

ON THE MARK

CARYN CAPOTOSTO DESCRIBES THE JUBILANT AND PAINSTAKING COMMITMENT OF FOLLOWING A STAR ON THE RISE.

INTERVIEW BY LISA Y. GARIBAY

Lil Nas X: Long Live Montero Caryn Capotosto, p.g.a.

In 2019, Lil Nas X exploded into critical and commercial success with his Grammy Award-winning track “Old Town Road.” It was a song that defied boundaries of all kinds, just as its creator continues to do.

The rap-country-pop hybrid reached #19 on *Billboard’s* Hot Country Songs before being disqualified for not fitting in with the musical genre. The disqualification inflamed a debate about

the definition of country music that continues today (reflected in the 2024 Beyoncé album *Cowboy Carter*). Both Lil Nas X’s original version and a remix featuring country star Billy Ray Cyrus reached #1 on *Billboard’s* Hot 100 and remained at the top for a record-breaking 19 consecutive weeks. It’s one of the best-selling singles of all time.

It took another three years for Lil Nas X—whose given name is Montero Lamar Hill—to embark on his first-ever headlining tour. Given his track record of unbridled and unabashed artistic output, the industry at large eagerly

anticipated what the creative dynamo would unveil. Not wanting to pass up the opportunity to capture such a landmark moment, producers at RadicalMedia and Museum & Crane hit the road with the artist during the 2022–23 tour. The result is a documentary that offers intimate access to Hill/Lil Nas X as he navigates even greater fame, criticism, self-growth, and impact as a beacon of Black queerness and societal change.

Leading the production was three-time Emmy winner Caryn Capotosto, founder of Museum & Crane. Her credits include the critically acclaimed documentaries



A still from
the film *Lil
Nas X: Long
Live Montero*.

Little Richard: I Am Everything, Feels Good Man, Best of Enemies, 20 Feet from Stardom and *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, which received a 2019 PGA Award.

Capotosto received the Producers Mark alongside RadicalMedia's Dave Sirulnik, who has his own trailblazing background in music documentaries. Here, Capotosto describes how she and Sirulnik pooled their wealth of experience to help create a film honoring the imagination and humanity of its star.

WHEN AND HOW DID YOU COME ON BOARD THE PROJECT?

In early 2022 I was doing some documentary development consulting with Sony Music Entertainment. Soon after, I received a dream call from them saying that Lil Nas X was starting rehearsals the following week for his first-ever tour and that they were interested in documenting it. Within days I was speaking with his management and creative team and had pulled together a small doc crew to film a week of rehearsals.

Two weeks later we were flying to Detroit to capture his first-ever headlining show. From there we went on tour with unbelievable access to capture it all. Everything happened very quickly, and I knew I needed a small but mighty team.

My first call was to Zac Manuel, whose cinematography style I loved. We knew we wanted the film to feel intimate and reveal a side of Montero that many people had not seen. Zac assumed the role of a DP/director on the film. Meanwhile, the larger infrastructure of the project was being formed as we joined forces with Radical Media, with Dave Sirulnick joining me as producer.

The final piece of the puzzle was bringing Carlos Lopez Estrada onto the team to codirect with Zac. Carlos was involved from the earliest stages of planning Lil Nas X's tour show, which had narrative and biographical elements of Montero's story baked into the performance, so we knew that telling his story would involve weaving elements from the live concert and

the documentary elements we were capturing behind the scenes.

The project was a unique collaboration propelled by a lot of trust, and I think that our filmmaking process shines through on the screen in a wonderful way.

SOME OF YOUR PREVIOUS FILMS SHARE SIMILARITIES WITH THIS ONE IN TERMS OF SUBJECT AND THEME—NAMESLY, MUSIC AND MUSICAL CREATORS. WHAT MAKES THIS FILM DIFFERENT FROM PRIOR MUSICAL PROJECTS YOU PRODUCED LIKE *20 FEET FROM STARDOM*, *LITTLE RICHARD: I AM EVERYTHING*, AND *FILMAGE: THE STORY OF DESCENDENTS/ALL*?

The beauty of this project for me was the challenge of making a doc about an artist at the beginning of his journey versus a story about an artist with a long history to draw from. Most of the music docs I have worked on are largely archival and tell stories connecting the dots of history to our current moment, whereas on this project we were documenting an unfolding, an artist at a pivotal moment stepping into the unknown.

Being along for that ride and watching it unfold was thrilling in a different way, and it was fun to allow the story to be written as it was happening in front of our cameras.

WAS LIL NAS X'S LABEL INVOLVED IN THE DEVELOPMENT, PRODUCTION AND/OR DISTRIBUTION PROCESS? IF SO, HOW DID YOU WORK WITH THEM?

Lil Nas X's label (Columbia Records) and Sony Music were partners on the film. They recognized as they were planning the tour that this was a pivotal moment in Lil Nas X's life and career and that it needed to be documented in a signifi-

Caryn Capotosto (right) with the film's codirector Zac Manuel during the tour.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HBO (LEFT) AND CARYN CAPOTOSTO (RIGHT)



Behind the scenes
on *Lil Nas X: Long
Live Montero*.

cant way beyond the scope of a typical concert film.

The label and management worked closely with Montero on creating a stage show that included narrative and autobiographical elements, which became a jumping-off point for our approach to crafting a documentary that included the tour as a spine but transcended it to allow audiences and fans to get to know Montero in a new way.

Working with his team was a fantastic experience. They were incredibly accommodating to our constant requests for things like archival photos and videos and they allowed us unrestricted access behind the scenes of the tour, both on-stage and backstage. They made sure that we had the time we needed with Montero to build trust and capture some quiet moments with him.

His team was hands-on at every stage of the filmmaking process, from development to production to sales and distribution conversations. We all worked together to handle the various aspects of financing, conceptualizing, crafting and bringing the film into being. Everyone brought enthusiasm, good energy and a shared sense that we were creating something special that would be a snapshot of a moment that Montero would look back on as his star continues to rise and he continues to grow as an artist and a person.

LIL NAS X SEEMS LIKE SUCH A HANDS-ON AND CAREFUL CURATOR OF HIS IMAGE, VISION, AND THE WAY THAT IT IS REPRESENTED—FROM

TIKTOK TO MUSIC VIDEOS TO FASHION TO LIVE SHOWS. HOW MUCH INPUT DID HE HAVE IN TERMS OF WHAT YOU WERE ALLOWED TO SHOOT AND WHAT MADE THE FINAL CUT?

Montero approached the documentary process in a delightful way—with curiosity, thoughtfulness and playfulness. He opened up to us from the first day of rehearsals and allowed us to capture moments as they were preparing for tour that were undoubtedly very stressful. He took the whole process in stride and set a tone of calm, honesty and vulnerability that I believe permeated the moments we captured with him.

His sense of humor also shined through from the first moments, and it became clear early on that he was on board with revealing more of himself to the world. During the tour we had unfettered access, and he never shied away from the cameras capturing the dramatic moments—even filming him while he was puking backstage. He was game for almost anything. When we asked him to drive to Santa Cruz to walk around a butterfly sanctuary and manifest what would become one of the closing scenes of the film, he rolled with it.

He gave directors Zac and Carlos creative freedom, and at certain points in the process weighed in with his own ideas that could elevate the storytelling, visuals and music. A great example of that is the stylistic scenes with “young Montero.” Our final shoot of the project was to film the young actor Maximus Turner embodying the spirit of a young Montero and weaving into the film some of the fantastical video elements



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HBO



from the stage show that represent transformation and becoming. Lil Nas X was hands-on for this shoot, coming to set and ideating with Zac and Carlos for this final imaginative piece of the film.

In terms of what made the final cut, we shared rough cuts with Montero and his management, and everyone provided sensible notes and valuable input that elevated the film until everyone agreed it was ready for the world.

DESPITE YOUR EXPERTISE IN PRODUCING DOCUMENTARIES, DID YOU COME UP AGAINST ANY CHALLENGES THAT WERE DIFFERENT FROM COMPLICATIONS YOU’VE TACKLED IN THE PAST? HOW DID YOUR PAST EXPERIENCES WITH DOCS AND MUSICIANS HELP YOU NAVIGATE AND ELEVATE THE PROJECT?

We were very lucky on this film to have such solid support from Lil Nas X’s management and creative team. They helped us with access at every turn, from getting quiet time with Montero to connecting us with his family, dancers, choreographers and musical collaborators.

The biggest challenge on docs with music superstars is a logistical one with film crews—making sure that we are working with a team that understands we might be on “Montero time” and that when the artist is ready for us, that’s when we need to shoot. Having flexibility and a positive attitude were critical, along with a deep love and respect for music.

WAS THERE A SPECIFIC OBSTACLE THAT YOU’RE PROUD OF HELPING THE PROJECT OVERCOME IN A UNIQUE OR UNIQUELY PERSISTENT WAY?

In many ways, the project was two films in one. On the one hand, we wanted to make a film that felt intimate and behind the curtain, getting to know Montero in a personal way. On the other, we simultaneously wanted to capture the spectacle and the monumental moment that Lil Nas X was having on his first world tour. The challenge was weaving the two elements to feel seamless.

Our approach to that was to divide and conquer the production aspects, with my team capturing the “scrappier” (yet beautiful!) doc-style material and Dave’s team capturing the monumental show elements and weaving the layers together in edit. The main obstacle was making sure that both teams were in constant communication on ways to ensure that the elements we were capturing would fit together stylistically later. Zac and Carlos navigated this beautifully to find creative ways to bridge both worlds.

The mechanism of both approaches came together in one wild shoot at the Los Angeles concert, when we filmed both the 10-camera multi-cam of the live concert *and* the spiciest backstage antics with celebrity guests like Saucy Santana, and a hometown crowd. Seeing it all come together in the edit was a thrill.

YOU AND DAVE SIRULNIK BOTH RECEIVED THE PRODUCERS MARK FOR THIS FILM. HOW DID YOU DIVVY UP RESPONSIBILITIES? WHAT SPECIFIC STRENGTHS DID YOU EACH LEND?

While we each had distinct roles with the aspects of the film we were individually producing, we always felt a part of the same team with one cohesive film in mind. I was most involved in the earlier stages—getting production off the ground and managing the team that went on tour. Dave picked it up to capture the main performance footage and oversaw the edit and post. But from the earliest stage to the final stages, we all came together to make sure we were all heading in the same direction creatively.

Dave played a huge role—working closely with Zac and Carlos—in guiding the weaving of all the elements, shaping the elements we delivered to them, and filtering the feedback that was coming in from various teams. My biggest strength was the ability to mobilize a stellar team quickly and nimbly to ensure we would not miss any magic moments, and the ability to operate a small team at a high level, making sure we were welcomed into the fray while remaining somewhat inconspicuous while doing what we needed to do.

It was a wonderful experience working with Dave and RadicalMedia. They are consummate pros and incredibly lovely people. The best experiences in production happen when everyone on the team respects one another, trusts each other to deliver their best, and are flexible and willing to try new approaches and allow the possibilities to unfold.

WHAT IS ONE THING THAT THIS PRODUCTION TAUGHT YOU THAT WILL INFORM YOUR WORK AS A PRODUCER IN THE FUTURE?

I really enjoyed the process of working with a young artist earlier in his journey. I found that there is much joy in the discovery of the story as it is happening as opposed to recontextualizing historical stories.

I love both types of docs, but after this project, I look forward to more stories that can be followed now—more verité doc making. One project I am working on now bridges both types of stories, so I am excited to dive into it. It's a documentary about the jazz and disco icon Asha Puthli.

WHAT ABOUT *LONG LIVE MONTERO* ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

One special moment that happened with this film actually began on the film I produced just prior to this—*Little Richard: I Am Everything*. In our discussions about Little Richard's legacy and young artists of today who seem to be inspired in many ways by his musical patrimony, we spoke a lot about Lil Nas X before I began work on *Long Live Montero*.

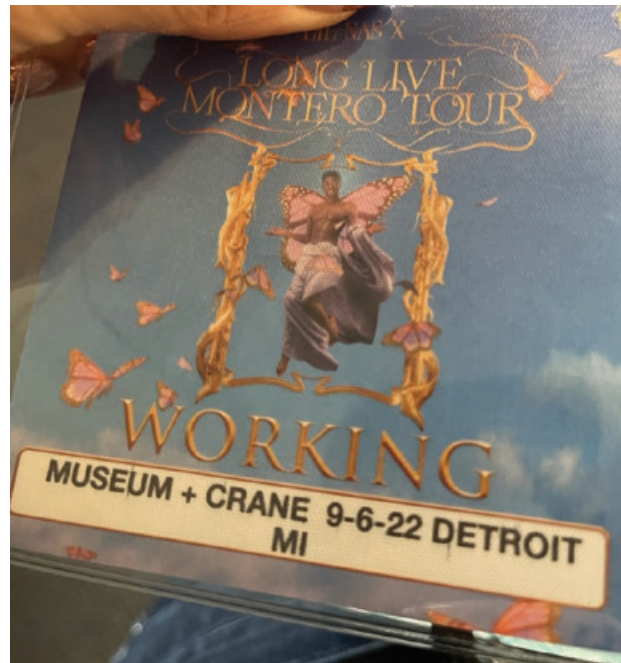


PHOTO COURTESY OF CARYN CARPOTOSTO

At one point we requested an interview with Lil Nas X, and at another point, we sent him the Little Richard film in hopes that he would watch it. But I always thought he never watched it.

Fast forward to our final interview with Montero. Unprompted and out of the blue, he started talking about Little Richard and his legacy, connecting his own dots to the complicated journeys of other Black, queer artists and reflecting on his own place in this history and the unique role he plays in inspiring change for his generation. I swooned!

Later in the edit, the only archival clip that made its way into *Long Live Montero* was Little Richard saying, "The love, the gentleness, the tenderness, the kindness. You ain't supposed to hide nothin.' You got it, God gave it, show it to the world." I'm extremely proud of both films and that they nod to each other in such a special way is quite wonderful. ■

Certification via the Producers Mark (represented by p.g.a.) indicates that a producer performed a major portion of the producing functions in a decision-making capacity on a specific project. Criteria, its definition, the process for earning the mark and other particulars can be viewed at producersguildawards.com.