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FODI: THE IN-BETWEEN

EPISODE 01: Joya Chatterji & Stephen Fry

TRANSCRIPT

Epoch theme music begins

Stephen Fry Anything you say about Enlightenment can be used against itself because it's really a historical label that is attached to an impulse in humanity. And all impulses in humanity, like everything in this Cosmos, cast a shadow.

Theme music builds

Joya Chatterji Even if we're just thinking in a very Eurocentric way about the Enlightenment, it's not a neat and tidy story. And then unfortunately, there's the whole world to think about as well.

(First drop in theme music)

Danielle Harvey: Welcome to The In-Between, a project by the Festival of Dangerous Ideas, presented by The Ethics Centre.

My name is Danielle Harvey, Festival Director and one of the Curators for this project. I'm recording on Gadigal land, in Sydney Australia.

While FODI has been on pause, we have watched a virus sweep across the planet, movements rise, and figures fall. Perhaps in the midst of all this uncertainty, what we are actually witnessing is the end of an age, and the dawning of a new era.

Across this series, we will sit between historians, philosophers, researchers, writers and scientists, as they contemplate how we got to this point and what our future holds. Accompanying each conversation is a short creative response, documenting this moment in sound.

MUSIC CHANGE

Our first conversation is between Joya Chatterji and Stephen Fry. They speak about the Age of Enlightenment - a movement defined by reason, progress, freedom and rational thought - and whether or not this is coming to an end.

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Joya Chatterji is a Fellow at Trinity College. She has written extensively about the Partition of India, its legacy and migration.

Stephen Fry is a British actor, writer and presenter, whose commentary spans politics, history and mythology. They're in conversation with Festival Co-Curator and the Director of the Ethics Centre, Simon Longstaff.

This conversation was recorded remotely in November 2021.

On behalf of the Festival of Dangerous Ideas I acknowledge the long history of thought, storytelling, care for community and land, that has carried the oldest continuous culture through millennia, and that continues to teach us today.

We pay our respects to the traditional custodians of Country, to Elders past and present, and to all First Peoples of the many lands where the conversations in this podcast took place.

THEME MUSIC OUT

Simon Longstaff Well, first of all, let me welcome Stephen Fry and Joya Chatterji. Joya, can you give me a little bit of a description of where you are at the moment?

Joya Chatterji I am at home in Delhi. Right outside my window is one of Delhi's greenest belts, called the lung of Delhi. So I'm very lucky to be where I am because Delhi's in the middle of its worst pollution crisis, which is not unrelated to the Enlightenment. So it's both a pleasure and a kind of trigger to some thoughts I've been having about it. And I'm actually in my son's bedroom, which has been converted into a study, so please forgive the total mass of papers and things you can see around me. I'm in the middle of trying to finish a humongous book, which Simon it was all about.

Simon Longstaff And how did you come to be a historian?

Joya Chatterji Oh, now that's a matter of falling in love. My first romance was with history when I was 11 years old, very young, very impressionable, and I had a marvellous history teacher who, in a very conventional school, just started a lesson by reading from a primary source. The source was from the 11th and 12th century and it was jaw dropping. The time travel to a hugely different world of ideas and perspectives and scenes and settings and materialities that just, I mean, I couldn't be the same person after I left that class, and I'm still grappling with that encounter.

Simon Longstaff Stephen whereabouts are you? And I wouldn't even try to describe to you, you're such a polymath, so I'm not sure what you would pick (laughter in voice) out of something as a single moment on your journey.

Stephen Fry Well, I'm in central London. The sun is shining off a window almost into my face. And if I look backwards, I can see the spire of St James's Piccadilly, a Christopher Wren church, a symbol of the Enlightenment, if ever there were one. Who I am and what I am

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I don't know! Without claiming to be Jean-Paul Sartre, I more or less reinvent myself every day in terms of what my curiosity might lead me towards. But I am, more than anything I think, animated by that, by curiosity. I have a fat tummy and I have a fat mind if I do say, simply because in both cases, I'm greedy! I'm always greedy to learn new things and to try and understand new ways of looking at the world. And I hope that will never stop. Every day you go to school, they say in Spain. Although I heard a very good remark on the radio the other day, someone said, 'You learn something new every day, don't you?' And the other person said, 'Really? I didn't know that.' (Simon and Joya laugh) So, rather pleasing.

Simon Longstaff Well, I think to be a curious man there's few things better than that. Stephen, you gave a very eloquent account of just the place and it's Enlightenment resonance. What do you think is the historical, if you like, grounding of the Enlightenment, what's its essence that we see through history, at least as you perceive it?

Stephen Fry I mean, again, a joke can sometimes lead to the best way of understanding what's wrong with this way of looking at history. I remember a friend of mine, who was a very witty soul, was asked in a quiz on the radio. What the last words of Queen Anne were. And he said, Alas, with me dies a whole period in table legs. And it's good because it points out the absurdity of these barriers and boundaries in history, as if there are these kinds of doors that shut and open. But certainly, if one wants to layout in the normal school way, there was this scientific revolution, if you like, that was begun by Bacon and figures like that and obviously taken up by Newton and Pascal and many, many others in the West, looking at the moment, of course. And along with the humanism of the Renaissance and so on, came new ways of thinking about how the individual had an autonomy rather than being part of a hierarchy in which their autonomy was severely compromised by the King, the Lord, the church hierarch. All these casts of priestly and worldly authority were questioned. And I suppose the central figure there in Western philosophy is Immanuel Kant, who actually wrote a famous work called What is the Enlightenment? *Was ist aufklärung?* And it is usually summarised as his little phrase 'Dare to be wise', *sapere aude*, dare to be wise. In other words, think for yourself, you are here on this Earth and you have your own brain and your own experience and your own ability to find out where we come from, where we're going. And we owe it as a duty to future generations, not to close off debate, but to keep it open, to think about things and to use logic and reason and one's senses as best one can, rather than taking the authority of others on the basis of revealed religion or constitution and so on.

This was all deeply compromised by the French Revolution, which was seen to be the kind of reification of of this philosophy, but turned into a bloodbath, the terror. And maybe this gave rise to a new German anxiety about the French influence of the *philosophe* they would call the intellectuals. But there's always been a counter in Enlightenment. There've always been, of course, priests and holy men who have hated the idea of this taking away the power and authority of the church. But there have also been others who saw the the pluralism and openness of the Enlightenment and its modification by romanticism as being dangerous and leading to terror and tyranny, many would say. That's my sort of if I were a schoolteacher, I suppose what I would try and get across. But I think there are many questions there, and I'm sure Joya will have a much clearer sense of how both limited and Eurocentric it is, but also how as a historical analysis, it's very cartoonish.

Simon Longstaff Joya?

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Joya Chatterji I think that was grand. It was far from cartoonish. It was very useful in the way you separated out the French from the Germans and the British. You didn't mention Scottish and the different traditions of The Enlightenment, each of which generated different elements into what we now consider as being a single great thing. So I think it's very important not to think about it as a singular tradition, and we think about what would we might regard its central ideas as, say, a reasoned commitment to scientific principle, commitment to the individual or individuation, commitment to the above all progress as being some of the core ideas that bind these different traditions. But on the other hand, you have things that tear different sections, even of the Western Enlightenment apart. Such as liberalism versus republicanism and so on. So, even if we're just thinking in a very Eurocentric way about the Enlightenment, it's not a neat and tidy story. And then unfortunately, there's the whole world to think about as well.

Stephen Fry (laughs)

Joya Chatterji And that's where it gets a little bit more complicated. So one very influential tradition is that actually the Enlightenment and modernity didn't just happen in one place. Different varieties of modernity were kind of sprouting up in different parts of the world where the ecosystem was right. Where you had the accumulation of capital, where you had a significant growth of political power and so on, so forth. And in these different zones, you had different kinds of forms of enlightenment traditions emerging which we might marginalise and call vernacular enlightenment or the vernacular modernities. But nonetheless, they did exist, and many would go further and talk about cross-cultural encounter between these different forms of modernity. And really, something as simple as recognising that the Bible wasn't the truth - historically, it didn't tell a historical truth - is coming from cross-cultural encounter between Darwin and the rest of the world, suddenly realising that, actually, oh dear! I mean, it's not simply possible that the Bible has it right. So, it's scientific on the one hand, imaginative, on the other hand, artistic on another level, but deep level, culturally complex and layered.

The second thing that you have to recognise is that there is a powerful anger in the non-Western world. You may wish to call it the Global South, it's a kind of term that slightly irritates me, but never mind, let's- you can stick with it for ease of conversation. There's a powerful feeling that this Enlightenment was forced upon the people of the global south by colonialism and it was forced upon them through a civilizational matrix. And obviously only the Western powers were enlightened, and every other power was measured according to every other society, civilisation. Because they spoke in terms of civilisations, in that period of history, was measured according to how enlightened i.e. unenlightened it was. So Africa was beyond the pale. India was a little bit higher. And every other society could never really progress to the level of the West. So we can't talk about it as if it's this sort of flat rolling out of carpet that happens in this even way.

Stephen Fry No, it's not syntagmatic, as I think is the word they use for that, that kind of unrolling. But I was very interested by this idea that it was a kind of energy that arose around the world simultaneously because that seems to have happened before, doesn't it? I rather enjoyed Karl Jaspers, the German philosopher's idea of the axial age in which he pointed out that at the same time that Aristotle and Plato and Socrates were changing the way we

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thought in the West and in Athens. At the same time, the Old Testament prophets arose and created the Talmudic and biblical kind of energies that went into Christianity, and Buddha and Confucius walked the Earth all at the same time. And I think to your point about capital making the Enlightenment possible and and Jaspers, this point, I suppose in modern, you know, very fashionable evolutionary psychology and social anthropological palaeontology would tell us that for the first time, humans had the calories and therefore the leisure to stop and think and speculate and inspect the world. Maybe it was as simple as the fact that plagues began to stop affecting the world quite as badly as they had for the previous 100 years. There are all kinds of people and books that privilege one particular kind of social or physiological upheaval. It could be the arrival of wheat or rice, or it could be the new ways of fishing. But something clearly happened that gave humanity a kind of new energy for inspecting and reasoning, and maybe also for believing in individuation, this idea of the autonomy of the self.

Joya Chatterji So what I want to follow that up was by saying that the arguments I was talking about are in the sense of pushing back against the Enlightenment, critiquing the Enlightenment, talking about the Enlightenment as part and parcel of colonialism, in the context of colonised societies. That is very much part of the intellectual sphere. And there is another section of society, which is the much larger section of society, which is the base. Where actually one sees a very different story. And which is where I would argue against Simon's sort of notion of the death of an era. I would argue that we're seeing a huge energising of a certain kind of Enlightenment where there's a huge urge for progress. There's a huge urge for science based medicine. People want that. They want clean water, they want schools and, above all, they want opportunities. They want education, they want opportunities for progress that they use the word progress as a political term. They want progress for their children. And it's wise to recognise that there's an energy there and that's an energy for enlightenment.

Stephen Fry I think that's very, very good. And that also reminded me that there's an amusing fact that in English and I don't know how true this is of other languages, but the word we use for Enlightenment as in *aufklärung* as in the Kantian sense of the word, is exactly the same word that is used to describe something very unenlightenment in those terms, which is Buddhist enlightenment, the kind of enlightenment you think of when people, especially in the West, fiddle around with eastern ideas of philosophies and religions and it is a suggestion in both of them that human beings have an apprehension, if you like, of something that lights the mind and connects things up as light does. When we're in the dark, everything is separate and everything, you bump into it and it has no relation to anything else. But when the light is on, you see things as they are. And I think it's a deep human feeling. Why can't we see properly? There's something we're missing. We need light to shine upon us and to shine upon the world so that we could connect things up and know.

BRIDGE - MUSIC

Simon Longstaff I think you'll both agree that there is no end to the European Enlightenment, in fact, I think you'd say, both of you, there is no such thing as the 'European Enlightenment', there are various movements toward Enlightenment. Is it fair to say then also there was no beginning to it? That it just blends back seamlessly into the history of humanity?

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Stephen Fry Like the famous rising middle classes in history, there isn't... No matter how far you go back you can always put the sentence in your school essay. And at this time, the middle classes were rising up as never before. And you can say that in 14th Century England, you can say it in Rome, Greece. Obviously, you can say it any time later. And I suspect, yes, I mean, you can look at the beginnings of Renaissance Humanism as being very much the seeds of it in Europe, certainly. So even going back as far as Peter Abelard and the first kinds of movement of humanism within very strict church hierarchies, you could still find these little blades of grass pushing up through the stonework of the churches and eventually flowering a little later. So it probably is impossible to go back too far.

Joya Chatterji Well if you perceive that, you've got the whole period of the Islamic Enlightenment -

Stephen Fry Yes.

Joya Chatterji - where you have this huge flourishing of science and mathematics. What was then, what we call now the Islamic world, they went through a very rich period of enlightenment and preceding that if we go back even earlier, there was a period of enlightenment around 600 B.C. where you had a number of philosophers in the Indian subcontinent who were doing things like, for instance, discovering there was such a thing as zero, which is the beginning of mathematics.

Stephen Fry Yes.

Joya Chatterji So there is a sense in which you can continue to unravel this concept backwards and backwards in time. And it's only if you look at this very particular way, which is indeed, it's a spectacular thing that happened in Europe at that time. But spectacular things happened at other times, too.

Simon Longstaff So what it says to me is it's not something which is marked out by a beginning or an end in time, but rather, it's a tendency, wherever it arises, of a certain kind of valuing of rationality over superstition, a certain kind of valuing of the individual rather than just the collective. And that varies from place to place, I understand that too. Is that something that you think is right? That it's not a temporal thing but it's more of an outlook, a worldview, a way of being?

Stephen Fry It is what T.E. Hulme, the philosopher, called a concrete flux of interpenetrating intensities. It is both a flux and concrete (laughter in voice), and it is the intensities that interpenetrate from all kinds of different directions. It's a preposterous phrase, but it's one of my favourites. But it is, to return to that joke about Queen Ann table legs, you know, it isn't just, you know, 'and then one day Goethe spoke', or 'one day Kant spoke', or 'one day Rousseau' or whoever. They do interpenetrate. And of course, mercantilism and the beginning of the movement around the world that caused the horrors of empire, but also the flourishing of trade in both goods and ideas is something that the Enlightenment made more welcome. It meant that ideas from Japan, China, India and Africa were more likely to take some sort of route slowly.

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BRIDGE - MUSIC

Simon Longstaff So. The Enlightenment, we've talked about many of its great achievements, but it also produced World Wars, it's produced global warming. I don't want to just give a list of all the bad things, but you can't pretend that it hasn't also thrown up some things. You even mentioned it, Joya, when you said looking out your window at the green lungs of Delhi, you mentioned that was one of the legacies, the pollution of the Enlightenment. So, whether it's still expanding or whether it's fading, what are the one of the great triumphs of the Enlightenment and its worldview in its multiple forms? Whether you pick it from Scotland or Germany or France or India? What would you want to carry forward into the future? And what, if anything, would you want to leave behind? What are its darker sides that you think we ought to try to remove from our world?

Stephen Fry Well, I'll go for that, if I may, which is, firstly, that I don't really accept this idea that in the Enlightenment, as some separate thing, is responsible for world wars and communism and revolution and all the rest of it. It clearly preceded them. And as much as there is cause and effect to everything, what caused the Enlightenment? Well, whatever caused the Enlightenment caused those wars that came after the Enlightenment, too, is pure logic. It isn't difficult to see that. So you might as well say that Aristotle caused the Second World War. I mean, it's the same argument that sort of definitively shows there's no such thing as free will really, isn't it? It is simply cause and effect going back and back. But you could argue that by loosening the shackles of ecclesiasticism and the monarchies of the world and allowing a new kind of dispensation that included republicanism and parliamentary democracy and various other versions, including French Revolution, followed by Empire and so on. That yes, those were energies released by allowing us to think for ourselves rather than taking on trust that the scriptures of Catholicism or any other religion. And what is good in the Enlightenment is still, I think, what Kant said, 'dare to be wise', dare to know for yourself, don't take anything absolutely on trust. But then that of course, also lets in a kind of fanaticism and lets in what we now call conspiracy theories and mad views of things. They say, 'Well, I'm just doing what you said, Stephen! I'm thinking for myself and I'm discovering and researching for myself that vaccines don't work and I'm discovering...', you know.

The fact is, anything you say about Enlightenment can be used against itself because it's really a historical label that is attached to an impulse in humanity. And all impulses in humanity, like everything in this Cosmos cast a shadow. They can be very, very bright, and the brighter they are, the darker the shadow they often cast. And that's obviously true of artificial intelligence, the internet and science. Generally, it has some bright and extraordinary achievements. The reduction in child mortality, the longevity of humans, the reduction in disease and poverty has been real. And the outlook for most human beings is better. We know more so we can see more suffering than we ever used to. But we can't un-enlighten ourselves as far as science and political thinking, we can't unknow what we know, we can't unlearn history. We move forward, whether we call it progressivism or just the natural progress of one year following another. That is bound to continue, and we can't abandon ways of thinking logically, reasonably and empirically testing those ideas. So in that sense, the Enlightenment is as much a part of us as hair under our arms or language. It's something that humans have evolved around the world. And as in all evolutionary traits, they start in one

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particular territory and then they move and develop and take on different features in others. Joya will have a better perspective.

Simon Joya?

Joya Chatterji I wanted to say something - although I agree with a lot of it - but I'm saying it because I'm sitting where I'm sitting and the things that concern me are very much inspired by the place where I'm sitting. What's one of the things I would like to take forward about the Enlightenment, which will go on whether we want it to or not, it's, you know, it's not in our hands, is actually food security. There's been a huge amount of scientific research which was, strangely enough, Indian scientists collaborated with Pakistani scientists to make the varieties of rice that created the Green Revolution, which now mean that India is self-sufficient in food. That's not to say that we don't have starving people. That's another issue altogether. But we do need to use science for these basic issues of hunger and disease, and you know, actually direct it towards the issues that are glaring. And somehow we can't just keep it restricted in our universities and in our lovely... I also wanted to make a plea that in societies like India and many others where we have authoritarian governments which make the freedom of speech difficult, there are many people in danger, particularly people who work on social, economic, historical, philosophical questions. And it's quite important to give them solidarity and support by helping them in some ways, you know, inviting them abroad or trying temporarily to give them a refuge because they're being arrested every day. We live in dangerous times.

BRIDGE - MUSIC

Simon Longstaff I just want to push back a little bit on the sense that the Enlightenment is summed up by a desire for progress in technology and other things, because both of you spoke in part about a certain kind of autonomy that people have. And I wonder then whether or not you are sensing that there's a closing down in some sense of the open mindedness, which some assert to be part of that Enlightenment project, which produced the technology. Whereas you can have a very closed mind, you can have a totalitarian state that can produce lots of technology and prosperity in the sense of progress, and you can have a very fractured society where every dissenting opinion is shut down because it offends some individual's perspective. As Stephen has put it elsewhere, people just shout across at each other across the chasm of difference. That seems to me to be a threat to this ideal of Enlightenment that you're talking about now. I wonder what you make of that, whether or not you see this as something which is weakening it or is just a phase that people go through and come back to a more balanced position. Joya?

Joya Chatterji I would say that the Enlightenment is not one thing, it's many, many different ideas that have come out at different times and different places and don't necessarily cohere. So if you stick with that model, you can understand why different societies, different countries have produced their own versions of Enlightenment models and created a structure that they feel works for them without necessarily adopting full individuation. Which we associate with, say, democracy or liberalism or republicanism, whereas other societies haven't. In fact, the majority of societies, and let's just face it, the majority of the world has not done individuation. So that's one of the problems in thinking that the Enlightenment has happened and it's over.

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Enlightenment is happening. One of the areas in which you see it actually happening is in the Hindi movies in Bollywood. Because I've been following the movie industry now from the 30s to the 2000s. And you can see gradually the figure of the individual emerge. Initially, he or she only speaks in song, in romance. You hear the self, only in the context of a romantic, intimate conversation, which is absurdly impossible in day-to-day life. But it's an idea. It's an idea that is put there for the people and the people love it. I mean, obviously, it's the most famous and most public form of entertainment. But now you gradually begin to see that this idea of the individuated self grows and grows and grows and develops all manner of features of power, of despair, of I suppose, an emotional interior. He thinks differently. He wants something. He exists. And you begin to see that so powerfully by the end of the century. So individuation is happening. It's in process. It's under way. So again, I think it's too early to say that it's over.

Stephen Fry I think that's beautifully put Joya, really interesting. It makes me think also, of course, that there's an even bigger question now, and that is when the Enlightenment, as we think of it, grew up, the world was still a hierarchical place and there were hierarchies to question, God, King and Lord, and there still are employers, bosses -

Joya Chatterji Families,.

Stephen Fry - power and family power structures within families. But, there's a historian who with whom we probably both all three of us disagree violently called Niall Ferguson, whose views on empire and things are somewhat counter to the prevailing work that people like Joya are doing. But I do think he gets one thing right, and that is that society has - almost without our noticing it - morphed from a hierarchical structure to a network structure, and network structures are reticular. They have nodes that connect lines, and the way we communicate and the way we individuate within the network is different to the way we have typically done within hierarchies. I notice in things like comedy, for example, that you can no longer - unless you set it in the past, like the thing I did called *Blackadder*, for example - you can no longer have the comedy of the anxiety and stress and rebelliousness of the hero stuck between hierarchies: the boss, the General or the prince who they have to please, and the servant that they can bully, and the comedy that comes from the reciprocation throughout those sort of classes. The sandwich of a hierarchy is simply no longer possible in a film.

This obviously leads us to one of the major problems of our era just in current terms as we think about social media and about that sort of issue and, you know, the annulment of certain people because of their views and the care we all take in order not to upset a node somewhere along the network. So I think that makes an enormous difference because you can look at all these things intellectually on paper but forget the soil in which they're expected to thrive today. It's a different soil from the soil of yesterday. It's a network soil and not a hierarchical one.

Joya Chatterji I think that you're absolutely right. We do have a networked society. However, we still have a hierarchical society, that's not dead yet.

Stephen Fry Ah no.

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Joya Chatterji It's alive and well in three quarters of the world. And it's properly alive and well in many European homes along axes of gender, axes of sexuality. Honour.

Stephen Fry Honour.

Joya Chatterji Et cetera, masculinity. So many things we could talk about.

BRIDGE - MUSIC

Simon Longstaff Stephen and Joya are there any final thoughts on this topic before we go?

Stephen Fry Well, all I would say is anybody interested in this subject should dive in headfirst and find out what they can find out. And I think they'll find it an extraordinary journey because it is really a journey of ideas, how humans have thought about themselves and the society that we find ourselves in when we're born. And that at its best, Enlightenment is just a way of offering you a torch so that you can look into the darkest corners.

Simon Longstaff Thank you, Stephen. Joya, any final words for you?

Joya Chatterji I think it's more complicated than that. (Stephen and Simon laugh)

Stephen Fry Of course it is! Everything is more complicated than I say it is.

Joya Chatterji Nice to meet you, Stephen.

Stephen Fry Nice to meet you, Joya, and thank you for putting up with my nonsense.

Joya Chatterji I saw you at Hay and I was most impressed. You were lovely.

Stephen Fry Oh. Laughs. Very honoured, thank you so much.

Theme music

Danielle Harvey: Thank you to Joya Chatterji, Stephen Fry and Simon Longstaff. Accompanying this episode is a short response in sound. It features music made from archives of the first recorded sounds, and the words and voice of Sydney-based writer Tasnim Hossain.

In our next conversation, we sit between Peter Singer and Sam Mostyn.

The In-Between is an audio project by the Festival of Dangerous Ideas. If you've enjoyed what you've heard, tell your friends, rate and review us online or subscribe for the next episode.



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The Festival of Dangerous Ideas will make its return to Sydney in 2022, on the 17th and 18th of September. Sign up for program announcements at festivalofdangerousideas.com. That's where you'll also find full bios on today's speakers and artists. Or follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

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