

MoS Episode Transcript – will.i.am

will.i.am: And our number, when we do “Boom Boom Pow” – “I be rockin’ them beats!” – I have everybody in the light-up suits form an arrow and lean forward so they could point to the “B.” I was like, I have an arrow that's pointing to what you need to pay attention to.

REID HOFFMAN: That’s will.i.am. You know: will.i.am, frontman of the Black Eyed Peas, among other distinctions. He’s describing his Super Bowl halftime show from 2011. But to understand the triumph in his voice, I think we need to start the story a bit earlier...

will.i.am: We were rehearsing for the Super Bowl while we were on tour in Brazil, while I was writing a new album, right when me and Marc Benioff’s relationship began.

HOFFMAN: Marc Benioff is the co-CEO of Salesforce. Will had partnered with them to promote their new app, called Chatter. And he saw an opportunity.

will.i.am: I said, “Hey Marc, why don’t you do a Super Bowl ad?”

He was like, “Yeah, we’ve been thinking about that.”

I was like, “You know, we’re playing at the Super Bowl.”

HOFFMAN: The ads? They’d feature a cartoon will.i.am “walking” out of the animation and on to the live stage just before he walked on the actual live stage. There were obvious challenges to pulling this off, not the least of which was the lack of ad spots to buy. Will called up Fox, who was broadcasting the game.

will.i.am: “Hey this is will.i.am, we’re playing on the Super Bowl this year. I want to buy some time.”

They were like, “Well, it’s already sold.”

I was like, “Well, you could create a new ad buy.”

HOFFMAN: Will pitched Fox on creating two new ad slots that would bookend the halftime show.

will.i.am: That’s a new unit you could sell, at a premium. If the person performing has 11 minutes and they purposely forfeit a minute and 30 seconds, and they only play 10 minutes, that’s an awesome business model.

HOFFMAN: Will was giving up his own time but he knew those ads were worth more than the extra time on stage. In fact, the bookends would make all the stage time more valuable. They

linked his Super Bowl performance to his other project with Salesforce. The network finally agreed. The ads ran. The animation worked. And that's why I believe...

will.i.am: No, no, no. Check this out. And then I was like, "Yo, can we get the Black Eyed Peas logo to be on the field?"

HOFFMAN: That's right. Having pulled off a previously unimagined sponsor integration, will.i.am is just getting warmed up. The Super Bowl is a pretty big gig. But Will knew he could make it bigger. Not content to simply perform on stage, he wants the Black Eyed Peas' logo on the field as part of the choreography. But the NFL had a strict "no logo" policy on their turf.

will.i.am: They were like, "You cannot write anything on our field."

I was like, "What about U2's logo?" U2 wrote "love".

"What about Rolling Stones?" They had their lips. That's a logo, there's no words.

"What about Prince?" Prince had his symbol, no words.

HOFFMAN: What you'll want to listen for is the way Will strategizes, not just for the Black Eyed Peas but also for the headphone company Beats, in which he was a part owner.

will.i.am: I was like, "Okay. What if we used 'love'? But the stick of the 'L' and the 'O' to create a 'B'." They were like, "Okay."

HOFFMAN: The NFL said "okay". And during that epic 2011 halftime show, the word "love" did appear, colossal and glowing with LED lights on the darkened field. But here's the thing: The word "Love" doesn't light up until nine minutes into the 10-minute show. The rest of the time, it's just a "B," a "B" that stands for Black Eyed Peas – but also just happens to look exactly like a certain logo.

will.i.am: So I put a massive Beats logo in the center of the field. The NFL didn't know what we were doing. And our number, when we do "Boom Boom Pow" – "I be rockin' them beats!" – I have everybody in the light-up suits form an arrow, and lean forward so they could point to the "B." I was like, I have an arrow that's pointing to what you need to pay attention to.

HOFFMAN: Most musicians would consider the Super Bowl a big opportunity in itself. They'd prepare their performance and take the applause. But Will didn't see a single opportunity, he saw a way for his opportunities to multiply. He leveraged the Super Bowl to the benefit of three brands: the Black Eyed Peas, Beats, and Salesforce.

Think of each brand as one panel in a tri-fold mirror, where each panel reflects not just the brand or the brand but each other's reflection as well. Angle it just right, and the compounding reflections will stretch to infinity.

I believe you should never settle for a big opportunity when you can leverage it into something epic. A win on the scoreboard isn't enough when you can change the whole game.

[THEME MUSIC]

HOFFMAN: I'm Reid Hoffman, co-founder of LinkedIn, partner at Greylock, and your host. I believe you should never settle for a big opportunity when you can leverage it into something epic. A win on the scoreboard isn't enough when you can change the whole game.

And before we go any further, I have a confession to make: I am a Super Bowl skeptic. Will and I couldn't help but laugh about this during the interview.

HOFFMAN: I frequently get pitched on, "We should go do a Super Bowl ad." Right? Because it's like, it's your debutante moment. Everyone will pay attention to you. I'm usually like, "That's totally vanilla, don't do that. That's the generic thing that everyone is doing."

So I'm usually the negative voice on this. And yet, you did some amazing things around the 2011 Super Bowl ad.

will.i.am: Boy, did we.

HOFFMAN: will.i.am's Super Bowl story clearly challenges my long-time view. And it also shows how you can take the big opportunities that come your way – the ones most people would just be grateful for – and turn them into something bigger still.

I wanted to talk to will.i.am about this, because his ability to identify and compound opportunities is like nothing I've ever seen. You probably know him as a musician, the founding member of the Black Eyed Peas. He was also an original partner in the headphone behemoth Beats, and he's had a wearable consumer-tech company, called i.am+. And there's his foundation, bringing STEM programs to schools. Then there was that time he was Director of Innovation at Intel. And that other time he wrote the song for the iconic "Yes We Can" video during the 2008 election.

By the way, will.i.am also co-hosts a great podcast called "Pivot to the Future" and I had the fun of being his guest. His co-host is Omar Abbosh, the Group Chief Executive at Accenture. His guests: some of the biggest names in business. The topic: how companies are continuously reinventing themselves to thrive in our digital age. And reinvention comes naturally to will.i.am. He rejects the received definition of limits. And it starts with how he grew up.

will.i.am: I was raised really poor. But my creativity was my currency. It kept me out of trouble. Trouble meaning the local gang didn't bother me. Trouble meaning being bullied for being poor going to a very rich school didn't happen because I was the creative, William. "William, do that little rap you were doing."

HOFFMAN: You can hear in that story how Will learned to move between worlds.

will.i.am: If people call me "William," they know me from school. They call me "Willy," they know me from my neighborhood. They call me "Will," it's work.

HOFFMAN: When Will was still in high school, he formed a hip hop group that would eventually become The Black Eyed Peas. They gained some traction in the underground hip hop scene, opening for bigger acts like Macy Gray and got some regular play on MTV. They had a distinct sound and a devoted niche audience. And then there was this stylistic shift toward something a bit more mainstream. Like any entrepreneur who spies a bigger audience or bigger opportunity, Will decided to pivot.

will.i.am: That was rebellion. Not a pivot.

HOFFMAN: Sorry! There was this rebellion.

will.i.am: We started off as an underground jazzy hip hop group, and my ex-girlfriend worked at this underground record store. She got upset with me, the community got upset, when MTV chose to play our song seven times a day.

She said, "That's why you guys are pop."

I'm like, "What do you mean we're pop? We're not pop." She used that as a stabbing thing. I was hurt that she said that.

I was like, "You know what? Just to show them, I'm going to leave this world and I'm going to shoot for a bigger audience."

HOFFMAN: Will took that insult, and turned it into possibility. His band was already finding success: consistent MTV and radio play, touring gigs, screaming fans, the works. But Will wanted more. He saw a window to create a bigger opportunity. He'd change his sound and change the game.

will.i.am: I want to make music for people, not just people that like what I like – and that's harder than making underground music. Making music for people that like what you like, that's pretty easy. You know exactly what they want to hear. But trying to get

other walks of life – old, young, Muslim, Jew, black and white, male, female – that is freaking hard.

HOFFMAN: Notice the way Will articulates this crucial insight about scale.

will.i.am: I want to make music for people, not just people that like what I like.

HOFFMAN: Will wanted to move beyond the people who already knew him and liked him. In the music world, that's called "going pop." But it relates directly to the business world. In startups, we might call that "gaining traction" or "expanding beyond your early adopters." Will has a lot to share about going mainstream without losing what made people love you. I asked him about his playbook.

HOFFMAN: You said, "Okay, I'm going to go do this." What was the next step?

will.i.am: To study the people that have done it over and over again. I studied Lionel Richie and Commodores songwriting, Stevie Wonder songwriting, and Bob Marley.

Bob Marley was making Rastafarian music. But the thing in common that he had with the Beatles was the chord progressions. You know like 1-4-5s, and all these different chord progressions. That's the commonality between a hit and not-a-hit. And why jazz is jazz, and obscure music is obscure music. The ones that work share a lot of these chord progressions.

HOFFMAN: In other words, this was much more than a marketing push. The change was foundational. Will wanted to create music that created leverage. And to do that, he had to build a different foundation underneath his music. A foundation that could support massive, compound growth. The key, as it turns out, was chord progressions. I find that as fascinating as Will did:

will.i.am: I was like, "Get the F out of here. Are you serious bro?" I studied more and more and more and applied that songwriting to the Black Eyed Peas.

HOFFMAN: This new approach to songwriting set the Black Eyed Peas up for massive growth. But Will's insight applies to more than just songwriting. It's a kind of leverage that starts at the beginning, at the foundation of anything you build. In business, you might need to innovate on the go-to market strategy, rebuild your code base, or create a new differentiated hiring strategy. Whatever your foundation, a metaphor might help:

Imagine you're a kid playing with wooden blocks. You want to build the tallest skyscraper you can. You want to be the Frank Gehry of your kindergarten. As an industrious little builder, you realize that a super-tall tower starts with a solid foundation.

But there's a limit to how stable that tower can be, because it's still made of blocks that can slide apart. A strong breeze, a careless door slam – that tower's coming down.

Now swap those wooden blocks for, say, LEGO bricks. That tower can go higher and higher. It can be 114 feet tall with 550,000 pieces. (That's the current record anyway.) Interlocking bricks give you leverage. Instead of a single precarious tower, you can build an entire skyline.

And it was this kind of leveraged thinking that Will brought to his music. He didn't randomly write catchy tunes. He strengthened his music's foundation, based on the building blocks proven to work.

And he brought this thinking to the band itself. He knew they needed a brand he could leverage into ever-bigger opportunities. It's a page he took from the business world.

will.i.am: When I started working with ad agencies, they had a brand bible, where for every product they had a font, a color scheme. That's when I started applying all that stuff to the Black Eyed Peas. We had a color scheme, a font, and chord progressions that associated itself with that.

HOFFMAN: When did you start realizing that you had to be creative not just in songs and performances, but also in the way that you thought about music as an industry, music as a product, music as a service?

will.i.am: Yeah, it was because I had a manager that was from New York, and didn't know how to drive. So I had a car and I would drive him to our meetings and sit in the meetings and listen.

HOFFMAN: Driving your manager around town might strike you as an obligation, but Will saw an opportunity to gain leverage.

will.i.am: Like, "What? What do you mean publishing? There's a separate deal I have to get other than just a record deal? What do you mean, mechanical royalties? What's that?"

HOFFMAN: Will started to train his eye toward ever bigger opportunities. But his focus was still on making records. Then he wrote his first song for a TV commercial, and a lightbulb turned on.

will.i.am: Once we had music out, I saw how much money I made selling records versus how much money I made being lucky to have made a song for Dr. Pepper. I moved my mom out the ghetto with a 30-second song. Meanwhile, the two albums that I made that were like two hours worth of music, I had \$20,000 in the bank. That's when I realized there was a different world.

HOFFMAN: This realization – that there's a different world – may resonate with many of you listening. Because it's not just about a musician who discovers marketing budgets. It's anyone who realizes there's more money to make, more value to create, more impact to have when you gain leverage.

So Will learned a lot in those early meetings. The biggest lesson? The value of meeting – with producers, with marketers, with brands. Each new connection creates a new way to find leverage.

will.i.am: I like to network. Because those fields usually never come across the talent. There's always some medium there, some manager or some agent. I wanted to interface directly with the executives at record companies, like Jimmy Iovine, or the executives at ad agencies.

HOFFMAN: Jimmy Iovine is, of course, the legendary music producer and co-founder of Interscope Records. He's also the co-founder of Beats Electronics, so you can tell he's going to stay in this story. Jimmy's first big hit as a producer was a collaboration between Bruce Springsteen and Patti Smith, and he built his career on unexpected pairings, working with artists from U2 and Tom Petty to 50 Cent, Eminem, and Dr. Dre.

will.i.am: Jimmy told me something one day that sticks with me. He was like, "Will, you're the kind of person that if you stay at the table long enough, you'll figure it out. You just got to figure out a way to stay at the table – or be the table."

I'm like, "What? Be the table? What?" Mind blown.

HOFFMAN: "Be the table." It sounds like a Zen mantra, but it's great business advice. Being at the table means you're in the room when life-changing opportunities present themselves. Being the table means you're the one creating and leveraging those opportunities. It was in meetings with Jimmy himself where Will learned how it was done.

will.i.am: Jimmy loved having different disciplines in the room. So say, for example, at 1pm I had a meeting with Jimmy. Classic Jimmy Iovine is that your 1pm would start at 2, but you'll be sitting in the room with the meeting that lingered. And here is the guy from Activision. So now there's three people in the meeting.

Then your meeting that was supposed to start at 1, that started at 2, now his 3 o'clock is there. Now it's four people in the meeting, and his 3 o'clock is the guy from MySpace. And then we're all in a room, trying to figure out how to get in front of the eyes and ears of people.

HOFFMAN: If sitting in on his managers' meetings taught Will how the business works, sitting in on these meetings with Jimmy showed him something else: how partnerships create their own leverage.

Whether it's finding a cofounder for your startup or a brand collaborator for your company, teaming up with unexpected partners can grow opportunities – not just linearly, but exponentially.

It's like the scene in *Ratatouille*, the Pixar film. Remy the Rat is explaining to his brother why two complementary foods in combination taste better than each one individually. They taste first berry, then cheese; then berry and cheese together. Colorful fireworks flash in their minds! Message: the whole really is greater than the sum of its parts.

And this is the insight that lets you leverage a big opportunity into something truly epic. I wanted to show you another example of how this plays out, so I took a look at a stunning project beginning on the New York City waterfront. It started, like many epic projects, in the wake of disaster.

JEREMY SIEGEL: Lower Manhattan, along with a lot of neighborhoods in New York City, were very hard hit during Hurricane Sandy. The Con Ed substation on 14th Street blew. And it famously caused everything south of 34th Street to go dark.

HOFFMAN: That's Jeremy Siegel, an urban designer with Bjarke Ingels Group, also known as BIG. And the first thing you need to know about BIG is that they share Will's capacity to leverage big projects into something epic. In one of their most famous projects, they won a bid to redesign a power plant in Copenhagen, and they turned it into a four-season artificial ski slope, which also had the world's highest climbing wall on its exterior.

In New York, they won the bid to protect Manhattan from future storms. It was a billion dollars in federal funding. And the goal was to build a physical U-shaped shield around the southern tip of Manhattan. But Jeremy wanted to build more than a wall.

SIEGEL: When we started our work, we were basically looking for opportunities to take what could be really burdensome, ugly, completely uniform flood protection infrastructure and turn it into something that would be a benefit for the city.

HOFFMAN: Jeremy and his team knew that a giant wall around half the city would be a disaster, cutting entire communities off from the waterfront. So instead, they teamed up with those communities to find out what their infrastructure needs were.

SIEGEL: We basically just started working with the communities and neighborhood by neighborhood put forward a series of options from really basic flood walls that would

block people off from the waterfront, to, what if it's urban furniture that's helping to stop the water? What if it's buildings? What if it's park land?

Neighborhood by neighborhood, we started to see what the needs and desires were, and that's what ended up informing our proposal. So the "Big U" is actually made up of a series of little "U"s.

HOFFMAN: Jeremy's team won \$335 million to implement this series of delightful little coast-protecting "U"s. New Yorkers, if you didn't know about the Big U project, you will soon. Its size and scope goes way beyond what could have been just a wall.

SIEGEL: Essentially rather than building a wall, we're building an elevated park. So the park itself will be what stops the water from coming in when you have a big storm surge like Hurricane Sandy. We're adding all kinds of recreational spaces, space to sunbathe and have picnics, the kinds of spaces that don't really exist in the park today.

And it's also not just BIG. We're working with huge teams of engineers, landscape architects, ecologists, economists to make the right decisions. You can't do this stuff alone.

HOFFMAN: Jeremy and his team at BIG took the big opportunity of protecting the New York City coast, and leveraged it into something epic with the help of partners. This is the skill will.i.am started cultivating while sitting at the table with Jimmy Iovine and others. I was curious if that helped him spot the opportunity with Apple.

HOFFMAN: Right, so you succeed. Then you start applying that, and doing the same kind of synthetic fusion to other things. You see, for example, the iTunes platform coming, and you go, "There's some amazing stuff we can do here."

will.i.am: iTunes was a... At that point in time nobody knew. For me to be like, "Yo, I knew it was going to be big"? I didn't know.

HOFFMAN: Will may not have known that iTunes would be big but he knows an opportunity when he sees it. So when Apple needed a new song to help launch their brand-new product – the iTunes Store – Will saw a big opportunity he could leverage into something with epic potential. And so did Jimmy.

will.i.am: Jimmy says, "You know Will, Apple is coming out with this new product called iTunes." Nobody knew what that was. "It's going to help us fight Napster." Because he brought the catalog from Universal Music over to Apple.

HOFFMAN: And at this point, Will has been "in the room" enough to know he had to get leverage early on. He started angling for his percentage.

will.i.am: When they came to us and said, "Hey, they want to use a Black Eyed Peas song for the commercial," my first instinct was, "Well, how much are we getting paid? Because Dr. Pepper paid me a whole lot of money."

They're like, "You're not getting paid any money. Apple doesn't have that type of budget." They said, "They'll give you some Apple computers and laptops."

HOFFMAN: This was a curveball for Will. If the iTunes Store was going to be such a big deal, why wouldn't they pay for a song? And it would have been logical to pass on the commercial and wait for something that gave him more leverage. But something about this potential partnership with Apple captured Will's imagination. He had a lifelong love of Apple as a brand, dating back to his youth and using an Apple IIC.

will.i.am: The Apple is my instrument. I'm more a coder than I am a musician. I just wanted to share my enthusiasm, and love, for open Apple everything. This is the language for me, I create with this. I just wanted to share that.

HOFFMAN: Will had no way of being sure the iTunes Store was going to take off. But he loved Apple as a brand, and he said "yes." The Black Eyed Peas helped unveil the iTunes Store in 2003. And if you're wondering how it all worked out – there's a reason you're hearing my voice on a podcast.

Will and the Black Eyed Peas leveraged that launch into numerous product launches that followed.

will.i.am: Like when Verizon started VCast, we were there. When Nokia started Comes With Music, launched that with them.

HOFFMAN: Will started looking closely at the business model he'd been a part of, in which the art is used to sell the product. It's a model that's existed since before the gramophone, a fact that Will talks about regularly. When the music in the ads feels vital and current, consumers will want that music and that device, right now. Will saw a new and epic opportunity in the making.

And we'll hear all about it... after the break.

[AD BREAK]

HOFFMAN: Before the break, Will had worked with Apple on the launch of the iTunes Store, followed by a series of other products. Will saw the massive potential of using art to sell a hardware product. Another lightbulb went off. He pitched Jimmy Iovine on an idea.

will.i.am: One year, 2006, I come home, and I'm like, "Jimmy, why don't we make our own hardware? And use our own music to sell our own hardware."

HOFFMAN: Will saw a path to greater and greater leverage. If version 1.0 was "A soda company will license our song for a lot of money," version 2.0 was "Apple will license our song for no money, but will leverage an epic brand opportunity." And version 3.0? Well, Jimmy needed some convincing.

will.i.am: I'm like, "Jimmy, why don't we make our own hardware? And use our own music to sell our own hardware." He's like, "Will, that's why they call it hardware. It's hard. What do you mean, 'make our own hardware'?"

"Let's do our own hardware, Jimmy. That would be amazing." And that's how we started Beats.

HOFFMAN: What was the initial, "Well actually in fact this channel by which we're using music could actually be the way of creating an entire industry, which people wouldn't have normally thought of around headphones, around high-quality hardware product," which, as he said, is hard.

will.i.am: I saw the trust that people have with musicians – especially the good ones, the great ones. They're vulnerable, and the audience knows they're vulnerable. And the audience leans on the musician to relate to them. There's no other industry that exists that way – not politics, not corporations. Music and people, it's this other-world thing.

If Bob Marley was alive today he would have... I don't know what product he would have. But he would have a product that people will adore. Maybe medical marijuana, maybe you'll have Bob Marley CBD or something like that. But now that it's legal.

HOFFMAN: Yes, exactly. With the Rastafarian, exactly.

will.i.am: Legalize it!

HOFFMAN: Because that was among, kind of the thing that is not just being creative in the music, but creative about how the business comes together, about how different industries touch each other, how they can actually reinforce each other.

HOFFMAN: It would take some time before Jimmy would bring this hardware idea to Dr. Dre. As the story goes, they ran into each other on the beach in Malibu, and Jimmy learned that Dre was thinking about starting his own sneaker line. Famously, Jimmy retorted, "Forget sneakers. Let's make speakers."

Interestingly, will.i.am isn't often mentioned in the official Beats origin story. But Jimmy never forgot where the inspiration to get into hardware came from.

will.i.am: The kind of person Jimmy is – he could have just ignored that I brought up the hardware discussion and gave me some finder's fee or seed creation money. To have me part of the company just shows his loyalty in building those networks.

HOFFMAN: The Beats brand exploded onto the music and lifestyle scene. And true to form, just as Jimmy Iovine didn't forget Will, Will didn't forget Beats. He did everything in his considerable power to highlight the Beats brand. Beats headphones and speakers are everywhere in Black Eyed Peas videos and songs. As Will mentioned earlier, there's a line right in the middle of their song, "Boom Boom Pow."

will.i.am: "I be rockin' them Beats!"

HOFFMAN: Will even wore them while being interviewed live on CNN in 2008. He was on screen next to the legendary poet Maya Angelou, talking about Barack Obama's presidential campaign, sporting a pair of Beats headphones, with their signature lowercase "b", casually around his neck.

And now we've come almost full circle back to will.i.am at the Super Bowl, sneaking a giant Beats logo past the NFL. But wait, there's one more level to this partnership still.

In 2014, Beats was bought for \$3 billion dollars, creating a massive payday for its founding shareholders. The buyer? None other than Apple.

It's very tempting to end our journey here. We've traveled from Will's Apple IIC in his childhood classroom to a post-Jobs Apple buying Beats for a record sum.

But if you think that this sale ended Will's quest for ever-larger opportunities, you haven't really been listening. Will has ventured deeper and deeper into the tech world since that 2011 halftime show. And he's continuing to develop ideas that could turn into the next big – really big – thing.

HOFFMAN: Tell me about your workspace. As I understand it, it's literally called "The Future".

will.i.am: Yeah. When I was at Beats I would come up with these wild ideas. Some of them would get heard, a lot of them didn't. I would get frustrated, like, man, I just need my own team.

HOFFMAN: This is a continuation of the lesson he learned with Beats: artists benefit when they own the tech, not just when they help sell it.

will.i.am: When I got some disposable money, I got this building. Jimmy was like, "Why you got this? What are you going to do here? What is this?"

I was like, "Jimmy, you don't understand. I'm going to have my developers right there. I'm going to have like a recording studio and stuff."

"Why are you going to have a recording studio next to developers?"

"Then I'm going to have my CNC machine, and my hardware stuff over there."

"What is this for?"

I was like, "Jimmy, you don't understand, man. In the future hardware companies are software companies and content companies. I want to prepare for that. Apple being a hardware company starting iTunes tells you that maybe they're going to want to do and make their own content. I want to prepare for that. I want to have my studios and my developers all in the same house so we don't have to go and find marketers to sell our stuff. If I have culture in the place that's creating stuff that's going to change culture, I want it all to come from us."

"But what's your product? How are you going to have a building before a product?"

I was like, "We're going to figure out the product."

Turns out I was batshit crazy for having an empty vessel and then figuring it out later. We figured it out.

HOFFMAN: In 2012 he founded his own tech startup, i.am+. It began as a consumer tech company, focusing on wearables. One of their first product rollouts was the foto.sosho, an iPhone accessory that looked like an Instamatic camera. Another? Fashion-forward earbuds called Buttons that look exactly like what their name suggests.

But Will was looking to go bigger. Of course. Their flagship product? It came from an idea he had back when he worked at Intel.

will.i.am: When I worked at Intel I helped the futurist department, I said, "Well, why don't you guys create your own operating system if no one is building an operating system on your mobile chipsets?"

That's what gave me the "aha moment" that "When I get some disposable money, I'm going to create an operating system. How hard could it be?" Anyways, turns out to freaking impossible, let alone hard.

HOFFMAN: Yes, exactly.

will.i.am: But we did.

HOFFMAN: i.am + developed Omega, a new AI interface that Will says will be better than Siri or Alexa. Their goal is to create an AI voice-activated interface with better context awareness, like a Siri that has gotten to know you. In 2017, i.am+ raised \$117 million in venture financing, a large portion of that VC funding came from Salesforce Ventures. You remember: from the 2011 Super Bowl.

will.i.am: Marc Benioff has been there every step of the way, they've invested in every round.

HOFFMAN: As you've no doubt noticed, will.i.am's career offers an almost infinite number of examples for how you can leverage a big opportunity into something truly epic. From building a solid foundation to "being the table," Will has mastered leverage. But there's one aspect of leverage we haven't touched on yet: timing.

When you're building scale, it isn't just about moving fast. It's often about leveraging an event or a moment that can give you liftoff. Sometimes you're racing against a competitor; sometimes you're racing toward your own rocket launch, and sometimes, when you're will.i.am, there's an actual rocket leaving the planet for Mars. We'll let Will set the scene.

will.i.am: I'm on tour and I called Ron Conway, and I'm like, "Ron, do you know the guy that created the Segway?"

ROBOT VOICE: Ron Conway is a Silicon Valley super-angel investor. The Segway is a two-wheeled motorized personal vehicle.

will.i.am: He was like, "I don't know the guy that owns the Segway company, but I know the guy that created the technology behind it."

I was like, "Can you connect me with him? I want to figure out a way to take the governor off, because I found this team that I want to test out to take the technology and create a new type of vehicle. But I don't want to create a vehicle that goes 30 miles an hour. Can you take the governor off, is what I want to ask him?"

HOFFMAN: If you didn't catch that, Will is wondering whether it's possible to remove the speed regulator on a Segway, which, it turns out, is very dangerous, and its inventor, Dean Kamen, told him as much. But the two got to talking, and Kamen offered Will a quid pro quo: I help you with your vehicle – you help me with something too.

will.i.am: He's like, "I have this thing called FIRST."

I was like, "What's FIRST?"

"That's the problem, I've been doing it for 20 years and nobody knows about it!"

HOFFMAN: FIRST is the high-school robotics competition Kamen founded. He thought maybe Will could come to the event's kickoff and lend a little star power.

will.i.am: He says, "I need you to help me make FIRST cool."

I was like, "I can't help you make it cool, it's already cool. It just needs to be a little louder."

HOFFMAN: I like thinking of these escalating opportunities this way: like a volume knob you can just ratchet up to 11. "Loud" translates into a wider audience; a bigger impact. Loud lets whole other communities hear you outside your own.

will.i.am: I was like, "But, why don't you make a TV show?"

He was like, "Nobody wants to put a robotics competition on TV."

I was like, "Well, I just bought time on Fox. Why don't you call up ABC and buy time?"

HOFFMAN: Does this sound familiar yet? Will is still using those lessons he learned from the Super Bowl, about how to parlay air time, how to move it around, and how to shape it in creative ways.

will.i.am: I called up ABC and said, "Hey, how much does an hour cost? I want to create a program called First Robotics: i.am FIRST for a robotics competition, and a concert."

I got the Kids' Choice Awards and Nickelodeon to do that. Then Dean helped me get companies like Boeing and Johnson & Johnson to buy the ad buys. It was great. No one lost any money, Obama kicked it off, brought a whole bunch of recognition and eyeballs to it.

HOFFMAN: Instead of begging the network to air a noble ratings loser, Will restructured the event and sponsorships in a way that would attract attention, which attracts more sponsors. He turned a favor into a mutually beneficial gift.

Pulling this off required every one of the leverage techniques we've looked at so far: a rock-solid foundation of an established competition with real scale; unexpected partnerships that are bigger than the sum of their parts; creativity as capital to bring value to the partnership. And just

like the Super Bowl halftime show, each separate element of the FIRST Robotics Competition reflected back onto another, amplifying the event as a whole.

And what happens? Well Will doesn't just settle for that big opportunity, he leverages it into something epic.

will.i.am: Because of that, NASA then called me up to JPL to help them think around their stuff.

HOFFMAN: That's right. NASA called. They saw Will's work for the FIRST Robotics program and thought, "This is the man to invite to our Jet Propulsion Lab and direct more eyeballs to the launch of our Mars rover, Curiosity."

will.i.am: I was like, "Well, why don't you have a concert at a rocket launch?"

They was like, "We can't have a concert at a rocket launch, a rocket launch is too loud."

I was like, "Well, have you been to a rock concert?"

He was like, "Will, have you ever seen a rocket take off? I mean, yes. A rock concert is loud, but a rocket launch. You're not going to get anywhere near the rocket launch to have a rock concert. The blast radius is just... No. It's going to be pointless."

HOFFMAN: And loud.

will.i.am: And loud.

HOFFMAN: Eventually, Will hit upon a better idea: He'd write a song specifically for the Curiosity mission.

will.i.am: I was like, "Okay, well, what happens when the rocket lands on Mars?"

"It sends the signal back."

"Well, instead of sending a signal back, why can't it send a song back? Can you do that? To all the classrooms across America?"

"I never thought of that. Well, who's going to make the song?"

"I'll make you the song. I could make it."

HOFFMAN: That song, "Reach for the Stars," became the first song ever to be transmitted to Earth from another planet. Students and special guests gathered at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab

in Pasadena to watch the broadcast. And just because will.i.am never, ever passes up an opportunity to go bigger, the event was also used to – let me count these out:

- 1) Promote a separate STEM initiative for Will's foundation.
- 2) to raise awareness for NASA. And...
- 3) to promote the song itself, which would soon appear on Will's solo album, *#willpower*.

That is how you leverage a big opportunity into something truly epic, on an inter-planetary scale.

will.i.am: My mom calls me the little engine that could. I said, "Hey, I want to shoot for the stars."

It was like, "But what if you don't make it?"

I was like, "Well, then I'm off the planet. If I shoot away from here, I'll get off the planet."

HOFFMAN: I'm Reid Hoffman. Thanks for listening.