

# NEON

Presents

# the Biggest little Farm

A FILM BY JOHN CHESTER

RUNNING TIME: 91 minutes

RATING: PG

## FESTIVALS

2018 Telluride Film Festival  
2018 Toronto Film Festival  
2018 Hamptons International Film Festival  
2018 Mill Valley Film Festival  
2018 Middleburg Film Festival  
2018 Vermont International Film Festival  
2018 Philadelphia Film Festival  
2018 Denver Film Festival

2018 Virginia Film Festival  
2018 St. Louis International Film Festival  
2018 Napa Valley Film Festival  
2018 DOC NYC  
2018 AFI Festival  
2018 Hawaii International Film Festival  
2019 Sundance Film Festival  
2019 Santa Barbara International FF

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## **SHORT SYNOPSIS:**

Two dreamers and a dog embark on an odyssey to bring harmony to their lives and to the land. As their plan to create perfect harmony takes a series of wild turns, they will have to reach a far greater understanding of the intricacies and wisdom of nature, and of life itself.

## **LONG SYNOPSIS:**

A testament to the immense complexity of nature, *The Biggest Little Farm* follows two dreamers and a dog on an odyssey to bring harmony to both their lives and the land. When the barking of their beloved dog Todd leads to an eviction notice from their tiny LA apartment, John and Molly Chester make a choice that takes them out of the city and onto 200 acres in the foothills of Ventura County, naively endeavoring to build one of the most diverse farms of its kind in complete coexistence with nature. The land they've chosen, however, is utterly depleted of nutrients and suffering from a brutal drought. The film chronicles eight years of daunting work and outsize idealism as they attempt to create the utopia they seek, planting 10,000 orchard trees and over 200 different crops, and bringing in animals of every kind—including an unforgettable pig named Emma and her best friend, Greasy the rooster. When the farm's ecosystem finally begins to reawaken, so does the Chesters' hope – but as their plan to create perfect harmony takes a series of wild turns, they realize that to survive they will have to reach a far greater understanding of the intricacies and wisdom of nature, and of life itself. 91 minutes.

## **INTERVIEW WITH JOHN CHESTER, DIRECTOR**

*Q: It's one thing to start farming and it's another thing to start farming and make a feature-length documentary about the experience. What inspired you to want to make THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM?*

JC: For the first several years that we were running the farm, I was not convinced that our plan to farm the land, rebuild the soil and coexist with nature would even work... So I didn't want to encourage others to drink the Kool-Aid, and be misled to think this level of collaboration with an ecosystem was possible. But around year five something changed. I saw the return of critical wildlife as well as a variety of insect species that were now serving as predators helping to rebalance the pest infestations that we had been fighting. The real inspiration came when I started to notice how the things that we thought were problems, like certain plants classified as weeds, were actually cycling critical nutrients back into our soil and feeding our fruit trees. The farm was taking what we had started and rebuilding its own complex immune system. We were capturing this story the whole time but I never really committed to the idea of making the film until that year. I remember the day I decided to do it. I was walking in the orchard by a tree that only days before had been completely covered in aphids, a pest that kills plants when it sucks the nectar from certain plants. But now they were all gone. Instead the tree was covered in hundreds of ladybugs, one of its main predators. The ladybugs had returned because we had created a habitat throughout the farm for them to thrive in. It just snowballed from there to one example of return after another and I knew I was ready to tell this story.

*Q: How challenging was it to be filming when you were also so deeply immersed in the farming itself?*

JC: Doing both was probably the most insane thing I've ever done. It's hard enough to deal with the complexities of a farm let alone shoot what is basically a nature documentary within the ecosystem of a farm. It was also quite challenging on both our farm team and my family especially in the final year of editing. I am so grateful to them for supporting me through this. That final year of post-production I had officially taken on too much. I'd be in the barn editing with Amy Overbeck the editor and have to rush out because of a fire, windstorm emergency or troubled livestock birth. Then walk back into the edit covered in various fluids and smells and keep cracking away on the story. The most difficult times were when the emergency would involve the death of a sick animal and I'd find myself returning to the edit room with very little time to process the loss. I've got a lot of favorite animals here so none of that is easy. We were shooting 365 days a year for almost eight years. There was constant tension for me personally between the needs of the farm and the needs of the film. The cool thing about nature and the farm, though, is that they have their own rhythms, so you can anticipate when something is about to happen. It's all about watching for the routines in nature and being there waiting for it to happen. That's obviously the secret formula for directing nature docs but funny enough it's also the most important trick to farming in this way. Observe and anticipate. And both require an extreme level of humility.

It was really challenging to allow myself to film the problems and the mistakes that we were making. I had to shut off the ego and not worry about exposing mistakes. Lots of times we would have interns with us on the farm who became really confident shooters, and they would encourage me to allow them to film things that I was uncomfortable with. I knew that they were right but that was a constant battle that went on in my head. In the end that's what I'm most proud of, we kept it real.

*Q: THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM was obviously unfolding in real time as you shot it. Given that, what was the most surprising and unexpected thing that you witnessed over the course of that time?*

JC: The return of so much wildlife. And then watching that wildlife become integrated into the needs of the farm. It's just absolutely mind blowing.

*Q: It's clear from the film that one of the largest lessons you learned is that if one is going to be a farmer, it is essential to pay close attention and to see and understand the interconnectedness of everything. I wonder how that lesson has expanded to your wider life?*

JC: Albert Einstein said, "Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better." It was something he wrote to a friend whose wife had died. The mystery behind the human condition, the infinite possibilities that we see in nature's complexity, are metaphors not only for how we live but for how we face all obstacles. You need not go any further than understanding the hierarchy of natural systems. They're not based on right or wrong but on a higher law of consequences. I feel like that's constantly reflected back to us. We put ourselves in a situation where we are required to understand how we fit in and what level of control we may or may not have.

*Q: Farming was clearly the culmination of a dream for you and your wife Molly. So having lived as farmers now for almost a decade, what would you say is the most delightful thing about life as a farmer?*

JC: One of the really inspiring things about farming in this way, where we prioritize the cultivation of beauty, is the amount of inspiration and energy we get even in the throes of some of the most difficult challenges and struggles. If you wake up every day and you're inspired in some visual way—by the type of cow that you farm with or the crops that you intermingle in the fields—if you're constantly reminded of the remarkable beauty and complexity of nature, then it's a place you want to be, it's a place you want to solve problems. Wendell Berry said it best. He said, "It all turns on affection." We're never going to see the potential in a troubled person that we do not already first love. And I think for us the cultivation of beauty has allowed us to fall in love with the land in a way that is very different and much more complex and much more unconditional. That has made us willing to stay with it through the hard times. And it's brought about the opportunity for us to maybe see solutions that we might not have otherwise seen if we didn't just first and foremost feel intoxicated by the beauty with which we farm.

*Q: And what is the hardest thing about life as a farmer?*

JC: It never stops. You're always having to make tough decisions, needing to look out and ask yourself, "Is this going to be mentally and physically sustainable? Financially sustainable? Ecologically sustainable?" You constantly have to make decisions about what is and isn't working.

*Q: THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM opens with a dramatic wildfire nearby and fires are now being called "the new normal" in California. How is the farm dealing with the threat of fire?*

JC: The only thing that we can do as a farm is to make sensible decisions about where we're going to move animals if and when a fire breaks out. We've experienced an intensity in fires around the farm over the last three years, and the fire season is now starting several months earlier than it has in the past. In the last month alone, we've had three fires within about ten miles of the farm. The only thing we didn't have was the seventy-mile-an-hour winds and they're coming because we get them every October. All we need is the right combo of events—which is what happened with the Thomas Fire and the Carr Fire—and we're done, regardless of our intent and how honorable we are with nature and the earnestness of our stewardship. We're not immune to the times that we're all living in and these massive fires.

*Q: All over the world, farmers are dealing with climate change. How do you personally deal on a day-to-day basis with the very real changes that everyone is now seeing from climate change?*

JC: We are trying to be an example with our patch of the quilt. If our methods of regeneration have a positive impact and other farms do similar things, the patches on that quilt will spread. Obviously I don't think that we alone or any one farm alone can change the climate crisis. But I think that if we each do our part for the ecosystem then that will be how we solve the problem—or at least a part of the problem, because I don't believe it's all agriculture's responsibility. But agriculture is pretty significant, especially when it comes to the degradation of soil and the use of glyphosphate to kill "weeds" and grasses out of fear they're interfering with crops. Those plants are the way that soil is able to sequester carbon from the atmosphere and regenerate and feed the microorganisms that essentially turn death into life.

*Q: What are your hopes for THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM once it's released?*

JC: I hope it also finds its way to younger viewers. While the film might contain some intense scenes, the story is very much for them too. And then I hope that all the viewers will see that a collaboration with nature offers infinite possibilities. Those possibilities that have evolved to perfection over billions of years of evolution. They've never stopped working for us, maybe we've just been too distracted from seeing them. I don't want anyone to feel like this film is trying to promote a way, or the only way, to farm. I do hope that it inspires the viewer to trust that nature has the answers for us. And those answers won't all come at once. It's taken us a long time to get where we are when it comes to soil degradation and desertification and it's going to take us time to back out of it. It won't be any one generation to solve it all. But we

have to leave our children the building blocks, the healthy functioning soil system, to continue in a direction that no longer threatens the planet's natural immune system. The planet itself will be fine, it just might not be a nice place for humans to call home, especially if she sees us as part of the problem. So we just need to decide "what side of her immune system are we on?" I would imagine that our response to that question has consequences.

## **INTERVIEW WITH MOLLY CHESTER, FARMER, COOKBOOK AUTHOR**

*Q: What inspired you to want to make a film about the adventure of creating the farm?*

MC: Honestly, when it comes to the film I'm simply the costar. My inspiration came in making the farm itself. There's a creative force within both John and myself and we are very supportive of each other's creativity. John is the filmmaker and he was the one recording what we were doing. I believed in THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM because I believe in John as a storyteller. I think everything he does is amazing and good for the world to see. From the perspective of the farm, I believed in THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM because what we're doing on the farm is different—out of the box—from what is commonly seen and known. We're allowing the voice of another way to exist, allowing regenerative agriculture to have a place in the more general conversation on agriculture.

*Q: What would you say has been the most meaningful thing that you've witnessed over the course of your time at the farm?*

MC: I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt what I wanted to see at the farm. It's been fascinating to see how that has evolved and deepened within me. You get intimately intertwined with nature and your surroundings. You have to go deep and it gets hard. But the hardness doesn't necessarily come from, "Oh, it's hard work to farm." That is one thing, but it's also that when you are coexisting with nature, nature throws you curveballs constantly. It's a very gritty and raw experience to work with biology. I think that experience has awakened my spirit to a connection with nature I didn't even know I was missing. That's been really beautiful. And it's been wonderful to see dreams become reality and to see how working with a team forms something bigger than you ever could've imagined. To be honest, the farm has exceeded my wildest dreams and that's been humbling and awe-inspiring.

*Q: What would you say is the greatest lesson that you've learned from the land?*

MC: That conquering doesn't work, that the focus isn't eradication or winning - it's collaboration and understanding. You're always trying to figure out what purpose something serves and how you can channel it into that purpose so that it takes the pressure off of everything else and things can fall into alignment. You have to watch and be observant. Something is always going to be causing "problems" but they're not really problems, they're just teaching you what the land needs. They're your next place to find greater harmony.

*Q: What for you is the most delightful part of daily life as a farmer?*

MC: The most delightful part of farming for me is that there is an innate freedom within it and a daily experience of beauty, especially at this farm because it's so beautiful. Everywhere you turn there's a flower that blows your mind or butterflies in the air or the grass looks extra green because of the way that the sun is hitting it. Nature is your boss and you're doing what needs to be done to make it all work. Freedom is something I've always valued a lot. Having a sense of freedom within such magnificent beauty is a thing that I really love.

*Q: And what is the hardest part?*

MC: The elements. The winds in the winter are really brutal. Honestly, I'm scared of them. And the fires are scary. You can be squashed so easily. And then there's maintaining your team and morale, making sure that you're constantly nurturing and supporting the people around you. That's work. But it's fun too.

*Q: You live a life that calls on you to understand the interconnectedness of everything around you. How have the lessons that you learned from farming expanded to fill your wider life?*

MC: Going back to the idea that it's not about conquering and winning: I know it's changed me as a manager because I have a gentler approach, a more feminine approach to leadership and that comes a lot from watching Mother Nature. She can be hard but generally she has a sense of collaboration. I think that understanding has extended into my experience of the world, of my family and friends. It's gotten me to understand more deeply how fragile it all is and to be a little bit more appreciative and go a little deeper.

*Q: What is it like to work within an ecosystem that is constantly under assault from climate change?*

MC: I went to a school called the Natural Gourmet Institute for Health and Culinary Arts. When I left, I got very, very deep into traditional foods, looking at how traditional cultures maintained health and longevity without medicines and modern conveniences. It becomes about your gut biome and supporting your body. What I learned about the body was absolutely a blueprint for how we farm because it's the same thing: we're basically treating the soil of the farm as the gut, doing everything we can to increase the digestion of that gut and give it the most nutrition we possibly can.

Right now, our bodies are really struggling from the overuse and abuse of so much. And it's the same thing in our climate. The irresponsibility in how we approach nature is similar to the irresponsibility in how we approach our bodies. Generations of decisions have led us to where we are now and it's our responsibility to clear it up and to have generations of decisions in front of us that are more responsible.

This work gives me purpose and meaning and a reason to wake up in the morning. I hope that that's inspiring to other people. I'm not saying our way is the way, but if it helps people to find some love for nature and get reconnected, then possibly we can all make some serious change.

*Q: What are your hopes for THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM once it comes out?*

MC: I hope that the world falls in love with it. I hope it reminds people that the earth is a beautiful, magical place. I hope it makes people want to take care of something that's precious.

## **ABOUT THE TEAM**

### **JOHN CHESTER, Director**

John Chester has been a filmmaker and television director for the last 25 years. His recent short films for OWN's Super Soul Sunday (including Saving Emma, Worry for Maggie and The Orphan) have won five Emmy Awards, for outstanding directing, writing, and cinematography, among others. Chester first reached a wide audience with his primetime television docu-series on A&E, Random 1, which he directed and starred in in 2006. The series then inspired his feature documentary Lost in Woonsocket, which premiered at SXSW in 2007. Chester also directed the documentary Rock Prophecies, about legendary rock photographer Robert Knight, which won three audience awards for best documentary feature and was distributed nationally on PBS in 2010. Alongside his feature documentary work, it was the time he spent traveling the world as a wildlife filmmaker with Animal Planet and ITV Wildlife shows that inspired his interest in the complex interworking of ecosystems—a curiosity that serves him well on Apricot Lane Farms, the biodynamic and regenerative farm he and his wife started in 2010.

### **SANDRA KEATS, Producer**

Sandra Keats is a documentary producer, whose work focuses largely on environmental and social issues worldwide. Sandra recently co-produced the feature documentary Eating Animals, directed by Christopher Quinn and produced with Natalie Portman and Jonathan Safran Foer, based on Foer's critically acclaimed book of the same name. The film premiered at the 2017 Telluride Film Festival, and was recently distributed theatrically by IFC Films/Sundance Selects. Sandra was also a co-producer on Lauren Greenfield's documentary Wealth: The Influence of Affluence (Sundance 2018/Amazon Studios), and prior to that co-produced the 2012 Sundance Audience Award-winning documentary short The Debutante Hunters, and Participant Media's Misconception (Tribeca 2014)—her second feature documentary collaboration with Oscar-winning director Jessica Yu and producer Elise Pearlstein. A graduate of Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Sandra began her career in documentaries as an associate producer on Participant Media's Last Call at the Oasis, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and Berlin International Film Festival prior to a theatrical release in 2012.

### **Laurie David, Executive Producer**

For over a decade Laurie David has brought her passion and dedication to a variety of important environmental and food issues, from global warming to America's overconsumption of sugar. Laurie was a producer on the Academy award-winning An Inconvenient Truth and executive producer on Fed Up. Laurie has also co-written two cookbooks, The Family Cooks: 100+ Recipes to GetYourFamilyCravingFoodThat'sSimple,Tasty,andIncrediblyGoodforYoua ndTheFamily Dinner: Great Ways to Connect with Your Kids One Meal at a Time. She also coauthored the children's book The Down-to-Earth Guide to Global Warming, which has been published in over ten languages.

Laurie has received numerous awards and honors, including the Producers Guild of America's Stanley Kramer Award, a Humanitas Prize Special Award and a Gracie Allen Award. Laurie has been honored with the Audubon Society's Rachel Carson Award, the Feminist Majority's Eleanor Roosevelt Award and the NRDC Forces for Nature award. Laurie, a regular blogger on the Huffington Post, has been featured on The Oprah Winfrey Show, Good Morning America, The Today Show, CNN, Fox News and MSNBC. She was named a 2006 Glamour Woman of the Year and has been profiled in People, Glamour, Redbook, Ladies Home Journal, Vogue, Rolling Stone, Elle, Wired, House & Garden, The New York Times and Vanity Fair.

### **ERICA MESSER, Executive Producer**

Erica Messer is an accomplished Showrunner, Executive Producer, Writer and Creator of dramatic series for U.S. network television and has worked in the industry for over 20 years. Messer is serving her eighth year as Executive Producer and Showrunner of Criminal Minds, continuing her streak as the longest-serving writer on the series, having joined the show in its first season in September 2005.

Erica began her career working in drama development at FOX then moved to the writers' office of the hit series Party of Five. From there, she launched her writing career on Alias, The OC, and Charmed before moving to Criminal Minds. She recently embarked on a two-year development project with ABC Studios under Erica Messer Productions, creating new network, cable and streaming television shows with a stable of talented writers.

### **MARK MONROE, Writer**

Co-founder of Diamond Docs, Mark Monroe is an award-winning documentary filmmaker with an extensive list of writing and producing credits. A graduate of the University of Oklahoma, Mark began his career in Atlanta as a writer for CNN's Headline News and NewsNight. Moving to Los Angeles in the late 90s, Mark went on to produce over two-hundred hours of biography-style television. His theatrical credits include: Academy-Award winning Icarus; Academy Award-winning The Cove; Academy Award-nominated Chasing Ice; Racing Extinction; Grammy-winning, The Beatles – Eight Days a Week: The Touring Years; Leonardo DiCaprio's Before the Flood; The Game Changers and The Devil We Know.

### **JEFF BEAL, Composer**

A five-time Emmy-winning composer, Jeff Beal's approach is a favorite for more sophisticated works. His TV credits include HBO's Rome, Carnivale and the Netflix series House of Cards. His documentary work includes Blackfish, Weiner, The Queen of Versailles, An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth To Power, and Boston, a documentary about the history of the Boston Marathon. Jeff's upcoming film projects include Shock and Awe (directed by Rob Reiner) & Bigger (directed by George Gallo).

Recently, Jeff's performing, conducting, and composing worlds have begun converging. Jeff conducted The National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center in the premiere of House of Cards in Concert, with further performances in Miami, The Netherlands Concertgebouw, Denmark, and Jerusalem. He also led the Boston Pops Esplanade for the premiere of Boston live-to-picture, and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra for his new score to The General. New commissions include works for the St. Louis Symphony, New West Symphony, Smuin Ballet, Brooklyn Youth Chorus, Oregon Ballet Theater, and the Los Angeles Master Chorale.

**AMY OVERBECK, Editor**

Amy Overbeck has been John Chester's go-to documentary editor for the past 12 years. Amy first worked with Chester as an editor on his breakout primetime television docu-series Random 1 on A&E in 2006. From there she edited his first feature documentary Lost in Woonsocket, which premiered at SXSW in 2007. And then went on to edit his documentary Rock Prophecies, about rock photographer Robert Knight, which won three audience awards for best documentary feature and was distributed nationally on PBS in 2010.

MAIN TITLE CREDITS

NEON and FarmLore Films present

**In Association with**

Diamond Docs

**In Association with**

Impact Partners and Artemis Rising

THE BIGGEST LITTLE FARM

**Music by**

Jeff Beal

**Edited by**

Amy Overbeck

**Written by**

John Chester

Mark Monroe

**Executive Producers**

Laurie David

Erica Messer

**Executive Producers**

Paul Gurinas

Jessica Gurinas

**Produced by**

Sandra Keats

**Produced by**

John Chester

**Directed by**

John Chester

End Card

A Film by John Chester

END CREDITS

**In Association with**

Chester Films

Erica Messer Productions

**Consulting Producers**

Joy Kecken

Joshua Kunau

**Animation by**

Jason Carpenter

**Director of Photography**

John Chester

**Cinematography by**

Mallory Cunningham

Benji Lanpher

Chris Martin

Kyle Romanek

**Specialty Cinematography**

Nick Savander

Drew Lauer

**Wildlife Time-Lapse Photography**

Chris Martin

Kyle Romanek

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Andre Cronje

Carla Sendino

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Jacob Fisher

Alex Marmalichi

**Production Assistant**

Ainhua Hardy

**2nd Unit Field Producer**

Mallory Cunningham

**2nd Unit Radcam Operator**

Jay Halsey

**2nd Unit Dolly Grip**

Cranston Gobbo

**2nd Unit Production Assistant**

Keri Oberly

**Additional Footage by**

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Jack Messer  
Charlotte Savin

**Post Production Consultant**

Benjamin Lindemuth McRobie

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Chris Martin

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Van Bedient  
Matt Christensen  
Mike Hogan  
Todd Reeder  
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FotoKem

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**Digital Intermediate Editor**

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Alex Sanchez

**Digital Intermediate Producer**

Ricardo Hernandez

**Online Conform Editor**

Aaron Howell

**Online Conform Assistant Editor**

Jacob Fisher

**Audio Post Production Facility**

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**Foley Editor**

Hannah Gregory

**Foley Artist**

Ben Jones

**Re-Recording Mixer**

Andrew Wilson CAS AMPS

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**Sound Designer**

Alex Knickerbocker

**Re-Recording Mix Tech**

Bill Meadows

**Stage Engineer**

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**VFX by**

HEYCHROMAKEY

**VFX Creative Director**

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**Additional VFX**

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**Music Supervisor**

Kevin Edelman

**Score Recorded at**

Many Rooms Music

**Conducted & Produced by**

Jeff Beal

**Additional Orchestration**

Marco Valeria Antonini

**Orchestra Contractor**

David Low

**Violin (Concertmaster)**

Mark Robertson

**Violin**Rafael Rishik  
Susan Rishik  
Armen Anassian  
Maia Jasper  
Lorand Lokusza  
Marisa Sorajja**Viola**

Erik Rynearson  
Corinne Sobolewski  
Victor DeAlmeida  
Carolyn Riley

**Cello**

Dennis Karmazyn  
Julie Jung  
Alisha Bauer  
Trevor Handy

**Bass**

Nico Abondolo  
Henry Beal

**French Horn**

Steve Becknell  
Allen Fogle  
Teag Reaves  
Katie Farauto

**Tuba**

Gabriel Sears

**Banjo, Dobro, Guitars**

George Doering

**Flutes**

Sara Andon

**Oboe, English Horn**

Chris Bleth

**Clarinet**

Dan Higgins

**Bassoon**

Judith Farmer

**Vocals**

Caroline Beal

**Piano, Harmonica & Electronics**

Jeff Beal

**Researcher**

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Lisa Callif, Esq.  
Kate Serfoss, Esq.

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Momentous Insurance Brokerage, Inc.

**Sales Agent**

UTA Independent Film Group

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Alan York

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