

EPISODE 834

*“**JH:** Impetuous is like, the best way to put it. We were just reckless kids. We didn’t really know what we were getting ourselves into. It goes into a broader philosophy that kick-started this whole thing for me, which was taking risks and then making those risks fuel your desire to fulfill. We graduated, we moved to DC. I didn’t have a job lined up. I just knew that I had to figure something out, because there’s no other option. I had a child and a wife who was recovering from birth. There was that sense of urgency, because I had gotten myself into a position where not doing anything, or not having success wasn’t really an option, I had to figure something out.”*

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:01:25.5]

FT: Imagine the week you're graduating from college is the week that you become a parent. Welcome back to So Money, everyone. You just listened to Johnny Harris, who is a filmmaker and journalist and known for his super famous Vox Series Borders. He and his wife Lizzie gave birth to their first child around the time they were graduating from college. They graduated with about \$1,300 in the bank, moved to Washington DC to pursue their careers. Well, the rest you'll learn on this episode.

It worked out. Johnny today, currently still based in Washington DC where he makes web videos for vox.com. He reports on interesting trends and stories, both domestically and around the world. His visual style blends motion graphics with cinematic videography to create content that explains complex issues in relatable ways. He has a BA in international relations from Brigham Young University and a master's in international peace and conflict resolution from American University.

He brings all of that background, as well as his filmmaking skills and journalism skills to his new series called Borders, which follows Johnny to 11 countries; from the North Pole to the northern shore of Africa to the Himalayas of Nepal, Johnny travels to these borders to tell their origin story, the human stories behind the lines on a map. Johnny shares candidly the beginnings of

his career, how about \$1,300 made do, the mistakes he made, the jobs he held and where he's headed next.

Here we go. Here's Johnny Harris.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:03:03.4]

FT: Johnny Harris, welcome to So Money.

[0:03:06.3]

JH: Great to be here. It's super great to be chatting about this stuff. I love talking about it.

[0:03:12.3]

FT: Well, that's good. That's a good prerequisite for guests. If you like talking about money, you'll probably have a good time on this show. You also come to this interview with so much more to offer, in terms of your career, your docu-series on Vox, how you got the job, the current project you're working on. I will just start by saying that Johnny, your videos are better than coffee.

[0:03:43.5]

JH: Wow.

[0:03:45.1]

FT: That's saying a lot coming from a mother of two under the age of five.

[0:03:49.0]

JH: Yeah. Wow.

[0:03:51.4]

FT: Just to give listeners a sense of what I mean, and Johnny a sense of what I mean is that I woke up this morning, I was excited to interview you, opened my laptop, started to watch some of your videos and then I thought, “Okay, I'm going to take a pause and go get some coffee.” That never happened. I continued to watch your videos. Here I am uncaffeinated, but high off of your videos. That is my testament to your work, I think.

[0:04:21.4]

JH: I mean, that may be the best compliment I've ever gotten. In fact no, I can say definitely that is –

[0:04:25.3]

FT: You can put it on your website like, “Better than coffee.”

[0:04:27.5]

JH: Better than coffee.

[0:04:28.8]

FT: Farnoosh Torabi, host of So Money.

[0:04:32.5]

JH: Wow, yeah. That's amazing. That happens to me sometimes when I'm researching and making these videos, where I become truly obsessed with the topics. I become so deeply curious and fascinated that that is my stimulant for the day. I get on this high going down these rabbit holes learning about these new things, because I report on stuff that I don't know a lot

about. It really is the novelty of it, the newness of it can wake up your brain in a way that yeah, can be a replacement for coffee. Not all the time –

[0:05:05.1]

FT: Not all the time.

[0:05:06.2]

JH: — but from time to time.

[0:05:08.0]

FT: Funny enough, I was watching your video on with the five things you do when you come to a new city. The first thing was get a haircut, second was get coffee, or maybe it was get coffee then get the haircut, or maybe the haircut wasn't part of it. I don't know. Everyone, just check out Johnny on YouTube. He's amazing.

Also your Vox Series, Borders, I want to dive into that a little bit. As I'm watching all of your work I'm thinking, "Man, Johnny has such a gift." I feel that's not credit enough, because you do work so hard. I think that there is a lot of talent and there's a lot of genius to what you're doing and how your story tell, but you are a hard worker.

Before we get to current times and your Borders Vox series, I'd love to have you take us back to maybe the last day of college where the journey began for you becoming a dad, but also embarking on a career at the same time. Take us back to graduating.

[0:06:01.3]

JH: Oh, geez. I mean, now that it's been a few years, I look back and think, "What were we thinking?" We were so young and my wife and I graduate at the same time. We decided to have a baby as well at that exact same time. Isabel had the child and a week later, we took our final

exams and graduated. There's these photos of us starry-eyed with our child in our graduation robes.

Impetuous is the best way to put it. We were just reckless kids who didn't really know what we're getting ourselves into. It goes into a broader philosophy that kick-started this whole thing for me, which was taking risks and then making those risks fuel your desire to fulfill. We graduated, we moved to DC, I didn't have a job lined up, and I just knew that I had to figure something out, because there's no other option. I had a child and a wife who was recovering from birth and we had to figure something out.

I started beating the streets and looking for a job. Again, there was that sense of urgency, because I'd gotten myself into a position where not doing anything or not having success wasn't really an option. I had to figure something out. I mean, that's really what kick-started up a broad avalanche of different events that led me to where I am today. It really did start with rushing into that decision to have a kid.

[0:07:41.8]

FT: Can you share a little story about – a money story from those early beginnings, those times when you were looking for work, you had a baby, I think you had \$1,300 in your bank account you said? What's one story that you look back on that maybe is funny now, but at the time it was not funny at all?

[0:08:02.9]

JH: Yeah. Oh, man. The big one was – Geez. That \$1,300 in our bank account came from a grant, a research grant that I'd gotten from the university. I made a proposal to do some fieldwork in Peru, put that in and I got \$1,500, or maybe it was \$1,700 or whatever. For some reason, I decided that with that money, which was literally all we had – I mean, I had some student debt too, so actually we were in the red. I decided that it was a good idea to buy an iPad. I was like, “Oh.” We can use a third of this money to move to DC and start a new life and then – or like two-thirds of it and then the other third, I'm going to use to buy an iPad.

I remember doing that impetuously and then realizing as I looked at the bank account and that \$450 or whatever the iPad cost came out, I was like, “We're doomed. What was I thinking?” I couldn't return it. It was this awkward tension between me and my wife that I had this iPad and that was the thing. I look back at that now and I think it's just really funny that the iPad was the big – like a big symbol of our recklessness. At the time, it just seemed so dire that we had spent a third of our money on this stupid piece of technology. It just goes to show the position we were at and how big of a deal that was.

[0:09:37.4]

FT: I understand you took a job at a restaurant to make ends meet. You just roll up your sleeves, like you do what you have to do.

[0:09:45.3]

JH: Totally. Again, it goes back to this notion of having to figure something out. No one was hiring for international relations graduates. If anything, they were giving internships to people who were in grad school. I was like, “There's no way I'm going to get a job in the city that's going to pay me enough to support my family.”

Yeah, I e-mailed five different chefs in Washington DC. Just found their personal e-mail, or the marketing e-mail at their restaurant and said, “Hey, I studied culinary on the side. Can I come in and be a line cook, or be a prep cook in your restaurant?” One place here in DC responded and I came in, did a little knife audition and got hired. That's how I paid the bills for a couple of months before I finally did find a job in video, which is my pivot when I pivoted to pay the bills, which then ended up being the best thing that ever happened to me, that I started to lean into video.

[0:10:45.6]

FT: Yeah. You mentioned your background, international relations and conflict resolution. You have an MA from American University. You wanted to channel that into video. I remember watching one of your videos where you were introduced to Vox, they had just launched, which is

where you work now. You applied, didn't get the job. Where you're working today is, it's the second coming of that; was the first time you got rejected, the second time you got the job. Tell us about the first time versus the second time. I think the difference in why you didn't get the job the first time and why you did the second was because you showed what you could do as opposed to just tell the person that you're passionate about working there, which is a big distinction.

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JH: Big distinction. That was a big lesson for me as a storyteller, the show don't tell. The first time I applied to Vox was me basically saying, "I really love this. I really want to work there." It was a very passionate application that I submitted, but I didn't have the skills. What that made me realize is if I'm not up to snuff for these people, there's no way they're going to hire me. I started to dedicate myself to training and learning and I just upped my skills in every aspect that I could.

The second time I applied, I didn't just apply with a standard resume and an application, I actually created a video, a video resume specifically for Vox. That was my pitch on why you should hire me. It was way better than six months previous my application was before. It was way more indicative of what I could do for them. It's way more convincing and that's what eventually got the job for me.

It made you realize, if I'm going to tell stories, if I'm going to convince people of anything, it's going to have to be through a strong showing and not just me using words. It's going to have to be this visual proof of what I'm trying to say. That has stuck with me in my journalism. It stuck with me and when I'm pitching people, when I'm negotiating, anything. I use that lesson, because to me, it's so vital.

[0:13:05.9]

FT: It's such a good lesson, I think for anyone listening and no matter what your career path is, especially for those of us who want to transition into something that they feel is so new for and why would anyone hire me to do something that I have no experience in. Don't wait for the

experience to show up at your doorstep. Go get that experience, right? Tinker with it. If you want to become an expert in something, find the people who are already experts and have them be your mentors, shadow them.

Even going back to your anecdote about e-mailing all the chefs in DC, if that was the path that you wanted to pursue, if you wanted to actually lean in culinary, that would have been a great way to go about it. Maybe it means not getting as much money in the beginning, or any money, but at least you're getting that experience. One of the lessons that I learned from one of your videos about how you got the job at Vox was that your first job is not going to be your dream job. Your second job might not even be your dream job.

Your main priority should be, with any job that's meant to groom you is to be in an environment where you're going to be constantly perfecting your skills, and so that there is a volume of work for you to do. To fail almost – I'd rather fail at not my dream job.

[0:14:23.6]

JH: Totally. Oh, my gosh. Yeah. Yeah, those stepping stones are so vital. My phrase for this is like, an excuse to put your hands on the tools, an excuse where someone's paying you to put your hands on the tools and developing that muscle memory, developing those best practices through a lot of either mediocre work, or work that you're not excited about. I feel you have to get all that out of your system in order to get to the place where you're making work that you love at a place that you love, but it's like no one skips that. No one's leapfrogging the giant volume of mediocre work in a place that they don't love.

I mean, maybe some are. Maybe 1% of the population can do that. As far as I'm concerned, everyone needs to go through that path of doing the stuff that's not nearly as sexy as your end goal, with the intention of eventually getting there. That process isn't fun and it's what weeds a lot of people out. If you can endure that and push through it with the intention of getting to that dream goal, it really is the path that at least I've formulated.

[0:15:33.6]

FT: I'm trying to also follow along as we're talking about your career journey, your financial journey. We started with a picture of you and your wife at the \$1,300. You blew a little bit of that on the iPad. Lesson learned. You're now at a place where you're employed and now maybe fast-forward to when Vox hires you the second time and you're making more money. How is your financial life adjusting?

[0:16:00.0]

JH: For me, what it's turned into is becoming sensitive to what value I add to the economy, which right now luckily, and this is a timing thing for me, the world is interested in digital video. Digital video was hitting a swell a point when I moved out to DC and I didn't really pick up on that until later. I started to realize that this isn't just a fun thing that I like to do. It's a very valuable thing. I think that that's something that people should have in their mind. Not just, "Is this valuable to me? Is this valuable to my workplace?" But is this valuable to a broader market?

The only way to do that is to look around and to start seeing what other places are valuing video-makers at. We're at a time where being a digital video maker or journalist with video skills is very valuable. From the beginning, I didn't really know that at first, but as I got into the market and realize how much demand there was for this among news outlets, I did start to realize, "Man, I could probably leverage this a little bit more."

I do various skills in terms of animation and video. I started to wake up to that, and that helped me I think match my value at Vox and really get to a place where I felt I was being valued. It continues to be a journey for me, like figuring out what the value of this is. It could change. Next year, the economy could turn and suddenly, digital video is going to lose its value. Right now, I'm seeking out what that value is and trying to push whatever work I do to be valued at the best I can. That takes a little bit sensitivity and research and conversations with other people in the industry.

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FT: What has been the best career-related purchase you've made? You are really into the gear. Even on this interview, you showed up like no other guests with all the bells and whistles, the

audio, the pop filter, the whole thing. You poo-pooed my Skype tac, my connection. I'm all about the bootstrapping on this end. You're very much into the gear. It's hard.

I think for those of us who want to pursue your path and get into videography and docuseries and all that, there is a cost element to it. What's been a great investment for you and then what advice do you have for others who want to equip themselves properly, but not going in the red?

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JH: Totally. The beautiful thing is – the answer to this question and in today in 2019 is a very hopeful question, a very accessible answer, a very hopeful answer, which is that you don't actually have to buy a lot of stuff to start to hone these skills, which honestly timing-wise, I'm so grateful that I'm doing this now as opposed to 20 years ago.

If you want to learn video skills, you need a computer with internet and you effectively need a cellphone. I know people say that and it's maybe reductionist, but I actually – I'm starting to believe that there are films being made on the Galaxy S9, Samsung phone. There's no longer barriers to entry for anyone to get good at this stuff. I never went to film school. I never had a gatekeeper tell me that I was good at this stuff. What I had was a internet connection and to answer your question, I would say the best investment, the best purchase I ever made was a subscription to lynda.com, which is a tutorial training site where I learned everything. That was my film school.

I think if you're a student, it was 20 bucks a month. For 20 bucks a month, I could devour really high-quality tutorials on every single thing I could have imagined; everything from motion graphics and animation, to filmmaking, to audio engineering, to graphic design, to color theory. You can just devour that unlimited for 20 bucks a month. I don't know the exact pricing, but it's something very accessible.

There was one summer near the end of college when I probably spent 20 hours a week watching tutorials and doing exercises that the tutorials gave me. That's where I cut my teeth. That's where I learned so much of the stuff that I use today. For such a low price point, I mean, imagine 20 bucks a month? That's nothing.

I definitely say, as much as I'm a gear person, I go back to the fact that this education was so empowering and it taught me how to use this gear and it taught me how to hone a sensibility for filmmaking that is now the most valuable thing I have. Yeah, that's my most valuable purchase.

In terms of accessibility and someone who wants to get into this, you don't even need a lynda.com tutorial. You just need to go to YouTube. There's a giant community of people who are teaching you how to be filmmakers, teaching how to be graphic designers. What you need is just the dedication and the time. Yeah, there's little cameras here and there. You can get point-and-shoots and little gimbles for your phone that are – make your filmmaking more amazing. Honestly, that stuff is ancillary. It's great and supportive, but the heart of it is the education and the learning and you can do that with a cellphone.

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FT: With a cellphone. I mean, that's so true. The accessibility of all this is one of the greatest advantages of being alive now, with the internet like you mentioned, YouTube, the advances on our phones alone. Let's talk about Borders. This is a massive, massive undertaking project; a six-documentary series. Just to give listeners some background on this, this was really sourced from audience as well, 6,000 story suggestions, 13 dispatches, three cameras, 11 countries, six documentaries. The series is called Borders. You're the creator, the host, the everything. Then you've got this massive team of support.

Maybe where we can begin with this is you telling us the why for this show. Why this show? You could probably have done anything, but this I think because it marries some of your international relations interest, but there was probably more to it, right?

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JH: Yeah. Borders is just – it's so natural. Now that I think of it, it's like this is the thing. I could have done a million things, but it feels the exact right fit for me. It brings together so many of my interests. I lived in Mexico for two years. I was a Mormon missionary in Tijuana. I grew up Mormon, and at 19 you go on these, to your missions and I was sent to Tijuana, which is a very

intense border zone. I lived a couple blocks from the border or wall between Tijuana and San Diego.

The visual of that sunk itself into my psyche forever, just the stark contrast between the two countries and where they meet. It stuck with me. As I went in, studied international relations and went on to get a masters in conflict resolution and peace studies, always fascinated by this notion of human drawn borders, lines on the earth that we've created, and always unsatisfied with the macro-level analysis. Let's look at the map and decide who has balance of power and all these geopolitical terms that dehumanize the reality and make it more like a chess game.

I was always fascinated, well there's people on these lines. What about the people living there on these lines? That curiosity came together in late 2016 when Vox was asking me to pitch a series. All that came together and I said, "Borders. Borders is just the perfect framing and a perfect topic." It's vague and broad enough for me to be able to go anywhere, but it's specific enough that you know it when you see it. That balance felt really right for me.

Yeah, I set out and crowd-sourced ideas. Got a million amazing ideas. It was a curse of abundance, too many good ideas. Went out and told a lot of compelling stories of people who live on these lines. Since that first season gone to Hong Kong and then Columbia, to focus in and do multiple episodes just on one place, so that season two and three have been more of a focus. I'm gearing up to do a couple more seasons this year looking at places like India, Pakistan, or Cyprus, or Indonesia, places that have really fascinating borders. There's just no end to good ideas within the borders framing.

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FT: Is this you think the beginning of another Borders maybe part two, or has this now inspired a different route for the next series?

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JH: The format is slightly changed than that first season. What I felt when I was going to this places is man, I'm in Nepal, China, and there's no way I can tell these stories with one video. I

went to six places in that first round and felt like, “Oh, I had to cut so much out.” Now what I'm trying to do is the borders idea of going to borderlands, but spending five or six videos just on that place. To me, that gives me more leeway to dive in and go deeper and explore different angles that aren't just conflict or migration. They've allowed me to expand what borders is and scope and allowed me to go deeper as well.

This year, it's still Borders. It's still the same idea of humanizing the lines on the map, but it's going to be spending more time in these places and going deeper and showing multiple dimensions to these stories.

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FT: How did you ultimately narrow down the borders? We have borders ourselves here in North America. I'm just curious, what were the ultimate criteria?

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JH: Yeah. The main criteria is the gut criteria for me, which is a big part of my creative process, which is like, I feel the story. I get it, I can see it, I can see the mapping, I can see the animation already, I can see the interviews and feel the story. I know that's a total vague answer, but that's really it. We went through the 6,000 submissions. There were a lot that were – you would imagine Israel, Palestine, Northern Ireland, but there was some obscure ones that piqued different interests and ideas.

Between just going through all of that, sometimes things just stand out and you're like, “Wow, that is fascinating. I want to know more.” I let that gut curiosity guide and drive the process for development. Then I have a producer who helps me develop these stories and find access and do the research and all that stuff to actually make it happen. That obviously determines whether or not it's feasible.

Between all of those things, mainly driven by a gut creative process, we settle on it. It's always painful to say like, “Oh, man. I really wanted to do China, Russia, but that's just not going to fit this season.” You don't want to do in the future.

[0:27:44.2]

FT: Well, congratulations. It's such a feat to have – Now that you're on the other side of it and you're hopefully taking a bit of a break; I know you have two kids, you have a family. What are you filling up your time with now? What's next? As you say, you always have to have the long vision and being it for the long game. What's life like right now?

[0:28:06.8]

JH: Right now, I am exploring what non journalism video-making looks like for me. Journalism was something that I crash-landed into and loved and it's been amazing. I feel I have an impulse inside of me to make videos that are maybe a little more creative or a little bit less rigorous on the journalism side.

What I'm doing for the first couple months of 2019 before I jump into another series of Borders, which I'll probably be doing in the spring is I am I'm playing with my YouTube channel. I have three videos up right now and I'm going to start uploading weekly my thoughts on a lot of stuff. I'm editing one right now called Should You Go to College? It's my riff on that.

It's not a rigorous take. It's commentary. It's me talking and reflecting. I'm going to be exploring on my YouTube channel and trying new formats, new ideas. Then come the spring, I'm going to ramp up the journalism engine again and get back into pitching Borders and doing another series of five or six videos.

[0:29:10.6]

FT: Starting the YouTube channel is so smart. I mean, really and tell me if this is – this was also your train of thought. For my perspective, it's like you have such success at Vox. You've created a following. How can you now leverage this to create your own personal brand, which can then be layoff-proof, recession-proof, all of the things? I know that when I was at the street.com years ago as a senior correspondent, that was where I got a lot of my success. In my career as a

journalist, I got a lot of opportunities there that led to a lot of followers. I wrote a book while I was there, which again got me more – just more presence in the media. Then I got laid off.

Thankfully, I had this book that I had written that was mine and that was my parachute. I always encourage people to find their parachute and to do it, almost build that parachute simultaneous to while they're working a nine-to-five somewhere else, because you never know when your own personal brand is going to take over, out of necessity or just desire.

[0:30:16.2]

JH: Yeah. I think there's definitely a practicality and a strategic piece to it as well in that sense. It's having that personal brand is I think almost an insurance for the future. That's part of the calculus for sure. I think the driving force really was this almost creative itch to say like, "Well, what else can I do with these video skills that I haven't really played with in a non-journalism environment?" As I've done that, I'm also realizing, "Oh, this is probably a good business move as well to be developing this on the side."

If nothing else, just to learn – to have my ear to the ground on the market and to understand what's in demand and how it works out there in the real world, in case I really do need to lean into that for whatever reason. I'm in digital media and news, which is a very volatile and unknown market right now. Things could totally be different in 18 months. You're right, that there is a need for a little bit of fallback that I think a personal brand definitely offers a little bit of cushion in that, which is I think an added bonus, though not the driving force of the move for sure.

[0:31:26.6]

FT: For sure. Yeah. Definitely helps though. Our show is sponsored by Chase. We want to know what our guests' financial resolutions are for the New Year. I know some people don't even like the word resolution, but we can call it a theme, we can call it a goal. What's on your financial to-do list in the first couple months of the year?

[0:31:47.7]

JH: Because I'm in this transition of doing a lot of more of my own stuff, and my wife incidentally is also in the same transition. She's building a show for Eater and then doing a lot of her own work. We are both in the mindset of investment. Investing not in stocks and bonds, but in our creativity.

We are at a place where we have more time on our hands and we want to invest in things that make us creative and that make us content creators in the best way, because we believe that that's going to add a lot of value in the future. We've done that and dabbled in that a little bit, but this year, we're going to lean into it very heavily. In fact, I'm sitting right now in a studio that we're remodeling that we've spent the past six weeks gutting and remodeling to be a full-fledged studio.

That's our first – I allocated a bunch of money from an index fund into the walls of the studio and that was a big symbolic push of saying, “I'm going to invest in our creativity, so we have a space to build beautiful, interesting, awesome things,” because we believe that's going to be the lifeblood of our businesses and our income in the future, and we need to up our game in that. This year, I'm investing. That's my mantra. That's my theme. That's my resolution.

[0:33:05.7]

FT: I love that. It reminds me of a book that James Altucher wrote. I think it's called *Invest in Yourself?* Yeah. Bestseller. Basically, you're living proof of what he prescribes, which is that your best investment in life is the one that you make in yourself, in your own career growth, in your mental health, in your – things that aren't traditional assets that we think of, the market. That's great. You and your wife, you trade notes. That's great to come home and you can talk shop with your partner.

[0:33:38.8]

JH: Oh, my gosh. Yeah. It's pretty sweet. It gets to the point where we're almost we can't turn it off. Now whenever we watch a show, or whatever, we're sitting there nerding out about camera moves and stuff, it's amazing. It's amazing, but it's almost we can't escape it. Because her brand

is family filmmaking, so it's like, we go on family trips and she's vlogging and creating. She just released a show today on Eater actually. It's Family, Food and Travel in Portugal, and so our kids are involved too. It's literally the family enterprise is cameras and travel and YouTube. That's becoming the whole thing. It's fun. It's super fun and I'm super excited about what this next year has to hold for both of our differing paths in this same realm.

[0:34:27.4]

FT: Well again, congratulations. This is such a masterpiece; Borders airing on Vox. You have your YouTube channel. We're looking forward to more. As you said, you're going to be maybe embarking on the next season in the spring. We will be tuning in. Johnny Harris, thank you so much.

[0:34:46.9]

JH: So glad to be here.

[END]