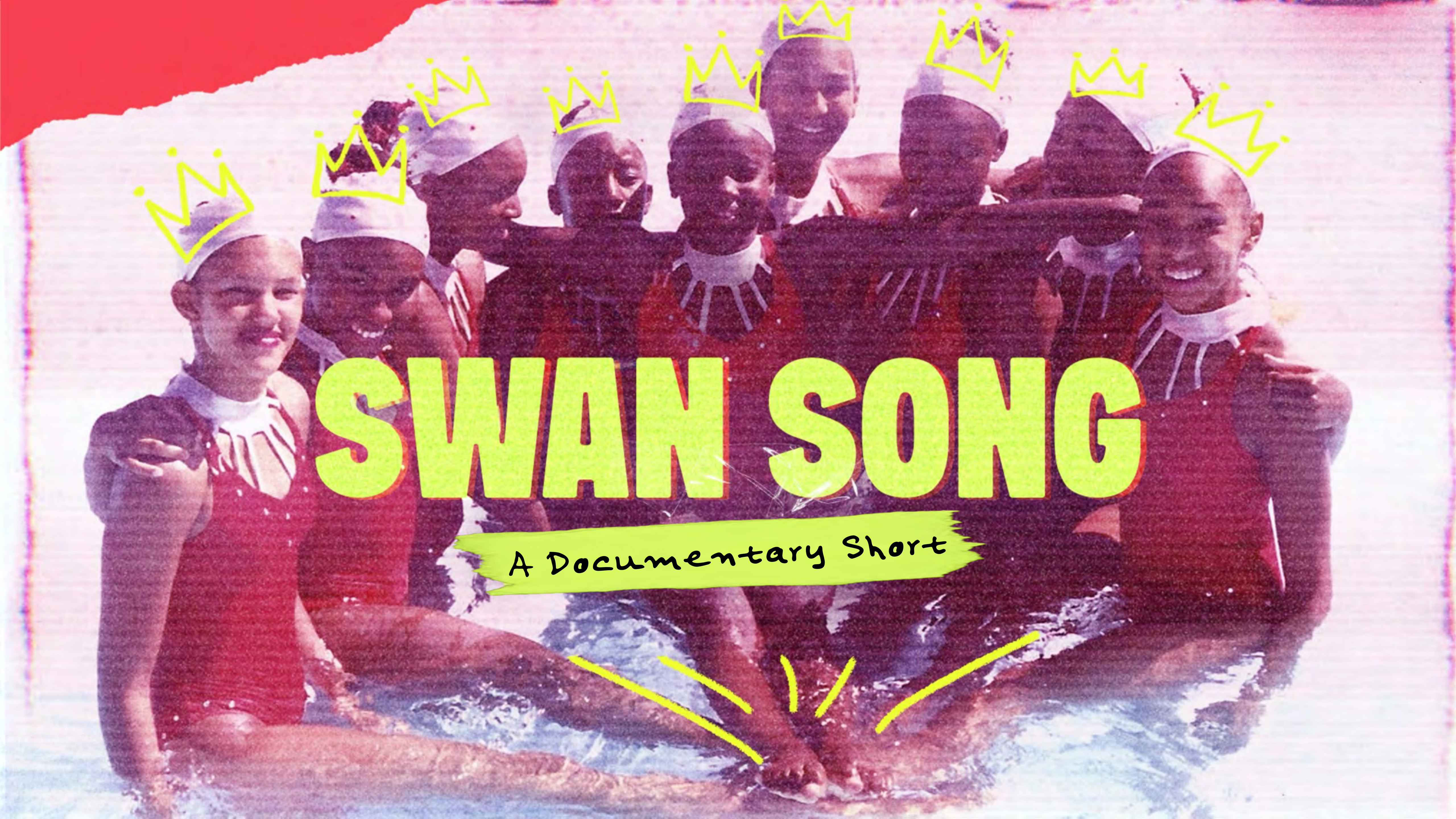




SWAN SONG

A Documentary Short

Deckwork

Twenty-five years after making history, the original members of the first—and still only—all-Black synchronized swimming team are diving back in. Reuniting as adults, they're training for a comeback at the U.S. National Competition in the Masters division. But their journey began in the late 1990s, when a 17-year-old dynamo and a group of fierce, determined mothers built a team from a crumbling pool in South LA's "Jungle" neighborhood. Bringing hip hop, cornrows, and unapologetic Black culture into a rigidly traditional sport, these young women broke barriers, challenged stereotypes, and placed at Nationals against all odds.

SWAN SONG is a powerful, multi-generational story of legacy, sisterhood, and reclaiming space—in and out of the water.



Act 1: Land Drilling

In present-day Los Angeles, a group of Black women reunite to train for the Masters National Synchronized Swimming Competition—26 years after they first made history. They are the original **Synchro Swans**, now mothers, professionals, and cultural trailblazers, returning to a sport that rarely made space for them then—or now. Their comeback, sparked by a reunion performance in Beyoncé's Film *Black Is King*, becomes a powerful act of reclamation.

As they dive back into competition, we follow them into the past—to the broken pool where it all began.

SPORTS

Ymajahi Brooks: A Remarkable Coach

By **CHETERA WATSON**
Special to The Sentinel

Picture yourself at a recent practice of the Southland's all-black synchronized swimming team. Girls ranging in age from about 7-17 jump into the water, laughing and talking to each other. Mothers (known under Synchrono Moms) are gathered under umbrellas in the heat, snacking and talking, but watching every move in the pool. There is total silence when coach Ymajahi Brooks (pronounced Emma-jai) calls for the girls to begin their routine. Like everyone else, you hold your breath, and then you open your eyes wide to take it all in. "Amazing!" you whisper as you watch the girls swirl, flip, float and jump up in the water in perfect unison. "How can they do that?" you wonder. Then you notice that even the moms yell and whistle their approval when the girls complete particularly difficult moves.



Synchronized swimming coach Ymajahi Brooks (top, in white swim cap) with her championship team.

The focus for the amazing accomplishments of the swimmers is their remarkable coach. The girls are at practice for at least 12 hours per week—sometimes longer. She gets such a thrill from their accomplishments that she doesn't even get paid. Parents pay for her wage for herself, until she was able to join a synchro swim team at age 11. Since then, she has been a junior lifeguard, a locker attendant, a coach, and now a synchro coach.

Do you know anyone who might like to join a synchro swim team? Ymajahi says, "Anyone can do it. There is always time and space for anyone interested. I'm glad to have you on the team."

Youngsters must be able to pass a swim test—swimming back and forth across the width of an Olympic-sized pool. Should you want to watch Ymajahi's team in action, there will be a regional meet at Exposition Park Swim Stadium on Aug. 22. Those who win first and second place awards will participate in the championship meet to be held on Aug. 26, also at Exposition Park.

Act II: Spins, Twirls & Twists

In the 1990s, South LA's "Jungle" neighborhood was known more for gang violence than synchronized swimming. But at the heart of it stood the rundown Rancho Cienega pool—a lifeline for the community. Years earlier, a young Ymajahi Brooks had nearly drowned in a different pool. Instead of retreating, she taught herself to swim. One day, she spotted a girl spinning upside down in the water and was instantly intrigued. With a dance background and a desire to move like that, she joined a novice synchro team. Her talent and enthusiasm quickly stood out, and within a few years, she was asked to coach. By 17, she was a lifeguard, choreographer, and the visionary leader of an all-Black synchronized swimming team called the Synchrono Swans that challenged the very definition of the sport.

Backed by fearless mothers—many of whom were denied access to pools themselves when they were younger due to Jim Crow laws—the Synchrono Swans rose from the margins to dominate LA's novice scene. When the establishment pushed back, the moms pushed harder: creating a new division, fundraising relentlessly, and even becoming certified judges to protect their girls from bias.

Their reward? A groundbreaking appearance at the 2001 U.S. Nationals competition, where they placed 4th in the country, shattering expectations.



The teenage members of the Synchro Swans squad pool their efforts during a recent local performance.

Bringing a New Cool to the Pool

■ Reportedly the nation's only black synchronized swim team, the Synchro Swans of Southwest L.A. have a style all their own.

only African American synchronized swimming team in the nation, according to the sport's governing body. "If you want to be different from anybody else, you can," said the Swans' coach, 19-year-old Ymaja Brooks. "We look like we're from the future."

African American Swans Splash the Competition

by DONALD JAMES

There has never been an African American synchronized swim team in the nation, according to the sport's governing body. "If you want to be different from anybody else, you can," said the Swans' coach, 19-year-old Ymaja Brooks. "We look like we're from the future."



SWAN SONG

Black synchronized swimming team eyeing Olympics, ending stereotypes

OS ANGELES — It's the graceful way the Synchro Swans glide through the water that catches audiences' eyes. But it's the Swans' unique makeup as the nation's only all-black synchronized swimming team that could draw crowds from across the country. The 8-year-old team is among a growing number of junior-level synchronized swimming teams popping up across the nation. The Swans and their coach, Ymaja Brooks, are the only African American team to compete in the Olympic sport. "We look like we're from the future," said Brooks. "We're here to stay."



Act III: The Ripple Effect

Back in the present, the Swans prepare to compete again—now in the Masters division. Where there is less pressure and more focus on the black joy that they knew as kids. Now balancing their families and adult responsibilities. The Swans will be getting back into form through practices 2x per week, team meetings once a week, developing new routines to current music, while also mentoring a new generation of Black and Brown girls. But they're not just returning to the sport, they're rewriting its story. Now in a atmosphere that is more familiar with a style they pioneered.

Swan Song is a multi-generational story about turning exclusion into excellence—and about the lasting power of sisterhood, self-expression, and the fight to be seen.



SYNCHRO SWANS HATCH AQUATIC EXCELLENCE

PERFORMANCES TO SONGS FROM JANET JACKSON'S THE VELVET ROPE, R. KELLY'S "I BELIEVE I CAN FLY," AS WELL AS THE MORE EXPECTED DISNEY-TYPE SONGS, REALLY EXPAND THE SPORT'S LIMITS. SOME OF THE SWANS' MOST INTRICATE MOVEMENTS DRAW FROM POPULAR VIDEOS. THERE IS ONE WHERE THREE ROWS OF GIRLS STRIKE THE "WALK LIKE AN EGYPTIAN" POSE—THE FIRST AND THIRD ROWS WITH THEIR FEET, AND THE SECOND WITH THEIR HANDS—TO ANOTHER WHERE THEY RE-EMULATE THE MOVES FROM MICHAEL JACKSON'S "SMOOTH CRIMINALS." ANOTHER MOVE COMES FROM "RHYTHM NATION"—HAND FLAT IN FRONT OF THE FACE, WITH HEAD ALTERNATING FROM SIDE TO SIDE. EVEN THOUGH BROOKS HERSELF HAS NO PREVIOUS SYNCHRONIZED SWIMMING EXPERIENCE, SHE WANTS TO SHOW THE WORLD THAT THEY ARE LEARNING TO BE THE BEST. THEY ARE.

THE SYNCHRO SWANS

They glide, flip and backstroke in perfect Janet Jackson or to R. Kelly's "I Believe Flo-Jo-style in asymmetrical metallic swimsuits. Now, the Los Angeles-based Synchro Swans, the only known African-American swimming team to break a wave. Formed by coach Ymaja Brooks, 19, the 28 Swans, boy ages 9 to 14—have already won a first in their southwest Los Angeles area. They are competing in the water routines, the pool has never been

KOBE BRYANT

At 18 he was the youngest basketball player skipping college to go directly to the Charlotte Hornets. He was traded to the LA Lakers. At 19 he was the next Michael Jordan and has broken records in Los Angeles basketball games, where he will help the Lakers return to championship. The wunderkind ballplayer signed a six-year contract with the Lakers reported to be worth nearly \$70 million. Bryant is no slouch academically. He attended college in Italy for years while his father, Joe Bryant, played with an Italian league. He picked up 12 points in his first year in the pros. This is the start of a career that will be remembered for years.

VENUS AND SERENA WILLIAMS

Tall, brash, young and Black, the Williams sisters are the most powerful African-American women in sports. They are the most successful tennis players in the world. They are the most powerful African-American women in sports. They are the most successful tennis players in the world.

The Line Up

THE SWANS

(Then)

They were smart, sassy, and strong—Black girls from South LA who dominated a sport and brought their community together. With cornrows, hip hop routines, and unwavering discipline, the original Synchro Swans broke barriers and redefined what excellence in the water could look like. They didn't just win—they made history.

THE COACH

Now a mother herself, Ymajahi resides in Long Beach, CA with her family. By day she works at SoCal Gas, but, her passion for synchro still burns within. Today Ymajahi juggles motherhood, her job, and her synchro life. An active member of the Black Swans performative group, Ymajahi is still crafting routines to the music of today for their performance and event squad.

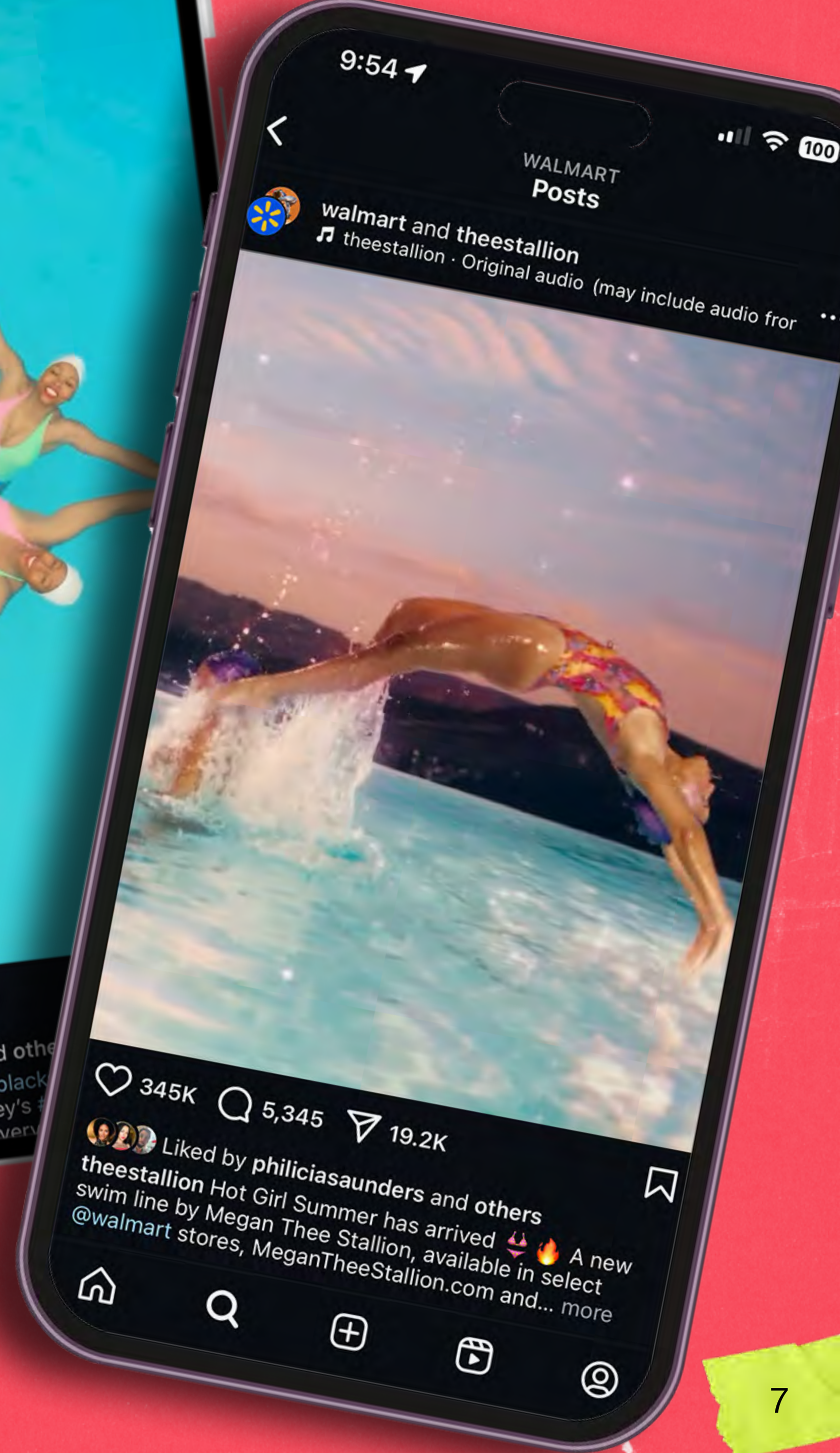
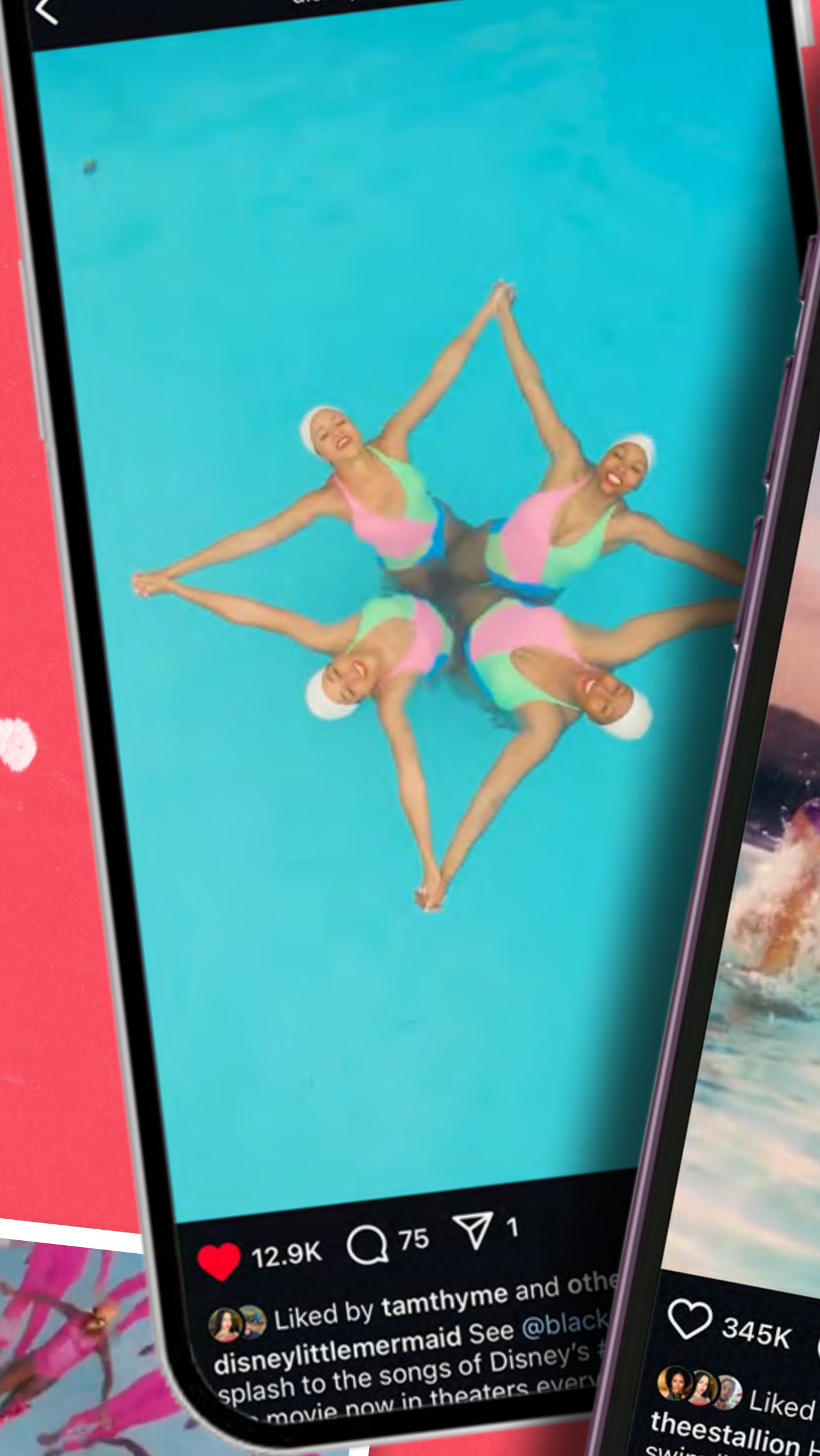


SWAN SONG

The Swans (Now)

Now professionals, artists, educators, and mothers themselves, the Swans have returned to the sport they helped transform. Reunited after performing in Beyoncé's *Black Is King*, they continue to shine, appearing in commercials like Walmart's collaboration with *Megan Thee Stallion* and Disney's promotion for the live-action *Little Mermaid*.

After participating in a Juneteenth charity event at Celes King Pool, where their journey began, they rediscovered the joy of competition and community service. Now, they're training to compete in the Masters division, mentoring young swimmers, and paving the way for future generations.



Synchronized

Not Without You

In late 2025 Philicia was diagnosed with a medical issue that would require immediate treatment and keep her out of the water for an extended period of time.

With her heart heavy, she hopped on a call with the Swans and informed them that their original plan to compete in the 2025 Masters in October would not be possible for her. She still offered to support them, and be there in a coaching capacity—They responded with only one answer...

“Not without you”



The MOMS

Working full-time jobs, many as single parents, the Swans' mothers did it all—braiding hair at dawn, cooking breakfast for 5am practices, and fundraising every weekend. Most didn't grow up knowing how to swim, but they made sure their daughters learned.

They were the backbone of the team and the architects of a movement.

Today, some of these same mothers are still showing up to help, organize, support, and cheer on the Swans as they prepare to compete again.



SWAN SONG

The Experts



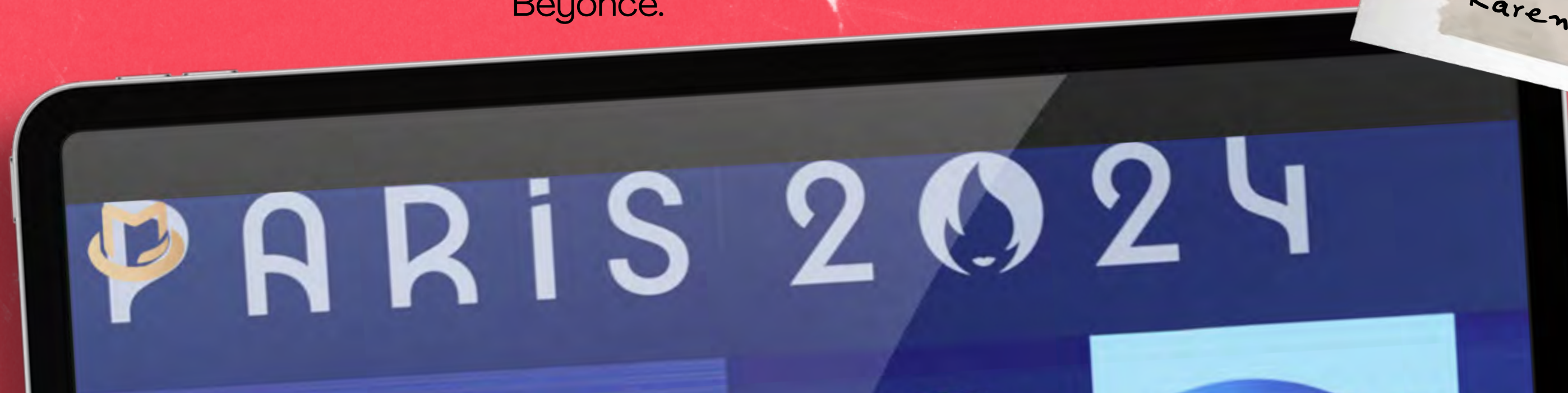
Sue Nesbitt

Two titans of the sport, Sue Nesbitt and Karen Rosolowski bring decades of synchronized swimming expertise as coaches, champions, and judges. With deep knowledge of the synchro world, they help contextualize the Swans' story—offering insight into what made this team so groundbreaking then, and still influential now. As undefeated rival coaches and judges, they were on the ground in real time with the Swans, leading opposing teams and witnessing the Swans' rise firsthand—giving them a unique and powerful perspective on the team's impact and legacy.

Other potential interviewees include Olympic Gold Metallist Cullen Jones, Team USA Synchronized Swimmer Danielle Rameirez and Beyoncé.



Karen Rosolowski

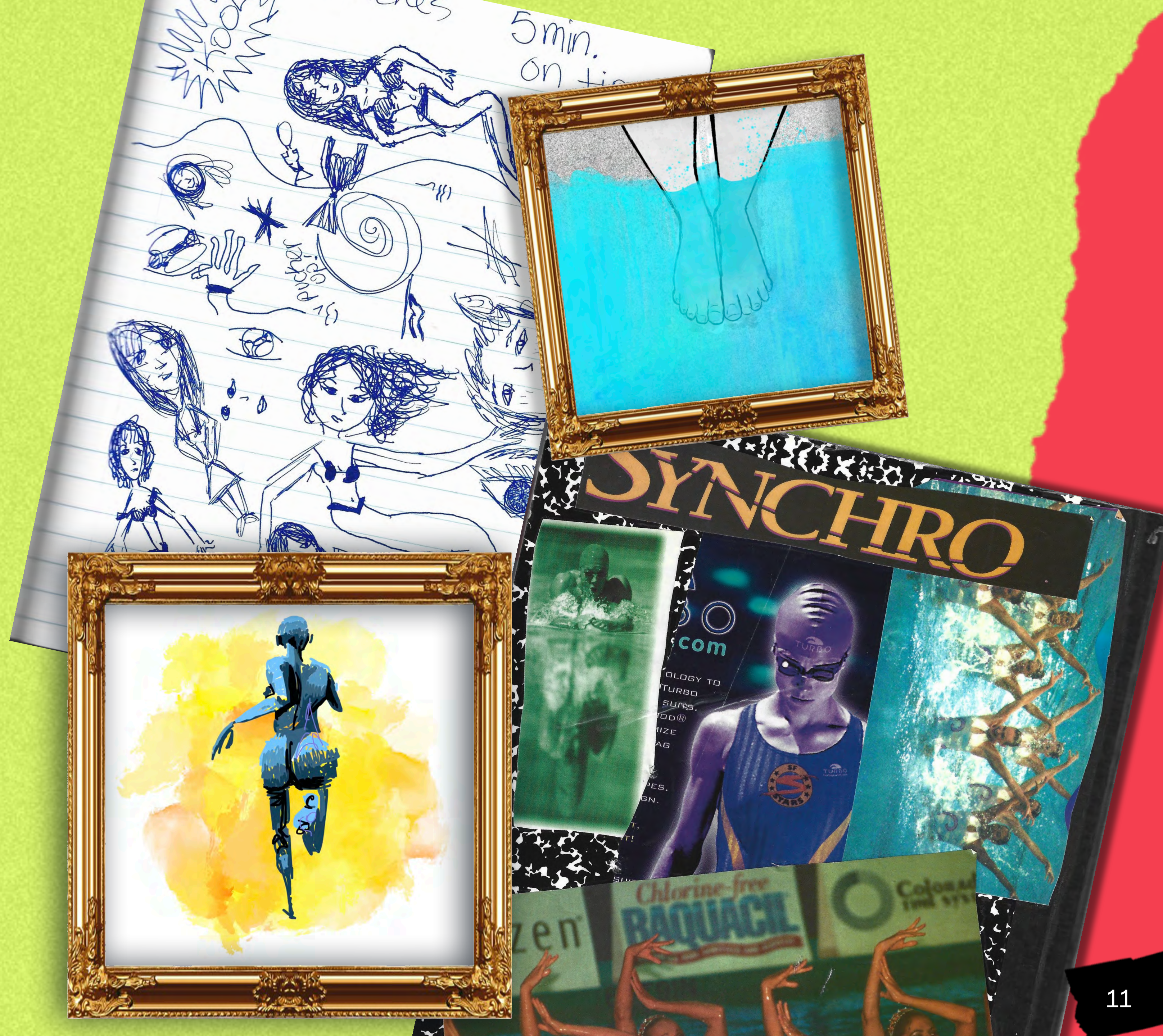


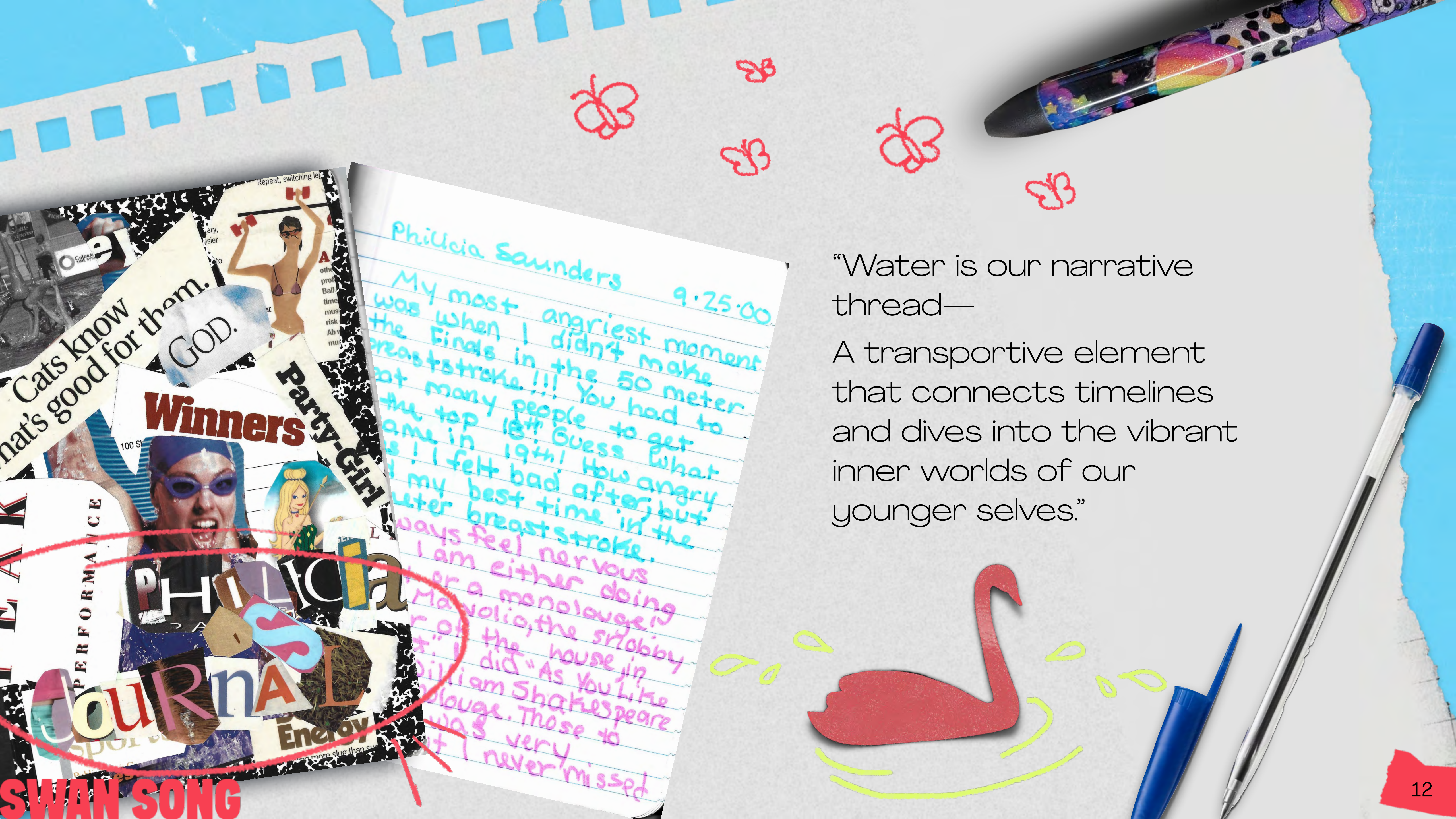
Approach & Style

The film blends archival footage—including home videos shot by the mothers, local news clips and magazines/newspapers, and rare footage of the Swans at the 2001 Nationals—with present-day vérité scenes that follow the women as they organize and lead synchro workshops, mentor young swimmers, train for and compete at the 2026 Masters competition. Overall, the structure moves fluidly between past and present.

The film flows like choreography—braiding together present-day movement, personal memory, and collective history into a resonant story of return, sisterhood/community, and a new generation shaped by the ripple effects of the first.

To deepen the emotional and sensory layers of the film, we will incorporate animation in the form of 90s scrapbook-style sequences with water as the central motif and mode of transition between past and present. These animated moments of magical realism visualize memory, imagination, and the physicality of synchronized swimming, giving voice to the interior lives of the girls as they once were.

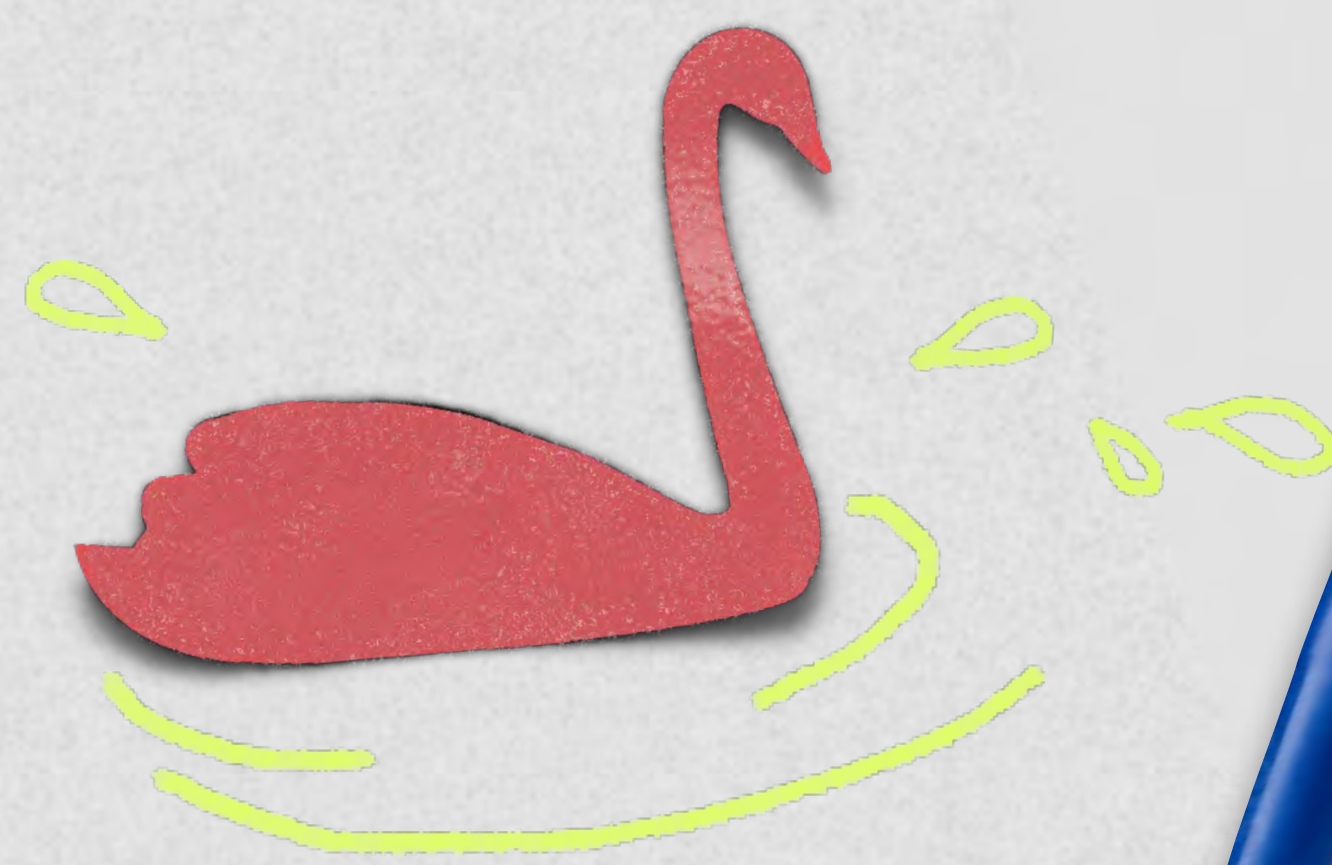




Phillecia Saunders 9.25.00

My most angriest moment was when I didn't make the Finals in the 50 meter breaststroke!!! You had to get the top people to get in 1st! Guess what? I felt bad after, but my best time in the 50 meter breaststroke was 1:19.4! How angry I am either doing a monologue or a monologue in the house in 'The House in the Street'! As you like William Shakespeare's monologue. Those who were very angry but I never missed.

"Water is our narrative thread—
A transportive element that connects timelines and dives into the vibrant inner worlds of our younger selves."



SWAN SONG

Tone

Music drives the film's rhythm— from the iconic sounds of 90s legends like Janet Jackson and Will Smith to the bold, contemporary influence of artists like Beyoncé and Megan Thee Stallion. It mirrors the energy of the girls, powers their routines, and echoes the drive of Ymajahi and her team. At its heart, this documentary is a love letter to South LA and the legacy of the Synchro Swans that was born from it—a celebration of its grit, beauty, and the vibrant pulse of the Black community that supported their journey.



Themes:
Redefining
A
Sport



The Synchro Swans didn't just enter the world of synchronized swimming—they changed it. With cornrows, hip hop beats, and choreography inspired by Black music and dance, they broke the mold of a sport defined by tradition. Their style, skill, and unapologetic presence redefined what excellence in the water could look like—and their influence is still be felt today.



Themes:
Mother/Daughter
Bonds

Not only were these mothers instrumental in the Swans' rise, but they also shielded the girls from many challenges and obstacles. Though they themselves never learned to swim, they fiercely advocated for their daughters' recognition. While the girls focused on the joy of swimming, their mothers organized community events and became certified judges at competitions. These women provided essential context about what it meant to be trailblazers, proudly documenting the journey and serving as archivists of their daughters' legacy.

Themes: Black Bodies In Water

Historically excluded from pools, Black communities have carried the weight of segregation, generational trauma, and a lingering stereotype that “black people can’t swim.” Today, these communities are still disproportionately impacted by drowning. *Swan Song* confronts that systemic trauma and reclaims the water as a space of visibility, safety and pride.

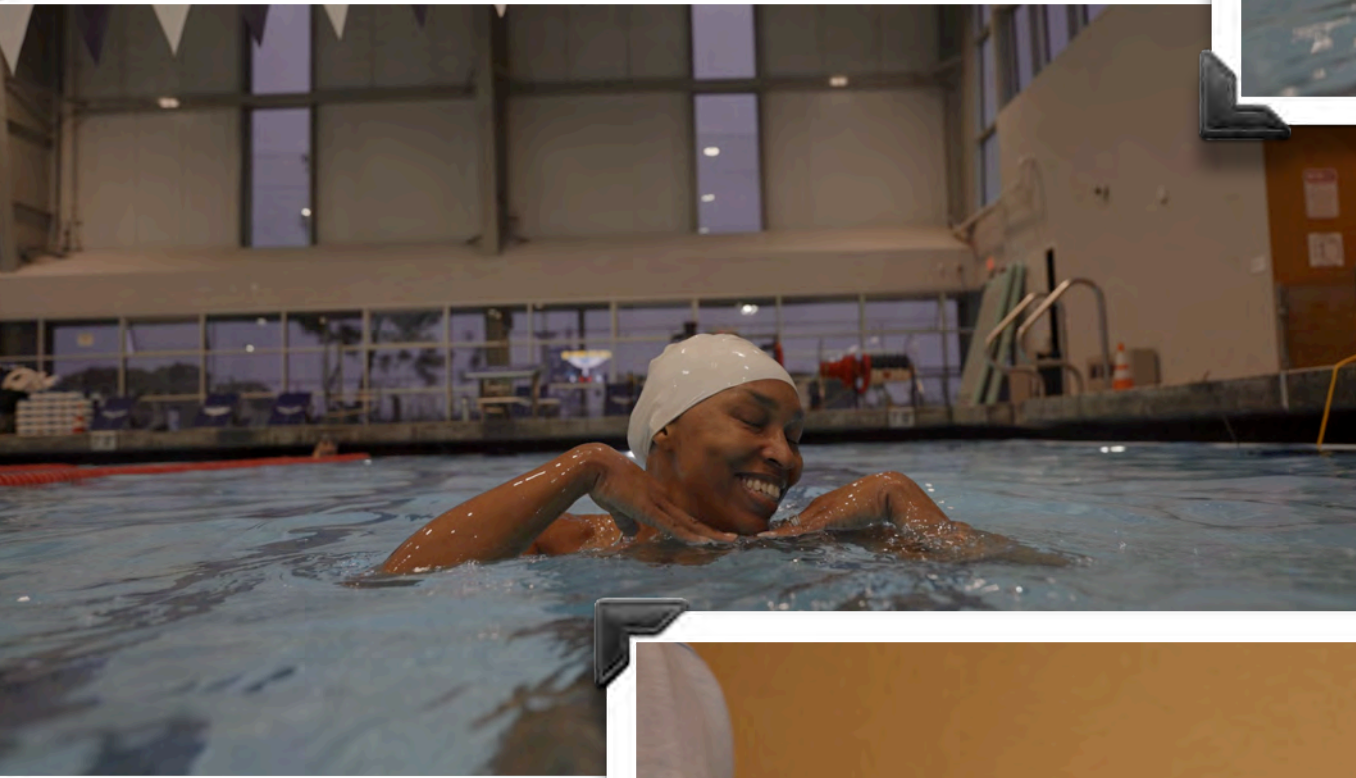
Through the stories of mothers shaped by exclusion and their daughters breaking barriers, the documentary challenges false narratives—and inspires a new generation through workshops, mentorship and powerful representation in the pool.



Themes:
Black Joy

The intergenerational story of the Synchro Swans features and appeals to a broad audience, from young to old. Set to the soundtrack of South LA, Janet Jackson, Queen Latifah, Megan Thee Stallion, *Swan Song* radiates Black joy. This is a story of Black girls laughing between routines, mothers dancing poolside and cheering their daughters on, and a community rallying around a dream no one thought possible.

Its resonance endures today, reflected not only in the widespread embrace of Black music in Olympic synchronized swimming but also in the inspiration it provides for the next generation, including Jamaica's youth synchronized swimming team and marginalized communities that have better access to pools today. The Swans are on a mission to spread the joy of swimming and give back to a community that saw them defy the odds.





Filmmaker's Statement

Swan Song holds a deeply personal significance for me. Having been a part of the Synchro Swans synchronized swimming team – the first ever all African-American synchronized swimming team in the country, at the age of 9 and now a founding member of the Black Swans performance team today, I experienced firsthand the transformative power of synchronized swimming and the importance of representation and inclusion in an aquatic sport. Through this documentary, and using the legacy of the Synchro Swans as a lens, I aim to inspire future generations of African-Americans to learn from the journey and experience how a community was able to come together and support young African-American girls and boys to be uniquely themselves in a space that wasn't meant for them. The Synchro Swans turned the sport on its head and even though I wasn't aware of it at a young age, I see the effects we had on the sport and how we are still striving to get more people that look like us in the pool to learn how to swim, maybe even synchronize swim.

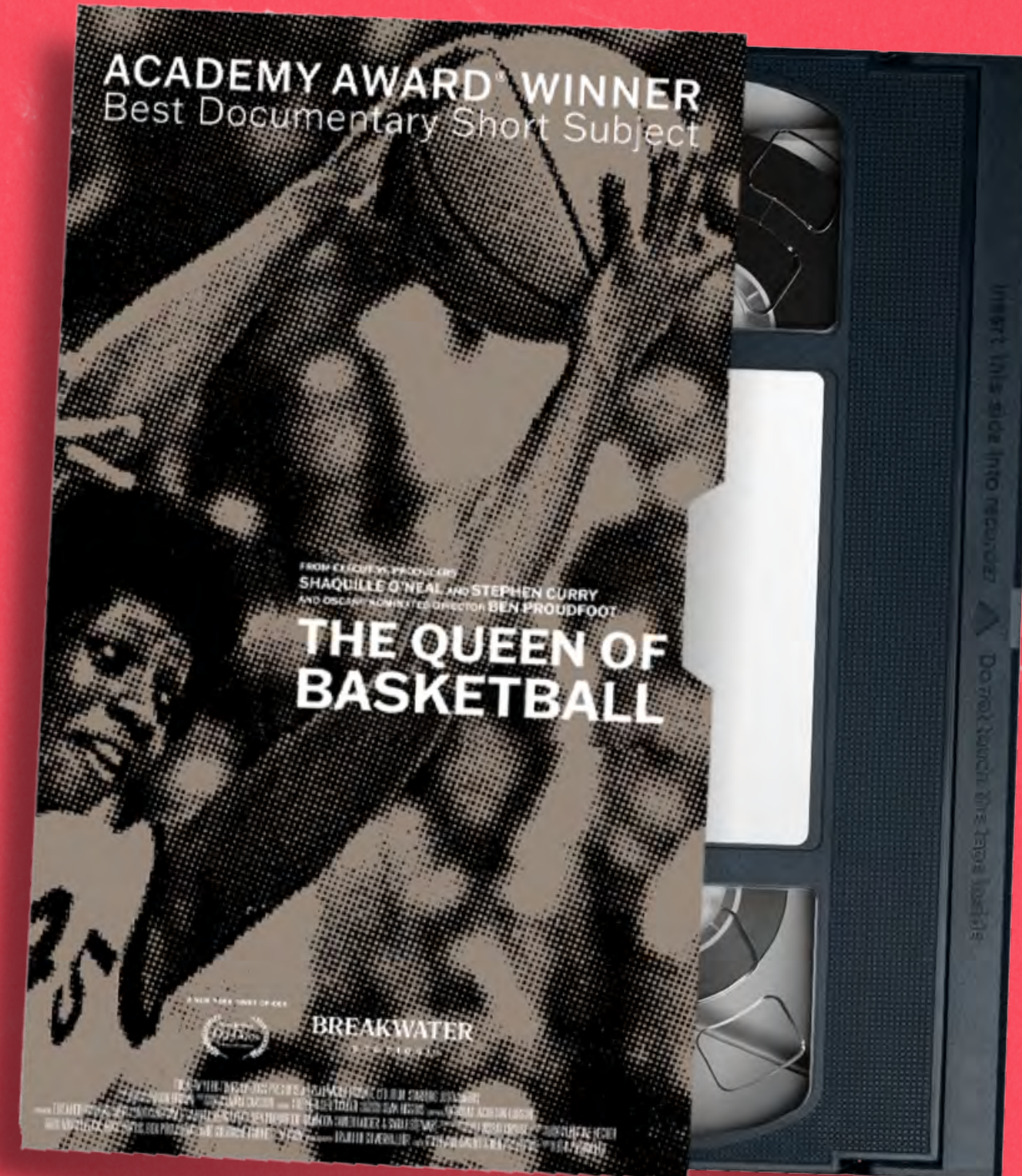


This project is expanding my creative practice by allowing me to blend personal experience with filmmaking. It challenges me to discover the human experience in storytelling while honoring the legacy and struggles of a community often overlooked in swimming and synchronized swimming spaces. Success for me as an artist working on this project means not only capturing the essence of the Synchro Swans' journey authentically, but also driving awareness around African-Americans' relationship to water – a deep and complicated history that will be addressed in this documentary. How can I, in some small way, change the narrative? Why are we the highest percentage of people who cannot swim in this country?

One of the significant challenges I face is balancing the emotional depth of personal stories with the broader societal issues highlighted in the film – weaving them together in a seamless narrative. It's crucial to convey both the triumphs and ongoing challenges faced by African-Americans in swimming without simplifying the narrative or losing the essence of individual experiences. This project compels me to navigate these complexities with sensitivity and clarity – as I will be showing the stories of individuals that are very near and dear to me – but I believe we all share a collective goal: to ensure that the film resonates deeply with audiences and drives meaningful change in our community. We are going to change the narrative.

Phylicia Saunders

Creative References



SWAN SONG

The TEAM

PHILICIA SAUNDERS | DIRECTOR

In 2020, Philicia created her own production company called Breathe Solo Productions. For her first project, she executive produced, wrote and starred in an art activism solo performance/film called Breathe. The film has since garnered multiple awards on the festival circuit and received a Webby Award nomination for Best Individual Performance in Video in 2022. She went on to direct, produce, write and star in the short film Hairitage, which made its World Premiere at the Oscar-qualifying 2024 Pan African Film Festiva. Philicia is also a competitive artistic swimmer and regularly performs on entertainment artistic swimming teams. In 2020, she founded an entertainment team made up of women of color called the Black Swans. She has swum alongside Beyoncé, Solange and Lizzo. Philicia also speaks Japanese and volunteers with local children's theater groups in South LA. www.PhiliciaSaunders.com.

CASEY SUCHAN | PRODUCER

Casey began her career producing documentaries on the history of Hip Hop for Quincy D. Jones' Ill's QD3 Entertainment, including the seminal documentary on the history of break dancing, THE FRESHEST KIDS (2002); the platinum selling Tupac Shakur documentary, THUG ANGEL (2002); and the critically acclaimed BEEF (2003) and BEEF II (2004), exploring the evolution of MC battles from verbal one-upmanship to street warfare. In 2006 Casey directed and produced the documentary ROCK THE BELLS, a behind-the-scenes look at how a young concert promoter beat the odds to reunite the Wu-Tang Clan for their final performance with O.D.B. The film premiered at The Tribeca Film Festival and was picked up for distribution by Warner Brothers. Recently Casey directed THE ANIMAL PEOPLE — a feature documentary for Executive Producer Joaquin Phoenix about a precedent-setting case brought against the activist organization "Stop Huntington Animal Cruelty USA" and in 2020 finished work as lead director on MAKE/SHIFT — a CLIO and Webby award-winning documentary sponsored by WP (WordPress) Engine about marketing in the digital age.

The TEAM

CHARLES J MALONE | PRODUCER

Under the mentorship of Oscar-nominated producer Carla Hacken, Charles embarked on his film career during the production of Amy Poehler's debut feature WINE COUNTRY. Since then, he has progressed to an Associate at Bad Robot Games, where he has been at the forefront of the intersection of Entertainment & Tech and has played a pivotal role in producing several proof of concepts, award-winning shorts, and feature films. In 2022, he produced ALPHA MALE, which premiered at the 52nd International Film Festival of India (IFFI) and garnered accolades including Best Film at the Cinequest San Jose Film Festival. Most recently, Charles produced "Hairitage," a short film by Philicia Saunders, that premiered at the Pan African Film Festival. His work is driven by a profound belief in the power of human connection, the transformative potential of collaboration, and an unwavering passion for storytelling.

JORDAN WILSON | PRODUCER

Jordan is an actor, producer, and writer known for his voice-acting with notable brands including Walmart, Starbucks, Hennessey, and Golden Road Brewing. Jordan produced "Hairitage," a short film by Philicia Saunders that premiered at the Pan African Film Festival. The film was the beginning of a creative partnership between Philicia, Jordan and Charles that would lead to SWAN SONG and other projects that he has developed alongside his collaborators. Among his other producing tasks, Jordan has taken the lead in collecting, organizing and preserving the dense archival materials related to the SWAN SONG documentary.

The TEAM

JEREMY COON | EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Jeremy Coon produced and edited NAPOLEON DYNAMITE. Napoleon premiered in 2004 at the Sundance Film Festival, where it was acquired by Fox Searchlight Pictures; it became one of the most profitable and culturally impactful indie films in history. In 2006, Jeremy produced and edited THE SASQUATCH GANG. Sasquatch won the audience award at the 2006 Slamdance Film Festival. Most recently, Jeremy co-directed and produced the feature-length documentary RAIDERS!: THE STORY OF THE GREATEST FAN FILM EVER MADE which premiered at the 2015 SXSW Film Festival and was released theatrically by Drafthouse Films to rave reviews.

BARRY POLTERMANN | EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Barry is a producer, director, story supervisor and editor. His most recent project is the 6-part docu-series THE LAST MOVIE STARS for director Ethan Hawke and Executive Producer Martin Scorsese (Cannes, 2022). He has edited several acclaimed feature films, including American Movie (Sundance Grand Prize Winner, 1999), The Pool (Sundance Jury Prize Winner, 2007), Raiders!: The Story Of The Greatest Fan Film Ever Made (SXSW, 2015), Jim & Andy - The Great Beyond (Venice Biennale, 2017, Emmy nominee) and I Am Not Alone (Toronto, 2019 Audience Award for documentary at TIFF, DocNYC & AFI Fest); and was the Story Supervisor on Whirlybird (Sundance, 2020).



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