Jim Miller Q&A
What Happens Next – 01.23.12

Jim, why did you decide to dedicate such a substantial portion of your book on the business side of HBO, why should we care about the suits?

Jim Miller:
As someone who has worked on both the creative side and the business side in media, suits aren't just accounting types, trying to make budgets. There are creative people who rise to corporate power. And even though they become a suit, they're still incredibly devoted to the creative side of the business.

These are businesses and public companies. So, they have duties to investors and shareholders that sometimes don't align with the wishes of creative partners.

People need to understand that there are responsibilities beyond the creative process.

Larry Bernstein:
The suits are making the decision of whether to invest say 100 million dollars in Game of Thrones or The Sopranos. That is the call they need to make. In your book you mention that Netflix outbid HBO for House of Cards. Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose.

And what I found surprising is that HBO's organizational decision-making process was so effective. There was a lot of turnover at HBO, but different suits who ran programming consistently made the right decisions.

Jim Miller:
William Goldman's, great quote, "Nobody knows anything," I think it's overstated. But the truth is how many studios passed on Titanic? Everybody knows the ending, and the movie's been made several times before. A totally legitimate position, except it turned out that that was wrong, and it's one of the most successful movies ever made.

You have a moment where HBO sends out a pilot to The Sopranos for testing.

The audience doesn't like Tony Soprano. They don't really understand the world. There are not a lot of likable characters. And I think it's fair to say that at many networks would've pulled the plug at that point.

What Jeff Bewkes and Chris Albrecht decide is that despite these test results, we believe it can work." And so they go against the grain and they commit to it. They happened to luck out there. HBO went on a great streak. In a very short amount of time after Larry Sanders and Oz, you had Sex and the City, The Sopranos, Curb Your Enthusiasm, Six Feet Under, The Wire.

But the truth is, they also had John from Cincinnati. Lewis and Clark program was a 25-million-dollar write off, and never even went to the air. There are no guarantees in this business. You try and have a good batting average, and when you need to double down and when you need to escape. That's the key.

Larry Bernstein:
What is it about HBO's DNA that allowed different individuals in that same programmer's seat to make the right call?

Jim Miller:
There is a DNA for the HBO brand.

Carolyn Strauss, Chris Albrecht and Bridget Potter carried them through for a while. That's not to say that there wasn't a lot of disagreement. The Comeback and Enlightened, those are two shows that were canceled after the first season. Both of those shows deserved more time.

That was part of the HBO brand which is unlike the networks, "We're going to give you time to grow. And to find your way." The Sopranos wasn't The Sopranos until episode five. But they hung in there. And sometimes it takes more than a season.

Larry Bernstein:
Let's talk about sports next.

Tell us about how HBO looked at sports differently than its competitors. And how did HBO change sports entertainment?

Jim Miller:
What happened with HBO Sports early on falls under that rubric that I was talking about disruption.

Because the networks had basically given up on boxing. They'd moved it to Saturday afternoons, when everybody's doing their yard work. And boxing was no longer a part of the culture the way it had been in the '50s and '60s.

They engineer a satellite hookup for Ali-Frazier in Manila, and then they decide they're going to go after boxing in a big way. And they go to the promoters.

Michael Sheets says to Don King and Seth Abraham, who was running HBO, "We're going to put you in prime time. We're going to cover the sport outside of the actual fights.

"And we don't have commercials, we're going to be there for the pre-fight. We're going to be there an hour or two afterwards. We are going to go deep into this world of boxing."

HBO is perfectly positioned for this new world of Marvin Hagler and Tommy Hearns and most importantly, Mike Tyson.

Boxing is a huge, huge part of HBO's development. HBO research shows that early on in its history, men were controlling their remote and the wallet. And a lot of their subscribers were buying it for boxing.

They brought us Wimbledon during the week. Back then, you saw Wimbledon on the weekends. And you didn't see the early rounds.

Tennis and boxing became the foundation for HBO Sports.

And then come 2000, they have to give up Wimbledon, because now they're in the original programming game. And they'd much rather spend that money on big time series or big documentary series from Earth to the Moon or Band of Brothers or things like that than sports rights. And HBO Sports really gets diminished. ESPN cleans their clock with 30 for 30 documentaries.

Larry Bernstein:
How did HB0 differentiate itself from the networks and other cable channels for the production of high-quality documentary programming?

Jim Miller:
What Sheila Nevins did at HBO in the world of documentaries was transcendent and just incredible. She revolutionized the form. Sheila had the documentary world to herself. And she took advantage of it, she went high and she went low, as Michelle Obama would say.

Like Real Sex and Taxicab Confessions were enormously popular. And she did Academy Award winning documentaries that were on the front pages of The New York Times like Paradise Lost, The Jinx, or Chernobyl. Every compelling story that was in the culture somehow made its way to HBO Documentaries.

I was talking to Nancy and Lisa who run HBO Documentaries now, people would come in and pitch a documentary to Sheila Nevins and sometimes she would say no, and then a year later, she'd say, "I changed my mind. Let's do it."

Now, somebody comes in and pitches, there's no luxury for time. It's much more competitive, the good news is that the audience has more choices for that kind of storytelling.

Larry Bernstein:
The Sopranos revolutionizes television. How did HBO crush it?

Jim Miller:
There's an interesting link between The Sopranos and Succession, which is a huge hit for HBO now. With Succession, they decided they were going to make the show the star rather than have stars in the show. Not to say that Brian Cox isn't a great actor, Jeremy Strong, but none of them were household names. And they made a point of casting people that were going to be great for the show, and the show became the star. That's one ingredient.

That was mirrored with The Sopranos, aside from Lorraine Bracco, who received an Academy Award nomination for her incredible work in Goodfellas.

The second thing that's instructive about Succession and I think the seeds were planted with the Sopranos is, there aren't a lot of likable characters. Who do you root for in Succession? Who do you even like?

The biggest creative disagreement that ever occurred between HBO and The Sopranos creator, David Chase, was over episode five. It's called College. I think it's one of the great hours ever done in television. And David had written it where there's an old nemesis of Tony's, and Tony strangles him and sends him to hell.

And Chris Albrecht was afraid that the lead can't be seen killing a guy. And a lot of people I talked to said, "Well, wait a second, they already made that decision when James Gandolfini's cast and he's got a hairy back and he's in a wife beater t-shirt.

And Chris relented, because David said to him, "Look, if we don't do this, then this show isn't what it says it is. And this is the reality of this world." And it comes down to decisions. All these tiny grains of sand make up a beach, and they wind up being incredibly important, not only to the future of a show but to the HBO brand.

Larry Bernstein:
When you compare Curb Your Enthusiasm with Seinfeld, why do you think that Curb could only have been made on HBO?

Jim Miller:
The Seinfeld show wasn't even a hit when it first started. The Seinfeld chronicles started, it was basically friends and relatives watching it. One of the hallmarks of Grant Tinker and Brandon Tartikoff at NBC, the suits, is that they decided that they were going to stick with things.

Even Law and Order, I remember Brandon saying to Dick Wolf, "You better get some women in there, or else we're going to throw this thing out the window." They were able to stick with things and support them, even though they weren't getting the numbers.

The only way to be in in business with Larry David is to give him complete freedom. The show is still on 21 years after it started. He disappeared for eight years, it's unheard of. But if you build that into your way of doing business with somebody like that, then there are no rules.

Sometimes suits can be incredibly vital, without being persnickety by creating that freedom and by letting an important creator know that, "Look, you're not ready next year? That's fine. Let us know when you are." David Chase took off some time. There were there were some big interludes with The Sopranos.

When The Sopranos came back after long exoduses, the ratings went up.

Larry Bernstein:
Sometimes great TV is not the biggest moneymaker. My favorite program on HBO was The Wire. It was so revolutionary, so creative, but it had difficulty finding its audience. How did HBO management think about The Wire?

Jim Miller:
It's funny because David Simon talked to me at great length about this. Not only did it not get the ratings, but it also didn't get the awards that it should have. There was a, kind of a trifecta at HBO for many years, ratings are not paramount, but we want to win a lot of awards and we want that kind of recognition, so more people come into the tent. And we also want to be part of the larger dialogue.

Chris Albrecht said to David Simon, "Look, I don't mind that you don't get ratings. I'd love to see this on the front page of the New York Times." And the Wire did that. The Wire was important because it created new discussions and new narratives outside of television. They were talking about huge things in our world, about drugs and law enforcement and communities and everything else. And HBO thought it was so important that they were able to justify it on that alone.

Larry Bernstein:
There are different TV business models: the networks obviously cannot charge for subscribers, and HBO used cable companies to pay them for their product. How did HBO's business model determine the programming that it offered?

Jim Miller:
HBO never had contact with their customers, for a while there, people at HBO loved it. We don't have to sell it. We don't have to fix the cable box. We don't have to install it. If you got a problem, call Comcast, call Spectrum, call whatever. What a God send.

Turns out though, they wanted to know who their customers were. Amazon and Netflix, they know everything about us as subscribers. They know what we order. They can suggest other things. They can sell off our information in a way that HBO couldn't. And that became very, very problematic. One of the biggest matzo balls in the whole kind of soup of HBO's challenges.

Larry Bernstein:
Did you write your book Tinder Box because you thought that to understand the future of media entertainment you need to understand the past and HBO's history specifically?

Jim Miller:
The next two years are going to be pivotal, they will determine the next decade. What do these entities have to do to survive? HBO has to keep on doing a very, very good job, having a Sopranos is not enough, so you have Mare of Easttown, you have White Lotus, you have Succession, you have to have a pipeline that is full of arresting entertainment that people are going to want to come back to time and time again.

Project Popcorn, they got a lot of criticism, particularly within the Hollywood community about how they were bypassing exhibitors, or at least debuting things on HBO Max. It turned out to be a success in terms of their sub growth, and they had to pay a fortune to talent, basically paying them as if it had been in theaters and, that is a part of the business that is still being figured out.

The way that David takes HBO in the future may not be the way that Viacom takes Showtime or Reed and Ted take on Netflix. It's a very precarious time, but it's also a very dynamic and exciting time.

Larry Bernstein:
Your book Tinder Box tells a story by laying out a collection of edited interviews. Why did you use that approach for storytelling?

Jim Miller:
I approached it as a journalist to write a history that's a book of record. It's not like I take a bunch of interviews and just edit them and throw them together. I have to do a lot of reporting to make sure that that's actually happened.

The second thing is, this happened with Saturday Night Live, it happened with ESPN, it happened with CAA, and now with HBO. I don't care if you're Hemingway, I don't think that there's anybody that can write a book with the verisimilitude and the transparency that I want without hearing directly from these people. To hear Billy Murray talk about Gilda Radner's death and the last time he saw her in his own words, I mean, I do a lot of writing in these books, and I write interstitials that are connective tissue too because narrative structure is very important to me, and I also want to help the reader along and give them factual information that serves context so they understand it.

But I think that hearing directly from these people, hearing directly from Michael Fuchs in the HBO book and his sensibilities. You understand his fearlessness. You understand his hubris. When Julia Louis-Dreyfus is talking about Veep or the creators of Game of Thrones, over 700 interviews to talk with me about their work and their approach and what was in their mind and setting the scene for the reader, I personally think that that's unequaled.

It would have taken me half as long to write this book if I decided to sit down at my computer and bang out a history, just with prose. Doing an oral history is like climbing Everest on a cold day in your shorts. You've got to get the right people. You've got to beg them. You've got to go back to them. I interviewed Jeff Bewkes 32 times.

And it's because every time I had an interview with somebody, it told me another part of the story, I'd call up Jeff and say, "Wait a second, you didn't tell me that," and he'd say, "Oh, I was hoping you wouldn't find that out." But it's a huge pain in the ass. But it's worth it. And I hope it gives readers a unique take on the history of these places.

There are tons of reporters who cover the agency world, tons of sports reporters who cover ESPN. I have to bring something different to the table. And, this is the way that I = decided to do it.

Larry Bernstein:
Jim, thank you very much.

Jim Miller:
Larry, thank you, and I appreciate the level of insight into your questions.