

When it Mattered

Episode 52: Don MacKinnon

Chitra Ragavan:

Legendary music producer Don MacKinnon was just 15 years old when he developed what would become a lifelong fascination with making music mixtapes. Little did MacKinnon know it, but that's simple idea of creating mixtapes to share his passion for music and curation would lead him to revolutionize the music industry and how you discover, listen, share, and build your community around music today. That's whether you're browsing through iTunes or standing at your local Starbucks shazaming some unknown artist as you wait for your iced caramel latte.

Chitra Ragavan:

Hello, everyone. I'm Chitra Ragavan. Welcome to the 52nd and final episode of season two of When It Mattered. This episode is brought to you by Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups with brand positioning and narrative.

Chitra Ragavan:

Joining me today to talk about the mixtape of his life and career is Don MacKinnon. He's the former founder and CEO of Hear Music, an innovative music retailer featuring the first CD-based listening stations, which he sold to Starbucks and developed that company's strategic music platform, releasing more than 300 eclectic CD compilations. Don also created the Hear Music label, which released the Triple Platinum Grammy Award winning Ray Charles compilation, Genius Loves Company, Rolling Stones Rarities 1971 to 2003, and Bob Dylan's iconic first recordings of Live at the Gaslight.

Chitra Ragavan:

MacKinnon also was instrumental, so to speak, in building one of the most famous global corporate social responsibility platforms for Product RED. That's the organization that Bono and Bobby Shriver created to help fight AIDS in Africa. MacKinnon brought in artists including Coldplay, Jay-Z, Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, Usher, and dozens more to the platform. Now MacKinnon is about to transform how you discover, curate, and build community through podcasts using the same concept he pioneered in music. What else, but mixtapes? Tomorrow, he's unveiling his new stealth podcast curation platform called Hark. Here to tell us more about his life and times and about Hark is Don MacKinnon.

Chitra Ragavan:

Don, welcome to the podcast.

Don MacKinnon:

Thanks, Chitra. It's great to be here. I'm the season finale. This is amazing. But thanks for that intro. That's great.

Chitra Ragavan:

Do you remember how the idea of mixtapes came up when you were in high school?

Don MacKinnon:

I think it must be that every generation thinks they're at a magic. They're at a pivotal moment in the history of technology evolution. But I do remember loving. I just remember making them and I remember the act of making them and it sound ... and for many younger listeners, it may seem crazy to talk about it, because we can just drag and drop songs wherever we want in Spotify. What is Spotify? But some giant mixtape. But there was a time when we walked to school in the snow. There was a time when songs were trapped on vinyl. There were albums were on vinyl. That's where the songs lived. There were radio DJs who mixed it up and play different songs from different albums on shows.

Don MacKinnon:

But the ability to sit down, and liberate those songs from their albums, and create something new was fascinating to me. It took time. Again, for folks who even like not quite as young listeners who remember making mixed CDs were, again, you could drop a digital file. It happened in real time. You had to plan it out. I remember sitting on the floor of my room with the records spread out, organizing them, and making notes about the order I wanted to have the songs appear in. As you recorded it, you dropped the needle on the song and it's recording it in real time on to the tape. While you're doing that, you're writing liner notes, which are ... because you're making ... the beauty of a mixtape is you end up with an artifact. A physical thing you can give to someone.

Don MacKinnon:

The beauty of a mixtape is you're helping them discover something new, and you're giving them a lens through which to approach it. Part one is you need to name your mixtape. It needs to have a clever title. That's a theme. Whether it's breakup songs, or driving music, or whatever, you have a concept for it and you need to come up with a clever name. Then for each song, you're writing that little couple of notes on this little cardboard folded Maxell insert for the cassette that for each song tells the person you're giving it to why you chose that song and how to listen to it. I just absolutely loved making them. They were, in many ways, that activity I think has informed my approach to helping people discover music and now podcasts.

Chitra Ragavan:

Where was this? Tell me a little bit about where you were born and where you went to school and geographically where was all this happening?

Don MacKinnon:

I was born in New Jersey. I grew up in Short Hills, New Jersey. I went away to high school. I went to boarding school in Connecticut at a school called Choate, and Choate Rosemary Hall. I found myself with a bunch of other friends who I was learning about music from, much the way all high school students learn about music. But we really loved adopting this ability to construct something that would be something you could hold in your hand and listen to as an experience.

Chitra Ragavan:

Tell us a little bit about the music that you included in those mixtapes, your early music interests, were they always eclectic?

Don MacKinnon:

They certainly got more eclectic as I got through college. I would say I started as a big R.E.M. fan. This is the early to mid-'80s. But I loved Laurie Anderson, and Lou Reed, who, to me, were different artists, but who ended up marrying each other. I would see them walking their dog in the West Village later in my life. I was obsessed with Tom Waits, of all the artists I went on to interview when I did *Hear Music*, the Rolling Stones, et cetera., Tom Waits was the one I was the most excited about. But I also found my way to ... I loved the Goldberg Variations by Bach, done by Glenn Gould, who you could hear singing a little bit when he was playing. He recorded them twice.

Don MacKinnon:

In 1982, which he recorded them at the end of his life, you could hear him singing a little bit while he was doing it. That's a fun question to ask me what I was listening to then, because music discovery was harder. It was more expensive. It took more time and research. You had to read magazines and ask friends. Then you had to go to the record store and take a chance and pop down significant money to buy a record. It also meant that you listen to an album all the way through and savored all of the tracks, or tried to savor all of the tracks as opposed to what we have today, which is the concept of the album is getting eroded.

Chitra Ragavan:

You also loved writing, I guess, in magazines and you were without even knowing it at the time, bringing all of these passions together with these liner notes that you were, I think, lovingly writing. It seemed a real ... a combination of things that you cared about that you were bringing together into what would eventually be this revolutionary idea.

Don MacKinnon:

Yeah. I did love making magazines. I made a couple of different magazines in high school, in college. I partnered with a friend, Pat, to create a current affairs, more politically oriented one. But my favorite one that we did was called *Route 2* that I did in college. I went to Williams College. *Route 2* goes through Williams College. But there were more associations than that. If you think about it, when you're making a magazine, you're also collaging an experience together that someone you're going to allow them to

go through. You're creating a narrative that they're going to go through, more than websites are today.

Don MacKinnon:

A great magazine is a curated ... is an experience of serendipity. You don't get a magazine and go look at the table of contents and just go to page 97. A great magazine is a magazine that you actually move through. The best magazines are organized, where you're led into the experience. Think about the New Yorker starting with the talk of the town or goings on about town and then moving further into it. I did love that about magazines. Mixtapes, you could say are the most control freak version of that where I'm giving you something that you're going to listen to in a sequence. While you're listening, you're going to read the companion text that we have with it. This may be where you're going.

Don MacKinnon:

But I really do feel like those two pursuits that seemed very different, making mixtapes and making magazines actually were very similar inspirations in my mind. They were about trying to create an interactive experience that there wasn't really the technology to do yet.

Chitra Ragavan:

That also intertwined when you were in college. You're about to graduate and took you on your next path towards creating a more concrete life around music. That was when you had a setback as you were graduating and looking for work.

Don MacKinnon:

Oh, yeah. I had this great experience, which is I was so happy I got a job very early in senior year. I was going to write for Seven Days magazine, which raise your hand out there if you remember Seven Days magazine, but it's a bit of a legendary magazine. It was writing about culture in New York, and in New York City. It was edited by Adam Moss, (who now does the New Yorker), of the New York magazine. I laughed at all my friends, senior year of college, while they took the LSATs and interviewed with consulting firms or investment banks. Said, No, I've got a job writing for my dream magazine living in New York City.

Don MacKinnon:

Then in the spring, they had their funding pulled. They've been around for 10 years. They actually won the Magazine of the Year Award for General Excellence that year after they had gone under. I think it was maybe it was April or March, found myself without what I was going to do next. That led to the creation of Hear Music.

Chitra Ragavan:

Tell me how that came about.

Don MacKinnon:

I had worked the summer before at Time Magazine as an intern, and met a friend named Andrew McKee, who was at Harvard Business School between first and second year. He and a fellow student, Kevin Sheehan, had done the spring business plan competition. They were looking at the music industry, and how adults were ... how hard it was to discover music and how so much of the music industry focused on the top 40. I started collaborating with them, even though I wasn't going to school with them in the spring on this idea for a magazine/catalog that we'd recommend music.

Don MacKinnon:

When Seven Days went away, I decided to join forces with them. We founded Hear Music. That business plan actually won the competition. Then we founded Hear Music the day after I graduated from Williams, June 18th, 1990.

Chitra Ragavan:

Well, I guess creating a catalog is easier said than done, right? Especially this was pre-Internet. How did you go about it? What were some of the challenges you faced?

Don MacKinnon:

Yeah. I often say Hear Music, which went through all these evolutions was a format in search of a medium. The format was very much inspired by the work, the idea of the mixtape that you could listen to music in a serendipitous way and discover things and the narrative experience of an immersive visual experience of an editorial experience of a magazine. We created these beautiful magazines when years later met Bob Dylan's manager. As I was talking to him, I saw on his bookshelf, he had the Hear Music catalogs all in a row, wedged in there. That was great ... delayed reaction catharsis.

Don MacKinnon:

I approached making it a little bit a mixtape in a magazine. I organized each of the spreads had a theme, whether it was songwriters, that could be novelists, or the birth of Bebop, or Amateur Night at the Apollo. Then I would also interview my favorite artists about the music they thought people should be listening to. Early interviews I did were John Lee Hooker and Rye, Cooder. And then that went on to John Prine, who passed away last year, just an incredible array of my musical heroes who loved participating in this project of trying to help people discover the music that they loved.

Don MacKinnon:

Many of those artists talked about the same artists. Lyle Lovett, and many other artists would talk about Willis Alan Ramsey, who I'd never heard of and Chitra have you ever heard of Willis Alan Ramsey? There you go. Willis Alan Ramsey made one unbelievable record in 1972 and was one of those seminal influential artists on so many of these folks that they were able to cast back out. But to your point about interactivity, we were doing everything we could. I think part of what ... it was like an education trying to do this thing as a catalog at first.

Don MacKinnon:

The Artist's Choice influences, and how do you get people to want to discover something that they don't know, the mission of Hear Music was "How do I get you beyond the top 40? How do I help you want to hear something different?" One example of what we tried to do was, I interviewed Rye Cooder, the great guitarist, and genius musician, and he said, "What I think everyone should listen to is a blues musician from Mali called Ali Farka Toure." I said, "Okay, well, you got to explain why they're going to want to hear that. How would you recommend that to a friend?" He said, "Well, Ali Farka Toure is like John Lee Hooker played backwards."

Don MacKinnon:

I said, "that's great." We blew it up really big in the catalog, and it was beautiful. People would call in and say, "Okay, I'm almost ready to take a chance on that. But what does it really sound like?" We were in Boston. We had all Berklee School of Music students working for us. They would run into, "Hold on." They would run into the warehouse, grab the CD, put it into a boombox, and hold the phone up to the boombox. That was our version of on demand streaming in 1992 and '93 which was you could see we're doing everything we could to create an interactive experience. That's all the work we're doing to make catalogs work. But at the end of the day, it's incredibly capital intensive business.

Don MacKinnon:

It's that entrepreneur's dilemma where both of my original partners had left, Lisa Larman, who was another founder, who was the creative director, who we eventually got married and became husband and wife. We had all these amazing people working for us doing this catalog. We could just tell. We were trying to do this, but the limitations of the format were holding us back. That's what led us to feeling we needed to make a change. For those of you listening, who are saying, "The internet," there was no internet yet. It was too early. That's what led to creating the Hear Music stores.

Chitra Ragavan:

Yeah. You said to me that you were actually dreaming off the Internet without knowing what it was, right? You had this great idea, but you just didn't know how to get it to people in the scope and scale you wanted to get it to people.

Don MacKinnon:

Yeah. I mean, I think if you track the ships for Hear Music, it's like we created a magazine that was as interactive as we possibly could. We literally created 800 numbers you could call in and put in a code and listen to 30 seconds of the song. We just sort of did everything we could with that format. Then we said, let's create a store but make it essentially as interactive an environment as we can and as graphic and editorial an environment as we can. Again, the sounds absurd to listeners in the present day. Thinking about where we are with technology. But at the time that My mother likes to point out that in Toronto, Canada, when she was growing up, she could go into a store and there were ... she could put an album and she'd go into a little booth. But that idea of an interactive listening station was something that hadn't been done.

Don MacKinnon:

We really tried to make the store an experience that you walked through, like people have described the Hear Music stores as a combination of Copenhagen coffee house, Japanese sushi bar, and the best indie bookstore, and an art gallery, or a museum. As you walked through, it was like you were walking through the pages of the magazine. Here's David Byrne recommending the music he thinks you should be listening to from Cuba. As you walk through here's Yo-Yo Ma helping you get into the music of the classical period. Here's an entire vault on how the best of '50s jazz. That real sense of curation.

Don MacKinnon:

It wasn't just about having listening stations but was around making a store that I don't think there's ever been a store before or since that had more words on its walls than that store than those stores did and using graphics to help people go places we had. As you walked in, there was a beautiful rotunda with a plaster wall and Lisa, our creative director, made actual slides, physical slides. We would pick for each song that played, I would pick a lyric, or we would write a little few sentences about it. She would make slides that were just projecting beautiful white type on the wall. It looked somebody's gone up and painted the quote on the wall. People would walk in and look at it, and then the song would change, and the slide would change, and people would look up and say, "Wait, how did that happen?"

Don MacKinnon:

We had motorcycle taillights under the CDs that were playing. All of this was super fun to do, and again, trying to build another form of interactivity. I think all these training wheels of interactivity meant that when we finally got the internet, we were ... to the point of your question, we brought more to it, I think. I think it was helpful to have gone through those phases. Lisa herself, who had been before we met the designer of a number of music magazines, musician magazine, she redesigned Creem Magazine. She is of that generation, the last of the generation designers who were taught doing paste up, physical paste up of design before computers.

Don MacKinnon:

She actually took the job with Hear Music because we were going to buy her a Macintosh and let her learn QUIRK, which was the design program. She also feels strongly that learning analog allows you when you get the freedom of digital to be smarter.

Chitra Ragavan:

How many stores did you have? How did you make this all happen physically, financially? It sounds like a huge labor of love but a massive undertaking.

Don MacKinnon:

Yeah. I mean, one of the most pivotal meetings of my life, we were in Boston, went met with a man named Charles Leighton, who owned a company called CML, which was a

holding company. They own Boston Whaler and NordicTrack, and Smith & Hawken, and Nature Company. Smith & Hawken and Nature Company were companies that had stores and catalogs. We went and I was pitching him in a big trading places picture very severe businessy board room and I'm pitching this man on, yes, we're doing these catalogs, but I have a vision for creating an interactive retail environment.

Don MacKinnon:

He started smiling and kept smiling. Then he interrupted me and said, "Don, I would like to fly you to California to meet with a person who whether you end up working together or not, will be one of your favorite people ever." His name is Richard Altuna. Richard is one of the greatest retail designers in the history of that discipline. He designed the NBA Store in New York, Patagonia Stores, every Restoration Hardware and Pottery Barn and William Sonoma you were ever in, all of those stores he did. He said, "Well, if we're going to think about interactivity, we have to go to Paris." I said, "Okay, I'm up for Paris."

Don MacKinnon:

Because there was nowhere to sort of ... He said, "Because we have to think about how interactivity works in a retail environment." We went to Paris. First, we went to ... it's an interesting, quick story. We went to Virgin Megastore, which had a bank of listening stations with the hits. You could listen to the new Madonna record, and you could listen to the new Mariah Carey record. Then there were acres of CDs and bins that you couldn't listen to. That didn't seem right. This is a Goldilocks story. Then we went to a store, a really beautiful store called Fnac, F-N-A-C, which is feels like you're in a house ware store, a home. It feels almost a residential environment, and then there would be a cushy chair with headphones, and there was one CD on repeat at a table. We sat there for a minute, and that didn't feel right.

Don MacKinnon:

He said, "This isn't right. We have to go to Frankfurt." We flew to Frankfurt. In Frankfurt, at the top of a very traditional department store, there was a very stripped down record store. Above every bin, there was a shelf. On the shelf, there was a single disc changer with one CD on repeat. What was interesting about it was as people shopped, wherever they were, they would just take the headphone and put the headphones on and listen for about six seconds. Then they would either take them off, or they would look up and grab that CD.

Don MacKinnon:

That for me is the serendipity. It's serendipity versus discovery as work. They found their way to something they never would have found. That inspired us when we built the first Hear Music store. We actually built it. Our idea was that we were going to have single disc players. Then while we were building it, Sony came out with a cheap enough 10-disc CD changer. Again, your younger listeners have no idea what I'm talking about, that allowed us to go buy these and solder. We bought buttons at RadioShack and literally screwed buttons onto the shelves and soldered them back to these 10-dish changers.

Don MacKinnon:

We opened this store, and people came in. A number of people over the first month said, "Where's the computer?" They thought there was a giant hard drive in the back of the store. Again, it's that sense of trying to create a sense of magic around using analog. That when you ultimately get the magic technology of the internet and everything, you have a better sense of how to use it.

Chitra Ragavan:

You were starting to get a lot of attention around the stores. Then you had an interesting call, I guess, or visit from Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz.

Don MacKinnon:

Right. Right. I think, just quickly ... The first store we ever built was on Fourth Street in Berkeley. We built a store at the Stanford Shopping Center in Palo Alto that Steve Jobs shopped at regularly. When I met Steve Jobs years later, and I had them send me ... fax me his receipts, the receipts so that I know what Steve Jobs has bought over those many years. When I finally, Howard Schultz introduced me to Steve Jobs, and he said, "I know. It's your music. My favorite store." I said, "You love Ennio Morricone." It was fun to break privacy for the man who created our lack of privacy. No.

Don MacKinnon:

The Stanford Shopping Center, Santa Monica, and those stores were able to truly drive demand on music that otherwise was left out of the equation. Until we allowed us to have a much different ... that was incredibly valuable that we were able to take a band that maybe wasn't being played on the radio or anywhere else, and make it our top seller. That was great for the musicians. But it was also great for the customers who would come in and walk away with something that really felt they had discovered something new. I think that plays into what ... we'll talk about with Hark and podcasters, too.

Don MacKinnon:

One day, I got this call from Howard Schultz. We built a store on Russian Oak in Chicago, the corner of Russian Oak. We had built it next door at the same time as a really beautiful flagship Starbucks store. Howard Schultz called up and said, "I don't know if you know. We have a store next to each other." I was like, "I have many fewer stores than you have. I'm aware." He said, "The big thing that the customers are asking to do, all the comments are that they want to knock down the wall between the Starbucks and the Hear Music store, and they want to integrate the experience."

Don MacKinnon:

That was a pretty good opener. At that point, we were based in San Francisco and I flew up to Seattle. cThis is 1999. The Internet bubble is going like crazy. A lot of our investors were saying, "Hey, let's go raise a bunch of money and go on the internet." But the internet was still ... We had just gone from 14 4 modems to 28 8 modems. It was

still very slow, very hard to deliver that full experience there. Then when I got a call from Howard, I was like, "Look at this beautiful thing."

Don MacKinnon:

There was a great team there." Timothy and Holly and David, who were playing incredibly great music for people and one of the top questions to the baristas was always, "Excuse me, what is this song that's playing?" and the ability to take that incredible, that serendipitous moment and start creating real mixtapes. This takes us back to high school. Everything had been an approximation. But here, we can create compilations, and really mixtape at scale, and it was really, really fun.

Chitra Ragavan:

Tell me about your role at Starbucks. I guess, you guess built their whole strategic platform for this curated serendipitous experience around music.

Don MacKinnon:

Yeah. As I said, there were great folks there, Timothy Jones, Holly Hinton, and David Brewster who had started the ... they were playing. It was very focused on jazz and world music. I felt there was a way to scale that until it was around ... we built the compilations you saw, Artist's choice CDs. On my 35th birthday, we interviewed the Rolling Stones, one after another an hour each about their favorite music for their Hear Music Artist Choice CD, which was an unbelievable experience, and Opus collections where we would take an artist like Etta James and create our own mixtape of her, the best moments from her career.

Don MacKinnon:

Again, this was at a time where the physical distribution of music was going away. But digital hadn't really scaled yet. There was a real magic that was a magic moment where Starbucks was at the perfect place to collapse marketing, like discovery, and distribution in the same act. It was incredible. We did not only do we make the compilations. We put in the WiFi networks. I remember going to a meeting where the operators were saying the customers wanted more phone jacks that you could ... if you remember that. Starbucks put in WiFi, which enabled an entire whole another level of experiences there. We did a Hear Music XM75 satellite radio station, which is now the Coffeehouse Station if you have SiriusXM, but, yeah, all sorts of amazing stuff.

Chitra Ragavan:

We have to get some stories from you on what it was like to interview every member of the Rolling Stones on your 35th birthday.

Don MacKinnon:

They were in Toronto. They were preparing for the world tour of Forty Licks. They were all living on the ... they had the entire top floor of the Four Seasons. The team took ... Me and Tim Ziegler who did the interview to the suite at the end of the hall and brought them in one by one. They each have their own manager. We had been faxed separate

lists by each of the people, for each of them. None of them had seen what the others had picked, which is funny. Of course, Charlie Watts came in first and said, "I just want to make sure I didn't choose Chuck Berry because I assumed Mick and Keith would choose Chuck Berry," and lo and behold, neither of them had and he got very upset.

Don MacKinnon:

Mick was incredible. There were really surprising picks. Mick chose a song by Sade, and that's not what you would think Mick Jagger would put. Then when Ron Wood came in, and they each had a rider for what would be moved into the room before they came for Charlie Watts. It was a big pot of coffee. For Mick Jagger, it was two wine goblets filled with cranberry juice. For Ronnie Wood, it was a giant ashtray. For Keith Richards, it was two bottles of Stolichnaya with can of Orange Crush open.

Don MacKinnon:

But when Ron Wood came in, he immediately said I need to see everyone's picks. He looked at Charlie's list. Charlie had chosen a song by Earl Bostic which I'm not sure any of your listeners have heard of Earl Bostic. I had never heard of Earl Bostic. Bostic was a pop, R&B, saxophone player from the '50s, I think, or the '60s. He got very upset. Ron said, "We cannot have Earl Bostic on this compilation. This is our legacy." He said, "Come with me. Come with me." He starts running down the hall. We follow him down the hall and he starts pounding on Charlie Watts' door. I am just trying to have the interview not end.

Don MacKinnon:

He's saying, "Earl," I won't say the word. I don't know. But Earl F-ing Bostic. Are you kidding me?" and shouting at the door. Finally, I'm thinking the managers are going to make us go away and everything. But finally Charlie Watts opens his door, like Lurch, and looks down at Ron Wood with a withering stare. Says, "I'll have you know, when I was nine years old, I heard Earl Bostic and it inspired me to rule up a newspaper in the shape of a saxophone and painted yellow." F-You, and ... slams the door in his face. It was an amazing moment. Ron wood said, "Okay," and then we went back down the hall. That's my Rolling Stone story.

Chitra Ragavan:

It's incredible. The access you had and to all of these great musicians and what an education it must have been.

Don MacKinnon:

Yeah. I mean, it was beautiful. I have a lot of friends who are music journalists who have interviewed many of the same people. But it is different. It's a different conversation. Musicians talking about, "Well, this is my latest album." They have a formula they fall into when they get into press mode and they're talking about their new record. They have a little hard drive of quotes about it. There's a great moment where they realized ... when we interviewed Lou Reed in his apartment in the West Village, he was very unwelcoming. We were in his home. But he was very ... there's a lot of stories

of Lou Reed and we were about to live one of those mean Lou Reed stories. He started just talking about the new record that he was making.

Don MacKinnon:

I interrupted him and said, "Listen, that's not what this is. This is about what music do you wish people would hear?" He said, "Can I talk about Doo-wop?" We said, "Yeah, absolutely." He was like, "Okay, can I make you some tea?" He started putting on Doo-wop records and playing them at top volume. It was just incredible. I feel like I created my dream job. It was a dream.

Chitra Ragavan:

What was it like to interview Tom Waits?

Don MacKinnon:

I think I said earlier, I've interviewed all these amazing people. But Tom Waits is the one that I was the most nervous about and that I wanted the most, and Tim, who did maybe interviews with me, I think, felt the same way. He was on a major label, and we couldn't get to him for a long time. Then he switched to an indie label. We were able to get to his wife, Kathleen, who said that he said, "This just sounds like doing the SATs." But he told us to meet him at a truck stop in Sebastopol, which is up north of San Francisco and near Sonoma. We were suddenly in a Win Vendor's film like Paris, Texas, the perfect truck, stop with the perfect little cafe. We went in and sat in a booth.

Don MacKinnon:

He came in carrying a stack of vinyl up to his chin and put it on the table. I almost had a cardiac arrest. I said, "So great to meet you. Thank you so much for bringing these records." He said, "Actually, if you can help me out, I got the rest in the truck." We went out and he had a big black suburban, and he opened the back doors, and it was filled with CDs and albums. He said, "Before I met Kathleen, these were all in pizza boxes." We carried them in and we sat in that truck stop diner, in that booth, and he just went record by record. It was an unbelievable experience. It went on for over three hours, just incredible.

Chitra Ragavan:

That's an amazing story. Then how did you end up with building your own music label?

Don MacKinnon:

The Hear Music label, I think, it really the Etta James collection that I talked about earlier, a lot of that music had come from a record label called Concord Records, which was run by a great and is still run by a great man named Glen Barros. We sold some unbelievable number of edited James compilations in three weeks. We had a conversation about what if we actually went and because we had this, as we said, unique ability to play music for 60 million people a week and have the record right there. What if we went and found an artist? The artist that we found was Ray Charles. Sorry. Created the Hear Music label and launched new artists.

Don MacKinnon:

I was thinking we would be finding upstart singer songwriter. But it was the greatest legend of them all, Ray Charles. He wanted to do a ... he had been passed, dropped by, I think, Universal he had been passed on by all the major labels. Imagine that. What he wanted to do was a duets record. Now, I think it seems Lady Gaga and Tony Bennett do a duets record every four minutes. But at the time, there had been a very legendary one done by Frank Sinatra. But that was really sort of it. He was saying, "I want to sing with Norah Jones. I want to sing with Elton John. I want to sing with Diana Krall." We did it and it was an incredible year of doing the recordings.

Don MacKinnon:

We did not know what at the time, but he was dying of liver cancer. It's the same time that Taylor Hackford and Jamie Foxx were making the film Ray. I remember being at all of the recordings. I love. There was one with Willie Nelson, where they recorded it on the Eastwood Soundstage at the Warner lot which is ... you see that at the Grammys where there's the big ... or the Oscars where there's the big orchestra there, and then there's sort of isolation booths, and they can score a film, and an incredible setting. They had Willie Nelson in one booth and Ray in the other, and this giant orchestra. You can picture Willie Nelson singing When I was 17, it was a very good year.

Don MacKinnon:

It's this wistful song. It was an incredibly emotional experience. The last recording he ever made was with Elton John, Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word and Elton was recording an album and they set up the studio across the hall and brought in Ray from the hospital and recorded it. It was an unbelievable experience. Then he passed away and that album one ... it was the Adele of that Grammys. It won eight Grammys Record of the Year that Norah Jones song with Ray won Song of the Year. That was a pretty good way to launch the Hear Music label that you could never follow up on.

Don MacKinnon:

We did release, as you mentioned at the top, Bob Dylan's Live at the Gaslight, which are the Gaslight Recordings that had been around on bootlegs but never released and did a record with Herbie Hancock where it was duets record. But it was more than that. He went into the studio with John Mayer, whom he'd never met. They wrote a song on the spot. That was pretty incredible. It allowed albums that might otherwise never have happened to happen, and to get a broad audience. That was really satisfying.

Chitra Ragavan:

What was the next step and the evolution of your journey through this time?

Don MacKinnon:

I mean, I could talk about all the great stuff at Starbucks forever, which was an incredible company. I got there when there were 1,100 stores on from their 10th ... I don't know what the numbers are. But it was there during this incredible period of growth. One day, Howard Schultz called me up and said "Bono is coming tomorrow."

They won't tell us why he's ... The people won't tell us why he's coming. I should be in the meeting, because it's probably about music. I, of course, thought, arrogantly thought, "Oh, of course, U2 must have a new record. We'll do an artist choice with U2 and Bono and it'll be great."

Don MacKinnon:

But that is not what the meeting was about. He was, at the very beginning, of creating Product RED, which was his organization to fight AIDS in Africa. At this point, I think Product RED to your listeners, most of what your listeners are wearing, gives back to some brand in some way. Gives back to some cause. From the remove of 2020, Product RED can seem pretty ... I don't know, trite. But at that moment, it was a really incredibly innovative idea. Companies, Howard, actually had an offsite a few months prior to that, where he talked about how customers were going to take ... do an audit of the businesses ... the companies they did business with.

Don MacKinnon:

But at that point, so much of what companies thought about was having a corporate social responsibility tab on their website about what their maybe their foundation was doing. It didn't get into the dialogue with the customer. It didn't get into the brand itself. RED was this ability to ... Bono's idea was this is an emergency, and it's an emergency, not just of raising money, but of helping people understand what's happening. We need the best in his words, the best storytellers in the world to help do that. I think it's to his credit that he would then say, and some of the best storytellers in the world are, Steve Jobs, Phil Knight, are these incredible brands.

Don MacKinnon:

If we could hijack their marketing in a way that communicated what this emergency is in an empowering way, and made it really simple to make a difference. I was completely blown up. He basically said, "I'm flying up the coast. Two nights ago, I was with Steve for Apple, and I got him. Last night I was with Phil Knight with Nike." That's how he says Nike. "And I got him and now in here for you." I was absolutely blown away by the idea. He also talked about we're going to have the most creative people in the world work for the poorest people in the world. That wasn't just sort of Nike, and its agencies. That was musicians and artists and writers and actors.

Don MacKinnon:

I really loved that idea. Eventually, I left. While we didn't do the Starbucks deal, at that moment, I did leave and join Product RED, which at that point was very small. A very small number of amazing people, as you mentioned, Bobby Shriver, Sheila Roche is just an ... it was one of the most amazing people ever that made it happen. This tiny group of people were able to have the fulcrum of these giant brands to launch a brand on their backs. That's a really tricky thing, too. Steve Jobs was very ... I can't have the Apple logo have parentheses around it. There is no way I'll let that happen. But he let it happen. It was an incredible experience.

Chitra Ragavan:

You were able to bring in a whole new generation of artists in the process.

Don MacKinnon:

Yeah. I mean, I think, when we launched on Oprah, there was a big Oprah show where we launched and Bono and Oprah went down Michigan Avenue. I was in the Motorola store with Kanye West, presidential candidate Kanye West. But I think if we did allow ... we did create a way for musicians to turn their concerts RED, we created a thing called RedWire, which was a subscription music service that was essentially getting a mixtape from RED every month with exclusive. You would get an exclusive song from Coldplay or Jay-Z, and then an emerging song that you wouldn't have otherwise known about.

Don MacKinnon:

Some other piece of content that would help you understand not just the AIDS crisis, but the cultures of Africa that you were helping. We were helping you understand ... that's a real ... anyway, helping people really get a vision and understanding of the people they were helping.

Chitra Ragavan:

What did you do after Product RED that was the next step in your curation and discovery and community process?

Don MacKinnon:

I went back to the ... I loved Product RED. I did it for five years. But we jumped. I wanted to get back to curation and discovery of culture. I created a company called MILQ, M-I-L-Q with two co-founders, Jordan Jacobs, and Tomi Poutanen. It was really ... That's the company out of which we're sort of creating Hark, but MILQ was really saying, "Okay, we're now at a time where ... now we have the internet, like Hear Music." You can share any digital content, any culture, a song, a film, clip anything. Yet, the way we're sharing on social media right now feels like we're atomizing culture, as opposed to organizing it.

Don MacKinnon:

MILQ was about finding a way to allow people who love and have knowledge about certain areas of culture, whether it's '60s film ... whether it's Film Noir, or tennis, to be able to share with each other in a way that maps that area of culture. We launched a consumer business. We powered a book discovery experience for Barnes & Noble. We developed an AI algorithm that we spun out and sold to TD Bank about a year and a half ago, which was very successful for everybody. Then I really wanted to turn my attention to specifically solving the issues around podcasts.

Chitra Ragavan:

Why did that come about? Do you feel the same barriers exist for podcasts as well?

Don MacKinnon:

I see a great sort of rhyme between the issues of around music and the issues around podcasting. I mean, first of all podcasting ... I mean, one thing is I love podcasts. Part of what I love about podcasts is what I love about music. What I love about music is there's an incredible array of artists of incredible diversity out there and yet the music industry feels it's about self-fulfilling prophecy a bunch of music that sounds similar, and the same star system being re-circulated. Podcasting, it's that times a billion. What we love about podcasting is the means of production have been handed to the people.

Don MacKinnon:

There's an incredible diversity of voices talking about a truly infinite array of topics. There's incredible content out there. I want to tap into that. Yet, the tools that I'm given are ... the current apps are here. I've subscribed to six podcasts. Those episodes pile up, like New York Times, New Yorker issues I haven't read yet, which is not to say, I don't love those episodes. But what I feel and as I've talked to other people who love podcasts feel is there's so much out there and there. It doesn't feel like podcasts are browsable. What I want is a prism that would refract it for me, so I could of tap into the genius conversations that are happening out there.

Chitra Ragavan:

That's a great idea. That's such a volume. There's no way to curate it at the moment.

Don MacKinnon:

Exactly. I think it's a big problem for listeners. I know it's a problem for listeners. But it's also a really big problem for podcasters. Because it means that it's very ... the Apple podcast chart is a self-fulfilling chart of its own. People will keep listening to the Daily or Joe Rogan and not get beyond it. The question of how to solve that though, it's different than music. With music, there was actually a really interesting podcast last week, Andreessen Horowitz podcast had the head of R&D for Spotify on. He talked about how ... Spotify has made a major push on podcasts.

Don MacKinnon:

He talked about how ... with Spotify Discover for music, you can ... they give you a bunch of songs you've never heard of, and people skip the song within two seconds, like, nope, nope, nope. You can do that 10 times and then get to a song that you might like. But with podcasts that are ... and he said with podcasts that are 90 minutes long, you can't needle drop into the beginning and understand exactly what it is that quickly. I think we need to take a different ... if what we're going to do is create a serendipitous way for a broad audience to find their way to podcast that otherwise might not have discovered, I think we need a different model than that.

Don MacKinnon:

The idea for Hark at its simplest is to go and find those great moments within podcast episodes. You talking to Nina Totenberg about how as a young girl she loves Nancy Drew, and how that inspired her to become Nina Totenberg. There's tons of examples

of like when we find ourselves telling people all of you podcast listeners, 'I have that moment where I want you to listen to the whole episode. But you got to hear this one moment.' That one moment is the genius thing that will be their way in. The idea of Hark is, what if we could create an entire immersive listening experience out of the best moments from great podcast episodes where we organize those moments into, yes, mixtapes, because what else would it be after listening to me for an hour?

Don MacKinnon:

That would do two things at once. We could have mixtapes on all different topics, musicians telling the story behind their song, or what are different perspectives ... what are the likely policies of Amy Coney Barrett, or different versions of history of the civil rights. Think of all the beauty of podcasts is all of the perspectives, and the ability to create a mixtape that allows you to hit Play, walk your beagle, and hear it move from moment to moment and clip to clip. But at the same time ... you can listen to it the same as you listen to podcasts. But what's beautiful is each of those moments is an invitation to go, listen to the whole episode. Discover the podcaster that made it. You start from being dropped into an amazing moment and you end up discovering the voice you might never otherwise have found.

Chitra Ragavan:

I want to circle back to the beginning here. Looking back on the mixtape of your life, and that young man who is creating mixtapes in high school. What would you say to that young man about this journey that you've been on?

Don MacKinnon:

Well, I certainly didn't think it would have anything to do with anything I would end up doing. I think the number one thing I would say is find a way to keep pulling. Keep pulling at the threads, the sweater, keep doing the things you love and find finding ways to apply those to what you want to do in your life and that you feel can have a meaningful difference. I feel very lucky that something I love doing when I was 15 ended up being something that I could try to apply to what I wanted to accomplish. What I wanted to accomplish was have other people have that incredible experience of discovering an artist ... discovering Ali Farka Toure, finding themselves listening to a Malian blues guitarist and loving it because Rye Cooder helps you understand how to appreciate it.

Don MacKinnon:

Similarly to with Hark, finding yourself listening to an incredible discussion of the Liscow Caves by John Green from the Anthropocene Reviewed, because you found your way there through a mixtape on Hark. That, to me is like why I feel lucky that I fell in love with the right hobby way back then.

Chitra Ragavan:

This year has been such an extraordinary one in our history with COVID-19 up ending our lives. Now this historic election, have you had any ... what I call viral insights from COVID-19, that moment of clarity brought upon by a crisis?

Don MacKinnon:

It's been such a tragic year on so many levels. Not just COVID-19. I mean, I think COVID-19 all of the social justice, just the travesty of George Floyd and then the incredible partisan divide are the things that ... I think having those things happen in a world where COVID was happening, which meant that some people were holed up in places of comfort, and some people were not, I think, again, really COVID has shown us that we are not all living in the same America. George Floyd has showed us that we're not all living in the same America. I think what's ... I don't know that it's an insight. But it's an imperative of what can possibly help bring America together.

Don MacKinnon:

Another thing I work on is I created a website for Ken Burns called Ken Burns Unum, which essentially is allowing Ken Burns to create mixtapes of moments from his films, around themes where he's trying to help. You'd see a moment from our history and how it applies to now. For instance, an interview he did with James Baldwin around the Statue of Liberty and how it relates to Confederate monuments. My hope is that we can find a way. I mean, the thing that feels so powerless is how paralyzed we are and how we're not talking to each other, and different parts of America are consuming fundamentally different media, and getting fundamentally different perspectives.

Don MacKinnon:

One of the things to bring it back to Hark is I do think what's powerful about it is we feel like we're creating a new medium. There isn't a place where you can hear a playlist of short clips from different perspectives on one topic. I'm not saying that's all of what Hark is. But I think, as we've started to wear the sweater and try out the elasticity of this format that's what's been the most powerful of trying to create something that actually isn't just one perspective or another, but brings those voices together.

Don MacKinnon:

I'm not saying I think it's a silver bullet to solve the problem in America. But that's not so much an insight, but as a concern.

Chitra Ragavan:

That's great. Well, Don, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today.

Don MacKinnon:

Thank you. I appreciate it. I love your show.

Chitra Ragavan:

Don MacKinnon is the CEO and founder of Hark, a podcast, discovery, curation, and community building app that's launching tomorrow to help listeners discover podcasts that they otherwise might never have found. Thanks for listening to the 52nd and final episode of season two of *When It Mattered*. I'm really looking forward to bringing you season three in the New Year. We have some great guests lined up and they'll be sharing amazing stories that will inform, delight, and inspire you in your own journey as leaders.

Chitra Ragavan:

When It Mattered is brought to you by Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups with brand positioning and narrative. This is *When It Mattered*. I'm Chitra Ragavan.