

THE WRAP

DOCUMENTING 2021

EXPLORING THE YEAR IN NONFICTION FILM WITH TODD HAYNES, EDGAR WRIGHT, STANLEY NELSON, MATTHEW HEINEMAN AND MANY MORE

SPECIAL SECTION

THE NEW AWARDS LANDSCAPE

GOLDEN GLOBES TURMOIL OPENS THE DOOR FOR THE SAG AWARDS AND CRITICS CHOICE AWARDS

TV'S HOT NEWCOMERS

SQUID GAME, MICHAEL KEATON, OSCAR ISAAC AND MORE

the
SUMMER
of LOVE

QUESTLOVE'S SUMMER OF SOUL HELPED LAUNCH A TREMENDOUS YEAR FOR MUSIC DOCUMENTARIES

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— Edgar Wright, *The Sparks Brothers*

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The Music Man

It figured that Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson would take control of the music when he came to TheWrap office to shoot the cover of our second annual documentary issue. But I definitely wasn’t expecting that the drummer, bandleader of the Roots, deejay and director of the soul, gospel, jazz and R&B extravaganza *Summer of Soul* would request a yacht-rock playlist. That, though, is exactly what he did, which means that the shoot progressed to the sounds of (in descending order of palatability) James Taylor, Steely Dan, Elton John and Kiki Dee, Air Supply and, gulp, Barry Manilow’s “I Write the Songs,” among many others. And when it was over, Questlove apologized to me and then explained that his fondness for those sounds began as a joke between him and his late friend Anthony Bourdain, who claimed he fired three restaurant employees for playing Billy Joel.

I suppose it’s fitting that a hip-hop star would play some wimp-rock classics (sorry for that pejorative label, but my inner rock critic is re-emerging) while shooting the cover, because this year’s bumper crop of music documentaries is nothing if not eclectic. Docs in 2021 have delved into everybody from Stevie Wonder and Sly Stone to Billie Eilish, from Kenny G to the Velvet Underground, from Sparks to Dionne Warwick. Of course, there’s a lot more than music in this issue, which looks at the full range of the year’s nonfiction filmmaking and then detours into contenders in both the film and television categories for the upcoming Screen Actors Guild Awards, Critics Choice Awards and maybe even Golden Globe Awards, in whatever form they may take. And while Questlove might want you to read this issue while listening to his yacht-rock playlist, I’ll have to pull a Bourdain and say that I would not recommend it.



Questlove with hair stylist Kailie Joe



ON THE COVER
Questlove
photographed by
Corina Marie at
TheWrap’s studio on
Oct. 19, 2021

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TheWrap has won multiple awards for its reporting, columns, criticism and feature writing. In 2021 Waxman was honored as the Best Online Journalist at the L.A. Press Club SoCal Journalism Awards, as well as for her blog, Waxword. TheWrap was chosen as the best online news website at the SoCal Journalism Awards in 2018, 2012 and 2009, and best entertainment website at the National Arts & Entertainment Journalism Awards in 2018. In 2019, the site won two National Arts & Entertainment Journalism Awards for the multimedia package “#AfterMeToo: 12 Accusers Share What Happened Next, From Firing to More Trauma.” In 2021, the L.A. Press Club’s SoCal Journalism Awards gave the site top prizes for feature photography as well as for its weekly podcast, “TheWrap-Up.”

In 2020, Sharon Waxman was named one of the Top 100 Women Entrepreneurs by Inc. Magazine.

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THE HUMAN FACE OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS

Two documentary shorts pick up honors by finding a new approach to a heated hot-button issue



By the beginning of November, something strange was happening in the Oscars' Best Documentary Short Subject category. At that point, only 42 doc features had been made available to Documentary Branch members in the members-only online screening room devoted to the category, half as many as were in the room at the same point in last year's schedule and less than 18% of the 238 that qualified in 2020. But at the same time, the doc-short screening room was unexpectedly robust. It contained 80 shorts, potentially putting the category on track to top last year's total of 114.

While it's always hard to track what shorts have the inside

track with the voters who watch enough films to cast ballots in the category, it's safe to say that a pair of them are off to a very good start. When the International Documentary Association's IDA Documentary Awards, the Cinema Eye Honors and the DOC NYC film festival unveiled shortlists of the year's best doc shorts, only *Águilas* (*Eagles*) and *A Broken House* wound up on all three lists. Both were distributed by the New Yorker magazine, both dealt with the refugee crisis and both found a new way to humanize a hot button issue.

Kristy Guevara-Flanagan and Maite Zubiaurre's *Águilas* came out of a larger research endeavor called Forensic Empathy, which



focuses on migrant care at the U.S./Mexican border. Zubiaurre had become part of the *Águilas del Desierto*, who go out on weekends to scour the Arizona desert in search of migrants or, most often, their remains. “It was a gateway to thinking about issues of migration that can become really heated or statistics-driven,” Guevara-Flanagan said. “This really humanizes the effort, and shows the great gravity.”

Zubiaurre said that before the *Águilas* group allowed them to bring cameras on weekend excursions, they needed to feel that the film would benefit migrants. (One concrete effect: A migrant who works at a Gatorade plant in Phoenix saw the film and persuaded his boss to donate hundreds of pounds of powdered Gatorade to border efforts, which humanitarian groups say has saved the lives of migrants deprived of water and minerals.) But *Águilas* also documents the discovery of remains—and the way to put that on screen, Guevara-Flanagan said, was “something we really grappled with” in the edit. “We had to really think about how to incorporate the footage respectfully, how to do it with just the right tone so we can show the seriousness but not sensationalize it or disrespect the people who have passed. We have to build toward that moment so that people have enough information and an emotional relationship to what’s going on so that they receive it in the way that we want them to.”

Director Jimmy Goldblum also had a desire to show a different side of the refugee community in his film *A Broken House*. He was working on the Apple TV+ series *Home* when a researcher brought him the story of Mohamad Hafez, an architect who began building a scale model of buildings he remembered from his homeland of Syria

when U.S. immigration policies forced him to remain in the country separated from his family.

“I felt like the ways in which our Muslim immigrants and refugees were being spoken about in the press was just completely anathema to everything that I stand for and everything that I believe a healthy society needs, which is diversity of perspectives and a syncretic worldview,” he said. “I was probably going crazy, to be frank. But in Mohamad’s story, I saw the ways in which he used art and architecture as a way of humanizing the immigrant and refugee experience. And because of my experience with (his 2014 feature documentary) *Tomorrow We Disappear* and my obsessions with cultural loss, it just felt like a natural story for me to tell.”

A since-departed exec nixed Goldblum’s initial plan to make Hafez’s story the first episode of *Home*—but former congressman Dick Gephardt, who was infuriated by the Trump administration’s 2017 ban on travel from Muslim-dominated countries, was looking to finance stories that Goldblum said “would be humanizing in this incredibly dehumanizing climate.”

Before it was released, though, *A Broken House* acquired a resonance that extended beyond the refugee experience. “Something happened halfway through the pandemic, when the film began to register with people on a different level,” he said. “That idea that Mohammed hadn’t been under the same roof as his family for 15 years, that he missed weddings and funerals—suddenly that became our collective global experience. And I think it allowed us to empathize with this one immigrant’s perspective in a way that we maybe couldn’t have before. In that sense, it’s a very beautiful thing.” —SP

More Shorts

While only *A Broken House* and *Águilas* were shortlisted by the IDA, Cinema Eye Honors and DOC NYC, these four nonfiction shorts made the lists of two out of three groups:

Don’t Go Tellin’ Your Momma, Topaz Jones, Rubberband

The film was made to accompany the latest album by Topaz Jones and incorporates the *Black ABCs* developed in the 1970s. (DOC NYC, Cinema Eye)



Joe Buffalo, Amar Chebib

A portrait of Canadian skateboarder Joe Buffalo, who escaped a troubled life in the Indian Residential School system through skating. (DOC NYC, IDA)



The Last Cruise, Hannah Olson

Passengers who were on board the *Diamond Princess* cruise ship tell their stories and share their footage from the January 2020 cruise that found 700 people on board infected with COVID. (Cinema Eye, IDA)



Takeover,

Emma Francis-Snyder
An archival doc about the 1970 occupation of a South Bronx hospital by members of the Young Lords Party, who were demanding better health care. (Cinema Eye, IDA)

