

**STRAND
RELEASING**

presents

THE SKYJACKER'S TALE

A FILM BY JAMIE KASTNER

*Starring: Ishmael Muslim Ali (formerly LaBeet), Margaret Ratner
Kunstler, Michael Ratner*

PRESS NOTES

*Official Selection:
Toronto International Film Festival 2016*

Country of Origin: CANADA
Format: DCP/Color/ **Sound Format:** Dolby SRD
Running Time: 76 minutes
Genre: Documentary
Not Rated
In English

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THE SKYJACKER'S TALE

SYNOPSIS

From award-winning Canadian filmmaker Jamie Kastner comes THE SKYJACKER'S TALE, which gives unprecedented access to one of the top five most wanted US fugitives in Cuba.

Ishmael Muslim Ali (formerly LaBeet) is the American convicted of murdering eight people on a Rockefeller-owned golf course in the US Virgin Islands. After years of trying to get his conviction overturned, he took matters into his own hands and hijacked an American Airlines plane full of passengers to Cuba on New Year's Eve 1984, and got away with it. Until now.

Thirty years on the FBI's most wanted list and against the backdrop of his looming extradition to serve eight consecutive life sentences in the US, the film recounts the hijacking that got him here, re-examines his original trial and reveals a gross miscarriage of justice. In a story that is more relevant than ever with racially charged police brutality and injustice constantly in the headlines, THE SKYJACKER'S TALE captures LaBeet / Ali's first interview since the hijacking and includes never before seen footage.

Is he a heartless criminal or a victim? The audience must decide. But what emerges is a picture of American government and law enforcement attitudes and actions toward their own population that are shockingly similar to the headlines of today.

THE SKYJACKER'S TALE

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION (DIRECTOR: JAMIE KASTNER)

INSPIRATION – ORIGINS

As past titles of mine such as “Secret Disco Revolution” or “Kike Like Me” might suggest, I’ve been known for making idiosyncratic docs, funny films on serious subjects, or vice versa. So THE SKYJACKER’S TALE, at once a political thriller, an action flick, a whodunit, and a courtroom drama, may seem like a bit of a departure.

But it was a story, which once it found me, wouldn’t loosen its grip. I knew I had an incredible documentary character on my hands, an incredible story, full of injustice, and mystery, racial elements and famous figures all involved in a huge story, an American story with global resonance of which few people were aware. Then, as work on the film began, a seismic geo-political shift, the thaw in Cuba/ US relations, and suddenly Ishmael Muslim Ali (formerly LaBeet) and his story were at the center of current events again.

There were considerable challenges gathering the material, either because of political sensitivities navigating two old cold war enemies, or unearthing people to speak about a notorious racially charged crime on a Caribbean Island (St. Croix, US Virgin Islands) 40 years after the fact. As an exciting change, I received death threats, endured life-threatening night car tours of unlit island roads with crack-addicted guides, overcame influential locals set against my gaining access to characters. (Not that getting access to Gloria Gaynor for the disco film was a cakewalk either.)

This remarkable, charismatic, lead subject trusted me to tell his story. But could I trust him when so many people along the way vilified him? Others of course, backed him up. At every stage, from debates with the crew in the van, to debates with my editor, this character and his story have fascinated and frustrated everyone who has come across them. In the final stages of an edit, we regularly test screen, revise and test again. One day the audience would say: he’s obviously guilty, the next they’d say: he’s clearly innocent and you’re one of those bleeding-heart activist filmmakers.

Then one day someone who was not naturally inclined to sympathize with Ali said: “When the film started I felt one way about this character. Then I totally revised what I thought. Then I began to question what kind of person I was to revise my thoughts about this guy...” And I knew it was working. I have tried to structure the film so that the audience experiences a version of the fascination and frustration I felt and still feel with this story, the indignation at injustice - but which one? (And I still managed to work some funk into the soundtrack.)

A BRIEF HISTORIC TIMELINE

SEPTEMBER 6, 1972

Eight people are killed (seven white, one black) and several more wounded by masked gunmen at the plush Fountain Valley Golf Course, owned by the Rockefeller family on St Croix, US Virgin Islands.

SEPTEMBER 7, 1972

Responding to fears of a potential Black Nationalist uprising, US Virgin Islands Governor Melvin Evans calls the mainland for assistance. A posse of 125 police, FBI and U.S. Marshals conduct a manhunt of the island during which some 100 local black men are detained and interrogated.

SEPT 7-12, 1972

The five prime suspects are: Meral Smith, 22, Beaumont Gereau, 23, Raphael Joseph, 20, Warren Emmanuel Ballentine, 23 and Ishmael LaBeet, 25. All have some police or criminal history, and are considered to have links to Black Power movements. All five are found and arrested.

SEPTEMBER 19, 1972

Police announce they have confessions from all five defendants. Federal District Judge Warren Young, one-time Rockefeller corporate counsel, is named presiding judge for the upcoming trial.

OCTOBER 6, 1972

Famed U.S. civil rights lawyer William Kunstler, who is retained by three of the accused, calls the case "very important ...from the sociological and economic point of view."

APRIL 16, 1973

An unusually long pre-trial Suppression Hearing begins, in which the defense argues to exclude the defendant's confessions from evidence, claiming they were obtained by torture.

JUNE 12, 1973

Sensing Judge Young is biased in favor of the prosecution, Kunstler requests that the judge recuse himself.

JUNE 13, 1973

Judge Young hands down his ruling on the Suppression Hearing, ruling against the majority of the defense's arguments, including the claims of torture, concluding that the arrests were valid, "Tortures were not used here." He declines to recuse himself and the case proceeds to trial.

AUGUST 13, 1973

The verdict is delivered: All are found guilty; each defendant is sentenced on the spot to eight consecutive life sentences plus 90 years. Defendants are transported same day to detention in Puerto Rico, then transferred to federal mainland institutions in Georgia, Nevada, Indiana, Pennsylvania and Illinois. 1973 - 1984 Numerous appeals by the defendants, who steadfastly maintain their innocence, are denied. 1984 Ishmael LaBeet transferred temporarily back to St. Croix in connection with a civil suit over wrongful solitary confinement.

DECEMBER 31, 1984

Being flown back to mainland prison accompanied by three US Virgin Islands prison guards, LaBeet forces a pilot at gun point to re-route NY-bound flight to Cuba, where he has lived to this day.

1985

Co-defendants Smith, Ballentine, Gereau and Joseph are transferred back to prison in St Croix, USVI.

DECEMBER 1994

Defendant Raphael Joseph has his sentence commuted by then US Virgin Islands Governor Alexander Farrelly. He later dies, of an alleged drug overdose, six years after the pardon.

DECEMBER 2014

President Obama announces intentions to restore diplomatic relations with Cuba, a first step towards ending the 60-year embargo.

JUNE 2016

Talks begin between the two countries regarding an exchange of U.S. fugitives in Cuba for Cuban spies in the U.S.

THE SKYJACKER'S TALE

FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHY

JAMIE KASTNER

Jamie Kastner is known as the writer/producer/director of such idiosyncratic feature docs as “Secret Disco Revolution,” “Recessionize! (For Fun and Profit)” and “Kike Like Me.” His work has played at festivals including Toronto International Film Festival, London Film Festival, Rotterdam Film Festival, Hot Docs, and has been commissioned by BBC Storyville, ZDF/Arte, TVO, Bell Media and sold around the world on various platforms, won prizes, and resounded with audiences and critics alike.

THE SKYJACKER'S TALE

WHO'S WHO

ISHMAEL MUSLIM ALI (FORMERLY ISHMAEL LABEET)

Born Ronald Jean LaBeet in St. Thomas, US Virgin Islands in 1947, Ali successfully hijacked a full American Airlines plane bound from St. Croix, USVI, to New York, rerouting it Cuba on New Year's Eve 1984. Previously Ali and four co-defendants had been convicted of the 1972 murder of eight people on a golf course owned by the Rockefellers, the so-called Fountain Valley Massacre, a crime for which he has steadfastly maintained his innocence. Sentenced to eight consecutive life sentences plus 90 years, he had served 12 years at the time of the hijacking. He has lived in Cuba since the hijacking. The Skyjacker's Tale is the first time he has told his story publicly.

MARGARET RATNER KUNSTLER

Part of the Kunstler defense team, she became chief counsel for Warren Ballentine. Together with her late husband, William Kunstler, she would become known for her work on high profile cases that included the Fountain Valley 5, Attica, and Wounded Knee, and her work at the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) as an attorney and educational director. A speaker on human rights and consultant to Occupy Wall Street protesters, Kunstler co-authored with Michael Ratner Hell No: Your Right to Dissent in Twenty-first Century America, a handbook for activists. She still practices law in New York.

WILLIAM KUNSTLER

Radical American lawyer, dramatic courtroom presence Kunstler, along with his team, acted for Beaumont Gerecht and Meral Smith. Kunstler's famous causes dated from the early days of the civil rights movement through the bitterest days of the Vietnam War. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr was one of his early clients. His best-known case was that of the Chicago Eight, who were tried on charges that they conspired to incite riots at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. He was also known for his defense of prisoners charged after the 1971 rebellion at Attica Correctional Facility in upstate New York in which more than 40 convicts and corrections officers were killed. He died in 1995.

LEROY MERCER

Leroy "Lee" Mercer, born in St. Thomas to a single mother, grew up in the area where the defendants were first hiding out, although he wasn't acquainted with any of them. After four years in the U.S. Air Force, he put himself through university and law school in New York, driving a cab. Newly married, with a baby son, he had only been practicing civil law in St Croix for two years when he was appointed to the defense team, following the Fountain Valley Massacre and subsequent arrests, acting for Meral Smith and Rafael Joseph—at half his usual rate, a hardship for a new lawyer. He and his wife Mary Mercer, who worked in the Attorney General's office at the time, had separated by the time of the trial. Judge Warren Young, presiding over Fountain Valley trial, was also handling their

divorce. During the trial, Mercer bunked for a time with star visiting attorney Chauncey Eskridge. In his subsequent career Mercer became Virgin Islands Attorney General from 1984-1986. Now retired, he lives in St. Thomas.

MICHAEL RATNER

Michael Ratner, who died not long before the film's release, in May 2016, worked on the appeals against the Fountain Valley verdict. Ratner was a leading civil liberties lawyer who successfully challenged the United States government's detention of terrorism suspects at Guantanamo Bay without judicial review, represented WikiLeaks' Julian Assange, and was a longtime advocate for lifting the US embargo against Cuba. As head of the Centre for Constitutional Rights, co-founded in 1966 with William Kunstler, Michael Ratner oversaw litigation that voided New York City's wholesale stop-and-frisk policing tactic. He had previously worked with Kunstler on the Attica Prison trial.

JUDGE WARREN F. YOUNG

Chicago-born, Harvard Law graduate Young who died in St. Croix in 1980 at the age of 63, discovered St Croix on a visit after his WW2 military service. While establishing his fledgling law firm, he opened a bar and sold real estate until his law practice grew into an 8-man firm with offices in St Croix and St Thomas, representing such blue-chip clients as the Rockefeller brothers, Laurance and David, owners of the Fountain Valley Golf Course. It was Young who gave attorney Brit Bryant his first job in the islands. In 1971, Young was appointed Federal District Court Judge for St. Croix, by then-President Richard Nixon, hearing mainly corporate and civil cases, until he was assigned to preside at the Fountain Valley criminal trial in 1972. Judge Young served on the bench till his death in 1980.

CHAUNCEY ESKRIDGE, DAVID COAR, ROY INNIS

Refusing to be represented by a white lawyer, LaBeet had his family contact Chauncey Eskridge and David Coar, high-profile U.S. attorneys for the NAACP, the prestigious national black civil rights association. Among Eskridge's clients were Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and boxing icon Muhammad Ali. Attending as consultant was Roy Innis, St Croix-born attorney for the more radical U.S. group CORE, the Congress for Racial Equality.

KRIM BALLENTINE

Deputy U.S. Marshal Ballentine, one of the first blacks to be appointed to the U.S. Marshal Service, was based in his native St. Louis when he was assigned to head security in the Fountain Valley trial — distinguished for his experience as security chief in the 1969 trial of the Chicago 8, who were also defended by William Kunstler. Ballentine moved to St. Thomas after the trial and has lived there since. Married and living in St. Thomas since 1973, he is author of the self-published "The Last Negro," copies of which he sent to Harry Belafonte and President Barack Obama. Ballentine has also been active in an ongoing judicial battle to win USVI residents the constitutional right to vote in US federal elections, a right they presently lack.

BRIT BRYANT

Louisville, Kentucky-born corporate lawyer, longtime US Virgin Islands resident and former USVI senator. Bryant first came to work in St Croix in 1964 as a criminal lawyer; by the time he retired, in 2014, he was the longest-practicing lawyer in the USVI. His wife clerked part-time in the Fountain Valley pro shop, and the couple was friends with one of the victims: Pat Tarbert. On the day of the Fountain Valley Massacre, September 6, 1972 Tarbert, the pro shop manager, had stepped in to substitute for Louise Bryant, who had called in sick. Bryant was asked to be part of the defense team, but refused. He stopped practicing criminal law from that time on.

JEFFREY RESNICK

Connecticut-born Chief Assistant Attorney- General for the VI, Resnick had moved to St Croix with his parents and sisters in 1964, where his family opened a restaurant, and where Resnick worked while attending law school. The family considered themselves well integrated into island life. As Chief Assistant U.S. Attorney General, reporting to Virgin Islands A.G. Ronald Tonkin, he was a key player in the investigation and arrest leading up to the Fountain Valley trial, ensuring the legality local police in search and investigation practices, and liaising with the dozens of FBI and US Marshals brought in to manage the situation. He later went into private practice in St. Thomas, and was appointed a judge, and was honored by the District Court and the V.I. Bar Association in 1988. Retired and living in Florida, he hopes to teach law part-time.

JOEL SACKS

Sacks was a Washington, DC-based lawyer when he discovered the Virgin Island and moved his practice there in 1970. Appointed U.S. Attorney in 1971, he was looking forward to a long career in the Islands when he was appointed to lead the team prosecuting the Fountain Valley case in 1973. Before the trial was over, he resigned and was abruptly transferred from his VI post to a new and remote posting in Arizona in the Federal Narcotics Enforcement Administration, regional Director for the Southwest U.S. — a program that was closed down ten days after Sacks' arrival. He went on to work for the Department of Justice in Washington as assistant U.S. attorney. Assistant U.S. attorney Julio Brady, a USVI native and cousin of Ishmael LaBeet's, took over in Sacks' place for the remainder of the trial. Now retired, Sacks lives in Oregon with his wife.

BOB DWYER

Dwyer was an FBI agent, part of the agency's field division stationed in San Juan, Puerto Rico at the time of the Fountain Valley Massacre. He was flown to St Croix as part of the wave of federal agents and Deputy U.S. Marshals commandeered to help the USVI prosecutors. An ex-Marine Corps captain, he specialized in helicopter reconnaissance, so-called "vertical assaults." Part of the second team into the suspects' hideout house, in the ten days he spent in St Croix he also participated in interrogating Ishmael LaBeet. A 20-year veteran FBI supervisor in Latin America, since 1986 he has operated as an

international private investigator. Now based in Florida, he has written a book about one of his most dramatic cases — aside from Fountain Valley.

LEGRAND LEE

Lee, one of the only white officers in the VIPD, began as a prison guard in 1967, transferring to the force in 1968. In the 1972 Fountain Valley investigation he participated in the manhunt and interrogations. A skilled marksman, he was part of the sniper squad assigned to cover the St. Thomas airport after the LaBeet airplane hijacking, retiring with the rank of police corporal in 1988. Lee lives in Puerto Rico where he still consults on police work, and says he has “made peace with God.”

TINA TUITT

Dominica-born Tuitt, who lives in St Croix with her daughter, moved to the island with her USVI born husband in 1960. A waitress first at the Rockefeller-owned Good Hope Hotel then at their Fountain Valley Golf Course clubhouse. When gunmen stormed in, on September 6, 1972, she was badly wounded in one leg, but escaped death because she ducked beneath a counter. Later she lent her voice to petitioners who successfully sought a 1994 pardon for the youngest defendant, Rafael “Rafie” Joseph after 21 years in prison.

OHANIO HARRIS

Harris, one of the investigating officers on the Fountain Valley case, rose through the ranks from patrolman in 1968, to deputy chief of police, the post he held when he retired in 1992. Born in Frederiksted, on St Croix, like many of his fellow officers he went to school with several of the defendants, and his family were particularly close with Rafie Joseph’s. In 2008, retired from the VIPD, head of a startup sewage company and employed as a special assistant to the USVI governor, he was sentenced to a year in prison and fined, after pleading guilty to conspiracy to commit fraud, in a case involving a \$3.6 million contract to his company. He served six months in prison, with six months of house arrest. He lives in Christiansted, St. Croix.

DENNIS MCINTOSH

McIntosh, a St Thomas native, is the brother of Rupert “Goof” McIntosh, one of the suspects picked up by police following the Fountain Valley Massacre, for interrogation back at the Fountain Valley golf course. Dennis, a Vietnam vet who grew up with several of the defendants, lost his government job as maintenance worker after testifying at the Fountain Valley trial. He and his brother, now known as Juba, still live together in in Fredriksted, St. Croix, where he works in construction.

MARY MERCER

Maryland-born Mary Mercer Welcome, then-separated from defense attorney Leroy Mercer after three years of marriage, was a lawyer with the USVI Attorney-General's office in 1973. She was called by the defense to testify about police interrogations of the Fountain Valley suspects. She later represented Wayne B. Williams, convicted of the Atlanta Child Murders in 1982. She currently practices law in Maryland, specializing in wage claims and discrimination.

KEN KORSHIN

Ex-US Airforce who flew transport planes in Vietnam, Korshin was the pilot of American Airlines Flight 626, heading from St Croix to New York, on New Year's Eve 1983, when it was hijacked by Ishmael LaBeet (later Ishamel Muslim Ali). Korshin modestly claims to have had closer calls in his military career. Retired and living in Florida with his wife, herself a retired stewardess. He still feels airline security is "a joke."

THE SKYJACKER'S TALE

CREDITS

A CAVE 7 PRODUCTION

A JAMIE KASTNER FILM

Written, Produced and Directed by
Jamie Kastner

Editor
Jorge Parra

Director of Photography
Derek Rogers

Original Music by
David Wall, Jamie Shields & Adam White

SUBJECTS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

Ishmael Muslim Ali – (formerly LaBeet)

Brit Bryant – VI Senator (Ret.)

Michael Joseph – Author, “Fountain Valley 1972”

Ken Korshin – Pilot

Jean Keiser – Flight Attendant

Joel Spiro – Passenger

Melanie Chertoff – Passenger

Charles Christian – Guard

Sharon O’Neill – Flight Attendant

Ohanio Harris – VI Police Force

Legrand Lee – VI Police

Leroy Mercer – Defense Attorney

Jeffrey Resnick – Assistant Attorney General

Margaret Ratner Kunstler – Defense Attorney

Krim Ballentine – Chief Deputy U.S. Marshal

Joel Sacks – U.S. Attorney

Leroy Mercer – Defense Attorney

William Kunstler – Defense Attorney

Michael Ratner – Defense Attorney

Dennis McIntosh – Trial Witness

Jeffrey Resnick Assistant Attorney General

Bob Dwyer – FBI Supervisor

Jean Keiser – Author, “Above the Glamour”

CO-DEFENDANTS:

Beaumont Gereau

Hanif Bey

Meral Smith

Malik El-Amin

Warren Ballantine

Abdullah Aziz

CAST:

Ali	Bradley Gordon
Jean	Maarika Pinkney
Sharon	Charlotte Marie Knight
Pilot	Drew Taylor
Co-Pilot	Jorge Parra
Young woman in hat	Annie Kathleen Tuma
Melanie	Isabella Carr
Richard	Andrew Thomas Higgerty
Joel Spiro	Rob Young
Spiro's Son	Jonah Rava
Guard 1	Rob Ifidi
Guard 2	Edward Parks
Guard 3	Ro Manning
Tina	Tainya-Sue Brown
Vincent	Kwaku Adu-Poku
Charles Melsinger	Helder Ramos
Ruth Griffen	Daniela Biz
Alliston Lowery	Daniel Ellis
Nicholas Beale	Gino Raimondo
Joan Melsinger	Felicity Adams-Hannigan
Richard Griffen	Matthew Kovacs
Robber 1	Obsa Ahmed
Robber 2	Peter Bent
Robber	Jahte Le
White Officer	Paul Norie
Black Officer	Martin Huss
Hansen	Alioune Haynes
White FBI Agent	Daniel Peters
Black FBI Agent	Jesse Jones
Mike Hanson	Newscaster Voice

BACKGROUND PERFORMERS:

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Mike Mesich
Courtenay Bainbridge
Vince Cardarelli
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Bonnie Fairweather
Daniel Gomez
Wendy Graham
Suhan Hanifa
Deborah Jayne Smith

Debra Kaiser
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