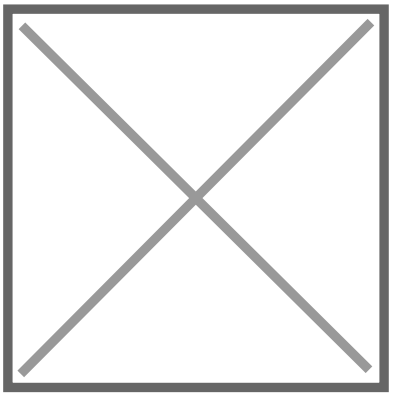

Listening for the American Dream: A Conversation with David McCourt on New Documentary â??Amerigoâ?•

Description

David McCourt is clear about what he wanted *Amerigo*â??the documentary set to air on PBS in June 2026â??to be, and just as precise about what he did not want it to be.

McCourt, an Emmy Awardâ??winning producer whose career spans educational television, documentary filmmaking, and global telecommunications, is best known as a producer of *Reading Rainbow*, the beloved PBS childrenâ??s series that won the Daytime Emmy for Outstanding Childrenâ??s Series in 2005.

Across his work, McCourt has long framed media as a tool for listening and civic reflection. His latest PBS documentary, *Amerigo*, directed by Adam Mason, extends that ethos outwardâ??assembling conversations over two years and across all 50 states to ask what remains of the American Dream as the nation approaches its 250th anniversary.

> **â??Usually when people promote a film or a book,â?• he told me, â??they go on a speaking tour. They try to tell you what they know. I wanted to do the opposite. I wanted to learn what I donâ??t know, not repeat what I already know. Because feelings arenâ??t negotiable. If people are feeling like something is broken, then we have to understand what that means.â?•**

That refusal to perform expertise rather than practice inquiry shapes *Amerigo* as something closer to an archive than an argument. McCourt and his team interviewed more than a thousand people across all fifty statesâ??workers, caregivers, artists, educators, small-business owners, public servants, and others navigating the pressures of everyday lifeâ??many of them encountered informally rather than recruited through institutions. The film moves between these conversations, McCourtâ??s family history, archival imagery, and music, assembling a portrait of a country struggling to recognize itself.

> "I wanted to learn what I don't know, not repeat what I already know. Because feelings aren't negotia

Listening as Method

For McCourt, listening is not a soft posture or a waiting room for solutions. It is an ethical practice defined by restraint: a refusal to dilute what people are saying, and a refusal to sprint toward fixes before reckoning with the conditions that made the crisis possible.

Amerigo unfolds through a wide range of voices, many encountered by chance rather than design. Some appear only briefly; others recur as touchstones across the film. McCourt himself moves in and out of the frameâ??not as an expert narrator, but as a guide shaped by his own family history, particularly the story of his grandfather, a janitor who owned his home, died debt-free, and raised a family on a single income.

> **â??Feelings arenâ??t negotiable,â?• McCourt said. â??If people feel like something is broken, then something is brokenâ??even if we donâ??t yet agree on why.â?•**

Listening, in this frame, is not neutral. It either redistributes authority or quietly reaffirms who already holds it.

What *Amerigo* does not yet resolve is what happens when listening is met not with transformation but with continuity. Institutions shaped by unaccountable power have a long history of absorbing critique without altering their underlying structures, reproducing inequality regardless of intent.

What McCourt Heard

McCourt resists the language of inevitability. The conditions documented in *Amerigo*, he insists, are not natural outcomes but the result of choicesâ??particularly the choice to prioritize short-term extraction over long-term responsibility.

> **â??Weâ??ve gotten way more individual and way less community-oriented,â?• he said. â??Weâ??ve convinced ourselves that as long as the shareholders are taken care of, everything else will somehow work out. But you canâ??t exploit the customer, exploit the worker, and ignore the community and expect it to turn out well.â?•**

Across the film, interviewees describe a nation that feels increasingly less collective and more exclusionary. Housing is unaffordable. Wages stagnate. Mental health crises proliferate. Addiction and homelessness are framed as individual failures rather than social symptoms. McCourt is blunt about the stakes.

> **â??Weâ??re taking our strongest assetâ??all these young peopleâ??and weâ??re not letting them be their best,â?• he said. â??Thatâ??s not just tragic. Itâ??s expensive. And itâ??s avoidable.â?•**

Quote by David McCourt: 'You can't exploit the customer, exploit the worker, and ignore the commun

Ethics of wealth and responsibility

Listening takes on different stakes depending on who is doing itâ??and who can afford not to be affected by what is heard. That tension shaped my approach to this conversation.

I came to it with hesitation. As a scholar of archives, performance, and public memoryâ??and as a single mother navigating academic precarityâ??I am wary of national conversations about hope articulated by those least threatened by its absence. What mattered here was that McCourt did not deny the tension of his position.

> **â??A lot of wealthâ??any wealthâ??involves luck,â?• he told me plainly. â??People like to think itâ??s all because they worked ten hours a day, but a lot of people work ten hours a day. Thereâ??s luck involved.â?•**

McCourt resists exaggerated claims about his net worth, but he does not deny his advantage. What matters to him, he insists, is not wealth itself but how power is exercised. He pointed to examples from his business practices in rural Ireland, where his company supports small-scale job creation through technology.

> **â??We donâ??t just give a grant,â?• he explained. â??We go out and talk to the person. We tell them we think their idea is a good idea. That confidence matters. It gives them hope.â?• He paused, then added with a note of irony: â??And the funny thing is, our business is making more money than we thought it would. Weâ??re above budget. Maybe my grandfather was right when he told me, â??Every dollar you give away, youâ??ll get five back.â??â?•**

McCourtâ??s emphasis on responsibility is sincere, and it gives *Amerigo* much of its moral force. But it also reveals a quiet fragility in the filmâ??s framework. Ethical appeals depend on those with power choosing restraint over extractionâ??not because they are compelled to, but because they believe they should. What *Amerigo* does not attempt to resolve is what happens when power listens carefully, understands clearly, and chooses not to change.

Benchmarks, Legibility, and Representation

That tension between moral benchmarks and narrative legibility comes into sharp focus in *Amerigo*â??s repeated recourse to janitors as a measure of economic possibility. McCourt returns repeatedly to the story of his grandfatherâ??both in the film and in his own framing of its stakes. A janitor who owned his home, died debt-free, and raised a family on a single income, he functions less as a symbol than as a material benchmark.

> **â??Those are facts,â?• McCourt said. â??He was a janitor. He owned his own home. He raised my mother. And if thatâ??s not possible today, we should admit it instead of pretending itâ??s someone elseâ??s fault.â?•**

The insistence matters. But it also exposes a central tension in the filmâ??s framing. The American Dream is examined primarily through lossâ??what no longer worksâ??rather than through those who were never fully included in it to begin with. Listening, here, risks becoming a form of recognition that stops short of reordering power: acknowledging harm without altering the structures that determine whose stories shape the frame, and whose remain contextual.

That risk becomes clearer when the film returns to janitors as a moral and economic reference point. McCourt asks whether someone doing that work can still buy a home, still participate in the American Dream. When I pressed him on whether janitors appear in the film as identifiable voices, he pointed to several participants working multiple janitorial jobs, some holding two full-time positions across hotel chains. Their labor is present, he explained, even when their titles are not foregrounded.

The distinction matters. Presence without legibility shapes how listening is received. Without being named, janitors risk functioning less as narrators of economic reality than as symbols through which broader anxieties are voiced. What emerges is not bad faith, but a gap between intention and receptionâ??one that quietly reinforces the filmâ??s larger tension between ethical listening and narrative control.

Promotional image for the documentary series 'AMERIGO,' highlighting its exploration of the America

What the Name Carries

The title *Amerigo* signals more than a poetic variation on the nationâ??s name. It gestures toward the act of naming itselfâ??and toward the stories that naming both reveals and conceals.

Amerigo Vespucci, an Italian navigator and cartographer, is remembered less for discovery than for naming. He argued that the lands Europeans had reached were not the edge of Asia, but something else entirelyâ??*Mundus Novus*, a â??New World.â?•

In McCourtâ??s framing, *Amerigo* becomes less about discovery than about survival. The country that emerges is one that has endured genocide, slavery, and civil warâ??an idea explored in the documentary at length through the reflections of artistâ??scholar **Paul Baldwin**, a prize-winning poet. These survivals are not framed as triumphs, but as moral reckoningsâ??endurance that carries cost as much as continuity.

That reckoning surfaces most clearly in the filmâ??s invocation of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. First associated with abolitionist **John Brown**, later rewritten by **Julia Ward Howe** as a condemnation of slavery, the hymn becomes less a declaration of righteousness than a record of struggleâ??rewritten again and again to meet the urgencies of the moment.

Who Gets to Be Central

That question becomes unavoidable in *Amerigo*â??s engagement with Indigenous perspectives.

> **â??You canâ??t in ninety minutes make everything central,â?• McCourt said. â??But I insisted on us adding it. It mattered to complicate the idea of Americaâ??s**

> **birthday.â?•**

McCourt described interviewing Indigenous scholars, speaking with members of four different tribes, and sitting in on Indigenous studies courses in an effort to avoid superficial inclusion.

> **â??Americaâ??s celebrating its 250th birthday,â?• he said, â??but there were people living here for thousands of years before that. So whose birthday are we celebrating, and whose are we ignoring?â?•**

Still, Indigenous dispossession appears alongside other national pressuresâ??gun violence, addiction, misinformation, declining unions, private equityâ??treated as interconnected rather than constitutive. The film listens carefully, but it does not fully dwell on what it means to position dispossession as contextual rather than foundational, a choice that reflects the limits of what listening can accomplish without reordering narrative centrality.

Songs of Moral Urgency

Music provides one of *Amerigo*â??s most affective through-lines, particularly in its closing sequence, which brings together multiple reinterpretations of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. The song functions not as a unifying anthem, but as a vesselâ??one that has carried different moral urgencies across time.

> **â??Itâ??s been rewritten over and overâ??for abolition, for labor movements, for religious reflection,â?• McCourt said. â??Itâ??s always been a song to motivate people around a cause.â?•**

Rather than prescribing a single meaning, McCourt invited musicians to reshape the hymn freely. â??Add lyrics, take religion out, put religion back inâ??it wasnâ??t for me to say,â?• he explained. â??The song has carried a lot of meanings. It can carry new ones.â?•

Layered over these performances are excerpts from speeches by Martin Luther King Jr., a choice McCourt described as both historical and personal. â??He quoted that song often,â?• McCourt noted. â??And his last publicly recorded words referenced it.â?• For McCourt, King represents a model of moral urgency without violenceâ??proof that radical critique need not rely on brutality to be transformative. â??He was a peaceful revolutionary,â?• McCourt said. â??You could be radical without being brutal.â?•

Together, the music and Kingâ??s words frame moral urgency as a collective undertakingâ??sustained, reiterated, and renewed through shared cultural labor rather than vested in any single authority.

It is here that a quieter tension comes into focus. When asked about compensation, McCourt acknowledged that the musicians who contributed reinterpretations of the hymn, as well as many interview participants, were not paid beyond limited expense reimbursement. Their labor was framed as voluntary, part of a collective civic effort.

While consistent with *Amerigo*â??s ethos, the choice also reflects a broader cultural pattern in which creative labor is routinely asked to stand in for compensation. When ethical capitalism depends on goodwill rather than structural norms of payment, it risks reproducing the very inequities it seeks to critiqueâ??even as it calls for moral renewal.

The Work After Listening

McCourt does not claim *Amerigo* offers solutions. He frames the film as a beginning, not a blueprint. Again and again, he returns to the necessity of long-term thinking, explicitly invoking Indigenous governance traditions as a corrective to short-term political and economic logic.

> **â??Jefferson, Franklin, and Washington studied the Great Law of Peace,â?• he said. â??But they left out three critical parts: womenâ??s political power, collective decision-making, and seven-generation responsibility.â?• He paused. â??Maybe we can still bring back at least that last part.â?•**

That *may be* where *Amerigo* is strongestâ??and where its limits are most visible. The film listens carefully. It assembles voices with sincerity. It resists the urge to individualize systemic harm. What it leaves unresolved is whether listening aloneâ??without surrendering narrative control, without redistributing authorshipâ??can move beyond recognition into repair.

I do not always agree with McCourt. But I admire the seriousness of his effort and his willingness to sit with contradiction. *Amerigo* does not resolve the crises it documents. Instead, it insists that before anything can change, we must first be willing to hear what has already been saidâ??and to reckon, together, with what listening obligates us to do next.

> A middle-aged man in glasses wearing a black suit and white shirt smiles while sitting on a plush sof
> *David McCourt, Image provided by McCourt Entertainment*

Category

1. Spotlight

Tags

1. American Dream
2. Amerigo (PBS)
3. creative labor
4. Cultural Criticism
5. David McCourt
6. Documentary Film
7. Economic Inequality
8. Indigenous Perspectives
9. Keolanani Kinghorn
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