

The Axe Files with David Axelrod

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Ep. 500 — John Legend



Speakers

Narrator, David Axelrod, John Legend

Narrator

00:00:05

And now from the University of Chicago Institute of Politics and CNN Audio: The Axe Files with your host, David Axelrod.

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David Axelrod

This is the 500th episode of The Axe Files. I'll have more to say about that at the end of this podcast. But appropriately, today, I'm joined by a legend, John Legend. The Grammy, Tony, Emmy and Oscar-winning musician and film producer. His personal journey is remarkable, but the way in which he's leveraged his celebrity to combat injustice and create opportunity here and around the world is truly inspiring. So here it is: Episode 500, my conversation with John Legend.

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David Axelrod

John Legend, it's great to see you. I am so excited to have you on my 500th episode.

00:01:04

John Legend

Oh, wow. That's a nice milestone.

00:01:06

David Axelrod

Of The Axe Files. Yes. And I needed someone who was up to the task, and who better than a legend to be on my 500th podcast? And I'll talk to you later about how John Stephens became John Legend.

00:01:19

John Legend

Yes.

00:01:20

David Axelrod

But I want to talk about going backwards and explore the Stephens family. I know you were on with Skip Gates on his show and he explored your roots and you learned a lot. And it was like an extraordinary story. Tell me about your family going back.

00:01:36

John Legend

He learned so much about my family that we had no idea about. And this was like cinematic. Some of the stories he was able to find out that we had some of our ancestors were enslaved in the south in a border state, and were granted their freedom by their enslaver upon his or her death and then moved to Ohio, which is where I was born and raised. Moved to Ohio, but some of the surviving relatives of the enslaver wanted to basically bring them back into slavery. And there was an entire court case fought about it. And Ohio basically was on our side, on our family's side, and fought for us in court. And they won. They were able to win our family's freedom and the right for them to stay in Ohio. And I had no idea about any of that until I was on Finding Your Roots with Skip Gates.

00:02:36

David Axelrod

Now, one thing that we can assume is that one of the things that sustained them through all those ordeals was faith, which I know was a very big part of your upbringing. Talk to me about what the church meant to you as a child.

00:02:54

John Legend

Well, my family basically ran the church. So when I thought about the church, it was literally my family. So my grandfather was our pastor and my grandmother was the church organist. My mother was the choir director. And my father taught Sunday school and sang in the church choir and played the drums as well. So we all were very involved in running the church as a family. And I spent a lot of my time there as a kid. And when it comes to music, that's really where I got most of my foundational training as a musician, singing and playing in church, learning from my grandmother, learning from my mother, learning from my family and singing with them and playing with them. And you'll hear that story quite a lot, particularly with Black musicians singing R&B and soul music, that a lot of our roots are from gospel music, and we develop our chops by playing and singing in church. And I'm certainly one of those folks.

00:03:58

David Axelrod

That influence is still — you can hear that influence in your music.

00:04:01

John Legend

Absolutely. It's here and it's here to stay.

00:04:05

David Axelrod

You knew very young that, man, I like being up here singing and performing in front of people.

00:04:12

John Legend

I loved it. I loved it from a very young age. I would do it at school. I would do it at church. I would do it at recitals for my piano teacher. And either way, I enjoyed being on stage. I loved the connection I felt with people. I loved the feedback I got from people. And I loved being creative. I loved coming up with a performance and coming up with songs eventually that I started writing when I was a little bit older as a kid, but I loved all of that and I wanted to do it for a living. And when I was a kid, that meant, you know, I wanted to be on Star Search. I want to be on the Grammys. But eventually it meant that I started really working on my own original material and started developing what an album from me would sound like. All those things started happening when I was a little bit older, but I was in college and then in my early twenties when I started to figure out my sound and how I wanted to sound if I came out with a record, and that all started happening over those years. But it started with me singing and playing in church as a kid.

00:05:21

David Axelrod

And tell me about your folks, because I know that it wasn't a straight line for your family, that there was some real struggle.

00:05:29

John Legend

That's right. So I grew up in that family. And you would think, you know, everything was pretty peachy keen for a while. But my grandmother died in her late fifties, which is pretty young for anyone to die. But she had heart failure. And it really rocked my family, particularly it rocked my mother because that was her mother. And she became depressed and eventually disconnected from the family, from my father particularly, but from all of us. And then once they got divorced, she kind of was essentially living in the streets, addicted to drugs and self-medicating and kind of disconnecting from us as a family. And we lost her for about a decade. She recovered. And eventually my parents got remarried and all these things happened. And she's living a very healthy life now and is a great mother and a great grandmother. But for those ten years, we barely saw her.

00:06:26

David Axelrod

How old were you when she broke away?

00:06:29

John Legend

It was basically my entire adolescence. So she left when I was around 11. I started going to public school for the first time. In eighth grade I was the age of a sixth grader, but I had been homeschooled. And so they skipped me up a couple of grades because I tested out of the grade I was supposed to be in.

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David Axelrod

Your mom homeschooled you?

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John Legend

My mom homeschooled me. And so I start eighth grade when I'm 11 years old and high school when I'm 12. And all of that happened with my mom's help and preparation. But then she disappeared essentially for about a decade.

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David Axelrod

How does an 11 year old deal with that?

John Legend

00:07:07

Well it's hard you know but we had each other. It was my dad and me and my three siblings. So there's five of us in the house, my dad and four kids. And then we had lots of relatives that lived nearby. My uncles, my aunts, my cousins. And, you know — Hillary wrote that book, "It Takes a Village." And that's, you know, based on a, I think an African proverb. But it does take a village especially when one of the parents is missing and you need that extra support. And our village really rallied around us, my church, my extended family, even folks who worked at the public schools that I went to, like counselors and teachers, people just all pitched in and helped us. And part of it, I think people saw a lot of potential in me. I was a straight-A student and usually near the top of my class, and a lot of people wanted to make sure that that potential wasn't wasted. And so they took particular care to, you know, invest their time and energy into making sure I didn't slip through the cracks. And so I'm grateful for those people in my life.

00:08:11

David Axelrod

But there's no substitute for a mom.

00:08:14

John Legend

There's no substitute for a mom. And it was tough for us. You know, I think part of the way I coped with it, honestly, was through music. It was through finding other outlets and finding ways to connect with people through music. And part of it was I just wanted to stay busy so that I didn't have to go home and, you know, kind of think about the fact that we didn't have our mom there. And I avoided her for a while because she just looked unhealthy. She was addicted at the time and it was a tough time to see her. And so I kind of avoided seeing her and just threw myself into music and school and all the other distractions that I could find.

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David Axelrod

You know, I read somewhere you saying that you're not an emotional person, that you're not really demonstrative.

00:08:58

John Legend

Right.

00:08:59

David Axelrod

Which is so striking to me because your music is so evocative and connecting. And it kind of got me wondering, cause I've done these podcasts with, you know, like Tom Hanks, for example, who had a really difficult upbringing and lived in ten different places. And said, you know, I found my community in theater. I found my community there. And I was wondering what music — you sort of answered this — but music is a way to express yourself so you don't have to express yourself in other ways.

00:09:35

John Legend

Yeah, you know, I think a lot of people who are good on stage are also really shy in person and and guarded in person. And I was very guarded and reserved and shy and like I said, I was a couple of years younger than everyone, too. And so that kind of exacerbated whatever social awkwardness that I had. And so music was that time when I felt like I was in control and I was I was my full self and I could express myself fully. And I think it is therapeutic to be able to do that and be on stage and feel like you're being, you know, this idealized version of yourself in front of an audience. And then it makes it easier for you to be offstage, too, because I think I became more social when I was able to introduce myself to people on stage through music.

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David Axelrod

Yeah, he actually — Hanks particularly said the same thing. He said he appeared on stage and people would laugh and people would respond and it was connecting for him.

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John Legend

Yes.

00:10:37

David Axelrod

So you talk about your mom self-medicating and you've spent a lot of your life, your adult life, addressing issues like criminal justice reform and sentencing reform and so on. How much was she on your mind? How much did that focus you on what happens to people when they have mental health issues or drug related issues and get treated as if they're criminals?

00:11:06

John Legend

Well, you know, what's interesting is sometimes, particularly when you're younger, you don't see the macro view of things. You're just seeing what's happening in your life. And then as someone who avoided getting in trouble with the police, I saw that I was able to do that. And you start to see everything through the lens of individual responsibility. You're thinking, well, my mother made mistakes. She coped with her trauma and her tragedy in the wrong way, and this caused consequences for her. And then I had multiple friends, you know, who got in trouble with the law. You know, some of them were hustling, they were drug dealing. They were involved in situations they shouldn't have been in. And so when I'm younger, I'm just thinking of those individuals and the mistakes that they made and there being kind of almost like an automatic punishment for those mistakes in the law. But I'm not thinking about the fact that those laws were written by men and by women with frailties and with political, you know, points of view. And that these were policy choices that these lawmakers and executives made to put our country in the place where we were the most incarcerated country in the world. So I saw the micro view of the individual making a bad choice, but I didn't think at all when I was a kid about the macro decisions that were made to make us the most incarcerated country in the world. To make us, you know, pursue the war on drugs. To make us pursue these tough-on-crime policies that lock up, you know, millions of people every year in America. And so it took me getting older and then reading more about the macro side of things, reading, you know, Michelle Alexander's book, "The New Jim Crow" reading Bryan Stevenson's work and reading others' work about the system that we've created through policy decisions over the last few decades that dramatically accelerated incarceration and made incarceration the go-to solution for a wide range of societal issues. And those were all policy decisions that were made. And those put us in this place right now. And so as an older person, I was able to relate my mom's individual trauma and struggle to all those other millions of people who have gone through substance abuse, mental health struggles, all these other struggles that they've gone through and how we as a nation have decided to treat those issues almost with the same solution all the time, which is lock more and more people up.

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David Axelrod

Yeah, I talk a lot about mental health here on this podcast because we treat it as some sort of character deficiency.

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John Legend

Yeah.

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David Axelrod

Rather than an illness. And that leads us to terrible policy choices. I want to come back to what you're specifically doing in a few minutes, but I don't want to lose the thread of your story because it's too good to not follow that thread. So you go to college at 16, you go to the University of Pennsylvania, which is quite a college. Once again, you arrive and you're younger than everybody.

00:14:31

John Legend

Younger than everybody. I'm poorer than everybody, pretty much coming from a small town when most of the kids came from either big cities or suburbs and major metropolises. And, you know, I just felt out of place in a lot of ways. But again, music was my connector. I started singing in an a cappella group there, made a lot of friends that way, and just connected to a lot of other people through music. I started working at a church up in Scranton as well, where our president is from. I used to drive up on the weekends and play and sing at this church and direct the choir there.

00:15:05

David Axelrod

But how did you connect with that? You're a kid. You're a teenager.

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John Legend

Yeah.

00:15:09

David Axelrod

How did that happen?

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John Legend

I played and sang a lot growing up in Ohio, played in church a lot. And one of our family friends knew a pastor in Scranton, Pennsylvania, who was looking for a new musician. And I started just going up there, I think once a month or twice a month. And eventually they hired me to come up every Sunday. And yeah, it was just all through a family connection and family friend connection. And I started, you know, living a double life where I was a student all week. And then I would drive to Scranton on Saturday, rehearse with the choir, and then play for them on Sunday morning, and then drive back to school right after Sunday morning service.

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David Axelrod

I mean, one of the things that is another throughline in your story is you're always ridiculously busy.

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John Legend

Yeah.

00:15:57

David Axelrod

I mean, because Penn is not an easy school.

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John Legend

It's not easy. And, you know, I was doing my main, you know, activities were actually going to school. I also had a work-study job at Upward Bound, which is a kind of a pre-college program for underrepresented and first generation and minority students. And then I was leading the a cappella group that I was in eventually, so that took quite a few hours of my week, and then I would drive up to Scranton and do what I did with the choir. So those were my like main things in my life and I did not sleep enough. I was always sleepy, sleepy, driving to Scranton, sleeping in class. I always tell people I was busier then than I am now, for sure. Even though I have a family and a pretty demanding career. I got less sleep then and worked more back then in college than I do now.

00:16:49

David Axelrod

Well, you must have been awake in class long enough or enough because you— this kind of blew my mind that you went to work at the Boston Consulting Group.

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John Legend

Yeah.

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David Axelrod

Which is a, you know, a major corporate strategic consulting firm.

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John Legend

I worked there for three years. I graduated magna cum laude from Penn with an English major, and I knew that I wanted to do music, but I needed a job. And most of my friends were applying to these firms, you know, the banks and the consulting firms. I didn't go to Wharton, but Wharton is right there on our campus. And so we were a big feeder school into a lot of these big firms. And, you know, those were the prestigious jobs that were available. And I didn't even consider that kind of work. I don't even know what they did. I didn't know anyone who did it until I started to know alumni, you know, who were like a year or two ahead of me, who were, you know, coming back to campus to recruit. And one of my friends, her name was Kenna, she came back to Penn to recruit. She had worked at BCG at the time, and she had this event she was a part of where alumni will come back and speak to Black and Brown students about these careers that were available to them. And I sat next to her and she told me all about the work she was doing and it sounded interesting. So I applied to BCG and a few other firms. I got interviews with BCG and McKinsey, but I didn't get an offer at McKinsey. I got one at BCG and it was for 50 grand a year, and for me that was a lot of money at the time. So my dad was a factory worker. My mother stayed at home with us. There was no point at which our family income was greater than 50 grand a year, and that was the first salary that I was offered coming out of college. And I was like, well, I got to take this job. So I graduate, start working at this consulting firm and I figure I'm going to get a record deal within a year or two and I can quit this job. By that point, I had already played on "Everything Is Everything" on Lauryn Hill's Miseducation album. I did that while I was still at school, and I was starting to work with different producers and writers and and recording a demo while I was still in school. And so I figured my big break was going to be right around the corner. But it took five years from when I graduated from school to when I got a record deal. And during that time, three of those years I was working at BCG.

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David Axelrod

Yeah. I mean, the thing that strikes me is, as you know, most performers, their side jams are like waiting tables and tending bar and stuff like that.

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John Legend

Yeah.

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David Axelrod

That must have been absorbing.

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John Legend

It was, it was a lot of time and energy, but I found time to write songs, I found time to connect with people. And you know, that first year I was in Boston, which wasn't great for my music career, but I asked them to let me transfer to New York for my second and third years, and they allowed that. And this is a time when the Internet boom was happening, that first one, near the end of, you know, Clinton's time in office and young people who were working in these consulting firms were all leaving to go work for dot com. They would go work for Pets.com or whatever dot com, every dot com, every word that had a dot com after it was starting to, you know, attract all these young, smart people. And so our consulting firm was starting to lose people to that. And so—

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David Axelrod

You had some leverage.

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John Legend

Yeah, that was a good time to ask for a favor. So I'm like, well, I need to transfer to New York. And they were like, okay. So I transferred to New York and that was when things started really opened up on my music career so I could work all day and then I would play gigs in New York. I would just meet different people in the industry. I met Kanye during that time.

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David Axelrod

Yeah, which became a formative relationship.

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John Legend

Yes, of course. So I, one of my roommates from college and from New York was a guy named DeVon Harris. And DeVon was Kanye's cousin, is Kanye's cousin. And Kanye moved from Chicago to the New York area and started to, you know, blossom as a young hip hop producer. And DeVon was like, you got to work with my cousin. He just moved here and we started working together. And I eventually worked on a lot of his early recordings and he worked on a lot of mine. My demo eventually became my debut album, Get Lifted, and his demo eventually became College Dropout, all of which we worked on together.

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David Axelrod

Yeah, because it's interesting that you guys both were in sort of the same position. You both were very, very talented young guys. Just trying to find a way to break through.

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John Legend

Yeah. And, you know, he broke through just a little bit before I did, but we were basically peers and coming up together. But he was in a position to really help me as a producer, and he began to have more and more connections in the business. So eventually I signed to his production company as kind of like a go-between between me and any major label that I would sign with. So I was signed to his production company, Good Music, and he helped me get signed to a major label deal with Columbia. And I signed with them in 2004.

00:22:18

David Axelrod

We're going to take a short break and we'll be right back with more of The Axe Files... And now back to the show.

00:22:37

David Axelrod

Let me ask you about your relationship with him, because I know you're friends still, but he's, you know, his behavior and his politics, I guess, his politics are much different or have been much different than yours.

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John Legend

Well, you know, we aren't friends as much as we used to be, because I honestly think because we publicly disagreed on his running for office, his supporting Trump, I think it became too much for us to sustain our friendship, honestly. He was upset that I didn't support his run for presidency of the United States of America for understandable reasons.

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David Axelrod

You weren't alone in that, by the way.

John Legend 00:23:19
I wasn't alone in that. But, you know, he was not happy about that. And we really haven't been close since then.

David Axelrod 00:23:26
What don't people understand about him?

John Legend 00:23:28
Well, I think people get a lot about him. I think he's been very open with who he is and his struggles with mental health. And he's very real, honestly. So I think there's not a lot about him that people don't get. Like he's been pretty up front with his opinions, his struggles, all the things that he's dealing with. And I think what you see with him is pretty much what you get. I don't feel like he's a whole separate person in private than he is in public. I think you're pretty much seeing the real Kanye publicly.

David Axelrod 00:23:59
First of all, you had great success right out of the bat. You got a rap full of Grammys and Grammy nominations and so on, and you went from struggling to find your place in the music world to a breakthrough artist. How did you process all of that success that came all in a hurry?

John Legend 00:24:19
Well, you know, it's interesting because back to Kanye being with him when it happened for him, just, you know, like a year or so before it happened for me, that was actually useful for me because it was almost like an apprenticeship where I got to see everything that was going to happen to me like a year in advance. And it helped me, I think, mentally prepare for it and know how to move in that world before I was the focus of attention.

David Axelrod 00:24:49
In 2006 you took a very public position about the war in Iraq.

John Legend 00:24:53
Sure.

David Axelrod 00:24:53
And I know that, you know, your advisers were nervous about that, as advisers always are.

John Legend 00:24:59
Possibly. I don't remember them being that nervous. They didn't really talk to me about being nervous. And, you know, before the war even happened, I was marching on the streets of New York when we had that huge protest as we were, you know, as you could tell, the Bush administration was drumming up support for the war. We all knew, all of us who marched knew that it was bullshit, you know, like the case was bullshit. You could tell they were trying to find reasons to do something that they really just wanted to do. And they were trying to drum up intelligence support for something that clearly they just decided they wanted to do. Clearly, Saddam had nothing to do with 9/11, and the case for him having WMDs was, you know, weak at best. And it just seemed like they were selling us a bill of goods that, you know, I didn't believe it, and I know your former boss didn't believe it either.

David Axelrod 00:25:55
No, he made a speech to that effect not far from where I'm sitting here that probably changed his life and changed the world.

John Legend 00:26:02
Yeah, changed American history that he made that speech. But, yeah, I was one of those people that just didn't believe it from the beginning, I marched to protest against it from the beginning. And I didn't believe in it after it happened. And I thought it was a waste of our troops, of our money, of all the things that all the resources were put into. And and it distracted us from solving other problems that needed to be solved.

David Axelrod 00:26:27
I mean, you articulate it almost as he did when we talked about him making that speech back in 2006. But or I guess it was that that that time it was 2002, in the fall of 2002.

John Legend 00:26:40
No one knew who I was when I was marching in 2002 and I was just another person on the street marching. Eventually, you know, as we had gone to war and and they were still talking about surges and all these other things, I was still against the war, but the original protests were before anybody knew who I was.

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David Axelrod

And did you always have these sensibilities, these political sensibilities? Did you pay a lot of attention?

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John Legend

Well, I grew up very inspired by civil rights leaders, so I would read about them. You know, I was home schooled for quite a few years in my youth, and we would go to the county library and my parents would let us pick out whatever we wanted to read about. And I would always gravitate towards reading about Black people who fought for our rights in America. I was always inspired by them, always proud of the work that they did for our people. And so that was my real introduction to politics was through the inspiration that civil rights heroes brought to me, including Dr. King, but others as well. And so that was my first sense of political engagement and awareness, was thinking about it through the lens of justice and equality and the rights of Black Americans to be full citizens in this country.

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David Axelrod

I should point out one of his last initiatives, as you know, was his opposition to the war in Vietnam.

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John Legend

Absolutely. The war in Vietnam, fought to end poverty, fought to organize workers. You know, these are things that he focused on in addition to fighting for Black people to have the right to vote and desegregation and all those other things.

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David Axelrod

You've said that you cried the night that Barack Obama got elected president when you were watching the coverage from Grant Park down the road here. But earlier you said, you know, I'm not one who's demonstrative.

00:28:33

John Legend

Yeah.

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David Axelrod

Why that moment? Why were you so overcome at that moment?

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John Legend

Well, I thought about the history, and the the moment that broke me was watching the older Black Americans who were in the park. Reverend Jackson was there.

00:28:49

David Axelrod

Yes, I was standing right near him, and I saw tears pouring down his cheeks. And I thought about everything that he had been through in his life, including being there when Dr. King was killed.

00:29:02

John Legend

And that's what broke me, was watching people like him crying and thinking about all that they had seen in America and probably never believed that this moment would have arrived. That was the most moving thing about that. And then, of course, the fact that we were able to be part of it and help, you know, inspire the country, inspire young people to go out and vote and vote for him. I was proud and honored to be part of it. But truly, what broke me and made me cry was thinking about our ancestors and our predecessors who fought so hard.

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David Axelrod

You talked to your folks about it?

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John Legend

Oh, yeah. They were you know, they were all moved by it. And they were proud that I had any small part in, you know, helping him become president. And eventually they got to meet the president when he came through Ohio on campaign stops. And that was all cool. But yeah, I mean, it was, you know, it was inspirational for a lot of folks.

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David Axelrod

You were a big and an articulate supporter of his powerful advocate for him. I want to ask you about the role of celebrities in politics. It strikes me that you are, there are different categories. There are people who express themselves and show up at a fundraiser or lend their name to a fundraiser. And then there are people who go beyond that. And it feels like you you have two things going on at once in your life. One is you're investing of yourself in your music, obviously, and in your creative side. You have a film company now named after your first album, but you're also someone who is not just speaking, but organizing. Tell me about what drew you to being much more active than simply lending your name.

00:30:48

John Legend

Well, like I said, these are issues have cared about for a long time and thought about them for a long time. I even wrote an essay when I was 15.

00:30:56

David Axelrod

I saw that essay.

00:30:57

John Legend

Yeah. For a McDonald's competition called Future Black History Makers, where you had to talk about how you plan to make Black history. And I said I was going to become a famous musician and I was going to use that success to try to make the world better, and particularly to fight for the rights of my people and my community.

00:31:15

David Axelrod

And you don't want to lie to McDonald's, you know that.

00:31:17

John Legend

You don't want to lie to McDonald's of all people. But you know, but it just and I forgot about this essay for a long time, but my dad reminded me of it and he was like, Johnny, do you remember this essay you wrote? And I forgot about it, but I vaguely remembered having done it and I read it and it was so, you know, pretty close to spot on for what I'm doing in my life right now. But I think I've grown over time in understanding how to use my celebrity and how to use the power that I have and the reach that I have and the resources that I have to actually make change. And so over the years, you know, sometimes I would be more focused on education reform. And then more lately, I've been focused more on justice reform and also just the whole idea of local government and how we think about how our local governments work on our behalf and make us stronger and and invest in the right things to make us all healthier. So I've been interested in all those things, but there's more to it than just being interested. Once you start building organizations and having a team that are focused on these issues. And so we've been really building, we've been raising money, we've been contributing our own money and then building organizations that focus on these areas. So we started FREEAMERICA, I think back in like 2014 or 15, somewhere around there. And FREEAMERICA has been focused on ending mass incarceration in America. And so we do quite a few different initiatives and we talk to a lot of different activists and get involved in a lot of different local and state fights and national fights when necessary. But some of it's through thinking about the role of the district attorney and how we can be impactful in races for district attorney in communities. Some of it's through changing laws at the state level, like the Amendment Four in Florida that restored voting rights to folks with a felony conviction, or Prop 47 in California, which downgraded a bunch of crimes that were originally thought of as felonies to misdemeanors and subsequently reduced our prison and jail population by about 20,000 people a year and redirected the funds that we would have spent on those things to community building activities. So we've gotten involved in state and local fights primarily because that's really what our criminal justice system is about. It's a bunch of criminal justice systems in a bunch of places, whether they're counties, cities, states. That's where a lot of the decisions are made that impact people's lives. And the vast majority of our incarcerated people are not in federal prison. They're in either state prison or in their local jail.

00:34:12

David Axelrod

Local jails waiting, oftentimes waiting to be tried.

00:34:15

John Legend

To be tried, not convicted of a crime, but they can't afford to get out because they can't afford the cash bail that's been assigned to them. So we started FREEAMERICA and then we started Human Level, which works with some other former Obama alums from FUSE Corps. And that's all about local government and the role that local governments play in people's lives, particularly in thinking about structural racism, whether it's housing or environmental or the criminal justice system. And overall, I talk a lot about budgets and the impact that budgets have on people's lives. And it's been said that budgets are moral documents. And essentially what we're saying is in the budgeting process, in the resource allocation process, let's have people in the room who are thinking about the community, thinking about the marginalized people who have often been ignored, so that when these decisions are being made, these folks lives are being considered. And so we hire fellows who are funded through our fundraising efforts, but they work at the behest of the city government to be in the communities and try to make change within the room when the decisions are being made about resource allocation and how to execute the laws of that community in a way that's really fair. And just for all the community members.

David Axelrod 00:35:37
You travel the country a lot, having a lot of conversations. It's not just about raising money. Talk to me about that.

John Legend 00:35:44
The first thing we did when we started FREEAMERICA was do a listening and learning campaign, almost like a politician would do. You know, I remember when Hillary ran for Senate the first time in New York, I was you know, I was one of her constituents at the time. And she did a listening tour around the state, you know, and a lot of times people are kind of cynical about those things. But I honestly think she learned a lot in that process and she became a better candidate for it.

David Axelrod 00:36:10
John, let me just interrupt you and tell you that Barack Obama running for the Senate and spending as much time as he did in small towns and rural areas, as well as the Chicago area, I think really prepared him for Iowa, but also just for being president of a big, diverse country.

John Legend 00:36:27
Absolutely. And so we need our politicians to go on listening tours. We need them to listen and pay attention to what people care about.

David Axelrod 00:36:34
As long as they are listening, yeah.

John Legend 00:36:35
Yeah, pay attention. And then actually, you know, govern as though they've paid attention. But anyway, we did a similar thing. We went around and talked to folks. We went the prisons, went the jails. We went to juvenile detention centers. We went to meet with a group of prosecutors, went to go meet with public defenders. We went to meet with corrections officers, all the stakeholders in our criminal legal system. We met with them to really find out what was on their minds, what they cared about, what they prioritized. We met with a lot of formerly incarcerated people who are often the leading activists when it comes to this. Learned what they were prioritizing, spoke with them a lot and started coordinating with them a lot in their activist organizations. So we learned what they cared about and learned what we thought would be good for us to fight for. And then we started picking fights and getting involved. Some of it was to pass state propositions. Some of it was to get certain people elected, which I have to kind of separate from the nonprofit wing of my life, but I still personally get involved. And then a lot of it was about education. So taking what I was hearing from all these stakeholders and then translating that to my audience, I have, you know, 15 million Twitter followers and 15 million Instagram followers. A lot of people who, you know, might be paying attention to what I have to say and what I think. And so I wanted to amplify, you know, all the things I was learning, amplify the voices that I was hearing from and go out and tell people about it so that the public could understand what we were doing as a country. And whenever our government is doing something, they're doing it either tacitly or explicitly with our approval and with our tax dollars and with our votes. And so I wanted the American people to know more about what our government was doing under our name. And I don't think a lot of people even knew that we were the most incarcerated country in the world. I said it on the Oscar stage when I got the award with Common for "Glory" for Best Original Song. I said we were the most incarcerated country in the world, and most people were like, "Is he telling the truth? Is that true?" I got fact checked, I think by Washington Post or one of the fact checkers. But yeah, that's true. That is a fact.

David Axelrod 00:38:48
Yeah, no, that is a fact.

John Legend 00:38:50
And so I and others have really taken upon ourselves to educate the public about what we're doing and then help us imagine a better way of solving these issues.

00:39:03

David Axelrod

We're going to take a short break and we'll be right back with more of The Axe Files... And now back to the show. Let me ask you about these D.A. races that you've been involved in and also the general discussion about budgets, about policing. Because I feel like, well, you know, it's going to be a very long time before we get our arms around what this virus did to us. But we've seen, you know, an eruption of crime. And there's been sort of a backlash because people want to feel safe. And that's not— that's people in the poor communities and other communities. And so this whole idea of alternative sentencing and so on has run into a lot of opposition. And these D.As, who you've helped elect, I mean, we just saw Chesa Boudin in San Francisco lose around these issues, but really as a reaction to crime. So tell me where you think we are on this and how do you respond to people who say, well, hey, you know, I don't want to let a whole bunch of people out because I don't feel safe.

00:40:24

John Legend

I understand. First of all, everybody deserves to feel safe. And when I say everybody, I mean everybody. I mean folks who encounter the police, folks who are caught up in the system in some way, but also the broader community, their families, their neighbors. Everybody deserves to feel safe. And there's a role for policing to play in that. There's a role for the criminal justice system to play in that. But I think we also need to realize that we have to make other investments in safety to make our communities truly safer. That means focusing on mental health. That means focusing on drug addiction. That means focusing on homelessness. That means realizing that incarceration doesn't solve all of our problems. We are already the most incarcerated country in the world. If that were the key to us being the safest country in the world, then we would already be that. But we also have a gun problem where we are the most armed country in the world. We also have mental health crises in so many communities. We have drug addiction crises. So all these other things are happening. And then particularly in places like San Francisco, we have an affordable housing crisis. And so a lot of times the issue of safety and crime has been conflated with, oh, I see a bunch of people on the streets in my community, and I understand why that makes people feel less safe. But the solution to make us all feel safer really would be, well, how do we find affordable housing for all these folks so they're not living in a state of chaos? And what we've found is that when people are homeless, it actually exacerbates the other issues that we're worried about. It exacerbates drug addiction. It exacerbates any mental health crises that they're dealing with. So if we were to attack the root of that, it would be, well, how do we find more affordable housing for these folks? And trust me, it costs a lot of money to incarcerate those folks. It'll be cheaper to find affordable housing for those folks. And then I think it's also important to make sure we're dealing with facts and not the kind of exaggerations of people with an agenda. And one of the things that's been a worry is that while crime has gone up during the pandemic, a lot of it has been exaggerated by people with an agenda who are anti the reforms that we've fought for. So there are folks with an agenda to incarcerate more people, to kind of attack any attempts at accountability for the police and any other actors in our system. And so some of those folks have dramatically exaggerated the uptick in crime while there's some crimes have gone up. I saw a chart recently about shootings in New York. They haven't gone up dramatically, but the press coverage of them had gone up dramatically. And so we need to make sure we're dealing with facts and we need to make sure that our journalists are telling the truth and making sure they're not just repeating propaganda by people with an interest in the outcome and an interest in the funding decision. And either way, people deserve to feel safe. And there was an uptick in crime during the pandemic. And we need to make sure we are trying to solve those problems by attacking the roots of those problems and not just thinking we're going to incarcerate our way to safety in our communities, because we've been doing incarceration. We've been doing very well in incarcerating people, but we're not solving all these problems. So we need to think more creatively about how to invest in our communities to prevent some of these crimes from happening. Make all of our people feel safer, but also give them places to live, give them opportunities to work. And if they're having mental health crises or drug addiction crises, giving them help.

00:44:08

David Axelrod

You were unhappy or you expressed unhappiness when the president said that he wanted local communities to use some of the some of the Rescue Act money that's remaining to increase the hiring of police and I presume this is why you think that some of those resources are better spent on other priorities.

00:44:28

John Legend

My view of that is basically we fund police at a very significant level. I believe our police funding outstrips the funding of just about every other country's military funding in the world other than, I think China and maybe a couple of other countries. So we spend a lot of money on police. So again, if we could police and incarcerate our way to safety, we would have already done it. So the question is, is there any better use for that fun than putting it in policing? And, you know, people got upset about "defund" and how, you know, they thought it was a disaster as a political slogan. But the fact is, it makes you actually pay attention to funding. And the fact is, we continue to fund and continue to fund, no matter what happens, whether crime goes up or goes down. We continue to fund the police. And the question is, would any of those funds be better spent doing other things? And we always complain about we don't have the money for this. We don't have the money for that. We don't have money to help the poor. We don't have money for housing, but we always have money for jails, prisons and policing. So my admonition to the country is, let's think about those priorities and decide that there are better ways to spend this money sometimes than more jails, prisons and police.

00:45:45

David Axelrod

But just as a political matter wasn't defund police, didn't that become kind of a cudgel for opponents.

00:45:50

John Legend

It did, but isn't everything a cudgel? First of all, no Democrats ran on defund. No, you know major national Democrats. Joe Biden didn't. Almost no House members ran on it. Almost no Senate members ran on it. It was really just an activist slogan, people on the left who are activists responding to George Floyd's murder. So even though no Democratic politicians ran on it, they were saddled with it anyway. So it goes to show you that it doesn't matter to some extent, these far right forces and the status quo forces, status quo defenders are going to blame Democrats, going to blame whatever slogan they can whenever they want to. And they're not going to let the truth be any kind of barrier for them in going after them. And not only did Joe Biden not defund the police, he funded them even more than they were funded before. And if anyone is still blaming him for an activist slogan, then, you know, they're not doing it with any kind of sincerity or honesty. They're being disingenuous. And I don't know how you fight that because it's not true. Like they're accusing him of something that's just not true.

00:47:07

David Axelrod

I want to just switch subjects for a second. You and your wife, Chrissy Teigen, who is well-known as well, have two children. And you had a third child and you lost that child during the pregnancy. And she's written and talked about how devastating that was to all of you. We have this debate going on now about the Dobbs decision overturning Roe. And I'm wondering how your experience of having lost that child plays into because there is this notion that somehow people are making casual decisions.

00:47:45

John Legend

Yeah. And, you know, anyone who's dealt with pregnancy knows none of this is casual. None of this is frivolous. And it's so intimate and it's so personal. How do we want our governors and our legislators, most of whom are men in this room with a doctor and with this person who's dealing with their pregnancy? Why do we want our government involved in those decisions? Someone made a somewhat humorous commercial recently. I thought it might have been almost too tongue in cheek about it, but they were essentially saying, you know, do you want Governor Abbott in the room helping you decide what to do with your pregnancy and— no! And having gone through that situation with my wife, essentially anyone who would have a miscarriage would have to be investigated. If you decide they weren't allowed to have an abortion, then anyone who had a miscarriage after all of that trauma, after all of that pain, after all those tears we went through to then have the local D.A. or a local law enforcement do an investigation and make sure the miscarriage was approved by the state and not just a regular run of the mill abortion. To have the government decide whether or not the life of the mother was sufficiently in danger for them to make this intimate decision that they make between themselves and their doctor, to have the government involved in that conversation in any way is so offensive to me. It's nasty. It's evil. It should not be even a discussion. The government should not be involved. And I believe, you know, I understand people that are like, well, what about after six months? What about after eight months? But if you saw Mayor Pete Buttigieg, who's now Secretary Pete, I think he had a great response to that. And he was saying basically, anyone who gets to that stage of a pregnancy, they wanted to have the baby. They usually have a name for the baby.

00:49:51

David Axelrod

Got the room set up. Yeah.

00:49:54

John Legend

Yeah, they have a room set up. We had a name for Jack. We were about five or six months in. Anyone who makes that gut-wrenching decision at that point in the pregnancy, they're only doing it because they have a serious reason to do it, whether it's the health of the mother or the health of the child. And they don't want to do it. They wanted to keep that baby. Why would we have the government come in and do a postmortem to make sure it was legal? It's insane. I think the government should come completely be out of the abortion conversation. I don't care about six months, three months, eight months. It should be between the person who's pregnant and their doctor, their family, if they want them to be involved.

00:50:41

David Axelrod

This has been driven, obviously, by not exclusively, but by the evangelical movement. You're a person of faith. How do you process that and how you think about that and the role that they've played in our politics and conservative voices within your own, within your own church community?

00:51:00

John Legend

Well, I'm not an active church member anymore, so I don't want to say that I am a part of a particular church community, but I grew up in a Black pentecostal church. But we also had a lot of interactions with White evangelical churches in my community. And in fact, I went to a Christian school for two years that was run by an evangelical church in my community, a White evangelical church in my community. And so I'm very familiar with, you know, the community with the culture of the White evangelical church. And we have to be clear that that is a political movement as much as it's a religious movement. And in a lot of ways, it's a racial movement just as much as it's a religious movement. So we can never exclude White from our descriptive conversation about the evangelical church. Because the White and the evangelical are doing a lot of work in that conversation. So part of the reason for the conservatism in that community is a racial conservatism. They've been against a lot of the advances for Black and Brown people in our nation, but they've also been against advances for women in our nation. They've been against advances for the LGBTQ community in our nation. So they've in multiple ways stood against progress in our country. And I just disagree with them. I disagree with them on multiple levels. And I don't believe that they should be able to use their faith as a way of imposing their beliefs on the rest of the country. We were judiciously and wisely by our founders devised as a nation where the government didn't root for any particular religion, that the government didn't try to establish any particular church or any particular denomination or any particular religion. And we shouldn't let the religious views of some dictate the behaviors of the entire nation.

00:53:04

David Axelrod

You said when Donald Trump was elected that you thought that it was a backlash to the Obama years?

00:53:11

John Legend

Yeah.

00:53:11

David Axelrod

And where do you think we are now?

00:53:13

John Legend

I think we're in the midst of another backlash. And I think a lot of that crime conversation has been a big manifestation of the backlash. So, you know, after George Floyd, there was a so-called reckoning where everyone, you know, changed their social media avatars and a lot of companies put out statements and a lot of people hired DEI officers and all these other things. And then we had, you know, a lot of conversations around this nation's history of racism. And then a lot of folks were upset that that conversation happened, that it made certain folks feel guilty about what their ancestors did or what their forefathers and mothers did. And we've seen a massive backlash not only in the crime conversation, but we've seen it with all this nonsense about CRT, all of the removal of books and items from the curriculum in a lot of states and communities. We've seen serious backlash on multiple levels to the so-called racial reckoning. And I think we're still experiencing that backlash right now.

00:54:17

David Axelrod

And what is the pathway forward, do you think? You supported, I know, Elizabeth Warren for president in 2020?

John Legend

00:54:23

I think the pathway forward is us realizing that the fact that we are of different races is our strength as a nation, the fact that we're a diverse nation where folks come from all over the world to try to live the American dream is a strength of our nation, it's not a weakness. It makes us better. And if we're able to see each other, respect each other, acknowledge the fact that we may be different in some ways, but look at that as a strength and then govern ourselves accordingly. We can become a better nation. My friend Heather McGhee wrote a great book called "The Sum of Us," where she talked so much about how us having racial resentment hold the nation back has cost everybody. And her metaphor throughout the book, of course, is the public pool. So rather than desegregating the public pool in a lot of these communities, they just got rid of the pool. So this public good that was benefiting all kinds of folks and that would have been available to everyone once it had to be desegregated. They would rather get rid of it so they didn't have it, than make it be available to everyone. So I think that kind of mentality, that zero sum mentality where we're competing against other races and not thinking we can all succeed together and grow together, that's what's holding us back. And the only way we get through it is if we see each other, love each other, care about each other, empathize with each other, and decide that we're better off when we work together to make our communities safer and stronger and healthier. And, you know, that's the kind of work that I've been trying to do around the country.

00:55:59

David Axelrod

Everybody who's listened to this will have the same question. So I've got to ask it. Way back when, when you were musing about your future, I think there was some musing also about playing a leadership role beyond music, running for office, perhaps president, perhaps something else. You're a powerful advocate. Do you ever think about that? Do you ever think about, hey, maybe I should step away from the piano for a while.

00:56:23

John Legend

I do not want to run for office. I definitely don't want to do it now. I don't envision myself wanting to do it in the future. I did when I was a kid. I did want to be president and I wanted to be a few things.

00:56:34

David Axelrod

Now you know what it's like and you think maybe not.

00:56:37

John Legend

Exactly, I know enough people to have been president, one in particular, that I'm good. I don't need that in my life. You know, I love what I do. I love my day job. But I also love the work we do politically and philanthropically. And I feel like I'm able to make a big impact through the work that I'm doing and. I like the way that I'm doing it now and I don't want to run for office. Part of it may be just my own selfishness and vanity. Like, I like the fact that half the country isn't rooting for my failure every day right now. And I don't look forward to the idea of half of my country rooting for me to fail and looking to destroy me. I respect anyone who's willing to put themselves and their family through that, but I just don't want to do it.

00:57:21

David Axelrod

I'll tell you, John, I don't know about them rooting against you to fail, but I wouldn't bet against you to fail based on your incredible life and story. And thank you for all the contributions you've made.

00:57:33

John Legend

Thank you, David. It's such a pleasure talking with you. And it's truly been a pleasure. And I feel like hopefully people can learn from my story and engage with some of the things we talked about today. And we can all grow together.

00:57:45

David Axelrod

Let's hope. Thank you. Great to be with you.

00:57:48

John Legend

All right, David, take care.

00:57:55

David Axelrod

Before we sign off a word about the team that makes this podcast possible. You know, I'm the genial front man, but I rely each week on the exquisite research of Miriam Annenberg, the technical assistance of engineer Jeff Fox and producer editor Hannah McDonald and Megan Marcus, and the splendid crew at CNN Audio. And I want to offer a special thanks to my intrepid executive producer and right hand Allyson Siegal. Brilliant, insightful and sensitive, her partnership and counsel has meant more to me than I could ever adequately express. Finally, thanks to all of you, our listeners, for taking these journeys of discovery with me each week. I look forward to sharing more of them in the months and years to come. And maybe we'll even hit a thousand.

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