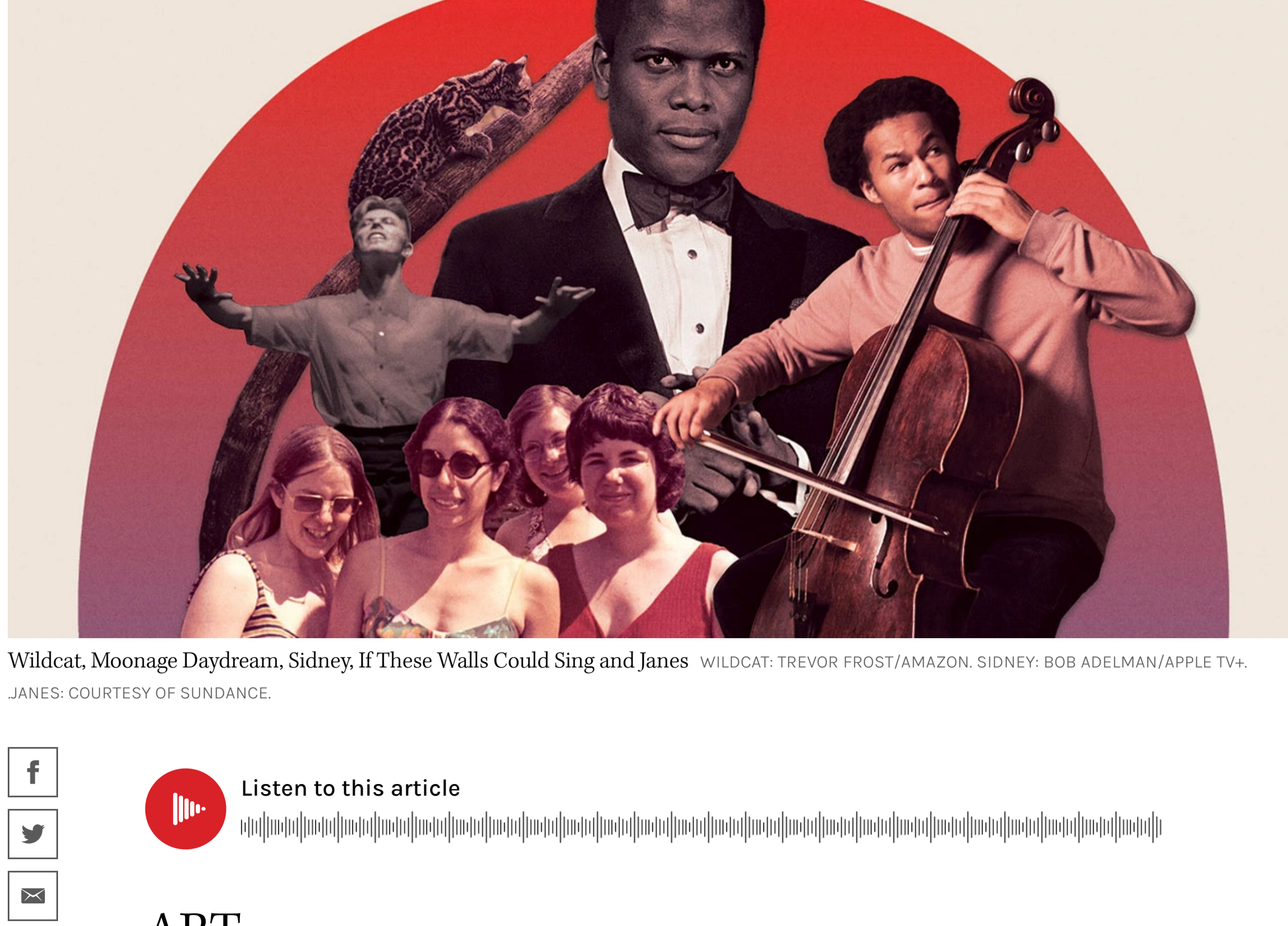


# Incredible True Stories Make Up the Many Documentary Features in the Oscars Race

From 'Moonage Daydream' to 'Sidney' to 'If These Walls Could Sing,' a deluge of nonfiction films have entered the Oscar race for best doc feature.

BY TYLER COATES, BEATRICE VERHOEVEN, HILTON DRESDEN DECEMBER 8, 2022 12:25PM



Wildcat. Moonage Daydream. Sidney. If These Walls Could Sing and James WILDGAT: TREVOR FRIST/AMAZON SIDNEY: BOB ADELMAN/APPLE TV+ JAMES: COURTESY OF SUNDANCE.

Listen to this article

## ART

### 1341 Frames of Love and War (YES DOCU)

In celebrating the work of acclaimed Israeli war photographer Micha Bar-Am, director Ban Tal's *1341 Frames of Love and War* offers a meditation on photography, political violence and identity through an exclusive (and exhaustive) deep dive into Bar-Am's expansive artistic archives over the past five decades.

### All the Beauty and the Bloodshed (Neon)

Laura Poitras (an Oscar winner for 2014's *Citizenfour*) directs this portrait of renowned photographer Nan Goldin, one that offers intimate access to her suburban upbringing and experiences living among marginalized communities and artistic scenes in New York City. It also depicts the downfall of the Sackler family, a target of Goldin's activism and whose company Purdue Pharma created and marketed OxyContin — the root cause of the American opioid epidemic.

### Art & Crimes by Krimes (MTV Documentary Films)

While serving a six-year prison sentence for drug possession, artist Jesse Krimes secretly created massive works of art, including a gigantic mural on bedsheets. Upon his release, he struggles to readjust to society and the scrutiny of the art world while serving as a criminal justice advocate, as depicted in this film directed by Alysa Nahmias.

### We Are Art: Through the Eyes of Annalaura\*

Director Annalaura di Luggo chronicles her artistic process in this film, an inspirational look at creativity, as she endeavors to create her boldest, largest work yet: *Colloculi*, an immersive re-creation of a giant eye in Naples, Italy.

## BIOGRAPHY

### 2nd Chance (Showtime)

Ramin Bahrani's debut feature follows the career and life of Richard Davis, the inventor of the concealable bulletproof vest, who had to shoot himself 196 times in order to prove the efficacy of his creation.

### Loudmouth (Greenwich Entertainment)

The Rev. Al Sharpton is the subject of this portrait from director Josh Alexander, which charts Sharpton's beginnings as a child preacher who toured with gospel great Mahalia Jackson to his rise as one of the United States' most ardent, vocal and uncompromising civil rights activists.

### Louis Armstrong's Black & Blues (Apple TV+)

Sacha Jenkins' film centers on the story of legendary jazz musician Louis Armstrong, the vocalist and trumpeter who gained international fame during the turbulent period between the Civil War and the civil rights era. The doc bridges the gap between those two time periods, showing how Armstrong's popularity and fame shifted the culture and made him one of the greatest jazz figures of all time.

### Salvatore: Shoemaker of Dreams (Sony Pictures Classics)

*Call Me by Your Name* director Luca Guadagnino made this documentary (see page 42) about the life and career of shoe designer Salvatore Ferragamo, who created footwear for Hollywood icons during the silent film era before launching his own label, which remains world-renowned today.

### Selena Gomez: My Mind & Me (Apple TV+)

Alek Keshishian's film follows pop star and actress Selena Gomez's rise to worldwide superstardom, while also providing a rare and intimate look at her struggles with mental health in the face of massive fame.

### The Princess (HBO)

This immersive HBO doc, devoid of talking-head commentary, takes yet another look at one of the most famous people to have ever lived, Princess Diana, drawing from archival audio and video footage to take audiences through the key moments of Diana's life and her untimely death in 1997.

### Sidney (APPLE TV+)

Reginald Hudlin directs this Oprah Winfrey-produced documentary film about the life and legacy of actor, director and activist Sidney Poitier, who in 1964 became the first Black man to win the Oscar for best actor. The film features talking-head appearances from other iconic Black entertainers: Harry Belafonte, Halle Berry, Morgan Freeman, Quincy Jones, Spike Lee and Denzel Washington.

### Turn Every Page (Sony Pictures Classics)

Director Lizzie Gottlieb follows the 50-year relationship between esteemed author Robert Caro and his longtime editor, Robert Gottlieb (the director's father), as they work to finish their literary opus together: the final volume of Caro's multipart biography *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*.

## DOMESTIC POLITICS

### Gabby Giffords Won't Back Down (Briarcliff Entertainment)

Julie Cohen and Betsy West are known for making documentaries about powerful women (*RBG*, *My Name Is Pauli Murray*) and now return with this insightful documentary about Gabby Giffords, a former Arizona congresswoman who became partially paralyzed after a 2011 assassination attempt and has since served as a prominent gun control advocate.

### Punch 9 for Harold Washington\*

Joe Winston's film follows the life, career and legacy of Chicago's first Black mayor, Harold Washington, who battled one of the dirtiest smear campaigns of all time to emerge victorious and make history. Chicago political figures Jesse Jackson and Richard M. Daley, as well as former Obama advisers David Axelrod and Valerie Jarrett, serve as talking heads.

### Riotsville, U.S.A. (Magnolia)

In the late 1960s, the U.S. military created fictional towns called "Riotsvilles" to instruct and militarize police officers in battling rioters and protesters. Sierra Pettengill's examination shows how the militarization of police forces had a dark impact on the constitutional rights of free speech and assembly.

### The Corridors of Power (Showtime)

Director Dror Moreh, an Oscar nominee for 2012's *The Gatekeepers*, offers a look at U.S. foreign policy over the past several decades, with archival footage and interviews raising the question of why, after repeatedly saying "no more," U.S. government officials have continued to allow genocide to go unstopped around the globe.

## FAMILY STORIES

### Bad Axe (IFC Films)

David Siev's film documents an Asian American family living in small-town Michigan in 2020, as they fight Trumpism and the pandemic to keep their restaurant and American dream afloat in the face of uncertain times.

### Last Flight Home (MTV Documentary Films)

Two-time Sundance U.S. documentary Grand Jury Prize winner Ondi Timoner (*Dig!, We Live in Public*) returns with an intimate and touching cinema vérité portrait of her father, Eli, a former executive at now-defunct AirFlorida, and his extraordinary life during his final days.

### Let Me Be Me (Greenwich Entertainment)

Directors Katie Taber and Dan Crane's film follows the Westphals over the course of two decades in this family biography after youngest son Kyle is diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. The compassionate film sees the family looking back on their journey together and Kyle's progress as a fashion designer.

### Mija (DISNEY)

Isabel Castro directs this documentary about Doris Muñoz, who began a career in music development and then met singer Jacks Haupt, with whom she shared a guilt of being the first American-born members of their undocumented families.

### Sr. (NETFLIX)

Produced by Robert Downey Jr., *Sr.* tells the story of his father, Robert Downey Sr., who as a visionary director set the bar for countercultural comedy in America in the 1960s and 1970s. It also depicts a touching portrait of the father and son as they collaborate one last time before Downey Sr.'s death in July 2021.

### The Super 8 Years (Kino Lorber)

Nobel Prize laureate Annie Ernaux finds herself in the doc race with this autobiographical film, co-directed with her son David Ernaux-Briot, that compiles home movies shot by the writer and her family between 1972 and 1981.

### What We Leave Behind (Array)

Filmmaker Iliana Sosa crafts a love letter to her 89-year-old grandfather, who will face a final military bus ride from his home in Primo de Verdad, Mexico, to El Paso, Texas, begins to build a house next to his own so that his children might one day return home to live near him.

## FILM

### Is That Black Enough for You?? (Netflix)

Tracking the history of Black film, with a particular focus on the 1970s, film critic Elvis Mitchell's doc features a montage of cinematic imagery and new and archival interviews with many of the foremost voices of that era, including Margaret Avery, Harry Belafonte, Charles Burnett, Suzanne de Passe, Glynn Turman and Billy Dee Williams.

### Mickey: The Story of a Mouse (Disney)

Jeff Malmberg's film follows the 100-year history and filmography of Mickey Mouse, Walt Disney's animated creation who has captured the popular imagination as Disney's most endearing and identifiable character.

### My Name Is Alfred Hitchcock\*

Documentarian Mark Cousins tells the story of Alfred Hitchcock's contribution to film history through the perspective of the master himself, voiced by English impressionist Alistair McGowan.

## GENDER

### Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power (Kino Lorber)

Writer-director Nina Menkes developed her 2017 essay and PowerPoint presentation into a film examining the biased ways in which women are represented onscreen versus men, speaking with major feminist film theorists about the exploitative effects of the male gaze.

### Framing Agnes (Kino Lorber)

After uncovering case files from the UCLA Gender Clinic in the 1950s, an ensemble of trans actors presents a talk-show-style program (hosted by the film's director, Chase Joynt) to expose the legacy of a trans woman forced to make a painful choice about her gender identity.

### Hidden Letters (PBS)

For centuries, women in China forced into oppressive marriages wrote a private language among themselves, called Nushu. Now, two young women are obsessed with that language and they forge their own paths in their culture. The film, directed by Violet Du Feng and Zhao Qing, shines a light on women's equality in China.

### The Janes (HBO)

Directed by Emma Pildes and Tia Lessin, *The Janes* follows a group of women who were arrested and charged for running a clandestine, pre-*Roe v. Wade* abortion services network in Chicago called the Jane Collective. Using code names and safe houses, they built an underground service providing safe and affordable abortions to women using just the name "Jane."

## INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

### A Compassionate Spy\*

This political documentary from two-time Oscar nominee Steve James (*Hoop Dreams*, *Small Enough to Jail*) tells the story of Manhattin Project scientist Ted Hall, who lived a double life as a spy for the Soviet Union and shared classified nuclear secrets during the Cold War.

### Blue Island (Icarus Films)

Chan Tze-woon's film looks at the difficult relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China, and specifically focuses on citizens of Hong Kong who have had to grapple with China's consolidation of power and influence over the city since the territory was transferred back to the Chinese from the United Kingdom in 1997.

### Bobi Wine: The Ghetto President (Nat Geo)

This film from directors Christopher Sharp and Moses Bwayo follows Bobi Wine, a Ugandan musician and actor turned activist and opposition leader who used his music and celebrity to fight against autocratic President Yoweri Museveni's regime — and whose unsuccessful presidential campaign resulted in Wine's placement under house arrest in 2021.

### Eternal Spring\*

Using the animated art of Chinese artist Daxiong, *Eternal Spring* explains how a state TV signal in China was hacked, and the series of events that followed in the wake of that.

### Freedom on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom\*

Acclaimed director Evgeny Afineevsky's timely film captures the powerful resistance and resilience of the Ukrainian people in the wake of the 2022 Russian invasion.

### Icarus: The Aftermath\*

Bryan Fogel returns with the sequel to his Academy Award-winning documentary *Icarus*, which uncovered the Russian Olympic doping scandal. This second chapter follows whistleblower Grigory Rodchenkov, who struggles with his on-the-lam existence as a political target hunted by his home country.

### In Her Hands (Netflix)

Zarifa Ghafari was one of Afghanistan's first female mayors and was the youngest, at age 26, to ever hold the position. This documentary, executive produced by Hillary and Chelsea Clinton and directed by Tamana Ayazi and Marcel Mettelsiefen, was filmed over two years and chronicles Ghafari's personal battle for survival in the days leading up to the Taliban's return to power.

### Merkel\*

German-born filmmaker Eva Weber examines the career of Germany's former Chancellor Angela Merkel by incorporating fresh interviews with international political figures like Hillary Clinton, Susan Rice and Tony Blair to put Merkel's achievements into focus.

### Navalny (Warner Bros./CNN Films)

Daniel Roher gained incredible access to Alexei Navalny, which revolves around popular Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who was poisoned with Novichok nerve agent in 2020. Navalny has consistently blamed Vladimir Putin for the attack, and the Russian government has continued to deny the claims while considering Navalny to be a dangerous political dissident.

### Retrograde (Nat Geo)

Directed by Matthew Heineman, an Oscar nominee for 2015's *Cartel Land* and whose COVID doc *The First Wave* earned a spot on last year's documentary feature shortlist, this film examines the last months of the 20-year war in Afghanistan. It focuses on the relationship between American Green Berets and the Afghan officers they trained.

### The Territory (Nat Geo)

After a group of Brazilian farmers lays claim to a protected area of the Amazon rainforest, a young Indigenous man and his mentor fight to save the forest and the Uru-eu-wau-wau people who live within it. Alex Pritz's film offers unprecedented access to the Indigenous people living within the Amazon, whose lives are frequently threatened by deforestation and development.

### **Three Minutes: A Lengthening (Super/Neon)**

A found snippet of 16mm footage — from a home movie shot in 1938 by a man named David Kurtz — show a glimpse of the lives of Jewish citizens of a Polish village just before the start of World War II, offering a little-seen depiction of and emotionally charged meditation on a community devastated by genocide and war in this film narrated by Helena Bonham Carter and directed by Bianca Stigter.

## MISCELLANY

### **American Pain (CNN Films)**

Investigative journalist Darren Foster tells of the shocking rise and fall of twin brothers and bodybuilders Christopher and Jeffrey George, who ran a franchise of pain clinics in Florida and became the leaders of the largest oxycodone trafficking network in the United States at the height of the devastating opioid epidemic.

### **The Automat (A Slice Of Pie Productions)**

Director Lisa Hurwitz's comically nostalgic film looks at the history of Horn & Hardart's Automat — the restaurant that served fresh-cooked meals in a cafeteria setting via vending machine — with the help of Mel Brooks, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Elliott Gould and Carl Reiner, who all offer their memories of the eatery.

### **The Great Basin\***

This portrait of rural Nevada and the people who live around the “loneliest road in America” explores how this community is a microcosm of the larger marginalization of rural communities.

### **I Didn't See You There \***

Reid Davenport, a disabled filmmaker, shot and directed this film after a circus tent was erected outside his Oakland apartment. Davenport's powerful doc allows viewers to see the world through the eyes of someone with a disability, and it contends with the long history of the circus freak show while forcing the audience to pay attention to those often reduced or erased from sight.

### **Katrina Babies (HBO Documentary Films)**

Sixteen years after Hurricane Katrina, first-time filmmaker and New Orleans native Edward Buckles Jr. chronicles the impact of the disaster on Louisiana youth — offering a voice to the survivors of the cataclysmic storm, many of whom share their traumatic memories of the event that affected their childhoods for the first time in the film.

### **Let the Little Light Shine (PBS)**

Families of students at a top-ranked, majority-Black elementary school on Chicago's Near North Side must fight to stop their institution from being replaced by a new school for wealthier families in this stirring film from director Kevin Shaw.

## MUSIC

### **Hallelujah: Leonard Cohen, A Journey, A Song Song (Sony Pictures Classics)**

This film tells the story of iconic singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen through the legacy of his seminal track “Hallelujah.” Directors Dan Geller and Dayna Goldfine examine the song's impact on other artists and the culture at large.

### **If These Walls Could Sing (Disney)**

Paul McCartney's daughter Mary McCartney directs this film, which chronicles the history of the world's first purpose-built recording studio, and one of the all-time most famous: London's Abbey Road Studios, where many of The Beatles' most innovative and popular recordings were produced.

### **Moonage Daydream (Neon)**

Through never-before-seen footage, director Brett Morgen (who helmed the bio-doc *Montage of Heck* about Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain) offers new perspectives on the life, art and legacy of the legendary musician, artist and actor David Bowie. A must-see for Bowie obsessives, the film uses an immersive style that may be the best attempt at re-creating the experience of seeing Bowie live in concert.

### **Nothing Compares (Showtime)**

Kathryn Ferguson's film (see page 40) follows the rise and fall of Irish singer-songwriter Sinéad O'Connor, exploring her time in the spotlight, her bold artistry and outspokenness, and why she was nearly excommunicated from popular culture after her infamous musical performance of Bob Marley's “War” on *Saturday Night Live* — which culminated in her ripping apart a photograph of Pope John Paul II.

### **Personality Crisis: One Night Only (Showtime)**

Martin Scorsese and David Tedeschi direct this documentary about former New York Dolls frontman David Johansen's intimate concert at Café Carlyle in January 2020, performed as his hepcat alter ego Buster Poindexter.

### **The Return of Tayna Tucker (Sony Pictures Classics)**

Tanya Tucker's astonishing rise to superstardom in the country world is the focus of this portrait. Following her debut at just 13 years old with the 1974 hit “Delta Dawn,” the nostalgic look back at her rocky career is framed by the recording of her 2019 comeback album, *While I'm Livin'*, co-produced and co-written by singer-songwriter (and Tucker megafan) Brandi Carlile.

### **The Voice of Dust and Ash \***

The untold story of the Iranian maestro and legend Mohammad-Reza Shajarian, whose stunning voice became even more important when the ayatollah banned all music and performances after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, is the focus of this film from Mandana Biscotti.

## NATURE/SCIENCE

### **All That Breathes (HBO)**

Winner of the Golden Eye award at Cannes and the grand jury prize in world cinema documentary at Sundance, Shaunak Sen's moving film follows two brothers in New Delhi who devote their time to protecting the black kite, a bird of prey essential to the area's ecosystem.

### **Bitterbrush (Magnolia)**

Emelie Mahdavian's film follows two young women working alone in the American West herding cattle and contemplating their nomadic existence and the future of their vocation as they make a months-long trek through a remote Idaho mountain range.

### **De Humani Corporis Fabrica (Grasshopper Film)**

Centered in five Paris hospitals, directors Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's fascinating film brings the inner landscape of the human body to the screen using microscopic cameras, revealing its incredible properties and offering a celebration of life and death.

### **Delikado (PBS)**

This timely environmental thriller tells the story of three environmentalists who try to defend Palawan, an island in the Philippines described as “the last ecological frontier,” from being corrupted by politicians and businessmen.

### **Fire of Love (Nat Geo/Neon)**

Directed by Sara Dosa and narrated by Miranda July, this film tells the story of volcanologists and lovers Katia and Maurice Krafft, who risked their lives to study the beautiful and deadly mysteries of active volcanoes and captured their scientific investigations in intimate home videos.

### **Good Night Oppy (Prime Video)**

In his previous docs, filmmaker Ryan White explored the unsolved murder of a nun (*The Keepers*) and the assassination of Kim Jong-nam (*Assassin*). The director now travels to Mars to follow the journey of the rover Opportunity, which was supposed to be on the planet for 90 sols (roughly 92 days in Earth time), but ended up staying online and exploring the red planet for 15 years.

### **Nothing Lasts Forever (Showtime)**

Jason Kohn's documentary explores the billion-dollar diamond industry, seen through a criminal investigation that shakes the accepted notions of the value of a universal symbol of love and devotion: the diamond engagement ring.

### **Patrick and the Whale \***

This nature doc follows Patrick Dykstra, who has devoted his life to traveling the globe and diving with whales, allowing him to learn how these magnificent creatures see, hear and interact with others in the ocean.

### **Sophia (Showtime)**

Directors Jon Kasbe and Crystal Moselle's character study takes us into the mind of David Hanson, an inventor who wants to perfect the most realistic humanoid robot ever created: Sophia. The Showtime doc looks at the world and politics of AI, forcing audiences to think about what it truly means to be human.

### **The Volcano: Rescuse From Whakaari (Netflix)**

Rory Kennedy (a 2017 Emmy winner for *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* and 2015 Oscar nominee for *Last Days in Vietnam*) directs this nature doc about bravery and resilience after a volcanic tragedy strikes New Zealand.

### **Theater of Thought\***

In his latest nonfiction venture, acclaimed auteur Werner Herzog sets his sights on the inner workings of the human mind and the rapidly advancing technology seeking to understand and harness it. His explorations take him to the most cutting-edge scientists and researchers working in the field today.

### **Wildcat (Amazon)**

Trevor Frost and Melissa Lesh's film tells the story of a British soldier returning from Afghanistan, who, as she struggles with depression and anxiety, heads to the Amazon to foster an orphaned ocelot alongside an American scientist.

## SOCIAL JUSTICE

### **Aftershock (HULU)**

The families of two Black women who die in childbirth sound a rallying cry for the disproportionate number of POC women failed by the maternal health industry each year in Tonya Lewis Lee and Paula Eiselt's incendiary documentary.

### **Civil (NETFLIX)**

Nadia Hallgren's film follows the legal battles of attorney Ben Crump, who represents such clients as the families of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in their quest for justice against the American legal system.

### **Descendant (Netflix)**

Margaret Brown's powerful film charts the stories of the descendants of survivors of the *Clotilda*, the last ship to carry enslaved Africans into the United States. After the schooner is finally recovered from Alabama's Mobile Bay, the enslaved Africans' descendants must reckon with their shared history — and with the descendants of the wealthy man who illegally smuggled the Africans into the country half a century after the U.S. ended its involvement in the Atlantic slave trade.

### **The New Abolitionists\***

Filmmaker Christina Zorich travels around Southeast Asia to document individuals fighting to end human trafficking and prosecute those responsible. The doc, produced by Zorich's late mother, Olympia Dukakis, follows the director's seven-year journey through Cambodia and Thailand while serving as both a witness to — and an activist for — the victims of trafficking and enforced sex work.

\*No U.S. distribution

*This story first appeared in a November stand-alone issue of The Hollywood Reporter magazine. To receive the magazine, [click here to subscribe.](#)*