



# BLOODY NOSE, EMPTY POCKETS

A film by Bill and Turner Ross



**\*\*WORLD PREMIERE – U.S. DOCUMENTARY COMPETITION - 2020 SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL\*\***

**\*\*INTERNATIONAL PREMIERE - PANORAMA - 2020 BERLIN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL\*\***

## **Sales Contacts**

Jason Ishikawa, CINETIC - [jason@cineticmedia.com](mailto:jason@cineticmedia.com)

Alexis Galfas, CINETIC - [alexisg@cineticmedia.com](mailto:alexisg@cineticmedia.com)

## **Press Contacts US**

Ryan Werner, CINETIC Marketing - [ryan@cineticmedia.com](mailto:ryan@cineticmedia.com)

Rachel Allen, CINETIC Marketing - [rachel@cineticmedia.com](mailto:rachel@cineticmedia.com)

## **International and German Press in Berlin**

Claudia Tomassini, claudiatomassini + associates - [claudia@claudiatomassini.com](mailto:claudia@claudiatomassini.com)

## **SYNOPSIS**

In the shadows of the bright lights of Las Vegas, it's last call for a beloved dive bar known as the Roaring 20s. That's the premise, at least; the reality is as unreal as the world the regulars are escaping from. *Bloody Nose, Empty Pockets* is a mosaic of disparate lives, teetering between dignity and debauchery, reckoning with the past as they face an uncertain future, and singing as their ship goes down.

Filmmaking duo Bill and Turner Ross (*Western*, 2015 Sundance Film Festival) return with an elegiac portrait of a tiny world fading away but still warm and beating with the comfort of community. Their beguiling approach to nonfiction storytelling makes for a foggy memory of experience lost in empty shot glasses and puffs of smoke.

## A DISCUSSION WITH BILL AND TURNER ROSS

Moderated by Museum of the Moving Image Curator Eric Hynes

**Traveling the world as documentary filmmakers, I imagine you've spent a fair amount of time over the years in bars. Is this something that you had long thought of making?**

**Bill Ross:** Around the time of *45365*, we were living in LA, and we would drive through Vegas for a variety of reasons. The outskirts were always what fascinated us. Since then we dreamed of making a film in that area, where people are either trying to break in or falling out—living in this purgatory. You're in the desert, you're in this fake city, but you're in the realest part of the fake city. There were all these big ideas, which were rich for exploring. We wanted to make a kitchen-sink film, where we could just throw all these ideas within these four walls.

**Turner Ross:** So in 2009 we took a scouting trip there and did two days of filming. The little color pieces in between scenes—a lot of it was shot in 2009. So we were doing location and character studies, and just figuring it out. At that time, with the recession, whole neighborhoods that had been developed were going under, people were living out of motel rooms, the effluent outside of a fantasy land. We originally had a much more direct approach in thinking about it, like, "Okay, we're just gonna set up shop here and we're gonna find what this world has to tell us." Then we got into other movies, but it always sat with us—we were always collecting notes, collecting ideas. After making *Contemporary Color*, another film within four walls filmed over multiple nights with inserted characters, we finally arrived back at it, through this idea of a bar film. A film that exists in a common, shared space.

**How did the bar idea come into it?**

**TR:** When I was nine years old, my aunt was living in New York and she took me to go see *The Iceman Cometh* on Broadway. For a nine-year-old kid, that's an adult dose. It's a four-and-a-half-hour stage play about drunks in a bar, and what always stuck with me was the idea of people with dreams, of people with stories, who all find one another. Why do they choose this space, this space of shared solace, and what does it mean? So we took it to the Vegas idea, which is these lives lived in the shadows of the bright lights. Why are these people choosing to hole away from the brightness? What stories did they bring? We arrived at a scenario that we wanted to create: a space and a dynamic situation in which people could be themselves and truly express themselves. To see what kind of things would come out of a dynamic, prescribed environment.

### **How did you arrive at the space where you shot the film?**

**BR:** We had scouted all these bars on the outskirts of Vegas thinking that we would just set up shop and film there, but we quickly realized that it really wasn't possible. Either the bar aesthetically looked correct and the people inside it weren't, or you'd find a bar where maybe a couple of people worked, but the bar wasn't right. Nothing really clicked or matched up. And beyond that, it was like, how are we going to get down to what we wanna get down to?

**TR:** The reality of a bar is not as profound as the moments that are remembered from the experiences therein. From these bars in Vegas we were learning the look, we were learning the characters, and saw how all these bars had a common theme, which was that the people were from everywhere, in some sort of transition—a thrown-together group of people who came from many different places. Yet a lot of the bar spaces were extremely generically Vegas, like you were going to a Vegas-themed bar. What we needed was a lived-in space that is basically a universal space. It could be anywhere, but it is certainly Vegas. The framing was more important than the actuality. In *The Iceman Cometh*, Eugene O'Neill is speaking many great truths, but you're in a theater somewhere in the world, you are not on the Bowery. Yet you imagine you are on the Bowery, and that setting is important. What is most important is these peoples' stories and the reasons why they're there, and why they choose to stay there.

### **When and why did you decide to shoot in New Orleans? What did it afford you?**

**TR:** Afford is a good word. That's an actual answer, because in terms of budget, we didn't have one. There's this incredible bar down here in New Orleans, a hidden gem in one of the outlying communities that just had that quintessential womb-like old outskirts of Vegas feel that very few places even have anymore, because everything is being gentrified and turned either into a kitschy version of itself or a cosmopolitan upgrade. And we could afford it and we could have complete control over this space. We did the shoot there in three days. There was a preliminary, around the bar shoot with the kids, and then there was an 18 hour two camera non-stop shoot which was the primary shoot. There was a follow-up shoot a few days later that riffed on what had happened within that time frame and then we took a few weeks to distill what had happened and let it spill out into Vegas when we took the crew to Vegas, most of which didn't make it into the final film. We were still enamored with Vegas, and the film is evocative of it, but in the end the film isn't about Vegas, or about what comes before and after. It's about them arriving and departing, and what happens within the space.

**The space is heavily mirrored, and there's obviously not a lot of room in there. You don't go out of your way to prevent one camera from noticing the other. You allow yourselves to be part of the scene, in a way.**

**TR:** We decided before we shot that we were not going to avoid each other and that that was part of the deal. Editorially we could have tried to skirt around it, but in terms of shooting we didn't avoid it at all. We didn't want to have conversations where people would feel like they've been hoodwinked, which is antithetical to what we're doing. What we're doing is trying to create a very sincere experience in which we acknowledge that we're there and we're part of this experience and not being shy about that.

**Your films have always been about community and communities of people, digging into and having a community show itself to you. What's different about this is that the nature of the community, much like the nature of a bar, is its transience. How do you actually feel a sense of intimacy in a transient space like this, and how do you represent it on film?**

**TR:** That's why we chose to compose this in the way that we did, so that we could have an intimacy, so that these people could feel a sense of place and feel safe within it. While it does read as a community in the film, most of these people didn't know each other until the day we filmed. So it was an extraordinary experiment to see if that would work. And then when on the second day of filming, when one of our older guys is actually crying because he has to leave the bar, we realized that community is what you choose to declare. Obviously it's a huge component of what we were after—exploring why we choose these spaces of shared solace. Some people find that in churches, or in sports. Wherever you can go to lose yourself and to be yourself and be whoever you wanna be if only for a moment, and you check in and check out, you clock in and clock out of these spaces. Like, why do you go into an airport bar and start telling your life story to a perfect stranger who's on a flight to Detroit? It's a fascinating scenario.

**Let's talk a little bit about who these people are, where you found them.**

**BR:** It's a collection of people that we met throughout our lives, as well as a lot of bar casting. We went around to I don't know how many bars here in New Orleans.

**TR:** We did a dozen casting sessions. We just sat and talked to people and we got about half the bar through that.

**BR:** One of the first people I thought of was this guy I had seen in a play here in New Orleans. It was another Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. The guy that played the father was this struggling local actor, someone who's good but maybe not great, someone who didn't quite make it. I could imagine him in this bar, so that's Michael, and he was really our glue throughout the entire shoot. He was our guy, our inside man.

**TR:** Michael's character is inspired by Michael Jeter from the musical *Grand Hotel*. Hopelessly at the end of his rope and this is gonna be his last great hurrah. We had been looking for this. But then, as with all of our movies, there was a breakdown of archetypes. Who fills out a community, who fills out a bar? And a lot of that was based on notes we had taken in our trips to bars on the outskirts of Vegas. And watching *Cheers*. What are all those characters actually doing? Who do you put behind the bar, who is the wingman to this person, and who's just sort of hanging in the background? And then these people start to fill in the space. In a couple of instances, we cast a really strong character, and just asked, "Who's your best drinking buddy?" And a few of them are.

**How did you go about creating a space in which these relative strangers could relate to one another and be themselves?**

**TR:** First of all, we actually dressed a bar to be what we wanted it to be. But we also choreographed the space. At 3 o'clock in the afternoon, *Jeopardy* comes on. I imagine everybody's gonna turn to watch *Jeopardy*, and yes, they do, and what will they say during it? Or the music, or who's coming [into the bar] when, and why. We were trying to elicit these dynamic reactions. The characters were unaware - the choreography was hidden and the set was closed. So they're walking into a space just as if they were walking into a bar and they know nothing else, and what happens on the TV happens on the TV.

We created this framework, these interjections of stimuli to try to provoke these interactions, to try to create scenarios that we knew could be dynamic. And then as it builds, we started introducing new characters, two people then tell their story to a third. Three people are then the regulars. It becomes four, it becomes five, six, and seven arrive together. And all of a sudden they have all of these stories and they have their positions and they have a history, even if it's brief. And so as we got further into it, these people take ownership of the space. And it becomes their role that they're creating.

**I would imagine that not everything happened as you expected or wanted it to. Particularly during that main 18-hour shoot—how did it go down?**

**TR:** It was control and chaos. Bill and I had different roles. We had a checklist of things we wanted—entrances, exits, images that should be happening at that time of day, what's the music and on television. There was a five-point checklist for every 15 minutes.

**BR:** Knowing full well that it would go off the rails. But we wanted to have a structure.

**TR:** I was in charge of maintaining that and Bill was in charge of finding whatever was naturally happening. Some things went out the window, some things were added impromptu. But we knew that if we wanted certain continuity things and story trajectories, we had to bear them in mind over the course of that shoot. Some things became far more profound than we ever could have anticipated, and some things were dead on arrival. It's wild to look back on intentions that we had, because so much of it does manifest itself. But the greatest and the most enduring parts of the film are the things that happened through serendipity, these true emotional interactions between these human beings that we couldn't anticipate. Veterans weeping together. An old man telling a young man to get out. A young man telling an older man that his generation has failed him. These are honest interactions.

**BR:** I think it worked because our casting was good. We cast people whose emotions are close to the surface, and didn't have any problem just being who they are, and people who were no strangers to sitting at a bar for a long period of time. It was familiar, and after a while it didn't much matter to anybody that Turner and I were there.

**Did they need any encouragement to utilize the space in ways you'd envisioned?**

**BR:** [Laughs.] No. And that's what made editing so fucking hard. You cut from one end of the bar to the other. The person that was in the scene that you just cut from is now over in the background of the other. We tried to manage it so that we didn't have any music so that we could have clear dialogue, but at a certain point there was a mutiny and they just took over - they were like, "This ain't a bar without music!" We'd have to reel them back in and then they'd spill out again. They took ownership of the space and of who they were and who they wanted to portray and what they wanted to convey. And they knew that we were there to be attentive to that and to be curious about that. And I feel like they felt safe and comfortable there and that they felt seen.

**I love how thoroughly diverse the room is in terms of age, race, background, and I presume in terms of politics.**

**BR:** It goes back to what we saw in Vegas. These bar rooms are made up of people that wouldn't otherwise be together. And that's fascinating.

**TR:** Age became such a factor in this. In a way that we were intentional about, but it became something of a somatic landscape that we did not pre-ordain. We wanted to create a space in which those things happen naturally. In real life, they happen via serendipity. And we had to create a scenario in which we could provoke that and allow for that.

**How did you handle the circumstances of drinking on set? Obviously that's part of the subject here, but did you set up any limitations or guardrails for them?**

**BR:** We were very aware of the risks and had a team outside the bar ready to get them sobered up. If somebody was getting way too drunk we would pull them out and put them in a car and get them lots of food and water and make sure they got home okay.

**TR:** None of these people are amateurs. This is realism and we were not gonna create a disingenuous space where these people were drinking non-alcoholic beer. These are people who drink alcohol. This is a space for alcoholism. These people are gonna drink and relate to each other within that framework and that is the armature of this movie. We couldn't do without it, so there was no pussyfooting with that. It was like, we're opening a bar. You are gonna drink the way you drink. And we're gonna be privy to that. We ended up with a cast of people who were willing to participate in this.

**Do you know if any of them have stayed in touch since you filmed them? If any of them became drinking buddies because of the film?**

**BR:** Big time. Two of the people ended up bartending there. The old man Lowell with the long white hair flew to Australia just a week ago to go on a tour with John the Australian. They just went on a drunken road trip across Australia together. They had so much fun together that they wanted to continue.

**So you had one long central shoot and some shoots around it—less than any previous film of yours, I would presume. How did that affect your approach to editing, Bill?**

**BR:** I went into it thinking it was gonna be the easiest edit yet because it was a point A to point B— the bar opens, the bar closes. But it was by far the hardest edit I've ever done. There were countless challenges, one being that, in looking through footage, you're hanging out with people that are drunk for at least 12 hours a day. In nonstop doses like that it's infuriating, it's obnoxious, it's exhausting.

**TR:** And as we mentioned, the geography of the thing was tough with people moving around the bar constantly, and trying to reveal all our themes using footage that is not scripted. In the edit you want to allow it to breathe, you want to give the audience a break, audibly and visually. And it's a huge cast, so you continually need to check in with everyone. We started with a framework, then we watched all of the footage, and then we wrote a script based on what we saw in the footage. And that was our starting point. From there, Bill composed



basically a linear film that would not have many cuts within scenes, to allow it to be totally honest and authentic.

**BR:** Yeah, that was a rule early on— we didn't want this to feel any more manipulated than it already was, so it was a lot of long takes.

**TR:** So much had happened in-camera, but we realized we could further that by structuring scenes, by being able to move around the room. We realized we ultimately had to cut within scenes, and be able to move across the room while things are happening in real time, acknowledging things can be happening simultaneously. It allowed us to compress time as well.

**I'd like to ask you a more holistic question about construction as a way of getting to truth, about the push-pull between making creative choices and then also letting life happen in front of you. Each filmmaker can have his or her own idea of where the line resides, of what's valued and how to get there. For the two of you, what is that idea?**

**TR:** I think that's a constantly evolving thought, but in this instance, I feel like the only way we were going to get to what we had experienced in real life was to create this scenario. Rather than write a script and say, "Perform this for me," what we're trying to do is either find or create worlds that are evocative of those scenarios, and then try to either elicit or be present for that real thing. It is just so much more powerful when you see it happen. If we need to create a framework to elicit it, and if we then need to editorialize in order for a viewer to have that experience in the way that we feel is most powerful, then that is what we're going to do.

**BR:** The end justifies the process. What we're after is being able to find that shareable moment, that shareable feeling, that shareable experience that maybe you have emotionally in life, or through art—to capture these authentic experiences. And that's been the case throughout all our films. We have a picture in our head, or a feeling, and we've done what it takes to get to that truth.

**TR:** Also we're not *trying* to exist under the guise of documentary. It's not our chosen purview—it's where our films exist. For us, this is the way that we want to make films. We want to use reality, naturalism, realism, things that are around us and available to make these hand-made movies together. To make movies that are full of ideas, and to try things. And it happened that the palette that we paint with is gleaned from real life. We may be authors or provocateurs, but we haven't coached these performances out of these people, these people are giving us an authentic piece of their lives.

## **ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS**

### **BILL AND TURNER ROSS - Directors / Producers / Cinematographers**

The Ross Brothers are an American filmmaking team whose credits include the award-winning films 45365 (2009), TCHOUPITOUULAS (2012), WESTERN (2015), and CONTEMPORARY COLOR (2017). Born and raised in Sidney, Ohio, and both graduates of the Savannah College of Art and Design, Bill and Turner Ross began work in the film industry in Los Angeles, with Bill as an editor and filmmaking teacher, and Turner in art departments on studio features. But they soon decided to eschew the day jobs of Hollywood and continue the creative partnership they began as kids by making their own films. In the years since, their films have brought them renown as some of the most innovative and interesting documentary filmmakers working today, with a style all their own and always evolving -- pushing the art of presenting uninhibited portraits of and journeys through places, with all the complicated, humanistic, and lyrical truth that that entails.

Their work has been featured at museums and film festivals throughout the world, including the Museum of Modern Art, Lincoln Center in New York, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the British Film Institute in London. Their work has been supported by the Sundance Institute, the Rooftop Filmmaker's Fund, Cinereach, the San Francisco Film Society and a generous grant from the late Roger Ebert. They were honored as Ambassadors for the American Film Showcase and as Sundance Documentary Institute Fellows. They were named Decade Filmmakers by Cinema Eye Honors, and in 2018 they became members of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Sciences.

According to Metacritic, Bill and Turner Ross are the 6th best reviewed filmmakers of the 21st century.

When not making their own films, they collaborate with friends and fellow filmmakers such as Benh Zeitlin (BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD, WENDY), David Lowery (AIN'T THEM BODIES SAINTS, A GHOST STORY), A.J. Schnack (CAUCUS), Robert Greene (BISBEE '17), Raoul Peck (I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO), and David Byrne. They live and work in New Orleans.

### **MICHAEL GOTTWALD - Producer**

Michael Gottwald is a founding partner and producer with the Department of Motion Pictures, which has three films premiering at Sundance in 2020. He produced BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD, directed by Benh Zeitlin, which won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance and the Camera d'Or at Cannes; it was nominated for four Academy Awards. Michael has produced episodes of "HIGH MAINTENANCE" and collaborated with acclaimed documentary filmmakers Bill & Turner Ross on TCHOUPITOULAS (premiered at SXSW), WESTERN, (a Special Jury Prize at Sundance), CONTEMPORARY COLOR (a concert film collaboration with David Byrne), and their most recent, BLOODY NOSE, EMPTY POCKETS, which will premiere at Sundance and Berlin. Michael produced Jeremy Jasper's debut feature PATTI CAKE\$, the closing night film of Cannes' Directors' Fortnight. He is an Executive Producer on WENDY, Benh Zeitlin's follow up to BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD, and FAREWELL AMOR, Ekwa Msangi's debut feature, both premiering at Sundance 2020. Michael worked for the Barack Obama campaign in 2008 and 2012.

### **JOSH PENN - Executive Producer**

Josh Penn is a producer with the Department of Motion Pictures. He produced BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD (2012), which won the Sundance Grand Jury Prize, the Caméra d'Or at Cannes, and was nominated for four Academy Awards (including Best Picture). In addition, Josh was nominated for Outstanding Producer at the 2013 Producers Guild Awards. HE has also held producing roles on MONSTERS AND MEN (Sundance 2018 Special Jury Prize Winner), PATTI CAKE\$, WESTERN (Sundance 2015 Special Jury Prize Winner), THE GREAT INVISIBLE (SXSW 2014 Grand Jury Prize Winner), CONTEMPORARY COLOR and the live documentary A THOUSAND THOUGHTS among other films. Josh has three films premiering at Sundance 2020: WENDY, FAREWELL AMOR and BLOODY NOSE, EMPTY POCKETS. In 2018, Josh was accepted as a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Outside of his work in film, Josh was previously the Michigan New Media Director for President Obama's 2008 campaign and a Senior Digital Program Manager for the 2012 re-election campaign.

## CREDITS

**Concordia Studio** presents

**A Department of Motion Pictures Production**

**In Association with:**

XTR

**BLOODY NOSE, EMPTY POCKETS**

**Produced by:**

Michael Gottwald

Chere Theriot

**Executive Producers:**

Davis Guggenheim

Jonathan Silberberg

Nicole Stott

David Eckles

Minette Nelson

Matt Sargeant

Bryn Mooser

Kathryn Everett

Josh Penn

**Co-Executive Producers:**

Daniel Patrick Carbone

Matthew Petock

Zachary Shedd

**Contributing Producer:**

Justin Lacob

**Consulting Producers:**

Noah Stahl

Elizabeth Lodge Stepp

**Associate Producer:**

Jesy Rae Buhl

**For the Department of Motion Pictures:**

Emily Jampel

Cypriene Oliver

**Original Score:**

Casey Wayne McAllister

**Re-recording Mixer:**

Tom Efinger, Red Hook Post

**Production Sound Mixer:**

Kyle Sheehan

**Sound Advisor:**

Lawrence Everson

**Music Supervisor:**

Rachel Sipser

**Fair Use Legal Counsel:**

Peter Jaszi

**Colorist:**

Bossi Baker

**Titles:**

Markus Rutledge

**Title Logo Design:**

Leanne Wagner

**Visual Effects:**

Josiah Howison

Markus Rutledge

**Editor:**

Bill Ross IV

**Directed, Produced & Photographed by:**

Bill Ross IV

Turner Ross

//

**FEATURING:**

Michael Martin

Cheryl Fink

Marc Paradis

John Nerichow

Lowell Landes

Ira J. Clark

Bruce Hadnot

Pete Radcliffe

Felix Cardona

Al Page

Rikki Redd

Pam Harper

Shay Walker

Tra Walker

Trevor Moore

Kevin Lara

David S. Lewis

Kamari Stevens

Sophie Woodruff

Miriam Arkin

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Joanne Feinberg

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Bill Ross III

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**Distribution Advisory Services**

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**For CONCORDIA STUDIO**

**EVP Physical Production**

Shannon Dill

**Director of Development**

Rachel Traub

**Development Executive**

Emma D. Miller

**Production Manager**

Kelsey Carr

**Studio Associate Producer**

Ryan Daly

**Executive Assistant**

Taylor Micelotta

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