

# HALE COUNTY THIS MORNING, THIS EVENING

A film by RaMell Ross



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## **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

Composed of intimate and unencumbered moments of people in a community in Alabama's Black Belt, *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* offers an emotive impression of the Historic South. Daniel Collins attends college in search of opportunity while Quincy Bryant becomes a father to an energetic son. Creating a poetic form that privileges the patiently observed interstices of their lives, RaMell Ross' film trumpets the beauty of life and consequences of race, while simultaneously existing as a testament to dreaming - despite the odds.

## **SYNOPSIS**

*Hale County This Morning, This Evening*, set in Alabama's Black Belt, presents the lives of two young men in a series of visual movements that replace narrative arc with orchestral form, offering a cinematic experience of landscape and community, alongside the personal and public moments of its main protagonists.

Daniel Collins attends college in search of opportunity while Quincy Bryant becomes a father to an energetic son in an open-ended, poetic form that privileges the patiently observed interstices of their lives. Filmed over the course of 5 years, the quotidian and pivotal, the mundane and monumental combine to communicate the region's deep culture and glimpse the complex ways the African American community's collective image is integrated into our nation's visual imagination. This formalism gives the film an aesthetic life separate from the film's narrative resistance, activating the tropes and symbols of blackness while refocusing the energy normally allocated to plot, to give time to the universal moments of human experience.

The avoidance of narrative arc relieves the pressure for Daniel and Quincy to overcome their individual circumstances, a pressure often expressed in the pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps phrase. As their cause/effect trajectory is de-emphasized, attention is placed on the environmental actualities of the region, and the film's associative editing and studied imagery reveal this local community's continuity with the old orders of inequality.

The film advances through the transitioning from day to night, sunset to sunrise, distorting time while moving us seamlessly through both montage and long immersive moments. We meet community members fluidly while the resulting panorama of place becomes a third character- the Historic South's agency transforming the banal moment into the symbolic and epic, elevating Daniel and Quincy's lives while customizing a representation unique to circumstances of their realities. That the Historic South is largely imagined through mythos and folklore – a history known as hostile yet painted with white supremacist romanticism – is something *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* seeks to completely reframe. It constructs a topical picture to memorialize the Hale County of today from the position of the centrality of the African American community.

Since it is within this landscape that the Black community's public image was forged, *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* uses that tacit language as content, acknowledging that photography and film were stewards of racism.

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## **BACKGROUND - HALE COUNTY, ALABAMA**

In the 1930s, the Farm Security Administration commissioned Walker Evans to document the effects of the Great Depression in the Southern States. Evans' signature photographic perspective established a new documentary aesthetic and would eventually define a region. Working with a large format 8x10 inch camera, his view of Southern poverty was crystallized in the summer of 1936 when he went to Hale County, Alabama with the writer James Agee, on assignment for *Fortune* magazine. Their documentation of poor white sharecropping families became the landmark book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

In the history of documentary practice, Hale County is a mythical place. On the one hand it is part of the rarefied cannon of black and white photojournalism. On the other hand, James Agee's text, his collaboration with Walker Evans in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is unique for both his descriptive prose-poetry and his reflexive questioning of whether documentation can ever represent such social misery. Today, Hale County is a different place. While the current residents subsist with comparable economic hardship, the racial demographics of the region have shifted. These forgotten, isolated, famous men in Hale County are now people of color.

Largely disenfranchised, the African American population and communities subsist under conservative political structures determined to maintain a ritual of peaceful cohabitation and unequal distribution of, and access to, resources. The cycle of poverty in this region persists not only through mainstream political inaction, but also through the absence of progressive initiatives that deconstruct, intervene and disrupt this 'Bogeyman' region existing in the American consciousness.

The film avoids the tropes of traditional documentary to get at these issues while reacting to the historic, cultural imaging of African Americans, in a pursuit to exalt the lives of Daniel and Quincy.

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## **A CONVERSATION WITH DIRECTOR RAMELL ROSS**

**How did you come to meet Daniel and Quincy? And why did you choose to focus on them?**

While teaching in a GED program in Greensboro Alabama I met Quincy, and coaching basketball at the local High School I met Daniel. We didn't start filming together until after about three years. I had a lot in common with them both, and our relationship naturally grew over time, like any other relationship.

**Where did the idea for the film come? Were there specific influences or texts that inspired it?**

The idea for the film started small and grew through a series of “ah-ha, oh-no, ah-ha, oh-no” moments. During the filming and thinking process an underlying interest of mine resuscitated itself: to investigate the ‘return to home’ of a Northern Black American. My large format photography was already invested in the exploration of this particular perspective and the film and its form emerged from that critical inquiry. I eventually knew I wanted to make a film that looked closely at vast stretches of Quincy and Daniel’s lives and witness the ephemera of the human project – the latter in the context of the Historic South, the origin of Black American aesthetics, and in that – I wanted to make a film that formally and conceptually strove toward engaging the visual complexity of being Black.

Godfrey Reggio’s *Qatsi Trilogy* and Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* are two formally ambitious works of art that inspired *Hale County This Morning, This Evening*.

**What were your intentions at the outset of following the film’s main protagonists, Daniel and Quincy, 5 years ago? What were some of the major obstacles you faced in making this film? How did you address them?**

The intentions were quite simple: to exalt Daniel and Quincy’s lives from our centrality, the looking out from the Black community, in the documentary genre’s language of truth. Immediately the problem of agency and historical imaging emerged. I realized I could not faithfully represent the lives of Daniel and Quincy without acknowledging the trouble of representation, that any viewer’s engagement with their lives without first confronting that influence of racism on our perception, was irresponsible. It was the trappings of representation that called for a responsive form: the use of an almost claustrophobic subjectivity and associative editing techniques to give the film a double consciousness. It became possible that a conversation with the historical imaging of African Americans could be the passive aggressive content of the film.

**Why is it important that we understand the lives of Quincy, Daniel, and the people of Hale County through glimpses rather than the conventions of a detailed narrative arc?**

Generally I've found that when someone sees another person making a decision, they naturally judge the decision. But if you refuse the viewer that moment, removing judgment, they're forced to consider a person and their life through other means, through the bigger picture, one that requires the filling in of blanks and active thought. This relieves a burden from the protagonist, perhaps the burden to succeed and / or make the right decision to earn compassion, and / or escape the odds. In this case, *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* avoids the convention of narrative in order to highlight the greater forces at work in the lives depicted.

**Your voice and presence enters the film at times, what role do you see yourself playing? Are you a traveler, guest, guide, friend, someone else?**

I've never make the distinction. During the process, it would not have been useful and now, I'd just say I'm kin. Fam- is how I'm referred to in most cases.

**Can you talk about the use of music in the film? It's used sparingly but to great effect.**

The music in the film was used to initiate a spry, fleeting experience in line with the film's itinerary. *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* takes inspiration from both the music and its desired effect, as well as from forms of musical structure. You could say it's composed of / by a series of movements.

**What brought about this visual form? How much did you shoot and what was the process of editing?**

Once deciding to make the film associatively, these wonderful little things would happen when editing, in that a series of images would unite together to have a cumulative effect, a self-determined montage of sorts. They also brought a sense of traveling through and into some other place. We called them movements because of their musical relation, and they have a similar quality in that they cultivate a state of being. At some point, I realized that these movements could be used to organize the audience's journey with the film, allow them to engage with a sense of progress yet encourage the visuals to function the way music does: for that moment of engagement, the pleasure of that single exchange.

The global structure of the film is sun up - sun down, all images relating to each other by time of day. According to that structure, the film takes places over the course of just under a week, 10 or 11 'film days', depending on your count, though the footage range is from a 5-year period of filming.

I shot over 1300 hours of footage. The editing process was happening throughout the entire production of the film.

Joslyn Barnes, Maya Krinsky and Robb Moss (the editing team) and I were really challenged. As the film is composed of almost completely single moments, the characters do not appear as much as they would normally, which not only increases the weight of that appearance but also makes the moments more susceptible to influence by what comes before it. Adhering to the form of the film while balancing the micro shifts of feeling and mood while balancing the clarity/ambiguity of story took a collective brain.

**If images create reality as much as they represent it, what might *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* reflect back into the real world?**

The film is in some ways itself an effort to answer that question. It is an attempt to create the reality, a reality of film as strategic inquiry, while representing the pre-existence of that world.

**There are visual moments so intimate in this film that the look itself feels embodied to the point of a sense of participation or involvement. How does the film invite audience to consider or confront the question of gaze (or perspective)?**

The camera in *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* isn't there to point to a person or something and say to the audience: look at that, this is what is happening. The camera is used, inasmuch as is possible, as an extension of my consciousness, part of my experience there, which must then pull the viewer further from their vantage point of outsider and closer to mine. It's really the proximity to things that determines how much of them we understand. And so the film takes a radically subjective approach to bring people closer together.

**To what extent can we understand another person's life through the cinematic form? How do you think *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* creates relationships between the audience and individuals on screen?**

I think the extent of understanding is limited by the individual watching, in some respects. Cinema is still very young.

I hope *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* offers the audience a cinematic experience of perspective and place. Shared experience brings people together and while those onscreen are the other participants, cinema acts as their medium of exchange. The film closes the distance between people by inviting close looking, and in turn close feeling, and allows the audience the feeling of witnessing something - linking wonder and awe to the encounter with the protagonist.

**There is an element of cosmic and environmental wonder that enters the film. Can you talk about why this was important for you to include?**

Popular American culture's relationship to time and memory is distorted. Days, months, years, when does one thing cease to influence another? How many sunrises until one moves on? The past doesn't fade, it is absorbed into the present. In the same way we are all made of stars, we are all made of history. All of human history has happened under the same sun.

**Could you also talk about the archival footage from Hollywood that appears in the film?**

Bert Williams, who appears in the film, was the central Black entertainer of his time. He shouldered an unimaginable burden, to represent a race. While he wasn't in control of his scripts, his nuanced, silent performances illustrated a master at work, one conscious of the extent to which "blackface" could function as an outfit to undermine racial casting. Joslyn and I felt it was important to bring the audience back to the origins of cinema's early declarations of Blackness, in order to allow the audience to adjust their bearings, and consider the ways their encounters with media's Blackness determined their lived reality.

\* \* \*

#### **ADDITIONAL QUOTES from DIRECTOR RAMELL ROSS**

*"Skin is flesh. I like looking at things/people, the curves of an object, the drumming of a thumb, the way everything imaginable is contained in the softest gestures or common events. It's the way these are put together that makes them evocative, that overwrites memories with new memories."*

*"I've believed that straying from structured acts of seeing can produce the strongest connection with an audience. By reorganizing and juxtaposing symbols of Blackness/Black life I am hoping to create a new interaction between the viewer and the lives unfurling onscreen. The fact is that most people don't really know what it is like to be poor and Black in America and also dismiss that race is manufactured by design."*

*“My aim is to create a vehicle to transcend color consciousness by providing an experiential entrance into the signified and signifiers of blackness in the South, an entrance into the actual space of meaning. Here, like the gaze of a lover or a brother, where there is an attentiveness of looking at one’s first born, the safety and comfort of perceived knowledge through social constructs, gives way to the phenomenological and the undeniability of one’s humanity.”*

\* \* \*

## **KEY PERSONNEL**

### **RaMell Ross**

**Director, Producer, Writer, Cinematographer, Sound Recordist, Editor**

RaMell Ross earned a BA in both English and Sociology from Georgetown University and an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. His photographs have been exhibited internationally and his writing has appeared in such outlets as the New York Times and Walker Arts Center. He was part of Filmmaker Magazine’s “25 New Faces of Independent Film” in 2015, and a New Frontier Artist in Residence at the MIT Media Lab. In 2016, he was a finalist for the Aperture Portfolio Prize, winner of an Aaron Siskind Individual Photographer’s Fellowship Grant and a Sundance Art of Nonfiction Fellow. In early 2017, he was selected for Rhode Island Foundation’s Robert and Margaret MacColl Johnson Artist Fellowship. RaMell is currently on faculty at Brown University’s Visual Arts Department. *Hale County This Morning, This Evening* is his first feature documentary.

### **Joslyn Barnes - Producer, Edit Team**

Among the films Joslyn Barnes has been involved with producing since co-founding Louverture Films with Danny Glover and partners Susan Rockefeller and Bertha Foundation are: the features BAMA KO (Abderrahmane Sissako), THE TIME THAT REMAINS (Elia Suleiman), UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES and CEMETERY OF SPLENDOR (both by Apichatpong Weerasethakul), WHITE SUN (Deepak Rauniyar) and ZAMA (Lucrecia Martel); and the documentaries TROUBLE THE WATER (Tia Lessin & Carl Deal), THE HOUSE I LIVE IN (Eugene Jarecki), BLACK POWER MIXTAPE 1967-1975 and CONCERNING VIOLENCE (both by Göran Hugo Olsson), HOUSE IN THE FIELDS (Tala Hadid), STRONG ISLAND (Yance Ford), HALE COUNTY THIS MORNING, THIS EVENING (RaMell Ross), THAT SUMMER (Göran Hugo Olsson) and the forthcoming ANGELS ARE MADE OF LIGHT (James Longley) and AQUARELA (Victor Kossakovsky). In 2017, Barnes was the recipient of both the Cinereach Producer Award and the Sundance Institute | Amazon Studios Producer Award.

### **Su Kim - Producer**

Su Kim is a Korean-American producer based in New York City. She is entrepreneurial, creative and committed to crafting compelling stories and supporting independent filmmakers. Her films in release include the Sundance Film Festival premiere KIMJONGILIA (dir. NC Heikin), ADAMA (dir. David Felix Sutcliffe) supported by ITVS, and SOUND OF REDEMPTION: THE FRANK MORGAN STORY (dir. NC Heikin). As a producer, she has been awarded CPB/PBS Producers Workshop Scholarship as well as numerous grants from ITVS, the Sundance Documentary Film Program, NYSCA, Tribeca Film Institute and the US State Department. In 2014 she was selected along with five other women filmmakers as a Fellow for the Sundance Institute Women's Initiative. She is currently producing ONE BULLET AFGHANISTAN (dir. Carol Dysinger), SANSÓN and ME, and LUPE UNDER the SUN (dir. Rodrigo Reyes) and HALE COUNTY THIS MORNING, THIS EVENING.

### **Maya Krinsky – Co Writer, Edit Team**

Maya Krinsky is an artist and educator. She has an MFA from Rhode Island School of Design and a BA from Bard College, and attended the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program. Krinsky has exhibited internationally, including the Cairo Video Festival, where her short piece "English Lessons" screened at the Gezira Art Center. In 2017 she exhibited several projects funded by the Andy Warhol Foundation at Yeah Maybe in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She teaches studio and seminar courses at RISD and has worked for many years as an English language instructor for immigrants and international students, experience that informs her focus on language and translation.

### **Robb Moss – Edit Team**

Robb Moss' most recent project, CONTAINMENT, is about the disposition of nuclear waste for now and for the next 10,000 years. Co-directed with Peter Galison, the film premiered at Full Frame in 2015 and has shown in more than forty festivals and other venues, including in Berlin, Paris, Rio, Budapest, Beirut, Sheffield, Cuernavaca, and Tasmania. Art Galleries in Dublin, Sydney and Antwerp have used the film as the foundation for exhibitions, and Moss and Galison re-made the film as an installation piece for the Steirischer Herbst art festival in Graz, Austria. The television broadcast on Independent Lens was in January 2017. Previous films, SECRECY (2008-directed with Galison) and THE SAME RIVER TWICE, (2003) premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and, together, showed in more than fifty film festivals and in over one hundred theatres. THE SAME RIVER TWICE was nominated for a 2004 Independent Spirit Award, and SECRECY was screened by the Congressional Record and the ACLU in an effort to help think through government secrecy's relationship to national security and democracy.

### **Apichatpong Weerasethakul – Creative Advisor**

Apichatpong Weerasethakul is recognised as one of the most original voices in contemporary cinema. His previous six feature films, short films and installations have won him widespread international recognition and numerous awards, including the Cannes Palme d'Or in 2010 with UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES. His TROPICAL MALADY won the Cannes Competition Jury Prize in 2004 and BLISSFULLY YOURS won the Cannes Un Certain Regard Award in 2002. SYNDROMES AND A CENTURY (2006) was recognised as one of the best films of the last decade in several 2010 polls. MYSTERIOUS OBJECT AT NOON (2000) his first feature has been recently restored by Martin Scorsese's World Cinema Foundation.

### **Dan Timmons | Sound Recordist & Re-Recording Mixer**

Dan Timmons, a native of Rochester, New York, lives and works in New York City as a sound designer for documentary and feature films. His family proudly runs two generations deep as employees of Eastman Kodak. With each film he is involved with, Dan would like to push the medium forward as a tool to bring compassion to our disparate little space rock.

### **Tony Volante | Re-Recording Mixer**

Before starting his film career mixing Todd Solondz's Sundance Grand Jury Prize winner WELCOME TO THE DOLLHOUSE, Tony Volante spent 15 years recording and mixing music for Grammy winning recording artists like Donald Fagen of Steely Dan and Roger Daltrey of The Who. Tony applied his music career experience to enhance many music related films including Phish BITTERSWEET MOTEL, Herbie Hancock's POSSIBILITIES, The Ramones END OF THE CENTURY (Grammy nominated), Lou Reed BERLIN, Patti Smith DREAM OF LIFE, Lee Scratch Perry THE UPSETTER, Tony Bennett THE ZEN OF BENNETT, Fela Kuti FINDING FELA, Nina Simone WHAT HAPPENED MISS SIMONE (Grammy nominated, Oscar nominated, Emmy winner). Tony's film mixing career has spanned over 22 years. He was instrumental in starting from the ground up two highly respected film divisions, first, Soundtrack and then second, Sound Lounge. Throughout his career he's worked with some of the most respected filmmakers in the industry including Derek Cianfrance, Oren Moverman, Jim Jarmusch, Joel Schumacher, Alex Gibney, Doug Liman, Ron Howard, Jonathan Demme, Liz Garbus and Yance Ford, to name a few. Tony has been nominated for 2 Primetime Emmy Awards (Outstanding Mixing WHAT HAPPENED, MISS SIMONE and Outstanding Mixing GOING CLEAR) and an MPSE nomination for Best Sound Editing WHAT HAPPENED, MISS SIMONE.

### **Danny Glover – Executive Producer**

In addition to being one of the most acclaimed actors of our time, with a career spanning 30 years from “Places in the Heart”, “The Color Purple”, the “Lethal Weapon” series and the award-winning “To Sleep with Anger”, Danny Glover has also produced, executive produced and financed numerous projects for film, television and theatre. Among these are “Good Fences”, “3 AM”, “Freedom Song”, “Get on the Bus”, “Deadly Voyage”, “Buffalo Soldiers”, “The Saint of Fort Washington”, “To Sleep with Anger”, and “Mooladé”, as well as the series “Courage” and “America’s Dream”. Since co-founding Louverture Films, Glover has executive or co-produced “Bamako”, “Africa Unite”, “Trouble the Water”, “Salt of this Sea”, “Soundtrack for a Revolution”, “Dum Maaro Dum”, “The Black Power Mixtape”, “The Disappearance of McKinley Nolan”, “The House I Live In”, “Highway”, “The Narrow Frame of Midnight”, “Cemetery of Splendour”, “White Sun”, “Strong Island” and “Zama”. He associate produced “The Time That Remains” and the 2010 Cannes Palme d’Or winner “Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives”. The recipient of countless awards for his humanitarian and advocacy efforts on behalf of economic and social justice causes, Glover is a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and a recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from Amnesty International and the President’s Award from the NAACP.

### **Susan Rockefeller – Executive Producer**

Susan Rockefeller is a partner in Louverture Films and a documentary filmmaker whose in-depth look at critical issues has won top awards at many film festivals across the United States and around the world. Her recent efforts include producing and directing the HBO documentary "Making the Crooked Straight," which received a Christopher Award; and directing and producing "Striking a Chord" on the ability of music to help heal Post Traumatic Stress (PTSD). She directed and produced "Mission of Mermaids" on ocean health, and is currently in production on two films: one about agricultural breeders, farmers and chefs; the other on Bach's "Coffee Cantata." When she’s not making films, Susan designs message-inspired jewelry to raise awareness about protecting family, art and nature, and sits on the boards of Oceana, the We Are Family Foundation and the program committee for The Stone Barns for Sustainable Agriculture.

### **Tony Tabatznik – Executive Producer**

Tony is the founder of the Bertha Foundation, which dreams of a more just world and supports forms of activism that aim to bring about change. The foundation champions those using media, law and enterprise as tools to achieve their vision. It envisions a society where stories come from many different voices, where law is used as a tool for justice and where business delivers positive social impact. It works with a network of people whom we believe can change the world - activists working with storytellers and lawyers. While powerful on their own, the Foundation also look for opportunities for leaders to collaborate across portfolios.

**Laura Poitras & Charlotte Cook – Executive Producers for Field of Vision**

Laura Poitras is a filmmaker and journalist. Her film CITIZENFOUR won an Oscar® for best documentary, as well as awards from BAFTA, Independent Spirit Award, and the Director’s Guild of America. The first film in her 9/11 trilogy, MY COUNTRY, MY COUNTRY, was nominated for an Oscar. The second film, THE OATH, was nominated for two Emmys. Her reporting on NSA surveillance shared in the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for public service. She received a Peabody Award for her film Flag Wars. She recently exhibited her first solo museum show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. She is a co-creator of Field of Vision.

Charlotte Cook is a curator, writer and producer. Prior to Field of Vision, she was the Director of Programming at Hot Docs, North America’s largest documentary festival. In London, Charlotte was the Head of Film Programming at The Frontline Club. She has also worked with BBC Storyville, the Channel 4 BritDoc Foundation’s Puma Creative Catalyst Fund and the Edinburgh International Film Festival, where she curated the strand Conflict I Reportage. In addition to her work at Field of Vision, Charlotte is currently a programmer at CPH:DOX.

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**MAIN CREDITS**

A film by RaMell Ross

**Hale County This Morning, This Evening**

**2018 – US – 76 minutes – sound Dolby 5.1 – ratio 1.78 – English**

Featuring, in order of appearance

**QUINCY BRYANT  
DANIEL COLLINS  
MARY B. COLLINS  
LATRENDIA “BOOSIE” ASH  
KYRIE BRYANT  
TOMEKO ELLIOTT  
BERT WILLIAMS  
NATHANIEL DAVIS  
KARMYN BRYANT  
KORBYN BRYANT  
SHADEDRA COLLINS**

Directed, Filmed, Edited and Written by  
**RAMELL ROSS**

Produced by  
**RAMELL ROSS  
JOSLYN BARNES  
SU KIM**

Co-Writer  
**Maya Krinsky**

Edit Team  
**Robb Moss  
Joslyn Barnes  
Maya Krinsky**

Creative Advisor  
**Apichatpong Weerasethakul**

Original Music by  
**Alex Somers**  
**Scott Alario**  
**Forest Kelley**

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In Association with  
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**Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program**

Executive Producers  
**Danny Glover**  
**Susan Rockefeller**  
**Bertha Foundation**

Executive Producers for Field of Vision  
**Laura Poitras & Charlotte Cook**

Co-Executive Producer  
**Lynda Weinman**

Associate Producer  
**Sarah D'hanens**

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“Hale County This Morning, This Evening” was presented at the following pitch forums:

**Full Frame Festival – Garrett Scott Documentary Development Grant 2014  
Sundance Film Festival – RaMell Ross, Documentary Fellow 2015  
CPH:FORUM of CPH:DOX - Copenhagen International Documentary Film  
Festival 2017**

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