LIFE IS A MAYS IN ASSOCIATION WITH FIRELIGHT MEDIA PRESENTS

BLACK STRINGS

DISCUSSION GUIDE

A FILM BY MARQUISE MAYS

FOREWORD

We are a people of prayer. Sometimes it's feet pounding pavement or hymns that shake the bones clean. For others, it's simply a head nod in passing. It is always a space for us to be and love and laugh and heal.

What follows is one possible prayer. We ask that you watch without distraction. We ask that you reserve judgment.

This is the Black Strings Triage Ensemble.

DESHAWN MCKINNEY

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IMPACT STATEMENT

The reality for many Black and Brown people in Milwaukee is that we learned long ago that no one is coming to save us. In many ways, we have made peace with that fact and continue to be the heroes in our stories. *Black Strings* seeks to be one of many examples of what it looks like to show up for one another when grief and pain seem neverending. The film covers much ground in a short time as it relates to communal grief in Milwaukee and how music can help remedy it.

The Black Strings Triage Ensemble urges us to think of how we can continue to use music to survive and create space to grieve those we have lost. This in no way, shape, or form is positioned to be the end-all, be-all solution to the issues that impact the Milwaukee community, but simply a song of many songs that deserve to be sung.

So, you can use this discussion guide to compose questions, answer them, and learn what it means to be your hero to save others and yourself. The Black Strings film crew extends our immense gratitude to the readers, viewers, and participants of this film and we send a special thank you to the Black Strings Triage Ensemble for letting us into your world and allowing us to share this story of hope, reconciliation, and faith.

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. 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.

DIRECTOR

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, many 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.

MARQUISE MAYS

A THREAD OF SURVIVING MELODIES

UNDERSTANDING BLACK MILWAUKEE

Black Strings, as a film, seeks to make sense of the rippling effects of grief and loss that echo throughout the Milwaukee community, specifically Black Milwaukee. As a viewer, you may find yourself asking questions such as what can be done to remedy the harm that seems to undercut the rich history of Black settlement in the city and what does the continuation of the damage mean for future generations? Here, we must redirect our attention to the historical analysis of the conditions in which Black Milwaukee came to be and how the development of said community mirrors the one we see today.

Due to the Bridge War of 1845, Milwaukee became the unified City of Milwaukee on January 31, 1846. Almost a decade before that, the first record of Black residency in Milwaukee was credited to Joe Oliver, who worked as a cook for the Juneau family. Around that same period, two more Black residents, Henry and Georgiana Anderson moved from Green Bay to Milwaukee. With the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, by which the population of Black residents had grown from 100 to 20,000, it was brought into question what the future of Milwaukee would look like for a growing Black population or the city in general.

UNDERSTANDING BLACK MILWAUKEE

Considering that Milwaukee was primarily populated by different ethnic groups of European immigrants and American-born descendants from places such as Ireland, France, and Germany, an influx of Black people entering the city posed a threat to job security and community development in the "City of Nations." With racial tensions brewing between the growing number of white immigrants and Black migrants, a fight between two Irishmen and two Black men in 1861 further highlighted the ensuing conflicts. The fight resulted in the death of one of the Irishmen and the public lynching of one of the Black men by a white mob.

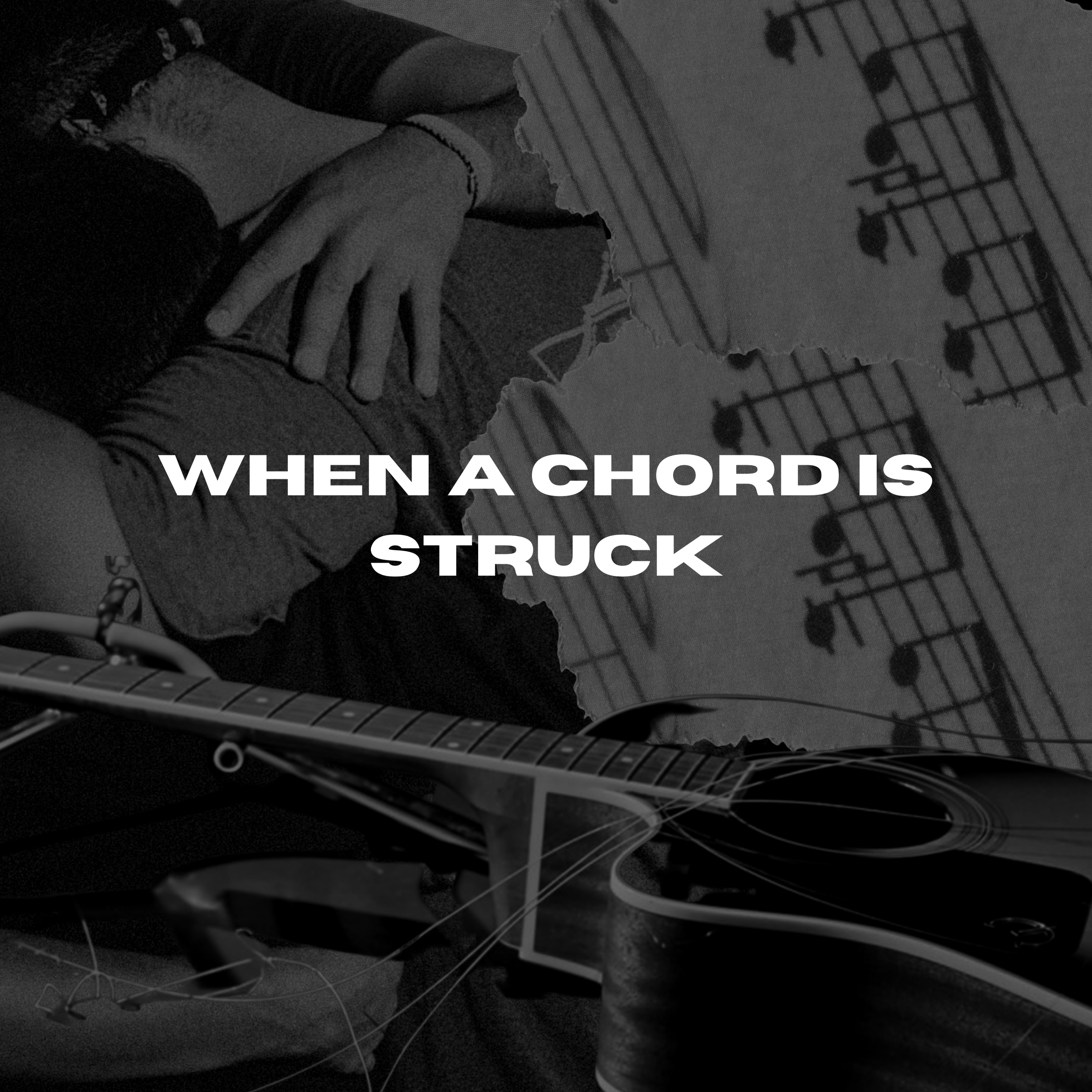
Following the incident, petitions were introduced to the state legislature to support barring Black migration into Wisconsin in 1863. This led to a dramatic shift in the Black population of Milwaukee, which eventually led to "a newer, less established Black community with lower literacy rates, fewer skilled jobs, reduced property holdings, and decreased interracial marriages," according to historian John Doughtery. It wasn't until the 1950s that there was a significant uptick in Black settlers, with roughly over 100,000 Black people living in Milwaukee by the 1970s.

UNDERSTANDING BLACK MILWAUKEE

With Black settlers being confined to the Northside of Milwaukee through restrictive and discriminatory housing, education, public service, structural displacement, and health policies, in conjunction with 'white flight,' "-the level of segregation in Milwaukee equaled Birmingham, Atlanta, and other southern cities," as mentioned by author and professor Patrick D. Jones.

To this day, Milwaukee is still recognized as one of the most segregated cities in the nation, even with the highest recorded number of Black residents, sitting at 240,203, according to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services in 2022.

Please learn more by clicking *here.



WHEN A CHORD IS STRUCK

*AN ASTERISK NEXT TO AN UNDERLINED PIECE OF TEXT INDICATES THAT YOU MAY CLICK IT TO BE TAKEN TO THE SOURCE.

GRIEF & LOSS IN MILWAUKEE

In the film, Dayvin Hallmon, founder of the Black Strings Triage Ensemble, mentioned that the ensemble would appear in the aftermath of scenes of reckless driving, drug overdoses, and gun violence. In prioritizing scenes of gun violence, the ensemble calls attention to a community issue that has impacted not only Milwaukee but the nation at large. An early 2023 article entitled, '*Gun Violence is not Our Story,' stated that "Milwaukee is not alone in dealing with a spike in violent deaths. The homicide rate across the nation increased 30 percent between 2019 and 2020, according to *a report from the Pew Research Center." Yet and still, "Milwaukee's 95 percent increase during that time period dwarfs that spike. According to a *national study, the city also had the fifth-highest homicide rate increase in the country since 2020."

In relation to 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically impacted the day-to-day lives of billions globally. When looking at the statistics of COVID-19-related data in Milwaukee, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people were the leading groups infected with the virus who had also experienced some of the highest disproportionate hospitalization and death rates, according to a *2022 Milwaukee County COVID-19 Data Summary. Before the pandemic, the '*Blueprint for Peace' plan was passed in 2017 to help take action to help prevent gun violence and reduce homicide rates in Milwaukee.

In using a public health approach, the plan also provides avenues for more economic opportunities and counseling for traumatized children. The blueprint was created by a local Milwaukee organization called *414Life* with the support of Milwaukee residents, stakeholders, and community leaders. As a result of the plan, from 2017-2019, "homicides declined in Milwaukee."

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GRIEF & LOSS IN MILWAUKEE

The reality of enduring through the pandemic for many was and still is unbearable. As of February 1, 2023, the *MKE Elevate Issue Brief declared that, “People of color in Milwaukee County have the highest percentage of diagnosis of mental health conditions with 45% Hispanic or Latino, 33% of Black and 29% of other.” And that, “Black and Indigenous adults have the highest rates of ER visits due to adult mental health issues.” It is also worth mentioning that, “COVID-19 has led to chronic anxiety and stress among parents and families.”

For those involved in the fight for community renewal and restoration, many witnessed their efforts be thwarted on account of the pandemic. A Milwaukee activist known as Vaun Mayes mentioned that, “COVID-19 blunted the impact of local violence prevention programs and initiatives.” Many of the programs and initiatives in place were undercut with the grave threat to the overall health of Milwaukee. But health in this context extends beyond the COVID virus itself.

The health of Milwaukee is also referring to the pre-existing conditions in which Black and Brown communities are subjected to endure through. According to the *World Health Organization, “health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social-well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” In other words, the health conditions of Milwaukee for Black and Brown residents were already too poor to blame on COVID alone.

AN OVERTURE OF NEW LIFE

WE HAVE ALWAYS SAVED OURSELVES

The use of song and music are intricately woven into the DNA of Black history. The practice of the Black Strings Triage Ensemble is a protection of communal grief, that says “you deserve to feel peace as soon as possible and I will sonically create a space for your worries and woes.” Dayvin, in an interview with director, Marquise Mays, mentioned that “I think for us as POC, particularly Black and Latin folks, when we do music it is a summoning. It is an ancestral tradition that we are calling on something greater than ourselves, and we know it and we feel it.” When we think of the impact of grief and loss on a community, we must assess the spiritual toll just as much as the physical toll.

On the next page you will have a few discussion questions that will help guide your understanding of what you have read and watched. Be sure to talk them over with close friends, family members, or community members. We urge you to think deeply and critically about your responses and be open to dialogue about what feelings or thoughts may come up. This is the start of healing. This is the work of faith.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you think music can offer people who are recovering from the loss of someone/something?

- Outside of music, are there other artistic mediums that you think could help provide therapy for those in emotional and spiritual recovery? What would make it effective?

- Having a chance to view the film and read a bit of history, what have you learned about long-term grief and its impact on community? How is grief manifested in your community? Through what actions?

- What is something that you feel you can take away from this film to empower your community?

- Who are key organizations, local leaders, etc, that you feel you could partner with to provide help in your community? What do you envision your role being? Contact them. Be apart of the change today. Think of your strengths and what you could offer.

WE HAVE ALWAYS SAVED OURSELVES

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR STATEMENT

It was about 4 A.M. when my mother's scream rang out like a banshee in the middle of the night. She became inconsolable as she heard the news of my father's incident. I had no idea the repercussions that would follow when I found out that my father had fallen victim to an act of gun violence. My father survived, yet the irreparable damage to his spinal cord would signify the end of our family unit as we knew it. One day, one night, and one moment forced us to assume new roles to cope with the side effects of what happened and what had yet to come. This was just the beginning of countless acts of gun violence that impacted my life while growing up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

My family's story concerning gun violence within the city of Milwaukee is not unique. Like other community members and families, I grappled with the deep sadness, confusion, and anger that lingered while trying to overcome my grief. In a city with a historic wave of gun violence, grief often permeates the air as a feeling that is hard to describe. Yet, as a community, we collectively experience this feeling, constantly struggling to express and process those emotions.
'Black Strings' is not a solution. Rather the beginning of investigating what gun-violence activism looks like through the actions of the Black Strings 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.

Historically, music has been used as therapy to help us cope with the pain of loss. It has enabled us to open up and lean into our faith when faced with difficult times. Whether listening to a song that reminds us of a loved one or creating our music to express our pain, music can be an incredibly powerful tool to help us through the grieving process. I want to invite audiences to investigate the actions of the Black String Triage Ensemble as they set out to change the notion of a 'first responder.' As Assistant Director and Producer of Black Strings, my goal was never to help present this story to sway audiences to one side or another but instead challenge you as a critical viewer to continue and begin conversations around gun violence and the grief that follows. How do you feel about the ensemble? How does your activism shape your ideas around possible solutions to acts of gun violence How can music be used as a way to initiate the grieving process?

As you navigate the intense experiences shown in this body of work, it is my hope and the hope of the Black Strings Production team that you consider these questions critically by the end of this film.

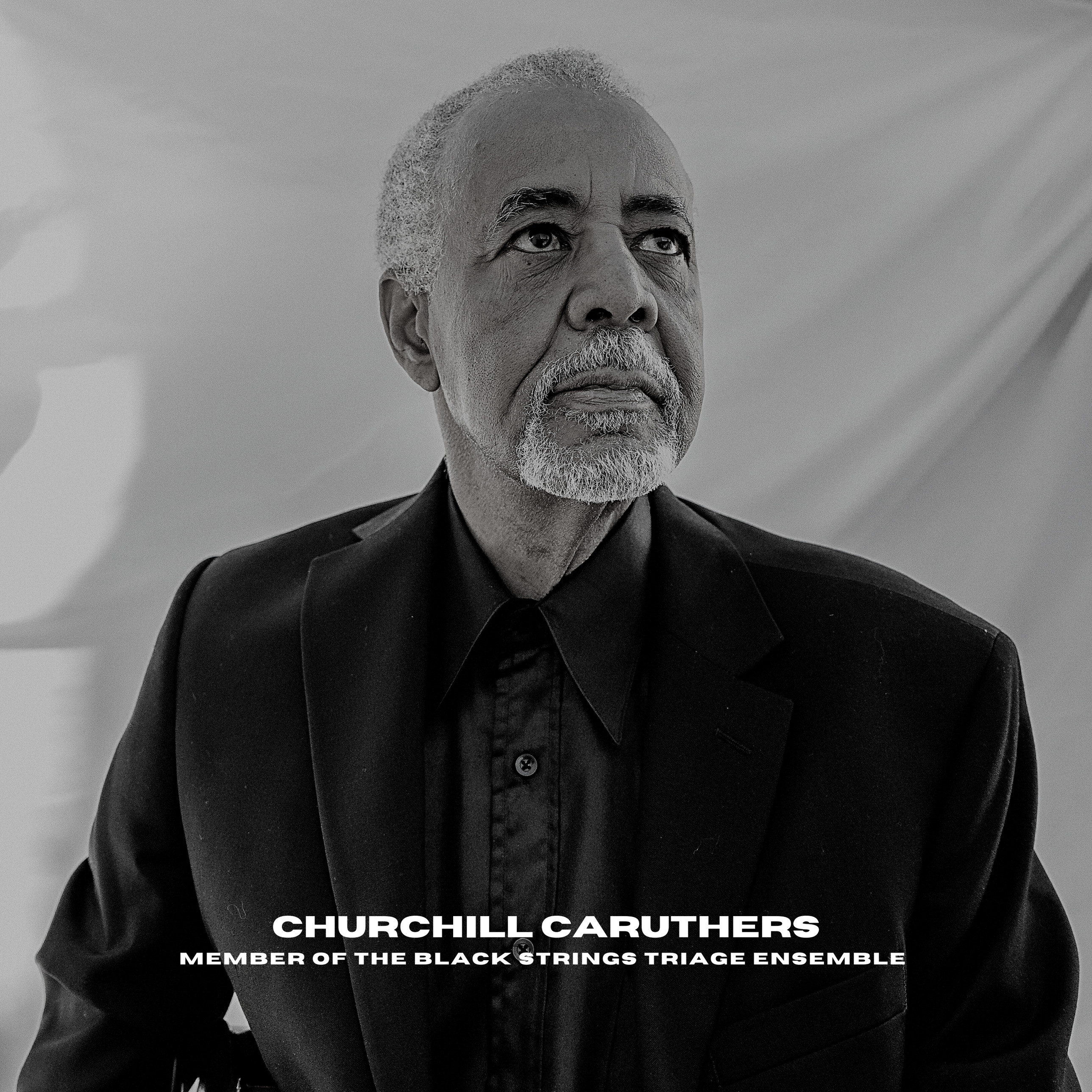
RJ SMITH

THE GRAND MAESTROS

THE BLACK STRINGS TRIAGE ENSEMBLE

DAYVIN HALLMON

FOUNDER & DIRECTOR OF THE BLACK STRINGS TRIAGE ENSEMBLE



CHURCHILL CARUTHERS

MEMBER OF THE BLACK STRINGS TRIAGE ENSEMBLE

ALIDA LACOSSE

MEMBER OF THE BLACK STRINGS TRIAGE ENSEMBLE

THE FILM CREW

MARQUISE MAYS
DIRECTOR, PRODUCER, & EDITOR

RJ SMITH
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR & PRODUCER

BREANNA TAYLOR
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

CALEB PEAVY
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

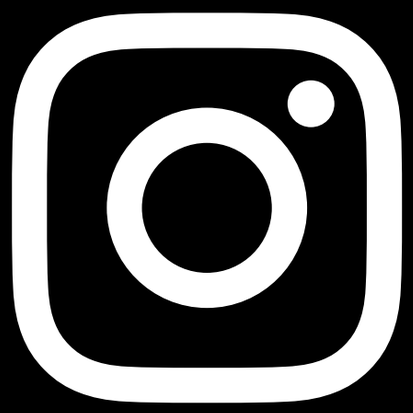
GABRIELLA CISNEROS
EDITOR & WRITER

PETER NIENHUIS
ON-SET SOUND MIXER

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT BLACK STRINGS PLEASE CLICK THE ICONS BELOW TO FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND CHECK OUT THE FILM'S WEBSITE!

INSTAGRAM:

@BLACKSTRINGSTHEFILM

WEBSITE:

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