



THE COVER

Jesse Collins

THE ART OF THE LIVE SHOW

It's 48 hours after the Oscars, and Jesse Collins—who coproduced the awards ceremony in the most challenging of years with Steven Soderbergh and Stacey Sher—is feeling good. “I talked to Steven and Stacey and we felt like we did some new things,” he tells *Produced By*. “Yeah, not everything worked out the way we thought, but overall, we felt really good about the show and the pre-show and post-show.”

In any given year, producing Hollywood's biggest night is a daunting task. Producing the Oscars in a year when live shows had to be completely reimaged to adapt to a pandemic presented a whole batch of new obstacles.

And yet by April 2021, Collins, 50, had become a seasoned pro at pulling off hybrid virtual/live ceremonies. Beginning with the BET Awards in June 2020, Collins went on to deliver the 14th Annual Stand Up for Heroes ceremony, 2020 Soul Train Awards, the Super Bowl LV Halftime Show with The Weeknd, and the 63rd Annual Grammy Awards.

INTERVIEW BY PIYA SINHA-ROY

PHOTOGRAPHED BY KWAKU ALSTON,

PHOTOGRAPHER FOR FOURELEVEN.AGENCY

A full-page photograph of Jesse Collins, a Black man with a short beard and mustache, looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a dark navy blue suit jacket over a light blue and white vertically striped button-down shirt. A white pocket square is visible in his jacket's breast pocket. He is standing in a modern interior with a vibrant red wall and a dark metal railing. His right hand is resting on the railing. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and shadows.

Jesse Collins stands in the Geffen Theatre at the brand new Academy Museum. The venue was the location of the Oscars musical performances this year.

Washington, DC, native Collins

has had an unconventional journey in producing. As a talented radio DJ, he hosted shows on local urban stations in the '90s, where he encountered the biggest names in pop and hip hop. In the early 2000s he moved into producing the BET Awards and carved a career in bringing live entertainment to screen.

That music background came in especially handy at this year's Oscars, where performances helped to anchor the ceremony. And then during Questlove and Lil Rey Howery's music trivia game, it was Glenn Close nailing the answer for E.U.'s Da Butt that became Collins' personal highlight. "I'm from DC, so that was a huge, very important part of the show for me personally," Collins explains. "I was running out during a commercial break asking her, 'You're all set, right? You're ready?'" and she's like, "I got it; relax."

Close took it one step further: She spontaneously performed the "Da Butt" dance to raucous applause from the audience, and it quickly became a viral moment. "The fact that that came off was amazing. All my friends and family from DC were texting and calling," Collins says, laughing. "It feels like DC was recognized."

WITH ALL THE LIVE SHOWS YOU'VE DONE THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC, FROM THE BET AWARDS LAST SUMMER, THE SOUL TRAIN AWARDS, THE SUPER BOWL HALFTIME SHOW, THE GRAMMYS AND THE OSCARS, WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES AND WHAT HAS BEEN SURPRISINGLY SUCCESSFUL FOR YOU?

The BET Awards was the first major pandemic award show and we didn't know if it was going to be received like it was. It was just a decision—these are the cards we've been dealt, there's a pandemic, and no one really understands it at this point. We felt like we needed the show. We needed to be entertained; we needed to get our message out. George Floyd had just happened. It was really a rough time, and the BET Awards is something that I feel like we all look forward to—to come together, a sense of community. We were able to do it in a different way. People liked it, and that set us on a trajectory. With the Super Bowl halftime show, again it was challenging, but I liked that we were pushing past what anybody had done up until that point. That was a live show in front of about 25,000 people. People thought that it was going to be one of those pre-taped performances. We did this kind of proscenium show, but then ended on the field, which was really saying, "We are getting back to an even better version of what we had in the past." Then the Grammys was just another step of artists and community on stages, bringing music together, and that was amazing. Then the Oscars was like, now we have

a room full of people, we're together and we're celebrating this art. When the BET Awards come around again in June this year, we're going to push the envelope even further. That's been the best part of this—being a part of the progression in these award shows, figuring out how to not let COVID stop the entertainment and the sense of community that entertainment brings to us. Music, film—it all brings us together. It's all a sense of bonding, and I think that's really what we want.

YOUR BACKGROUND IS ROOTED IN LIVE SHOWS AND THE MUSIC WORLD, AND THE PERFORMANCES AT THE OSCARS ARE A REALLY BIG SHOWPIECE. SO HOW DID YOU PLAN THOSE OUT AND STAGE THEM TO MAKE THEM FEEL DYNAMIC THIS YEAR?

We had five amazing songs and wanted to make sure that everybody was able to perform the whole song, and we wanted everyone to have a great creative so they could be presented in the proper fashion. Chris Robinson directed them. Our creative team, Raj Kapoor and Dionne Harmon, did a great job of pulling it all together, along with each artist and their own creative directors. Like H.E.R. was developed by Tanisha Scott, who's brilliant. We all came together, we wanted them to feel elevated, we wanted them to feel like important parts of the Oscar experience, and I think we accomplished that.

YOU WERE CONTENDING WITH MANY CHALLENGES AT THE OSCARS THIS YEAR, GIVEN

THE PANDEMIC, LOCATIONS, HOLDING THE SHOW TWO MONTHS AFTER IT USUALLY TAKES PLACE AND GOING HOST-LESS ONCE AGAIN. WHAT WERE YOU HOPING YOU COULD DO THAT THAT WOULD MAKE IT FEEL DIFFERENT?

We tried to find a location that could fit the creative narrative of intimacy, to create a full room. We knew that we were only going to be allowed so many people. We didn't want to have a stage with an empty room and we didn't want people spread out where it's like this massive arena and there's just 50 people in there. If we were going to create a sense of community on television, we had to have a sense of community in the room. It was designed from the moment you walked in. Our pre-show was in that patio area where people could walk around and have drinks and mingle, and it set the table for when they walked into a room. They were sitting at tables with their friends, and bringing that together was phase one of trying to create a great Oscar experience. As for where we didn't use packages and we told stories, again, that was speaking to the narrative of community. We wanted to let people understand who these people are that are nominated, especially those in the craft awards. Yeah, we could run a package and show the hair and makeup from the films, but we felt like it was more interesting to tell you about the people who applied that makeup and created those looks, so you understood where they came from and what their dreams were. There was an online campaign that supported that—where you could find out more about these people with the hope that it would inspire people watching—to show that films are not just made by actors and directors; there's a whole community of people behind them.

THE ACADEMY HAS BEEN CONTENDING WITH RELEVANCY THE PAST FEW YEARS, AS WELL AS ABC



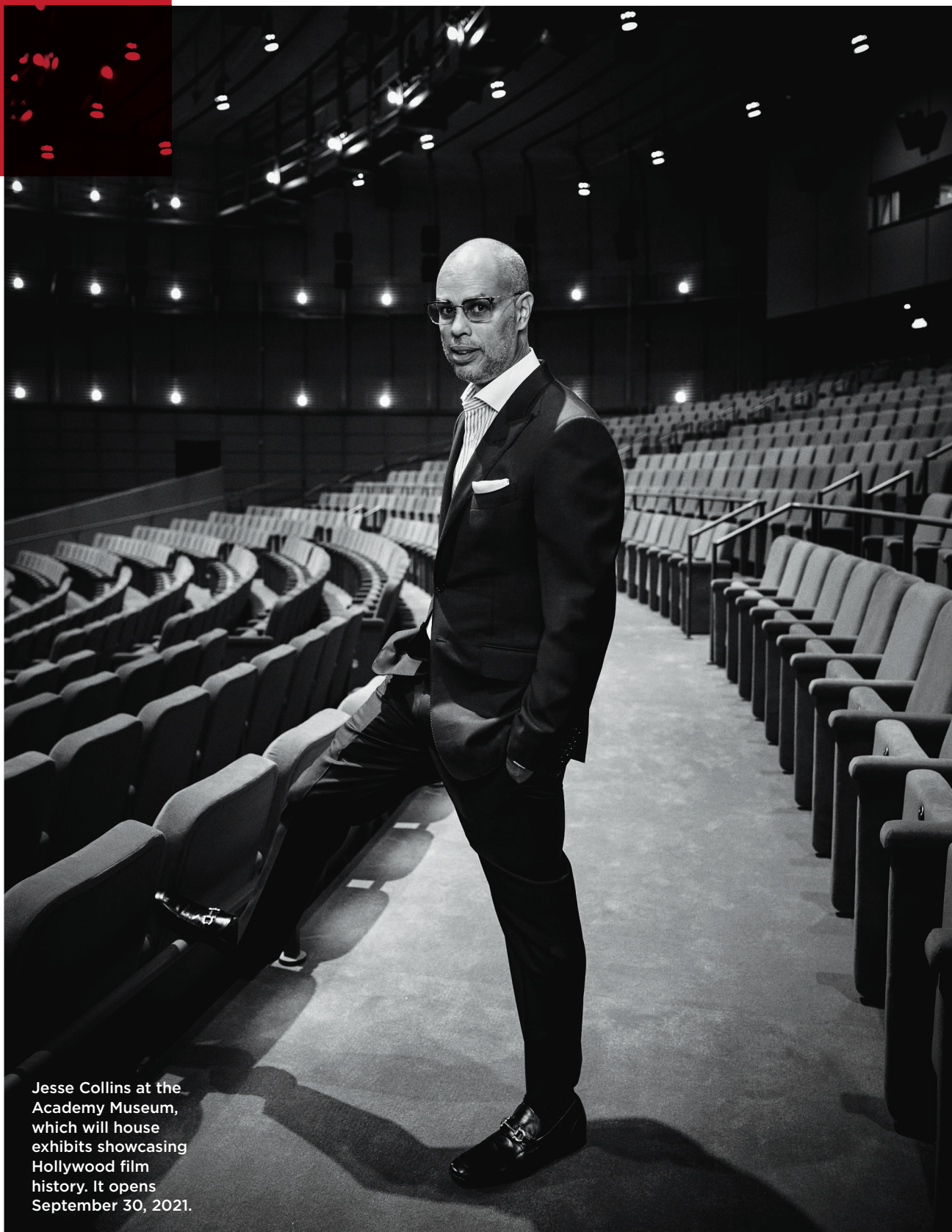
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WITH THE OSCARS RATINGS. SO HOW DO YOU MAKE THIS AWARD SHOW MORE COMPELLING TO TODAY'S AUDIENCE, ESPECIALLY WHEN SO OFTEN THE NOMINEES ARE PRESTIGE FILMS THAT AREN'T NECESSARILY WATCHED BY THE MASS AUDIENCE THAT YOU'RE HOPING TO DRAW? THIS YEAR, GIVEN THE CIRCUMSTANCES, DID IT ALLOW YOU TO HAVE A LITTLE BIT MORE FREEDOM?

I think everybody knew going in that this was the year to shake things up. In a COVID year, I think it was like, how can you even do a show? So it did give us a tremendous amount of freedom: different location, different look, satellites all over the world, talking about nominees instead of packages. This was the year to take a risk and do something completely different. ABC and AMPAS were very supportive from the beginning.

WHAT DREW YOU TO THE INDUSTRY AND SET YOU ON THE PATH TO YOUR CURRENT PRODUCING CAREER?

I was an intern at a radio station in DC and then I got on the air. I did nights at a station in Ocean City, Maryland, and then I went back to DC and I got on WPGC, a big, big urban station. From there, I went to LA, got on another radio station. Then my break into Hollywood came from Robert Townsend and Faizon Love. We all were friends, and I used to hang out with them at the comedy clubs. I had lost my job and I was down to like my last unemployment check and Townsend said, “You can be a writer on *Parenthood*,” and he gave me a script to punch up. It's funny, I had at some point decided that I wanted to be a writer. Marlon Wayans was nice enough to tell me the program that I needed to write with and he gave me a book—Syd Field's *Screenplay*. Then I showed Marlon the script and he said, “This is terrible.” But then Townsend got me a job as a writer trainee on his sitcom. From there, I just bounced around different shows and



Jesse Collins at the Academy Museum, which will house exhibits showcasing Hollywood film history. It opens September 30, 2021.

PHOTO COURTESY THE COLLINS JACKSON AGENCY



Jesse Collins at the Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Florida, ahead of the 2021 Super Bowl LV Halftime Show, headlined by The Weeknd.

I met John Cossette, who passed away some years ago. John made me a writer and coproducer on BET 20th Anniversary, the first BET awards show. That was when it all connected, because I was able to use my radio and music background for entertainment with award shows. Then we were off and running, and we've been doing award shows for BET ever since. When John passed (in 2011), I was able to start my own company, and we've been rolling ever since.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO BE A DJ DURING THE '90s HIP HOP AND URBAN MUSIC SCENE?

It was a crazy time because that was at the height of the East Coast, West Coast beef, the height of Suge and Eazy-E going

at it. All that stuff was happening, and you were seeing the bad-boy era grow. Looking back on it, everybody was so young, people were making so much money, and there was nobody to tell everybody to slow down—like this could end really bad, everybody's getting a little too caught up in this. Unfortunately, the end result was that we lost two amazing artists that I wish were still here today. Imagine what the world would be like with Tupac and Big in their 50s. What would have become of their careers? Looking back on that and just seeing their explosion—it's tragic. It's like when people post things about Ruthless Radio. I wish Eazy could see what we're all doing today because these guys were at the forefront of it all. I'll give you just a crazy moment.

YES, PLEASE TELL ME ABOUT CRAZY MOMENTS!

So we shot the performances on the roof of the Academy Museum, which is right across the street from the Petersen (Automotive) Museum, which is where Biggie got shot. I look over and was like, "That's the Petersen, and that's where the truck (that Notorious B.I.G. was shot in) was. I remember driving that night, I remember leaving the party, and I saw Big in his truck and we were all going—well, I don't know if he was going, but I was going—to the Trackmasters party up in the hills. I remember saying "what up" to him because he had been in the party all night, and him being like, "I'll see you." And then (I remember) driving up Fairfax, not knowing what had happened, and being at the



Jesse Collins backstage at the 2021 Grammy Awards with nominee and performer Harry Styles and Styles' manager, Jeff Azoff. Styles won his first Grammy that night.

PHOTO COURTESY TERENCE PATRICK

party. You're getting paged, and people are talking. You're starting to hear about it. It took time to even find out what happened. Things are so immediate (now). You just Google it and you TMZ or whatever. It was a crazy moment. I remember standing there the night (this year) we were shooting, and being like, wow, this museum is where it happened and now here we are, shooting performances for the Oscars.

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PIECE OF ADVICE THAT YOU WERE GIVEN, ESPECIALLY TOWARD THE START OF YOUR CAREER, FROM ONE PERSON?

A friend of mine, Drew Tillman, gave me the best advice that I still use to this day. He said, "Don't waste phone calls." When

you call somebody, especially someone that you want to be in business with, be organized, know what you're going to do. Don't call Tyler Perry to be like, "So what do you have for breakfast?" Unless you're at that point in the relationship, have a point and make it meaningful for both parties so that people will pick up your next call. Even if it's a no, it had a point. You won't get a chance at a second, third or fourth call.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE TOUGHEST LESSONS THAT YOU LEARNED ABOUT PRODUCING IN YOUR EARLY YEARS?

Learning patience. John (Cossette) used to always say you've got to just be patient with stuff. You can't just get on a call

and say, "It's got to be like this, this and this," and drive everybody crazy to make it exactly the way it is in your head. You've got to let it evolve, let people help make the idea grow. What I learned on my own is the responsibility of being a producer. In a lot of cases, I'm financially responsible. The network trusts me with X amount of dollars to deliver the show. You're responsible for your word when you tell an artist that such and such is going to happen. They have to believe you that that is going to happen and that it's going to be great. You realize that to some extent, everything is your responsibility. The buck really does stop with you. When it's an issue, you've got to be the one to take the bullet, to take the blame, to exit and to move forward.

AS A BLACK PRODUCER WORKING ON AWARDS SHOWS IN THE PAST YEAR, ESPECIALLY WITH THE RESURGENCE OF THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT, HOW DO YOU WEAVE THESE ISSUES WITHIN THE WORK THAT YOU DO?

Look, it is a part of Americana at this point, it is a part of American culture, whether people want to accept it or not, and it's not going away. We're going through a shift in this country. What the BLM movement is doing will be studied for decades, and some people are going to be on the right side and some are going to be on the wrong side of history. So I think it's important for me to make sure that you keep the narrative going, keep exposing it. It doesn't mean that you have to do a lecture or a package every time. There's so many ways to integrate the story. Sometimes it needs to be heavy-handed, and sometimes just our existence in a situation sends a message. Sometimes it's a line. Regina (King)'s opening to the Oscars was beautiful because it wasn't all about that. It was like, "Let me just send this message, let you know where I'm at." It was very personal for her, and then she went into the show, which means that she made it a part of the show—because it is a part of who we are right now. It's nothing to be scared of. This is our progression, as humans, as Americans, and we have to embrace it. People are opening their eyes and they're realizing, "Oh, we were pretty messed up. That was racist." I'm sure there are execs that are sitting there and they're realizing, "Hmm, I've had this black executive on my team but oddly enough, I only asked him about Kevin Hart; I never asked him about what he thinks about Brad Pitt. It's always like, "You think Kevin could do this?" As opposed to, "What actor could do this?" That moment of clarity for people of color in Hollywood is like when the people in the room with you aren't just asking you about talent that reflects your community.

"THIS IS OUR PROGRESSION, AS HUMANS, AS AMERICANS, AND WE HAVE TO EMBRACE IT. PEOPLE ARE OPENING THEIR EYES AND THEY'RE REALIZING, 'OH, WE WERE PRETTY MESSED UP. THAT WAS RACIST.'"

WHAT SPECIFIC PIECE OF ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR YOUNG PRODUCERS THAT ARE ENTERING INTO THE INDUSTRY NOW?

I think young producers entering the industry understand that the gatekeepers think that you are entitled. Just know that going in, and so prove that you're not. Be willing to do the extra thing. Work really hard to get the thing that you want, or come in with it all together and done—but prove that you can do the work. Don't just chase the title, chase the job and everything that comes with it. When you walk in the door and (say) "I did this little thing, so I want to be executive producer," you won't actually learn how to be an executive producer. So even if you get the credit on that one project, that moment will go away, and you won't be able to recreate it. Whereas if you really learn the job and do other jobs leading up to it, then when you do get that credit, you also get that respect from the community, which is actually better currency than the credit. Because as a producer, a lot of it is on your word. To be able to tell the studio, "Oh yes, I can deliver this. Oh, yeah, this will work. Oh, yeah. I won't go over budget," they're really just trusting

you, and that trust only comes from a community of people saying, "Yes, they delivered." You only can build that by really understanding the job and working your way up.

WHAT BARRIERS DO YOU FEEL STILL EXIST, ESPECIALLY FOR PRODUCERS OF COLOR OR FOR UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS RIGHT NOW?

That saying from *Hamilton*, being in the room where it happens—we need to be in more rooms and be a part of decisions. Not just the urban films, not just the first black person to do whatever story. We need to be in every story, just like someone white can be in any room. They get to be a part of that process, and when they're making a movie that happens to not have a lot of people of color in the cast, that doesn't mean that you can't have people of color behind the scenes, or people of color in the room giving the green light for that film. Because we are not limited to understanding only our stories, our culture. We're the ones that are culturally connected to understand all of them. ■

This interview has been edited and condensed for space and clarity.