

Interview, Audio: Sabaah Folyan & Damon Davis of 'Whose Streets?'

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CHICAGO – The historic 2014 street killing by law enforcement of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. – and the subsequent deflection by the police – continues to resonate. “Whose Streets?” is a new documentary about the incident and aftermath, and it marks the debut of co-directors Sabaah Folyan and Damon Davis.

“Whose Streets?” relates the incident of an unarmed teenager named Michael Brown, who was killed by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9th, 2014. His body laid in the streets for hours, and police tried to deflect what happened. This marked a breaking point for the African American community in Ferguson, nearby St. Louis, and supporters from all over the world. The subsequent protests and confrontations made headlines, all the way up to when Officer Wilson was acquitted of wrongdoing by a grand jury. However, the events empowered the community, to stand up to systemic racism within the law enforcement community and the use of National Guard military force. “Whose Streets?” profiles the new generation of activists that were inspired, to fight not only for their civil rights, but their right to live.



The Activists Arise in 'Whose Streets?'

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

The two co-directors making their film debut are artists and activists themselves. Sabaah Folyan is from South Central Los Angeles, who studied at the Lee Strasberg Institute of Theatre and Film while a teenager, and performed with the Black Theater Ensemble in New York City. She helped to organize the Millions March there, a reaction to the choking death of Eric Garner by police, and went to Ferguson in the aftermath of the Brown incident. Damon Davis is an award-winning interdisciplinary artist from St. Louis, with shows all over the country, and is a Firelight Media Producers and Sundance Institute Lab Fellow. HollywoodChicago.com talked to Folyan and Davis, about their path to filmmaking, the Michael Brown incident and Ferguson.

HollywoodChicago.com: So much has happened since the Michael Brown killing, and so much more needs to be done. How does the movement that developed from the situation, in your observation in putting together the film, maintain its strength in the face of the current presidential administration?

Damon Davis: I have mixed feelings. This administration is unapologetic about the way they feel about everyone who is not them. That is a level of outright hatred I have not seen in my lifetime. My parents have seen it, so it's not a new thing. But on the other hand, no president have ever looked out for black people, whatever color he may be. African Americans are always the last people in this country to be looked out for, and no administration has looked out for the people themselves. What we have done with this film is create a piece of art that is soul food, to fortify people, to allow them to get up and continue this fight.

Sabaah Folyan: To reflect on what Damon was saying, we didn't make this film under the Trump administration, it was put together under Obama, which is significant. But with it releasing in this environment, the big deal now is truth and 'alternative facts.' Do we live in a post-truth time? I'm excited to present this film to the world, because I believe the truth of the experience comes across in the film in a way that is undeniable, and can be healing for this country, both for the participants of Ferguson and as a reminder that truth does exist, that it can be shown and it can be felt.

HollywoodChicago.com: There were indications of how slavery and its resonance in the relationship between whites and black still have an affect on the African American community. In what community issues do you believe we still see the roots?

Davis: The police. The police were created as slave catchers. But really it is everything... there was a recent study that found that black families are still 280 years behind the wealth of white families. 280 years ago there was still slavery. America was build on slavery, because of the relative short time it has existed. Older cultures had slavery, but no other country was built from the ground up on the backs of slaves except America. You cannot remove slavery from our narrative, not only in how black people are treated, but how everyone is treated. It's a foundational DNA thing that keeps coming up in America.

Folyan: It was recently proven that the descendants of Holocaust survivors had modified DNA, because of the trauma their ancestors had received. So black people are suffering the genetic impact of slavery constantly. Plus in this country, there has never been a true reconciliation project. White people have never been asked to reckon with what it means to be the descendants of slave holders or the free people in the time of slaves, nor have black people been reconciled. It creates a huge divide that is ever present. It can't even be brought up, because it's always thought to be divisive.

I think it was significant that Barack Obama was not an ancestor of American slaves. If, for example, you go onto diverse college campuses, and you look at the make up of the black student population, in regard to how many of them are descendants of American slaves versus black people who are immigrants, and you will see a specific delineation. Descendants of American slaves are treated differently in this country, and if we don't face it head on, it's not going to disappear.

Davis: I want to add that slavery is not over. The prison industrial complex houses a majority of people of color. What goes on inside those complexes? Slavery has just grown and evolved, and got different names. And the same people who were enslaved before, are enslaved now. There are more people in prison now than there were slaves in 1865. Slavery is not over.



Co-Directors Damon Davis and Sabaah Folyan at a Recent Film Festival for 'Whose Streets?'

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: There is so much gut-wrenching emotion in the film. How did you maintain a filmmaker's eye in balancing your story in the face of your connection to that emotion?

Folyan: It helped for me, because I always saw it as a privilege to work on this project, and have a distance from it, and not return to that situation. Although I feel connected to it, I didn't have to experience the day-to-day feelings involving it. It still was emotional, but our editor Christopher McNabb is white, and he was able to get more of a distance from it, while being very intuitive and respectful of our perspective.

Davis: It was harder for me to keep that emotional balance, because I live there. To be real with you, there were times when I thought I could not go on with the film. I give props to my co-director.

Folyan: I want to add that I think this would have been true no matter who made the film. Racism implicates all of us, we're all involved, it just has to do with what level we're involved in. We get the question a lot because we're black and we're activists, and it's assumed we're going to have a particular vested interest in what this story is, which is true, but I think it's important to acknowledge that everyone has a stake in what is presented, and there are no 'blank slates' that can look at it 'objectively.'

Davis: And there are also people who don't have a f**king consciousness about it. It goes beyond not being objective, there are people who look at this and think it doesn't affect them, like they're watching a National Geographic thing... but what they're actually looking at is themselves.

In the audio portion of the interview, filmmakers Sabaah and Damon talk about the role of police in society, the use of the "n-word" and lessons from Ferguson.

"Whose Streets?" opens nationwide in select theaters on August 11th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Directed by Sabaah Folyan and Damon Davis. Rated "R"



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