

THE DAY THE MUSIC STOPPED

A FEATURE-LENGTH DOCUMENTARY IN-PROGRESS

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NASHVILLE'S SOUL
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EXIT/IN

THEY CREATED A SCENE. AND THAT PUT A BULLSEYE ON THEIR BACK.

SYNOPSIS

The Day the Music Stopped (working title) is a feature-length documentary examining the decade-long struggle of independent music venues and the creative class they support against developers and concert promoter Live Nation. Taking place in Nashville, Tennessee, dubbed “Music City USA”, our story is depicted through the lens of *Exit/In*, one of the nation’s most historic independent music venues. We watch as the club’s owner/operator Chris Cobb, the musicians who perform there and political allies work together to save the club from imminent corporate takeover and potential demolition.

Chris Cobb crowd surfs at *Exit/In* Nov. 23, 2022

SYNOPSIS

“Live Nation told me to my face that ‘In 10 years, we will own the market from top to bottom and you’ll either be with us or against us’”.

- Chris Cobb, owner Exit/In

In terms of iconic and historic punk and rock clubs in the United States, there are a handful that come to mind. *CBGB* in New York, *The Whiskey A Go-Go* in Los Angeles, *The 40-Watt* in Athens, Georgia and *The 9:30 Club* in Washington, D.C. to name a few. In Nashville, Tennessee there’s *Exit/ In*.

***Exit/In* opened in 1971 as an alternative to Nashville’s country music scene, anchoring what would come to be known as “The Rock Block”. Voted “Best Independent Venue in the Nation” in a 2022 nation-wide poll conducted by Pollstar, *Exit/In* has helped launch the careers of acts like *Jimmy Buffet* (who played the club’s first show), *Billy Joel*, *The Police*, *The Red Hot Chili Peppers* and countless Nashville acts, such as *Ben Folds Five*, *Kings of Leon*, *Margo Price*, *Cage the Elephant* and *Paramore* to name just a few. It was also home to one of the most vibrant scenes in modern rock history starting around 2014 when a handful of bands exploded onto the scene. That scene continued for years. Even as bands outgrew it and left on tour, *Exit/In* remained their home base. But everyone there knew it wouldn’t last forever.**

SYNOPSIS

“Live Nation told me to my face that ‘In 10 years, we will own the market from top to bottom and you’ll either be with us or against us’”.

- Chris Cobb, owner Exit/In

As the club celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2021, owner/operator Chris Cobb learned that the building the club is in was put under contract to be sold to *AJ Capital Partners*, a developer from Chicago with ties to *Live Nation*. With a murky trademark on the *Exit/In* name, the club appeared to be facing a fate similar to many of the other independent music venues in the city and across the nation.

BACKSTORY

In 1950 Nashville, Tennessee was dubbed “Music City USA”, but in many people’s minds, it’s always been a country music town. However, over the past decade or so, the city has become a hub for essentially every kind of music you can imagine. As a result, tourism was exploding and Nashville was becoming one of the fastest growing cities in America. Every facet of the music business exists here from mega-stars like Taylor Swift and Jack White, a massive recording and publishing industry, songwriters, up-and-coming artists and small, independent venues that support them. In short, Nashville has become the epicenter of the music industry in the United States with a unique music ecosystem where every part is interconnected and dependent on the other. The problem the city faces is that one part of that ecosystem is not particularly profitable: Small, independent venues, the mom-and-pop clubs run for, and by, people in the community where up-and-coming artists are given the opportunity to hone their craft. Though Nashville was quickly becoming a top tourist destination, the city had the lowest cash reserves of any major city in America, so balancing cultural preservation and growth was made more difficult. How does a city prioritize an unprofitable yet arguably vital part of their brand when the world’s largest corporations want to move in?



BACKSTORY

Live Nation Entertainment is the world's largest concert promoter. After merging with *Ticketmaster* in 2010, the company vertically integrated the concert market, creating a monopoly under condition of a probationary period, or "consent decree" imposed by the US Senate. Despite the agreement, over the course of the next five years, *Live Nation* used its leverage to either eliminate or buy their competition, taking control of artist representation, concert promotion and ticketing. In 2014, *Live Nation* made its entry into Nashville through a partnership with *Bridgestone Arena*, the city's largest venue. Over the next few years, they continued to arrange agreements with smaller venues around the city, including the taxpayer-funded *Ascend Amphitheater*, a 2,500 seat venue. Though they had garnered the city's largest venues, their strategy to control Nashville's live music market was only beginning.

By 2015, *Live Nation* had garnered substantial marketshare in the nation's mid-sized-to-large concert market including festivals such as *Lalapalooza* and *Bonaroo* (which they bought a controlling stake in). The last remaining piece of the live music industry was the small, independent venues where local, up-and-coming artists perform. In 2016, *Live Nation* approached *Exit/In*'s owner/operator Chris Cobb about purchasing the club. When negotiations fell through, a *Live Nation* representative told Cobb "In 10 years we'll own the market top-to-bottom and you'll either be with us or against us."

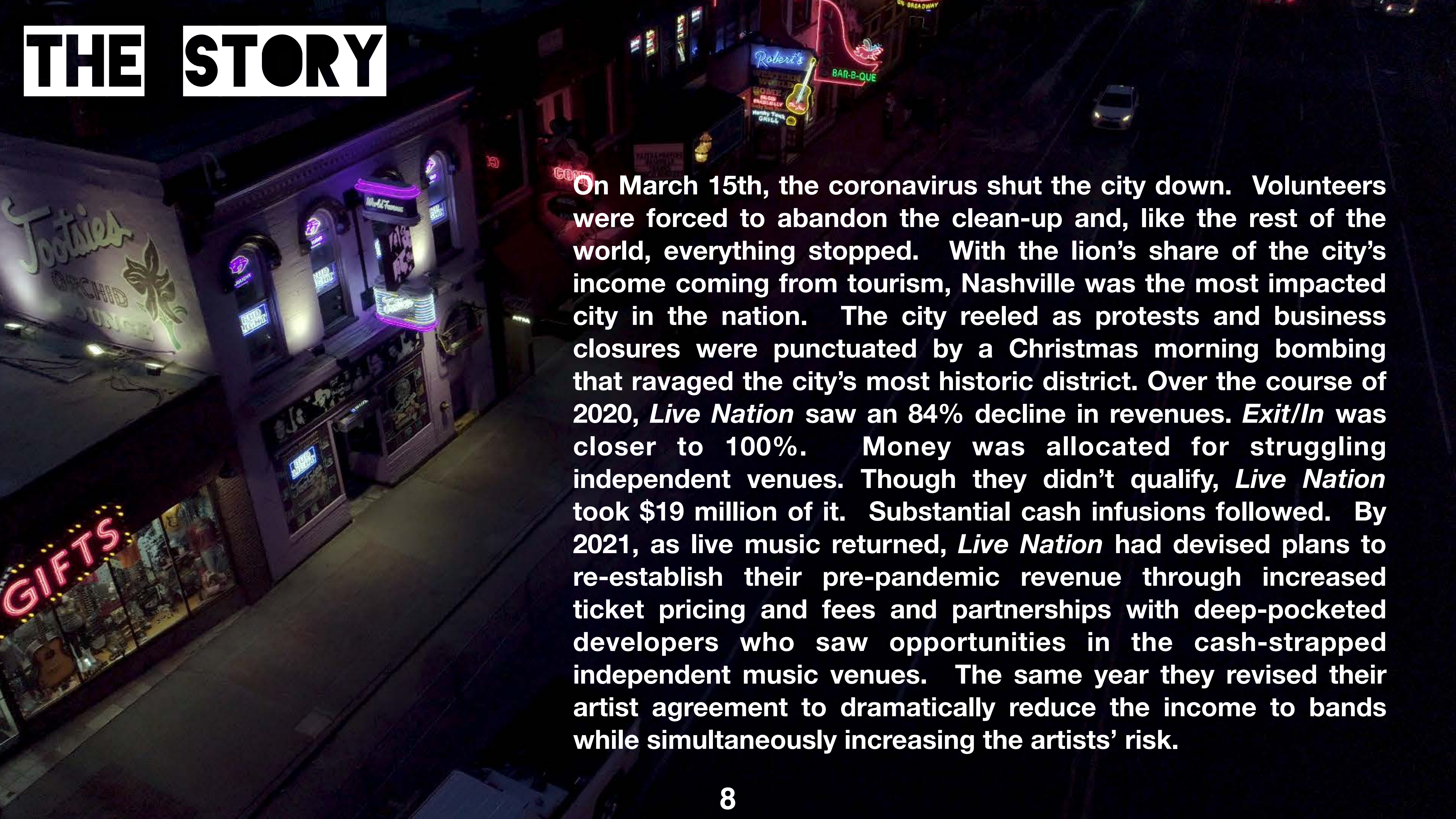
THE STORY

“The flood is where it all began.” - Alanna Royale, Nashville musician

Following a devastating flood in 2010, Nashville saw an influx of capital as developers looked to cash in on the city’s depressed real estate values. As a result, the city saw strong and steady growth from 2013 through the beginning of 2020. As Nashville became a top tourist destination, investment in the city’s culture, namely live music, was growing quickly. Over time, the mom-and-pop venues that were part of the city’s cultural foundation found themselves in a difficult situation. As investment in the city soared, a perfect storm of unsustainable rent increases and well-financed competition threatened to upend the already-unstable market.

On March 3rd, 2020, the deadliest tornado in Nashville’s history cut through the heart of the city. Volunteers poured into the affected areas. Musicians held benefits. GoFundMe accounts were started. They had just twelve days to help.

THE STORY

An aerial night view of a street in Nashville, Tennessee. The street is lined with buildings featuring vibrant neon signs. On the left, a building has a sign for 'Jooties' with a floral design. Below it, a storefront window is illuminated with a 'GIFTS' sign. Further down, a sign for 'Robert's BAR-B-QUE' is visible, along with a neon guitar. The street is dark, with a few cars visible in the distance. The overall atmosphere is that of a bustling city at night.

On March 15th, the coronavirus shut the city down. Volunteers were forced to abandon the clean-up and, like the rest of the world, everything stopped. With the lion's share of the city's income coming from tourism, Nashville was the most impacted city in the nation. The city reeled as protests and business closures were punctuated by a Christmas morning bombing that ravaged the city's most historic district. Over the course of 2020, *Live Nation* saw an 84% decline in revenues. *Exit/In* was closer to 100%. Money was allocated for struggling independent venues. Though they didn't qualify, *Live Nation* took \$19 million of it. Substantial cash infusions followed. By 2021, as live music returned, *Live Nation* had devised plans to re-establish their pre-pandemic revenue through increased ticket pricing and fees and partnerships with deep-pocketed developers who saw opportunities in the cash-strapped independent music venues. The same year they revised their artist agreement to dramatically reduce the income to bands while simultaneously increasing the artists' risk.

THE STORY

“We don't have effective tools at historic preservation to say nothing about cultural preservation. It's hard to substantiate the value of culture in dollars and cents.”

-Jeff Syracuse, BMI, Nashville City Council

***AJ Capital Partners*, a Chicago-based developer had moved into Nashville years earlier. They had purchased and developed multiple properties around the city. Among others, they constructed a building just south of downtown which would become *Live Nation's* Nashville headquarters.**

Investment opportunities were abundant as the local music scene reeled. *Douglas Corner*, a beloved singer-songwriter venue closed. *Mercy Lounge*, another of the city's long-time independent venues learned they would not be able to afford to renew their lease. As Chris Cobb struggled to keep *Exit/In* from insolvency, *AJ Capital Partners* moved in and put the building he was in under contract.

Chris Cobb and city councilman Jeff Syracuse immediately went to work to rally the city's leadership to avoid *Exit/In's* closure and possible demolition. Citizens spoke out. The city government demanded answers. But *AJ Capital Partners* remained largely silent.

THE STORY

“None of us were really interested in winning a grammy. It was almost an anti-band. The name came about because it was the worst name they could think of.”

- Evan Bird, musician

Exit/In has a rich history of opening their stage to up-and-coming acts in Nashville and from around the world. Like other independent, community-based venues, *Exit/In* was willing to take a chance on unproven talent, giving them an opportunity to hone their craft and build an audience. Over the years, many great Nashville bands were launched out of the club and, along the way, a local scene would build around these bands. Around 2015, a scene emerged around a handful of bands, with one becoming arguably the most popular band in the club's history.

Diarrhea Planet is a wall of sound. Four guitars, bass and drums and about as wild a show as you can imagine. In fact, the “No Stage Diving” signs at *Exit/In* were put in place because of them. The signs didn't help. People jumped into the crowd. They jumped onto stage. Sometimes they were handed a guitar or might just start singing. The band went on to tour the country for years becoming a lot more successful than they had originally intended. And, though they had outgrown *Exit/In*, when they came back to Nashville, that's where they played. 3 nights in a row sold out. For years. It was the picture of the kind of scene that bubbles up out of an independent venue. The kind of hyper-local experience that Nashville was in danger of losing.

“This is beyond just music. This is where somebody's found a home and they have a connection to that home.”

- Jordan Smith, musician

THE STORY



Despite their efforts to save the venue, it became clear that the city simply doesn't have the resources or tools to fight on behalf of *Exit/In*, or any other historic venue for that matter. As Syracuse raised funds to complete a study of the city's independent venues, time was running out to find solutions.

Six months after the closure of *Mercy Lounge*, a capacity crowd witnessed the end of *Exit/In*'s 51 year run as an independently owned venue. The final night, November 23, 2022 saw *Diarrhea Planet* take the famed stage one last time for a night no one there would ever forget. From the first song the lines between band and crowd blurred as fans rushed the stage, the band surfed the crowd and everyone became so immersed in the moment that there didn't seem to be any time to contemplate what the show signified. Decades of music culminated in one perfect night of music. As people crowd surfed on stage for the final song, *Diarrhea Planet*'s frontman, Jordan Smith thanked the crowd and said goodnight for the last time.

THE STORY

1971 - 2022

EXIT/IN

“It was national news that independent venues were struggling. These guys were flush with cash. It’s clearly predatory behavior.”

-Chris Cobb, owner *Exit/In*

Within weeks, there were few indications that *Exit/In* had ever been there. Six months later, *Exit/In* reopened under new management with bands booked through *AJ Capital’s Stage Right Productions* and ticketed exclusively by *Live Nation Entertainment’s Ticketmaster*.

Since their purchase of *Exit/In*, *AJ Capital Partners* has acquired similar independent venues in Memphis, TN, Charlotte, NC, New Orleans, LA and Portland, OR with all booking handled internally and all ticketing handled by *Ticketmaster*. As venues and artists have continued to struggle, *Live Nation Entertainment’s* revenue for the twelve months ending June 30, 2023 was \$19.202B, a 64.98% increase year-over-year. *Live Nation’s* annual revenue for 2022 was \$16.681B, a 166.11% increase from 2021.

THE STORY

Nashville simply wasn't prepared. There was no plan in place to safeguard the independent music venues that many deem vital to remaining "Music City USA". After losing *Douglas Corner*, *Mercy Lounge* and *Exit/In*, the city seemed ready to move forward and address the multi-faceted issues facing independent venues. Jeff Syracuse's venue study was funded and efforts to both understand and address the problem got underway. While it was too-little-too-late for some, it was an important first step in addressing how we safeguard a critical piece of the city's music scene and set the stage for new venues to emerge and prosper going forward.

The Nashville musicians who played, or would have played, *Exit/In* have moved on to other clubs. As they've always done, the city's artists have found a way to make and share their music. And, as the traditional opportunities to launch their bands have diminished, artists are finding new ways to find their fans. Chris Cobb is working to set up a network of independent clubs across the country to allow up-and-coming bands a way to tour independent of *Live Nation*. Bands have also moved online with opportunities on various platforms offering a way to reach new audiences without being dependent on record labels or promoters.

While we will most likely continue to see every facet of the music industry shift toward a more corporatized, centralized model, there is every indication that musicians and fans will continue to find a way to find each other.

THE CHARACTERS



Jeff Syracuse, BMI, Nashville City Councilman



Chris Cobb owner, *Exit/In*



Alanna Royale, musician



Jordan Smith, Diarrhea Planet

THE FILMMAKERS

Patrick Sheehan: Director, Cinematographer

Patrick is a Nashville native who, throughout his high-school years was in a band that performed at Elliston Square (now The End) across the street from Exit/In on The Rock Block. While filming The Day the Music Stopped, he heard the news that the building that houses Exit/In was under contract to be sold, fundamentally changing the direction of the film.

Patrick has written, directed, filmed and produced multiple documentaries, including:

**Death is our Business (Cinematography, Edit) Frontline
Good Trouble (Co-cinematography) CNN Films, Magnolia Pictures
Always in Season (Cinematography) Independent Lens, Winner - Sundance
Gip (Director, Cinematography) PBS. Winner - multiple festivals
Two Points, One Title (Director of Photography) ESPN Films
Gideon's Army (Co-cinematography) HBO. Winner - Sundance.
Man in the Glass: The Dale Brown Story (Director, Cinematography).
Winner - multiple festivals.**



THE FILMMAKERS

Demetria Kalodimos: Producer

Demetria Kalodimos is a trusted voice in Middle Tennessee. She has anchored and reported the news for more than 35 years and has won some of the top awards in broadcast journalism including 16 Emmys, 3 Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) National awards and 3 Edward R. Murrow Awards for investigative reporting. Demetria has consistently been voted Best Local Anchor by readers of the Tennessean and the Nashville Scene. She was inducted into the Tennessee Journalism Hall of Fame in 2016.

Demetria holds a Masters in Journalism from the University of Illinois and a Bachelor of Music Education and Honorary Doctorate from Illinois Wesleyan University. She is executive producer at The Nashville Banner and 2021 Journalism Professional in Residence at Lipscomb University. She also produces her own award winning documentaries, music videos and other visual content through her company Genuine Human Productions, headquartered at The Filming Station.

