



Participant Presents

A Stick Figure Production

# *I'M YOUR VENUS*

Directed by Kimberly Reed



World Premiere Spotlight Documentary

[Screening Schedule](#)

Run Time: 85 minutes

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**Logline:**

Venus Xtravaganza emerged as a global trans icon after being featured in the groundbreaking 1991 documentary *Paris Is Burning*. Venus was murdered before that film's release, and *I'M YOUR VENUS* picks up the story of a trail gone cold as her two families - biological and ballroom - come together to seek answers and celebrate her legacy.

**Short Synopsis:**

Venus Xtravaganza emerged as a global trans icon after being featured as a glamorous "ball walker" in the groundbreaking 1991 documentary *Paris Is Burning*. Venus was murdered before that film's release, and now, decades later, *I'M YOUR VENUS* picks up a trail gone cold as her two families - biological and ballroom - come together to honor her legacy, seek answers about her killing, and in the process find unexpected common ground.

**Long synopsis:**

For many years, the glamorous, underground world of trans and queer Ballroom culture and its network of "Houses" was just that — underground. When the groundbreaking 1991 film *Paris Is Burning* became a global sensation, this New York City subculture hit the international stage for the first time. The documentary provided an insider introduction to the electric energy of Ballroom as well as an understanding of the sanctuary provided through ballroom house families. For the queer community — and queer communities of color, specifically — the film was a landmark opportunity to truly see and celebrate themselves, sometimes for the very first time.

Venus Xtravaganza — an aspiring model from the House of Xtravaganza — was a rising star in the ballroom scene who dreamt of a life of beauty, serenity, and family. Tragically, Venus would never get to see her dreams realized nor her impact on an entire generation, because she was murdered just before the film's release. Venus was 23, and her murderer was never found.

Intimate and insightful, director Kimberly Reed's *I'm Your Venus* (presented by Participant and produced by Stick Figure Productions) picks up the story 34-years after Venus' death. Haunted by unresolved questions and family trauma, Venus's biological relatives— brothers John, Joe, and Louie Pellagatti, and her niece Jillian—enlist a legal team to find the answers that have eluded the family for decades. They press the NYPD to reopen the case, and despite warnings that their chances of finally finding closure are slim, they agree the inquiry is worth the gamble.

As the Pellagattis seek answers, they reach out to Venus' chosen family, the venerable House of Xtravaganza, and the house mother, regal and empathetic Gisele. A superstar model and icon in her own right, Gisele decides that she and the Xtravaganzas will help the Pellagattis, noting Venus' killing was not the last or only murder within the House of Xtravaganza and is still all too common in the trans community even today.

Attempting to learn more about Venus' parallel world and the past she kept hidden from them, the Pellagattis delve deep into their own family's story: replaying old scenes, reveling in small moments, contemplating their own past prejudices, and ultimately hoping to make amends for their role in Venus' decision to seek sanctuary elsewhere, with the Xtravaganzas.

Through never-before-seen archival material, intimate vérité moments with Venus' biological and chosen families, and raw, confessional scenes with Venus herself from *Paris Is Burning* and its outtakes, *I'M YOUR VENUS* presents a layered, deeply felt portrait about

family and the true meaning of acceptance. The film reminds us that while life itself may be finite, legacy is forever: there's always room to grow, space to celebrate, and time to correct — if not amend — the record.

*"I want a car. I want to be with the man I love . . .*

*I want a nice home away from New York*

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*I want to get married in church in white . . .*

*I want to be a professional model behind cameras.*

*I want this. This is what I want and I'm going to go for it."*

-- Venus Xtravaganza, from *Paris Is Burning*

### **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

This film always struck me as a story of two strands — Venus' ballroom and biological families — but that is much easier said than done, especially when it involves weaving *Paris is Burning's* esteemed and complex legacy with our film. Thanks to a lot of trust and grace, we witnessed the Xtravaganzas and Pellagattis working through a difficult past to find a promising future, one that ends up honoring Venus' legacy in the most appropriate way. It's a bit of a cliché to speak of filmmaking teams becoming family; perhaps it was more the case that the Pellagattis and Xtravaganzas welcomed us into theirs, to witness their journey with film. I am so grateful to our diverse and lovely production crew, who joined to capture potent moments with beautiful images. Documentaries are built in the editing room, and we had an amazing team of editors to tell this multifarious story.

It has been a welcome challenge and profound honor to direct this film, and I am excited to share our loving, messy, funny and poignant film with you all. I hope it mirrors the complicated, striving lives we all lead, especially at this time of social division that has placed us trans folks in the crosshairs once again. May the irrepressible love and the tough grace shown by the Xtravaganzas and Pellagattis show us the way through.

## **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION:**

### ALT ABOUT THE PRODUCTION:

In death, Venus Xtravaganza became larger than life.

She was, however, far more than a cautionary tale: She was a daughter, a sister, an aunt, and an icon. She was flesh and blood, a lost loved one, claimed and mourned across two families.

More than thirty years later, the spirited talk around Venus has yet to diminish. It is especially fervent within the communities she was closest to —her chosen family, her biological family, and her closest friends living with and haunted by her memory — still searching, still inspired by Venus' ability to inhabit a true self at a time when being trans was even less accepted than it is today.

One of the luminous Ballroom performers made famous in director Jennie Livingston's groundbreaking 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*, Venus' life was cut short in December, 1988: her body discovered in a New York City hotel room; her murderer never found.

Venus did not live to see her screen debut. She was 23.

### VENUS AS MUSE:

In the ensuing years and in the absence of answers, speculation bloomed: False leads, dead ends and wild inaccuracies filled the space where a person had been.

It has been daunting for all parties who hold Venus's memory close, says Dominique Jackson, an Executive Producer on *I'M YOUR VENUS* 'far-ranging producing team, a dedicated cohort who have set out to untangle and correct the record, ensuring that Venus' life and legacy are accurately presented and honored. Crucial to this task is bridging Venus' families: the one she was born into — the Pellagattis — and the family where she formed her extensive Ballroom network — the House of Xtravaganza.

Livingston's, award-winning documentary pulled the Ballroom scene into sharp focus. Lively and bold, *Paris Is Burning* showcased the lives of the performers both on and off their makeshift stages. It revealed a niche and mostly unknown LGBTQ+ subculture to an international audience. It also hinted at the many versions of themselves those featured performers had to be in order to survive in the real world.

Jackson is an actress, author and trans rights advocate who played Elektra Abundance, the lead character, on *POSE*—the landmark FX television series showcasing the late-80s ball scene. Jackson brought with her a steely authenticity, as she herself came onto the Ballroom scene in the 1990s. While she was a whisper too late to cross paths with Venus, she herself saw early on in the contours of Venus's story: "When I came into this knowledge that I didn't have to *hide* myself, one of the first things I was shown was *Paris Is Burning*" says Jackson.

As a trans woman of color — of Italian and Puerto Rican descent — Venus's arc conveyed a message, to move with care. "Those people said to me: 'Well, you *want* to go to New York, because you want to make it, *'but* in New York this is happening.'" Once Jackson fled her hometown of Baltimore, people in her New York circle further counseled her about

how to stay safe: “You knew there were many girls who disappeared, but the story of Venus *always* kept on coming up. “Before I would leave to go out with anyone, that’s what they would always say to me. ‘Remember Venus.’”

### BALLROOM LIFE

Compassionate yet unflinching, *I M YOUR VENUS* leads viewers further inside the complex support network and working parts of Ballroom culture that *Paris is Burning* first explored. Rooted in the Black and Latino underground LGBTQ+ community, Ballroom’s earliest origins reach back to the 19th century in the United States. By the 20th century, these gatherings, or more accurately, events, convened Black and Latino participants, who would “walk,” “pose,” and “vogue” to garner trophies or cash for their skill and stage presence. These performers, like Venus, were also part of a community of found family — a “house”—where they could interact and form connections and, most critically for many, find shelter, or support if they were estranged from their biological family. It was a sanctuary.

“From 1993 that warning has been in my head,” says Jackson. ‘*You can’t end up like Venus.*’. She’s never stopped thinking of her. But what compelled her into action was watching the final cut of a 2021 Hulu special, “Defining Moments,” which featured her own path to fame, the struggles and triumphs and switchbacks. “There’s a scene of Venus walking [on the pier along the Hudson River], and then the shot turned into me. And it hit me. I’m really going to do something. I need to. And during the pandemic, I finally get a call, *the call.*”

### GROUNDING IN HISTORY

That call would come from Jonovia Chase, an actress, producer and organizer/leader within the House-Ballroom and LGBTQ communities. Chase was working with filmmaker Mike Stafford, who, in 2019, had begun his own deep dive into Venus’ story after re-watching *Paris Is Burning* for the first time since he’d originally seen it in the 1990s.

As serendipity would have it, says Stafford, “My wife and I had been binge-watching *POSE*, and *Paris Is Burning* came up as a suggestion.”

Something powerful unspooled, as he took it all in: a long ago and faraway gritty New York City, tinted as if through a filter; old bars and familiar night haunts; the voices and faces of a Scene, some now gone and some in their awakening. And then there was, of course, Venus—both tough and gentle, her blonde mane flowing behind her. The credits were barely rolling when both he and his wife began Googling for updates to Venus’ story.

“There were just a lot of discrepancies: The name of the hotel where she was found. This idea of family abandonment, which wasn’t true” says Stafford. “Trying to find information was really hard. A lot of people out there had good intentions. But a lot of the stuff was made up.”

For Stafford, the most critical piece of this was to correct the record: “Venus represents a tangible time in history. We’re living in a moment when people are trying to say that the LGBTQ+ discourse is coming out of academia and that it is a made up agenda. *No*. People have *been* here” he explains. “This is why, if not properly contextualized. coupled with the fluidness of everything on social media, she can be erased. Her legacy. It can get erased, even with people’s *good intentions*. Venus is not just a ‘legend’, she’s history.”

But her fate — the danger that still stalks trans lives — is something, Stafford and the trans community as a whole well know, that does not live in past tense.

## THE MARCH FORWARD

I'M YOUR VENUS ' director Kimberly Reed knows that in present-day discourse it's especially important to find language to speak candidly about these issues: the existence of trans people, their struggles and their triumphs. A story like this can help point us there, she believes: "Especially at a time where I feel like, so much communication in our country is broken down. We've just lost the ability to talk with folks who maybe see things a little bit differently than we do."

There are important first steps to build a bridge.

A veteran filmmaker, Stafford is also an attorney whose work centers LGBTQ+ issues. "I've always been heavily involved in the trans community and transgender civil rights. I full-time produce and direct, I always have. But I felt like if I have this skill, I should use it to help people."

He had, for the most part, kept those two enterprises on parallel tracks, but around 2014 when he was pulled in to produce a project—the *T-Word* with Laverne Cox—that all changed. "For the first time, this combined my worlds and sparked my mission." It was one that was double-pronged, developing a go-to crew as well as looking for meaningful projects.

"It was very hard to find a trans or LGBTQ crew when you're crewing up quick," says Stafford, "You only have a few weeks to put something together, you've got to go to people that you can trust. I felt like I wanted a roster of people. So I started this project with my wife, we just invested some money, and we make these short films. We looked to trans women to produce short bios on cis women and we put them on Instagram." It was the beginning of a dynamic and much-needed database.

This endeavor had connected him to Chase and, ultimately, her network.

Stafford went to Chase when it looked as if his own querying was gaining traction: "I had gotten in touch with a friend who was a detective. Not someone who had been on the case, but someone who could break down for us the police processes."

He along with his wife worked up a strategy for next steps. "We'd drafted a five-year plan," says Stafford. "Our mission became putting together a plan to approach the Pellagattis. The goal: to ask them if we could look into and hopefully solve the case, with their support."

In April of 2020, after eight months and once they felt satisfied with the proposal, Stafford cold-called Venus ' middle brother, Joe Pellagatti, at his office. "I got a receptionist and I told her that [the call] was regarding his sister Venus. He answered immediately. I laid everything out, and the first thing he said to me was 'In all these years, no one has ever reached out. It blew me away.'"

They spoke for nearly an hour and Stafford brought him up to speed about all that he'd uncovered and what they were prepared to do. I told him, "I'll represent your family for free and we will work this thing to the end whether you want to shoot something or not."

Everyone in the family had to sign off, Joe told him. Immediate and extended. This had to be a family decision, given the scope. When the full family returned with a 'yes', Stafford went into overdrive. In certain ways, he says, "I was open to whatever might come our way. It was most important to try."

For the Pellagatt's, revisiting the details of the case and the context felt like cracking open a time capsule. "They were in their 20s at the time of Venus' death, and the grandmother and mother and father had dealt with all of the details," says Stafford. Consequently, while the brothers might have moved forward with their day-to-day lives, it became clear that they hadn't moved *on* from the tragedy. What lay ahead was raw and unprocessed, requiring both a look back at the family's past while simultaneously accepting new revelations in the present.

But as they traveled deeper, Stafford realized that this process, albeit difficult, was creating space for the brothers to not just grieve, but be part of writing the next chapter of Venus' legacy.

Several months into the project, Stafford realized that they'd come to a critical turning point, one that was not specifically about the case, but signaled something key: the family's own awakening. What followed were a series of epiphanies. "I had let the brothers know, 'Now I am going to have to start filming. This is too good. Too important.'"

At this crossroads, Stafford made two key shifts: He immediately separated himself from the case and set the family up with legal counsel, then reached out to Chase to loop in the Xtravaganzas. She in turn made calls to House Grandmother Coko Xtravaganza and House Mother Gisele. As family, Stafford and Chase knew they should be part of this too.

Presenting this mission to Venus' Ballroom family came with its own specific sensitivities. Chase knew to expect it. Walking back into this story, this sorrow, they all needed to be mindful and transparent about what the goals were in the largest sense: What they were seeking and why it was necessary. Chase needed to be clear: "How can we both be of service and be critical about what it means for the community at large to have access to Venus' journey? What will it mean? Why is it important?" says Chase. "We needed to be clear about our intentions. And for me, anything that is being done for and with the House Ballroom community needs to be done with very vigorous intention."

#### SWITCHING HATS: ENTER STICK FIGURE PRODUCTIONS:

Stafford knew what was at stake. And while he had changed roles, his focus didn't waver. The shift in duties, however, did alter in a significant way what would happen next. "The thought had been that my wife and I were just going to pay for the film ourselves. Like, we'll plan to pitch it and get it done some way. But word got out," he says. "Jessica Cozzetta at Stick Figure Productions, who was someone I had worked with before, reached out. And in the context of a causal conversation, she asked what I was working on, and then expressed interest. We never even pitched it. They immediately got it and they wanted to help."

Stafford felt confident that they would be a partner that would understand the weight and complexity of the subject matter.

"It had all of the hallmarks of what makes a strong film," says Jamie Schutz, president of Stick Figure Productions. "We wanted to explore the unsolved and tragic murder of Venus Xtravaganza and honor her legacy, while following her brothers on a journey to try to right some wrongs."

What also struck Schutz was the love and admiration that Venus' ballroom family had for their sister, thirty years after her passing. "The Xtravaganzas loved Venus unconditionally and provided her with the freedom and space to explore her identity and gender. We felt strongly that Gisele and the Xtravaganzas needed to be part of this journey and have a strong voice in this film as well," says Schutz.

Accordingly, Schutz and Stafford, who have known each other for over twenty years, knew it was critical get the right director in place. “We were looking for an experienced filmmaker, someone who was part of the community and would not be afraid to ask some tough questions, while supporting their journey,” says Schutz. “We found that with Kim Reed.”

### *“It Starts With Who’s Behind the Camera”*

*I M YOUR VENUS* director Kimberly Reed knew up front she’d be navigating tender territory on all sides. For Reed, whose trailblazing film *Prodigal Sons* became the first documentary by a transgender filmmaker to be released theatrically in the United States, the tangle didn’t give her pause. She found herself in her element. “This was part of the appeal of the project,” she says. “It’s important to bring in different worlds, with different perspectives.” When they started, Reed recalls, “The Pellagatti brothers talked about how they had been yearning to do things for Venus, to find ways to honor Venus. Determining those initial steps though had proved a challenge for them. The way grief works, sometimes it gets buried. Especially when someone is taken so young and so quickly when they were all young.”

“As for the *Xtravaganzas*,” Reed reflects, “they were also grieving loss and seeking justice and a way to honor Venus. I saw these two families start out thinking that that was the answer—holding somebody accountable.” But as they pressed on, there were bigger questions that were being answered. “Deeper emotions that were being processed, that had more to do with honoring Venus the way she lived.”

On a personal level, Reed understood Venus’ charismatic pull and power. She’d first seen *Paris is Burning* while in college and living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Although San Francisco was a destination and safe harbor for LGBTQ folks, “It wasn’t *this*,” says Reed: “My own transition was happening, but I was trying to get up the courage to do it. I was kind of, about that time, in the middle of it, but really desperate to see examples of other trans folks, which was hard to come by in 1990. They were very few and far between. So seeing trans folks, but *especially* Venus who is such a big part of that film, I had an immediate connection to this project. I wanted to know more.”

The way forward required patience. She understood she would need to be empathetic and alert to what might raise a red flag for her subjects. As well, she needed to be open to where the story took itself and pivot as need be.

“I feel like cameras rolling can be a catalyst. And can give people an opportunity to express themselves in a way that might be latent,” she explains. New contexts, new people bring new questions or perspectives. “Documentaries can serve as these catalysts for these nascent emotions that just haven’t expressed themselves. These really big things, like losing a sibling and not quite knowing what to do with that. It kind of gets buried. The scars happen and you don’t really want to rip them back open. And people can go for a long time suffering.”

She had to earn their trust. “It was an honor to be in that position. To have that opportunity to be with them, to listen compassionately as they were processing their grief.”

While the Pellagattis wrestled with the past, the *Xtravaganzas*, while still reckoning with their own loss, were also concerned about being portrayed in a fully-dimensional, present-day way.

“There has been this tendency,” says Reed, “for film crews to show up and just extract culture from the community who created it, and we wanted to stay a million miles



away from that.” She knows that what definitely helped was having someone behind the camera who understood the experience, who embodied the journey themselves. “There wasn’t the need for a lot of explaining.”

What so often gets lost, says Reed, is that Ballroom is activism in and of itself. It started as a pushback to a dominant culture that censored, segregated and alienated queer folks, particularly LGBTQ+ people of color. It was a sociopolitical response. In Ballroom they found a release, community and strength.

Reed would start with hands-on work: People at rehearsal, in the streets, in protest, gathered in strength. “Because that’s where Ballroom is rooted. It was important to portray Ballroom not just as glitzy glammy stuff that you see — this kind of highly polished and highly produced imagery. What you’ll see in this film is *people*. Ballroom families. What was happening in Venus’s day is what’s happening now. Still. But so often it’s easier to see the kind of shiny side of things.” Reed and crew wanted to flip the narrative and stare down the uncomfortable truth.

“The news cycle made the story pressing,” says Steven Cantor, founder of Stick Figure Productions. When Stafford first spoke to Cantor, he had no trouble convincing him of *I’M YOUR VENUS*’ significance and urgency. It was clear in the story’s framing.

It confirmed his instincts: “We felt like it was an important story to tell at this moment in time. I knew that this was something for us.” Nonetheless, Cantor was aware that the team was up against a number of challenges: negotiating with the NYPD, mediating the two families, as well as digging deep to recreate the mood of that era. And there too, at the center, was Venus, as a trans woman of color, whose story embodied what was at the crux of the film’s message—the vulnerability and disposability of trans lives.

To convey that urgency, the filmmakers knew that it was essential to place viewers inside the moment. The film makes palpable the perilous risks the LGBTQ+ population took to find community, peace and sanctuary on their path to live their truth.

Bringing this context to the screen was essential. “There was this incredible archive of materials from *Paris Is Burning* and New York in the 1980s. The Pellagatti family archive, which was mostly photos,” says Cantor. “We have an archival producer that we’ve worked with on many films, Sylvia Cahill, who is fantastic. She was able to tap into places so that we have a really strong past and present storyline.”

It was critical to spotlight New York City in that era, the terrain that backdropped their lives, the worlds that Venus and her Ballroom family had to navigate daily.

“The year Venus passed away there were over 1800 murders in New York. So it was an extraordinarily dangerous place. And Venus was out there, meeting folks, making her way. So for me, to fully understand the context of Venus, you need to understand the time. Then you realize what she was up against. That the desire to be who you are, as Venus did, needs to be quite powerful,” Stafford added.

### REALITY: UNVARNISHED

It’s important to be truthful and forthright about all of it, says Dominique Jackson—afterhours life, the slim working options, the sex work, the risks of just living in your skin.

As much as *Paris is Burning* had been a touchstone in her own life, she hoped that *I’M YOUR VENUS* would and could push even further for the community. Jackson says, “I started to realize that our challenges in making this film would not only come from trying to get these families to be true: Trying to get the Xtravaganzas to be able to face the Pellagattis

and getting the Pellagattis to be able to acknowledge the truth of their relationship with Venus.” While they loved her, Jackson concedes, there was a reason Venus needed her Ballroom family to help come into her own.

With all this in mind, it was not without trepidation that Jackson signed on. She knows that there is so much unexplored and unspoken within families — the estrangement, the avoidance, the gulf in understanding — Jackson herself had lived it.

“These families were distant,” says Jackson. “There’s a lot of pain here. Thirty years later and people are breaking down? I asked myself: ‘How will they be when this comes out?’”

But she has also witnessed the power of the media to bridge that very distance of which she speaks, to initiate repair. “I know that there are so many families out there that are probably going to look at this and say to themselves: ‘Let me call my daughter’ — or — ‘Make sure I call my son and make sure that they’re okay’. Or, — ‘You know what, let me bring you closer to home.’”

This idea of this film’s potential spoke to Courtney Sexton, Executive Vice President of Documentary Film and Television at Participant, who had been a champion of the film from the time she first heard of it. She’d initially gotten wind of it when it was first picked up by CNNFilms where she was then a Senior Vice President. When CNNFilms shut down Sexton brought the project over to Participant. She saw the opportunity to reach a broad audience. For many new to this world, it could be a doorway: “We see a big portion of the story through the eyes of her brothers,” says Sexton. “And to me they represent just everyday people who are learning to understand what it means to be trans and expressing that understanding.”

Because of its accessibility, buttressed by its compelling on-screen subjects, Sexton “kept telling the filmmakers that I wouldn’t quit it.” says Sexton. “This is a film for the trans community, the Ballroom community, but it’s also a story about Venus’ biological family’s evolution – and you can really see it. To me, this is one of the few trans stories that captures the attention of people who haven’t had much access to such stories. A population that is perhaps just at the beginning of understanding what it means to be trans and what the dangers are, and the hard road that some people have. My hope is that they can leave this film feeling a little further along than where they started.”

While there are far more resources for LGBTQ+ support—from gender identity and pronoun guides to resource centers, counseling and busy online networks, during Venus’ blooming in the 1980s, there was much less assistance and accessible support. There weren’t the same guideposts, resources, or readily available information at the click of a button in place that we have now that a young Venus could turn to—or pass on to her family—that articulated the life she was dreaming and shaping: What were the correct pronouns to use? How might her loved ones reference her with respect and sensitivity? In short: There wasn’t a clear way to describe to her family what she’d felt at the very root of her being and what she might have needed to feel free and understood.

What’s tragic about this, Mike Stafford underscores, is that if Venus had lived, she would have been able to experience a world that, for all of the risks and dangers that trans people still navigate, has itself begun to transition, evolve. With Venus’ death at 23, the Pellagattis missed out on an opportunity— a key component of the process. If willing, “Family goes through a transition *with* you,” says Stafford “They *have* to transition with you. The brothers didn’t have that,” says Stafford.

They had to come to an understanding amid their heavy grief. “At one point, when we hit a tough spot early on, I had to remember that they didn’t get the opportunity to transition with her. She was stolen from them.” This was a journey too.

Director Kimberly Reed agrees and expands the frame: “Most of us are living lives like the Pellagattis are—going through this and trying to figure out not one big kind of clarion solution to all of our questions, but a series of revelations.” In today’s context, Reed continues that, “The [wider] audience is going to be much more likely to relate to having somebody— a queer person or trans person —in their family. And queer or trans just doesn’t translate in the same way as it did 35 years ago. ...I think the audiences today are going to see things as much closer to home.”

### THE ECHO OF HEARTBREAK

Indeed, *IM YOUR VENUS* convenes Venus’ families at a critical juncture in the culture, where there is far more visibility and resources. However, while trans activism and representation might be in the spotlight, Jackson and others on the filmmaking team have observed too many tragic echoes, too much violence, too many names to memorialize.

“We are talking about a situation now where thousands of women are being murdered. When I was researching and writing my memoir in 2014, I went back to 1992, more than 5,000 women. 5,000,” Jackson emphasizes. “The induction that I got from those women, part of the community, is what a lot of young women *need*, to stay safe,” says Jackson. “Look at the young lady [Koko](#) [rapper Koko Da Doll], who was in that documentary *Kokomo City*. She was talking about how she wanted to change her life, that she wants to better her life. She never got to see that documentary play out. She lost her life. Last year. There was, once again, the similarity to Venus. There just seems to be a target on our backs.”

Chase concurs: “People are still carrying the burden of what happened to Venus because it is happening every day. So for us, highlighting and centering trans lives is critical. It’s a very sensitive project,” says Chase. “It’s from a human lens. It’s telling the truth that’s not paid attention to. This too is Ballroom. Without the glam, it’s really going to show what it really means to value women, to value, honor and protect trans lives.”

### THE GREATER GOOD

As John Pellagatti mentions in the film ““Sometimes things fall together, so they can fall apart”. This stuck with Reed as she considers the complexity of shifting family dynamics. “And just having the flexibility to allow your definitions of love and family and support to shift, to change and to grow to accommodate this, you know? I think it’s just really beautiful to watch the Pellagattis adjust.”

And while it’s been cathartic to witness Venus’ families in conversation, it’s the reclamation of Venus—as a flesh-and-blood icon — that’s been at the forefront of this hard work, says Chase.

For decades, what we knew of Venus had been captured by Livingston’s lens. “It was the only interview and footage of this person as a being,” says Chase. “Now we’re giving voice and space for Venus, and those who knew and supported her, to fill in her story. That was such a sacred thing.”

Those tender *Paris Is Burning* images of Venus — in late-night kakis with Ballroom family on the pier, walking a catwalk at a Ball, daydreaming in her bedroom — now stitched through Reed’s documentary, are a reminder of what it looks like to be on a path to finding and embracing one’s full self.

“What we’re seeing is that she was before her time”, says Chase, “People have always desired to live out, in liberation.”

Chase’s wish is that Reed’s revisiting will underscore this sense of aspiration. “I want to show that there is hope, you know? There’s a place to live authentically. You don’t have to be alone. For us now, it’s picking up the path and keeping the message moving forward, for generations to come. It’s letting you know that, if you choose to live against the grain, go against societal norms, that yes, your life could be highly at risk, but it is not the end . . . There’s family for you. And they are up to the task to assure that there is a legacy there for you to point to, to be proud of.”

Jackson concurs: “What made me say ‘yes ’ to all this is that when I think about Venus, I realized that I got all the things she wanted. Marriage, love, fame. I got the things she had wished for. To be able to work on this documentary takes me totally back and gives me the kind of satisfaction of bringing something powerful to people’s screens. Into their homes. It can help change the conversation. I’ve seen it in my own life. So, when you look at this, we’re telling you the truth, the truth of us. All of it,” she underscores: “Yes, you’re learning about a murder, about the risks, but you’re really seeing that we have family and that there is connection. There is love. And this will teach the world.”

## **ABOUT THE FILMMAKING TEAM**

### **KIMBERLY REED, DIRECTOR**

Kimberly Reed’s trailblazing film *PRODIGAL SONS* won 14 international awards and was the first documentary by a transgender filmmaker to be theatrically released in the US. Her next feature doc, *DARK MONEY*, was an award-winning selection at Sundance, was promptly named one of *Vogue*’s 66 Best Documentaries of All Time, nominated for 4 Critics’ Choice Awards and the IDA Award for Best Documentary, shortlisted for an Oscar, and won the duPont Columbia Prize. Also Oscar shortlisted was *SEAT 31: ZOOEY ZEPHYR*, winner of Best Short Documentary at Palm Springs Shortfest and Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, among others.

She was named an American Film Showcase Expert and one of *Filmmaker Magazine*’s “25 New Faces of Independent Film” and *Out Magazine*’s “Out 100.” Her films have premiered at Telluride, Sundance, BFI London and Tribeca, and have been released on HBO/Max, Netflix, Amazon & PBS. Kim is a member of AMPAS and sits on the Documentary Branch Executive Committee.

**JAMIE SCHUTZ, PRODUCER**

Jamie Schutz is an Emmy Award winning producer, director, and President of Stick Figure Entertainment and recently produced BORN IN SYNANON, a series on the drug treatment facility and cult for PARAMOUNT+ and HIP HOP WORLD for AMAZON. Jamie EP'd Crime Waves: Cold Truth and The Mad King, podcasts for Q Code. Other recent producing credits include CITIZEN ASHE on tennis player/activist, ARTHUR ASHE, directed by SAM POLLARD and REX MILLER, and EP'd by JOHN LEGEND for CNN, Emmy Award winning, WHEN CLAUDE GOT SHOT, directed by BRAD LICHTENSTEIN and EP'd by SNOOP DOGG, HOOD RIVER for HBO MAX, directed by STEVEN CANTOR and EP'd by ROBERT RODRIGUEZ, RELENTLESS for DISCOVERY+ in association with BLUMHOUSE, STAY HOME WITH: YUNGBLUD and 30 DAYS WITH for YOUTUBE, TWYLA MOVES, an AMERICAN MASTERS on TWYLA THARP for PBS, and FOUND for NETFLIX, directed by AMANDA LIPITZ. Current films include NEVER SATISFIED: THE MAKING OF HAMILTON w AMBLIN, VENUS XTRAVAGANZA w PARTICIPANT, FOUR DOWN w DWAYNE JOHNSON, VANISH MODE w AMBLIN, BECOMING NORMANI and SNAKE CHURCH. Other recent producing credits include, BETWEEN ME AND MY MIND, on TREY ANASTASIO and WHAT WILL BECOME OF US, on Holocaust survivor and Westfield Malls magnate FRANK LOWY, both directed by STEVEN CANTOR. Jamie also produced BALLET NOW for HULU, on ballerina TILER PECK, with ELISABETH MOSS, in association w VULCAN STUDIOS, and SUNDANCE AWARD winning film, STEP, directed by AMANDA LIPITZ, distributed by SEARCHLIGHT. Jamie also EP'd DANCER, starring SERGEI POLUNIN, and CHASING TYSON for ESPN. Jamie produced Emmy Award series, THE MASK WITH HENRIK LUNDQVIST and CLYDE'S NEW YORK about Clyde Frazier, for MSG NETWORKS, a film on DAVID ROBINSON, son of JACKIE ROBINSON, with SPIKE LEE, SPYBALL on MOE BERG, STORYTIME WITH OZZIE GUILLÉN, an animated series starring OZZIE GUILLÉN and directed BY THE NUMB3RS WITH JUSTIN ZORM3LO and directed THE COLLECTORS, all for ESPN. Jamie produced/directed films for Philips, DuPont, IBM, Lenovo, Expedia, Unilever, and IKEA, while serving as Head of Production at Ogilvy Ent., and directed a film on ANDY WARHOL for the WARHOL museum. Additional TV credits include Co-EP on MIAMI INK and SHALOM IN THE HOME, S. Producer on NANNY 911 for FOX and THE MILLER SHOW for Oxygen and field producer on SURVIVOR 1 & SURVIVOR 2 for CBS and ECO-CHALLENGE for USA Network, and co-creator and co-producer of THE REAL CANCUN, distributed by NEW LINE. Jamie began his career AD'ing features & music videos for VIN DIESEL, KEVIN SMITH, WHITNEY HOUSTON, SHERYL CROW and JANET JACKSON, amongst others.

**MIKE STAFFORD, PRODUCER**

Mike Stafford is an Emmy Award-winning producer and director with over two decades of experience across a diverse range of genres. In addition to his career, Stafford is a passionate advocate for transgender rights. He spent a decade with the Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund (TLDEF), serving as both a pro bono attorney and a member of the board of directors. Stafford's commitment to advocacy extends seamlessly into his creative work on projects such as "Laverne Cox Presents: The T Word", digital platform "T4Short" and the feature documentary "I'm Your Venus".

**STEVEN CANTOR, PRODUCER**

Steven Cantor is a filmmaker and founder of New York City-based Stick Figure Productions. Eight of his films have been nominated for Primetime Emmy Awards, with two winning, including the 2022 Outstanding Documentary prize for *WHEN CLAUDE GOT SHOT*. Steven received an Oscar nomination for his first film, *BLOOD TIES: THE LIFE AND WORK OF SALLY MANN*.

Cantor is currently finishing work on the boating disaster film, *FOUR DOWN*, based on the bestselling book, “Not Without Hope”, by the survivor of the tragedy, Nicholas Schuyler. Other current titles include *BORN NORMANI* about the rise of the pop star and *SATISFIED* about the making of the musical *Hamilton*, as experienced by the female lead, Renee Elise Goldsberry.

Notable past works include the films *TWYLA MOVES* (PBS American Masters), *CITIZEN ASHE* (CNN Films), *STEP* (Fox Searchlight/HULU) which won a Special Grand Jury Prize at Sundance in 2017, *HOOD RIVER* (HBO/MAX), *UNRAVELED* (Showtime), *NO ONE DIES IN LILY DALE* (HBO/MAX), *REPORTER WITH NICHOLAS KRISTOF* (HBO/MAX), *I AM AN ANIMAL* (HBO/MAX), *WHAT REMAINS* (HBO/MAX), *LOUDQUIETLOUD: A FILM ABOUT PIXIES* (SUNDANCE/IFC/BBC), *AMERICAN MASTERS: WILLIE NELSON* (PBS), *DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND* (HBO/MAX), and *DANCER* (BBC FILMS/IFC/HULU)

Cantor also directs and executive produces series through the Stick Figure banner. Current and recent series include *RELENTLESS* (Discovery, 2021), *BORN IN SYNANON* (CBS/Paramount, 2023), and *HIP-HOP WORLD* (Amazon, 2024).

**JONOVIA CHASE, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER**

Jonovia Chase is a community stakeholder, producer, runway legend, and creative within the House Ballroom and transgender communities. She is the co-lead representative of House Lives Matter, an international initiative created for and by the House community and leads and collaborates with several organizations and community stakeholders on events and initiatives committed to intersectional social justice and activism. She serves as NYC Mother of the Legendary House of Xclusive Lanvin, a consultant with New York University, NYC Kiki Coalition, a member of Venus Pellagotti Xtravaganza's landmark committee, and the Ballroom Engagement Coordinator at the Hetrick Martin Institute. Jonovia has worked as a consultant for several Ballroom focused films, docudramas, and photo documentary projects including her role as the Ballroom Coordinator on Ryan Murphy's Hit series, *Pose* FX.

**COURTNEY SEXTON, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER**

Courtney Sexton is Executive Vice President of Documentary Film and Television at Participant, the leading media company dedicated to entertainment that stands at the intersection of art and activism.

Prior to Participant, Sexton was Senior Vice President for CNN Films, where she supervised the production of documentary films for theatrical exhibition and distribution across CNN's platforms, as well as for distribution by other partners. During her tenure, she executive produced films including *GABBY GIFFORDS WON'T BACK DOWN*, *The Last Movie Stars*, Oscar® winner *NAVALNY*, *John Lewis: Good Trouble*, *Apollo 11*, *Linda Ronstadt: The Sound of My Voice*, *RBG* and *Three Identical Strangers*.

Before joining CNN, Sexton worked as a development executive at Participant on the documentary team. During her first stint at Participant, her projects included the Academy Award®-winning *An Inconvenient Truth*, Academy Award®-nominated *Food, Inc.*, *Standard Operating Procedure*, and *Page One: Inside The New York Times*.

#### **DAVID LINDE, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER**

David Linde's background spans production, global distribution and building multiple companies from the ground up. He has long championed the voice of signature directors and their films, having worked on multiple films with Pedro Almodóvar, Sofia Coppola, Alfonso Cuarón, Todd Haynes, Ang Lee and Tom McCarthy, among many others.

Most recently, as CEO of Participant, the leading global media company dedicated to entertainment harnessing the collective power of art and activism, Linde was responsible for leading the company's overall strategy, content creation, advocacy, operations, strategic investments and acquisitions. During his tenure, noteworthy films from Participant included Academy Award® winners for Best Picture *Spotlight* and *Green Book*; Best Documentary Feature winner *American Factory* and winners for Best Foreign Language Film *Roma* and *A Fantastic Woman*; as well as acclaimed, award-winning series including Steve James' docuseries *America To Me* and Ava DuVernay's EMMY®-winning *When They See Us*.

Linde has also served as chairman of Universal Pictures, where he successfully pursued a broad outlook regarding international productions, animation and family entertainment, and distribution. He was co-founder of acclaimed specialty film studio Focus Features, formed from Universal's acquisition of the acclaimed independent production company Good Machine, of which he was a partner. Prior to Participant, Linde was the CEO and owner of Lava Bear Films, where he produced the Best Picture Academy Award-nominated *Arrival*, from director Denis Villeneuve.

Linde serves on the Board Of Trustees of the American Film Institute and the Board of Directors of Film Independent.

#### **DOMINIQUE JACKSON, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER**

Dominique Jackson is a model, actress, and author who is best known for her performance as the lead role ELEKTRA in POSE for FX and recently starred as BLOODY MARY in the weekly anthology spin-off series AMERICAN HORROR STORIES. Dominique can also be seen in an arc on AMERICAN GODS on Starz, the feature film CHICK FIGHT opposite Malin Akerman, Bella Thorne, and Fortune Feimster, and as a guest host on LEGENDARY for HBO MAX where Dominique's appearance went viral. Dominique also released her autobiography THE TRANSEXUAL FROM TOBAGO and was seen on the reality TV model/fashion show STRUT for Oxygen.

#### **DAVA WHISENANT, ACE, SUPERVISING EDITOR**

Dava Whisenant wrote & directed Focus Features' critically-acclaimed musical comedy BATHTUBS OVER BROADWAY, for which she won a WGA Award as well as Tribeca Film Fest's Best New Documentary Director award and an ACE Editing Nomination. Dava has worked in both narrative & nonfiction film for over 20 years, with an emphasis on music and comedy. In addition to her own scripted and documentary projects, Dava also assists

other filmmakers as a story consultant and producer. Recent collaborations include the new Reading Rainbow documentary BUTTERFLY IN THE SKY, FX's HYSTERICAL about female stand-up comedians, XTR's upcoming music doc DIANE WARREN: RELENTLESS, and Kimberly Reed's I'M YOUR VENUS. Dava also edited NatGeo's Oscar-shortlisted and Emmy-winning doc short THE FLAGMAKERS.

#### **MICHAEL PALMIERI, EDITOR**

Michael Palmieri is a filmmaker, musician and multimedia artist whose work spans feature-length documentaries, music videos, and live cinema. A director of his own work, he also often collaborates with other filmmakers as a cinematographer, editor or composer. His films have exhibited at Sundance, SXSW, Tribeca, NYFF, True/False, Locarno, IDFA, HotDocs and others. His first feature OCTOBER COUNTRY won the Grand Jury Prize at Silverdocs, received two Cinema Eye Honors, and was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award for Best Documentary in 2009. His most recent feature THE GOSPEL OF EUREKA was released in 2018 by Field of Vision and Kino Lorber. His latest project is a collaboration with Donal Mosher called SPECTRAL TRANSMISSIONS, a cinema, stage, and audio project that invites writers, filmmakers, artists, and musicians to reimagine the ghost story as a tool for addressing the issues of the contemporary world. His recent collaborations include visual installations for musicians Daniel Lanois and Lonnie Holley, editing for filmmakers Rob Epstein and Kimberly Reed, and cinematography for Jeanie Finlay and the Ross brothers. His past music videos include work for Beck, Sharon Van Etten, The Foo Fighters, The Strokes, Tears for Fears, and many others.

#### **ERIC DANIEL METZGAR, EDITOR**

Eric Daniel Metzgar is an Emmy Award winning documentary filmmaker based in Pacifica, California. He is a two-time Sundance Documentary Lab Fellow. He directed, shot and edited Reporter, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, aired on HBO, and was nominated for an Emmy Award and Cinema for Peace's International Film Award. Metzgar edited and produced Crime + Punishment (Oscar short-listed, Emmy Winner, Sundance Special Jury Winner, Hulu), and edited Give Up Tomorrow (Emmy-nominated, PBS/POV) and Almost Sunrise (Emmy-nominated, PBS/POV). Metzgar also directed, shot and edited Life. Support. Music. (PBS/POV, 2008) and The Chances of the World Changing (Independent Spirit Award nominee, PBS/POV 2006). Metzgar co-edited Mayor, which won an Emmy Award and Peabody Award and was named one of the best films of 2020 by the New York Times, IndieWire, The Boston Globe, Vulture, Paste, RogerEbert.com, and Vox.

#### **ROSE BUSH, DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY**

Rose Bush is the director of photography of the Oscar Winning film, COLETTE. She is a rural Alaskan turned filmmaker based between Stockholm, Sweden and New York City. She works in a diversity of forms amongst cinema & television from non-fiction to narrative film, and what might be discovered next. She has a foundational belief that filmmaking is one of our best tools to expand our humanity and pursues the world with films made in uncharted existential territory. In her collaboration with Academy Award Nominated director Nicole Newnham, her work with THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SHERE HITE premiered in competition at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival and was listed by The New Yorker as "deserving of an Oscar nomination". She was the official presenter of the Emerging



Cinematographer Award at the 74th Cannes Film Festival and has screened with IFC Films, The Guardian, Dogwoof, Netflix, Hulu, The New Yorker and more.

**JOSHUA Z WEINSTEIN, DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY**

Joshua Z Weinstein has lensed the films: Menashe (A24), Sell/Buy/Date (featuring Rosaria Dawson and Brian Cranston), Elaine Stritch: Shoot Me (IFC Films), and Bikini Moon. His works have shown at Sundance, Telluride, Berlin, and Camerimage. Weinstein's advertising spots have been nominated for a Cannes Lion. Born in NYC, grew up in Jersey, he spent the aughts playing bass in the hardcore band Trophy Scars, a legacy that will live on through the tattoos of the band's fans. The DIY punk culture is enmeshed in his visuals.

**CREDITS (partial list)**

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**Produced by**

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Jamie Schutz

Mike Stafford

**Executive Producers**

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**Music by**

T Griffin

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