

PROFILE

Sam Bathrick

BY SIMON YAFFE

FROM an early age, Sam Bathrick was imbued with a strong sense of social activism.

His parents, Jessie and Richard, were community activists in their native Atlanta and he belonged to a synagogue which was set up by members of a local gay and lesbian group.

And it was while working in West Africa with civil war refugees that he realised he could use those empathetic tools artistically, too.

It has resonated in the filmmaker's latest work, *16 Bars*, which is released at London's Regent Street Cinema on March 27, and nationwide a week later.

The soundtrack will also be released on March 27.

The film, which will be released on DVD on April 27, follows four inmates — Anthony Johnston, Garland Carr, De'Vonte James and Teddy Kane — who are serving terms or back on the street following incarceration at the Richmond City Justice Centre for crimes that vary from drugs to robbery.

And Speech — AKA Todd

These four are the story of millions

Thomas, from Grammy award-winning hip-hop group Arrested Development — thinks he can help prisoners find their way through music.

His programme, a music workshop, takes him into the confines of the jail in an attempt to contact those who want to show their skills in the field of music.

And it is Speech's hope that they will find something that will give them a future that may be a lot brighter than the life that put them behind bars.

"I see this film as a catalyst for gathering people and starting conversations," Sam told me from his home in New York.

"I want all young people to watch this film, as well as those

I want my film to make people take good look at themselves



people who are wrapped up in the prison system in America.

"Maybe they will take a moment to examine themselves and, at that point, maybe make a different decision.

"Anyone who sees the film will be able to walk away and think, 'I know these people like I didn't know them before'.

"We did not try and zoom out and say this is a story of millions of people — we zoomed in and said these four (inmates) are the story of millions."

Mass incarceration is a huge issue in America, with the country locking up more of its citizens per capita than any other nation on the planet.

And Sam believes the film tells a micro-story: four men who are trapped in the system and whom are trying to find a way out.

"These guys, with the help of Speech, are writing music behind bars, so their lyrics gives viewers a really unique lens into their struggles, such as addiction, generational poverty and mental health, which have landed them and so many others behind bars," he said.

"Their honesty, humanity and courage are what made us want to

tell this story."

Speech first encountered the music programme at the Richmond jail when he saw a segment on CNN.

His team contacted Sam, who took it to his colleagues at Resonant Pictures, where he is executive producer and head of operations.

Sam, who first met Speech while making the PBS travel series *Music Voyager*, recalled: "We went back and forward over a couple of years with Speech and his manager, and then the jail.

"It took a whole while to get to the starting line.

"When we went to the jail, we took cameras down and started talking to inmates and seeing what their characters were like.

"Speech had an understanding of what this film meant to him, especially when it comes to the issue of mass incarceration.

"The film is meant to walk you in there plainly, without explaining that much.

"Homelessness is a big piece of it — you can't talk about prison life unless you talk about what happens when the inmates get out, where there is homelessness and drug addiction.

"You also have to talk about what happened before they went through the prison's door.

"The way some leaders talk about people shapes the way we think, so the film is meant to stand as a record in opposition to that.

"We know that these guys are human and they are not perfect — that is what gets lost in the news and the reductive politics, which reduces them to stereotypes and caricatures."

Sam, who lives in Brooklyn, read psychology at Wesleyan College, Connecticut.

But he was never really into the clinical part of the course and, instead, enjoyed the qualitative method research class, where he interviewed people to find out their stories.

"I started to think about why we are the way we are and what shapes us," Sam said.

A Ghanaian teacher at Wesleyan encouraged him to study abroad and, in 2002, he moved to Ghana, where he was a caseworker for a resettlement organisation which helped refugees from countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and The Gambia.

Sam continued: "It was about building their case histories, which was emotional and painful for them."

It was lonely for him at times in Ghana, where he also suffered from anxiety, which Sam describes as an "inherited trait".

The 39-year-old said: "I don't know if I suffer from it more than others, but I do know it is part of my family's genetics.

"I think anxiety is part of the Jewish experience, but that is not to say it does not exist elsewhere — it is just about the way people deal with it.

"In Ghana, people don't sit around stressing about their problems, for example.

"Being there was a transformative experience for me because I learned to get out of my head and into my body."

While not religiously Jewish, Sam, who is married to Korin, believes being Jewish means a

connection to his lineage.

"My family passed through Ellis Island 120 years ago," he explained.

"My great-grandma, who emigrated to America from Poland in 1903, lived to be 99.

"Part of my Jewish identity is answering to these elders who tell you how important it is that you are Jewish before it even makes sense to you."

Sam went on to follow his passion, discovering fascinating people and what makes them tick.

For example, one of his first films was *Run For Your Life*, which told the story of Fred Lebow, a Jewish immigrant from Transylvania who created the New York City Marathon.

Reduces them to stereotypes and caricatures

Then there was *200 Miles*, about ultra-marathoner Eric Gelber, who attempted to run a record 200 miles around New York's Central Park to raise awareness and \$1 million dollars for the Multiple Myeloma Research Foundation.

Sam, who is father to six-year-old Asa, has also produced commercial content for numerous brands, such as Delta Airlines, Jameson Irish Whiskey and Amazon Music.

While, thanks to the many streaming services, the film industry is oversaturated, Sam believes it is both a curse and a blessing.

He said: "People are hungry for documentaries that cut through and tell the truth.

"We were lucky to find distributors because they saw the film as more than just a commercial product.

"On the flip side, an album came out of it, so it is a commercial product which can benefit the artists."

■ 16barsthefilm.com



LEARNING: Todd 'Speech' Thomas working in the studio with inmate Anthony Johnston

AGE: 39.
BORN: Atlanta, Georgia.
LIVES: Brooklyn, New York City.
FAMILY: Mum Jessie, dad Richard, wife Korin and son, Asa.
EDUCATION: Wesleyan College, Connecticut.
SELECTED WORKS: *16 Bars*, *200 Miles*, *Run For Your Life* and *Music Voyager*.