

## **MAI KHOI & THE DISSIDENTS**

A Film by Joe Piscatella

Running Time: 70 minutes

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## **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

Vietnamese pop star, Mai Khoi, had it all – money, fame and the blessing of the Vietnamese Communist Party. But when the government cracks down on those who oppose them, Khoi turns her back on stardom and risks everything to stand up against the oppression of Communist control and inspire others to join her.

## **LONG SYNOPSIS**

At age 13 Mai Khoi runs away from her poor village in Vietnam to the bright lights of Saigon where one night she sees a singer playing in a bar. Upon learning that the singer made good money, Khoi decides then and there to one day become a pop star...

By her early 20s Khoi has released four albums of pop music love songs. When none of them produce a breakout hit, Khoi is ready to give up until her father suggests she write a song honoring their country. On the plane ride home Khoi writes “Vietnam,” an ode to the beauty of her country that becomes an instant classic. It wins “Song of the Year” in Vietnam. Radio stations everywhere play it. She is asked to sing on Vietnamese television every night. The Communist government in Vietnam even uses the song to promote tourism. “Vietnam” gives Khoi everything she had dreamed of as a child. Money, fame and most importantly, the blessing of the Vietnamese Communist government who through state-run media keeps her in the public eye with frequent magazine covers.

Despite her fame and fortune, Khoi feels empty in her new role, especially as Vietnam has such an atrocious human rights record, particularly when it comes to freedom of speech and freedom of the press. She starts to question if she can use her star power and music to make change the country she loves. Khoi starts speaking out for freedom of speech and women’s rights, even causing a national scandal in conservative Vietnam when she tells a reporter that she does not plan to get married or have children.

When the government starts to censor her songs – even the patriotic ones – Khoi circumvents the government’s censorship board and releases her next album without their approval. Her title track, “Selfie Orgasm,” is a hit. In the first week her new song racks up more than 300,000 streams on the popular Vietnamese music-sharing site, Zing.vn. But by the end of the week the government pressures the Zing.vn to remove the song from the Internet to send Khoi and other artists a clear message: the country is under control of the Vietnamese

Communist Party and dissent in any form will not be tolerated. Vietnam has a heinous track record of human rights violations against its own people.

Unwilling to stand down, Khoi capitalizes on her popularity and runs for Parliament to draw attention to the censorship issues. As her campaign gets traction in the conservative country, especially among young people for her stance on taboo social issues like women's rights, gay rights and free speech, state-sponsored media stops covering her historic campaign. So Khoi mounts an Internet campaign that reaches the nearly 100 million Vietnamese who rely on social media. It looks like Khoi may win a seat in the election when the government suddenly leaves her off the election ballot without any explanation.

Still not backing down, Khoi uses her celebrity to call on President Obama to meet with her and some other activists on his visit to Hanoi to enlist his help to push back against an increasingly oppressive government. The week of the meeting more than half of the invited activists are detained or put on house arrest to prevent them from meeting President Obama. Using a series of safe houses, Khoi makes the meeting and is seated next to Obama. This is a moment for huge change...But President Obama is unable to help. Although Vietnam is notorious for its human rights issues and oppressive government, it's up to the Vietnamese people to solve the problems themselves. The Vietnamese government is furious with Khoi for meeting with Obama and they effectively ban her from performing in Vietnam, cutting off her primary source of income.

Banned from performing, banned from state media and under constant surveillance, Khoi's pop-star and celebrity status is quickly fading. But Khoi still refuses to stay silent. She puts together a new band – the Dissidents – and decides to write and record one more album to inspire her people to join her in standing up for freedom knowing full well she runs risk of jail, banishment from her home country or worse.

***Mai Khoi & the Dissidents*** brings back together the team behind ***Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower*** (Audience Award winner at Sundance 2017). The film is directed by Joe Piscatella (***#ChicagoGirl: The Social Network Takes On a Dictator; Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower***). The Director of Photography is Jonathan Young (HKSC). Music is composed by Christopher H. Knight. The film is produced by Matthew Torne, Mark Rinehart and Joe Piscatella, and executive produced by Andrew Duncan.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I've always been drawn to stories about unlikely heroes who stand up to immovable power structures. Fourteen-year-old Joshua Wong in *Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower* who rallied hundreds of thousands of Hong Kongers in the streets and sounded the alarm on how China will treat the rest of the world. Nineteen-year-old Alaa Basatneh in *#ChicagoGirl* who helped coordinate the Syrian revolution from the Chicago suburbs and turned the world's eye to the atrocities being committed against civilians.

When producer Matthew Torne first approached me with the story of Vietnamese pop star Mai Khoi, I immediately saw another unlikely hero taking on an oppressive government and who had the ability to get the world to pay attention. As soon as we pitched it to executive producer and noted human rights activist, Andrew Duncan, he was on board.

A few years ago Mai Khoi was a pop star who had it all – money, fame, fans and most importantly, the blessing of the Vietnamese Communist Party. In a country where all media is state-run, if the government decides you're the pop star, well, you're the next pop star. But as the government cracks down on anyone who dares to speak out against the Communist Party, Khoi hits a crossroad. Is her music just a vehicle for fame and fortune or can she use her voice to wake people up to what is going on in her country?

Turning her back on pop stardom, Khoi becomes one of the most visible advocates for free speech in a place where there is none. Because of her fame, it's harder for the government to crack down on Khoi. But as they pull her music from the state run airwaves and ban her from performing in Vietnam, Khoi refuses to be silent. Going around Vietnam's government censors Khoi secretly writes and records an anti-government album that when released, threatens her safety and ability to remain in the country she loves.

For nearly 18 months our production team embedded with Khoi in Vietnam. They weathered police raids on Khoi's secret shows and her homes. My team was tailed by secret police. But the team and I remained as committed to telling Khoi's story as Khoi is about her message of freedom and her ability to shine a light on the human rights issues in Vietnam.

And as I've seen in so many of my films' subjects, courage + action = change.

-Joe Piscatella

## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Director Joe Piscatella and British filmmaker and producer Matthew Torne are always looking for stories of inspiring dissidents so Mai Khoi had been on their radar since her unprecedented run for Vietnam's Parliament. After Torne flew to Germany to meet with Khoi, he immediately called Piscatella and said, "This has to be our next story."

"I love stories about ordinary people who do extraordinary things, every day people who stand up to enormous power structures," says Piscatella whose last film, ***Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower*** won the Audience Award at Sundance and in one of the most high-profile documentary sales of the festival in 2017. New York-based producer Andrew Duncan agreed. Duncan, a noted human rights advocate, was so impressed with Khoi's mission of freedom in her country he offered to finance the production. "Khoi's passion is undeniable," says Duncan. Duncan has previously championed the causes of Chinese dissidents including Chen Guangcheng and Joshua Wong.

"The Vietnamese government has done an amazing job of selling the world on the idea that Vietnam is a great place to backpack, hit the beach, or even invest," says Piscatella. "And the world forgets that Vietnam is legendary in its human rights abuses, particularly the Vietnamese Communist Party's campaigns of intimidation to silence those who speak out against them." In a 2017 report, Reporters Without Borders lists Vietnam in the bottom five nations in the world for press freedom along with China, Syria and North Korea. "We've all seen pop stars and actors who use their celebrity for activism," says producer Mark Rinehart. "But what drew me to Khoi's story were the stakes. If a Western pop star speaks out, the consequences are minimal, maybe radio stations taper airplay like with the Dixie Chicks. But with Khoi, the stakes are real. She's risking her life to openly sing her songs."

### The Challenges of Documenting a Pop Star

During production, Piscatella and producers Mark Rinehart and Matthew Torne discovered that following a dissident pop star had its challenges. "Too often we found that while we were following Khoi, so were the secret police," says producer Matthew Torne. Members of the production team was detained by police, shaken down at airport customs over equipment, stood their ground to continue filming at Khoi's "secret show" that was raided by police and at one point fled their production headquarters with just harddrives off footage minutes ahead of a police raid on Khoi's apartment.

Another challenge for Piscatella and his team was getting Khoi to open up emotionally. “Because she is a pop star she has done hundreds and hundreds of interviews,” Piscatella explains. But Piscatella and his team didn’t give up. “We kept pressing. We kept challenging and forcing Khoi to confront her pop star roots as well as recognize her new reality as a dissident still in her own country. “The moment Khoi’s secret show was raided, that’s when we realized we had something special,” remembers Hong Kong-based cinematographer Jonathan Young.

### **A Harrowing Ending**

Capturing the final scene of the film where Khoi attempts to flee Vietnam proved to be a nerve-wracking experience for the production crew. Because it’s illegal to film in the Hanoi Airport, hidden cameras were deployed and a cameraman, booked on a separate flight out of the country, secretly filmed Khoi as she faced down the police at customs. “I didn’t sleep for a week,” says producer Torne. During a dry run the day before, the police spotted one crew members camera forcing the film crew to scatter and flee through the parking garage. “We were all on edge. Khoi had been through so much, had done so much, to have it end with her arrest trying to flee the country would’ve been a disheartening ending to a courageous story,” says Piscatella. “But my favorite moment is the very end where the police officer recognizes and agrees to let her through because he is a fan of her music, proving that music can bring about change, even if it’s just one person.”

### **Epilogue: The Struggle Continues**

Since the completion of *Mai Khoi & the Dissidents* Khoi has returned from exile to Vietnam. She continues to push for human rights and is considering running again for Parliament while she works on new music.

### **ABOUT THE FILMMAKER**

**JOE PISCATELLA (Director)** has, since graduating from the graduate writing program at USC, written for a host of television, film, radio and print projects. His second feature documentary, *Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower* won the Audience Award at Sundance 2017 and was acquired as a Netflix Original. His first feature documentary, *#ChicagoGirl*, has been seen in more than 60 countries. He was also an executive producer on the documentary *Finders Keepers*, which premiered at Sundance in 2015. In 2019 he was nominated for an Emmy for his directorial work on *Food Interrupted*.

In addition to his directing work, Piscatella has written numerous feature scripts and television pilots for 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, Spyglass and Touchstone Television. His credits include Disney's *Underdog*, Warner Bros.' "Ozzy & Drix" and NBC's "Stark Raving Mad."

The filmmaker graduated from Georgetown University. After a tryout as a punter in the Canadian Football League, he began his writing career as a speechwriter in Washington, D.C., where he wrote jokes for clients such as executives at Johns Hopkins Medical Center and high-ranking personnel in the U.S. Air Force. In addition, he interned for Ted Koppel on ABC's "Nightline."

**ANDREW DUNCAN (Executive Producer)** is a producer on of several films including the psychological thriller *Thoroughbred*, written and directed by Cory Finley, starring Olivia Cooke, Anya Taylor-Joy, and Anton Yelchin; *Fun Mom Dinner*, directed by Alethea Jones, starring Toni Collette, Bridget Everett, Katie Aselton, and Molly Shannon; and the feature length documentary *Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower* about Hong Kong student activist and politician, Joshua Wong. Duncan serves as producer: Paul Dano's directorial debut, *Wildlife*, starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Carey Mulligan; *The Florida Project*, written and directed Sean Baker (*Tangerine*) starring Willem Dafoe; and the dramatic comedy *Dude*, written and directed by Olivia Milch, starring Lucy Hale, Kathryn Prescott, Alexandra Shipp and Awkwafina.

**MATTHEW TORNE (Producer)** Matthew Torne is best known for producing *Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower* a feature-length documentary that won the Audience Award at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival and was nominated for a Producer's Guild of America Award. Prior to producing *Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower* Matthew produced and directed the feature-length documentary *Lessons in Dissent* (2014), which premiered at the 38th Hong Kong International Film Festival and was an Associate Producer on the Sundance 2010 and Emmy winning *Enemies of the People* (2010). Matthew studied Modern Chinese Studies at Oxford

University and Film Studies and History at the University of Kent. He is a member of the Producers Guild of America.

**MARK RINEHART (Producer)** is an Emmy-nominated director whose network credits include programming for Discovery, National Geographic, Travel Channel, Oprah Winfrey Network, and Current Television. He has also created digital content campaigns for a wide range of brands including Intel, Toyota, Ford, Chevy, Starbucks, HP, and Pepsi. Mark recently produced “Joshua: Teenager Vs. Superpower” a feature length documentary that picked up the audience award at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival. Netflix Originals acquired the film while at Park City. He also produced “[Decoding Deepak](#)”, a theatrically released film on Deepak Chopra, and “[#chicagoGirl](#)” (a feature-length doc about a young woman who manages the Syrian revolution from her laptop in suburban Chicago). Both of these films can be found on Netflix as well as Apple streaming or download. While at Current Television, Mark developed and executive produced the critically acclaimed “[Embedded](#)” music series. In-depth profiles of artists ranging from Common to Ben Harper earned the show positive reviews in Rolling Stone and Billboard magazine. He directed the premiere episode that featured [Mos Def's tour of Japan](#). Mark also executive produced and directed “[TV Free Burningman](#)”, a flagship series that earned a national Emmy nomination. Prior to his tenure at Current, he directed multiple segments for the award winning PBS series “Spark”. His short film “Jumpers” premiered at SXSW and screened in multiple festivals including San Francisco International and Silverdocs. He received an MA in film from Stanford University.

**JONATHAN YOUNG (HKSC)** has been the Director of Photography on more than 7 feature-length documentaries. Jonathan's documentary film "Cottondreams (2014)" went to over 100 international film festivals including the 68th Cannes Film Festival and won the Grand Jury Prize in 2015 Amsterdam Film Festival. Jonathan was the director of photography for the Sundance Award-winning documentary 'Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower'. In early 2017 he filmed 'Operation Red Sea' a USD\$70 million action movie, which grossed USD\$574 million. He has worked in the camera department on over 50 films and worked with some of the biggest names in Hong Kong cinema, such as Chow Yuen-Fat, Johnnie To, Shukei, Benny Chan, Dante Lam, Anthony Pun... as camera operator. He holds an MA with distinction in Cinematography from the Polish National Film School in Lodz. He is the youngest member of the Hong Kong Society for Cinematographers.

**MATTHEW SULTAN (Editor)** Before pursuing his love for media-making, Matthew held jobs as a primate researcher, veterinary technician, bindery worker, and noodle house dishwasher. He is a filmmaking multi-hyphenate dedicated to the art and craft of storytelling. In 2008, he earned an Emmy nomination while working as a Supervising Producer / Editor at Current Television. More recently, he earned an Emmy nomination for producing a digital series for Panera Bread. Matthew edited the Netflix Original “Joshua: Teenager Vs. Superpower,” a feature-length documentary that picked up the audience award at the Sundance Film Festival. With strong roots in editorial, Matthew brings a birds-eye-view perspective to the projects he tackles. He enjoys teaching others and has led workshops on the topics of media literacy and citizen journalism. From the jungles of Colombia to the playa at Burning Man, he feels lucky for all of the adventures his career has afforded him. He is always interested in meaningful projects and doubly interested if the project involves travel. This is his third film with director Joe Piscatella. He lives in Los Angeles where he is a husband, father, and partner in the content creation studio OFFICIAL. FUN FACT: His sixth-grade soprano voice can be heard on several tracks in the film Home Alone, which may be one of his biggest accomplishments...ever.