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NANCY KRSN: We're talking to Michael Conti, Director of the movie, "The Unruly Mystic: John Muir." Good morning, Michael, thanks for joining us here on KRSN.

MICHAEL CONTI: Oh, it's my pleasure, Nancy. Thank you so much.

NANCY KRSN: Sure, so can you – tell us, who is John Muir?

[00:00:14]

MICHAEL CONTI: Well, he is the, the person that I'm feeling right now; I'm actually standing at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, looking out as the sun is just hitting the, the North Rim and bathing me in that, that feeling you get of being in such an awesome, vast place.

NANCY KRSN: That's fantastic –

MICHAEL CONTI: It's what John Muir wrote about and I think is what I connected with when I, when I made this film and, which I hope the audience, also, connects with, too.

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NANCY KRSN: Mm-hmm. I, I watched the trailer for it and it talks about John Muir tying himself in a tree during a windstorm.

MICHAEL CONTI: Mm-hmm. Have you done that?

NANCY KRSN: No. Have you?

MICHAEL CONTI: I have – I haven't actually tied myself, but I've been in a, in a storm, hovering underneath a tree, kind of above, um, the tree line, in Colorado, in a summer squall. And I know that feeling of the, the tree kind of hitting you and you're just very afraid of, of being a connection between the ground and, and lightening.

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NANCY KRSN: Mm-hmm. So, John Muir is described as a naturalist, an author, an environmental philosopher, Founder of the Sierra Club, mountaineer, dedicated advocate for the vital preservation of our natural resources. How has he influenced our whole country?

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MICHAEL CONTI: Well, we have what we call these, these natural cathedrals and, as you know, I mentioned at the beginning of the show, I'm standing in one of them right

now. There are people from – internationally here. We've seen Japanese, Chinese people, Europeans, Americans and it's where we can really kind of connect with, with our spirituality as, as a human being, as Americans and as people on this, on this planet and I think that's why, you know, we look back at John Muir and recognize the value of, of his foresight in seeing that our National Parks needed, needed to be protected.

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NANCY KRSN: So, I have to admit that before I heard about this movie, I wasn't familiar with John Muir at all. How did you first become with him?

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MICHAEL CONTI: I read about him when I was probably in my, in my teens and, you know, I grew up in Boulder, Colorado; one of my really good friends, Jonathan Nation, is from Los Alamos. We met when we were students at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He and I would go off and go on these epic hikes. He would do a lot of drawings. I would do a lot of, um, photographs and it was, it was hard to figure out how to communicate that experience and reading John Muir's writings was the way to kind of see how writing could also invoke that feeling, that faint feeling that one might get through a photograph or through a drawing.

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NANCY KRSN: Mm-hmm. And, how did you put together this film about John Muir?

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MICHAEL CONTI: It's, it's a series of films that we're doing on the unruly mystics. The, the first one is on St. Hildegard, so it would have been kind of ironic of me to have done John Muir first. I, you know, I grew up more in the mountain west. I, I started on it because 20 years ago, I did a, I was working in Hollywood; it was kind of, like, the last project I did there – was an IMAX film. I wrote the script for it. The film never went anywhere and that was kind of the genesis to do the John Muir film.

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So, it, it took a while. It's not in IMAX. But, it is theatrical. We just did our 20th screening of it. We are – it's just amazing to be able to share it with, with an audience and see what their reaction is, so, we're coming out of Tucson right now with it and we'll be in Albuquerque before we come to Los Alamos on, on Tuesday – on Monday – I'm sorry.

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NANCY KRSN: Michael Conti, can you give us a little history of you, the filmmaker?

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MICHAEL CONTI: Oh, a little history of me?

NANCY KRSN: Mm-hmm.

MICHAEL CONTI: Oh, boy. Um – I started off as a painter, when I was in college, a few years at Colorado, Boulder. I transferred to the Colorado College, where I became an English, English Major, but I still had a strong interest in the, in the arts and ended up doing a 16-millimeter film that, that led me to Hollywood, where I worked for, for ten years and just kind of worked my way up the ranks, learning the, the process of filmmaking and back to Boulder and started making a film once a month, for about a year, just to really – like a short film – just to really get into what I would call, like, poetic cinema and owning the process and I encouraged other people to do that and we did some other, like, “Make a Film in 24 Hour” filmmaking festival.

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Meanwhile, worked with various clients. Currently I’m working with the Colorado Department of Transportation on a pollinate, pollinator highway project, which is just kind of neat to see how I can take my environmental interest and, and apply it to my filmmaking skills, so, just a variety of different things that I’ve, that I’ve been doing, enjoying doing.

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NANCY KRSN: Have you moved to digital filming?

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MICHAEL CONTI: Oh, yeah. I think that’s really the benefit of emerging filmmakers, that is, that we can work in a digital, digital environment, all the way from what we shoot to how it’s projected. And, I think, I think that I really love and, you know, like, for instance, the real-deal theater in Los Alamos is a great example of that, where you have a community theater that can show both nationally-released films, as well as films from independent filmmakers and people want to have that community experience, so, they, they want you to watch something with a group of people and be able to interact afterwards and talk about it and we do do a filmmakers’ talkback and it’s not about, you know, skills or the things that I did in the film; it’s really about how people are interacting with the content of the movie and, hopefully, that they share that beyond, beyond the screening.

[00:06:23]

NANCY KRSN: Hmm. Sounds fantastic.

MICHAEL CONTI: Yeah, so, digital is – digital is the way that, that can happen. It just, it just reduces the cost and the flexibility of getting your format into theaters in different formats.

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NANCY KRSN: Mm-hmm. So, Michael, you keep referring to “we.” Are you traveling with a team?

MICHAEL CONTI: I am traveling with my beautiful wife, um, Heather Boyle, who’s, who’s the producer with me, so, I always think of her as “we.” She’s, she’s back at the, back at our lodging while I stand here on the rim, looking over Angel Trail, down into the Grand Canyon.

[00:07:02]

NANCY KRSN: It’s kind of bringing me a picture, so, I’m out of my studio and at the Grand Canyon here for a minute.

MICHAEL CONTI: Yeah, I’m hoping I bring enough for all your listeners. It was cloudy last night. There’s, there’s snow on the ground here from, I guess, recent storms, like, you know, Los Alamos.

NANCY KRSN: Mm-hmm.

[00:07:19]

MICHAEL CONTI: The – I – One of the things, too, I wanted to share about the filmmaking process and this, the series, is really about encouraging people to, to step out of their own comfort zone and to recognize they’re also capable of having this – experiences –

NANCY KRSN: Mm-hmm.

MICHAEL CONTI: And, to be unruly, and in this time and age, you know, it’s really important for us to, to recognize our own innate power and, and take advantage of that and, and not be complacent. There’s a lot of work that we need to do, to make sure that the world that we have now continues to exist and support us and into future generations and, and when I look back at these mystics like St. Hildegard, the German Saint in the 11th Century and, you know, John Muir, who’s a patron saint – lowercase saint – um, you know, they, they are thinking ahead and if we had more people doing that, I, I feel, I feel good about where our future’s going to be.

[00:08:20]

NANCY KRSN: That's nice to hear; it's really not something we're hearing a lot these days. Well, this film has been out for almost a year. Again, the film is called "John Muir" – I'm looking for the title – "John of the Mountains." It's been out for almost a year. You have the discussions following the, the screenings. What have you learned from the discussions?

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MICHAEL CONTI: Um, there's a lot of hope. Um, the – we're – one of the things is, you know, it's – right – it's been out for a year; we've done 30, but we'll have done 30 theatrical screenings by the time we get to April, but, it's really about kind of rolling it out slowly and interacting with people and figuring out what's best to do with that, that, that interaction, right?

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So, for instance, we've done a couple of screenings up in Colorado, where we've raised money for the Sierra Club. I think that's super important and I think that's one way for our, our money to get to the right people that can actually effect some change. I don't know. I mean, if, if, if you feel more of a connection to nature and you need to go for a longer hike more – that's great.

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If you feel that you want to put some money into, do a project that can do something, that might even be, that might even be better in terms of, like, longevity. So, the, the film activates people on how they get activated. What they do with that is really up to them, but, that kind of, I guess, remains to be seen is, where are we going to, where are we going to be in a couple of years from now, after more and more people have seen the film?

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NANCY KRSN: Mm-Hmm. And, this is a fundraiser for our nature center here, this screening here in Los Alamos.

MICHAEL CONTI: It is. It is. Right. Yeah, so, I – once again, having come to Los Alamos for the first time probably in '19 – I think it was probably '83 or '82 – and having gone hiking and, um, with Bandolier, around New Year's, or overnight camping down there – I'm familiar with the area and the serenity and I'm happy to help do what I can do to preserve that.

NANCY KRSN: Fantastic.

MICHAEL CONTI: And do better.

[00:10:28]

NANCY KRSN: Well, back to your film. You call John Muir “The Unruly Mystic.” What do you mean by “unruly mystic?”

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MICHAEL CONTI: Well, it’s, uh – we’re working on a third film right now and it, maybe that might help kind of explain that, that term, because in the third film, we’re, we’re looking at spirituality and science and we just got done interviewing the Head Astronomer from the Vatican, down in Tucson, Brother Guy, and I asked him the same question, because it’s always interesting when you hear about how somebody in different theologies respond to what a mystic is and what unruly is.

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And, unruly, right, most of us can think of ourselves as humans and as being unruly at various points, um, as maybe kind of bad behavior, behavior we don’t, we don’t – you know, might be childlike behavior. And, a mystic is, is somebody who is outside of the bounds of the conventional thought and sometimes those people are, you know, might be seen as being mentally ill or just a little too over the edge.

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And, so, the unruly mystic is kind of a combination of what I would also call “crazy wisdom.” It’s like the drunken master; it’s the person who is slightly crazy, but also making sense. Um, and a little bit on the edge, but, also, inside the box. So, it’s that kind of combination of, of those two.

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NANCY KRSN: Like somebody who would tie themselves in the top of a tree during a windstorm?

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MICHAEL CONTI: Nancy, I think that would probably be a pretty good example.
[LAUGHTER]

NANCY KRSN: So, in your –

MICHAEL CONTI: From me coming out here, looking down in the Grand Canyon, before the sun is up, you know, it’s just – you know, most people would rather have their coffee and stay in bed.

NANCY KRSN: Right, right. Watch the TV news. So --

MICHAEL CONTI: Yeah.

NANCY KRSN: I just lost my thought there. Totally lost my thought.

[00:12:21]

So, tell me what really inspires you? You said, “Standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon in the morning before sunrise.” What other kinds of things inspire you?

[00:12:31]

MICHAEL CONTI: Oh, making a film, you know, doing, doing my art, spending, you know, spending three years on, on doing interviews and we interviewed over 17 people of totally different walks of life, um, met the challenges of the logistics of doing all that and, then, went through the whole postproduction process; went through getting people to watch it, friends to watch it, to get feedback and, then, actually showing the film. I mean, to me, that’s also – and I think for most of us, who have a creative pursuit or have a goal, you know, it’s, it’s about taking those little steps to, to kind of reach to that, to that vastness of, “Oh, my gosh, I have something that people want to see” and, and we’re actually filling out theaters and we wanted to, you know, there’s opportunities to take it overseas, to Scotland and Australia.

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That is also, you know, that same kind of experience one would get when you go and see a peak or you see a valley you want to go explore. It’s, it’s like, there’s something unknown about it, but there’s an appreciation and such a gift of having that experience available to you. So, for me, that’s – I kind of tie myself up in the script, in the tree.

NANCY KRSN: Mm-hmm.

[00:13:44]

Uh, in your, in the trailer, it has three different people that comment about, about John Muir tying himself in the tree. How much of the film is people inter – you know, people talking, and how much is nature shots? How do you, how did you put it together?

[00:14:00]

MICHAEL CONTI: That’s a good question. There’s a lot of talking in the film. There’s a lot of people talking about things that are not talk-able; talking about what “awe” is, what “inspiration” is. There is also imagery and footage from various – some, some of it’s mine, but, also, various footage from other artists, of, of wild areas, specifically, Yosemite. That, um, that, kind of in a combination of those two, brings you into this, this

flow state of, of connecting to nature in a way that you may not have thought about, you may not be able to articulate, but, you know that you feel.

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And, that, that one thing, once again, that goes back to John Muir and his writings, you know. You read John Muir – “My Summer in the Sierra” would probably be the most accessible book – and, it – and if you’ve been to the Sierra or if you’ve been to the high country or that kind of place, you’d be like, “Oh, I’m feeling that. I have a longing to go to that, be in that place.”

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So, both, both words, um, imagery and then we – I hired a wonderful composer who did an original score for the film, Chris Borowski, and, so, that, combined with doing the audio postproduction for us in 5.1 Surround Sound really makes it into an immersive environment, just like nature is, when you, when you sit, um, look out and see; you hear; you hear the crow, hear the wind through the juniper. Um, maybe the biggest difference is, in nature, you can smell something. In the movie theater, you’re not going to smell anything except maybe popcorn.

NANCY KRSN: Mm-hmm. [LAUGHTER]

MICHAEL CONTI: So, so that’s the, that’s the goal with the film in that sort of environment.

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NANCY KRSN: Fantastic. We are talking with Michael Conti, Director of the movie, “The Unruly Mystic: John Muir.” This will be showing at the Reel Deal Theater on Monday, at seven p.m. You can buy your tickets now, in advance; they’re \$12, available at the Reel Deal. You can also purchase them at the theater on Monday. Michael, what else would you like to share with us today?

[00:16:15]

MICHAEL CONTI: Well, I just would just – in the film, there’s the ending of it, which I think is important, um, and we visit with a Native American, a First Nations person up in, in British Columbia. I went on a trip up to a lake, called Lake [KIT-A-LOOP] and that lake – there’s some places that are, what I would call, like, “thin veil” and you kind of know that when you go there. You just – you’re able to connect easier to, to the greater whole.

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And, in that film, the, the gentleman who we're with just reminds us of, of that connection and, and it really kind of goes back to the children, you know. We are here to make the world a better place for our children and, um, I, I always kind of carry that with me. Like, it's not about me; it's really about the generations that, that follow, follow me – my children.

[00:17:09]

NANCY KRSN: Mm-hmm. Right. Well, Michael Conti, thank you so much for joining us here on KRSN. We'll see you at the Reel Deal on Monday.

MICHAEL CONTI: Thank you so much, Nancy. I appreciate it.

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[INTERVIEW ENDS]

[CLIP ENDS]

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