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*DOCUMENTARY “THE PICTURE TAKER”
UNVEILS THE SECRET LIFE AND
LEGACY OF FAMED CIVIL RIGHTS
PHOTOGRAPHER AND FBI INFORMANT
ERNEST WITHERS, PREMIERES
JANUARY 30 ON PBS’S
INDEPENDENT LENS*

DECEMBER 19, 2022

The Film Paints a Compelling Portrait of a Man Who Chronicled the Triumphs and Tragedies of Black History for the Nation as Well as for the FBI

(San Francisco, CA) December 19, 2022 — Born and raised in the segregated South, Ernest Withers (1922-2007) captured over six decades of African American history that witnessed the height of the Civil Rights Movement and The Cold War. The Memphis, Tennessee, native photographed legendary icons, ranging from prominent activists like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Medgar Evers to musicians like Elvis Presley, Tina Turner, and B.B. King. Despite his commitment to truth-telling through photojournalism, Withers took a closely-guarded secret to his grave: for over a decade of his professional career, he worked for the FBI.

“The Picture Taker” makes its broadcast debut on INDEPENDENT LENS on January 30, 2023, at 10:00 p.m. ET (check local listings). The film also will be available to stream on the PBS app.

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Emmy and Peabody Award winner Phil Bertelsen (“Who Killed Malcolm X?”) tells the alluring story of Withers’ career—from his mom-and-pop photo shop beginnings through the shocking revelations about his FBI cooperation.

Withers learned his craft while serving in the segregated U.S. Army during WWII. Through dogged determination, talent, and courage, he established himself as a photojournalist with unprecedented access to the movers and shakers of Southern culture and politics. His camera snapped nearly 2 million images, creating a photographic treasure trove of Black history from the everyday to the momentous. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, the trial of Emmett Till’s murderers, the desegregation of Little Rock High, the Memphis sanitation strike, and the turbulent aftermath of Dr. King’s death were all captured by a man whose boundless energy and work ethic put him on the front lines of newsworthy events.

Withers’ images spread the word about civil rights and wrongs throughout the nation, making him a hero in his hometown of Memphis. But that legacy was shattered by a newspaper exposé published after his death, detailing years of secret FBI service. Bertelsen gives voice to this work by interweaving archival testimony from Withers’ FBI handler, agent William Lawrence, to whom Withers reported and provided photographs and identification of key activists. “The Picture Taker” includes interviews with Lawrence’s daughter as well as activists close to Withers, including Rosetta Miller-Perry who, upon discovering his work with the FBI, questions Withers’ intentions. Throughout the documentary, the juxtaposition of Withers’ work—as witness, photographer, and potential spy for the U.S. government—is explored within the context of Withers’ coming-of-age in the Jim Crow South and the civic upheavals which threatened that status quo.

“There is almost no one else in contemporary U.S. history who has chronicled African American life with such depth and intimacy as Ernest Withers,” said Bertelsen. “We set out to capture the complexity of Withers, from his undeniable accomplishments and contributions to Black history, culture, and journalism as a whole, to the underlying question of his work with the FBI and how it impacts that legacy. We wanted to honor Withers’ work, his

community, and the labor of activists by using his photographs to convey the realities of the segregated South for future generations.”

Described by *The New York Times* as “a compelling biography of Ernest Withers” and “an engrossing watch,” “The Picture Taker” showcases Withers’ incredible photographic archive alongside testimonials from those closest to him, providing an in-depth, multilayered account not only of Withers’ career, but also of milestone moments in American history and the ongoing fight for African American liberation.

Visit “[The Picture Taker](#)” page on INDEPENDENT LENS to learn more about the film.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS:

Phil Bertelsen (Producer, Director)

Emmy and Peabody Award winner Phil Bertelsen directed “Through the Fire,” “School of the Future,” and episodes of “The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross” and “Finding Your Roots.” He co-directed NBC’s “Hope and Fury: MLK, the Movement and the Media” and Netflix’s “Who Killed Malcolm X?,” which helped exonerate two men convicted of Malcolm X’s murder.

Lise Yasui (Producer, Lead Researcher)

Lise Yasui produced and directed the Oscar-nominated “Family Gathering,” about her Japanese American family’s WWII internment experience. It aired on “American Experience,” the BBC, and Star TV. She co-produced “Frontline’s” Peabody-winning “The Gate of Heavenly Peace,” about the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, which was broadcast internationally.

CREDITS:

Producer/Director Phil Bertelsen

Producer Lise Yasui

Executive Producers Sally Jo Fifer
Lois Vossen
Leslie Fields-Cruz
Tony Decaneas
Eric Meola
Robert Katz
Philip Hack

Visit the INDEPENDENT LENS [website](#) for more information.

ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS

INDEPENDENT LENS is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series, airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 p.m. ET. The acclaimed series, with Lois Vossen as executive producer, features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, Action Family Giving, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more visit pbs.org/independentlens. Join the conversation on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram at @independentlens.

ABOUT ITVS

ITVS is a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that has, for over 25 years, funded and partnered with a diverse range of documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning films, and then airs [them](#) for free on PBS via our weekly series, INDEPENDENT LENS, as well as on other PBS series, and through our digital platform, OVEE. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, The National Endowment for the Humanities: American Rescue Plan, Acton Family Giving, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and Wyncote Foundation. For more information, visit itvs.org.

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