

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Fenton Bailey

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. Today's episode is really exciting. They're all really exciting. But this guest, he's an absolute leg, as my husband would say. He's a legend of the unscripted TV industry. He is someone who I've had the pleasure of working with before. Someone who I look up to and they have a new book and they are just someone who I'm so excited to have on Getting Curious. And we can kind of go on, like, a fun, lighter exploration of things that make me curious, honey. So welcome to the show, Fenton Bailey of World of Wonder, where we get to ask him: How did you change reality TV as we know it?

If you've ever enjoyed an episode of Drag Race, you have this week's guest to thank. As one of the co-founders of the production company World of Wonder, he has changed television and American culture as we know it, and we're not just talking about the Drag Race empire. World of Wonder is the producing force behind projects like The RuPaul Show, The Eyes of Tammy Faye, Party Monster. So good. Becoming Chaz and Being Chaz. Catch and Kill: The Podcast Tapes. And a little Netflix show called Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness. Okay, now wait, can I just say from that really quick, everyone listing our gorgeous listeners, like, hi, how are you, miss you all the time. If you do not watch Drag Race, I just don't know what to do with you. I just really don't know what to do. And you should go back. And it's actually really exciting that you have a plethora of content to just, like, sink your teeth into for so long. But Fenton Bailey is an award winner, producer and director who has worked with the likes of a RuPaul, Britney Spears, Miss Monica Lewinsky, honey! He founded World of Wonder in 1991 with Randy Barbato. Their show RuPaul's Drag Race has won dozens of Emmy Awards. They were executive producers on the 2021 biopic The Eyes of Tammy Faye, which won not one but two Oscars. Their documentaries have won acclaim for their focus on society's oddballs and outliers. Today we are asking Fenton, how are you creating a world of wonder? Hi, Fenton.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:02:08] Hi. It's so great to see you. Thank you for having me.

**JVN** [00:02:11] I have looked up to you for such a long time. I adore you so much. And I'm so honored that I got to work with you and make Getting Curious with you, and I'm so excited that you're on the podcast side of things, and it's always such a pleasure to see your fucking face.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:02:23] Getting Curious and World of Wonder, they're, they're like sisters.

**JVN** [00:02:27] They're literally sisters.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:02:29] It's all about curiosity and wonder, right?

**JVN** [00:02:31] I love that that is just things that we love. We can't help that we have good taste.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:02:36] Exactly.

**JVN** [00:02:37] We just can't. Okay, so but let's start in the eighties, dip our toe into some queer history. It's the early eighties. We're at the Pyramid Club in New York City. A rising star by the name of RuPaul takes to the stage. What's it like to be in the audience?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:02:54] Randy and I, we would skip film school editing classes and we would go to The Pyramid. And it was, it was kind of, like, such a legendary place. It was kind of a dive bar. You know, it was this railroad place, had a long bar, kind of stank—you know, stale beer and cigarettes—and then a tiny stage all the way at the end. And Ru is about, you know, six-foot-plus, seven foot in the hair, heels, wig, etc. And that stage can hardly have had, like, two inches of headroom once he was on it, you know. But he was such a commanding presence. And we saw so many queens there, including Ru and, you know, Lady Bunny and John Sex. And, you know, the weird thing is: only in retrospect do you know that it was a magical time. At the time we were just, like, you know, "The drinks are too expensive," or, you know, complaining. But it was incredible. It really was.

**JVN** [00:03:52] I can just imagine that with these people and these entertainers, it is just, like, such a fucking, like, energy. And also, too, sidebar, where was it?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:04:00] Avenue A, just south of Seventh Street, just by Tompkins Square Park. And Alphabet City in the early eighties was kind of a no-go area. It was just before the crack epidemic, but it was very rundown and was known as Alphabet City and there were all these burned-out buildings and abandoned lots. It was kind of, of it was kind of a spectacular dump, but it was affordable. It was an affordable place. You know, you could get an apartment for a few hundred dollars a month. And, and Randy and I, we met, and we fell in love, and we moved in together, and we were in this sixth-floor walk up apartment, where a lot of the people who ran The Pyramid lived as well. So it was kind of a cool building.

**JVN** [00:04:40] So you and Randy are just, like, young and in love and you're in New York City and it's, like, the eighties. Or, wait! Eighty...

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:04:46] Yeah, it's nineteen hundred and eighty two, eighty three, and eighty four.

**JVN** [00:04:52] [LAUGHTER] So, like, what's the significance of this place and this cultural moment? Because it is significant.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:05:02] I want to know what your answer is. But I'll tell you, I guess I'd never seen drag like it before in my life. It wasn't like, it wasn't like Some Like It Hot, you

know? It was like everything from pop culture, TV, everything sort of thrown in, and then sort of regurgitated. It was just sort of taking the piss of popular culture and celebrity, but also celebrating and loving it. I'd just never seen anything like it before. And I, I just thought, "This is it." And Randy felt the same way, too, that this was real art, but not in an arty sense. "Real" like really great, entertaining, funny, incisive stuff. And, I mean, you know, just seeing John Sex there, who was, like, a Liberace kind of queen with his hair up. And I remember he'd often have the boa. This is, you know, decades before Britney Spears. He'd have a boa onstage. I mean, it was just, like, jaw-dropping. I'd just never seen—maybe I'd led a sheltered life—I'd never seen anything like it before in my life and felt it was something. You know what? I'd never seen anything like it since, as a kid, I would watch Batman on TV, you know, the TV series, because that was crazy, camp, and colorful and over-the-top and sort of trashy. But something about both those things really just made me resonate like a gong.

**JVN** [00:06:28] For me, I feel like you had such a, like, bustling, like, art and queer scene. And, like, little did everyone know that they were about to, like, trauma bond in such an intense, pandemic-y way. But you're still in your youth and you're, like, having fun. But it was so serious at the same time. So when you said, like, "What does it mean for you?" I just wrote down, like, "trauma bonding," but, like, I didn't understand the significance of that until I was a lot older.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:06:54] You're so right. Because AIDS was just about to appear. I remember maybe a few weeks before I left for America, and I'd never been to America in my life, but I was moving to America in 1982, and I read the first article about GRID, and I just remember a friend saying, "Just be careful." And it all sort of happened. But here's the weird thing. I think our focus was, in spite of this apocalypse going on around us, there was this determination and defiance to make stuff and to put on a show. It's so funny looking back on it. We don't have a lot of the memories of the awfulness of it and the suffering and the death. I mean, that was a constant. But what lives in the memory is this sort of like, "We're going to do this, we're going to do stuff." And it was just so—, I guess that is trauma bonding. Do you know what I mean? But it was almost like we would blank it out. Because I think if you took it in, it could just be overwhelming. And it could crush you.

**JVN** [00:08:09] Of course, yeah. Now, I also wrote down, at the time, did your friends in this era, and queens, like, did they ever feel unsafe in the city? Was there, like—because at the time you have, like, Reagan in office and, like, it is the beginning of, like, GRID and everything, but did, like, were people talking about, like, hate crimes? Were people talking about, like—how were people talking about, like, queer liberation and, like, queer safety and access to livelihood then and now?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:08:38] In the East Village, the landlord of our apartment building had this drop dead beautiful son. I can't remember how old he was, but he was absolutely gorgeous. And also in the neighborhood, there was this other kind of group of guys. And they were really tough. And they were kind of, mmm... I guess I'd say criminals. Anyway, they once, walking across Tompkins Square Park, they once, me and Randy were in our sort of paisley

long shirts and boxer shorts, you know, and I remember they once threatened me and Randy. And Randy just turned around and, like, I can't remember what he said. He was, like, "Fuck off before people know you're queer," kind of. I was like, "Randy!" He was so, like, tough and confrontational, and they kind of just disappeared. Of course, you know, there were beatings and hate crimes. And Michael Stuart was an artist, a graffiti artist on the scene. I remember this quite clearly. And he was in The Pyramid all the time. He was African-American and he was beaten up and killed by the police. It was at Astor Place. It was one of the first, kind of, for me, realizing that, you know, this was a truly dangerous time. But, you know, overall, there was a feeling of safety. It's just that violence could strike you at any time, you know. I was once on the phone, because this was pre-cell phones. I was once on the phone, you know, in those little phone booths and someone came up to me and stuck a knife in my throat and said, "Give me your money." And I was on the phone just about to say, "Oh, I've got to go now, I'm being mugged!" And I gave my money, which was, I don't know, I had eight bucks because I was going to go to the movie theater to see [Rainer Werner Fassbinder's] Querelle. I do remember that. So I had to give him my money and I didn't get to see Querelle.

**JVN** [00:10:26] Ah! I'm so glad they didn't kill you, Fenton!

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:10:28] Me, me too, yeah.

**JVN** [00:10:30] We would not have had one of this generation's greatest and foremost unscripted and scripted producers of our time, darling!

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:10:37] Oh, please! Thank you!

**JVN** [00:10:39] It's true! Okay, so wait, now can we just talk about ScreenAge, you guys? Who gave you permission to be such a good writer? It's so fucking good. ScreenAge is your second book. And you take us through TV history from the first TV station in upstate New York in 1928 to last year's Oscars broadcast, which was such an uneventful affair. But rather than focusing on primetime programming, you explore infomercials, which we are obsessed with here. And you know that I love an infomercial. Public access stations. Julia Child, give it to me. Home shopping networks, music videos, and beyond. Why did you decide to center these types of programming?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:11:19] Well, you know, I kind of wrote the book because it seemed to me that that TV has changed my life. I grew up watching TV and, one day, I was like, "How come all the books about TV seem to be bashing it?" You know, there's just this huge literary tradition of saying that, you know, "57 channels and nothing's on," "age of disinformation," that "we're all being turned into morons." TV has been seen as this demon force, especially by writers and in journalism and in print. And I said, "This isn't true at all! It is a magical technology that has completely transformed our lives." And it just felt like no one had stopped to say, "Hang on a second. This stuff is amazing." And I know now, you know, we've got premium TV, but really, I think that actually the TV that's really had the most cultural impact has

been the least respected genres in this least respected medium, like infomercials, like reality TV, and especially public access, you know. To me, they're the life force of TV, they are TV's original, they are TV the way TV should be—rather than TV trying to imitate Hollywood or imitate the movies. Because I think people sometimes think that all TV is, is a lesser version of the big screen. You know, Norma Desmond, you know, "I still am big. It's the pictures that got small." This is wrong. TV is not a version of the big screen. It is not the movies. It's a totally different thing.

**JVN** [00:12:56] So I love that, that you're like, "Hold on a minute. This is actually, like, really fierce and also deserves, like, a respectful exploration because it's really interesting the way that it has interacted and progressed through culture. So, like, let's look at it." So I love that. What did you take away from studying infomercials, public access stations, home shopping networks, like, and especially their evolution from 1928 until now. What did you take away from that and what its relationship is to our TV history and our American cultural history.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:13:28] Well, I think infomercials, you know, they were sort of a genius byproduct of deregulation, of Reagan's deregulation. And they let people on the air who would never be allowed on regular network TV, you know, like Susan Powter or Richard Simmons. I mean, these were like larger-than-life characters, but nonconforming characters. They didn't perform in traditional gender ways, for one thing. You know, Richard Simmons is the campest thing you could ever imagine. And yet he was so entertaining and so compelling. And similarly, Susan Powter. They were disrespected because they were selling new stuff. But what we were really getting out of the whole experience was the force of their personality. And I don't think, it really wasn't until YouTube came along that we would have access to such strong characters in such an undiluted way. My point being that almost anything that was interesting to someone queer like me was sort of regulated out of existence, wasn't allowed to exist on television. Similarly, public access. You know, when I grew up in the U.K., there were three channels, you had three channels. And the idea that anyone who wants to make a TV show could make their own show and have it air. That's what public access is in America. That was an extraordinary idea. It was like heresy, the idea that anyone could make their own TV show. And as a result, you had all these characters making their own TV shows, who again, you'd never see on network because no advertiser would support them. And, and these shows were sort of outrageous and revealed a whole group of characters who are on the margins or invisible. And then I think reality TV delivered on that even more. You know, it allowed all the people who've been excluded from society, from the culture, to be seen.

**JVN** [00:15:30] I think especially in the era of the eighties and the nineties—well, and prior—watching TV at home or in an intimate space where you felt comfortable was, like, a pretty big thing because you weren't watching TV on your phone, like, out, you know, on public transport or, like, at a park or, like, so letting someone onto your TV screen, like, into your home was like a much more intimate act, like, I think because you didn't have as many choices. So it's really interesting to think about, you know, Richard Simmons and, like, some of Americans', like, first interactions with someone who is nonconforming, if you didn't know

someone like that in your real life. And, like, that's actually kind of significant and quite important.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:16:10] Yeah. And, and queer people especially were—they would only show up, you know, as murder victims or people who'd killed themselves, or just scandalous, shadowy figures. And that was why, as a kid, seeing Quentin Crisp on TV in this made-for-TV drama was such a radical, life changing thing for me to see this incredibly swishy, sexy, unapologetic figure who wasn't in any way weak, was in fact incredibly brave and incredibly strong and just had zero fucks to give. And, in fact, it was at the end of that play, that play that was made on television when he was almost assaulted in the park. And he was, like, "Do your worst, you know, I'm one of the stately homos of England." And then he walks off because everyone's just, they don't know what to do. They're not going to throw a punch. And the card said, you know, "Quentin Crisp moved to New York," and I was, like, "Yes, that's what I have to do. I just have to get there, somehow, somehow." You know.

**JVN** [00:17:20] Ah! It gave you a roadmap, honey..

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:17:23] It did! It absolutely did.

**JVN** [00:17:26] So in the book. You explore televangelism. I had, like, the guiltiest crush on, like, Joel Osteen in the nineties and, like, early 2000s, like, I just—no, it was, like, his the wavy hair and his shoulder pads, like, "Oh my God, his big pearly whites, honey." I was just feeling him. But! But, like, very shamefully so. We just learned on Getting Curious this month about televangelism and how much it's influenced US politics and how much they're entangled. How have televangelists influence you in your work.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:17:53] Randy and I in the East Village, we would watch the PTL Club. We loved it, and we loved it because we loved Tammy Faye. We're not, to be honest, or no great surprise, not particularly Christian, but Tammy Faye was amazing. And we even went on a—when we were, Randy and I had a band, the Fabulous Pop Tarts.

**JVN** [00:18:14] Ah! It was called The Fabulous Pop Tarts?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:18:17] Yes! And you know what Graham Norton said to me the other day? He said, "Well, no one else called you that!" Because we, we added, "Fabulous." So we went on tour and one of our stops was, like, a pilgrimage to PTL. And it was just after the scandal, so the place was at a low ebb. But Tammy Faye was, like, such an inspiration. And Tammy Faye, obviously, was a very atypical televangelist. She wasn't preaching fire and damnation. It was obvious she loved the gays. And Tammy has always said herself that she was a drag queen, so...

**JVN** [00:18:53] That movie made me cry so hard, it was so good, like, it moved me to my queer bones. How long did that project take you guys?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:19:07] Well, we first met Tammy in the basement of our house. We were in L.A. and we were doing a show for Channel 4 UK, it was called TV Pizza. And so it was clips from public access shows with interviews with people. And we had Tammy on the show and we also had Sister Paula, a televangelist from Seattle, trans televangelist in Seattle. And we thought, "We better make sure that they don't bump into each other because Tammy might be offended. I might just, you know, be a problem for Tammy." But of course, you know, the way everything works out, they just bump into each other on the stairs and they just became the best of friends, laughing it up, having a fabulous time. So it was sort of around then that we began to think, "Oh my gosh, it would be great to make a film about Tammy Faye, a documentary." And her husband, her second husband was in prison as well. And we knew he didn't he didn't mind the gays, but he didn't really embrace. And we knew we had Tammy basically for 12 months. And we went out to Palm Springs where she was living and said, "Will you let us make a film about you?" And she said, "Yes!" We went out to Palm Springs to talk about it. And she came to the door camera-ready. It was a long time after making that film, that was 2000, with Ru narrating—doing the voiceover. It wasn't, what, 21 years later that the, the movie got made. Jessica [Chastain] is so—she's not playing Tammy, she is Tammy Faye, right?

**JVN** [00:20:38] She was Tammy Faye, honey!

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:20:42] She was. Yeah. And she got it, you know, she was, like, "It seems to me we should be talking about Tammy is radical acts of love, not about her makeup," you know, because people are to this day obsessed with her makeup. But of course, her makeup was also her drag. It was her—, it was the way, it was her look. It was her, it was her brand.

**JVN** [00:21:03] It was kind of fabulous. I love, like, a big ole look. So wait, what do you see as being the connections between televangelism and queer culture? Is it just, like, basically, like, that she was, like, a low-key drag queen?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:21:15] Yes. I mean, I'm not sure that a lot of televangelism has a lot of affinity or in common with queer culture. But I do think it's a unique genius application—it's the killer application of TV, because I think TV's really good as a medium at selling you things, at selling you can openers or a whole new you. And that's what televangelism is trying to sell you, is sort of transformation of salvation or whatever you want to call it. But essentially it's like a friend, television. Television's hanging out with you. And, and so you get to see, even if I don't agree with 99.9% of the beliefs of televangelists, you know, you have your Joel Osteen and you have these characters that are really front and center, that come into your life and sort of make you feel that maybe you aren't alone in the world, you know?

**JVN** [00:22:07] Yeah, it's, like, warm hugs. Like, warm hugs through the TV screen.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:22:11] Yes. You know Robert Tilton, a terrible—in the sense of criminal—televangelist. He used to say, “Touch your television set right now!” And Ru adapted that as his own, saying this idea of people at home touching their television sets to receive, you know.

**JVN** [00:22:29] Yes! All of the documentary projects that Randy and you and World of Wonder and the team have produced are just intimate portraits of individuals. Introduce us to some of the characters that you featured or people who were featured.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:22:41] Yeah, Tammy Faye changed our lives, but we've made a lot of films for HBO, thanks to Sheila Nevins, who herself should be the subject of a documentary. I mean, just this fabulous, larger-than-life character who ran the documentary division of HBO for years. And she, for example, sat us down with Monica Lewinsky. And we made a film, *Monica In Black And White*. And now this was before—Monica has always been Monica, but society has re-embraced her. And this was a long time before that. But it was just Monica talking with law students. And Monica was so, obviously, so smart and lovely and obviously also traumatized by what she'd been through. But it was just incredible that she'd survived. And like Tammy, in some respects, I mean, what they'd both been through would have, I don't know, just. Just hard to imagine surviving that.

**JVN** [00:23:40] Just like just a public thrashing of epic proportion.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:23:44] Yeah. Again and again and again. And neither of them bitter, but just fabulous, beautiful creatures, who have so much to, to tell us.

**JVN** [00:23:53] I am glad that Monica is alive for her, like, comeback, though, because she's, like, people love her, I love, like, the admiration is strong for Monica Lewinsky, for me.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:24:03] The film, you know, the Television Critics Association that is held every year? And HBO launched the film the same time as they launched the 9/11 In Memoriam film that they did. So this was the same room that Rudolph Giuliani walked out into.

**JVN** [00:24:21] Oh!

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:24:22] And, and oh, my gosh, it was an ugly experience. You know, the the reporters were really awful to Monica. They were, like—one of them even said, “Why didn't you just curl up and die?” You know, in contrast to when Rudolph Giuliani came out, he got a standing ovation because he was seen as this great hero of 911, which, of course, we now know he was not. So, you know.

**JVN** [00:24:45] In time all is revealed or whatever they say.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:24:48] Mmm. Right, right.



**JVN** [00:25:50] Cause, like, his fuckin' bronzer-melting ass, you know, everybody knows. So what cultural connections, if any, do you see between some of the subjects that you've covered over the years? Like, Britney Spears? Like, Andy Warhol? Like, what are the other things?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:25:06] I think Randy and I are just attracted to outsiders. I mean, we feel like outsiders. I think, you know, the queer experience is that you do feel like an outsider. But, weirdly, I think everybody feels like an outsider, really. And that, that, that queer experience or that trauma isn't unique to LGBTQ plus IA. It's actually everybody feels that way. And I think we're also drawn to people who are judged or or misunderstood or both, and as a result, sort of exiled. And I feel that Britney, especially during the height of her popularity. Yes, the fans bought the records, but Britney could not catch a break. She was just slagged off again and again and again and. We made this film about her. And as she was getting ready to do this residency in Vegas. And, you know, everybody said it would be a failure and were, like, making fun of her. But it was a singular success. And the thing about Britney is she's like—and she says it herself—she's just a normal person.” And so her being misunderstood is that no one will accept that she's not this sort of sexually turned on pop tart. She's this great stage presence, but offstage she's just a normal, boring person and no one will let her be that.

**JVN** [00:26:28] She does seem like she likes to show a little bit of skin nowadays on the 'gram from time to time. But I love that for her. Live your fucking life, Britney. I want to show my titties on the 'gram, sometimes, I do! And I do, sometimes! Sometimes I just want that validation, we all want it sometimes, we can't help it!

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:26:46] Yeah. I hope she's okay. I really, I really do.

**JVN** [00:26:47] I love B-Spears so much. Sometimes in my standup show, I just, I say, “Everybody hold up two hands. We're sending love to Britney.” Yeah, it's good.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:28:55] Touch the television set right now!.

**JVN** [00:27:58] Yeah, touch the television set! Okay, so obviously, you're a storyteller, honey. You're a producer extraordinaire. You're an author, honey. But in this book, you tell some of your own stories. One of the ones that I was the most surprised about? North Korea, honey, like, we need to know. Like, that was not on my bingo card, like, “Fenton goes to North Korea.” But, alas, here we are. Tell us the who, what, where, when, and why, and how of Fenton goes to North Korea, honey?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:27:32] But it was not on my bingo card, either. And it was an amazing experience.

**JVN** [00:27:39] And what year is this? Is this Kim Jong-un or is this his dad?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:27:44] This is 2012 or 13.

**JVN** [00:27:51] Fuck me, that may be Kim Jong-un, honey.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:27:53] These two—Charlotte and James are these curators in the UK and they have done these things called art diplomacy. So they did this Francis Bacon exhibition in Moscow and they took Gilbert and George to Beijing and they wanted to take a Western artist to North Korea, and that had never happened before. And the North Korean government said, “Yes, let's do it, come on.” And so this was the trip to recce the whole thing and to get the agreements in place with the North Korean government to film it because, you know, you're not normally allowed in. And I think it's very rare in life you can go somewhere that is completely non-Western, you know, I mean, just completely alien, you know, there were no shops, there was no traffic. It was like being on another planet. And, and also you arrive at the airport and they take away your laptop and your phone.

**JVN** [00:28:58] And you just collect it when you go back?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:29:00] Yes. Yes. When they let you out. Which you hope they do. But it was interesting because, you know, I don't know if this happens to you, but people are always on me about being on my phone. Just not having it was... that was, that was hard.

**JVN** [00:29:17] It's like rehab, but, like, North Korea.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:29:20] Yeah, it was!

**JVN** [00:29:22] So did you stay in Pyong—

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:29:24] Yes, Pyongyang. And there's two hotels where they put all the foreigners and you have minders with you, 24/7. And they actually sleep next to you, not in the same bed in the same room, in the, like, the next door room.

**JVN** [00:29:36] Did you have to share a bathroom with them?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:29:38] Them. And. No, you had your own bathroom. But they, they would miraculously appear, like, you'd go downstairs in the morning for breakfast and suddenly they would appear. They kind of knew your every movement.

**JVN** [00:29:50] Were they nice? Would they be, like, “Oh, are you having a nice time?”

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:29:54] They were very sweet. They didn't go in for a lot of flippancy. They didn't tell a lot of jokes. And we kept saying, “Oh, can we, can we go shopping?” Because we want to get souvenirs? And they eventually took us to a shop, but it was the strangest shop. We went in and all the lights were out, and we went back into the back, and

the most amazing thing was the wrapping paper that they wrapped up the art that you bought in. And I was, like, "Please, can I buy some of that?" Because it was very pop art, you know? I mean, it's amazing. And there's huge monuments because there's a lot of buildings and it's not very dense in an urban sense or a lot of traffic. You know, it's just very sparse. Every now and then, you'll come along these massive monuments that are just—because they are so big and everything else is so small—it's, it's kind of gobsmacking.

**JVN** [00:30:46] Did you go outside the city or was it more just like in the city?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:30:50] No, we didn't go outside of the city. They took us to farms, fruit farms and collectives. And the whole idea was to set up the exhibition of the, of this artist. The paintings he did were really cool. They were close-ups of McDonald's cartons and wrapping. So they were, like, you looked at them and they were sort of abstract, because they were basically white, but with, like, a bit of red or blue or yellow and a little glimpse of the golden arches, very abstract. And the North Korean curator lady didn't like them at all. She looked at them and then said, "Would it be possible to bring a different artist?" And we were, like, "No, but what?" You know, "There isn't enough paint on the canvas." And, and all their art is very representational. And nine times out of ten, it's the Dear Leader doing something. Because they believe that art should not necessarily be self-expression. They believe that art should express the collective, communal idea. Conceptual stuff? No. I mean, it's like, you know, "My child could paint that." And I realized that it's actually because, you know, in the West, we have everything. We have access to anything, any technique, any material. So our art is conceptual. We're always looking for meaning and often not finding it. We're looking for the meaning of things. But in North Korea it is about the skill and the artistry and the execution. Even the soldiers in the armies can make beautiful pictures out of tiny snails. 5000 snails arranged in a beautiful picture of the Dear Leader. It's just completely night and day.

**JVN** [00:32:37] And, I'm almost done with the random North Korea questions but, did you have, like, a TV inside your hotel room or no?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:32:43] There was a TV in the hotel room. It was very old. And as I recall, there was really only one channel, state channel. And they have a sort of version of MTV, that are these songs. Sort of patriotic songs about the nation state or, you know, a song called My Name is Not Important. And it's all beautiful footage of people in fields or working in factories or the Dear Leader visiting. I mean, it's—

**JVN** [00:33:10] My name is not important!

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:33:12] Yes, Remember Not My Name, I think, is the name of the song.

**JVN** [00:33:17] Damn.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:33:18] Yeah, a stirring song because it's everybody's working for the greater good, in theory.

**JVN** [00:33:22] So, like, what did traveling to North Korea really, like, reveal about American culture and America's media landscape, for you?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:33:31] Well, it did do a bit of a number on me in the sense that I know in the West we read about the, you know, the awfulness of living in North Korea. And there's no question, it must be very, very hard. But it was, it was so interesting talking to North Koreans because they genuinely felt sorry for *us*. You know, I think we went in being slightly patronizing. And when they were sort of apologizing to us, we were, like, "Oh, no, you don't have to say sorry, because there isn't much to buy in your shop." And they were, like, "No, we're sorry for you because you have so much. You have everything that you know, the value of nothing," you know, and that, that they had such conviction about loyalty to the leader and the sense of the greater good. It was interesting to see that our—in the West—our sense of community seems to be being eroded. And that we don't really feel that way, you know? I'm not saying by any means that theirs was the right system, but it was a shock to the system to see people who genuinely don't believe in *our* system, you know? It's not that they're deprived of it, which they are, but they genuinely think it is decadent and spiritually lost.

**JVN** [00:34:57] We need to do a North Korea episode is what I'm realizing. North Korea, honey, writing it down for later because that is interesting. Okay!

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:35:04] There's a film, I will send you a link. It's called Propaganda. And it's it's on YouTube. It's by a director called Slava Mogutin. And you watch it and you think it's made by North Korea. You think it's a North Korean piece of propaganda. And it begins with scenes from the Oprah show, The Favorite Things episode with the audience screaming and shouting, and the voiceover says, you know, "Why are these people screaming? Are they having a religious breakthrough? No, they're being given sneakers." And it's this very clever sort of invective against advertising and commercialism. And, and it goes on and on. It's fake, it's not made by North Korea, but it's a fabulously, brilliantly observed satire. I just think you would love it.

**JVN** [00:35:54] I know I would love it. I'm obsessed already. Okay, so now let's go to what I know so many people are wanting to talk about. And we are also wanting to talk about: your creative partnership with RuPaul and Drag Race. So, I mean, I remember watching Drag Race season one with breathlessness. Like, I've been watching from the beginning, have always loved. I mean, I remember in, like, the earliest seasons, like, all of my girlfriends in L.A., we would, like, all watch it together. We, like—also, when I was in rehab, after the meeting, I'd be like, "We must haul ass back! Drag Race is starting." Like, I got everyone in Drag Race in rehab, both times!

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:36:29] Thank you!

**JVN** [00:36:30] Yes, you're welcome. So—, and then I just, like, went back into my North Korea. So I'm, like, "So North Korea," I'm like, "Wait, no! We're past that part!" So what's the significance of Drag Race now airing on MTV, a network whose history you explore in the book?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:36:42] Yeah. I mean, Drag Race began on Logo. God bless Viacom for even launching a gay channel. And Logo was a, was a small cable channel. And I think to some degree, the secret of Drag Race's success is that it was such a small channel and the budget was so tiny that no one thought to cancel it. Do you know? Like, the first couple of seasons, it was very quiet and word of mouth gradually spread. And then there was a leadership change and in came Chris McCarthy, and it moved to VH1, which is around the same time had the first Emmy campaign. And that's when the show really took off. And VH1 has been, you know, Ru had his talk show on VH1. We did 100 episodes with Ru and, and Michelle Visage on VH1 in the nineties. So VH1's been really good to us. But it's unbelievably exciting that the show is on MTV because MTV is this, it's just this global brand, right? It's the channel that changed the world. And I believe, you know, now it can reach more people. You know that the majority of the audience—Drag Race—does not identify as gay.

**JVN** [00:37:57] Mmmm.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:37:59] And the majority of the audience is also women. So it's counter intuitive in some ways, I suppose.

**JVN** [00:37:08] Yeah. So, and now it's, like, Drag Race is international. It is all over the world. What's it been like to take it international? And what's distinct about some of the TV markets that you have found Drag Race in.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:38:22] Drag has existed forever, you know. And I think drag is in every country. There's a drag community in every country. And what's so fascinating is how it's just all slightly different in every country. You know, I'm speaking in generalizations, which isn't good, but, you know, in Thailand, for example, a lot of people assumed, "Why didn't you make Drag Race Thailand earlier?" Because they said, you know, "Because the ladyboy tradition, surely it's accepted." And that is true. Except that drag and ladyboys, they're not necessarily discriminated against, but they don't have social status. That has been what is the challenge in getting it onto TV. And so Perry, the, the amazing guy who came to us and said, "We've got to do drag race Thailand." You know, he wanted to change that perception that, that drag was not seen as fashion, you know. So in every culture, it's, it's different. And that's, that's just endlessly fascinating.

**JVN** [00:39:31] And have you found anything that's been, like, consistent about, like, Drag Race, like, between like Australia, Because you guys are, like, in, like, Australia, Spain, Canada, Thailand, United Kingdom? Like... where else? All over Europe.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:39:49] Mexico. Sweden. Belgium. I'll tell you what's consistent.

**JVN** [00:39:54] The talent, honey!

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:39:55] Well, the talent is bottomless.

**JVN** [00:39:58] I don't know it bottomless is the right—I feel like it's full of bottoms and tops and verses, which is great, but it's endless. There's, like, an endless well of talent you could pull from, one might say.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:40:09] Thank you. Yes. Also, though, I think the key of any drag is there's a wink to it, a sense that it is play. That's the whole idea. Like, nothing is what it seems. And that, you know, as Ru says, you know, "You're born naked and the rest of us drag." Everything we put on is a statement about our identity or some desire to be something, you know, to create an image. And drag is, is, is doing that in a spirit of play. It's like a joke that everybody is in on. And I think that's why it's, as a medium, it's perfect for these, this really polarized, complicated time we're living in because it's so affirmative of, of, like, "Yeah, do yourself, do your thing. Be who you want to be." It's fun, it's joyous, celebrate it. And perhaps that's why certain groups in our society have such a problem with it and are trying to ban it and outlaw it because it—because they want to crush that joy. They want to crush that freedom. Because they perceive it mistakenly as some kind of threat.

**JVN** [00:41:25] So how do you see as a way that we can resist these fucking conservative lawmakers that are trying to limit drag performance, and ban it outright in some cases.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:41:35] Yeah. I mean, well, register to vote. Vote. I mean, I really do think that if all of us were voting, it would be a very different story.

**JVN** [00:41:47] I watched a minute-long TikTok today on the significance of Avril Lavigne dating Tyga. And I watched it with bated breath. If all of these people on TikTok were as concerned about anti-trans and anti-drag and anti-gay legislation as they were with keeping up on the TikTok drama of Avril and Tyga or the TikTok drama of, like, Selena Gomez and Hailey fucking Bieber, etc. We would be so much better off. If we could just get as interested in what is actually affecting our lives. But I do think that it is also a lot of, like, the cis allies. It's the people who consume Drag Race. It's the people who consume Queer Eye that are down to sit there and binge it for 6 hours but then aren't down to talk to a family member for 20 minutes or maybe send, you know, reach out to a local or state representative if they live in one of these states in question.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:42:43] I can understand the detachment, though. I can understand the detachment because I think the political process is a minority of people—we are in this situation, in this moment being manipulated by a few people, you know, who've seized control

of the, of the methods of government and will do anything to, to have that power. This is not a reflection of what most people want.

**JVN** [00:43:09] But Tennessee, Texas and Florida, based off of, like, taking it back to voting, their voter turnout was so bad for Democrats, one. Two, the disenfranchisement of people who have been charged with felonies, whether it was, like, marijuana possession or, you know, various crimes of survival in these states can't vote. So then you have, like, disenfranchisement of so many people, which is a fucking gigantic problem. But it's, like, I do feel like in these states, these conservative-led states, it's, like, it's even more than, like, voting. It's, like, we have to make inroads with people, like, we have to make inroads with people who consume our culture but don't want to fight for us to be, like, safe and our children to be safe and, like, our young people, to have safe—and not only be safe, but, like, have opportunities, like, to build a career and to, like, exist in the world in, like, a safe way because they're making it so hard for, like, young queer people to, like, exist.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:44:13] I think, you know, it's 1000%. And by the way, have you ever thought about running for office because you would be a fabulous and fierce leader, you know?

**JVN** [00:44:22] Ah, I would be! I have thought about it when I'm, like, a little bit, not right now.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:44:42] Yeah. Because I think the challenge we face is that the political process is being hijacked by a few radical, crazy people. And it's, it's not the will of the people. And, and you're completely right that we cannot afford to be complacent or detached about it.

**JVN** [00:44:44] I don't think, nationally, but unfortunately, so many of our queer people are being targeted in, like, state legislatures, where it so is the will of the people, unless the will of the people starts speaking the fuck up louder. Because, I mean, they have a supermajority in Tennessee and a governor who gladly signed this anti-drag legislation into, into law. So, I mean, that was overwhelmingly the will of, like, Tennessee voters, or at least they were willing to prioritize whatever tax incentives or economic incentives or lifestyle incentives, like, they were willing to compromise. You know, queer people in service of whatever the priorities of Republicans were in that state, because they do have such a majority. These fuckers, hate.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:45:32] Yeah. Fuckers. Yeah, it's not good. It's also a distraction, isn't it? It's a failure to address issues, like, the safety of kids in school or jobs or clean water or—

**JVN** [00:45:46] Infrastructure. Healthcare.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:45:50] Right.

**JVN** [00:45:51] Electric grids here in Texas.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:45:53] Right, it's like, "Oh, let's look over there!" "Let's beat up on the drag queen. Let's outlaw trans people. It's—

**JVN** [00:45:58] Really, it's, "let's beat up on the kids that you've been beating up on your whole life, because that's what I realized recently, that, like, a lot of these lawmakers, they're my age and they have been bullying people like me since they were fucking little. And now they are holding the reins of power and they are doing the same shit. They're proliferating the same shit. Like, Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert are, like, not that much older than me. So it's like interesting that, you know, it's like these people who've been bullying the fuck out of people their whole lives, Like now they've done it all the way, you know, to political office. So let's change the subject a little bit. Ah! [LAUGHTER] Let's disassociate! Who was your favorite guest judge in Drag Race history?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:46:40] Oh, God! I can't say that.

**JVN** [00:46:43] Fenton, top three! Tell me right this instant!

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:46:48] No, I won't. I won't. I won't. [LAUGHTER] The story that I always tell, and it's not, like, "Oh, I'm just playing my tapes." Roxxy, when she tells that story, when she—they've just done the lip sync, with Alyssa. Roxxy and Alyssa. And the sob. And Ru's, like, "What's wrong?" And Roxxy's, like, "Nothing." And then, like, Ru's, "No, what's wrong? Tell me." And then when she tells—I have two kids. You know, I have two beautiful, amazing kids, 16 and 8. And when Roxxy tells the story about her mother leaving her at a bus stop, just abandoning her. I—it just destroys me every time, which I know isn't like, "Well, why are you telling that story?"

**JVN** [00:47:43] Okay, wait. How about this? How about this? How about this? Was there a time? Has there ever been a time where, like, Michelle and another judge or, like, Carson and Michelle or, like, Ross and Michelle and the guest are all, like, firmly, like, team one person, but then Ru's always, like, you know, like, "The decision is mine and mine to make alone." Like, is there ever a time when, like, like, every all three are, like, against but then Ru's, like, "No, bitch, it's my fucking show." And then, like, she is, like, the overturning one or do they usually all align?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:48:14] There has never been the time of which you speak.

**JVN** [00:48:17] There's never!

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:48:19] There never has, no. They don't always completely align, It's never been one's against, everyone against Ru.

**JVN** [00:48:27] Ah, so usually pretty aligned jury decisions.



**FENTON BAILEY** [00:48:30] Yeah!

**JVN** [00:48:31] Love that.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:48:32] I think one of the greatest aspects of *RuPaul's Drag Race* is that ultimately it is Ru's decision, because I think that, you know, heavy lies the head that wears the crown. I think it takes someone particularly strong. I can't think of anyone, actually, who is happy to do that job of making the very tough choice to send someone home because everybody's a nice person. And I think everybody would love everybody to stay around. And, you know, I love Ru for many, many, many, many reasons. But the strength with which he takes on the responsibility—and then subsequently a lot of the heat—for making the ultimate decision is amazing to me because it's—on some of the other Drag Races, international versions—you know, it's more like a group decision. And no one wants to be the one to send someone home. You know, it's, it's, it's a tough job. My favorite TV commercial line, “It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken.” I'd forgotten about that since the eighties. But Frank Perdue, the chicken rearer, he used to say, “It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken.” And I would say, you know, it takes a tough man to decide who to eliminate on Drag Race.

**JVN** [00:49:52] Okay, Fenton, are you ready? And I saw Ru successfully answer this question on TikTok, but the asker had to, like, ask her, like, four times. Okay, are you ready? And she did fucking answer!

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:50:02] Oh, god! No pressure! No pressure!

**JVN** [00:50:03] Well, there is pressure. And I want to hear your goddamn answer. And don't you dare not answer me.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:50:10] Okay, I'm sweating, actually, with anxiety, yes.

**JVN** [00:50:12] Who do you think? And all of Drag Race history is most deserving of having been a winner, but did not win their season.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:50:23] Oh, good God. Oh!

**JVN** [00:50:26] Ru answered. And if you really don't feel comfortable, it's fine. We won't include it in the episode, but I need to know your answer, like, and I also think everyone else really wants to know, Fenton. And then I'll tell you who she said.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:50:40] Um.... yeah. Okay. Pangina. In UK Versus The World.

**JVN** [00:50:49] Wow. Not on my bingo card! No, Pangina was amazing. I loved her. She made me cry really hard. She made me cry really hard. Her elimination was devastating. And also her costume was amazing.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:51:04] You know what? Her elimination was the making of her and the making of Blue Hydrangea. Do you know, like?

**JVN** [00:51:12] Ah, Blue Hydrangea, honey! Yes. Okay, do you know who Ru said?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:51:17] Yeah. No, I don't, actually.

**JVN** [00:51:18] Ru said Shangela.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:51:20] Mm. Well, power to Ru for answering that. That's a difficult question—that is, yeah, wow.

**JVN** [00:51:28] I think I saw it on Shangela's Instagram. I think that's where I saw it, now that I think about it.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:51:32] I mean, in the world of deep fakes, how can you know that that really happened...

**JVN** [00:51:36] That's true! Maybe I just fooled you into doing an answer that Ru never even answered! No! But I do think that was, like, I did think and then also, like, didn't Manila Luzon never win?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:51:52] I think you're right.

**JVN** [00:51:54] I think she's another, like, major standout for me that, like, is deserving of being a winner that, like, has what it takes and, like, didn't—

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:52:02] Look, it's a cliché, but I do think everyone who goes on Drag Race is a winner, you know?

**JVN** [00:52:07] It's like, it's like, it's like Lizzo says, "If you got nominated for an Emmy, honey, you're already a fucking winner, baby." So it's like. It's like. It's so true. I had a present, but you do just get really fierce as a viewer. You just get really like, no. I mean, I tell a joke in my standup about how, like, I accidentally, like, tell Russian teenagers to go fuck themselves, like, because they're trying to take the gold medals from our girls, like, in gymnastics. Like, I'm never about being mean or hateful unless it comes to a foreigner trying to take a gold medal from like, one of our American girls. But I'm working on it. So it's good to be aware. But I notice that that ugliness comes out in me when I also watch Drag Race, especially in my earlier twenties. I was a little bit, I didn't have the clarity. I got a little bit uhhh.... Identified. So back in

the day, and this is true because I come from a broadcasting family and when my great grandfather bought the first TV station in my family's broadcasting company, people said he was fucking crazy. They were like, "You're going into debt to, like, buying this. Like, you shouldn't be doing that. Like, you have radio and newspaper and, like, this is a flash in the pan."

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:53:01] Wow.

**JVN** [00:53:02] But it, it did end up being the next big thing. So what do you think is the next big thing?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:53:08] I think that's a really good question. And I, in all honesty, I have no idea. I mean, it took me this long to figure out that television has changed our lives. And this medium's almost 100 years old. I do think that the next big thing will be a continuation of the same thing, which is screens. You know, people say we spend too much of our time, our lives in front of screens. Yeah, maybe we do. But we are going to spend more of our time in front of screens, not less. And you know, as much as we watch TV today, as much as we're on our phones or our laptops, it's, it's only going to be more and more and more. There is no limit to that. And now, of course, it isn't just TV, it's TikTok, it's Instagram, it's social media. So..

**JVN** [00:53:56] Okay, we're finishing up! Rapidfire! Are you ready? TV show that people would not expect that you watch.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:54:04] I don't know. I don't know that one.

**JVN** [00:54:05] Do you watch Gardeners World or something?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:54:08] Oh! Oh, yes! The Repair Shop!

**JVN** [00:54:11] Oooh, that's a good one. Okay.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:54:13] I love The Repair Shop. You know where people bring broken things.

**JVN** [00:54:15] I love that answer! It makes me cry!

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:54:16] Yes, The Repair Shop!

**JVN** [00:54:19] Favorite infomercial of all time.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:54:22] "Stop the insanity!" Susan Powter.

**JVN** [00:54:24] Ah, okay! Favorite awards show moment.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:54:28] The slap. I mean, a terrible thing to have happened. But the ultimate reality moment, I think, on reality TV, ever.

**JVN** [00:54:37] Mine. I'm going to say mine there. I have, like, a two-way tie between Steve Harvey Wrong Miss Universe or wrong Best Picture. Favorite TV catchphrase.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:54:48] "Nationwide is on your side."

**JVN** [00:54:50] Oh, my God. I love that. Dream interview subject for a WOW documentary, living or historical?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:55:00] Alexander the Great.

**JVN** [00:55:03] Oooh! Moment in queer history you would have liked to witness.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:55:07] Stonewall.

**JVN** [00:55:09] Ah! I would have liked to have watched Abraham Lincoln, like, fuck another man if it was true. Because they say that he was gay.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:55:16] Oh, I see! I didn't know. I thought I had to be a public moment. I. Oh, I see. Oh my gosh.

**JVN** [00:55:21] Well, I just said, "a queer moment" and my mind went there because I—

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:55:24] Definitely would have to be someone doing some—  
[CROSSTALK]

**JVN** [00:55:28] Some gay shit! [CROSSTALK]

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:55:30] Well that's why I said Alexander the Great. Because I think there was a lot of hot gay sex going on while he was conquering the world.

**JVN** [00:55:37] Yes, honey! And if I would have been alive in 1860, I would have been, like, the best side chick for Lincoln ever. Like, I would have, like, been down with Mary, honey, I would have, like, been—Mary Todd and I would have been, like this, honey. I just, I would have totally let Abraham Lincoln fuck me, for world peace.

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:55:56] Ah, you know, I do think there's a connection between politics and sex that you should explore more.

**JVN** [00:56:02] It's so true. What is wrong with people? We are just nightmares. Okay. Final question. What advice do you have for people looking to express themselves through creative projects and find their creative community?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:56:17] Just do it. Like, what is so exciting about today? The most exciting thing about today is, is you can! I mean, the phone is such a powerful piece of technology. Camera, video, you can shoot, edit. I mean, I do think it is. Just do it. It's a very, it's a—, it's a Nike slogan. I know, But it's also a punk thing. It's just go do it. It doesn't you don't need a lot of money. You don't need someone else's permission. Just do it.

**JVN** [00:56:44] Fenton Bailey. We love you so fucking much. Your new book is out. You guys read it. We will include a link in the bios that you can read it. It is so good. We love you so much. Fenton, you're slaying, do you need to say anything else? Did I cut you off, darling?

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:57:01] I need to say thank you. And I love you. And I'm so grateful to be here, thank you!

**JVN** [00:57:05] And we love you, too. And I can't wait to see you at South By!

**FENTON BAILEY** [00:57:08] Oh, we have to do Getting Curious Season two.

**JVN** [00:58:10] Well, we will do that. We are one—that is already on my calendar. So we got it down. You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness, our guest this week with Fenton Bailey. You'll find links to his work and the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is Freak by Quin. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce the friend honey, and please show them how to subscribe. Kind of hard to find it on there. You got to go find that on to Spotify or Apple or the wherever. It's like, how do you find it? So just can you show your friend through your parents so we love them. You can follow us on Instagram and Twitter at @CuriouswithJVN. And our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Julie Carrillo.