



# Dayveon

## Amman Abbasi

**Producer** Amman Abbasi, Alexander Uhlmann, Lachion Buckingham. **Production companies** Cximple (Little Rock, AR, USA), Rough House Pictures (Los Angeles, CA, USA), Muskat Filmed Properties (New York, NY, USA), Symbolic Exchange (New York, USA), Salem Street Entertainment (Swampscott, MA, USA), Mama Bear (Chattanooga, TN, USA). **Director** Amman Abbasi. **Screenplay** Amman Abbasi, Steven Reneau. **Director of photography** Dustin Lane. **Editor** Michael Carter, Dominic LaPerriere. **Music** Amman Abbasi.

**With** Devin Blackmon (Dayveon), Kordell „KD“ Johnson (Brayden), Dontrell Bright (Bryan), Chasity Moore (Kim), Lachion Buckingham (Mook), Marquell Manning (Country).

Colour. 75 min. English.

**Premiere** January 19, 2017, Sundance Film Festival

**World sales** Visit Films

„Don't tell Kim“ is key to understanding Dayveon's inner conflict. His older sister isn't supposed to find out about the dodgy goings-on the thirteen-year-old has got himself caught up in; he only confides in her boyfriend, Bryan. Bryan has offered himself to Dayveon as a kind of substitute for his brother, whose death was linked to his gang membership. And now Dayveon and his best friend Brayden have themselves joined the Bloods. Amman Abbasi has worked as a documentary filmmaker, as the coordinator of the Little Rock Film Festival and as an assistant to David Gordon Green; with his brother Yousuf, he's also had success as a musician and composer. Dayveon is the feature debut of this multitalented 28-year-old; he wrote the screenplay, acted as editor and producer and also composed the music. Filmed in classic Academy format, the film combines sun-drenched images of the American South, eerie night scenes, suggestive nature shots (a swarm of bees is a recurring motif) and the family's cramped home into a dense portrait of a life on the periphery, constantly teetering between tenderness and brutality, poetry and realism.

*Christoph Terhechte*

## A documentarian eye

*Dayveon* is set in Wrightsville, Arkansas. 'Arkansas has a big gang presence, and I'm from Arkansas,' Abbasi says, 'so it felt like a natural story there.' Wrightsville, near Little Rock [the state capital of Arkansas, -Ed.], has a population of just over two thousand people and, since 1981, has been home to the Wrightsville Unit of the Arkansas Department of Correction. Despite the fact that *Dayveon* was conceived as fiction, Abbasi was aware of his limitations in being able to depict on intuition alone the realities of the characters he was writing. In order to render a textured, true-to-life portrayal of a rural gang and its members' inner worlds, he knew he would have to approach *Dayveon* as a documentary, digging deep to understand the perspectives of its subjects. Abbasi reached out to a local juvenile-justice-reform activist, Steve Nawojczyk. He helped Abbasi gain access to a boot camp for troubled youth, many of whom were already affiliated with gangs and in the pipeline to imprisonment. There Abbasi workshopped script ideas, refining nuances, and scrapping what he had got wrong. 'It was just myself and the group of kids. We had a really good rapport with each other,' Abbasi says. He went there daily, and conversations often went on for so long that they had to be picked up again the next morning. 'It was really easy to find comfort and chemistry with everyone there.' He notes that they kept all the names confidential, and that the workshop was not used for casting. 'That was really more for personal inspiration,' Abbasi says. 'Steven, the co-writer and I, we kind of pored over a lot of that, went through it and thought, "What works within our own story?"'

## Community collaboration

Bringing character development to completion was, Abbasi says, 'a deep collaboration' between him and the cast, some of whom were themselves Bloods, or intimately acquainted with the gang. None of the cast had done film acting, and the majority had never acted before in any capacity. Many of them became involved with the film through Lachion Buckingham, introduced to Abbasi through Nawojczyk. Buckingham had originally come on as a producer for *Dayveon*, but ended up acting in the film as well. Abbasi and Buckingham worked out their vision for the film over long drives. 'At a certain point,' says Abbasi, 'the script was obsolete.'

Once the film had been cast, Abbasi began engaging the actors in hours-long rehearsals nearly every day for four months, which, he says, 'helped inform the script more so than what was on the paper.' By the time they were prepped for shooting, the cast had so perfected the flow of dialogue that they could go for entire blocks of time relaying the script uninterrupted, as if they were acting out a play.

## The cast

Devin Blackmon (*Dayveon*), age 14, was born and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he lives with his mother, Gwendolyn Johnson. He is the youngest of three children. Blackmon attends the historic Little Rock Central High School, home of the Tigers. He plays centre position on the basketball team for Greater Star Baptist Church. Previously, he attended Dunbar Magnet Middle School, where he was an active member of both the basketball and football teams. (...) Blackmon recently began taking acting and drama classes in Arkansas. *Dayveon* is his first film.

Kordell 'KD' Johnson (Brayden) is from Little Rock, Arkansas. Johnson was supposed to be in drama class in high school, but he dropped it because he was nervous. *Dayveon* is his first film. He's excited for his next role.

Dontrell Bright (Bryan) is from Little Rock, Arkansas, where he currently lives. *Dayveon* is his first film, and his first experience with acting. Bright works two jobs – as a security guard, and at a factory that makes dog treats. He's also an artist, with a particular interest in fashion. Bright is working on a T-shirt line as part of his ultimate goal of creating his own apparel company.

Chasity Moore (Kim) is making her film debut in *Dayveon*, though theatre has been a long-standing part of her life. In addition to majoring in early childhood education at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, Moore became heavily involved with the John McLinn Ross Players and joined Alpha Psi Omega National Theatre Honour Society. The Houston native, who now calls North Little Rock home, works primarily as a pre-K teacher assistant. Her passion for young people follows her even outside the classroom, and she volunteers as a tutor in her spare time. Moore also enjoys music, spending time outside, reading, and cooking for friends and family.

Lachion Buckingham (Mook) is from Little Rock, Arkansas. He recently produced his first film – *Dayveon*, which was heavily inspired by his brother. His son in the film, LJ, is his real son: Lachion Buckingham, Jr. is three.

Marquell Manning (Country) lives in Wrightsville, Arkansas, where the film was shot. The house where *Dayveon* was filmed is his home. Manning is a first-time actor. *Dayveon* is his first film.

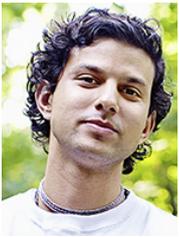
## Perspective & place

*Dayveon* conveys a sense of individual and collective isolation. This is enhanced by filming that mimics the main character's perspective, or POV shooting. As *Dayveon* waits out in the car during his first crime as a Blood, for example, he's cut off from the details of what he's just been an accomplice to, and the audience is kept similarly in the dark. The effect is disorientating. 'That was extremely intentional,' Abbasi says. 'Those lingering effects – for the character and the audience – are more important to me than a punctuation mark. And that lingering effect creates so many opportunities for different decisions for a character to make, because you can then understand this character is still processing, like, "Holy crap, was someone shot? What happened?" In that way it sets itself up mirroring life and reality, where you don't get all the answers in a clean way.'

This sensibility is carried out in other, even subtler, aspects of the film. Abbasi told director of photography Dustin Lane that he wanted *Dayveon* shot in 4:3 – an aspect ratio that creates an image that's more square than rectangle, like watching from an old TV, or a cell phone. 'I'm used to shooting everything anamorphic, which is super wide,' Lane says. 'When Amman and I started talking he's like, "You know, I don't know that a wide thing's right for this." And I think it started with phone culture, you know, so many people are watching videos on their phone, which is a vertical image.' They knew they didn't want to do vertical and they considered a straight square, but ultimately settled on 4:3, blending 'a classical element' with a more modern look evocative of a phone screen, or portraiture. 'You could almost take stills

away from it and they look more like photographs than stills from a movie,' Lane says. 'I think, too, it made sense for the story because the character is very enclosed in his own world. It's not like an expansive, grandiose place. He lives on one street, his best friend's up the road, there are a couple of streets around the town, and that's it. It's a very closed-off, confined environment, and I think the aspect ratio felt – you know, you were literally boxing someone in'.

*Anna Cherry, Susan Norget*



**Amman Abbasi** was born as the son of immigrants from Pakistan. He grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, USA. He has worked as a director's assistant for filmmakers such as David Gordon Green, and he now works as an editor and composer. In 2008, he and his brother released their debut album, *Something Like Nostalgia*. *Dayveon* is Amman Abbasi's first feature film.