

# FUSE

A BOMB  
PODCAST

MUSICIAN & FILMMAKER

## Okay Kaya & John Wilson

SEASON 2 | EPISODE #1

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*Kaya Wilkins is a Norwegian American Berlin-based musician, composer, and artist who records and performs as Okay Kaya. Okay Kaya has released numerous acclaimed albums including Both (2018), and most recently Watch This Liquid Pour Itself (2020) followed by her companion album Surviving Is the New Living (2020).*

*John Wilson is an NYC based documentarian who has been making low budget documentaries for over a decade. His films eventually caught the eye of Nathan Fielder, who ended up convincing HBO to give John his own TV show. How To with John Wilson is the result of this collaboration.*

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**Chantal McStay** Welcome to FUSE: A BOMB Podcast. 40 years ago, BOMB began as conversation between artists around a kitchen table in downtown New York. Today, FUSE brings you into the room to listen in on candid, unfiltered conversations about creative practice. Here's how it works. BOMB invites a distinguished artist to choose a guest from any creative discipline: an art crush, a close collaborator, or even a stranger they've admired from afar. And we bring them together. No host, no moderator, no interruptions, just two artists in conversation. For this episode, we asked the musician Okay Kaya who she'd most like to speak with. Without hesitation, she named the filmmaker John Wilson.

**Okay Kaya** John is an amazing documentary filmmaker and an amazing director of photography. Seems to really be able to just connect with everyone that is around him when he's doing this project in a really heartwarming way. And he just makes me feel really warm thoughts towards human beings.

**CM** John Wilson is a New York City-based filmmaker who has been making low budget documentaries for over a decade. His films eventually caught the eye of Nathan Fielder, who convinced HBO to give John his own TV show. *How to With John Wilson* is the result of this collaboration. Kaya Wilkins is a Norwegian American Berlin-based musician, composer, and artist who records and performs as Okay Kaya. Okay Kaya has released numerous acclaimed albums, most recently, *Watch This Liquid Pour Itself*, followed by her companion album *Surviving is the New Living*. Kaya and John discuss how to find beauty in the unremarkable, how to shape self doubt into art, and how to approach strangers with a camera.

**OK** I got reintroduced to your movies, John, when one of my best friends here in Norway, Lisa, sent me the link to your *How To* on HBO trailer.

[CLIP FROM TRAILER FOR HOW TO WITH JOHN WILSON]

“Hey New York. HBO was having a hard time explaining what my show is. So I just figured that I just try to do it myself. Usually the host of a TV show is right in front of the camera. And you can see exactly where the voice is coming from, which I guess people like. But in my show, you never really see the host. And that's because I'm actually behind the camera the whole time filming everything you see. So instead of having to stare at me for the whole program, you get to see all the cool stuff that I like to film instead. Which I think makes it a lot more exciting to watch. I spent a lot of time walking around New York, trying to find the answers to some of life's biggest questions.”

**OK** When I watched the trailer it reminded me of a film I'd seen a few years ago that was called, *The Spiritual Life of Wholesale Kids*.

**John Wilson** Oh yeah.

**OK** And I realized that you're the same person. And so yeah, I feel really lucky and blown away by your show. And I want to say congrats on all the films you've done. I love your movies. They feel like some sort of immaculate glove. (laughter)

**JW** Ooh a glove.

**OK** Well, I don't know how to explain it. It's like you can knit everything together in a way that just fits.

**JW** Oh, cool.

**OK** Sorry. I didn't mean to call your work a glove. It seems weird.

**JW** No, no, it's a nice new...I bet a lot of people have been using a lot of similar words. I've never heard that one before. (laughter) Yeah, thanks. I'm glad you enjoy it. I'm really surprised that you saw that other *Spiritual Life* movie. A lot of my friends haven't even seen it.

[Music: "La Meg" by Okay Kaya]

**JW** I think I became familiar with your work just through Spotify, maybe. I kind of just pick a song usually and just let the algorithm wash over me. I heard your music a few times without really knowing what it was. And then when you asked me to do this, I looked it up again, and I realized that I had already listened to and enjoyed your music before. So I thought, I thought that was really cool.

**OK** That's so cool.

**JW** It's always really exciting when something that you've heard before or seen before just becomes, you know, it enters the real world for you or your world. It always feels so distant when you're just observing it on the internet. But yeah, you're a real person, which is great. (laughter)

**OK** How'd you get into filming in the way that you do?

**JW** It was kind of born out of desperation, I think. When I was a kid, I would always use my camcorder that my dad had at home. And I would always make scrappy stuff. I would make a movie every single day when I was a kid with like my friends in the neighborhood. And then, I used to make this show called the Johnny show, which was just kind of like a talk show that I did in my room. And it seems like nothing has changed still. Like I'm, I'm still (laughter) basically just making the Johnny show, but with a bigger budget. But yeah, in filming the way that I do, I realized that I wanted to get into documentary around the same time that I started working for this private investigator, right after college. It was just a really dreary, depressing job where I had to watch hours and hours of really banal footage every single day and just try to find one little incriminating moment in there. That trained me to notice things that I didn't notice before. And I think that went hand in hand with my obsession with filmmaking and kind of cameras in general. So I started taking cameras from the PI place and, because you know, they would have these spy cameras that were sometimes broken. And I would go and try to . . . I would like repair them and use them around town and just film stuff. I just really liked that style. I don't know. I was, I was also just really . . . just trying to consume as many documentaries as I could at the time. And as much nonfiction film, and you know, a bit of everything else, too. But that was the moment when I realized that I wanted to take direct cinema or documentary more seriously. Because you know, I just looked around and I just realized that no one was doing anything quite like this. I just wanted to put all my favorite things together into the same place. Was there a moment for you, where you realized in your life that you knew—like a eureka moment where you knew exactly what you wanted to do? Or where you wanted to be? Like, you've been working towards that?

**OK** Mmm, no. (laughter) As I'm thinking about being a kid or when things start or stop . . . I either have incredibly bad memory or it all feels like the same kind of thing. I know that a lot of the reasoning for why I do what I do is just like pure desperation and boredom and trying to make sense out of things and moods and just kind of

everyday life as well, I guess.

**JW** Why is it through song?

**OK** The fun thing about working with song and songwriting is that you can kind of have all these different layers of what the song is. Like you can write a melodically really happy-sounding song and then contrast it with stranger, or darker, or mundane lyrics. It kind of just feels how you want it to feel depending on how you want to listen to the song. I think it's like a really fun medium to interact with and hopefully for other people to interact with. (laughter)

**JW** Is there a desired activity that you want your listeners to be, to be doing while they're listening to your music?

**OK** Yeah. Preferably, I want them to be, you know, jerking off and sobbing at the same time. (laughter)

**JW** Me too, with my movies. (laughter)

**OK** That's so funny, because that's exactly what I do when I watch your movies. (laughter)

**JW** That's cool.

**OK** Yeah, I'm paying you the highest compliment. (laughter)

**JW** Yeah, I didn't even know.

**OK** I once heard my music in a coffee shop in Copenhagen, in Denmark. That was fun.

**JW** Did you start pointing at the speakers and telling people it was you?

**OK** (laughter) No.

**JW** Because that's what I did when the billboard went up for my

show a few weeks ago. (laughter) I stood underneath it for a few days and I just kept, I kept pointing at it and telling people that it was me. You know, most people didn't care, but I thought it was really funny.

**OK** Yeah. (laughter) It's cool. It's crazy to have a billboard. I don't think I've ever had a billboard of myself. I'd probably do a little, you know, a casual selfie with it.

**JW** You wouldn't camp out underneath it for days at a time?

**OK** No, but I love that you went camping. (laughter)

**JW** I think your approach is probably healthier. Yeah, they actually let me keep the billboard, I asked them for it. And they told me that they never let people . . . I mean they tell me that no one's ever asked, and that they usually just throw them out. And I asked if I can keep it. But now I have this massive piece of vinyl . . .

**OK** In your house?

**JW** . . . yeah, it has no other . . . Like, there's nowhere else you could put it except for Times Square. (laughter) And I don't know what to do. But I hated the idea of it being thrown away, you know?

**OK** Well, don't you have a storage unit for your chair replica?

**JW** Right. Yeah, so I guess I could store it in there. But, you know, I like to . . . or maybe I'll rent a separate one. I like to have the chair in it's almost like, what do the Egyptians do? Kind of like, yeah, a tomb.

**OK** (laughter) Well, it's, it's interesting, it seems like you're good at and concerned with preserving and documenting and archiving . . . um, things. And where does that come from, this, this urge? Do you know?

**JW** When I started making movies, I didn't really know why I was making them. And then, you know, I went to school, and I started to read a lot more academic stuff about movies. And, you know, I

started to think more deeply about why I was making movies and not, you know, painting or, or, you know, writing, or doing something else. And I came to the point where I felt like film and video is, for me, best used as a document of something. I really like to use it. It's such a great way to capture something that's disappearing. And, you know, I was always just so afraid of losing things that I loved. And I wanted to capture as much as I possibly could. Just for preservation and archival purposes, you know, and I don't, I don't know . . . I didn't always know where all that raw material was going to end up. I just felt like the impulse to capture it was the right one.

**JW** I write what I do every day in these calendars. You know, I still don't know what . . . like I don't want anyone to really have them. I don't know what they're for. And they kind of make me sad. But I, (laughter) you know, I still do it, because it's just a lot of raw data that could have an application one day somewhere. And, you know, I felt like even, even the worst documentaries, like . . .

**OK** Yeah.

**JW** . . . succeed as raw footage of a very specific time and place. That's how I feel about my movies, too. Is that even if, even if people had to mute it while they're watching because they didn't like the sound of my voice, at the very least it would succeed as just raw footage of New York City in like, in an otherwise unremarkable period.

**OK** I think at first when I saw your film, *The Spiritual Life of Wholesale Goods*, I was just amazed over your ability as a director of photography. (laughter)

**JW** Thanks.

[CLIP FROM HOW TO WITH JOHN WILSON]

"When I got there, I was buzzed into the warehouse and walked up to their showroom, which was right next to a Buddhist Center. Fortunately, the Vice President was there. So I was able to talk to him for a few minutes about the company. And I didn't bring



anything to test my new microphone. But he lent me a pair of trisonic headphones, which sounded fantastic. 'I think we like to look at our products holistically, more than just a screwdriver, or a light bulb. Because a screwdriver, and a light bulb, can bring you happiness, it can bring you comfort. It's not just this 75 cent item, or \$2.50 item, it can be much more than that. Sometimes the translations don't come out exactly one for one, but this says 'to see clearly within ourselves is the most difficult thing to do.'"

**OK** The way you juxtapose these anecdotes, essays . . . I don't know what to call them really. How did you decide to work that way? I just, yeah, I really like it. It gives so much space.

**JW** The work is kind of like a stew of all of these different things. And a big part of it is like, you know, journalism and, you know, some of my favorite essayists, like Susan Orlean, or Janet Malcolm, like Gay Talese, or . . . these are all writers that I just am obsessed with. And I wanted there to be . . . you know, I wanted it to feel like an essay, because I was always afraid of writing. It was like pulling teeth to get me to write even a basic email for years. Because that, you know, I didn't know how to, how to start it or end it. And (laughter) everything in the middle, you know, I just didn't know, like, what part of me was writing the email. So I wanted to just start writing to force myself to become comfortable with it. And that's where the whole kind of narration comes from, is trying to get over my fear of writing and of hearing the sound of my recorded voice. Do you come up with like, a theme for the song, and then you, you fill it out with lyrics? Do you, do you just write a long body of text? And then how do you know when the bridges are? How do you know what part goes where and like . . . Because if you're telling a story, at what point do you interrupt that story with like a refrain?

**OK** Yeah.

**JW** I don't know. Well, yeah, you tell me.

**OK** I think this . . . it's tricky to answer. I'm really bad at linear thought and writing. (laughter) Like, I've never . . . I don't think I've



ever written an essay, for example. And so for me when I write . . . or I'm kind of obsessed with documenting my life, in a way, or the moods that enter in a day, and so a lot of the basis of the songs is, is normally some sort of strange punchline of how I felt in a day. You know, and then I can kind of work out from that. Usually, it's something funny to me in hindsight. Mostly because it's a little tragic, or just a little boring or something. And then I just sort of, yeah . . . all my songs tend to come out of a thought or a sentence or something I overheard.

**JW** Oh, but then it's like, oh, you know, you overhear something and then you think, and then you think, I gotta make a song you can dance to out of that?

**OK** (laughter) Yeah. Um, trying to come up with an example. Oh, I love to, I love to go to karaoke. Fuck, what's that place called? It's like Frank's or something in Downtown Brooklyn? I remember going there once and all the singers, they're like, really good. I'm not a very good singer.

**JW** Next to, next to Bam?

**OK** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**JW** Frank's Cocktail or whatever.

**OK** (laughter) They're so good at singing there. Um, I remember going there and listening to all the people singing and being amazing. And I was like, I want to try to sing "Sexual Healing" by Marvin Gaye. And I've had a few of Frank's cocktails at the time. And, you know, I totally bombed. And it was really embarrassing to me, and then I went home and wrote a song about, you know, my version of a Marvin Gaye song, basically. So it's just like, I was just writing about how sex with me is probably mediocre, but I have other things to offer. And then I thought it would be really sad if that was just like a slow, sad ballad. And so I tried to make it into like a dance song. (laughter) Out of necessity.

**JW** I think, yeah, successfully. No, I think I have a similar impulse which I noticed when I was listening to that, that very song, which is to take something that you're self-conscious about and turn it into something that makes other people happy. You know, so it's not just a kind of a net loss, you know . . .

**OK** Exactly.

**JW** . . . that always makes you sad.

[Music: "Asexual Wellbeing" by Okay Kaya]

**JW** Do you find yourself, like, being self-deprecating as a form of therapy?

**OK** Definitely. I like, you know, shaping experiences or feelings about myself that are negative into something that I think is beautiful. Which is music. I try to make the most beautiful melodic thing out of it. And that's really helpful to me. For sure, yeah.

**JW** Do you go to actual therapy?

**OK** (laughter) Uh, yeah.

**JW** Oh, okay. My friends have told me to go to therapy a bunch of times. But I said no, because, like, for me the work is kind of like . . . all of these things are completely unprocessed when they go into a voiceover or as I'm filming. You know, it's like, I'm really working through all of this stuff . . .

**OK** Yeah.

**JW** . . . in real time, on screen, and as I'm recording. It's kind of important for me. But it's maybe, you know, obviously not the most healthy way to go about it. But do you feel like that helps you, creatively? Like to process it in a separate space?

**OK** Yeah, I mean, I don't know. I think probably the real processing

is probably through kind of hashing it out in my work, my biggest hobby. (laughter) I got diagnosed with the disorder called Bipolar II. And after that, I think a lot of my friends and family and stuff started to ask me to take things seriously and not just pour everything into just my music or whatever. (laughter)

**JW** Yeah.

**OK** So after that, it was kind of like, okay, just get some sleep and talk to some people and stuff.

**JW** Yeah, I know, I think that's a much better idea. I told my friends what I just said, and, you know, they still thought that I was being stupid, and that it wasn't smart. So who knows? But I don't know. I'm doing okay, right now.

**OK** That's good.

**JW** Surprisingly.

**OK** Your work is really healing to me and all of my friends. And it's definitely doing a lot more than any therapy session has done. So, there is that about art. I am curious about how you . . . because this is so brave to me. You kind of enter any sort of public setting in a really disarming way, like you're some sort of judge-less alien. You can just approach strangers in such a cool way that . . . and you're so warm to them and they warm up to you. And do you know . . . like, how did you figure out how to do that? Or how did you dare to start doing that?

**JW** That was another thing that I've forced myself to do because of social anxiety. The camera was this tool . . . it gave like purpose to the relationship in a way that I don't often have. Like when I just approached someone normally in New York, which I've also been getting better at. I think the whole process with the cameras made me a lot better at it. But you just kind of have to roll the dice with people sometimes. And I just really love talking to people that don't usually have the microphone. And a lot of the time people

have a lot to say. I mean, yeah, it was hard at first to get over the social anxiety that I usually have. But it's really rewarding, because a lot of people just want to show you their world. I'll just, I'll walk up to people sometimes. And, you know, I don't give them my name. I don't give them anything. They just see that I have a camera and they just open a door and just say, you know, right this way. (laughter) And I cannot explain why that is, or predict when it's going to happen, but when it does, it's, it's just one of the most exciting feelings in the world to me. And it's just like a high that I can't really replace, you know, or substitute for anything else. It's like when I feel like I'm hearing something that no one else has heard, or seeing something that no one else has seen, it gets me really, really excited. And that's my favorite part of everything. So, yeah, and I think that if you're just honest with people and tell them what you're doing, you know, it goes a long way. Even if I'm just filming someone from across the street, and then I run up to them to ask them for, like, an image release. You know, just if they ask what it's for, just say, you know, "I was making an episode about small talk and you and your friend were making small talk, and you tapped each other when you went away and I thought that was really cool." Because that's a pattern I noticed and sometimes they asked to see the clip and you show it to them. You know, it's pretty much it. But then some people obviously don't want to be filmed. You can tell immediately. And you just move on, you know, and you apologize.

**OK** It kind of reminds me of the work of Daniel Arnold, you know, the photographer?

**JW** Oh, yeah, yeah, we're friends.

**OK** Oh, cool. I am always so amazed about the images that he also is able to capture. I'm just like, how do you even dare to click the button?

**JW** I don't know what it is, yeah, street photographers have a . . . you need a bit of armor. If someone does get upset, you know, you have to just kind of have your own ways of dealing with that. With someone like Daniel Arnold's photography, that kind of street

photography, you're moving so fast that most of the time people don't even notice. It's a little less intrusive, in a way. With the video, you know, it's, it's a much different challenge, and you have to think about like, a whole bunch of different little things like composure and the timing of how long they're going to be in this position, you know, whatever is happening. So, that was something that I kind of had to bring my team through. I shoot about three quarters of my show myself, but then the other quarter is filmed by this team of second unit filmmakers who just kind of roam around the city every single day, capturing as much as they possibly can, just so we have a huge library of material that's all catalogued that if we need a specific shot of something in the edit, you know, there's a good chance that we have it.

**OK** That's so cool. Does it take a lot of time to shoot (laughter) these episodes?

**JW** It's hard to say it's . . . I mean, we have an obscene amount of footage. And every shot is unique. Like we're not doing multiple takes of the same thing, like a normal show. So it's a lot of stuff to ingest and kind of get familiar with. I don't know it . . . the thing that takes the longest is just like trying and failing and trying and failing all these different ideas. You know, like, you're only seeing what succeeds and you're only seeing the funniest stuff. There's so much that just failed miserably that conceptually might have worked, but like the people didn't . . . weren't there or the . . . like we couldn't . . . I don't want to spoil anything coming up. But like going down to New Orleans for the scaffolding convention and then the Hard Rock Hotel just collapses. You know, it's like, that was just gonna be one part of the scaffolding episode, you know, but then the Hard Rock thing happened and it became a bigger thing. Yeah, you just kind of structure the work around the strongest moments, whatever they are.

**OK** So it's like, all the strongest moments of reality, hopefully captured, (laughter) then edited.

**JW** The longest part is the edit, you know, yeah.

[CLIP FROM HOW TO WITH JOHN WILSON]

“You can waste your entire life playing it safe. But the real danger is never what you expect it to be. And if you put up too much scaffolding to protect yourself, you might just end up buried underneath it. But if we try real hard to take it down, piece by piece, eventually, one day, it’ll all be gone. And only then will we know if it was all for show.”

**JW** I mean, I learned everything from YouTube. But like the college I went to was an experimental film college. They taught you how to use like 16mm or the optical printers, you know. Like nothing that prepared you for the industry whatsoever. Like anything I learned at all is just all from, just from people on YouTube.

**OK** You watch a lot of how to tutorials.

**JW** Yeah, exactly. And then I was just like, I wonder why this guy looks sad. And then started to make my own how to videos. Yeah.

**OK** So cool.

**JW** Have you noticed a big change in yourself after you’ve finished an album or a song?

**OK** I guess hindsight is a bitch, but you can also learn from her. I don’t really notice so much growth, per se. Yeah, I’m still . . . I’m still not aware of the reasoning why, but I do know that I feel better putting something into a recording and then putting it behind me. What about you?

**JW** For me, it’s just trying to do something constructive with something sad or something that bothers me. I usually feel better admitting something publicly that I would otherwise suffer privately. I made a movie about regret, you know, and I talk a lot about saying stuff that sticks with you forever. You know, like, there, there, there are certain things that I say, that I’ve said throughout my life, that once a week I think about and I just like . . . it’s just so painful thinking about things that I said that I wish I could take back. Admitting that

publicly in a video is a way for me to almost apologize to people and to let them know, you know, that I can't speak to every single one of you but I'm sorry for the stuff that I did, and it makes me feel a little better even though they may never see it.

**OK** That's beautiful. It makes sense.

[Music: "Vampire" by Okay Kaya]

**JW** How do you take failure?

**OK** I take failure every day, along with my B12 and my toast.

**JW** Oh, it's a, it's a supplement.

**OK** It's my supplement. It's just there. It's fine. What about you?  
(laughter)

**JW** Do you take criticism well?

**OK** Yeah, I think so. Because I think I'm pretty insecure, or maybe not so insecure, but I guess self-critical. Yeah, I feel like it would be weird if everything was just received as something that is perfect and fine when . . . yeah, I guess I'm aware that nothing I make is perfect and fine. Yet even though it would be cool to get there someday.

**JW** No, but it's good. It's healthy to be self-critical, or else you might become a monster.

**OK** Yeah, I don't want to be a monster.

**JW** Yeah, yeah. As long as you get to it before other people do. It's kind of this like defense mechanism. I remember going to a party at one point at a bar and this woman there told me that she wished that my voice was two octaves lower.

**OK** Why? (laughter)



**JW** I don't, I don't know. And that was when I realized that I wanted to lean into it even harder.

**OK** Yeah, that's fucked up. Also your voice is great. Whoa, what a crazy bar.

**JW** Thank you. Yeah. Everyone at the bar, I guess, must have had really deep, deep gravelly voices except for me.

**OK** They're like, "another drink please."

**JW** And, yeah. (laughter)

**OK** I'm actually going to YouTube how to dismantle Ikea beds. So I'll be thinking about you for the rest of the day. (laughter)

**JW** Cool. Yeah. Well, thanks for, thanks for talking to me, too. I feel like you could probably dismantle an Ikea bed with a, with an axe.

**OK** Yeah, with brute force. (laughter)

**JW** In all honesty, it was great talking to you and getting to know you over this call and everything, and thanks so much for asking me to do it. It's really touching that you liked the movies enough to ask me to talk.

[Music: "Comic Sans" by Okay Kaya]

**CM** FUSE is produced by Libby Flores, Associate Publisher at BOMB. It is edited and engineered by Will Smith. With production assistance by Josh Dassa. I'm Chantal McStay, Associate Editor at BOMB Magazine. Our theme music is "Black Origami" by Jlin. You're listening to "Comic Sans" by Okay Kaya. This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts on the web at arts.gov. Subscribe to FUSE on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen.

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