



Press Contact:

**CaraMar, Inc**

Cara White

843.881.1480

[cara.white@mac.com](mailto:cara.white@mac.com)

In Sundance

843.224.1442

Mary Lugo

770.623.8190

[lugo@negia.net](mailto:lugo@negia.net)

Photos and more information:

<http://pitch.pe/38907>

## **FREEDOM RIDERS**

A Stanley Nelson Film  
A Firelight Media Production for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Produced, Written and Directed by  
Stanley Nelson

Produced by  
Laurens Grant

Edited by  
Lewis Erskine, Aljernon Tunsil

Archival Producer  
Lewanne Jones

Associate Producer  
Stacey Holman

Director of Photography  
Robert Shepard

Composer  
Tom Phillips

Music Supervisor  
Rena Kosersky

Based in part on the book *Freedom Riders* by  
Raymond Arsenault

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is a production of WGBH Boston.

Senior producer  
Sharon Grimberg

Executive producer  
Mark Samels

## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Award-winning filmmaker Stanley Nelson (*Wounded Knee*, *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple*, *The Murder of Emmett Till*) returns to the Sundance Film Festival with his latest documentary *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.

*"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-Ofuso, 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.

Organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), 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 Rides 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 the 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 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."

## **AN INTERVIEW WITH STANLEY NELSON**

**Q: What made you decide to make a film about the Freedom Riders and why now?**

Nelson: I thought it was a great story about the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement that hadn't really been told and where the main characters were common and unknown people. I think there are a couple of reasons for doing it at this time—one of them being that it happened almost 50 years ago and many involved have passed away but there are many still alive. The other reason is that the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary is in 2011.

**Q: What were some of the surprising things you discovered when making the film and speaking with the participants?**

Nelson: It was dangerous and they were alone. There was no police protection, no press and they faced this alone, just a group of 12 people who decided to challenge the segregation customs in the Deep South. I was also surprised that the Civil Rights Movement looked at Mississippi at this time as impenetrable and really had not gone into Mississippi up until this point. Also surprising was the level of violence that they faced given the fact that they were just trying to sit on a bus and eat together.

We also found footage that was shot in the late 1970s of a former Klan informant for the FBI who was involved in the attacks against the Freedom Riders. We only found this by combing through 35 40-pound boxes that were in storage for decades. The interview was part of a film that was never completed, and thus never seen before by the general public.

**Q: Were all the participants—including people like former Alabama Governor John Patterson—agreeable to speaking on camera or was a certain amount of convincing necessary?**

Nelson: We felt it was very important to tell the story from multiple perspectives. They were surprisingly agreeable once they were convinced that what we were doing was honorable and in depth. I think people like Governor Patterson looked at it as a chance to tell their side of the story. Also, Ray Arsenault had convinced a lot of these people to tell their stories for the book, and he introduced me to them when it came time for the film.

**Q: What challenges did you face during the production?**

Nelson: We had the usual production challenges of trying to find archival hidden gems, including footage of the burning bus from the FBI that they had never released before.. And one of the more unusual challenges during filming was that while filming our evocative scenes, our cameraperson was hit by a car and the man is still at large!

**Q: It's obvious that America, and the South, have come a long way since 1961 but it's hard not to feel that we may have lost some of the passion and moral courage that the Freedom Riders exemplified. Do you agree?**

Nelson: Yes, I would agree. I think that one of the major points of the film is the courage and

commitment that so many people had to change America.

**Q: Young people today don't seem very aware of the past, including the very recent past. Do you see this film as a corrective to that?**

Nelson: Yes, we hope that it will inspire young people to see that the past was made up of courageous, ordinary people who were able to make great changes. One of the things that the film does really well is to show that success was not inevitable and only came from perseverance. Young people today haven't seen such successes in their lifetime. We think they are connected to the '60s but they are not. In the '60s and '70s, we had people-based movements on so many fronts: the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-war movement and the women's movement, and young people today haven't seen that. It's important to show them what courageous people can do.

**Q: How does this film connect to your previous work?**

Nelson: By a set of circumstances, I've done many films about the period of 1955 to 1980, some of them on Civil Rights subjects and some not. Part of what I've tried to do is make films about what I call 'people-based movements' that in some ways go against the 'great man' theory of history.

**Q: How did you decide to structure the film?**

Nelson: The film is structured in a chronological way because the Freedom Rides were something that took place in a short period of time—most of the main action occurred within a one-month period. Within that we saw the Freedom Rides as consisting of three waves: the first wave of the 12 original Riders; the second wave, the students from Nashville; and the third wave, people from all over the country joining in. So it helped us to think of it as three waves or like a symphony in three movements.

**Q: What would you like people to take away with them after watching FREEDOM RIDERS?**

Nelson: 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.

**Q: Do you know what your next project will be?**

Nelson: We are talking with AMERICAN EXPERIENCE about doing a film on Jesse Owens and the 1936 Olympic games. We're very excited about this possibility. We also have a number of films in the development stage which includes a series on Historically Black Colleges and Universities [HBCUs]; a film on the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense; and the Atlantic Slave trade.

## **FREEDOM RIDERS**

### **Interviewees, in order of appearance**

(Biographical information published in *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* by Raymond Arsenault, 2006)

**John Lewis** was on the first CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) Freedom Ride and is currently a United States Congressman from Georgia.

**Genevieve Houghton** was a New York stockbroker who became the CORE Field Secretary and went on the first Freedom Ride.

**Mae Frances Moultrie Howard** was on the first Freedom Ride and currently teaches in Philadelphia.

**Jerry Ivor Moore** was a student at Morris College when he joined the first Freedom Ride; he currently lives in Los Angeles.

**Raymond Arsenault** is the author of *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* and the John Hope Franklin Professor of Southern History and co-director of the Florida Studies Program at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg.

**Gordon Carey** was a National Director for CORE and involved in the planning of the Freedom Rides.

**Derek Catsam** is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Texas of the Permian Basin, and the author of *Freedom's Main Line: The Journey of Reconciliation and the Freedom Rides*.

**Diane Nash** was on staff with both the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Nashville. She organized the Nashville Freedom Riders that took the place of the CORE riders who were derailed by violence in Alabama.

**Charles Person** was a student at Morehouse College when he became the youngest member of the first CORE Freedom Ride group.

**Sangernetta Gilbert Bush** was a witness to the violence at the Montgomery bus station.

**John Seigenthaler** was Administrative Assistant to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy in 1961 and was sent to Alabama to deal with the crisis.

**Evan Thomas** is Editor at Large of *Newsweek* and the author of six books including *Robert Kennedy: His Life*.

**John Patterson** was the Governor of Alabama in 1961.

**Dr. Clayborne Carson** has devoted his professional life to the study of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the movements King inspired. Since receiving his doctorate from UCLA in 1975, Dr. Carson

has taught at Stanford University, where he is now professor of history and founding director of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute.

**Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr** is a pioneering Civil Rights activist who helped found the Nashville Christian Leadership Council and served as a mentor to several future Freedom Riders including John Lewis, and Bernard Lafayette. He was on the May 24<sup>th</sup> Montgomery to Jackson Freedom Ride.

**Julian Bond**, the current Chairman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was the Communications Director for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

**Hank Thomas** grew up in the Deep South and was on the first Freedom Ride; he is a businessman in Atlanta.

**Moses J. Newson** is an award-winning journalist who was on the first CORE Freedom Ride.

**Brandt Ayers** is currently the chairman and publisher of *The Anniston Star*, an award-winning Alabama newspaper that was started by his grandfather.

**Janie Forsyth McKinney** was twelve when her Anniston neighbors set fire to the first Freedom Ride bus; she defied her elders and brought water to the choking Riders.

**Diane McWhorter** is an Alabama-born journalist who has written extensively about race and the history of Civil Rights. She is the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*.

**Ted Gaffney** was a photographer for *Jet* who was on the first Freedom Ride bus and documented the journey.

**Harris Wofford**, a former Democratic U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania, served as an attorney for the United States Commission on Civil Rights from 1954-1958 and was a special assistant to President Kennedy and chairman of the Subcabinet Group on Civil Rights from 1960-1962.

**Jim Zwerg** was a student from Wisconsin when he joined the first Nashville Freedom Ride. He was brutally attacked by Klansmen in Montgomery.

**Frederick Leonard**, who had been active in the Nashville movement, was on the first Nashville Freedom Ride.

**Rev. C.T. Vivian** was on the Montgomery to Jackson Freedom Ride and has founded several Civil Rights organizations; he lives in Atlanta.

**Bernard Lafayette, Jr** was on the first Nashville to Montgomery Freedom Ride and currently teaches at the University of Rhode Island.

**William Harbour** was on the first Nashville to Montgomery Freedom Ride and is currently retired in Atlanta.



**Catherine Burks-Brooks** was born in Birmingham where she currently resides; she was on the first Nashville to Montgomery Freedom Ride.

**Delores Boyd** practiced law for twenty-five years in her hometown of Montgomery, Alabama, before serving as a municipal court judge and a United States Magistrate Judge. Her high school experience with desegregation is profiled in *Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories*. She was 11 years old in 1961 and witnessed the events at Montgomery's First Baptist Church when the Freedom Riders were there.

**Tommy Giles** was a photographer and Aide to Governor Patterson and a Montgomery-based photographer for UPI.

**Joan Mulholland** was a Freedom Rider from Arlington, Virginia. After the rides she stayed in Jackson, attending Tougaloo College and continuing to work in the movement.

**Pauline Knight-Ofosu** active in the Nashville student movement; her participation in the Freedom Ride resulted in her arrest and imprisonment.

**Israel Dresner**, a retired Rabbi, participated in the June 1961 Interfaith Freedom Ride.

**Glenda Gaither Davis** participated in the New Orleans to Jackson Freedom Ride aboard the Illinois Central Railroad.

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

### **Stanley Nelson, Producer, Writer, Director, FREEDOM RIDERS**

Stanley Nelson, 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's INDEPENDENT LENS. In 2005, PBS's 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 executive producer of Firelight Media, a non-profit production company dedicated to telling the stories of people, places, and issues that are underrepresented in popular culture.

### **Stanley Nelson and the Sundance Film Festival**

1999      *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords*  
Freedom of Expression Award

2001	<i>Marcus Garvey: Look for Me in the Whirlwind</i>
2003	<i>The Murder of Emmett Till</i> Special Jury Prize
2004	<i>A Place of Our Own</i>
2009	<i>Wounded Knee</i>
2010	<i>Freedom Riders</i>

**Laurens Grant, Producer, FREEDOM RIDERS**

Laurens Grant is a multi-Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker whose credits include serving as co-producer for 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, 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.

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