



A confluence

OF VISION AND DETERMINATION

**TOMMY OLIVER'S POWERFUL BUSINESS MODEL
IS ROOTED IN AN IMPASSIONED COMMITMENT
TO COMMUNITY AND AUTHENTICITY.**

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Tommy Oliver is a producer, but he is also a DP, an editor, an acclaimed photographer (his photos reside at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture), a writer, a director, a founder, a CEO, and, most importantly to him, a husband and father. He grew up in Philadelphia, was raised by his grandmother, and worked his way through Carnegie Mellon University where he double majored in digital media and economics.

That training in finance, coupled with tackling almost every behind-the-scenes production role from high school to the present, has made the founder and CEO of the Confluent Company an industry powerhouse.

"There's Confluent Films and there's Black Love Inc. Above them both, there's the Confluent Company," Oliver explains. Altogether, Confluent produces and finances, but its 20-person team also offers expert photography, marketing, videography, and postproduction services that make the outfit almost entirely self-sufficient, not to mention a tremendous value to those who collaborate with it.

Oliver's achievements over the past 18 months have been astounding. He was credited as producer or EP on four films that made the 2023 Sundance Film Festival lineup. Three of those films were the first features ever financed by Confluent.

Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project received Sundance's documentary grand jury prize, racked up a slew of additional awards and nominations, and was Oscar shortlisted. *Young. Wild. Free.* was purchased by a distributor and will be released this summer. In February, *Fancy Dance* was purchased by Apple Original Films; it will make its debut on Apple TV+ on June 28.

Also this February, Confluent announced a new FAST channel on Amazon Freevee showcasing a rich library of existing, licensed content under



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the Black Love banner that began in 2017 with a hit docuseries for OWN and expanded into a multiformat universe.

Black Love Inc., cofounded by Tommy and his wife, Codie, has provided the foundation for much of Confluent's success. The brand is dedicated to promoting healthy relationships within the Black community, from romantic connections to familial bonds to self-love.

As chief creative officer of Black Love, Codie brings a background in broadcast journalism and a degree from USC's Stark Producing Program to the company's efforts, which include original series, a podcast network, a website with continually updated original content, a robust social media presence, in-person events, an app, even a forthcoming card game. She also hosts *The Mama's Den* podcast.

Codie describes her role as "speaking authentically to the Black audience and coming up with creative from digital to film to packaging to make the projects as strong as possible." This laser-focused commitment to authenticity has cultivated a large, loyal audience that Black Love can leverage for giant brands like Target, Audible, and Disney.

Each day, the Olivers recommit to adaptability, to staying finely attuned to the broader industry and cultural landscape, to continuing to figure it out through daring and hard work.

James Lopez, president of Macro Film Studios, was the exec on the first studio film Tommy Oliver produced, *The Perfect Guy*.

"I knew he was special when he told me about his background, which included graduating from Carnegie Mellon and taking a job at Microsoft before deciding to become a filmmaker," Lopez says.

Oliver also told Lopez about *Kinyarwanda*—a depiction of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda—for which he received his first feature producing credit. "After hearing his account of what he went through to produce that film, I felt

he was a special being," Lopez says. "I am not surprised of the strides he has made."

The Kinyarwanda Story

Oliver came on board *Kinyarwanda* as the DIT (digital imaging technician). Three days before the first day of shooting in Kigali, Rwanda, his astute financial eye caught a massive exchange-rate error in the film's budget. The production couldn't afford the equipment it planned to get from South Africa and there was not a single light or grip stand available in Rwanda. So, the 24-year-old went into action.

Oliver traversed three African countries by plane and truck (dodging treacherous potholes and troops of baboons) to track down G&E for *Kinyarwanda*. He negotiated maddening, days-long delays at border crossings among machine gun, machete, and pistol-toting crowds. And that's the short version of the story.

Oliver and the equipment pulled into the Kigali base camp just in time. The film premiered at Sundance in 2011, where it won the World Cinema Audience Award. It won the audience award at AFI. Roger Ebert gave it four

stars and ranked it No. 6 on his top 10 films of 2011.

Today, Oliver and Confluent Films are producing and financing a documentary series with *Kinyarwanda* director Alrick Brown. "That's really important to me. My first film doesn't happen without him," Oliver says. "Now, we're able to do something where we can bring him in and support him in an organic way."

Coming Full Circle

In 2016, Oliver planted a seed he named Directing While Black. "The directors that we revere and love from the '70s, Coppola and Scorsese and Spielberg and de Palma and Lucas, were all friends who supported each other. I realized that as Black directors, we didn't really have that, at least not in a way that was intentional. So I created it," he recalls.

"At the very first dinner were Shaka King pre-*Judas and the Black Messiah*, Barry Jenkins pre-*Moonlight*, Steven Caple Jr. pre-*Creed* and *Transformers*, Justin Simien pre-*Dear White People*, and Sheldon Candis, whose next movie we're producing," Oliver says.

For Simien, DWB provides catharsis.

"It's one of very few places to safely and honestly share and mirror experiences with community. A much-needed antidote to the gaslighting you have to just accept in order to Hollywood while Black."

Simien, who saw huge success with his feature and series *Dear White People*, will direct an adaptation of Vault Comics' *Heist: Or How to Steal a Planet*, with Oliver producing. He believes the most significant impact Confluent is having on the industry is their financing of Black projects.

"It's crazy that such a thing is still so radical in this town, but it is, especially now," Simien says. "Many of the Hollywood entities who pledged to do better in the wake of George Floyd have all but given up on us. Tommy stays in the ring fighting the important and necessary fights."

Within 24 hours of viewing footage sent by *Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project* co-director Joe Brewster, Oliver was asking Brewster what he could do to finish the film. Given the quality of what he saw, he was shocked the filmmakers hadn't yet found the help they needed.

"It's an incredible story, told



Kena Onyejekwe, Tommy and Cassie Freeman on the set of *Kinyarwanda* in 2009

unbelievably well, about somebody who means so much,” Oliver says. “The opportunity to join in any capacity as producer or financier shouldn’t have been there. It’s a failure of the system that nobody said yes to that film without wanting to strip away all the things that made it special.”

The second Sundance film, *Fancy Dance*, brought Oliver back together

with producer Heather Rae, who was EP on his first feature.

“Heather was there when I needed support. She was sage and had more industry experience and connections. It meant so much for us to have the full circle moment with *Fancy Dance*, a story that she cared about so much,” Oliver says. Confluentia financed 90% of the feature.

“Tommy was the best leader we could have had for this special film,” Rae says. “He always came with something to offer and guided the project past the finish line. He impressed with his leadership when he refused to accept offers that didn’t reflect the quality of our film—and sure enough, the right offer came.”

“I really respect that Tommy took a chance on me, a first-time filmmaker



Codie and Tommy Oliver in the Confluentia office



Producers James Wilson (middle left) and Tommy Oliver on the set of *Hamlet* with line producer Greg McManus (left), first AD Marc Wilson (right), and director Aneil Karia (far right) in 2023

telling a very personal story about a small Native American community in Oklahoma,” says cowriter and director Erica Tremblay. “He saw the value in what I was trying to do and backed that up with financing and tangible support.”

“A lot of folks in Hollywood claim they support underrepresented voices, but not many are willing to pony up the resources to actually make our projects a reality,” Tremblay adds.

That support includes always answering Tremblay’s calls and texts no matter what. “He’s a very busy guy, but he makes time for his filmmakers. I always know I can count on him to solve whatever it is that I need solved,” she says.

To Live and Die and Live was the third Sundance film crediting Oliver (as EP). Confluentia is now financing and producing a doc series with director Qasim Basir. “We are developing two other scripts with him

as well,” Oliver says.

Number four in the Sundance lineup was *Young. Wild. Free.*, which Oliver produced and cofinanced. “Without James Lopez, I don’t make my first studio movie, *The Perfect Guy*, which he was the exec on,” Oliver says. “So when he needed a partner on *Young. Wild. Free.*, I’m only there because he had supported me earlier. That’s the tapestry that I appreciate and want to be a part of creating.”

“It made total sense that we would do this together. Tommy already had a strong relationship with director Thembi Banks and was convinced she could execute the script written by Juel Taylor,” Lopez recalls. “It was the first time in both of our careers that we produced a film 100% funded by two Black-owned and run companies. It was empowering that we didn’t have to ask anyone.”

At the time of publication, five of

Confluentia’s last six projects had female directors or co-directors, all of whom are women of color.

Doing What it Takes

It’s worth noting that Oliver was on set for both *Fancy Dance* in Oklahoma and *Young. Wild. Free.* in Los Angeles, even though they were shooting simultaneously. One day in particular, Tommy woke up in Oklahoma, went to set for a morning shoot, left for the airport at lunch, and flew to Los Angeles for a night shoot on *Young. Wild. Free.*

“We can finance, but I’m a producer and I like to be on set. I like to be in the trenches and help figure out what’s going on,” Oliver says.

From the harrowing equipment hunt for *Kinyarwanda* to the unmitigated success of *Black Love* to an exciting slate of forthcoming releases (including a modern-day version of *Hamlet* starring Riz Ahmed), Oliver has channeled sheer grit and financial acumen into a nimble, forward-thinking enterprise.

“His experience with and empathy for all dimensions of creating content help him power stories and projects forward,” says Aaron Siegel, global head of entertainment investment banking at Goldman Sachs, who advised Tommy and Confluentia on their inaugural capital raise in 2022. “I’m thrilled that we’ve been able to help him support stories and storytellers that have not always had access to the capital and resources Confluentia can deliver.”

And this is precisely what Oliver hopes his legacy will be: “The number of women and people of color we’ve been able to support and give opportunities to,” he says. “Everyone from directors, writers, and producers through creative execs, business execs, and vendors who will have careers in this industry long after they’re no longer working with us.”

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HOW DID CONFLUENTIAL EVOLVE INTO A ONE-STOP SHOP?

Codie Oliver: When we licensed the *Black Love* series to OWN (Oprah Winfrey Network) in 2016 (it aired in 2017), they were the distribution partner. They didn't do any marketing. So a lot of the things that we started to do for *Black Love* were born out of marketing the series and content we were passionate about within our community.

We did a tour with *Black Love* couples in different cities. We did a *Black Love* summit (the sixth edition was held in October 2023), and we launched blacklove.com, which we always planned to do. The thought was, "This will help support the show and get the eyeballs because we are responsible for making sure there's eyeballs." We know the Black audience and community doesn't always get to be seen and celebrated in this way.

Tommy Oliver: When we got to the deal phase with OWN—which was Codie's top choice—I said to them, "We want to license it to you." They were like, "You want to do what?" I had made maybe two movies at this point, and we had no company or anything. But we knew there was real potential for success. We ultimately took a criminally low license fee for season one in exchange for being able to own it.

Codie: We came in with the full season. We had done all the interviews. We'd already done the edits and a sizzle. We were not going to anyone without that much done. So we had a lot more leverage in terms of licensing it than we would have if we'd just said, "Here's a really good idea."



Tommy with the *Fancy Dance* team in 2022: producer Deidre Backs, cowriter Miciana Alise, producer Nina Yang Bongiovi, cowriter-director-producer Erica Tremblay, and producer Heather Rae.

Tommy: When we had locked picture on all episodes and it was time for color and deliverables, I had a conversation with a handful of places about what it would cost. We would've given away something like 30% of our total licensing fee for delivery and color. I was like, "That makes no sense at all." That's when I built our first color suite. We also cut the original piece at our dining room table. I did all the deliverables myself for season one.

Black Love premiered as the most-viewed unscripted series debut in OWN network history. It was because we were able to do all those things and reinvest in what we were doing and how we were trying to do it.

All the money that we made from

Black Love we poured back into the community and the company to be able to create things that we could be proud of. Building our brand and community was done from a place of love, care, and wanting to do right by the people who needed the content, who needed the stories.

WHAT ARE THE POSITIONS THAT YOU NEED TO MAKE AN OPERATION LIKE CONFLUENTIAL RUN SUCCESSFULLY?

Tommy: I'm all about ruthless optimization. There are things that we're doing now that we're not going to do in six months. And if we're not doing that, it's a problem because we're

not being efficient, we're not being disruptive for ourselves. It's about finding people who can embrace that, people who are going to challenge me, people who are better than I am at things, and people who are willing to embrace tech and AI.

At the Confluent Company, there's me and Codie, our head of production, and our head of post. Our head of business and legal affairs is a rock star that we got from Amazon. Our COO is also fantastic. She's a Harvard Business School grad who was in tech, and she brings a different way of thinking about things.

I cannot read the amount of stuff that comes to us. So you need people who have good taste. You can teach the business, you can teach how to evaluate certain things, but you can't really teach taste. Ideally, you have somebody who can be that filter.

These are the people we need to get anything done, whether we are evaluating if we're going to finance something, evaluating what production on something looks like, evaluating what the deal looks like, or doing the deal.

Codie: Our social media team is really important because they are our day-to-day touchpoint to our community. Our head of partnerships is responsible for not just film and TV projects, but for every other marketing partnership with brands and studios. We have a head of video who oversees everything that's not a television show or a film, and we have our in-house editors who can turn things around quickly, whether it's a show, a sizzle for one of those shows, or a sizzle for a TV show that we're pitching. That's in addition to the incoming needs of our brand partners where we ask, "What can we make in any of those buckets that we can use for brand storytelling-type conversations?"

HOW DO YOU APPLY THIS RANGE OF SERVICES AND EXPERTISE TO PROJECTS THAT DIDN'T ORIGINATE AT CONFLUENTIAL?

Codie: We're able to leverage our Black Love audience and platforms to offer anything from straightforward social media marketing to more experiential customized content or events for partners like Disney.

Tommy: We're just starting to offer our production and postproduction services capabilities to third parties. Heretofore, we've only worked on our own productions. But we plan to build that business out quite a bit.

We built up our product and services capabilities to be able to do our projects, not others'. But what usually happens is when Hulu or Netflix or whoever is interested in doing a project needs a production services company, 19 times out of 20, the approvable production services company is a white company, even if it's a project that is culturally specific.

Now you've got a creative who's forced into a shotgun marriage with folks who don't necessarily understand. Not that they're bad people, not that they're not going to try, but it usually results in all sorts of compromises.

We're working on a project like this now with Hulu. We've delivered to Apple, to HBO, and we're the production service company on something with Magnolia. We're also the post and deliverables company. With the exception of sound, we do most of the editorial in-house and all of delivery in-house. We can do all of it from soup to nuts as a partner who understands the nuances of telling a Latine story or an Indigenous story in a way that can be supportive.

Because we have shared production services capabilities, the same team that's delivering to HBO can work on materials for partners. That runs the gamut from doing a custom campaign with Target, who has been a partner for *Couch Conversations* for four seasons, or marketing partnerships for projects from Paramount or Audible or Disney.

WHERE WAS CONFLUENTIAL WHEN YOU DECIDED TO RAISE CAPITAL IN 2022? WHAT DID THAT RAISE ALLOW YOU TO DO?

Tommy: We've doubled in size. Our scope has expanded to be able to commission development, and deficit finance docs, docuseries and

unscripted projects. We can cofinance or fully finance films.

We have enough production gear and cameras—Red, Sony, Cannon—to support multiple projects. We moved into a bigger office with edit suites, color suites, and assistant editor and flex stations that we built out to be able to support the most rigorous postproduction processes, up to and including delivering to Apple, which has some of the most technically stringent delivery specs.

WHY DECIDE TO GO THROUGH THE EFFORT AND RISK OF RAISING CAPITAL TO BECOME A FINANCIER WHEN YOU'VE GOT SO MUCH ELSE GOING ON AT CONFLUENTIAL?

Tommy: *The Perfect Guy* cost \$12 million. It opened number one in the U.S., did a total of \$60 million at the box office—\$57 million domestic, \$3 million internationally—and another \$40 million ancillaries off a \$12 million budget. I made that (indicates a tiny amount with his fingers) much money and I realized that there was a significant misalignment of interest.

I'm perfectly happy for partners to make money, but there should be a way for people to share in what they create. Had I at that point the ability to cofinance that movie, the economics would've been fundamentally different.

Confluent is the confluence of art, entertainment, business, and cultural specificity. We're not going to make something that doesn't have something to say. But we're also not going to do things that are financially irresponsible or things that aren't entertaining.

We don't put money into projects we don't produce. We're not just cutting checks. We are producers. We don't have to develop stuff from the start, but we are partners on everything that we do. We have very real relationships with the producing partners, director, writer and the whole team.

Codie: Black Love Productions has the



ability to bring an audience because we're talking to them every day on social. We're talking to them every week in our newsletter or on blacklove.com. We're talking to them with events that we're doing multiple times a year. We're talking to them through podcasts, YouTube, and now Freevee.

Tommy: Then when we have new movies, we can push it to that audience in an efficient manner. Part of the argument that you'll get from studios is, "It may be a good movie, but it'll cost a lot to market, so it's not quite worth it." Well, we have a way to do this efficiently or cost-effectively.

The business argument for these projects never should have been, "We're doing this because we think that it'll make us feel better." The projects work. The creatives work. These projects make money. Look at the ROI or the cash-on-cash return for projects from diverse storytellers with diverse casts. They do better empirically.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR PRODUCERS WHO ARE

STRUGGLING TO ATTAIN THE GOAL OF OWNERSHIP AND WANT A STRONG ARGUMENT FOR OWNERSHIP WHEN THEY MEET WITH INVESTORS OR DISTRIBUTORS?

Codie: Make sure you're creating as much leverage as possible, which isn't easy or always inexpensive. You're usually making a compromise or a sacrifice to get to the long-term goal that ownership provides. I don't think that people think about that part of it.

Tommy: Netflix is starting to do deals that are a little bit different—where instead of just a cost-plus deal, it's more like a TV model. They realized, "We don't need to own this thing in perpetuity and overpay for it. Instead, what if we have this film for, say, 10 years and pay 70% of it?" Then Confluent or somebody else has a way to bring that extra 30%. So now the studio has paid way less but gets most of the value out of the film much earlier.

You're not going to get more money out of this library title right now, but because you've done the deal in a way that takes

Tommy with Sanna Lathan on the set of *The Perfect Guy* in 2014



care of your future self, in 10 years you have an asset that you can monetize.

EVEN THOUGH YOU WORK HARD TO UNDERSTAND THE BUSINESS, IT'S FRIGHTENING AND FINANCIALLY RISKY TO STAND YOUR GROUND. WHAT'S A RECENT EXAMPLE OF HOW THAT HAS THAT PAID OFF FOR YOU?

Tommy: When *Fancy Dance* went to Sundance, it was in the middle of a terrible indie market. Buyers did not respond to Lily (Gladstone) in the way that everybody eventually did and that we all knew she and the film deserved. We were encouraged to take a literal \$40,000 deal for the film, given it was the best offer we received. I said, "We're not going to just lock in our losses for a movie that is so well done and meaningful and sitting at 97% on Rotten Tomatoes, even if it's been eight months." I was not OK with this being another data point for people to say, "It's a good movie, but Native movies don't work commercially or from a business perspective."

Erica (Tremblay) and Lily were amazing partners. Talk about sitting in your power and being able to use your position to effect change, which is exactly what they did. It was the combination of the producing team, Lily and Erica speaking loudly and unapologetically, along with a willingness to be patient because we knew what we had. Apple made a verbal offer in late December, and we closed the deal the last week of January.

Ultimately, *Fancy Dance* turned into an unmitigated success commercially and financially. The movie is profitable, the film is great, and it shuts down the argument that Indigenous cinema can't work.

Even in boom times, it's still not easy for creators of color. When times are tighter, their projects are often the first to be cut. It puts more pressure on figuring out how to get stuff through,



Tommy and Codie Oliver
in Confluent's new
editing suite

how to create leverage, and how to be crafty and diligent in ways that were not as needed before because the number of slots has decreased in a big way. We need to keep moving and figure out how to tell the stories that we're proud of and make them in the ways that we're also proud of.

YOU'VE BEEN A DEDICATED MENTOR WITH SUNDANCE, DOC NYC, THE ACADEMY GOLD PROGRAM, AND THE PGA. ARE THERE MENTORS

WHOSE GUIDANCE HAS HELPED YOU SHAPE CONFLUENTIAL?

Tommy: While I have a director buddy village and a producer buddy village, I don't quite have the same when it comes to being a founder or a CEO running a company. The truth is that raising institutional capital and running/building a company is an incredibly lonely job. But I would happily welcome advisors who can help me see my blind spots and better navigate this crazy-ass industry. ■