

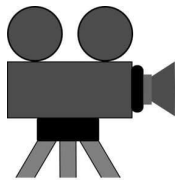
Mary Pickford Film Center  
DOCTOBER DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL 2016  
Film Discussion Guide

**BREAKING A MONSTER: Unlocking the Truth (2015)**  
A documentary film by Luke Meyer

Malcolm Brickhouse.....Guitarist and Lead Vocalist  
Jarad Dawkins.....Drums  
Alec Atkins.....Bass  
Annette and Tracey Jackson.....Malcolm's parents  
Alan Sacks.....Band Manager, Exec. Producer

*The Story:* Jarad started drumming at age 2; Malcolm picked up the guitar at age 7; and both boys taught ten-year old Alec, whom they had known since preschool, to play the bass. Their basement jam sessions evolved into a raucous gig in Times Square that resulted in a YouTube video that went viral, and this led to a \$1.8 million recording-deal that changed their lives.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEMsJPVego8>

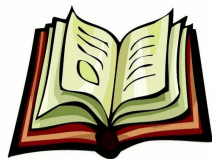


**DOCUMENTARY STYLE:**

Bill Nichols, film educator, has written many texts on documentary styles and his analysis is distilled in the article cited here. He categorizes documentaries into 6 styles.

<https://www.videomaker.com/article/c06/18423-six-primary-styles-of-documentary-production>

*Breaking the Monster* appears to have been produced using a hybrid documentary style that uses both the **OBSERVATIONAL MODE** (where an unobtrusive film crew follows the story as it unfolds un-staged in real-time), and the **PARTICIPATORY MODE** (where the filmmaker aims for immediacy and point-of-view is achieved through direct encounter with the film's subjects through interviews, etc.).



**USING THIS GUIDE:**

As you answer the following questions, cite textual evidence to support your analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. This guide correlates with Middle School CCSS for Reading of Literary and Informational Text.

## **MEET THE PEOPLE: Key Details**

### The Band

- What motivated the boys to hone their skills and create the band in the first place? What personal skills and attributes led to their success?
- Malcolm's mother believes that success is achieved if "You dream it, you write it, you make it happen!" Do you see evidence of this advice as the band establishes its long-term goals and envision their success? Explain. Alex has a different way of envisioning his future. Explain.
- After they entered the music industry, list the events that facilitated or frustrated their abilities to reach those goals?
- What were the boys asked to sacrifice for their success? How did the boys feel about these losses? Were any compromises struck?

### Their Parents

- In what ways did the parents of the band members support the ambitions of their talented children? How necessary was their support to the band's success?
- The band members and their parents began the journey with optimism and idealism. Later, they quarreled and began to doubt. What was upsetting everyone?
- Mrs. Jackson, Malcolm's mother, is an interesting and dominant force in the life of the band. Describe how she both managed and marketed the band from the inside.

### The Manager

- Why do you think Alan Sack wanted to manage the group? What life experiences prepared him to work successfully with 12 and 13 year-olds?
- Sacks describes his relationship to the boys as "grandfatherly" yet he declares that he will throw them into the "hard core world" of the music industry. Unpack the contradictions.
- Malcolm confronts Alan and wants to know if his motives are tied to money. Alan denies that he's "in it for the money." What do you think? What evidence can you cite?

### The Music Industry

- Another "character" in the film is the Music Industry itself. What are the characteristics, components, purposes and values of The Industry?
- How did The Industry positively and negatively impact the boys' personal lives, their musical ambitions, and their very 'spirits'? Consider these Industry roles/functions as you evaluate the age-appropriateness and success of their interactions with the band.

Manager (Alan)  
Vocal coach  
Studio sound recorder  
Wardrobe guy  
Legal/Business office

Merchandise/Image Creators (T-shirt)  
Promotion/Tour organizers  
Sony Producer, Cherry  
Set design

## KEY IDEAS

- “*Monster*” is in the title of the film and is also the subject of their main song, “*I am a Monster.*” Who or What is the “Monster”? Then describe how the monster is being “broken.”
- The name of the band is “*Unlock the Truth.*” Is that an apt name for this heavy metal band? Define whose “truth” is being unlocked, the nature of that Truth, and then describe how it is being unlocked?
- The Music Industry is sometimes described as a “digestive system” through which few bands, especially boy bands, survive. Is this the way the Industry is portrayed in the film or can you identify a better analogy?
- “All that glitters is not gold” is a common idiom perhaps dating back to Aesop. Can this phrase be used to describe the complex events that occurred during the branding of the band or would you capture the essence of the film using a different idiomatic expression?
- As 12 and 13 year olds, do any of the band members have a say in what happens to them while under SONY management? Do they have a Voice? Do they have fair Representation? What behaviors do they display when their Voices have been muted or silenced?
- Jarad tried to represent himself by asking questions about the terms of the Contract, but his questions were ignored. After reading this article excerpt that breaks down the terms of a music contract, decide if contracts, such as the one they signed with SONY, is in their best interest. <http://www.soundonsound.com/music-business/recording-contracts-explained>
- The boys were frustrated with the pace of producing their first album. After separating from SONY a year after they signed with them, the band released their first album, *Chaos*, and also released a music video for the song, “*Take Control.*” In what ways do the titles of the video and album describe central themes in their lives?  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqfYVg8Bv3k>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3Zdl2YxZxI>

## CRAFT AND STRUCTURE

- What is the point-of-view or purpose of the documentary? Does the filmmaker, Luke Meyer, offer the audience a balanced perspective or one that has a distinct point-of-view regarding the band and its handlers? Does it change your analysis when you know that Alan Sacks was one of three co-producers of the film? Do you see evidence of his role in the film?

- What does Malcolm’s mother mean when she warns her son to “be careful what you ask the Universe for.” How does this early warning contribute to the tone of the film and to the development of the film’s key themes? Defend your point-of-view.
- Select one of these quotes from the film and discuss how this content fits into the overall structure of the narrative and contributes to the development of the film’s ideas:
  - Alan: “They [the boys] need to be more mature in the process...They need to know that they need to work....Everything’s been easy for them....It’s not just gonna ‘happen.’”
  - Jarad: “All-in-all, everything is not where it should be. That’s not what the song is about. The video needs to be matched to the song...Quality is what matters most.”
  - Alan: We’re selling things [from the website] that don’t even exist yet. That’s a good thing.”
  - Alec: “[because I’m being punished] I can’t play GTA now. I like GTA so much because...you can live a life before you actually live it...They think we’re just kids. They think it’s just a phase. One minute we’re heavy metal and the next minute we won’t. But that’s not how it is...”
  - Tracey Jackson: “You have to crawl before you walk. You have to go through these stages...We have to get out there and try.”
  - Annette Jackson: “Sometimes you have to put the brakes on and just say ‘no’. I don’t want my kid to sometime burn out. I don’t want the band to be a job.”
  - Malcolm: “I make music because I have nothing better to do....For the front man, especially, I have to do more than the other two. It’s a lot of pressure on me. It’s a lot of work that I guess that I’m not used to.”

## CONNECTING TO SELF

- Malcolm tells his mother that he is “too young for responsibility.” How should parents and significant adults help young people to become more mature and responsible? Using your criteria, did the significant adults in the lives of the band members act responsibly and in the boys’ best interest? What about the significant adults in your life?
- The boys had to give up many things in order to achieve their goals. Have you ever had to give up one thing in order to succeed at another? Do you think it is possible to ever “have it all”?
- The boys mentioned being bullied for their appearance, for their musical tastes, and for stepping outside the musical boundaries of their cultural group. Have you ever been bullied for being different? Read and respond to the following article:
  - <http://gawker.com/internet-famous-preteen-metalheads-are-being-bullied-fo-513780506>

- Identity—what factors shape our identities? Are these core parts of ourselves, immutable and never changing? Or do our values and personalities continue to evolve over time as the result of events in our lives? At the end of the film, the boys are asked about the impact of fame on their lives. Can you identify or relate to any of their responses about “living the famous childhood dream”?
  - Jarad: “I’ll feel a little guilty when I move [due to increased crime in the neighborhood and economic freedom] because there’s a possibility that I may never see my friends again...I grew up with them....I’m gonna miss them a lot.”
  - Malcolm: “I switched schools because my mom thought it’d be better if I was in a smaller environment....I can’t do things [now] because of who I am. They won’t let me have a girlfriend or go to parties by myself because of my fame.... No one really knows me. They know “Unlocking the Truth”, but not me.”
  - Alec: “I’m still making my own person....I’m not guaranteed anything. We’re not guaranteed we’re gonna succeed. We’re not guaranteed that we’re going to be one of the biggest heavy metal bands. But we gotta believe. I want to be famous for the right things.....”

## FURTHER EXPLORATION

- Charisse Jones is writing a book about the development of the band. When it’s available, compare and contrast the tone and content of the book to that of the film.  
<http://www.penguin.com/book/unlocking-the-truth-by-unlocking-the-truth-with-charisse-jones-introduction-by-questlove/9780399174537>
- “*Unlocking the Truth*” is a successful band not only because the boys are disciplined and skillful musicians who have created an original style, but also because they are young, cute, and play a musical genre rarely associated with Black musicians. They are a “novelty act.” But as they age, the novelty-factor may wear off...and then what will happen to them? Research the fate of child stars. Based on your research, create a set of instructions that will help young talent survive-and-thrive rather than crash-and-burn?
- The primary purpose of the Music Industry is to “market the brand.” But this is also the purpose of many other industries. Research the economics of branding and how it is accomplished. Examine the extent to which your tastes and preferences have been created by the branding-sales cycle and decide for yourself if you want to continue to participate.

MONSTER: Official Music Video-- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYH7BkV1BPQ>