For Immediate Release

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“New Muslim Cool” Takes Inside Look at Fusion of Islam and Hip-Hop When P.O.V. Kicks off 22nd Season on PBS Tuesday, June 23, 2009

Former Drug Dealer Struggles to Transform Himself and His Community Through His Faith and His Music

Produced in Association with Latino Public Broadcasting (LPB)
And the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM)

“New Muslim Cool transcends race, ethnicity, class and religion. Like hip-hop culture, the film is all about irrepressible social transformation and empowerment.”
— Dr. Benjamin Chavis, Hip-Hop Summit Action Network

New Muslim Cool is Islam as you have never seen it. It is also hip-hop as you have probably never heard it. This new film, which opens the 22nd season of P.O.V., PBS’s award-winning nonfiction film series, gives audiences an insider’s view of a little-known cultural fusion between Muslims and street beats that has been developing since the very beginnings of hip-hop culture. The result is a surprising challenge to stereotypes of both Muslims and urban youth in America that encourages viewers to look critically at the “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West.

Jennifer Maytorena Taylor’s New Muslim Cool has its national broadcast premiere on P.O.V. on Tuesday, June 23, 2009, at 10 p.m. (Check local listings.) American television’s longest-running independent documentary series, P.O.V. received a 2007 Emmy for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking. The 2009 season of P.O.V. continues each Tuesday at 10 p.m. through Sept. 22, with two specials in November and January.

New Muslim Cool is more than another hybrid hip-hop story. It’s also the story of a man coming of age, facing his deepest questions about his faith, trying to keep his family safe and learning how to hold himself accountable. A decade ago, Hamza Pérez, born Jason, was a drug dealer on America’s mean streets. The child of Puerto Rican parents, he had two recurring, competing dreams at night: in one he was in prison by age 21, and in the other he was dead. New Muslim Cool is the story of how, as Hamza laughingly puts it, “both [dreams] came true,” albeit in unpredictable ways.

Indeed, when Hamza was 21, he was hanging out with friends and getting high when a chance encounter with an “old sheikh” transformed his life. The death he experienced was “a death of all my past, the negative,” he says. He gave up drugs and the street life and converted to Islam. He then went further, becoming active in forming a community of Latino and African-American Muslims, many of whom, like Hamza, were former street hustlers and drug dealers. The community ultimately moved from Massachusetts to Pittsburgh, Pa., with Hamza bringing along his son and, after the breakup of his first marriage, his daughter.
As part of their efforts to build a community that would reconcile their heritage with their new faith, Hamza and his brother, Sulíman, formed the rap group Mujahideen Team (M-Team). M-Team strives to use knowledge gained in the streets to put Islam’s religious message into a familiar context. Ultimately, Hamza would bring that message to prisons, fulfilling his other dream in a way he had never imagined.

Early on in the film, Hamza and Sulíman joke about the exotic hybridization their faith and community embody. “See, we don’t speak full Arabic,” says Hamza, “but we know Arabic Spanglish Ebonics.” The two men’s conversion has largely bewildered their family, who raised them as Roman Catholics. The family’s initial upset has been tempered by gratitude that the brothers’ new faith has gotten them off drugs and away from other dangerous pursuits. Yet the family also feels some discomfort over the tough lyrics Hamza and Sulíman use as M-Team.

With their unflinchingly critical words and intense stage performance — complete with flaming machetes — Hamza and Sulíman attempt to carve out a place for themselves in the tradition of protest poetry, up from the rawest roots of hip-hop. Within the Muslim hip-hop world, they are recognized as heirs to the tradition of artists like the Last Poets and Public Enemy, freely criticizing the government and many elements of modern society. But their music also draws scrutiny and eventually complicates Hamza’s life, even as he begins to grow and embrace a softer way of expressing himself.

The struggle to make his community thrive, raise his kids, build a new marriage and, paradoxically, deal with an FBI investigation of his group’s new mosque in Pittsburgh, Pa., all serve to deepen Hamza’s study of and thinking about Islam and the plight of the poor and imprisoned in America.

Hamza begins to reach out to prisoners, using his faith and struggles to inspire them. His work also leads him into surprising alliances with ministries of other religions that, like his own, seek to build a road to redemption from the nation’s jails.

Says director/producer Jennifer Maytorena Taylor, “New Muslim Cool came out of my long-standing interest in the power of pop music and culture to create social change and a deep feeling that we urgently need to look for common ground as our world grows increasingly diverse and interconnected. This is a story about who we all are as a country, making choices about our deepest values in tough times and continually redefining what it means to be American.”

*New Muslim Cool* is a production of Specific Pictures in association with Latino Public Broadcasting (LPB) and the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM).

**About the Filmmaker:**

Jennifer Maytorena Taylor, Producer/Director  
Jennifer Maytorena Taylor’s works explore the connection between the personal and the socio-political, and frequently feature Latino themes and Spanish-language content. Her documentary credits include “Paulina,” which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and was broadcast by the Sundance Channel; the Emmy-winning “Home Front,” a co-production with KQED-TV San Francisco; “Immigration Calculations”; “Ramadan Primetime”; and, most recently, “Special Circumstances,” which will air nationally on PBS as part of the Voces series in 2009. She is a recipient of the James D. Phelan Art Award for her body of work.

She has produced short stories for the public television series “California Connected” and “Keeping Kids Healthy” and co-produced Sophia Constantinou’s history of Cyprus, “Divided Loyalties” for the Sundance Channel. Jennifer also worked as an associate and co-producer with Lourdes Portillo on *Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena* (P.O.V. 1999) and *Señorita Extraviada* (P.O.V. 2002), two award-winning documentaries that had their national broadcast premieres on PBS.
Fluent in Spanish and Portuguese, Jennifer has worked throughout the United States, in Latin America and in Europe. She is a native Californian of Irish and Mexican heritage and was raised in Los Angeles and Vermont.

Credits:
Producer/Director: Jennifer Maytorena Taylor
Co-producers: Kauthar Umar, Hana Siddiqi
Cinematographers: David Sarasti, Jon Shenk, Mark Knobil
Editor: Kenji Yamamoto
Original Score: Chris Strollo
Additional Music: Herman “Soy Sos” Pearl, Junoon, Sean Jones, Rey Nieves

Running Time: 86:46

Festivals:
• San Francisco International Film Festival, March 2008
• Al Jazeera Documentary Film Festival, Doha, Qatar, April 2008
• Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, New York, June 2008
• Film Society of Lincoln Center’s Independents Night, New York, June 2008

Music in “New Muslim Cool”:

The **New Muslim Cool** original score was composed by multi-instrumentalist and new music composer Chris Strollo, with additional tracks by electronica and hip-hop producer Herman Pearl, aka Soy Sos.

This eclectic jazz-based set of compositions features guest appearances by Sean Jones, lead trumpet of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra; Abdulhamit Shukurovich, master of the double-reed Uzbek koshnai; acclaimed flautist Stephen Schultz of the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra; and bassist Jeff Grubbs of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

Rounding out the score are two original compositions by Puerto Rican guitar virtuoso Rey Nieves and the global hit “Sayonee” by U.N. Goodwill Ambassador Salman Ahmad and his American-Pakistani rock group Junoon.

The film’s musical selection also includes a diverse range of hip-hop songs by the film’s lead subjects, Hamza Pérez and Sulíman Pérez, performing as M-Team.

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Created in 1998 by Edward James Olmos and Marlene Dermer, Latino Public Broadcasting (LPB) is a nonprofit organization funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. LPB’s mission is to support the development, production, post-production, acquisition and distribution of non-commercial educational and cultural television that is representative of or addresses issues of particular interest to U.S. Latinos. These programs are produced for dissemination to public broadcasting stations and other public telecommunications entities. Mr. Olmos is presently LPB’s Chairman of the Board of Directors. For more information please visit [www.lpbp.org](http://www.lpbp.org).

The Center for Asian American Media (CAAM) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to presenting stories that convey the richness and diversity of Asian American experiences to the broadest audience possible. We do this by funding, producing, distributing and exhibiting works in film, television and digital media. For more information, visit [www.asianamericanmedia.org](http://www.asianamericanmedia.org).
Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and beginning its 22nd season on PBS in 2009, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running showcase on American television to feature the work of today’s best independent documentary filmmakers. Airing June through September with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought more than 275 acclaimed documentaries to millions nationwide and 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 is available 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 our films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video and community-based and educational content that involves viewers in activities and feedback. P.O.V. Interactive also produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, P.O.V.’s Borders. In addition, www.pbs.org/pov has launched the P.O.V. Blog, a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss and debate their favorite films, get the latest news and link to further resources. The P.O.V. website, blog and film archives form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education
American Documentary | P.O.V. works with local PBS stations, educators and community organizations to present free screenings and discussion events to inspire and engage communities in vital conversations about our world. As a leading provider of quality nonfiction programming for use in public life, P.O.V. offers an extensive menu of resources, including free discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. In addition, P.O.V.’s Youth Views works with youth organizers and students to provide them with resources and training so they may use independent documentaries as a catalyst for social change.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by PBS, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, The Educational Foundation of America, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, The September 11th Fund and public television viewers. Funding for P.O.V.’s Diverse Voices Project is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Special support provided by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. 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, 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.

DVD 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.

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