



RIKSHAW FILMS



# THE LISTENING PROJECT

a documentary film by Dominic Howes & Joel Weber  
2008 | 76 minutes

A cinematic journey around the globe in search of *what the world thinks of America*



[WWW.THELISTENINGPROJECTFILM.COM](http://WWW.THELISTENINGPROJECTFILM.COM)

# SYNOPSIS

## “What does the world think of America?”

**This seemingly simple question led to a global quest for four Americans, whose thought-provoking journey through fourteen countries is documented in *The Listening Project*. Emotional encounters with dozens of diverse and fascinating characters reveal the breadth of U.S. impact on ordinary people's lives around the world. The result is a beautiful and inspiring examination of crumbling empires, human fellowship, and the meaning of citizenship in a globalized world.**

The film opens by introducing the four American *listeners* whose global journey is documented. Bao Phi is a first generation Vietnamese-American poet and self-described “nerd” who has only left the U.S. to visit family in Vietnam. Carrie Lennox is a 7<sup>th</sup> grade history teacher who relishes the opportunity to bring the lessons she’ll learn back to the classroom. Baby boomer Bob Roeglin is a probation officer who talks about traveling “without fear” as a young man and wonders how different he’ll find traveling in a post-9/11 world. And Han Shan is a 30-something human rights activist in New York who feels anxious about how much he doesn’t know about the world.

During their global journey, the American *listeners* linger in some unforgettable places, sharing intimate moments with people whose perspectives are variously discomfiting, surprising, and illuminating.

In a rural Tanzanian village, Carrie meets a traditional Masai woman in colorful garb who says, “Thanks to God I’m meeting an American for the first time.” When asked what she knows about the U.S., she replies “I heard about a war over there. I hope it doesn’t come to Masai Lands.” In a classroom in wintry Samara Russia, Bob listens to Russian college students discuss their love for Metallica and Guns N’ Roses. He is caught off-guard when they ask him, “I wonder how much young Americans are really interested in Russia?” In bustling Shanghai, Bao Phi finds common ground with “Gary,” a DJ obsessed with American hip-hop. He confesses, “My parents...all they want for me is to get a stable job, get married, have kids, and die. They never understand. I play music. I make money. Are you kidding me?” On the war-torn outskirts of Kabul, Han visits with Arifa, who lost most of her family to an errant U.S. bombing in 2001. He is speechless as she sobs, “They could have helped. But they never even came to see!”

Filmed in verité style, the viewer is invited to become another *listener* on this cinematic journey around the world. But breaking with documentary conventions, the arc is emotional rather than narrative. The film concludes on a hopeful but urgent note. In Tanzania, a young student says “just imagine what would happen if...people start realizing what part they play in their community, and their community happens to be the whole world.”

# ABOUT THE CO-DIRECTORS

## Dominic Howes & Joel Weber

Dominic and Joel are co-owners of the Minneapolis-based production company Rikshaw Films. In 2005 they co-directed their first documentary film, the 48-minute *Awakening*. Filmed in Afghanistan, India, Colombia, and South Dakota, *Awakening* explores the emergence of micro-finance as a tool for economic empowerment and poverty alleviation in the developing world. *Awakening* won the Audience Award for best short documentary at the 2006 Santa Cruz International Film Festival.

Dominic was born in Philadelphia, PA, but grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. He plays the Indian tabla drums and is a devoted exponent of the Hindustani classical music style from India. He is an experienced home-builder using eco-friendly construction practices. Dominic was a contributing author for *Alternative Construction: Contemporary Natural Building Methods* (2000) and his work was featured in the book, *Building With Earth*, by Paulina Wojciechowksa (2001).

Joel was born and raised in Minneapolis, MN. He is a graduate of the University of Minnesota with a degree in Film Studies. He also holds an MA degree in International Business from Saint Mary's University in Minnesota. Joel served as the director of photography for both *Awakening* and *The Listening Project*. Prior to pursuing a career as a documentary filmmaker Joel played drums and toured North America with the popular jazz/funk trio *The Greyhounds*.

# CO-DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

Civilizations, empires and nation states have come and gone for millennia but none before eclipse the massive economic, social and military power that the United States now wields. There are few people on earth who are not affected by this. With this in mind a central question emerges, "what do people think about the United States?"

In mid-2005 we were finishing our first documentary film, *Awakening*, about the emerging phenomenon of micro-credit. After two years of work in four countries on a shoestring budget, we were beginning to ruminate on what we would do next. *Awakening* had taken us into rural India and an Afghan war zone. As we worked through post production in the safe confines of our Minneapolis studio, a new conversation evolved in response to Executive Producer Jim Pohlads' curiosity about current global opinion of the United States.

As a team, we'd been lucky enough to have spent significant time overseas and could recount many encounters in which our American identity overshadowed all else. Whether it was the time we spent in Afghanistan, visits to Europe or even a long-ago vacation to Mexico, we had often seen firsthand the deeply passionate feelings evoked by the mention of "America."

Our conversation soon turned to brainstorming how we could explore this idea through documentary filmmaking. Like all Americans, we had our own feelings about the United States and its place in the world. We were much more interested in finding a way to create a platform for other people's ideas around the world. As our friend Marcelo who we met during filming in Brazil said, "God has given you two ears and one mouth, to listen more than speak." This was the ethic we tried to maintain with our film, *The Listening Project*.

The film was edited from 280 hours of footage shot on location in fourteen countries. A wide-ranging group of people are portrayed, with myriad different views and ideas of the United States. Not surprisingly, we found that the relatively simple idea of "what people think of America" is in reality incredibly complex. Rarely were any of the responses to our questions cut-and-dried, but instead often thoughtful, personal, and contradictory. People's views were often interwoven with the day-to-day reality of their own regional, political and social environments. We tried to avoid providing ready-made "answers" or thrusting a convenient narrative onto the many hours of footage we sorted through. Ultimately, we chose characters and subject matter that would provide both "person on the street" opinions and more in-depth examples of U.S. impact on peoples lives in other countries.

Visually, the film combines a cinema verité style with some journalistic qualities, such as enlisting four friends who we followed traveling and interacting with our subjects. However, our correspondents – or *listeners* as we like to call them – are not professional journalists, academics or experts on foreign policy. They are simply four

Americans from different backgrounds with their own unique stories and perspectives. Besides providing a vehicle to help the viewer experience our global journey, the *listeners* also shaped the film through their interactions and perceptions. However, the emphasis always remains on the fascinating people we encountered everywhere we went.

Stylistically, we avoided making a traditional talking head-style documentary. Instead, the action unfolds in the homes, workplaces and communities of our subjects. By employing small cameras and a team never larger than four, we were able to be present in the moment with our characters. Rather than an obstacle, we found the camera to be a tool capable of capturing moments of true human vitality. Ultimately, our goal was to be reactive and observant, not controlling of every situation, and the scale of our production helped facilitate this.

We placed a strong emphasis on the cinematography in an attempt to give a worthy depiction of the rich and diverse cultures of each location and to bring a sense of humanity to the film. Hours and hours were spent behind the camera, on street corners, in living rooms, and simply capturing the day-to-day rhythm of life.

We have portrayed numerous people and stories that simply aren't found in the countless polls on global opinion of the United States. We hope that the film will engage viewers with the seemingly limitless ideas of what America means to people around the world. We believe that viewers will be left less fearful and more curious about the world around them. It is our ultimate hope that Americans who see this film will be compelled to ask themselves what it means to be a citizen not just of the U.S., but of the world.

–Dominic Howes & Joel Weber  
December 2007

# REVIEWS

"Poignant and thought-provoking, the feature raises questions about what it means to be a citizen of the world."

"...cinematography evocative of *Baraka* and *Koyaanisqatsi*."

– City Pages (Minneapolis/St. Paul)

"If you can see only one documentary at the Durango Independent Film Festival, don't miss *The Listening Project*. Buried among all the other documentaries, *Listening* has taken a back seat to *War/Dance*, one of two Academy Award nominees on this year's roster. See both and compare. Judge for yourself. In both style and content, "Listening" is a superior film. The premise, structure and cinematography are clearer and more innovative in *Listening*."

– Durango Telegraph

"While there is a superficial resemblance to the nonsensical vox pops which are a staple of TV news... *The Listening Project* uses a wealth of voices to develop a bigger picture. It's both interesting and a little chastening. It is also above all hopeful."

– Minnesota Public Radio

★★★ (out of 4)

– VitaMN magazine (Minneapolis)

"Beautifully shot, the film gives us a stimulating visual buffet of images of the people and countries the Americans visit."

– The Rake magazine (Minneapolis)

# TECHNICAL NOTES

The Listening Project was shot by Joel Weber and Dominic Howes with Panasonic DVX-100A, DVX-100B, and HVX-200 cameras on Mini DV in 24p, 16x9 anamorphic. All sound was recorded on the camera.

280 hours of material were recorded between November 2005 and November 2006 in 15 countries worldwide; Afghanistan, Brazil, Canada, China, France, India, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Palestine\*, Russia, South Africa, Tanzania, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Recorded interviews were translated into English from French, Spanish, Russian, Mandarin, Japanese, Masai, Arabic, Dari, Pashto, Kanadda, and Portuguese.

The film was edited by Todd Grabe with additional editing support by Joel Weber, Dominic Howes, and Carlos Lamas using Final Cut Pro software on an Apple Macintosh platform.

The film was transferred to DigiBeta by Gasket Studios and color corrected by colorist Oscar Oboza at Filmworkers Club Dallas using a da Vinci 2K system.

The original score was composed and recorded by Reid Kruger. Sound mixing and mastering was also performed by Reid Kruger using ProTools 7 on an Apple Macintosh platform at Waterbury Music & Sound Studios in Minneapolis, MN.

\*For the purposes of this project, Rikshaw Films has considered the Palestinian Territories as another "country."

## CREDITS

Featuring ( <i>Listeners</i> ):	Carrie Lennox Bao Phi Bob Roeglin Han Shan
Directors:	Joel Weber & Dominic Howes
Executive Producer:	Jim Pohlad
Associate Producer:	Chelle Stoner
Editor:	Todd Grabe
Director of Photography:	Joel Weber
Additional Photography:	Dominic Howes
Line Producer:	Tammy Kimbler Weber
Production Coordinator:	Carrie Bush
Original Score:	Reid Kruger

## CONTACT

### General Inquiries:

Rikshaw Films  
79 13th Ave. NE Suite 103  
Minneapolis MN, 55413  
612.216.1446  
dominic@rikshaw.net

### Press Inquiries:

Han Shan  
Producer, Rikshaw Films  
917.418.4133  
han@rikshaw.net

[WWW.THELISTENINGPROJECTFILM.COM](http://WWW.THELISTENINGPROJECTFILM.COM)