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POV's "Sweetgrass," a Stunning, Poetic Elegy to a Vanishing American West, Premieres Tuesday, July 5, 2011, on PBS

On Horseback and Armed Against Bears, the Last of the Old-time Sheep Ranchers Drive
Their Herd Into the Absaroka-Beartooth Mountains of Montana One Final Time

"The first essential movie of this young year. . . . Astonishingly beautiful. . . . In 'Sweetgrass,' a graceful
and often moving meditation on a disappearing way of life, there is . . . much that is magnificent."

—Manohla Dargis, *The New York Times*

Sweetgrass may well be the last real Western. Simply put, Lawrence Allestad and family were among the last of the traditional shepherders of the American West. Under a public grazing permit that had been handed down in his Norwegian-American family for generations, Allestad was the final rancher to drive his herds into Montana's rugged Absaroka-Beartooth range north of Yellowstone to fatten on sweet summer grass. The family members and their hired hands conducted the drives much as their pioneer forebears had — on horseback, with dogs for herding and guarding, and armed with rifles to frighten away bears and wolves. Over the years, better gear — walkie-talkies, four-wheelers and cell phones — took some of the edges off a hard life, but still the work remained exhausting and dangerous for both men and animals.

By 2001, Allestad realized not only was he the last old-time sheep rancher, but he was also about to make his last old-time sheep drive. He proposed that "someone ought to make a film about it." Luckily for anyone interested in the American West or traditional ways of life — or the sheer beauty of mountain wilderness — two adventurous filmmaker-anthropologists, Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, decided to take Allestad up on his suggestion.

The result is **Sweetgrass**, a new documentary having its national broadcast premiere on PBS' **POV (Point of View)** on **Tuesday, July 5, 2011**, at 10 p.m. (Check local listings.) POV's 24th season continues on Tuesdays through Sept. 27 and concludes with 2011 and 2012 specials. American television's longest-running independent documentary series, POV has won a Special Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking, the International Documentary Association Award for Best Continuing Series and NALIP's 2011 Award for Corporate Commitment to Diversity.

Sweetgrass offers an unprecedented record of a cowboy way of life at the moment of its disappearance, and a magnificently filmed portrait of a world in which nature and culture, animals and humans are on intimate terms — and sometimes violently at odds. Indeed, the filming proved almost as punishing for the married filmmakers as the drive was for the hired hands — grizzled veteran John Ahern and the younger Pat Connolly, who drove 3,000 sheep on the highest and hardest part of the drive. While Barbash filmed in Big Timber, Montana, where the Allestad spread is located, Castaing-Taylor, riding and hiking with camera gear in tow, followed the men and animals into the mountains, where he was charged by grizzly bears — and he came down 20 pounds lighter and in need of double foot surgery.

Without narration, **Sweetgrass** lets the camera, often at sheep-level, reveal the drama of the formerly yearly endeavor.

In *Big Timber*, the film discovers the seasonal work-a-day world of sheep ranching. Under the watchful eyes of family patriarch Lawrence, his wife, Elaine, and son, Billy, in winter the herd nuzzles through the snow in search of feed. In spring, the sheep are shorn of their thick winter coats. Lambs are born and ewes have to be enticed to nurse offspring that are not their own. Other lambs have to be hand-fed. Raising sheep remains an intense, hands-on business. Humor, though, is often invoked to help pass the time: Billy tells a joke about a guy shopping for new brain. He's shown banker's and lawyer's brains, which he turns down. Then he sees a brain on the shelf costing the most — \$2 million. "That's a cowboy brain," he's told, "never been used."

Until the summer, the work is a family endeavor, with kids, grandparents, neighbors and even passersby all pitching in. But after the Fourth of July, when rodeos, dog trials, shooting competitions and haying contests break out all over Sweet Grass County, the hard and lonely work of an old-time drive into the mountains begins in earnest for hired hands Ahern and Connolly. It's a grueling 250-mile round trip climbing high into the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness — on hoof the whole way — that lasts from July until September.

The grass is sweet, but getting a herd of sheep to it while staving off predators is no picnic. For Connolly and Ahern, who are escorting a virtual buffet on hooves, encounters with bears or wolves are inevitable. The team's dogs often bark at night, as coyotes and wolves howl, keeping the herders awake and bringing them out of their tents to fire rifles to scare off the wild animals. One night the dogs fail to bark, and the herders begin to lose sheep.

On the trail of the herders and their livestock, **Sweetgrass** opens up on an untamed wilderness, awesome in both its vastness and its details. Castaing-Taylor captures the beauty and unforgiving ruggedness of the landscape, and also the slow, difficult rhythms of the drive and its daily grinding work, punctuated by strange incidents and sudden crises. In one of the film's most startling moments, Connolly, driven to tears by the long hours, the rainy weather, the stupidity of the sheep, the wear on his dogs, horse and himself, plus the inescapable sense of lurking danger, breaks down in an emotional phone call to his mother.

Ahern, with the weathered looks and few words of a man who's seen it all, seems to take everything in stride. But when some of the sheep, in a tight spot, simply go over a cliff, it's difficult not to sympathize with the exasperated herders. On the way down, joined now by Lawrence Allestad and other hands, the men emit raucous whistles, shouts and hoots, as they call the dogs and drive the sheep, and the usually taciturn Ahern breaks into an old song: *I was born up in the mountains, up where the snakes they have legs / The hoot owls speak in English and the roosters lay square eggs.*

The last Old West sheep drive — a family's hundred-year tradition of work — comes to a simple conclusion, with only a hint of nostalgia. In a pickup truck on the way back to the ranch, Ahern is asked what his plans are. "I wasn't going to worry about it for a week or two," he replies. In fact, the ranch and most of the sheep were sold in 2006.

"We began work on this film in the spring of 2001," says Castaing-Taylor. "Living at the time in Boulder, Colorado, we heard about a family of shepherders in Montana who were among the last to trail their band of sheep long distances — about 150 miles each year, all of it on hoof — up the mountains for summer pasture. I visited them during lambing — when the sheep are born — and was so taken with the magnitude of their life that we ended up working with them, their friends and their hired hands intensely over the following years.

“Spending the summers high in the Rocky Mountains, among the herders, the sheep and their predators, was a transcendent experience that will stay with me for the rest of my days,” he says.

“We ended up with 200 hours of footage, the material for several films,” says Barbash, “but we decided the most compelling story was the one we’d been interested in from the first, the sheep drive itself — as ritual, as history, as challenge. We went back to film lambing, shearing and the following year’s sheep drive in 2002, and the one after that in 2003. Most of the footage, however, is from that first summer. While the shepherders’ journey is tremendously hard, it is undertaken not just for the literal goal of reaching (sweet) grass, but also to carry on tradition against all sorts of odds.”

About the Filmmakers:

Ilisa Barbash (Producer) and Lucien Castaing-Taylor (Cinematographer)

Working in Montana on and off since 2001, Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor have deployed varying styles in film, video and photography to explore the monumental Western landscapes and the subjective, mythologizing response of humans to the land. Forthcoming video installations by Castaing-Taylor include “Hell Roaring Creek,” “Coom Bidy,” “Into-the-Jug (Geworfen),” “Turned at the Pass,” “Breakfast,” “Daybreak on the Bed Ground,” “Bedding Down” and “The High Trail.”

Barbash and Castaing-Taylor’s previous credits include “Made in USA” (1990), a film about sweatshops and child labor in the Los Angeles garment industry, and “In and Out of Africa” (1992), a video about authenticity, taste and racial politics in the African art market that won eight international awards. Their work has been exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution, the British Museum, the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York and the James Gallery at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Their written publications include *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking* (University of California Press, 1997) and *The Cinema of Robert Gardner* (Berg, 2007).

A native of Liverpool, England, Castaing-Taylor was the founding editor of the American Anthropological Association’s *Visual Anthropology Review*, which he edited from 1991 to 1994, and edited both *Visualizing Theory* (Routledge, 1994) and *Transcultural Cinema*, a collection of essays by the ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall (Princeton University Press, 1998). He is the director of the Sensory Ethnography Lab, director of the Film Study Center and co-director of graduate studies in critical media practice at Harvard University, where he teaches visual and environmental studies and anthropology. He earned a master’s degree in visual anthropology from the University of Southern California and a doctorate in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley.

Barbash, a New York City native, is associate curator of visual anthropology at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. She received a bachelor’s degree in French from Middlebury College in Vermont and a master’s degree in visual anthropology from the University of Southern California.

Credits:

Producer:	Ilisa Barbash
Cinematographer:	Lucien Castaing-Taylor
Editors:	Ilisa Barbash, Lucien Castaing-Taylor
Sound Editing and Mix:	Ernst Karel
Running Time:	86:46

POV Series Credits:

Executive Producer:	Simon Kilmurry
Co-Executive Producer:	Cynthia López
Director of Production and Programming:	Chris White
Series Producer:	Yance Ford

Awards and Festivals:

- Best Feature, Play-Doc Festival, Spain 2010
- Audience Award, Punto de Vista, Pamplona, Spain 2010
- Artistic Excellence Award, Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, Montana 2010
- Best International Doc, Astra Film Festival, Romania 2009
- International Documentary Association Award Nomination, Best Feature Documentary 2010
- Film Independent Spirit Award Nominations, Best Documentary, Truer Than Fiction Award 2011
- Independent Documentary Association Award Nomination, Best Feature Documentary 2010
- Official Selection, Berlin Film Festival 2010
- Official Selection, New York Film Festival 2009
- Official Selection, AFI FEST, Los Angeles 2009



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and beginning its 24th season on PBS in 2011, the award-winning POV 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, POV has brought more than 300 acclaimed documentaries to millions nationwide and has a Webby Award-winning online series, *POV's Borders*. Since 1988, POV 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. Visit www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

POV's award-winning website extends the life of our films online with interactive features, interviews, updates, video and educational content, as well as listings for television broadcasts, community screenings and films available online. The *POV Blog* is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss their favorite films and get the latest news.

POV Community Engagement and Education

POV films can be seen at more than 450 events across the country every year. Together with schools, organizations and local PBS stations, POV facilitates free community screenings and produces free resources to accompany our films, including discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

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