



QUEST

A film by Jonathan Olshefski

105 min. USA 2017

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LOGLINE

QUEST is an intimate documentary film that captures eight years in the life of an African-American family living in North Philadelphia.

SYNOPSIS

Filmed with vérité intimacy for nearly a decade, QUEST is the moving portrait of the Rainey family living in North Philadelphia. Beginning at the dawn of the Obama presidency, Christopher "Quest" Rainey, and his wife, Christine's "Ma Quest" raise a family while nurturing a community of hip hop artists in their basement home music studio. It's a safe space where all are welcome, but this creative sanctuary can't always shield them from the strife that grips their neighborhood. Epic in scope, QUEST is a vivid illumination of race and class in America, and a testament to love, healing and hope.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

This film started off as a chance encounter while I was teaching a photography class in North Philadelphia a few blocks away from the Rainey's home/music studio. It is a reflection of a relationship. It mirrors the friendship that I have developed with the Rainey family and their community over the last ten years. That friendship is the most precious thing to me—the film and all that comes from it is a bonus.

I came to Philadelphia in 2000 after growing up in Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh is a relatively diverse town and is pretty integrated. I went to elementary school in the '80s and '90s and old school hip hop was just a part of the culture I was immersed in, even though I liked oldies at the time. Many of my classmates, my bus drivers and the recess ladies wore the gear and sang the songs. I loved so many of them and thus was imprinted positively by that world. When I came to Philly to go to Temple University I fell in love with the city, but recognized that many of its communities were really struggling. I was surprised by how segregated it was with its stark barriers between communities of different races and ethnicities. It was a contrast to my experience in Pittsburgh. I had a deep desire to see healing and connection across these artificial barriers and after graduation was searching for opportunities to make that happen. At the time, I was making experimental films and getting into photography of interesting spaces (abandoned warehouses and buildings etc.), but did not see any correlation between my art and my desire for connection. I had no interest in documentary.

When I first met Chris and Christine's Rainey ("Quest" and "Ma Quest"), I was working construction and making art on the side. When I learned about Quest's balancing of the studio and the paper delivery route I saw myself. I could relate to the juggle of the passion project and the day job. We began a photo essay project that would convey that dynamic, which led to me sleeping in their studio in order to be up and ready to join the paper route at 3am. After spending so much time with the Rainey's and their community, I quickly realized that the essential story was not the studio and the paper route, but the family and their community. I also began to realize the limits of still photography and want to find another medium that would better reflect the complexity and points of view of my subjects. This led to the decision to make my first documentary film.

Over the years I have often been asked, "What right do you have, as a white man, to make a film about a Black community?" I don't know if I am the one to answer that question. I made the film and I stand by my choices, but I don't think I have any inherent right and I am very aware of the long history of privileged filmmakers going into communities that are not their own to take stories and craft them for other audiences outside of the community. This can be an incredibly destructive process and marginalize the place and its people, especially when it is a place that was already marginalized.

Stories are incredibly powerful. Who tells them, how they are told, and who they are told to is important.

I will say that I did make this film for North Philadelphia and places like it. My original vision for the film was to use it to promote the Rainey's studio to share their message of hope and

community and to bring the film to different neighborhoods around Philly and maybe even go to other cities with the Rainey's and their artists. I could have never dreamed it would show in Sundance when making it, but my hope is that this experience enhances our ability to create a context around the film so that North Philly benefits from it. I believe that a story well told and brought to a place in a compassionate way can build bridges and strengthen community.

Films surely reflect the voice of the director, but my goal as a director is not to just push my own personal feelings, but to reflect a respect and honor for my subjects and accurately reflect and amplify their perspectives and feelings. My only agenda is to provide viewer the opportunity to connect to these really incredible individuals and share the love that I have for them. That is what I want the viewer to take away. These are people whose voices should be heard.

- Jonathan Olshefski

FILM TEAM

Jonathan Olshefski, Director/Cinematographer

Jonathan Olshefski is an artist and documentary filmmaker. In 2017, he was named one of the “25 New Faces in Independent Film” by Filmmaker Magazine, and was listed in the New York Times as one of “The 9 New Directors You Need to Watch.” QUEST is his debut feature documentary and premiered in competition at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival. Olshefski strives to tell intimate and nuanced stories that honor his subjects’ complexity by employing a production process that emphasizes collaboration, dialogue, and relationship to amplify their voices and reflect their points of view in an artful way. He has an MFA in Film and Media Arts from Temple University and is an Associate Professor of Radio, TV and Film at Rowan University. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife and two sons.

Sabrina Schmidt Gordon, Producer

Sabrina Schmidt Gordon is an award-winning documentary producer, editor and director. She is the co-producer and editor of *Documented* (2013), about Pulitzer Prize-winning undocumented journalist Jose Antonio Vargas’ fight for immigration reform, and of *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, which premiered at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival. Gordon’s directorial debut, *BaddDDD Sonia Sanchez* (2015), for which she is also the editor, was nominated for an Emmy and won Best Film Directed by a Woman of Color at the African Diaspora International Film Festival. She is a Women at Sundance Fellow and is on the faculty at Columbia University and the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism.

Lindsay Utz, Editor

Lindsay Utz edited the award-winning documentary *Bully*, which was released nationally in 2012 and shortlisted for an Academy Award for Best Documentary. Her other documentary credits include the TIFF award-winning *First Position* (2011), the Sundance-supported *In Country* (2014), an Emmy-nominated episode for PBS Frontline (2015), and multiple shorts for the New York Times. In 2012, Utz was named the Karen Schmeer Film Editing Fellow in honor of Errol Morris’ late editor.

T. Griffin, Composer

T. Griffin has composed music for over 30 films with at least one represented at Sundance every year since 2009. Notable titles include multiple festival award-winners *Life, Animated, The Overnighters* and *Welcome to Leith*. Griffin has worked with musical luminaries including Patti Smith, Vic Chesnutt and members of Godspeed You! Black Emperor and Fugazi. He was a fellow at the Sundance Composer’s lab in 2008 and has been nominated twice for Cinema Eye Honors.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR JONATHAN OLSHEFSKI & PRODUCER SABRINA SCHMIDT GORDON

How and when did you first meet the Raineys? Describe the moment you knew you wanted to document their lives.

JON: In 2006 I was teaching a photography class to adults in North Philadelphia in partnership with an amazing organization called New Jerusalem Now. One day after class one of my students, James, said, “My brother runs a music studio out of his house a few blocks away. Do you want to meet?” The next thing I know we are knocking on the door and Christopher “Quest” Rainey answers and gives his brother a weird look—something like “why are you bringing this white guy with a camera to my house”? I didn’t think much of the interaction, but a few months later Quest invited me to come back to the studio to take some photos of the guys recording to promote their work.

When I first showed up to take pictures of the studio I learned that Quest didn’t make his living from the studio. He paid the bills delivering circulars (coupons/advertisements). I was working construction at the time while doing art on the side. I really felt a connection then and thought that it would be really interesting to do a photo essay that would parallel the working life vs the creative life. That’s when I began following him on his paper route.

QUEST chronicles nearly a decade in the lives of the Rainey family. At what point did you know that such a long time commitment would be necessary to tell their story? At any point were you ready to wrap, and then decided to keep the camera rolling?

JON: Many times! At first it was just going to be a short film, and we completed shooting for that in December 2007. In 2008 Obama became a candidate for president. I thought it would be a cool thing to experience his campaign from the perspective of the Raineys, so we continued filming. I continued filming through to the 2012 election, which I thought would be a nice way to end the film. In 2013, I was editing when I got news that there was a crisis in the family and went back into production. Now here we are in 2017 and we are about to finally show the film.

Sabrina, how did you get involved with the project?

SABRINA: A mutual filmmaker friend of ours told me about a first-time filmmaker he met, who was in need of a producer. “Hmm...a white guy in the ‘hood filming Black folks performing hip hop...I dunno!” (laughs). I think people of color, filmmakers and audiences alike, are increasingly skeptical, and a little weary, frankly, of white filmmakers telling our stories. It’s a rejection of the “white gaze” that, for so long, defined people of color in the popular imagination, and is often exoticizing, reductive, or simply uninformed. So much so that hashtags like #OscarsSoWhite, #DocumentariesSoWhite have been making the rounds on social media and filmmaking panels. We’re asking, “Who gets to tell whose story?” “Why should you, or I, be the one to tell this story?” For me, it’s not so much about segregating filmmakers and their subjects, as it is about filmmakers actively interrogating their motives, biases, privilege and access. And then, making

choices that reflect an understanding of the impact of those things, that amplify the voices of the people whose story is being told, that reflect their truth.

I was honest with Jon about my reticence and he was open to the conversation. That was very important. As I watched the footage, it became clear to me that Jon had developed a deep and intimate connection with the Raineys. There are moments captured in the footage that I don't think can be explained any other way. Without being specific, there's a moment when most filmmakers would be asked to step away, but the Raineys brought Jon closer. I knew then that we could create a sensitive and thoughtful portrait of this family.

How do you think about the fact that you are white man telling the story of a black family, particularly at this moment in American life? What did you discover about the nature of family, mother and fatherhood?

JON: On a basic level it is weird for me to be a white man telling the story of a black family. There is a long history of privileged filmmakers telling stories about communities that are not their own with negative impact. I am aware of this. I know Philly and I know the Raineys, but I recognize that have blind spots. That said, I have collaborators and mentors who help me to fill those blind spots. Sabrina has certainly challenged some of my choices and approaches throughout the filmmaking process. At times I've been surprised by what I missed or didn't consider, but most of the time it's not so clear-cut and we just work through the choices. Our priority is always to get at the truth, which can be complicated and messy. But, we trust each other to have the film's best interest at heart.

Sabrina, how difficult was it to have those conversations?

SABRINA: It really depends. What mattered was that Jon and I were on the same page. Our understanding of the story we wanted to tell was the same, so we were never at cross purposes. Every circumstance, of course, is different, and they're not all necessarily only about race. In that sense, we get to explore the intersectionality and complexity of human experience, and that's, ultimately, the gift of storytelling, the gift the Raineys give by allowing us to share their story. We don't have to claim to transcend race in a sort of faux post-racial-society kind of way in order to appreciate what we all share, what is universal. What's great about documentary filmmaking is that, in trying to work through story challenges, you humble yourself to a process, and allow it to challenge and teach you, too. If you're lucky, you complete every project with a deeper understanding of yourself as well as the world around you, and the issues you are exploring through the film. Hopefully, viewers of QUEST will experience that, too.

Did you have any political or sociological motivations when you decided to make this film? What are the most important things you learned about the North Philly community over the years?

JON: My basic goal for the film is for it to be a catalyst for connection across perceived barriers. Our society is incredibly polarized right now and, I believe, desperate for opportunities to

connect across the various barriers that (we think) separate us: race, class, religion, geography, political party. I want viewers to see themselves in the Raineys and their story.

I also see this film as just the beginning. It is a conversation starter. I hope that it leads to discussions in classrooms, living rooms, community centers, houses of worship, and beyond. Festivals and sales are not the measuring stick that I will use to gauge the success of this film. No matter what happens in terms of critical response the film will not be successful if it does not have a positive impact on North Philly and places like it.

SABRINA: To make that happen, we are launching a national impact and engagement campaign, leveraging the film as a tool to support and empower communities, like North Philadelphia, across the country. QUEST provides a unique opportunity to explore a range of issues and topics—family, parenting, violence, healing, forgiveness, sexuality, trauma, love, and community. For the past year, I've been researching those issues brought up by the film, and interviewing activists, community leaders, influencers and changemakers to help define and frame our impact goals for the campaign. One of the organizing principles of our campaign is the belief that families like the Raineys should be at the table, so to speak, when policy-makers are making decisions that affect their lives. They should have a voice in crafting solutions that reflect their needs, their aspirations and their priorities. We're building partnerships across disciplines, focus areas and industries, and I'm very excited about the robust and, hopefully, transformative campaign that is coming together.

When documenting moments of family crisis from such an intimate level of access, how did you decide when to turn the camera off and when to keep rolling?

JON: Early on, I would tend not to film very intimate moments because I did not think that I had earned the right to capture those in the early years. When Quest's mom, Carol Rainey, died in 2007, I attended her funeral and I had my film gear with me, but in that moment I felt like I needed to be completely present to the family during a time of such deep loss. I will never forget watching Quest and PJ standing off to the side by themselves having a quiet father/daughter moment with him kneeling down while PJ let go of a balloon and watched it float off into the sky. I remembered sharing this with Quest after the fact and he said, "why didn't you film it?" I responded that I wasn't sure if I should have been filming such a private moment. He reassured me that it was OK and that he trusted me.

FEATURING

Christopher Rainey
Christine'a Rainey
Patricia (PJ) Rainey
William Withers
Price

CREDITS

Director	Jonathan Olshefski
Producer	Sabrina Schmidt Gordon
Editor	Lindsay Utz
Original Music	Christopher Rainey, Everquest Recordings
Original Score	T. Griffin
Cinematography and Sound	Jonathan Olshefski
Consulting Producer	David Felix Sutcliffe
Consulting Editor	Enat Sidi
Assistant Editors	Timothy Fryett
	Ellen Knechel
Supervising Producer, ITVS	Michael Kinomoto
Executive Producer, ITVS	Sally Jo Fifer
Executive Producers, American Documentary POV	Justine Nagan
	Chris White