



Young Mideast bunch on tour in 'America'

By Gary Strauss, USA TODAY



By Leon Shahabian, Sundance Channel

Front-page news in Mississippi: *On the Road in America* cast members read about themselves on the cover of Clarksdale's *Press Register*.

For four young Middle Easterners, *On the Road in America* was the ultimate road trip.

Their excursion, which has its U.S. premiere on the Sundance Channel tonight (9 ET/PT), took them on an unconventional three-month ride across the country.

Conceived by American backer Layalina Productions to help erase cultural stereotypes and portray the USA more favorably during the protracted war in Iraq, the 12-part docu-reality series was a hit when it aired on the Arab satellite network MBC1 in 2007.

On the Road focuses on three Arab men — Egyptian Ali Amr, 22, Saudi Sanad Al Kubaissi, 20, and Jordanian Mohamed Abou-Ghazal, 27 — as well as Lara Abou Saifan, a Palestinian on the production team.

How well the MTV-style series will play here remains unclear. *On the Road* creator/producer Jerome Gary hopes viewers will be attracted by the four while gaining insight into the Middle East. (Two of the final episodes take viewers to Cairo, Beirut and Dubai.) "Viewers are going to like these kids. They're going to get that they're not all terrorists," says Gary, best known for producing 1977's Oscar-nominated documentary *Pumping Iron*.

The four were initially wary about how they would be received by Americans. "To be honest with you, after 9/11, I didn't think Arabs would be welcome, because everyone viewed us as terrorists," Amr says. "After I went to America, my mind definitely changed. You can't judge any country without visiting. Just watching something on TV is like brainwashing."

Cast and crew toured in a recreational vehicle, starting in Washington, D.C., where they had conversations with Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dick Durbin and Reps. Sam Farr and George Miller. For the most part, the travelers' interactions were with more average citizens, including a New York bond trader, Chicago Cubs fans, Mississippi gospel singers, former L.A. gang members and Montana dude ranch employees.

As the group navigated landmarks and popular culture in the summer of 2006, their wide-eyed experiences as tourists frequently gave way to sharp criticism of U.S. foreign policy, spurred by the then-current TV reports of the vicious battle between Israeli troops and Hezbollah fighters that decimated parts of Beirut, Saifan's home.

The conflict underscores some interesting interplay between Saifan, who doesn't hide her long-standing contempt for Jews, and Guy Livneh, an Israeli and *Road's* photography director.

"I hate Israelis," Saifan says early on. Yet after several conversations, the two become friends — something *On the Road's* backers hope will gain broader traction among Americans and Arabs.

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