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### 1971: The Year that Music Changed Everything: Interview with Editors Sam Blair and Brett Irwin

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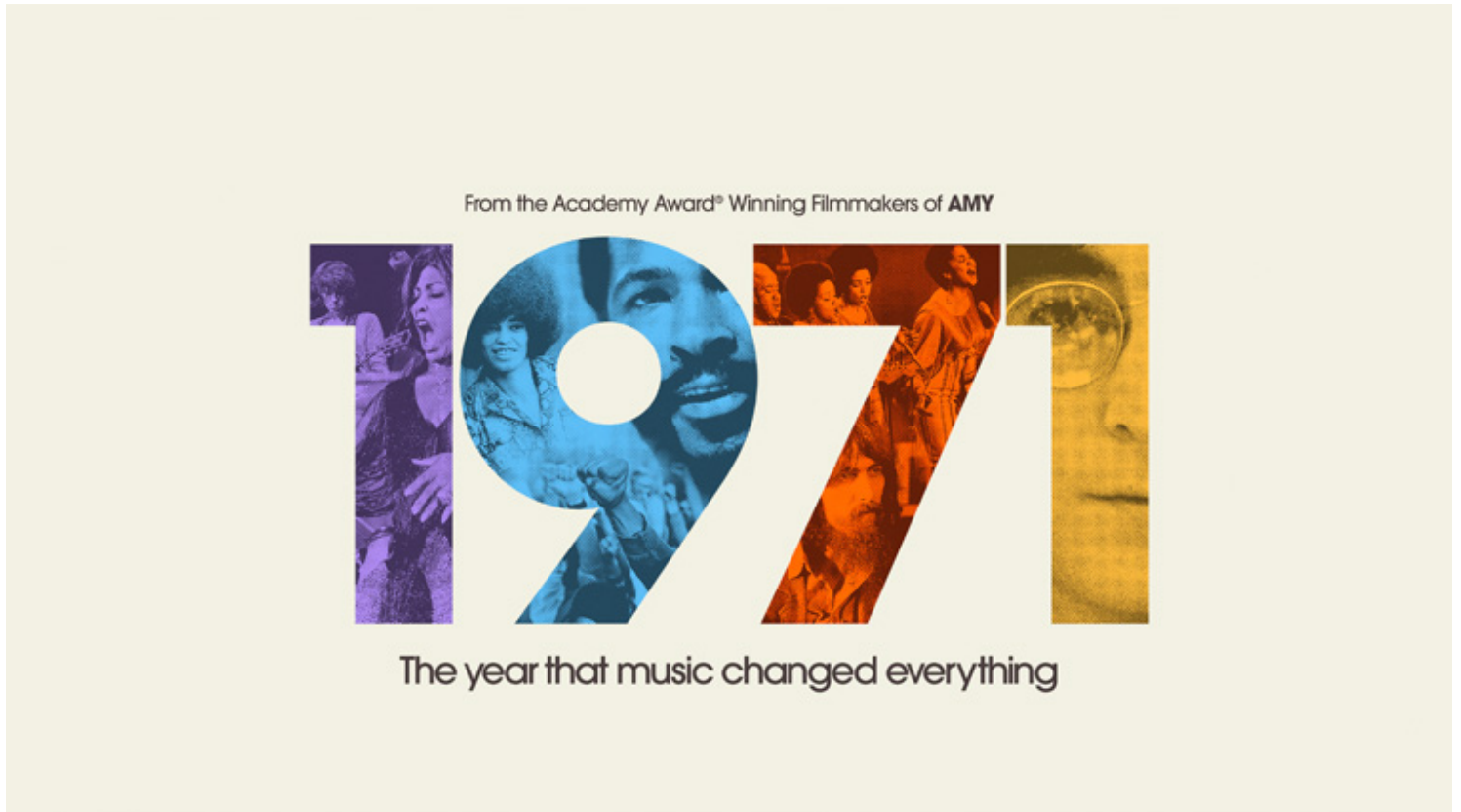
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# 1971: The Year that Music Changed Everything: Interview with Editors Sam Blair and Brett Irwin



GWU student and film critic Thomas Manning had the opportunity to interview editors Sam Blair and Brett Irwin about their work on the Apple TV+ streaming documentary series “1971: The Year that Music Changed Everything.” Blair was recently nominated for the 72<sup>nd</sup> Annual American Cinema Editors Awards for his work on the finale episode of the season, titled “Starman,” in the category of Best Edited Documentary (Non-Theatrical).

During their conversation, Blair and Irwin discuss the unique benefits of working with stock film footage, the process of developing a connected narrative arc throughout an episodic series, and the emotional journey of editing footage with such sensitive thematic material, among other topics.

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**Thomas Manning:** *In looking at 1971 from a retrospective 50 years later, what was it like working with footage, photos, and interviews that were 50 years old, using modern editing technology? What was that contrast like of the technological eras from working with modern editing equipment, and looking back so many years later with old footage?*

**Sam Blair:** I think the challenge was to make that old footage just feel alive and new. In terms of the technology we’re using, I guess we’ve got this incredible scope, to search for whatever we want, in a way. I can think of moments in – I cut the films about David Bowie – where we had almost no material of him. So, we’d need to find

material to help tell his story. And you'd work with the researchers, and they can just dive into the internet, search kind of across the world and find this footage. I think it's the availability of material and the creative potential of that. We had huge amounts of footage at our disposal at all times. And so, if an idea came into your head...in the start of one of the [episodes], a journalist happens to be at a party with David Bowie, but there's no material of this. So, we just find material to create a party. So that is amazing, it's fun, it's creative. It was an amazing experience for us as editors, I think.

**Brett Irwin:** The first thing I'd say is, we were lucky in period. When you're doing archive film – you know, we're in the 70s – so most of the stuff is still shot on film. So, it looks lovely. If we were doing this about 1981 or '82, and you've got the advent of video, your images don't look quite so rich. And I think in terms of the technology, it's a weird conjunct, because with Avid, or with Premiere or whatever, you've got so much – you can throw something at the timeline so quickly. To be using modern techniques, with the interviews that we had, I lived by script-thinking in Avid. Which, you know, if I was cutting on the Steenbeck, I'd be in a lot of trouble, if I was cutting back in a day.

But with archived films of this nature, a lot of the time you find some absolutely wondrous film – but you're working within what's already been cut. It's very rare that you're going to get those initial clean rushes. So, you're always working within, and you're just hoping that you've got a film which is cut by a good editor previously, or, you know, it's not been cut too fast. I dread to think what is going to happen for people cutting in the future when they're cutting at certain periods when everything's been cut so quickly, because you just can't use that footage in the future. But with this, the editing pace is that much slower usually, so you could work with it.

**Thomas Manning:** *Sam – you were editor on episode three, "Changes," and then episode eight, "Starman." And I noticed there were stories set up in "Changes" that were concluded in "Starman," specifically that of David Bowie's arrival into the spotlight, and then the Oz magazine controversy. So, what was your approach in piecing together these story arcs and developing a connective fabric between them?*

**Sam Blair:** Originally, when we began the process, it was actually four [episodes]. So, Brett and I – our two episodes, were originally one film. And, at some point, the decision was made to split them. So, a lot of these arcs have been built across actually one feature length film, and then were broken up over the eight episodes. In my [episodes], Bowie's arc was the kind of thing that held it all together. He starts in one place and ends in a very different place. And that change is just, you know, that's really solid storytelling. But within that kind of arc, the idea was to show a lot of what was influencing him and what was influencing his change, and the people who were moving in parallel to him. So, you have kind of parallel storylines that go a certain way. They might die off.

Yeah, and then the Oz trial was connected to this fear of change that was there. You know, I think that's where the themes and the sense of the time and the place, really are what support the storytelling. Massive backlash against what happened in the 60s. So, you've got these artists who are trying to push it even further, and then you've got people, you know, more conservative elements in society, just trying to drag it back from what they think is the precipice. So, you know, what all that has is tension. There's tension there to play with, there's opposing forces, there's a sense of change. And that's all great storytelling material.

**Thomas Manning:** *Brett – one of my favorite sequences from the entire series was in the first episode, "What's Happening." You had the part with the cross-cutting between the Frazier/Ali boxing match, and then the break-in at the*

*FBI building. You had the diagrams and the floor plan [of the FBI building], depicting how all that was carried out. So, is there anything in particular that you remember about piecing that sequence together?*

**Brett Irwin:** One of the first things that happens when you get a story...the story of the FBI break-in...by its very nature, you don't have footage. It's getting a lot of the initial footage from a film that they made just about that story called "71." And so, it was it was a very deliberate construct to use the [Frazier/Ali] fight that way, because it's expedient. The only shots I had of the building were two shots, which I took into the other film, and then we regenerated the building plans. And so very much when you're building up something like that, I really like playing the interplay, the weaving of sound. So, I've really enjoyed the weaving of the commentary and playing in it two different ways – if it's in the radio or in the car, and it's there and it's outside. And you know, the interview is very good in describing that sound – how he's upstairs and he's thinking somebody else is downstairs there. And so, you can do a lot with sound on that, you know, you're very tight on your sound edits.

You can make two still shots of a map, and you can cut on a breaking-in of a door, and suddenly those shots become very dynamic, and then matching that. I remember, I always had that moment – whether it happened in real life like that, it doesn't matter – cutting when Ali gets knocked down. And actually, I remember cutting stills in, and that working so much better than the live-action, because it matched the pattern of the map shots. And you know, it's very satisfying.

**Thomas Manning:** *Sam – as someone with a background in directing documentaries as yourself, how has that experience as a director influenced your approach to editing a project directed by someone else? What are some of the notable differences in how you attack your role as a director versus your role as an editor?*

**Sam Blair:** I mean, I started out editing, so I guess I have that experience. I love it. To be honest, for me the biggest pleasure of working on this project, you know, the creative freedom we had – but also the teamwork, the sense of being part of a structure. And for me it was a pleasure. I guess having been in both seats, I understand the pressures the directors are under. But you know, what I think in either seat that you're in, the most important thing is the dialogue you're able to have – the respect you have for each other and for the work. It's not a big problem for me.

Editing documentaries is such a kind of unique process within filmmaking. I think it's so creative. It's like, I guess, maybe akin to the writing process in fiction films. Maybe, I don't know if you can really make a connection. But yeah, for me it was just a pleasure to work with Danielle [Peck] who directed my two episodes. But I think with docs, just respecting the process in the editing. You know you're going to get into trouble, no one has the answers. The thing for us is we'd get into the kind of reviews when we would all watch each other's films. And you've got [executive producer] Asif Kapadia there who's giving us his point-of-view. Chris King, one of the other editors. These are incredible guys within the field of documentary. So, you just listen, and do the work, and collaborate, really.

**Thomas Manning:** *It's pretty obvious that all the collaborative efforts worked out really well for you guys. So you should be proud of the work you did.*

*And Brett, your work on the fifth episode of the series, "The Revolution Will Not be Televised," was really one of the most powerful and emotionally resonant episodes of this series. The moment with the Attica prison riot really stands out. And*

*there's the part where the television reporter is live on the scene, breaking down crying. So, what's it like for you working with such sensitive material as an editor, and ensuring that respect is paid to the subject, but also crafting an emotional piece of filmmaking?*

**Brett Irwin:** I think in all documentaries, for me, that's one of the most important things. I always try to go in as being an advocate for the person or the story that I'm dealing with there, at that time. The footage I came across with Attica was absolutely astonishing. And one of the challenges you have, when you're doing a film like this, is giving it due weight or due heft. You know, I didn't want Attica to go too quickly, and it just be an accompaniment for music, because it's such a massive story. And as Sam said earlier, these [episodes] were one film – mine was [episodes] one and five, and it was the protest of Vietnam, and this. And you get to Attica, and it's just such a big thing that it was one of the reasons I would split those films – because the balance. You can't get to Attica and cut to Nixon, because Vietnam and Attica are two big things in their own right. So, it's getting that level right.

And then the piece of interview that you mentioned – sometimes, that's just luck. The question earlier about the technology, which Sam answered – I came across that interview by the news anchor virtually the week before post, and we'd been cutting that for weeks. And we have a great team, so actually it was in post and I said, "Look, I found this." And you find this just by modern technology. I was on YouTube, you know, I never turn off even when it's in post...and then you see something and it's kind of like, "Wow, I've not seen that." I mean, we've been cutting it for a year and there's always going to be more stuff you don't see. And for me, just having a Black news anchor was the first thing that came up because all the other stuff had been very white. And so, it was incredible to see. You just have to pick on that moment and go "Look, this needs to come in," and work it in.

**Thomas Manning:** *That emotion that you were able to bring to the table with that – it really stuck with me for a while after I watched it.*

**Brett Irwin:** Yeah, editing it sticks with you. You know, these films, those stories stay with you. There's a trauma. I always feel you're working on other projects, but as a director – going to some of what Sam will be doing – it's like there's almost...I wouldn't say secondary trauma for this, but like almost a third-degree trauma when you're watching these lives being ruined. The tragedy of it is just enormous.

**Thomas Manning:** *I will send out one final question to both of you guys as a bit of a lighter note to close it out. Of the artists that were examined in the documentary series – any certain ones that stand out as your personal favorites, whether you grew up with them, or ones that you've always latched onto their style?*

**Sam Blair:** It's funny, I'm not a particular fan of any of the artists who I cut. So, for me, it's actually a chance to get to know them. I managed to sneak in a few things that maybe I'm more into. I really like CAN, like some of the krautrock stuff, and I really liked getting Kraftwerk in there. Like this quite small story...Kraftwerk were really obscure at that moment. The story is, basically they picked up the drum machine that was sat in the corner of the studio and decided to use that. That little story kind of goes on to change music as we know it. And I really liked getting in these slightly outlying stories, not just going in with the big numbers. So, I think I'm pleased about the slightly more outlying stories we managed to get in the films.

**Brett Irwin:** I was born in 1971. So, it's my anniversary on this anniversary. Some of these artists I'm a little bit too young for in a sense. I'd say where I like the Beatles and et cetera, I wouldn't have said I liked Lennon or any of the

Harrison stuff. I think for me it's the discovery of new. I'm not a massive hip-hop or rap fan, but the Gil Scott-Heron tracks I really love, and stays with me. And then the Curtis Mayfield...just the balm. Almost like the ease and the balm of his tracks. Like "Keep On Keeping On," stuff like that. I just love all that stuff that really – almost, reflecting your question – is giving me that lighter tone. Aretha [Franklin] in the middle is doing "Rock Steady." What it does for the film at that point is just give you a little bit of...relief kind of thing. So those are the tracks that stay with me more.

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*Interview edited for clarity.*

*This interview was originally conducted on June 16, 2021.*

"1971: The Year That Music Changed Everything." In a tumultuous era, 1971 was a year of musical innovation and rebirth fueled by the political and cultural upheaval of the time. Stars reached new heights, fresh talent exploded onto the scene and boundaries expanded like never before.

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