

Cultural Daily

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DISCO'D: a documentary featuring the people, the voices, of L.A.'s homeless community

Jessica Ceballos Campbell · Wednesday, March 29th, 2017

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“The disco is when you’ve been up for too long, and you start losing base with reality. It gets you to where you’re losing your grip on reality... that’s what it is...You start losing touch with what’s going on...You’re vulnerable...People get paranoid, they lose their minds...discombobulated, disconcerted, know what I’m saying? Sitting there with a question mark hanging over your head going, ‘What the hell?’”

Sam Mantell and Matthew Siretta are both filmmakers based in Los Angeles. I’ve known Sam for several years, but haven’t stayed connected other than through social media. It’s funny how art can connect people, or in this case reconnect, in so many different ways. When I received his email about their documentary film *Disco’d*, the idea that the Trump administration would eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for Humanities (NEH), the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), had only been a rumor. I watched the film clips he sent me, read about the project on the [Indiegogo](#) page, and was immediately drawn to the purpose of this film, and its response to the urgency of the issue of homelessness in this city.

The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority [counted](#) 43,854 homeless people during the 2016 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count. Almost 13,000 of those people are critically homeless and over 4,000 are veterans, the highest number in the nation. Both activists and officials have blamed the rising numbers on the lack of access to affordable housing, and the cost of housing isn’t expected to lower anytime soon.

A week after watching the film clips, but before I was able to respond to his email, the administration released their proposed budget for 2018. Eliminating four arts & cultural agencies and their collective \$971 million budgets was now an official proposal from the Trump administration. It’s long been [proven](#) that the arts can play critical roles in fostering healthy

learning environments, and states arts agencies have often filled the gaps that public education leave behind. But another important, yet oft-missed point to acknowledge are the contributions PBS, NPR, and the National Endowment for Humanities have made towards stimulating interest in urgent issues that affect marginalized peoples in our communities, and throughout history. One look at the [list of films](#) that have been supported in part by the NEH is a reminder of why this *funding* is especially significant. The second part of using arts and media as a means to call attention to these issues is – *access* to an audience. The CPB supports over [1,498 outlets of distribution](#) across the country, both radio and television, which provide space for programming through the Public Broadcasting System, and National Public Radio. Ending these programs will mean less outreach and opportunities for awareness of issues that have impacted, or are currently impacting cities across the nation. But the fact is, it can take some time before [this kind](#) of budget proposal takes effect, especially considering the impact it could have on such a widespread amount of issues. For now, arts are here, and artists are facilitating the conversations we need to have. In the case of *Disco'd*, Sam and Matthew have provided a platform for our homeless community to facilitate the conversation.

They're on their last few days of campaigning for finishing funds through Indiegogo. I was happy to have this discussion with them, not only because it's a great-*looking* documentary, but because it's important that we humanize the homeless community, their voices make them people, not criminals, entitled to basic human rights. Let's help Sam and Matthew finish the project, and who knows, maybe it'll find it's way to PBS!

Hi Sam and Matthew! So happy to interview you about this project! So first of all, what does *Disco'd* mean?

Hi! So, *Disco'd* means a couple different things. It's slang, short for discombobulation, discomfort, disconcertedness, disconnected. In the film, it also describes the state a person can get into, when they reach a certain threshold, where they're stuck because of how homelessness has affected them.

How did you come up with the title?

We started to hear “disco'd” or “the disco” used a lot on the street around some of the more dense camps where people were living, particularly in one area along the 101 Freeway. We thought of using it as the title when we were beginning post-production. We were editing one night and needed to take a break so we walked around Hollywood and we ran into one of the guys in our film. At first he didn't recognize us but once he realized who we were we walked and talked for awhile, and then ended up taking him back to our studio with us to see some of the footage. While we were viewing an early cut of his scene, he said at one point “now that's the disco.” We asked him what that meant, because although we had heard it used before, we still didn't really understand the meaning. After he explained, we just knew, it grabbed our attention, and we realized it related in different yet relevant ways to the main characters and the rest of the picture. We started to look for these elements and themes of the disco, which really helped narrow down the focus of the film.

The last time we chatted we discussed how much the houseless population had grown, even in the short time since you moved to Los Angeles. Has this been something apparent to you? And has it ever crossed your mind that your art would be used as a tool to raise awareness of such an urgent issue? First of all, do you consider your craft, your skill, an art? Let's answer

that first.

Matthew Siretta (MS): I think of my craft as a form of art because of the process. My intentions, how I use the camera, what I focus on, my aesthetic, my artistic influences...I think there's enough personal sensibility. I'm not just creating an expression or story from the characters, with the camerawork and editing, I'm taking the literal and creating abstractions. So yes, this crossed my mind.

Have you worked on documentaries before?

MS: I've worked on Documentaries before. My first Documentary is called, [My 100 Year Old Mother](#) (2012). I was obsessed with a Documentary that Scorsese made in college called *Italianamerican*. It's simple and entertaining. The film crosscuts between his parents talking about their family history while having dinner, and his mother making the dinner, in their small apartment in lower Manhattan. You can tell that Scorsese is still learning how to be a filmmaker, and yet so confident. This was amazing to me, because I thought if I could just do something like this, with no money, I'd learn something from it, and have my first serious film. So basically I had the idea to do this with my one hundred year old Italian grandmother, and cross cut between her with her two sons and their long time friend having dinner as she tells stories about her life, and my father cooking the meal. In 2013, I worked with documentarian Matthew Akers and Klaus Biesenbach at MoMA PS1 on an untitled documentary. The film was never released. Then in 2014, I got to meet one of my favorite filmmakers Frederick Wiseman during the production of his latest film "In Jackson Heights". I was living in Jackson Heights, Queens, at the time, and had started to make my own documentary about the neighborhood. Once I discovered Wiseman had beaten me to it, I quit making the film, and decided to track him down instead. I found out he was keeping his film equipment at the local synagogue. So I went there, left my number with someone who was in touch with Wiseman, and the next day he called me. He ended up invited me on a few of the shoots, where I got to watch him in action. I brought my own camera and photographed him while he worked. This was truly an amazing experience for me that I'm so thankful for.

In terms of seeing homelessness grown here in Los Angeles. I think Sam has seen it grown more than me. He's lived here longer. I've only been in L.A. since 2014, and before that I would occasionally come out here. Before moving to Los Angeles, I'd already thought homelessness was really bad in New York, so when I saw how much worse it was here in L.A., I was very shocked. This is when my interest in the subject grew, especially because of how ignored this margin of society seemed. Maybe because it's a sensitive of a subject in our culture, and many people feel to make a film about homelessness, you're just exploiting them. I'm not sure, but I felt confident I could do it in a way that wasn't exploitative, had never been seen before, or in some way shared new and interesting perspective on the issue. When I first moved out here, my job required that I drive around the city a lot and that's when I really started to gauge how immense the issue of homelessness is, and that it truly is an epidemic now. I found myself looking, driving around these more hidden, tucked away areas along the sides of freeways, curious to learn more about where people lived and how they lived. I think I was just generally interested in the driving dynamics of the personal relationships to the resources of the urban landscape

Samuel Mantell (SM): Definitely. It wasn't something I grew up around or experienced until I moved here. The first time I saw Skid Row was, like it is for everybody, it's an eye opener. Homelessness is a part of the culture of Los Angeles. From very early on after moving here, I used my writing as an attempt to understand the homeless community, homelessness as a facet of

society, and my relationship to it as a part of the same society. Just short stories and journal entries. But starting a couple years ago, it seemed like homelessness was getting much worse. I was seeing more, and larger, tent villages popping up all around the city. Living in Hollywood made me more acutely aware that homelessness was on the rise, I started writing a script with characters that were homeless. It wasn't very good, because of the many homeless people I saw, I never talked to any. Around the same time, Matt and I were coming up with an idea for a movie as well, and we'd taken to driving around in the hills and tossing ideas around. One night, we came down onto Hollywood Blvd, and I think it really struck us both as odd and disconcerting that the polar extremes of wealth could coexist in such close proximity. So the idea of a movie in that setting occurred pretty naturally to us as a way to explore that dichotomy between two worlds. When Matt suggested we take a camera on the street one night, it seemed to make sense; we could actually start making a movie. Any time you think of yourself making a movie, you want it to have an impact, and making an impact on viewers, as well as understanding its impact on us, was definitely a present thought. I had never made a doc before, and we didn't know if we were making a doc or a narrative at first, but once we started gathering footage and meeting people on the street, the distinction sort of fell away and it became about telling that story. I think for me, my craft, my skill as a producer, as a production person in general, I don't know if I would call it art. I wouldn't say it's *not* art. It's thrilling, it comes naturally to me. I love it. But I would say what distinguishes my sense of production from my sense of art is that production is not wholly spontaneous, whereas my art, my writing, is born in spontaneity. So that's how I think of art coming from myself. The rest is work. But I think that's why film is so attractive for artists, because you can have that spontaneous moment, that flash, and then because of the tools and the ingenuity of people you collaborate with, and hard work, you can make that spontaneous thought or feeling into a work of art.

Yeah. To be cognizant of where “the art” meets “the work” is something so materialized in filmmaking, especially documentary filmmaking, I think.

You both hold day jobs, right? How did you prepare for filming at night? And you filmed at all hours of the evening?

SM: Yeah we both had day jobs while shooting. We weren't being paid to make the movie so we needed to make money somehow. We worked during the day, and then we'd meet up at the studio where Matt worked, check our equipment, load up a backpack with snacks and water, and chose a place to film if we didn't already choose one.

MS: We focused on areas throughout the city where the communities of people living on the street were most prominent. Then we went there to talk and meet people first, and we would either film with them that night or plan a night to come back. Preparation was minimal. Staying patient and sharp so you can make the right decisions, and making sure you really know how to operate the equipment otherwise you miss things. And we were prepared to stay out as late as needed. It was like we had full time day jobs and full time night jobs. We weren't getting much sleep at all, but we didn't care because it was so exciting.

SM: Right, the preparation was really mental. We had to get ourselves to a place where we could make sound decisions for the film with little sleep and very limited resources. On top of that, justifying, in our heads, being up that late, doing what we were doing, which seemed a little crazy. But it was exciting.

How many hours of video do you have?

Over 180 hours. We don't know the exact number.

Is there anyone you bonded with, built a relationship with?

MS: We bonded the most with Julie, a woman we met one night in Hollywood. She's in her sixties, and when we met her she had been living alone in a tent for five years. When the recession hit, her rent tripled, and she had nowhere to live. She didn't use drugs, she was just hoping to find housing, and so we felt for her. She's just an all-around great person, and just as great on camera. She's incredibly present and aware of everything, but somehow seemed to never notice the camera. But half the time we spent with her, we weren't even filming.



Julie

SM: Yeah, we met Julie early on. We introduced ourselves, had a seat on the sidewalk, and filmed her while she read us poetry, and talked about living in a tent on the sidewalk as a sixty five year old woman. For three hours. She had really high spirits. She was in direct contrast to the environment we were in. It was inspiring, and she showed us that becoming homeless could happen to anybody. She was probably the first person we spent an extended period of time with, and we learned from that experience. She's in assisted housing now, thankfully. We stay in touch.

Ah! That's great that she found housing. Super news!

As filmmakers, you came into this project with a certain frame of mind, right? Did you find that maybe you had to let any preconceived notions go? You decided to stay behind the camera, and you basically just let the camera go, sort of empowering the people you're filming to just tell their stories the way they want to tell them. Did you have any filmmakers in mind when you thought of shooting in this style?

MS: I always have other filmmakers in mind. For this film it was primarily the work of one of my favorite filmmakers Frederick Wiseman, and Errol Morris, specifically the film "Vernon, Florida". I also rewatched the film Dark Days a few times, which is a great film about a homeless community living in the underground subway tunnels of New York City. When I began this film, I knew it would be impossible to have any true preconceived notions because I knew very little on a personal level about homelessness, and needed to be able to adjust, and remain open to discovering as much as possible. We still gave the film some parameters. We knew we wanted it to taking place on streets of L.A. at night, and some of the general areas where we wanted to immerse ourselves, and this of course evolved over time. Other than that I had some ideas for visuals that I knew I wanted to capture based on what I had already seen in some of these areas, but I didn't have any specific agenda, questions, or ideas for our subjects until working with them in the moment. Most of my decisions were in the moment. I just knew that I wanted the subjects to be diverse, and had a general idea of how I wanted the film to look and feel. I wanted the film to move like the characters, focusing on what's happening in the immediate. So I never wanted them to just give their whole life story on camera. I was more interested in their immediate concerns and actions, in hopes of finding and relating that, to the other characters and the story at large. I wanted it to play more like a regular narrative film than a documentary.

That makes sense, seems more purposeful to have intentions and goals. What about you Sam?

SM: My frame of mind was, this is a topic I'm wanting to explore more, and Matt and I are talking about making a movie, so let's make a movie. I'd never made a feature, I'd never made a documentary, I'd never worked with Matt, and I never pursued this subject matter with film. So it would have been hard to form preconceived notions about anything we were doing. But it was important to let go of a sense of what a documentary was, to me, because I thought of talking heads and b-roll, so at first that's where my mind was while filming. I was talking to people too much, trying to get sound bites. Then Matt showed me the work of Frederick Wiseman and I saw pretty clearly what we were aiming for instead. I was really struck by that vision. It turned into an education for me, and I really felt influenced by all the other movies we were talking about and watching at the time too, in addition to those Matt mentioned. *Killer of Sheep*, *Taxi Driver*, *Streetwise*. It was a thrill to think about making movies like that.

What's next on the list of things to do to finish this film? And you're using [Indiegogo](#) to try to fill those funding gaps, which I think is a great way to get these issues heard, aside from funded.

First thing on our list: reach our Indiegogo campaign goal. Then we'll use that money to pay for the final stages of the process: mixing the sound, color correcting, and quality control. That's it. The movie is already cut. We just have to make sure it looks good and sounds good in the theater.

The documenting and delivery of media arts relating to pressing socio-political issues, specifically funding and distribution to an audience, has always been a tricky one to navigate, but has traditionally been supported by the Public Broadcasting Service, National Public Radio, The National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities – all programs that the current administration has cut from their proposed budget. When you two decided to embark on this project there was a possibility that these programs would be in jeopardy. Was this something that was on your mind? But you didn't think of the non-profit/grant route, right?

We considered grant funding here and there, but once we started, we were always shooting or editing. We were lucky in that we never needed funding to make the movie, up to now. We were able to shoot and edit on our own dime. Our film was very low budget to begin with and we already had most of the equipment we needed to begin production. So we paid for it ourselves, until we realized we would definitely need more money to pay for finishing the movie.

But talking about those great programs, they've always been great resources for a lot of artists, and it's gonna really hurt if they end up getting cut. That was unthinkable at the time we were making the movie. It was 2015, and the homelessness issue was getting a lot of attention at the time. So if anything we thought PBS might want to air the movie. But we didn't think much about funding aside from that.

What are your goals with this film? Do you plan on screening it to raise awareness on issues surrounding homelessness?

We're submitting to festivals and will distribute the film in hopes of reaching people everywhere. The film aims to raise awareness and offer new and interesting perspective on the subject of homelessness by giving you an experiential look at homelessness through an immersive character-driven story that plays more like regular narrative fiction. Homelessness is a global issue, but in L.A., maybe it's slightly unique in the sense that it's one of the more famous and wealthy cities in

the world with tremendous poverty and wealth coexisting in very close proximity.

I think in the end we're also hoping the power of film can triumph here. Most people who are not homeless experience homelessness in the same way; observing from afar, or just looking away. But *Disco'd* spins that around. A change in perspective can be a very powerful thing, and film is a great tool for that. If a movie can make one person think differently in their daily life, it worked on some level.

The film is *Disco'd*.

Directed & Filmed by Matthew Siretta

Produced by [Samuel Mantell & Matthew Siretta](#)

You can watch a clip, or read about the film at the [Indiegogo page](#). Consider a contribution to help them finish the project!

Indiegogo webpage: <https://igg.me/at/discodmovie/x/15713225>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/DiscodMovie/>

Instagram: @discodmovie

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