



OJ Lima Episode Transcript

Intro music plays.

Rashaun: Welcome to Shot Caller, the premium podcast, with two parts booze, one part pop culture. Every other week, we will be bringing you a spirited conversation with bartenders, artists, influencers, and anyone else who loves a good cocktail.

Rashaun: I'm your host, Rashaun Hall, pop culture expert and cocktail connoisseur, thanks to growing up in a Jersey dive bar.

Lucinda: And I'm Lucinda Sterling. I'm a bartender and managing partner of Middle Branch in NYC. I'll be mixing it up with our guests and creating original cocktails for our Shot Caller fam. Stay tuned to the end of the episode for a one-of-a-kind recipe inspired by our guest.

Lucinda & Rashaun: Cheers!

Lucinda: And it's nice to see you, Rashaun.

Rashaun: Nice to see you too, Lucinda.

Rashaun: And I don't know if you know this, but I used to be a music writer. Music was and, funny, I always say was now, was a really, really big passion of mine. It just meant so much to me as a teenager who didn't connect to much. Hip-hop in particular, that was my version, I guess, of rebellion. I was a fairly good Mama's boy, if you will, but being able to say, "Fuck the police" in my room, listening to NWA was very rambunctious for me.

I had the really fortunate chance to be able to write some of those artists' stories over the years and get to meet them, and I think one of the reasons I say, "I was a music writer," and, "I had a passion for it," is like anything.

You do it too much or for too long, and it becomes a job, like anything else.

Lucinda: Passe.

Rashaun: Yeah, just not passe, but it ended up taking over my life in ways that I could not listen to music without thinking about that experience I had with a particular artist, or couldn't go to a show without saying, "Why am I going to jump up for an encore when I know an encore is coming because they have not played their biggest song?"

So all those things that typically, as a general consumer, that magic that I still have when I go to a movie and I go, "Oh, my god, this movie's amazing." Yes, I know special effects exist, but I

don't necessarily know, I don't think about the wires that the guy is attached to when he's flying, whereas that is what I think of oftentimes when I listen to music.

Lucinda: I feel the same way when I walk into the bar. "Oh, no, they're using the wrong ice," or, "He's touching the glassware in the wrong spot," and things like that.

Rashaun: So what is that passion point for you now? What do you do if it's not bartending?

Lucinda: Well my passion point now is actually movies and drinking wine at home.

Rashaun: There you go. So, it's the wine process.

Lucinda: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rashaun: And I think that everyone at some point has to find other passion points. I think that's just a natural evolution of people, that as you grow and you mature and you change. And interestingly enough, our guest today is, like me, a former music journalist and media expert who has a passion for bourbon.

Rashaun: So let's welcome to Shot Caller our guest, OJ Lima.

Lucinda: Hello.

OJ Lima: Thank you.

Rashaun: I want to talk to you a little bit about your history in the entertainment industry as well as your esteemed bourbon collection and collecting. But first off, tell us a little bit about how you got into the media industry and your first job being at Vibe magazine?

OJ Lima: My first job was at Vibe magazine. I used to live on the Upper West Side, so I'd commute down the D train to Herald Square. So this morning, I took the exact same commute to get here to do the podcast as I did for my first job in media, last century. So it was kind of a blast from the past. Also, looking at New York, how much it's changed, also how much it stays the same.

Lucinda: In a good way?

OJ Lima: I mean, I've had a really positive career here. I started in 1994 in magazine publishing. I worked at multiple magazines, ran my own company building websites, and then have worked at a couple great media companies, you know, Complex, Viacom.

Rashaun: Tell us about the start at Vibe. What led you to getting into publishing?

OJ Lima: I left college and I was moving to New York City to go to Teacher's College to get a Master's in Education. At the time, I wanted to be a teacher. And in the meantime, for the summer, I was looking for something to do, so a friend of mine helped me apply for an internship at Vibe magazine, which was in its infancy. Maybe it had one test issue out. And it was started by Quincy Jones and Time Inc. as a joint venture to compete with Rolling Stone. The feeling was there were no magazines in the music space, other than The Source, that covered black music at the time.

So I got the internship, I worked there for the summer while I was also bartending uptown at this place called the [Sharp 00:04:15] Bar, which was a legendary athlete, black celebrity spot on the Upper West Side, soul food place.

And then, after the summer ended, I was asked to come back and be a fact-checker, a researcher. And so I did that. Vibe, interestingly enough, though it was supposed to be entertainment, when rap got really popular and gangster rap got really popular, and there were some people of ill repute in the industry, you know, people were getting shot and killed, and we were investigating that.

I mean, we investigated Tupac's murder, Biggie's murder. I remember sitting next to Dave Bry talking to the coroner in Las Vegas where he had a body chart we had drawn, and he was confirming on the body chart while talking to the coroner, where he had been shot, where the bullets had entered and where the bullets had gone through. And we were the first ones to have all of this information, I mean, we had a really crack team of excellent people, and it was really the Golden Age for me of like starting your career and getting the goosebumps of knowing you're doing something, and you're doing something that's cool, and you're doing something at a high level.

So it was a great way to start my career. It really did jumpstart me into bigger and better things.

Lucinda: What was your first experience with drinking?

OJ Lima: Providence, Rhode Island. I was probably six years old. So my dad was a fireman and he had a lot of homeboys who were firemen and civil workers and longshoremen, and in the '70s, people would come over to your house, they would hang out.

And so I just remember sitting with my dad, with his friends, on his lap at the table, and they were talking and doing whatever. And they're smoking, maybe they were playing cards or something. I remember sitting there and all these guys are at the table, these big dudes, these big in-shape older guys like my dad. And you know, I just grabbed someone's beer and I drank it, and someone saw me, one of my dad's friends, and laughed about it.

It was like, "Ah ha ha ha, look, look, the kid's drinking beer," and my dad was laughing, and then of course my mom hears it and she comes from outside, like, "Sidney, don't let him drink that, he's only six years old." And you know, meanwhile, the guys at the table are laughing, like, trying to give it to me.

So that was my very first memory of what was alcohol, and that was like, a Miller High Life.

Rashaun: The champagne of beers.

OJ Lima: Right. I still drink it to this day. I love the Miller High Life ponies, the little tiny ones that you take to the beach and then you knock them out. Ponies are one of the greatest inventions ever.

Lucinda: So, what's your background and your heritage?

OJ Lima: My family's from the Cape Verdean islands. It's a group of islands off the west coast of Senegal. And my grandparents came here to this country, all four of them, around 100 years ago, actually.

Rashaun: Wow.

Lucinda: Okay.

OJ Lima: So that was my first memory of drinking. Then I remember being mildly older, early teens, and like sneaking a glass of wine at Thanksgiving or that kind of stuff, and having other people--I had a massive family. I had 20 aunts and uncles total, so, maybe like 60 first cousins, so you know, this sort of thing was kind of widespread and a different cultural aesthetic about it. So liquor was always around.

Rashaun: So being Cape Verdean, are there certain liquor or cocktail traditions?

OJ Lima: We have this one liquor, what is that stuff called? Grog. Grog, that's what it's called. It has more of a fruit liqueur taste, like a peachy.

Lucinda: Oh, it's like fermented fruit?

OJ Lima: Yeah.

Lucinda: But not quite alcoholic? Not like a spirit.

OJ Lima: Not like a spirit. In between, probably like, for proof's sake, probably in between a wine and a spirit. I don't know, maybe it's in like, 30 percent?

Lucinda: Okay.

OJ Lima: It's sweet. It's not for me. I don't like super sweet alcohol.

Musical intro

Lucinda: So, you're ready to make one of Shot Callers signature cocktails. But you don't have all of your ingredients. Hmm.

Rashaun: That reminds me. I need a bourbon. Can I get a bottle from you?

Lucinda: No, I can't lend you one. I don't have any to spare, but you can get your own from our friends at Saucey. They'll deliver whatever spirits, beer, wine, or mixers you need, directly to your door.

Rashaun: Well that's a relief. You can go to saucey.com, that's s-a-u-c-e-y, or download the Saucey app today in the App Store or Google Play.

Lucinda: Remember to use our special code "shotcaller"--all one word.

Rashaun & Lucinda: Cheers!

Music fades

Rashaun: So what you do like is bourbon?

OJ Lima: I like the bourbon.

Rashaun: What brought you to bourbon in general, first of all?

OJ Lima: So, when I was in college, I was in a secret society and our drink was Old Grand-Dad. And Old Grand-Dad, I was not a fan, but in college, we would do shots. On some of these occasions, when we'd be dressed up in ties and other little secret stuff, I can't tell you, I'd have to kill you.

Rashaun: So that was really not a fraternity, just a secret society.

OJ Lima: Secret society.

Rashaun: Got it.

OJ Lima: You know, I don't want to speak too much on it.

Rashaun: Okay, okay.

OJ Lima: Just telling you these traditions right now, somebody could be coming through the door for me.

So that was my first experience, really, with bourbon, and Old Grand-Dad is harsh. You don't know it at the time, but you're drinking it, it's fun, and we're drinking it in a jovial fashion. And when I moved from college into the city, I went through this phase that everyone goes through of experimenting with what you order when you go out to a bar.

You know, it was always easy to order a beer, and there were fewer beers that you could get when you went to a bar in the '90s than there are now. There was... this whole craft distillery thing that the United States has become didn't exist at that point.

So, you had some choices of your basic beers, you could always have a vodka tonic, you could have a gin tonic, or you could go brown, you could have Hennessy, or something like that. I ended up settling on gin tonics. I had gin tonics and then I would have gin gimlets, but I found, when I got to the winter, it didn't really suit the winter time.

I started to search around in the brown spirits for what I wanted, right. So, was it a rum and coke? Too sugary. Was it scotch on the rocks? I didn't really like the peaty flavor. And, you know, it took me a long time to figure out what I kind of liked in the space, and I didn't really start to drill down into it until I worked at Complex, and I worked with the Schonberger brothers on First We Feast and Arosarano on liquor writing for the lifestyle section.

And at that point, we started to have liquor companies come in and do tastings with us. We went on trips to different liquor companies and, in particular, we went on one trip to Tennessee to Maker's Mark. And on that trip, we also collected, I mean this was like an overnight trip. We went on a Wednesday, we flew down, had dinner, drank, got up the next morning, went to Maker's Mark, hit a couple of their distilleries, had dinner, went to WalMart,

bought a suitcase, put all the liquor in the suitcase, because you have to put it under the plane because you can't ship it, went back to the airport, got on the plane, and came home. And at that point, when we came back with a suitcase of all these different alcohols, bourbon in particular, was when, as an office, we started to really think about it.

This was eight years ago, maybe a little bit more. You could still go into a liquor store and buy a Pappy Van Winkle 15 year for market price and it would actually exist and be there. And so I remember, when we started to just order more stuff to review it or do any kind of post, we had a different, really excellent bottles. We got to try a lot of stuff before it became too rare.

And then shortly after that, as more people started to get interested in it and the lore of American spirits started to change and people started to recognize what a craft American historic industry this was, it really started to explode, I think, the bourbon market in the north. And then once it exploded in the north, where our economy is really, in the city, dictated by Wall Street, like, everything went to Wall Street prices immediately.

So, you know, guys in Kentucky and Tennessee and Georgia and South Carolina, didn't know anything about us up here, never seen us, never been up here, lived their whole life in The South, now there's a shortage on their products because people who live in The North want them, and they want them badly, and they have the money to pay for them, no skin off their back.

Rashaun: Right.

Lucinda: From a business perspective, I remember being begged to have a bourbon from Kentucky on the shelf. It was like, "We just want a small space," and it was an \$18 bottle, and now, forget about it. It's hard to get-

OJ Lima: Yeah, and if you recall, at that time, there was this big trend towards vodka.

Lucinda: Vodka Red Bull.

OJ Lima: And Vodka Red Bull. Flavored Vodkas.

Rashaun: Ciroc, Gray Goose, Alba, yeah.

OJ Lima: Exactly. All of that stuff.

And so there wasn't an emphasis at all on brown spirits, and right at that time is when things started to change.

And at that point, I started to become more of a connoisseur. I mean, we buy it and we drink it. No matter what the price point, there's no point, I think, for a food item, to buy it and ultimately not experience it. You know, it's way different than any other product in that regard, like, you know, I don't know, a Marvel doll or whatever those things are that you like, keep them in the plastic and that has value.

To me, the original intent of the creator of it was for it to be experienced by humans.

Lucinda: So do you think it's silly that they actually will auction off whiskies or other spirits at Christie's?

OJ Lima: You know, I'm not at that level. So my level is... I bought the most expensive bottle of liquor I ever bought two weeks ago. It was the Four Roses AI Young 50th Anniversary. It's impossible to find anywhere right now under \$700 on the internet. I saw it in the liquor store for \$400 and I said to the guy, "Hey, I really want that. I can't find it anywhere. \$400 is out of my price point. Can you do anything for me?"

He had three bottles on the shelf for \$400, and I'd see them there prior a few weeks earlier, so clearly no one's buying it. So I said, "Can you, you know, let's talk some turkey. Can you make me a deal?"

He was like, "Well, I can bring it down to \$350." And I was like, "Alright, cool. Like, \$350, I feel comfortable with that and now I know I'm going to come in under \$400," and so it ended up being, like, I don't know, \$390 something? It's the most money I've ever spent on alcohol, ever.

Lucinda: And how did it taste?

Rashaun: How did it feel?

OJ Lima: I had it already at a hotel called the Roundhouse in Beacon. So, I was there a couple weeks ago, went on a little romantic getaway. It's a beautiful hotel on this river with a waterfall, and they had it at the bar, and I said to the guy, "Hey, how much is that for a shot?" And he was like, \$30, and I was like, "I got \$90." Like, it's not uncommon to go to the bar between you and the people you're with and drop \$100 a head, if you're at someplace that's cool.

And so I was like, "Let me try this first and make sure I like it," and I would say that I do that with anything that's really high-end and expensive. I will usually try to find someplace where I can have it first, because even though it's expensive at the bar, it's still attainable, right.

Lucinda: That's smart.

OJ Lima: And then decide whether you want to spend big money on it.

Musical intro

Rashaun: Hey, are you listening to us on your commute, at the office, or at the gym?

Lucinda: Wherever you are, all this talk about cocktails probably has you thinking about having one.

Rashaun: Well, we've got you covered. Thanks to our friends at Hooch, the app that gets you access to hundreds of bars and lets you have a drink on them everyday.

Lucinda: And all of that for less than \$10 a month.

Rashaun: That's right. Download Hooch today in the App Store or Google Play.

Lucinda: Use our special code, "shotcaller", all one word.

Rashaun & Lucinda: Cheers.

Music fades

Rashaun: So, I know you, OJ, worked with Pharrell at around the time he was launching Qream. So tell us a little bit about that, for our listeners who may not know about Qream, what Qream was and what Pharrell was trying to do with the brand.

OJ Lima: This was around 2011, and I was working on a project for Pharrell called Kidult, which was supposed to be a news type site for youth, early teens. And I was working under Mimi Valdes, long-time friend, collaborator. She was working directly with Pharrell as he was starting to branch out into different projects, other than music.

So Diageo brought a deal to him to have a signature liquor at the time, and it was one of many ideas that were coming to him, and that he agreed to do it. The alcohol that they made was called Qream. It came in two flavors, like strawberry and peach, and it was in kind of like a, almost like a Courvoisier bottle? Like a fancy bottle.

And the idea was that, I think in Pharrell's mind, was that kind of like men had Hennessy that they drank, men of color had Hennessy that they drank, and that was a somewhat high-end drink, and there should be something equivalent for women of color. And so they wanted it to be easy drinking for women, and so I think they probably modeled it after say, Baileys or something, a sipping liqueur like that. And they ran into difficulty with Diageo in terms of how it was going to be marketed.

So Pharrell believed it should be marketed as a high-end drink, and Diageo believed it should be marketed as a club drink. And so there was constant beef between the sides about what it should be, how it should work, how it should be in the market, and ultimately it was unsuccessful.

What happened was that Pharrell then, it was under a three-year contract he had with Diageo, so at that point he sued them for breach of contract, and I honestly don't recall how it was settled, but I'm sure it was settled and people got paid and everyone walked away. And I would say, all around, it was viewed as a failure, both by Pharrell and both by Diageo.

It was one of those things where Pharrell is a genius and he takes a lot of shots, he tries a lot of interesting and new things, things that people don't really think could potentially be possible. And so you have to love that about him, and you have to love that his whole id is from trying things that people thought were kind of impossible.

In this case, it was an opportunity that didn't work out because the reality was, he and Diageo probably weren't a fit in terms of a person and their intelligence and how they viewed the other product and the marketing of the product, and then how the company operated. So it wasn't a fit.

But now we see Pharrell comes back in 2017, and he does the song for Louis XIII Cognac, and it was something called the 100 years?

Rashaun: Yeah, I think so.

OJ Lima: So they debuted the song, all right, it was like three months ago, only a few people got to hear it, they made it out of an album that's made of clay that comes from the earth where they store the Louis XIII, and the whole purpose of the song is to promote awareness about environmental issues, right.

So, Louis XIII has a similar desire to promote environmental issues because they use products from the earth to make their cognac, they store their barrels, probably, underground, in the earth. There has to be a certain temperature for it. So climate change is an issue for them, it's potentially a threat to their business.

So now he does this project, everyone loves it, everyone says it's amazing, and they congratulate the union of someone who is a creative and a liquor producer. What a great fit, right. Exact opposite of what happened to Pharrell the first time when he went to work with Diageo.

And so, to me, as much as people make jokes about Qream and like how it tasted like Strawberry Quik, or Peach Quik if that existed, and like, what was he thinking? Like, you're never going to know what Pharrell is thinking because he's already thinking like 10 steps ahead of you. And sometimes 10 steps ahead of you still ends in a dead end. But he was able to ultimately think about the long-term of it and be like, "Okay, I did something. It didn't work out. The next time that I decide to go into an area like this, I want to make sure that my message is in line with the manufacturer and the producer, because then, if that's the case, then we're going to have a success."

And I think it also demonstrates on the other side, the producer side, when you get someone like that at that level to come and work with you, you don't sit them down in a board meeting and tell them, "No, your product isn't for women to have at home in a fancy setting, it's for the club." Then you're stupid. Because what did you bother calling this guy for in the place if you didn't want him-

Rashaun: Hold my beer, I got this.

OJ Lima: Right. Exactly.

So some senior vice president at Diageo one day was like, "Actually, Pharrell, take the night off, I got Madison Square Garden for you tonight."

Rashaun: Right. Just give me the mic, I got it.

OJ Lima: Like, no, it would never work. You get someone like that for a purpose, and it's great to see the difference between, in this case, a brand that understands what the talent is and what they're about and how they can marry their messages, versus someone who looks at the creative as a commodity.

Rashaun: You have such an illustrious career in entertainment and the media industry. You also obviously have a great passion for spirits and bourbon in particular.

OJ Lima: Oh yeah.

Rashaun: I feel like there is a pathway coming for you to combine those two. Any thoughts about that?

OJ Lima: I would say, alcohol and spirits, I really do have a passion for it, and I enjoy different spirits. The one thing that I would love to do with regard to spirits is I would love to do barrel picks. That's something that I would really do.

Do I think that I'm going to go ask someone I know with a bunch of money to back me to open a distillery, and then be like, "You're going to get your money in like 12 years, don't worry about it, it's going to be all good."

No, I don't think that's going to happen, and I don't know that that would be something I would want to do anyway. But what I would love to do is do what a lot of liquor stores and/or different brands are doing. Those guys like Bourbon Cartel, they're doing barrel picks, and other people, that is go to a distillery that you really like. For me, that's Four Roses, I really love. Michter's, I really love. Heaven Hill, which makes Elijah Craig, which is one of my all time favorites--who will go over there and pick a barrel and then bottle those as say, the Shot Caller podcast on-sale at, I don't know what your favorite liquor store is, but mine would be, you know, 58th Street Liquor.

So, my barrel pick that I did of Elijah Craig 12 Year is on sale at 58th Street Wines, and I went down to Kentucky and did it with the Shot Caller people, and here it is, boom. And I would love to do a bunch of barrel picks, but you know, that also takes time and relationships.

Lucinda: Did you happen to notice the four Elijah Craig barrels downstairs as you walk in?

OJ Lima: I did not, but that probably means that there will only be three when I leave.

Lucinda: I'm happy to pass one on.

Rashaun: Well, OJ, thank you so much for coming through. Really appreciate it, sharing your bourbon and media wisdom.

COCKTAIL RECIPE

Lucinda: Okay, so now we're going to make a drink called the OJ Grand-Dad with Old Grand-Dad bourbon.

So we've got two dashes of Angostura bitters, and then, instead of using a sweet vermouth everybody knows, which is Carpano Antica, I used Punt e Mes, a little less on the herbal and spice side.

And then complementing that with a peach liqueur and then two ounces of the Old Grand-Dad bourbon, which was mentioned earlier in our show.

And this is a stirred drink, so we're going to add ice. We're stirring this drink. It's a style of preference, but it wouldn't be a sin to shake this one because of those fruit flavors. Getting the vermouth mixed in with the bourbon.

We are going to strain it to a glass, and then garnish it with a lemon twist.

OJ Lima: Yeah, I like a lemon zest in my bourbon drinks.

Lucinda: I've had a lot of shaken Manhattans with lemon twist in lieu of a cherry, and I feel like that was a nice pop.

I was thinking that the lemon twist added a little bit more dimension, brought out some of those botanicals from the Punt e Mes, the sweet vermouth. And then also took back a little bit of the sweetness from that peach.

Lucinda: So, cheers, the OJ Grand-Dad.

OJ Lima: Boom, all right. And cheers myself.

Lucinda: Cheers. I'll drink with you.

Music fades

Rashaun: Last call, everybody.

Lucinda: I'm Lucinda Sterling.

Rashaun: And I'm Rashaun Hall. In the immortal words of Kanye West, here's a toast to the assholes.

Lucinda: Thanks for listening.

Lucinda: Our theme song is "You Know You Want To" by Dan Phillipson. The podcast is produced and distributed by Lantigua Williams & Co.

Rashaun: Big thanks to Middle Branch, New York City, for letting us hang out today.

Rashaun: Our audio producer is Molly Nugent.

Rashaun: Follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram at shotcallerpod, and use the hashtag #shotcallerpod to let us know what you want to hear coming up, what's shaking, what's stirred, what's twisted, anything and everything, we want to hear about it.

Rashaun: And make sure you subscribe, rate, and review us on iTunes or Google Play.

Produced &
distributed by

**Lantigua
Williams
& Co.**