



BLACK STRINGS

A film by Marquise Mays

Follow The Black String Triage Ensemble, a group of Black and Latinx musicians in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, as it performs at crime scenes in the immediate aftermath of tragic events. Together, the group seeks to alter the notion of first responders.

Documentary Short

 LIFE IS
A MAYS

SYNOPSIS

"To have a concert outside is a community experience. A tragic event like a shooting of a person is always, in some form, a community experience. The feelings of rage, sadness, and despair can only be touched by coming into contact with them. Physically touching those emotions is impossible with the human hand. Music becomes medicine for the mind, body, and soul."

Founded by Dayvin Hallmon, The Black String Triage Ensemble is a group of violin, viola, cello, and upright/double bass players based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Seeking to interrogate the meaning of a "first responder," the Ensemble arrives at the scene of acts of violence immediately after they have occurred, standing just beside the police tape amid the chaos of sirens and lights with their instruments in tow. The ensemble conducts a meditative and embodied musical experience right at the scene, shifting between negro spirituals, classical and popular music, organized around the five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – with the addition of a sixth: faith.

In a city with a deeply embedded mistrust of police and a historic wave of gun violence, many people are looking for an answer or remedy to it all. Our cast of participants are attempting to do their part by using music to amplify a new type of response to gun violence. This film adds to the well-established canon of cinema dedicated to archiving new forms of transformative community work that exist outside of the trauma we've been programmed to witness. But the group continuously struggles with a lack of funding. Despite musicians without adequate resources, an increase in violence, and the newness of this concept, can the ensemble transform these traumatized public spaces into a place of recovery, healing, and even hope?

In 2019, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, ranked second in the U.S. for Black homicide victims. In 2020, the neighboring city of Kenosha garnered national attention after the shooting of Jacob Blake. In 2021, there were 189 killings, a 93% increase from 2019 and the most ever recorded. As of July 2022, Milwaukee reports the fourth-highest increase in homicides among major U.S. cities, with a 40% increase. There have been many dialogues about what our communities can do to prevent gun violence, but this film wants to explore beyond those actions and attempt to understand the emotional and physical root cause.



ABOUT THE ENSEMBLE



The Black String Triage Ensemble is a group of violin, viola, cello, and upright/double bass players from the city and county of Milwaukee. The African Diaspora consists of all persons of African descent. The Diaspora includes Latinx people. The Black String Triage Ensemble is open to any and all Black or Latinx string players regardless of age and regardless of playing ability. There are no dues or fees required of its members. Musicians are expected to commit to all rehearsals and be on alert during the selected, "On Call" weekends.

Throughout the summer, The Black String Triage Ensemble, designates weekends of its choosing to be "On Call" to respond to shootings that occurred in the Milwaukee community. This ensemble is the first of its kind anywhere in the world.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Over time I've recognized that to live in Milwaukee, is to feel like you have to live with the weight of grief forever. Never understanding why, but knowing that grief will follow you, no matter how hard you try to run from it. I have seen firsthand how gun violence can impact not only the grieving family, but also an entire block, neighborhood or community. I know what it feels like to walk outside of your home and have to reconcile with the fact that this may be your last time on this earth. To have our names and our lives immortalized on street corners with teddy bears and deflated balloons, hoping that the loss allows us to realize how hurt we really are as a community. My connection exists beyond just simply being from this city. I am a part of a generation of community members interested in interrogating everything we were taught was normal. We understand that grief is a human process, but we yearn to discover how to heal from these moments. This connection is quite literally my life. A continuous cycle of learning and unlearning, with the intent to heal.

My personal stake in this film is based on the fact I was born and raised in Milwaukee. Not too far from Sherman Park. This city alone has tales and narratives that can stand the test of time, but no one bothers to listen. No one bothers to ask us who we really are? And to be quite honest, a lot of us wouldn't know how to answer that question in the first place. So I find myself, as a filmmaker, deeply connected to this project because I seek to archive moments that allow our city to speak for itself, on its own terms.

Milwaukee as a city has always been a microcosm for Black American identity. This city incorporates the radical and vigilant energy of the coasts, to the earnest and soulful religious attitudes of the south, with the angst and expression that comes from Detroit or Chicago, and our own unique history with orchestral musicianship, but it is still difficult to conceptualize what this place really is. So, for Milwaukee to birth this kind of response to violence through music, is in a way cathartic. To tell this story cinematically will add to the ever growing archive of dialogues happening nationally about what communities actually need. Continually and constantly begging the question of, "how do we move forward," and attempting to answer it in real time.

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MARQUISE MAYS



Marquise Mays is an award-winning filmmaker and media scholar based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Experienced in an array of media and art practices—from cinematic storytelling to exhibition curation—Marquise brings imagination, technical expertise, and cultural awareness to entertainment productions, journalistic undertakings or media-rich events and civic engagements.

Currently, Marquise is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Cultural Diversity and Foundations at the Peck School of Arts housed in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he teaches nonfiction production. He holds a M.A. in Cinema and Media Studies from the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California (USC). Whether it be a sweeping study of one woman’s blindness and insight (*Blindspot*, Director, 2020); or surveying the intimate history of Latasha Harlins, an often-overlooked figure in the L.A. riots depicted in the Student Academy Award Winning Film, *The Dope Years* (Associate Producer, 2019); or interrogating the unrequited love between Black kids and the city of Milwaukee (*The Heartland*, Director, 2021), Marquise seeks to capture the humanity of individual subjects with precision and integrity. Indeed, Marquise’s films and multimedia work evince a sympathetic depth and clarity of voice.

DIRECTOR, PRODUCER, EDITOR

RJ SMITH



RJ Smith is an artist and filmmaker based in Milwaukee, WI. As an independent storyteller, RJ's goal is to breathe new life into stories addressing themes of healing, transformation, and social justice. RJ brings multifaceted experiences, including cinematic storytelling, television and film production, screenwriting, acting, and graphic design skills. RJ's past work includes Producing the award-winning Short Documentary film, *The Heartland* (2020). Additionally, RJ is a Design Consultant at Langston League. Recently designing Langston League's *Wakanda Forever* curriculum and PBS's *The Big Payback* Documentary Film Discussion Guide and *Reparations Repair Toolkit*. RJ is currently serving as Assistant Director & Producer on *BLACK STRINGS*, presented by Firelight Media & PBS.

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, PRODUCER

BREANNA TAYLOR



Breanna Taylor is a Curriculum Consultant at Langston League. A Milwaukee-native, Breanna brands herself as an interdisciplinary artist with an emphasis on dance, film, content creating and writing. She was the co-designer of Langston League's HBO's *Lovecraft Country* syllabus and the *Candyman 2021* Companion Guide, created alongside Jordan Peele's *MonkeyPaw* Productions and NBCUniversal.

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

CALEB PEAVY



Born and raised in southeastern Wisconsin, my primary interest as a filmmaker is to share stories of Midwestern people and culture. I often explore the history of individuals, communities and natural landscapes in my work. The ability to immortalize people through time-based media is what drew me to pursue a career in film and video. After graduating from UW-Milwaukee in 2019 with a degree in Film & Video, I've gained experience working on a variety of productions including documentaries, music videos, and commercials. Currently based in Milwaukee, I'm operating as Assistant Producer & Editor at Steinhafels Furniture, a family-owned furniture store located in Wisconsin and Illinois.

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

GABRIELLA CISERNOS



Gabriella "Gabbi" Cisernos is a Mexican-American, Milwaukee-based filmmaker. Her personal work focuses on presenting ordinary experiences in a visually and sonically interesting way, using experimental editing to highlight each experience's singularity. She is a 2018 graduate from UW-Milwaukee with a BFA in Film and a secondary concentration in Spanish.

EDITOR, WRITER



THE BLACK STRING TRIAGE
ENSEMBLE









TECHNICAL INFORMATION

SHOOTING FORMAT: DIGITAL

ASPECT RATIO: 2:35:1

AUDIO FORMAT: 5.1, STEREO

RUNTIME: 12 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: USA