



Films de Force Majeure presents

# THE LAST HILL BILLY

A film by Diane Sara Bouzgarrou  
& Thomas Jenkoe

WRITTEN & DIRECTED, IMAGE & SOUND DIANE SARA BOUZGARROU & THOMAS JENKOE  
WITH BRIAN RITCHIE

EDITING THÉOPHILE GAY-MAZAS SOUND EDITING & MIXING PIERRE ARMAND ORIGINAL SCORE JAY GAMBIT PRODUCER JEAN-LAURENT CSINIDIS PRODUCTION FILMS DE FORCE MAJEURE SUPPORTED BY CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE / PROVENCE-ALPES-CÔTE D'AZUR REGION IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CNC / PICTANOV\* WITH THE SUPPORT OF HAUTS-DE-FRANCE REGION AND IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CNC / THE DOHA FILM INSTITUTE / BROUILLON D'UN RÊVE DE LA SCAM ET LE DISPOSITIF LA CULTURE AVEC LA COPIE PRIVÉE / PROCIREP - SOCIÉTÉ DES PRODUCTEURS / ANGOA / SACEM PROJECT SELECTED BY EURODOC 2017 / PITCHING DU RÉEL - NYON 2018 / LES ARCS - WORK IN PROGRESS 2019 / RÉSIDENCE D'ÉCRITURE AU CHALET MAURIAC - RÉGION NOUVELLE AQUITAINE 2017 / STORIES & BEYOND - HOLLAND FILM MEETING UTRECHT 2017 / PARISDOC WORKS-IN-PROGRESS 2020 WORLD SALES THE PARTY FILM SALES

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# **THE LAST HILLBILLY**

by Diane Sara Bouzgarrou & Thomas Jenkoe  
Produced by Films de Force Majeure  
France/Qatar - 80 minutes - 2020 - Documentary

## **LOGLINE**

A cinematic last witness to a quickly vanishing world waiting to be reinvented

## **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

In the state of Kentucky, it is often said that its residents feel less American than Appalachian. Reeling from the effects of an economic downturn, mines that used to employ thousands sit empty across a wild, rolling landscape. Those remaining in the area are often referred to disparagingly as “hillbillies”. For Brian Ritchie, a gentle local worker and loving father, this term is a provocation to be proud of, regularly using it in his affirming, vulnerable poetry to outline his identity and subvert stereotypes.

“The Last Hillbilly” breaks away from traditional narratives around the American wilderness and offers a cinematic last witness to a quickly vanishing world waiting to be reinvented.





## LONG SYNOPSIS

In the Eastern sprawl of the rural state of Kentucky, it is often said that its residents feel less American than Appalachian. Reeling from the effects of an economic downturn following the decline of the coal industry, mines that used to employ thousands sit empty across a wild, rolling landscape. Those remaining in the area are often referred to disparagingly as “hillbillies”, a mountain-dwelling working class caught between a mythical past and an indiscernible future.

Brian Ritchie, a local worker and loving father, unexpectedly met directors Diane Sara Bouzgarrou & Thomas Jenkoe at a diner in 2013, when the pair were passing through on a road trip. An amusing conversation progressed to a seven-year friendship and a gradually opening door to an altogether different world, through which Brian, a humane and passionate narrator, acts as an intimate guide. For Brian, "hillbilly" is a provocation to be proud of, regularly using the loaded term to outline his identity and subvert stereotypes.

Split into three distinct chapters, 'The Last Hillbilly' begins by exploring the importance of family, especially for those who have remained steadfast in the region, despite its struggles. From here, Brian earnestly reflects on his position between worlds, displaying an inquisitive sensibility that is as comfortable questioning tradition as embracing it. In its concluding chapter, the film focuses on Brian's children, finding new energy in their naivety and optimism. Seemingly attuned to the uncertainty of their futures, they have nonetheless inherited their Father's distinct emotional intelligence.

Shot in unusual 1.33 format and accompanied by an ominous soundtrack from Philadelphiaian noise musician Jay Gambit and music composer Tanya Byrne, itself a novel blend of field recordings and adaptations of traditional Appalachian folk instruments, 'The Last Hillbilly' confidently seeks to break away from traditional narratives around the American wilderness. In its place, the verite style of Bouzgarrou and Jenkoe meets Ritchie's affirming, vulnerable poetry to offer a cinematic last witness to a quickly vanishing world waiting to be reinvented.





# INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTORS

## **You're both based in France. How did you come up with this film shot over several years in Kentucky, USA?**

What triggered our desire to make the film was our meeting with Brian Ritchie, our main character. It was in 2013, during our first stay in Kentucky. At first, like most people, we were just passing... One evening, we have a break in a diner by the road. Clearly we stand out among the regulars, that's when Brian comes to meet us and in his amused and casual way, he tells us, a little provocatively: "okay, so what the hell are you doing here?"

We were still far from imagining that it was the starting point of an adventure of almost seven years. It was one of those seemingly chance meetings, but retrospectively we realize it actually wasn't. For several reasons, we immediately clicked, and very quickly Brian offered to introduce us to «the real Kentucky». He opened the door to a unique world, his own, that of his family and friends, that he gradually introduced us to and we became very intimate with them.

## **Noteworthy is the fact that Eastern Kentucky is a specific territory...**

Absolutely! It's a rural and remote area where social organization is woven around family clans. This region has always had a particular relationship with the rest of the USA, cultivating a spirit of independence and a strong will for self-sufficiency, which goes hand in hand with a marked distrust for the outside. And the rest of the country is fine with that, referring to the people who live there as "hillbillies". A very derogatory word meaning «rednecks», literally «stupid people of the hills».

## **Why use this word in the title of the film?**

Because we were struck by the way Brian uses this insult and twists it to his advantage to question the history and culture of this region. Of course, there is the will to assert something about the insult itself, but his gesture goes beyond provocation: Brian uses this word to outline his identity and question the stereotypes behind it.

## **This is quite characteristic of Brian, who is a surprising character. Was it obvious right from the start of your relationship?**

Yes, very early on, he appeared to us as an amazing film character. First of all, with his psychological density, the accuracy of his thought process, and his very unique view the world around him. Then there is his voice, his oral inventiveness, his flow, which inspired us a lot. He is also able to unleash disillusioned and consistent anger, in surprisingly calm and specific words.

Brian deconstructs people's prejudices just by the way he is and speaks... sometimes even when pretending to confirm them! It's paradoxical, subtle... and captivating.

Creating a film work around him and with him was particularly exciting. We wanted to invite viewers to share this experience, to live in Brian's inner world, and to walk across his universe, in his shoes, for the duration of a movie.

## **How did you proceed, in terms of storytelling and staging?**

In order to access his interiority, we first wanted to use the texts he writes: they are vibrant with literary and poetic beauty, and manage to convey Brian's outlook on the world and his community. He becomes the bitter and enlightened witness of the harshness of



life in this region, which has been undermined ecologically, socially, economically, and lately politically with the election of Donald Trump.

Very early on, we gave him a digital recorder so that he could record at any time, when inspiration came or when he was experiencing something important. Voice-over recordings were therefore not part of the filmmaking process. These are very spontaneous traces of his inner life.

They are multi-layered: metaphorical, when Brian mentions a mysterious disease that slaughtered deer in the area; historical, when he relates the arrival in Kentucky of early settlers, the massacres they committed to settle down and the hopes they had invested in this new territory; and ultimately intimate when he refers to children and the anguish to see them gone. It became an essential element in the construction of the film.



## **The editing also plays a role in the immersive feeling within his subjectivity.**

Yes, because we wanted to offer the viewer a sort of «stream of consciousness», made up of moments of direct observation of reality and «disconnected moments», as we come across images and sounds that seem detached from reality, like echoes of thoughts, emotions, memories that run through Brian. There are certain wounds, certain feelings, which one can only describe as a daydream. There is also this feeling of nightmare in the face of the disintegrating reality. To carry out this associative editing while preserving the unity of the film, our editor Théophile Gay-Mazas was of great help.

## **How did you approach sound design?**

Brian's mind is pervaded with an ongoing catastrophe and an apocalypse to come. He faces the fear of seeing his world fall apart and disappear. We worked in this sense with Jay Gambit, a noise musician of Philadelphia's scene. During a recording session in France, he composed, based on a first rough cut, a score with instruments belonging to Appalachian music folklore, together with mining noises (once very present in Eastern Kentucky, but now bound to disappear) recorded on site. He reworked them until they were unrecognizable, like the remote echo of a long gone past. The music thus created is an extension of Brian's feelings and reveals both the death throes of a region and the dark foreboding of someone who sees it and dreads its upcoming end.

When the music appears, it is often the driving force of the scene. We paid a lot of attention to sound effects, through sharp cuts, use of saturation and change of tone of certain sounds, sub-modulation – or conversely amplification. It's a way of communicating emotions without words or situations.

## **Why this unusual, almost square-shaped image format?**

The choice of a 1.33 format made it possible to break away from the stereotypical representations of westerns, films about the great outdoors, etc. We didn't want to give in to the excess that seems attached to the landscape, and stay close to the characters. Although our film has connections with westerns, the myth remains in a minimalist and twilight form – and not in an iconic, visual or dramatic form so much so that it would keep us from seeing the rest.

We wanted to reinforce this approach by opting for a color scheme centered on primary colors, which we have emphasized by adding more contrast. We were aiming for a kind of «harsh» visual beauty.

## **Can you explain the three-chapter structure?**

Overall, the film is akin to chanting, and the chapters contribute to it.

The first part – *Under a Family Tree* – deals with the importance of the family clan, which is under an underlying threat, because what is happening on the outside (in the hills and elsewhere in society or the world) contaminates the inside of the family unit.

The second part – *The Wasteland* – focuses on those who, like Brian, stayed in the region, endure its harshness, see it decline and nevertheless continue to hold on to their way of life. We wanted that second movement to be more solar, on edge, like a suspended moment, a reflection of a present which is about to move into an uncertain future.

In the third part – *Land of Tomorrow* – the children, up until then in the background, take over the film. Gradually, they become the center. They impose themselves through their naivety and life instinct that is in sharp contrast with Brian's numbness more and more consumed by a feeling of failure. We wanted him to give way to them, to become at best a silent presence, an erratic figure, a mere ghost that haunts the premises.

We very much wanted to end on the children. On their energy and presence, but also on something that we viscerally felt throughout the shooting: a cry for help from a child, heir to a world in ruins he will have to reinvent.

*Interviewed in June 2020*





# DIANE SARA BOUZGARROU & THOMAS JENKOE



**Diane Sara Bouzgarrou** and **Thomas Jenkoe** live and work together in Lille.

**Diane Sara Bouzgarrou's** work is inhabited by characters haunted by their loneliness and exiled within themselves. Both raw and sensitive, her films explore moments of breach and return to the light. Her previous film, *I remember nothing*, was acclaimed in festivals, in France and abroad (Cinéma du Réel, Torino Film Festival, RIDM).

Through the question of Evil and borders (be it mental, moral or social), **Thomas Jenkoe** questions the divorce between Humans and the world in our modern societies. His previous film, *Memories from Gehenna*, won the French competition award at Cinéma du Réel and has been shown in prestigious festivals (IFF Rotterdam, DocFortnight at MoMA in New York).

*The Last Hillbilly* is their first feature film.



# CREW

Written and directed by **Diane Sara Bouzgarrou & Thomas Jenkoe**

Voice-over written and performed by **Brian Ritchie**

Director of photography **Thomas Jenkoe**

Sound engineer **Diane Sara Bouzgarrou**

Editing **Théophile Gay-Mazas**

Music **Jay Gambit**

Sound editing & mix **Pierre Armand**

Producer **Jean-Laurent Csinidis**

Production manager **Nora Bertone**

Production **Films de Force Majeure**

Nationality **France, Qatar**

Length **80 minutes**

Ratio **4/3**

Sound **Stereo / 5.1**

Language **English**

Subtitles **French, english**

Supports

**Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée | Région Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur** in partnership with the **CNC | PICTANOVO** with the support of **la Région Hauts-de-France** and in partnership with the **CNC | Doha Film Institute | Brouillon d'un rêve de la Scam** and the device **La Culture avec la Copie Privée | PROCIREP - Société des producteurs | ANGOA | SACEM**

Workshops & markets

**Eurodoc 2017 | Résidence d'écriture Châlet Mauriac (Nouvelle Aquitaine) 2017 | Holland Film Meeting Utrecht 2017 | Pitching du Réel 2018 | Les Arcs Work-in-Progress 2019 | ParisDoc 2020 | Cannes Doc 2020**



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