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***They Call Us Monsters* Premieres on *Independent Lens*
Monday, May 22, 2017 on PBS**

Online Streaming Begins May 23



Credit: BMP Films

(San Francisco, CA) — *They Call Us Monsters* goes behind the walls of the Compound, a high-security facility where Los Angeles houses its most violent juvenile criminals. To their advocates, they're kids. To the system, they're adults. To their victims, they're monsters. Produced and directed by Ben Lear, *They Call Us Monsters* premieres on *Independent Lens* Monday, May 22, 2017, 10:00-11:30 PM ET ([check local listings](#)) on PBS.

They Call Us Monsters follows three young offenders who sign up to take a screenwriting class with producer Gabe Cowan as they await their respective trials. Arrested at 16, Jarad faces 200 years-to-life for four attempted murders; Juan, also

arrested at 16, faces 90-to-life for first-degree murder; Antonio was arrested at 14 and faces 90-to-life for two attempted murders. As the boys work with Gabe on their screenplay, their complex stories are revealed.

Halfway through the class, Antonio returns to juvenile court and is released with time served but, back in the neighborhood, he quickly falls into the same patterns of drug use and gang life that led to his incarceration in the first place. Meanwhile, the realities of Jarad and Juan's crimes and pending trials set in. One of the victims of Jarad's shooting is only 17 and permanently confined to a wheelchair. And, even if he is released, Juan faces deportation and separation from his family, including his infant son.

"I first visited the Compound in early 2013 and just couldn't stop thinking about this world I'd stumbled into — the narrow space between a lost childhood and a stolen adulthood where these kids managed to live, laugh and discover their potential," said filmmaker Lear. "When I learned about an upcoming California Senate Bill that would provide them the opportunity for a second chance, I knew I had a film to make."

In California, juveniles between the ages of 14 and 17 can be tried as adults and receive sentences longer than their natural life expectancy. As the film reveals, in the last four years, the state has passed bills to decrease juvenile sentencing — a move that has re-sparked a national debate over the very nature of these violent juvenile offenders. Do they have the capacity to



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change and return to society? What responsibility does society have to these kids and to their victims?

Visit the *They Call Us Monsters* page on [Independent Lens](#), which features more information about the film. *The film* will be available for online viewing on the site beginning May 23.

About the Filmmakers

Ben Lear (Director/Producer) graduated from NYU in 2010 with a degree in music composition. For his senior recital, Lear wrote and performed his folk-opera *Lillian* (about a man who travels to the great Pacific garbage patch to reclaim all he's lost) with a 20-piece orchestra and light show. Lear, who released *Lillian* as an album, partnered with Plastic Pollution Coalition and 4Gyres to raise awareness for plastic pollution. This work has led him to performances at TED and the UN. As a result of making *They Call Us Monsters*, his first film, Lear sits on the advisory board of InsideOUT Writers and is an ally member within the Anti-Recidivism Coalition, teaching a weekly writing class within the Compound and mentoring former juvenile offenders under reentry.

Sasha Alpert (Producer) is executive vice president of Bumin/Murray Productions as well as of the documentary division, BMP Films, which she founded in 2006. Her most recent film is *Valentine Road*, which premiered in competition at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival, aired on HBO and was nominated for two Emmys. BMP's first film, *Autism: The Musical*, won two primetime Emmy Awards and premiered on HBO. She also produced *Shadow Millions*, the story of DHL founder Larry Hillblom, who disappeared mysteriously in a small plane crash and left his unacknowledged children to fight for a share of his vast fortune. Additionally, Alpert produced *Forever Hollywood*, which has been playing at the American Cinematheque's Egyptian Theater in Los Angeles for 13 years. She also wrote, directed, and produced a documentary on the Western film as part of the PBS series *The American Cinema*. She has produced several documentaries for PBS including films on film noir, poets Sylvia Plath and T.S. Eliot, and Nobel Laureate Joseph Brodsky, as well as specials for CBS, MTV, TBS, and The Disney Channel.

Gabriel Cowan (Subject/Producer) is an award-winning filmmaker and President of New Artists Alliance. His film *Cheap Thrills* won an audience award at SXSW in 2013, where *Bad Milo*, a film he produced alongside the Duplass Brothers, also premiered. In 2016, Cowan wrote and directed *Truck'd Up*, a television pilot for Ted Field and Radar Films; produced *Genesis*, a sci-fi TV show for Stephen Bochco; and premiered *Fear Inc.* at the Tribeca Film Festival, where he also premiered *Loitering with Intent* (starring Sam Rockwell and Marisa Tomei) and *Just Before I Go*. Cowan was an IFP Fellow for *Extracted*, a film he co-wrote and produced that premiered at SXSW 2012. Since graduating CalArts in 2008 with an MFA in film directing, Cowan has produced over 20 feature films. As a musician, Cowan has earned two platinum records and recorded with Jackson Browne, Robbie Robertson, Tower of Power, Ry Cooder, Van Dyke Parks, and others. He serves on the board of InsideOUT Writers, an organization that provides creative writing services in juvenile halls, and is on the advisory committee of Common Sense Media, an



organization dedicated to helping kids thrive in a world of media and technology that has over 65 million users.

CREDITS

Directed by	Ben Lear
Producers	Gabriel Cowan Sasha Alpert Ben Lear
Executive Producers	Jonathan Murray Gil Goldschein Todd Rubinstein Scott Budnick Ted Dintersmith
Co-Producers	Ella Hatamian Chip Warren
Editor	Eli Despres
Original Music Composed by	Ari Balouzian
Director of Photography	Nicholas Wiesnet

They Call Us Monsters is a BMP Films Presentation in association with New Artists Alliance.

About *Independent Lens*

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 PM. The acclaimed series, with Lois Vossen as executive producer, features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more visit pbs.org/independentlens. Join the conversation: [facebook.com/independentlens](https://www.facebook.com/independentlens) and on Twitter [@IndependentLens](https://twitter.com/IndependentLens).

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