



AFROPOP SHORTS PROGRAM

Lonnie Holley: The Truth of the Dirt
a film by Marco Williams
(USA) 30 min.

Kojo
a film by Michael Fequiere
(USA) 15 min.

He Who Dances on Wood
a film by Jessica Beshir
(USA) 6 min.



AfroPoP X
the ultimate cultural exchange

DISCUSSION GUIDE
SEASON 10

HOST: NICHOLAS L. ASHE stars as Micah West in the critically acclaimed OWN series *Queen Sugar*, directed by Ava DuVernay and executive-produced by Oprah Winfrey. Earlier he played Viola Davis's son in the courtroom drama *Custody*. Ashe made his acting debut at age 10 in the role of Young Simba in the national tour of *The Lion King*. Ashe is also a talented vocalist, pianist and composer. In 2015, he created a scholarship for young artists in his hometown of Freeport, Long Island. Ashe collaborated with Cierra Glaude on a short film titled *Last Looks*, which had its world premiere at the 2017 Urbanworld Film Festival.



AfroPop: The Ultimate Cultural Exchange is a US-based public television show featuring independent documentaries and short films about life, art, and culture from the contemporary African Diaspora. The African Diaspora includes Africa, the Caribbean, Canada, South America, Europe, the US, and anywhere people of African descent have made a significant contribution to the culture.

The films are always carefully selected to portray a more balanced view of Africa than you'll get on the nightly news and to provide fuel for what must be a global conversation on the present day realities and contemporary lifestyles of Africans, both on the continent and in the Diaspora.

USING THIS GUIDE

BACKGROUND

The first section of the guide provides

- A synopsis of the film and information on the filmmaker, along with a list of central characters and topics
- Background on the film's key issues, focused on brief historical, cultural, and political context

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

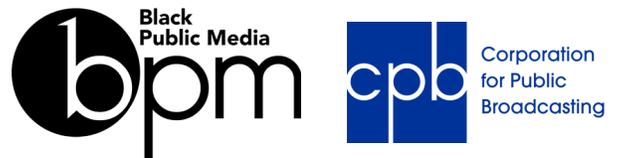
The second part of this guide provides questions crafted to be springboards for dialogue, inviting audience members to engage with the issues raised in the film and with one another.

The prompts are designed to meet the needs of a wide range of audiences and circumstances, so you'll want to choose those that best meet your particular needs. You may want to dive directly into an issue-based prompt, or you can gauge the interests of the audience by starting with a general question. There's no reason to cover them all or to use them in order (except for the "wrap-up" questions, which are intended to help people synthesize information at the end of a discussion). Typically you'll only need one or two questions to get things going; let the audience take it from there, using their interests to guide the path of the discussion.

Recommended for: high school, college, and adult audiences

RESOURCES

The final section the guide lists related resources. You can use them to prepare for leading a discussion or recommend them to audience members seeking additional information.



AFROPOP: THE ULTIMATE CULTURAL EXCHANGE

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BACKGROUND

The Films

LONNIE HOLLEY: THE TRUTH OF THE DIRT

An observed portrait, complimented by an intimate interview with the artist, *Lonnie Holley: The Truth of the Dirt* documents a man who sees beauty in what others step on, step over, and leave behind. A quintessential folk artist, this self-taught, African American elder, sculptor, and musical performer from Birmingham, Alabama transforms “junk, trash, garbage and debris” into art.

KOJO

Kojo is a short documentary on twelve-year-old jazz drummer Kojo Odu Roney. In this candid interview, the New York City-based prodigy reflects on his tireless work ethic, the current state of jazz music, learning from his mentor and father (jazz saxophonist Antoine Roney), and much more. Kojo’s charisma, sensibility, and passion are as mesmerizing as his drum skills.

HE WHO DANCES ON WOOD

This simple portrait shares the profound story of how one man’s search for joy has culminated in a constant experience of rhythm in the world around him. Every day, seventy-six year old Fred Nelson carries a weathered board into Brooklyn’s Prospect Park, places it underneath a tunnel, laces up his tap shoes and begins to dance. This is Fred’s daily prayer. As we watch him dance, we join him in his daily journey to coax the secret ecstasy and beauty of life from an old piece of wood.

Topics: *age, African American, art/artist, drummer, dance/dancer, jazz, music/musician, sculpture, performance, prodigy, visual art*

The People in the Films

Lonnie Holley was born in 1950 in Birmingham, Alabama. He lived a tumultuous childhood, passed between the homes of family and friends – some well-intentioned and some negligent. By the time he was twelve he landed at the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children. It was there that he began creating his art. Injuries from a horrible beating by the white men in charge rendered him immobile. Until he could heal, his mother gave him ‘art materials’ to keep him busy. With these materials he mimicked his grandfather, a man who created things around their home from found objects. From that moment forward all sorts of materials served as Lonnie’s tools to make beauty from a cruel world.

Kojo Odu Roney sat down to play a first drum set at the age of two and has never looked back. The son of jazz saxophonist Antoine Roney and choreographer and dancer Nia Love, and the nephew of trumpeter Wallace Roney, Kojo was able to play with jazz ensembles at age 4. By the age of 8, he went on his first tour in Europe, the start of his career as a professional musician. Though barely a teenager, Kojo has shared the stage with many accomplished musicians including Buster Williams, Darrell Green, Billy Spaceman Paterson, Rashaan Carter, Brandee Younger, Saadi Zain, and Emanuel Ruffler. He has even had the chance to sit in with Lenny White, Al Foster and legendary jazz drummer, Roy Haynes, while great jazz drummers Louis Hayes and Grady Tate were in the audience. He has also been befriended by the great Jimmy Cobb. Kojo currently performs with his dad and uncle.

Fred Nelson, Jr. was born in Detroit, where he grew up loving to dance to R&B. Today he lives in Brooklyn and works night shift as a doorman at a building on the Upper East Side. Fred discovered his love of tap dancing late in life. Inspired by a challenge from his teenaged son, he donned his first pair of tap shoes in the late 1990s. He started dancing in Prospect Park in the early 2000s. When weather forced him to find shelter, he found himself dancing in the Meadowport Arch. He was enthralled by the acoustics and has been tapping there ever since, every day, sometimes for hours, practicing and searching for perfect rhythms.

The Filmmakers

MARCO WILLIAMS is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and professor of film production. For over 30 years he has made films that look at injustice and America, usually through the lens of race.

His films include *Tell Them We are Rising: The Story of Black Colleges and Universities* (co-directed with Stanley Nelson), *The Undocumented*, *Banished*, *MLK Blvd: The Concrete Dream*, *Freedom Summer*, *I Sit Where I Want: The Legacy of Brown v. Board of Education* and *Two Towns of Jasper* (both co-directed with Whitney Dow), *The Black Fives*, *Inside the New Black Panthers*, *Making Peace: Rebuilding our Communities*, *The Spiritual Deficit and The American Dream*, *In Search of Our Fathers*, and *From Harlem to Harvard*. He has been nominated three times for the Sundance Film Festival grand jury prize.

Williams received a B.A. from Harvard University, in Visual and Environmental Studies. He received a Master of Arts degree from UCLA in Afro-American Studies and a Master of Fine Arts also from UCLA in their Producer's Program.

MICHAEL FEQUIERE is a Brooklyn based filmmaker. His 2009 City College of New York thesis film, *Faux Pas*, won best directing and best editing at the CCNY student film festival and also screened at the Big Apple Film Festival and the Cannes Film Festival's Short Film Corner. In 2011 he directed a short sc-fi thriller, *Traum*, and in 2013 directed Austrian body-painter Neil Curtis in the provocative short documentary *Replace Clothes with Paint*.

JESSICA BESHIR is an award-winning Mexican-Ethiopian writer and director based in Brooklyn. Her first short film, *Hairat*, premiered at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival and has screened at festivals worldwide. Her most recent short film, **Heroin**, premiered at the TriBeCa film festival. Beshir is currently developing her debut feature film.



MARCO WILLIAMS



MICHAEL FEQUIERE



JESSICA BESHIR



CONTEXT

The three art forms featured in the films each have long rooted connections to the African American community and culture:

FOLK ART

Though folk art not unique to African Americans, there is a long tradition of African-American folk artists dating back to African artisans whose skills were sought by slave traders looking to sell their captives for a higher price than simple laborers could bring. Folk art can take many forms. It is distinguished by self-taught or minimally-trained artists. Typically, artists had little access to resources so art was crafted from “found” materials. Often items were utilitarian (like quilts or paint that protected a wood surface).

JAZZ

African Americans invented jazz. The music grew out of field slaves’ call-and-response work songs, Black spirituals, and blues. The roots of this quintessential American music are traced to mingling of cultures in New Orleans in the 19th century. In the 1920s, when African Americans began migrating to northern cities like Chicago, Detroit, and New York in search of better opportunities, they brought jazz with them. And it was jazz musicians who invented the drum set.

Sources: www.pbs.org/jazz; http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/bhistory/history_of_jazz.htm

TAP DANCE

Like jazz, tap dance is indigenous to America. The rhythm style of the dance is actually part of the jazz tradition. Originated by slaves and spread via minstrel shows in the mid-1800s, and later in Vaudeville shows, tap was the fusion of African tribal dances, especially Juba, with English and Irish clog and percussive folks dances.

Sources: <http://www.tapdance.org/History>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tap_dance





DISCUSSION PROMPTS

General

Was there anything in the films that “spoke truth” to you?

If you were going to tell a friend about these films, what would you say?

Describe a moment in one of the films that you found particularly moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling?

In a word, what’s your initial reaction to these films? How did they make you feel?

What did you learn from these films about art/music/dance or artists/musicians/dancers?

Did you see anything in the films that was familiar? What do you have in common with Fred, Lonnie, or Kojo?

The Nature of Art

What makes an artist an artist? What characteristics do Lonnie, Kojo, and Fred share that distinguishes them from people whom we don’t identify as artists (or musicians or dancers)?

Each of the people featured in the film do some form of improvisation. What is it about that form that suits each of these three artists particularly well?

When Lonnie uncovers “the truth of the dirt,” what do you think he means?



Community

Lonnie has a gift for seeing meaning in the things others toss aside. Fred and Kojo hear music in the rhythms that surround them. What do we gain by having people in our midst who see and hear the world differently than most?

Imagine what Kojo's path might have been if his parents weren't in the arts or able to teach him, couldn't afford a drum kit, didn't believe that music was a viable or appropriate career, or never listened to jazz. Where else in the community might he have learned about music, heard jazz, or had an opportunity to learn to play the drums? Who supports those opportunities in your community?

Lonnie says, "For me, memories are very, very important. The brain is made up of memory projections and then it pulls from those memories, as inspiration to create something even greater." How does art reflect who we are as a culture or community? Is it just about the artist's individual memory, or does it succeed as art because it taps into memories that many people share?



Personal Journeys

For Fred tap dancing is spiritual and transcendent. Have you ever been transported by music or dance or art to a deep spiritual place or, like Fred, a place of total joy? How did that moment come about? What happened? Was it as simple as it is for Fred – rhythms on a piece of wood?

Lonnie talks to students about freeing their minds, "If we allow our brain to not do its thing; If we allow our brains to turn us into dragons... When I leave you all today, I just want you all to think this is my brain and the best thing I can do is return home and say I got a one-way ticket to 'I can do.'" What do you think you might create if your brain let go of all its boundaries and expectations? Why is that task so difficult for so many people?

Fred Nelson explains, "There's nothing that gives me more joy than when I'm in there tap dancing. It's a way of talking, speaking—the wood has a voice too." What do you think the wood is saying to Fred? What does Fred's dancing say to you? How about Kojo's drumming or Lonnie's visual art pieces? What do they say to you?

Fred explains that if his name actually captured his essence as a person, it would be "He Who Dances on Wood." What would your name be if it actually expressed the core of your soul?



Filmmaking Choices

What major questions were each of the filmmakers trying to answer and how do you know?

What emotions did each of the films evoke? What filmmaking techniques contributed to that reaction?

Was there anything about the construction of any of the films that you found to be particularly notable or memorable?

If you could ask each of the filmmakers one question, what would you want to know?

Wrap-Up

Complete this sentence: I think Lonnie's / Kojo's / Fred's stories are important (or interesting or inspiring) because...

Is there something you learned from these films that you wish everybody knew? What do you think would change if everyone knew it?

Fill in the blanks: One thing I learned from this screening is _____.

Now that I know, I will _____.

RESOURCES

AfroPop: The Ultimate Cultural Exchange

www.facebook.com/AfroPoPTV

www.blackpublicmedia.org

@BlackPublicMedia

[www. http://worldchannel.org/programs/afropop/](http://www.worldchannel.org/programs/afropop/)

@WORLDchannel

Lonnie Holley

www.facebook.com/LonnieHolley

<https://m.facebook.com/LonnieHolleyTheTruthoftheDirt/>

www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/lonnie-holley

The site includes a detailed autobiography and examples of Holley's art

Fred Nelson

"Under an Arch and Dancing Through Rain, Sleet, Snow"

www.nysun.com/new-york/under-an-arch-and-dancing-through-rain-sleet-snow/17876/

-A 2005 profile of tap dancer Fred Nelson.

Kojo Roney

www.facebook.com/KojoOduRoney

@KojoOduRoney



SEASON 10

TEN DAYS IN AFRICA
BETWEEN TWO SHORES
BLACK PANTHER WOMAN
FATAL ASSISTANCE
AFROPOP SHORTS

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