

FilmRise PRESENTS

MISSING FROM FIRE TRAIL ROAD

A FILM BY SABRINA VAN TASSEL

FILMRISE

FILMRISE PRESENTS - A TAHLI FILMS PRODUCTION - IN ASSOCIATION WITH CANAL+DOCS WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE CNC & PROCIREP
DIRECTED BY SABRINA VAN TASSEL - ASSOCIATE PRODUCER DEBORAH PARKER - EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS DANNY FISHER, MAX EINHORN - CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS CRISTINA GUGGINO, KATIE CARROLL
CANAL+DOCS ACQUISITIONS CHRISTINE CAUQUELIN, OLIVIER AGOGUE - DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY CHRISTOPHE ASTRUC - ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK CHRISTOPHE LA PINTA & ANTONE GEORGE

CANAL+
DOCS



WORLD PREMIERE TRIBECA FESTIVAL



Dec 2, 2024 12:30pm PT

‘Missing From Fire Trail Road’: A Heart-wrenching Doc About Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women

Filmmaker Sabrina Van Tassel focuses on the disappearance of a young Native American woman in Washington State to illuminate ongoing national tragedies.



Nov. 18, 2024 at 10:00 am | Updated Nov. 18, 2024 at 10:00 am

‘Missing from Fire Trail Road’ focuses on missing Indigenous women

Though it meticulously walks us through the case “Missing from Fire Trail Road” is not simply a true-crime documentary, but an examination of the impact of multigenerational trauma.



Published on November 2, 2024 05:00AM EDT

Native Woman Won \$400,000 from Abuse Settlement, Then Vanished.

The documentary explores how Johnson-Davis’ story hits home for every Native woman: Either they are victims themselves, or they are sisters, mothers, aunts and nieces of the victims.



“

Layering together past and present, Van Tassel weaves a rich tapestry which illustrates the multiple elements of complicity in Mary Ellen's disappearance.

- EYE FOR FILM -

***Missing From Fire Trail Road** recounts a tragic story, but shows the bravery and guts indigenous women must have to survive this world. Very impressed with the work Van Tassel has done to highlight this injustice.*

- MOVIEJAWN -

***Missing From Fire Trail Road** is an essential documentary as it shines a light on the plight of a culturally rich segment of Americans that are literally going unnoticed and unaided.*

- FILM THREAT -

***Missing From Fire Trail Road** is incredibly informative and hard hitting.*

- THE NEXT BEST PICTURE -

*The most powerful doc I have seen in years.
Sabrina Van Tassel expertly humanizes her subjects giving them all a voice.*

- THE MOVIE REVUE -

***Missing From Fire Trail Road** comes with a special mandate with the hopes to advance new laws and safety measures to protect indigenous women.*

- INDIEWIRE -

A harrowing, vital documentary.

- AISLE SEAT -

A distressing yet vital overview of generational systemic oppression towards the Indigenous community.

- CINEMATIC WORDS OF A CHAOTIC GEMINI -

”

“

***Missing From Fire Trail Road* is an evocative condemnation of the culpability of North America against its Indigenous peoples.**

- ELEMENTS OF MADNESS -

It's tough to ignore the horrors that Van Tassel highlights throughout **Missing From the Fire Trail Road**. For years, there have been active plots to weaken and remove power from Indigenous communities.

- SUNSHINE STATE CINEPLEX -

Sabrina Van Tassel's **Missing From Fire Trail Road** investigates the disappearance of one Indigenous woman, but ends up hitting a much deeper-rooted issue in the justice system

- LOUD AND CLEAR -

Sabrina Van Tassel has crafted something powerful.

- THE PLAYLIST -

Film shines light on missing Tulalip woman's story and discovers larger crisis

- EVERETT HERALD -

What Sabrina Van Tassel's documentary works to uncover and succeeds in explaining is the connection between events in history and what's happening today.

- ALLIANCE OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS -

***Missing From Fire Trail Road* is not only a compelling document but an urgent argument for systemic change.**

- KATIE AT THE MOVIES -

Unsolved case with family's search is put in context of many Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, legal impunity of non-native men and multi-generational trauma from boarding schools.

Sadly, shows their lands as dumping ground for broken minds and bodies

- MAVEN NEST -

”

AVAILABLE ON DEMAND! ON

amazon prime

tv+

 **Google Play**

 **Microsoft**

NOW AVAILABLE ON

American Airlines 



SYNOPSIS

Mary Ellen Johnson- Davis disappeared over two years ago from the Tulalip Indian reservation near Seattle. Because the investigation is at standstill, her sisters and other tribal members set off to discover what happened to her. Their quest uncovers a harsh reality: indigenous women are murdered at an alarming rate. Complex tribal jurisdictional issues have turned reservations into lawless zones and hunting grounds for predators. Most crimes go unsolved and are committed by non-natives. But this crisis has historical roots and emanates from the genocide created by institutional policies to eradicate an entire culture. This film sheds light on the weight of generational trauma and discrimination that indigenous women continue to face.

THE WOMEN IN THE FILM



DEBORAH PARKER

Deborah Parker, is an activist and the ex-vice chairwoman of the Tulalip Tribes.

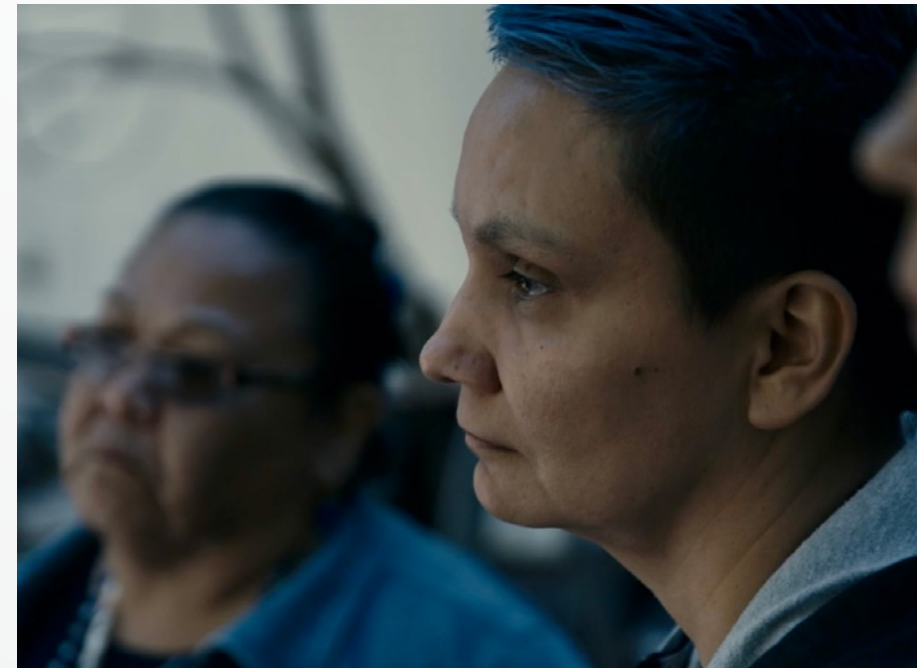
During the Violence Against Women Act of 2013, Parker successfully campaigned for the inclusion of tribal courts jurisdiction over crimes against women and families involving non-Native Americans on tribal lands. She is now CEO of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, which aims to recognize the systemic abuse that occurred through Institutionalized policies.



TERI GOBIN

Chairwoman Teri Gobin, whose Stohobsh name is “Sha-ha-ha-los”, leads the Tulalip Tribes of Washington.

She proudly carries on the legacy of her late father, Stan Jones “Scho-Hallem”, who served on the Board for 44 years and 26 of those as Chairman. A boarding school survivor, he dedicated his life to getting the tribes’ culture and language back. Teri Gobin embodies vibrant Indigenous leadership through the resilience of culture, ceremony with a lens on historical trauma.



NONA, GERRY AND LYNETTE

Nona and Gerry are Mary Ellen’s sisters. With their cousin Lynette they have been looking for Mary Ellen for three years.

They come from one of the largest families in Tulalip. As little girls, they were taken from the tribe, stripped of their culture and placed in foster care with a non-native family. For years, Nona and Mary Ellen were sexually abused by their foster father. The sisters sued the State of Washington for neglect and won.



ROXANNE WHITE

Roxanne White has dedicated her life to helping families searching for their missing loved ones.

She is the executive director of “Missing, Murdered Indigenous Women, People, and Families and People”. Roxanne White is a survivor of childhood abduction, sexual assault, domestic abuse and sex trafficking. Her personal experience enables her to empower and support survivors and impacted families throughout urban and rural Native communities.



DEB HAALAND
U.S SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR

Deb Haaland made history in 2021 when she became the first Native American to be sworn in as the U.S Interior Secretary.

Dedicated in bringing to light the cases of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, she opened an investigative unit within the Bureau of Indian Affairs. She also launched a federal investigation into government-run Indian boarding schools. Highlighting a century of abuse at hundreds of Federal Indian Boarding Schools throughout the United States.

THE WOMEN BEHIND THE FILM



SABRINA VAN TASSEL
Film Director, Author and Producer

Sabrina Van Tassel is a French-American film director and an investigative journalist. She has directed over 45 documentaries in the last 20 years.

Van Tassel is lauded for her award-winning documentary features focusing mainly on women, social justice and political matters. Giving a voice to the voiceless, her extensive work covered topics like underage sex trafficking, child abuse, gun violence, women on death row and the holocaust.

Her 2020 feature “The State of Texas vs Melissa” about the first woman sentenced to death in Texas created a major national media stir. After premiering at Tribeca and winning 16 awards around the globe, her documentary was sparked by an effective grassroots campaign, social and celebrity support. The film went viral around the world leading to numerous petitions for a down to the wire stay of execution for Melissa Lucio, who was saved 48 hours before her execution date.



DEBORAH PARKER
Executive Producer

Deborah Parker, also known by her native name Cicayalça?, is an activist and Indigenous leader from Tulalip, Yaqui and Apache descent. Her lifelong goal has been to honor and uplift her Indigenous way of life.

An enrolled member of the Tulalip Tribes, she served as its Legislative Policy Analyst in the Office of Government Affairs before becoming the vice-chairwoman of the tribe from 2012 to 2015. During the Violence Against Women Act of 2013, Parker successfully campaigned for the inclusion of tribal courts jurisdiction over crimes against women and families involving non-Native Americans on tribal lands.

Deborah Parker is now CEO of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NABS), which aims to recognize the systemic abuse that occurred through Institutionalized policies. She is currently advocating with other tribal leaders for the reintroduction of the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act.

A close-up portrait of a young Indigenous woman, likely from the Amazon region, looking slightly to the right with a serious expression. She wears a large, wide-brimmed hat made of woven palm leaves. Her face is adorned with traditional body paint: a thick black line runs from her forehead down her cheeks, framing a large area of red paint on her cheeks and chin. She is wearing a black garment with a large, circular pendant around her neck. The pendant features a white bull's skull in the center, surrounded by a ring of colorful beads in red, yellow, and blue. The background is blurred, showing other people and a red banner with white text.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I've had this film on my mind for the last ten years. I remember precisely the day I found out about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. It was also the very first time I heard about activist Deborah Parker. Little did I know then, that we would embark together on this journey a decade later.

It was back in 2013 and I had come across a video where Deborah was delivering a very powerful speech. She was speaking in front of the house of Congress in Washington DC, enumerating the hundreds of uninvestigated and unprosecuted cases of indigenous women and asking a floor full of male politicians: *"Why is my life and the lives of so many other Native American women less important than yours?"* I remember being outraged by this injustice, wondering why this hadn't made worldwide news and wanting to cover her fight.



To me that tragedy rang a bell. I knew that Native women had gone missing since first contact between European settlers and the Indigenous population in the 17th century. Many Americans are part of this dark history, including my own family. My Dutch ancestor was “given” a woman from the Montaukett tribe when he came ashore Long Island. When I was a child, I imagined a fairy tale. Only to realize as an adult, that it most probably involved rape and abuse. Doing research, I found out that the entire tribe was wiped out from the face of the earth soon after. How many of us carry that heritage in our veins? And how could this still be going on?

I convinced the network that I was working for at the time, to let me do a short documentary about MMIW. I went to Tulalip to interview Deborah and several other tribal members. I was in a state of shock, the numbers were staggering. Over 80% of the women on tribal land had been raped. So many had disappeared and nobody was talking about it. At the time Deborah Parker was the vice chairwoman of the Tulalip tribes and an activist defending Indigenous women’s rights. She worked actively for the campaign to include native women in the reenactment of “The Violence against Women Act”, which would end up being signed by Barack Obama. It was a huge victory. But it only allowed tribal police officers the right to arrest non-natives in cases of domestic abuse. They still had no authority over non tribal members even if they committed rape or murder. Thus, creating lawless zones on reservations.

Deborah and I stayed in touch over the years. Sadly, native women were still going missing at a horrible rate and the issue was barely being addressed. We spoke a few times about doing a feature documentary on the matter. We were determined to bring this issue to the forefront but for some reasons it was never the right time. At the end of 2020, I found out that a woman had gone missing from the Tulalip Tribes. Her name was Mary Ellen and she had vanished in plain sight from one of the busiest roads on the reservation. There was a huge reward put up by the tribe and the FBI. Her family was actively looking for her. Every time I thought about the film, her face would pop up. Where was she? What happened to her? And what happened to so many others like her?

A couple of months later, my documentary “The State of Texas vs Melissa” created a media stir and was instrumental in saving a woman on death row from being executed. All of a sudden, I was asked what I wanted to do next. I immediately talked about this film. I felt that this was the right moment, that we could create awareness on this issue. When I called Deborah to tell her that we had the financing to make it happen, we cried together. This is the story behind this film. Two women joining forces to raise awareness on women who have been silenced. Women who are not accounted for.

My goal as a filmmaker has always been to challenge the stigma that often brands the most vulnerable in our society. Time and time again, flawed characters are shamed for assigned weaknesses. Specifically, when it comes to women. Society views women with addiction as “bad” or “immoral” with poor life choices. Despite the fact that most of the time they are survivors of sexual assault or domestic violence. But it is nothing compared to the prejudice and stereotypes that Indigenous women face on a regular basis. The myth that they “want” to go missing, that they are all addicted to drugs and alcohol, and that they are somewhat responsible for their fate goes way back. This systemic racism is deeply rooted in American society.

A genocide took place in America. It involved stolen land, broken treaties, institutional policies, conscious destruction of culture and history and massive sexual abuse. The goal was to eradicate and destroy the native spirit. Today, complex tribal laws and fragmented jurisdictions have created havens for rapists and killers. One atrocity has been replaced by another but women continue to pay the price. Through this film, I aim to expose how the legacy of the past is the foundation of the present. How trauma has been passed on from one generation to another, allowing an epidemic to go on. It is an act of atonement on my part, for the wrongdoings that have been committed against my indigenous sisters. Strong, resilient and dignified women. With the hope that acknowledging their wounds will enable the cycle to be broken.





THE IMAGE



CHRISTOPHE ASTRUC

Director of photography Christophe Astruc is a Cinematographer and a Camera Operator based in Paris, France. He specializes in high end documentaries and documentary series bringing a cinematic aesthetic to his images. His work includes: “Accessory to Evi” Netflix (2023), “MH370 Missing” France TV (2023), “Room 2806: The Accusation” Netflix (2021).

On my first day of filming in Tulalip, I was struck by the power of the setting. The immense and impenetrable forest plunging into the Pacific Ocean. As a silent witness to the history of this community and the drama of Mary Ellen’s disappearance.

As filming went on, I got to know the Native American community of Tulalip better. I discovered the spiritual bond that connects the community with nature, with its ancestors. We relied on this grandiose nature to show the strength and power of the tribe despite the tragedy of the missing and murdered women.

We chose to shoot with lenses that gave a very soft rendering on the skin while remaining extremely sharp and precise in the filming of the forest. We focused on very fine details and very strong contrasts. The small size and lightness of the lenses allowed us to shoot discreetly and for a long time with a hand-held camera. We remained as close as possible to our characters while maintaining the rigor of cinema optics.

It was necessary to create an enveloping and soft light while maintaining contrast to support the dramaturgy of the story, without falling into the archetypal image of true crime.



CHRISTOPHE LA PINTA

Music Composer Christophe La Pinta is a French-born musical artist notorious for arranging and composing music for films. He was the winner of the « Peter Carpenter Fellowship » organized by the BMI foundation. Giving him the opportunity to work on the series NYPD Blue. He has since collaborated with numerous directors for prestigious French films, Documentaries and TV series.

THE MUSIC

The work of a composer is often a long, lonely journey. We are very often locked alone in a music studio in front of keyboards and computers. Trying to find the right tune, the melody, the arrangement that will become the soul of the film.

I had worked with Sabrina Van Tassel on her previous film “The State of Texas vs Melissa”. I knew how music plays a vital role in her films, enhancing the narrative and creating the atmosphere, almost like a character itself. She wanted me to compose the music of her new film and I was happy to jump on this new adventure with her. But she told me that I wouldn’t be alone on this journey this time around. She had met a Native American musician named Antone George on her first day of filming and she wanted me to compose the music with him. I immediately loved the idea of mixing our two worlds. To me this is the very nature of a composer: to collaborate, to share, to learn. Besides, I have always been fascinated by Native American music.

When I first listened to Antone and his family sing, I was blown away. The drumming, the humming, the tempo was completely different from everything I had heard. I composed a few scores in my studio in Paris and sent them to Antone, hoping that he would be inspired by my music.

A couple of weeks later, I flew to Seattle with the director and the DP. We drove to the Lummi reservation to meet Antone and his family. That day he was by the water, getting ready for canoe practice with members of his band, the Westshore Canoe Family. The sun was shining, it was incredibly quiet and you could only hear the sound of paddling. His daughter Cheryl started singing. It felt as if time had stopped.

The next day we met at a studio in Bellingham to record the vocals. Antone started singing with his son and daughter on my music. But it had nothing to do with the melody I had written. I was stunned, I looked at Sabrina in disbelief. She asked me:” This is not your melody, right?” and I replied: “No, but this is so much better!” He had adapted my melody to his own without changing the harmony of the musical structure. Just like that. With effortless ease.

Before we left, they did a ceremonial and we were asked to stand in the middle of a circle. They thanked us for travelling such a long way to collaborate with them and helping to spread the truth to the world. I had never been honored in such a way. I felt something mystical and a certitude of being at the right place at the right time. These two days will stay with me forever.



ANTONE GEORGE

Co-music Composer Antone George is a citizen of the Lummi Nation in Washington State. He created the “Westshore Canoe Family” band, coastal jamming with his children and tribal members of the Northwest. Each year, they participate in canoe journeys travelling the waterways of the inland sea to visit with other tribes in the Pacific Northwest.

It was an honor to share and co-composed songs in this documentary to help create awareness on MMIW. So many of our native women across the United States and Canada have gone missing with very little concern from the authorities. The families have to fight for their voices to be heard and their loved ones to be looked for. I hope that the film’s impact will help families throughout native country be heard and treated fairly.

I composed the MMIW song back in 2019 prior to our Tribal Canoe journey in Lummi. I had a vision. I remembered, as a youngster, hearing of girls going missing all the time. We would travel from Pow Wows to Pow Wows across Washington State and families would be looking for their daughters. Little to nothing was done by law enforcement. We could only count on each other to look for them. I realized that it was still happening today at an adamant rate and still nobody was talking about it. I started writing the lyrics: “Every night and every day. I pray for you...” and the melody came along. We started drumming with my sons and my daughters created the dance. Pretty soon, the song became a phenomenon and travelled throughout native country. We now sing it at every Pow Wow in the Northwest. Little girls and their mothers dress in red with a bloody hand on their face in honor of their missing sisters.

The day we wrote the song “Come Home” with Sabrina Van Tassel, the director of the film, a hummingbird flew around us. The song was about Mary Ellen’s soul coming back to her ancestors. In our native belief, hummingbirds carry the soul of people gone to the other side. Wherever she is, I hope she knows that she mattered to us and that she was constantly on our prayers.

Co-composing songs with Christophe La Pinta, who is French and a renowned film composer, was intimidating. it was a first for me. When we met for the recording in Bellingham WA, I didn’t really know what to expect. He played the melody that he had composed and my son, my daughter and I, improvised on the music. And then it just happened. It was an awesome experience. For me it was meant to be. That is what the universe wanted.





THE CAMPAIGN AROUND THE FILM

The issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous women has been barely addressed. Even though it has been declared a National Crisis in Canada and there has been a Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women's Day in the US for two years. People are for the most part totally unaware of this issue and when they are, there is often prejudice that comes with their understanding of the matter.

We are on board with a few activists and political leaders who want to take action and be part of a campaign around the film.

Our vision for the campaign is to create major awareness on the issue of MMIW. To educate so there is an understanding of the consequences of transgenerational trauma. How this crisis is a continuity of the genocide that took place over a century ago in Federal Indian boarding schools throughout the US. By getting together different activists and uniting their work around one film we will expose the complexity of this issue.

Our goal is to educate, to inform and to heal. Families are often overwhelmed and misinformed when a loved one goes missing. Timing is critical and they are often met with skepticism by law enforcement. We aim to provide information about all the resources that are available in each state.

Local activists, indigenous leaders as well as counselors will be sought out to host screening events across the country. Screenings of the film will be coupled with Interactive maps pinpointing Missing Indigenous by state along with Indigenous amber alert information from the MMIWP task force and information about the Missing Cold Case Unit will be provided to local press and audiences. The idea is to provide the same kind of resources throughout Indian Country.



In order to help prevent future tragedies from happening, we will offer to connect women at risk with counselling groups in their community. There is already a counselor in Tulalip that focuses on transgenerational trauma and offers treatment paid by the tribe. The idea would be to duplicate this in other tribes if no such service currently exists.

Last but not least, advocating for the passing of the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School policies sponsored by the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition. This bill aims to recognize the traumas created by Institutionalized policies designed to eradicate an entire culture. We feel that this historical trauma needs to be recognized at a federal level.

THE WOMEN WHO WANT TO TAKE ACTION:

- Patsi Whitefoot is a lifelong MMIW activist from Yakama Nation, she focuses on MMIW cold cases with the coroner’s office in Yakama. They just found the remains of her sister who was assassinated 30 years ago.
- Washington Representative Deb Lekanoff from the Tinglit tribe sponsored a bill that created a first-in-the-nation statewide alert system for Missing Indigenous people.
- Deborah Parker is an activist and Indigenous leader. She is currently advocating with other tribal leaders for the reintroduction of the Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies Act.
- Abigail Echo-Hawk from the Pawnee Nation is the head of the Washington State MMIWP Task force with the Washington State Attorney General Office.
- Teri Gobin, the chairwoman of the Tulalip Tribes is very involved in the issues of both MMIW and transgenerational trauma created by Federal Indian boarding schools.
- Roxanne White has dedicated her life to helping families searching for their missing loved ones. She is the executive director of “Missing,Murdered Indigenous Women, People, and Families and People”.
- Mandy Yeahpau is a founding member of ILLUMINATIVE, she advocates for MMIW and against human trafficking in Indian Country.
- Theresa Sheldon is a member of the Tulalip Council. She previously worked with NABS who deals with boarding school survivors who are also sexual abuse survivors for the most part.



CREDITS

Written and Directed
and Produced by
Sabrina Van Tassel

Executive Producer
Deborah Parker

Executive Producers
Danny Fisher
Max Einhorn

Co- Executive Producers
Cristina Guggino
Katie Carroll

Director of Photography
Christophe Astruc
Second Unit Cinematography
Cyril Thomas

Editors
Damien Bois
Helene Lanfranchi
Mathieu Vatin
Louis Comar

Original Soundtrack
Christophe La Pinta
Antone George

Sound Editor
Maxime Saleix

Re-recorder Mixer
François-Joseph Hors

Colorist
Richard Deusy



PRESS CONTACT

Caitlin Hughes
Caitlin@caitlinhughespr.com

SALES CONTACT

Melissa Wohl
SVP, Head of Content Sales
melissa@filmrise.com
+1-310-309-7779

MAIN CONTACT

Sal Scamardo
VP, Marketing & Distribution
sal@filmrise.com