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Musician turns filmmaker to end slavery

By Jennifer Modenessi
CONTRA COSTA TIMES
Article Launched: 11/12/2008 01:00:00 AM PST

Four years ago, a magazine article plunged Justin Dillon into the world of human trafficking.

The Berkeley musician found the tale of young Eastern European girls lured to America and forced into prostitution so unbelievable he simply went on with his life.

But the concept of modern-day slavery came back to haunt him a few months later while touring Russia with his band. Struck by stories of young women willing to risk their lives for dangerous, often unpaid opportunities in the West, Dillon decided he had to take action.

He just never thought he'd make a film about it.

"I didn't mean to do it," he says about "Call + Response," an 84-minute nonprofit documentary that

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combines musical performances by hip-hop artists Emmanuel Jal, Moby, Matisyahu, Natasha Bedingfield and others with raw undercover footage shot in and out of brothels around the globe. It also contains interviews with actors such as Julia Ormond and activists like Cornel West, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and New York Times reporter Nicholas Kristoff.

"When the issue of human trafficking came into my life, I couldn't believe how big it was and that nobody knew about it," Dillon says while sitting in the micro-size Oakland office of his four-employee film company, Fair Trade Pictures. "As a musician, I thought, 'What is my community doing about it?'"

There were no benefit concerts, no charity work, nothing. We're talking

27,000,000 people, a huge human-rights issue and we don't have anything going for it."

Dillon started out small and created a fund, donating the proceeds from his rock band Tremolo's latest record to nonprofit groups such as Free the Slaves and Hoops for Africa. But motivated by his interest in how music and activism operate together, he decided to go a step further and put on a benefit concert to raise awareness "for a cause that no one has really ever heard of."

"That's what led to the film," the East Bay native says, explaining his leap from music to independent filmmaking. "What I wanted to do was give people the best concert experience they've never had and probably never would."

Shot in black-and-white in studios from Austin to London, the musical performances are meant to give voice to the silent victims, some as young as 3 years old, who are forced into prostitution, warfare or

unpaid labor. Dillon recruited the musicians himself and performed two original songs. English chanteuse Imogen Heap gives a particularly emotional performance, while a former "lost boy" of Sudan and child soldier Emmanuel Jal utters one of the movie's most unforgettable lines: "Music can get into your heart and mind without asking permission."

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Filmmaker Justin Dillon, an East Bay musician and first-time director whose debut film "Call +...

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To describe "Call + Response" — which takes its name from the music of 19th-century slaves — as a concert film would be somewhat misleading. A large portion of it is devoted to music, but there's also grainy footage of young prostitutes in Cambodia and India and machine gun-wielding child soldiers in Africa.

Still, you can't call it purely documentary, either. "Call + Response" is a hybrid film, something its director describes as "a movement toward a 21st-century documentary."

"It's interactive in many ways," Dillon says, urging viewers to turn their phones on and text-message, much as they would at a live concert, while the movie is playing.

"I don't want to just leave someone there," he says. "I want to give them the opportunity to actually get engaged with the film by texting and looping in because the window of opportunity to act on something is so small. All of us get inspired for a moment and then we go on with life."

Dillon suggests other ways to get involved with fighting slavery, such as "low-shelf" opportunities like visiting the movie's Web site and linking with a number of different organizations that combat human trafficking.

"Everyone has \$5 and five minutes," Dillon says. "You can leverage that to change legislation or push businesses to pony up product change. Everyone can write a letter. Everyone can participate."

And there are also what he terms "civil acts of disruption" such as mass e-mails and phone calls to offending countries regarding their human-rights violations.

The response to the film is building. Despite an absence of studio backing, advertising and distribution, "Call + Response" has attracted large audiences to its limited screenings.

Thousands of people have signed up for the movie's text-messaging campaign, and clothing giants like Burberry and Gap have agreed to monitor their businesses for illegal labor. It's a small step for the burgeoning new abolitionist movement.

"My premise is that the new underground railroad for slavery in the 21st-century is digital," Dillon says. "It's empowerment and letting people know that because of globalization, they have a way of affecting this issue in a way that's never been done before. I want to give the viewer not just information but an experience so that music transcends their firewall of information and actually goes into their mind and heart. It's amazing how much power we have."

Reach Jennifer Modenessi at 925-977-8483 or jmodenessi@bayareanewsgroup.com.

- WHO: Berkeley musician, filmmaker and activist Justin Dillon
- WHAT: "Call + Response," a benefit concert/documentary film examining human trafficking
- WHEN: 6:15, 8 and 9:45 p.m. Friday and Monday-Thursday, and 2, 4, 6:15, 8 and 9:45 p.m. Saturday-Sunday; through Nov. 20
- WHERE: Roxie Cinema, 3117 16th St., S.F.
- TICKETS: \$5-\$9.75
- CONTACT: www.callandresponse.com

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