Announcer:
Welcome to the Event Tech Podcast, where we explore the ever-evolving world of event technology every week. This show is brought to you by Endless Events, the event AV company that doesn't suck. Now, let's talk tech.

Will Curran:
Hello, hello, ladies and gentlemen, the Event Tech Podcast is back. This is Will Curran from Endless Events. And I'm ecstatic for this week's episode of Event Tech Podcast, because we're going to be talking about something that I think that you might have thought about for your events, but never implemented. And we're going to talk about the technology behind it. We have Kahlil Ashanti from WeShowUp, and you're going to love this guy. He's awesome. I get so energized talking to him, but he has such a cool business and such a cool technology that's going to revolutionize how people potentially pay and see value in events. Kahlil's story is incredible. So, you know what? I definitely just want to jump right on in, and we got to get this guy over here. Kahlil, welcome so much to the Event Tech Podcast. We're so excited to have you here.

Kahlil Ashanti:
Thanks, man. Good to be here.

Will Curran:
Well, let's dive in because I actually think your story is really, really cool. And I think it's important to, because you told me your story when you're describing the technology, I think it's important to what you were doing and why you thought about this. So, give everyone a little bit of background. Before you started WeShowUp, what were you doing? And give me that backstory.

Kahlil Ashanti:
It really was really just scratching my own itch. I'm an actor and a web developer and like many of you out there, I'm just trying to make ends meet. I've been blessed enough to have a tremendous amount of success in my career. I performed a one-person show called Basic Training that was a mixture of break-dancing and theater, about my violently abusive childhood and how I found peace by joining the military, and then sharing my story on stage with strangers. And so, I'm just taking this story around the world and it's sold out at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival twice. It won the Fringe First Award, New York Times Critics Pick. It got me selected twice for Cirque du Soleil. I mean, I just felt like... And then I ended up performing magic in Japanese at Caesars Palace for three years. We'll save that for another interview, but you know how it is, man. I know you people listening, we're just trying to make ends meet. And one of the things that I felt like was really unique about my journey was that I shook hands with every audience member as they left the show.

Will Curran:
I think that's so incredible. How many of us do that for every single of our attendees?

Kahlil Ashanti:

Yeah, I know it's odd, but it actually came from my time in the U.S. Air Force because I was a part of a group called Tops in Blue, which since 1953, was tasked to perform for our troops in harm's way and thank them for their service, remind them what they're fighting for. And we were required to shake the hand of every soldier who came to see us perform. That was the first thing that, looking back, that's where this app, this whole business really started. Because back then, back in the day day, you had to talk to your audience. There was no social media. You actually had to talk to people. Imagine that, right?

Will Curran:

Imagine that, imagine that. So, you decided that like, "Hey, I'm going to start shaking the hands of every person that attended one of my performances." And I think where we're going, I know where this story goes, but tell everyone a little bit about what next steps and what led you to start WeShowUp?

Kahlil Ashanti:

Well, shaking everyone's hand seems like a terrible idea in 2020.

Will Curran:

Oh, absolutely.

Kahlil Ashanti:

But it was actually, what led me to doing this was that when I wrote Basic Training, which started in the Fringe Festival circuit, it was just something I would do to thank people. It wasn't like... I wasn't trying to sell anything. I was just saying, "Look, people, you have... A dollar is not easy to come by. You chose to spend this time with me. The least I can do is work my butt off on stage and thank you as you leave. That's the least I can do."

Kahlil Ashanti:

And you know what happened, Will, is that people started being honest with me. They were like, "Kahlil, I didn't think I was going to like that, but it was amazing and I would have paid more for it." And one person after another, all over the world, man, whether it was Sydney, Australia, or Dubai, as I'm shaking hands with people, they say, "I would have paid more for that." That planted this seed in my head of, "Well, why can't they pay more for that? Is it possible that the perceived value of my show was highest at the end? And can I be the only person in the world who feels this way?"

Will Curran:

And the answer is obviously no, there's totally way more people out there that felt totally that yeah, people would probably pay more. So, you decided to create a mechanism for like... Well, no, you started this kind of, if I remember right, you did this kind of offline in a low tech way first and then kind of built it into the technology it is now.

Kahlil Ashanti:

That's right. That's right. I started with the traditional pass the hat, everybody come and see the show. Because as a performer, you know how it is, you do events, you get tired of ticketing, man. It's like, "Oh, I got to pick this. Which system?" I was like, what if I could just focus on performing and giving the best show possible for these kind people? And so, I did pass the hat and I made more money that way than had I charged $20 a person. But the problem was, I had email addresses over here, and I had a ton of cash over here. And I had no way of thanking people who put $100 bills in or even $1 bills in. I was like, "How is there no way for me to connect the two?" Then of course, you hit Google and this was 2018. And of all the companies out there, I could not find anyone that allowed you to make a reservation for an event as an audience member, enjoy the event, and then pay when the value of the experience is highest, which is afterwards. So, I built it.

Will Curran:

So cool. And that's basically WeShowUp in a very one-sentence explainer, right?

Kahlil Ashanti:

That's right. It is the digital pay-what-you-want solution for events. It doesn't have to be theater. It doesn't have to be in-person. It also works online, and it allows audiences to discover you in a way that de-risks the fact that they've never heard of you before. And it allows them to pay when the value of your talent is highest, which is afterward.

Will Curran:

That's awesome. I love that this is disrupting the traditional revenue-generating scheme that we kind of have. And I think we'll talk a little bit further about this, but to help people kind of understand this a little bit more, what's the difference between... And maybe there is no difference between this. What's the difference between this and a tipping system as well? Because it feels very much almost like a tip you're leaving. You say passing the hat, that sort of thing. What's kind of the difference between it?

Kahlil Ashanti:

That's such a good question, man. And the difference with tipping is, let's use a restaurant. When you tip, you've already paid full price for that meal. They didn't give you a discount on the steak. You order a T-bone, you're paying 37.95 or whatever that is. And if you want to tip a little bit afterwards, then that's fine. Now, with performance and events and live experiences, or even online experiences, where you have a talented person sharing their talent, what they're looking for is discovery. So, with our model, they're not asking you for full price upfront. They're saying, "Hey, look, Will, I know you've never heard of me. I'm glad you found me, but pay a couple of dollars to come check me out and let me prove that I'm worth the money that you work so hard to earn."

Kahlil Ashanti:

And then afterwards, when you're feeling like, "Man, she was incredible," you get a text or an email that says, not 1 or $2, but it's whatever the artist decides to ask you for. You get three choices and an empty text box. And the text says, "Hey, Will, thanks for coming to see Basic Training by Kahlil Ashanti. How much would you like to contribute?" $25, $15, $10, empty text box. And that's really, that's it.

Kahlil Ashanti:
And then the other model we have that's been really successful, especially with live streaming is, "Hey, Will, it's free to make a reservation. We only charge you if you don't show up."

Will Curran:
Ooh.

Kahlil Ashanti:
Otherwise, afterwards, you can choose how much you'd like to pay. So, those are the trees we're shaking, man.

Will Curran:
That's crazy. Okay, I have a lot of questions right now. So, definitely summarizing what you said. I mean, it's more, it's a little bit sometimes, ah. Like we're at a restaurant and you tip, you have a high amount of commitment upfront, and there's a little bit of upside on the end. Almost like a high base, some little small commission.

Kahlil Ashanti:
That's right.

Will Curran:
Whereas, this is low commitment upfront, but maybe a higher return on the end, which is really, really cool. So, curious to know, let's start diving into maybe some statistics with this. Because I think, I know there's one easy one I'll give to you. And then I'll go onto the other two. When you found that you told people to set their own price, and I already know the answer to this but I think the audience needs to hear it, how much more money or less money did you make telling people to set their own price?

Kahlil Ashanti:
Well, people paid 30% more than they were asked to pay.

Will Curran:
Wow.

Kahlil Ashanti:
And it's important... Yeah, right? This is the thing, Will, this is... I thought, you know why nobody else is doing this? Because it sounds crazy. That's why.

Will Curran:
Yeah, it's completely counterintuitive to what you think would happen.

Kahlil Ashanti:
That's right. But you get out there, you start performing, and then the fact that I'm an actor who knows how to write code and build these things means maybe I just approached it in a way that somebody with a computer science degree and no performing experience would never even think about. But the other thing I wanted to be clear about was that the audience member doesn't always set the price. So, the performer, they create an event in WeShowUp, and they say, "Hey, I want audiences to pay $7 and 50 cents upfront. And then afterwards, I want to ask them for X, Y, Z, three different prices afterwards." And then there's an empty text box. But either way, like you said, people are paying... 81% of people pay something, and 30% of people pay more than they were asked to pay to begin with.

Will Curran:
Wow. That's awesome. Okay. So now, I want to dive even deeper into some of the statistics. And I don't know if you have this data readily available, but I think I'm just more curious on majority versus minority on choice. But from when people had the choice, you said that 31% of people paid more. Does that mean they chose the empty writing box 31% of the time?

Kahlil Ashanti:
Oh, that's a good question.

Will Curran:
Yeah. I'm curious, out of the choices, which radio box did people select at what times? That was my curiosity with it, and maybe that data isn't quite there yet, but.

Kahlil Ashanti:
Yeah. That's actually data that we were compiling pre-COVID because we got a grant to share this information with the industry. And so, yeah. Yeah. Sorry, I don't have that off the top of my head, but yeah.

Will Curran:
We'll get it out to the audience at some point. We'll update the description of the podcast or something like that when that day comes out. I asked a super fresh question. Okay. So now, kind of diving into how this works also for an area that people are most concerned about right now, which is... In-person events have been very easy to price for years because we've been doing them. We know how to compare it, there's competitors, but a lot of people are struggling also with online events. And that's actually how we got connected originally, was talking about how this is such an innovative model also for online live streams, for like musical artists who are currently just like, "Oh, yeah, I'm going to put on my webcam and play in my living room." And this is like Sheryl Crow, who's used to making a quarter-million dollars every night. You know?

How can we start monetizing it? So, how does this work potentially for online events? And why do you think this also revolutionizes for online and digital and virtual events?

Kahlil Ashanti:
Well, because I feel like what a lot of these companies and industries are missing is something that we decided not to do is, we didn't want to build a ticketing company. We built an audience company, and live-streaming is just one more way we're seeing that the audience is the hero of the story. And the way that WeShowUp works with live events takes it one step further because you can use YouTube Live, Jitsi, Vimeo, Zoom, whatever streaming service you're using. WeShowUp allows you to wrap a commerce and attendance conversation around that. So, instead of streaming for free and creating zero value for you as an entrepreneur, as a businesswoman, or as a performer, you get no data when you stream for free.

Kahlil Ashanti:
So, with WeShowUp, we set it up in a turnkey way for you to accept reservations for your stream. Send them an email that says, "Hey, Will, thanks for making a reservation for my live stream. Here's the link. We'll email you the password closer to the gig." And now, this person has made a reservation. They've entered their credit card number. They've paid $7 and 50 cents or a dollar or free for your stream. But now you know who they are, and now they're going to enjoy your live stream. And then our system, the way that our code works is that it's timed to the end of your stream to send them a text, a thank you note or whatever you'd like that says, "Hey, how much did you think it was worth?" So, that's been the really exciting and fun part about the live stream economy is that we are the only solution that does that, and the results have been pretty incredible.

Will Curran:
What sort of, outside of obviously adopting and utilizing your guys' software, but when people are looking to adopt this mentality of, I'll call it the WeShowUp model, what sort of things do people need to be thinking about when they are doing this? What sort of tips do you have for people, if they're considering doing this? Is there a good way to do it, a bad way to do it?

Kahlil Ashanti:
Yeah. Yeah. You know what, man, I'm glad you asked that question, and I just want to give a shout out to Crowdcast and Stageit, and everybody out here in these streets trying to make this work for artists. I think... I have a ton of respect for all these companies. We're obviously in a very different space in the way we approach it, but best practices are, stop calling it a donation. You're not a nonprofit. You don't need donations. You're working hard as artists. So, communication is very, very important for artists dealing with their audiences. And it's a skill set that now is a perfect time to build. So, that's the first one.

Kahlil Ashanti:
The second one is, stop doing it for free, because you're setting a precedent in the minds of the audience that allows them to devalue everything that you stand for. And that's hard to change.

Once somebody sees something for free, you're not going to get them to pay for it. And it's very difficult for artists to get around, especially when you're starting out. You're trying to build that audience. You're trying to do your thing. You're trying to make that money, and free is easier. You really have to take a stand. And one of the things that I implore artists to do and create, and this is, creative entrepreneurs, creative souls, maybe you're a blogger or whatever, is to understand who your audience is not. And if people aren't willing to pay for you, they're not your audience. That is a way, I feel like in a connected economy, to build the belonging that scales in a way that makes your audience the hero of the story and allows you to be something that they would miss if you were not there.

Will Curran:
Oh, I love it. I love it. This is awesome. I think this is so good for people to tactically think about it. And I love the idea of that. You're setting a precedent, 100%. It just terrifies me when I see these events that they were usually charging $1000 to attend. And now they're like, "Oh, yeah, well, we'll do it for $30." I'm like, "Oh, my gosh, you're never going to be able to go back to a thousand dollars." That is so terrifying to think about. What do you see being as some of the biggest challenges when it comes to setting this model? Not beyond just obviously calling it donation or starting with free or whatever it may be, but what sort of other challenges do you see when it comes to this model that you think that planners need to be thinking about, if they're looking at making this transition to this pricing model?

Kahlil Ashanti:
There's a couple of things to think about. I feel like is, one of the things is that eventually, people are going to go back to live events. I know it seems like a long way away. I am not an advocate of making any of these planners out there who think that live events are dead. They're not dead. They'll just never be the same. And so, WeShowUp, in the model that in what we stand for with inclusive, diverse, and equitable access to all events is the fact that even as people go back to live events, there may still be some live streaming, who knows, in that crystal ball. But what we do know is that there's going to be a whole lot of empty seats, and there's going to be a lot of different venues still struggling. It's not going to be a flip that you switch to, to be able to fill your venues and get people going to gigs again.

Kahlil Ashanti:
So, using WeShowUp is a great way now to just start thinking about ways to engage your audience and build that trust and that brand identity in a way that doesn't alienate a lot of folks out there who have lost their jobs, don't have the dough that they had, and might not even have the discretionary time or income to come and see gigs at your venues. So, I feel like this time and this model is very, very relevant, but also provides that long-tail view so that it goes beyond the live streaming craze we're in right now.

Will Curran:
I love it. This is awesome. So, talk me through a little bit about, so we... Obviously, this is a tech podcast, so we got to talk about some tech.

Kahlil Ashanti:
Yeah, man.

Will Curran:
Talk a little bit through the technology and kind of some things that you think that really make this. So, I think, for example, one of the things you mentioned is that it can utilize email or text. And because, let's be honest, a lot of times we're at these events, there's a mobile experience, but you can also, sounds like there's some scheduling into it that you can fire it off at a specific time. So, maybe walk through a little bit about what the setup of this looks like and what sort of ways that people can set up a campaign utilizing WeShowUp.

Kahlil Ashanti:
Yeah, look, WeShowUp is built on the same technology stack as Airbnb and Uber. It scales infinitely well. We're using Heroku and AWS in different ways to make sure that whether it's a hundred thousand people or two, that you get a great experience. It takes less... I can't remember. We clocked it. I think it was like seven or eight minutes from the time you go to WeShowUp.io and click that button to being able to be on sale. And you're right, you can time the email. So, our thing is about, again, about inclusive and diverse and equitable, which means that you own your audience data, right? So, you get to decide when that email is sent to Will, who has made a reservation. You can edit the emails. So, we really made it agile.

Kahlil Ashanti:
And the other thing that I wanted to share, Will, it's because, like you said, this is a tech podcast. One of the things that gets overlooked is listening to the user, talking to the users. We were fortunate enough in the early days of... I built the prototype. I wrote the code myself and launched it. And then, because theaters around the world started writing checks for me to build this, not only was it a tremendous amount of validation, but I got to hire people smarter than me to do things like CSS and things I don't have the patience for. But the whole idea is that it was validated learning. We launched something ugly as soon as humanly possible. And then everything that we've implemented with the tech and the type of experience that we have is because of user feedback, and us constantly talking to the customers and asking for criticism and listening and... Sorry, and listening for consistency and not, if you asked most customers, it's like, "Hey, you should have a mobile app."

Kahlil Ashanti:
Okay. Yeah. Let's try that. You do want to look for patterns, but when it comes to the tech stack, it's deceptively simple, but unbelievably complicated in the way that we execute it. And we feel like that's one of our moats.

Will Curran:

Awesome. Wow. Incredible. Well, I'm curious to know too, Kahlil, what do you think is the future of this kind of set your own price model? And where do you see the future of this technology going, and the future of WeShowUp going?

Kahlil Ashanti:
I think the economics of perceived value will continue to be top of mind for marketers and creative souls, as we try to engage audiences in an economy that is rapidly changing. I mean, I have three boys. They're 11, 8, and 5, and they don't know the difference between NBC, CBS, and all these different things that you and I probably took for granted as kids. They don't... And so, I feel like where all of this is going, is putting the audience in the driver's seat. We are in the midst of a cultural creative renaissance with more content to consume than ever before. Dude, let me tell you a story. Here's where it's going. I finally got cast on a series on Amazon Prime called The Tick.

Will Curran:
Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I know The Tick.

Kahlil Ashanti:
Right? Now, I've been in this business, in the game since 1988 as a standup comic. I'm trying to work, trying to... And you go on 100 auditions, you might get one. There's so much content out there that I got cast in a major show on Amazon Prime. It was hugely anticipated broadcast. And I still have relatives who didn't even know it was there.

Will Curran:
Wow.

Kahlil Ashanti:
There's so much stuff out there, so I feel like-

Will Curran:
Yeah, yeah.

Kahlil Ashanti:
Audiences continue to want to have a say in how they value experiences. They have more information at their fingertips to make choices. And the advertising industrial complex is... Advertising will always be here, but it's withering in ways that I don't think we could foresee. And I think the future of WeShowUp is that it actually becomes really, this talent discovery engine powered by the economics of perceived value, that not only for theater or music, but for any time people gather and want to take part and arrive as strangers and leave as friends. It's an opportunity for artists and audiences to connect in whatever way they want, and in a way that doesn't make people feel bad for not having enough money or the socioeconomic background to belong. And I think that belonging is going to be a key factor in our future.

Will Curran:
Awesome. Awesome. All right, I got two more questions for you. So, let's go to the first one which is, what is one piece of technology that really excites you right now, that you are just super duper jazzed about?

Kahlil Ashanti:
Oh, man, there's one called... Oh, of course it slips my mind. It's the technology that allows you to find your way through a building. I can't remember what it's-

Will Curran:
Oh, like a... Yeah, like a... So, using Bluetooth low energy to be able to go up, like when you go up and down stairs. Is that what you're saying?

Kahlil Ashanti:
Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. And yeah, that's right. And there's a company... I've always wanted to figure out a way for when dads are sent to the grocery store and you can't find a damn thing, to have technology. You know what I'm saying?

Will Curran:
Yeah, yeah. Like hyper local, yeah, down to the inches. We'll know where that product is, yeah.

Kahlil Ashanti:
Yeah. You send me for baked beans. I'm not looking at aisle three and five. Oh, come on. They moved them last week and somebody just spilled something. Just let me flip on my phone and get in and get out, you know? So, it's that technology. Yeah.

Will Curran:
Awesome. I can imagine that too, eventually, like inter-placing with AR and you're wearing your glasses and it's like, baked beans, pointing exactly hovering over the baked beans where it is too for you.

Kahlil Ashanti:
There you go.

Will Curran:
I love it. Awesome, awesome. Well, also, Kahlil, I want to give a chance for you to kind of promote WeShowUp and get a chance for people who are interested in this idea of perceived-value pricing and want to implement your tool into their events. Where do people go? How easy is it? Tell people a little bit of information about it.

Kahlil Ashanti:
Thanks, man. All you got to do is go to WeShowUp.io, all one word, all lowercase. WeShowUp.io. And when you get to the site, click Get Started. It'll ask you a couple of

questions to register as an organizer. And then you'll get an email from our team to ensure you are indeed human, and you're off and running. It's that simple. There is no, you don't have to worry about knowing how to code, and you don't have to worry about downloading an app. It is responsive. It looks great on all devices, and all it is, is you can either, you get a custom landing page with WeShowUp, or you can add a button on your website or your Facebook event page and it's good to go. So, I invite you to follow us on Instagram at We.ShowUp or Kahlil.Ashanti. And yeah, come and have some fun. We'd love to have you. We've got virtual wine tastings. We've got people making jewelry out of fish skin. You name it, we got it. So, all are welcome.

Will Curran:
That is awesome. That is awesome. Kahlil, it's so awesome. Thank you so much for coming to be on this show and kind of get and tell your story and share a little bit information about what it's like to do this, yeah, this perceived pricing economics when it comes to events. Thank you so much for coming on the show today.

Kahlil Ashanti:
My pleasure, Will. Thanks for having me.

Will Curran:
Awesome. Well, thank you to the audience who's listening here today to the Event Tech Podcast. We want to know, what would you pay to listen to Event Tech Podcast? Obviously, we do this for free, upfront. I'm not listening to Kahlil's advice, but maybe I'll have to change some things soon, but I'd love to know. Shoot us an email, EventTechPodcast@HelloEndless.com. Let me know. What do you think that you would pay for the Event Tech Podcast? I'm not going to at all charge for this anytime soon, but I'm just curious to see what you guys think as well. And as always, feel free to rate us, review us on your favorite podcast platforms, all that jazz. We love to hear from you. But that's going to do it for today's episode. Thank you, Kahlil. Thank you to the audience and yeah, we'll see you guys next time on the Event Tech Podcast.

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