

At first rejected, laughed at, targeted by sexist and racist attacks, Venus and Serena eventually became legends, well beyond their sport. From the ghetto to the star system, the two sisters shook up an America that did not want to acknowledge them. Disruptive and ahead of their time, the Williams sisters have changed the rules on and off the court. And they bacame pop and feminist icons.

"Venus and Serena have something you don't find at a country club: neighborhood rage." says Kelvin Brown, a tennis coach in Compton, who watched Serena and Venus hit their first balls. Born in 1980 and 1981, the Williams sisters grew up at 1117 East Stockton Street. Compton is a Los Angeles suburb plagued by gangs, drug trafficking and corruption. The city is the birthplace of gangsta rap, the home of Coolio, Kendrick Lamar and Dr. Dre. It is also one of the most dangerous places in the United States. To understand the Williams sisters, you have to start from there. Start with the ghetto of Compton and never lose sight of it...

The documentary offers a social and political approach. For the Williams, sports was first and foremost a way to get out of the ghetto. Even after having succeeded in escaping from it, America constantly sent them back to their background. The two sisters accepted and overturned the stigma. They turned it into a strength, a trademark, almost a brand, transcending this identity in a country plagued by racism.

In Compton, the Williams were the only Black women playing tennis, a white man's sport, a rich men's sports. Gangs hung out on the courts, often littered with glass and used needles. It was not unusual for Richard, their father, to take a beating to protect his daughters. The emancipation of the entire family depends on Venus and Serena's success. The girls knew this from a very early age. It is what drove and bound them.

The Williams family moved to Florida and faced a different kind of adversity... For a long time, the two sisters were the targets of racism and misogyny. How many times did they feel that they were reduced to "Black girls"? When, in 2000, Venus won the Wimbledon Championships, a venerable temple of quiet tennis, their father let out from the stands what sounded like a cry of revenge: "Straight Outta Compton" (a reference to a song by the famous rap band N.W.A. coming from the same city).

2003. Venus and Serena were stars. Rich and famous. But the stray bullets of Compton hit again. Their older sister, Yetunde Price, was killed in a gangland shooting. The two champions were in shock. They were wavering. Together they would go back on track.

To understand how Venus and Serena overcame the obstacles, one must explore the intense sisterhood between them. Opponents on the court when they play each other in singles, they have also won 22 titles when playing doubles together. Off the court, they are a team. Venus, the elder, being the guardian angel.

Together, the Williams sisters are revolutionizing women's tennis. Through their strength, their mindset, their victories. But their aura goes beyond the world of tennis. They are said to be too masculine, too arrogant, their style is mocked, they turn stereotypes into positive images. They lead the way for many young Black women who see them as role models.

The Williams revolution also involves style: high top sneakers, denim miniskirt, ballerina tutu ... The sisters challenge both the norms of their sport and beauty standards. Business is business, Nike took advantage of this and dressed Serena in a black suit that makes her look like a Marvel superhero. She is also on the front page of Vogue or Vanity Fair. **Fashion designer Virgil Abloh defined her as a "muse"**.

The youngest is not content with being a marketing product: Serena Williams is becoming an activist. As a feminist and anti-racist, she embraces the struggles of her time, making wonderful use of pop culture tools to get her message out there. With nearly 16 million followers on Instagram, Serena seems to be on all fronts. She advocates for equal pay, denounces the treatment of Black women by doctors after her difficult delivery, calls for reforms to make it easier for players to return to competition after a pregnancy. And when the Black Lives Matter movement emerged, she gave it her public support, just like Venus.

Out of the two sisters, Serena is more successful. But when she evolved away from tennis in the summer of 2022, capped like no other player before her (23 Grand Slam titles), she said: "I wouldn't be Serena if it weren't for Venus." Amidst tributes from Oprah Winfrey, Tiger Woods and Michael Phelps, Michelle Obama praised "a young girl from Compton".

Director's note of intent

The documentary we are proposing tells the story of the extraordinary destiny of two iconic public figures of today's America. The production must echo the era and the issues that Venus and Serena Williams embody. The archives are numerous and particularly powerful.

The images

The archives take us to 1980s Los Angeles, and then more broadly to 1990s and 2000s America. These images tell us about the world in which our characters evolved. And the challenges that the Williams family faced.

The tennis archives are used to back the story: for example, this 1990 report where we see the father coaching his daughters in Compton, or those of the 2001 Indian Wells Open, where the Williams are booed by the crowd.

As soon as Venus and (even more so), Serena became public figures beyond the world of sports, images from social media, fashion shows or advertisements were used. In order to approach the two sisters' activism, we will also use news archives (television news or images filmed with smartphones such as George Floyd's arrest).

The sound

Interviews, TV shows, press conferences... We will hear the Williams sisters at different ages. From a very early age, they were solicited by the media. We will choose the archives that fit our approach. Thus, Venus' interview by ABC News, when she was only 14 years old. Hearing the journalist insist on knowing why his daughter was "so confident", Richard Williams interrupted the interview, furious: "You're dealing with a little black kid, and let her be a kid!"

We also imagine a soundtrack dominated by hip hop music. This choice echoes the Williams sisters' heritage and history. Like them, Dr. Dre, Coolio, Kendrick Lamar, and many rap stars come from Compton. These artists followed a similar path to that of Venus and Serena: from the streets to the stars, from the ghetto to the star system. Race, adversity, and the rage to succeed define this music genre. This music therefore seems particularly relevant to us for the documentary. The soundtrack will include original music. It is thought as a key element of the film.

Potential interviews

The direct witnesses

We are in touch with **Patrick Mouratoglou**, Serena Williams' iconic coach from 2012 to 2021.

We will also ask **people who knew the two sisters in Compton** and **Rick Macci**, who was the coach of both sisters' in Florida, from 1991 to 1995 for some insights.

Billie Jean King, an American tennis figure and a feminist, she paid a heartfelt tribute to Serena on the day she evolved away from tennis. She will explain the impact of the "Williams revolution".

Annie Leibovitz, American photographer specialized in celebrity portraits. She has photographed both sisters since the late 1990s. It is also to her that we owe the photo of Serena, pregnant, on the front page of Vanity Fair. She will shed light on the iconic dimension and symbolic power of the Williams.

The experts

Daniel Paisner, a journalist and best-selling author, he co-wrote her autobiography On the Line with Serena Williams.

Merlisa Lawrence Corbett, a journalist, author of the Serena Williams: Tennis Champion, Sports Legend, and Cultural Icon biography.

Marie-Cécile Naves, a specialist on the United States, Director of the Gender and Geopolitics Observatory at the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (French: IRIS), she is the author of Serena Williams une icône qui dérange (The Conversation). She also published Sport as a means of empowering women and girls all over the world.

About the author-director

Sonia Dauger is an author and a director. She has a solid knowledge of both American issues and the world of sports. Indeed, Sonia directed for Arte the documentary *Denzel Washington:* American Paradox. She also directed *Les Bleus, une autre histoire de France* (France 2) and *Sprint* (Canal+), two documentaries that address the social and political aspects of sports.

About the production

Brainworks produced several documentaries for Arte, including *Denzel Washington: American Paradox* that was broadcast on October 23, 2022. In the past, our teams produced *Stephen King, A Necessary Evil, Citizen Kitano* or *Global Diabetes*.

Brainworks explores all narrative forms of reality: from the *Cellule de Crise* and *L'Histoire Secrète* collections for France 2, to the original Canal+ programs or *Le Monde en Face* for France 5.

Brainworks received the Best Documentary on Cinema Award for *The 1000 Eyes of Dr. Maddin* at the prestigious Venice Film Festival in 2015.

