

## **SMFA Summit Interview with A. Jay, premiering 28 May 2021, 10am PDT**

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Everyone, I'm so excited to get to introduce you to probably my favorite headshot photographer in all of Los Angeles, it's A. Jay.

### **A. Jay**

Hey, yay. Hello. Hi.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Thank you so...

### **A. Jay**

Hello, thank you for that compliment.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

No, no, no. Well, let's, let's go back and explain why that is. Because I've had the opportunity to actually be with you during headshot shoots for quite a few of my clients, and so I'm there during the process of it, you are pure magic.

### **A. Jay**

Thank you so...

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Like it's not I send people to you, and then I see the results and go okay these are good headshots. Like yes there's that. These are spectacular headshots that you do some magic to really get their type and brand and bookable essence and soul to just kind of shine through in seemingly easy ways like you disarm them somehow. Can you talk a little bit about what your process is like for shooting headshots?

### **A. Jay**

Well first of all, I'm glad I'm making it look easy. Not always easy but you know I try to... I try to use as much of my personality as possible, because I, you know with headshots, everyone's nervous. You know, you're in your own head. You have no idea what you're actually looking like at this moment. So, you're you're thinking... everything possible that could be going wrong is going on in your mind.

So, I try to come forward with as much of my personality; being a little silly, a little vulnerable, fun, so that way you're not so much thinking inside the mind any more, you're now experiencing the moment. And you're in the moment and it helps you relax, you start to forget where you're at, you get really comfortable. We end up just being two friends, kind of hanging out, you know, taking pictures. I might be directing you a little bit but once I make you feel

comfortable with me that direction feels a little more loving and, you know, we work together in order to get a phenomenal shot. So just trying to be as much of myself, as direct as possible, with love, and making it just a fun experience, so you can kill those nerves and we can have a good time, you know?

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

I would agree that there are, there's such a case of nerves that are pre-loaded for headshots. Like the days before, of the anxiety of picking out what to bring, you know? Is the makeup artist going to get me looking right? Or is it going to be that one day that I have my makeup done the way I never could do it again? And what I end up seeing as a casting director on the buying side of a headshot is a lot of, "I hope this looks good. I hope this is a good shot. I hope my gut's sucked in, or my chin doesn't look wonky or whatever." And I think the, the conversations that you prompt people to have during the shoot really shows in the eyes and...

### **A. Jay**

Oh definitely, I mean I try to, you know, each step of the way, from booking, all the way down until just before the shoot, I try to communicate as much as possible with the client, what their needs are. You know, I've asked them to send me examples of what they're looking for in advance, so that way I can kind of get it in my mind what the shoot is going to look like so when they walk in, they are already seeing what it is that they want, based on the conversations that we had.

And then, you know, picking clothes, I always tell them to bring tons of options, because you don't want to just be set on one thing to get to your shoot and then you change your mind or you see the background now doesn't match. So, you know, I start off bringing a lot of clothes because we'll sit and we'll actually discuss the clothing, based on what casting you're looking for, based on what vibe you're trying to give off on your shoot. And then once we pick the clothes... so, it's all it's this whole process, by the time we get to you being behind the camera, or in front of the camera, instead, me being behind, we've already built sort of a relationship and expectations on what it is that we're trying to accomplish, you know, during our session.

And then hopefully, like I said with personality, with a little bit of laughter, with a phenomenal team -- because I do have a phenomenal team with me that, you know, helps keep the vibe going as well, you know, popping in with little hair, makeup, clothing -- just being a solid rock for me so that I can give the best of myself to my client, it all comes together and it makes it all work really smoothly.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

How did you learn you had a gift for -- I know headshots isn't all you do, I want to talk about that as well because you, you do some phenomenal photography out in LA, which of course is love of your life, love of my life that choosing to be here and all the beauty that is here you capture so much of that? How did you learn that you had a talent for photography?

### **A. Jay**

You know it was honestly by accident. I, I had no intentions on being a photographer in life, until I so happen to end up in a photography class in high school and was guided by a phenomenal teacher who kind of pushed me to, to try. And within trying I saw that I was actually kind of good at it.

You know, I didn't give it my all just yet because I was young, but that was kind of what sparked the, the vibe, you know. Just a little bit something in me and I continued to, to just take photos throughout life. But it wasn't until, you know, really sitting down and deciding to 100% focus on photography, which, you know, thanks to my boyfriend at... you know, he helped me really find the confidence that I needed in order to go back to school and take this seriously.

And then just, I feel like once I actually decided that this is what I want to do, little spark was there, but I made the decision that this is what I wanted to do. I had the support that I needed. The universe kind of just like, opened up and started showing out, I mean, so many opportunities kept coming my way in different avenues of photography. So, I didn't have to be stuck into one, you know, you know, one genre of photography. I got to play into many, many different avenues just by existing and continuing to move forward and trust within myself, and that I'm covered, you know what I'm saying.

And so, along that way, my journey took me all the way to a headshot company which you know, really helped me realize that this is something I am very good at. You know I like doing photography but as you know, you know, sometimes you're not always talking to people. Sometimes it's more about in your head and your being within yourself. I didn't know I would be good at making people feel so comfortable, and, and, you know confident. I... really if you were to ask me when I first picked up a camera if, years later, I was going to be doing what I'm doing now and enjoying it so much and having so much of my heart into it, I'd have been like, "Really? Okay, that's cool."

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

That's a really good point because the confidence that is instilled in those actors as they're getting their headshots done it... yes, it comes through, but then they have a tool that they use for months or years, sometimes almost a decade, they'll use it -- we can talk about that -- but that they'll use for so many submissions and so many opportunities, and it is a meaningful tool for them. So that confidence is a key factor in, in not not just trusting "I'm having a good headshot experience, but that I'm going to have something after this that really does represent me and where I want to go."

### **A. Jay**

Correct. And you know with headshots, sometimes people show up with so many expectations, right? And one thing that you actually helped me... I stole it from you I'mma be honest. When I

worked with you one day, you gave one of your clients this amazing tip which was to think about a line while you're shooting, you know, practice that. And you know I have my own tips and tricks and ways, but to convey a message, you know, why not have that message in your mind, and actually push it out of you by living in it.

You know, so while we're here, why don't we just do it? Do it for real. Don't just see this as me taking your picture and you standing there. Let's get into the moment. Let's actually act. Let's, let's fine-tune what it is that you're trying to, to put out in this shot. And so that that tip was amazing! And I love when your clients come through and they have like, you know, little Bonnie tips or or, you know, a sheet of paper with all of their words that they're supposed to be thinking about. It's, it's nice to see that, you know, your words didn't just help me, they're really helping actors put together such a phenomenal moment within their headshots that, you know. I'm happy that I met you!

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

I'm so happy that I met you! Yes, I just, I thank you for that and I'm so glad that that's been meaningful for you to get to have as a tool to use with actors because it's so often we forget that what we are thinking does read like...

### **A. Jay**

All over your face.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Just be thinking the line that you want to get cast to say, you know, you've got your next booking that you want; be in that character. And it doesn't mean get all costumey and shmacky and stuff. It just means be in that frame.

### **A. Jay**

Just feel it. Feel the character, so that you, your body language exudes this character. So that, like you said, your facial expressions will exude the character. Because you know we can do a whole bunch with your clothes, with the makeup, with the hair, but at the end of the day, you have one photograph that you're going to submit, and that photograph has to tell whoever is looking at it that you can play this role. So not that you're just pretty, not that you look good, you know, in a red top, but what about your face is going to convey.

You know, as a photographer, I'll put everything else together. I'll get your background together, I'll get everything I can to help bring this photo together, but how are you going to sell yourself in that little thing, thinking of a line, really does help change, like you said, the facial expressions, body language, and helps you convey your message.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Yes, yes, yes. How can an actor best prep for a headshot session? What are you hoping they have ready when they come to you? Or even before the session itself when they first contact you?

**A. Jay**

Well, so what I like to do is, you know, with each one of my clients, I send them a list of different types of things that they can do to prepare for their headshots. One of the most important things is to prepare, you know. Plan your outfits. Plan them at least two nights before, because you know one thing that really gets our nerves is being unprepared. You know, not knowing what we're going to wear. That's why, communicating with them, going over their outfits, so then that's the last thing you have to worry about. Find your line. Prepare it.

Practice in a mirror. You know the one thing... we're remembering what we look like when we're taking pictures, because we can't actually see ourselves. You know I will have a computer screen up so we can look at you as the session is going, but while you're in the moment and you're not looking at yourself, you're pretty much guessing what you look like. So, the best thing you can do is look in a mirror and try to remember what facial expressions you want to make. You know, play, do your line, act in the mirror and try to become consciously aware of what your face feels like when it's making these facial expressions. That way, you're a little more confident, right, when you come to your session. You know exactly what it is that you're looking for and you don't have to keep, you know, as they say "bird-looking" over at yourself to see, "Oh, am I doing good?" Because you kind of know, I remember what this facial expression felt like so I think I'm doing pretty good. And then I'll show you and you'll feel good. We'll high five.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Yes, it's that muscle memory really does kick in.

**A. Jay**

Correct.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Yeah. You mentioned your boyfriend earlier, and I know from following you on social media, you are really clear on the value of surrounding yourself with supportive, fantastic people. Can you talk about being a creative in show business, in this town, in this industry, in life, being a creative entrepreneur and the value of that support system that you keep around you?

**A. Jay**

Absolutely. I mean it's important. I didn't recognize how important it was, until my boyfriend and I got together. Just experiencing that level of support was astronomical in pushing me forward to do the things that I did just having someone to actually believe in you, to give you

the patience and the space to go find what it is that you're looking for, right? You know, I knew I wanted to be a photographer, but did I know how it would go to become one? Did I know what it would take to become one? Did I know what doors I needed to walk through? No. So how was I going to be able to do that? I had to build up my skill. I had to build up my confidence. I had to put myself around other creative like-minded people in order to... you know, 'cause you don't know something exists until you know it exists, if that makes sense? So, you kind of have to see it. And, you know, he gave me the strength and the patience to, to go out here and look for what I would need in order to succeed in this department, you know.

A lot of people, I don't want to say a lot of people, because I'm not gonna speak for everyone, but in my experience, sometimes, it doesn't always feel good when you're a creative and you're with someone who doesn't understand the creative, right? Because in this corporate world, we're kind of pushed to, to have one way of thinking and to try our hardest to get into one avenue of work, and to stick with that. And if you're not doing that, then you know, people get nervous. They get worried. "Freelance? What what is this? Independent contractor? What what is what are all these things that I don't understand?" And it can be discouraging because you... and so to have someone next to you, that understands what it is that you're going through, what you need, and then says, "Hey, I'm here, I'm going to support you..." and not just by cheering me on, but supports you by, you know, becoming a partner in the business. You know, helping out in any way, shape, or form. Giving me pep talks, like really important pep talks and knowing, you know, he's really good at knowing exactly when I need the pep talk versus when I need the stern talk, you know? "Get out there; you've got this." Just having someone who can see you start from one level, and watch you grow, and be that, that reminder of, you know, how high-powered you are and how important you are to the world and, and they've seen it.

And it's just someone who can confirm for you, you know that your purpose is real. That is so important and if you can get it with the person that you know you lay next to, great. If you can find that in a best friend, great. In a sister, a sibling, you know, a parent, that's awesome, because... you know, we can go far by ourselves. It just takes a really long time. When you don't have the support, it takes a really long time. So, I'm very grateful.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Yeah, and we don't have to go it alone like that. We... that... it's a choice, and it does make some of the success that we're going to experience take a little bit longer to come around.

### **A. Jay**

Yeah.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Yeah. When, when you get in those spots where you need a pep talk or a stern talk and you're, and you're not sure which it might be... because that that's natural, right, that we, we have those ups and downs in a creative career. What's some of the self-coaching that you do? Like if



someone watching this maybe isn't connected with their person who can be their cheerleader and their guide and their coach and their best friend, like what's the coach that's on the job 24/7? What's it got in store for that kind of moment?

**A. Jay**

So, before, before I had the support in-house, I'll say, I used to set an alarm. I had an alarm on my phone that would go off every night at nine o'clock, right before I go to bed, and it would say, "I love you. You did the best you did today. And even if you didn't accomplish all that you, you set out to, I love you anyway, and we can try again tomorrow." So, reading that every single night before bed, saying it out loud, it truly, truly inspired me. And it was a constant reminder for myself. You know, affirmations are real.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Oh, yeah.

**A. Jay**

The more you trick your brain, right, because affirmations are really about, you know, sealing something into your mind, so that you can actually live it through your body, right? So that, I did it every single night. I did not forget, even if I was sleep, the alarm would go off, I would wake up and read it. Because I wanted to make sure that on my mind had to be my own inner cheerleader. Right? And, and I think honestly just putting myself in that position is what made the universe push me towards the in-house support, because it saw that I was doing the work within. And, but, it knew I needed some outside support.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

But it could match the energy, because you already had it rolling at a certain frequency and so then the universe could line up, like, "Well, here's a similar frequency, so that you don't have to do it by yourself." But we got to get up to speed for that, that we want. You can't start from like a dead stop of no I'm over here talking about how, "Oh, I'm no good. Nothing ever works for me. Oh, woe is me." Like, because those are affirmations too; they're just affirming what you don't want.

**A. Jay**

Absolutely, I mean the, you know, negativity, it's everywhere. And it's easy, right, it's easy to blame everything for why you aren't where you are. And I'm not gonna say there aren't hardships or things that happen that can, you know, push against what it is that you're trying to do, right? But if you look within you, you'll start to see that you, you also don't help the situation. You're not helping the situation, if, if adversity hits you and your first thought is to go within and be negative and blame yourself and be angry, then you're wasting time.

Where, where do you have time to find a solution? If you're busy being negative and sad, where's the time to find the solution, right? Here's the problem. Here's the solution. Not, here's

the problem. Here's the sadness. Here's the woe is me. Here's the looking for outside sources to confirm your negativity and to spread... because, you know, energy is spread. So, you know when you're not feeling good about yourself, even though you're not trying to, just within conversation, you end up spreading a little bit of that negativity to someone else. And then you can discourage them. Because you know when you're talking about yourself, you never realize that the other person listening is also internalizing your words. Right?

So, when you're saying things about yourself, and what you're not good at, and how you can't do, well, this person might feel like they relate to you or have similarities to you, and then if you feel like this, then, "How am I going to do it? What good...." So now you've spread that negativity over to the next person, right? So, so my thing is, I gotta combat negativity every day. I gotta combat, you know, being stagnant. I have to combat... you know, when, when you're not living your purpose, life has this trick, where when you're not living your purpose, it can really start to convince you that you don't have one.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

That part.

#### **A. Jay**

You were just living your purpose, two months ago but suddenly this 30 days without doing anything, now you're starting to doubt, and you're forgetting. It's like coming down, you know from the creative high, so to speak. And so, you start to feel, "Oh..." and so if you don't have people in your team, or in your environment, that can just remind you, you know, "Girl. This is just one, one month, you know, get back out there." Or, or just be within your presence and tell you about their good news, right? Because if your team is not inspiring you or motivating you as well, right, these people are here to encourage you, but they also should be in your life to inspire you, as well. To kind of help you see a path that maybe you might not have known was there.

So, you start within. Right? Get the positivity going within. The universe usually will take care of you and once you start smiling more and feeling better about yourself, you become a little more open to the people that you actually need. Right? So, it's one step. Next step. Third step. Fourth step. Fifth step. And then it's all these thousands of steps that never end.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

For sure. But, I think when we're in that lower place it's so easy to look at a thousand steps and go, "I can never do that." And the work of it is, "What is the one very next step and can I make it just slightly higher, higher pitch, higher vibration, than, than making a low choice?" Which is... the low choice is an easy choice that's its basic. Complaining is....



### **A. Jay**

Do nothing. It's do nothing and continue on feeling like some... the world owes you something that you're not going out and getting yourself, you know? You feel... everyone feels entitled to purpose, right? They feel entitled to it. But, but purpose only shows up when you're ready, and when you've done the work, right? First you gotta find your purpose, then you have to know you really, it's really your purpose, right? It's not somebody else's purpose. It's not a purpose you discovered along the way that you want to try because you like the results of the purpose, right? Many people like the results of purpose, but they don't really care for the purpose itself. They don't really have an interest or love... like, for me, creativity is my love. Photography is my baby, right? I breathe photography. When I get behind the camera, there's a feeling, there's a tingle there's... and, you know, as you said earlier kind of shows when you're around me.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

You and your lens become one. It's amazing.

### **A. Jay**

It's like, I feel one with my lens. I feel, you know I always say the best time to catch me on my like excited moment is right after a shoot. You can almost ask me for anything 'cause I'm in such a good mood. I'm feeling the vibes. I'm feeling great. That's how I knew this was my purpose, because it was something that... with... my heart fluttered while I was doing it and I never felt... you know, I've had days where it's been like 14-hour days, and then I had to get up six o'clock in the morning. I'm in pain, I'm tired. I'm exhausted. I have to go do it again. But I don't dread it. Now I may be tired, but I don't dread it. I still can't wait to get up and do it all over again. And if you have that, and that's something that's within you don't give up on it. You fight for that.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

If you don't have that, where, where do you even begin to listen to find what it might be? A purpose.

### **A. Jay**

You know, honestly, surrounding yourself with other creatives. Surround yourself with people who are doing things. You know, it's easy to fall into people we know and people we've worked with, but you should really start to look for things that you want to mimic. You know, not that you want to copy, but just energy that you kind of want to mimic, you know. It's this person: "She's always glowing, she always seemed happy, or he's always in a great mood, I wonder why. Let me talk to them. Let me hear them. Let me absorb some of that positive energy," because it could... just a simple conversation with someone could trigger things within you that you never... like I said earlier, unless you see it, you don't see it. And sometimes you don't know what you're looking for and someone will literally have a beautiful conversation with you and open your mind.

You know, one day I was on a shoot, and a woman was talking to me she was, she was in her 60s. I won't say how high. She was in her 60s. And we were discussing, you know just life in general and we were having such a random, I mean random, conversation. And we talked about school. And she was saying how, you know, she felt she was too old to go back to school. And you know, I'm... you know me, I'm, "Girl, what? Too old to do what now? Hold on, let's talk about this." So, we sat there. We had about an hour-long conversation about, you know, life and age and what is age and you know the time, you know it's going to move anyway so why not try.

And, you know, what are you going to school for? Are you going because you just want the degree or are you going for the education and for the information? Because you know sometimes it's easier to get information from people than to go seek it yourself. So, what are you doing it for? So, we left, you know, parted ways. A year later, she caught me at another shoot, and she ran and found me and just threw her arms around me and hugged me and started crying. And, you know, I'll be honest, I didn't even remember the conversation. Not that I didn't remember her but it was you know, a year ago, and I'm like, "What did I do?" And she was like, "I've been looking all over for you and I'm so happy I ran into you again." And I'm like, "What's going on?" And she told me she enrolled in school. She's been going, she enrolled, literally after our conversation. She said if she never spoke to me, she never would have went to school because she just, she didn't even know how to start. She didn't even know how to start feeling like she was worthy of going and being educated, you know?

So, she thanked me and said if it wasn't for that conversation, "I would not be where I'm at today" and she said she's having a time of her life. She started listing off all the things she's learned. How she's... and even her energy was changed you know? She keeps talking to me with so much more confidence and, and she started showing me some of her work and I'm just, I was so proud. And to see the tears in her eyes and she's crying because she was lost. And she wasn't having these conversations. She says she never opened up to people about going back to school because she was embarrassed to even fathom the idea of going back to school. And I happen to just bring up school, and she just happened to just say, "Well, you know, I'm too old for that." And then I... She said, "The way you got on me, and it seemed like you were serious." She was like, you know, "I felt like we'd known each other for years and, and you were honest and you were direct." And I was like, "Well, you know, I'm happy to hear that." I hugged her again. And I say, you know, "Keep going," and that...

Like I said, within conversations you just have to not be afraid. And she said, my energy. She felt my energy, which is what made her feel comfortable enough to open up. So sometimes, just look at that person who's constantly smiling. Go ask them what are they so happy about because that could lead to, "Oh, I'm happy because I just got this job," or "I'm smiling because I just did this one thing," and now we're having a whole conversation and then she's yelling at you, telling you to go to school.

## **Bonnie Gillespie**

I love so much about that, but especially that if we make ourselves open to having conversations that are in, in the direction of YES, rather than in the direction of NO, with everybody we encounter, there is no end to the magic we can create together.

## **A. Jay**

NONE! Oh, and the magic, it's so, it's invisible until you see it. And then once you see it, it's like, OH. You know, when when I first decided to become a full-time business woman. And I said, you know, no more gigs, no more, you know, looking for jobs, I'm actually going to invest 100% into me. I woke up nervous. I woke up very nervous the next day. I'm not gonna lie, and you know I had this ritual where, in the morning I like to, you know, wake up, thank the universe for waking me up, set a few intentions for the day, and just you know maybe talk about something I'm feeling, like nerves. And I said you know "I'm gonna," I said, "Universe, I'm gonna trust you, because I you know I want this to work, but I'm not gonna lie, I'm a little nervous, right?"

And so, you know I get up, brush my teeth go about my day. I log into my email and I have three bookings. Three emails, separate emails, random. And I mean, Bonnie, when I tell you random, I wasn't doing any advertising, any marketing, any promo, I was just existing at that moment. And my goal was to start that day to do all the promo and I got three bookings. I booked all three of them, and you know I had to laugh, because I'm like, "You know, universe, you funny." You know, she was like, "No, no. It's time. You're ready. Don't be nervous, but I hear you, and so let me just sprinkle in...." And after that I had a whole found confidence. I was not nervous anymore. I knew that I was capable of doing this. I had been doing it, doing it for other people is no different than doing it for myself. Right? So, what was I nervous for?

## **Bonnie Gillespie**

A. Jay, thank you so much for this conversation. I know it is going to do so much for so many.

## **A. Jay**

Good!

## **Bonnie Gillespie**

I could keep talking to you forever. For those who would like to stay plugged in with you and follow up, and maybe learn more about working with you, or just follow your positivity on social, can you let people know best ways to stay in touch.

## **A. Jay**

Absolutely, well they can find me at @ajaysphotos310. So that's A J A Y photos 310 at Gmail, of course, and then you know they can always... if they want to book a session with myself or my lovely team, they can go to, ONAphotography.com, so that's, O, N as in Nancy, A as in apple, photography dot com. And they're, you know, they can take a look at, you know some of our

work and book straight from the site. You know, if they come from you, I am giving a little special. So....

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Y'all get on it.

**A. Jay**

If the Bon squad comes through....

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Y'all get on it.

**A. Jay**

We're giving \$75 off of a headshot session, so... and it's all set up so all they have to do is go on our website, they will literally see the link for, for Bonnie, they can click on that, and book their session, and you know we'll have a good time. I'm excited and I'm still... I've got to get you to come to one of these. So, if they can convince you, if they can convince you to come help them on a shoot, I will be so excited because working with you is great!

**Bonnie Gillespie**

The feeling is mutual. I love getting to work with you, A. Jay. Thank you so much for sharing this time with me. You're amazing.

**A. Jay**

I, thank you for asking me. \*mwah\* \*mwah\* \*mwah\* \*mwah\*