

# RECORDER

## The Marion Stokes Project



A Film by Matt Wolf



### DISTRIBUTION:

Nancy Gerstman & Emily Russo / Zeitgeist Films  
nancy@zeitgeistfilms.com • emily@zeitgeistfilms.com  
212-274-1989

### PRESS:

Susan Norget Film Promotion  
susan@norget.com  
212-431-0090

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**A ZEITGEIST FILMS release in association with KINO LORBER**

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## **Short Synopsis**

A Communist radical who became fabulously wealthy later in life, Marion Stokes secretly recorded American television 24 hours a day for 30 years from 1975 until her death in 2012. For Marion, taping was a form of activism to seek the truth and she believed that a comprehensive archive of the media would one day be invaluable. Her visionary and maddening project nearly tore her family apart, but now her 70,000 VHS tapes are being digitized for future generations.

## **Long Synopsis**

Marion Stokes was secretly recording American television twenty-four hours a day for thirty years. It started in 1979 with the Iranian Hostage Crisis at the dawn of the twenty-four hour news cycle. It ended on December 14, 2012 while the Sandy Hook massacre played on television as Marion passed away. In between, Marion recorded on 70,000 VHS tapes, capturing revolutions, lies, wars, triumphs, catastrophes, bloopers, talk shows, and commercials that tell us who we were, and show how television shaped the world of today.

Before the era of “fake news,” Marion was fighting to protect the truth by archiving everything that was said and shown on television. The public didn’t know it, but the networks were disposing their archives for decades into the trashcan of history. Remarkably, Marion saved it, and now the Internet Archive will digitize her tapes and we’ll be able to search them online for free.

A mystery in the form of a time capsule, the film delves into the strange life of a radical Communist activist who became a fabulously wealthy recluse archivist. Marion’s work was crazy but it was also genius, and she would pay a profound price for dedicating her life to this visionary and maddening project.

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## Director's Statement

Whenever I start a film I ask the questions, “So What? Why Now”? People sometimes ask me if Marion was just a pathological historian whose uncontrollable hoarding tore her family apart. My answer is no—she was an uncompromising activist, whose insight into media and technology was decades ahead of her time. Her work is incredibly relevant today.

When I started this film, facts and accountability were important. Now, as I'm completing it, we are living in the era of so-called “fake news.” Now more than ever, the truth is under attack. The *New York Times* published a full-page advertisement that said, “The truth is hard—to find, to know, and the truth is more important than ever.” This is what Marion committed her life to. She recognized that television is a persuasive and pervasive medium, and that it can be manipulated to shape public opinion. Her story should inspire others to fight for the truth in unusual and creative ways.

The moment I read about Marion's 70,000 tapes I imagined an endless collage of fuzzy clips—from tragic and triumphant, to historic and mundane—images that show the texture of our times. As a filmmaker, I'm known for using archival footage in unconventional and cinematic ways. I like to make old things feel new by using found images and stories in unexpected contexts. Whether it's vintage Kellyanne Conway defending Bob Dole on CNN or a four-screen montage that shows how the news of 9/11 broke on various networks in real time, I want viewers to see familiar things in a new way.

This story is also a mystery. Marion's an enigmatic and complicated character, and one of the ways we got closer to her is with stylized recreations that peer into her private world. These cinematic sequences from Marion's limousine or her secretive recording stations in her apartment trace the evolution of television and computer technology as vintage footage plays on screens.

The first time I met Marion's son Michael Metelits, he was intelligent, insightful, and he was also overcome with emotion about his complicated relationship with his mother. Through the film, Michael lucidly reflects on Marion's mission, his anger and frustration about her selfishness, and his pride in her accomplishments. It's a startling and emotionally moving family story.

In addition to taping television, Marion was an avid collector and investor in Apple Computer. She idolized Steve Jobs and, according to Michael, “Steve was the good son.” Like Jobs, Marion wasn't warm and fuzzy and she put her work and her ideas above her personal relationships. She thought differently and people didn't always get it. But she made profound sacrifices to pursue a project that she hoped would take on a life beyond her own. And now we have the opportunity to use it.

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## Process Statement

Working with Marion's archive of 70,000 VHS and Betamax tapes was daunting to say the least. My favorite part of making a film is developing a unique process, and many of my films incorporate expansive collections of archival footage. However this was on a new scale.

Marion diligently handwrote the dates, times, and networks on the spines of each of her tapes. When her son Michael and her trusted secretary Frank Heilman began the onerous task of organizing her collection, they stored her tapes in thousands of cardboard file boxes, which Marion amassed over her lifetime. Those boxes were loaded into a parking lot full of storage pods, but Michael and Frank didn't know if anybody would take the tapes. They feared that it would all just be thrown away.

Remarkably, in 2013, the Internet Archive acquired Marion's unprecedented collection with the commitment to digitize her tapes and to make them accessible online. The storage pods were shipped from Philadelphia to the Internet Archive's storage warehouse in Richmond, California, where the tapes currently live on hundreds of pallets.

Our first task was to work with the Internet Archive to index Marion's unconventional collection. To do this we created a unique conveyer belt system with a digital camera, and a crew of archivists captured high resolution photos of the spines on Marion's tapes. Zooming into these images allowed us to track the contents of each tape through Marion's diligent documentation.

We knew that transcribing this "meta-data" would be an epic task, so we put out a call for volunteers online, and to our surprise, the request went viral. Over fifty volunteers from around the world signed up to collaborate remotely. Using a shared google spreadsheet and a dropbox folder with the photographs of Marion's tapes, these volunteers began transcribing Marion's notes into a comprehensive database. As the process continued, one volunteer, the professional archivist Katrina Dixon, rose to the occasion and became the film's long-term supervising archivist.

My task was to create an eclectic but focused wish list of dates from Marion's start in 1979 through the day of her death on December 14, 2012. Fortunately, Wikipedia has a series of pages that summarize each year. These greatest hits include an eclectic list of events—from historic dates like the fall of the Berlin Wall, to esoteric pop culture moments like the collapse of the Miss America pageant's stage. My wish list incorporated an unusual timeline of these major events and marginal moments from history. I was imagining which stories would have appealed to Marion.

When the index was complete, Katrina would scour our online database and track Marion's notes to find a tape from the approximate date and time of the selected event.

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Archivists at the Internet Archive would use a forklift to locate the specific palettes and file boxes with our selected tapes, and then bring them to our preservationists at Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC). Each of Marion's tapes are 6-8 hours because she recorded on extended play, and the preservationists at BAVC watched these tapes in real time to assure a clean image from these degrading analog videocassettes. In total, we transferred 100 tapes for approximately 700 hours of television footage.

I worked closely with a team of assistant editors to organize this unwieldy collection of material. Sometimes we hit the jackpot with incredible footage, and sometimes a tape would be a dud, so this was truly a treasure hunt. In time I realized that the most interesting material wasn't the familiar historical events, but the unexpected local news stories, commercials, or talk shows that intersected with Marion's life story. After marking selects based on subject and visual interest, assistant editors organized the material by topics and dates. That's when the real creative work began—crafting an unconventional timeline to bring Marion's story to life, and to show history unfolding on television.

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## Director's Bio

**Matt Wolf** is a filmmaker in New York. His critically acclaimed and award-winning films have played widely in festivals and have been distributed internationally in theaters and on television. Matt's first feature documentary *Wild Combination* is about the avant-garde cellist and disco producer Arthur Russell. His second feature *Teenage* is about early youth culture and the birth of teenagers. Most recently, Matt premiered *Recorder: The Marion Stokes Project* at the 2019 Tribeca Film Festival.

Matt's work in television includes the HBO Documentary *It's Me, Hilary* about the Eloise illustrator Hilary Knight, executive produced by Lena Dunham and Jenni Konner. He was also Executive Producer, Showrunner, and Writer on a National Geographic miniseries *I Am Rebel* alongside Doug Liman. The series features 1930s crime scene photographer Weegee, the 1970s police brutality activist turned hijacker Louis Moore, psychedelic chemist Alexander Shulgin, and the hacker Kevin Mitnick.

Matt's most recent short film *Bayard & Me* (Sundance 2017) is about the civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, who adopted his younger boyfriend in the early 1980s to obtain the same legal protections as marriage. His other shorts include *I Remember* about the artist and poet Joe Brainard and *The Face of AIDS* for Time Magazine about a notorious 1992 Benetton advertisement. Matt has made a number of short series about the arts for organizations like The Whitney Museum and the New York Times, and commercials and content for numerous brands. He is the co-curator of film for the 2019 Whitney Biennial and a Guggenheim Fellow.

## Producer Bios

**Kyle Martin** is the founder of Electric Chinoland, a film label specializing in American independent cinema. His current productions include the PBS Independent Lens documentary *Over the Rainbow* with director Jeff Peixoto, Sam Ellison's documentary *Cheche Lavi*, and Dash Shaw's feature-length animated film *Cryptozoo*.

Kyle's previous producing credits include Independent Spirit Award nominee *Donald Cried*, the GKids 2017 release *My Entire High School Sinking Into The Sea*, Margaret Brown's *The Great Invisible*, Lance Edmands' *Bluebird*, Matt Wolf's *Teenage*, Lena Dunham's *Tiny Furniture* (Independent Spirit Award Winner 2011), and *NY Export: Opus Jazz* (SXSW Audience Award winner 2010 / PBS, BBC 4).

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He is a recipient of the Sundance Institute's Mark Silverman Producing Fellowship, the San Francisco Film Society's Kenneth Rainin Foundation Fellowship, the IFP/Cannes Marche Du Film Producer's Network Fellowship, the Sundance Institute/Rotterdam Cinemart Producing Fellowship, and was named one of Variety magazine's "Ten Producers to Watch."

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**Andrew Kortschak** comes from a background of tech industry innovators. A graduate of USC's School of Cinematic Art, he co-founded End Cue in 2013, where he has worked to combine his interests in film, animation, technology, and documentaries. He was recognized by Forbes Magazine in its 30 Under 30 Hollywood & Entertainment list for 2019. He was nominated for a Film Independent Spirit Award in 2016 as one of the producers of *Mediterranea*.

As a producer, Andrew has several features in development, including Jon Watts' untitled *Explorers* project, Taika Waititi's stop-motion animation film *Bubbles*, and *Moonfall*, a sci-fi pilot written by David Weil. Among his producing credits are the films *COP CAR*, directed by *Spider-Man: Homecoming* director Jon Watts, and *The Clovehitch Killer*, starring Dylan McDermott and Charlie Plummer.

**Walter Kortschak** co-founded End Cue, to which he brings more than 30 years of early-stage technology investment experience. As a producer, he has several features in development, including Taika Waititi's stop-motion animation film *Bubbles*, and the first film based on an AI-generated original screenplay. He has written an original feature-length screenplay, *TRIAGE*, which is planned for production in 2019. Walter currently serves as Executive Chairman of SignalFire, a data-driven venture capital firm in San Francisco, and is an active angel investor in such notable companies as First Republic Bank, Lyft, Palantir, Trade Desk and Twitter. He was a Managing Partner at Summit Partners for 21 years, responsible for investing in over 50 companies, and is a six-time Forbes Midas List investor. Walter received a BS from Oregon State University, an MS from Caltech, both in engineering, and an MBA from UCLA. He is an active philanthropist and serves as a member of the Board of Trustees at Caltech and is a past director of the National Venture Capital Association.

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## **Credits**

An End Cue & Electric Chinoland Production  
in association with C41 Media

### **Directed by**

Matt Wolf

### **Producers**

Kyle Martin

Andrew Kortschak

Walter Kortschak

### **Executive Producers**

Andrew Kortschak

Walter Kortschak

### **Co-Executive Producers**

Brendan Doyle

Peter Sillen

### **Edited by**

Keiko Deguchi

### **Music by**

Owen Pallett

### **Cinematographers**

Chris Dapkins

Matt Mitchell