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Cheo Hodari Coker's Evolution from Journalism to Film and Television

On an ordinary visit to Hamilton Street in Connecticut, a young Cheo Hodari Coker sits with his Grandma Bessie. *Ryan's Hope* comes on.

It must be 12:30.

All My Children plays next.

Must be 1.

Followed by *One Life to Live*. *General Hospital*. Suddenly it's 3. As Cheo learns how to tell the time, the beginnings of his writing career start to root themselves in. Day after day on his father's side of town, the Connecticut native was babysat by the television. "There were all these different shows," he said. "Pre-internet, all I would do all day is watch TV with them. So I'm watching so much television—I'm learning structure." Growing up in two different households, film and television were his window to the world.

Simultaneously, an interest in writing started to flourish. The other side of Connecticut, where his mother's side resided, found him spending time around his uncle Richard Wesley. Wesley, being a screenwriter who wrote *Uptown Saturday Night* (Poitier, 1974) and *Let's Do It Again* (Poitier, 1975), unintentionally provided inspiration to his nephew. One day he would be spending time with the family, and the next he was on a plane heading somewhere for a writing project; sometimes Cheo would catch him staring off into space, and other times he would be receiving phone calls from Sidney Poitier and Rick James. Coker was inspired by this lifestyle, and as an avid reader, the first few bricks were laid out for a path that he could take. "He was my direct influence on wanting to be an actual screenwriter," Coker said. "It just seemed like he had the coolest life ever."

Coker has gone on to earn credits as a writer, producer, and showrunner, known for projects such as *Notorious* (2009), *Southland* (2009-2013), and *Luke Cage* (2016-2018).

But multiple routes were open for him to take with writing. His career kicked off during his time at Stanford University, which his uncle Richard recalls well. “It was when he let us know that he was going to be a correspondent writing articles on West Coast hip hop for *Source* magazine,” he said, “that this other side of him, the **journalist** really started taking shape.”

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Journalist?

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“Suddenly, boom,” Wesley continued. “this whole new energy just burst out of him, and it was incredible. He wrote these very strong, in-depth articles for *Source*, and he exploded on the scene. And he was writing with an authority that belied his age and level of experience at that time.” This authority from Coker stems from his family as well, and specifically here from his aunt, Valerie Wilson Wesley. Valerie was the executive editor of *Essence*; on top of observing his uncle, Cheo was able to latch onto journalism as an interest of his. He would help proofread and edit her work. Eventually the path began to lay itself out, built on a strong foundation.

In the world of his mother’s side, they were driving Porsches, wearing Rolexes, and importing Perrier before they were available in store, showing Cheo a perspective of luxury. On the other hand, his father was rough on him in a very specific way. As Cheo puts it, “Sam Jackson as an alcoholic would play my dad in a movie.” Having grown up under two opposing lifestyles of his mother and father, he was conflicted over his identity in relation to the environment around him.

“A lot of black kids were like, ‘yo, you talk funny’”, he recalled. “They’d be like, ‘you can’t dance’, you know what I’m saying? And it took me a long time to have confidence in who I was and how I was,” Coker says.

The splits of his identity came together in 1988. Cheo was a sophomore at The Hotchkiss School. That year, Public Enemy released *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. At the same

time, Cheo was reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. With these two pieces, his entire perspective changed. “It gave me perspective that there is no one way to be black,” he said. “It’s being proud of your roots and understanding things. The fact that the music was saying the same thing that the book was, and it was a time when hip hop sent you to the library instead of the dance floor, all these things, all my geekdom, all kind of came together and that’s really who I am today.”

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“When you find something you love, you don’t have to study it.”

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Hip-Hop writing came naturally to Coker. He was already a strong writer and had a knowledge of music. “All of a sudden when hip hop came along, it was more than just finding out that a record sampled something,” he said. “I knew where the record came from and I knew the history of those records. And so I was always able to write with a certain level of perspective that most hip hop journalists didn’t necessarily have.” Beautifully, he credited it back to his uncle Richard. Cheo called their conversations together on film and music “transformative”, and is the base behind all of the authority that he was able to exude in his writing on Hip-Hop. Over the years since Hip-Hop entered the scene, Coker continued writing and found his biggest strength: the ability to profile. “Once I started becoming the interviewer, that was my real gift. It was not really necessarily just my knowledge of music. It was my ability to write profiles. It was my ability to talk to people and get them to talk to me and ask the right questions; and being able to write about those experiences, that’s when I really transformed.” Through this, he built a consistent and credible career in journalism. This career opened a door that, at this point, was assumed to be closed.

In 1997, Coker conducted an interview with Christopher Wallace, also known as The Notorious B.I.G., and wrote an extensive article to follow. It was one of the last interviews that B.I.G. did before he was murdered. This article would serve as the base of the screenplay that became *Notorious*.

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Richard Wesley sits back in his chair and laughs to himself, looking back on a memory from 25 years ago. “You gotta understand, he had a full-time gig at the Los Angeles Times and he was

covering music and arts, culture for them, that was like a serious journalist gig,” he began. “He called me basically. Looking back on it, it was completely unexpected... and Cheo said, ‘Uncle Richard, I made up my mind, I’m leaving the LA Times. I’m going into screenwriting.’ And I was like, you’re what?”

But even with his uncle Richard questioning his decision, Cheo was persistent.

“My uncle once asked me...” Coker begins.

“So what if you don’t sell the screenplay? What are you gonna do?”

“I’ll write another one.”

From that point on, Wesley knew that Cheo was in for the long run. He moved with confidence and maturity; “he was in the right place at exactly the right time and I was fortunately smart enough to realize that, because I came back down to earth a little from hitting the ceiling. Like, yeah, Cheo, do this, go for it.”

And so Coker’s career in screenwriting gains its jump start.

In a difficult, cutthroat industry, Coker created his own path. While sometimes reaching out to his uncle for advice, the constant shifts in the industry forced a form of independence. In time, the two of them collaborated together. While these projects haven’t seen light, Richard happily ruminates on those memories. In the early 2000s, the two of them went to the HBO offices in Los Angeles for a pitch. “He and I sat in there, we pitched it, and we were starting and finishing each other’s sentences,” he said. “I remember leaving the meeting shortly after it was over...Cheo stayed in with the executives and with the executive producer. And I was just sitting out there in the plaza in Century City and they came walking out, and Cheo said, ‘yo man, we’re in business. We’re in business, Uncle Rich!’”

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Coker navigated swiftly after transitioning into the film and television industry. Over a decade's time, he earned his credits on *Southland*, *Ray Donovan* (2014), and *NCIS: Los Angeles* (2009-2023), to name a few.

“And then, *Luke Cage*. Whoa.” Wesley recalls. Coker took the project as showrunner, a first in his career. As showrunner, he had the final decision on creative choices, a grand responsibility. As grand as it was, for Coker, this was a culmination of everything he's learned throughout his career. The adversity of journalism trained him for this task, having worked under many different editors with different styles and choices of their own. “Journalism training, particularly daily journalism, was absolutely the best training that I had for film and television because of the speed,” he says. “The speed of daily journalism teaches you not to get mystical about writer's block. You just got to spit out words and some days you just have to have different techniques to, you know, make sure that your words hit the page.” On top of that, there is a key skill Coker learned from journalism that transferred perfectly: interviewing.

“Half the time when I'm talking to actors, I'm interviewing them when they don't even know it. I'm asking them questions and they're talking and communicating, what they're communicating, but I'm actually interviewing them about their perspective on the scene and what and what it is that they need, what it is they're looking for. They're asking me questions, but I'm asking them more questions and guiding the conversation.” Through the techniques learned as a journalist, Coker was able to adapt cleanly into showrunning a large scale Marvel production. Communicating with high-caliber actors such as Regina King and Alfre Woodard worked the muscles he earned in his days of interviewing artists like Ice Cube and Wu-Tang Clan.

In time after the release of *Luke Cage*, Cheo Hodari Coker and Richard Wesley attended an event for The African American Film Critic Organization. There, Wesley was in attendance to be commemorated.

“People were flocking around him”, Wesley starts. “I was some old ancient guy there. They didn't know who I was, but they knew who he was, and I was, wow, I was so proud of him. He was very, very comfortable in that space, but I got a full appreciation of the impact that he had

made in that period of time and he was the center of the universe in any of those spaces that he walked in.”

While *Luke Cage* has been his biggest project, Cheo Hodari Coker has no signs of slowing down or walking away from writing. “Whether I'm getting paid or not, I'm gonna write because I'm going to write anyway,” he says. “What keeps me writing is that I love to write and I love telling stories. And my brain works a certain way, and I love to follow my brain and my talent where it leads.” The persistence in him when he first began still shines through today. His uncle Rich would testify that.

“Cheo, his hard work and his focus, that's what people talk about and, he's been so successful in a very, very difficult business, and I, so I'm really, really, very proud of that.” A huge smile grows on his face as he talks about his nephew.

Coker thinks back to when he was a child, admiring his uncle in the middle of his work. “There were a few times when he would be seemingly staring off into space, but I realize what he was doing now.”

