

Triple Threat TV
Presents

Kaepernick & America

A film by

Tommy Walker
&
Ross Hockrow

USA – 82 min. – 2022

Official Selection
Seattle International Film Festival 2022

Logline

Kaepernick & America explores the intersection between Colin Kaepernick's anthem protests and the reactions they spurred in the United States, revealing unique insights into America's ongoing racial turmoil.

Story Synopsis

It was the summer of 2016, an election year with unrest rumbling through America. There were countless triggers – the murder videos of Philando Castille and Alton Sterling, the counterpunch of Alt-Right and Fake News, Black Lives Matter, Russian meddling – a discordant national cauldron ready to boil over. It was the birth of Trumpism, but no one knew it yet.

Then, Colin Kaepernick took a knee and America lost its mind. Kaep's knee touched down on the divide between America's Black and White tectonic plates, creating an earthquake in the eternal race debate. The aftershocks of his singular gesture have already rippled through our country for years.

Kaepernick himself answered any and all thoughtful questions for a time, then stopped talking. And the resulting quiet has allowed for a thoughtful examination of the man and his story. It reveals layer upon layer of surprises and contradictions. Raised in a white family, he became a Black quarterback, while in fact, he is an adopted, biracial man. Inherently shy, he became the center of attention. The man everyone was talking about was mostly silent. He took a stand by taking a knee.

Kaepernick & America examines the man and his protest, exploring the remarkable conflict stirred by such a symbolic gesture.

Featuring

Reporter **Steve Wyche** was simply covering a pre-season game for the NFL Network when he found himself breaking the biggest story of his life. Before Wyche told America that Colin Kaepernick didn't stand for the national anthem, he spoke privately with Kaepernick and learned that this was no impulsive act. "He knew he'd be questioned and challenged. He was ready." As a Black man, Wyche was careful to emphasize Kaepernick's motivation to call attention to police brutality at the top of the story, ahead of the breach of protocol or disrespect of the flag. Not everybody saw it that way.

Nate Boyer was a 49ers fan first, long before he became a celebrated Green Beret. When Kaepernick sat through the anthem, Boyer wrote an open letter to Kaepernick describing how his protest had hurt Boyer personally. Kaepernick read the letter and reached out directly to meet. Through this unlikely connection, Boyer persuaded Kaepernick that taking a knee was the respectful way to send the same message. In that moment, an image of global protest was born.

Activist **DeRay Mckesson** was a school administrator in Minneapolis when the murder of Michael Brown in St. Louis moved him to become a pillar of the Black Lives Matter movement. He was jailed, wrote a book and visited the White House, all shortly after his own awakening. When Kaepernick protested a couple of years later, he reached out to Mckesson to meet people in the movement and become more educated on how protest works. Kaepernick proved to be an astute student and quickly a protest icon himself.

Hue Jackson is one of a handful of Black men who have led two different teams as a head coach in the NFL. He admired Kaepernick's smarts and football skills all the way back in college but missed the chance to draft him by a couple of picks. Many years later, when Kaepernick sought to re-enter the league, Jackson was appointed to run his extraordinary workout. Alas, the workout didn't work out the way anyone had planned.

News Anchor **Don Lemon** speaks to America nightly on CNN and observed the Kaepernick story as a parallel tower rising side by side with the rise of Donald Trump. "Trump reframed the Kaepernick narrative as white grievance, which was red meat for his supporters. In a strange way, he kept the story alive. They needed each other."

April Dinwoodie was a biracial child, adopted and raised by a white family, much like Colin Kaepernick. She has become an adoption expert, perhaps America's leading expert on this kind of transracial adoption. She has unique insights into how these circumstances helped shape Kaepernick and led to his remarkable awakening and protest.

Football coach **Jim Harbaugh** fell in love the first time he saw Colin Kaepernick. Together, they launched their 49ers on a memorable streak that landed them in the Super Bowl. Later, when Harbaugh lost his job, Kaepernick lost his champion and his entire career changed.

Sideline reporter **Pam Oliver** is an African American woman who grew up in a military family, personally aware of many of the conflicting forces squaring off over the Kaepernick protest. She knew Kaepernick personally as a sharp, likeable soul with remarkable football gifts and she worried greatly over the blowback he would confront.

Director's Statement: Tommy Walker

As a Black man, the Kaepernick saga captivated me from the start. It raised so many of the core issues that Black people deal with everyday in America. And yet, the Black American experience is remarkably diverse, because while Kaepernick kneeled in a football uniform in San Diego, another Black man wearing a military uniform stood nearby and proudly sang the national anthem. The experience of Blacks in America is not monolithic. We are all different, as are our American journeys.

There are more than a thousand Black men in the NFL, but the one who protested had a singular journey that led him to make the choice. His racial history is complicated. His mother is white, his father is Black and his adoptive parents are both white. How did this particular set of social and societal influences lead a young budding superstar to put everything at risk?

The film we have made seeks to discover the parallels between the life and activism of Colin Kaepernick and the tumultuous and divisive factors that have colored America's racial divide. It is only partly about Kaepernick, as it actually reveals more about America, the land that reacted so profoundly to such a simple gesture. Kaepernick's protest held up a mirror to a large portion of the public and millions didn't like what they saw. The young man stood his ground in the face of the brutal backlash, continuing his protest for twenty consecutive weeks. Somehow, with his right knee on the field and his arms passively crossed in front of him, he managed to point a finger at injustice without saying a word.

Director's Statement: Ross Hockrow

When Colin Kaepernick took a knee, I vividly remember the conversations I'd have with both strangers, and people I've known my entire life, about what it meant. To me, Kaepernick's message was clear. And if it wasn't clear, there was a 17-minute interview you could cue up on YouTube where he explained what he was doing, and why he was doing it. Yet, the media spun their own narrative. People had strong opinions about whether he was right or wrong. I was mostly confused. I wasn't confused about Colin's message. That was clear. I was confused about why people were losing their minds over a simple gesture. It's not like America hadn't seen a protest before. This was a massive story. One worthy of many different tellings. And I hope they tell this story many times, through many mediums, from all different perspectives.

When Kaepernick's knee hit ground for the first time it was a weird time in America. Our film, *Kaepernick & America* is a snapshot of the times. On one side you have Colin Kaepernick, taking a knee to protest real issues in this country, and on the other side you Donald Trump rising to power and eventually become president.

How can those two things be happening at the same place, at the same time? We thought that was a story worth telling.

Why did we freak out over a simple protest? Is this just who we are now? Is this who we've always been? These are questions about identity. And that's what this film is about. It's about how The United States of America, and Colin Kaepernick are having an identity awakening at the exact same time.

Full Team Bios

Director Tommy Walker

Tommy Walker is an esteemed producer and director of documentary film and television who has devoted his life to stories about race and identity. His most recent film was *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am*, an artful and intimate meditation on the legendary Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning author. He co-directed and produced the feature length theatrical documentary, *God Grew Tired of Us*, which won Best Documentary and the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival. He produced 13 films for *The List* series, including three episodes of *The Black List* for HBO. Other titles include *Mandela in America*, *Tutu and Franklin - A Journey towards Peace*, and *With All Deliberate Speed*.

Director Ross Hockrow

Ross Hockrow is a rising star in the documentary world, bringing his myriad filmmaking skills to a range of projects. *Kaepernick & America* is his latest effort, on which he is credited as director and editor. He has contributed in those roles as well as DP on a range of documentary films including *Born Strong* (Netflix), *Finding Giannis* (TNT), *The Fieldhouse* (2021 Discovery+), *Valley of Sin* (2020 Fox), *Woman of Troy* (2020 HBO), *We Town* (2018 SI/Amazon), *Foreman* (2017 Epix/NBC Universal), *An Act of Love* (2016 Apple) and *Pot Barons of Colorado* (2014 MSNBC). Previously, he wrote, directed and edited a long list of scripted films.

Producer Bill Stephney

Bill Stephney was the first president of Def Jam Recordings (where he helped develop the groundbreaking firm into a multi-billion-dollar, youth lifestyle company) and has also served as CEO for SOUL Records and Stepsun Music. He was a co-founder and producer of the Rock-And-Roll Hall of Famers Public Enemy and has produced singer-actress Vanessa Williams. He has supervised music production for successful films such as *Boomerang*, *Be Be's Kids*, *CB4*, *Clockers* and *Shaft*.

Producer Gary Cohen and Triple Threat TV

Gary Cohen and his company, Triple Threat TV, are Peabody and Emmy Award-winning producers of documentary films, including *Catching Hell* (Tribeca 2011, directed by Alex Gibney); *No Limits* (Tribeca 2013, directed by Alison Ellwood); 11 films for ESPN's 30 for 30 Films, *Requiem for the Big East* (directed by Academy Award-winner Ezra Edelman) and many more.

Producer Matt McDonald has produced all of Triple Threat's 11 films for ESPN's 30 for 30 Film series, winning an Emmy Award in the process. McDonald's mastery of archival research and production makes him an industry leader in producing historical documentaries.

Executive Producer Don Lemon is a CNN News Anchor and a leading voice on Race in America.

Executive Producer John Battsek has won two Oscars for Best Documentary Film: *Searching for Sugarman* (2012) and *One Day in September* (1999).

Kaepernick & America

Production Credits

Directed by

Tommy Walker
Ross Hockrow

Executive Producers

Don Lemon
John Battsek

Produced by

Bill Stephney
Gary Cohen
Matt McDonald

Edited by

Ross Hockrow

Art Directed by

Eric Baldetti

Line Producer

Niki Usbay McDonald

Assistant Editor

Matt Andreana
Shawn Wootten

Post Production Supervisor

Chris Spaide

Director of Photography

Scott Beer

Featuring

Don Lemon
Hue Jackson
April Dinwoodie
Steve Wyche
Nate Boyer
Jim Harbaugh
DeRay Mckesson
Pam Oliver