickname, so I almost it's kind of like, Okay, what's wrong with me, you know? But he enjoyed that, and he would ask it like if a certain camera a person didn't come along, you know, where are they? Are they OK? And no, sir, they're fine. You know, they're just going to make this trip. So it was always the personal touch. And if he couldn't be with us? Well, Jim Appleby would say, OK, you guys go take the boat, go to lunch, you know, and just have a good time. He was good with my kids. There was one time we

were meeting him in Houston and my son was doing a report on Katrina. So we were headed to Houston in New Orleans, so we were going to go down to the Ninth Ward so he could look around. And then Gene Decker let my son interview President Bush for his projects. When we got home and he wrote it out, the teacher actually called us thought my son was lying, so we had to, you know? No, no, that's all. That's all true, but just very gracious. And he expands not just you but who you are, who is your family, who are your kids. And so it's just it's in the humbleness, and I'll keep going back to those words, but those are just so true in my mind.

Sam LeBlond: [00:17:40] Jeff, it has been a true pleasure getting a peek behind the curtain of the making of 41 and also exploring your friendship with my grandparents, which seemed to have blossomed very quickly. The documentary must have come full circle for you. When my grandfather passed and you were invited to his funeral to celebrate a man, you dedicated three years of your life documenting. Jeff, what do you remember from that day in 2018 and what do you miss most about no longer having 41 on this Earth?

Jeffrey Roth: [00:18:13] Well, a sad day, of course. A day also of celebration, getting together with a bunch of people that we hadn't seen for quite a few years. But the one thing that I'll remember mostly is that when we did our first say friends and family screening at the library, we did a photo shoot with him. And as he was coming in, Jim Appleby handed me a little package and he says, This is from the president. You wanted to give you a gift. I said, OK, great, you know, and I put it aside and he's like, No, you need to open that up now. And I said, OK, fine. So you know, I open it up and it was a tie. And again, put the top back on. I was like, OK, great. Thanks very much because I didn't want to hold him up, right? He's waiting for us to take pictures now. Jim Appleby says, No, you don't understand. You need to turn that tie over. And I said, OK, so I turn it over and embroidered on the bottom of the tie. It was forty one. And he says President Bush had that made for you. There's only two in existence, and he's wearing the other one right now. So we went over and we took some photos with it. But at that funeral, that was the only time I ever wore that tie. And I'll never wear it again. So I just this was my way of honoring him in that moment.

Sam LeBlond: [00:19:20] Well, Jeff, it's been a true pleasure. Getting a peek behind the scenes of making of 41 and also exploring your friendship with my grandparents would seem to have blossomed very quickly. I want I have one more question and I see the 41 poster. I see the wonder of it all poster. What's next from you, Jeff? Where what are you working on? What's what's coming out soon? What can everybody look to find the next Jeff Roth creation?

Jeffrey Roth: [00:19:45] Well, the one that's sort of coming back out is called president waiting, and that one is on the Office of the Vice Presidency from a historical point of view up into how it has changed with the Carter Mondale era. And we at the time interviewed all the living vice presidents and all the living former presidents, and it'll be coming out on should be CNN plus. I believe they're airing in March, so you can find it there.

Sam LeBlond: [00:20:10] Great. Well, we'll definitely tune in, Jeff. Thank you again for being a part of all the best and thank you for putting together what we think is an unbelievable tribute to our grandfather who we love so much.

Jeffrey Roth: [00:20:20] Thanks for having me. Appreciate it.

Sam LeBlond: [00:20:23] I'm Sam LeBlond reminding you to listen, share and subscribe to all the best on Apple Podcasts, Spotify and everywhere great podcasts are found. Thank you for joining me as we celebrate-

George H. W. Bush: [00:20:36] All the best.

George H. W. Bush: [00:20:42] That while the White House is important, the country's future is in your house, every house, all over America, preparedness, strength, decency and honor, courage, sacrifice, the willingness to fight, even die for one's country. America, the land of the free and the brave. And God bless the United States of America, the greatest country on the face of the Earth.