



Magnolia Pictures, Concordia Studio, Wavelength, Old Chilly Pictures

PRESENT

BITTERBRUSH

A film by Emelie Mahdavian

USA, 2021, 91 minutes

Official Selection

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FINAL PRESS NOTES

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SYNOPSIS

Emelie Mahdavian's sweeping documentary BITTERBRUSH follows Hollyn Patterson and Colie Moline, range riders who are spending their last summer herding cattle in remote Idaho. Totally off the grid with only their dogs as companions, Hollyn and Colie brave inclement weather and perilous work conditions while pondering their futures. A portrait of friendship, life transitions, and the work of two skilled young women in the isolated and beautiful landscape of the American West, BITTERBRUSH is an intimate portrayal of a way of life rarely seen on film.



STORY ARC

Spring: Old friends Hollyn and Colie prepare to drive 500 pairs of beef cattle over a ridge deep into the Idaho mountains. They move their most necessary belongings into a 100-year-old cabin where they will live for the season. They are eager, excited. Colie, in particular, can't wait for the work to begin.

Summer: Hollyn and Colie have settled into the rhythm of life off-grid. They love what they do, but they also recognize that this seasonal work is unstable. Looking at the grandeur of the landscape, they find peace and spiritual fulfillment. On some days, the beauty of the landscape and the sense of accomplishment at a job well done seems like enough to sustain them in spite of the economic and physical hardships they face.

Fall: It is snowing. Hollyn and Colie are on horseback, searching for the cattle who have remained in the mountains as the snow sets in. Colie's dad wants her to come home and help on the family ranch, but she is considering staying on at the ranch in Idaho. Hollyn has discovered that she is pregnant and is preparing for a new life with her fiancé that probably will not include range riding. As the season comes to an end, Colie is sad to leave the cabin, while Hollyn seems ready for a new life chapter. For both women, the future remains uncertain.

Epilogue, the next Spring: Hollyn is pregnant, at home, and Elijah comes home from work. Meanwhile at a ranch in Montana, Colie is working the night shift birthing calves. Weary from a long night's work, she calls her old friend Hollyn, eager to check on her friend and the little baby on the way. Hollyn is preparing for the arrival of her daughter any day. In contrast, Colie is making her way through the world alone.



INTERVIEW WITH EMELIE MAHDAVIAN

How did you come to meet Hollyn and Colie? And why did you choose to focus on two women?

Actually, I met Hollyn at a dinner at my neighbor's house the summer before we began production. I was living in rural Idaho in an off-grid cabin about 20 miles from the area where we see Hollyn and Colie working, and in fact the ranch they worked for sometimes put them up in a house about one mile from me. So, they were my neighbors.

I decided to focus on them because I wanted to make a film about women in ranching that went beyond the "oh, look! Women can do this too"-type of thing. Because Hollyn and Colie are actually excellent at their work. I was told this by my neighbors who were ranchers. So I just wanted to take their expertise and skill for granted and then use the film to bring the audience into a place they probably don't often go, but ground it in this beautiful thing, which is women's friendship.

What are Hollyn and Colie doing? What is Range Riding?

Basically, range riders are responsible for keeping a herd of cattle (or sometimes sheep) on the move and in the right place at the right time as they move across a large area, usually a relatively open range. In the western US, many ranchers have grazing rights on federal land that require the presence of range riders. Other times, ranchers use them to protect their herd from predators. Range riding is an old practice that serves a few purposes: to keep the cows from overgrazing one area, to keep them out of vulnerable areas like waterways, and to doctor them and protect them from predators. In short, the range riders' job is to protect the herd and also the health of the land.

Where did the idea for the film come from? Were there specific influences that inspired it?

I wanted to tell a story from the community where I lived. The idea for this specific film came from meeting Hollyn. Not only was it obvious that these women were really interesting people doing fascinating work, but they were tough. Living for long stretches beyond phone reception without utilities, sometimes out on the range in very inclement weather on pretty treacherous terrain. It was immediately compelling.

But I also knew right away that my artistic approach was not going to lean into the sensational so much as the formal. I wanted to make it a one-season film, bounded by the late spring and early fall snows. And I was inspired by the cinema tradition of sensory ethnography; by the smell of sagebrush; by my own feeling for the rhythm of life off-grid and by the knowledge of how seasonality can permeate human lives too. These ideas



guided the pacing of the edit, the construction of the sound design, and the cinematography.

What were your intentions at the outset of following Hollyn and Colie? What were some of the major obstacles you faced in making this film? How did you address them?

My first intention was to make this a one-season film, a film with a strict structure. Their work is seasonal -- it changes with the seasons, and they often move jobs with the seasons too. So it made sense to place that boundary on the film as well.

So really, the big challenge of making a film like this is just that -- to follow these women. They are riding all over the place covering many miles in a day; the weather can change; their plans are always changing. And so, it was really a process to figure out how we could build our camera and sound and production approach to keep up with them. Producer Su Kim and I spent a bunch of time planning with our amazing team. Dan Timmons came up with a plan to make sound recording possible, and he also came out and captured location ambiances that he then used to build a real feel for the space in the sound design. We ended up shooting with three different cameras for different situations, basically depending on how much control we had and whether we were shooting from horseback. The horseback shooting meant building a really light camera rig that could be managed by someone while riding -- which takes a lot of skill with both camera and horse.

This is probably most obvious in that blizzard scene: Hollyn is pregnant, riding in a blizzard. And right there next to her is our incredible cinematographer Derek Howard, with two pairs of gloves on, on a horse and managing to get the shots at the same time. He was a popsicle at the end of that blizzard, but he delivered my favorite scene of the film.

And then, there was the fact that I was 8 months pregnant when we started filming. So, I was hauling a camera around up in the mountains, and per doctor's orders staying off horseback until after my daughter was born, which meant ATVing as far as possible and then hiking to catch up with the women as they worked. But I was actually used to the elevation since I lived there and hiked a lot, so I was able to pull it off -- but a shoot that was always going to be physically taxing was even tougher twenty pounds heavier and uncaffeinated!

In the end, becoming mothers turned out to be a really interesting point of connection between me and Hollyn, because my daughter was born right around when she found out she was pregnant. We are both women who love our work and our daughters, so I think I understood the personal choices she was facing.



What brought about the formal aspects of the film? How much did you shoot and what was the process of editing?

We actually had a very low shooting ratio, particularly for an observational film. So, we had to go into production with a lot of intentionality to get a story arc. Even though it was an observational film and we didn't know what would happen (we didn't know, for example, that Hollyn would get pregnant), I did have a pretty detailed list of shots and types of material that I wanted to capture. We knew this was going to be essential to giving the story the spine it needed to hold up whatever story unfolded.

During production and the edit, we sought to delineate the spaces of the film: the range and mountains, the interior of their cabin, and the warmth of the campfire in their yard. These different spaces tend to draw different portraits of the women; their grit when at work is contrasted with the intimacy of the scenes by the campfire.

And we worked hard to capture close-up moments with the animals: the horses, cows, and dogs, in particular. We wanted to feel them as unique presences in their own right, so that we could sense the way that the women's work is intertwined with their relationship to these creatures -- some of whom are working animals, some of whom are the herd, a very few of whom are pets.

So then, the edit was really a process of honing in on the central themes the women had given us and drawing it out of the material we had. I was able to assemble the summer material before I went to go shoot the "epilogue," so this meant that I could focus that shoot thematically in relation to what I could see the film was shaping up to be.

And then, once we had a full cut of the film together, I was really fortunate to be able to work with editor Curtiss Clayton, who brought a rich, cinematic sensibility from his work on many fiction films that I admire. We were really clear when we were bringing on an editor that it needed to be a fiction editor. I had already done what I thought could be done as someone with experience cutting *verité*. But the influences I went into the film with were not just documentary, and there was a formalism that I wanted to make sure we preserved, even as we shaped the character arcs. And so, Curtiss was able to bring that touch to the edit that I think elevates the storytelling and gives it more nuance.

Can you talk about the use of music in the film?

Obviously, this is a place where you can feel the hand of the director, so to speak - which, again, was important to me, because I didn't want to pretend that there is such a thing as "pure" fly-on-the wall observation going on here. It was intended to be quite a formally constructed film, and a film that took for granted the intelligence and dignity of Hollyn and Colie. So I wanted to use music that also worked with a very formal structure.



And so I chose Bach keyboard works. I have a music degree and grew up with piano music always in our household, so I am interested in how the sound and music contribute to the voice of a film. In this case, the sound design was going to give us that feeling of immersion in the environment. And I wanted the music to do the reverse: to elevate us, and to suggest all those things that come with Bach: formal structure, religious faith, and, of course, depth of feeling.

We were extremely fortunate that the incredible piano duo Anderson and Roe agreed to work with us. They were my first choice and I never dreamed they would say yes. Their interpretations of these pieces are exquisite and modern and essential to the tone of the film.

How does the film invite audiences to consider or confront the question of perspective?

As I said, female friendship is at the heart of this film. Hollyn and Colie both face life choices - choices that will take them down different paths. The summer together is a special time, something never to be repeated. I wanted to capture that feeling of joy and friendship at the outset through observational scenes that feel lived-in.

So, it is an observational film, but it isn't a film in which I obscure my own (or the camera operator's) presence. There are times the women look at the camera, or when they address me behind it. Sometimes I was just hanging out with them, or we ate dinner together by the fire. And the naturalness of what I was filming in those scenes is largely due to the fact that we were friends spending time together, and making a movie. So the fact that the camera was in my hands during those particular scenes matters, because that feeling of coming close to the women's perspective is really a product of them giving me their trust and being open with me.

And then, it was my job to use the medium of cinema to try to replicate the feeling of those moments in the edit and in the selection of the other moments that hold and frame those personal moments. For instance, I knew that replicating a feeling for the ways time was ebbing and flowing across that summer would help us to understand their work and their personal concerns. This is why we have several days close and open again: a sunset over the cabin, a starry night followed by a new work day. The repetitive nature of the work was important, but couldn't be boring. And the shifting of the seasons that frame the film point towards the inevitable end of this special time together. There is a return to the same willow plant as it loses its leaves and the season closes, we see the creek in spring with ice on it, and then thawed -- these elements aren't decorative, they help us lean into this world and feel the joys and pressures of seasonal work.

And so, gradually as time passes, the nagging concerns of the outside world creep in: family, future, career, financial stability.



To what extent can we understand another person’s life through cinema?

Often, as you are developing a film, you latch onto a quote that you are sure will open your film. For me, the guiding quote was the opening line of *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold: “There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot.”

Of course, the quote doesn’t open the film. But it describes a posture toward life on this earth that I was leaning into living out in those mountains, and which I recognized in Hollyn and Colie.

Having followed Hollyn and Colie as they work, I have great admiration for them. They are educated women who eschew materialism in favor of a life enriched by their spiritual beliefs, their time spent on the land, with each other, and with their animals. At the same time, their work can be brutal, exhausting, and lonely. Hypermasculinity permeates their world. In the face of this, they tell me they are sustained by the vistas, their faith, and the feeling of knowing you’ve completed a job well done. My intention was to render all these aspects of life with nuance and subtlety. I wanted to carve out a cinematic space to feel the world through their eyes.

So, I hope that the landscape in which Hollyn and Colie work feels like more than a “backdrop” for our heroines. I wanted to build a sense of the awe and love of the land that sustains them through tough times, to invite audiences to see and hear this place as something, as Leopold would put it, that we “can’t live without.” And to admire the work, just as they do.

I don’t think it would be right to claim that this means the audience understands everything about Hollyn and Colie. But I hope that the film curates a certain experience for the audience that I do feel is essential to who they are.

There is a sense of anticipated danger that is present in the film. Can you talk about why this was important for you to include?

Doing the work they do, there is always the possibility that something could happen that would upend it all. When you ask Hollyn and Colie what they would do if one of them got hurt, since they had no working means of calling for help, Colie’d say, “I trust Hollyn to carry me out.” And Hollyn would say the same of Colie. The day-to-day work is physically gruelling, but they are very skilled, so in general, they stay safe. But they don’t have control over everything. And the trust that they put in each other to go out together like that -- it speaks to the depth of their friendship.

So, we open with an unruly horse, to remind us just how large and powerful the animals they work with are, compared to them. And generally with the cinematography, we sought to capture different feelings of movement, not just of the camera and the two main



characters, but also of the wild world in which they work. The shifting rhythms of the place, sometimes very still and then suddenly blustering with wind and snow - it was important to building the sense of what these women contend with.

Similarly, we looked for ways to indicate the elements of the earth in the sound and cinematography: wind, fire, dust, muddy earth, and running water. This was not merely a means of pointing to the land, but a means of shaping the audience's experience: to feel a place in flux, the shifting seasons, the sudden bouts of stormy weather. To understand, more viscerally, how little control Hollyn or Colie have -- and by extension, how much ingenuity their work entails.

Why is it important we understand Hollyn and Colie's point of view?

Hollyn and Colie are giving us a chance to feel a particular rural American life through their eyes. And in many ways, the challenges they face are familiar: balancing motherhood and work, trying to build a career out of short-term "gigs," finding meaning in work and friendship. But there are also concerns that are very specific to their world: agricultural pricing and the shrinking of family operations, how young people from these family operations, and particularly young women, struggle to find a life path in an increasingly corporatized work climate. And maybe most importantly, they show us the beauty and devotion they have to their way of life; how much a feeling of connection to a particular place or even a single piece of land like a family ranch drives their choices. How much, in other words, the landscape of the mountain West is "in their bones" and that as a consequence, they will push forward into an unknown future in the hope of creating a place for themselves in a place they know is home.



ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

Emelie Mahdavian (DIRECTOR, PRODUCER, EDITOR)

Emelie Mahdavian is an Emmy, Peabody, and Sundance Award-winning filmmaker who was selected for DOCNYC's 2020 "40 Under 40" list. She produced, wrote, and edited *MIDNIGHT TRAVELER*, which won numerous international prizes and was nominated for a Gotham Award for Best Documentary. Previously, she created dance films which screened at Dance on Camera at Lincoln Center and other international museums and festivals. She is currently developing a nonfiction feature with Alonzo King Lines Ballet and writing a narrative feature set in the American West.

Emelie was previously a professional dancer and has a Ph.D. in Performance Studies with an emphasis on Film Practice as Research from the University of California, Davis. She is an Assistant Professor in the department of Film and Media Arts at the University of Utah.

Su Kim (PRODUCER)

Su Kim is an Emmy® and two-time Peabody Award-winning producer in New York. She is entrepreneurial, creative and committed to crafting compelling stories and supporting independent filmmakers. Her films in release include the OSCAR® and Primetime Emmy®-nominated *HALE COUNTY THIS MORNING, THIS EVENING* and *MIDNIGHT TRAVELER*. As a producer, she was awarded the 2015 Women at Sundance fellowship, CPB/PBS Producers Workshop Fellowship as well as funding from ITVS, the Sundance Documentary fund, NYSCA, the Tribeca Film Institute and California Humanities. She is currently producing *ONE BULLET* (director Carol Dysinger), *SANSÓN, ME* (director Rodrigo Reyes), *Free Chol Soo Lee* (directors Eugene Yi and Julie Ha) and *SARAH* (director Tracy Droz Tragos). In 2020, Su Kim was the New York producer for *LEARNING TO SKATEBOARD IN A WAR ZONE (IF YOU'RE A GIRL)* which won the OSCAR® and BAFTA. *BITTERBRUSH* is her second collaboration with Emelie Mahdavian.

Curtiss Clayton (EDITOR)

Curtiss Clayton edited *THE ASSASSINATION OF JESSE JAMES BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD*, directed by Andrew Dominik; *BUFFALO 66*, directed by Vincent Gallo; and four films directed by Gus Van Sant including *DRUGSTORE COWBOY*, *MY OWN PRIVATE IDAHO* and *TO DIE FOR*.



He has edited over three dozen other feature films, among them CHILD OF GOD, directed by James Franco; SHERRYBABY, starring Maggie Gyllenhaal and MADE, directed by Jon Favreau; as well as BROKEDOWN PALACE and UNLAWFUL ENTRY, both directed by Jonathan Kaplan.

Curtiss Clayton is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and has been nominated for an American Cinema Editors award. He graduated from the University of Southern California film school and lives in Los Angeles.

Derek Howard (CINEMATOGRAPHER)

Derek Howard is a director and cinematographer whose films have screened at the Venice Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, Sundance Film Festival, HotDocs, IDFA, Clermont-Ferrand, Festival du Nouveau Cinéma (Montreal), Festival des Films du Monde (Montreal), and many others. Derek was the assistant director and 2nd camera on renowned director Victor Kossakovsky's Venice Film Festival opening night gala film "Vivan Las Antipodas" (2011), and Oscar shortlisted "Aquarela" (2018). He shot Brett Story's latest documentary "The Hottest August," (True/False, SXSW, & Hotdocs 2019) as well as Jeremy Shaw's Venice Biennale premiering art piece "The Quantification Trilogy" (VIFF, NYFF, Tate Modern) as well as his upcoming Centre Pompidou 7-channel video exhibition "Phase Shifting Index." Most recently, he shot Emelie Mahdavian's feature length directorial debut "Bitterbrush" as well as Alison O'Daniel's doc-fiction hybrid feature "The Tuba Thieves." He is based in New York City.

Alejandro Mejía, AMC (CINEMATOGRAPHER)

Alejandro Mejía is a lefty Mexican-born and an Emmy-nominated Cinematographer based in Brooklyn N.Y. His work has been presented at the Berlin, Tribeca and Sundance Film Festivals, Los Cabos and Morelia, as well as on Netflix. Winner of a Panavision Award, his film "306 Hollywood" premiered at Sundance and was nominated for a Critics Award in the US and Emmy for Best Cinematography. A proud member of the Mexican Society of Cinematographers, Jano's latest film, "499," won Best Cinematography at the 2020 Tribeca Film Festival, as well as the Golden Frog for Best Docudrama at Camerimage.

Anderson & Roe (Keyboard works of Bach)

Known for their adrenalized performances, original compositions, and notorious music videos, GREG ANDERSON and ELIZABETH JOY ROE are revolutionizing the piano duo experience for the 21st century. Described as "the most dynamic duo of this generation" (San Francisco Classical Voice), "rock stars of the classical music world" (Miami Herald), and "the very model of complete 21st-century musicians" (The Washington Post), the Anderson & Roe Piano Duo aims to make classical music a



relevant and powerful force around the world. Their five critically acclaimed albums have spent dozens of weeks at the top of the Billboard Classical Charts, while their Emmy-nominated, self-produced music videos have been viewed by millions on YouTube and at international film festivals.

Since forming their dynamic musical partnership in 2002 as students at The Juilliard School, Anderson & Roe have toured extensively worldwide as recitalists and orchestral soloists; appeared on NPR, MTV, PBS, and the BBC; presented at numerous international leader symposiums; and served as hosts for the medici.tv webcast of the 15th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. A live performance by Anderson & Roe was handpicked to appear on the Sounds of Juilliard CD celebrating the school's centenary. Highlights of the 2019/20 season include performances throughout North America, Europe, and Asia; a stint as guest hosts of NPR's From The Top; the release of nearly a dozen new music videos; and a multi-week residency at the Tippet Rise Art Center as recitalists, recording artists, and filmmakers.

Concordia Studio

Concordia is a talent-first studio, founded by Davis Guggenheim and Jonathan King, to produce and finance the most compelling storytelling with the most exciting creators.

The studio's slate includes three 2021 Sundance Official Selections in competition: SUMMER OF SOUL (Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson) which won the U.S. Grand Jury Prize for Documentary and the Audience Award for U.S. Documentary and is distributed by Searchlight Pictures and Hulu; HOMEROOM (Peter Nicks) which won the Jonathan Oppenheim Editing Award for U.S. Documentary and is distributed by Hulu, and AT THE READY (Maisie Crow) which will be released by Gravitas.

Previous titles include: 2021 Academy Award nominated and Peabody Award winning TIME (Garrett Bradley), which won the Sundance Directing Award for U.S.

Documentary and is distributed by Amazon Studios; plus U.S. Grand Jury winning BOYS STATE (Jesse Moss & Amanda McBaine) which is distributed through Apple TV+ and A24; A THOUSAND CUTS (Ramona S. Diaz) which is distributed by Frontline (PBS), and BLOODY NOSE, EMPTY POCKETS (Bill Ross & Turner Ross) which screened at the 2020 Berlin International Film Festival and was released by Utopia. Other recent work

includes INSIDE BILL'S BRAIN: DECODING BILL GATES (Davis Guggenheim) for Netflix, Sundance premiered WHERE'S MY ROY COHN? (Matt Tyrnauer) for Sony Pictures Classics, Sundance premiered BISBEE '17 (Robert Greene), Sundance Grand Jury Prize Winning THE PRICE OF FREE (Derek Doneen) for YouTube Premium and FROM HERE TO HOME, a series of shorts with the New York Times Op-Docs including Laura Nix's Oscar-nominated WALK RUN CHA-CHA.



About Wavelength:

Wavelength is an Emmy-Winning film studio committed to developing, producing and financing films that tell great f**king stories. Helmed by Variety's "2020 Producer to Watch" Jenifer Westphal, Wavelength has produced over 60 films since its founding in 2015. Wavelength has curated a truly impressive roster of award-winning, buzz-worthy films including Emmy-winning documentaries FEELS GOOD MAN and ATHLETE A, WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?, SELAH AND THE SPADES, MAYBE THIS YEAR, Independent Spirit Award-Winning FAREWELL AMOR, Independent Spirit Award-nominated COLEWELL, Tribeca 2020 Best Documentary feature SOCKS ON FIRE, past winners of the Sundance Special Jury Award for Emerging Filmmaker, CUSP and FEELS GOOD MAN, and immersive documentary, 32 SOUNDS, which was included in Sundance and SXSW's official 2022 selection. The full-service commercial and branded division creates content for clients such as lululemon, Hypnotic, and American Express. Wavelength is dedicated to cultivating diverse filmmakers in all stages of their careers, including the signature WAVE Grant initiative and regularly contributing to grants, mentorship programs, and workshops.



CREDITS

Directed by Emelie Mahdavian

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Cinematography by Derek Howard, Alejandro Mejía, AMC

Edited by Curtiss Clayton, Emelie Mahdavian

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Nicole Stott, Jenifer Westphal, Joe Plummer

Keyboard works of Bach performed by Anderson & Roe

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Editing Consultant: David Teague

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Studio Associate Producer, Nonfiction: Ryan Daly

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