

Blow-by-blow story behind 'Fight Night'

Producer took 20-plus years to get project, based on a true story, on air.



In 2020, Jim Roberts (left) and Jeff Keating (right) did a podcast about the heist, which got people excited enough to get the project restarted, executive producer Kenny Burns said. COURTESY OF BLAKE GUTHRIE

By Blake Guthrie | For the AJC

After an hour searching the busy lot at Assembly Studios in Doraville in May, I find Jeff Keating standing in a long line at an ice cream truck parked outside of Soundstage 14. He's all smiles, chatting with the crew between takes on the set of "Fight Night: The Million Dollar Heist," Peacock's new limited series that airs its finale Thursday after a six-week run as the most-watched original series in the streaming service's history.

The show centers around a legendary heist that took place at a house party after Muhammad Ali's comeback fight in Atlanta on Oct. 26, 1970. Keating, 53, is an executive producer on the series along with Will Packer and star Kevin Hart. He's also the creator and host of the iHeartRadio podcast "Fight Night" that the series is based on, produced in conjunction with his company, Doghouse Pictures.

The show has received major media attention. What's missing in most stories I've seen is the deeper backstory of how Keating birthed and shepherded the "Fight Night" project through 20 years of development hell to a green light. I'm someone who knows that story because I had a ringside seat from the beginning.

When Keating spots me walking up to the ice cream truck, he steps out of line to give me a hug. I'm not here on assignment, but to meet with

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Terrence Howard (from left) Samuel L. Jackson and Michael James Shaw are among the actors who brought 1970 Atlanta alive in the Peacock limited series. PARRISH LEWIS/PEACOCK/TNS

Lewis' 'Life' is a hero's story

David Greenberg charts the civil rights leader's journey to Congress.

By Jeff Calder
For the AJC

John Lewis grew up in an Alabama family so poor that he and his young cousins once had to shuttle from room to room, acting as "ballast" to keep their aunt's house from blowing away in a windstorm.

Born in 1940, he came from deep within the country, but he hated farm work and made no secret of it. As a boy, denied a library card because of his race, he still managed to study Booker T. Washington's "Up from Slavery," though he liked reading the Bible most of all.

If, in a famous anecdote, he truly delivered barnyard sermons to chickens, they were likely a more attentive audience than much of the U.S. Congress, where he would reside for 17 years as the representative for Georgia's 5th District until his death in 2020. It hardly needs to be said that, even in his lifetime, John Lewis became the most revered and broadly loved politician in Georgia's history.

Traumatized by the gruesome Mississippi murder of Emmett Till in 1955, Lewis experienced a moment of illumination one year later when he tuned into Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. on a Montgomery AM radio station: "I heard this voice on the radio and that changed my life."

By the time he was 21, he no longer aspired to be a minister in the traditional sense, having embraced the "social gospel." Here, now fully committed, his biography unfolds as a danger-filled, coming-of-age adventure chronicled in sweeping detail by David Greenberg in his exceptional, tremendous biography, "John Lewis: A Life," the source for the background mentioned above.

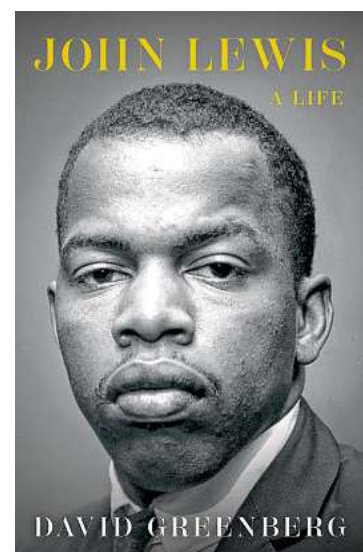
At Nashville's American Baptist Theological Seminary, under the

Lewis continued on E7

NONFICTION

"John Lewis: A Life"

by David Greenberg
Simon & Schuster, 704 pages, \$35



AUTHOR APPEARANCE

David Greenberg delivers the Livingston Lecture on "John Lewis." 7 p.m. Wednesday. \$12. Atlanta History Center, 130 W. Paces Ferry Road, Atlanta. 404-814-4000, atlantahistorycenter.com.

OPINION

Don't let fear guide you. Take control with facts.



Monica Pearson
A Monica Moment

Fear of failure, fear of heights, fear of flying, fear of bugs — whatever you fear can

be paralyzing. Most of us do nothing rather than confront our fear. Instead, we should probe why we are afraid and then act to overcome that fear.

As British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said, "Fear is a reaction. Courage is a decision."

Some of us fear what will happen in the future and that fear can be used by others to control us — physically, emotionally and psychologically.

We are seeing some of that fear play out in the current presidential election, leading to false allegations being levied at immigrant groups.

The decision to detest or hate another group often is based on fear. We hear immigrants described as criminals, leeches sucking up government services, overcrowding schools, becoming a burden to states, taking jobs that other groups used to do. In reality,

those immigrants are doing jobs many of us won't do.

That fear then causes people to categorize every person with an accent or features different from their own as illegal or suspect. They become a stereotype, loathed and distrusted.

Fear clouds the mind. People forget that for most of them their forebears came from another country and once

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an old friend. Walking through Assembly's mammoth soundstages with him while sharing a cookies 'n' cream treat is like going back in time in more ways than one. We marvel at the grand sets re-creating Atlanta in 1970 and reminisce on the early-to-mid aughts, a time when we daydreamed about what this production might look like one day.

Twenty-two years ago, the two of us were working the door together at Eddie's Attic nightclub in Decatur — that's where the story behind the film "Fight Night" begins. Back then, we were aspiring creatives who shared dreams with each other. Keating was a screenwriter who had started his own production company — Doghouse Pictures — and, though he had no productions to his credit, he did have a business card with a nifty logo. I was impressed by that. He'd written a couple of unproduced screenplays, but what he really wanted to do was a true-crime feature.

Keating's father remembered reading about the audacious heist that occurred in the wee hours following Ali's 1970 fight at the Atlanta Municipal Auditorium. The boxer had been sidelined from the sport for several years for refusing to serve in the Vietnam War, and celebrities including Bill Cosby, Hank Aaron and Diana Ross packed the auditorium to see him win via a technical knockout.

Keating's father encouraged his son to do some research.

Intrigued, the junior Keating began spending time at the microfilm machine at the Decatur Library, reading news reports from 1970 and beyond about the crime and its aftermath. The heist occurred at a house in Collier Heights attended by high rollers from around the country, referred to by some as members of the Black Mafia.

When they arrived at the soiree, they were met by gunmen with shotguns who led them to the basement, made them strip and took all their cash and jewelry. Initial estimates of the robbers' haul was \$100,000 — the equivalent of about \$800,000 today — but in subsequent reports the dollar amount kept climbing. Keating would bring Xeroxed copies of the reports to show me when we were working the door at Eddie's.

Two names kept popping up: J.D. Hudson, a Black detective for the Atlanta Police Department who was assigned to investigate the case (the Black victims were hesitant to talk with white investigators) and a hustler, Gordon "Chicken Man" Williams, who owned the house where the heist took place.

Some of the newspaper accounts said the Chicken Man was dead, presumably murdered in a hit, along with the stickup men who were killed in the months following the robbery. Hudson was quoted in The New York Times in May 1971 saying, "We said last fall it was just a matter of who caught up with them first, the police or the victims. It appears



Writer Blake Guthrie was there for the beginning of Jeff Keating's (above) screenplay aspirations regarding the heist. The pair were doormen at a Decatur club in the early 2000s. COURTESY OF BLAKE GUTHRIE



On its front page, The Atlanta Journal reported the Oct. 26, 1970, robbery at a party following a Muhammad Ali fight in Atlanta. AJC FILE

the victims got there first."

In 2002, Keating tracked down Hudson and interviewed him at his home in south Fulton's Cascade Glen subdivision. Tracing the timeline of the murders after the heist, he asked Hudson when Chicken Man was killed.

"Chicken Man is alive now," Hudson answered. "He is Rev. Gordon Williams at Salem Baptist Church."

Keating was dumbfounded. He came into work the next night with the news that Chicken Man was alive and played me a tape of the interview with Hudson. He called the church and got Williams on the phone. After introducing himself, he said, "Rev. Williams, I don't want to bring up any bad memories, but are you the Chicken Man?" After 10 seconds of suspenseful silence came a quiet reply: "Son, I am the Chicken Man."

Keating began meeting with Williams on a regular basis to interview him. His intention was to make a documentary and write a screenplay. In September 2003, they signed a contract giving Keating the Chicken Man's life rights. Keating was officially a producer. He finished his screenplay and

came up with a pitch. The problem was he had no industry connections.

One night while working the door at Eddie's, he overheard a patron talking about the film business so he introduced himself. At the time, J.D. Taylor worked as an assistant director. He heard Keating out and gave him the contact info of his then-girlfriend and future wife, Linda Burns, a producer and industry veteran.

"It's the best pitch I've ever heard in my 30-year career," Burns told me over the phone last month. "And I've been pitched a lot of stories. I could see the movie in my head, hear the music, see the costumes, feel the drama with its twists and turns."

Burns saw the project as a big-budget Hollywood feature but didn't have the juice to get it going, so she helped Keating navigate the difficult waters of the industry. Meanwhile, she and Taylor worked closely with Keating on other projects over the years, including getting documentary footage of a 2004 reunion between the retired police officer and the hustler-turned-preacher.

The meeting occurred at Williams' church. I was there on

assignment for the Atlanta news-weekly Creative Loafing, so I got to witness it.

"Where's my pastor?" Hudson bellowed as he walked into the church. When he saw Williams, the two men embraced. "Here's my pastor," Hudson said with a broad smile.

It was fascinating to watch the two men who first encountered each other 45 years earlier on opposite sides of the law sit in a church together talking about the events of "Fight Night."

During the interview, which has never been publicly released, Hudson took credit for saving Williams' life when he said in a national TV news conference in 1970 that "Chicken Man" wasn't involved in the heist when many assumed he was. The two men, now seated in the back row at Williams' church, leaned in to embrace again.

After the life rights contract was signed, Keating became close with Williams and his family. Both Hudson and Williams are now deceased, but last month, at an Atlanta screening of "Fight Night" hosted by Keating and podcast co-writer Jim Roberts at Tara Theatre, the guests of honor were Williams' children, grandchildren and wife Delores.

In early 2004, Keating made another connection at Eddie's Attic. One of the servers had a brother who worked for Dallas Austin, the Atlanta-based Grammy Award-winning music mogul and film producer. That connection led to an option on the "Fight Night" script after my Creative Loafing cover story published in November 2004.

"When Dallas heard that this was going out there in the public eye because of the cover story, he wanted to jump on it," Keating said. "It helped get the deal, for sure."

The option was for \$15,000. Keating was so broke at the time that before the check came in, he had to pick up an extra door shift just to get some money to celebrate his first film deal.

Big-screen greatness seemed imminent for "Fight Night," then everything stalled. Austin tried to buy out the rights. Keating held on, and the option expired. There were more options over the next decade that didn't pan out. Then around 2013, Atlanta radio personality and multimedia entrepreneur Kenny Burns was searching for new projects and remembered Keating's pitch from his time working with Dallas Austin. Burns (no relation to Linda Burns) reached out to a former colleague at Austin's company and asked him, "Can you find Jeff Keating?"

Running the media gantlet at the New York City premiere of "Fight Night" at Lincoln Center last month, Burns — also an executive producer on "Fight Night" — gave a succinct account to Baller Alert about what happened in the ensuing years.

"I would always hear this story, and I didn't really know much about it," he said on the red carpet. "Then, I met Jeff Keating, and he blew me away with the details. Eventually, the project landed with Will Packer. We were set up at Universal, but then Kevin Hart and Chadwick Boseman had another project called 'Uptown Saturday Night,' which was loosely based on (the events of) 'Fight Night.' So our film got shelved. But everything worked out because we did a podcast for the 50th anniversary of the heist, and that got everyone excited again. Now, here we are with a phenomenal series."

The remake of "Uptown Saturday Night" never got off the ground. Hart would later sign on as the star and a producer on "Fight Night" after Packer encouraged him to listen to Keating's podcast.

At Assembly Studios last May, Keating takes me into a re-creation of the iconic, blue-domed Polaris Lounge atop the Hyatt Regency in downtown Atlanta as it would've looked in 1970. The detail is astounding, down to the period menus on the high-top tables. There's a blue screen background outside that makes it feel like we're in the air. A phone starts buzzing. "I've got to take this call," Keating said.

Sitting next to him in the fake Polaris Lounge, I overhear his side of the conversation. He's pitching, of course.

"As we've done with 'Fight Night' and 'Pee Wee Gaskins Was Not My Friend,' our vision at Doghouse Pictures is to discover hidden-gem stories that we can fully research and develop into podcasts, films and television shows ..." On and on he goes until an alarm bell rings and a red light starts flashing.

He gets off the phone and rushes me into what's called the "video village," where producers sit to watch a take. I have no idea what's going on as he puts a pair of headphones on me and tells me to watch. A few yards away, Samuel L. Jackson and Taraji P. Henson film a scene together. Keating isn't watching the scene — he's looking at me, grinning ear to ear at my stunned reaction. After the wrap, I take the headphones off and say, "This is a long way from working the door for 60 bucks a night."



Executive producers (from left) Kenny Burns, Will Packer and Shaye Ogbonna are part of the reason why "Fight Night: The Million Dollar Heist" came to be, but it was fellow executive producer Jeff Keating's tenacity over the last two decades that kept the idea from fading away. OLIVIA BOWDOIN FOR THE AJC