

'PART OF THE

LEGACY

THAT SHAPES WHO WE ARE'





Oscar-winning filmmaker Kevin Willmott talks about his life in Kansas, his approach to cinema and his commitment to fighting racism

Interview by Martinez Hillard

Photography by Carter Gaskins

Illustrations by Torren Thomas and Lana Grove

IN FEBRUARY 2019,

Kevin Willmott won an Academy Award for co-writing the film *BlackKkKlansman*. This Oscar presentation followed a series of awards for the film, including the BAFTA (the British Academy award), and the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival. It also brought increased national recognition to a Kansas filmmaker and educator who was already well known for films such as the 2004 *CSA: The Confederate States of America* and the 2014 documentary of basketball legend Wilt Chamberlain's college career, *Jayhawkers*.

From his 1999 film *Ninth Street* to his most recent release, the 2020 film *The 24th*, the 61-year-old Junction City native has created fictional and documentary works focusing largely on American history, Black culture and race relations. His artistic creations offer insightful and unsparing critiques of the nation while also dipping into moments of delightful, absurd physical comedy.

For years a professor of film at the University of Kansas, Willmott is recognized as a collaborative creator—someone who builds and supports a community of filmmakers whether that means teaming up with Hollywood legends such as director Spike Lee or promoting his students and younger regional talent.

For this interview, Topeka-based musician and performer Martinez Hillard corresponded with Willmott to talk about Willmott's work, his life in Kansas and his assessment of where we are as a society in facing the issues his films bring to light.

Martinez Hillard (MH): Can you talk about your earliest remembrance of the social and political atmosphere growing up in Junction City, Kansas?

Kevin Willmott (KW): Junction City was a great place to grow up in the 1960s and 1970s. The Buffalo

Soldiers, African American soldiers who served on the Western frontier after the Civil War, lived in my neighborhood. The block I grew up on was the poster child for diversity. Almost everyone was racially mixed and biracial: Black and Korean, Black and Filipino, Black and German, White and Japanese, Black and Italian, Black and Vietnamese. It was great, but the problem was the city didn't celebrate the diversity. Unfortunately, they were ashamed of it. It gave Junction City a bad reputation because racism was the order of the day. Today Junction City is still very diverse and they should celebrate it! It is their strongest asset!

MH: Can you tell me what your experience was with integrated and segregated education and what you observed as a student through this period of integration?

KW: I went to an integrated school. But more importantly my father went to an integrated school at the turn of the century in Junction City. Kansas [secondary schools were] officially segregated in large cities. That is why Topeka, Wichita, Lawrence, and Kansas City were all segregated. Junction City was too small for segregation, and I recently learned my family left Mississippi to come to Junction City specifically because of the fairness it provided.

Kansas has always had a double nature. It is best described by my friend [Wichita author and educator] Mark McCormick as the "Noble Narrative." John Brown, the Civil War and Free State, William Allen White—all are positives about the racial history of the state, but there have also always been forces here working against them too. Lawrence, where I currently live, was founded by abolitionists, but then became segregated



5 SIGNATURE ELEMENTS

OF A KEVIN WILLMOTT FILM

Every filmmaker has a certain style and approach that carry over from one work to another. Here are some themes highlighted in many Kevin Willmott works.

FAMILIAR FRIENDS Willmott often works with a group of regular collaborators such as Spike Lee, Trai Byers, Byron Myrick, and Laura Kirk.

2 ABSURD AND THE TRAGIC Willmott's stories often combine the absurd with the tragic, blurring the lines between history and parody and challenging audiences to question the sense and often outrageousness of reality. *CSA*, for example, shows a story of President Abraham Lincoln trying to escape victorious Southern troops by wearing blackface. That's based on the real-life incident of Confederate President Jefferson Davis dressing as a woman to hide from Union soldiers after the South fell—and challenges audiences to compare the actual treatment of Jefferson Davis to what might have happened to a defeated President Lincoln. *BlacKkKlansman* follows the same pattern, juxtaposing the absurd reality of a Black man joining the KKK with traumatic photos of lynchings; the movie ends with the real and tragic events of the Charlottesville protests where anti-racist activist Heather Heyer was deliberately run over by a White nationalist in his car. The film opened on the anniversary of the protests and was dedicated to Heyer.

3 A COMMENTARY ON RACE in America Willmott's films often critique race relations in the United States, beginning with his big breakthrough, *CSA: The Confederate States of America*, a 2004 exploration of what modern America might have looked like if the Confederate forces had won the Civil War (and a disturbing examination of how harmful antebellum images persist in real, modern American culture).

4 A NOD TO OLD INDUSTRIAL-STYLE FILM Willmott will often intentionally edit the look of a film to make it appear somewhat scratchy, old-style, as if it was produced in the 50s or during the time the events took place. This technique was used in portions of *CSA* as well as in his acclaimed 2018 film, *The BlacKkKlansman*.

5 HISTORY LESSONS Willmott scripts extreme situations and characters, but he almost always grounds his themes in actual incidents and people. Two recent works are prime examples: *The 24th*, a summer 2020 historical drama about an all-Black infantry division and a racially-fueled bloody confrontation between soldiers and police in 1917 Houston; and *Da 5 Bloods*, Willmott's 2019 Oscar-winning film co-written with Spike Lee and based on the idea of Black U.S. military veterans returning decades later to the battlefields they fought in during the Vietnam War.

—Fally Afani

after the Civil War. Lynching took place here along with the many positives. Kansas has always had a few strong-willed people willing to do the right thing even when they were outnumbered. That is how we should look at it. For me, that ain't so bad!

MH: I'm curious about your time pursuing degrees at Marymount College in Salina, Kansas, and then at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. I imagine there was a fair amount of contrast between those environments. Can you share what was pivotal about having access to higher education and how it shaped your filmmaking? Also, what barriers did you encounter?

KW: Going to Marymount was like going to another planet for me. We didn't have a car growing up, and my family never traveled. For me, going 44 miles to Salina was like going to the other side of the moon. My mentor at Marymount was Dr. Dennis Denning, who ran an outstanding theater program, probably one of the best in the country. I learned drama from him. He gave me the opportunity to do my first play with a budget and production design. I wrote the play *Ninth Street* in his playwriting class. The Little Theater in Junction City refused to do my play because the subject matter [of returning Vietnam War vets facing racial prejudice] was too close to home. But the play won me acceptance into the program at NYU and it would become my first film.

MH: What inspired you to become a civil rights activist during your student years? Why was it important for you to advocate in Junction City, and how did you fold those experiences back into your screenwriting and filmmaking?

KW: I was expelled from high school during [the local] race riots in 1975. The school said get out and don't come back. The principal at the high school was one of the most racist people I have ever met and I've met a lot of racists in my day. [laughs] I worked at the Catholic cemetery on the CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training] Program, and Joe McCormick was my boss. He helped me to get into St. [Francis] Xavier's High School where I was educated by the Sisters of St. Joseph. They also educated me at Marymount. They were the best educators in the world. I also met my other primary mentor, Father Frank

Coady, who insisted I go to Marymount and supported my goal of being a filmmaker. Being thrown out of high school ended up being the best thing that happened in my entire life. I wouldn't have an Academy Award if I wasn't thrown out of school.

For me, I was always able to find acceptance and support as a kid but it was very difficult seeing all the racism around you. It is hard seeing others suffer. They would say "You're okay, Kevin, but he isn't." There were several racist teachers at the public high school. Their job was to control the Blacks. Seeing friends' lives destroyed by institutional racism was very difficult. I could have looked away and kept my mouth shut, but I didn't. That's why I still speak out today. History has taught us to always speak out against discrimination, violence, and injustice. You have to be willing to pay personally for your convictions and beliefs. Getting that lesson at an early age was probably the lesson of my life.

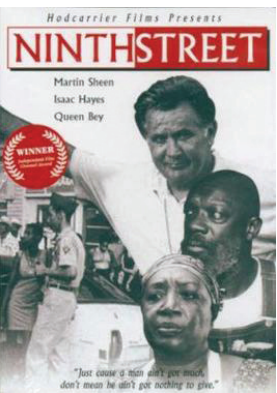
MH: I revisited your film *Jayhawkers* recently. Mr. Chamberlain's story—as a Black man, a student-athlete, and a public figure—continues to resonate in our society today. Can you discuss why, in the presence of change and with so many people pushing for it, there remains so much resistance?

KW: Many people don't believe in America. They would never admit it, but they believe in something closer to white supremacy. They don't understand how that has woven itself into every aspect of our nation. With every step forward, we see those forces still at work trying to hold onto the past. The best example is how they don't want to remove Confederate symbols from our society. Elected leaders who question a fair and free election and go so far as to call the system "rigged" should wake up Black in 1917 or 1929 or 1955 or 1968. They should wake up as George Floyd with a knee on their neck. We are seeing how they don't really believe in democracy when they are now asked to share it with a multiracial nation. They don't want to live in a nation where the police serve everyone fairly and equally. This fight is only just beginning. Kansas was always on the right side of that fight; I hope we find our place again. Unfortunately, we have lost our way.

MH: You've portrayed characters in your films as well. What is special to you about being on that side of the camera, or on stage, delivering those performances?

A WILLMOTT TIMELINE

90'S



NINTH STREET
 Film
 Year: 1999
 Willmott's role: Writer/Director/Actor/Producer
 Summary: Vietnam War veterans face

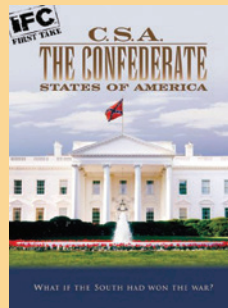
racial prejudice back home.
 Also involved: Martin Sheen, multiple Emmy and Golden Globe awards actor



THE BATTLE FOR BUNKER HILL
 Film
 Year: 2008
 Willmott's role: Writer/Director/Producer
 Summary: White vigilantes run afoul after mysterious disaster isolates rural Kansas town
 Also involved: Big Brutus, the giant Kansas steam shovel

00'S

THE '70S
 Television series
 Year: 2000
 Willmott's role: Co-writer
 Summary: Four friends graduate from Kent State into a turbulent nation
 Also involved: Disco



C.S.A.: THE CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA
 Mock-Documentary
 Year: 2004
 Willmott's role: Writer/Director/Actor
 Summary: What if the South had won the Civil War? Or did it?
 Also involved: Dozens of Kansas actors and crew

THE ONLY GOOD INDIAN
 Film
 Year: 2009
 Kevin Willmott's role: Director/Producer
 Summary: Kickapoo youth seeks to escape boarding school
 Also involved: Wes Studi, Academy Honorary Award Oscar winning actor

10'S

DESTINATION PLANET NEGRO!
 Film
 Year: 2013
 Kevin Willmott's role: Writer/Director/Actor/Producer
 Summary: Time-traveling Black heroes from Jim Crow past reconcile promises and failures of Obama-era America
 Also involved: George Washington Carver's secret rocket fuel and his clunky robot

JAYHAWKERS
 Film
 Year: 2014
 Kevin Willmott's Role: Writer/Director/Actor
 Summary: Wilt Chamberlain transforms basketball and Kansas
 Also involved: Justin Wesley, actor and KU basketball player



CHI-RAQ
 Film
 Year: 2015
 Kevin Willmott's role: Writer/Executive producer
 Summary: Black women advance radical solution to shut down gun violence
 Also involved: Spike Lee, Oscar-winning director

In addition to being a full-time educator, Kevin Willmott continues to create films and collaborate on a range of projects. This timeline represents only a sample of his past and ongoing work as a writer, director, actor and producer.

GORDON PARKS ELEMENTARY

Documentary

Year: 2016

Kevin Willmott's role: Writer/Director/
Producer

Summary: Challenges and successes of urban charter school

Also involved: A cast of heroic educators, students and parents

FAST BREAK: THE LEGENDARY JOHN MCLENDON

Documentary

Year: 2017

Kevin Willmott's role: Writer/Director

Summary: Homage to KU's pioneering Black basketball coach and College Basketball Hall of Fame inductee

Also involved: The 1968 U.S. Men's Olympic Basketball Team

THE PROFIT

Film

Year: 2017

Kevin Willmott's role: Writer/Director/Actor/Producer

Also involved: Scot Pollard, KU and NBA basketball star

BLACKKKLANSMAN

Film

Year: 2018

Kevin Willmott's role: Writer

Summary: True tale of Black cop going undercover against nation's hood-wearing bigots

Also involved: Hollywood stars John David Washington, Adam Driver, Laura Harrier, Alec Baldwin and musician/activist Harry Belafonte

20'S

DA 5 BLOODS

Film

Year: 2020

Kevin Willmott's role: Writer

Summary: Black Vietnam War vets return to battlefield, loss of charismatic, beloved leader

Also involved: The late actor Chadwick Boseman

THE 24TH

Film

Year: 2020

Kevin Willmott's role: Writer/
Director

Summary: Retelling of 1917 Houston race riot from perspective of Black army regiment

Also involved: Trai Byers, KU grad and star of *Empire* television series



WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE: WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH KANSAS

Documentary

Year: 2020

Kevin Willmott's role: Writer/Director/
Producer

Summary: Homage to Emporia newspaper publisher and political figure

Also involved: The voice of Bill Kurtis, prominent Kansas broadcaster

ARTHUR ASHE

Documentary

Year: In production

Kevin Willmott's role: Writer

Summary: Biopic of Black tennis legend and activist

Also involved: Ashok Amritraj, former National Geographic Films CEO

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Documentary

Year: In production

Kevin Willmott's role: Director

Summary: Rural Kansas fighting for equal rights

Also involved: CJ Janovy, award-winning Kansas journalist



5 TO WATCH

Kansas is known for producing some innovative filmmakers of color. Here are five young Kansans to watch with big projects on the horizon



Though she now works primarily out of the Kansas City area and teaches at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, African American filmmaker **DR. NICOLE HODGES PERSLEY** previously spent a lot of time working in Lawrence. She describes her recent short film *Epiphany* as a story of a young Black girl creating her own identity. "I think it is important for young Black girls to see images that center Blackness as the references for beauty, family, culture etc.," Hodges Persley explains. Currently, Hodges Persley has two projects that she wrote and plans to direct in pre-production after the Covid crisis, a TV pilot called *Mediocreville* and a short film called *Eighteen*. She previously worked in Los Angeles, but she found more opportunities to work between film and theater back in Kansas. "I started out directing film when it was actually film, film, not video, in the 1990s. Making movies was so expensive that I shifted to directing in the theater and have been directing there for the past 16 years," she says. "Returning to film at a time when anyone who has a phone can make a movie and not have to have a lot of money if you have artists who will collaborate with you is very exciting. I love being able to work with theater artists here in Kansas City who want to work in other mediums. I enjoy moving back and forth between theater, film, and TV projects."



African American cinematographer and Wichita native **MARCUS GUIDER** spends most of his time working in eastern Kansas. A previous film he worked on, *Now What?*, explores a young Black man's coming of age as he grapples with his identity. Currently, Marcus is working on a feature documentary called *Scout's Honor*, which examines the scope of abuse allegations against the Boy Scouts of America. He looks forward to using film in 2021 as a self-reflective medium to explore narratives of people of color. "I aim to create iconography that is rich in culture and spirited in the essence of humanity," he says.

NATHAN FUNG Chinese American filmmaker Nathan Fung lives in Overland Park but works in both Los Angeles and Kansas City. He has worked as a grip for Hollywood productions *Bill and Ted Face the Music*, *Logan*, *Deepwater Horizon*, and *Jack Reacher 2*. He says he enjoys working locally because of the people. "The film community in KC is so tight-knit, and everyone really watches out for one another. That's something you don't necessarily get in other larger markets," he says. "The film community really is a family here."

VIC DOMINGUEZ is a Mexican American filmmaker from Kansas City whose short film *We're Not Together* is currently in post-production and being edited by Secura Hatch. His latest short, *Beer & Cigarettes*, wrapped up in October 2019 and will be released soon. He keeps his projects local to stay on budget and to work with other locals such as Tony Ontiveros, DeVonte Brown, and Lucas Cohen. His plans for 2021 include working on another short.



TONY ONTIVEROS, who identifies as Chicano, lives in Lawrence and shoots films in Lawrence and the Greater Kansas City area. He just wrapped up co-producing and gaffing Vic Dominguez's *We're Not Together*, which he refers to as a comedy of errors and failing relationships. He's also in pre-production for a Christmas horror film called *Oh, Christmas Tree*. For Ontiveros, keeping his work local is an easy decision. "I've acquired strong relationships in production over the years and have a lot to offer as far as lighting and grip equipment. I have a lot invested here," he says. "I love the availability of living so close to the University of Kansas. As many experienced crew members leave for other adventures and job opportunities in Los Angeles, New Orleans, or Atlanta, I choose to stick around and look out for promising students from the KU Film Department who are graduating and are interested in breaking into the industry in different areas of production." Ontiveros also spent the pandemic working as a Covid compliance officer, making sure film crews follow CDC guidelines and safe practices on set.

—Fally Afani

Note: See also our profile of Native American Wichita filmmaker Rodrick Pocowatchit on page 26.

Also, do you think it's important to screenwriting and filmmaking to perform as well?

KW: I will often act in my films if there is a part I believe fits me, or if the budget demands it. In my film *Destination Planet Negro!*, I played one of the leads because it was a micro-budget, and I knew I would show up! [laughs] Acting helps your writing; it gives you an ear for dialogue, as well as pace and instinct. Writers should take acting classes or perform in plays to get a better feel for how drama works even if they don't want to act.

MH: You maintain a friendship and acclaimed working relationship with filmmaker Spike Lee. In addition to Mr. Lee, you've worked with lots of talented people. I'd like to know about your experience in collaborating with others and the trust that develops in the filmmaking process. What has to happen in order for a collaboration to feel successful to you?

KW: You have to feel like your collaboration is equal and your voice is being heard and respected. The collaboration has to be a fair give and take. You have to be willing to learn as well as teach. More than anything, the team must put the work first beyond egos and agendas.

MH: Congratulations on being awarded an Oscar for your contribution to *BlackKkKlansman!* Can you talk about how it feels to have your work recognized by the film industry?

KW: Winning an Academy Award was a dream come true. Watching those shows as a kid with my mother was always inspiring. Only in my fantasies did I think I would be on stage being handed an Oscar. But to be honest, I rarely thought about it. I only thought about the work. I learned from activism that you have to define success on your own terms. I did that with my film career. It kept me going when I was inside and outside of the film industry. I hope to never forget that principle.

MH: Lately there are many questions being asked of awarding bodies and their selection processes across numerous industries. Can you share your thoughts on what responsibility these various bodies have to the industries and creators they celebrate?

KW: Awards equity is really about industry equity. Awards reflect the equity of the business. If our stories aren't being told, then you can't compete for awards. If more stories are being told that give people of color jobs, then the awards will reflect that. More people of color need to be in positions to greenlight movies about underrepresented Americans.

MH: You've been an educator at the University of Kansas for 20 years. What are some of the conversations you have with your students about storytelling? Has the timbre of those conversations changed with time or are there still rudiments in place that budding filmmakers should always bear in mind?

KW: The big change was film turning into digital. However, the technology may change but storytelling doesn't. That is still the real challenge. Can you tell a good story? In the end it will always be the same journey and challenge to being a filmmaker. That is the role of education.

MH: What is important to you about having been in Kansas—as a father, educator, and filmmaker—throughout all these years?

KW: Living my life here made me love the state, but it is hard to be a Kansan these days. It is not the state I grew up in. My film *CSA: The Confederate States of America* is about the South winning the Civil War. That film made me understand how the South *did* win the Civil War. The best example is the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. How did Kansas, the Free State, turn segregated? Well, it listened to the South and adopted their way of life. This is how the South won.

Unfortunately, today the Confederacy is winning even more in our state. We [as voters] rejected the first Black president (even though his grandparents were Kansans) and the first Black woman vice president. We reject health care, gay marriage, and anything that makes the nation and our state a more equitable and tolerant place. ... I want people to know our story. It is far from perfect, but there are many things that made it great, and Kansas should celebrate those things. I am proud of Kansas. I remained in Kansas as a choice. Dwight Eisenhower, Langston Hughes, William Allen White, Gordon Parks, William Inge, Amelia Earhart—they are real heroes and Kansans. I feel fortunate that I grew up here and love being part of the legacy that shapes who we are. **KM**