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Akilah Hughes:

Yeah.

Fred T. Joseph:

Raising money for Black joy is a powerful thing, and I do ...

Akilah Hughes:

Hello, and welcome to Episode Three of the Black Euphoria Podcast. I'm your host, Akilah Hughes, and today's guest is someone I'm so excited to talk to.

Do you remember when the first 'Black Panther film came out, and the meme of the little Black kids dancing on tables in their blue school uniforms, because they all got tickets to see Black Panther? Yeah.

Well, today, I'm chatting with Fred T. Joseph, the man who organized those screenings, and helped create a global movement to help kids see themselves reflected on screen. Here's that conversation. Let's get started.

All right. So Frederick T. Joseph, the man, the myth, the legend, a person that I follow on Twitter, how did you feel after seeing Black Panther for the first time? What was that experience like for you?

Fred T. Joseph:

Oh, man, it was life changing. I said to someone recently that it helped me, even as a grown person, reimagine what was possible for Black art. Not just Black art in the way that we create in silos, or create for small audiences, but global blockbuster Black art, right?

As a creator, it helped me envision myself, my work, being able to reach millions upon millions of people, when I quite frankly, always figured out, "Okay, well my community will support me, hopefully." But that movie helped redefine what support, again, on a global level can look like.

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I saw the movie. I say this on every episode, but I was at this Twitter Blackbirds premiere in New York, and obviously, I had really high hopes for the film, because I'm like, "Ryan Coogler's wonderful, the cast is stacked. What's it going to be?"

And I also am a huge fan of superhero movies, but I have a high bar. The Dark Knight is obviously the North Star for this. After seeing the film, my friend Casey Neistat, of all people, he was there, and he was like, "We have to make a vlog immediately."

So he takes out his camera and he's like, "What do you think?" We were both, "This is the best superhero film of all time. This is unbelievable." It's the first time, I think, since the Dark Knight, probably, that we're rooting for even a villain.

The so-called villain has been redefined, because he made some points. But even just the way that it looked, the fact that it was colorful, and that didn't take away from it, in a time when all these films became so dark and of monotone and brooding, it was so joyful.

So I just want to give a moment to the art, because I think that's also part of why it's so groundbreaking, is that it felt Black, and in ways that I didn't even consider it could feel Black. It redefined some things.

Fred T. Joseph:

It was Black and vibrant on a vibrational level. Visibly, obviously, like you said, it was colorful and flamboyant, but on a soul level, it was bright. Even the end of it, bookending the film, where you have this redemption arc of the villain, right? Because there's an understanding as to why he was a villain, not just that he was a villain, but why?

When you get to that why hence, so all the think pieces and things of that nature, I wrote myself, when you get to the why, his why, you're not aiming that why at Black people, you're actually name aiming that why at systems. So the movie was just so powerful that you're even having those types of conversations, out of a Marvel Studios film. Who does that?

Akilah Hughes:

Right? I mean, completely redefined what's possible for a genre that, for the longest time, has been relegated to, "This is just for the masses." It's like, "Well, what if the masses had deep conversations about how we got here?"

I'm so glad we started there, because I think of you as sort of a superhero and just Black innovation. I'll get to how I think I found you and a lot of people found you online, but do you consider yourself an activist when you personally describe yourself?

Fred T. Joseph:

It's interesting, because I think that I grew up with the word "activist" being equated to our idols. The people whose shoulders we stand on, the Angela Davises, and the Fannie Lou Hamers, and the Malcolm Xs.

So I've never loved the title of activist. I think that we throw titles around. I'm just someone who sees issues occasionally, and likes to do something about it.

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah.

Fred T. Joseph:

I'll sneak in an occasional protest, I'll get out there. I'm not doing anything that I think has lived up to what I consider an activist, but that's the way I feel about it. I just actively do things.

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah. No, I mean, super relate to that, as well. I think it's hard to compare when we think about the era of civil rights where people were overcoming similar things that we're still kind of overcoming, but in a way that really put their bodies on the line.

But I ask, because the superheroic things that you've done, between writing, raising money, and then, also just bringing awareness, I think, to the importance of Black art. I think the audience would be interested to know, which came first for you?

Have you always been a writer? Have you always felt, were you driven to write, because of this sort awareness of the world? Or was it like you wrote, and then things opened up for you? How did you become who you are now?

Fred T. Joseph:

Yeah, so my grandmother was a writer, a Black woman who was raised in the South in the '50s and '60s, and she never got a chance to be published, or do some of the things that people such as you or myself have done. And so she kind of had a dream deferred, and she deferred it to me.

But for a Black boy growing up in the projects in the '90s, it wasn't really something I thought was possible, either. I went to college and I studied creative writing. I double majored in that, and poli sci, and then I went to law school, dropped out of law school pretty quickly, and then, went back to business school and got my MBA marketing. I think a lot of people don't know that, actually, for a lot of campaigns I do. I actually did go to NYU Stern and have an MBA in campaigning, and things of that nature.

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah, you know what you're doing.

Fred T. Joseph:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, just a little bit, just a little bit. At some point, though, the Black Panther film opened up a lot of doors for me. So people started being interested, and maybe we'll get into some of the things I did for the first film, but after I did a few things for the first film, people started being interested in, "Hey, what else do you got?" I was like, "Well, I write a little bit."

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah, because they listened.

Fred T. Joseph:

I started writing articles, and yeah, I was like, "Look, I got a little something." So I started writing articles, and that ultimately led to two New York Times bestselling books, and more books on the way, one that just came out four days ago, actually, so ...

Akilah Hughes:

Oh, well, congratulations.

Fred T. Joseph:

Yeah, yeah.

Akilah Hughes:

Wait, what's it called? Let the audience buy it, we got to read it.

Fred T. Joseph:

That book is called Better Than We Found It, and it's a young adult book that tackles issues from gun violence to healthcare reform, transphobia, homophobia, et cetera, and features people such as Elizabeth Warren, Chelsea Clinton, Nick Stone, Julian Castro, helping discuss these issues. And then, in November, I have another little book coming out for the Black Panther II film, so ...

Akilah Hughes:

Okay, well, we will definitely be getting into that. I'll skip ahead because I want to talk about, I think the elephant in the room is how you found the first Black Panther film, and saw an opportunity, I think, to uplift Black people, and specifically, Black kids across the country, and maybe even the world, in the end. You created the hashtag Black Panther Challenge. This is back in 2018 when the film came out, and I probably could do it justice, but you want to tell us a little bit more about what that was? Just jog everybody's memory, because I think we all have seen the GIF of the kids, dancing at the table, losing their minds.

Fred T. Joseph:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So the Black Panther Challenge was a campaign that I started to help kids see Black Panther for free. Growing up, we didn't really have the opportunity to always go to films and things of that nature.

I think a lot of people who were not necessarily in an economic place to do so, can't always take their kids to see blockbuster movies, and things like that, I wanted to make sure that kids had that opportunity. So I started raising money to take kids to see the film, and first it started with Harlem, and then, it ultimately became, I guess I just kept on pushing it.

I was like, "Okay, well, let's do Detroit. Let's do LA." And I was like, "Let's do Kenya, let's do Gambia, let's do Zimbabwe." Geographically, it ended up becoming the largest GoFundMe in history. We raised enough money to take 70,000 kids globally to see the film, so ...

Akilah Hughes:

Wow. I mean, it's hard, I think, for a lot of people to understand how many people that is. That's more than you can see in your frame of your eye, if you were in a stadium. You'd have to turn your head and it would be every seat filled. That is phenomenal. How do you think feel about how it's grown since?

Because I do think that that GoFundMe, and that action inspired a lot of people to start doing more and more campaigns to help children across the board, whether that be for paying for school lunches, paying for other opportunities. It was really the first time I'd ever seen another person fundraising on behalf of somebody that wasn't a police officer or something, you know what I mean, for the ultimate good, honestly.

So I think, how do you feel about the of impact of that? Because it can't be overstated. I was a kid in the '90s, as well. Space Jam was kind of it. That was the one movie that everybody finally forked over enough for me and my family to see it, but ...

Fred T. Joseph:

Yeah, yeah.

Akilah Hughes:

How do you feel about that?

Fred T. Joseph:

I mean, it's amazing. Someone asked me recently if I was doing something again for Black Panther II. Maybe something small, but I don't really need to, because now, it started this kind of fire that everybody in every city is taking kids to see Black Panther II. And that's the legacy of that moment. And it wasn't something that I did alone.

People had to donate, people had to share the posts, and things of that nature. I didn't have a public presence at the time. I had 2,000 followers on Instagram, I had, I think, 800 followers on Twitter. So it really was the people who did have the power, the people who did have social capital, sharing it, that also made great dents to help that happen.

And I think that, in that way, we all have to look at things we can do. I remember being in grad school, and we went to Ferguson to protest. We protested on the Brooklyn Bridge for Akai Gurley. And I've been, since I was a kid, really out in the streets doing things, but this was different, right?

Because we kind of see, I guess, going back to the question about activism, even, we kind of see activism as being one thing, I suppose, where it's like, "Okay, you got to be on the streets, you got to have a sign, so on and so forth." We were all out there in the summer of 2020.

But I do encourage people to redefine how they are active, because I do think that more people raising money, even to support, not just survival things, I would say, but even joy.

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah.

Fred T. Joseph:

Raising money for Black joy is a powerful thing. And I do think of that in that way, that as people being active in their community.

Akilah Hughes:

I'm glad that you said that, because I think that the innovative piece of what you did, and what has come from it, is that it was completely rooted in the idea that this is for the joy of Black people. It's not because somebody murdered a Black person. This isn't because of some injustice that we have to correct with our own dollars.

It was seeing an opportunity to bring joy to a community, and doing so, time and time again. So I think that that's powerful. And the idea that you did it from where you were. You weren't Kim Kardashian, with 100 million followers, able to Tweet anything or post anything, and obviously get traction, because you're paying marketing people, whatever else.

But you did see an opportunity and take it. And I think that a lot of listeners will relate to the idea of, "What can I do? Who do I think I am?" And it's like, you don't actually have to be some public figure yet.

You just have to have good idea, and then, find those people who are willing to also champion you. I mean, you did meet Chadwick Boseman, rest in peace, the king, the GOAT. What was it like meeting him?

Fred T. Joseph:

So Chadwick, I can't really talk about Chadwick without also talking about his wife Simone, because they are two phenomenal human beings. The gravity of the loss of Chadwick Boseman, I still can't put words to it, but I actually wrote about it in my last book, just what he meant to the community, especially Black men and boys, and what he projected, and how he carried himself.

But meeting him, man, that was a cool cat. That was a cool cat. Just real smooth, you know what I mean? Everything. It was like he was James Brown and Jackie Robinson, and T'Challa and all that, rolled into one.

And I'm not a little dude. I think I was bigger than Chadwick, but I was looking up to him, "Man, you Chadwick Boseman, bro, and we met."

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah.

Fred T. Joseph:

And I was at a party in LA. It's something I never do, actually, I don't really like going. But I was at a party in LA ...

Akilah Hughes:

Hey, I live here, and I'm the same way.

Fred T. Joseph:

Although, we're already in LA, a few weeks after meeting him, and this is just a testament, again, to who he is. His then, I don't know if they were married yet, but Simone had saw me, and I didn't know who she was, and she came up to me.

She's like, "You're Fred Joseph, right?" I'm like, "Yeah, I do something wrong." She's like, "Nah. Chadwick would be talking about you," and I don't know who she is to me, at the moment.

Akilah Hughes:

Right.

Fred T. Joseph:

So she's like, "Chad be talking about you, and just the effort, and how he wants to lift it up." And I sit there, I'm like, "Okay, who are you?" And that somebody's like, "Hey, that's Chadwick's partner." I'm like, "Oh, Chadwick be talking about me?" [inaudible 00:15:44].

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah, exactly, at home? Not just in a professional sense, but ...

Fred T. Joseph:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Akilah Hughes:

Actually, mutual admiration.

Fred T. Joseph:

Right.

Akilah Hughes:

Wow, that's beautiful.

Fred T. Joseph:

That's just wild. That's wild. To think that somebody, especially at the, I don't think people understand the magnitude of how big he was in that moment when Black Panther came out. He didn't have to even think about me after meeting me.

He could have been, "Okay, cool, whatever, I don't care." But to think that he's actually thinking about the community efforts to support something like Black Panther, says just a lot about him and his wife, on the deepest level.

Akilah Hughes:

Absolutely. It's really very impactful and empowering to see, not only great, wonderful talented people succeed, but also have the innate ability to acknowledge when people are giving back, and want to take part.

Man, I'm so glad you got to meet him, and I'm so glad that he knew all the work you did to make this come to fruition. You've been hinting at this collaboration you have with Marvel for Wakanda Forever: The Courage to Dream. So what is it and how did it come about?

Fred T. Joseph:

It was interesting, actually. So someone at Disney had read my first book. After the Black Panther challenge, I then kind of grew, I suppose, into a public figure.

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah.

Fred T. Joseph:

But people didn't equate me as a public figure to the guy who did the Black Panther Challenge. People just didn't realize that two people were the same, which is cool.

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah.

Fred T. Joseph:

This woman at Disney had read my first book and she's like, "Oh, I really like this guy's writing. We should talk to him about potentially working on Black Panther, if he's ever seen Black Panther, or has any interest in the film." So they messaged me, they're like, "Hey, do you have any interest in Black Panther?"

Akilah Hughes:

Wow.

Fred T. Joseph:

I'm like, "Yes."

Akilah Hughes:

Obviously, yeah.

Fred T. Joseph:

[inaudible 00:17:37]. They're like, "Oh, so you're familiar. You're a fan." I'm like, "Is this a joke," right?

Akilah Hughes:

Yes.

Fred T. Joseph:

So we actually spent the first few weeks of them just not realizing that I had done anything for film. As I'm giving them, as we're talking about what they want to do, and they finally tied it together. "Oh, my God, you are ..." "Yeah, yeah, yeah." They're like, "So how about this?"

Akilah Hughes:

You are the guy.

Fred T. Joseph:

Yeah, they're like, "So how about you just think of what you will want to write?" I'm like, "Excuse me?" They're like, "Yeah, what would you want to write for Black Panther II?" "You mean, you're going to make a book out of it?" They're like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah."

So I said, "Can I create an original character?" And they said, "Yeah, we'll have to ask Ryan." So I was like, "Oh, man, they got to ask Ryan, [inaudible 00:18:26] ..." I'm like, I'm all swagger. Because you got Chadwick, and then you got Ryan, right?

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah, exactly.

Fred T. Joseph:

I'm like, "Aw, man." And they got the approval. So I created this original character named [Dessada 00:18:38], who lives in the Marvel cinematic universe now.

Akilah Hughes:

Nice.

Fred T. Joseph:

Creating her, it allowed me to explore, for children, what children in Wakanda are like, right? So we have these films about adults, about all this melodrama, this, that and [inaudible 00:18:56]. But when you



really get into the nuanced nitty gritty of daily life, what does Wakanda University look like, so and so forth.

So I created her, and she's a disabled young black girl who's a brilliant person, actually. In the story, Shuri wants her to join the Wakanda Design Group because she's so brilliant. But she wants to be a Dora, because she's actually the cousin of Io, who's in the films, or whatever.

So I just explore her story a little bit, and that book really means a lot to me. As a person who lives with an invisible disability myself, bringing to page someone who is black and in a wheelchair, but not impeded by either of those things, is really powerful for me.

Akilah Hughes:

Absolutely. And I think it'll be impactful to so many people. So congrats on that, too. I know that it's just me telling you how wonderful you are, but objectively, it's an important thing that you were given a platform to do the right thing, and you were, "Let me actually take this platform, and really push it forward, and make something inclusive."

I appreciate it, and I know that so many more black kids are going to feel seen, and they can be a part of it, without having to just fantasize beyond there. It's like, "It's canon now, baby. We exist." Love it.

I think that this is a good point to talk about the Hollywood of it all, in representation. And we talked about it a little bit earlier with, when we were growing up, there was really, it was limited. There were sports figures, and there were a few movies, but it was often about us being disempowered and disenfranchised, and nothing about us being brilliant, the most powerful people in the universe.

So how does representation and entertainment in Hollywood sort of impact, I think, society at large, and then tying it into Black Panther? What has changed that you've seen, since this huge blockbuster hit that I think a lot of people, specifically white people, probably had really low expectations for?

Fred T. Joseph:

Yeah, so I think that I often call it "the Obama effect." When you see something, it ignites the imagination to what's possible. And people just can't deny that, whether however people feel about our politicians, or whatever ...

Akilah Hughes:

Exactly.

Fred T. Joseph:

Having Barack Obama, having Kamala Harris, and these people, it does mean something, right? I actually saw Obama speak for the first time when he was a senator. He spoke at the DNC, it was kind of his big coming out party, if you would.

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah.

Fred T. Joseph:

I was in high school, and I was just like, "Oh, they let in ..." Black folk be, "What?"

Akilah Hughes:

Exactly. They gave it on prime time?

Fred T. Joseph:

Exactly. And then, I ran for student government the next year, and won. Just that simple thing is exactly the type of change that a film like Black Panther can bring. Because you're taking that imagery, and you're exploring it for various generations, because Black Panther's not just a film about a superhero. It's a film about Afrofuturism. It's a film about colonization, and the lack thereof. It's a film about the impact of white supremacy on Black America. It's a film about womanism. It's a film about Black men deferring to Black women, and Black women and Black men protecting one another.

Akilah Hughes:

Yes.

Fred T. Joseph:

It's a film about loss. It's a film about all these things. When you start exploring these themes, and that's why I said in the beginning, it's not just about the film existing as an art piece in a bubble, or in a silo. You're exploring these themes in one of the biggest films in history.

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah.

Fred T. Joseph:

Every white kid in America, for the most part, has seen Black Panther.

Akilah Hughes:

Oh, and thinks he's cool.

Fred T. Joseph:

Right, exactly.

Akilah Hughes:

And isn't, "Oh, that's a weird D-list superhero." It's like, "No, he's an avenger."

Fred T. Joseph:

Exactly, exactly.

Akilah Hughes:

He matters.

Fred T. Joseph:

So what does that do for a generation of kids who saw Black Panther at eight to 10 years old, when it comes time for us to talk about the humanity of Black people in real life? Right. And that's the importance of things like this.

People think, "Oh, representation is ..." No, it actually really does matter. Proximity to things, proximity to marginalized communities, in any capacity, oftentimes does help people redefine how they humanize said communities.

So this piece of art, what Ryan put into this ... Be cause Ryan could have easily just made a movie about a superhero.

Akilah Hughes:

Right.

Fred T. Joseph:

But what he actually did was, he made an educational tool, and a love letter to the Black community.

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah, absolutely. And I like that you talk about, obviously, the representation and how it impacts children, but I think about my mother, and when you talk about the Obama effect, she was the loudest person at first being, "He's not going to be the President."

Not that she was against him. She's just, "This country, in my lifetime? Absolutely not." Then it was around summer, when he gets the nomination, and now she's out here in the streets in Cincinnati, "You all going to vote, we're all going to go," organizing in every way.

I think Black Panther was the second time I got to witness that side of my mother be like, "I didn't know this was possible." And what it means is so much broader than [inaudible 00:24:38]. We're not just a joke, or just another action film that we're never going to see again.

This is in rotation. If it's ever offered, we're going to buy it on DVD, and we're going to stream it, and our kids are going to know about. And my nephew did go as Black Panther that Halloween, and my niece did the next year. So it's like, it is amazing how uplifting a community can have those far-reaching effects.

My final question. Unfortunately, we have to wrap it up at some point, but this has been such a great conversation. We talk about, just generations and impact, and what the past is bringing to this moment, but also what we're innovating for Afrofuturism, and what we're able to see now.

If there was one civil rights leader, past or present with you, or that you knew, that you could bring to Wakanda, who would it be, and why? And what would you do there? Three questions. Who would it be, why, what would you do there?

Fred T. Joseph:

Oh, that's difficult. So I have a Malcolm X tattoo, so I'm going to have to go Malcolm, just based on ... I can't wipe that tattoo.

Akilah Hughes:

Right, he needs to see it.

Fred T. Joseph:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I think I choose Malcolm. I could have went with a billion different people, but I think Malcolm carried the spirit of so many people with him. Oftentimes, when we talk about these luminaries, and these, just massive people that came before us, and paved the way for us to literally be

on this conversation right now, we don't talk about how young they were when they were taken from us.

We don't talk about how much they went through, without many glimmers of hope. Like you said earlier, that we're still suffering from some of the same things. We're still fighting for voting rights. We're still fighting to essentially desegregate schools, in a way.

Akilah Hughes:

Yeah, jobs and opportunities.

Fred T. Joseph:

Right, right, exactly. We're still actually talking about slavery, even, through the modern institutions of slavery, through the prison industrial complex. So if I could provide respite, and that glimmer of hope, a little silver lining, I would provide that to Malcolm because I'm so thankful, because there's a through line from him to, I mean, the very nature of you, the producers of this, the gentlemen I'm in the room with right now.

Us all being here, it's no small feat. It's a beautiful thing. And it's, in its own way, creating our own little Wakandas, every day. Yeah.

Akilah Hughes:

Well, I can't beat that with a stick. That was a beautiful answer. Thank you so much for being here. Frederick T. Joseph, several books out, we'll have them in the show notes. But thank you again so much for being here.

Fred T. Joseph:

Appreciate it, appreciate it.

Akilah Hughes:

Thanks for listening to The Black Euphoria Podcast. Can't wait to be back with a new episode soon.