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DO I SOUND GAY?
A FILM BY DAVID THORPE



**A First-Person Docu-comedy Directed by David Thorpe
Featuring Margaret Cho, Tim Gunn, Don Lemon, Dan Savage,
David Sedaris and George Takei**

**Produced by Howard Gertler and David Thorpe
Executive Produced by Dan Cogan
Total Running Time: 77 Minutes**

World Premiere - Toronto International Film Festival 2014

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BACKGROUND

Is there such a thing as a "gay voice"? If there is...where does it come from? Why do some people "sound gay" and not others? Why are gay-sounding celebrities, from Liberace to Tim Gunn, beloved in pop culture but gay teens are bullied and harassed for sounding gay? DO I SOUND GAY? is the first film to comprehensively explore the linguistically and culturally rich notion of the "gay voice."

The fact that "sounding gay" *hasn't* been explored is all the more remarkable considering that it's on the minds of many gay men, like internationally acclaimed best-selling author **David Sedaris**, who says in the film:

I'm embarrassed to say this but sometimes somebody will say, "I didn't know you were gay." Why does that make me feel good? I hate myself for thinking that. I thought I was beyond that. What's the problem if someone assumes that I'm gay when I open my mouth?

Like Sedaris, gay journalist and filmmaker David Thorpe feels anxiety about his "gay" voice. DO I SOUND GAY? is a record of his hilarious, poignant, and empowering quest to come to terms with that anxiety. In the tradition of funny-but-serious first-person documentaries like *Super Size Me*, *Roger and Me* and *Good Hair*, DO I SOUND GAY? weaves Thorpe's personal story with a smart, funny and provocative cultural analysis of the "gay voice." Thorpe seeks answers from friends, family, historians, linguists, voice coaches, total strangers and a handful of LGBT celebrities, including **Margaret Cho, Tim Gunn, Don Lemon, Dan Savage, David Sedaris** and **George Takei**, who speak frankly about their own experiences.

SYNOPSIS

A difficult breakup undermines gay director David Thorpe's self-confidence and he finds himself obsessed with how "gay" his voice sounds. He's never entirely shaken the homophobia he internalized growing up, especially the fear that his voice gives him away as gay.

David soon finds out that other gay men—close friends, celebrities, total strangers—feel anxiety about their gay-sounding voices, too. Archival clips such as a Rush Limbaugh rant and a local news story about a savage bullying incident powerfully demonstrate why: The "gay voice" can provoke vicious homophobia. Man-on-the-street interviews reveal that even gay men themselves sometimes punish other gay men for sounding effeminate, for sounding, in essence, "too gay."

David has been out of the closet for decades. Hurt, lonely and fragile, he no longer believes that he can overcome the stigma he internalized as a child. He seeks out two different voice coaches to learn how to sound "straight."

David feels alone, but he has warm, loving friends and family, and he possesses an openness and sense of humor that draw people to him. Without fully grasping what he's doing, David takes steps that will ultimately empower him: Seeking out linguists to uncover the myths and

truths about “sounding gay”; delving into TV and film history in order to understand how popular culture influenced his sense of self in the absence of gay role models; revisiting his forgotten past with his high school and college friends; meeting a teen who has been bullied his whole life for being too effeminate but remains unbowed; seeking out the wisdom of LGBT celebrities like Margaret Cho, Tim Gunn, Don Lemon, Dan Savage, David Sedaris and George Takei. David gradually begins to piece together the source of his vocal anxiety: Growing up, because he knew his voice might give him away as gay, he disconnected himself from it. Ever since, David has searched for an authentic voice, whether it be the voice of the stereotypical aristocratic “pansy,” the silly, campy clown, or the out, loud and proud activist. It’s a search that’s not unique to gay men. Margaret Cho and Don Lemon both talk about negotiating the anxieties of their Korean and African American Southern voices, respectively.

David’s quest to sound straight unexpectedly drives him toward a new kind of empowerment. He throws himself into a series of vocal exercises. At first he struggles, but after months of hard work, he learns how to coordinate all the parts of his body—diaphragm, larynx, mouth—that, together, produce his voice. David literally finds his voice inside his body. David thought he wanted to sound straight at the beginning of his journey. He realizes that he just needed to reconnect to his authentic, physical voice, as gay as it wants to be. What’s more, David sees how loving couples like Takei and his husband Brad Altman and Sedaris and his partner Hugh have helped each other embrace their authentic selves.

David at last understands that his voice is an inextricable part of who he is. At an ACT UP rally with friends, he leads chants of “People with AIDS under attack, what do we do? Act up, fight back!” David at last can see how other gay-sounding men have embraced their voices and how culture has, too: A montage of wildly popular, gay-sounding vloggers, as well as men-on-the-street proudly owning how they sound, complete David’s journey, a journey that began with a simple question: Do I sound gay?

DO I SOUND GAY?

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

DO I SOUND GAY is a long-delayed confrontation with my own internalized homophobia, not just about sounding gay, but being gay. The film grew out of my gay midlife crisis. After a breakup, I found myself single and on the wrong side of 40. I was bitter about where life had left me...and suddenly found myself hating how “gay” my voice sounded, and not just my own voice but other gay men’s voices. I was pretty sure that these feelings came from my internalized homophobia, but I wasn’t sure what to do about it. I was in my early 40s—I thought my personality was cooked. If my voice bothered me so much, maybe I should try to change it, the way people go to the gym or get plastic surgery. At the same time, I realized I knew nothing about *why* I sounded “gay” and where my “gay” voice came from. So I decided to explore all avenues.

The idea for the film came to me when I was on the train to a gay beach town on Fire Island after the break up. I should have been excited. Instead I found myself absolutely cringing at this cacophony of shrill “gay voices” around me. It was the beginning of the summer season, so people were *especially* excited. And suddenly questions just came pouring in to my mind: Why was I having this adverse reaction to my own community, a community I had fought hard to create and participate in? Why *did* we all seemingly speak in the same “gay” way? Was it innate? Learned? Healthy appropriation or acquiescence to a stereotype? And lastly, what should I do about it? As they say, it was like a light went on. I *had* to know the answers to these questions and solve this problem for myself, or I would never be happy with myself.

Taking my personal story out of the equation, I quickly discovered once I started making the film that I was far from the only gay man who had been or was still self-conscious about sounding gay. I also found out very quickly that both gay people and non-gay people really wanted to understand the “gay voice”

Finally, of course, I’m sick of the slur that something “sounds gay.” I wanted to appropriate that phrase as a slogan of pride. I just don’t want to hear it anymore in a negative way: on the schoolyard, among adults, on Twitter, Facebook. Do I sound gay? Hell, yes.

The film leads viewers into the issue via my own story and the perspectives of the characters whom they meet — linguists, pop culture pundits, and beloved celebrities like Dan Savage, David Sedaris and Tim Gunn. I’d like people to be reminded how hard it can be to own your individuality even in seemingly small ways, and yet how farcical it is to try to be someone else. We’re all caught between that rock and a hard place. So hopefully the film will help people of all backgrounds laugh about that dilemma and prompt them to give some thought to how they can negotiate their own individuality or help someone else do so.

Having interviews with well-known personalities was very important to this film. Reaching out to David Sedaris was a no-brainer. One of his most beloved stories is “Go Carolina” from his collection *Me Talk Pretty One Day* in which he details his own saga about speech therapy. He paved the way for this movie and this conversation about gender and voice.

I contacted Dan Savage because I knew I needed the voice of a gay leader, someone who stood the best chance of explaining to me and the audience why I should be proud of sounding “gay.” I knew I needed a talking-to by someone who was genuinely gay-proud because at the time I wasn’t.

I contacted George Takei because he has one of the most iconic voices of the 20th Century! I knew for him that his voice was a source of pride and admiration. I wanted to know what that felt like.

Margaret Cho is such an astute observer of gay male life and yet, of course, she isn’t a gay man. I wanted to know what she was seeing from the outside—I thought she was going to read me! She proved to be thoughtful and smart about how stereotypes work. Both she and Don Lemon make the parallel between the pressure I felt as a gay man to the pressure they both feel as Korean and African-American, respectively.

I reached out to Tim Gunn because contemporary television has so many stereotypically gay-sounding voices now, particularly in fashion and style-related reality and competition shows. I thought it was important to hear from someone in that position. Tim is also a study in honesty. He pulls no punches.

The people I interviewed on the street play as big a role in the film as the celebrities. Nearly everyone I approached giggled uncomfortably when I explained that I was making a movie about sounding gay, and things got more uncomfortable when I asked, “Do you think I sound gay?” or “Do you think you sound gay?” But because I was making myself vulnerable about my own anxiety, these strangers made themselves vulnerable, too. Over years of doing these interviews, I realized that one way I got comfortable sounding gay was simply from having dozens and dozens of these conversations with strangers.

I would never have moved forward on my journey if I hadn’t pursued the linguistics behind the idea of “sounding gay.” Our voices are so essential to our identity; how could I move forward without some basic sense of where mine came from? Ultimately, understanding that men and women on average speak differently was truly liberating. I modeled my speech on the women I grew up with. I love those women! So it was refreshingly natural to make the next logical leap: There’s nothing to be ashamed of.

Ultimately, DO I SOUND GAY? couldn’t be more personal. It springs from my earliest childhood experiences and struggles to be myself. I’ve been self-conscious about sounding gay since I was 10 or 11. It may sound like a small thing, but for me it’s always been a symbol of how I had to compromise, hide, give away a larger part of who I am, first being in the closet, and then struggling to live an open, proud life.

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SUBJECT BIOS

David Thorpe

David is a gay journalist and filmmaker living in Brooklyn. Newly single and on the wrong side of 40, his confidence is at a low ebb. He finds himself obsessed with how “gay” his voice sounds. Unable to resist the homophobia he internalized growing up, Thorpe decides to try to learn how to sound straight with the help of two speech coaches. Unexpectedly, however, David’s vocal exercises reconnect him to his own physical, authentic “gay” voice.

QUOTES FROM THE FILM: *Sometimes gay men are afraid that their voices sound too effeminate. When I don’t have confidence in myself, I’m no different. I can’t shake the idea that my voice repels other gay men not to mention the world.*

I’ve felt so emotionally disconnected from my voice. I wasn’t sure who to be or what to sound like. It never occurred to me that I was physically disconnected from my voice. Maybe I didn’t go to [speech therapy] to sound less gay. Maybe I was just trying to reconnect.

Zach King

Zach, 15 (at the time of filming in 2012), is a Chillicothe, Ohio teen who was brutally assaulted at his high school. The attack was caught on a cameraphone, and the incident made national headlines after the footage was published on YouTube. Zach reveals that he’s been bullied ever since other kids started making fun of his effeminate voice in 3rd grade. Zach remains a defiant “diva,” but his mother says she sees the pain he hides from the world.

QUOTE FROM THE FILM: *When I was in third grade people started making fun of the way I talked, and that’s when the bullying started. Why do you talk like a girl, why do you walk like that? My voice was high and I had that little girl accent. I would be sitting there talking to my friends and people would walk by, “Faggot!”*

Dan Savage

Popular author, pundit and activist Dan Savage writes the internationally syndicated sex and love advice column Savage Love. He also co-founded the It Gets Better Project, a pioneering YouTube campaign to inspire struggling LGBT youth. The campaign’s videos (including one by President Obama) have received more than 50 million views. In DO I SOUND GAY?, Savage explains that gay men are insecure about their voices because they were persecuted for sounding gay as kids.

QUOTES FROM THE FILM: *A lot of gay men are self-conscious about sounding gay because we were persecuted for that when we were young. When you’re young and closeted and trying to pass you police yourself for evidence that might betray you, and it’s how you walk and how you talk, those two things. A lot of gay men carry that into adulthood.*

Many gay adolescents are right to be worried about how they sound because it draws violence.

A masculine voice, like a construction worker helmet, is the lingerie of Gayland.

For many gay men, that's the last vestige, that's the last chunk of internalized homophobia, this hatred of how they sound. What's wrong with sounding like you are who you are, sounding like a gay man, having a gay voice?

David Sedaris

Internationally acclaimed best-selling author and radio personality David Sedaris broached the topic of sounding gay in his essay "Go, Carolina" from his book *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. In *DO I SOUND GAY?* he brings his trademark biting wit to the topic and serves as a mirror to director David Thorpe's insecurities about his own voice.

QUOTES FROM THE FILM: *If I'm in a hotel and I call the front desk, they always say, 'We'll have that right up to you, ma'am!' I think, Really? Do I really sound like a woman? I don't think I sound like a woman. I think I sound like a very small man.*

I'm embarrassed to say this but sometimes somebody will say, I didn't know you were gay. It's like, Why does that make me feel good? I hate myself for thinking that. It's very disturbing. I thought I was beyond that. What's the problem if somebody assumes that I'm gay when I open my mouth? Why do I have a problem with that?

Margaret Cho

This Grammy- and Emmy-nominated comedian and actor is known for her raunchy taboo-busting stand up comedy and one-woman shows, in which she frequently dissects LGBT life. In *DO I SOUND GAY?* she confesses her own shame growing up about "sounding Korean," illustrating how David's dilemma about his voice relates to the pressure we all feel to fit in.

QUOTE FROM THE FILM: *My father went to very great lengths to rid himself of an Asian accent....he always felt like he was trying to catch up and be American, be truly American. It really made me feel the same way, like really determined to not be considered Korean and not have the imprint of the homeland. It really goes underneath, all of that self-hatred and anxiety really gets shoved under and it can last for generations.*

Don Lemon

Emmy- and Edward R. Murrow Award-winner Don Lemon is the first openly gay African-American national news anchor in the U.S. (Lemon hosts CNN Newsroom). In *DO I SOUND GAY?* Louisiana-born Lemon acknowledges the pressure he felt to change his voice for television, a change that his relatives think sounds "white." **QUOTES:**

QUOTES FROM THE FILM: *My accent went away when I started working in television, and I started listening to my voice, and I realized, you know, I didn't necessarily like the way it sounds when it's on tape. It sounds a little bit lazy. Maybe that's a stereotype, maybe that's part of code-switching, maybe that's part of fitting in.*

I have friends from home, quite honestly, some of my relatives will go, 'My gosh, you sound like a white guy!'"

Tim Gunn

Fashion mentor Tim Gunn is best-known as the host of the hit reality show PROJECT RUNWAY. He is also the author of two best-selling lifestyle books, a television and magazine journalist, and makes frequent television and movie appearances. In DO I SOUND GAY?, he candidly admits to being “appalled” at how gay he sounded when he began hosting Project Runway. Years later, he’s able to feel pride about his voice.

QUOTES FROM THE FILM: *If people hear my voice and identify me as gay, today, I'll say 'Thank you! I'm proud of it. Thank you!'*

Some of the gayest people I know are straight, and some of the butchest men I've ever met are gay. So in some ways, never assume.

George Takei

Up until 2005, actor George Takei was best known for his groundbreaking role as Mr. Sulu on TV's STAR TREK and roles in the STAR TREK movie franchise. That year, however, Takei came out publicly. Since then, Takei has become a global icon in his own right, an astute LGBT activist and political satirist and beloved Internet celebrity (7.5 million Facebook followers and counting). In DO I SOUND GAY? we discover that George helped his husband Brad get over his own insecurity about “sounding gay.”

QUOTES FROM THE FILM: *It's that insecurity that you have in yourself that makes you conscious of the way you sound. This is an issue that should be discussed. People should become aware of the fact that we are pioneers.*

Brad speaking about George: *One of the things that I love about George is that he loves me for who I am, and my voice comes as part of my package. At times I've thought it's not a good thing to have this kind of a voice, but George has reinforced over the decades we've been together, Who the hell are they to critique me for my voice?*

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PRODUCTION TEAM

David Thorpe (director, writer, producer) David Thorpe took a sabbatical from his work as a nonprofit communications director and freelance journalist to make DO I SOUND GAY?, his first feature documentary. Based in Brooklyn, Thorpe has written about gay life (including his own misadventures), AIDS, and popular culture for nearly two decades. He's worked as an editor at Jane, OUT, Time Out, POZ and his writing has also appeared in publications such as The Forward, New York, and O, the Oprah Magazine. Thorpe hatched the idea for DO I SOUND GAY? during his five-year tenure as communications director for New York's pioneering AIDS nonprofit Housing Works, an offshoot of ACT UP with a rich history of creative direct activism. Thorpe's 2006 narrative short, GAY VOLLEYBALL SAVED MY LIFE, premiered at the Frameline Film Festival and played LGBT festivals nationwide.

Howard Gertler (producer) Oscar-nominated producer whose credits include David France's HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE, which premiered in competition at Sundance 2012 and was released by IFC Films/Sundance Selects. The film was nominated for the Oscar and News & Documentary Emmy for Best Documentary Feature, and won the Gotham for Best Documentary, the New York Film Critics' Circle Award for Best First Feature, the International Documentary Association's Emerging Filmmaker Award, a Peabody Award and the GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Documentary. It was also a Film Independent Spirit Award Nominee. With John Cameron Mitchell & graphic novelist Dash Shaw, he produced the short film SERAPH for the band Sigur Ros, which premiered at Sundance 2013. Gertler won the 2007 Film Independent Spirit Producers' Award for John Cameron Mitchell's SHORTBUS, which premiered in the official selection in Cannes and was released worldwide.

Jenny Raskin (coproducer) s VP for Development and Filmmaker Relations at Impact Partners, a film fund and advisory service committed to financing independent cinema that addresses pressing social issues. She is also a filmmaker and story consultant. Her feature documentary ON HOSTILE GROUND was released theatrically to critical acclaim and broadcast on The Sundance Channel. She produced the feature documentary MOTHERLAND AFGHANISTAN for PBS/Independent Lens. She was an Executive Producer of OUR NIXON (SXSW / CNN), WEB JUNKIES (Sundance), and a co-producer of THE GENIUS OF MARIAN (Tribeca/POV) and THE NEWBURGH STING (Tribeca/HBO), among others.

Dan Cogan (executive producer) is the Executive Director and Co-Founder of Impact Partners, a fund and advisory service for investors and philanthropists who seek to promote social change through film. Since its inception in 2007, Impact Partners has been involved in the financing of over 50 films, including: THE COVE, which won the 2010 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature; THE GARDEN, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Documentary Feature in 2009; HELL AND BACK AGAIN, which won the Documentary Grand Jury Prize and Cinematography Award at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival, and was nominated for an Academy Award for Documentary Feature in 2012; and HOW TO SURVIVE A PLAGUE, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Documentary Feature in 2013. Mr. Cogan co-founded Gamechanger Films, which launched in September 2013. Gamechanger

Films is the first for-profit film fund dedicated exclusively to financing narrative features directed by women. Gamechanger's first film, *LAND HO!*, premiered at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival and was sold to Sony Pictures Classics for worldwide rights.

Maeve O'Boyle (editor and cowriter) edited *LEFT OF THE DIAL* for HBO, which was nominated for a news and documentary Emmy; "Frontline: Heat," which won the 2009 Banff World Television award. She edited and co-wrote Doug Block's feature documentary, *THE KIDS GROW UP* in 2009, which premiered at IDFA and Full Frame in the US to great critical acclaim. She edited a short film, *THE EDUCATION OF MOHAMMED HUSSEIN* for HBO, which was shortlisted for an Academy Award, and Doug Block's feature documentary, *112 WEDDINGS,* airing on HBO and the BBC in 2014.

Matt Bockelman (director of photography) is a documentary cinematographer and director. He has created original documentary films for the New York City Ballet, Madison Square Garden, MTV, and East Coast Artists; and shot commercial campaigns for ESPN, Allstate, SAP and Humana. Matt founded Fly's Eye Films in 2010 which has produced award-winning documentary shorts shown internationally at film festivals including Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, The Hamptons International Film Festival, DOC NYC and HotDocs. Fly's Eye Films creates original content and short documentaries for non-profit organizations around New York City. Matt is an adjunct professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

John Turner's (composer) music spans the full spectrum of style and genre. Film highlights include the thriller *YOU BELONG TO ME* (Wolfe, 2008), which features strings by the powerhouse NYC string band *ETHEL*, and the drama *ALMA MATER* (Hamptons International Film Festival and Austin Film Festival, Audience Award, 2002). Short films include *SLO-MO* (Sundance, Telluride, HBO, 2002) and *PASSENGERS* (Deauville Film Festival, Winner, Special Jury Prize, 2002; Sundance Film Festival, 2002). TV/web credits include *NBC's THE VOICE*, Animal Planet, Bravo, and The Sundance Channel, among others.

David Briggs (sound editor and designer) was the Supervising Sound Editor for *THE RED ROAD* (Sundance Channel series), the films *BOTTLED UP*, *MY BEST DAY*, *3 BACKYARDS*, *TEETH*, *YOU BEONG TO ME* and the documentaries *TAKE US HOME* and *KATE BORNSTEIN IS A QUEER AND PLEASANT DANGER*. Other sound editing credits include Chris Rock's *TOP FIVE*, Roger Waters' *THE WALL*, *MOONRISE KINGDOM* (Golden Reel nominee), *CONCUSSION*, *WE ARE WHAT WE ARE*, *THE WIRE*, *BACHELORETTE*, *NEW YORK I LOVE YOU*, and *FRIENDS WITH KIDS*. He also sound designed the Cannes Festival award-winning short film *OH LUCY!*, which is having its North American premiere at TIFF. He holds an MFA in film from New York University and teaches sound design in the graduate film program of the City College of New York.

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FULL CREDITS

Written and Directed by:

David Thorpe

Produced by

Howard Gertler

David Thorpe

Executive Producer

Dan Cogan

Co-producer

Jenny Raskin

Editor and co-writer

Maeve O'Boyle

Director of Photography

Matt Bockelman

Original Score by

John Turner

Sound Edit by

David Briggs

Sound Mix by

Eric Hirsch

Associate Producers	Terrence Meck
	Ben Thorpe
	Josh Thorpe
Consultants	Sandi DuBowski
	Alberto Orso
Assistant Editors	Charles Farrell
	Rachel Loube
	Sheila Shirazi
	Elizabeth J. Theis
Titles and Graphic Designer	Conor O'Boyle

Additional Writing	Michael Albo
Production Sound Mixers	Silver Sound
	Peter Dodenhoff
	Lawrence Fancelli
	Ryan King
	Robin Shore
Archival Researchers	Kenn Rabin
	Rosemary Rotondi
Production Assistants	Alden Peters
	Ric Savarese
VO Recording	Krissopher Chevannes
Sound Technician	Bob Troeller
Mixed at Goldcrest Post NY	
Digital Intermediate Colorist	Will Cox
Post Production Services	Final Frame
Publicity	David Magdael & Associates

Stills Courtesy of:	Kathi Littwin
Distribution Advisor	Cinetic Media
Original Score Produced & Mixed by	John Turner, Turner Music
Original Score Recorded by	Ian Pellicci, Engineer, Decibelle Recording Studio, San Francisco
Original Score Mastered by	Piper Payne, Michael Romanowski Mastering, San Francisco