

Nathan Davis Still Lives

A Documentary Film

DEAN GARRIS

Director BIO



Dean Garris began his career as an expressionistic painter and freelance artist. He moved into video and film in 2000 and began working with industrial and private clientele on video projects over a period of eight years. He successfully produced a year-long episodic public affairs program for the Raleigh and Chapel Hill TV and online markets in 2008

Nathan Davis Still Lives is Dean's first feature length film.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

In early 2009 I was looking for topics for a feature length documentary, so I began to post work from the last 8 years into an online portfolio. I had 3 qualifications for the subject, the story had to be local, I needed to have access to any materials related to the topic and the story had to be one that was worth telling.

In my portfolio was a music promo video I shot in 2001 and 2002. I was hired by a man named Jay Lomac to film his band, The Lost Cause, and their farewell concert (according to my memory of the situation, they were breaking up shortly afterwards and he wanted to tape their last shows). It was during the first show I taped at O'Donnell's Pub where I met their singer/guitarist, Nathan Davis. I remember distinctly being absolutely dumbfounded as to why this guy was playing small bars in Southern Pines and not in a bigger market.

This project lasted 4 months, about 2 months longer than expected. Shannon Campbell left the band after the shows but the others members lingered on together and became a threesome; so Jay decided the video was to be about the threesome and not a farewell concert (I had already begun editing and rendering footage). After some re-shoots and an extra month and a half of editing & re-cuts at Jay's request, I turned in a final cut and left the project, ending my contact with Jay and the Southern Pines crowd.

I ran into Nathan twice since then, once at The Six String Café in Cary, where he performed that night with John Henry Trinko, and once at The Red Room in Raleigh. I was always surprised that he remembered me and would mention doing another video together, I think this may have been more of a professional courtesy than work solicitation and honestly, having had such a frustrating experience in Southern Pines a few years earlier I never followed up on it. The Nathan I ran into in Raleigh was friendlier and more down to Earth than the one I remembered, I suspect maturity had caught up him and probably a few hard fought life lessons.

After posting 'The Lost Cause' video online I decided to contact the band members and let them know the video was available if they wanted to embed it on their site or link to it. The first person I contacted was Nathan; I fully expected that he would have caught the attention of a record label by then and be touring around the country perhaps supporting an album or radio single. I was shocked when I navigated to his myspace page and read the news of his passing. I immediately emailed whoever was still keeping his site running to let them know this video was available if they wanted to use it for the site and passed on my condolences.

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The next day I received a letter from the Myspace administrator, who turned out to be Nathan's mother, Sally. I was deeply moved by her gratitude toward me for posting the video and her story she briefly shared. In that email was an emotional energy strong and fierce, still fighting to keep her son's music available for his fans. Sally since mentioned to me that she, Dave and Nathan were like a 3 legged stool that had lost one of its legs. It seemed to me the music, the legacy, the drive to keep up the fight in their son's name was the ghost that kept that stool from tumbling over.

On top of the incredible grief that comes with losing a child was the sad circumstance that continues to keep Nathan's daughter from knowing anything real or good about her father. I learned that Nathan's wife, whom he had a child with, was now remarried and devoutly religious. She did not want the child to be influenced by Nathan's music or Nathan's atheist parents. I learned how Sally and Dave are keeping the music alive not only for the fans but for his daughter as well, profits from music sales go into a fund for her and Jennifer allows this to happen even as she sweeps away any memory of Nathan.

No matter what Nathan and his wife's differences may have been his daughter had a right to know who her father was, the whole world for that matter had a right to know. For me personally, ever since that brief time in Southern Pines, Nathan had become one of those things in life you could count on, you could trust the sun would shine tomorrow, that the tide would eventually break and that Nathan Davis was going to make it, how could this incredible musical talent be denied the recognition it deserved, all the music slowly fading away until it eventually dies out with the fans who remembered?

I emailed Sally back and proposed shooting a documentary about Nathan's life and music career. Both Dave and Sally were hesitant at first but also interested enough to talk more. After Nathan's death Dave and Sally worked out an arrangement with Nathan's producer, John Custer, to finish the album Revolution Lane that Nathan and John had been working on at the time of his death. Dave was coming to NC to speak with John Custer about the progress so we decided to meet then and go over some of the details of what I wanted to do. Sally also mentioned that they had 60 hours of unedited raw video of Nathan that was shot for use in a DVD he and videographer, Roger Flake, worked on.

Over the next couple of months I began researching everything I could find online about Nathan and his history. I looked up everyone who was friends with him on his Myspace page, read every morsel of blog postings that had any relevance to his life. I even dug out a copy of Nathan's CD 'Out Of My Skin' that he had given to me when I saw him at the Red Room, and began listening to it religiously to soak in as much as I could. The messages left on the Myspace page from August 2006 are some of the most touching and heartbreaking I found. I decided early on what the title of the film would be, the photo of the bathroom wall at The Lincoln Theater inscribed with the epitaph "Nathan Davis Still Lives" was pretty powerful but it actually wasn't until I ran across this Myspace message posted by Jessica Mashburn on the one year anniversary of Nathan's death that the title became obvious.

"As long as we have ears to hear and a friend to share his music with, Nathan Davis still lives."

When Dave and I met on April 09, I also met Daniel Albright. Dave "assigned" Daniel to me to help with production and to use as a resource for contacting people who knew Nathan and also I suspect to probably make sure I didn't run off with the video tapes. I spent the next few weeks working primarily on editing the raw performance footage with a target date for completing an assembly edit by mid-July 09.

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These tapes were shot I assume with the intention of layering the video clips over studio tracks from the forthcoming Revolution Lane album and for music video purposes. The most heartbreaking thing about these videos is that the only audio recorded during these shows was captured via the on board camera mic which was a nightmare to work with. Only the Continuum Series performance had properly recorded audio.

The production phase began in April 09 and lasted until October 09 and had its ups and downs. The very first person I contacted was indie-music.com writer and assistant editor Jennifer Layton, her articles and album reviews were one of the guiding voices I was using to navigate through writing the story structure and finding the arc of the film.

My original concept for the story was a bit different than the finished product. My initial structure involved me following Nathan's producer John Custer throughout the summer as he worked on finishing Nathan's last album Revolution Lane. Along the course of this journey I would introduce Nathan to the audience and the people he touched through his music, slowly revealing his life story. The movie would have a natural end with the release of Revolution Lane. That concept fell apart early on as John Custer was a rather tough individual to nail down for an interview, let alone multiple shoots following him through the process of finishing an album that had already taken 3 years. After the first 2 months of trying to schedule an interview with him and getting nowhere I decided to switch gears and rewrite the film structure as a bio-pic.

Daniel Albright was a tremendous help in contacting some of the friends and musicians who knew Nathan in and around the Raleigh area, Daniel also frequently runs sound at The Lincoln Theater and was able to get us in there twice for interview sessions. There were many individuals who were enthusiastic about the project and graciously shared their stories as well as bar/restaurant owners that allowed me to film in their establishments; the credits section list all of the outstanding places I was welcomed. Of course there were some individuals that chose not to participate or never responded back to me or ignored my emails after they found out what I doing. I discovered that people who knew Nathan were either passionately devoted to him or the exact opposite; deeply scarred and resentful.

Heather Raye Rickman also helped with finding and contacting friends from Southern Pines. These interviews sessions were challenging to schedule and most of my trips consisted of me waiting for someone to show up and leaving with nothing but more b-roll of Broadstreet. The interviews I did get from friends and colleagues in Southern Pines turned out amazing, my interview with Marshal Lewis is my personal favorite of the entire shoot and I am still sad that more of it is not included in the film. Dave "Dige" Nunley was my contact for the Alaska interview session that we did remotely and was great to work with. He coordinated getting Pete and Nusahn to join, as well as the camera and audio work.

In mid September I began to wind down the interviews with a scheduled trip to Kentucky to see Dave and Sally. I wanted to show them some test footage I had from other interviews, a music video I had put together for the song 'Nickels and Dimes' and get their interview. The hospitality and warmth they showed to me on the trip helped reaffirm my original interest in the project, Nathan's story as well as theirs was worth telling. Seeing Sally answer emails from fans, her office adorned with Nathan Davis paraphernalia and mementos was touching.

Their interview was tough at times due to the subject matter but they gave me everything I asked for and recounted every detail I wanted. The only frustrating aspect of the trip and interview shoot was that at times it seemed like all the best stories were told to me with no camera rolling or "off the record", as a fan myself I loved hearing every minute detail but constantly kept thinking about how to get the story on camera.

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After I returned from KY I posted the Nickels and Dimes video online to give the fans a tease and help alleviate some fears others had about the project. After posting the video I was finally able to get an interview with John Custer. John was extremely nice and forthcoming in his interview, a real class act. Speaking with him made me long for the abandoned story structure I had originally conceived.

Hopefully this film will introduce new fans to Nathan Davis and help keep his memory and musical legacy alive for future generations. I am honored to have had an opportunity to develop and create this film and in some way be part of that legacy. I look forward to other fans like myself finding creative ways to keep Nathan's music alive. The journey in making this documentary has been a great experience and to quote Nathan himself, "man I had a damn good time".

ADDENDUM

Shortly before the private screening for cast and crew in June '10, PJ Garrett was killed in an automobile accident. PJ was Nathan's best friend and was not at all crazy about the idea of this documentary being made. I believe he wasn't sure of my intentions and was fiercely protective of Sally & Dave. It wasn't until he saw the Nickels & Dimes video that Sally and Dave convinced him to do the interview with me that appears in the film. He was very gentlemanly and honest during our chat and I think after the first trailer was posted online in Dec '09 that he began to warm up to the idea of this film. I was really looking forward to getting PJ's feedback and approval at the screening. The film is dedicated to his memory.