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**INDEPENDENT LENS:
"STRANGE FRUIT"**

**By Joel Katz to premiere nationally
on ITVS's new series on PBS**

Documentary on the Unforgettable Song Made Famous
by Billie Holiday Explores Its Unending Impact and
the Fascinating Life of Its Unsung Composer

STRANGE FRUIT Airs Nationally on *Independent Lens*
April 8, 2003 at 10:00 P.M. on PBS
One Day after Billie Holiday's Birthday

"A Masterful Documentary" —NAT HENTOFF, *JAZZ TIMES*

"Absorbing!" —LOU LUMENICK, *NEW YORK POST*

*"Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh
and the sudden smell of burning flesh!
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop."*

—MUSIC AND LYRICS BY LEWIS ALLAN, © 1940

(San Francisco, CA)—Joel Katz's mesmerizing **STRANGE FRUIT** is an hour-long documentary essay exploring the history and legacy of a song unique in the annals of American music. Named in 1999 the "Song of the Millennium" by *Time* magazine, and best-known from Billie Holiday's haunting 1939 rendition, the song "Strange Fruit" is a harrowing portrayal of the lynching of a black man in the American South. **STRANGE FRUIT** will air nationally on the PBS series *Independent Lens* on April 8, 2003 at 10 P.M. on PBS, one day after Billie Holiday's birthday (check local listings).



STRANGE FRUIT tells a dramatic story of America's past by using one of the most influential protest songs ever written as its epicenter. The saga brings us face-to-face with the terror of lynching as it spotlights the courage and heroism of those who fought for racial justice when to do so was to risk ostracism and livelihood if white—and death if black. It examines the history of lynching, and the interplay of race, labor, the Left and popular culture that would give rise to the Civil Rights movement.

While many people assume that "Strange Fruit" was written by Holiday herself, it actually began as a poem by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish schoolteacher and union activist from the Bronx who later set it to music.

Disturbed by a photograph of a lynching, the teacher wrote the stark verse and brooding melody under the pseudonym Lewis Allan in the late 1930s. Meeropol and his wife Anne are also notable because they adopted Robert and Michael Rosenberg, the orphaned children of the executed communists Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Both sons are featured in the program.

"Strange Fruit" was first performed at a New York teachers' union rally and was brought to the attention of the manager of Cafe Society, a popular Greenwich Village nightclub, who introduced Billie Holiday to the writer. Holiday's record label refused to record the song but Holiday persisted and recorded it on a specialty label instead. The song was quickly adopted as the anthem for the anti-lynching movement. The haunting lyrics and melody made it impossible for white Americans and politicians to ignore the Southern campaign of racist terror any more.

According to the Center for Constitutional Rights, between 1882 and 1968, mobs lynched 4,743 persons in the United States, over 70 percent of them African Americans.

The story of composer Abel Meeropol doesn't end with "Strange Fruit." Working in Hollywood six years later, Meeropol penned his other well-known composition, the patriotic, Oscar-winning paean to tolerance "The House I Live In," which was first performed by Frank Sinatra and has experienced a revival since September 11, 2001. The film explores how two such seemingly different political and still-resonant songs came to be written by the same man.

The documentary includes several renditions of "Strange Fruit" by a variety of artists as well as archival footage and present day interviews with historians, musicians and activists, including Abbey Lincoln, Pete Seeger, playwright and critic Amiri Baraka, veteran civil rights activist Rev. Dr. C.T. Vivian, and Milt Gabler of Commodore Records, who first recorded "Strange Fruit" with Billie Holiday in 1939, as well as many of



Meeropol's friends, colleagues and his adopted sons. The film also includes an interview with, and original score by, composer and clarinetist Don Byron.

The tale of "Strange Fruit"—its genesis, impact and continuing relevance—is an amazingly complex one that weaves together the lives of African Americans, immigrant Jews, anticommunist government officials, civil rights leaders, radical Leftist teachers and organizers, music publishers, record company executives and jazz musicians. In many ways, the story of the song and its writer and interpreters is as moving and oddly haunting as the song itself.

For more information, go to www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit

STRANGE FRUIT Credits

PRODUCER/DIRECTOR/EDITOR	Joel Katz
COORDINATING PRODUCER	Prudence Hill
DIRECTORS OF PHOTOGRAPHY	John Miglietta, Thomas Torres
ORIGINAL MUSICAL SCORE	Don Byron
NARRATOR	Dorothy Thigpen
MUSIC SUPERVISOR	Rena Kosersky
ORIGINAL SCORE PRODUCER	Hans Wendl

FEATURED INTERVIEWEES/PERFORMERS, in order of appearance:

Abbey Lincoln	SINGER/COMPOSER
Milt Gabler	OWNER/PRODUCER, COMMODORE RECORDS
C. T. Vivian	REVEREND AND CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST
Farah Jasmine Griffin	AUTHOR AND EDUCATOR
E.M. "Woody" Beck	SOCIOLOGIST, UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA, ATHENS
Michael Denning	HISTORIAN AND EDUCATOR, YALE UNIVERSITY
Amina Baraka	POET/PERFORMER
Henry Foner	RETIRED SCHOOLTEACHER AND UNION ACTIVIST
Bernie Kassoy	RETIRED SCHOOLTEACHER/VISUAL ARTIST
Honey Kassoy	RETIRED SCHOOLTEACHER/VISUAL ARTIST
Michael Meeropol	ABEL MEEROPOL'S ADOPTED SON AND ECONOMICS PROFESSOR WESTERN NEW ENGLAND COLLEGE; BORN THE SON OF JULIUS AND ETHEL ROSENBERG
Robert Meeropol	ABEL MEEROPOL'S ADOPTED SON AND FOUNDER/ EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE ROSENBERG FUND FOR CHILDREN; BORN THE SON OF JULIUS AND ETHEL ROSENBERG
Jeffrey Melnick	HISTORIAN AND EDUCATOR
Don Byron	COMPOSER AND CLARINETIST
Pete Seeger	SINGER/SONGWRITER
Josh White	SINGER
Rich Rusk	FOUNDER, MOORE'S FORD MEMORIAL COMMITTEE
Robert Howard	MEMBER, MOORE'S FORD MEMORIAL COMMITTEE
Billie Holiday	SINGER (PERFORMING ON BRITISH TELEVISION IN 1958)
Hazel Carby	AUTHOR AND EDUCATOR, YALE UNIVERSITY
Ray Pultinas	ENGLISH TEACHER AT DEWITT CLINTON HIGH SCHOOL
Cassandra Wilson	SINGER

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

"**STRANGE FRUIT** was first inspired by a letter to the editor of the *New York Times Book Review* in late 1995. In this letter Robby and Michael Meeropol (the sons of "Strange Fruit" composer Abel Meeropol) wrote in response to some of the questions about "Strange Fruit" raised by Ned Rorem in his review of a Stuart Nicholson biography of Billie Holiday.

It struck me that this brief, four paragraph letter read quite like the script for a film, including plot twists and dramatic turns that sounded almost too unimaginable to be actual history. I began further researching the subject matter shortly after reading this letter, and filmed the first interviews during the summer of 1998.

The story of "Strange Fruit" also resonates with parts of my own background. In 1968, when I was 10 years old, my father (a Jewish man from Brooklyn) began teaching at Howard University, where he continued as a professor in chemical engineering until his retirement in 1986. As a Jew starting work at the pre-eminent African American university during the height of the Black Power movement, he was in a unique and sometimes difficult position. Over the years there he went through a wide range of experiences and emotions about this. Black/Jewish relations were thus a frequent subject of discussion at the dinner table I grew up at. Six years ago I began to teach myself, at a public university which has a highly diverse student body (New Jersey City University). Thus I sometimes feel that I am carrying on the mantle of my father's work.

It has been a unique pleasure for me to produce **STRANGE FRUIT**. I have tried to see it as an opportunity to try to heal some of the wounds around race which my father suffered and which all Americans suffer."

—JOEL KATZ

ABOUT FILM SCORE COMPOSER DON BYRON

Don Byron, clarinetist, composer, arranger, and social critic, redefines every genre of music he performs, be it classical, salsa, hip-hop, funk, klezmer or any jazz style from swing and bop to cutting-edge downtown improvisation. He has been voted best clarinetist by critics and readers alike in international music journals since being named "Jazz Artist of the Year" by *Down Beat* in 1992. Don Byron has performed at major festivals around the world, including recent appearances in Vienna, San Francisco, Hong Kong, London and New York. An integral member of New York's cultural community, Byron served for four seasons as artistic director of jazz at the Brooklyn Academy of Music where he curated a concert series for the Next Wave Festival and premiered his children's show, *Bug Music for Juniors*. His artistic collaborations include performances and recordings with the Duke Ellington Orchestra, John Hicks, Bill Frisell, Vernon Reid, Cassandra Wilson, Anthony Braxton, Leroy Jenkins, Bobby Previte, Mandy Patinkin, Steve Lacy, the Kansas City All-Stars, Medeski Martin & Wood, Angelique Kidjo, Carole King, Salif Keita, the Atlanta Symphony, Joe Henry and many others. His albums include *Tuskegee Experiments* (Nonesuch, 1992), *Don Byron Plays the Music of Mickey Katz* (Nonesuch, 1993), *Music for Six Musicians* (Nonesuch, 1995), *No-Vibe Zone* (Knitting Factory Works, 1996), *Bug Music* (Nonesuch, 1996), *Nu Blaxploitation* (Blue Note, 1998), *Romance With The Unseen* (1999), *A Fine Line: Arias & Lieder* (2000), and *You Are #6* (2001). Byron is currently an artist-in-residence at Symphony Space in New York City.

ABOUT DIRECTOR JOEL KATZ

Joel Katz (producer/director/editor) is a New York-based independent filmmaker. His *Corporation with a Movie Camera* (1992), a video about how corporate representations have shaped Americans' ideas about the Third World, was broadcast nationally on PBS's New Television series in 1994 and is in worldwide distribution. *Dear Carry* (1997), a video based on the life of a New York jewelry designer and amateur filmmaker named Carry Wagner (1895–1992), is a documentary essay about ancestry, identity, cameras and travel. It premiered in 1998 in the Museum of Modern Art's "New Documentary" series and has shown in festivals nationally and internationally. Katz's film script *Johnny & Clyde* has been awarded production grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. / Mexico Fund for Culture. He has also been the recipient of grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the New York State Council for the Arts and the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. Katz is an assistant professor in the media arts department of New Jersey City University and is a member of the board of directors of Third World Newsreel.

ABOUT INTERVIEWEE ROBERT MEEROPOL

Robert Meeropol is the younger son of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg and the adoptive son of "Strange Fruit" composer Abel Meeropol. In 1953, when he was six years old, the United States government executed his parents for "conspiring to steal the secret of the atomic bomb." For 30 years he has been a progressive activist, author and speaker. In the 1970s he and his brother, Michael, successfully sued the FBI and CIA to force the release of 300,000 previously secret documents about their parents. He earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in anthropology from the University of Michigan, graduated from law school in 1985 and was admitted to the Massachusetts Bar. In 1990, after leaving private practice, Robert founded the Rosenberg Fund for Children and now serves as its executive director. The RFC provides for the educational and emotional needs of both targeted activist youth and children in this country whose parents have been harassed, injured, jailed, lost jobs or died in the course of their progressive activities. In the past 12 years the RFC has built an endowment of over \$1.4 million, awarded grants totaling \$1,045,000 and gained 10,000 supporters nationwide. During the last decade, Robert Meeropol has spoken widely in support of efforts to abolish capital punishment. In 2001, he was a presenter at both the first national Murder Victims Families' for Reconciliation conference and the First Worldwide Congress Against the Death Penalty at the Council of Europe, which brought together 500 activists and world leaders from six continents. Currently, Robert is writing a memoir about his life and the work of the Rosenberg Fund for Children, which is due to be published by St. Martin's Press in June 2003 to correspond with the 50th anniversary of his parents' execution.

ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS HOST ANGELA BASSETT

Academy Award-nominated actress Angela Bassett, a long-time champion of independent filmmaking, will host the first season of *Independent Lens*. Says Bassett, "There are so many talented independent filmmakers working today. I'm excited that ITVS and PBS are bringing these films to primetime television. I'm inspired by the diversity and depth of the *Independent Lens* series." Bassett, whose career includes outstanding work in television, on Broadway and in film, has also consistently worked with independent filmmakers, including John Sayles, with whom she collaborated on the recent *Sunshine State*, *Passion Fish* and *City of Hope*. A skilled producer with numerous projects to her credit, Bassett served as executive producer of the recent highly acclaimed CBS film "The Rosa Parks Story," for which she earned an Emmy nomination as Best Actress. Bassett received an Academy Award nomination and a Golden Globe Award for her unforgettable portrayal of Tina Turner in *What's Love Got To Do With It*. Her many other film roles include *The Score*, *Boesman & Lena*, *Supernova*, *Music Of The Heart*, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, *Contact*, *Waiting To Exhale*, *Strange Days*, *Malcolm X* and *Boyz In The Hood*.

ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS

Independent Lens is a groundbreaking weekly primetime PBS series that airs on Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. and presents American and international documentaries and a limited number of dramas. Each week *Independent Lens* bursts onto the screen and presents a unique individual, community or moment in history to bring viewers gripping stories that inspire, engage, provoke and delight. From pioneering women surfers to brilliant composers to brave resistance fighters, *Independent Lens* introduces people whose stories are unforgettable. *Independent Lens* is for curious viewers of all ages, ethnicities and backgrounds; all that's required is a TV and an inquiring mind. The Executive Producer of *Independent Lens* is Sally Jo Fifer, ITVS Executive Director. *Independent Lens* is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), with additional funding provided by PBS.

ABOUT ITVS

Independent Television Service (ITVS) funds and presents award-winning documentaries and dramas on public television, innovative new media projects on the Web, and the weekly series *Independent Lens* on Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. ITVS is a miracle of public policy created by the vision of media activists, citizens and politicians seeking to foster plurality and diversity in public television. ITVS was established by a historic mandate of Congress to champion independently produced programs that take creative risks, spark public dialogue and serve underserved audiences. Since its inception in 1991, ITVS programs have revitalized the relationship between the public and public television, bringing TV audiences face-to-face with the lives and concerns of their fellow Americans.



ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American People.

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