

Official Trailer

2 min: <https://vimeo.com/513647831>

1 min: <https://vimeo.com/533839295>

Website

www.WitnessUnderground.com

Logline

Musicians escaping a cult push the boundaries of self-expression, only to hit the bars of their cage.

Short Pitch

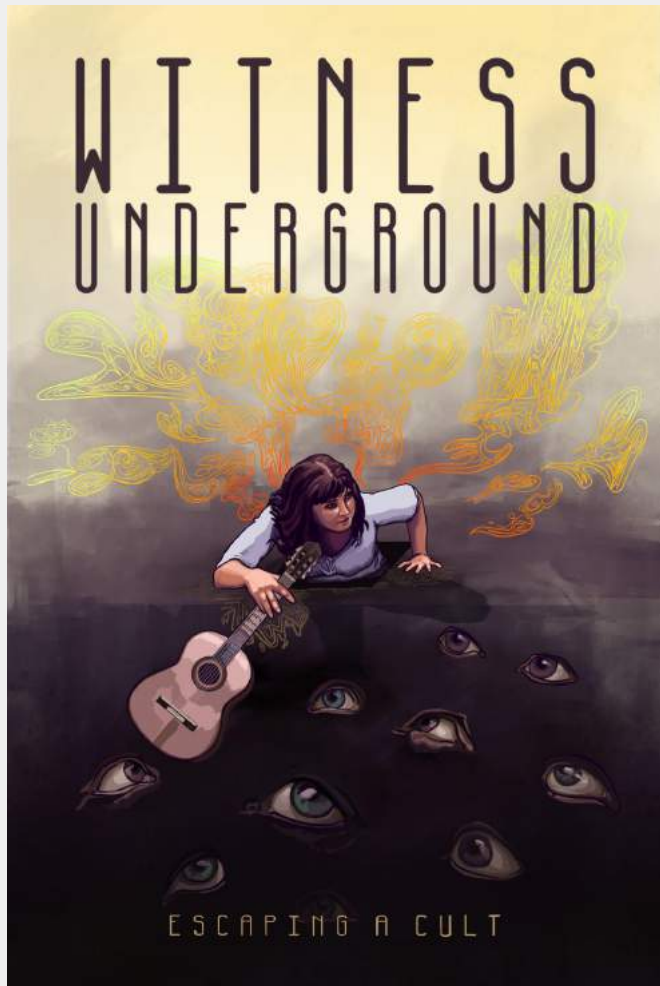
The only documentary to humanize cult life & survival via self-expression, musicians triumph over trauma from coerced shunning. "Jarring, heartbreaking, infuriating" "Advocacy with a megaphone" Witness resilience, escape, & healing through poignant original music. "Shunning beautifully illuminated"

Description

Within the confines of an elusive cult, a vibrant alternative music community thrived, deprogramming themselves through art. Poignant live performances punctuate tragic losses to beautifully illuminate shunning by Jehovah's Witnesses.

Sub Genres

Social Impact Documentary, Cult, Documentary | Arts and Culture, Social Issues, Music and Performances, Informational & Educational



Short Synopsis

Witness Underground is a feature documentary that reveals the insular DIY artist community that emerged within a high-control faith in Minneapolis. Music, fame, and success are typically forbidden in this religion, which instructs its members to “beware of independent thinking.”

The artists at the heart of the music scene have their faith tested in deeply personal ways. They battle for positive mental health and push the boundaries of their religion’s norms, where leaving often means being banned from interacting with your entire family and social circle for life.

Although severely restricted, they create the record label Nuclear Gopher and produce over 30 albums of earnest and personal music that spans singer/songwriter, riot grrrl, psychedelic rock, pop, EDM, shoegaze, and post-rock. Carefully curated songs and live performances punctuate their stories of friendship, deep loss, and personal growth.

Short Pitch - Español

Único documental que humaniza una secta y la supervivencia mediante autoexpresión, los músicos superan el trauma como marginados del grupo de odio. "Abogacía con un megáfono" Escape puntuado por actuaciones conmovedoras. "Ostracismo bellamente iluminado"

WITNESS UNDERGROUND



Long Pitch

In suburban Minneapolis, upstanding Jehovah's Witnesses are arriving home after hours of doorbell ringing and front doors slamming.

But not Cindy, or the elder staring down this teenager.
Or the man she lost her virginity to hours ago in a hotel.

"Did you start it? Did you touch him?", the elder asks.

"Did you have an orgasm?"

She played a show that week. A coffee shop Witnesses flocked to.

She plucked strings to her pop-punk anthem.

She belted out the words her spirit had tried to keep to itself.

Her "Prayer To No One" ricocheted off the walls to a riveted crowd.

They wanted an encore.

She knew a private punishment wasn't going to be enough.

She went back to the hotel for more.

Witness Underground unveils an unexplored music community surviving within a dystopia. It humanizes the struggle, courage, and artistry of former cult members. "Advocacy with a megaphone" [Bad Associations Podcast]



Discover their losses of innocence, friends, and family as they grapple with being outcasts. "Shunning, beautifully illuminated." [Chris Gray - Freestyle Distribution]

Experience their journey from home-brew music videos to grand pop-up festivals over 17 years and 30 albums. Art becomes more than self-expression; it is awakening, healing, and freedom from their trauma. "Frequently searing and undeniably confrontational." [Tone Madison Music Magazine]

Take a moment. Envision the power of Witness Underground on your platform - an extraordinary narrative of the resilience of the human spirit. Don't let this be a story untold. Add Witness Underground to your lineup.

"Jarring, heartbreaking, infuriating ...Movie score 8/10." [Film Threat]



Long Synopsis

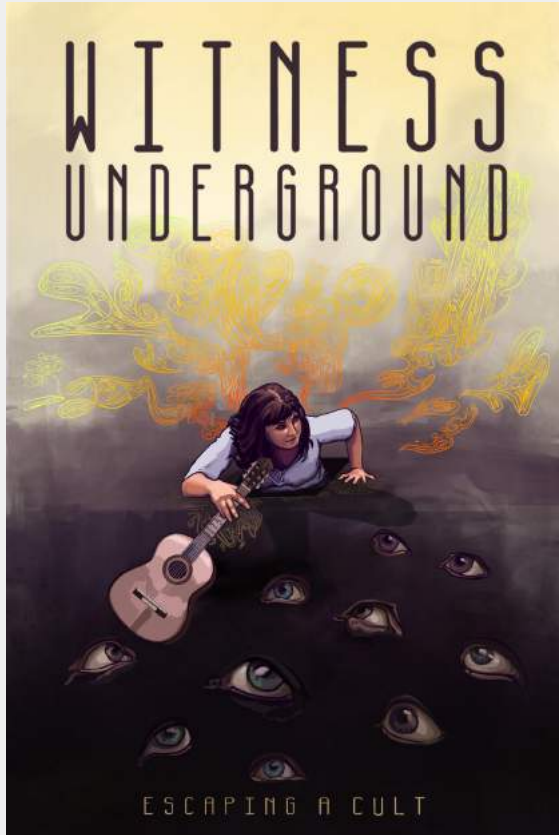
A chilling, yet empowering social impact documentary, *Witness Underground* highlights the music and defection of doomsday cult members and the consequences of self-expression. A "unique look, with unwavering access, inside the complexities of faith, and the bond forged between artists." [Amir George, Film and Art Programmer, True/False Film Festival.]

Nuclear Gopher, an underground indie record label, arose within their dystopia as a safe space for a few hundred born-in artists to express themselves. Witness the history of their most prolific underground bands as they navigated in the shadows of a high-control society. "Jarring, heartbreaking, infuriating ...Movie score 8/10" - [Film Threat].

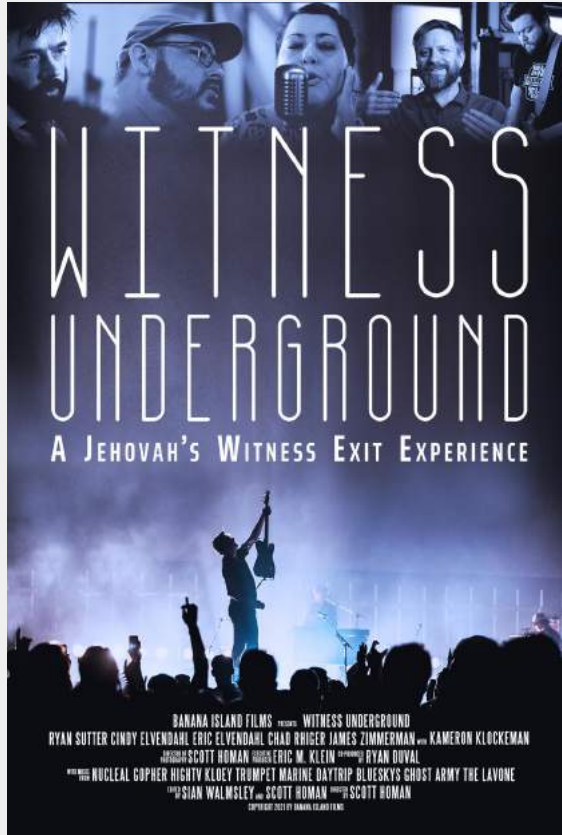
From homebrew music videos to pop-up music festivals these groups created earnest, multi-genre, secular music, as a means of waking up, deprogramming, and processing trauma. "Frequently searing and undeniably confrontational" [Tone Madison] As outcasts they expose the losses of community, spouses, and family. "Shunning, beautifully illuminated" [Chris Gray],

After official selection in 11 film festivals, including New Haven Documentary, Portland, Sound Unseen Film + Music, Filmocracy, and Wisconsin film festivals, and our success in winning "Best Documentary Feature" at Genre Blast Film Festival, we're now ready to humanize, advocate for, and educate about the realities of escaping from the Jehovah's Witnesses. These artists use their music as more than just an outlet for self-expression but rather as a powerful tool to heal. "Advocacy with a megaphone" [Bad Associations Podcast]

VOD Artwork



Buyer Artwork



FilmFest Artwork





Press WitnessUnderground.com/Press

Written reviews:

[Film Threat Review 8/10](#)

[Tonemadison Music Magazine](#) [KPISS.FM Radio Interview NYC \(~21:30\)](#)

Radio Interviews:

[WFMU Music of Mind Control Interview](#)

Festival Q&As:

[Q&A at GenreBlast](#)

[Cinemataalk WI Film Festival Q&A](#)

Podcast Interviews:

[Nobody Asked Us To Do This](#) [Super Little Challenges - Hamburg](#)

[Myth Vision Podcast interview](#) [IW Thoughts](#)

[Cult Hackers Podcast](#)

[DevOut! Wendi Renay](#)

[Jexit2020 - Film Review](#)

[Late Boomers Podcast - LA](#)

[Lloyd Evans Channel](#)

Contact

Director :

Scott Homan

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bananaislandfilms.com

Film Reviews



"Witness Underground is jarring, heartbreaking, infuriating, artfully made, and most important."

...**Movie score 8/10** - **Bradley Gibson, *Film Threat*** [original press article](#)

"Shunning, Beautifully Illuminated" - **Chris Gray, *Freestyle Digital Media*** (Distributor)

"Your film gives viewers a unique look, with unwavering access, inside the complexities of faith, and the bond forged between artists. A complete portrait of your subject's lives, from "origin stories" to who they have evolved to as adults, WITNESS UNDERGROUND is a study of memories, friendship and the power of a passion. By cutting between the band as it is today, and an all access pass to your subject's histories, we are treated to a complete portrait of their lives."

Amir George, Film & Art Programmer *True/False Film Festival*

"Frequently searing and undeniably confrontational, Witness Underground's strongest ancillary point is its understanding and respect for music. Throughout the documentary the most frequently heard songs are from projects of its subjects ...the expansive post rock of Daytrip and bands who would've slotted in neatly alongside the first wave of Riot Grrrl acts. For the people of this film, music wasn't just an outlet; it was a savior. Witness Underground's respect for that level of influence strengthens its margins and helps elevate the film from a strong multipurpose study to an essential one."

Steven Spoerl, Music Editor *ToneMadison.com* [original press article](#)

Everyone in the film has faced so much adversity. The strength in that sort of bravery, to step out into a world you're not prepared for because you no longer have the support of your loved ones... it's hard to imagine anything embodying the punk spirit more than that.

Naim - DJ Doctor Mister *KPISS.FM* [Video version of original interview](#)

"Creepy and Empowering" **Fan**



Ryan Sutter

Ryan is the world builder. He co-founded his first band, The Lavone, and his own recording studio and label, *Nuclear Gopher*, as a teenager. The resident *Nuclear Gopher* technologist, he established the label on the internet in 1994 and at nucleargopher.com in 1996 where it remained until 2004. He later independently recorded and released multiple solo albums. He continues to work on and record in his personal studio, *Nuclear Gopher Too*. He also plays in numerous live bands and is currently a director of software engineering.



Cindy Elvendahl

Cindy is a creative success story. As a songwriter and lead vocalist for the bands Kloey, HighTV, and Puff Puff she got an early start with other *Nuclear Gopher* artists. She has been deeply embedded in the Minneapolis music scene since she was a teenager. Her perspective and traumatic experiences as an indigenous woman in this religion are outrageous and unfortunately all too common for Jehovah's Witness women everywhere. She currently does UX research and design.



Eric Elvendahl

Eric, Cindy's husband, is a remarkably talented music composer. He's also a phenomenal musician and is proficient with many instruments. He has been in numerous bands in and outside of the religion and has produced many more. Visually and sonically, he's always been at the heart of the music scene and ahead of the curve. Today, he works as a full-stack engineer.



Chad Rhiger

Chad is a powerful social foundation: a natural skeptic, philosopher, comedian, and father to a wonderful daughter. He joined Eric and Cindy to create HighTV, a featured band, as the bassist and built out their sound. Together they found a healthy way to bridge the gap between their lives as Witnesses and their new life in the real world through music. He later joined the band Ghost Army and continues to write music. You can find him tending bar at the iconic CC Club in uptown Minneapolis.



James Zimmerman

Author of [Deliverance At Hand](#) and filmmaker, James offered up his entire archive of short films and collaborative video projects spanning over 15 years that made this a historical documentary. It was a precious gift to get access to all of his past work and also have him tell such a detailed intertwined exit story with Ryan Sutter. Today, he does technical writing and raises three kids.



HighTV the band

HighTV, featured throughout the film, are highlighted as a creative success story. The beautiful art that arose from picking up the pieces of their lives after exiting this cult is inspiring. Check out some of their music here:

[HighTV album Rick Brown Saved My Life](#)

[HighTV teaser soundtrack for XIW Coming Out](#)



Our Story from the director

This film was inspired by my own experience of being shunned after leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses. As a musician and visual artist who grew up in this religion, I personally grappled with the loss of my entire family (17 members) once I realized I no longer believed what they did. This is a work of activism against human rights violations as well as a true story for millions of former Jehovah's Witnesses around the world. Everyone in this film has lost their family and friends to cult mind control and active coercion to ostracize anyone who commits the thought crime of openly disagreeing with their ideas. It's very Orwellian.

It was also important for us to dive deep into the female experience in this religion. We follow an indigenous woman, Cindy, who grew up in the Spirit Lake Nation. She is the songwriter and vocalist of the featured bands Kloey and HighTV. Her songwriting and vocals with the backing of her husband and guitarist, Eric, and bassist, Chad, are as powerful and professional as they come. I eventually realized I could properly tell this nuanced and deeply misunderstood experience through the lives of this well documented and vibrant group of artists in Minneapolis, who I knew while in this religion.



The archival films and all 42 songs in the soundtrack were written and produced by these featured artists. It's a curated celebration of undiscovered art, that if nothing else is a life changing body of work. If you don't experience the soundtrack, I feel that you're missing out, and it barely scratches the surface of this music scene. This film was made in the DIY spirit and style that *Nuclear Gopher* represented and was known for. I also snuck one of my songs in there by A.D.D. Chronicles.

Director, Scott Homan

Scott is a first time filmmaker. He was raised in the Northwoods of Wisconsin in the heart of the Great Lakes region, where the culture is fiercely DIY. His dad joined the Jehovah's Witnesses when he was child. Taught by eccentric parents to defy cultural norms, Scott created his first two student documentaries at 17 in a high school program. He worked at Channel 7 News running camera and sound in Wausau, WI and then went to photography school in Minneapolis during the transition from film to digital. In his late 20s, Scott came to the conclusion he didn't believe in their God, Jehovah, and realized he was an atheist. For this, he was completely cut off by his family that remained in the religion.

He later lived abroad for seven years in Ecuador and Vietnam where he primarily focused on developing the skills to run a boutique documentary production studio. He and two friends in Hanoi created Banana Island Films, a music video and documentary production company that he runs to this day.

scott@bananaislandfilms.com



Editor, Siân Walmsley

Siân is an exceptional story editor. She took the film from an exhaustively long set of interviews and carved out the story I knew was there all the way to final color and titles. She's based in Atlanta, Georgia; originally from England. A graduate with a BA (hons) degree in Film from Falmouth University (Class of 2010). sianfilm@gmail.com



Co-Producer, Ryan DuVal

Somehow I intuitively knew that Ryan would want to help produce this film and that we would get a great story together. It was invaluable support. He has been the most consistent true north for the original vision of the film during post production. avlfilm.com



Music Producer & Archivist, Ryan Sutter

Ryan has been contributing to humanity since the early internet through music, software, and open source philosophy. His vast archive of creative commons media was so compelling that this film simply needed to be made. ryan@nucleargopher.com



What was your inspiration for the film?

I experienced a religious awakening from a taught world view and then trauma from cult shunning by immediate family, for simply disbelieving. That lit a flame within, that grew over time. This story needed to get out. If it was only my personal story, I'd let it go, but millions of people deal with similar trauma and worse, from just this one religion. As an atheist, looking back at my upbringing in the religion, I realized that it was an incredibly unique community that I was exposed to. I had become friends with other musicians while we were still Jehovah's Witnesses. As I pursued this project, I saw that, from the viewpoint of their stories, I could weave an honest representation of our collective Jehovah's Witness experiences, given that we've shared a lot as artists on the fringes of that culture. It also would allow us to give a powerful woman's perspective (Cindy) which I definitely couldn't do telling my own story.

What do you hope viewers will get out of this film?

On the surface level I wanted to make something that celebrated the Nuclear Gopher music scene, that we were all a part of, for what it was, but use it as vehicle to expose a deeply important topic about this religion. Jehovah's Witnesses recently lost a criminal court, class-action lawsuit in Belgium for discrimination and inciting hatred against their community members. It permeates their society, and it's at least that bad everywhere. I hope to bring awareness to the darkness that Jehovah's Witnesses bring to society through coerced shunning, to inform the world of this criminal practice, by taking it from abstract intellectualized obscurity to something you can actually personally feel.



What was the process of getting the film off of the ground and created?

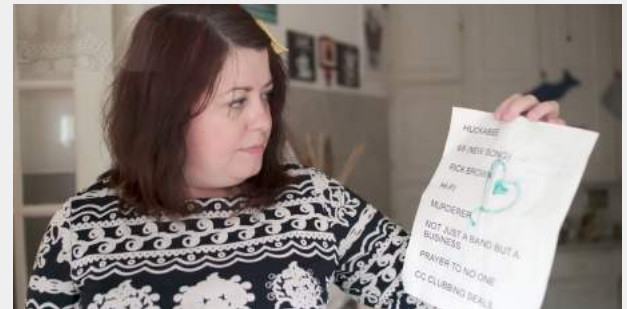
This is considered a no budget or extreme micro budget film. I put together a crowdfund campaign on Seed & Spark for production, then self funded editing and the film festival strategy. I did the vast majority of the work on this film outside of editing. I took on the roles of: writer, producer, director, cinematography, lighting, camera op, and sound capture. In post I curated the soundtrack and I mixed the key dialog audio, soundtrack, and sound design. Siân, the editor, and I, worked closely on the story, that's her strength. I couldn't have made this without her.

Are there particular traditions unique to the Jehovah's Witnesses?

There are hundreds of answers to that question which differentiate the Jehovah's Witnesses from Christianity. The most relevant answer to the question is that they strictly adhere to the practice of shunning family members who raise questions about the validity of their religious teachings. Even the belief in something different from what the religion teaches, thought crime, can result in being ostracized. Millions of people have become permanently estranged from their families due to this damaging practice.

Tell us about your decision to explicitly use interview dialogue.

Many films use voice over or narration, often by the director, to tell a story more quickly or for lower cost, but I felt that would reduce the quality of the story telling for this film— I had this intuition from the beginning. Ryan, my co-producer, and I crafted questions and a method that we hoped would allow us to use purely interviews to have the story be told exclusively from the subjects' own voices.



How did the project evolve and the film come to be made?

I started out creating the first season of the Youtube series, XJW Coming Out Of The Jehovah's Witness Religion, which led to crowdfunding this feature film. After we shot the feature interviews, I went on to film with nine other former Witnesses. That content is slowly being released on our channel. I needed to hear all of the interviews and dwell on them to consider where there was a cohesive story. The feature, as it is, became more solid as a story arc in my mind after shooting with more former Witnesses for the Coming Out series. It was a grand challenge to weave together what we set out to capture: explaining how the religion works, hearing unique exit stories, and celebrating their life on the outside. I've never seen a film that does what we have accomplished here.

What is the meaning of the title *Witness Underground*?

Underground is in reference to music that is not mainstream but that has a following, especially if it's small and influencing pop culture. I want it also to convey a social movement brewing below the surface of society, similar to the Underground Railroad. There are some parallels that could be drawn to what they were doing, rescuing people from peril and desperation, and what we hope to achieve in a more esoteric sense rather than a physical sense. With this film we join a century-long activist movement of former Witnesses, dedicated to helping others get out of this cult-like religion. We have taken great care to present an honest representation of the artists and their life within the religion. Although they grow immensely after exiting, personally and artistically, and self-identify with being out to non-believers, I thought it appropriate to highlight *Witness* in the title, in reference to their association with this high-control religion, rather than use the label Ex-Witness.



Cast

Nuclear Gopher founder & solo artist

Ryan Sutter

Celebrated indigenous songwriter

Cindy Elvendahl

Composer & former church leader

Eric Elvendahl

Songwriter

Chad Rhiger

Filmmaker, author, & former minister

James Zimmerman

Credits

Directed by:

Scott Homan

Written by:

Scott Homan

*Director of
Photography:*

Scott Homan

Produced by:

Scott Homan

Co-Produced by:

Ryan DuVal

Editors:

**Siân Walmsley
Scott Homan**

Music by:

**HighTV, Kloey, Trumpet
Marine, Daytrip, Blueskys
Ghost Army, The Lavone**

Executive Producers

Scott Homan & Eric M. Klein



Lighting & Key Interview Camera Operator:

"A" Camera/Steadycam Operator:

"B" Camera operator:

Sound recordists:

Boom Operator:

Dialogue Editors:

Title & End Credits:

Music Editor:

Live music recorded & Mixed by:

VFX & Graphic Artist:

EPK:

Archive Photography:

Drone Videos:

Archive Videos:

Drew Carlson

Scott Homan

Ryan DuVal

Scott Homan

Ryan DuVal

Ryan DuVal

Siân Walmsley

Scott Homan

Siân Walmsley

Scott Homan

Ryan Sutter

Eric Elvendahl

Klaas De Loose

Scott Homan

Ryan Sutter

Levi Talmadge

Josh Sorenson

James Zimmerman

Loose Knit Cinema

A Zimmerscope Production

Zimmerscope Filmlets

Ryan Sutter

Nuclear Gopher

Jennifer Faye

Gus Watkins

