

**AMERICAN EXPERIENCE Presents *Freedom Riders***  
*Broadcast Marks 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Original Freedom Rides*

Premieres Monday, May 16, 2011  
 8:00pm – 10:00pm on KCPT

From award-winning filmmaker Stanley Nelson (*Wounded Knee, Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple, The Murder of Emmett Till*) comes ***Freedom Riders***, the powerful, harrowing and ultimately inspirational story of six months in 1961 that changed America forever. From May until November 1961, more than 400 black and white Americans risked their lives—and many endured savage beatings and imprisonment—for simply traveling together on buses and trains as they journeyed through the Deep South. Deliberately violating Jim Crow laws, the Freedom Riders’ belief in non-violent activism was sorely tested as mob violence and bitter racism greeted them along the way. ***Freedom Riders*** features testimony from a fascinating cast of central characters: the Riders themselves, state and federal government officials, and journalists who witnessed the rides firsthand. Produced, written and directed by Nelson, ***Freedom Riders*** premieres on the PBS series **AMERICAN EXPERIENCE** on Monday, May 16, 2011 at 8:00pm.

*“I got up one morning in May and I said to my folks at home, ‘I won’t be back today because I’m a Freedom Rider.’ It was like a wave or a wind that you didn’t know where it was coming from or where it was going, but you knew you were supposed to be there.”* – Pauline Knight-Ofoso, Freedom Rider

Despite two earlier Supreme Court decisions that mandated the desegregation of interstate travel facilities, black Americans in 1961 continued to endure hostility and racism while traveling through the South. The newly inaugurated Kennedy administration, embroiled in the Cold War and worried about the nuclear threat, did little to address domestic civil rights.

“It became clear that the civil rights leaders had to do something desperate, something dramatic to get Kennedy’s attention. That was the idea behind the Freedom Rides—to dare the federal government to do what it was supposed to do, and see if their constitutional rights would be protected by the Kennedy administration,” explains Raymond Arsenault, author of *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*, on which the film is partially based.

The self-proclaimed “Freedom Riders” came from all strata of American society—black and white, young and old, male and female, northern and southern. They embarked on the rides knowing the danger but firmly

committed to the ideals of non-violent protest, aware that their actions could provoke a savage response but willing to put their lives on the line for the cause of justice.

Each time the Freedom Riders met violence and the campaign seemed doomed, new ways were found to sustain and even expand the movement. After Klansmen in Alabama set fire to an original Freedom Ride bus, student activists from Nashville organized a ride of their own. “We were past fear. If we were going to die, we were gonna die, but we can’t stop,” recalls Rider Joan Trumpauer-Mulholland. “If one person falls, others take their place.”

Later, Mississippi officials locked up more than 300 Riders in the notorious Parchman State Penitentiary. Rather than weaken the Riders’ resolve, the move only strengthened their determination. None of the obstacles placed in their path would weaken their commitment. The Riders’ journey was front-page news and the world was watching. After nearly five months of fighting, the federal government capitulated. On September 22, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued its order to end the segregation in bus and rail stations that had been in place for generations. “This was the first unambiguous victory in the long history of the civil rights movement. It finally said, ‘We can do this.’ And it raised expectations across the board for greater victories in the future,” says Arsenault.

“The people that took a seat on these buses, that went to jail in Jackson, that went to Parchman, they were never the same. We had moments there to learn, to teach each other the way of nonviolence, the way of love, the way of peace. The Freedom Ride created an unbelievable sense: Yes, we will make it. Yes, we will survive. And that nothing, but nothing, was going to stop this movement,” recalls Congressman John Lewis, one of the original Riders.

Says director Stanley Nelson, “The lesson of the Freedom Rides is that great change can come from a few small steps taken by courageous people. And that sometimes to do any great thing, it’s important that we step out alone.”

“*Freedom Riders* tells the story of an overlooked piece of not only civil rights history but American history,” says Mark Samels, executive producer of AMERICAN EXPERIENCE. “It’s a story that we knew had to be told. The film touches and inspires everyone who sees it and it’s an honor to be presenting it.”

#### ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

**Stanley Nelson (Producer, Writer, Director)**, recipient of a 2002 MacArthur Fellowship, is an award-winning filmmaker best known for his groundbreaking historical documentaries that illuminate critical but overlooked history. Nelson’s work for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE includes *Wounded Knee*, *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, *Marcus Garvey: Look for Me in the Whirlwind*, and *The Murder of Emmett Till*, honored with the Sundance Special Jury Prize, Peabody Award, Primetime Emmy, and an IDA Award. He directed *Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords*, which won a duPont-Columbia Silver Baton and the Sundance Film Festival’s Freedom of Expression Award. His 2004 film, *A Place of Our Own*, a semi-autobiographical look at the African-American middle class, screened at the Sundance Film Festival and later on PBS’ INDEPENDENT LENS. In 2005, PBS’ AMERICAN MASTERS debuted *Sweet Honey in the Rock: Raise Your Voice*, which went on to become a top-selling concert film. He produced and directed *Wounded Knee*, one of the five films that formed part of the WE SHALL REMAIN series for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE. Nelson is co-founder and executive producer

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of Firelight Media, a non-profit production company dedicated to telling the stories of people, places, and issues that are underrepresented in popular culture.

**Laurens Grant (Producer)** is a multi-Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker whose credits include serving as co-producer on two ground-breaking four-hour series for PBS: the recently released *Latin Music USA: The Chicano Wave* and the Emmy-winning *Slavery and the Making of America: Seeds of Destruction*; Grant was also coordinating producer for **AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**'s *The Murder of Emmett Till*, which was honored with a Sundance Jury Award, Primetime Emmy, and a Peabody Award for Best Documentary. The U.S. Department of Justice also re-opened the Emmett Till murder case in part due to the film's previously unpublished eyewitness accounts and research. Grant has produced and directed films for A&E and The History Channel and has directed projects in Africa, Latin America, and Europe and in America's inner city high schools. Prior to her work in documentary, she worked as a foreign correspondent, heading up the Reuters bureau in Panama, Central America. She also wrote about Latin America for *Newsweek*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, and *The San Francisco Examiner*. Grant is a graduate of Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism.

**MARK SAMELS (Executive Producer)** was named to lead PBS' flagship history series, **AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**, in 2003 after serving as senior producer since 1997. Produced by WGBH/Boston, **AMERICAN EXPERIENCE** is television's most-watched and longest-running history series and the recipient of every major industry award, including the Peabody, Primetime Emmy, Writers Guild, and duPont-Columbia Journalism Award.

Numerous films for the series have been recognized at major film festivals, including Sundance, and eight have been nominated for Academy Awards®. Prior to joining WGBH, Samels worked as an independent documentary filmmaker, an executive producer for several U.S. public television stations, and as a producer for the first co-production between Japanese and American television. A native of Wisconsin, he is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

#### **About AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**

Television's most-watched history series, **AMERICAN EXPERIENCE** has been hailed as "peerless" (*Wall Street Journal*), "the most consistently enriching program on television" (*Chicago Tribune*), and "a beacon of intelligence and purpose" (*Houston Chronicle*). On air and online, the series brings to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America's past and present. Acclaimed by viewers and critics alike, **AMERICAN EXPERIENCE** documentaries have been honored with every major broadcast award, including 14 George Foster Peabody Awards, four duPont-Columbia Awards, and 27 Primetime and Creative Arts Emmy Awards, one most recently in *Outstanding Directing Nonfiction* for *My Lai*.

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