

Chely Wright
Wish me Away

A Film By
Bobbie Birleffi and Beverly Kopf

96 minutes, Color, 35mm & HDCam Dolby SRD, 1.78, 2011



FIRST RUN FEATURES

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Short Synopsis

Emerging from a lifetime of hiding and shame that brings her to the brink of suicide, country singer Chely Wright comes out as gay, shattering cultural and religious stereotypes within Nashville, her conservative heartland family and, most importantly, herself. Knowing that she risks losing the dream that has inspired her since the age of four, she takes the bold step to use her public capital, not to better her career, but to speak out on one of the most polarizing civil rights issues of our time.

Growing up in Wellsville, Kansas, in the heart of the Bible Belt, she prays daily, “Dear God, please don’t let me be gay.” Arriving in Nashville at seventeen, she quickly realizes that she will have to keep her sexual identity under wraps to make it in this town. No Country star had ever come out as gay, and there is no way she will be the first.

But even at the height of her success, she remembers looking in the mirror and whispering, “Who are you? What are you doing?”

Finally, having painted herself into a corner, she realizes that she cannot survive the life she has created. She breaks down. With a 16mm gun in her mouth, staring at herself in the mirror and wondering who will find her, she prays to God for a moment’s peace. Songs begin to pour out of her soul and before long she plans her coming out moment, not just for herself, but for all the young people who believe they are damaged goods. Her public coming-out turns into an unexpectedly triumphant media whirlwind. She has struck a chord. As her Nashville dream fades, a confident, radiant and openly gay Chely Wright prepares for an unknown future.

Long Synopsis

Feature-length documentary *Wish Me Away* is a personal and intimate look at Chely Wright, the first country music star to come out as openly gay. The film charts her pursuit and rise to fame in Nashville, a hidden network of secrets and lies, her emotional unraveling and eventual rebirth. In the midst of a tumultuous political climate that has incited polarizing debates about the civil rights of the LGBT community, including gay marriage, the military's 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' policy and a bullying epidemic, one of America's celebrated public figures bravely chose to risk all that was important to her - family, relationships, career, success, fans and image - to live her authentic life.

Over a three-year period, award-winning filmmakers Bobbie Birleffi and Beverly Kopf were given unprecedented access to both Chely's public and private moments to document her struggle for personal acceptance in a commercial world known for its association with conservative values and its representation of patriotism. They interviewed many of those closest to Chely, including producers, industry insiders, fans, relatives, neighbors, advisors, mentors and confidants, and navigated an often impenetrable wall of homophobia in Nashville.

In the process of coming out and of filming the documentary, Chely faces a series of set backs and obstacles. A raw and moving portrait with an unfolding story culminating in an extraordinary event, *Wish Me Away* unveils a new side to the artist, one that is at times vulnerable, scared, angry and despondent, but ultimately hopeful and liberated.

The film follows Chely as she develops a team and strategy for coming out to family, public, media and music industry in a way that would create the right impact. Through the process, she builds a trusted new inner circle of people - including successful Artist Manager Russell Carter, iconic Grammy-winning Producer Rodney Crowell, renowned Random House Editor Victoria Wilson and Interfaith Leader Reverend Welton Gaddy, among others - who help her conquer fears, craft her message and find new creative outlets to express herself through writing a book and recording a new album. "Instead of ten steps up the mountain...if I do it in the proper way, I can get myself to the top of the mountain so when I say it, more people will hear and it will be more effective," says Chely. Her extraordinary metamorphosis also includes a life-changing migration, packing up her home after two decades in Tennessee and relocating to New York City.

In *Wish Me Away*, Chely talks about her roots and heartland upbringing, a turbulent family history, passion for music and an unrelenting drive - all the influential elements that shaped her life. For the first time on camera, she fully reveals the ways in which she felt like an outsider growing up, struggled to fit in, protected her secret and kept the world at an arm's length.

Through visits to Chely's hometown in Kansas, the filmmakers show the close bonds with her father and sister Jennifer, strengthening and growing exponentially through adversity. Amongst several other family members, the film captures contradictory forces between their love for her and a negative perception of homosexuality, as well as Chely's angst about a complex and troubled relationship with her mother.

Jennifer serves as a constant source of comfort for Chely and acts as her biggest supporter, counseling her on facing negative responses and a myriad of reactions. She also actively educates her son and daughter about their aunt's struggle and suicide attempt. In disclosing a fear that her brother-in-law will not want her to be a part of their children's lives, Chely asks Jennifer "How can I, in a two, three or five-hour conversation with my loved ones, offset years of teaching from the church? That is what is such a struggle."

Chely examines the significant role religion has played in her life. As a child, she prayed away feelings of homosexuality and attraction to girls, practiced self-condemnation and negotiated with God to keep her secret by replacing her desire for love with a successful career. As she secured her first record deal, her first #1 hit, regular radio play and skyrocketing popularity, Chely thought God had answered her prayers with a "consolation prize." As time passed, she recalls developing skills in the art of evasion, distracting people around her with a number of high-profile relationships with men and focusing her energy on public service and a wide variety of charity work.

In coming out, she seeks new guidance from a spiritual advisor and confronts conventional ideas about what makes a good American and a good Christian. Avowing unwavering dedication to her faith and country - Chely was the first artist of any genre to perform for the troops in Iraq - she can't help but question why some people feel she is no longer deserving of those labels.

"Young people in every corner of America are being told by their churches - and their parents are echoing what the churches are telling them - that they're damaged goods, and they're not," Chely remarks in her recent appearance on The Oprah Winfrey Show. In the aftermath, Chely discovers a new sense of belonging and finds new meaning in her advocacy efforts towards creating broad social change as well helping others with similar experiences. Though the film is about Chely's journey and healing, she hopes the message will resonate with anyone who feels a sense of isolation or exclusion. "Millions of kids are going to grow up not hating themselves because of you," encourages Rosie O'Donnell during an interview.

About the Production

Wish Me Away chronicles the first performer emerging from the world of country music to tell her story in a very public way and facing a culture that rejects those who do not conform to its carefully marketed image. Filmmakers Bobbie Birleffi and Beverly Kopf were introduced to Chely Wright through their network and connections around their previous documentary, *Be Real: Stories from Queer America*. Winding down their promotional tour for the film and in search of a new project, they nurtured a relationship over time with Chely, during which she confided her thoughts about coming out. Wanting to extend Chely's message to a wide audience and help her shatter biases, Birleffi and Kopf knew Chely's story was the perfect fit for their next film.

Chely's orchestrated plan included the coordinated release of her book *Like Me*, her album "Lifted Off the Ground," and a subsequent promotional media tour across the country. In the meantime, everyone around her had to keep her secret. As a result, Birleffi and Kopf were not able to contact people until after Chely's announcement. With less than three weeks to research and set-up Nashville interviews, they were fortunate in receiving support from and access to industry people like legendary producers Tony Brown and Rodney Crowell as well as Bill Cody, the WSM (Grand Ole Opry) radio DJ. However, when they approached some of the industry's top stars, friends and colleagues of Chely's, to appear in the film, it turned out to be a real challenge. What remains to be seen, is how the path of Chely's career will change and which audiences will embrace her.

While the film does capture a resistance to Chely's coming out, the filmmakers wanted to remain respectful and balanced in their handling of American values and religion. "Nashville is a very unique place — a creative town, full of songwriters, musicians and a very tight-knit community. We have paid a lot of attention to how we present Nashville, not as a monolith of homophobia, but as a very successful business that markets to a predominantly conservative audience, much like the rest of the country," says Birleffi. "Part of what we are trying to show in the film is the complexity of responses," explains Kopf. "It has been a roller coaster, we've seen crowds at her book signing events and thousands cheering her on at concerts and gay pride parades, as well as some venomous blog entries and a few tough interviews on the country music radio stations. There are "silent haters," who don't speak what they are really feeling and there are Christians, for whom this is a really difficult issue. The camera, however, has its own truth."

Along the way, many things surprised the filmmakers - Chely's courage and willingness to lose some of the things that meant the most to her including playing for the troops and performing at the Grand Ole Opry, and the responses of members of her family, whom she essentially outed when she came out.

The strength, tenacity and humanity that Chely regularly exhibited, continually inspired Bobbie and Beverly throughout the shooting process. "She has already saved lives. We witnessed young people telling her that she helped them decide to come out to their parents or not to kill themselves. She connects with people in places where gay is not

acceptable and she represents a positive image of a gay woman. She doesn't always alter opinions, but she knows how to start a conversation," recalls Birleffi.

After shooting and gathering over 100 hours of material, Birleffi and Kopf teamed up with editor Lisa Palattella. "In addition to being a brilliant storyteller, Lisa is also a gifted musician who has been able to use her background to integrate Chely's music into the film in delicate, daring, and unexpected ways."

The title of the documentary ***Wish Me Away*** comes from one of the filmmakers' favorite songs on Chely's new album. Sadly, many people struggling with their own identities, including Chely herself, at some point or another - can relate to wishing an entire part of themselves away. At its core, ***Wish Me Away*** is not a gay film. "This is a relevant story, for which the timing is definitely not coincidental. Chely is an amazing ambassador for anyone who feels like an outcast, that they have something to hide, or that they're not accepted for one reason or another. Popular culture has proven to be a critical forum for advocacy," adds Kopf.

Filmmaker Bios

Bobbie Birleffi & Beverly Kopf, Co-Directors & Co-Producers

Bobbie Birleffi and Beverly Kopf have completed numerous non-fiction projects since forming their production company in 2000 including *Be Real: Stories from Queer America*. The documentary, which celebrates the lives of six everyday heroes in the LGBT community, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2006, screened at other major film festivals around the country, including New York, San Francisco, and Miami, and aired on Logo. As a team, they have produced, directed and written critically acclaimed and highly rated documentary programming, biographies and specials for PBS, NBC, A&E, Bravo, Court TV, Lifetime, TLC, VH1, US NEWS & WORLD REPORT and Harvard's Center for Public Leadership. They have also collaborated on several projects with Tony Award-winning director Julie Taymor.

Bobbie Birleffi, Co-Director

Bobbie Birleffi is a consummate storyteller and award-winning documentary filmmaker. Prior to joining forces with Kopf, Birleffi produced her own independent films, raising funds, writing, directing a variety of projects for PBS. Her first effort *Is Anyone Home on the Range*, a one-hour special about her home state of Wyoming, was nominated for an Emmy Award and is still widely used as an educational tool by schools and community groups across the west. Her follow-up, *Men Who Molest*, a documentary for the PBS series Frontline, won an Emmy Award. Her documentary, *The Mormons: Missionaries to the World*, was nominated for an Independent Documentary Association Award of Distinction and was hailed, "brilliantly done" by The New York Times. Also for PBS, Bobbie directed the first two episodes of the historical series, *Texas Ranch House*, which was nominated for a Director's Guild Award.

With roots in public television and public affairs, Bobbie's work exhibits the compassion she learned from her first mentor, Bill Moyers. Her early work for the National Public Affairs Center for Television (NPACT) includes the Emmy-nominated documentary *The Unquiet Death of Julian and Ethel Rosenberg*, for which she tracked and interviewed nine of the original twelve jurors, and was the only journalist to locate Ethel Rosenberg's brother, David Greenglass. She worked closely with veteran journalists Jim Lehrer and Robert MacNeil on a precursor to the MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour and later produced feature stories for Newshour. She also worked with Hugh Downs on *Over Easy*, a daily PBS magazine show about aging produced by KQED/San Francisco, which won a Peabody Award and several Emmy Awards. Other credits include *The Age of the Female Icon*, for Lifetime in conjunction with The New York Times and the CBS daily magazine show, *Day & Date*, for which she was responsible for several exclusive stories, including an interview with LAPD Detective Mark Fuhrman during the OJ Simpson trial.

Birleffi's work in feature film includes *Tell Me A Riddle*, directed by Lee Grant, and the independent feature, *Wildrose*, directed by John Hanson. She has also taught undergraduate film production at the USC's School of Cinema and Television. Birleffi's

abiding love of the performing arts includes a two-year stint as a clown in San Francisco many years ago, where she studied with Bill Irwin and the Pickle Family Circus.

Beverly Kopf, Co-Director

Beverly Kopf's background includes collaborations with a variety of artists, celebrities and journalists. She has created several successful shows, and as a writer and producer, she brings a unique sensitivity and intelligence to her work. Before partnering with Birleffi, Kopf received an Emmy Award for writing the hit ABC talk show *The View*. As creator of the 'Hot Topics' segment, she helped develop the show's famed smart, off-the-cuff conversation and produced an important forum for women to influence national conversation on social issues. Beverly also received a GLAAD Media Award for a Barbara Walters' special feature story about hate crime victim, Matthew Shepard. Since departing *The View*, Kopf has continued her association with Meredith Vieira, writing for several projects hosted by Vieira.

Previously, Kopf served as a producer and talent executive during which she conceived, booked, wrote, and produced hundreds of cultural and issue-oriented segments. She also helped develop talk shows for Cindy Crawford, Stephanie Miller, Tammy Faye Baker and Mo'Nique. For four years, Kopf worked with Maria Shriver producing innovative, topical and award-winning specials for the NBC News critically acclaimed series, *First Person with Maria Shriver*. Other credits include *Good Morning America*, *CBS Morning News*, *Entertainment Tonight*, *A.M. Los Angeles* and *MADtv*. In association with Gay Rosenthal Productions, she also worked on a number of projects for Lifetime. Kopf's first autobiographical essay *Oy Vay the Kids are Gay* was published in an anthology entitled *Mentsh*. Her essay "Lose Your Mother, Find Yourself" appeared on the acclaimed literary website, *Fresh Yarn*.

Rhonda Eiffe, Executive Producer

Rhonda Eiffe is a business executive and equal rights activist based in Los Angeles. She is a recipient of IBM's "Humanitarian of the Year" award for her work with Project Nightlight, a non-profit organization serving the needs of AIDS patients. She has also received many other awards from large corporations such as IBM and Sprint, along with various entrepreneurial start-ups where she has been recognized for her strategic vision, business acumen and leadership skills. In 2008, Rhonda funded and campaigned for the advocacy film *A Shared Fate*, a documentary produced by BlueVoice, the oceans conservancy organization co-founded by actor Ted Danson. She has also advised Marianne Williamson, an internationally acclaimed author whose books were #1 New York Times Bestsellers and who has been a popular guest on Oprah, Larry King Live, *Good Morning America* and Charlie Rose.

Courageously living her life as an openly gay person, Rhonda has felt moved to use her personal experiences as a launching pad to speak out for equality and civil rights, in the workplace, at home and in the community at large. Her compassionate activism and social justice work is motivated by the divisiveness that workplace ecosystems often proliferate. She feels *Wish Me Away* is an opportunity to transcend stereotypes by showing what it takes to live an authentic life.

Richard Bever, Executive Producer

Los Angeles-based producer and co-president of the feature film production company Chill Entertainment, Bever is the former head of development and production at Andrew Lauren Productions, which produced the Oscar-nominated film *The Squid and The Whale* during his tenure. Bever also served as marketing and distribution director of *G*, the Andrew Lauren Productions film self-distributed onto over 500 screens nationally. Upon forming Chill Entertainment, Bever served as a Co-Executive Producer on the 2009 Sundance film *Against the Current* by Peter Callahan. He is currently developing the film adaptation of Pagan Kennedy's novel, "Confessions of a Memory Eater," with director Brad Anderson (*The Machinist; Transsiberian*). Bever and his partners are also packaging the horror project *Blood Letter* to be directed by David A. Armstrong (*SAW I-VI*), and the crime drama *Numb* to be directed by veteran actor Brian Cox. He is currently in post-production on the feature *AUDREY*, directed by Dean Pollack and produced alongside Stephen Israel.

Fletcher Foster, Co-Executive Producer

Over the course of his extraordinary career, Foster has worked at record labels in Nashville and Los Angeles including Arista, Capitol/Nashville, Sony and Universal - holding positions including Sr. VP/General Manager - overseeing all of the day-to-day operations - to Sr. Vice President Marketing, where he was responsible for all marketing activities including artist development, international, new media, production, publicity, and video. He has worked with an array of artists including: Trace Adkins, Dierks Bentley, Toni Braxton, Brooks & Dunn, Whitney Houston, Alan Jackson, Joe Nichols, Brad Paisley, TLC, and Keith Urban. Foster currently oversees Red Light Management whose roster includes artists such as Luke Bryan, Faith Hill, Jennete McCurdy, Tim McGraw and the Tammy Wynette Estate. A graduate of Nashville's Belmont University, he has served on the Board of Trustees for NARAS (Grammy's). He is on the Board of Directors of Gilda's Club, Leadership Music, Minnie Pearl Cancer Foundation, MusiCares, Second Harvest Food Bank and and Second Harvest Food Bank.