

# REALITY WITHOUT



# MANIPULATION



WITH SUCH SHOWS AS *THE REAL WORLD*, *KEEPING UP WITH THE KARDASHIANS*, *SURVIVING R. KELLY* AND *BORN THIS WAY*, JONATHAN MURRAY AND BUNIM/MURRAY PRODUCTIONS HAVE PLAYED A KEY ROLE IN ESTABLISHING THE TEMPLATE FOR THE REALITY REVOLUTION.

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**“I’m not here to make friends.”**

**“Make it work.”**

**“You’re doing amazing, sweetie.”**

**“The tribe has spoken.”**

**“I was rooting for you!”**

These are among the many memorable catchphrases associated with reality television. But for a certain segment of the population who are Gen X and younger, nothing is more iconic than the one that begins, “This is the true story...”

Those words kick off the main title sequence for MTV’s *The Real World*. They imply that audiences are about to peer into the lives of seven strangers who agreed to let camera crews record them living together in a revolving door of oh-so-stylish dwellings in a hip city.

Premiering in 1992— 19 years after PBS documented the not-so-placid existence of *An American Family* and eight years before CBS introduced American audiences to the voyeuristic *Big Brother*—*The Real World* acted as a lightning bolt of relevancy and insight into the minds of a generation coming of age in a new political and social era. Not knowing what to make of this new type of programming, the *Los Angeles Times* described it as “contrived” in May of that year and then a “documentary” that June.

For its target audience, the show’s various seasons would be an eye-opening education on the complexities of race relations, AIDS, abortion and don’t-ask, don’t-tell. For those viewers’ parents—and for advertisers—it was ongoing insight into what interested youths.

The groundbreaking phenomenon that *The Real World* became was not a foregone conclusion, especially since soap opera vet Mary-Ellis Bunim and broadcast news producer Jonathan Murray had trouble even selling their idea. Even after they successfully pitched it to then-MTV head of development Lauren Corrao over breakfast at New York's Hotel Mayflower ("What if we could do a soap opera without actors?"), it was months before the series got a green light.

But eventually, Bunim and Murray's "docu-soap" would not only usher in a new era of TV storytelling, it would also forever change the definition of "television producer."

It wasn't that Bunim and Murray didn't have appropriate resumes or that they lacked vision. She had the experience and ability to pace out drama over multiple episodes. Murray, in addition to his news background, knew what it meant to "see" yourself reflected in the media. He appreciated the way British documentarian Michael Apted's *Up* series looked at socioeconomic impacts over the course of his subjects' lifetime. Apted's project started in 1962, when Murray was 7 years old and growing up in England—the same age and nationality as the subjects in the first chapter of Apted's work, *Seven Up!* Murray, as a queer kid growing up in the '70s, also felt a kinship with Lance Loud, the openly gay son in *An American Family*.

But appreciating and doing are different things.

### Early Days: Winging It

"The first season of *The Real World*, we had an idea of what we wanted to make and some ideas about how to go about that. But it was all untested. We were just making it up as we went along," Murray admits now.

In those years before self-tapes and social media, "casting" the show involved pasting up flyers in laundromats and other places they



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—JONATHAN MURRAY

thought young adults might frequent. They'd stop people on the street if they seemed interesting—a method, Murray says, that still proves effective today. In the early years of their attempts to create an eclectic group of castmates, the term "diversity" was predominantly a Black and white issue. Other racial divides—along with sexuality, economic status, religion and disabilities—would be explored in more depth in later seasons. (One of the most memorable moments of my impressionable youth was hearing Pam Ling, a housemate in the show's San Francisco-based third season and who is second-generation Chinese American on her mother's side, expertly define the term "Oriental" as an adjective for rugs or food, not for people).

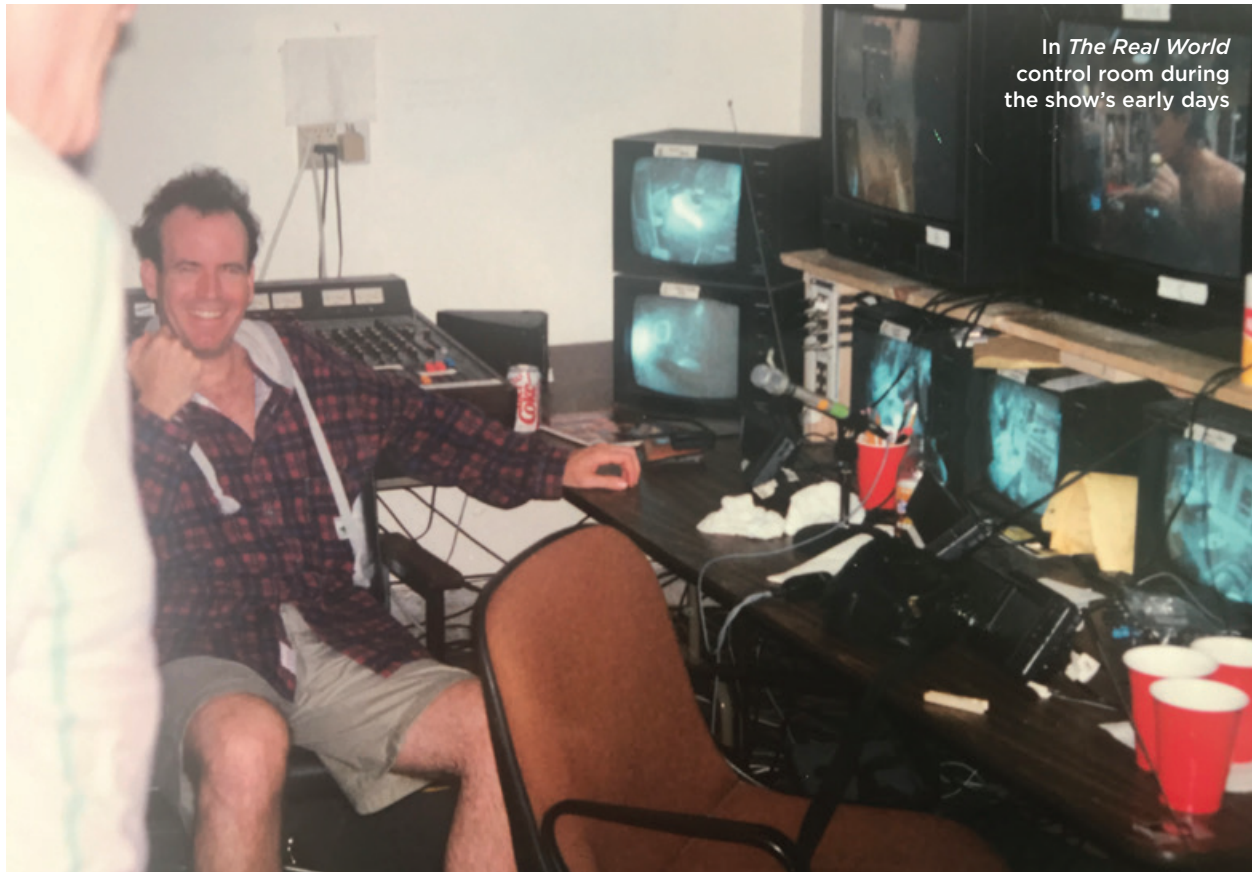
Murray says the first season of *The Real World* was made for around \$115,000 per half-hour episode, which included the perk of free office space at MTV. But the network "significantly upped the budget for season two to reflect the challenge of producing and editing this type of all-encompassing production."

Murray admits that he and Bunim, who passed away from breast cancer in 2004, made mistakes that first season. Capitulating to MTV's fear that there wouldn't be enough story, Murray says that they would "throw some pebbles in the pond."

The result was that "the cast threw boulders back at us. And we sort of had to rebuild trust with them."

The biggest conflict arose when producers planted the Bruce Weber book *Bear Pond* in the house, which was significant because the book contained nude photos of housemate Eric Nies. When cast member Heather Gardner found it, she mocked him, causing Nies and other housemates to turn on the producers. The producers apologized, and none of that story material ended up in the show.

"We quickly learned that you just have to have confidence in the people you cast," Murray says. "We realized that there's going to be an ebb and flow.



In *The Real World* control room during the show's early days

You'll get a lot of story in the first couple of weeks. Then the cast is tired and they'll go into hibernation mode. We learned to just to let that happen. Relax about it, and know that once they've regenerated their strength, we'll get more story."

What resulted was innumerable hours of footage, which were then handed over to series editor Alan Cohn.

"Editors are the unsung heroes. Editors make the rest of us look so good," Murray laughs.

He says that, going back to *The Real World*, the Bunim/Murray Productions process includes creating an outline and talking it through with the editors before sending them off to investigate the material.

"We would empower our editors to act as a check on us to make sure that story is really told," Murray says.

### Finding the Storylines

The process developed during *The Real World* would start with the production team's field notes, which—because the cast was monitored for all 24 hours—would be written up at the end of each shift so the incoming producers would know what was happening. The notes and tapes would be sent to the postproduction office, where the tapes would be duplicated for protection. A supervising story editor and story editor would oversee the story team as it created an outline and a three-act structure, with a main "A" storyline and a secondary "B" storyline.

The editors would then examine everything and, Murray says, "They had power to come back and say 'No, I don't think that story works.'"

MTV alum Corrao says that *The Real World* "was made in post," and that aside from the initial setup of putting seven

strangers in a fishbowl, "the idea was to not have it be contrived." The goal was that the story would evolve organically and not be something derived by a "leading-the-witness" type forcefulness.

"Unlike reality shows today, we didn't tell them what to do; we didn't force them to do anything," she says.

### Reality Road Map

Editor Cohn worked on the first season of *The Real World* and part of the second season. He recalls that for a test pilot of the series, he combed through 120 hours of footage, filmed over a Thanksgiving weekend, to piece together a single minute of footage that would set the grungy-yet-earnest tone that defined its early years. A fan of documentarian Fred Wiseman's ability to find the beauty in the ordinary, Cohn developed the then-revolutionary idea of splicing audio of someone talking about

something banal like having orange juice and sandwiches over otherwise overlooked footage of orange juice and sandwiches—even if they weren't the exact orange juice and sandwiches mentioned in the anecdote. The result was a feel of a relatable reality that would show, rather than simply tell, the audience what happened.

Incorporating strategies like that meant that *The Real World* wasn't just creating a road map for BMP; it would influence the entire genre.

"One of our biggest contributions were creating the process by which you do reality television as a whole," Murray says. "We would apply a lot of the basic principles of dramatic storytelling to telling our stories."

Since the success of *The Real World*, BMP has had its hand in such reality competition shows as what is now known as Paramount+'s *The Challenge*, which saw *Real World* alums square off against each other for the spin-off series *Road Rules*; *Project Runway* during its brief stint on Lifetime; and the two series that forever changed the concept of "celebrity"—E!'s *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* and Fox's *The Simple Life*, centered around alleged besties and privileged socialites Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie.

### Dedication to Craft

BMP has also made impactful series and documentaries about people with disabilities, including A&E's *Born This Way*, about young adults with Down syndrome, and HBO's *Autism: the Musical*. The company has also given voice to long-silenced sexual assault survivors: E!'s *Citizen Rose*, which followed actress and activist Rose McGowan after she went public with her allegations against Harvey Weinstein; and the game-changing Lifetime miniseries *Surviving R. Kelly*.

The company's credo, which Murray says was handed down from Bunim, is "Let's step back and look at the story (to find) what is the most interesting and



surprising way that will service it best and give the viewer the most enjoyment."

This dedication to detail and craft permeates the company. Julie Pizzi, BMP's president, started as a segment producer in the '90s for what was then called MTV's *Real World/Road Rules Challenge*. In addition to participating in an hour-long interview with Bunim and Murray, her application process required her to submit challenge ideas and

writing samples. She also had to take a grammar test—something she wishes the company still required because, she says, "It weeds out a lot of people who don't really care about writing."

### Casting Authenticity

This desire for quality and authenticity extends to casting searches, especially as the internet and social media have made us all a lot less genuine. BMP's



Far left: With the late Mary-Ellis Bunim, his production partner; on location for *The Real World*; with Mike “The Miz” Mizanin, who joined *The Real World* in its 10th season.



casting process includes stringent background checks to verify that the supposed personality people present in interviews is an accurate portrayal of who they are when cameras aren't rolling. This system is the result of years of trial and error, and Murray says it now includes "a psychological screening to make sure that they have the strength to do the show and that it's healthy for them to do it."

This doesn't preclude casting people who hope to use BMP shows to catapult themselves to fame and recognition. Mike "The Miz" Mizanin came on the 10th season of *The Real World* with the goal of becoming a professional wrestler. He and his family now star in the BMP-produced USA Network series *Miz & Mrs.*

“You don’t want surprises. You don’t want to put someone in the show not realizing who they are,” Murray says. He adds that especially for competition shows “when there’s a prize at stake, if someone misrepresents themselves or there’s something you didn’t know about that comes to light at the last minute, you might have to pull them. Either for the fairness of the competition or because it’s just not appropriate to show them in that situation.”

It also contributes to the company’s employee retention. Pizzi says this is because they like to work with people they can trust—and the people they work with like to work for people who respect what they do. When Pizzi started at the company, she thought she would be expected to sit with editors and go beat-by-beat through each storyline or music cue. Bunim told her that wasn’t necessary because “our editors are storytellers.”

When BMP was founded, Murray says, “there weren’t a lot of walls up between the departments.” Employees were encouraged to shift from casting to field producing to story development so that they could see how everything worked and find which niche of the medium made them the most passionate.

This also had the economical benefit of keeping quality employees around during the reality TV boom of the early 1990s when demand for field crews and editors increased, as did their pay. The company instituted an in-house training program to work with up-and-coming talent, which would give them hands-on experience and reduce budget costs. Murray jokes now that “there are lots of people in the business who went to BMP University!”

“People who don’t work in reality TV have lots of misconceptions about it. There are a lot of brilliant people in every craft in reality TV,” he says, adding that “I don’t think the (relatively low) cost of producing a reality show makes it any easier to get greenlit.

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—JULIE PIZZI, BMP PRESIDENT

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Networks are watching every penny and are always pushing to bring down the cost. That’s especially true for long-running hits whose staff and talent receive yearly salary increases.”

But earning the confidence of those who work behind the scenes doesn’t always require the same skills as working with those in front of the camera, especially if they are budding celebrities.

Murray says the difference between casting people to be on *The Real World* or *Road Rules* versus filming something like *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* is that it’s a host-versus-guest mentality.

For one thing, the producers don’t get to choose who is on the show.

“You’re going into a set situation,” he explains. “Before you even take on the project, you have to decide if the on-screen players are interesting enough on their own to bring in viewers. You have to judge whether that group of people is

fascinating because you’re not able to add someone to it.”

### Keeping Kardashian Boundaries

The other is a question of boundaries, both actual and figurative.

“When you’re working with the Kardashians, you’re going into *their* house; you’re going into *their* world,” he says. “So it’s a bit more of a negotiation about what you have access to.”

This could be different for each family member, he says. When sister Kourtney Kardashian and Scott Disick had their children during the run of the show, they had a camera in the delivery room that the couple was controlling. Not all family members were that open, and the producers respected this.

“The reason the *Kardashian* series on E! was so successful was that we, and the network, were able to build a real

trusting relationship with them where they felt safe to be themselves,” Murray explains. “We would go into an episode thinking we’re filming one thing. Then when one of those crazy moments of real life just happens, they were very good about letting us continue filming. Later we’d work out how we were going to tell that story.”

BMP clearly earned the family’s trust. The company also produced spin-offs for E! like *Khloé & Lamar*, about sister Khloe Kardashian and then-husband Lamar Odom; and the documentary series *I Am Cait*, about parent Caitlyn Jenner’s life after her gender transformation.

Although the family members’ stars grew as a result of the show and other factors, Murray says that the objective of the producers remained the same: “Find the humanity in the family.”

“With the Kardashians, as outrageous as they might be sometimes, ultimately, they’re family,” he says, adding that “as producers of television shows, you always want to have your central character be sympathetic. I think the Kardashians, through the 20 seasons that we made, always remained sympathetic and likable.”

Just like with *The Real World*, shows about celebrities can require patience before a story develops.

“I think it’s harder for celebrities to let down their guard and trust the process,” says Pizzi. “It takes a minute, and I think you can see that in a new season. We can always see a polish that is hard to cut through. But as time goes by, you might get some scenes without so much makeup on, or they become a little less filtered.”

But Pizzi says that, even at their worst, all reality TV stars must have something positive going for them.

“No villain-type character gets cast if they don’t have redeeming qualities,” she says. “At the end of the day, there are people you love to hate. But there’s got to be something about them that you care about or you don’t want to watch them.”

## Raising Up Voices

Just like in actual life, there’s no one-size-fits-all strategy to earning cast members’ trust or learning how much filming each person can endure.

After casting *Born This Way*, the A&E show about young adults with Down syndrome, BMP partnered with the disability-led nonprofit RespectAbility. Lauren Appelbaum, the organization’s senior vice president of communications, says with that show and its spin-off *Born for Business*, RespectAbility would provide crews one-sheets with information about each person’s disability. Producers also

learned to create schedules that could accommodate people who couldn’t be filmed 10 hours a day.

Applebaum says that they would also provide feedback on optics of plot points or music choices that might unintentionally elicit the wrong emotion or misconception. For example, a business closed because of COVID, not because the owner had a disability. The goal was to not sensationalize and to avoid something that might be construed as “inspiration porn,” a term she defines as “this idea that someone who has a disability is used to prop up the nondisabled person.”



**On *The Real World: Las Vegas* set with MTV execs. Opposite: In Colombia with *The Challenge* host TJ Lavin; with the *Born This Way* cast after winning the Reality Emmy in 2016**



"We've all heard how some unscripted and reality shows manufacture situations to cause people to get a little upset or heighten emotions," Applebaum says. "There was a concerted effort to make sure that did not happen with *Born This Way*."

Murray says his company took on *Born This Way* because it followed the trajectory set up by *The Real World*, which was all about "pushing up previously marginalized voices and making sure everyone had a voice."

"We've always had this desire to use the medium to raise up voices that weren't being heard," he says. "It was also

good for us economically, because people weren't telling those stories. It brought something fresh to the marketplace."

It also made an impact on his personal life. Murray joined RespectAbility's board of directors in 2016. When he and partner Harvey Reese redid their home, they made sure to make it more accessible.

### The No-Exploitation Tightrope

But even as participants and viewers of reality TV have become more savvy, producers still have to walk the line between a good story and exploitation. Murray recalls a moment from the 16th

season of *The Real World* when producers learned that housemate Danny Jamieson's mother had died before Jamieson had received the news. When the call was coming in from Jamieson's dad, the camera operator was instructed to stand back and give Danny his space.

This tightrope act becomes even more difficult when producers are doing a series that is largely about trauma. Murray admits that Lifetime's *Surviving R. Kelly* series, which aired its third and final installment in January, was "a very challenging thing to put together."

"A lot of work went into trying to tell that story well and trying to make sure that it was fair—specifically, to his victims, the people he had preyed on," Murray says of the multiple women who came forward to speak of the musician's abuse after years of being silenced.

"There was a lot of conversation within the production team about how best to tell the story. We didn't want to glorify him. But we did want to understand where he came from: his childhood, his background, his music."

Murray says writer-directors Nigel Bellis and Astral Finnie mixed survivors' interviews about the musician's abuse and manipulation tactics with interviews with journalists and others who could speak to the roadblocks faced to bring Kelly down. "It was very much an innovative program and set the pace for a lot of others that followed."

Despite his company's eclectic resume, Murray says he likes that reality TV production is still small enough for companies to home in on specific interests and fan bases. For example, Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato's *World of Wonder* has made an empire out of the reality competition series *RuPaul's Drag Race* and other queer-specific content.

But is any of it real? Or is it fake?

"I think all of what we do (in life), whether it's what we're doing right now or what we do in reality or in documentary, we are all producers, directors and editors making choices," Murray says.

Ain't that a true story? ■

