



MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE  
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA  
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2018  
Official Selection



**WHAT YOU GONNA DO WHEN  
THE WORLD'S ON FIRE?**

**A FILM BY ROBERTO MINERVINI**





# SYNOPSIS

Summer 2017, a string of brutal police killings of young African American men has sent shockwaves throughout the country. A Black community in the American South tries to cope with the lingering effects of the past and navigate their place in a country that is not on their side. Meanwhile, the Black Panthers prepare a large-scale protest against police brutality.

A blistering meditation on the state of race in America from the director of *THE OTHER SIDE*.



# COMMENTS FROM FILMMAKER ROBERTO MINERVINI A DISCUSSION ON RACE

My hope is that this film can facilitate a much-needed discussion on race and the current plight of African Americans who, now more than ever, are witnessing the intensification of hate crimes and discriminatory policies. Because, like Judy said to me: “After Katrina we lost it all, but if you care about us, we still have a lot left to give.”

During the main shoot in 2017, I concentrated all my efforts on working with four main characters/contexts: Judy and her large family, two young brothers named Ronaldo and Titus, Chief Kevin of the Mardi Gras Indians, and the Black Panthers.

Judy tries to keep her family afloat while dealing with the looming shutdown of her bar business and her 87 year-old mother’s eviction, both results of the ruthless gentrification of traditionally black neighborhoods. Ronaldo and Titus try to make sense of their mother’s teachings, while waiting for the release of Ronaldo’s incarcerated father. The revolutionary Black Panthers conduct investigations to uncover the truth behind racially-motivated killings in Louisiana and Mississippi and stage demonstrations to protest police brutality.





# JUDY

Judy is a 50 year-old single woman with a larger-than-life personality, who descends from a family of musicians. She hails from New Orleans' Tremé, America's oldest black neighborhood, where jazz originated. Despite her past struggles, three years ago Judy got her life back on track and became the owner of "Ooh Poo Pah Doo," the historic New Orleans bar where locals congregated to talk, drink, and play music. Judy also held meetings at the bar, with friends, family members and local activists, to take the pulse of the situation of Black people in New Orleans and the American South.

In 2017, Judy lost her bar due to the Tremé's ruthless gentrification process, which drove rent and property costs up, while pushing people out of the only neighborhood and community that they had ever known. As a consequence, Judy is back to looking for ways to make ends meet. As she says, "strong women need a strong mind because they have strong problems."





# RONALDO AND TITUS

We met Ronaldo and Titus while filming a gathering of neighborhood children. Ronaldo is a 14 year-old boy with a fierce look, hard-edged beauty, and an adult-like maturity level that was hidden under his childish innocence. His self-confidence was intimidating at first. Yet, as time went by, Ronaldo lowered his guard and opened up to us. He welcomed us into his world. We met his young single mother Ashlei, and his 9 year-old brother Titus. We found out that the two brothers have been raised by their mother with the intent to keep them off the streets, and out of trouble. Ronaldo has a sharp vision about the racial divide, and expresses his opinion about the need to preserve Black Americans' legacy very clearly, and without hesitation. It was striking to see such a young boy talking about the importance of the civil rights movement for Black people. "Without all of them who fought for us, we will still be slaves," Ronaldo said to Titus. These two young brothers have the wisdom of people who have already lived several lives.



*“Coming out of slavery, being African American wasn’t socially acceptable. By masking like Native Americans, it created an identity of strength. Native Americans under all the pressure and duress, would not concede. These people were almost driven into extinction, and the same kind of feeling came out of slavery, “You’re not going to give us a place here in society, we’ll create our own.”*

Ronald Lewis, former Council Chief of the Choctaw Hunters, a Mardi Gras Indian tribe he helped to start.

# CHIEF KEVIN AND THE MARDI GRAS INDIANS

The tradition of the Mardi Gras Indian groups in Southern Louisiana started in the mid 19th century when African Americans were not allowed to participate in the cities' formal parades. Runaway slaves from the transatlantic slave trade were taken in by indigenous Native American people, shielded from harm and accepted into their communities. Many times marrying Native American wives, these freed slaves strongly identified with the Native American fight against Anglo-Saxon oppression, and fought side by side with them. In both West African and Native American cultures, the use of masking, headdresses, feathers and beads were common practices and as these two cultures intermixed, a new masking culture developed into the Mardi Gras Indian tradition. Even though the Mardi Gras Indians have paraded for well over a century, with elaborate costumes, dance and song, their parades are perhaps the least recognized Mardi Gras tradition. The Indians work all year round on their costumes or "suits," spending thousands of hours and dollars on each suit, painstakingly hand sewing and beading each suit for 6-7 hours a day for an entire year. Each suit tells a story and is the result

of an extraordinary effort of intricate beadwork and dramatic images, and is only worn once and then retired. The difficulties (both emotional and financial) to prepare for Mardi Gras are enormous. But for them, being an Indian is an act of militancy: it is a struggle to regain a long lost freedom of expression for disenfranchised people.

There are more than 50 different Indian tribes in New Orleans, one of which is the Flaming Arrows tribe, to whom we were introduced by Judy at her bar. The Big Chief of the Flaming Arrows, Chief Kevin, is the leader of this tribe and a prominent figure in the Indian community. When the tribe gathers, music consisting of call-and-response chanting and drumming plays a central role in their performance. The Mardi Gras Indians' music contains a direct link between their tradition and that of African slaves. Through the lyrics of their chants, the Indians claim the right to exist ("Here we come"), and acknowledge the sovereignty of nature over human beings ("Water comes out of the water"). The Indians go out into the night to enter battle with other tribes, seeking to claim their territory and have their voices heard.





# THE NEW BLACK PANTHER PARTY FOR SELF DEFENSE

The Black Panthers need no introduction. Since their formation in 1966, the revolutionary group played a crucial role in the civil rights movement. However, half a century later, African Americans continue to witness a state apparatus that perpetuates a culture of fear and aggression, with frequent and unwarranted displays of racial violence and oppression. The hyper-segregation of African Americans was – and still is – a strong factor in fueling black political mobilization in an effort to improve their social conditions. Such political mobilization is the reason why black revolutionary movements never ceased to exist, despite being idle in the 80s. Today, the Party (renamed “The New Black Panther Party For Self Defense”) counts members all around the United States, Europe, and Africa. Its strongholds are the American South (Louisiana and Texas), and South Africa.

For a long time, the Black Panthers declined any participation in films and documentaries, for they were wary of both the propagandistic and sensationalistic

motives of the media. However, the current National Chair of the Party, Krystal Muhammad, agreed to be a part of this film after holding several closed-door meetings with our crew. Since then, we were given the rare opportunity to witness first-hand the Panthers’ activity, from political militancy to community service and outreach. We witnessed the Panthers conducting an investigation on the lynching and decapitation of two young black men in Jackson, Mississippi, guilty of having white girlfriends. We followed them marching in the streets of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in protest of the police killing of Alton Sterling. We achieved a level of mutual understanding that the Panthers acknowledged when we parted ways, and the film reflects this bond.





# MOVED BY ANGER AND FEAR

I have told stories of the American South which were unfolding before my eyes in unexpected ways. I have documented clusters of today's America where the seeds of anti-institutional, reactionary anger (which gifted the country with Donald Trump as the new president) were already planted, but no one cared to notice. This time, I intended to dig even deeper into the roots of social inequality in America, by focusing on the condition of African Americans.

I started a long journey, which began in August 2015, when I conceived the initial project of **WHAT YOU GONNA DO WHEN THE WORLD'S ON FIRE?** From November 2016 we pre-shot for a few weeks and looked at several characters.

Meanwhile, we were able to establish deep bonds with several people, and gained access to neighborhoods and communities that are off-limits to most. I soon realized that most of the people I met felt strongly about two dramatic events in Louisiana's recent history: Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the killing of Alton Sterling in 2016. Both events are the result of institutional negligence, of a socioeconomic divide between rich and poor, and of strong endemic racism. Moved by anger and fear, people wanted to get a chance to tell their stories out loud.

# ROBERTO MINERVINI

Roberto Minervini is an Italian-born film director, who lives and works in the US. After completing a Master's Degree in Media Studies at The New School University in New York City in 2004, he moved to the Philippines to teach Documentary Filmmaking at a University level. In 2007, he moved to Texas, where he directed three feature films, *THE PASSAGE*, *LOW TIDE* and *STOP THE POUNDING HEART*, a Texas trilogy that was presented and awarded at some of the most renowned film festivals in the world such as Cannes, Venice, Toronto, and Rotterdam, among others. In 2014, *STOP THE POUNDING HEART* won the David di Donatello Award (Italian Academy Award) for best documentary. *THE OTHER SIDE* (aka *LOUISIANA*), his fourth film, premiered at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival, competing in the Un Certain Regard section.

2018 *WHAT YOU GONNA DO WHEN THE WORLD'S ON FIRE?*

2015 *THE OTHER SIDE*

2013 *STOP THE POUNDING HEART*

2012 *LOW TIDE*

2011 *THE PASSAGE*







OKTA FILM PULPA FILM RAI CINEMA present  
in coproduction with SHELLAC SUD in association with MYmovies.it

# WHAT YOU GONNA DO WHEN THE WORLD'S ON FIRE?

**A FILM BY ROBERTO MINERVINI**

2018, Italy/USA/France, 123 min, B&W, ratio 1:1,85, sound 5.1, in English

## **MAIN CAST**

JUDY HILL – The woman  
DOROTHY HILL – The woman's mother  
MICHAEL NELSON – The woman's cousin  
RONALDO KING – Older brother  
TITUS TURNER – Younger brother  
ASHLEI KING – Boys' mother  
KEVIN GOODMAN – Mardi Gras Indian Chief  
THE NEW BLACK PANTHER PARTY FOR SELF DEFENSE

## **MAIN CREW**

Director – ROBERTO MINERVINI  
Director of photography – DIEGO ROMERO SUAREZ-LLANOS (A.E.C.)  
Editor – MARIE-HÉLÈNE DOZO  
Sound mixer – BERNAT FORTIANA CHICO  
Sound editor – INGRID SIMON  
Colorist – ISABELLE JULIEN  
Sound re-recording mixer – THOMAS GAUDER  
Associate producers – THOMAS ORDONNEAU, GIANLUCA GUZZO  
Creative producer – DARIO ZONTA  
Producers – PAOLO BENZI, DENISE PING LEE, ROBERTO MINERVINI

Production companies – OKTA FILM, PULPA FILM  
Co-production companies – RAI CINEMA, SHELLAC SUD  
In association with MYmovies.it

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