

Speaker 1: Welcome to the Bill Walton Show, featuring conversations with leaders, entrepreneurs, artists and thinkers. Fresh perspectives on money, culture, politics, and human flourishing. Interesting people, interesting things.

Bill Walton: Welcome to The Bill Walton Show. I'm Bill Walton. Well, today we're going backstage [00:00:30] again with a really great guy who I've known for six or seven years, Kenny Reff, who is the proprietor of LimeLight Communications, which is a fabulous video production company who actually is responsible for the look and sound of this show. And we worked together for a long time. And one thing I've always been curious about Kenny is when we were talking at the very beginning, he said ... And almost revealing this in a way, he said, "You know I'm a burner." [00:01:00] I said, "A burner? What's that?" And he said, "Well, I go to Burning Man every year, and so I'll have to be off this next August and I'm not available to do taping." So we dug into it a bit.

But it wasn't until now that we've had a chance to talk about what actually goes on there and his long history. And what we want to get into in this show is really what is Burning Man? What's the history? What type of people go? Can [00:01:30] we all go if we want to? What kind of art gets created? What kind of music? What kind of people? It's a fascinating thing that happens almost ... It's not spontaneous, but it seems spontaneous, I think, for the participants every year. I guess its greatest virtue as Kenny will point out, is it's in the middle of nowhere. Kenny, did I miss anything?

Kenny Reff: No. I think that's a good intro.

Bill Walton: We got all of this. We've [00:02:00] been talking about this before. This was started in 1984.

Kenny Reff: '86.

Bill Walton: '86. And you weren't there. Your first year was 2012. But what happened in 1986 that got this launched?

Kenny Reff: It was just a couple of guys, a few guys, Larry Harvey chief among them. Creative types living in San Francisco, and they decided to have a party on Baker Beach, which is a small beach with a [00:02:30] view of the Golden Gate Bridge. And they made, I think, a 13-foot effigy of a man, and they burned it for no reason. As far as I can tell, there was no particular reason other than to just do it.

Bill Walton: They just thought it'd be fun.

Kenny Reff: Yeah. My understanding is there were 30 people there and they had a great time. And they came back the next year. Word had gotten out. They did it a year later and a hundred or so showed up. And this continued for [00:03:00] about three or four years until it got into quite a few hundred. And then the police

caught wind of it and came down and said, "You can gather here, but you can't burn this thing because it's a fire hazard." And so they didn't burn it, and they looked for another location. And the other location that they found was two hours north of Reno in the Nevada desert. An area that used to be a lake. An ancient lake [00:03:30] bed. It's flat, and it is in the middle of nowhere.

Bill Walton: So the way you get there is you fly into Reno and you drive.

Kenny Reff: And you drive up there. Right. Yeah.

Bill Walton: And so when they got this started, this was Larry Harvey that started it. Is he still involved or who's in charge now?

Kenny Reff: Right. Well, unfortunately he passed away a few years ago there just before the pandemic, I want to say. But there were four other principles at [00:04:00] the time that were part of this small group that carried it forward. And it wasn't with any particular intention to grow it into the phenomenon that it is now. It grew very organically. People just found out about it. In those early days, this is pre-internet, there were printed newsletters. There was a thing called the Cacophony Society in San Francisco that had a following, and these were pranksters. [00:04:30] One of their most famous things was they all hopped on a trolley, a San Francisco street cable car naked. And this was a prank. And so they would go around town doing crazy things like this. And they got wind of this and publicized it to their following, and people drove out to the desert. And in the early days, it was totally unregulated. There's video of people in a convertible driving at high speed over the desert, shooting rifles [00:05:00] in the air. So it was the wild west.

Bill Walton: I had an uncle that lived out there. That's what they did for fun. He had a 50 caliber rifle. A lot of guns in the desert.

Kenny Reff: Yeah. Yeah. And each year, the man, so to speak, got bigger and bigger. The burning got bigger and bigger. But it eventually morphed into a major arts and music festival.

Bill Walton: I surprised you the other day. I went to Woodstock.

Kenny Reff: You're complicated [00:05:30] because I know a lot of your early years and yeah.

Bill Walton: That was '69, so that was before your time. But the promoters there, a couple of New York guys, kids, and they were going to make a fortune with Woodstock. Now, the people that started this out, they've got what they call decommodification. You're not supposed to be commercial when you go to Woodstock.

Kenny Reff: To Burning Man.

Bill Walton: Well, Burning Man, is that a business? Is it a nonprofit or what?

Kenny Reff: Yeah. It is a [00:06:00] nonprofit. And no, they didn't have any plan to make any large sums of money. They wanted it to be self-sustaining and they didn't want it to cost them money. But the profit was not the motive. The motive is really to just fulfill the needs of people that want to go out there and play. Rewind the clock.

Bill Walton: Well let me do my private equity thing, [00:06:30] if I may.

Kenny Reff: Okay, sure.

Bill Walton: Let me just do a couple numbers here. 70,000 people are now roughly the number that attend. What's a ticket cost?

Kenny Reff: These days it's about \$575, I believe.

Bill Walton: Okay. And all the revenue from that goes to setting up the city and that five by five mile area. How's that organized? How do you do that?

Kenny Reff: Well, it's a radial that mirrors a clock. [00:07:00] They do set up the streets, and those street names are from A ... Begin with the letters. It's alphabetical. They go from A to K. And then the cross sections are the radials of the clock. So 2:00, 3:00, 4:00, 5:30, 5:45, that kind of thing. So they create the streets, they provide porta-potties and they provide ice, and that's all Burning Man provides. But the rest of it is all provided by attendees.

Bill Walton: So if you [00:07:30] show up, you've got to bring in your food, your water. As you pointed out in your memoir, you bring in alcohol as well. I think you drank rum back in 2012.

Kenny Reff: But I found that I never opened that bottle. I don't know if I wrote that there.

Bill Walton: No, you didn't. By the way, a lot of what we're going to talk about, at least the early days, is in the Burning Man Memoirs, which Kenny wrote. It's fascinating. Great pictures. Really great feeling for what it's like to be there. Where do we find that? What's the ULR?

Kenny Reff: [00:08:00] Yeah. It's my name, kennyreff/burningman. Yeah. I'm a journalist. I used to work with CNN.

Bill Walton: We'll put it on the website. We'll make it part of the promo.

Kenny Reff: Yeah. I'm a journalist, and when I went to this thing in 2012, I was just so taken with it that I was just compelled to write about it. I'm not the only one. There's a lot of writing out there about this. But I did write a memoir about my first year where I went solo not knowing a single person. And then about the second year

where I was part of a big, what's called a theme [00:08:30] camp. So getting back to your question about what Burning Man provides, unlike other festivals ... A typical festival, the promoters provide everything. They book the entertainment, you pay for the tickets, there's vending. All kinds of merchandise is sold. Here, as you mentioned, it is decommodified. It's a gifting economy. There is no money exchanged whatsoever on site. But it takes a lot of money to make all this happen. So that occurs [00:09:00] ahead of time. And the theme camps-

Bill Walton: So they're working with roughly \$40 million to put this together.

Kenny Reff: The organization has that, and it's more than just the event. They're involved in a lot of different things and so right. But it is a nonprofit. But the theme camps, they have members. You join a theme camp if you'd like to and everybody works together to provide something to the community. So some camps provide open bars, some camps provide food, [00:09:30] some camps provide music, workshops. You want get your hair washed, you want get a massage. All of it's free for that week.

Bill Walton: I forget, did I mention in your intro your CNN background?

Kenny Reff: No.

Bill Walton: I want to make sure. You mentioned you're a journalist. It's important. You were the first White House producer for CNN back in the days when CNN-

Kenny Reff: I don't know that I was the first, but I was a White House producer during my time there. Yeah.

Bill Walton: I can call you the first. [00:10:00] It bears on this because I think your level of curiosity as a journalist, I think you really had to get out there to see it firsthand. Now, the first year you went out there though, you showed up just pretty much on your own. No camp. Nobody went with you. And you took the trouble. Didn't you buy something like a 40 pound wagon that you're going to carry all your stuff on?

Kenny Reff: Right.

Bill Walton: I can just see it. Was a little red wagon like a kid where you're-

Kenny Reff: No, no. [00:10:30] It was steel. It was very-

Bill Walton: Steel.

Kenny Reff: Because you had to have, as you mentioned-

Bill Walton: But you put it in the airplane.

Kenny Reff: Yeah. It was checked as luggage. It was crazy. But you had to have, as you said, your own water. So when I flew from DC to Reno, I provisioned in Reno. So things like water, I bought there. Listen, when you get your ticket, they mail you the ticket with I want to say almost a 40 page, maybe 30 page pamphlet called [00:11:00] The Survival Guide. And I meant to bring it and I forgot. The Survival Guide. And they're serious about reading it because you can die out there and they're serious about this. You need to hydrate to a certain level. You need to drink a certain amount of water per day. Obviously sunblock and all that-

Bill Walton: Temperature during the day is 110, 120. Temperature at night-

Kenny Reff: Yeah. It can go up to 110. It can go down into the low 30s.

Bill Walton: At night.

Kenny Reff: At night. You're talking about a 60 degree variance in a [00:11:30] 24-hour period. So you have to really be prepared. And they give you the information for that. But yeah, I went out totally alone. I had done my homework. I love learning. So part of the fun of this, once I got my ticket, was to learn all about it. And I went out there and I got my water, which was in these boxes. Well, it was plastic jugs in boxes. But I didn't realize how much that water weighed. And when [00:12:00] I put it on the cart, I could barely ... That plus my other stuff on the steel cart.

Bill Walton: You couldn't haul it.

Kenny Reff: I could barely haul it. And I wanted to go to it to a particular area to camp in the city, and it was going to be impossible so I started basically flagging down art cars. So you're not allowed to drive there.

Bill Walton: Real quick, what's an art car?

Kenny Reff: So you can drive to Burning Man, but then you must park it. You can't just drive around. People get around on bicycles. But art cars are allowed to drive around and they are modified [00:12:30] vehicles that are works of art. And they're registered. And many of them have mobile sound systems in them, and they become mobile dance parties. And they have a DMV. The DMV, Department of Motor Vehicles. No, it stands for department of mutant vehicles. And you have to wait online early the first day and wait to be inspected, and they will inspect you for brakes and lights and that kind of thing.

Bill Walton: So this is like designing your float for the parade.

Kenny Reff: Right. A mutant.

Bill Walton: [00:13:00] Do they have a minimum threshold of how mutant it has to be?

Kenny Reff: Yeah. Yeah. No. If you try to get away with bringing a golf cart just so you would have some wheels, no.

Bill Walton: No. Okay.

Kenny Reff: It's got to be a work of art. Not mutant enough.

Bill Walton: Especially a golf cart with this crowd.

Kenny Reff: Exactly. Yeah.

Bill Walton: One of the principles ... And we will talk about the 10 principles of Burning Man. One of them is gifting. And so the idea that you're hitching a ride, part of the culture [00:13:30] is people are supposed to want to help you out.

Kenny Reff: Help you out. And that's exactly true. People change there. One of the reasons people go back and keep on going back is that it's a totally different environment. For one week, you're in this community that has a different set of rules, a different set of ethos. People are fun. They get into deep conversations. They're [00:14:00] fun loving. And it's different than what they call the default world.

Bill Walton: Do you think we could set up an alternate for congress?

Kenny Reff: Yeah.

Bill Walton: Send everybody from Capitol Hill there.

Kenny Reff: Yeah. Absolutely.

Bill Walton: Maybe they could learn some comedy.

Kenny Reff: Absolutely. And it's snarky. Speaking of comedy, there's a humor to the burner culture that's really-

Bill Walton: Snarky.

Kenny Reff: Snark. Yeah. It's very snarky. There's a humor that's definitely there.

Bill Walton: This is Bill Walton. I'm here with Kenny Reff of LimeLight Communications [00:14:30] and is a longtime attendee of Burning Man, which has been much in the news, much maligned by the mainstream press because there was some rain on the desert and evidently this was supposed to be a catastrophe. And why don't you lead into that to show what really happened?

Kenny Reff: This is fascinating for me. First of all, I worked for CNN for seven years. My whole background is in journalism, very much a First Amendment advocate. And

[00:15:00] it's been distressing for years how the media has gotten so polarized and has lost its unbiased nature. And so this was fascinating for me because it's rare to be at an event and know really what happened and then see the reporting on it. And it does reflect poorly on the press. It's clickbait is what they're doing now. So what really happened was that toward the end of the festival, but not at the end ... And that's an important distinction. [00:15:30] The festival was going to be over Sunday night.

Bill Walton: The festival runs from Saturday to Sunday. So it's eight days.

Kenny Reff: Saturday to the following Sunday. That's right. And so on Friday night, it rained. And what that meant is that it became impossible to move around. Motor vehicles couldn't move. You couldn't even be on your bicycle. And that's the major form of transportation there, bicycles. You could walk, but slowly. It's like walking [00:16:00] in a big-

Bill Walton: Are there street cars? Can you hop a local streetcar?

Kenny Reff: No.

Bill Walton: No public transportation. It's all bikes or walking.

Kenny Reff: Right. Bikes or walking, which is normally beautiful and fantastic. But this was immovable. And so for people that know how things work there, real burners, it just meant you acclimate. One of the things that I think distinguishes burners from most anybody else is how they deal with adverse conditions and [00:16:30] unexpected changes. How you go with the flow rather than freaking out. And so the news reporting about people needing to get out of there, those were people that really didn't understand how to roll with it because all you needed to do was hang out for 24 hours and it was all back to normal. And during that 24 hours, all it meant is that you couldn't bike across the city to something else. You had to stay local, you had to get to know your neighbors. And we had a great [00:17:00] time. But the press wouldn't have you know that. For instance, ABC News says, "The race to escape Burning Man." And there was no reason to escape because it wasn't over. And the only people that did were those that were freaking out. This was a soundbite in that report where he said, "I was scared." He was scared because there's mud. And the worst was the Daily Mail in [00:17:30] the UK. "Burning Man descends into chaos as revelers finally snap and fight during mass exodus."

Bill Walton: But I read your two blogs from 2012, 2013. I don't recollect any reporting on any fight at Burning Man. It seems like this is just the opposite. And we talk about personality types. I want to go who goes there in terms of all [00:18:00] the demographics, but it seems like there's a personality type that goes there that wants to be adventurous, wants to be self-reliant. I think one of your 10 principles is radical self-reliance and communal effort. And so you get certain

types of people that want to be there. I think it sounds like a pretty attractive peer group.

Kenny Reff: Absolutely. The 10 principles is one of the things that distinguishes this culture and this event from regular [00:18:30] festivals. And they were written in 2004 by the founder, Larry Harvey. They weren't written as a set of edicts. They were written ... Basically, he just codified what the community was already doing.

Bill Walton: So by 2004, it had already been going from '86, so it's almost 18 years. So he took a look at what was there and this was it.

Kenny Reff: Yeah.

Bill Walton: Why don't you tick it off? That might be-

Kenny Reff: Yeah. I'd like to do that. So 10 principles. Radical inclusion. [00:19:00] Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. I won't read the entire thing. So anyone may be a part and that's what allows for its diversity. Gifting. Burning Man is devoted to acts of gifting, and it is unconditional. It doesn't mean barter. It's not like you have to give something back. It's an outright gift. Decommodification. This is really important. There is no commercial sponsorships. There is no merch for sale. And so [00:19:30] that changes everything when it's all a gift. Radical self-reliance. That's extremely important. They are saying, as I mentioned, when they give you The Survival Guide, you need to be responsible for yourself. Radical self-expression. This is what allows for the playfulness. This has been described as Disney World for adults. To me, one of the reasons I got into it and why it attracted me, is that [00:20:00] it reminded me of the fun I had as a teenager and in my young 20s before things got really serious.

So radical self-expression. And that's why you'll see all the crazy costumes. But then you get into things that sound like the Boy Scouts. Communal effort. Our community values creative cooperation and collaboration. We strive to produce, promote and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art and methods of communication that support that interaction. [00:20:30] And then another, civic responsibility. We value civil society. And then participation. Our community is committed to radically participate. Do not be a spectator. Participate. And immediacy. This is really important. This is about getting off your phone, getting out of the screen and being there. Living in the moment. And it says, "Immediate experience is in many ways the most important touchstone [00:21:00] of value in our culture." And lastly, leave no trace. This has gotten out into the larger world. You will see that phrase leave no trace all over the place now and Burning Man pretty much invented it.

And it is, our community respects the environment. We are committed to leaving no physical trace of our activities wherever we gather. We clean up after ourselves and endeavor whenever possible to leave such places in a better state than when we found them. [00:21:30] So you will not find that at any other



festival. At any other festival, they spend untold sums of money to clean up all the garbage that people just leave. And that's not done here. Everybody's responsible for that. And they have to be, because this is on federal property. So this ancient lake bed that I talked about is managed by the Bureau of Land Management. It's public space. And it's public. You're allowed to go there and this kind of event requires [00:22:00] a permit. But if they screw it up, they won't get the permit renewed. So leave no trace is very important.

Bill Walton: So Woodstock, they took about two weeks to clean it up. It was a mess. It was harder this year on the desert because of the mud. Everything had to be mucked down in there. But nevertheless-

Kenny Reff: There are stories now I've seen of ... This is amazing. Of people going back to Burning Man. These are mostly people on the West Coast that can drive there. Getting home, and then Burning Man put out a call and said, "We need [00:22:30] more help. This has been a special, hard year." People going back there with shovels-

Bill Walton: To help clean up.

Kenny Reff: Just to help clean up.

Bill Walton: So what is the profile? How many men attend? How many women? With this era of identity politics, what's the identity?

Kenny Reff: Well, if you Google Burning Man census, you'll get onto one of their webpages. By the way, having said that, if you go to just burningman.org I think it is, or com, the website is so [00:23:00] incredibly robust. Just check out the menu that's on the side and start playing around and you'll just fall down the rabbit hole. But one of the things is they do have a census that's been going on for years. So I have some statistics here. Right now, the median age is 37. That's the median, but there's quite a few people over 50. And over the years it-

Bill Walton: There's room for Sarah and me. I'm over 50. Sarah's not yet.

Kenny Reff: Yeah. You can look at the chart and you can see the numbers of people over 60, [00:23:30] over 70, over 80. It gets smaller of course because the conditions are a little tough.

Bill Walton: Like my triathlon.

Kenny Reff: Yeah. Right. It's very diverse economically. So one of the things is personal income over the years has been trending up as this thing has gotten more popular. And of course, it's skewed by one percenters that go more and more now because it's the cool thing to do. But more than 45% make more than \$100,000 [00:24:00] a year.

Bill Walton: 45%?

Kenny Reff: Yeah.

Bill Walton: Okay.

Kenny Reff: But at the same time, about 18% make less than 25,000. So you've got both ends there. About 35% have a master's degree. 40% voted in the last four presidential elections. About 54 identify as Democrats, but 34% identify with no political party. I thought that was really interesting.

Bill Walton: Well, this listing here [00:24:30] seems very ... Your principles seem very libertarian.

Kenny Reff: Yes.

Bill Walton: This doesn't line up left or right. This seems-

Kenny Reff: There is no political party associated with Burning Man, but if you had to, I would say that'd be the one. They do not have many rules. There are rules for safety. That's about it.

Bill Walton: What about that? You mentioned police. [00:25:00] What do police do there and how many are there?

Kenny Reff: Yeah. There's quite a few and a lot are undercover. Because you've got probably at least three different jurisdictions. You've got the federal ones because it's federal property, you have Nevada State, and you have the county. Then you have this thing called Rangers. These are Burning Man burners who are volunteers, and it's very organized. They're given [00:25:30] communications. And they are the intermediary between the burner attendee and real law enforcement. So the rangers can come in if there's an issue. And they're the first folks that you call if you have a problem with something. But there's no real crime there. What all of the law enforcement there is for is drugs, that kind of thing. So you walk [00:26:00] around and you won't smell cannabis very much, whereas you would at a typical festival, because-

Bill Walton: What drugs are legal in Nevada?

Kenny Reff: Well, that's a good question. Cannabis is legal in Nevada, but this is a federal property, so it's not legal. Just the same way as it's here in DC but-

Bill Walton: So they're enforcing marijuana laws at-

Kenny Reff: Yeah. But people don't really get busted for that as far as I understand it. They're there as ... What's the word? [00:26:30] They're there to show force.

But it is a self-policing community. And along those lines, even things like women feeling safe and being safe.

Bill Walton: What percentage of attendees are women?

Kenny Reff: It's about half-and-half roughly. Roughly. It's a little more men than women. It's off by just a few percentage points.

Bill Walton: Now, how sexy is Burning Man?

Kenny Reff: It's extremely sexy. It's extremely sexy. And the reason it is is [00:27:00] that women feel safe there. Now, that doesn't mean that there isn't a problem now and again in a city of 70,000, but it is a much safer environment than certainly your typical nightclub or bar or city street. It's self policing. In my 10 years going, I have never seen, actually, anything that was an altercation, any kind of fight, any kind of ... Some woman being really upset at some guy [00:27:30] or just two guys getting into a fist fight or anything. I've never seen that. And if it happens, the people that are around would go in and mediate and help.

Bill Walton: It seems like it.

Kenny Reff: Yeah.

Bill Walton: It's part of the-

Kenny Reff: Yeah. And so the reason it can be very sexy ... People aren't fornicating on the street, but it means that women can walk around topless and not worry about it. And they can do that because it's a fairly safe environment.

Bill Walton: It's like a European [00:28:00] beach.

Kenny Reff: Yeah. That's true.

Bill Walton: Clothes are optional. There are a fair number of naked people walking around.

Kenny Reff: Yeah. You know what I've learned?

Bill Walton: Your blog the first year, I think you took advantage of that.

Kenny Reff: The first year, as you mentioned, I went to-

Bill Walton: Fortunately you're very fit.

Kenny Reff: I wanted to go to an area of the city called the walk-in camping area. And it's an area that no vehicles are allowed whatsoever. [00:28:30] So I pulled my wagon as much as I could, and then I hitched a ride and somebody towed it with a rope out into the perimeter of the area, and then I had to manually pull it in a few

hundred feet. And I'll put a picture up in this thing of me sitting there. It reminds me of the old Maxwell tape ad. My posture. Yeah. First of all, I was in an area where there were very, very few people as you can see in that photograph. And so yeah. It was [00:29:00] early morning. You don't want to be out naked in the heat of the day. You'll just get fried anyway. But it's liberating to do yoga naked out in the sun. You don't get to do that too often.

Bill Walton: So there's a closing ceremony with the burning of the man and then there's also the burning of the temple. Is there an opening ceremony? Does it officially say, okay?

Kenny Reff: No, there's no opening ceremony. But [00:29:30] those two big burns, yeah, they're important touchstones and very different. So the man is this effigy. Everybody's pretty much seen that by now, and it changes every year, and it's made of wood and it goes up in flames on Saturday night at the end of the week. The temple goes up in flames the following night, Sunday night. And they're very, very different. The man is ... It's a celebration. There's incredible fireworks. Some of the best ... Actually the best fireworks I've ever seen [00:30:00] are out there while this thing is burning. And it's very celebratory. The question always arises, well, why is this burned? It's beautiful. So much work has been put into it. And also, it's not the only thing that burns. A lot of the art that's made of wood burns usually Thursday night and Friday night after having been able to be viewed during the week.

And the question is why? And the answer is that it's [00:30:30] celebrating ... That's not the right word. It's reflecting on the fact that everything is temporal. Everything changes. Nothing stays the same. Life is fleeting. It can turn on a dime and you need to appreciate every single moment of your life because you never know when it's going to flip. And the same goes for everything. And so this [00:31:00] art, which has taken dozens of people ... Each one of these things has taken many people, many hundreds of hours to create. It's appreciated and then it's burned. Now, that's the man. Sunday night, the temple, which is non-denominational, it's not religious, but it is highly spiritual. And it's a place that is devoted to loss. Personal loss. And so it's a place for people to [00:31:30] go and write on the walls or leave photographs or leave real artifacts about loved ones that they've lost, pets they've lost, lost opportunities. And so what happens when that burns Sunday night is 70,000 people are in a circle around this huge piece of art, and you can hear a pin drop. You hear a lot of whimpering because it's a very emotional thing. What's going up [00:32:00] in flames, you're letting go of the loss.

Bill Walton: And you walked into the temple as I recollect, and there were people laying on the floor or meditating or things like that. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people. And people go in. I want to touch on this, but it seems like the elements are there of art, music, food, spirituality, and then of course sex and drugs. Let's [00:32:30] talk about the art. How much of it gets created to get burned, and how much of it is brought in and then taken back out? And who creates it?

Kenny Reff: Yeah. The majority of the art is burned. Is temporal, made of wood. But more and more over the years, more art is now being created that's not meant to be burned because it then finds a home later on. [00:33:00] In the art world, the art of Burning Man is considered legit. The New York Times every year does a section on the major art pieces happening at Burning Man.

Bill Walton: Seems like it'd be awfully hard to keep that from getting commercial. The art world is very good at turning a piece of art into money. It seems like there'd be real cache to say this piece was at Burning Man.

Kenny Reff: I think that does happen.

Bill Walton: It's got to happen.

Kenny Reff: Afterward.

Bill Walton: It's got to happen.

Kenny Reff: Yeah. [00:33:30] There's a lot of Burning Man art that does find its way, whether it's in public spaces or in private spaces. And I'm sure money is exchanged then, and that's allowed. It's not at Burning Man.

Bill Walton: I'm going to edit this afterwards. I hope you show a lot of the art that's in this book.

Kenny Reff: So this is one particular. This is a really nice coffee table book, but there's quite a few books on Burning Man. But this is devoted to the art of Burning Man. I'll bring some of these full screen. Now here's an example of a piece. [00:34:00] This is called El Pulpo Mecanico, which I believe translates to the mechanical octopus. And that's what it is. This is one piece that is clearly not wood, and it has been there. It was there in 2012 when I was there. And I don't know if it was there for many years before that, but it's a real staple. I actually have video even from this year of it going down the street, which you're probably seeing over me talking right now if I've done my editing [00:34:30] correctly.

But you see the fire coming off of what they call the poofers. This is propane. And there's a lot of big art that has poofers. So fire is a big part of this thing. These days, you can see no end of photographs and videos of what goes on at Burning Man. But I got to tell you, when you go there in [00:35:00] person, it's like you never saw it before. It just blows you away. The enormity, the sheer vastness of everything. Just the quantity, the quality, it just is off the charts. So it's really inspiring. For people that are creative or whether it's a hobby or whether it's their business, this is a masterclass in creativity [00:35:30] and industriousness. People that don't know much about Burning Man thinks it's a bunch of hippies out in the desert. It is the furthest thing.

Bill Walton: It's clearly not.

Kenny Reff: Furthest thing from hippies.

Bill Walton: No. No.

Kenny Reff: Hippies aren't productive. These are people that get things done.

Bill Walton: So music. It seems like the music there has to be incredible. It seems like you've got an entire range of music. How many different venues and which genres?

Kenny Reff: Yeah. That's a really good question. My understanding ... [00:36:00] And again, I only started in 2012. My understanding is early on it was a lot of live music and all kinds of music. Over the years, probably beginning in the early 2000s, the majority of the music has now become what's called EDM, Electronic Dance Music. So I'll play a little bit maybe underneath me talking here so you just get a sense of what this is. So it's a DJ that plays. [00:36:30] If you go to a wedding and there's a DJ, they're mixing one song that you know, a popular song, and then they're picking another popular song, and they're mixing between them.

Bill Walton: Good DJs in a commercial world, they make two, three, four, \$5 million a year. That's become a prominent way that people-

Kenny Reff: Yeah.

Bill Walton: That's what is happening.

Kenny Reff: These are EDM DJs. And what that means is that this is not music you hear on the radio. It's original [00:37:00] music that's produced by various people that they mix together in a way where they are constantly mixing different tracks together. It's a real art form. But I have to say, it's extremely repetitive. It usually does not have lyrics. Sometimes they do. Sometimes live instruments are now integrated. I want to say it's a little bit like classical or jazz or the kind of jazz-

Bill Walton: I know the music. We play that music at our swimming pool.

Kenny Reff: All right. Right. [00:37:30] And it's like jazz, say instrumental jazz, in that it can be great for background music or classical.

Bill Walton: But the rhythms are not nearly as intricate as jazz.

Kenny Reff: No. That's true. No. It's very repetitive, but it's wonderful for dancing. It's a different kind of dancing. It's not couples dancing, it's not moves. It's just more flowy.

Bill Walton: The music you'd hear at San Tropez or [inaudible 00:37:54]. Yeah.

Kenny Reff: You're hearing EDM now all over the place. You'll hear [00:38:00] it at restaurants now in the background. So it's become very popular. Let me just say one thing. A lot of people, myself included, one of the things we love about Burning Man is the music there and the way it's presented. So in addition to it being presented on a stage and a sound system at a camp, there are huge art cars. Mobile.

Bill Walton: You have mutant vehicles [00:38:30] that house dance floors and the music.

Kenny Reff: Well, they don't have the dance floor, but they're a huge vehicle. Oftentimes it's a modified bus. Oftentimes a large bus. It's been totally modified. You don't even see the bus anymore. And I'll show pictures here. What you're probably seeing now is a very famous one called Robot Heart, which is a group based out of New York City. And they've been doing this for more than a decade, and they're just one of many. And technically speaking the sound [00:39:00] of these things is world-class. Just world-class. This is the kind of stuff that if you were in any city and wanted to be at a venue, one of these kinds of things, it would cost you a lot of money. And yet here you can do this every night for free.

Bill Walton: So the private equity gene in me keeps coming out. So you've got the investment that the organizers make and the basic infrastructure, but there are tens of millions of dollars that are probably [00:39:30] invested by people or participants to bring their art or their music to the venue.

Kenny Reff: Yeah. And it's not for profit. It's really gifting.

Bill Walton: Well, it is, but also, it's a branding opportunity. The way I think of it is if you're there, and if people take in the music, "Gee, where can I listen to this someplace else?" Then it becomes-

Kenny Reff: Well, for instance, the DJs, even world-famous DJs ... And for those of you watching the program that know any of this, like Diplo was in the news. This is a DJ named [00:40:00] Diplo, and he famously needed to leave Burning Man during the rain because he didn't want to miss a gig that he had, I'm pretty sure actually here in Washington. So anyway, he had to get out and of course the news covered him because he's a famous DJ. Now, he would normally command thousands of dollars for every single show. He plays there for free. Everybody plays for free. But like you said, yes, it ups their cred.

Bill Walton: It's a big deal.

Kenny Reff: It ups their cred.

Bill Walton: I was the DJ at Burning Man.

Kenny Reff: They played at Burning Man.

Bill Walton: My art was at Burning Man. This is Bill Walton. [00:40:30] I'm here with Kenny Reff and learning about this amazing event, Burning Man, and everything that goes on there. What about food? Seem like you go from treat to treat to treat. Do we have the same creativity that goes into the food?

Kenny Reff: It's so much fun. Oh my God. Yeah. A lot of camps, their gift is food of one nature or another. And you can find out about them ... I don't want to get off-topic. I want to get back to the food. [00:41:00] But you can find out about it because a book is published with thousands of events. And you get this when you enter the city.

Bill Walton: Is that available only for people who buy tickets? Can you get it on the internet if you were curious?

Kenny Reff: Yes. It's digital. The database is available. You can see all this. Even now, you could go back to a previous Burning Man and see all of the events. But the print version is given to you when you actually enter the city. It's not even when you receive the ticket. And so you can know what's going on. [00:41:30] And people do things like pancake breakfasts, Turkish coffee. There's roasters. Our camp actually had a huge industrial rotisserie and it was a huge barbecue. And this is all powered by generators. Everything has to be brought in. So you can go without any food. There are people that go and don't bring any food, and their plan is that's how they do their day. They're like, "Okay, where can I get breakfast? Okay, [00:42:00] where can I get dinner?" And you can do it that way if you wanted to. It's crazy. And you wait in line. Because if it's a good thing, there'll be a lot of people there. But then you talk to people and that's what your day is. Even though there's thousands of things ... And you can go through this and highlight it and say, oh, I want to do this, this, this and this. And what'll happen? You'll be on your way to do this and you'll never get there because you'll get sidetracked.

You're walking the city streets. It's just lined with camp after camp [00:42:30] after camp of things. There are hawkers out on the street trying to flag you down to come in and do this thing. Spin this roulette wheel and that will tell you what you're-

Bill Walton: Like a carny barker?

Kenny Reff: Exactly. Yeah. They have them out sometimes with megaphones.

Bill Walton: Hoochie coochie act in here.

Kenny Reff: Yes. Exactly. Brand your ass. Come on. Get in here.

Bill Walton: You do have that. There was a brand-



Kenny Reff: Brand-UR-Ass. Yeah. U-R. Brand-UR-Ass. It was one of the first things I stumbled upon in my first day at Burning Man, I think [00:43:00] in 2012. Luckily-

Bill Walton: This is not conjuring up a pleasant experience.

Kenny Reff: Well, luckily it wasn't an actual hot iron. It looked just like it, but it was ink. But what you had to do is you had to reveal your butt and you had to choose which brand. You chose which brand and then you revealed your butt and they branded you. But then no, you couldn't just leave. You had a parade along the line of judges before you could leave.

Bill Walton: So you get to pick your own brand or is this-

Kenny Reff: Yes. Yes. [00:43:30] Yes.

Bill Walton: You went there in 2012, 2013, and then it was off during the years of 2020 and 2021. Did it start again in 2022 or was this year the first year it was back?

Kenny Reff: Yeah. No. It came back on in 2022. So it was officially off for two years.

Bill Walton: Two years. 2021.

Kenny Reff: But in '20, the first year it was off, my understanding is somewhere [00:44:00] between 1,000 and 3,000 showed up anyway, because it is public land. And if you're just going to go as an individual, you don't need a permit. So no event was technically held, but at that time these people showed up and they had apparently a very good time and word got out. And the next year, which was also '21, officially not happening, my understanding is more than 10,000 people showed up and they're now calling it Renegade. That was the renegade burn.

Bill Walton: Well, as you describe what's going on, [00:44:30] if you're concerned about masks and social distancing, I don't think this is your event.

Kenny Reff: No. But Bill, this is uncanny. There are dust storms out there because it's on an alkaline water.

Bill Walton: Well then you want a mask.

Kenny Reff: And so you always walk around having a mask and goggles somewhere on your person because it can come in out of the blue. It can be a gorgeous sunlit day [00:45:00] but then all of a sudden the wind comes up and this alkaline dust just comes up. The mask of choice is the N95. Has been the N95 3M mask forever. And all the burners have them not just there, you have them at home because you bring them home and you bring them back or whatever. So when the pandemic hit and I'm walking down the streets of Washington, DC seeing people-

Bill Walton: Hey, I'm good.

Kenny Reff: No. Seeing people in N95s, I'm like, this is surreal. Because you never saw people walk around in these [00:45:30] things except out on the Burning Man desert. And this is actually what the desert is like. So this is not sand. First of all, they call it-

Bill Walton: Kenny, you're holding up a jar. You collected that jar from the desert.

Kenny Reff: I collected this jar. And it's like talcum powder.

Bill Walton: By the way, if anybody's listening to this, go back and take a look at it on YouTube, because the visuals that you're going to see that Kenny puts up are amazing. So this is the actual muck.

Kenny Reff: This is the stuff.

Bill Walton: This turned into the muck. This gets rained [00:46:00] on and this is ... You can't even move.

Kenny Reff: Right. So this is not dirt, it's not sand. It's an alkaline dust that coats the top of the surface. And it's responsible for dust storms that happen. But also when water gets into this, it turns into clay. It attaches to anything like tires. And so you just can't move. You can walk, but it's like walking through three feet of [00:46:30] snow. It's very slow.

Bill Walton: So a lot of people left their shoes in the muck at the last event. We promised we try to keep this under 60 minutes, although I think we can ... I don't know. I'm having a hard time doing that. I'm so curious.

Sarah: How is it that there's never been a movie made of it?

Kenny Reff: That's a good question. For one thing, Burning Man has a very, very strong IP department. Intellectual property department. [00:47:00] You will see that you will never see any commercial product using the word Burning Man or their logo. Say there's something that's used a lot at Burning Man, like a particular kind of water bottle. That manufacturer can never say, this is the chosen water bottle of burners. They enforce that rigorously. So there are documentaries on Burning Men. You can [00:47:30] definitely see that. But I don't think you'd be able to make a feature film about it.

Bill Walton: Well, the commercial possibilities from this are extraordinary.

Kenny Reff: Right. And that's why they have to be absolutely vigilant because it'll get out of control.

Bill Walton: But the financial piece of this is you get more and more venture capitalists who have never ... They don't walk or ride in cars anymore, they take helicopters. Is there a lot of pressure for a helicopter pad at-

Kenny Reff: Actually, [00:48:00] helicopters don't land there, but they actually have a bonafide airport. It's an official-

Bill Walton: I bet there are a lot of helicopters coming in and out now. No?

Kenny Reff: No. I don't know why. Maybe it's too far. I'm not sure. It's always small planes. No jets. It's a very small airport. It's FAA. It's a real FAA airport that's only there during Burning Man. Again, it's on the same desert. But yeah. People can come in by that method and certainly the celebrities typically do. Because if you come [00:48:30] in by a vehicle, it's a very long entry time and it's an extremely long exit time.

Bill Walton: Getting tickets. There's the regular way and there are also scalpers, I assume, for tickets. If you just got to go, you can pick it up from-

Kenny Reff: Yeah. So getting tickets, Burning Man, the supply and demand is way out of whack. It's in great demand. And so Burning Man puts the tickets on sale, I think on three separate days in [00:49:00] the months leading up to the event. And you can find out when they are. It's on their site. And then you can go on at the time and try your luck. But it is luck of the draw because the chance of getting it is not great. So the other way of doing it ... Scalpers. People do attempt to resell, but the ethos in the community is that if you see any ticket for Burning Man that is at more than face value, [00:49:30] that is the person who's trying to make a profit, you stay away from it. And so there's not a lot of success with scalpers.

Sarah: But there's gifting.

Kenny Reff: Yeah. The tickets aren't gifted. But if you have a ticket and then you find you can't go, you can sell it. Nothing prevents you from doing that. But typically you will sell it for what it costs you, including your fees, but not to make a profit. But the other major way of obtaining a ticket is to join a camp. As I mentioned earlier, the camps [00:50:00] are the major areas where all the action occurs. They're the places that are providing all the entertainment.

Bill Walton: What do you think, Sarah?

Sarah: I think we have to go.

Bill Walton: I think you're a burner. You're a burner.

Kenny Reff: And so the camps are allocated tickets by Burning Man. Again, not free, but they're allocated the tickets so they don't have to play the lottery. Because they want the camps to succeed. They need to have-

Bill Walton: Well, the camps seem to be a glue that holds this thing together. If everybody [00:50:30] out there were atomized it'd be impossible, I think.

Kenny Reff: No. Right. And then you have a built-in community, and more than that, you have built in infrastructure. So this is the thing. So if you're part of a camp-

Bill Walton: That's what I mean about the other investment besides just with the organizers. They invest in the infrastructure that makes this work.

Kenny Reff: Camps always have dues. So you're paying dues to the camp ahead of time. So the camp then has a budget and uses that. Again, it's not for profit, but it [00:51:00] uses that money to create infrastructure. Like if you're a member of a camp, you don't have to bring your own water because the camp will have water. Huge, 500 gallon-

Bill Walton: You don't need your wagon anymore?

Kenny Reff: You don't need a wagon. You don't need your food. You may not need a bicycle. Your camp may provide a bicycle. And very importantly, if you're in a tent ... And you could be in an RV. But if you're in a tent, they'll provide shade structure.

Bill Walton: So a couple of questions as we ... And I'm going to try to wrap this up. It's hard. [00:51:30] One of them is you said people change there. And in our highly politicized toxic culture in America right now, it seems like there's a lot of virtues here that you wish could be part of the larger culture. And is there any transmission mechanism you've thought of? And then the other is the flip side. What are the horrors here? What would you change about Burning [00:52:00] Man if you had the magic wand to do that?

Kenny Reff: Let me address the first part first. Burning Man has realized years ago that what happens for one week out there is not sustainable. You can't have, in our society, a gifting culture. Everybody knows that. That's fine. So it is a special week. However, the ethos, the principles, the way you live your life, yeah, that can come out into the real world.

Bill Walton: Well [00:52:30] radical self-reliance, radical, even self-expression, communal efforts, civic responsibility, leaving no trace. These are tremendously-

Kenny Reff: Tremendous. And so they have created ... One of the reasons, when we talked about Burning Man's budget, it's not just about creating the event. They also have other big things that go on all around the world. Smaller, what are called regional events. And they have huge educational opportunities. They want to get this ethos [00:53:00] out into the general sphere. Do you know the

Smithsonian Institution at the Renwick Gallery had a Burning Man exhibit for over a year. The Smithsonian. And they did a great job of educating the public. I was a docent there. I volunteered every week for about six months, once a week. It was fascinating to be in this museum and have just the general public. All the Smithsonian institutions are free of charge [00:53:30] when you want to walk in. So we have tourists visiting Washington, coming into the Renwick Gallery for a Burning Man exhibit. And it was just wonderful to answer their questions. So Burning Man is about getting this philosophy out into the broader world for sure.

Bill Walton: But I think you can't really go and listen to a lecture. You've got to be there to take it in.

Kenny Reff: Oh yeah.

Bill Walton: What's the word? What are we looking [00:54:00] for here? Immediacy.

Kenny Reff: Immediacy.

Bill Walton: It's experiencing something directly.

Kenny Reff: But having said that, Bill, let me say one thing for viewers that are really interested in this. So yeah, it's a big deal to go to this thing because it takes a lot of planning. It's pricey by the time you add your ticket costs, maybe your fees for a camp, your airfare, everything. It adds up. But there's an alternative and that is called the regional network. [00:54:30] So Burning Man has regional festivals all around the world. And if you go on their website, or maybe if you just Google Burning Man regionals, you'll come up with a list. And those typically don't sell out. They're in beautiful places. There's one that I love down in Miami called Love Burn. They usually have burn in the name somehow. And it's on a state park on a beach in Miami, 40 minutes [00:55:00] from the airport. And it's in the middle of the winter. So those of us in the northeast, you're talking about going down to Miami for some sun with some burners on the beach. Yeah.

Bill Walton: I don't know why I didn't ask this earlier. Kids. It seems like this is an adults only. This is 18 and ... Is there age limitation?

Kenny Reff: No, no. Actually not. There's no age limitation. In fact, there's a huge camp called Kidsville. This is especially for younger kids. So if you're a parent with a kid [00:55:30] from an infant ... I don't know. I'm guessing about up to maybe 10 or so, maybe less. I haven't been there. But it's an area where it's just for families and they have built-in babysitting. That's what the camp does. So you'll find infants will be there. I had a really good friend ... I don't know if I have a picture. I'll get her to give me a picture. We'll put it up. So great friend of mine, Katia and her partner and baby, I think two year old, were at Burning Man this year. [00:56:00] And the kid is in a little trailer that's attached to their bike. And the

trailer can have a cover so if there's a dust storm. And the kid is there with little goggles and they're doing the burn with their baby. And so there's more and more of that going on. What you don't see a lot of though, are the tweens. I would say kids that are like 12 until they become adults. 12 [00:56:30] to say 17 or so.

Bill Walton: Well that age didn't want to hang out with their parents anyway.

Kenny Reff: Yeah. You have to be a special tween ... As a parent, you have to know your kid is very special at that age to take them to this kind of thing because they're going to get exposed to a lot of stuff. So you see young kids and then you skip to young adults.

Bill Walton: Sarah and I are going to start looking for ... We're going to talk to you about the camp. [00:57:00] What haven't we covered that you wanted to? I know you as a very thorough guy.

Kenny Reff: Let's see. Maybe this real quick.

Bill Walton: Okay.

Kenny Reff: I want to show you two trinkets. So this is a necklace, and this is a ... Sorry, a pendant and this is a necklace with a little elephant. And the reason I'm showing you, these are samples [00:57:30] of gifts that I was given there. I mentioned it's a gifting economy. And even though I'm showing you these trinkets, it's not just about physical things. There are gifts that are services, a lot of that. Whether it's, like I said, a foot massage, a hair wash, a shave, of course music and things like that. But there's also a lot of these sorts of things. And here's what made this special. This thing. I was walking back. I had been up [00:58:00] for the whole night dancing at Robot Heart out in the desert.

Bill Walton: That's an elephant head we're looking at?

Kenny Reff: Yeah. It's an elephant head. And it's handmade. And anyway, I'd been out all night and I'm walking back to my camp about 10 in the morning after having been all night dancing and the sun is now up. It gets very cold at night so I had on my attire still from the night, and I was hot. So I saw a couch. [00:58:30] A regular fabric couch sitting out in the desert.

Bill Walton: In the desert. Yeah.

Kenny Reff: This is what happens. You come across things like this all the time. And I'm going over to this thing to then put my backpack down and I'm going to take off some of the clothing and just get down to shorts and a t-shirt because now it's really hot. And there's a guy sitting there and he's working, making these things. I say hi to him and I put my backpack down and I start changing. And he says, "Let me ask you something." I said, "Yeah?" He said, "Are you [00:59:00] a father?" And I

said, "Yeah." And he said, "I just found out I'm going to be a father for the first time. Tell me the most important lesson you've learned as a father." And I was like, "Wow. Jesus. That's deep." And I about it a minute and then I told him ... And the answer had to do with spending quality time, not quantity. It's about quality with my daughter. And then he gave me this as a gift. [00:59:30] That's what he was doing. He was sitting there making these things, getting advice from people. That's typical of what you'll run into there.

Sarah: And then you'll always remember him.

Kenny Reff: Yeah. Yeah.

Bill Walton: Well, I'm really glad we did this. We hadn't come up with this idea until it was so badly misreported, and we looked for you for days in the desert only to find out you were having the best time of your life.

Kenny Reff: [01:00:00] That is true. That is true.

Bill Walton: This has been the Bill Walton Show. I've been here with our producer director, Kenny Reff, who's a burner. We've been talking about Burning Man and very appealing. You'll find a lot of the visuals as part of the show, but I will put some links on the website as well.

Anyways, always hope you enjoy this. As I mentioned at the outset, this is our adventure in backstage, which is where we get into things. In some ways, the things [01:00:30] that really matter in life. The things that aren't the politics or about the big policy fights that exist in the world, but those things that are personal. And this has been a very interesting world to peek into. I'm curious, and I hope you're curious. So stay tuned for our next adventure backstage and Kenny might be behind the camera then, but I don't know. You did such a great job as a guest we may pull you back in. So anyway, thanks for taking in The Bill Walton [01:01:00] Show, and we'll be back with you soon. Of course you can find us on all the major website, all the podcast platforms, Rumble, YouTube, et cetera and Substack now. The list goes on. Anyway, thanks and looking forward to engaging with you sometime soon.

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