

THOUGHTFUL ROBOT & GUARDIAN DOCUMENTARIES

Present **BEIRUT DREAMS IN COLOR**

28 mins. DCP, ProRes 422, In English & Arabic with English subtitles



Award-winning filmmakers Michael Collins, Marty Syjuco, James Costa & Sarah Kasakas bring us the remarkable story of a revolution that will not be televised, but sung.

FESTIVALS:

(As of April 2022)

TRIBECA FILM FESTIVAL, NEW YORK CITY

BFI FLARE, LONDON

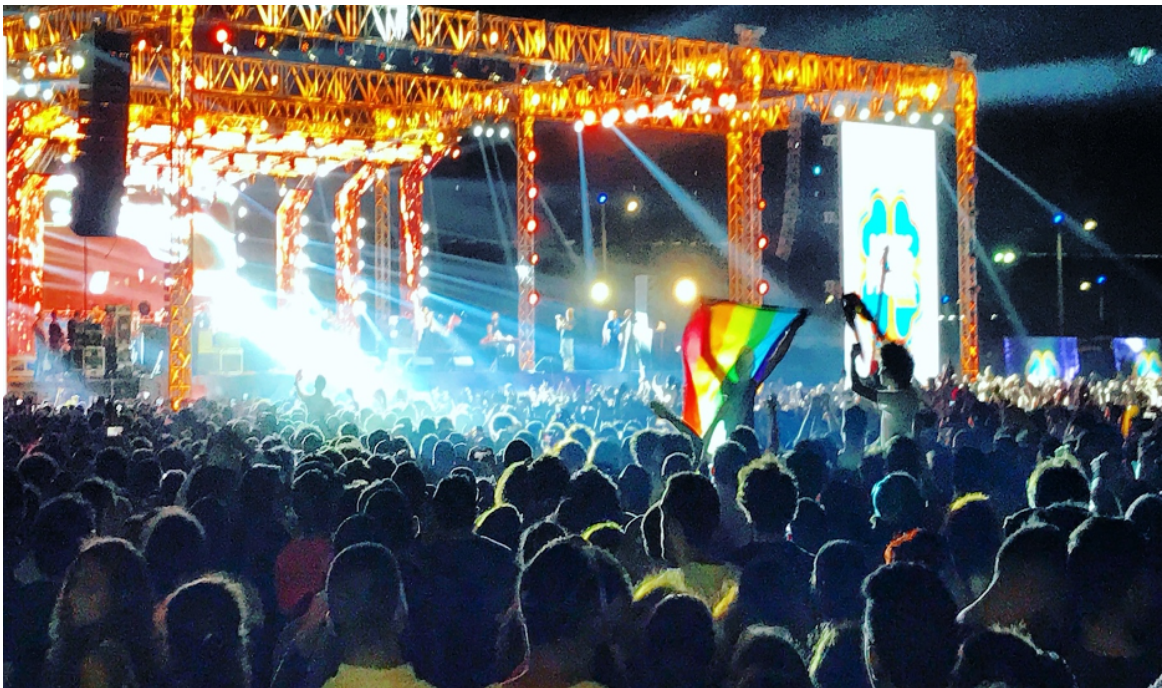
MOVIES THAT MATTER, THE HAGUE

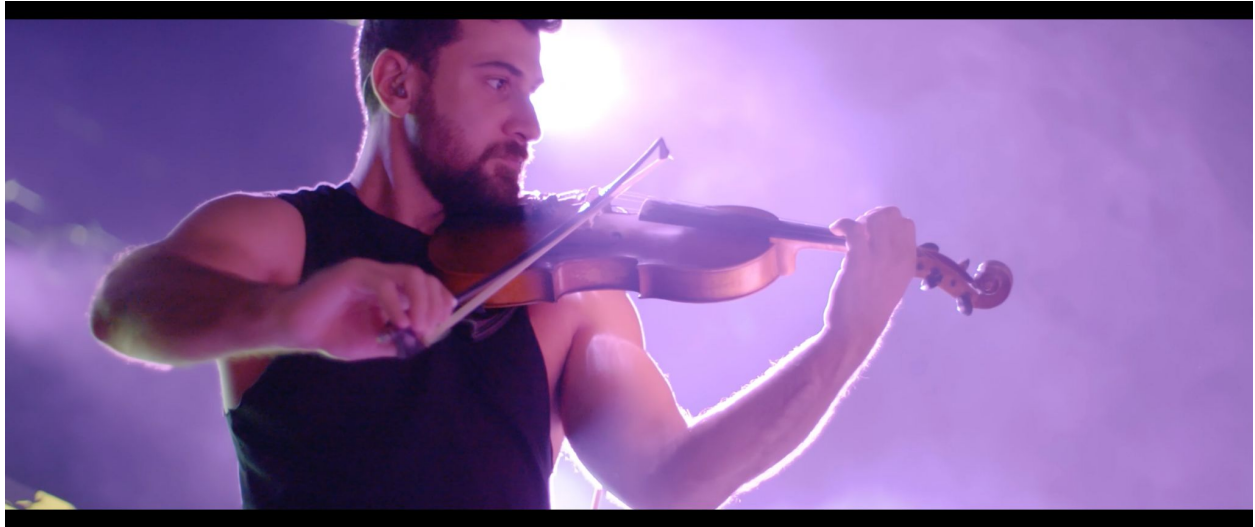
MOUNTAINFILM, TELLURIDE

DOC EDGE, NEW ZEALAND

INSIDE OUT, TORONTO

KASHISH INTL QUEER FILM FESTIVAL, MUMBAI





*Renegades, rebels, pioneers...
Mashrou' Leila are indie rock gods in the Arab world.
But their fame comes with a price.*

SYNOPSIS

At a concert in Cairo, the biggest band in the Middle East, *Mashrou' Leila*, energizes a crowd of 35,000 people. On stage, the charismatic lead singer, Hamed, the first openly gay rock star in the Arab world, faces a sea of swaying flickering lights. Among the incandescence, a fan raises a giant rainbow flag, capping off a magical night. Yet, that one simple act of pride and joy would ultimately catapult the band, the fan and others headlong into a tragic series of events.

Award-winning director Michael Collins brings us the timely story of a trailblazing rock band, a courageous fan, and a queer activist's daunting battle against religious extremists for equality in some of the most hardline places in the world. *BEIRUT DREAMS IN COLOR* is, simultaneously, a rare and nuanced look into the LGBTQ politics of the Middle East, and a moving testament to the power of music, and the universal desire for freedom.





DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Back in 2017, I was in Beirut and was fortunate to be introduced to Tarek Zaiden, who helms the oldest LGBTQIA+ rights organization in the Middle East. It's called *Helem* which is fitting as it means *Dream* in Arabic. Over coffee he told me about the rise in bullying and violence that the queer community in Lebanon was experiencing at the hands of the government security forces. Politicians were succumbing to increased pressure from religious extremist groups. Then, he told me about Mashrou' Leila - a popular indie band from Beirut that had been around for a decade, and whose lead singer, Hamed Sinno, was openly gay. Their music reflected all of the politics that they, as engaged young artists, were observing and reacting to, and this included the queer experience from a very personal point of view. In fact, their song "the smell of Jasmine" is known to be perhaps the first gay love song in the Arab world. This level of queer visibility is revolutionary in most countries, but, in this region, also dangerously tabooed.

I started listening to their music, sung almost entirely in Arabic. I was hooked.

I experienced the power of it; how it resonates with truths that go beyond spoken language. I did then, of course, read all their lyrics and wished I had grown up with such beautiful artists to look up to, whose concerts I could go to, and dance freely at; and in my awkward youth be reassured that there was, indeed, in this crazy, motley world, a space for me. As a queer man who grew up in a Christian country, I could relate to feelings of being *less-than* that were ever-present in the lack of positive queer representation in media - we were relegated to caricatures or monsters. I could relate to the death-by-a-thousand-cuts all queer kids feel as the preachers and politicians use them as tools to drum up fear, votes and all the benefits of othering and dividing to serve their needs.

It became obvious to me why they are hugely famous all over the Middle East. This added to the devastation of learning that one by one they were being banned from performing in most countries in the region, including Egypt, their biggest fan-base. But Lebanon always seemed like one place they could return to, especially their hometown of Beirut, which was historically known as a relatively liberal oasis, hence dubbed as “The Paris of the Middle East”. Yet by the time I reached them, that no longer held true. As Tarek points out in the film, “One good song can do more than 5000 protests.” It’s pretty self-evident that the very existence of this band, their fearless and often joyful expression of their experiences combined with their sheer talent, have done more to further the queer movement than we’ll ever know. But sadly, as their fame has grown, so has their perceived power in upsetting the status quo, making them a target for all kinds of attacks.

Yet cocooned within the tragedy, I also discovered hope in the spirit of Sarah Hegazy, a young Egyptian woman, a luminous leader who was silenced in the worst way. I hope through this film more people can meet Sarah and find inspiration in her voice. But I also wanted us to collectively have a space to grieve her loss, an act that is often robbed of those whose safety depends on their anonymity.

For me, this is the most personal film I’ve made. The process has forced me to confront my own past, and the lingering traumas of living in a society that continues to steer so many of our queer siblings to early deaths. *Beirut* is a film about belonging; a cautionary tale about what happens when greedy, fearful political and religious groups join forces to rehash some archaic worldview that feels more comfortable for them.

During a time when LGBTQIA+ rights are under attack in many parts of the world, including in the United States, my hope with this film is to elevate the conversation on the vulnerability experienced by individuals from minority communities in countries where religious conservatism and political extremism are on the rise. Systemic institutionalization of hate is always a looming danger that one must prevent to protect those who are ‘soft targets’ of increasingly polarized societies. What starts out as isolated incidents of hate and bigotry can often spiral into more devastating consequences for communities that are already struggling to find their voice in safe spaces. Despite the push-back from extremists and the indifference from other quarters of societies, some are born leaders who inspire us with a sense of hope and enthusiasm, even amidst troubling realities.



FILM TEAM

Michael Collins, Director/Producer/Editor

Michael is a two-time Emmy® and Grierson nominated filmmaker and the founder of Thoughtful Robot, a film production company committed to telling stories that inspire, connect and galvanize change. Michael is currently producing DELIKADO with ITVS, Vulcan Production and TIME Studios for POV. His previous film ALMOST SUNRISE premiered at Telluride Mountainfilm, won a CINE Golden Eagle Award, and was Emmy-nominated for Outstanding Current Affairs Documentary. Michael's first film GIVE UP TOMORROW premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival where it won the Audience Award and a Special Jury Prize for Best New Director, was selected for the Puma Impact Award and was nominated for an Emmy® Award for Outstanding Investigative Journalism. In addition to filmmaking, Michael volunteers as a meditation instructor working with a wide range of populations including veterans, military families and the queer community.

Marty Syjuco, Producer

Originally from the Philippines, Marty moved to NYC in 2000 and worked in film distribution at Focus Features. In 2004 he decided to pursue his passion: documentary filmmaking. His first feature GIVE UP TOMORROW, seven years in the making, has reached over 50 million viewers through broadcasts and digital platforms around the globe, including on BBC Storyville and PBS as part of POV's 25th anniversary season. Marty's producing credits include PARADISE, ALMOST SUNRISE and CALL HER GANDA, and he was recently invited to join the Documentary Branch of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences.

Sarah Kasakas, Producer

Sarah Kasakas is a Lebanese/American filmmaker, music composer and film educator. In 2016, Sarah co-founded Karaaj Films, an independent production company which focuses on documentaries and fiction films dealing with identity and marginalized communities in Lebanon. Under Karaaj Films, Sarah has written and directed the short documentary “Bread and Tea (2016)” and the feature documentary “Underdown (2018)” - both award winning films selected at festivals such as IDFA, EIFF, DOXA and Mostra. Sarah is currently in post production for 2 films that will be released in 2021: “STRUCK” (short documentary) and “The Window” (short fiction). She resides in Beirut, developing her first feature fiction and the sophomore album for her musical project Wanderland.

James Costa, Producer

James is Director/Producer of LUNCH HOUR: AMERICA’S SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM, executive producer of CALL HER GANDA as well as THE ANIMAL PEOPLE. He is Co-Executive Producer of WEED THE PEOPLE. He is Co-Vice Chair of The International Documentary Association as well as a Board member of Sea Shepherd. James is on the Executive Producer Council of CAP/UCLA and Leadership Council of The Roundabout Theatre of NY.

Patty Kim, Executive Producer

Patty is the writer, co-director and co-producer of the award-winning feature documentary “ABDUCTION: The Megumi Yokota Story” produced in association with BBC Storyville and executive produced by Oscar-winning filmmaker Jane Campion. The film was broadcast nationally on PBS and aired on major networks around the world. The film, which centers around the kidnapping of a child by North Korean secret agents, was screened at the United Nations in Geneva and New York, for audiences including the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as part of a movement supporting an international treaty to outlaw enforced disappearances. Patty served as executive producer of the award-winning feature documentary “Almost Sunrise” (director Michael Collins), and consulting producer on “Give Up Tomorrow”, which won two top prizes at the 2011 Tribeca Film Festival.

