



Presents

# KOKOMO CITY

**A film by D. Smith**  
73 mins, USA, 2023  
Language: English

## **Distribution**

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## **SYNOPSIS**

In the wildly entertaining and refreshingly unfiltered documentary KOKOMO CITY, filmmaker D. Smith passes the mic to four Black transgender sex workers in Atlanta and New York City – Daniella Carter, Koko Da Doll, Liyah Mitchell, and Dominique Silver – who unapologetically break down the walls of their profession. Holding nothing back, the film vibrates with energy, sex, challenge, and hard-earned wisdom.

This vital portrait, edited and shot by Smith in bold black and white, is her feature directorial debut. A two-time Grammy-nominated producer, singer, and songwriter, Smith made history as the first trans woman cast on a primetime unscripted TV show. Executive produced by Lena Waithe, KOKOMO CITY won the Sundance Film Festival's NEXT Innovator Award and NEXT Audience Award, as well as the Berlinale's Audience Award in the Panorama Documentary section.

## FILMMAKER STATEMENT

My debut film KOKOMO CITY is a raw, edgy but rare look into the lives of black transgender women as they explore the dichotomy between the Black community and themselves. A conversation that's been avoided for many, many years has now taken center stage.

So many of our Black children grow up afraid and confused because of traditional values or admissible violence against them. Sometimes leading to death.

Before starting this project, I reached out to 5 directors asking if they would help film this project, they all said no. I went out and bought a camera and a nice lens and filmed it myself. No assistant, no lighting person, no editor. Just the vision of a truth.

I wanted to create a film that people outside of the LGBTQ+ community could be drawn to. At the time of KOKOMO CITY's conception, there was a lot of transgender content with this narrative I call the "red carpet narrative." It's when a fierce PR team puts a trans woman in a fabulous gown and has her speak like a pageant finalist.

That's not our real experience.

I wanted to see something different. I wanted to feel something untampered with. Something that looks like my actual experience. Something that we can all find ourselves in. Something without all the rules and laws that separate us as people of color. I wanted those walls down. In this film, I was able to share the private lives of four transgender sex workers who are never represented publicly. I offered the girls freedom. Freedom to talk like us. Look like us. Don't worry about the politics. Forget about makeup. Don't worry about calling your glam squad today. Just tell your story. I wanted to humanize the transgender experience.

After losing participant and sister Koko Da Doll to gun violence, a greater sense of urgency loomed. It also validated the core purpose of speaking with each woman in this film. To show and prove how beautiful but vulnerable trans women are.

- D. Smith

# BIOGRAPHIES

## D. Smith, Director/Editor/Cinematographer/Producer



D. Smith is a two-time Grammy nominated producer, singer, and songwriter and is now making her film debut as a director of the documentary KOKOMO CITY.

Smith's father was a world-renowned drummer, and she wrote her first song at 10 years-old for the choir at church in Miami, Florida. From 4th grade through High School, Smith was a visual arts student, winning multiple awards for her eye including winning the statewide NAACP Act So award for photography and the statewide Scholastics Congressional award for drawing and was flown to the Capital in D.C. where her work was displayed. After coming out to her father as a teen, Smith was kicked out her house and was taken in by a church member. After graduating High School, Smith used the last of her

money on a one-way bus ticket to New York City. She then began singing in the subway where she was first discovered and offered a publishing deal from Sony ATV.

As a producer, Smith teamed with songwriter Stacy Barthe and they began placing records with major artists in the music business. Smith produced "Shoot Me Down" for Lil Wayne's Carter III album which went 8 times platinum and performed with Lil Wayne on Jimmy Kimmel. Smith then signed a major publishing deal with Universal Music. She has produced and written for Cee-lo Green, Estelle, Katy Perry, Andre 3000, Monica, Lloyd, Fantasia, Nipsey Hussle, Ciara, NeYo, and Billy Porter. She has also collaborated with super producers like Timbaland and Marc Ronson.

In 2014, Smith decided to walk in her truth and transition into the woman she always knew she was. She was unaware that living in her truth meant that she would have to sacrifice the thing she loved the most, which was making music for a living. People stopped calling. And eventually after running out of money and options, she knew she had to move on from the life she once knew.

The silver lining came with the creation of KOKOMO CITY which has breathed new life into her. She devoted almost 3 years to it while crashing on different friends' couches. All the while diving into the lives of four trans women who had a story to tell. Smith was over the moon to receive the call that KOKOMO CITY was to premiere at the Sundance Film Festival.

### Harris Doran, Producer



Harris Doran is an award-winning filmmaker whose short film *FUCK 'EM RIGHT BACK* premiered in the 2022 Sundance Film Festival and won multiple awards including “Best Comedy” at Aspen Shortsfest making the film Oscar-qualifying. He was shortlisted for the Film Independent Spirit Awards' “Someone to Watch Award” for his feature film *BEAUTY MARK* which earned the 'Breakout Performance' Jury Prize for lead actress at its LA Film Festival premiere, Best Ultra Indie Film Award at the Woodstock Film Festival, Audience Award Best Feature Film at Austin Film Festival. He wrote and directed the short film *THE STORY OF MILO & ANNIE* featuring Academy Award nominee Cathy Moriarty which won best narrative short at Indie Memphis Film Festival and created the “Know Your Rights” video series for New York Transgender Advocacy Group. Harris recently directed Niloufar Nourbakhsh's new opera *WE, THE INNUMERABLE* presented by National Sawdust and Center for Contemporary Opera; edited the Podcast Movie *GHOSTWRITER* starring Kate Mara and Adam Scott for C13Features and Best Case Studios (#1 Fiction Podcast on Apple Podcasts); production designed Seth Green's pilot *WHITE HORSE TAVERN*; directed Michael Mitnik's play *FIDELITY* for the 24 Hour Plays on Broadway; and wrote, directed and adapted the film/theatre hybrid feature *I SEE YOU AND YOU SEE ME* for Queens Theatre which premiered on PBS/WNET. Harris directed and was one of the writers of the podcast musical *BLEEDING LOVE*, which was a top Performing Arts podcast on Apple Podcasts. He has written for the TV series “I LOVE YOU BUT I LIED” for Lifetime, “REENACT” for TWST, wrote/directed the satirical webseries *THE IVANKA DIARIES* as well as the narrative/doc feature *THIS MOVIE WILL GET INTO SUNDANCE*. Harris is an adjunct professor in Columbia's Film MFA program where he teaches “Directing the Actor.” Training: The Juilliard School. [harrisdoran.com](http://harrisdoran.com)

### Bill Butler, Producer



Bill Butler (Producer) is a veteran entertainment agent, manager, and producer in the motion picture, television, theater, and the music space.

After moving to NYC, Bill was recruited by J Michael Bloom, a boutique agency in the city before joining the William Morris Agency where he worked to develop the careers of those such as Calista Flockhart, Justin Theroux, Jon Stewart, and Jane Krakowski.

Later, Butler was made head of The Gersh Agency's New York office before becoming senior partner. In 2010, Butler exited his post and became a partner at Industry Entertainment which gave him the opportunity to start producing. His first producing title was the Sci-Fi Channel's cult favorite "Happy" starring his longtime client Christopher Meloni. He also produced a number of theater workshop pieces by Billy Porter, who Butler met and signed at 22 years old. Butler's 30-year working relationship

with Porter has seen an incredible rise for Porter's star and talents over the past 10 years that include his Tony Award win for Kinky Boots and his Emmy win for Pose.

Butler has long enjoyed his love of contemporary music, which has led him to launch his own independent record label, The Butler Music Company Inc. This venture brought Billy Porter back to the contemporary music scene by producing and releasing the #1 Billboard Club Play dance track " Love Yourself", where Butler was introduced to music writer and producer D. Smith.

Bill continues his work with Industry Entertainment where he continues to develop, nurture, and launch unknown and established artists across various mediums. In addition to his ongoing duties as a manager and agent, he continues in his role as a producer and currently resides in Manhattan with his Husband Calvin and their 2 French Bulldogs Venus and Serena as well as participating in various philanthropic organizations and activism.

### **Lena Waithe, Executive Producer**



Emmy®-winning writer, producer, actor, and founder Lena Waithe continues to lead the cultural revolution in Hollywood with creativity, diversity, and charisma. Waithe expertly taps into emerging societal trends with a sharp wit, speaking to myriad experiences from her unique perspective, while challenging audiences to think outside of conventional norms.

With her impressive eye for discovering and spotlighting underrepresented voices, Waithe navigates the intersection of business and entertainment in conjunction with her own media empire, Hillman Grad. The company aims to empower underrepresented artists and amplify the stories of diverse, historically marginalized communities across all industries by giving these storytellers the platform and opportunity to access the industry. The comprehensive slate includes projects at Warner Bros, Netflix, BET, Disney, Amazon, Universal, Focus, HBO, HBO Max and Showtime. Waithe's first first-look deal was with Showtime to produce projects such as the critically acclaimed series THE CHI, which Waithe executive produces. The Showtime drama series is a relevant, timely, and distinctive coming-of-age story that follows six interrelated characters in Chicago's South Side. The show has received a Peabody Award nomination, and Waithe received two NAACP Image Award nominations.

Most recently, Waithe, under the Hillman Grad banner, produced KOKOMO CITY, which won the NEXT Audience and NEXT Innovator awards at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival and recently screened at the 2023 South by Southwest festival. Hillman Grad also teamed up with Focus Features, Sight Unseen, and Makeready on the feature directorial debut of A.V.

Rockwell's *A THOUSAND AND ONE* which won the Grand Jury Prize at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival and is set to release theatrically on March 31, 2023. Additional upcoming projects for Hillman Grad include HBO documentary film *BEING MARY: THE MARY TYLER MOORE DOCUMENTARY*, directed by James Adolphus, which also premiered at this year's South by Southwest festival; the Disney Studios high school basketball movie *CHANG CAN DUNK* for Disney+; and an in the works Sammy Davis Jr. biopic. This June, Waithe is set to serve as the Ambassador for the 2023 American Black Film Festival.

Last year, Hillman Grad produced the film *BEAUTY* for Netflix, directed by Andrew Dosunmu and written by Waithe, which premiered at the 2022 Tribeca Film Festival. Waithe's Hillman Grad also produced Radha Blank's groundbreaking film, *THE FORTY-YEAR-OLD VERSION*, which blends real life and fiction to follow its protagonist, a down-on-her-luck New York playwright, who decides to reinvent herself and salvage her artistic voice by becoming a rapper at age 40. The film premiered to rave reviews at the Sundance 2020 Film Festival, winning the festival's "Directing Award: U.S. Dramatic," and was quickly purchased by Netflix for distribution. The film was certified fresh on Rotten Tomatoes with a 98% rating. Additionally, in November 2022, Waithe joined the producing team for Broadway's *AIN'T NO MO,* starring Jordan E. Cooper, which opened at the Belasco Theatre in New York City on December 1, 2022.

She also wrote and executive produced her semi-autobiographical series, *TWENTIES*, for BET. The show has been praised for being the first primetime series starring a masculine presenting Queer woman of color in a lead role. Because of this, *TWENTIES* was selected as a finalist for MIPCOM's Diversity TV Excellence Awards in the category of "Excellence Award for Representation of Race and Ethnicity – Scripted" and nominated for a 2021 GLAAD Media Award in the category of "Outstanding Comedy Series." The nomination was BET's first GLAAD nomination in the television space, further cementing its impact on the industry as an example of overdue intersectionality between BIPOC and the LGBTQ+ community. For the second season, both Waithe and Rajani executive produced *TWENTIES THE AFTER SHOW*, a half-hour show that explored key themes in each week's episode of *TWENTIES* and highlighted an esteemed roster of Black LGBTQ+ voices, giving them the platform to share their personal experiences with the world.

Waithe and Hillman Grad go above and beyond to provide a platform and fellowship for diverse voices on the rise through the Hillman Grad Mentorship Lab, which is currently in its second year of programming. The lab offers opportunities for marginalized storytellers to connect, grow, and accelerate their careers in television and film through personalized instruction from industry professionals in the fields of television writing, screen acting, and executive development. While Hillman Grad has already mentored roughly 600 actors, 120 writers/directors, and 30 producers, the 2021 Class was the first group to go through the official Hillman Grad Mentorship Lab. Hillman Grad also has an ongoing partnership with Indeed and 271 Films for the Rising Voices program, which is entering its third year. The initiative aims to discover, invest in, and share stories created by BIPOC filmmakers & storytellers by awarding 10 creatives up to \$100K to make a short film that will premiere at the 2023 Tribeca Festival in New York.

The company has expanded to include Hillman Grad Records, a label in partnership with Def Jam Recordings; a multi-project development deal with Audible, under which the first project release was *Kym*, an original, scripted comedy series inspired by the life of Emmy-nominated actress/comedian Kym Whitley; and a partnership with independent book publishing company

Zando. As one of Zando's first founding publishing partners, Hillman Grad will acquire and publish four to six books over a three-year period, including memoirs, young adult titles, and literary fiction.

On the acting front, Waithe can be seen in the critically acclaimed third season of MASTER OF NONE: MOMENTS IN LOVE, which she co-wrote, executive produced and stars in, on Netflix. *The Guardian* and *The Independent* praised the season with five stars and Kevin EG Perry deemed it, "the most raw, honest and utterly compelling portrait of a relationship that's likely to be produced this year." Inkoo Kang of *The Hollywood Reporter* also praised, "[the show] truly dazzles, pushing MASTER OF NONE out of its comfort zone of lovelorn pining into emotional and ethical complexities that never lose their sense of headlong romance." The role was originally intended for a straight, Caucasian female, yet Waithe has made Denise's experience as a queer Black woman uniquely her own. In the second season, Waithe co-wrote the "Thanksgiving" episode, for which she received an Emmy Award in the category of "Outstanding Writing for a Comedy Series," making her the first Black woman to ever do so, and a NAACP Image Award nomination. She also appeared in the third season of HBO's WESTWORLD and in Justin Simien's horror satire BAD HAIR which premiered to rave reviews at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival and was quickly purchased by Hulu for distribution. Previous acting credits include Steven Spielberg's READY PLAYER ONE, Disney's ONWARD, Showtime's THE CHI, Netflix's #BLACKAF and their animated series BIG MOUTH, Quibi's YOU AIN'T GOT THESE, NBC's THIS IS US, and many more.

Waithe's distinction as a voiceover artist can be heard in content and commercials for AT&T, Indeed, Palo Alto, and animated films and series such as The Proud Family, Big Mouth, Onward, Tab Time, Black Imagination, and others.

Waithe made her feature film screenwriting debut with Universal's QUEEN & SLIM, directed by Melina Matsoukas and starring Academy Award® nominee Daniel Kaluuya and Jodie Turner. The film opened to incredible box office success and received rave reviews for its "thought-provoking, profound and deeply affecting" storytelling, as mentioned by The Wrap's Todd Gilchrist, and received numerous accolades including two AAFCA awards, seven NAACP Image Awards nominations, one award at the annual National Board of Review Gala and "Best Picture" at the BET AWARDS.

For her numerous television successes, Waithe was named The Hollywood Reporter's 2020 "TV Producer of the Year," making her the youngest to receive the massive honor. In 2019, she was honored with the "Creative Impact in Producing Award" at the Palm Springs Film Festival. Waithe was also selected by the American Black Film Festival Honors to receive the "Industry Renaissance Award," which recognizes content creators whose exemplary work in film and television contributes to changing perceptions of people of color in the entertainment industry.

Waithe is an advocate for queer representation throughout the industry and has been honored with several accolades such as The New York City LGBT Community Center's "Trailblazer Award," a GLAAD "Media Award," the MTV Awards "Trailblazer Award," named OUT Magazine's "Artist of the Year" and featured on the cover of the OUT 100 annual issue, and featured in numerous LGBTQ impact lists and Pride issues across publications such as The Hollywood Reporter, Fast Company, Variety, and more.

Waithe grew up in Chicago and currently resides in Los Angeles.



### **Stacy Barthe, Executive Producer**



Stacy is an American songwriter, composer, and singer originally from Brooklyn, New York City. Barthe began her career as a pop and urban marketing intern for Geffen and Jive Records. Following her internships, she connected with producer Hit-Boy on Myspace and moved to Atlanta in 2006 to work together. A year later, Barthe met Ethiopia Habtemariam, who signed Barthe to a publishing deal with Universal Music Publishing Group. As a songwriter, Barthe has penned album tracks for artists including Beyoncé, Kelly Rowland, Britney Spears, Katy Perry, Brandy, Miley Cyrus, Alicia Keys, Nipsey Hussle, Tiwa Savage, and Rihanna. The song "Cheers (Drink to That)", co-written by Barthe and performed by Rihanna, charted at number seven on the Billboard Hot 100. High-profile producers Barthe has worked with include Malay, Cool and Dre, The Runners, Jerry Wonda, Supa

Dups, Danja, Dapo Torimiro, and Tricky Stewart. Barthe is also a Grammy-nominated songwriter for her contributions to Katy Perry's "Teenage Dream," Rihanna's "Loud," Miley Cyrus' "Bangerz," Nipsey Hussle's "Victory Lap," and Beyoncé's "The Lion King: The Gift." Barthe made her feature film debut where she played the role of the Black Madonna in the 2021 romantic drama "Venus as a Boy," which was directed by Ty Hodges.

### **William Melillo, Executive Producer**



For over 35 years, William Melillo has left his mark as a founder, creator and producer of various New York City venues and BQE Productions. He raised funds with BQE for HIV & Aids organizations during New York City Pride and events for People of Color from 2000-2005. He executive produced Grace Jones Halloween Party '89, and events for the likes of Lady Gaga, Mary J. Blige, Janet Jackson, Lil Kim, Ashanti, Blu Cantrell, and Syleena Johnson. William Melillo was born and raised in the Peterstown section of Elizabeth, New Jersey, and has lived in New York City since 1987.

## Daniella Carter, Film Participant



Daniella Carter is a lifelong advocate for LGBTQ+ youth, Director, and Creative producer. She has given speeches at local, national, and international events, including panel discussions with political leaders and dignitaries. She spoke at TED Talks Live and also delivered talks during TEDxABQ and TEDxMidAtlantic. Carter appeared in a Puma campaign alongside Cara Delevingne and shared her experience with youth homelessness at the Human Rights Campaign's "Time to Thrive Conference." She was recognized on the 2015 Trans 100 list and attended the Obama White House's Annual Emerging Leaders Day, highlighting 100 Black leaders. She has appeared on MSNBC, Good Morning America, ABC News, and the New York Daily News, Ms. Carter recently executive produced a Nirvana reimagined as house techno

and was featured in BBC's Nirvana's 25th-anniversary documentary, Grammys.com, People Magazine, Forbes.com and in the New York Times. Daniella initiated a project to bring visibility to trans youth issues and has collaborated with Miss Universe and others to share their experiences in overcoming homelessness. She has worked with her mentor Laverne Cox and was featured in the Emmy award-winning MTV & Logo documentary, Laverne Cox Presents: The T Word. Daniella's message transcends boundaries of race, class, and gender, focusing on the intersection of identities, in the fall of 2020, she participated in a groundbreaking ADCOLOR panel on LGBTQ inclusion in advertising with GLAAD and Peppermint. She also spoke about trans issues on a Vote America panel alongside Mary L. Trump and GLAAD President and CEO Sarah Kate Ellis. She is also the subject of an episode of Robin Roberts' Thriver Thursday series. In August 2020, she launched 'Daniella's Guestbook', in partnership with creative agency SpecialGuest.co. 'Daniella's Guestbook, a site, and Instagram channel spotlight the work of Black creators to unlock employment opportunities in advertising and creative industries for them and other BIPOC creators. This past December Daniella produced a short film that opened up for John Galliano at the 2021 DVOF festival in Paris and at the Chelsea Film Festival's 10th anniversary. She recently released a series that she co-directed for Glaad in partnership with Gilead Sciences Compass grant program. Carter is also featured in the award-winning documentary KOKOMO CITY which is set to have its theatrical release on July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

## **Dominique Silver, Film Participant**



Intelligent, kind and beautiful are three words that are commonly used to describe Dominique Silver. She was born in San Diego. Growing up in the National City area, science was her favorite subject to study. Reading and fitness are two of Dominique's favorite ways to sustain her mind and body. Author Hope Giselle's book 'Until I Met Black Men' made a strong impression on Dominique. She feels that it really puts a perspective on transitioning as a black transgender woman in this society. Her favorite authors are Maya Angelou, Hope Giselle, Viola Davis, and Michelle Obama. Her favorite fitness activities include SLT (Strengthening, Lengthening and Toning), Cardio and dance.

Dominique made her modeling debut when she was asked to do a Patricia Field fashion show on ice in Rockefeller Center. She was scouted shortly after by a huge mainstream modeling agency. She was an instant success and rapidly reached the heights of the fashion industry.

Iconic photographer Glen Luchford photographed Dominique for the cover of Richardson Magazine. Calvin Klein cast her for its 2022 Pride campaign, photographed by John Edmonds. Dominique is also the first black trans woman to be cast by Ulta Cosmetics for its Great Lengths Campaign. Famed photographer Ethan James Green has been a frequent collaborator and champion of Dominique. In 2023, Dominique was seen in the Renaissance Couture campaign with Beyoncé which appeared in French Vogue.

Acting is another enterprise of Dominique's. She made her television debut on Ryan Murphy's "Pose" on FX, playing Nakisha.

Activism work is another of Dominique's passions. She is actively fighting for equality, educating people about the struggles that people of color face on a daily basis in America. Her goal is to bring awareness to issues like racism, inequality, misrepresentation, and ending pay gaps.

Currently she lives in New York.

### **Koko Da Doll, Film Participant**



Koko Da Doll is from Atlanta, Georgia and grew up in the Southside College Park area. She's been writing music for at least three years and began her transition at the age of 13. She was a talented aspiring musician who released her songs "Trick" and "Bulletproof" under the name "Hollywood Koko." Koko had plans to create her own hair brand titled "Hollywood Koko Collections." During the Sundance Film Festival Koko stated "I will be the reason there's more opportunities and doors opening for transgender girls I would like to start off by saying thank you so much to D. Smith and Dustin Lohman for giving me this opportunity, and for believing in me, and wanting to get my story out so beautifully thank you so much what you've done here for

me is going to save a lot of lives."

### **Liyah Mitchell, Film Participant**



Hey my name is Liyah, a girl from a small city with big dreams. I'd like to see myself as a diamond in a rough. Young Black trans woman of color fighting for her rights of equality. I was always outcasted in my younger years, but I fell in love with the fact that my difference and individuality is what made me who I am and stand out. What I learned in life is that you are not your past but where you're headed to, you can achieve anything if you put your mind to it, you can make your dreams a reality. And everything happens for a reason. Never let people take away your shine. Everyone can be a star, but only few are chosen. And if god chose you then follow. I am a survivor, a warrior that made it through. and I hope that my story can prove to girls like me that if I can do it, you can do it too :) ☆

## **PRODUCTION CREDITS**

A film by  
D. Smith

Filmed, edited, and directed by  
D. Smith

Produced by  
D. Smith

Produced by  
Harris Doran

Produced by  
Bill Butler

Executive Producers  
Lena Waithe  
Rishi Rajani  
Stacy Barthe  
William Melillo

Starring  
Daniella Carter  
Dominique Silver  
Koko Da Doll  
Liyah Mitchell

with  
Bancroft Fitzgerald  
Bebé Smith  
Colt Walker  
INW Tarxan  
James Tony  
Joss Amor  
Lexx Pharaoh  
Lenox Love  
Michael Carlos Jones aka “LØ”  
Rebecca Elise Torner  
Rich-Paris  
XoTommy

Casting by  
D. Smith  
Dustin Lohman

Title Design by  
Mary Hawkins

Associate Producer  
Dustin Lohman

Technical Editor  
Harris Doran

Post-Production Supervisor  
Harris Doran

Supervising Sound Editor/Re-Recording Mixer  
Ric Schnupp

Sound Effects Editor  
Roni Pillischer

Dialog Editor  
Kristin Catuogno

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