

34lukefilms presents
in association with Sundance Channel

a summer in the cage



a new documentary film by Ben Selkow

documentary feature | usa | 2007 | 82 minutes | English

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a summer in the cage | documentary feature | 2007
www.cagethemovie.com

[critical response]

"I highly recommend *A Summer in the Cage*. It is an extraordinary film: powerful, affecting and honest."

-Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison, Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University
Author of *An Unquiet Mind* and *Touched with Fire*

"*A Summer in the Cage* is an exceptional and deeply humanizing look at bipolar disorder. The result is a haunting film about the power and the limits of a friendship to save a good man from his inner demons."

-Tim Dickinson, National Affairs Contributing Editor
Rolling Stone

"Quite frankly, one of the most powerful documentaries that I have seen. I do not know of any other filmmaker who has captured the roller coaster of ordinary life that a person with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder experiences."

-Pete Earley, Parent of Bipolar Patient, Journalist and Author
CRAZY: A Father's Search Through America's Mental Health Madness

"This beautifully shot, six-year odyssey is profound and sincere...the result is a haunting and riveting personal tale of a descent into mental illness."

-Sam Mettler, Creator and Executive Producer
A&E's Intervention

"The filmmakers brilliantly and accurately portray the insidiousness of this invisible illness. The pain of the illness in the film brought me back to a place I never wanted to return. But it's a place that people need to see to better understand this illness which is still so stigmatized."

-Andy Behrman, Bipolar Patient and Author
Electroboy: A Memoir of Mania

[logline/synopsis]

Logline:

A Summer in the Cage follows the friendship and eventual explosive downfall of a documentary filmmaker and his embattled subject who is diagnosed with manic-depressive illness.

Synopsis:

A Summer in the Cage is filmmaker Ben Selkow's feature-length documentary chronicling his friend Sam's battle with manic-depressive illness, also known as bipolar disorder. The film follows Sam for seven years as he suffers delusional manic episodes, battles paralyzing depressions, and tries to escape the legacy of his bipolar father who committed suicide when Sam was eight years old. The film features interviews with renowned Johns Hopkins University author and clinician Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison; who is also bipolar. Through intimate footage of Sam, Ben and Sam's mother Sharon, *A Summer in the Cage* shows the difficult emotional impact of being bipolar on Sam, his family, all those who care about him and the filmmaker. *A Summer in the Cage* hopes to put a human face on an illness that affects millions of families. But as this dramatic story unfolds and heads to an explosive standoff, it also becomes a unique tale about friendship and the ethical responsibilities of a documentary filmmaker.

[the story]

A Summer in the Cage is a feature-length documentary about Sam Murchison's battle with manic-depressive illness--a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in a person's mood, energy, and ability to function marked by manic highs and depressive lows, also known as bipolar disorder. The film begins before Sam's diagnosis with bipolar disorder and follows him through his seven-year battle to repair the damage of delusional manic episodes, overcome paralyzing depressions, and escape the legacy of a bipolar father who committed suicide when Sam was eight. During the seven years of documenting this story, a tenuous triangle forms between Sam, the filmmaker, Ben Selkow, and the filmmaking process itself. Sam and Ben's relationship is brought to a dramatic precipice by Sam's cycle of manic episodes and a light is eventually cast on the ethical responsibilities of the filmmaker to his subject. While Sam's life deteriorates on screen, the question is asked: "Are the wider benefits of showing an audience someone's plight worthwhile if the very process of making the documentary may be damaging the subject?"

A Summer in the Cage began with a chance meeting between the filmmaker, Ben Selkow, and the subject, Sam Murchison, in the summer of 2000. What began as their collaboration to document life on and around the West 4th Street basketball courts in Manhattan – affectionately referred to as “the Cage” – evolved into a portrait of Sam's battle with bipolar illness as seen through the lens of Ben's camera. Using interviews and personal video diaries shot, as well as archival video and film footage from the last six years, *A Summer in the Cage* is highly subjective storytelling. The film begins by depicting the seeds of the original street basketball story, with Sam as collaborator and his photographs as the storytelling device. But once Ben (and, by extension, the audience) witnesses Sam's increasingly manic behavior, caught by accident on video, the film transforms into the story of Sam's illness. The film subsequently follows Sam over seven years as he lives with this disease, retraces his father's battle with mental illness and his ultimate suicide, develops an intimate confidence with Ben through their periods of filming together, flirts with suicide himself, and tries to come to terms with the uncertainty of his future. The filmmaker-subject relationship explodes in 2006 with Sam's third manic episode. Ultimately, the film asks the question, ***When do you turn off the camera?***

[filmmaker's statement]

I came to filmmaking after double-majoring in Film and African-American Studies at Wesleyan University. After college, I worked for two years on studio feature films. While I observed the collaboration between director, actors, writers and producers from a distance, I was not happy being so removed from the collaborators. I needed to be intimately involved with the storytelling process. I bought a video camera and headed down to “the Cage” on West 4th street in Greenwich Village to make a film about three generations of street basketball players. The film, and my relationship with my subjects, was derailed by my new friend Sam Murchison’s first manic episode. Initially, I was reluctant to switch subjects even with my original film in shambles. I couldn’t turn away from Sam as the subject; and he initially invited me to make a film about him. But, what was supposed to be *one* summer in the Cage has since become seven years chronicling my friend’s battle with manic-depression. It was a constant emotional and creative battle: a struggle to reconcile my responsibility to my friend with my desire to tell a gripping story. I tried to help Sam. Yet I believed, perhaps naively, that resolving the film would somehow create a happy, Hollywood-style ending for Sam. He seemed to believe this as well. Sam wanted to be a model for others afflicted with mental illness, and shouldered a tremendous burden in trying to play that role. His sense of obligation may, in part, have contributed to his re-occurring manic episodes, and it’s a burden he and I share. In 2002, before I really understood the disease, there were times when I kept filming and perhaps it contributed to his feelings of manic grandiosity. But, I was torn. The dogma of the documentary filmmaker is to never stop rolling camera. As Sam’s mania became dangerously apparent, I knew I needed to help Sam and put the camera down. When I recount the plane ride in 2002, undoubtedly my colleagues ask, *Did you film it?* As a friend, you know putting the camera down was the right thing to do. As a filmmaker, you grit your teeth at having turned away and missed something powerful, unique and dramatic. In the most recent mania in 2006, Sam shifted the blame to the filmmaking process and me for his paralysis in recovery. I think Sam’s struggle with accepting psycho-education, therapy and full compliance in taking his medications had more to do with his slow maintenance process than the stress from the filming. But that is such subjective ground and ripe for debate. Ultimately, I decided to stop filming Sam entirely because I wanted to remove the filmmaking as a possible scapegoat, variable and barrier to Sam’s healing. I want Sam to strike the balance of striving, being responsible in managing bipolar disorder, making art, and being independent. Like the ending of the film, the battle with the disease is an ellipse...

I hope audiences that see *A Summer in the Cage* will take away a better understanding of the symptoms and manifestations of manic-depressive illness. I also hope that by witnessing one person’s battle with manic-depressive illness, the audience will appreciate the patience, compassion and action necessary to help someone suffering from a mental illness. As a filmmaker, I want audiences to understand the inherent duty, respect and responsibility we ought to feel for our subjects whenever we pick up a camera.

[about sam]

I met Sam in May of 2000 on one of my first days filming at the legendary New York City street basketball court called “the Cage”. I was getting my feet wet, building relationships, and looking for a good story to tell in my first documentary effort. When I first saw Sam, he was showing his photos to some of the other players at the court. They were thrilled to see themselves captured in his brilliant photos. Sam then tucked his photos away and played pick-up with the guys. He was talented (he had played Division-I basketball at Long Beach State), physical (6’7” and 235 pounds), and had enough cachet with the players to argue calls and stand up for himself. To me, he seemed like a gifted artist who was completely comfortable on the basketball court as well. I decided to interview him. It turned out that he was about to turn 30 and had quit his finance job that very day. He recalled looking at his computer screen that morning for a final time and saying, “not today, not tomorrow, not ever again,” before standing up from his desk and announcing his resignation. At the time, it all sounded courageous as he was now going to pursue his passion for photography and sports broadcasting fulltime.

As I continued to get to know Sam, I realized that we had a lot in common. We both came from liberal, hippie backgrounds and were raised by single mothers; he was from the East Bay in California. We both had open minds and were fired up by socio-political injustices. Most importantly, we both had creative ambitions and a love of basketball. Sam eventually said he wanted to help me make my documentary on the Cage. He had great photos of the court and established relationships with many of the players there, so I took him on as a junior partner. He began working on the film all hours of the day with a boundless energy and a robust ego. Only later would I realize that his unyielding energy and ego were also classic signs of ramping mania.

Weeks later, Sam had his first mental breakdown followed by an extended hospitalization. While in the hospital, he was diagnosed for the first time with bipolar disorder. Sam’s mother, Sharon, and older sister, Shelley, flew to New York from California to help him. I later learned that Sam’s father had also battled bipolar disorder until he killed himself in 1979 by stepping in front of a tractor-trailer on a Texas highway, unmedicated and destitute, when Sam was 8 years old. Sharon had dutifully watched her children for signs of this hereditary disease, and was devastated to learn that the disease had afflicted her son at such a late age. Both she and Shelley swore to not let Sam go through the affliction alone.

After Sam’s first manic episode in New York in 2000, he moved back to Oakland, CA to live closer to his family and try to create a new life for himself with his bipolar disorder his life back on track. In 2001, supported by his mom and sister, he moved to Los Angeles to be closer to friends and to try to get his photography career on track. Sam found some limited success shooting music videos and film productions stills, but the hustle and management of an emerging freelance career overwhelmed him. He was unable to find gainful employment but he continued to take still photos. These photos reflect the haunting loneliness he was

experiencing at this period of his life: stills of female mannequins, abandoned objects, the Santa Monica piers and jungle gyms at transitional times of day. But debt from school loans, hospital bills, rent, and other living expense continued to grow with no job prospects arising and Sam's compliance regiment being marginal. It was during this time period, Sam attempted suicide by trying to overdose on sleeping pills and vodka.

In 2005, Sam moved back to Oakland, CA to take a job, teaching high school math through the Oakland Teaching Fellows. Sam resigned after the first day.

While Sam struggled to make a new life for himself in northern California, he could never escape the grasp of his disease. Huge manias came in the spring and summer (often caused by Sam taking himself off of his medications) and almost always resulted in hospitalizations and massive sedations. The "zombifying" effects of heavy sedatives and anti-psychotics followed these periods. In the spring of 2007, Sam had his fourth and arguably largest manic episode that required a three-week stay in a psychiatric facility in Oakland.

Sam has since been released and is slowly easing back into life. With the advice of social workers, Sam's family is trying to take a "tougher love" stance with him to see if it will spark him to be more independent taking care of his disease. Though deeply afflicted by this hereditary disease, Sam is lucky to have the support of his family and friends. Sam's mother, Sharon, and sister, Shelley, are also completely heroic in their unflinching dedication to helping and supporting him. I am humbled by their efforts in duty and love.

Sam and I continue to talk and email regularly. I feel a strong, inextricable bond to him. In many ways, I know him as well as anyone, but only because he chose to trust me. That trust enabled us to make this film. Despite the happy ending we wanted eluding us, Sam is courageous to participate in this film so that others can learn about his devastating disease. Currently, he talks about the baby steps needed for recovery and independence. Sometimes, though he knows it makes everyone nervous, he entertains thoughts about exhibiting his photographs, developing a website and making art. I take it as a very good sign that he can think about the future, to try and conceive it. The traumas, losses and grief of his past have paralyzed him for so long. We always hope this is the time he gets it and takes the next step to realize the person we see him to be.

[filmmakers]

Ben Selkow, Director/Producer/Cinematographer/Writer

Ben Selkow recently was honored as one of 50 Non-Fiction Filmmakers at the Current TV/Fader Films Symposium "A Day of Dialogue and the Future of Non-Fiction Film" on November 6, 2007 featuring keynote speaker former Vice President Nobel Prize honoree, Academy Award winner and Current TV founder Al Gore, as well as luminary filmmakers Barbara Kopple, Albert Maysles, Alex Gibney, and Marc Levin.

Selkow is the director/producer/director of photography/writer of *A Summer in the Cage*. A feature-length documentary about bipolar disorder, for cable release on Sundance Channel in October 2007, an educational/institutional outreach campaign and ancillary home video distribution with Indiepix. The film was nominated for a 2008 Prism Bipolar Disorder Depiction Award. He also is the Producer of *Onward Christian Soldier*, a feature-length documentary film about fugitive bomber and domestic terrorist Eric Robert Rudolph for director Jim Chambers' Field Hands Productions based in New York City. The film is intended for theatrical, cable and DVD release in 2008. Along with running Field Hands Productions, Ben oversees all phases of pre-production, production (shooting with cinematographer Maryse Alberti) and post-production with editor Susanne Rostock for *Onward Christian Soldier*. In 2003, Ben was a participant in the annual Sundance Producer's Conference at the Sundance Institute in Utah. Before producing at Field Hands, he associate produced for Fox Sports Net's *Beyond the Glory* (2000-2001). Ben also was a field producer/camera operator for a series of street basketball DVD's entitled *Straight from the Streets* (2000). He began his filmwork experience as a production assistant and assistant director on feature films such as *Meet the Parents* (2000), *What Lies Beneath* (2000), *Center Stage* (2000) and *Random Hearts* (1999), television shows such as *Sex in the City* and *The Sopranos*. Ben began his film career interning at Tribeca Productions and Warner Brothers' story development departments.

Ben first became interested in film after seeing his mother, a psychologist, being featured in the National Film Board of Canada documentary *L'Interdit* (1976), about an alternative commune for treating schizophrenics in Canada. He is a screenwriter, an avid photographer, traveler, and basketball player. Ben is a member of the Independent Film Project (IFP) the International Documentary Association (IDA), as well as being fiscally sponsored by the IDA. Ben was born in Montréal, Canada and is a dual-citizen. He holds Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Film Studies and African-American Studies from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut where he received the W.E.B. DuBois Academic Award for Overall Excellence. He received a certificate from the School for International Training in Tanzania, East Africa. He resides in New York City.

Currently, Selkow is shooting a new feature documentary on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder entitled *Buried Above Ground*.

John Mims, Editor/Writer

Currently, John Mims is editing a feature-length documentary entitled *32 hours, 7 minutes*, directed by Cory Gravid about the legacy of the U.S. Express – once known as the “Cannonball Run” – and specifically of Alex Roy, one of the best of the current generation of outlaw drivers, as he sets out to break the record time set on the last such illegal race nearly a quarter century ago. Mims was the editor and co-writer for Ben Selkow’s *A Summer in the Cage*, which aired on Sundance Channel in 2007.

Prior to these films, Mims edited two other feature documentaries: *The Voyagers*, a profile of Brooklyn-based artist Ward Shelley and his walking sculpture project; and *Slammed From the Street*, a showcase of urban league basketball highlights and profiles of its dominant players. He has also edited several other programs including: *ThinkNOW*, an experimental short examining the effects of commerce on the psyche and an hour segment for *Beyond the Glory* on Fox Sports Net and Hock Films.

John is currently the senior editor at UNICEF Television, and has worked with the organization since 1998, producing and editing numerous PSA’s, short features and news reports. Before becoming an editor, John was a fine arts painter, holding a B.A. in Art from University of California-Berkeley. He resides in Brooklyn.

[film credits]

**director/producer/camera
editor
writers
composer
executive producer
associate producer**

Ben Selkow
John Mims
John Mims and Ben Selkow
Hajo Carl
Paola Freccero
Joedan Okun

still photography

Sam Murchison

usa cable distributor

Sundance Channel

foreign sales distributor

re:think Entertainment

home video distributor

Indiepix

fiscal sponsor

International Documentary
Association (IDA)

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