



Presents

# FREE SOLO

**A film by Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin**

100 mins, USA, 2018

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2017 Toronto International Film Festival – International Premiere

**Distribution**

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## SYNOPSIS

From award-winning documentary filmmaker Chai Vasarhelyi and world-renowned photographer and mountaineer Jimmy Chin, the directors of “MERU,” comes **FREE SOLO**, a stunning, intimate and unflinching portrait of free soloist climber Alex Honnold, as he prepares to achieve his lifelong dream: climbing the face of the world’s most famous rock ... the 3,200-foot El Capitan in Yosemite National Park ... without a rope. Celebrated as one of the greatest athletic feats of any kind, Honnold’s climb set the ultimate standard: perfection or death. Succeeding in this challenge places his story in the annals of human achievement.

**FREE SOLO** is an edge-of-your seat thriller and an inspiring portrait of an athlete who challenges both his body and his beliefs on a quest to triumph over the impossible, revealing the personal toll of excellence. As the climber begins his training, the armor of invincibility he’s built up over decades unexpectedly breaks apart when Honnold begins to fall in love, threatening his focus and giving way to injury and setbacks. Vasarhelyi and Chin succeed in beautifully capturing deeply human moments with Honnold as well as the death-defying climb with exquisite artistry and masterful, vertigo-inducing camerawork. The result is a triumph of the human spirit that represents what The New York Times calls “a miraculous opportunity for the rest of us to experience the human sublime.”

National Geographic Documentary Films will release **FREE SOLO** in theaters nationwide this fall.

## DIRECTORS’ STATEMENT

### CHAI VASARHELYI

**FREE SOLO** is an intensely personal film. I’m married to a climber and interested in the emotional questions around climbing. It was important to me that the film explore not only Alex’s internal dialogues, but also his personal relationships — those with family and friends, and the nascent relationship between Alex and his girlfriend, Sanni McCandless. We wanted to look at how Sanni lives with the risks Alex takes and how Alex deals with balancing his climbing aspirations with his personal life. The incredibly candid scenes between Alex and Sanni will always stay with me.

We wrestled with including the meta conversation around our filmmaking process. Ultimately, it was clear that the filmmaking itself was an important part of the story. Every day presented ethical questions of risk and filmmaking. It was an ongoing process between Jimmy and me as directors and Alex as our subject.

But Alex is not a maverick, he’s incredibly methodical. It was the process that allowed his free solo to succeed. Alex’s story has a strong aspirational quality that affected me deeply, and I wanted to pass on these vivid questions to the viewer: “If Alex can do this with his fear, what can I do with mine? What are the frontiers of the human spirit?” Those are some of the larger themes I wanted to explore in **FREE SOLO**. In its essence the film calls deliberate attention to the choices that we make: What’s a meaningful life and why?

### JIMMY CHIN

Free soloing takes extraordinary commitment because you’re climbing without a safety system to catch you. Simply put, if you don’t perform perfectly, you die. It is the purest form of climbing, and the most dangerous. It’s just you and the rock with no margin for error. Alex Honnold prepares meticulously for his solos and has a specific talent — he can control his fear absolutely. The greatest athletes are judged by how well they perform under pressure. To be able to maintain total composure

and execute perfectly for hours at a time when the stakes are life and death the entire time — that's extraordinary. The choices you have to make to be a free soloist point to some very hard decisions — in a way, to the essence of some of the hardest decisions that a person has to make in life: ambition versus family/relationships, risk versus reward, etc.

In making this film I had to trust Alex from the beginning, that he would only decide to free solo El Capitan if he felt he was 100 percent ready. It's difficult for me, even now, to imagine that someone could feel they were 100 percent ready to free solo El Cap. The technical difficulties are such that even if you're a professional climber, with a rope, on one of your best days, you could fall. Beyond requiring superhuman power and endurance, the climbing on Freerider is very insecure and complex; it requires an enormous amount finesse and nuanced body positions. There are sections where it's purely friction. Your feet are standing on nothing and there are no handholds to catch yourself. You have to be perfect. And he was.

### Q&A WITH ALEX HONNOLD

#### **ALEX HONNOLD**

*Q: What was it like, the first time you climbed El Capitan?*

A: Completely outrageous. My partner and I had the big goal for the season to climb El Capitan in a day—by any means, not free climbing, just doing anything we could to get to the top. We built up for it the whole season. It was a big adventure, a big challenge. We climbed the easiest route in 23 hours. Doing it represented a whole other world of climbing.

*Q: You've said that free soloing El Capitan was the ultimate climb you'd been working toward, the pinnacle achievement. What were your thoughts when you walked up to El Capitan the morning you were going to free solo it?*

A: Not really anything. The whole point of all the preparation was to ensure that on the day of I wasn't thinking anything through. I'd been doing a ton of thinking beforehand. The morning of, I was just on auto-pilot, executing. I did park in a slightly different parking place because I didn't want to see anybody in the meadow. It meant that I was walking a trail that goes past the length of El Cap. I was walking along the entire east wall and did think, "This sure is a big piece of rock." I knew that I was ready and that it was all happening.

*Q: Did you feel any added pressure because there was a movie being made of it?*

A: Not really. In a lot of ways I actually wanted the movie project. It put slightly more time pressure on it so that I would be motivated enough to get out there and start working. Climbing El Cap is something I'd been dreaming about for years but had not actually acted on because it seemed a little too daunting or a little too big. So I wanted an extra push to get me started and putting in the work. My big fear was that I would go my whole life without actually trying. There had been six or seven years that I'd said, "This is the year I'm going to solo El Cap," and then gone to Yosemite and said, "Nope, this isn't the year, and I'm not even going to try." I needed a reason to start putting the effort in and see if it was possible.

*Q: Where's your orientation when you're climbing? Do you look down a lot? How aware are you of where you are in relation to the ground?*

A: I'm very aware. A big part of going up on big walls like that is to have the exposure, to have the experience of being way up off the ground. That's definitely a big part of the appeal to me. In terms of "Do I look down?" Of course I look down. But in the actual movement of climbing, you're constantly

looking down at your feet and your hands and that doesn't mean that I'm thinking about the exposure. Primarily, I'm just climbing.

*Q: Where does the confidence and self-belief come from?*

A: I see it all rooted in rationalism, in a basic evaluation of objective reality: Can I do this? And if I can, then I just do it. If I've done something on a rope over and over and over, then obviously I can physically do it, so there's no real reason why I shouldn't be able to do it without the rope.

*Q: What are your thoughts about fate, given what you do? Many people would look at what you do and have a sense that you're right on the edge between life and death.*

A: I would hope that they're wrong about that! But who knows? I've never been religious or spiritual in any way. I'm not a big subscriber to fate. I see life as probabilities and chance and reality. Fate doesn't play into my thinking at all. But I definitely do think about mortality and my time being short. I'm very aware that I have a limited time here and I should make the most of it and do what I can. I think that the desire to do my best in climbing does stem in part from knowing that I'll only be here for a certain amount of time.

*Q: Do you have a sense of what the next big challenge will be?*

A: I have no idea. In terms of an El Cap type challenge, I think it might be another year or two before I really get inspired by something mega. We'll see.

*Q: I think it's fair to say that you do things that many people would not do because they would be stopped by fear. What is the difference there? Is it that you've learned to manage fear, or something innate?*

A: Part of that is that I've spent so much time being afraid. I have a lot of experience with fear, probably more than the average person. And I think that allows me to help differentiate when I'm truly in danger and when I should act on it — whether or not this fear that I'm feeling is important or not.

*Q: So it's almost like a practice then?*

A: It's such an interesting and complicated subject, fear and how the brain works. There was a story in Nautilus magazine about a study of my amygdala. One of the things I took away from that article is that my brain seems to light up a bit less than normal to begin with, so I was probably already on the fairly dull end of the spectrum in terms of a fear response. That combined with years and years of exposure to fear, now I think it's really dulled.

*Q: Why are you out climbing?*

A: Because it's awesome.

## **Q&A WITH DIRECTORS CHAI VASARHELYI & JIMMY CHIN**

### **CHAI VASARHELYI**

*Q: What drew you to want to make this film?*

A: Alex is fascinating. And he's a good friend of ours. And it was clear that a film like this should be made. Before we knew that he was planning to free solo El Capitan, we were flirting with the idea of a character study. Alex and I set up a time to meet, and he came to stay with me in New York. It was there that he told me that he was working on free soloing El Cap. And that changed the game a little bit.

What drew me to the story was the very, very simple fact that when he was a young boy, it was easier for Alex to go climbing by himself without a rope than it was for him to talk to somebody else and ask them to go climbing with him. That little kernel was something that I could empathize with, that I felt like a lot of people would empathize with. It was so unlikely for someone like him — given his talent, you could never really imagine that he came from that place. There was also the story's aspirational quality: If he can do this with his fear, what can I do with my fear?

*Q: What was Alex like as a subject to profile?*

A: Wonderful, because he's so candid. He is a very candid, honest, intelligent person. He's one of the best-read people I know. He's incredibly engaging, very open about his own limitations and also very open to thinking about the questions we asked. And he's so intelligent that he'll come back to the question if he doesn't know the answer. He's very engaged that way.

*Q: What were some of the biggest challenges that you faced in making the film?*

A: Clearly the danger and the ethical questions around the danger: Is this film something we even want to do? And if so, how do we negotiate those lines in a way that both honors Alex and the way that he would love this climb to be captured? And how do we get the emotional moments that we know are needed so that this is more than just a climbing movie? As a filmmaker you know you're there for those real moments, and they're sometimes the most difficult moments for the subject.

In terms of the *risk*, Jimmy definitely shoulders most of it because this is his world. His career is to make an assessment of risk in exactly these types of circumstances. My weight is more about: Are we doing the story itself justice in a way that respects the state of mind that you have to be in to free solo a mountain? Alex is so studied and prepared, and he's got a process. So how do you respect the process as well as film the real moments that are important? How do you make sure you can see his eyes before he does the climb because that's what allows an audience to engage? That was probably the most difficult part — negotiating a way to make a film that was meaningful within the very real danger of his endeavor.

*Q: And what did you think when you saw El Cap?*

A: It's absolutely enormous. Jimmy and I went and sat in the meadow and looked up at the lights of the people spending the night on the wall. It is unfathomably large. And what's so unique about Yosemite is you can walk right up to it.

## **JIMMY CHIN**

*Q: When did you first meet Alex Honnold?*

A: It was around 2009. Alex was this up-and-coming climber. No one really knew much about him but then all of a sudden he pulled off some of the most daring climbs the climbing world had ever seen. He free soloed a route called Moonlight Buttress in Zion National Park and then he free soloed a very iconic climb, the Regular Northwest route at Half Dome. Before Alex, there were a few really great free soloists, probably the most famous of whom were John Bachar and Peter Croft. Free

soloing is extraordinary and takes a lot of commitment because you're climbing without a safety system to catch you if you fall or make a mistake.

Normally when you're climbing and you get scared or tired, your technique starts to suffer. Your breathing increases, your heart starts to pound. Essentially, your capacity to climb falls apart. If you're climbing with a rope, you have the option of letting it fall apart and the rope will catch you. When you're free soloing, obviously that's not an option. You have to have a different level of mastery over your physical and mental capacity. You have to be able to completely control fear, which is a very difficult thing to manage. And what Alex did that's extraordinary is he climbed *really* big walls. It required a great mastery on a very high level. When people found out that he did it ... Well, it's not like anybody has to brag about free soloing Half Dome. It tells you everything you need to know about that person's ability as a climber. At the time free soloing Half Dome wasn't even something that climbers were talking or thinking about. It wasn't even in the consciousness. So when he did it, it was like, "Wow. OK. The bar just got moved."

*Q: When did you first learn that Alex wanted to free solo El Capitan and what did you think when you heard about that?*

A: Yosemite is kind of the proving grounds for climbers, especially in the big wall world. If you're a serious surfer, you move to the North Shore of Oahu and put your time in surfing Pipeline — that's where you cut your teeth and make your name. If you're a climber, you go to Yosemite and you climb Half Dome and El Capitan. They're the two iconic formations and climbing them is a rite of passage. So after Alex climbed Half Dome, if you even dared to think about it, El Cap was the next logical step. But people weren't talking about it. Knowing Alex all of these years, I let myself think about it, but I never considered it a possibility. We were friends and I didn't talk about it in case putting it out in the ether would in some way make it something that *he* would think about. I didn't *want* to talk with him about it.

*Q: How did the film about his ascent of El Capitan come to be? Did Alex come to you about the climb?*

A: After the success of our film "Meru" at Sundance, Chai and I were getting calls from studios and producers about what was next for us. Chai and I had talked about a few different ideas. In the back of my mind I thought of making a feature film about Alex, but I was conflicted because free soloing is dangerous, and a film about Alex would obviously involve a lot of free soloing. I knew exactly what such a film would entail, the kind of pressure it would put on myself and Chai and our crew because there's not a lot of room for error and the stakes would be extraordinarily high. I said to Chai, "I need you to think about it." Like me, Chai believed that the film could be very interesting because the choices you have to make in life to be a free soloist really point to some very hard decisions — in a way, to the essence of some of the hardest decisions that a person has to make in life. How does one make those decisions? That's interesting.

At this point, we were only talking about a film about Alex because he had never said to me that he wanted to free solo El Cap. So Chai had a conversation with Alex. She just wanted to get a sense of whether he would be an interesting character to make a film about. And in the conversation, he told her that he was thinking about free soloing El Cap. So when I talked to Chai after and asked, "How was your conversation with Alex?" she said, "It was great, and he told me that he would love to free solo El Cap."

I just stopped in my tracks. At that moment I thought, "I don't think I can handle that; I don't think I can make that film." As a climber and a filmmaker, your mind just goes to one place: imagining Alex falling and the fact that I would probably be there, and we're talking about a good friend of mine. And of course in my field of work you're very conscious of "Kodak courage," when people do something they wouldn't normally do because they're being filmed. I specifically don't work with athletes I feel make decisions that way. In a lot of ways that's what being a professional is: being able to make

good decisions, not to feel the pressure. But honestly, it's impossible not to feel the pressure if there's a film happening and a lot of people working on it and money involved and everybody's spent weeks getting in position. That said, if there's one person that I trust more than anybody I've ever worked with to make the right decision, it's Alex. He's just wired in a way where he manages external pressure very well. He doesn't let it affect his decisions ... but we're all human.

*Q: So many people who see footage of Alex's climbs can barely stand to watch — even when they know the outcome of the climb and that he made it safely! What was it like to be filming the climb in real time as it was actually happening?*

A: Before you start, you have to check your basic assumptions: Do I trust Alex to make the right decisions? And remind yourself: Yes, I do. Once you've done that, you have to put it away and go on to autopilot and focus on what you're doing because there's a lot going on. You can't make any mistakes either. You can't drop a lens cap that could fall 80 feet, 100 feet, 1,000 feet and hit him. You could kill him. There's plenty to think about. And, of course, you're hanging off a huge wall yourself so you have to be focused on your own personal safety as well. And you have to keep your camera equipment dialed in and know what lenses you're going to use. And you have to have enough water and food for the day. Things are happening for you as a climber and as a filmmaker. I say to my crew all the time, "No mistakes, and stay focused on the task at hand and don't get distracted." It's really easy to get distracted when someone's free soloing 1,000 feet off the ground in front of you.

*Q: Let's talk about the logistics of filming the El Cap free solo ascent. How many cameras did you use? Where were you as Alex was climbing?*

A: There were four cameramen on the wall, including myself. Most of us were up high. There were two remote triggered cameras above the Crux. Alex didn't want anybody there because if he was going to fall that would be a very likely place, and he didn't want to fall in front of a friend. We had one long-lens camera on the ground and we had a cameraman on top for when he popped over.

## BIOS

### Chai Vasarhelyi Director, Producer



Award-winning filmmaker Chai Vasarhelyi is the director and producer of **FREE SOLO**, from National Geographic Documentary Films. Co-directed with Jimmy Chin, the film offers an intimate, unflinching portrait of rock climber Alex Honnold, as he prepares for and then achieves his lifelong dream: to climb the face of the world's most famous rock ... without a rope. Vasarhelyi's films as a director include "Meru" (Oscars Shortlist 2016; Sundance Audience Award 2015); "Incorruptible" (Truer Than Fiction Independent Spirit Award 2016); "[Youssou N'Dour: I Bring What I Love](#)" (Oscilloscope, 2009), which premiered at the Telluride and Toronto Film Festivals; "A Normal Life" (Tribeca Film Festival, Best Documentary 2003); and "Touba" (SXSW, Special Jury Prize Best Cinematography 2013). Vasarhelyi has directed a New York Times Op Doc, an episode for Netflix's nonfiction design series "Abstract" and two episodes for ESPN's new nonfiction series "Enhanced." She has received grants from the Sundance Institute, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Bertha Britdoc, the William and Mary Greve Foundation and the National Endowment of the Arts. She is a member of the DGA as well as AMPAS. She holds a B.A. in comparative literature from Princeton University and lives in New York City.

## Jimmy Chin

Director, Producer, Cinematographer



Jimmy Chin is a professional climber, skier, mountaineer, 18-year member of The North Face Athlete Team and National Geographic Explorer. As the director, producer and cinematographer of the National Geographic Documentary Film **FREE SOLO**, which he co-directed with Chai Vasarhelyi, Chin captured rock climber Alex Honnold's nail-biting free solo ascent of Yosemite National Park's El Capitan.

Consistently over the past 20 years, Chin has led or participated in cutting-edge climbing and ski mountaineering expeditions to all seven continents and made the first and only American ski descent from the summit of Mount Everest. He is also a filmmaker and National Geographic photographer. He has worked with many of the greatest explorers, adventurers and athletes of our time, documenting their exploits in the most challenging conditions and locations in the world. He has garnered numerous awards shooting on assignment for publications, including The New York Times Magazine, Vanity Fair and Outside Magazine, and has directed commercial work for a wide range of clients, including Apple, Chase, Pirelli and The North Face. His 2015 documentary "Meru," which was also co-directed by Vasarhelyi, won the Audience Award at Sundance and was nominated for best documentary by the DGA and PGA. "Meru" was also shortlisted for an Oscar.

## Alex Honnold

Professional Rock Climber, Film Subject



Alex Honnold is a professional adventure rock climber whose audacious free solo ascents of America's biggest cliffs have made him one of the most recognized and followed climbers in the world. A gifted but hard-working athlete, Alex "No Big Deal" Honnold is known as much for his humble, self-effacing attitude as he is for the dizzyingly tall cliffs he has climbed without a rope to protect him if he falls. Honnold has been profiled by "60 Minutes" and The New York Times, been featured on the cover of National Geographic, appeared in international television commercials and starred in numerous adventure films, including the Emmy-nominated "Alone on the Wall." He is currently the subject of the documentary

feature **FREE SOLO**, which is being released by National Geographic Documentary Films.

Honnold is sponsored by The North Face, Black Diamond, La Sportiva, Goal Zero, Stride Health and Maxim Ropes. He is the founder of the Honnold Foundation, an environmental nonprofit. To this day, he maintains his simple "dirtbag-climber" existence, living out of his van and traveling the world in search of the next great vertical adventure.

## Evan Hayes

Producer

Evan Hayes is the Head of Production & Development at the Emmy award-winning production company ACE Content, where he is also a Partner. Hayes developed and produced **FREE SOLO** alongside co-directors Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin. During the production of **FREE SOLO**, he served as President of Production at Parkes +MacDonald/Image Nation where he supervised all aspects of production, finance and creative development in both film & television. Hayes also oversaw Parkes+MacDonald's discretionary development fund as well as strategic partnerships with Image Nation Abu Dhabi, Universal Television and Studio Canal, among others. During his tenure at Parkes+MacDonald the company produced and/or financed such films as James Ponsoldt's "The

Circle” starring Tom Hanks, Emma Watson & John Boyega; Davis Guggenheim’s “He Named Me Malala” for Fox Searchlight; and “Rings” for Paramount Pictures.

Prior to joining Parkes+MacDonald, Hayes served as President of Production at Story Mining & Supply Co. where he oversaw the Starz original series “Outlander” created by Ron Moore; the upcoming Fox Searchlight film “The Fence”, written by Dennis Lehane & George Pelecanos and to be directed by Peter Nicks; and “The Yellow Birds” directed by Alexandre Moors and starring Alden Ehrenreich & Tye Sheridan. Hayes also spent eleven years at Working Title Films, where he first met Chin, as a producer on “Everest.”

## **MORE INFORMATION**

### **About National Geographic Documentary Films**

National Geographic Documentary Films is committed to bringing the world premium, feature documentaries that cover timely, provocative and globally relevant stories from the very best documentary filmmakers in the world. National Geographic Documentary Films is a division of National Geographic Partners, a joint venture between National Geographic and 21st Century Fox. Furthering knowledge and understanding of our world has been the core purpose of National Geographic for 130 years, and now we are committed to going deeper, pushing boundaries, going further for our consumers ... and reaching over 730 million people around the world in 172 countries and 43 languages every month as we do it. NGP returns 27 percent of our proceeds to the nonprofit National Geographic Society to fund work in the areas of science, exploration, conservation and education. For more information, visit [natgeotv.com](http://natgeotv.com) or [nationalgeographic.com](http://nationalgeographic.com), or find us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Google+](#), [YouTube](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Pinterest](#).

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 AN ITINERANT MEDIA PRODUCTION  
 A PARKES+MacDONALD/IMAGE NATION PRODUCTION  
 A FILM BY ELIZABETH CHAI VASARHELYI & JIMMY CHIN

## **FREE SOLO**

DIRECTED & PRODUCED by ELIZABETH CHAI VASARHELYI & JIMMY CHIN  
 PRODUCED BY EVAN HAYES  
 PRODUCED BY SHANNON DILL  
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