



For Immediate Release

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“Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars” Answer Terror with Music, Tuesday, June 26 on PBS’s P.O.V. Series

The Refugee Camps of War-torn West Africa Give Birth to a
True Band of Survivors

“It’s as easy to fall in love with these guys as it was with the Buena Vista Social Club.” – Vanessa Juarez, Newsweek

The plight of the refugee in today’s war-torn world is captured in the African proverb “When two elephants are fighting, the grass dem’ a-suffer.” So it was in Sierra Leone from 1991-2002, where the government and various rebel factions carried out a brutal civil war in which the terrorizing of civilians — by killing, mutilation, rape, and forced conscription — was common practice on all sides. The war sent hundreds of thousands of ordinary Sierra Leoneans fleeing to refugee camps in the neighboring West African nation of the Republic of Guinea. That’s where the remarkable story told by the new **P.O.V.** documentary **Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars** began.

Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars are a band of six Sierra Leonean musicians who have been living in Guinea. Many of their family and friends were murdered in the violence, leaving them with physical and emotional scars that may never heal. Despite the unimaginable horrors of civil war, they were saved through their music. **Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars** chronicles the band over three years, from Guinean refugee camps back to war-ravaged Sierra Leone, where they realize the dream of recording their first studio album. And so begins a musical phenomenon that is making the world hear the voices of West Africa’s refugees, while drawing the accolades of Keith Richards, Paul McCartney, Ice Cube (one of the executive producers of the film), and Joe Perry.

Zach Niles and Banker White’s **Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars** has its national broadcast premiere on **Tuesday, June 26, 2007** at 10 p.m. on PBS, as part of the 20th anniversary season of public television’s groundbreaking P.O.V. series. (Check local listings.) The film is a P.O.V. *Diverse Voices Project* co-production, made possible through major funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. American television’s longest-running independent documentary series, P.O.V. is public television’s premier showcase for point-of-view, nonfiction films.

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Walking with his wife, Grace, through the squalid and dangerous Kalia Camp in Guinea, Reuben Koroma was happy to find Franco John Langba, a “musical brother” from the pre-war music scene in Freetown, Sierra Leone’s capital. In camps like

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Kalia, discovering someone alive feels like a miracle. But the three took the miracle a step further by making music for their fellow refugees. The camp had already become embroiled in Guinea's fractious politics, and soon the unwanted Sierra Leoneans were relocated to Sembakounya in the remote countryside. It was there that Reuben, Grace, and Franco were joined by three other refugee musicians, and acquired beat-up instruments and a rusted-out sound system.

At Sembakounya Camp, the newly formed Refugee All Stars, led by Reuben, had another fortuitous encounter — with American filmmakers Zach Niles and Banker White and their musical director, Chris Velan. The filmmakers, both living in San Francisco, had previously had substantial experience in Africa, and were in Guinea looking for stories that would balance the Western media's focus on the region's violence with a sense of African society's beauty and resilience.

When they were introduced to the All Stars, Niles and White knew they had found their story. That was in August 2002 and the band was just preparing, under the auspices of the U.N. refugee agency, to tour other refugee camps in Guinea. The filmmakers followed the All Stars on that tour — where they were wildly received — and over the following three years as the members worked on their songs, wrestled with the lasting traumas of the war, and ultimately returned to Freetown, under an uneasy peace settlement, to record their first album, *Living Like a Refugee*. (Information on the band's album and U.S. tour, beginning June 8, 2007, is available at www.refugeeallstars.org.)

Despite all the recent hoopla in the group's life, including a tour of music festivals throughout Europe, North America, and Japan, the band and its music remain close to the reality of the camps that gave them life. The songs on *Living Like a Refugee*, including the title track, "Bull to the Weak," "Weapon Conflict," and "Compliments for the Peace" speak directly from the refugees' experience, against war, and the hatred, greed, and brutality that accompany it.

As **Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars** so vividly reveals, no amount of Western entertainment glitz could sweep away the pain and terror that gave the band its soul and which, paradoxically, led to a buoyant, hopeful, and even joyous music. With its own blend of traditional Sierra Leonean *goombay*, West African high-life, reggae, and hip-hop, the All Stars are bonded by the determination to do no less than "take the suffering of the people and make a song of it." In this there is no distance between them and their subject — the suffering is indelibly their own.

Reuben and Grace had fared among the best, having fled Freetown in the midst of a rebel attack. In the camps, the couple had one another, but had lost everything else, including contact with family, friends and the musical life they had known.

Franco had been separated from his wife and kids and had still not been able to learn anything of their fate. Of the other band mates, Arahim "Jah Voice," so called for his perfect high pitches, was forced to watch rebels kill his father before they cut off his arm at the shoulder and left him for dead. Mohammed Bangura had similarly been forced to watch the murder of his parents, and infant child before having his hand severed. Alhadji Jeffrey Kamara, called "Black Nature," at 15 is the youngest of the group. Orphaned by the war and tortured by police in Guinea where he had fled, Black Nature is perhaps the most traumatized and is considered an "adopted son" by the others.

Yet it is in such grace notes — in the warmth, humor, and searing candor with which the band members bare their personal and collective wounds — as well as in the music they make, that the All Stars express their fierce loyalty to each other and to their people, and indeed to refugees of all the world's terrible conflicts. They must face the present with courage and the future with hope in order to save their lives. Thus the band's return to a barely reconstructed Island Studios in Freetown, while the devastation and a shaky peace treaty signed in 2002 keep many refugees away, comes as a powerful message of renewal.

Says co-director Zach Niles: “Even amidst unimaginable hardships, we knew the All Stars’ story would be not only a celebration of what is beautiful about Africa, but what is beautiful about the human spirit — the willingness to overcome adversity, the ability to forgive, the desire to share hope with others.”

Adds co-director Banker White: “From the beginning, we would joke that Reuben knew what we were doing there better than we did. Reuben said they had been writing and practicing all along, and were just waiting for us to arrive. He really was writing songs for the whole world to hear.”

Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars is a production of SodaSoap Productions, LLC.

About the filmmakers:

Zach Niles

Co-director/Co-producer

Zach Niles comes from a music-industry background and from 1998-2004 was part of the production and promotion of some of the largest rock and roll tours (The Rolling Stones, Paul McCartney, Madonna, Simon and Garfunkel). In 2001 he was the associate producer for the eight-part television series “Live at the Fillmore,” documenting a “day-in-the-life of a rock band” as they prepared for a concert at the legendary Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco. He has lived and worked in South Africa and Cameroon, and has had a long-standing personal and professional interest in the music and cultures of Africa. Though his heart is still in his native Vermont, Niles currently lives in San Francisco. This is his first film.

Banker White

Co-director/Co-producer

Banker White is a multi-disciplinary artist in the San Francisco Bay Area. He has been a writer/director for many short films, and from 1994-96 he helped start the Kokrobitey institute in Ghana, a learning center established to allow for the discovery of the cultural and intellectual richness of Africa. White, who received his master of fine arts degree from the California College of Arts and Crafts, is originally from Boston.

Credits:

Co-directors/Co-producers: Zach Niles, Banker White
Executive Producers: Matt Alvarez, Steve Bing, Ice Cube, Shelley Lazar
Editors: Jim Bruce, Banker White
Cinematography: Banker White, Chris Jenkins, Andrew Mitchell
Musical Director: Chris Velan

Running Time: 86:46

Awards & Festivals:

- International Documentary Association Nominee for Best Documentary Feature, 2006
- Full Frame Documentary Film Festival 2006, *Filmmaker Award* and *Audience Award*
- Miami International Film Festival 2006, *Audience Award*
- Nashville Film Festival 2006, *Impact of Music Award*
- South by Southwest (SXSW) Film Festival 2006, *Audience Award Runner Up*
- Human Rights Watch Film Festival 2005, *Best of the Fest Award*
- AFI Festival 2005, *Grand Jury Prize, Best Documentary*

Original Online Content on P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

The **SIERRA LEONE'S REFUGEE ALL STARS** companion Web site www.pbs.org/pov/sierraleone offers a streaming video trailer of the film, an interview with filmmakers Zach Niles and Banker White (video, podcast and text); a list of related Web sites, organizations and books; a downloadable discussion guide and classroom activity; and more about life on tour with the band in exclusive video shot by the filmmakers after the film was completed.



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and celebrating its 20th season on PBS in 2007, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running showcase on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing Tuesdays at 10 p.m., June through September, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought nearly 250 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and now has a Webby Award-winning online series, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V is available online at www.pbs.org/pov.

P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces special features for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of P.O.V. films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video, and community-based and educational content that involves viewers in activities, information, and feedback on the issues. P.O.V. Interactive also produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. In addition, www.pbs.org/pov houses *Talking Back*, where viewers may comment on P.O.V. programs, engage in dialogue, and link to further resources and information. The P.O.V. Web site and P.O.V. archives, including special sites from previous broadcasts, form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education

P.O.V. provides Discussion Guides for all films as well as curriculum-based P.O.V. Lesson Plans for select films to promote the use of independent media among varied constituencies. Available free online, these originally produced materials ensure the ongoing use of P.O.V.'s documentaries with educators, community workers, opinion leaders and general audiences nationally. P.O.V. also works closely with local public television stations to partner with local museums, libraries, schools and community-based organizations to raise awareness of the issues in P.O.V.'s films. *Youth Views*, P.O.V.'s youth engagement initiative, expands these efforts by working directly with youth service organizations.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Ford Foundation, the Educational Foundation of America, PBS, and public television viewers. Funding for P.O.V.'s *Diverse Voices Project* is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KCET Los Angeles, WGBH Boston, and Thirteen/WNET New York.

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, on line 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.

TAPE REQUESTS: Please note that a broadcast version of this film is available upon request, as the film may be edited to comply with new FCC regulations.