

Jamal Hines' Discusses Detroit Web Series The Union (Interview)



Jamal Hines created his web series *The Union* with the idea of adding to Detroit's mystique with a story about battling crime clans. The underground power battles are constructed with raw acting, a soundtrack suited for the nocturnal and shot with the spirit of guerrilla filmmaking. After a five-year delay and the advancement of the iPhone Hines and his crew are streaming their crime drama on Amazon and adding to the adventure with Facebook Live episodes. Actor Julius Kline III, who plays one of the Industry Boys, says that "Everyone wants to be a gangster" and that along with Detroit as the setting is part of the show's appeal. The show's second season debuts today and in the following interview, Hines talks about his path to the present and his interest in making a show about Detroit.

"I kind of want to create a Detroit mythology"

What's The Union?

The Union is three crime families from different backgrounds pooling their resources to run the city. You have the Galdwin family who are the old money Detroit family who is kind of like the Ilitches or Dan Gilberts of the city ultra-rich, well-known but they have power through their criminal background. There's the Black Order Crew who are our Black Mafia group and they do all the underground stuff, there's

the Italian family and thereâ€™s the Polish family. So they pull all their resources together to control the city. Itâ€™s like a *Game Of Thrones* set in Detroit.Â

Did you write the story?

I am the main writer but each actor owns their character. They can guide or influence where they want to take the character. For instance, one of our main characters Tokio who plays Marco Paige has a lot of input about where he puts his character mentally and where heâ€™s at emotionally so we collaborate a lot. *The Union* is not just on Amazon Prime we do live stream shows on Facebook. While *The Union* on Amazon is our grand plot on Facebook we get more into the character stuff I let the actors mess around. I will guide the story but I pretty much try and let them do what they feel is best for their character. Itâ€™s really a collaborative project, unlike most shows.

What inspired you to make this show?

I like grand epic storytelling like *The Godfather* or *Star Wars*. I come from a very rich sci-fi and comic book background so I kind of want to create a Detroit mythology with these characters. Like what other crime shows try to go for the nitty gritty which we try to do to a point. I realized thatâ€™s not where I want to go so thereâ€™s a lot of stuff thatâ€™s based on Â Detroitâ€™s real background. Like *The Union*, partnership is based off real Detroit names and I try to change the real live playersâ€™ names but I wanted to create a mythology. So thatâ€™s what inspired me to do the show.

Is this your first show?

This is the first show we did on Amazon. We tried to do *The Union* in 2012 but at the time the technology and the budget we just couldnâ€™t do it. Sometimes the grand story telling is too much and we just kind of fizzled out. And then we tried to

do a sci-fi show which we did launch for a few seconds in 2013 or 2014. Then we tried The Union again and we became more successful we tried to scale back a little bit and play to our strengths and so for our last two years, weâ€™ve been doing pretty well. We had a complete season last year and weâ€™re starting a new season next week. Weâ€™re also trying out a couple more series for Amazon hopefully we launch next summer early fall. So we're doing good making progress.

Is this through your production company?

Yes, so I have a partner Jack Finley heâ€™s also an actor on the show and the cinematographer. Me and Jack are the majority owners all the cast and crew are part owners so everybody has a stake in this itâ€™s more like a co-opt.

How did you end up doing the show for Amazon Prime?

We had a goal last year that we wanted to be on a streaming service because thatâ€™s just the way the worldâ€™s working. Thereâ€™s a couple of new things like Agitator Clickster or something like that where you sell them your project like a regular distribution company. You give them your stuff and you pay them like \$1200 and they will put you in a lot with other shows and they will tell you itâ€™s better for them to sell you in a package deal with like maybe 10 or 20 projects to a streaming service. So we originally thought about doing that but we didnâ€™t have the money so we said letâ€™s do Youtube and give that a shot. The first four months of The Union series that started a year ago and it was just over-saturated. We just could not break the noise there was so many other web series and content that no one would notice us.

In mid-August, we tried a gamble and we decided to try to do a Facebook Live show. We talked about doing something like that but we werenâ€™t sure about how to execute it At the time we were kind of desperate So we were like letâ€™s do it from the standpoint of one character and see if it works. So we tried

it and the responses were pretty positive so we started doing that. In the meanwhile, I was looking into trying to get back on a streaming service because Youtube wasn't working. Amazon has now changed their policy. At the beginning of the year you could just drop off your film and call it a day but they changed it where you could partner with them if you pass a certain criteria. I saw the process and we sent a few emails back and forth and now we're on Amazon. It's not an exclusive Amazon Prime like *Bosch* but we can stream our show on the Amazon server put it on Amazon Prime and the only catch is they don't promote us we promote ourselves. We try to get as many viewers as we can and Amazon pays us.

Do you consider yourself a storyteller? A director? What would you call yourself?

I would definitely go with storyteller. Writing I love but I started doing this as a director but I think directing and telling a story is I hate using the word passion because I think passion is indirect I love this I love that but it's not a direct purpose. My purpose is to be a storyteller is to be a writer and my tools are being a producer and a director and sometimes an extra. I got myself killed off so now my cameos are taken care of I will be the victim and I'm done. I use history in my work on *The Union* which I based off *The Rise And Fall Of Napoleon* and I just kind of merged that with Detroit's history and we're here where we are. It seems like we got a pretty good response so far.

What is your overall vision for your work?

If you asked me that 10 years ago I would've said I want to win an Oscar and be a big director doing big movies but now I like where the indie world is going for film makers. Like the whole Amazon thing was a stroke of brilliance because I don't want people telling me what to do I want to tell my stories the way I see fit. You work in the big system it's obviously it's their money so they have their right to say

what they need to say. I want to tell my stories my way how I see it and I still want to make a decent living. The idea of a middle class for indie creators is my goal. Where you create your stories with your sci-fi budget or your small indie opera house family dramas but you can create this and promote this on your own and you can still have a sustainable living. By next year I can be totally independent working on my projects and sustain the cost of living. To do this without anyone over my head to tell my stories.

Did the iPhone make all this possible for you?

Yeah, once they started doing 4k resolution it revolutionized the game because it gave people the power to tell their own stories. Some will say it kind of downplayed film making. Everyone is a film maker so no one is a film maker, I disagree because I think talent always trumps over everything else. But it gave the people who didn't have the resources for the \$5000 camera and the \$6000 sound equipment it gave everybody a fighting chance. Now what you do with that is up to you but it did level the playing field for everyone else. There's a movie called *Tangerine* that I think two years ago shot their movie on an iPhone and they went to Sundance. They didn't win the major awards but they cleaned-up pretty well and got distributed. So this is the future. Like the David Lynches of the world, myself, the amateur film makers we're not going to get the big budget camera and the big Hollywood budget which in the end I'm actually cool with that.

Will it stream exclusively for Amazon Prime?

They can watch the show on Amazon even if they don't have Prime they can watch it there. And then our Facebook Live episodes on our Facebook page. Every week we do a Facebook live episode it's scary as hell because it's live and anything can happen. We tried to film at a park in Warren last week but there were gunshots so we had to go. So far we've been on this for a year and we've only had one mess up and

only the crew knows and I will not say where.

Watch [*The Union*](#) on Amazon and [Facebook](#)