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## **Episode 57: Nelson's Camera**

### **Air Date: December 7, 2022**

**David Goldman:** He was very handsome. [quiet playful music] He had a beautiful mustache that he kept perfectly trimmed. And just had a lot of style. He had long legs and he never looked like he was in a hurry, but he walked faster than anybody else. It was impossible to keep up with him practically.

**Phoebe Judge:** This is David Goldman. He's talking about his friend Nelson Sullivan. They met in 1984 in New York City.

**David Goodman:** Nelson lived in this fantastically weird house that was this three-story, very rickety sort of old, old, old house. And he took me up to the second floor, which is his living room, and we drank a pot of coffee out of this Faberware electric percolator that he had. And he played for me what he said was the overture to an opera that he'd written about Galileo. It was mostly on the black keys of the piano, and it sounded real

spacey. And then we went out, walking around all over the Village, all over Midtown, and we ended up at the Empire State Building. Nelson took me all the way to the top of the Empire State Building and showed me his house from there. So, that was pretty cool. He loved New York. Nelson really loved New York.

**Phoebe Judge:** Nelson moved to New York in 1971 as soon as he was done with college in North Carolina. He worked as a hairdresser, a cab driver, and a baker. And he eventually started working at a classical sheet music store and found a place to live in the Meatpacking District.

**Fenton Bailey:** And this was in the days in the '80s, sort of pre, pre-mega gentrification. So the Meatpacking District was still a meat packing district. There was still carcasses being delivered and trucks pulling up.

**Phoebe Judge:** Fenton Bailey, one of Nelson's friends.

**Fenton Bailey:** But it was this gorgeous industrial space with this single house sort of standing there. And I remember up on the second floor, Nelson had a piano in his kitchen and a huge oil painting of himself with his dog Blackout. And he found Blackout during the 1972 blackout. [laid-back hip music] Hence, he was called Blackout. He was a black lab called Blackout.

**Phoebe Judge:** At night, Nelson and his friends would go out to clubs downtown. By the early '80s, a lot of clubs in New York had become places to see art and performances, along with new music, and each had its own distinct personality. The Mudd Club was an art gallery, punk venue, and salon. Club 57 was a dance club that also had monster movie nights on Tuesdays. And the Limelight was a former church and still had stained glass windows and rafters. Nelson and his friends liked the Pyramid Club, known for drag performances and punk bands, where Nelson's friends sometimes performed. One day in 1983, Nelson got a video camera and started filming his friends when they went out. His friend David Goldman remembers that when Nelson walked into a room, you noticed the camera right away.

**David Goodman:** Nelson was working with a shoulder-held camera and a battery pack in a carrying thing on his side. So it's very heavy equipment, very unusual. You hardly ever saw anybody with video equipment back then.

**Phoebe Judge:** He took the camera out almost every night. In one of his nightclub videos, you can catch a glimpse of Nelson as he passes a mirror. He's in the dressing room, filming his friends getting ready to go on stage in drag. Nelson squeezes in with the camera on his shoulder.

He looks like a one-man TV news crew. Most of the time, Nelson filmed people in places downtown where artists like Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat were becoming big names. Art critic, Carlo McCormick has said, "All these people came downtown because they were different. They were ostracized and alienated from this normal America."

**Fenton Bailey:** It was this great sort of fertilization of things. And it was radical, but it wasn't really anti-establishment in the way that punk before it had been in the '70s. There was a real sense of let's do something and let's make it.

**Phoebe Judge:** Fenton Bailey.

**Fenton Bailey:** Those people on the margins, those artists on the margins, had had enough of being on the margins, and were doing work that deserved to be seen and were real drivers of popular culture. And so Nelson, I think was unique in having the vision to recognize that. [theme music comes in] And I think that's why he got out a video camera. That's why he started taping it — because he really felt that something was going on that needed to be documented. Plus, he loved it.

**Phoebe Judge:** I'm Phoebe Judge. And This Is Love. [theme continues]

**Robert Coddington:** Nelson just hit record and let it play, and just let whatever madness might ensue occur.

**Phoebe Judge:** This is archivist Robert Coddington.

**Robert Coddington:** He just wanted to record his friends and the things he loved. That was his M.O.

**Kennon Raines:** Nobody was doing that then. Nobody had cell phones. My parents never had a movie camera or whatever.

**Phoebe Judge:** This is Kennon Raines another one of Nelson's friends. She used to bartend at the Pyramid Club, and she performed poetry every week there for years. She remembers that at first being filmed by Nelson's camera felt strange.

**Kennon Raines:** It was awkward. It was hard not to feel like, oh, somebody's put a camera on me...I've got to be a performer now. I've got to try to be interesting. And so sometimes people did seem a little overly chatty or overly...just contrived, you know? And a lot of us at different times would say, oh God, Nelson, turn that off, 'cause it felt like it was hard to just be yourself. But he just was persistent, and he just did his thing. And eventually we got used to it and forgot about it and eventually we began to be ourselves.

**Phoebe Judge:** In some of Nelson's videos, you can see people who had become household names. He filmed RuPaul's first show at the Pyramid, and Keith Haring's New Year's Eve party. There are videos of drag queens lip syncing to Gloria Gaynor and Patti LaBelle. There's one video of a surprise hair dying party at Nelson's apartment. Eventually, Nelson got a hernia from carrying around his heavy camera all the time. [pleasant atmospheric music] His brother got him a new 8mm camera. It was much smaller; it only weighed about three pounds. And because it was so small, Nelson could turn the camera on himself.

**David Goodman:** And that was when he developed this extraordinary technique where he would hold this camera, usually with a fish-eye lens, out—his very long arm—and the subject became himself and whatever was around him. So people who came up and talked to him, what he was looking at, of course he would show you other things, but he became the narrator of his own life story.

**Phoebe Judge:** Nelson Sullivan shot over 1100 hours of footage between 1983 and 1989.

**David Goodman:** He didn't just tape nightclub things and people performing in nightclubs and theater.

**Phoebe Judge:** David Goldman, Nelson's friend.

**David Goodman:** He'd tape these long walks with his dog early in the morning, where you can watch these tapes, it's Nelson and Blackout out there for a stroll. And they're so calm and beautiful to see this city just waking up.

**Phoebe Judge:** Nelson often holds the camera low just behind Blackout's tail, so the whole video looks like a dog's eye view of the city. [smooth gentle music] When Nelson turned the camera on himself, he would talk about what he was going to do to an invisible audience. There are videos of him walking to the grocery store after a night out. He's often with friends. In one video, they buy flowers. In another, they're hailing a cab. Nelson once filmed himself waiting for a flight at the airport, looking for magazines at a newsstand. Later, he tours the bathroom. The videos look like they could have been made today for Instagram or YouTube, but Nelson was just doing it for himself. There's one tape of Nelson walking over to his friend Kennon Raines's his house for dinner. When he gets there, everyone is crammed around a tiny table next to the stove where Kennon is cooking.

**Kennon Raines:** And you know, it was such a humble little dinner party. I think I just had enough money to scrape together enough to make a big pot of sauce and the noodles were cheap. And we could bake a cake in those days for about three bucks. And I didn't even have a bottle of wine on the table. [chuckles] But, you know, it was

about six or eight people came over, and it was just like those little simple moments. He was always making you feel like he was—couldn't desire to be with anybody more than you in that moment. That camera really helped you not only feel like somebody thought you deserved to be validated in what you were doing, but then when you would see yourself, and he would play these for you or have you over to his house to show them to you, you could see what your performance was like on stage. You could see what your natural interview self was like on just, you know, running into him on the street. He was nonstop pleasant paparazzi. He wasn't out to embarrass anybody with his work. Everything that he did with his camera was to capture something that he thought was beautiful or funny or iconic or charming, and to help people notice something wonderful in life.

**Fenton Bailey:** One afternoon, one weekend, Nelson came over with his camera, just hanging out. We all walked back to his apartment from the East Village—from our apartment in Alphabet City, we walked all the way across town to his house. And he was videotaping the whole way. And when we got there [chuckles] he took out the tape, put it and played it, and we all watched it. [laughs] We all watched back the tape of us walking across town.

**David Goodman:** My favorite tapes to watch and show people are the ones that I'm in. Not because I want people to look at me, but because I can say, look, there's our house! And that was my Cadillac...and look at our dogs! It's a beautiful sort of a time tunnel. I remember once he said, we need to make more tapes of our loved ones because if we don't, when they're gone, we're going to get tired of watching the same tapes over and over again. And he was sort of making a joke, but I think he was sort of sincere too. [pensive minimal music] Uh, you know, AIDS is not in the tapes. And yet it's in every tape because people were having all this outrageous fun at night because they couldn't change what was happening in the daytime. They couldn't unhear what they had heard when they picked up the phone that day and they got a report on somebody. It was really...I think it was a grim and scary time. I was in Atlanta, and it was a very traumatic time, and I know it was worse in New York.

**Phoebe Judge:** In 1981, *The New York Times* reported that 41 gay men in New York and California had been diagnosed with a “rare and often rapidly fatal form of cancer”. The next year researchers began calling it Acquired Immunodeficiency Disease or AIDS. In New York City, Mayor Ed Koch was criticized for being slow to take action in response to the crisis and not doing enough to promote risk reduction or to educate the public. Because so little was known about how the disease spread, some people were fired from their jobs when they tested positive. Doctors often wouldn't treat patients and friends and family wouldn't visit. Terry Sherman, a DJ who worked the nightclub scene in the '80s, said that the mood in New York and the clubs changed after AIDS. He said that friends of people who had died or were sick stopped coming because it was too

painful to go to a place with so many memories of the fun times they'd enjoyed with their friends or lovers. In 1987, a quarter of all AIDS cases in the country were in New York City.

**Fenton Bailey:** A lot of people were getting sick and disappearing. And it was a very present thing. At the same time, I think that presence of AIDS and that appalling amount of government indifference really drove people to express themselves and to create what they created even more. In the sense that we will not be victims. We will not be ignored. There was a tremendous amount of creativity. There was a sort of rage of creativity that was just an explosion.

**Kennon Raines:** Nelson caught the magic. He was like this big butterfly net, and he just caught all these incredibly beautiful creative butterflies of people that gave themselves permission to have fun during a terrible epidemic of AIDS. And yet we still got out there and had fun and created and wore costumes and made friends and celebrated life every day. [sentimental minimal guitar music]

**David Goodman:** I think that he almost, in religious terms, he almost had like a burden for this videotaping project that he undertook beginning in 1983. He felt more and more like he should be taping more and more things and of course the videotapes began to take up a lot of room in the house. And he wasn't sure what he wanted to do with them.

**Phoebe Judge:** Nelson sent tapes to his childhood best friend, Dick Richards in Atlanta, to air on Dick's public access show, *The American Music Show*. It was known for celebrating queer culture at a time when other shows didn't. Dick Richards described Nelson as a portraitist. He said that Nelson taped because he wanted to. He very much respected the artists who were his friends, was intrigued by the oddities of life and was in awe of being in New York. In 1989, Nelson quit his job at the music store to compile all his videos into a TV show for a public access channel in New York. But just a few days later on July 4<sup>th</sup>, Nelson died from a heart attack. In his last video, he's walking to the Hudson River with his dog and a friend. It's one of Fenton Bailey's favorite videos of Nelson.

**Fenton Bailey:** And the sun was setting, and it was just so peaceful. And watching that tape back, it's hard to watch that tape without feeling that Nelson knew it was his last night on earth. And every time I watch it just, you know, I get goosebumps because there was—and it's sad, yes, it makes me teary-eyed, but at the same time he was so peaceful, and he was so content in that moment. Gosh, I wish when all our time comes that it could be like that. It was really beautiful. [minimal pleasant electronic music] So that's a memory of Nelson and I wasn't even there! But I saw that tape and knowing Nelson as I did, as I was honored to do, it was just so him. It was the essence of him.

**David Goodman:** It was a just an incredibly terrible shock.

**Phoebe Judge:** David Goldman, who is Dick Richard's husband.

**Phoebe Judge:** Dick left quickly to go over and be there for Mrs. Sullivan and the family and to show respect in the old-time way. There was a funeral for Nelson and two carloads of us from Atlanta went over for it. And very quickly after that, Dick began his plan to rescue the tapes.

**Phoebe Judge:** After Nelson Sullivan's death, his best friend Dick Richards was immediately concerned about Nelson's tapes. He wanted to make sure his friend's work was cared for.

**David Goodman:** He flew up to New York and boxed up all the tapes and shipped them back to our house in Atlanta. So these many, many boxes of tapes started to arrive at the house in Atlanta. And we put them into the spare bedroom that was already sort of Dick's studio where he had his video equipment set up.

[to David]

**Phoebe Judge:** What did you think when all of these tapes arrived? Was it an overwhelming amount of footage?

**David Goodman:** It was an overwhelming amount of boxes. [laughs] We had to make a space for them. And I was really glad, of course, very glad that he got them. Very glad that they didn't fall into ruin or get picked apart, which might have been the thing that would've happened I think if he hadn't have acted to save them. People would've probably, with all good intentions, would've probably come over and said, oh, that was my birthday party, and gotten that tape and taken it away. So we were happy to have them there. But then the question becomes, what are you going to do with this? And in a way it's sort of the same thing that confronted Nelson — what are we gonna do with this? And so Dick began to watch the tapes. And they were all labeled, you know, Pyramid Club and the date or whatever, but there wasn't a catalog that went along with it or anything to show what was on every tape. So Dick started, that was the first step — was to watch the tapes and start marking what's on what.

[as narrator]

**Phoebe Judge:** It took Dick six months to go through Nelson's videos.

**David Goodman:** He would sit in there by himself watching these tapes and laugh, and laugh, and laugh.

**Phoebe Judge:** In the early '90s, David and his husband Dick met a man named Robert Coddington through a friend. Robert had been a fan of Dick's public access show. Dick invited him to come visit.

**Robert Coddington:** I walk in with my camera and the first thing Dick says to me is, oh, look, it's another Nelson. And I'm just kinda looking at him not understanding. And while we're at the house, we stayed there for the week, shot this show, and Dick showed me Nelson's archive. And it was a room in his house in Atlanta and there was about 600 tapes, different formats, VHS, 8mm. And over the course of the '90s, I would just make a yearly trek down and just watch Nelson's tapes.

**Phoebe Judge:** In 2006, Robert moved into Dick's guest bedroom so that he could spend time converting the tapes to digital files. [soft sentimental music] He remembers there were so many tapes stored in the room that they were stacked eight feet high along the wall. The only things in the room besides the tapes were a bed and editing equipment. Robert and Dick started to put together highlights of Nelson's videos and began to post them on YouTube.

**David Goodman:** I do think that Dick sort of saw what he and Robert were doing as giving Nelson the show that Nelson would've done had he stayed alive.

**Robert Coddington:** I mean, his tapes are so infectious. I just went after it. And there was a point where—'cause I was a musician, professional, doing commercial music—and I got to the point that I realized that it seemed more important to save his work than continue with mine. I thought I can use my talents as being an editor and a musician that would be more useful to Nelson. Because he wasn't around anymore. And Dick decided I was the one to do it because my passion for doing it. I came along at the right place in time, and I've been doing it ever since.

**Phoebe Judge:** Robert has dedicated the past 30 years to working on Nelson's archive. Nelson's videos have been seen over 25 million times since Dick and Robert started the YouTube channel. There are new comments on the videos almost every day. [slow-paced guitar music]

**David Goodman:** He in his mind knows that what he's shooting is important. He just hasn't figured out how it's gonna be presented or why it's important. It's such a simple technique. I think a lot of that reaches out to people and it gives a slice of life that the historians yearn for 'cause you can't get that now. Watching his videos is very much like time travel. The way that he taped you just feel like you're there.

**Fenton Bailey:** What Nelson created was a sort of body of work that really captured a community, a scene, a moment in time. And I think a moment in time that people will return to again and again and again to kind of understand where we are now culturally. Because I think that so many of the people in that scene, well, many of them didn't survive, but many of them have gone on to make enormous cultural contributions, and really shape the culture.



**Phoebe Judge:** In 2012, Dick and Robert got Nelson's collection archived at New York University's Fales Library. The library has called Nelson's videos a record of history that might otherwise be lost, but also an expression of one amazing person's life and sensibilities. Nelson's friend Fenton Bailey eventually co-founded a production company called World of Wonder which would go on to make a TV show with his and Nelson's friend RuPaul, called RuPaul's Drag Race. In the '90s, Fenton also made a documentary about Nelson using Nelson's footage. He says he wanted to make sure that what Nelson had done wouldn't be forgotten.

**Fenton Bailey:** In terms of personally looking back on it and seeing myself younger with hair, it's okay. You know, it's not, oh, I wish I was young again...I kind of don't wish that for a moment, actually. [laughs] Because I think that it's part of that false glamor. It in many ways, it was a really tough, painful time. And it's really good to be here as opposed to there. [dreamy music] And I suppose the other thing is, I often feel incredibly lucky and grateful...I mean, really loved—I was gonna say loved Nelson. But you know, he's a sort of—you know what it is when some people you've known for an awful—your parents, for example, or when someone really close to you passes away, they end up staying with you. And I do think that about Nelson. There isn't a day that goes by where I don't think about him. [archival audio comes in from Nelson's tapes]

**Nelson Sullivan:** Guys, my neighborhood is still the best in town. Look how beautiful it is. [traffic whirring by in the background] The buildings over here... my house...the big square out front. It is all so beautiful around here. I guess I'll never have enough pictures of it. I should walk out this way and see what it looks like. [cheery piano music]

**Phoebe Judge:** This Is Love is created by Lauren Spohrer and me. Nadia Wilson is our senior producer. Katie Bishop is our supervising producer. Our producers are Susannah Roberson, Jackie Sojico, Lily Clark Megan Cunnane and. Our technical director is Rob Byers. Engineering by Russ Henry. Learn more about the show at our website, [thisislovepodcast.com](http://thisislovepodcast.com). And if you like the show, tell a friend or leave us a review. It means a lot. We're on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram @thisisloveshow. Special thanks to Kinolibrary for letting us share audio from Nelson Sullivan's videos. You can watch more of Nelson Sullivan's work on YouTube at 5NinthAvenueProject.

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I'm Phoebe Judge. This Is Love. [music fades out]

**END OF EPISODE.**