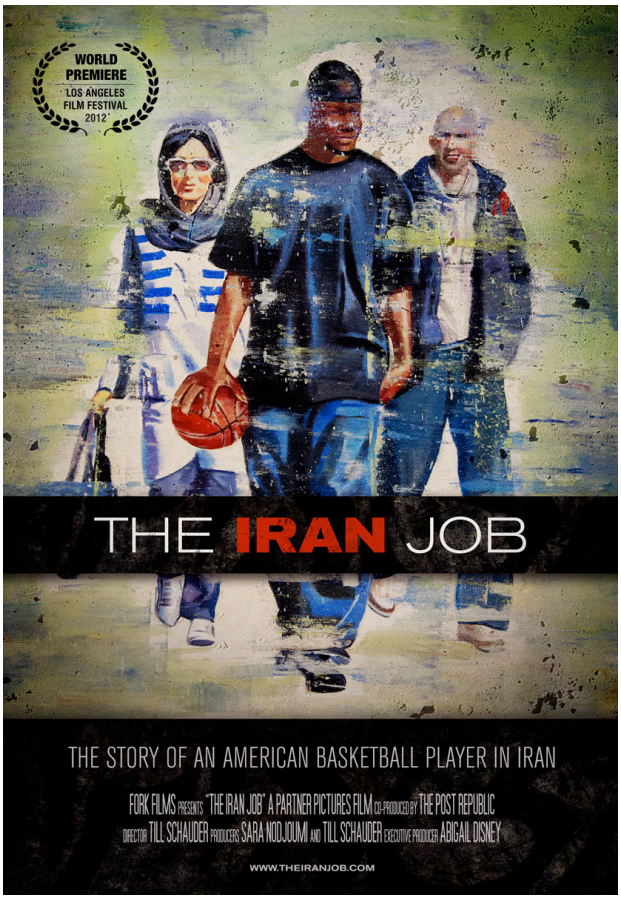

A FILM BY TILL SCHAUDER

Official Selection:
2012 Los Angeles Film Festival (World Premiere)

Running Time: 93 minutes
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THE IRAN JOB

a film by Till Schauder,
produced by Sara Nodjoumi and Till Schauder

When American basketball player Kevin Sheppard accepts a job to play in one of the world's most feared countries – Iran – he expects the worst. But what he finds is a country brimming with generosity, acceptance, and sensuality. With a charismatic personality that charms everyone he meets, Kevin forms an unlikely friendship with three outspoken Iranian women who share with him their strong opinions on everything from politics to religion to gender roles.

Kevin's season in Iran eventually culminates in something much bigger than basketball: the uprising and subsequent suppression of Iran's reformist Green Movement – a powerful prelude to the sweeping changes currently unfolding across the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring.

In THE IRAN JOB director Till Schauder reveals the human, often humorous, and sometimes heartbreaking sides of Iran, giving us access to a country often hidden in mystery. The film's soundtrack features some of the most cutting-edge Iranian rap and hip-hop artists, including Shahin Najafi, Jaduguaran, and ZedBazi. The Kickstarter campaign to fund the film was one of the most successful crowd-funding campaigns since the site's launch, generating major media hits and donations for finishing funds from all over the world.

THE IRAN JOB is directed by Till Schauder and produced by Schauder and Sara Nodjoumi. The film is Executive Produced by Abigail Disney and co-produced by Michael Reuter and Rebekka Garrido. Editing is by David Teague, with original music by Kareem Roustom.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Kevin Sheppard, a flashy American point guard, who hails from tiny St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands, didn't make it. At least not to the NBA, the highest stage of professional basketball. As a so-called "journeyman" Kevin built a career for himself the hard way - by playing overseas, in countries like Brazil, Venezuela, Spain, China and Israel. Having seen much of the world this way, Kevin accepts a job to play in one of the world's most feared countries, Iran.

Kevin's family - particularly his girlfriend Leah - is not happy about his decision to play in a country widely considered a safe-haven for Islamic terrorists and suspected of being in pursuit of nuclear weapons. Kevin's fragile relationship with Leah, who's pushing for an engagement ring, is put to the test when Kevin refuses to take her along for the ride - 'for safety concerns.' It doesn't help that Iran's president Ahmadinejad has just called for the destruction of Israel – again, reinforcing the "axis of evil" label that has stuck to Iran for years. But ultimately the salary is good enough to overcome Kevin's fears; he signs a yearlong contract with A.S. Shiraz, a new team in Iran's Super League.

After his arrival in Shiraz, located in Southwestern Iran - between Persia's ancient capital, Persepolis, and one of the country's nuclear sites - Kevin tries to separate sports from politics and religion only to find that both are impossible to escape in Iran. The scrutiny that comes with being the "American import," the highest paid player, and the only black guy on his club, intensifies the pressure to lead his team to success. The club's stated goal is to reach the play-offs, a feat that has never been accomplished by a first-year team. Kevin's own goals are even higher – he wants to win the Iranian championship. The stakes are clear: if he fails to lead Shiraz to the play-offs, he will get fired.

Using a contagious sense of humor that penetrates all language barriers, Kevin coaxes his under-achieving team to play as a unit. Thanks to his hip-hop-loving teammates, he also immerses himself in Iran's urban subculture. The hunt for the play-offs leads to a dramatic showdown. But the emotional arc is set outside of the basketball court. Here, the Iran Kevin finds is vibrant and full of intellectual, political and sexual energy.

Kevin quickly faces a challenge much greater than basketball when he forms an unlikely alliance with three outspoken Iranian women - Elaheh, Hilda and Laleh, all in their 20's. These women are attracted to Kevin for different reasons, and they risk much more than broken hearts. In Iran there are serious consequences for unmarried women who socialize with men, particularly foreign men. How this unfolds, the added danger and intrigue, and how it affects Kevin's commitment to Leah propels the narrative into unexpected territories. Kevin's apartment becomes an oasis of free speech where he and the women discuss everything from politics, to religion, to sex and gender roles.

Kevin's friendship with the women is contrasted by the bond he forms with his teammates - particularly Mehdi, Ali and Kami - who offer a male perspective on life in Iran for the under-25 population. Kevin also connects with Zoran, the second import player on his team, who hails from Serbia. Zoran provides yet another perspective on this cross-cultural adventure.

Through his friends and teammates, and in particular through the three women, Kevin learns about Iran, about Islam, about the desire for freedom, and about Iran's social and women's rights issues. Along the way he manages to turn a group of inexperienced players into contenders. Kevin's professional and personal storylines merge in dramatic fashion when the play-offs coincide with Iran's controversial 2009 presidential election. The ensuing riots shape his personal worldview as he grows from being an easy-go-lucky jock to becoming a mature global citizen who is finally ready to commit to his girlfriend.

Kevin's season in Iran culminates in something much bigger than basketball: the uprising and subsequent suppression of Iran's reformist Green Movement – a powerful prelude to the currently unfolding Arab Spring. Seeking sports glory in "enemy territory," Kevin instead undergoes a life-changing political and personal awakening while providing his own brand of basketball diplomacy.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I first became interested in the topic of American basketball players in Iran upon reading that some of the players faced severe fines from the U.S. State Department for allegedly breaking the embargo against Iran. In the midst of the current international tension, I was inspired by these athletes, who arguably do more for dialogue between Iran and the West than any politician on either side. Reminded of the ping-pong diplomacy, which preceded Nixon's visit to China, I decided to make a film about one American players' experience in Iran.

I began researching players and others involved, including coaches, agents and basketball officials. Most everyone I spoke to was immediately excited about the idea to make a movie about this cross-cultural adventure. However, finding a player with that intangible special quality that's necessary to carry a feature length film proved difficult. And since only a handful Americans play in Iran each year the choice was limited.

In the fall of 2008 – shortly after Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called for the destruction of Israel – Sara and I had a Skype call with Kevin Sheppard, a point-guard from the U.S. Virgin Islands. Kevin was about to start a basketball contract in the Iranian Super League. A minute into the conversation he had us rolling on the floor laughing in spite of the prospect of playing in a country that's supposedly full of illegal nukes and Islamic terrorists. His witty charisma and disarming sense of humor convinced us to start filming immediately, even without a budget. He had the exact qualities we were looking for in our protagonist, because they created an opportunity to add fun and positive energy to a film that could otherwise easily fall into the trap of "another-Middle Eastern-the-world-is-about-to-end" flick.

Originally the plan was for us to go as a two-person team, Sara and I. But when the journalist visas that we requested were denied and it became evident that we'd have to shoot the film "under the radar," we decided it was safer if I went on my own, entering as a tourist with my German passport (I'm a dual German-U.S. citizen. The German citizenship made it much easer to enter Iran, for obvious reasons). Sara has U.S. and Iranian citizenship, both of which could have been problematic if we had gotten into trouble in Iran. I packed a small HDV camera, a wireless mic, and one extension cable – all of it small enough to fit into an unassuming backpack. The (in hindsight very naïve) thought was that if I ever got into trouble I could say that I'm just a German tourist filming the ancient sites of Iran.

I filmed Kevin in Iran over several visits, until on my last trip - in the run-up to Iran's 2009 election - I was informed that I had made it onto a "black list" (for reasons still not clear to us), and was put in detention in a kind of "hotel-prison" inside the glitzy new Tehran airport. Sara was at home – five months pregnant with our second child - while I was in Tehran hand-shredding some not-so-cool-documents-when-you're-stuck-in-Iran and flushing them down the toilet (e.g. my father-in-laws satirical art, which is banned in Iran). The detention room had a television, so I spent the night trying to find something to watch to ease my concerns. But the television had only one channel, and it played a loop of the 1982 soccer world cup final between my native Germany and Italy – one of the

most painful defeats our team ever suffered. It was like Chinese water torture. The following morning I was sent back to New York on the next plane -- a stroke of luck in retrospect given the number of filmmakers and journalists recently arrested in Iran.

Iran is often portrayed as a terrorist nation, a nuclear threat, and a charter member of the Axis of Evil bent on the destruction of Israel. But behind the headlines – and the aggressive rhetoric of Iran's hard-line leaders – lies one of the most fascinating nations, as sensuous as it can be challenging, with a life-loving people. This film focuses on Iran's people, rather than its government, and I hope it can challenge perceptions of Iran by providing an authentic perspective that may be crucial when choices are made between war and peace. It is probably safe to say that getting Iran "right" is as impossible as getting any culture "right." Nonetheless, for their people and for ours, it should be a high priority.

Having visited Iran a number of times I remain fascinated by contemporary Iran, specifically by its young people and their desire for social and political change. Their passion reminds me of how my East German countrymen brought down the Berlin Wall without firing a single bullet. I feel that today, little by little, young Iranians are tearing down their own wall. This process is not completed, and it's unlikely to unfold as non-violently as in Germany. But it is under way.

More than a fish-out-of-water sports documentary this film focuses on social issues including women's rights, political freedom and religious conflict, through the lens of a black American basketball player.

When people hear about the film, they often ask me if Kevin changed the perception of Iranians vis-à-vis the West, and specifically vis-a-vis Americans. And I think Kevin did indeed change the perception of Iranians – but not necessarily in the way most people might expect. By routinely dispelling the notion that America is a land of limitless opportunity and riches, Kevin may have actually crushed some Iranians' illusions about America. While he often stressed that there is more opportunity in America, and more personal freedom, he also made it clear to Iranians that life in America can be – and often is - just as hard as anywhere else. He also spoke candidly to Iranians about being *African*-American, and how that factors into his own personal experience.

Thanks to his easy-going personality Kevin didn't so much transform Iranians' opinion of Americans as reinforce it. Many Americans don't realize that Iranians actually have a very high opinion of them. Approval ratings for Americans are consistently high, sometimes in the 70% positive range. This is a stark contrast to almost anywhere else in the region, in fact anywhere else in the world. One would be hard-pressed to find those approval numbers in Europe, much less in Iran's neighboring countries, where Americans are lucky to get into the 20% positive range. This was one of the biggest surprises for Kevin. In fact, he often marveled how - if one believed the mainstream American news media, - one could get the impression that as an American you won't survive a single day in Iran. This was exactly opposite to his own personal experience with Iranians, who treated him with hospitality, respect and friendship.

In many ways, the most important aspect of Kevin's experience is not how much he changed Iranians' perception, but how thoroughly Iranians changed his perception of them. At the same time Kevin is careful not to confuse the Iranian people with the Iranian government, keenly aware of the considerable gap that exists between the two. Not unlike in the United States, for that matter.

This film is a story of people coming together to learn from each other. It celebrates our shared humanity and it points toward what unites us, rather than what separates us. Sports is the perfect platform for such a story, because sports allows people to come together in ways few, if any, other activities can. I hope the film will help remind us of what's at stake – in terms of sheer humanity – when we muse about going to war with people we often know too little about.

– Till Schauder

KEVIN SHEPPARD

Kevin (born 1979 - the year of Iran's Islamic Revolution) is a multi-talented United States Virgin Islands athlete. Kevin played basketball and soccer at Jacksonville University, on scholarship. As a teenager he was pursued by the global soccer powerhouse **Manchester United** to join their youth development program in the English Premiere League. Kevin, who was also pursued by various college basketball coaches in the United States, chose hoops over professional soccer because "all the girls were into basketball players."

After a successful college career in the Atlantic Sun Conference at Jacksonville University (where he led his team in assists and minutes played each year and was a two-time all-conference player) Kevin started his professional career overseas, playing in South America, Europe, China and Israel before joining the **Iranian Super League** in 2008. He stayed in Iran through the 2011 season and became one of the most successful and most popular players ever to play in the Super League.

In 2011 Kevin and his wife Leah had a baby girl. Since becoming a dad Kevin has taken time off from professional basketball to run a non-for-profit youth league, **CBA – Choices Basketball Associations Inc**, of which he is founder and president. CBA's goal is to break the cycle of violence in Kevin's native U.S. Virgin Islands by providing a positive environment for kids through after-school programs and basketball.

To learn more about and support Kevin's non-for-profit youth league please visit http://choicesbasketballvi-org.webs.com/

THE FILMMAKERS

Till Schauder, Director/Producer/Cinematographer/Co-Editor: Till got his start in Germany where he wrote and directed the award winning films STRONG SHIT, and CITY BOMBER. After earning a government grant for the arts he made his U.S. debut with the romantic comedy SANTA SMOKES which won several international awards, among them Best Director at the Tokyo International Film Festival and the Studio Hamburg Newcomer Award. DUKE'S HOUSE, about Duke Ellington's Harlem home premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival. Through his company Partner Pictures Till writes, directs, shoots and produces for television and film. He has a side career in acting where he is occasionally cast in shows like HBO's Mildred Pierce or commercials like a 2008 national American Express campaign. Till is a graduate of the University of Television and Film, Munich. He teaches film classes at NYU and has been a guest lecturer at several other campuses, and a panelist at various film festivals.

Sara Nodjoumi, Producer: Sara is a film programmer and producer. She co-produced and co-directed a series of documentaries about the Iranian community in America. I CALL MYSELF PERSIAN: IRANIANS IN AMERICA, the first of these films, aired on multiple PBS stations and premiered in New York at the MoMA Documentary Fortnight. From 2002 to 2005, Sara joined director Till Schauder as an Associate Producer on his feature films SANTA SMOKES and DUKE'S HOUSE. In 2006, she worked on the marketing and release of Charles Sturridge's critically acclaimed LASSIE. From 2004-2009, Sara worked at the Tribeca Film Festival as an Associate Programmer. In 2009, Sara launched and programmed the first children's film series at Tribeca Cinemas (Rated #1 movie series in NYC for kids by NY Magazine). She is frequently invited to serve on and moderate film festival juries and industry panels, e.g. at the Tribeca Film Festival, Bahamas Intl. Film Festival, New York Women in Film and Television. Sara and Till reside in Brooklyn with their children, Nika and Luca.

Abigail E. Disney, Executive Producer: is a filmmaker and philanthropist. Her longtime passion for women's issues and peacebuilding culminated in her first film, the acclaimed Pray the Devil Back to Hell, about the Liberian women who peacefully ended their country's fourteen-year civil war. She is currently Executive Producer of the groundbreaking PBS mini-series Women, War & Peace, the most comprehensive global media initiative ever mounted on the role of women in peace and conflict.
Along with her husband, Pierre Hauser, Abigail co-founded the Daphne Foundation, which works with low-income communities in the five boroughs of New York City. Her work in philanthropy, women's engagement and leadership, and conflict resolution has been recognized through the Epic Award from the White House Project, the Changing the Landscape for Women Award from the Center for the Advancement of Women, and the prestigious International Advocate for Peace (IAP) Award from the Cardozo Law School's Cardozo Journal of Conflict Resolution. In addition, Abigail holds degrees from Yale, Stanford, and Columbia. She lives in New York City with her husband and four children.

David Teague, Editor: Teague has edited multiple award-winning documentaries, including the 2009 Academy Award® winner FREEHELD, the 2011 Academy Award® nominated SUN COME UP, and BORN SWEET (2010 Sundance Film Festival). Teague also directed, shot, and edited the award-winning documentary INTIFADA NYC.

Michael Reuter and Rebekka Garrido / The Post Republic, Co-Producers: www.post-republic.com – This Berlin based full service post-production house specializes in international co-productions. Credits include THE FIRM, BRONSON, Waltz with Bashir.

THE IRAN JOB

Directed by **Till Schauder**
Produced by **Sara Nodjoumi and Till Schauder**
Executive Producer **Abigail Disney**
Co-Producers **Michael Reuter and Rebekka Garrido**
Edited by **David Teague**
Co-Editor **Till Schauder**
Cinematography **Till Schauder**
Additional Camera **Bahman Kiarostami, Chris Valentien, Arash Abalouch**
Rap & Hip Hop by **Shahin Najafi, Jadugaran, ZedBazi**
Original Music by **Kareem Roustom**
Animation and Graphics by **Wes Townsend/Garbanzo Grafix**

Featuring

Kevin Sheppard
Leah Sheppard
Hilda
Laleh and her generous family
Elaheh and her generous family
Abdullah and his generous family
The entire A.S. Shiraz basketball club
Zoran "Z" Milicic, Center
Kami Jamshidvand, Forward
Ali Doraghi, Center
Mehdi Shirjang, Forward
Gholamreza Khajeh, Team Owner
Asadollah Kabir, Coach
Fereidoon Reisi, Manager
Mohammad Ahmadi, Analysis Coach
Ehsan, Driver

2012 • USA-GERMANY-IRAN • 93 mins
Color • In English & Farsi • Stereo • Digital • 1:1.66 aspect ratio

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(CNN) -- The United States and Iran cut diplomatic ties during the 1979 hostage crisis, and relations between the two countries today can only be described as tense. But that didn't stop a sharp-shooting U.S. basketball player from winding up his professional career in the Islamic republic.

Kevin Sheppard -- a six-foot point guard who competed internationally for 10 years after playing college ball -- was one of 13 Americans recruited by the Iranian Super League in the fall of 2008.

He joined Iran's only non-government-sponsored team, in the cultural center of Shiraz, mostly "out of curiosity" -- and immediately fell in love with the country.

"Iran was beautiful," Sheppard said. "I saw something I'd never really seen on the news, heard from people or read in the newspaper."

What he saw was the generosity of the people -- they treated him to dinners, took him on tours of historic landmarks and welcomed him, a non-Muslim from the West, into their homes.

A native of St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Sheppard starred in both basketball and soccer for Jacksonville University in Florida. He decided to pursue a professional basketball career overseas, excelling as a shooter and playmaker on teams from Cuba and Venezuela to Australia and Israel.

He stunned family and friends when he decided to play in Iran, where he averaged 26 points a game and eight assists as the team captain. Now retired from playing, his memories extend well beyond the basketball court.

"Sometimes you have to go out there and see it for yourself," the 32-year-old said. "I thought if it's nice then I'm going to see one of the best things a lot of people on this side of the world will never see."

Sheppard was taken aback with the level of admiration and respect Iranians showed toward Americans. Despite being the highest-paid player, his teammates welcomed him, introducing Sheppard to their culture and hoping to benefit from his professionalism.
"They brought me in as a brother," Sheppard explains. "And my job was to teach them how to play the game the mental way. They had skills, they could dunk and guys could shoot, but they lacked mental discipline."

Sheppard says he taught his teammates how to prepare for games, watch film and learn from scouting reports.

He quickly emerged as the undisputed star and captain of Shiraz; regularly swarmed by young Iranian fans for his autograph. Every Thursday, sell-out crowds jammed the gym, with more than 3,000 fans cheering, "Kevin! Kevin!"

That first year in Iran, Sheppard, along with another import, Serbian Zoran Majkic, led their team to the playoffs for the first time. "I brought a sense of belief to them," Sheppard recalled. "When I got there, they had no playoff aspirations. Once we started winning, they realized we can do something special."

By this time, American filmmaker Till Schauder, intrigued with Sheppard's Iranian adventure, had begun shooting a documentary of his success with the team and how he was adapting to life in a faraway land.

Schauder and his Iranian-American wife Sara Nodjoumi said they were fascinated by the notion of an American playing basketball "in a land allegedly full of nukes" and enjoying every minute of it.

In his initial conversations with the couple, Schauder said, "he had us on the floor laughing."

"Sara and I looked at each other and said if he's as clever and funny as he is on Skype then I'll stay in Iran and we'll make this film," Schauder said.

But Sheppard, who also played for Azad University in the Iranian league until this year, had no idea he was about to become the star of what initially struck him as a 24/7 reality show. "I was starting to think this was like 'Jersey Shore,' or some craziness," he said. "I was like, man, I ain't gonna do this."

But Schauder and Nodjoumi hoped to make Sheppard's story much deeper than his basketball because he was breaking cultural barriers. For instance, Sheppard became close friends with three Iranian women, rare in a country where the sexes are forbidden from interacting in public. The bonding began with Hilda, the team physical therapist, and two friends who became Sheppard's translator and driver.

The relationships gave Sheppard his first sense of human rights issues in Iran, especially the inequality between the sexes. "It was really bad for women. Once I got to know some of the ladies it was so ... it was even worse," he says. "Most of the women are so highly educated and can't use it to their potential. It was so sad."

But the filmmakers insist their documentary -- "The Iran Job"-- is not meant to be a heavy-handed political documentary on a Middle East country fighting for its freedom. They felt that Sheppard's witty personality attracts colorful characters that bring playfulness and humor to an unusual story. "Through sports we wanted to get into a society that is often misrepresented and misunderstood," Schauder said. "Kevin had the same perception about these places as many Americans; he just goes there and shatters them."

Schauder continued filming the discussions and cultural exchanges Sheppard encountered both on and off court, but as the 2009 presidential elections and violent street protests took hold, it became increasingly difficult to gather footage of him on the streets of Tehran.

Working as a one-man band, Schauder found himself filming non-stop for three to four hours at a time. With nothing but a backpack and endless tapes, he was extra cautious not to attract attention, often trying to blend in as a tourist.

He would mail footage to his mother in Germany who would send it to his wife in New York -- in one case, 90 hours' worth. "I mailed 80 tapes and kept the 10 I felt had the biggest nuggets with myself," Schauder says. "I hid them in my underwear and socks out of fear.

"That was the scariest time for me because I knew that was great footage. I knew this was potentially a really good film if it ever gets to America."

Schauder, who had been denied a journalist's visa, freely traveled in and out of the country before his last planned trip near the end of the basketball season. Shortly before the June elections he was detained in Iran. He spent 24 hours in confinement before being sent back to the United States with no explanation.

On the basketball court, Sheppard was unfazed by the street protests. However, off court he found himself enmeshed in the tangle of politics, current affairs and sports.
"I could see it on my teammates' faces," he said. "Their relatives were being hurt and kidnapped. That's when it really hit me that this thing is real, and I just couldn't escape it."

Sheppard is now focusing on his after-school education program mentoring children in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The most talented are given the opportunity to meet basketball scouts in hopes of one day following in his footsteps.

While still interested in visiting his friends back in Iran, he admits that might be difficult.
"After this documentary is released, I don't think I will want to go back -- they'll lock me up!"