

# *Songs from the Hole*

PHOTO: AMANDA AUSTIN

# CASE STUDY

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# DEVELOPMENT & PRODUCTION

**DEVELOPMENT: EARLY 2019–SEPT 2020**

**PRODUCTION: OCT 2019–JUNE 2022**

**POST-PRODUCTION: OCT 2021–OCT 2023**

From 2014 to 2018, Firelight Media Documentary Lab alum Contessa Gayles spent her days creating, directing, and producing films and series for CNN. An alum of NYU’s journalism program, she used her nonfiction storytelling skills to develop long-form pieces for the cable giant, collaborating with the veteran journalist Lisa Ling on series like *This Is Sex* and *This Is Birth With Lisa Ling*, as well as women’s rights activists on *Women Who March*. But it was her final film with the network, *The Feminist on Cellblock Y*, that routed Gayles into independent film with her second documentary feature, *Songs From the Hole* (Netflix).

During production on *The Feminist on Cellblock Y*, richie reseda, the film’s main protagonist, was leading fellow incarcerated men through circles centered around healing toxic masculinity through feminism. Gayles was taken by the conversation and transformation taking place in the circles. During one shoot, reseda and his friend “JJ’88” performed some tracks they’d been working on together on the inside, and Gayles was spellbound.

JJ’88 had been writing rap songs in prison, and recently decided that he’d like to take his various songs and turn them into a slate of music videos. reseda, who had helped produce JJ’88’s tracks in an undisclosed location within the prison, had another idea: What if JJ’88’s songs could be woven together into one linear piece—a film, even—like Beyoncé’s visual album “Lemonade”? But neither of them had experience with film, a plan for how to manage such a sprawling concept, or the resources for such an undertaking. But Gayles did.

After *Feminist* wrapped, reseda, a born logistical producer, contacted Gayles to see if she’d be open to collaborating with him and JJ’88 to develop and direct the new project (initially called *Life + Life*) as the two served their sentences. (The film’s new name refers to “the hole” or solitary confinement, where JJ’88 spent many of his days writing.) She said yes, and over the course of a year—from 2019 to 2020—the trio began working in tandem, rewriting scripts, redeveloping music video concepts, and creating film treatments before calling action on “Sea Floor,” the first music video for the film concept. With initial grants from the SKOLL Foundation and Field of Vision, Gayles and reseda, who had just been released, shot one video per month for each of JJ’88’s songs.

# DEVELOPMENT & PRODUCTION

## CONT.

Reflecting on their production experience, the three filmmakers underscored the importance of collaboration in making the film a reality. “Typically, what happens when a filmmaker is telling the story of an incarcerated person, they see them only as a subject,” said JJ’88. “But from the beginning, I was a collaborator in telling my own story. And unfortunately, that’s not usual, but it’s necessary if you want your story to be told completely.”

Even with JJ’88 serving two life sentences, the trio, new to this workflow, played to their strengths: Contessa would be the director, reseda would use his background in activism to find synchronistic funders, and JJ’88 would constantly revise his music for the evolving film.

“Even that is too oversimplified,” Gayles said. “There was multiple hat-wearing and overlap throughout.” But, together, she, alongside her two new collaborators, “didn’t know what they didn’t know,” solving every issue as a team. (Producer David Felix Sutcliffe joined the team—initially as a consulting producer starting in the development phase, and then as a full producer as the film began post-production—fundraising, managing post, festivals, and sales along the film’s life.) Nearly a year after reseda was released from prison, he began fundraising.

But in the throes of the COVID pandemic, the trio had to figure out how to keep the production moving even as the state wouldn’t allow the production crew to film JJ’88 inside the prison. Gayles got creative, pulling the artist’s journals where his verses were scrawled in handwriting, recording his voice through the prison phone to stand in for his likeness, using actors to play him and his family, and employing archival photos to show his life before sentencing. Gayles wanted the audience to experience the rapper as his family did, “at a physical distance, but emotionally present,” she said.

Producing a film while a collaborator was in prison was a task unto itself. There were limited phones, each with a line of inmates waiting to talk to their loved ones for a maximum of 15 minutes. Gayles would play telephone with JJ’88’s parents, telling them that she wanted to get him on tape; they’d tell JJ’88, and he’d call Gayles. (“I kept my phone nearby with the record button ready at all times!”) Meanwhile, JJ’88 was busy rewriting some of the original music video treatments before production days and giving feedback on production stills that were sent to him via mail.

After three years in production, piece by piece, the collaborators had made a rough cut. Then, after working and petitioning for years for reduced prison time, JJ’88 was released from prison and was able to collaborate more actively with the rest of the team.





# FINANCING

Prior to filmmaking, reseda's prison abolition organization had been supported by the Meadow Fund, a California-based nonprofit founded by Patty Quillin. She, along with others, urged the team to connect with Impact Partners, where Quillin is on the Board. Impact Partners takes a recoupable equity stake in films it invests in, and, in return, helps filmmakers navigate the often murky documentary space. Their investment in **Songs From The Hole** led to a non-recoupable (or non-equity) grant by Regina K. Scully through her organization, Artemis Rising. With this early support, the team's production began to hum. To get through everything beyond production, the team cobbled money together from various other organizations and individuals who were passionate about the project and its potential reach.

The team notes that the fundraising for their independent feature was faster than is typical for most documentary filmmakers. Perhaps it was because, in the wake of 2020, **Songs From The Hole** could be used as a tool toward the racial justice reckoning. Or perhaps it was because their grantors and partners were well-networked and well-resourced, tipping one another off to the power of the film.

**By the end, the film's budget reached into the low \$1 million range.**



# LIST OF GRANTS

## **Development**

Skoll Foundation, non-recoupable grant

## **Development/Early Production**

Field of Vision, non-recoupable

## **Early Production**

Meadow Fund, non-recoupable

Impact Partners, equity investment

Regina K. Scully / Artemis Rising

Foundation, non-recoupable

Lauren & John Driscoll, non-recoupable

Sakana Foundation, non-recoupable

Robina Riccitiello, non-recoupable

Film Independent, non-recoupable

## **Production**

Impact Partners, Producer Fellowship stipend, non-recoupable

Bay Area Video Coalition, non-recoupable

Open Society Foundations, non-recoupable

California Arts Council (for Contessa Gayles), non-recoupable

California Arts Council (for richie reseda), non-recoupable

## **Post-Production**

Firelight Media, non-recoupable

Chicken & Egg, non-recoupable

Building Beyond Policing Network, non-recoupable

Quiet Fellowship, non-recoupable

Frequency, non-recoupable

International Documentary Association, non-recoupable

Jennifer Pelling, non-recoupable

Quiet, non-recoupable re-grant

## **Finishing**

Field of Vision, non-recoupable re-grant

deNovo Initiative, recoupable grant

Jennifer Pelling, non-recoupable re-grant


# FESTIVAL EXPERIENCE



The **Songs From The Hole** team worked with The Film Collaborative because they wanted a robust festival run and considered festival strategy its own form of distribution. The Film Collaborative provided needed help with that lift, as applying to festivals and delivering all print traffic, DCPs, etc., is a full-time job unto itself.

Film Collaborative works on commission, and took 50% of all screening fees for their services.

# PREMIERES & SCREENINGS



<b>SXSW Film Festival</b> .....	3/8-3/16/24
<b>Milwaukee Film Festival</b> .....	4/11-4/25/24
<b>Seattle Black Film Festival</b> .....	4/26/24
<b>Newark Black Film Festival</b> .....	7/12-7/14/24
<b>BlackStar Film Festival</b> .....	8/1-8/4/24
<b>Vashon Island Film Festival</b> .....	8/8-8/11/24
<b>Indie Street Film Festival</b> .....	8/19-8/25/24
<b>Nashville Film Festival</b> .....	9/19-9/24/24
<b>Buffalo International Film Festival</b> .....	10/10-10/17/24
<b>Fist Up Film Festival</b> .....	10/10-10/11/24
<b>San Quentin Film Festival</b> .....	10/11/24
<b>New Orleans Film Festival</b> .....	10/17-10/22/24
<b>Montclair Film Festival</b> .....	10/18-10/27/24
<b>Sing Sing Film Festival</b> .....	10/24/24
<b>Inthrive Film Festival (stop #1)</b> .....	10/19/24
<b>AFI FEST</b> .....	10/23-10/27/24
<b>Denver Film Society</b> .....	11/1-11/10/24
<b>American Film Festival Poland</b> .....	11/5-11/11/24
<b>St. Louis International Film Festival</b> .....	11/7-11/17/24
<b>Urbanworld Film Festival</b> .....	11/16/24
<b>Inthrive Film Festival (stop #2)</b> .....	2/1/25
<b>Honolulu African-American Film Festival</b> .....	2/6-3/2/25
<b>Salem Film Fest</b> .....	3/27-3/30/25
<b>Cleveland International Film Festival</b> .....	3/27-4/5/25
<b>Inthrive Film Festival (stop #3)</b> .....	5/2/25



# AWARDS

## Festival Awards 2024

- WINNER** SXSW, Audience Award: Visions
- WINNER** BlackStar Film Festival, Jury Prize: Best Feature Documentary
- WINNER** Newark Black Film Festival, Jury Prize: Spirit of Paul Robeson Award
- WINNER** Indie Street Film Festival, Jury Prize: Best Feature Documentary
- WINNER** Fist Up Film Festival, Jury Prize: Best Feature Documentary
- WINNER** Sing Sing Film Festival, Jury Prize: Excellence in Criminal Justice Storytelling
- WINNER** Buffalo International Film Festival, Audience Award: Best Feature Documentary
- WINNER** New Orleans Film Festival, Audience Award: Best Feature Documentary
- SPECIAL MENTION** New Orleans Film Festival, Jury Prize: Best Feature Documentary
- WINNER** Urbanworld Film Festival, Audience Award: Best Feature
- WINNER** St. Louis Film Festival, Audience Award: Best Feature Documentary

## Industry Awards

- NOMINEE** IDA Award: Best Music Documentary, 2024
- WINNER** Cinema Eye Honors: Heterodox Award, 2025



# PRESS & PUBLICITY METRICS

For their festival premiere, the team paid \$8k for publicity via MPRM. And, in total, \$12k was spent for festival entry fees, delivery costs (DCP creation, etc.), travel and accommodations for filmmakers (director and producers) and film participants (the Jacobs family), promotional materials, event photographer, premiere reception with live performance, etc.

In the month around the premiere (starting about 2 weeks before + 1 week after):

- 11 reviews – 3 with major trades (Variety, Hollywood Reporter, RogerEbert.com)
- 1 exclusive – with Complex
- 4 interviews
- 17 online press or social media breaks
- Photo coverage – Getty, Shutterstock, Wikimedia

(Variety heralded the film as a “mesmerizing story of a rap album created behind bars”)



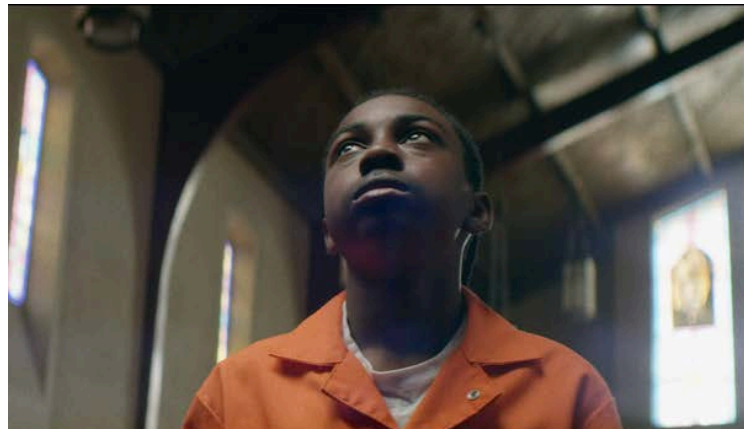
# THE SALE

Even with numerous film festival accolades, the road to a sale wasn't easy for the **Songs** team. "Everyone said no," richie said. "Formerly incarcerated filmmaker D'Lo Louis introduced us to Archie Davis, and he said, 'just show your art to your people, and the industry will catch on later.'" And that they did: At festivals like BlackStar and San Quentin, the first-ever film festival held in a U.S. prison, distribution executives were tipped off to the buzz surrounding the screenings of **Songs From The Hole**. "[We showed the film] where it was OUR people on OUR terms—and when people felt the energy in the room, a couple [executives] changed their minds," said reseda. The team thinks it's important to note that "Nos aren't always nos."

As they began to discuss a potential sale between themselves, a question lingered that many other filmmakers have asked themselves: **Who is this film for?**

Within prisons across the country, incarcerated folks are only allowed to watch PBS on their televisions. "Saturday mornings on PBS were my lessons in filmmaking," JJ'88 said. So PBS seemed like a fitting destination for the film. **After much consideration, they decided Netflix was the best home for Songs.**

**"With respect for the value and service of public television, the team also considered the possible reach and impact with a global streamer like Netflix."**



"Our film will be available worldwide and translated into multiple languages on the streamer," he said. And for a film that aims to change minds and hearts around incarcerated folks and the prison system at large, the viewing opportunity streaming provides was too great to pass up.

In the spirit of prison abolition, the team also recognized it needed to preach beyond the choir. "The Homies know the experience of being incarcerated," reseda said, referring to those held behind bars across the country. How could they show the lived experiences of their peers to the rest of the world?

Besides, they'd find a way to make sure incarcerated folks could get their hands on the film, too. "With the organizing backgrounds that [JJ'88 and richie] have, the relationships, this film would be seen by our people no matter where it landed. This is gonna get to the people it needs to because that's been the spirit and energy that has guided this project and this story all along."

To that end, the team partnered with an organization called Healing Through Creative Practice and worked tirelessly to provide access to the film via computer tablets within all California state prisons, with a goal of the film being available in prisons nationally.



# OWNERSHIP

As is standard for most premieres on the streamer, Netflix will control all rights in perpetuity for the film. But if the music makes up the backbone of *Songs From The Hole*, does the streamer own the music as well? “No, ” JJ’88 told us. “Thankfully, Contessa and richie helped steward my music through the distribution talks, which was a blessing for me as an independent artist. **We decided to license the music to the film so that we’d retain ownership of the music no matter where the film went.**”

There were conversations the team had with distributors who suggested that the film rights should come with the music rights, but the team was adamant that there was no film without the music, not the other way around. “So, we’ll release the album from the film the same day it’s released on Netflix [and reap the benefits].”





PHOTO: NETFLIX

# IMPACT & ENGAGEMENT

reseda and JJ'88 took the lead on impact, and they began their campaign in tandem with their festival screenings. When they were in a city for a festival, they planned a free community screening with local partners and/or a screening in a prison or a jail.

At each screening, their mission is to encourage healing for those affected by incarceration and community violence. "Film is a tool to create a more just world," reseda shared. "The point of the healing plan that accompanies the film is to encourage audiences to live in ways that don't respond to harm with harm, but rather with healing." The plan, which they make available to partners and online, encourages audiences to reconnect with their community and create an accountability plan for how they will "combat domination, violence, and shame." The point is "to make us reliant on each other, to live in harmony with all natural things," said Richie.

So far, they've brought the film to 18 prisons with partners like Represent Justice and Healing through Creative Practice, with the support from Firelight Media, Chicken & Egg Pictures, Sundance/Sony Music, Pop Culture Collaborative, The Michael Latt Legacy Fund, and Waterman II Fund of the Philadelphia Foundation, at the recommendation of David Haas.

They've even made impressive inroads into changing the time spent behind bars for incarcerated people in California. **With Healing through Creative Practice's help, the team has expanded their healing program into a curriculum that, when completed, will allow incarcerated persons to receive a week off of their sentence.**

"I have been in a prison where people are writing it on poster boards and putting it up on the walls: 'Healing Through Creative Practice...1 week milestone,'" Richie said. "285 people signed up in one week." They'll work through 2025 to bring [Songs From The Hole](#) to more prisons and advocate for more sentence reductions alongside curriculum completions.

As for how they're structuring payments for the work they've put into the impact campaign: "Whatever hours were being billed on weekly calls which were on production budget, we're now billing from impact," Contessa said. "Richie and JJ'88 are paid as facilitators alongside other facilitators. And we provide a stipend for partner orgs [who help us get access to particular communities, like prisons]."

**FirelightMedia**

CASE STUDY: SONGS FROM THE HOLE / 2025

# ADVICE FOR FILMMAKERS



"For incarcerated folks who want to be filmmakers, I'd tell them to get up to speed on the administrative skills it takes to be a filmmaker, not just the creative ones. To do well in the film business, you need a 60/40 split, creative and administrative, not just creative. And then, don't think about doing it...just do it."



"I'd have more explicit prep conversations about how the industry works and what our individual roles are and what we need from each other. Lack of experience can put a strain on a collaborative team's relationship. I would have been more boundaried and explicit about what I needed as a person, friend, and collaborator."



"Trust your vision and be true to your voice as an artist. Don't let the fact that you're doing something new and doing it differently than how it's been done before intimidate or dissuade you. Don't let shifting market forces or notions of commercial viability water down your distinct point of view. And don't wait for gatekeepers to greenlight you. Greenlight yourself."



## ABOUT FIRELIGHT MEDIA

Firelight Media's mission is to support the creation, distribution, and impact of documentary media by and about communities of color in all our vibrance and complexity. By providing filmmakers mentorship, funding, and creative development, we seek to advance the art of nonfiction storytelling to realize a more just and beautiful world.

Learn more at [firelightmedia.tv](https://firelightmedia.tv)

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