

**Interview of Keith "K.K." Barrett**

UCLA Library, Center for Oral History Research, University of California, Los Angeles  
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**Transcript**

**Session One (January 18, 2019)**

**COLLINGS:**

Okay, so we're on now. Today is January 18, 2019, Jane Collings interviewing Keith "K.K." Barrett in his home. Why don't I just ask you, to get started, where and when you were born.

**BARRETT:**

Born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1952, and lived there until I was about eight, and then moved to Springfield, Missouri, for a couple of years, then to Oklahoma City, and then to Tulsa, and then to university in Stillwater, Oklahoma, and then shortly after that, came to Los Angeles in '77.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay. So, a lot of moving around when growing up.

**BARRETT:**

A lot of moving around, yeah.

**COLLINGS:**

What was that about?

**BARRETT:**

Just opportunity. My father was an electrical contractor, sold electrical systems for at the time what were two-, three-, four-, five-, ten-story office buildings in little midwestern cities that were growing through growing pains, and so the next opportunity was the next city that was growing.

**COLLINGS:**

Sure, sure.

**BARRETT:**

So, just moved and moved, followed that.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay, so he was a bit of an inventor.

**BARRETT:**

No, no, not an inventor. Just a salesman.

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, he wasn't doing the hands-on installations.

**BARRETT:**

No, he was just applying the resources to the particular building and working with the architect firm in selling the system.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay. And what kinds of interests did or does your mother have at that time?

**BARRETT:**

She was a housewife and a barbershop singer.

**COLLINGS:**

Really?

**BARRETT:**

Yes.

**COLLINGS:**

So what would she do?

**BARRETT:**

Oh, she was in quartets and ensembles, and that was kind of her other creative outlet--

**COLLINGS:**

So there was a lot of music growing up?

**BARRETT:**

--besides sewing. Not a lot, not a tremendous a lot. No, there were probably less than ten records in the house. I first became aware of music when we got a transistor radio in probably around 1960 or '62.

**COLLINGS:**

So you started listening to pop music.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, that was our first window into kind of like having the radio present and listening to pop music, yeah.

**COLLINGS:**

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, I have an older sister two years older and a brother two years younger and another sister six years younger.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay. And what kind of things do they do?

**BARRETT:**

They do different things. My brother was a policeman and then worked in airport security. And my older sister worked in retail in department stores and for different brands, and my youngest sister is an art director.

**COLLINGS:**

Ah! How funny!

**BARRETT:**

Yes.

**COLLINGS:**

I suppose you got her into the--

**BARRETT:**

No, no, no, no, no, no.

**COLLINGS:**

Developed her interest. I meant develop her interest.

**BARRETT:**

Maybe. I don't know. It was kind of parallel in different places. Because she was the youngest, I had already left home before she ever went to college, and she went to college in Colorado and I

was already in California by that time. I don't know. She's in a different field. We cross over somewhat. She's in advertising. And even though I do a lot of that, she's more the developmental side and I'm more on the final execution of the idea side.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay. I did see an interview with you where you said that you had gone to Tulsa Memorial High School.

**BARRETT:**

Yes. True.

**COLLINGS:**

And had some art training there, a little bit.

**BARRETT:**

Well, I took some art classes. I mean, in high school you can only take one or two, but I always, even from the time I was about ten, I remember going to classes at the local museum in Springfield, Missouri and doing drawing and stuff.

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, okay.

**BARRETT:**

I was always doing it.

**COLLINGS:**

So you were always attracted to doing drawing.

**BARRETT:**

I always knew I could kind of do it to some degree. I was never afraid of it.

**COLLINGS:**

And I think you also said that you were self-taught at Tulsa's downtown library. Did you mean by self-taught in terms of art history?

**BARRETT:**

Well, now you just go--like my kids go on the Internet and they can learn anything they want. You'd be surprised how much they know. You think they're wasting their time on computers, and you'd be surprised how much they know and how much they don't know.

**COLLINGS:**

So true.

**BARRETT:**

I took an interest in modern art in high school, and when I went to high school in Tulsa, it was just for the last two years, so I was kind of the new kid in a high school of three thousand, one of the new kids, and I had known everybody in my previous high school in Oklahoma City through junior high, so it was a group of people I grew up with a little bit through my teens, and then all of a sudden, I was transplanted, so I didn't have as many friends or as deep a social circle, so I just took it upon myself to discover the library and go through every book that I was interested in and just absorb it.

**COLLINGS:**

That's good. I'm always interested when people mention something about the library, actually to know if it was a Carnegie library perhaps. I noticed that this library, the text about it says "When the library opened in 1965, it was envisioned as a modern temple for books, an integral part of a new civic plaza designed in the spirit of urban modernism." So it sounds like you were there at sort of a cultural moment.

**BARRETT:**

I don't know. It was the library and I went to it. It didn't seem like it was contemporary at the time, although I was much more interested in the seedy parts of downtown Tulsa that you see in the movies Rumble Fish or The Outsiders--

**COLLINGS:**

Sure.

**BARRETT:**

--which were contemporary to that time, rather than what they did later in gentrification and kind of like neutered the flavor of the urban development.

**COLLINGS:**

So what were you doing in these seedy parts of Tulsa?

**BARRETT:**

I was just exploring. You're driving, so you're just going through little towns around the periphery and looking in thrift stores and finding things. I think when you're that age, you're really interested in cultural things that are no longer being paid attention to, because you have all this catching up to do, so you're interested in--this was in the seventies, so you're interested in the sixties and you're interested in the fifties and the forties and beyond, because it's a new world that's not around you. It existed, but it's not present. So I think you're just curious about those things.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

And that kind of culture was still alive. It was very habituated. I went back to Tulsa a year and a half ago, just going through, passing through, and it seemed like it was very empty downtown and very safe, probably, but very quiet and ghostly.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes, perhaps gentrified.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, of course it's definitely gentrified, and they're very happy with it, as most gentrified areas are.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes.

**BARRETT:**

But for those who enjoy the texture of the past, it's not the same.

**COLLINGS:**

And were you interested in the objects themselves from any kind of design perspective at that time?

**BARRETT:**

No. I didn't really think about--you know, I don't know where design comes from. I think just being aware, you know, just observing and being aware and realizing why something's in one place and something beside it fell into place happenstance and saying, "Oh, that looks really nice." And then later you realize somebody designed that, paid attention, made decisions, organized the forms together.

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

But at the time, you either like it or you don't like it, or it appeals to you or talks to you or its just functionary.

**COLLINGS:**

I wonder if all that moving around and always recreating the home space might have brought it to the forefront.

**BARRETT:**

I think moving around is really good. I always say change is good, but forced change is better. Because forced change makes you change when you're not ready, and all of a sudden, you can't get comfortable for too long.

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

You have to adapt. So it's like, okay, these are my surroundings. What can I make of them?

**COLLINGS:**

Right. It might have been an interesting training ground.

**BARRETT:**

It helped later in moving around in movies from different city to city and country to country.

**COLLINGS:**

I could see it would. So you went to Oklahoma State University to study painting. So you went in there with the intention "I'm going to be a painting major."

**BARRETT:**

Definitely. By that time, through the couple classes--I really think I had two classes, but it was the only thing that was exciting to me, was painting and music, and for some reason I didn't think music was a course of study, and I knew I was good at art, even though my father wanted me to take business, and I said, "This is something I understand. I can do this, so I'm going to pursue this." So I specifically took mainly art classes, yeah.

**COLLINGS:**

And I think you said that you felt that you had come there at a very good time. You said somewhere that you said that there were a lot of forward-thinking people. Could you say something about your college time?

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. You got to realize this is in the middle of the country.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

A different time than now. We weren't as polarized.

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

It was quite wide open and open-thinking, surprisingly, even though it was in the Bible Belt. But there were pockets of very enlightened liberal thinking, and the universities were, you know, anchors of that, and the teachers that I had had come from the sixties, you know, so they had come from the fifties and then been kind of mentally liberated in the sixties and gone to university in that period and now were teaching, and they were very open, some of them had come from San Francisco, some from New York, a very eclectic group of teachers that weren't parochial, they weren't regional. They were very wide-thinking.

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

And they weren't--you hear of schools now where you get the idea that maybe somebody's trying to teach you what they think is the right thing, and all of the teachers that I had were very insistent on you being yourself.

**COLLINGS:**

That was the era.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. If you were just doing something and they said, "Why are you doing that? You did something yesterday that was much more inventive. Are you trying to be just good at craft or are you trying to explore and find something?"

**COLLINGS:**

Yes.

**BARRETT:**

So they were all about pushing us in directions to find ways of thinking and owning our own identity.

**COLLINGS:**

And what kind of genre? I mean conceptual art, painting, different kinds--

**BARRETT:**

Conceptual art a little bit. I definitely had--I think the class was called "Sound and Design" or "Color and Design." It was called "Color and Design." But it was a teacher that was a sculptor, a

kinetic sculptor, and it was very much about conceptual. There was no concrete medium that was the main focus. It was anything. It was the idea about what something could mean or make us think about. It wasn't as conceptual as the big conceptual movement that happened a little bit after that. There was no strict discipline. It wasn't Expressionistic. I suppose because of the age that I was and the culture I was interested in, it was a bit Popish, but it wasn't--I don't know.

**COLLINGS:**

Just eclectic.

**BARRETT:**

It was very eclectic, yeah.

**COLLINGS:**

And did you do a thesis project?

**BARRETT:**

No, no. It was a bachelor of fine arts, and we didn't have a thesis.

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, right. Of course.

**BARRETT:**

So it wasn't just going into that. I think I'm on my thesis project now.

**COLLINGS:**

Now you're doing your thesis project. Yeah. So I was trying to sort of hone in on what the--

**BARRETT:**

Just get out there in the world is the thesis project.

**COLLINGS:**

--interests were. And how about the landscape? Was that an influence of yours?

**BARRETT:**

I'm sure it was. I'm sure it was, especially when you move to an urban city and you realize how the density changes your vision. Always I'd grown up with wide open landscapes, where you could see forever, and you could see weather coming from half a day away and stuff like that. And all that land was your own to play with. So I'm sure that that had a spatial informative stamp on me, and I'm sure it still does.

**COLLINGS:**

So you develop a sense of space--

**BARRETT:**

Also how something sits.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

You know, a clean space, and how something can arbitrarily break up that consistency.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes. So what did you decide to do once you graduated?

**BARRETT:**

After I graduated, I was getting a little restless with being in a painting studio. I was sculpting and painting, but mainly painting at that time.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay.

**BARRETT:**

And I was enjoying it, but I was just infected with music, and I--

**COLLINGS:**

"Infected with music."

**BARRETT:**

--started playing music, and I thought it was much more gregarious and more interactive.

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, okay.

**BARRETT:**

And so I just--even though I was still painting, I was playing music, and so a couple other painters that were in our circle, we all had a house together and we were playing music every day, and we started playing in a band together, and when I finally used up Oklahoma and realized, "Okay, I've got to go, got to leave," it was in the winter and I think my side job was the highest-paying thing in town and it was--

**COLLINGS:**

Which was what?

**BARRETT:**

--maybe \$12 an hour for being a stonemason.

**COLLINGS:**

That's actually a very good job at that time.

**BARRETT:**

It's good pay at that time too.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

This is 1976. And unskilled but just--

**COLLINGS:**

So, working on houses.

**BARRETT:**

Working on buildings--

**COLLINGS:**

On buildings.

**BARRETT:**

--and doing different things. Just kind of decorative stone on banks and mixing cements and putting stones on and organizing and--

**COLLINGS:**

How did you get that job?

**BARRETT:**

I just kind of talked my way into it, you know.

**COLLINGS:**

That's interesting.

**BARRETT:**

In the summers in college between my years, I would go back to Tulsa and work as a carpenter and started from the ground up just being a laborer, and at the end of the first summer, the head of the company said--it was a long project. I think we were building 300 apartment units, and they were only half done by that summer, and next summer there'd be more, and so he said, "If you want to come back next summer, there's a job for you, and you can do whatever you want. Just tell me what you want to do." So I came back, and the next year they realized I could read blueprints, which was very surprising to them.

**COLLINGS:**

How did you learn how to do that?

**BARRETT:**

In junior high, we had technical drawing classes, which is what they called it at the time, and my father was always bringing blueprints home and I was taking them and doing drawings on them, so it was very easy. It was very rudimentary. But that was the highest tier of that work order, where the people--

**COLLINGS:**

I see. So they found out you could do the--

**BARRETT:**

--with the blueprints, laying out the initial problems and interpreting them. So I went back the next year and said, "Can you put me on something different every week?" They said, "Which group would you like to be on?" So there were people laying out the floor plans and there were people building the stairs and doing the windows and the roof trusses and I said, "Just put me on something different every week, so they did. So I got to move around and learn what every task was.

**COLLINGS:**

That's terrific. That's a great training ground.

**BARRETT:**

It was a great training ground. And so--

**COLLINGS:**

And paid.

**BARRETT:**

And paid, yeah, yeah, well paid. And so I kind of felt like, "Okay." But then I know when I left Oklahoma, I knew how to use tools, but I left them there. I did not want to come to California--

**COLLINGS:**

Why is that?

**BARRETT:**

I did not want to fall into working every day all day long at something that would pay well enough to keep me from pursuing things that I hadn't touched yet.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay. Interesting--

**BARRETT:**

You work all day, you come home tired-- Rather than go out there, just kind of wing it, and find other jobs that you didn't know existed before.

**COLLINGS:**

Right. So you actually owned all your own tools at this point.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, enough tools that you needed to.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay. So you come out to L.A. What happens?

**BARRETT:**

Came out to L.A., and it was funny, even though I was playing music, I thought I was going to be a painter, had all these lists of, very naively, like, museums to visit. I wasn't going to go to school again, but I thought that I would go around and, I don't know, set up a studio and show my stuff and figure out how to get a gallery. And that lasted about a week. My father had told me, he says, "You know, these things, it's a lot more spread out than you think."

**COLLINGS:**

What the galleries or the--

**BARRETT:**

The galleries and opportunities and the different places I was looking at.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay.

**BARRETT:**

And I came out without a car.

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, good.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, which for the first two years I lived without a car here. And so within two weeks, I ran into some musicians and I was playing music, and I'd been playing. We'd been writing songs and making original music back in Oklahoma, so it was very unusual at that time to run into people that had already recorded stuff at home and who were making artful music, you know.

**COLLINGS:**

Where did you meet them?

**BARRETT:**

At a club, at the Whiskey a Go Go.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay. And how would you characterize the music?

**BARRETT:**

Art rock. It was rock music of a bent, but very artful and very not commercial whatsoever.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, adventurous, self-pleasing.

**COLLINGS:**

So now the music era begins.

**BARRETT:**

So now the music era begins, very quickly. It was just a time of a bunch of people in Los Angeles were shut out from really playing music live anywhere, because you had to have a record contract to play in clubs, and to get a record contract, you had to have a lawyer and you had to be packaged. It was very canned, the whole era at that time. So the sixties had distilled into a business by 1976, a big business, and there was a lot of money in music.

**COLLINGS:**

Sure.

**BARRETT:**

But the music we were playing, there was no money in, but there were a lot of like-minded people that wanted to play music, and we just started playing at shows put on in basements and places.

**COLLINGS:**

And how would you organize all of this?

**BARRETT:**

I don't know. There was about two or three hundred people. It's funny, last night I was watching a film on Jean-Michel Basquiat, and they were talking about the eighties in New York, and I knew the late seventies, early eighties in New York, and they were saying "the five hundred," like the five hundred people that you would always see that were either musicians or artists or dancers or actors, and they were all hanging out incestuously with each other. And it was the same thing here, but it was more like two hundred or a hundred. It starts small and then it finally--it slowly grows. You keep seeing the same people that are interested in nightlife culture, and some of them are putting shows together, some are putting magazines, some are photographers, and it's kind of self-supporting, so in a bubble, we were doing the same thing in Oklahoma, but it was more like "the ten"--

**COLLINGS:**

"The ten."

**BARRETT:**

--rather than "the five hundred" or "the hundred." And we were entertaining ourselves. And so it was just at a time when all of a sudden there was a lot of media attention and people were hungry for it, and it was something that made noise literally and culturally and was very well documented. So it was a nice place to float through for a couple of years.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay. And what happened next?

**BARRETT:**

We got to play those places that we couldn't play before, broke some doors down, went to the East Coast, hung around with "the hundred" or so before they became "the five hundred." Went up and down the West Coast. There was nothing in the middle of the country to offer us anything and then we decided--

**COLLINGS:**

And "we" being?

**BARRETT:**

The band.

**COLLINGS:**

The Screamers.

**BARRETT:**

Yes, yes, The Screamers. A director came along. We were doing other things. I was part of a record company. We made a record company, even though we didn't put our own records, The Screamers' records out. I was playing in other bands at the same time. A director came along and found us and said like, "Oh, would you like to do some--?" We were very visual. "Would you like to do some short films?" And this is before MTV. So there's no real outlet for this. But we said, "Yeah." We're in Hollywood, we'd been on stage with attention, and now in front of cameras? Sure. And so he got some money. I started building a recording studio for him, bought

tools again, became the carpenter for the recording studio, so we were going to record music and make some visual projects in the same space.

**COLLINGS:**

Where was the space located?

**BARRETT:**

At Heliotrope and Melrose . It was an old vitamin factory that we gutted and turned into first a studio and then later a sound stage, because it had quite a big room.

**COLLINGS:**

So who bought the building?

**BARRETT:**

We rented it.

**COLLINGS:**

I see.

**BARRETT:**

And I was getting-- I don't know how much money. It was a pittance, maybe a couple hundred dollars a week, something to do this, maybe less, but it was something to do, something I knew how to do, so when they said, "Let's make these films," I said, "Who's going to design them?" precociously. They didn't have an idea, and I said, "I will." And they said, "Okay." And so I just started. I didn't know what the term "art direction" was or "set design" or "production design." Didn't know anything about that at all. All I knew was that there were things that people acted in.

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

And I had studied film to the library the same way I'd studied art, so I was approaching it more from an artful, sculptural angle than true reality replication. So it was pretty expressionist. And I remember one of the questions I asked was, "Do you want the sets to be just locations or personalities themselves?" And I don't know how I knew to ask that question--

**COLLINGS:**

I was just thinking that.

**BARRETT:**

--but it was, again, precocious. They said, "No, more personality." I said, "Okay." And there weren't any real rules. I mean, these were the precursors of music videos. They were music

shorts, where the song and the lyric and the song is driving the thing so it's a bit of a montage or situational montage in the background. So I just made stuff up.

**COLLINGS:**

So what did you make up? Do you remember any of the--

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, it was a very Caligari-esque set. And I remember I made these drawings, and the directors, they said, "Well, how much is this going to cost?" And I said, "I don't know." And the director said, "Okay." He knew this real art director and showed them to them, and he said, "Well, nice drawings, but you can't build from these."

**COLLINGS:**

Oh.

**BARRETT:**

They weren't blueprints. They were just an expressionistic take on what I thought the scene would be. And so I was a little bit insulted by that, and he didn't know that I was going to have to build it, too, and I knew that I was going to have to build it. So I just started building it. I just built it without plans and enlisted some people that were good enough, but had never done it before as well, to be my construction cohorts, and we just built it and painted it, and we did everything.

**COLLINGS:**

That sounds great.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. It was exciting and it was a good--it wasn't even a trial by fire. There was no failing. We were just off by ourselves doing it.

**COLLINGS:**

Doing it, yeah.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, we were just doing. So I think that's one of the threads through everything that I've participated in, is just making, collaborating and making. You know? "Let's make something happen."

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

And in the course of that, there's things that get made that live a life after you're finished with the exercise of collaborating together.

**COLLINGS:**

It really sounds like that, even when you were talking about your college life, living in a house where creative stuff was happening.

**BARRETT:**

Oh, yeah. We were painting. We'd come home. We'd go to the classes in the daytime, then we'd come home and then continue painting, then play music, then paint and draw and play music, then go out and just do the whole thing, so it was very sloppily disciplined, but it was very--the work ethic was good. Something was always coming out. Something was always being done.

**COLLINGS:**

And always kind of in collaboration, ideas arcing off of each other.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, or competition, collaboration, yeah. That's the other thing. I think I had really good peers, only two or three that we'd push each other. It's really all you need. Something that gets an idea that you hadn't thought of yet and then go, "Ah! I got to catch up. I got to do that." And then all of a sudden, you do something and they realize. We start copying each other and bouncing it forward and upward, and it's healthy.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah, sounds exciting. Did those friends go on into the arts?

**BARRETT:**

One of the roommates is still a painter in Connecticut. And then one that I had the record company, played music with--and a couple of these people came out to Los Angeles after I did, and we continued to do other things--is no longer--he's in the oil business now. He's no--

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, how interesting, yeah.

**BARRETT:**

--longer a painter. Quite capable. Although he did send me a song that he'd recorded for Christmas, so he's not that far out of it.

**COLLINGS:**

So you're out here and you're doing the music videos, and then you start doing some commercial work at that time?

**BARRETT:**

Let me see. Actually, so the short videos turned into a film. All of a sudden, he said, "Let's make this a feature film." And then there was new narrative created to--

**COLLINGS:**

Was this Population:1?

**BARRETT:**

Population:1, yeah. It started out, I think it was called Mensch first, and then it became Population:1 later.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay. What is it about?

**BARRETT:**

Originally, I'm not sure. I'm still not sure. It's a bit of a mess.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay. "After the nuclear annihilation of the planet, the last member of a small society of survivors finds himself trapped in an underground control room where he recounts the history of his world through musical numbers." I don't know if that's a fair approximation.

**BARRETT:**

That's a revisionist framework.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay.

**BARRETT:**

And that is the diatribe at the top of the film. But it justified stringing these different bits together.

**COLLINGS:**

So it's revisionist. Right.

**BARRETT:**

Yes, because then we lost that place and kind of the director rewrote stuff, and I built another--I built an underground bunker then, or the lead into this underground bunker, and the apartment above a pizza place on Hollywood Boulevard, and that was a set for about a year. We would work in on weekends and whenever we could, while somebody lived in it.

**COLLINGS:**

That's great.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. And shades of things to come later, making underground sets. So then we continued that. The band fell apart. Then I got a job as a graphic designer in an advertising agency, just very small, to--

**COLLINGS:**

By now you need some money, is that--

**BARRETT:**

I need money. Yeah, I need a job, so I was doing that and I was drawing and doing paste-up, used to cut out the type and the photos and get them scanned and put these things together by hand, pre-computer, and I was doing that. And then I was asked to do another film because they knew that I could design films.

**COLLINGS:**

This was after Population:1?

**BARRETT:**

This was after Population:1. It was a few years after Population:1. I thought I'd just done that, I was done with film, like, "Oh, I did that once. What's next?" you know. And this is so far outside Hollywood, even though we're right in the middle of Hollywood. I'd never been on a lot, I'd never--you know, I didn't even know what people's real titles were. And then I was asked to do another film, a low-budget horror film, and I said, "Yeah, sure," you know. This is around the late eighties. So that was the next film. But, yes, in between, there was another period where I started doing commercials and animation, so from the graphic house, in my nightlife side, I started with a friend, I started a hip hop club. After-hours club.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay. What was that called?

**BARRETT:**

It was called Radio. And this was right after the Population:1 demise, completion, and me and a friend, Alex Jordanoff, realized we liked this other kind of music that was real exciting, abstract and cut-up, and this music was only happening in New York at the time. So we said, "Let's invite them out here. These guys have probably never been to Los Angeles." So we invited some of the main guys at the time out.

**COLLINGS:**

And who were those?

**BARRETT:**

Afrika Bambaataa, a guy named Phase One (phonetic), who was also a graffiti artist, and then this scratch DJ named Grand Master DST (phonetic), and they were on a record label, a French record label called Celluloid, but they were all from New York.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay.

**BARRETT:**

And they all knew each other from New York. And so my partner, Alex Jordanoff, who grew up in Paris, Bulgarian but Paris, and his father, I think, worked at Lawrence Livermore in nuclear things, he knew the head of a French label.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay.

**BARRETT:**

And so that's how we were able to get a hold of those guys and bring them out here, and we did a night at a club called Club Lingerie, which was a club that had a lot of different types of music and a very creative booker named Brendan Mullen, who had also run this club called The Mask in the punk rock days that I was involved with in a basement. And that's a whole scene and there's a whole many volume of books on that. And so after we did that one night, we decided, "We'll open our own club."

**COLLINGS:**

Wow.

**BARRETT:**

So we did. We found a place on MacArthur Park and cost \$100 a night, another \$100 for a sound system, and another \$30 for a rent-a-cop to be at the door, because this was a bad neighborhood, horrible neighborhood, no licenses, open only on Friday nights from 2:00 to 5:00 in the morning. So after all the other clubs would close, people would come here, so you had the Hollywood kids and then you had South Central kids coming because it was a big dance party.

**COLLINGS:**

What a scene.

**BARRETT:**

And we found this guy, the only guy that we could find that had a hip hop record down in Los Angeles, a seven-inch, called Ice-T, so we paid him to kind of be the host every night for \$30.

**COLLINGS:**

Good. That's great.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. So that lasted about a year and a half, and again it was another magnet for photographers and artists and musicians to come down, musicians of all different kinds, because a lot of people didn't like this kind of music and they thought, "I don't know." But they would come down and hang out because it was energetic and they couldn't deny it after a while. And one of the people that came down was Jane Simpson, who I met, and she said, "What do you do?" And I go, "I do this." And she said, "No, what do you do during the day?"

**COLLINGS:**

When it's not 2:00 to 5:00.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. Well, this was only one night a week, you know. So I said, "Well, I'm kind of an artist." And she said, "Oh, you can draw?" "A little bit." Because you don't want to say you can draw when people expect you to do perfect likenesses and things like that.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes.

**BARRETT:**

And she said, "Have you ever done animation?" And I said, "No." And she said, "Perfect. You want a job?"

**COLLINGS:**

Ah!

**BARRETT:**

"Because I don't want anybody that's got preconceptions." So I kept making these opportunities for myself where I had just enough skill to be helpful and learn on the way.

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

And so she had a commercial house doing mainly animation commercials. And so I did that, and she said, "Can you run a darkroom?" And I had done a little bit of darkroom work in school. One of my bandmates had a darkroom set up and was taking photography classes. I didn't take any, but I did some in his darkroom. And so I started running a darkroom for her company and doing hand-painted animation.

**COLLINGS:**

Hand-painted?

**BARRETT:**

Hand-painted. Yeah. And then my wife also started doing hand-painted animation at the same time, because we were both artists, and now I was getting back into art and doing a lot of art at home again.

**COLLINGS:**

What kind of art?

**BARRETT:**

Mainly drawing, a little bit of painting, mainly a lot of drawings, and she was doing a lot of pastels. Somebody just showed us a video that they had taken--this is on YouTube now--of us talking about painting and art, and showing this book and stuff like that. It's quite funny. Called "Hollywood Poetry of the Night," something like that. Anyway, I was happy to see it again, because it made me realize that after all that nightclubbing, that we just stayed home. We finally got a really nice apartment and just stayed home and made art all the time. Didn't have a TV, didn't have any of these distractions. And then in the day, we worked making commercials.

**COLLINGS:**

And why did the person with the commercial company want someone without preconceptions?

**BARRETT:**

I don't know.

**COLLINGS:**

That's counterintuitive.

**BARRETT:**

I don't know. They just thought that it wasn't that hard to learn and that enthusiasm was a helpful trait in hiring.

**COLLINGS:**

What were they commercials for?

**BARRETT:**

A lot of different things, but we had a string of commercials for Bubblicious, which was a chewing gum, where it starts with a live-action set and you blow a bubble and they go into a fantasy. So we have to draw these fantasies that they can go through, flying around in whatever the fruit flavor was. And this got me back into live-action sets, so I was doing the darkroom, I was going the animation, and then if we had a set to do, I would design and build the set too and then finally have someone build the set instead of myself. So that was kind of the tip of getting into that. And then a friend of hers said, "I'm going this low-budget horror movie. Do you want to do it?"

**COLLINGS:**

So would that have been Blood Diner?

**BARRETT:**

No, Blood Diner was a friend of mine.

**COLLINGS:**

Bloody Pom Poms?

**BARRETT:**

That was Bloody Pom Poms, yes. Blood Diner was first, another friend where--this was a friend again met through music, met through a character that was drafted to be in the Population:1 movie, named Dino Lee (phonetic), and his friend was Jimmy Mazlin (phonetic), who had been a rockabilly singer and a cult film fan. So all these drive-in movies, these kind of like softcore titillation and cheap horror movie drive-in movies made for nothing, he was a big fan of and bought them for about--I think Herschell Gordon Lewis was the first director that he bought the films of, and I think he bought them for \$15,000. So he had the negatives. He had everything, and the rights to them. And then he found another woman director who was working with Bettie Page and Doris Wishman, was her name, and he bought her films for like another \$10,000, and she said, "Oh, Jimmy, make sure you're not going to lose money on this. Are you sure you're not paying too much for this?"

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

So this is before VHS.

**BARRETT:**

And then he licensed them to VHS and he licensed them so many times since then only for like three-year windows. And so he did very well from that.

**COLLINGS:**

I can imagine.

**BARRETT:**

So anyway, he said, "Let's make a movie. Let's make a remake of one of these Herschell Gordon Lewis movies," which was Blood Diner. I think originally it was called Blood Feast. And a friend of ours wrote it, and we just kind of winged it and made it, and it was the same thing as always, like, "Let's put a show together."

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

Again, way outside--this is even sub-Roger Corman--

**COLLINGS:**

Definitely.

**BARRETT:**

--way outside Hollywood. And right in the middle of Hollywood, using our friends from music and nightclubbing.

**COLLINGS:**

So when you made Population:1, you had a kind of an artistic notion. I don't want to sort of over--you know.

**BARRETT:**

Over-skill it?

**COLLINGS:**

Over-skill it. But, I mean, I can imagine that you're making music, you're coming from an arts background, you wanted to kind of do something new with the medium, something experimental. I'm guessing.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, it's true.

**COLLINGS:**

But with Blood Diner, are you doing the same thing or is it more just a commercial project?

**BARRETT:**

Well, in Bloody Pom Poms, there was no description of what the environments were. And so I would make an environment and they'd shoot in it and then they'd tell the story to go with it. Population:1 was a bit of a commune. We just kind of collected anybody that we knew that had a skill, and I think the director had a little mini studio idea of like collecting these character actors, but they were really not official actors. They were musicians or characters.

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

And building scenes around them.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

And so in Blood Diner, it was an actual story where it described the different places.

**COLLINGS:**

But there was an idea of marketing it to make money. Hence, the word "blood".

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. I don't think he even thought about it, you know. I'm sure he thought, "Now that I've licensed these films, I can make and license an original film." And he liked the genre, you know. So now I had to make up stuff that was somewhat--like there was a living room, there was a graveyard, there were things, a police station, there were things that there was a real reference for. But, naively, I kind of just didn't look for reference. I just off the top of my head made things up and just kind of pastiched it together, probably from just watching television, which, unfortunately, I think happens still.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

People still just incestuously copy other people's versions of things, rather than making something up new or going to what the real thing is. It took me years to figure that out.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

So I just made it up.

**COLLINGS:**

So how do they look?

**BARRETT:**

Oh, it's crappy. It's crappy and scrappy. But it was supposed to be cheesy. And I didn't know any better, so it was cheesy. And I thought, you know, I wasn't trying to get a job. These things just came to me.

**COLLINGS:**

Looking back, was there something you kind of did with those that you can kind of say, "Hey, this is the germ of my approach or my style"?

**BARRETT:**

I was always--I don't know. I don't know whether it was the dollars or the Oklahoma landscape or the fact that I was studying Bauhaus artists in the library. But it was always pretty minimal. It was always pretty sculptural and pretty minimal. So it was more about the shape of the environment than the contents of the environment. I was never really interested in the dressing or the contents except how they changed the shape of the room or the landscape. That's a thread that I can definitely see. So I was taking everything on as an art project. I wasn't taking things on as a documentarian of an environment because nobody--

**COLLINGS:**

These were sculptures.

**BARRETT:**

--told me I didn't have to.

**COLLINGS:**

Were they sculptures?

**BARRETT:**

They were environmental sculptures in a way, yeah. Yeah. I just was doing them for fun. But then I learned very quickly. So I did that movie and I thought I accomplished miracles with no money, and then again I thought I'd never do another movie. Into the nightclub, still working at the animation house, and then starting to get asked by other people to do small commercial sets.

**COLLINGS:**

Ah! That must have been a different experience.

**BARRETT:**

It was.

**COLLINGS:**

Set building.

**BARRETT:**

And by now MTV had happened. So now I'm getting asked to do music videos.

**COLLINGS:**

I see.

**BARRETT:**

Because all of a sudden, there's a huge need for these, and, again, there's a lot of people that don't really know the rules of how to make films or how to make sets, and they're fantasies. Music videos are, by their nature, fantasies.

**COLLINGS:**

That's true.

**BARRETT:**

So again, it was a bit untethered to reality, and I could just make environments and play with it. And so I got asked to do another film. That was Bloody Pom Poms. That was purely a financial thing where a friend of the person I was working at the commercial house for said, "We're doing this film. Would you like to do it?" And I go, "Well, how long is it?" I was basically broke or living month to month, and so I said, "Yeah. Two months? I'll go do it." And it was a lot of fun and it was just me and two other people. That was the entire crew. And by now I've got a kid. Our first kid was born in 1985, and so I needed to get a little bit more responsible and know where money was coming from or that it was coming from, and my wife would work and I would work, but we both had an agreement that if we didn't like what we were doing, that you could quit and the other person would work.

**COLLINGS:**

So work was plentiful.

**BARRETT:**

No, it was just enough. But, again, keeping this idea that don't get stuck doing something you don't like.

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

Because when you're broke and living bohemian style, it's very easy to stay that way. But once you get kind of settled in or spoiled, it's going to be very hard to go back to that. And we were young and everything seemed top of the world. We were able to travel back and forth to New York somehow and keep up with that culture and our friends there in Los Angeles and still just barely have nickels to rub together. So I did the movie, and then I thought, "Okay, now I've got three films. I'm going to take pictures from them and show them and try to get a job."

**COLLINGS:**

So you're putting a portfolio together.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, I put a portfolio together for the first time.

**COLLINGS:**

And that was purely because now you have a child and you want--

**BARRETT:**

I'm going to try to apply myself.

**COLLINGS:**

--to make some money.

**BARRETT:**

Yes.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay.

**BARRETT:**

I guess this pays. I'm still not that interested in it as like this--I'm not hungry to just make films. Still playing music a little bit. I was in another band. After the hip hop club, I was back into a rock band again, and now I'm in neither. So I show some people the stuff-- And I couldn't get anybody interested, and I realized, then I looked at it hard myself, and realized even though I thought I was doing a miracle for \$10,000, it looked like \$100,000, nobody wanted it to look like \$100,000. They wanted it to look at a million dollars. And so I decided I wasn't going to do any more horror films, because only horror films were being offered to me, and I would just stop and do commercials and music videos, which were becoming pretty plentiful, until I got good enough to say, "This is who I am" again.

**COLLINGS:**

I bet you had learned a lot on the commercials.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. You learn a lot on both-- Because the genre's changing very quick. Commercials have a high quality standard, something that I'd never been held to before, because they don't want their product to look like it exists in a shabby world. They've got stratas of--I can't remember the buzzword now--achievement, you know. Aspiration. That's the word.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay.

**BARRETT:**

Stratas of aspiration, that they want their consumers to think you're buying this and you're getting this lifestyle.

**COLLINGS:**

They would say that, "stratas of aspiration"?

**BARRETT:**

No, they'd say "aspiration" all the time.

**COLLINGS:**

Aspiration. Okay.

**BARRETT:**

All the treatments would say, like, "an aspirational living room."

**COLLINGS:**

I see. Okay.

**BARRETT:**

Somebody's moving up in the world. So you've got to have this as part of your moving up. Got to consume this or that. So that was very funny. And I would just take the jobs and sometimes they'd be really mundane, but I was always working with smart, creative people, and if there were things that I didn't get a kick out of, I would say, okay, I just have to do this very professionally, but always find my point of interest in the job to do something I hadn't played with before.

**COLLINGS:**

So can you remember any examples of that?

**BARRETT:**

New materials. I was always into Plexiglas, even in art school. Big fan of an artist named Anton Pesner (phontic), who made these Plexiglas sculptures in the thirties. And just looking for new materials, so always exploring that. And that was one way, or just forms, just playing, making sculptures. So I was able to kind of like bring up the craft part, which is really just finish. It's just completion. It's not idea based. The idea is one thing and the craft is just professional presentation of the craft, of the idea.

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

So I learned that you had to do both of those things. So then my game got better and better and

better, and I was starting to get asked to do really high-end commercials, and all of a sudden, I was--you know, here's \$100,000 for just my department.

**COLLINGS:**

Were you starting to be asked to do more and more high-end stuff because of your ideas?

**BARRETT:**

I think so. I think it's because I was always known as kind of a creative--like the artsful guy, artful guy. So it was a mundane thing. Then I could do it, but I got attention by doing the other things. That's the thing that people were, you know, attracted to. And so I took it upon myself to at one point say, "Okay, I'm not going to do any kitchens and bathrooms," because I figured by not doing that--

**COLLINGS:**

In the commercial world.

**BARRETT:**

Yes. That I wouldn't be doing any household products. And I wanted to start doing products where you're--probably from music video experience, where you're creating an atmosphere associated with a lifestyle you're imagining, like you eat chocolate and all of a sudden you're in this romantic situation, or perfume. Ended up doing a lot of beauty products because they had sculptural abstract backgrounds.

**COLLINGS:**

Sure. That makes sense.

**BARRETT:**

Cars sometimes, when they weren't just driving on the road, when they're being presented. And so then that's what my work looked like. And sometimes I'd want to show it and I wouldn't even have the product and I realized it was just a bunch of pictures of sculptures, or sculptural environments.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah, that makes so much sense to sort of carve out the kitchens and bathrooms and then you're left with--

**BARRETT:**

Well, I realized when I was so miserable doing some of those things and I was like, "Why are we doing this? Why don't we do this?" And I was trying to push an envelope that didn't want to get pushed.

**COLLINGS:**

Right, because it's Pine-Sol, yeah.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, and it's just like just show what it does. And if I got into products where I didn't have to show what they did but how you felt, supposedly if you consume them then it was less of a how-to and more of a dream along with me.

**COLLINGS:**

That makes so much sense.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. And I'm sure that that had an influence on how I approached films later.

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, yeah.

**BARRETT:**

Just, you know, there's the mundane, have to service that, if it's necessary, and then where's the dream part? And then the directors, they started going after--the music directors--the world of commercials and grabbed the music video directors, because they were doing things without any rules, same as I was. They had great ideas and they started thinking "What happens if we take these directors that have their own ideas and put them with commercial agencies who have their ideas, and they'll elevate the concepts together." So I was swept along with those people, working with artful directors and then we made the better commercials. Then, of course, the next thing is those commercial directors want to make movies, and so the first movie like that that came along was--I'd been working with Spike Jonze for about a year, and he had a team. I think I

was the last one to join the family of all of the different role players within a film, within a commercial. The costume designer who he'd just said like, "You're going to be the costume designer" to our friend, he said, "What do I do?" He said, "Go get some costumes."

**COLLINGS:**

Is this for Being John Malkovich?

**BARRETT:**

This is before Being John Malkovich. It leads up to it.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay.

**BARRETT:**

So the costume designer, Casey Storm, was our friend that he was hanging out with, and he kind of invented him that way. The DP, director of photography, Lance Acord, they'd met doing music videos, and Lance had gone to school as a photographer and an art photographer's assistant and done fashion stuff. So they'd been working together for about a year making videos, and then the producer, Vincent Landay, had gone to school, I think actually in film production. The editor, Eric Zumbrunnen, had gone to school, broadcasting school, at UCLA or USC. So they'd already been making videos. So after you get out of school, what do you do? Can you really get a job, you know? Well, they were all making videos as their "get out of--" job, where I'd come up a little bit earlier than them, a bit older, and found my path through music and films, and now we were in the same place at the same time. Just as Spike started doing commercials, I started working with him and those guys.

**COLLINGS:**

And you met them through commercials.

**BARRETT:**

Through other commercials at the same company. It's a very incestuous pass-around kind of business, rather than knocking on the door and saying, "Here's a résumé." And says, "Who do you think would be good for this?" And they go like, "Why don't you talk to them." I know that's how I work. I pass people around and people get passed to me. So there was an opportunity to do this movie for the Beastie Boys called We Can Do This. It was very elaborate and it was going to be done for \$100,000, and it was kind of like what I had done before, but now that I knew how things were done properly and finally learned how to distribute the jobs to other people and share the tasks, rather than try to do everything myself, so I was aware that I wouldn't be able to delegate with the budget that we had, and I was worried that I couldn't go backwards and do everything I could, because I had gotten to the point where I said, "It's not worth doing if it's not going to look good. Let's just not do it at all. Let's only do the things we can do good." So we all said, "Okay, we're going to do this." And then finally, thankfully, it disappeared. They chickened out and didn't do it. But we were all ready and we were committed and we were all really scared it was going to be impossible.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah. Because now you have a reputation.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah.

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, dear.

**BARRETT:**

Well, it was also just practical. I never cared about reputation, still don't. I just didn't want to spend a lot of time on something that wasn't going to be seen and wasn't going to be respected, you know. Respect the idea and give it what it needs. So, luckily, Being John Malkovich came along right after that, and it was the script that nobody thought was makeable. I think Charlie Kaufman had sold one other script before that, and he'd been working on TV shows in a writers' room, but this was like the one, his pride and joy-- And it was supposed to be unmakeable.

**COLLINGS:**

So what's the story of the film from your perspective?

**BARRETT:**

It ended up falling in our lap, falling in Spike's lap, and he says, "I'm gonna do this."

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

The story of the film?

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah, as you see it.

**BARRETT:**

The story of the film is--it's very prescient now because it's like imagining what would it be like to live in somebody else's shoes, what would it be like to live the life of a celebrity. The grass always looks greener and it always looks like, oh, that life must be fantastic, you know. I wouldn't want to wish celebrity on anyone.

**COLLINGS:**

I would think.

**BARRETT:**

Success is different than celebrity. Notoriety, everybody knows who you are, everybody assumes that you're some way, everybody wants to tear you down if you disappoint them. So that's kind of the gist of what it is, but it's the story of two humble people, one's a puppeteer and one works with animals, and living in a basement. He needs to get a job. I felt like I'd lived this life. He needs to get a job. He finally answers an ad, can't imagine what he's good at, answers an ad at a

company that's on the seventh-and-a-half floor. And he's going to do filing. Seems mundane enough, but the whole company is actually a front for eternal life living through other people's bodies, experiences, and he ends up finding a portal into John Malkovich's head or experience and sells tickets. Him and a secretary working there sell tickets where they can go into this portal for fifteen minutes. I suppose it's a riff on Andy Warhol's "Everybody's going to be famous for fifteen minutes" too. And you look at it and you end up inside his visage and you're looking out at the world through John Malkovich. And even the real John Malkovich at the time said, when I designed his apartment, because here I am again making up somebody's world, maybe not as it really is for him, but the way I thought he would be, which I thought was perfect for the story. If I imagine this is how a celebrity would live or what his apartment's like, within the means of what I have to achieve it in the film, then it's probably right. And he said, "Well, hmm. Interesting. So this is what you think of me. Hmm." You know? "It's a little stiffer. I'm much more whimsical than this." You know? But I thought it worked for the film. But it was a good lesson. It was a good lesson that, you know, you're presuming what people live like, rather than scratching the surface and getting deeper into character. But it was as surface as the experience was supposed to be in knowing who he was.

## **COLLINGS:**

So how did you go about--You know, the seventh-and-a-half floor, the interiors of the office, the--

## **BARRETT:**

Well, by then I was used to--I mean, you dig into the script. The script has a lot of information at this point. Where scripts before I'd said didn't have that much information, this described him living in a poor apartment as a puppeteer. It described the seventh-and-a-half floor as being you go up there and you stop between two buttons and there's an elevator operator that takes you through it, and they crowbar it open. And it's a floor where everything is three-quarter size. On the script, it said everything is three-quarter size or half size. And it was built by a captain of a ship who built the building a long time ago, who had a very petite wife and he built it for her. So it's all just like out of control. Spike's version of it was a very good lesson. He always took everything--he didn't want things to look like films. He wanted them to look like things that he knew.

**COLLINGS:**

What do you mean?

**BARRETT:**

He didn't want to copy other films.

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, yes.

**BARRETT:**

So if you said, "This is what a fantasy looks like," and he says, "I don't want that fantasy. We've seen that before."

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

He wanted to make things up.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes. Which is so hard in a media-saturated world.

**BARRETT:**

It's not as hard as you think. It's just harder to talk people into it. It's not hard at all. You just have to keep digging. Everybody's done it before us. They'll do it long after us. I'm sure we're not done inventing the world.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes.

**BARRETT:**

So he said, "No. The building was remodeled in the eighties. It was built in the 1800s, but it was remodeled in the eighties, and that's what it looks like." And then I had to solve it.

**COLLINGS:**

He brought that detail.

**BARRETT:**

He brought that detail.

**COLLINGS:**

That it was remodeled in the eighties.

**BARRETT:**

And only the floor is shorter. Not all the furniture, not everything. Which I couldn't have afforded to do anyway, and certainly not well. So we went at it, and I found a place. By this time, I was good at going to locations, figuring out what I could do to them and modifying them or not, and we found a floor on the--I think it was on the tenth floor of a building that was U-shaped around a courtyard, an atrium, and lowered the ceilings down--a very high-ceilinged floor, but we lowered the ceilings down to the middle of the windows, which became our new ceiling, put crown moldings around that, and then developed an elaborate maze where you could go in certain doors and stand up so your back didn't break, and go back down, and reconfigured the whole floor and look out windows as if you were looking at another building across the way with normal windows, but it's really the same building, just across the atrium. So it was a puzzle. And again, it just felt like play. I was with friends, we were all doing this together, and we had done commercials, so we knew there was a certain level. And the other thing that happened was this film was started by one company, it was Part Propaganda films, and Propaganda was a big commercial company at the time where Spike was, and I worked with a lot of other directors, and it kind of went under right about then. It got bought by a bigger company. In this transition, this film was funded but nobody was paying attention to it. There was nobody in charge anymore. And so we were kind of like kids let loose to go play.

**COLLINGS:**

That's unusual, I would think.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. We had one executive producer, Steve Golin, who's still a very successful executive producer, recently won an Oscar for *The Revenant*, and he was the only person we kind of had to report to and said, "I don't know. I guess okay, keep going. All right." And he trusted us.

**COLLINGS:**

Wow!

**BARRETT:**

But it did well, you know. It surprised people. It was a fresh voice. And Catherine Keenan got nominated for an Oscar, Spike got nominated, so all of a sudden, my first movie after ten years, and I guess it's good enough to come out and play again.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah. I just had one follow-up just about the settings. They're all very cluttered and crowded. Was that something that you brought or was that in the script? There's so many objects. There's so much--

**BARRETT:**

It's funny, because it goes against what I said about being sculptural and minimalist. And I think

it was only to the degree that it was written, I think that it was about a certain amount of--there was a theme of claustrophobia.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes.

**BARRETT:**

And here's a guy that lives in a basement which we built on a stage, the beams are right above his head, and then he goes to a job where the ceiling's even lower. So as you go up, you're even more squashed. So there was a bit of like playful metaphors going on. Eventually there's two or three people inside his mind and he becomes--he realizes his puppeting skills, which nobody respected, he was able to control John Malkovich. So it is dense.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes.

**BARRETT:**

And Charlie Kaufman's scripts tend to be very, very layered and dense. There's not a wasted word. Everything relates to something else or is paid off in another way. There's no grace notes. It's all dedicated to enlightenment and humor and being intertwined with a very clear point.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes.

**BARRETT:**

So it was a good experience. So now after that, I went back to doing commercials, but then also there was a next person that wanted to come along and do a film, and the next person to do a film, and the next one was Michel Gondry, who was also doing commercials and extremely inventive music videos, and that was the next film I did right after. I knew Michel from--it becomes the next layer of incestuous now, where everybody's also working at this company or coming through and looking at each other's work and coming to watch you make the film and hang out. Michel Gondry came and watched us make the film. Sofia Coppola was around, married to Spike, a little bit at the time, around a little bit because she was also making her own film, *Virgin Suicides*. And then Michel came. David Russell would come around because Spike had made an aborted--he had got offered another film to do of a child's book called *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, and him and David worked on it together for a while before it fell apart. This was before I was hooked up with those guys. And so these people all would echo and then I'd later do films with each of them, so I kind of had my connections set up for the next ten, fifteen years, just being passed or leaping from one to the next and the next and going back, and when I went back, I would have more kids and make more commercials.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes.

**BARRETT:**

You know?

**COLLINGS:**

So now you're billing yourself, I presume, as a production designer.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, yeah. By now I know what the job is.

**COLLINGS:**

And are you in the union at this point?

**BARRETT:**

When did we have to get in the union? We did so many commercials. I think just before Being John Malkovich, so after that ten-year span, at some point they came along and they said, "You know you have to be in the union." And it wasn't like you were asking to get in. It was the production companies, the production companies, were signators of the union and they were supposed to only high union crews, but they hadn't been doing it, and they'd been taking part of our paychecks and applying them to benefits, which was good, but they didn't ask us to become members. So then one job, they finally locked down on all of them and they said, "I guess this is kind of weird, but rather than trying to unionize, we're being told we have to join the union now to keep working." And so we did, and it was great because we had all these benefits built up, and it meant everybody had insurance, and then maybe the eighteen-, twenty-four-hour days, driving home dangerously would stop. And so it was a good thing. It was a good thing all along. And at the time, they didn't change how we worked, so in commercials and in music videos, we all just helped each other and did whatever had to be done, and we overlapped tremendously. It was another ten years before that got settled down and they finally said, "No, you have to do it this way." You don't understand how this was done. Unions were built for films and then they were adapted to television, then the rules were specific to those places and the studios, as if everybody came to work, punched a clock, fulfilled a role, and then went home, and there was a tier system and a hierarchy and you had to learn a trade going up. It was nothing like the experience I'd had where I just taught myself what I needed to know and moved as fast as the skill and the demand for that skill was deemed necessary.

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

And I always thought it was more about hiring the person for what they can do, rather than the title of what's to be done. You're hiring a personality and a vision, rather than just hiring somebody that can just paint. Okay, you can paint, but what style do you paint? If left alone, what are your ideas to contribute to this? You know? So I had a complete different angle on it, and it took until just recently for--even on this movie I'm on right now, I'm hitting a new wall of rules that I never knew before.

**COLLINGS:**

Like what? And the movie is?

**BARRETT:**

The movie I'm working on now is called Birds of Prey, and it's a Warner Bros. movie for DC Comics. It's a comic movie. I never had so many art directors. Everything has to have an art director and everybody has to do this, and I didn't realize that the construction shop couldn't do the sculpting, and the sculpting couldn't--

**COLLINGS:**

So you've never worked in that environment before.

**BARRETT:**

No. An artist to me is an artist, and an artist, they can paint or they can sculpt or they can finish the thing all the way through. No, it's like once they do this part, then another team has to do this part, and it's like you're going to lose the definition of what's trying to be said with that element as you keep handing it off. And that person's going to be less engaged with it down the line because they're not going to know where the idea came from, and they're treating it like assembling a car.

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

Now you're putting the seats in and then you're going to put the glass in, and they have no idea what the finished piece started as or will end up as.

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

So it's frustrating to me. It's crazy.

**COLLINGS:**

That's a very different way.

**BARRETT:**

And there's so many skilled people, but they still have doors on either side that they have to come through and can't go past--

**COLLINGS:**

Uh-huh. Sounds like a Kaufman script.

**BARRETT:**

--technically. It is. It's Kafka. Yeah. Yeah, it's weird, but it gets done and there's a lot more help, but there's also a ton of waste, a ton of inefficiency.

**COLLINGS:**

Is the scale much bigger on this production than--

**BARRETT:**

I've had bigger-scale things in the past, but they were in other countries, different rules.

**COLLINGS:**

Different rules.

**BARRETT:**

In Australia or in France we had bigger scale.

**COLLINGS:**

So what about working with Spike Jonze on the Adaptation? What was that experience--

**BARRETT:**

It was very much the same, except now that we were a little bit more confident of ourselves, and every film I try to kind of have a buzzword for, and Malkovich, I think, was "low," you know, compression, and I think Adaptation--I can't remember what it was.

**COLLINGS:**

Well, there seems to be this theme of wanting to feel something very deeply and striving to have that kind--

**BARRETT:**

I was very much in a mundane reality mode on *Adaptation*.

**COLLINGS:**

In what sense?

**BARRETT:**

I thought I'd never done anything real before. And I wanted things to be real, and the script is about an author who's challenged to make things Hollywood fake. To celebrate--he's struggling against his own ethics of wanting to do a good story without beefing it up with unnecessary jazz just to please an audience. And yet his doofus brother decides he can do this, he can write a script, and he writes all of the absurdities and clichés that Charlie Kaufman, the true author who's struggling with his own ethics on trying to adapt a book without becoming Hollywood style, whereas Donald, his parallel twin brother, just takes all those clichés and makes a hit.

**COLLINGS:**

Right, right.

**BARRETT:**

Drives him crazy. So it's about selling out. It's about trying to find and keep that original idea. How much harder is it to make an original idea than to just borrow from what's already worked in the past? So there's big lessons within the task of accomplishing the film. There's lessons of who are you in this? Are you Donald or are you Charlie? Are you going to make the film with ethics or are you going to do Hollywood clichés? And so while I was lucky enough to participate on these films, I'm also doing soul searching and saying, okay, I've got to really make a very real film to base part of this real character in, so that when the fantastic parts happen and you don't know when Donald's soul takes charge of the movie, but he does at a certain point, and that they'll seem out of place and they'll seem absurd, even though the audience is going like, "Oh, yeah, finally! Finally the movie's coming together. It's going to be exciting now." Because they're being served what they always get served towards the end.

**COLLINGS:**

Right, right.

**BARRETT:**

So it goes back and forth between being absurd and just being real, and it's basically the story of the author, Charlie Kaufman, struggling this while trying to adapt the story, rather than actually adapting the book. Actually, rather than the content of the book, there's sprinkles of it, but it's the bigger picture of finding a character which is in the book, and he keeps moving from subject to subject, being fascinated and diving deep into something as a bit of a savant, and then being done with it and hitting a wall of authority and moving on to something else. And so it's a meta-level film, and a lot of people didn't like it, but it's one of my favorites. It's not flashy at all.

**COLLINGS:**

No, it's very concerned with the medium. It's very self-reflexive.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it is.

**COLLINGS:**

So you're saying this is the first time that you wanted to, if I understand you, create like a real environment like a hotel room or a seminar?

**BARRETT:**

I mean, in Being John Malkovich, I was a little aware of it and I wanted it to be, you know, certain things to be very grounded and very real.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes. So now you need a hotel room. You need a restaurant. You need somebody's office.

**BARRETT:**

I have to have, you know, a lower-middle-class house in Florida that's obsessed with different things. And living with his parents. A swamp.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah. Oh, yeah.

**BARRETT:**

Three swamps.

**COLLINGS:**

And after Hurricane Andrew, that was a great thing.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, after the hurricane, yeah, yeah. That was such a cheap scene, but we--yeah, just what's the distillation if you glanced at a scene and looked away? Would you relate to somebody else and tell them what it was about? Often it's not the details you think; it's the impression. It doesn't all have to be there. You don't have to tell a bigger picture, but you have to somehow feel like, oh, my god, they lost everything.

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

Something's gone. Something's out of place.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

At that point, I think I'd been doing it now--I'd started in 1980, and this is almost 2000. It's definitely in the 2000s, so there's twenty years of me learning, figuring out what the thesis is going to be. So I pretty much knew how to solve problems by then, to the point where I could solve the problem and then also be playful with it, figure out what the attention center was, what the takeaway, what the impression was.

**COLLINGS:**

What was the attention center?

**BARRETT:**

Well, it's scene by scene. In the hurricane, you want to say like there's destruction, there's like-- You've got to start all over. That was an abandoned nursery that was already half just left to the weather and then we--

**COLLINGS:**

Wow.

**BARRETT:**

--added some stuff to it. The swamp, you had to really feel like they were lost in a deep, dark swamp, and that swamp was supposed to be in Florida, and yet that swamp was partially out in the high desert--

**COLLINGS:**

Really?

**BARRETT:**

--in the back of a pond, and mainly on the back lot at Warner Bros., you know, five-minute walk from my office right now, where there's a concrete pool that we built islands that we'd move around every day to rearrange it, and had the actors walk on their knees so it looked like they were struggling through mud in deeper water. So you're learning how to use the theatricality and still make it look as real as you want it to look. So you want that to feel harsh and yucky and futile, and yet you're in a very false place. So before, I would celebrate the falsity of it, and now I'm trying to hide the falsity of it.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes, yes, and this is like for the first time, you're saying.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, yeah. Like, okay, now I've done that, and in between I'd done the Michel Gondry movie, which was very artificial, very theatrical.

**COLLINGS:**

And what was that movie?

**BARRETT:**

That was called Human Nature. Another Charlie Kaufman script. So three Charlie Kaufman scripts in a row.

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, I didn't realize that. Oh, that's very interesting.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. And it was about what's it mean to be human, you know, like if we're intelligent, how intelligent are we? Is our sex drive any different than an animal? Are we just animals at heart? Or are we smart enough not to think past being an animal? Are we so dumb that we think we're smarter than we really are, and we're just inherently a nature force, you know? So, got a lot of good questions going on. But Michel's very playful and theatrical, and we didn't have much money on it. I think that Being John Malkovich might have been, I don't know, 15, 18 million, and I think that Human Nature was 4 million, 3 or 4 million. Adaptation was probably the same as Malkovich, maybe up to 20. And anybody hearing those numbers thinks it's, you know, no big deal, but when you figure out the number of people and the number of places you have to rent

and move people from place to place and pay talent and then advertising, there's a lot of stuff. The money's gone in a hurry.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

And Charlie writes a lot of places, so--

**COLLINGS:**

Huge numbers.

**BARRETT:**

Huge number. I think we might have had fifty or sixty sets. So I said, "Michel, the only way I'm going to be able to do this is--." And I knew he could because I'd worked with him on commercials and videos. I said, "If you show me exactly how much we need--." And usually with directors you don't know what they're going to end up shooting, and so you have to build as much environment as you can 360. But Michel said, "Okay." And he drew every frame of the film to its edge, and he says, "You only have to build from that edge to that edge."

**COLLINGS:**

Ah!

**BARRETT:**

And it was crazy. But it was the only way we could have pulled it off. It was a completely different way of working. Usually you build too much and then you have an area that you kind of like and you hope that they'll walk in and go right to that area, where you put the best energy and the focus of attention.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah. Well, is this preferable to have these exact lines of demarcation?

**BARRETT:**

No. It's convenient, but it's not preferable, because editorially, when you walk into a room, the light changes you might want to look--the actors end up walking different places. It's kind of canning the film before it has a chance to breathe.

**COLLINGS:**

That makes sense.

**BARRETT:**

So, editorially, you don't have options. You've just got this and this and this and this. And I know the Coen brothers, who I've never worked with, storyboard their films completely before they film them, and they've got them timed out with the dialogue and everything, and they really know, but I think they've got the science down pretty well, so they know. Animated films do this too. They know exactly what they're doing before they execute it. So it can be done as long as you spend enough time in that process to make the film. There's that cliché that you make the film three times: when you write it, when you shoot it, and when you edit it, it's made completely again. So I like to have that amount of breathing room. The better films that I've worked on, I've had that much space.

**COLLINGS:**

And what are some of those better films?

**BARRETT:**

I think the two best films that I've done are *Lost in Translation* and *Her*, which are bookends of each other.

**COLLINGS:**

They are.

**BARRETT:**

And both with Scarlett Johansson's voice and both with people longing. And they're both very real films. They're different than everything else I've done as far as coming from an art background, but at the same time, they're taking locations that are unique to themselves and good for what they are. I'm not trying to find something and embellish it. I'm saying this is good, this is where we should be to start with. We're here because we don't need to do things to it.

**COLLINGS:**

What do you mean by that?

**BARRETT:**

I mean I'd prefer to find a location that works just like it is. You come in--

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, you do like to do that.

**BARRETT:**

I love that.

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, I see, because you haven't spoken about that before.

**BARRETT:**

I'd rather start there. When a real location is prescribed, I'd rather go to the real location if it exists in the temperament and mood and--I'm looking for another word, but I guess "mood" is pretty much what I need to say, than try to build it.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay. I guess Extremely Loud and--

**BARRETT:**

Incredibly Close?

**COLLINGS:**

Would be an example of that, with many different locations around New York City.

**BARRETT:**

Yes, yes. Yeah, yeah. That was a different exercise.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah, yeah.

**BARRETT:**

But these, I'm trying to find exactly what it's supposed to be.

**COLLINGS:**

So you're talking about Lost in Translation, going to Japan, and then what did you do?

**BARRETT:**

In Lost in Translation, I learned probably--I'm constantly learning, but I probably learned the biggest lesson on how to design a film-- And I started with that film, I was on a commercial that I couldn't get off of. It was very art-centric, and I couldn't just say, "You know what you're going to do, no." "No, no, no. You've got to be here with us." It's like everything, we keep changing and I couldn't get off of it. Sofia's friend Anne Ross had started the film, and they used to share an apartment. They were old friends. Anne had worked with Dean Tavoularis, who was the first name I'd ever heard of as a production designer, and admired him tremendously. So Anne was supposed to do Lost in Translation, went to Japan, set up the hotel, started looking for some other things, and her father got sick and she had to leave. And so Sofia called and said, "Can you come and take over? We haven't started yet. Can you come and do it?" They were about three weeks out. I said, "Yes, but I'm in the middle of this thing I can't--they won't let me go. Let me ask." And I asked and they said, "No, no, you can't go." Okay. "Send me what you've got and I'll try to bring myself up to speed and I'll hit the ground running." And I thought about it, and I realized that the first couple of days were in the hotel, and that was set up, and then I could start with them in the morning, go out all day and find the other things, hook up with them the next morning, go out and find other things, take them to show them at night, and that's what happened. And the whole thing took four weeks, and I showed up the night before we started shooting. So it was very compressed. But the lesson I learned was, I went around looking for locations as if I was the character. So the story is of a displaced person that feels both amused and in wonderment at Tokyo, but also a little lost. I didn't feel lost. I had been to Tokyo and met some of the characters in the film--they were Sofia's friends--with Spike. We had gone there to research a commercial, and I'd been there for about a week before, a couple of years before, but I'd been there for a week. But I went out through the eyes of the character, and I wanted to say, okay, what would she be interested in? How would she see this? And then every film I've done since that, that's how I approach it. So I always said that I paid attention to the characters as written in the story, but I didn't really prepare the characters the way that actors do. And then I

started thinking, oh, some of these actors, they really know their own backstory. They really know--they've thought about this a lot. They have to build it so that they're not putting on a façade. And if I'm in charge of the facades, then I have to know how this facade came to be.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes.

**BARRETT:**

And I don't know why it dawned on me, but it dawned on me that basically I was living--you needed to go out and look for these places and be so happy to be walking around in Tokyo and going like, "What if we came here?" And then show that to the directing team and the DP, and they go like, "Yeah, why don't we go there? I want to go see that. Where'd you find that?" And so it became a game of sharing and tag, which is what you do culturally all the time anyway, you know. "Have you heard this yet? Have you seen this?" "How do you know about that? I want to know about that." And I think in art circles and music circles, cultural circles, there's always this hoarding of new information and wanting to share and keep up. So it was like that, and you always want to go, "How'd you find out about that? I want to know about that. Where'd you get that?" So then every film since then, I've approached it from how did I get here, who is this character, what do they have, why do they have it, how do they end up with it. You know, don't just surround them with things that they never would have got.

**COLLINGS:**

So how do you determine that? Because you said that you don't--for example, you don't want to read the source material first because you don't want to be influenced by it. How--

**BARRETT:**

No, that's not the script. That's a book.

**COLLINGS:**

I know. That's what I meant.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. That's because it's a different medium.

**COLLINGS:**

But I guess I was just--maybe this is wrong. I was sort of thinking of the character being, you know, like fully actualized in the book.

**BARRETT:**

I'm thinking-- See, with the source material when it's a book-- I think that, okay, that was fine. That's for the readers. But we have to remake this, and it's a different language and it's a different world and it's much more first impression. You can spend 40, 100 pages describing somebody's abode or their world in great detail, but in a film, that would be like sitting watching somebody glance over at something, and then the camera glances over at that thing and dwells on it, and then the next thing, you open this book and you open that-- And then you ask the book how I got here and who made it and who handed it to you. And that's fine for a long summer read on a beach, but in film, you have to do all of that behind the actors in a minute.

**COLLINGS:**

So you're really taking to heart this notion of film language, where, you know, the shot is of this wall over here and it's purported to be through the eyes of the character.

**BARRETT:**

Well, or--

**COLLINGS:**

You're sort of saying, "I really want to sort of know the psychology of this person so that I really know what they're looking at and why."

**BARRETT:**

No. I want to know that if there's something that I--if there's a piece of furniture or if there's a piece of artwork on the wall, is that person artfully inclined? How did they end up with this? I don't want to make a pretty--I don't want to make a decorated room just to make the eye move on a film--

**COLLINGS:**

Right, right.

**BARRETT:**

--if that character who put this room together, not me, wouldn't have put that there. Because then you're competing with the character's performance and the direction on how that person is grounded. You're conflicting with what you know about them. Or you're saying like, "Oh, well, they must have been this because that was at their house." No, they have nothing to do with that. You know?

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

See, you just have to be careful. It made me very mindful of not assigning certain histories to people that conflict with the distillation of the story being told at that moment. You don't have to tell the story of the world or the history of all these different items, but make sure that you're not competing with the story that is being told. If the story's just in motion for a moment between a couple of people, you don't want to be thinking about where they got their pillows. So--

**COLLINGS:**

So how do you juggle all that?

**BARRETT:**

--take things away, take things away, take things--

**COLLINGS:**

You're always taking things away.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, takes it back to sculpture. And then the more things you take away, I think there's a couple schools of production design, and one is certainly more is more is more, and, you know, keep the eye moving, but it has nothing to do with the story. It just keeps you distracted. I'd rather just put them on a naked stage or focus to them, and if there's something in the room, make sure that it either is not distracting or it's meaningful and has another shade that you don't have time for in the dialogue, but somehow has a relevance to the situation or the character's history.

**COLLINGS:**

So that would make, in *Lost in Translation*, the setting in the hotel quite suitable for this philosophy, because precisely because it is a hotel, it's very--

**BARRETT:**

It's lonely. Hotels are very lonely. There's a whole world outside you, but you're still in isolation--  
-

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

--and in a city that's not yours. And the belongings are only what you brought into the room. So it's--

**COLLINGS:**

So how is it that you had that realization on that film?

**BARRETT:**

I don't know. I don't know. It just hit me. And I don't know if it hit me then or it hit me when I did Marie Antoinette later.

**COLLINGS:**

Because you had mentioned that your instruction was do whatever you want, but make it so that it makes sense to be--that it's seen from the point of view of like a sixteen-year-old girl.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, yeah, in Marie Antoinette. I was saying that this was--I mean, they're not that different in age. Charlotte as Scarlett, Scarlett at Charlotte was supposed to be a little bit older, young married, and Marie Antoinette was supposed to be an even younger married, but she was really a teenager and pulled from one family, even though it was a very wealthy, isolated, privileged society, to another parallel one with a different language in a different country, with a forced

relationship, and she's faced with rules of the court, mannerisms that maybe she didn't have at home, and she's a kid, you know. I think kids are all kids, you know. So even if she knew how to behave in a regal society, still she's just a kid, you know. She's distractible and attracted to certain things that seem more fun than rigorous obligation.

**COLLINGS:**

And how did you go about this one? Because it's very--the frames are very full. I mean--

**BARRETT:**

Well, by their nature they're very full.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes.

**BARRETT:**

I hated, I hated art history in school, even though I realized I absorbed a lot of it. On the last--on the film I'm working on now, we created these playful sculptures of women who look like they're holding up a building, and somebody said, "What are those things?" And this word popped into my mouth that I hadn't used--I don't think I've ever uttered it before, and I said, "Oh, those are caryatids." They go, "What's that?" I go, "You know, female sculptures that hold up a building." And then I went, "Wait a minute. Let me make sure I'm not making this up." And I looked it up, and sure enough--

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah. I mean, I've seen those--

**BARRETT:**

Greek architecture.

**COLLINGS:**

--and I never knew that's--

**BARRETT:**

Temple of Diana.

**COLLINGS:**

--what it was called, yeah.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, but that's what the name was, and the spelling and the pronunciation was right. So somehow in my resistance to art history, it had still absorbed. But I didn't like how busy everything was in eighteenth century France. It was blingy and excessive and noisy. So, luckily,

they didn't have a lot of possessions. All their walls and furnishings and decorativeness was usually flat to the wall or the furniture, but it wasn't like layers and layers of objects like we have now. So it was still sculptural in a different way--

**COLLINGS:**

Ah, I see.

**BARRETT:**

--with the heavy texture.

**COLLINGS:**

And did you actually shoot at Versailles?

**BARRETT:**

Yeah.

**COLLINGS:**

What was that experience like?

**BARRETT:**

It was fantastic. For somebody not liking art history and not liking--the reason I didn't like art history was because I wanted to be of--when I was being a young scrappy painter, I wanted to be of my time. I didn't want to fix into history; I wanted to make history--

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

--like an arrogant little art kid, you know.

**COLLINGS:**

And there was a lot of talk of "rupture", you know--

**BARRETT:**

Just like all of this academic stuff that I didn't really care about. It's like make stuff and you talk about it later, you know. But then you land in a place as richly historic as Versailles, and you're pretty impressed.

**COLLINGS:**

I'll bet.

**BARRETT:**

It's very impressive, both the grandeur and then also the squalor, the fact that when Benjamin Franklin would write about going to Versailles, he'd say like, "Oh, now I'm back in Versailles. I remember how bad it smells." Because people would line up in the halls with their dogs and they wouldn't get out of line, and they'd pass pisspots and the dogs would just shit on the floors, and it was just disgusting. The whole place was disgusting. Here you've got fountains for miles and miles, and there's not one piece of working plumbing in the entire building for people.

**COLLINGS:**

That's interesting. I didn't know that.

**BARRETT:**

There's one chamber pot for the queen, and that's it. So it's a pretty raw society for how elegant it is. And the ladies had fans, and they never smiled because their teeth were all rotten. So we're really talking façade and façade now.

**COLLINGS:**

Right!

**BARRETT:**

But Sofia's clues were she wanted it to be a young person's world and a young person's visage of this world, and she didn't want to get stuck with what she called jewel colors, you know, deep hues, which she felt like were used by the old royals. So we decided that the pastel, the young kids all had pastels, and the old kings had deeper colors and then also when you try to do research of this time, you've only got court paintings that were made to make everybody look good.

**COLLINGS:**

Of course.

**BARRETT:**

There's no reality. But you get to go into a place with this much history and say, "What's behind that door?" And they go, "Let me show you." And they'll take you into places the public never gets to go.

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, wow. What did you see there?

**BARRETT:**

Oh, attics and corridors and the archives, the minutes of everything that happened in the court every day, written longhand in books, that the librarian who showed me said--I said, "What does it say?" "Oh, I can't read it. It's archaic."

**COLLINGS:**

Archaic, yeah.

**BARRETT:**

Archaic French. And then the fact that every piece of furniture after the revolution that was taken out of Versailles was recorded and tracked, and they know where every piece is, and they're still trying to buy the pieces back. And we couldn't bring anything in. We could only shoot there one day a week and the rest of the time--because it was closed to the public one day a week, and the rest of the time it was tours and tours and tours, so we'd have to load in every Monday night, shoot Monday, load out every Monday night, and go to other places that we'd built to replicate the rooms that we couldn't actually touch. We could only shoot in the public areas and walk through them.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah. That makes sense.

**BARRETT:**

We wouldn't bring furniture in, because one time accidentally a television crew had taken furniture out--

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, no!

**BARRETT:**

--and left the replica, not knowing the difference.

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, wow!

**BARRETT:**

They got it back.

**COLLINGS:**

That's funny.

**BARRETT:**

They couldn't have that happen again.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah, absolutely.

**BARRETT:**

So it was fun to go back and play in history and be trusted with being accurate loosely, and having to do enough research where I knew what was correct and what wasn't correct, and know when I was breaking a rule.

**COLLINGS:**

So was this the first film for which you had done historical research?

**BARRETT:**

Yes.

**COLLINGS:**

How did that interact with your process?

**BARRETT:**

Well, again, I just did enough. I just did enough to know what was correct. And it's not like there's photographic research.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah, of course.

**BARRETT:**

So you'd read and then you'd listen to the different docents, and you'd realize that they have conflicting opinions. The history's all different depending on who interprets it. Then I felt a lot better. And they work there every day. So it was part of the process, and I watched other historical films and I think we've gotten much better about the honesty of our historical films. They look less theatrical than they did before. But I fully expect our film to look very silly in the future as well.

**COLLINGS:**

Oh. In what sense?

**BARRETT:**

Well, it can look just as theatrical as everybody else's did.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

You don't know.

**COLLINGS:**

So you said that you thought that *Lost in Translation* and *Her* were two films that you really felt that you had stretched yourself and brought something--

**BARRETT:**

No. Well, I thought that they were the best films I worked on.

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, the films themselves were the best.

**BARRETT:**

Yes, yes. And I felt that my work was aligned--you know, it was probably my best work because it was appropriate to exactly what the film needed and no more.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay.

**BARRETT:**

It was just enough. It didn't get in the way. It didn't distract. It supported. It was one as a whole. I want to make films where everything is making a unique art object that belongs to itself and isn't sitting on the shelf next to the other one that it kind of looks like.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah, I think at one point somewhere you said that you were interested in making something flawless, like--

**BARRETT:**

I probably overstated that. I love flaws. But just something that's of a piece to itself.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes, yeah, where the script, the art direction, the--

**BARRETT:**

Where everything--

**COLLINGS:**

Everything is just--

**BARRETT:**

Everything, yes, definitely is of one.

**COLLINGS:**

Is of a particular style. It's all working in the same direction.

**BARRETT:**

It belongs to itself. It's not like we borrowed a piece of this to make that work.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes.

**BARRETT:**

Both of those things are director-written.

**COLLINGS:**

That's a good point.

**BARRETT:**

And I try to find films like this as much as possible because that's the start of not taking a script off a shelf and having other people say like, "Oh, I know what this could be." Because they have a vision of experience and visions when they were writing it of what they thought this world would be. It's much more pure. I wouldn't say flawless. I would say pure.

**COLLINGS:**

Pure.

**BARRETT:**

I want films that are pure.

**COLLINGS:**

And I think Spike Jonze--I mean, he said, or characters in the films have said, that they want-- you know, something about making films that have never been made before. I think one character said there's been no new genre film since Fellini made the mockumentary, and perhaps somebody like Spike Jonze is trying to make--

**BARRETT:**

I don't know. I don't know about that. I don't know, but I think that there's no end to new. I certainly think there's no end to new. I think when I did *Extremely Loud* was the first time I did a drama and even though I think that *Lost in Translation*'s a drama-- Or is it a comedy? Or is it a-- you know, is it just life?

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

All of the other ones I had brackets on the description of, because I didn't know really what they were.

**COLLINGS:**

But you're calling-- *Extremely Loud* is a drama, yeah.

**BARRETT:**

But if I say that's a drama, that means it's of a dramatic genre.

**COLLINGS:**

Right. Now, that one seems like it would have presented a lot of challenges because you have to create a sense of place, places, and yet at the same time, the narrative is so fragmented that--

**BARRETT:**

It's a search, though. It's a search, and the main thing there was I said, okay, I know a lot of New York, but it suggests that he goes to places that he's never been, and he's a fearful kid, and yet he'll go because he'll think he'll become close to his father if he does this. So I wanted to present nothing that we'd ever shot of New York before, so any--like there's a book that came out at the time, a Magnum photographic book of like New York in the movies, and I said, okay, let's look at this book.

**COLLINGS:**

Cross everything off. Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

Nothing--we can't do anything from this book. No place from this book can we shoot at. Because it's so rich. There's so many places. We didn't even get to all of them.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

And so I kind of want a film to be--the other part of *Lost in Translation* was I felt like I was discovering that city for myself, and then I was able to share that with other people that would watch the film and they'd go like, "I'm going into a city." And it dawned on me that I want to go into a film like I'm going into an experience I've never gone into. Not like I'm going into a ride, you know--

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

--or like these virtual experiences or things like that. I think they're all very familiar, in fact. But I want to go during this time with these people, this story, I want to keep looking around the corner, going, "Oh, I didn't know that was there. I don't know these people." Or I know people like this, kind of, but I don't know people exactly like this. I don't know this world. So if you were able to make every film like that where you didn't know what to expect when you went in, but you wanted to keep peeling back the layers and you wanted to keep learning, then it was like me going to Tokyo for the first time or me going into Versailles for the first time. And to be able to share that excitement and that wonder with the audience, to have them participate in a film. When you're playing music live, the other participant is the audience, and the audience is kind of conducting you. You understand--

**COLLINGS:**

Oh, that's very interesting, yeah.

**BARRETT:**

--you're doing it amongst yourselves. You're locking in sync to make something more pure and swell up together so it becomes something you couldn't do on your own. And then with the audience participating, that's the last piece of the equation. We are not in the theater to watch if the audience gets to do this in a movie.

**BARRETT:**

But if they're able to participate in a movie and you're not telling them everything that they need to know, and they're able to guess what's going to happen or they're able to come out with a different story, when you hear a song, everybody has a different version of what those lyrics mean and nobody's supposed to explain it, and I wish that was the same with film. You come out and you go like, "Let's argue about this. This happened. No, that didn't happen. No, it was more like this. No, that's not what they meant." Then you've got something going on. Then you've got an audience participating.

**COLLINGS:**

Yes.

**BARRETT:**

So that's the last part of the equation. So to try to be aware of that and try to lay something out where you go, okay, here's this world. There'll be things that you know so you're not afraid of it, but you'll be curious and you'll want to keep going down the path and opening doors. And if we've lost your attention, then I'm sorry, that's my fault. I need to get your attention back again. And if I've numbed you by just showing you everything you already know, that's my fault, too, because I didn't stop and play with your curiosity and keep you engaged.

**COLLINGS:**

Well, it's interesting because it's like place or setting as experience. It's almost like, you know, as you were sort of going back, harkening back to the notion of an artwork, it's like a sort of an 3D artwork that you engage with, except that you're doing it virtually because you're not actually physically inhabiting the space. And it's also interesting that you came from commercials, because commercials are precisely eliciting behavior on the part of the viewer.

**BARRETT:**

But they're also enticing you.

**COLLINGS:**

Enticing, but it presumes an active engagement with the viewer.

**BARRETT:**

It goes. Commercials were a good lesson because, say you've got thirty seconds, and you can actually tell a lot in thirty seconds. Am I going to turn it off? Am I going to mute it? Or am I going to--

**COLLINGS:**

That's so true!

**BARRETT:**

--am I intrigued? Am I intrigued? If you're intrigued, then you're participating in filmmaking. And if you can't take that to the film--

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

I love a long patient film, you know, --

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

--as long as I'm brought down the road. And I can also be impatient with a film and check out. Even if it's fast moving, if I don't feel like they're asking me--if they're not letting me play with it, then I'm probably lost, because they're just talking at me like when you're in a class and people are just telling you what to think, you know, rather than asking your participation.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah. You had sort of mentioned in passing the notion of a theatrical audience, of a film being screened. You said when you referenced the audience, it was a--

**BARRETT:**

Participating?

**COLLINGS:**

It was the notion of an audience in a theater. I mean, is that kind of like your touchstone in the sense of the audience? I mean, we all know how screening and other platforms have changed.

**BARRETT:**

I don't think it matters communally whether they're sitting next to other people. I think it's a unique experience, and I do think you feel it much like I think the phenomena of sports in sports stadiums and things like that and concerts. It's definitely different by the swell of reaction from other people. Because the viewing experience is always not that great. It's pretty terrible. It's usually much further away, but you've got all this humanity absorbing it at the same time at different rates, and little echoes and delays of reaction. So I think the theater experience is good, but I also think that if you're doing these same things--I watch a lot of things on computer. But I always want headphones on so that at least aurally I'm surrounded by the depth of sound. I think

the picture can be crappy, but as long as the sound is good, then you feel like it's a volume of world around you. So I don't mind. I think the same exercise is true. You still want them to dive into the story the same way in the world, but I know that it's more impactful if it's bigger than you are.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah, I think that's a good way of putting it. So I know you said that you were cutting away from your work today.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah.

**COLLINGS:**

Could I just ask you, did Her--what kind of special problems, creative problems did Her present in the sense that you were creating the future?

**BARRETT:**

I'll tell you, but let me take a break.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay, so we are back on, talking about the future in Her.

**BARRETT:**

I think that when we began the film, we thought it was in the future, and then just because there was something that doesn't exist now, which is an extremely intelligent, interactive operating system that learns at such a pace that it almost seems human for a moment.

**COLLINGS:**

For a moment, for just a moment, yeah.

**BARRETT:**

For a moment because it's superhuman. Because we're probably so egotistical that we think that something that's--it's impossible for something to think faster than we do or more complicated than we do. But in the end, it's a very simple story about the technological world around us and the fact that in a world of comfort, where everything's provided for you, that doesn't mean that the simplest problems of human nature, companionship and being happy, are going to be solved for you. So we thought at the beginning when we were prepping that it was a movie about the future. Then we realized how close around the corner these interactive voice-responsive computing systems would be. Siri came out while we were like in the first two weeks.

**COLLINGS:**

Wow. That must've been a moment.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. And yet it didn't really touch on the complications and the depth of what the script was. So it wasn't in the way, but we realized that we could play it two ways. We were excited about playing with the future, rubbing our hands together, and then thinking like, "Wait a minute. We're being those filmmakers. We're being those people that want to show off and say, "This is what your future's going to be."

**COLLINGS:**

Aha!

**BARRETT:**

And that is nothing about what the script is. There are things in the script to facilitate the story that don't exist yet, some of them playful and some of them, most of them, just this voice at the other end of your computing system that you're trying to use as a false companionship rather than really dealing with people. So it's not-- We said, "This is not in the future at all." "This is how far away from now?" Originally I think we were thinking twenty years, and then we realized it was one operating release away. It was a season away. But we leapt forward and changed things so that they weren't familiar to our world, and again it goes back to making you pay attention. "I don't have that yet. I wish I had that." But not in such detail that it's covetous. It's not like "I want that fancy car." I'd love to design a car. I've said this in an interview, that I'd love to design future things, but they would probably just get in the way of the movie, as I've seen it get in the way of other movies. It's a bit showoff-y and then we're thinking about that and talking about that in reviews and critiques, and we're talking about "Don't you want this fancy watch? Don't you want this fancy phone?" Or this car or this impossible flight-through-air system. And you want people talking about the fact that it's about the human dilemma and so you don't want to get in the way visually or artistically, from my point of view of playing with future gadgets.

**COLLINGS:**

Right.

**BARRETT:**

And so the mandate was that everything in the world is a level playing field. Everybody's happy. Or, not everybody's happy: Everything is supplied.

**COLLINGS:**

Wow.

**BARRETT:**

There's healthy food. There's nice places where everybody lives. Everybody has a nice job. Transportation is easy. You can quickly go to the beach or you can quickly go to the mountains. You can take time off if you need to. You're in constant communication. You can summon music or the arts or artificial companionship, but it doesn't solve the problem of connecting with people and making yourself feel not lonely. So in that way, it's very much a parallel to *Lost in Translation* as well. You've got this whole world of amazement, but it's the human condition that's a little bit fractured. And so the more we thought about things that we could do, the more we thought about how they would distract from the story and nobody would talk about the story.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.

**BARRETT:**

The story's pretty delicate anyway and so it'd be easy to miss and people wouldn't relate with being that sad sack. They would relate with wanting that thing. And so we went in the opposite direction and made things not look bright and shiny, but look like older, as if we'd jumped forward, if we'd gone back twenty years and had things that did the things that we do now but they weren't designed as slick as the things we have now. And so we dumbed down the interactive handheld device to more of an address book that you'd keep in your pocket or a cigarette case or a lighter, things that used to have tactile-- And they barely did what they needed to do to make the story point, but they weren't flashy and distracting from what they were conveying in the story plan. So it wasn't about the future at all. It was about, if anything, it was about the more things change, the more they stay the same. But it was a good exercise in restraint and changing the world so that it's not like our world, and so you pay attention to it and you're excited about it, but for years I was asked to predict what--from that movie, "Can you come and do a little talk on our panel about the future--

**COLLINGS:**

Ah!

**BARRETT:**

--and devices and this and that?" I go, "Why? We didn't do that." "But because you got rid of the device." Like they've been designing this stuff for years, with more money than I had, and they hadn't gotten rid of the main thing that I just swept away because I couldn't afford to do it better.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah. I think it's the pants that really suggest the--

**BARRETT:**

That was the playfulness, yeah.

**COLLINGS:**

Another era.

**BARRETT:**

Well, we always said like fashion is cyclable, so let's go back to the forties.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah.. Okay. Shall I let you go now?

**BARRETT:**

Yes.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay.

**COLLINGS:**

Okay, so you were saying you read the script for Her and you said, "Here's my version of the future."

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. So my first interactive conversation with Spike, I asked him a couple of questions. Then I said, "Okay, so I wrote this list of things that-- This is my version of--," what we were calling the future at the time, but later just an alternate world. So that people would--

**COLLINGS:**

You changed it from the future to alternate world.

**BARRETT:**

Well, it would still be called the future, and everybody still thought we were in the future, but all we did was change things from what we know right now. And they're very, very simple things. I said, "Let's have no typography. Let's have no signs. Let's have no advertising." And if there's advertising, it's only a slow-motion visual that engages you, and everybody has to participate and figure out what the story is and what the product is. So it's like a short silent film in slow motion, and people will discuss it for weeks, and finally maybe a month later, they'll tell you what it was about. And it becomes engaging participation. So that's advertising. No sports clothes, no logos, no blue jeans, no cars. I'm sure there were some others, but that was the first swipe. So that when

you looked at people, because you've seen future films and all of a sudden, everybody's dressed in black or some kind of severe orderliness. And I said, "If we just take away certain things that everybody has, no sneakers, then they'll look different and you won't be able to put your finger on why." So then the DP came along and said, "Okay, then no blue." I go like, "Okay. Fair enough." And then the costume designer came along and said, "Okay, no belts."

**COLLINGS:**

No belts?

**BARRETT:**

No collars. We went like, "Okay, okay." Because I'd already stepped on his toes. So it was fair game, but little by little, by making these dogmas, we altered the everyday world that we'd go out and see. The cars was a thing about not being able to say we were in another time and still see what we have right now.

**COLLINGS:**

Sure, sure, sure.

**BARRETT:**

It would take us out of the--we would anchor ourselves.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah, yeah, or have to design some car which would be very distracting.

**BARRETT:**

Have to design cars that we didn't have the money for. It ended up being one car in the film, a taxi, and I got the dumbest, ugliest Chevy that I could and just didn't talk about it. There are cars down--we found a place to do our walking scenes on an elevated walkway in Shanghai, which keeps them from having to stop for traffic.

**COLLINGS:**

It's shot in Shanghai. Yeah, that's right.

**BARRETT:**

And part of it's shot one week in Shanghai.

**COLLINGS:**

And why is that?

**BARRETT:**

Just so that Los Angeles wasn't familiar. Again, it's the same kind of shakeup. It's denser, as if things had changed and progressed-- Or just in a parallel different way, developed.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah, those odd round podlike things that they sit amongst. It's like on a rooftop.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah, parks on rooftops. That was another idea. That was something that Spike came up with. Then we found out they really did that. They really--the government gave money for all these parks, and we went to a couple of them and they were all dead. It was impossible to keep up, and nobody used them. So we built one in Shanghai.

**COLLINGS:**

The office with all of its Plexiglas and reds, it almost looks like stained-glass windows.

**BARRETT:**

Yeah.

**COLLINGS:**

There's almost a sort of reverent quality.

**BARRETT:**

That was supposed to be a take on these playful new offices where everybody's comfortable, you know, the dot.com offices. And you don't have to be anchored to a desk. You can go sit in a beanbag chair or play some Ping-Pong or go out and do your work on a laptop in the garden. And it was kind of supposed to be like that. It was supposed to be a very healthy environment for people. And the only place that I liked was this building on Hope Street downtown here that I loved, but it was so expensive that I couldn't have it but for two days and I couldn't paint it, I couldn't alter it, couldn't bring construction in, but I could bring those colors in. So I put all those colors in, and it had a huge atrium light, so it was constantly changing through the day and moving those colors around on the walls. And so it was kind of a parlor trick to make it interesting and yet different.

**COLLINGS:**

Yeah. Okay, I know you have to go, but did say that you make rules before each film?

**BARRETT:**

Yeah.

**COLLINGS:**

You said that off tape, so I just wanted to get--

**BARRETT:**

Yeah. Well, those were the rules for Her. Her had more rules than most of them. In Where the Wild Things Are everybody kept saying--I feel so burdened by these famous books. Everybody

kept saying, "Well, where are you going? Are you going to go to Hawaii? Are you going to the jungle?" And I kept looking at forests and being disappointed because they didn't seem volatile. They seemed comfortable. And the name of the book is Where the Wild Things Are. Wild things, you know, I wanted it to be wild. And so the touchstone for that film was depth. I wanted it to have depth all the time, because every time I went to the forest it was forest for the trees, it was shallow, it was comforting, it was you wanted to have a picnic. You didn't want to think about wild things until we went to a burnt forest in Australia. We could see between all the trees forever because the leaves were all gone. Just the trunks were left, and the leaves were dead and silver on the ground. And so I said, okay, no green in the film, no green. In the film where they expect me to have green, the first thing we're going to do is take away the expectation. And then Spike said, "Yeah, but let's have it being reborn, like all the seasons are happening at once." And I said, "Okay." So then we decided to have sprigs of new life come up from the dead growth, but they came up in fall colors rather than coming up green.

**COLLINGS:**

Ah! Yes, yeah.

**BARRETT:**

So we painted orange and yellow leaves and then we had snow for no reason. And finally we got sick of the palette and we said, "Okay, we've got to have some green somewhere." So we found this really nice little forest to walk through that still had lots of depth--