

# How HBO's *Winning Time* used retro A/V to recreate the 1980s



By [Rick Marshall](#) March 6, 2022 5:24PM

You don't have to be a basketball fan — or even a sports fan, for that matter — to find something fascinating about HBO's new scripted drama *Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty*. The 10-episode series offers a time capsule of sorts, chronicling one of the NBA's most transformative periods against the backdrop of seismic cultural and economic changes in America.

John C. Reilly (*Boogie Nights*, *Step Brothers*) portrays the Los Angeles Lakers' colorful team owner Jerry Buss, who sets out to reinvent the team and the league as a whole, and in the process ushers in a new status quo for the league's predominantly Black players, as well as the media and fans' relationships to professional sports. The series blends archival footage with scripted elements and recreations of iconic moments, filtered through the lens of Oscar-winning filmmaker Adam McKay ([Don't Look Up](#)).

Tasked with bringing McKay's vision for the series to life was cinematographer [Todd Banhazl](#) (*Hustlers*), who strove to seamlessly blend existing footage from the era with the show's scripted, multifaceted, and occasionally fourth wall-breaking narrative. Digital Trends spoke to Banhazl about the innovative approaches *Winning Time* took to recapture the look and feel of the '80s.



**Digital Trends:** *Winning Time* has such a unique visual aesthetic. What were the early conversations like with Adam McKay about his vision for the series?

**Todd Banhazi:** We knew from the beginning that the show was going to mix different formats and styles, and that we'd be pulling footage from the period and photos, and referencing pop culture and famous commercials from the time. We reproduced the [scene from \*Airplane\* with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar](#), for example, and we knew that kind of thing was going to be a big part of it. So from the beginning, the conversations were about deciding on our main aesthetic, and how we would branch off from that.

One of our big influences was advertising photography from the period, and what America looked like to Americans through a commercial lens in the '70s and '80s. Taking that and playing with it, that's how we landed on the main look for

the show, which is 35 millimeter, [Ektachrome](#) look — like a really juicy, reversal film stock. It's grainy and dirty and you can, like, *eat* the color, you know what I mean?

**I do! There's that textured, grainy feel to so much of the series ...**

Exactly, yeah. That's the '70s influence on everything, too. That era was like a dirtier glam. It had a greasy look, filled with men with lots of chest hair and skin oil. There was all that shine and money, and all that was part of it, too.

**You recreated it so well that I wasn't sure where the footage from the '80s ended and the scripted material began, in some cases. What did it take to blend it all together?**

Well, that was definitely the goal: If we do our job right, the audience should not be able to tell the difference. It all started with the 35 millimeter film, but we also did things photochemically to it. We underexposed the film and left it in the bath extra long, for example. That's something called [push processing](#), where you leave it in development longer. The film gets more contrasty, more grainy, more saturated.

We also mixed in digital processes to further degrade the image. We asked the lab to not dust-bust the negative, for example. When they finish developing it, they typically blow all the dust off the negative, but we asked them to leave it. We said, "If a piece of dust ends up on someone's face, we'll digitally remove it, but everything else we want."

**So you basically created some of the flaws that you'd typically be fixing in film?**

Right. For a lot of the things we normally consider mistakes, we told our team to leave them in. So we started there, and then we started shooting on 16-millimeter and eight-millimeter film. That's the stuff that's really grainy, where you can see the perforations on the side while watching it. We used the eight-millimeter film for shooting time and place shots, establishing, inserts, and bits of

basketball or things that really happened that we were recreating — all so you lose track of what's archival and what's new.

Audiences have been seeing [Earvin] "Magic" Johnson and these other people in the media for decades, so it's fun to play with seeing them the same way you would have seen them back then — on 16mm and lower-resolution film formats — but with our actors portraying them [in the show]. It blurs reality in some fun ways.



**So much of the footage looks like an old home movie from the '80s, which works perfectly in the series.**

Yeah, we literally called it "Dad Cam" while we were shooting it. Initially, we were building the eight-millimeter cameras too much like today's film cameras, with all the gear and handheld stuff, but we eventually realized it looked too cinematic. The best version of the eight-millimeter stuff was when you just had a little pistol grip and it felt like a dad at a barbecue, filming his family. The more we created with that in mind, the more that look we wanted came through in the footage.



**You could easily end up going down a 1980s A/V rabbit hole working on this series. Did that happen?**

We did! The other thing we did is to shoot on these Ikegami tube cameras from the '80s. We were researching what cameras shot the actual basketball games back then, and we discovered it was these tube cameras that have that classic look: The lights kind of blur and streak and melt in that classic '80s TV style. So, we found the cameras.



**Where did you get them? And maybe more importantly, that they actually worked?**

We found them in warehouses and on eBay. They had been sitting on shelves for 40 years, and some of them still had the news insignias on them. I ended up developing a fun hobby of researching the history of the cameras. One was from a news organization in Chicago that's now defunct. Only half of them even turned on, and we began testing them to find out which ones had a look we could actually use.

So we knew we were going to use those cameras to reproduce the basketball footage and to reproduce famous news conferences, and then we got really excited about using the cameras in narrative scenes, like a third camera. We started intercutting the eight millimeter and the Ikegami footage, midscene, sort of like jazz. It became this collage of images — photos, images of the period, our stuff, all grainy, and then the 35 millimeter and the Ikegami low-res video footage. We ended up with something like an American culture mix tape. It's a collage of America at that time.



**You just gave me the perfect segue, because music is used so wonderfully in the series, too. You've directed quite a few music videos. Did that shape your work on the series at all?**

It did. McKay and I always said, "If it feels right, we should do it." There's a joy in the filmmaking for this, and it feels really good. There's also a joy in the editing, and a joy in the music, and a joy in the writing. I got a lot of joy from the '70s-style zooms and stuff like that. I always said the show is like *The Brady Bunch* with cursing.

We wanted something that feels wholesome — like there's something family about it and hokey in that '70s, '80s way — but at the same time, characters are cursing and being disgusting in that '70s way, too. You're in the backrooms and clubs with them.

**The series made great use of up-close shots of actors that give certain moments an intimate, home-video feel. The scenes with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar come to mind, specifically. What was the thinking behind those shots?**

Yeah, that's something we really wanted in it. Even though the show has so much bravado and so much charisma, and there are all these big egos, we also wanted it to be extremely emotional and vulnerable at times.

There's something interesting about seeing these mythic characters in our culture, these icons, as we saw them in the past, but also in this very stripped-down, human, vulnerable way. That's the idea behind the super close-ups. It's about seeing the skin texture and the grain and just being that close with them. You can constantly play with them as icons and giants who are larger than life, but also as very vulnerable human beings.

*Episode 1 of Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty premieres March 6 on [HBO](#) and [HBO Max](#).*