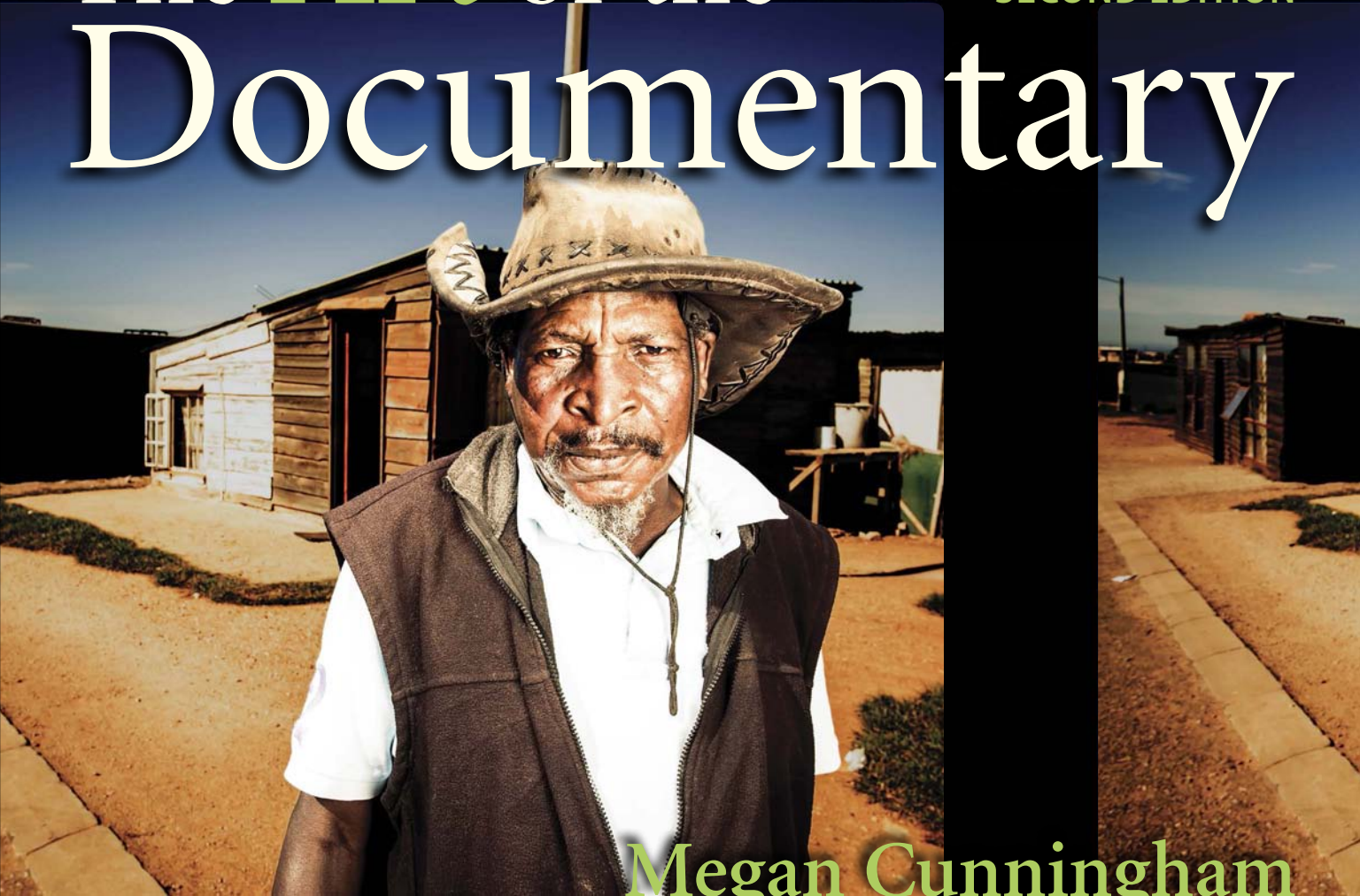



The **Art** of the  
**Documentary**

SECOND EDITION



**Megan Cunningham**

Fifteen Conversations with Leading Directors, Cinematographers, Editors, and Producers



With a foreword by Oscar®-winning director Barbara Kopple (*Harlan County, U.S.A.*, *Wild Man Blues*)

# The Art of the Documentary

Fifteen Conversations with Leading Directors,  
Cinematographers, Editors, and Producers

2ND EDITION

The logo for New Riders, featuring the words "New Riders" in a bold, sans-serif font. The word "New" is positioned above "Riders". A curved line arches over the text, starting from the left and ending under the "s" in "Riders".

New  
Riders

Megan Cunningham

# **The Art of the Documentary, SECOND EDITION**

## **Fifteen Conversations with Leading Directors, Cinematographers, Editors, and Producers**

Megan Cunningham

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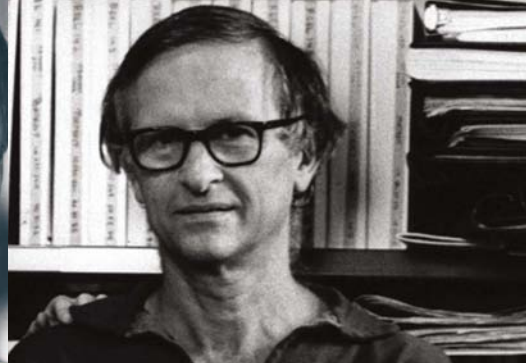
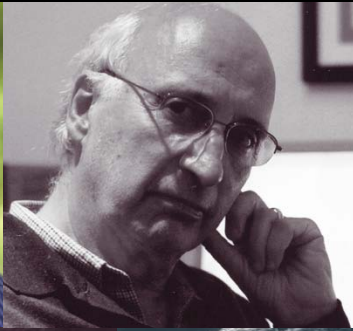
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*This book is dedicated to Larry Silk, A.C.E., a generous mentor to so many,  
who taught me a deep respect for the craft, to enjoy the rewards  
of creative work, and to maintain integrity above all else.*



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# Acknowledgments

This book project, like the films it discusses, was a true collaboration.

Each person who consented to be interviewed for *The Art of the Documentary* far exceeded the conventional expectations of such involvement. All were extraordinarily generous in donating time and insights to help me create this book, and it was remarkable to witness their connection to the subject—digging through boxes in attics to uncover rare photos, pursuing long-forgotten factual information, and allowing me to conduct follow-up conversations. Their support of my project was a great compliment to me, and their devotion to documentary filmmaking is a gift to readers.

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The true hero of this project was my immensely talented editor, Douglas Cruickshank. From his first day on the book until the last, he lent me personal advice and expert guidance, sharing seasoned professional practices. Beyond the scope of traditional editing, he helped hone my interview process, shared his intimate familiarity with the film industry, and with his uncommon wit and dependable instincts, made even the daunting parts of the production enjoyable. My gratitude to him is beyond words.

Finally, every time I undertake a new project, my parents, friends, and family inevitably see more potential than I can imagine fulfilling. I rely on this network more than any other, and I am grateful for their faith. It means everything to me.

# Foreword

BY BARBARA KOPPLE

For me, documentary filmmaking has always been about taking the time to go beneath the surface and find the heart of the story. Documentary filmmakers create unforgettable and entertaining films that introduce us to people we never would have known, or show us a different side of people we thought we knew already. Great nonfiction filmmakers take us halfway around the world, or maybe just to the other side of the tracks, but either way, it's a journey that can change us forever. What makes this journey possible is collaboration with other directors, with camera people and editors, and with the subjects of their films.

I learned in the beginning of my filmmaking career that collaboration was part of successful and powerful documentaries. My first job in the industry was working for Albert and David Maysles, who strove to create a family-like atmosphere while working. We screened footage together and listened to each other's opinions. It gave me a sense that what I said mattered. The Maysles were doing more than creating documentary films; they were creating a community of documentary filmmakers.

This idea of community came into play on the film *Winter Soldier*, which captured the testimony of veterans after they returned from the Vietnam War. This film was made by a collective of 15 independent filmmakers in collaboration with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. During the many months of editing, the filmmakers and some Vietnam veterans lived and worked together in a house in Allamuchy, New Jersey. While cooking together and taking turns doing different chores, we screened material and discussed it as a group. This intense, collaborative living and working situation created an environment where everyone could contribute their diverse opinions and ideas to the film.

Perhaps the greatest collaboration in documentary film is between the filmmaker and the subject. Documentary filmmakers encourage and inspire subjects to tell their story, and subjects learn to trust the filmmaker to tell it with honesty and integrity. During the shooting of *Harlan County, USA*, we lived with the striking miners and their families and formed an intense bond with them. Even when we couldn't afford to buy film stock, we stood on the picket line alongside the miners. It was an honor to have become a close part of their lives and to tell their story.

I have been fortunate to have collaborated with several of the filmmakers included in this book: Sheila Nevins, the fearless president of HBO Documentary where she has given so many filmmakers an opportunity to show their work; Kirsten Johnson, the talented cinematographer, whom I worked with on the films *My Generation*, *American Standoff*, and *The Hamptons*, and who is now shooting and directing her own films; the brilliant Larry Silk, who edited so many of my films—*American Dream*, *Wild Man Blues*, *Fallen Champ: The Untold Story of Mike Tyson*, and *The Hamptons*—is a true storyteller.

Every talented person included in this book, and many more, are part of a larger documentary community where we respect each other and support each other's work. I am privileged to work in this industry and to be in the company of such wonderful and creative people. In Megan Cunningham's book, documentary filmmakers and filmgoers alike will get the rare opportunity to meet some of these amazing documentarians who reveal so much about their art.

# Lauren Lazin



Director

# Making Television With a Conscience

**L**AUREN LAZIN IS NOT YOUR TYPICAL TELEVISION EXECUTIVE. SHE recognizes the value of her show's strong ratings and the importance of the MTV News and Specials department (which she formed in 1992) to the network's public image. Her priorities, however, are more closely aligned with an activist's or an independent filmmaker's. Lazin remains committed to producing work that addresses social issues affecting contemporary youth, and she's interested in working with the film world's leading documentary filmmakers. As an executive who produces dozens of shows a year, she's focused first on treating her show's real-life characters with respect, and second with impacting viewers in a meaningful way that touches their lives. "I tell filmmakers who come to us, 'Take everything you *think* is MTV and just put that away, because that's not what we do here.'"

Prior to joining MTV, Lazin graduated from the acclaimed masters program in Documentary Film Production at Stanford University. She came to New York in

## Lauren Lazin filmography

### Director

*Imagination Unleashed: An Artisan's Journey* (2013)  
*Can't Stop Losing You* (2012)  
*VH1 Rock Docs: The TRL Decade* (2012)  
*Get Schooled* (2009)

*The Last Days of Left Eye* (2007)  
*I'm Still Here: Real Diaries of Young People Who Lived During the Holocaust* (2005)  
*Tupac: Resurrection* (2003)  
*Journey of Dr. Dre* (2002)  
*Seven Deadly Sins* (2001)

*24 Hours in Rock and Roll* (2001)  
*Fight Back* (2000)  
*Sex in the '90s* (1990–2000)  
Rockumentaries on The B-52's, Robbie Robertson, Michael Jackson, The Who (1987–2000)  
*The Flapper Story* (1985)

### Producer/Executive Producer

*Imagination Unleashed: An Artisan's Journey* (2013)  
*VH1 Rock Docs: Yo! The Story of Yo! MTV Raps* (2012)  
*VH1 Rock Docs: The TRL Decade* (2012)

**Lauren Lazin received the Student Academy Award for her film, *The Flapper Story*.**

*Photo courtesy of Lauren Lazin.*



1985 when *The Flapper Story*, her film school project, premiered at the Museum of Modern Art's *New Directors/New Films* series and won a Student Academy Award. "I had a film that I had written, produced, directed, and edited. So, I could come here as a filmmaker, which was great."

While the majority of her work over the past 20 years has been at the MTV television network, where she's held a variety of production executive positions, Lazin continues to direct films. She's chosen topics that have earned her awards and rave reviews from diverse political organizations. She has made documentaries for the National Organization for Women (NOW), and received honors for her work from the National Association of Minorities in Communications, and the Ryan White Youth Service Award for outstanding contributions to the fight against HIV/AIDS among teenagers. In 1996, the Women's College Coalition featured Lazin in its national ad campaign promoting women's education.

In her capacity as an MTV executive, Lazin also works to insure that the network's programs have an impact on the community through off-air channels of promotion. "A lot of documentary filmmakers are motivated by outreach: They want to get their message out, they want to affect people," Lazin says. "MTV has been a direct way to do that. We've always made sure our pieces include heavy educational outreach. We've even given our films to schools and libraries." Lazin shared with me numerous accounts of MTV programs having a direct impact on the issues they addressed, and on teenagers's lives. In 1995, for example, she produced a film about child sexual abuse, *Fight Back*, which was featured in a special screening for Congress.

Lazin is fiercely committed to using the network to launch the type of work she cares about. A recent example is a new project, *I'm Still Here: Real Diaries of Young People Who Lived During the Holocaust*, which brings to life newly discovered diaries written by teenagers during the Holocaust, many of whom were peers of Anne Frank. For this project, Lazin received network

*Get Schooled* (2009)  
*The U.S. vs. John Lennon* (2006)  
*LOGO Momentum* (2005)  
*My Super Sweet 16* (2005)  
*I Want a Famous Face* (2004)  
*Tupac: Resurrection* (2003)

*Camp Scott Lock-Up* (2001)  
*Cribs* (2000–2005)  
*Sex 2K* (2000–2004)  
*True Life* (1998–2004)  
*Sex in the '90s* (1990–2000)  
*MTV Uncensored* (1997–2000)

*MTV Ultrasound* (1997–2000)  
*Megadose* (1997–1998)  
*MTV Rockumentary* (1995–2000)  
*alt.film@mtv* (1996–1998)  
*Straight from the Hood* (1992)

#### Writer

*The Last Days of Left Eye* (2007)  
*Seven Deadly Sins* (1993)  
*Straight from the Hood* (1993)

support, but also fund-raised outside the network to complete the financing. “You’ve got to be a force of nature,” she says. “My professor Ron Alexander once told me that, and it sounds so obvious, but it’s true!” After two years of fund-raising, the project was completed and scheduled to screen at documentary film festivals before airing on MTV on Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Most recently, Lazin took a leave of absence to direct MTV Film’s first feature-length documentary, *Tupac: Resurrection*. The film traces the life story of Tupac Shakur, the celebrated rap artist who was gunned down in Las Vegas in 1996 while driving with his record-company owner, Marion “Suge” Knight. In typical MTV form, the film was packaged with a companion book, a DVD full of ancillary footage, a Web site, and a platinum hits album.

But the film is more than a marketer’s dream: It’s the embodiment of Lazin’s belief in trusting her subject’s voice to tell his own story, as reflected in the advertising slogan, *In His Own Words*. Throughout the film, Shakur, son of a Black Panther, speaks from beyond the grave in insightful interviews. With *Tupac: Resurrection*, Lazin’s first-person storytelling strategy is reminiscent of the style of programming she produces for the MTV network. In series such as *True Life* and *Diary*, the primary commitment is to honor the voices of teenagers when depicting their experiences. “The channel is the voice of young people,” she says. “Our shows are not preachy. They’re often informative and helpful, but they’re from young people, they’re from the *perspective* of young people. And I think that’s why they work.”

Of course, graphics and music also play a critical role in Lazin’s filmmaking style. For *Tupac*, Lazin and editor Richard Calderon wove Shakur’s words from “lots and lots of sources” into a tightly knit narrative of street philosophy and political oration. They then incorporated graphic composites of headlines, personal letters, and other found artifacts—many shared with Lazin by Shakur’s mother, Afeni Shakur, who served as the film’s executive producer. “His mom had his photos



**Lauren Lazin on location in Lithuania, shooting *I’m Still Here: Diaries of Young People Who Lived During the Holocaust*, a project Lazin is currently directing.**

*Photo courtesy of Katy Garfield.*



and his poetry and his albums. I got access to the vault, stacks of phone numbers from girls, all kinds of great things.” The film is artfully timed to an impeccable score of Shakur’s own rap music and relevant songs by others. In the tradition of MTV documentaries, many sequences correlated closely to the lyrics of popular songs. (At one point, amidst a creative montage of images of Shakur snuggling up sequentially with dozens of different female fans, the soundtrack turns to Sade’s *Smooth Operator*.) Lazin’s year-long research effort and diligent use of Shakur’s archives paid off. In November 2003, *Tupac: Resurrection* opened theatrically on 800 screens through a distribution deal with MTV’s sister company, Paramount Pictures, and was nominated for a 2005 Academy Award for Best Documentary.



## From Music Videos to Meaty Stories

**When you joined the network, it was still early in the evolution of cable television. What was MTV like?**

I was part of the second wave of MTV. The first wave was videos and the second wave was actual programming. I was in a department called Special Programming. It included everything that wasn’t a video, a promo, or a news piece; anything longer than three minutes was my area. We were considered “long-form programming.”

Right away I started doing documentaries. Doug Herzog, who is now the president of Comedy Central—he’s the man who hired me—actually told me the story that, the day he hired me, he turned to his assistant and said, “Can you imagine doing *documentaries* on MTV?”

But it worked out really well. I started off doing artist’s biographies: Robbie Robertson, the B-52’s, and Janet Jackson. And we did a few movie star biographies. Then, in 1990, I moved over to the news area, because I thought, that’s where all the smart people were. I said, “Can we do documentaries that are *not* about celebrities? Can we do documentaries about something else? How about ideas and issues?”

◀ **Joan Crawford in *Our Dancing Daughters*, 1928, from *The Flapper Story*.**

*Photo courtesy of MGM.*



**The B-52's, subject of one of the many rockumentaries Lazin produced and directed in her early days at MTV.**

*Photo by Janette Beckman, courtesy of Direct Management.*

### **What was your first non-celebrity documentary at MTV?**

The first one we did was on sex. It became a very long-running series called *Sex in the '90s*. It was very light and fun and sexy, but it was also about parental consent for abortion, homophobia in the music industry, and HIV testing. It was real stuff that really mattered. So, the ratings were great! The shows did well. And from there we branched out and did documentaries on drugs, on religious intolerance, and all kinds of interesting topics that affect young people.

---

**Your department was separate from the MTV News group?**

Yes.

**What was the news group doing at the time?**

They were doing their news reporting. They were covering artist stories, celebrity stories, and Artists Against Apartheid. Anything that happened in the news. Our department would expand it, and make longer documentaries about similar topics. But our division wasn't just celebrity-driven. My programming role models were people like Sheila Nevins at HBO and Pat Mitchell at Turner and people who had these really great documentary areas. I always thought, "Wouldn't it be great if we could do that here at MTV?"

**Your goal was to expand the scope of the network's programming?**

I wanted to produce programs that covered thought-provoking, interesting topics, but told in an MTV style.

**For an audience unfamiliar with news and specials programming at MTV, can you talk about how MTV evolved from a music video channel to programming?**

It evolved because the shows worked. And the more rigorous and thoughtful the pieces were, the higher the ratings were. At its cornerstone, it was because we trusted the audience. We believed our audience wanted to get really meaty, interesting stories. And we always were one of the highest-rated programs on the channel. Back when ratings for *Beavis and Butthead* were so high, our ratings were as high as *Beavis and Butthead*, and then they were as high as *The Real World*. And news and specials programs still do very, very well.

**Beyond the ratings success, how does producing documentaries help achieve the goals of the MTV network?**

“My background was in sociology,  
and I still feel like a sociologist.”

They’re certainly good for the channel in terms of image. In the beginning, they helped us not get kicked off of cable affiliates who were concerned about MTV’s influence on young people. Because we’d be able to say, “Hey, we’re also looking at guns and schools, and we’re looking at other topics, and kids are watching it.”

## Urgent Programming, Impacting an Audience

**In addition to on-air programming promotion, your department is very active with off-air outreach.**

We’ve always made sure our documentaries include heavy educational outreach. We’ve even given our films to schools and libraries.

### **Why is that important?**

One of the things I’ve always liked about doing documentaries on MTV is that the audience is really involved with the films. They’re watching, they’re attentive, and they interact. A lot of documentary filmmakers are motivated by outreach: They want to get their message out, they want to affect people. MTV has been a really direct way to do that.

**Can you give me an example of how MTV’s documentaries affect the lives of your viewers?**

About ten years ago, I directed a program on child sexual abuse called *Fight Back*—young people fighting back against child sex abuse. And we had an 800 number at the end of the piece where viewers could call for further information.

Every time that documentary ran they would get hundreds of phone calls from kids, hundreds and *hundreds* of phone calls. Eventually, we were then able to make

the piece available for free from Blockbuster stores. And we heard from a lot of young people who took their abusers to court.

**That's incredible.**

Isn't it? I mean, there are people who took their abuser to court. And when they were asked, "What made you do this?" they said, "Well, I saw this documentary on MTV, and I learned how to do it." So our programming is a direct line to our target audience.

**Does that happen often when you tackle social issues?**

Yes. I executive-produced a documentary a couple years ago, *True Life: I'm Bipolar*, directed by Lucia Engstrom, on young people diagnosed as bipolar. And I can't begin to tell you how many requests we've gotten for that show from people who are friends of people who are bipolar, from parents who are asking, "What does this mean?" The bipolar diagnosis often surfaces when the victims are teenagers, and they don't know how to handle it. Our documentary shows them: Here's how other people are handling it.

**What about the series you executive-produce, *True Life*? I know many episodes have dealt with difficult topics from a very personal, first-person point of view.**

One episode that had a big effect on viewers was *True Life: I'm Coming Out*, which was also directed by Lucia Engstrom. It followed several young people coming out of the closet to their parents. We're very careful to show all sides of it. A lot of young people come out to their parents and the parents can't accept it. It's a very troubling, difficult thing. So we don't whitewash it. We try to show what really happens. I know that's had a huge effect on our viewers. Still, now, there will be gay kids working here at MTV who'll say, "I saw that show, and that's what made me decide to come out. Because I saw someone else do it."

---

*"A lot of it is just what filmmakers should do: Keep their eyes open to the world around them."*

“You never know where some of these films are going to end up.”

---

**That must be rewarding.**

Yes, that's been a really gratifying part of doing documentaries here: The audience owns the channel. They're really part of it.

**I understand that your department is different from MTV News, but do you respond to what is going on right now that's affecting teenagers? Is that part of your programming charter?**

One of the things I've really enjoyed about being here is, it's really about capturing the zeitgeist. My background was in sociology, and I still feel like a sociologist. I feel like you have to capture what's going on today.

**How do you do that?**

Well, we have a great research department. But a lot of it is just what filmmakers should do: Keep their eyes open to the world around them. Keep their eyes open for good stories. After a while, it's intuitive. You start to trust your gut feeling.

**Can you give me an example of how you were tuned in to a big youth problem before the mainstream media recognized it as an issue?**

I'll give you a really good example. A number of years ago we did a piece with director Betsy Forhan on shootings in high schools. This was pre-Columbine. And we worked in conjunction with the American Psychological Association. It was a great program about encouraging young people to keep their eyes open when they saw signs of depression or violence. It discussed what peer threats to believe. So, when a classmate tells you they're going to kill themselves, you should know that they might. *Listen* to that. Don't just toss it off!

We titled it *Warning Signs*, so that people could see: Here are actual signs to look out for. When your friends are giving these signs, they might do something serious. It included stories where somebody told somebody that they thought

---

something was going to happen, and hundreds of lives were saved. It was a really strong program about gun violence in schools, and about school shootings.

Well, we finished the piece, and we were waiting to air it, and then Columbine happened. So we rushed it to air, and we had dialogue around it, and it got a tremendous response. People asked us, “How did you know?” And we said, “Well, that’s what our job is. Our job is to know what the vibe is, and what’s important. What’s urgent. What’s urgent programming.” And it was interesting, a lot of those kids who were in Columbine, they were being interviewed on the news programs, and they would say, “Oh, there was a documentary on MTV.” And that captured it for us. That felt like that was the right vibe.

#### **Was it used in the school system?**

Well, actually, I wasn’t so happy because since there were warning signs from the American Psychological Association about how to help someone before they hurt other people, a year or so later, some schools were using that program as a way to sort out the bad kids. I wanted to say, “No, that’s the absolute opposite of what the message of the documentary was.” So, you can’t really control how a piece is going to be used. But for the most part we were really happy with it.

#### **MTV has a diverse audience. Have any of your programs addressed race relations?**

We made a documentary a number of years ago called *Driving While Black*. It was an episode of *True Life*, directed by Norman Green, so it was from the point of view of being black, and being pulled over for no reason other than the color of your skin. It was a really powerful piece. It had some important information in it as well, about what to do if you are pulled over, and how to react and how not to react. That program won an NAACP award, and I know it is being used by police around the country in sensitivity training programs. So, you never know where some of these films are going to end up.

---

## Film and Television Collide

**Your programs have high-quality production values, and address serious social issues. However, MTV is not typically thought of as an outlet for bona fide documentaries. Would you agree?**

The frustrating thing is, for years when people would write reviews about our documentaries, they'd put *documentaries* in quotes. When I would read it, I would ask myself, "Why is that in quotes? How is this not a legitimate documentary?" It's reaching all these people. It's nicely made. So, it was frustrating. I think, now, people are finally catching on, but it's been a long time.

**Why do you think there was a dismissal of your programming within the film world and the media?**

Well, I think there was a little prejudice because it was about young people. So when you're working outside of that demographic, it's easy to just disregard it, or not take it seriously. Also, we use music in the storytelling pretty strongly. But I know some people that aren't familiar with the music, they just heard noise. They couldn't take the shows seriously because they were so finely edited—almost like a music video, but with content. Plus, the shows were on cable. We used to do very well at the Cable Ace Awards, but it was hard to get an Emmy nod. We finally did, but it took a while. For a long time cable was considered to be lower-quality television.

**But some people must have recognized how teenagers were reacting.**

The people that were always the most open-minded to us were teachers. We always got a lot of respect from teachers, because they could see, they knew when they played any of these documentaries in the classroom that kids would watch, and they'd ask questions, and they'd get involved. So anybody who actually watched the films became a fan and a supporter. The people who didn't take the shows seriously were also people who never watched any of them.

*“I met all these great filmmakers—  
people who I really admired.”*

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**How did you break down those perception barriers?**

I made a concerted effort a number of years ago for us to become bigger players within the documentary film community. We’ve sponsored Full Frame, the documentary film festival, the last couple years. We’ve given an award every year for the best film about young people. I’ve done a lot of outreach to documentary filmmakers that I’ve admired: Liz Garbus, Fenton Bailey, Randy Barbato, Joe Berlinger. People who I’d really like to come make films for us; I’ve invited them to work with us.

**You seem to straddle the film and television worlds.**

Traditionally, there’s been a real divide between people who work in TV and people who make films. Filmmakers are very precious with their pieces, and they have to run on the festival circuit, and then maybe they’ll come out on video or maybe they’ll be on PBS. And I would say, thanks to people like [HBO Documentaries president] Sheila Nevins, who has broken down that divide, that’s changing a little bit. At the Museum of TV and Radio, there’s Television Curator Ron Simon, he’s someone who really helped break down the divide. And Nancy Buirski, who runs the Full Frame Film Festival, that’s one of the first documentary festivals that would show TV programs. It was great to see them on the big screen, and to have a dialogue. But, for years there were the films that were in festivals, and then there were films that were shown on TV. It was like two separate worlds.

**It’s surprising to me that you’re not overwhelmed with pitch sessions and proposals. I would think that for documentary makers, it’s nearly impossible to manage a career outside of television work. Is it financially possible to produce documentaries independently for film festivals in the hopes of securing theatrical distribution?**

Well, when I first came to New York in the mid-’80s it was the tail end of the grant-making era, where you could actually write for grants for your film. I had directed a film, *The Flapper Story*, that was in festivals, and I met all these great filmmakers—people who I really admired, who were my heroes. When I spoke



**Shooting *Tupac: Resurrection*. Lazin worked with Tupac's mother, Executive Producer Afeni Shakur, to produce the film. "His mom had his photos and his poetry and his albums. I got access to the vault, stacks of phone numbers from girls, all kinds of great things. Then, I had to shape it so it had a dramatic flow, an arc, so that it felt like a movie. But certainly the story was there, and he really held it, he held the story."**

*Photo courtesy of Katy Garfield.*

with them, they all would say, "I don't know how I'm going to send my kids to college. I don't know how I'm going to get money for my next documentary." And I thought, "You're the most famous person I know, who's made so many great documentaries! There's got to be a way, there's *got* to be a way."

## ***Tupac: Resurrection***

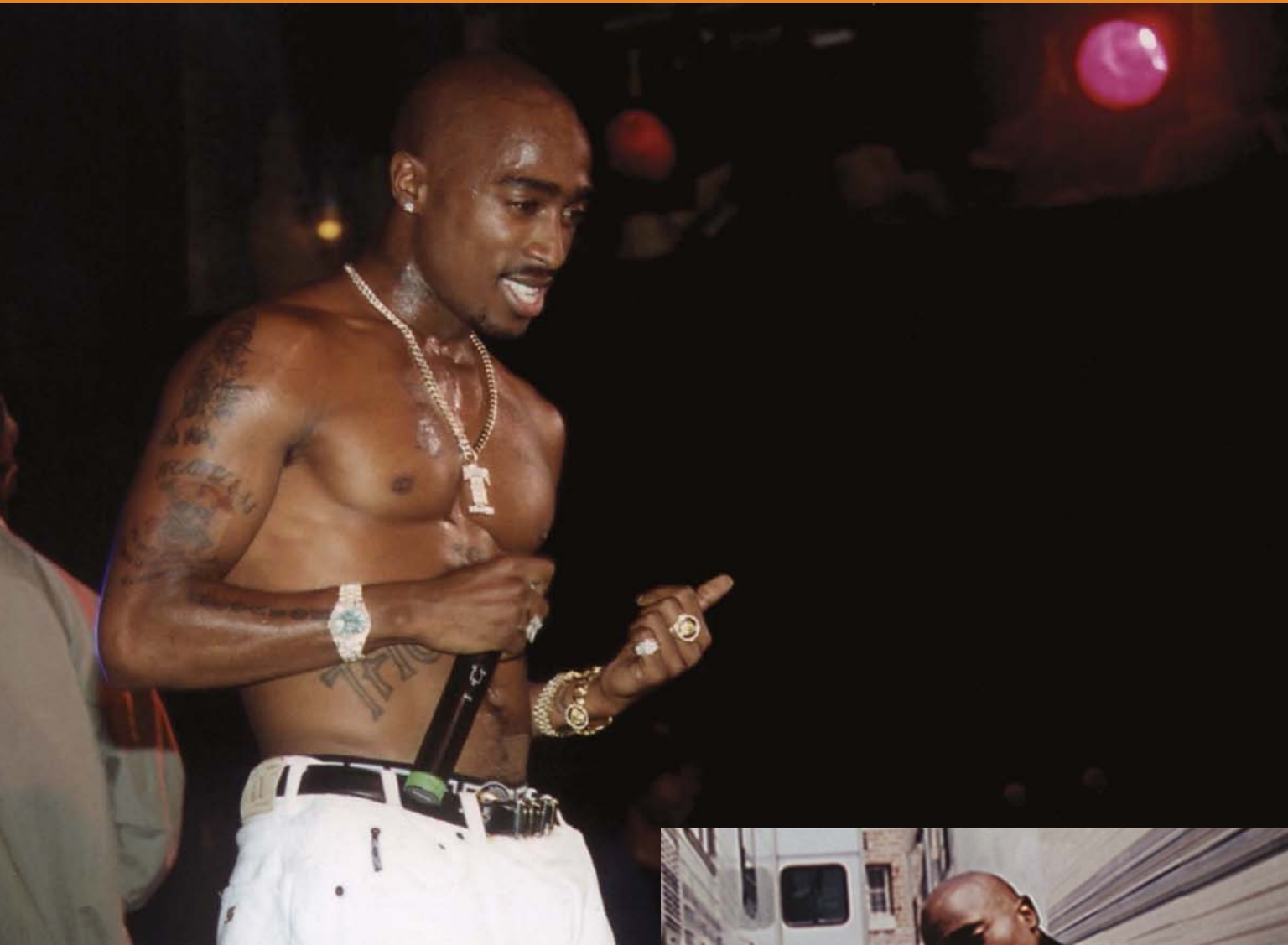
**You're still working as a film director, though you're a television executive.**

I've been making films all along. I didn't come here to just be an executive, I came here to be a documentary filmmaker, and I've always been able to make films while supervising other films and growing the

department. Two years ago I took a leave of absence from my job at MTV to direct *Tupac: Resurrection*, which is a feature film for MTV Films, which then got picked up by Paramount.

**Why did you produce it for theaters first instead of for television?**

Because creatively I was ready. Ready to make a long film, with no commercials, a film that could go deep. It was our first feature-length documentary, released through MTV Films. It was released to 800 screens. It was a really big release for a documentary feature. It was interesting, because at the first marketing meetings with Paramount they made the decision, let's never talk about it as a documentary. You don't use that word, *documentary*.



**"Tupac's a brilliant speaker, there are lots and lots of interviews with him telling his story. So I said, 'He can do it. Let's just let him do it. Let's trust him to do it.'"**

*Photos courtesy of Paramount.*



### **Why was that?**

Because at the test screenings, it was testing off the roof, and none of these people had ever gone to a theater to see a documentary. This is pre-*Fahrenheit 9/11*. But to these kids, it wouldn't even occur to them to go see a documentary, they just saw a good movie. So part of me was really torn. Part of me was saying, "I've been this advocate for documentary all these years. How could you not call it a documentary?" But then part of me said, "You know what? It's going to reach a wider audience. It's still the film it is. Obviously, it's a documentary."

### **Why were you interested in making this film?**

I had a concept to tell Tupac's story in his own words. And his mother, Afeni Shakur, had that same vision. A lot of people had wanted to make his life story.

### **How did you know that approach would work— an autobiography of a rap star, told in his own words, posthumously?**

He's a brilliant speaker, there are lots and lots of interviews with him telling his story. So I said, "He can do it. Let's just let him do it. Let's *trust* him to do it." It took a lot of editing, a lot of shaping. There are a lot of interviews from a lot of different sources. So it was a year of doing that research, and gathering archival material. We had a lot of stuff in-house at MTV. His mom had his photos and his poetry and his albums. I got access to the vault, stacks of phone numbers from girls, all kinds of great things. Put together, it's a pretty traditional documentary film other than the whole concept of him telling his own story in his own words. Then, I had to shape it so it had a dramatic flow, an arc, so that it felt like a movie. But certainly the story was there, and he really held it, he held the story.

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*“Certainly the story was there, and he really held it, he held the story.”*

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### **How did it do?**

It did well, seven-seven in box office [\$7.7 million total domestic box office gross]. And it did extremely well on DVD. It's still selling very, very well. We had a big hit, platinum soundtrack, and a book. The book did really well. I'd like to do more films like that.

## **Avant-Garde Aesthetics**

**Music is obviously a big narrative component to the way you tell stories.**

*Fahrenheit 9/11* is a good example of a documentary that used music the way we've used music for a long time. It's just another tool at your disposal to tell stories. Sometimes we would use music that we would know our viewers would know the lyrics to, and know why we were using it, even though in the documentary we never came up on the lyrics. We work really hard to make the editing beautiful and precise. I'd see other documentaries on television, and I'd think, "It must be so easy to make that film and not have to kill yourself scoring it." Music is another reason why I think people watch MTV documentaries.

**The PBS series *Alive From Off Center* was an incredibly innovative documentary series. You produced an episode for them, early on in your career. Can you tell me about it?**

Oh, yes. That was a great documentary. It was a piece called *Seven Deadly Sins*. I actually hooked up with Neil Sealing, who was running it from a public television station in Minnesota. But I had wanted to do a piece with PBS. I was a big PBS fan.

**Was that when you were at MTV?**

Yes. I had wanted to do "MTV Meets PBS." It was lowbrow meets highbrow.

### **A surprising combination.**

It was great in terms of publicity and press. We got a tremendous amount of press on it because, at that time, people were shocked: MTV and PBS? How could that be? But the thing that was so great about it was, Neil was so open-minded.

### **What was the subject matter?**

It was on how the seven deadly sins are expressed through popular culture today, and how young people relate to them. For example, gluttony was bulimia. I think PBS put up half the money and we put up half the money. And we broke it into two parts, because we had a lot of rights acquisitions. I think MTV ran it as an hour, and PBS ran it as two half hours.

### **Had PBS and MTV ever worked together before?**

PBS had already done something with MTV with the promo department. We had a really avant-garde approach, especially in the early days. That's where [MTV president] Judy McGrath came from, she ran the promo department. That stuff was beautiful, it was art. And they worked with, you know, Andy Warhol and Jean-

Michel Basquiat. They had done a piece for *Alive From Off Center*, a series of MTV promos. So that's how the connection was originally made. I came to them saying, "Let's do something with some content, let's do something that's *about* something."

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*"I came to them saying, 'Let's do something that's about something.'"*

### **Why was it a successful collaboration?**

They weren't afraid to push buttons, they weren't afraid to talk about religion. I remember we had a lot of press, and the reviewers didn't know how to wrap their heads around the program. Is it MTV? Is it PBS? What is it? Once again, we got our biggest support from teachers and from theologians.

---

### **Theologians supported the *Seven Deadly Sins*?**

Yes! All these religious people who worked with young people loved it. Because they thought, “Oh my God, you’re talking to young people about moral and ethical issues, and about *how to live your life*.” They watched the shows. That’s always the biggest stumbling block, getting them to watch the shows. I know it was a great collaboration, because we both aired it at exactly the same time, and both our ratings were great. We both hit our audience with equal strength. And then we got a Cable Ace Award for it. That’s one of the highlights for me, those kinds of collaborations with different partners.

## **Attention Span and Awareness Management**

**By using music, graphics, and fast-paced cuts, MTV has been credited with shortening a generation’s attention span. Do you agree with that assessment?**

I don’t know. I mean, I’ve been hearing that for 15 years. Maybe I just have a really short attention span, because to me, the documentaries seem to go at a very comfortable pace. I get bored otherwise. I also feel that pretty early on we tapped into a phenomenon.

**So MTV was responding to something, not creating it?**

With our viewers, certainly, as early as the early ’90s, I felt they knew how to process information faster than previous generations. They were fundamentally capable of processing information faster, and we met that capability better than other people did.

**The title graphic designed for the *Tupac: Resurrection* poster. "It's important to me that our films don't have a cookie-cutter look or feel."**

*Graphic courtesy of Paramount.*



**Is that still happening? Is there an ever-shortening supply of viewer attention?**

I don't know. I mean, I've been hearing that from day one—attention spans are getting shorter. I just think we caught on that our audience was able to process information more quickly. I think viewers today, certainly people in their 30s and 40s, like a lot of stuff coming at them.

**Is there a different strategy for programming that takes into consideration multiple forms of media?**

Certainly all our shows are supported on a lot of different media. And that, to me, is great. It's like a bonus feature on a DVD. Especially with a documentary, where you're so caught up with the characters and what happened to them that you want to know more about the world that they're in.

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## The Reality Television Craze

### **Has reality television affected your programming strategy?**

It's so interesting, this whole reality craze. It's just hilarious to me, because we've been doing this for years and years and years and years. We've done straight-up documentaries on a pop channel, and they respond to it. I don't know how much the whole reality movement is going to change things. My friends are all working on reality shows, everybody's working on reality TV. And that's got to have an impact.

### **Do you think that's a good thing or a bad thing?**

Well, it's a good thing because it's getting a lot of people work. But it has set the bar very, very high for things to “happen.” So when we do a cinema verité piece, stuff's got to *happen*.

### **Why is that?**

Well, it's really important in *True Life* that the character go through a story arc, that there's a beginning, middle, and end—you're on a journey with them. There's something they want that they can't get, or there's something that they want that they do get. They're not profiles, there's storytelling. We don't do profiles. That's not what *True Life* is. It's story arcs. And it's tough to do that if you're not going to live with the character for three years. But that's the bar we've always set for that series.

### **What impact have reality shows had on your programming requirements at MTV?**

When you're competing with reality shows, you're up against a highly manipulative setting. Often, characters live together, and they've been cast because they don't get along, and the producers are going to throw things in the way in order to create “drama.” So, it's a really interesting art form in itself, because it's a mixture of spontaneity and things that are contrived. And the audience knows what's contrived

and what's spontaneous, and that's part of it. It's an interesting dynamic. But it has really set the bar high; as a viewer you want something *dramatic* to happen.

**But isn't that always the case?**

Some of the best documentaries work because they take a while to experience, to live out. You can't just enter into someone's life and say, "Here's their precious life, and we're entering into it," and then try to just get to the dramatic parts really quickly. It's not fair to their world. You can only be so manipulative in a documen-

tary, from my point of view. But you can be totally manipulative in a reality show, because, to me, the viewers know what the rules are before they watch it. But nonetheless, all audiences want some drama. They want exciting things to happen. They're used to that now. They're waiting for that. And it's tough to get that, and stay honest to your characters.

---

*"You can only be so manipulative in a documentary, from my point of view."*

## Development and Project Financing

**For those who may be unfamiliar with television programming jargon, can you describe the difference between series and one-off episodes?**

Well, that was a transition that happened a couple of years ago in our area: We moved from being a specials department to becoming a series department. So they wouldn't just order one show at a time, they would ask for ten. *Cribs*, created by Nina Diaz, was one of MTV's first big successful series. So it's not just one show; they asked us, "Can you do ten?" But, there are pros and cons to that kind of a model.

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**Tell me about the pros. What do you like about producing series?**

The good news is, it's lots of work for lots of people. And, you can capitalize on the efficiency of scale.

**Do you mean by marketing the entire series, and getting viewers to tune in every week?**

Not just marketing, but also in terms of production: You can produce a series more efficiently than a single program. And yes, viewers will tune in every week when they know what they're getting. So it really raises your visibility.

**What's the downside?**

The tough part is it's important to me that our films don't have a cookie-cutter look or feel. It's very easy to drift into format and formula, which to me is just *killing* the whole wonderful thing about a documentary: that you don't know where it's going to go!

With *True Life* we've been able to keep it as an anthology series. That's probably the closest that we have to a traditional cinema verité documentary series—it's probably the closest to something you might find on PBS or HBO. Each one is made by a different filmmaker, so every one has its own vision. But in general, it's hard to maintain that with a series. I mean, people do it. *Frontline* is a really good example, I think, and *P.O.V.*

**When you're producing an episode for a specific series, how do you foster the individuality of each episode? Is that something you get very involved with in each show?**

Yes, we're pretty hands-on. Some shows require more input than others. A show for a series like *Cribs* or *Diary* doesn't need as much hand-holding as something like a *True Life* show does. I'm pretty hands-on when it comes to looking at the scripts—and they do have scripts; every single thing we do has a script.

---

**When you are trying to get a project off the ground, what is your relationship to MTV?**

My college professor Ron Alexander used to say you have to be a force of nature. It sounds so obvious! But, you know what? That's really what you have to be. It ended up being a gem of wisdom; I tell filmmakers that all the time. If you have a vision, or an idea, you have to use *all* your resources to make it happen. You have to bring it to the people that you think are going to be sympathetic to it, or who are going to be interested in it economically, or creatively, or people who just care about the subject matter.

**Can you give me an example where you rallied champions to get a project you cared about financed?**

A good example was a piece that I'm directing right now called, *I'm Still Here: Diaries of Young People Who Lived During the Holocaust*. A couple years ago—it was before I directed *Tupac: Resurrection*—I brought this to the heads of MTV and said, "I found this book written by Alexandra Zapruder called *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries of the Holocaust*. She collected diaries written by young people; she found over 50 diaries written by young people during the Holocaust—peers of Anne Frank!" I asked the MTV heads, "Don't you think that would make a great documentary for MTV, the voices of young people telling about the Holocaust from their point of view?" They said, "It sounds great. If you can get the money, you can make this piece. We'll air it, we'll support it." It took a couple years to do the fund-raising, and I learned about fund-raising from all these different organizations.

**You had to go outside the network to find financing?**

We got the money from several different places: Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation, the Tauber Family Fund, and the Weinberg Family Foundation. It was enough to get us started. I put together a creative team. I did some outreach to MTV-U, because they're probably going to premiere it on college campuses throughout the country. I talked to our Public Affairs group, because

# “Your job as the director is to make sure everybody has the vision.”

“Choose or Lose” was the big campaign for 2004, and they’re not yet focusing on the pro-social campaign for next year. I asked them, “What’s going to be the campaign next year? How could this fit into that piece?”

## **You galvanize support from different affinity groups.**

Yes. I ask myself, “Who are your allies?” I have financial business planners and business managers at the company, and production managers at the company. Really, those people are just there to support you financially with your budgets. But I actually sit and talk to them creatively about what I’m doing. That’s a really important policy—you’re asking someone to *make time* for your piece. You don’t just say, “This is what I need from you.” I try to get them motivated and excited about sharing a vision. I’ll tell you something: You’d be surprised how often people who are in a business role have something creative or interesting that actually helps you as a filmmaker. That’s something that’s always been very important to me.

## **So you invite in participants who would not ordinarily be giving creative input.**

I also try to do that with my staff. I have people who are working with me that are very experienced, and I’ll also have people working with me that are new. We have a lot of people coming out of college. And I’ll make sure they get to know what the whole big picture is. It’s an interesting learning experience for them, but I also think they’re better at their jobs when they get what the whole big picture is.

## **Why is that important?**

Your job as the director is to make sure everybody has the vision. The vision of how it’s going to work economically, the vision of what you’re trying to do creatively, the vision of your storytelling. I also listen to feedback from everybody. I’m not one of these people who’s sensitive about getting people’s comments about their piece. I listen to everything, from everybody. Because in the end you’ll make your own decisions, but it will prepare you for what’s working and what’s not.

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**When you get feedback from MTV's business planners, does that affect how you adjust the budget?**

Every show is different. I know pretty much what the channel will spend on a half hour and what they'll spend on an hour. It's cable—we keep things lean and mean. There are not a lot of extras.

**Are the budgets for MTV's documentary television programs comparable to an independent film budget?**

I'd say they're competitive with most cable outlets. As far as I can tell they're pretty competitive with the History Channel and A&E. I think HBO probably has larger budgets. But we're pretty competitive. Our budgets are certainly not like a network's would be, but we produce more hours of programming than a network.

**Are your programming ideas sometimes limited by budgetary constraints?**

I think it's made us more enterprising in terms of how to tell these stories. This channel is really quick to jump on new technologies, changing how we do things. Very early on, we were shooting on DV. There are certain places where people spend the money: Our sound mixes are perfect. Every single show has a beautiful sound mix. There are certain things we don't compromise on.

**Are your sound mixes done internally?**

Usually, we go to outside studios, but at this point the channel has a lot of deals with a lot of places.

**What's exciting for you about new program development?**

I'm really excited about DVD. I feel like it's the DVD market right now. With feature films, especially low-budget feature films, the theatrical release is really just advertisement for the DVD. And I love the art form. People tend to have really



**Shooting *I'm Still Here: Diaries of Young People Who Lived During the Holocaust*.**

*Photo courtesy of Katy Garfield.*

nice screens when they watch a DVD, and they watch it in the privacy of their home. I love doing all the DVDs, and the extras. A film might get a small theatrical window, but it will wind up on DVD.

It's such a great model, economically, because the risk is so much lower and with the Internet you can reach your target audience cost-effectively. It's just a great model for documentarians.

**You seem to really enjoy the creative challenge of getting a project off the ground.**

I, personally, like working at a big company, because I'm good at learning how to work the system. Someone once called me intra-preneurial. And I *do* like coming up with ways to accomplish things within a larger corporation.

**What's your next challenge?**

I've changed my role here at MTV. Going forward I'm going to be working not just with MTV but also with VH1, and LOGO, the new gay channel. Now I'm looking around, there are a whole lot of networks under the MTV network umbrella, and they're interesting to me. It's interesting to think about programming to different audiences.

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