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issue theme

ARTS & EDUCATION

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A REAL PLACE WITH REAL PEOPLE

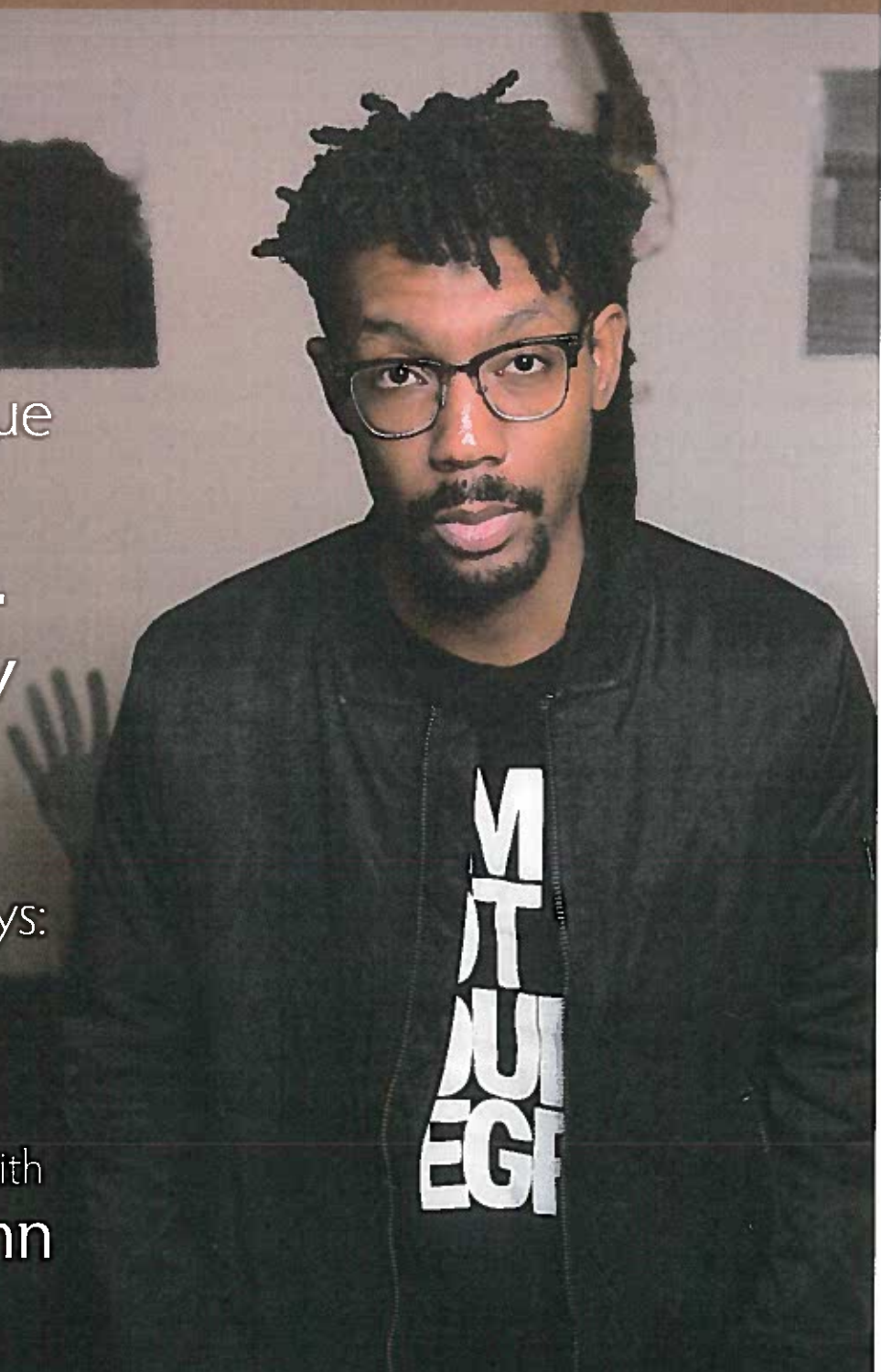
Featured in This Issue

Cover Story

Damon Davis – Interdisciplinary Storyteller

**Michael Thomas Says:
Tell Your Story!**

A Pathway Between
the Arts and Education with
Dr. Roderick Nunn



DAMON DAVIS

Interdisciplinary Story Teller

BY **Tim Fox** PHOTO BY **Michael Thomas**

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When Damon Davis heard that Michael Brown had been shot, he was teaching mural making at Freedom Arts Summer Expo, a camp for kids in St. Louis.

"I didn't understand what was happening," he remembers. "A friend told me a kid was shot in Ferguson and that people were gathering. Later, I went up there to see what was going on."

What Davis found, and what happened in Ferguson in the weeks and months that followed, are the subject of *Whose Streets?*, the East St. Louis native's first feature-length documentary film, co-directed with Sabaah Folyan. *Whose Streets?* debuted at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival and has been picked-up by Magnolia Pictures. Magnolia will release the film publicly August 11, 2017.

When *Whose Streets?* hits the theaters, it will be just the latest in a string of artistic accomplishments for Davis. The founder of the record label FarFetched Collective, Davis is also a musician working under the name LooseScrewz (half of Scripts N Screwz, a hip-hop duo), an accomplished digital graphic artist, a sculptor, and a star in St. Louis venues like the Kranzberg Arts Center and galleries around the country.

But what he is first of all, he'll tell you, is a storyteller.

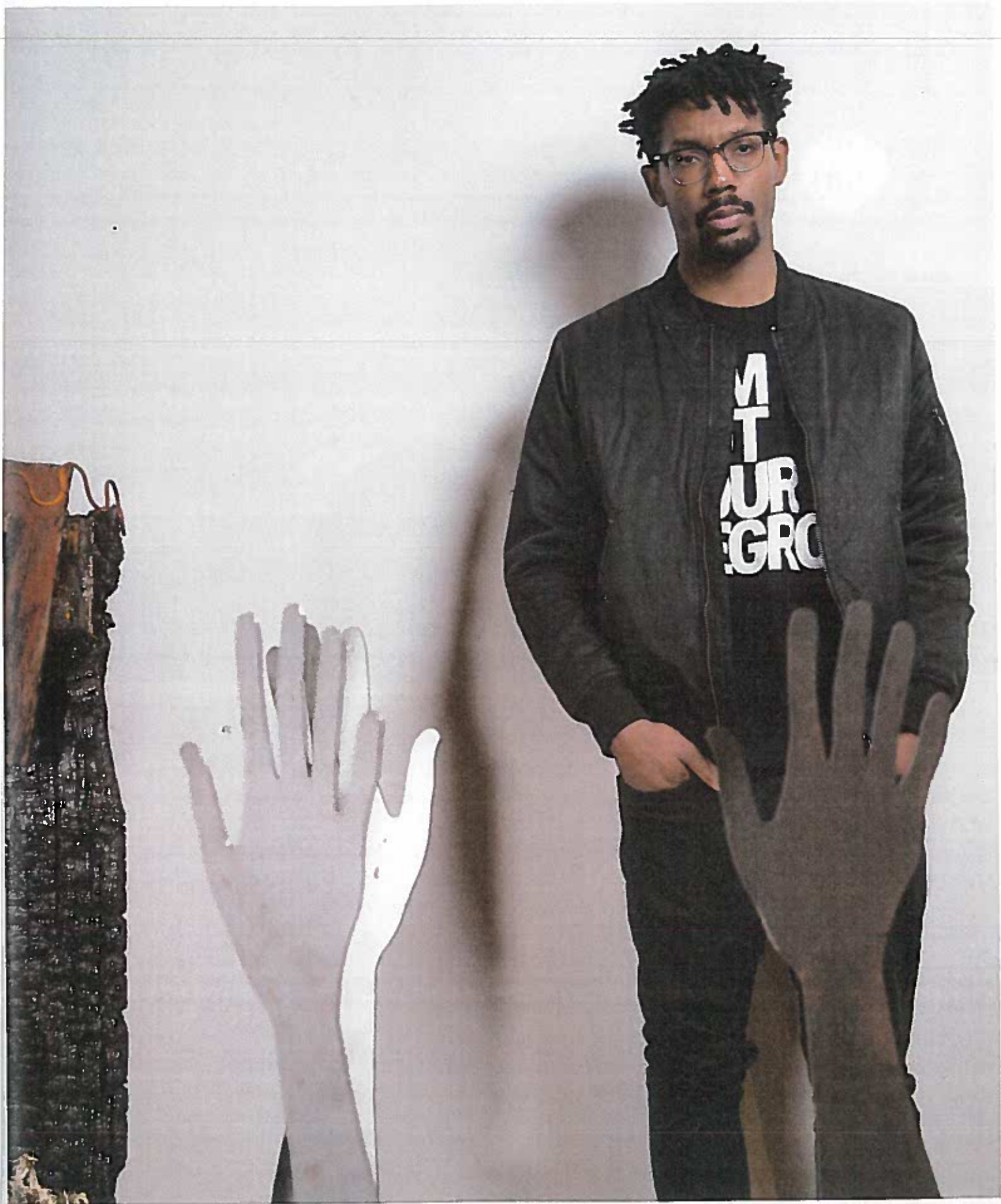
"I grew up in the Parkside neighborhood of East St. Louis," he says. "I was a quiet kid, and I spent my whole life drawing, painting, and making stuff. I took what was around me and created imaginary worlds by myself to tell stories."

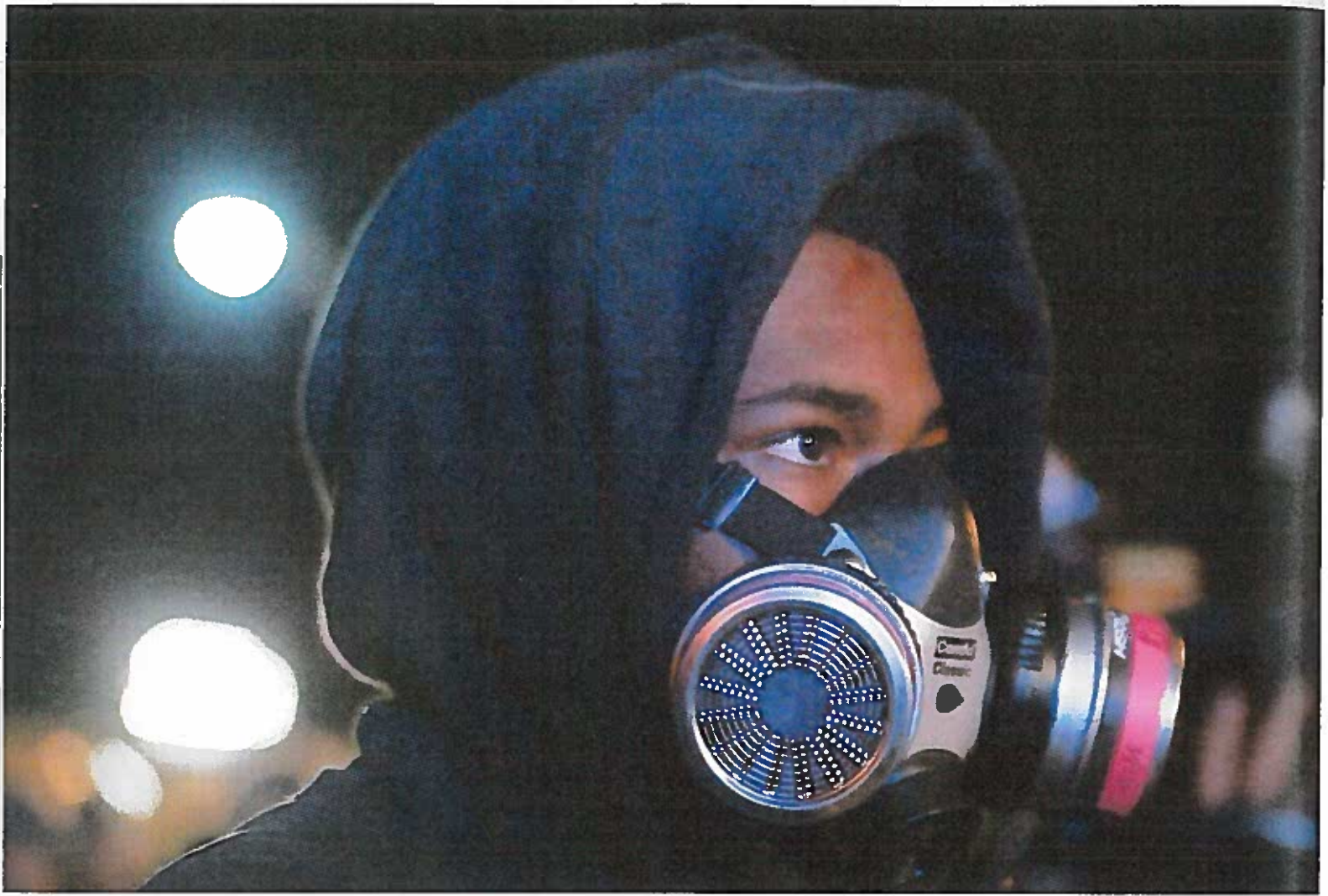
He also found music to be a powerful medium for storytelling. He began DJing when he was in his early teens, drawn initially to hip-hop.

"I still rap or sing when the story calls for it, but the music I make now I would call progressive electronic beats," Davis says. "I am a producer/composer for the most part, and the genres and artists at FarFetched are very different. Music is the most forward-facing thing I do now, but it's just another medium. The message is whatever I'm inspired by. The same themes I explore in my visual art pop up in my music."

While Davis's imagination soared, his family kept him grounded. Born the youngest of five children, his nieces and nephews played the role of his siblings growing up.







Still Images from the film *Whose Streets?*

"We weren't perfect and never will be, but we bonded together," he says. "Because of my family, I was able to achieve the things I've achieved. They gave me the values and morals I needed to work through a lot of obstacles."

Davis was raised Catholic, attending Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School in East St. Louis for grade school and Althoff Catholic High School in Belleville.

"Things materialized racially for me in high school," Davis recalls. "Before that, I hadn't experienced racism, but I saw it then and it helped form me and shape how I view the world."

His vision became clearer as a student at Saint Louis University, where he earned a bachelor of arts in Communication Technology in 2007. As a student he discovered "my life's work," digital art—"the thing I gravitate to the most."

Davis moved to St. Louis after college and started making and exhibiting art on Cherokee Street. He also discovered the Regional Arts Commission's Community Arts Training Institute, where he met other artists and started doing shows.

"It was a long progression and a lot of hard work," he says. "My work became more politically charged because I was making art about the people who matter to me. I had a lot of support, but I also didn't let up—I kept pressing on, because this was my life choice. It's what I was going to do."

Davis also became acquainted with Reginald Clemons, a man who has been on death row for 25 years. The two hit it off and became friends, leading him to think about his own life. When a company called Antidote approached the Regional Arts Commission seeking an artist to produce a short documentary, the commission decided to do a piece on Davis's life. Called *A Story to Tell*, it was his first documentary film, winning a local Emmy award in 2013.

"*A Story to Tell* was about me," Davis says. "I filmed parts of it in my mom and dad's house, parts in my studio, and parts on the streets of East St. Louis. It's a statement of who I am as an artist and why art is important to me and to society."

But Davis didn't realize then how much his views would change after that fateful day in August 2014.

As a filmmaker, the first thing Davis noticed in Ferguson was how peaceful it was, unlike what he was seeing on the news.

"The vibe was very much one of community, of a peaceful presence," Davis remembers. "People were standing up to the police, but it was peaceful, it was respectful. That inspired me to use the tools I had to help out."

Inspired to again use the tools at his disposal to make art and convey a message, Davis collaborated with other local artists to articulate what the community was feeling. *The Atlantic* magazine's *CityLab* website wrote about the installations.

“I spent my whole life drawing, painting, and making stuff. I took what was around me and created imaginary worlds by myself to tell stories.”

In one project, Davis's enlarged photographs of protesters' hands were pasted on the plywood covering storefronts. Now in the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture's permanent collection, the photos were picked up by the cameras broadcasting the scene around the world, a powerful reminder that real people's lives were at stake.

For another installation, *Hands Up*, he and artist Basil Kincaid installed large plywood hands, painted black, around St. Louis. Davis also worked with a group of artists, including Marcis Curtis, to build a mirrored casket for demonstrators to carry. The casket forced police to see their own reflections in the glass. As *CityLab* reporter Mark Byrnes wrote, "Davis's art looks at the ugly realities of America so starkly realized in his own region, yet it always manages to stay constructive."

Davis's work continues to reflect his time in Ferguson and the emotions he has felt since. His project *Negrophilia* is a personal collection of mixed-media paintings that explore the affect that images of black lives being taken on television and social media has on the minds of both the victims and the viewers. *All Hands On Deck* riffs on the theme of the storefront photos, pairs of hands—some darker, some lighter, some bare, some adorned with jewelry—portraying the power of the most important symbol of the Ferguson uprising.

"*The All Hands On Deck* project is an ode to that diverse collective dedicated to protecting our human rights, no matter race, age or gender," Davis says. "*All Hands On Deck* is our charge—a call of action to stand with those who stand for us all." In a recent TED Talk, Davis said that the works he created for Ferguson were "things specific to the protest... things that would give people voice and things that would fortify them for the road ahead." The film he created with fellow filmmaker Sabaah Folayan will bring those voices to the world. It is not a responsibility that Davis takes lightly.

"*In Whose Streets?* I'm only making out of it what I saw, what I experienced," Davis says. "In Ferguson, the police response to a community in mourning was to use power to impose fear. Fear of militarized police, imprisonment, fines. The media even tried to make us afraid of each other by the way that they spun the story. But the film is about courage. Courage is contagious. That's what I wanted to show."

No matter how far *Whose Streets?* takes him, Davis says he'll never forget being from East St. Louis, but he'll never let it define him, either.

As he explains in *A Story to Tell*: "You need to know where you come from ... and you should speak for those people that you come from, but you also shouldn't let society dictate who you are or what you should be doing with your time."