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Pressroom for more information and/or downloadable images:

www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos

Program companion website: www.pbs.org/loadedgun

**INDEPENDENT LENS's "LOADED GUN:
LIFE, AND DEATH, AND DICKINSON"
SEARCHES FOR SECRET SOMETHING THAT GAVE
EMILY DICKINSON HER POETIC POWER**

—Frustrated Filmmaker, Trying to Make a Documentary about
Dickinson, Tries a Revolutionary Approach to His Elusive Subject —

**Film by Jim Wolpaw and Steve Gentile
Premieres Nationally on "Independent Lens,"
ITVS's Acclaimed Series on PBS
Presented in Association with WGBH - Boston
December 16, 2003 at 10:30 P.M.
(check local listings)**



*"Somehow, time has made a few curious adjustments to the myth of Emily Dickinson. Nearly a century after her demise, she was the nice poet. She was the serene poet. She was the sad, lonely, unlucky, tragically unsexed poet. All these faces and more of Dickinson appear in Steve Gentile and Jim Wolpaw's brisk, often brilliantly funny documentary. **LOADED GUN** doesn't require a prior passion for the subject or her work to find any of this entertaining, just a willingness to watch a host of Dickinson diehards change the bull in their idol's halo."*

—WESLEY MORRIS, *BOSTON GLOBE*

*"**LOADED GUN** is an absolute delight—informative, inventive, cinematic, and often outrageously funny. Jim Wolpaw has not only deconstructed the documentary format in hilarious fashion but has created a superb and thoughtful educational tool on the life and art of this great poet."*

—MAX ALVAREZ, FILM CRITIC/HISTORIAN/CURATOR

(San Francisco, CA)—And she thought she'd be safe in her Alabaster chamber... Emily Dickinson, whose beautiful, haunting, cryptic poetry has never quite squared with her waif-like, reclusive spinster image, has



remained defiantly unknowable although hundreds of scholars and biographers have tried to understand and explain her. In Jim Wolpaw and Steve Gentile's delightfully un-academic **LOADED GUN: Life, and Death, and Dickinson**, a stumped filmmaker decides to use an unorthodox approach to illuminate his ethereal subject—with hilariously frustrating results. **LOADED GUN** airs nationally on the PBS series *Independent Lens*, hosted by Don Cheadle, on Tuesday, December 16th at 10:30 P.M. (check local listings.)

*"My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -
In Corners - till a Day
The Owner passed - identified -
And carried Me away -*

*And now We roam in Sovereign Woods -
And now We hunt the Doe -
And every time I speak for Him -
The Mountains straight reply*

*And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow -
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through*

*And when at Night - Our good Day done -
I guard My Master's Head -
'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's
Deep Pillow - to have shared -*

*To foe of His - I'm deadly foe -
None stir the second time -
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye -
Or an emphatic Thumb -*

*Though I than He - may longer live
He longer must - than I -
For I have but the power to kill,
Without—the power to die—"*

“If you don’t understand this poem,” says filmmaker Jim Wolpaw, “join the club.” **LOADED GUN** chronicles Wolpaw’s efforts to make a documentary about the poet Emily Dickinson. He starts out with the standard documentary approach, interviewing historians, English professors, artists, poet laureates and a trio of psychotherapists and throwing in some “artsy nature shots” as background to readings from Dickinson’s nearly 1800 poems. “But my central character wasn’t coming into focus. How did this woman, who was apparently too sensitive to go out in the world, write about the world with such power, precision and presence?”

Wolpaw considers going “the Hollywood route,” imagining Charlton Heston and Jean Stapleton as Emily’s parents, Tracey Ullman as sister Lavinia and Kevin Spacey as brother Austin. But who to play Emily? An ad in *Backstage* magazine yields more than 1000 responses and viewers join Wolpaw at several auditions as a handful of “would-be Emilies” strain to answer Wolpaw’s four audition questions: (1) Why don’t you ever leave your house? (2) Are you in love with Death? (3) Do you have a problem with God? (4) Describe what would be for you “a truly wild night.”

Dickinson’s poetry suddenly became more heated and sexual in 1861, and scholars have tried in vain to pinpoint the focus of her passion. This mystery causes Wolpaw to confess that, “what I really wanted to know is whether anyone had ever gotten past second base with Emily Dickinson.” But, although there are several possible candidates, a positive confirmation—like almost everything else about Emily—is impossible.

How also to explain her fascination with death? Her seeming delight at chronicling pain and misfortune? How can that possibly co-exist with her mythic image as a fragile recluse? Says Wolpaw, “I figured that it was about time for the killer poet to get equal billing with the spinster in white.” Is it the mystery of good Emily vs. bad Emily that makes her such a captivatingly modern enigma, one that continues to inspire legions of fans that include not only wan English majors but punk rockers and bad boys? As **LOADED GUN** shows, Dickinson’s greatest legacy is simply her words and her persistent refusal to be easily defined.

The program’s interactive companion website at www.pbs.org/loadeditgun features detailed information about the film, including an interview with the filmmakers, as well as links and resources pertaining to the film’s subject matter. The site also features a “talkback” section for viewers to share their ideas with one another, preview clips of the film and much more.

Additional information and/or downloadable photographs from **LOADED GUN** are available at www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos.

LOADED GUN: Life, and Death, and Dickinson is produced in association with the Independent Television Service (ITVS), WGBH-Boston and the Center for Independent Documentary.



FEATURED INTERVIEWEES

JULIE HARRIS starred as Emily Dickinson in the one-woman play *The Belle of Amherst*. During a career that spans more than 50 years, Harris has distinguished herself on stage, in film and television, garnering 10 Tony Award nominations (winning five times), 11 Emmy nominations (twice winning), a Grammy Award and an Academy Award nomination.

BILLY COLLINS is in his third year as United States Poet Laureate. He has been honored with fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, and is a winner of the Bess Hokin Prize, the Frederick Bock Prize, the Oscar Blumenthal Prize and the Levinson Prize. In the film, he responds to Dickinson's life and work and reads his humorous (and sometimes controversial) poem, *Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes*.

POLLY LONGSWORTH is the author of many Dickinson-related books, including *Austin and Mabel*, a chronicle of the legendary love affair of Emily Dickinson's brother Austin with Mabel Todd, and *The Dickinsons of Amherst*, a pictorial history of the Dickinsons and Amherst.

ADDITIONAL INTERVIEWEES (in Order of Appearance)

DANIEL LOMBARDO was the curator of Special Collections at the Jones Library, Amherst, Massachusetts, for 17 years. He is the author of *A Hedge Away: The Other Side of Emily Dickinson's Amherst* and a forthcoming book on the history and future of New England windmills.

DR. MARK FELIX is a clinical psychologist practicing in western Massachusetts.

DR. RICARDO CASTANEDA is a psychiatrist who is director of in-patient psychiatric services at Bellevue Hospital in New York City.

The late DR. KEN ROSEN was a psychiatrist who practiced in the New York City area.

LESLEY DILL is a New York-based artist who incorporates Emily Dickinson's words into her work.

ELLEN TADD is a sensitive and past-life therapist who resides and works in western Massachusetts.

PHILIP JENKS is currently an assistant professor at Portland State University in Oregon who has a full-length tattoo of Emily Dickinson on his back.

DR. ALAN POWERS is a professor of English at Bristol Community College in Fall River, Massachusetts. His book *Bird Talk: Conversations with Birds* was recently published by Frog, Ltd. of Berkeley, California.

DR. LISA PERKINS is a former Tufts University professor of English and a Keats Scholar.

DR. GLENN SKWERER is a psychiatrist practicing in the Boston, Massachusetts area.

LOADED GUN Credits

PRODUCERS

WRITER AND DIRECTOR

PHOTOGRAPHER AND EDITOR

ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS

AUDITIONING EMILIES

Steve Gentile & Jim Wolpaw

Jim Wolpaw

Steve Gentile

Lisa Heiserman Perkins

Regan Heiserman

Hira Ambrosino

Megan Auster-Rosen

Carolyn Coughlin

Anne-Marie Cusson

Danielle DiGiulio

Lily Fink

Leslie Fleming-Mitchell

Alexis Glickman

Teresa L. Goding

Jeanine Haas

Susan Hern

Birgit Huppuch

Lucy Ives

Nicole Jessen

Sarah McGurkin

Dossy Peabody

Michele Proude

Deborah Shariff

Bronwyn Sims

Emily Singer

Patricia Sorgman

Carol Symes

ABOUT EMILY DICKINSON

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts to a prominent family. Her father, a politically active lawyer, was stern and authoritarian. According to Emily, her mother “didn’t care for thought.” Emily was nevertheless educated at Amherst Academy and then at Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary, where she resisted enormous pressure to join the Calvinist church.

Dickinson wrote the first of her nearly 1800 poems when she was about 20 years old, and although she shared them with her sister Lavinia, her brother Austin and other family members and close friends, only a handful were published during her lifetime. She often wrote in the meter of hymns about her vexed relationship with God, her fascination with death and immortality, her delight in nature and the power and limits of language to express her ecstasies and terrors. Her unusual use of dashes, sporadic capitalization of nouns, off rhymes and eccentric metaphors made her one of the most innovative 19th-century American poets.



Although she read widely, Dickinson began to withdraw from the world outside her home at the age of 23. She dressed only in white, spent most of her time in her room and rarely saw visitors. At some point she seems to have had a disappointing love affair, perhaps with the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, a famous Philadelphia preacher with whom she corresponded; or with Samuel Bowles, editor of the *Springfield Republican*, to whom she addressed many poems; with Judge Lord, a widowed friend of her father's; or with Austin's wife, her sister-in-law Susan Dickinson, who lived next door. In any event, her biographers believe she suffered an emotional trauma in her early thirties, some psychological crisis that resulted in the writing of more than a third of the total output of her compact, candid, enigmatic poems.

After Dickinson's death at the age of 56, her sister Lavinia discovered an astonishing number of poems assembled in packets of "fascicles," which Emily had bound herself with needle and thread. Lavinia co-edited three volumes between 1891 and 1896, the first of which became popular. In the early 1900s, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, the poet's niece, transcribed and published more poems. *Bolts of Memory* appeared in 1945. Emily Dickinson has come to be hailed as perhaps the greatest female poet since Sappho.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

JIM WOLPAW (Producer/Director/Writer) a Brown University graduate, has worked in independent film for the past 20 years. His films include the Academy Award nominated documentary *Keats and His Nightingale: A Blind Date* (1985); *Cobra Snake for a Necktie* (1979), a portrait of rock and roll legend Bo Diddley which aired on Showtime; and the feature comedy *Complex World* (1992). He has freelanced as a writer, film editor, post-production supervisor and creative consultant on numerous documentary projects, and for the past six years has taught film production and screenwriting at Emerson College. His films have won awards at more than a dozen film festivals worldwide and his honors include an Academy Award nomination and a Cine Golden Eagle.

STEVE GENTILE (Producer/Editor/Director of Photography) Since graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1987, Steve Gentile has had an extraordinarily diverse film career. His animated films *The Ant Who Loved a Girl* and *The Soldier* have won awards at over 30 film festivals worldwide, including London, Hong Kong and Zagreb. As an editor, he has six feature credits including the rock'n'roll cult comedy *Complex World*, written and directed by Jim Wolpaw. He was also the post-production coordinator on Miramax's *Next Stop Wonderland*. Gentile has had recent success as a screenwriter, scripting three one-hour teleplays for independent film legend Roger Corman's Sci-Fi Channel series *Black Scorpion*. He has freelanced in a variety of technical capacities on numerous documentary and industrial projects, and has taught film production and animation at Emerson College, Boston Film/Video Foundation, the School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and Boston University. His honors include a Regional Student Academy Award nomination, a Cine Golden Eagle and a NEA/Massachusetts Artists' Foundation fellowship.

ABOUT *INDEPENDENT LENS*

Independent Lens is a weekly series airing Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement and unflinching visions of their independent producers. *Independent Lens* features unforgettable stories about a unique individual, community or moment in history, which prompted Nancy Franklin in *The New Yorker* to write "Watching *Independent Lens* ... is like going into an independent bookstore—you don't always find what you were looking for but you often find something you didn't even know you wanted." Presented by ITVS, the series is supported by interactive companion websites, and national publicity and community outreach campaigns. Further information about the series is available at www.pbs.org/independentlens. *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS, and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private corporation funded by the American people, 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 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. More information about ITVS can be obtained by visiting www.itvs.org. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American People.



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