

TRUE LIVESA New Limited Series from the Producers of *P.O.V.***For Immediate Release**

Contact:

Cathy Fisher, cfisher@pov.org, 212-989-7425Neyda Martinez, neyda@pov.org, 212-989-7425**“Sweet Old Song” Tells Unique American Love Story***An Independent Television Service (ITVS) and National Black Programming Consortium (NBPC) Co-presentation*

“Sweet Old Song,” Part of “True Lives” Series Distributed by NETA,
Available for March 2008 – December 2009 Scheduling by PBS Stations

Acclaimed musician Howard “Louie Bluie” Armstrong (1909-2003) was renowned for a lifetime of jazz, blues, folk and country music. In P.O.V.’s first season on PBS in 1988, he was the subject of Terry Zwigoff’s “Louie Bluie,” and he reappeared on the series in 2002 in Leah Mahan’s **Sweet Old Song**. Armstrong’s roots in America’s musical past, his accomplished musicianship, and his sly and charming personality led the National Endowment for the Arts to honor him as a “national treasure.” But when Armstrong met Barbara Ward, a sculptor 30 years his junior, a new chapter of his life and art unfolded.

Sweet Old Song is the story of Armstrong and Ward’s courtship and marriage, a unique partnership that inspired an outpouring of art and music. This creative work drew on nearly a century of African American experience, beginning with Armstrong’s vivid stories and paintings of his childhood in a segregated town in Tennessee.

Sweet Old Song airs on public television stations as part of *True Lives*, a series presented by American Documentary, Inc. and the National Educational Telecommunications Association (NETA). *True Lives* is a new programming initiative from the producers of P.O.V.

The national broadcast premiere of **Sweet Old Song** on P.O.V. on July 30, 2002, brought rave reviews and a nomination for Outstanding Directorial Achievement from the Directors Guild of America. Acclaim for the documentary put Armstrong, then 93, back into the spotlight with a concert tour including the Country Music Hall of Fame and honors such as the Folklife Heritage Award from the Governor of Tennessee and nomination for a W.C. Handy Award from the Blues Foundation, considered the highest honor in the blues.

When the vibrant and dashing Armstrong met Ward in 1983, he was 73, though Ward thought he was about 50. Armstrong confessed he thought Ward was 25 — she was 43. From this comic misunderstanding, which turned generational expectations on their heads, the two went on to develop a loving and creative relationship that played like one of the “sweet old songs” that poured effortlessly from Armstrong.

Armstrong and Ward’s bond inspired them to explore their artistic and cultural roots. A tireless artist and collaborator, Ward encouraged Armstrong to document their memories in paintings and illustrations for a children’s book. For Armstrong, these recollections stretched back to a pre-World

War II era of black string bands when, along with his younger brothers, he performed on the street and at white society dances. As Armstrong worked to convey their personal histories on paper, his collaboration with Ward often took a humorous turn, with a grouchy but playful Armstrong responding to Ward with mock exasperation.

Armstrong's recollections took on added poignancy and urgency when the last of his siblings died. Shortly after, he was invited to his hometown of LaFollette, Tenn., which declared a Howard Armstrong Day in his honor. Armstrong's visit was bittersweet, as he reminisced with old neighbors, recalled the train accident that killed one of his brothers, and was honored at the local high school that was closed to black students when he was a child.

Ward, meanwhile, joined Armstrong's band as percussionist and manager, helping him tour and perform long past the age when most musicians retire. Despite Armstrong's bravado on stage, Ward reluctantly admitted that as age slowed her partner, she devoted herself more and more to looking after him and his artistic legacy.

Ward was both bemused and richly rewarded as she accompanied Armstrong on his journey through the past. "He was always ready to tell a story and engage with whoever crossed his path," Mahan told the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "Barbara always teased him that he was 'showing off' and he'd recite one of his favorite lines, which was something his grandmother told him: 'There's nothing wrong with showing off as long as you've got something to show.' And man, did he have a lot to show."

Howard Armstrong died on July 30, 2003 in Boston.

About the Filmmaker:

Leah Mahan Producer/Director

Leah Mahan began working on documentary films in 1988 as a research assistant for filmmaker Henry Hampton on the acclaimed PBS series **Eyes on the Prize: America at the Racial Crossroads**. In 1997, her first independent film, **Holding Ground: The Rebirth of Dudley Street**, aired on public television. The documentary chronicles the 12-year struggle of local residents to transform Boston's most devastated neighborhood into a vibrant community. The Ford Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation funded a national education and outreach initiative based on the film, including the distribution of the video and companion materials to more than 1,000 nonprofits committed to sustainable development. To this day the video is used widely in the community-development field. After Hurricane Katrina a short version of the film was commissioned by the Annie E. Casey Foundation for use by community-building organizations on the Gulf Coast.

Mahan's **Sweet Old Song** premiered on the P.O.V. series in 2002 and had an encore broadcast in 2003. It was selected by film critic Roger Ebert for his 2004 Overlooked Film Festival.

The filmmaker is currently working on a documentary about Turkey Creek, a coastal Mississippi community settled by emancipated slaves that is threatened by urban sprawl and environmental contamination. This work-in-progress is featured on the "Bill Moyers Journal" Web site for a story titled "Katrina Recovery Gone Wrong?" at <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/blog/katrina/>.

Mahan, who holds a BA in anthropology from Cornell University, lives in Oakland, Calif.

Credits:

Producer/Director: Leah Mahan
Co-producer/Editor: William A. Anderson

Running Time: 1 hour

Awards & Festivals:

- 2004 Roger Ebert's Overlooked Film Festival, Official Selection
Smith Rafael Film Center, San Rafael, Special Engagement
- 2003 Black International Cinema, Berlin, *Best Documentary*
Memphis International Film Festival, Official Selection
- 2002 Country Music Hall of Fame, Nashville, Special Engagement
Directors Guild of America, Nominee for Outstanding Directorial Achievement
Festival du Film Independent, Brussels, *Special Jury Mention*
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Special Engagement
Roxbury Film Festival, Boston, Official Selection
Silver Images Festival, Chicago, Official Selection

Co-Presenters:



ITVS funds and presents award-winning documentaries and dramas on public television, innovative new media projects on the Web, and the PBS series *Independent Lens*. 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. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people. For more information, please visit www.itvs.org.



The National Black Programming Consortium (NBPC), a national, nonprofit media arts organization, is the leading provider of black programming on public television and the greatest resource for the training of black media professionals within the

Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). NBPC develops, produces and funds television and online programming about the black experience and, since its founding in 1979, has provided hundreds of broadcast hours documenting African American history, culture and experience to public television. For more information, visit www.nbpc.tv.

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National Educational Telecommunications Association (www.netaonline.org)

The National Educational Telecommunications Association is a professional association based in Columbia, S.C. It serves public television licensees and educational entities in all 50 states, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico by providing quality programming content, educational resources, professional development, management support, and national representation.

American Documentary, Inc. (www.amdoc.org)

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation. Simon Kilmurry is executive director of American Documentary | P.O.V.

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