



**PBS and WETA Announce New Documentary Series
from Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
THE BLACK CHURCH: THIS IS OUR STORY, THIS IS OUR SONG
to Air February 16 and 17, 2021 at 9:00 p.m. ET
(check local listings)**

**Two-part series reveals the broad history and culture of the Black church
and explores African American faith communities
on the frontlines of hope and change**

**Featuring interviews with Oprah Winfrey, John Legend, Jennifer Hudson,
Bishop Michael Curry, Cornel West, Pastor Shirley Caesar, Rev. Al Sharpton,
Yolanda Adams, Rev. William Barber II, BeBe Winans, T.D. Jakes,
Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie,
Sen. Rev. Raphael Warnock and more**

**THE
BLACK
CHURCH**
THIS IS OUR STORY
THIS IS OUR SONG

Credit: PBS

(REVISED JANUARY 28, 2021): FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE (JULY 28, 2020): Today at the Virtual PBS Press Tour, PBS and WETA announced **THE BLACK CHURCH: THIS IS OUR STORY, THIS IS OUR SONG** will premiere February 16 and 17, 2021 at 9:00 p.m. ET on PBS stations nationwide (check local listings). This moving four-hour, two-part series from executive producer, host and writer **Henry Louis Gates, Jr.**, the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor at Harvard University and director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, traces the 400-year-old story of the Black church in America, all the way down to its bedrock role as the site of African American survival and grace, organizing and resilience, thriving and testifying, autonomy and

freedom, solidarity and speaking truth to power. The documentary reveals how Black people have worshipped and, through their spiritual journeys, improvised ways to bring their faith traditions from Africa to the New World, while translating them into a form of Christianity that was not only truly their own, but a redemptive force for a nation whose original sin was found in their ancestors' enslavement across the Middle Passage.

Renowned participants in the series include media executive and philanthropist **Oprah Winfrey**; singer, songwriter, producer and philanthropist **John Legend**; singer and actress **Jennifer Hudson**; **Presiding Bishop Michael Curry** of The Episcopal Church; gospel legends **Yolanda Adams**, **Pastor Shirley Caesar** and **BeBe Winans**; civil rights leaders **Rev. Al Sharpton** and **Rev. William Barber II**; scholar **Cornel West**; and many more. Through their interviews, viewers will be transported by the songs that speak to one's soul, by preaching styles that have moved congregations and a nation, and by beliefs and actions that drew African Americans from the violent margins of society to the front lines of change.

For many, the Black church is their house of worship. For some, it is an engine for social justice. For others, it is a place of transcendent cultural gifts exported to the world, from the soulful voices of preachers and congregants, to the sublime sounds of gospel music. For the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., going to church in America also was “the most segregated hour” of the week. **THE BLACK CHURCH: THIS IS OUR STORY, THIS IS OUR SONG** will explore the changing nature of worship spaces and the men and women who shepherded them from the pulpit, the choir loft and church pews. The churches are also a world within a world, where Black Americans could be themselves; and the epicenter of the freedom struggle that revolutionized the United States across slavery and abolition, Reconstruction, Jim Crow and the Great Migration, and the civil rights movement.

“Our series is a riveting and systematic exploration of the myriad ways in which African Americans have worshipped God in their own images, and continue to do so today, from the plantation and prayer houses, to camp meetings and store-front structures, to mosques and mega-churches,” says Dr. Gates. “This is the story and song our ancestors bequeathed to us, and it comes at a time in our country when the very things they struggled and died for — faith and freedom, justice and equality, democracy and grace — all are on the line. No social institution in the Black community is more central and important than the Black church.”

“We are proud to join forces again with PBS, CPB and our longtime production partner Henry Louis (Skip) Gates, Jr., to share this illuminating new series with the public,” said Sharon Percy Rockefeller, President and CEO of WETA. “Skip beautifully weaves meaningful history and cultural stories that illustrate the complex social fabric of our uniquely American experience.”

“Representing the full range of the American experience is core to our mission and work in public television,” said Paula Kerger, President & CEO of PBS. “PBS is thrilled to partner with WETA, CPB and Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to present this series, which sheds important light on the central role that faith has played and continues to play in the African American community. Once again, Dr. Gates has created an extraordinary film which deepens understanding, fosters conversation and so beautifully connects our country’s past to our present.”

“We are honored that for many years Skip Gates has partnered with WETA and PBS to present his remarkable documentaries that reinforce public media’s commitment to serving diverse audiences and reflecting the people of our nation,” said Pat Harrison, president and CEO of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). “CPB is pleased to be part of this powerful documentary that beautifully illustrates the preeminent role church, faith and spirituality have played in shaping the Black American experience.”

Throughout the series, viewers will witness much of this world expand out to politics, culture and education, as churches are born, denominations are fractured, and leaders are made and critiqued in their quest to bring the Word to the world and the world to a higher ground. At once a liberating and traditional center of power, the church in Gates’s telling is at a crossroads today, torn between social issues and justice, human rights and inequality, secular and spiritual trends, the past and future, prompting many to wonder whether the churches of their parents and grandparents have become closed off to the most important issues of the time. The Black church has taken people from the valley to “the mountaintop” and, as some of the most influential Black voices today reflect on the meaning of the church in their lives and to the country, the series will contemplate where the “promised land” is for this generation and the next.

PART ONE – Tuesday, February 16, 2021 at 9:00 p.m. ET on PBS (check local listings)

Host Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explores the roots of African American religion, beginning with the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the extraordinary ways enslaved Africans preserved and adapted their faith practices under the brutal realities of human bondage. As an awakening of Protestant Christianity spread

in the 18th century, Black Americans embraced a vision of a liberating God and Black churches that would become bedrock institutions in the long struggle to dismantle slavery, culminating in the Civil War. With Emancipation and Reconstruction, independent Black churches flourished and helped the formerly enslaved navigate a perilous freedom by fulfilling the social, educational, financial, cultural and political needs of African Americans. Dr. Gates speaks with noted scholars, public figures and religious leaders about faith and the struggle for rights in the midst of growing racial violence that would continue well into the 20th century. Key figures include founder Richard Allen and preacher Jarena Lee of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; abolitionist Frederick Douglass; influential religious figure Henry McNeal Turner; and pioneers Virginia Broughton and Nannie Helen Burroughs of the National Baptist Convention.

PART TWO – Wednesday, February 17, 2021 at 9:00 p.m. ET on PBS (check local listings)

The series continues with the Black church expanding its reach to address social inequality and minister to those in need, from the exodus out of the Jim Crow South during the Great Migration to the heroic phase of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and '60s. After the violent loss of leaders like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., many Black churches found themselves at a crossroads — struggling to remain relevant in an era of increasing secularization while reckoning with urgent social and cultural issues within their congregations and broader communities. The series brings the story of the Black Church up to the present — a time of renewed struggle for racial justice in America. Host Henry Louis Gates, Jr. interviews prominent figures across African American society, including celebrities Oprah Winfrey, Jennifer Hudson, and John Legend; Bishops Michael Curry, Yvette Flunder and Vashti Murphy McKenzie; Rev. William Barber, and more.

With **THE BLACK CHURCH: THIS IS OUR STORY, THIS IS OUR SONG**, Gates continues a tradition of producing sophisticated documentary films for public media about the African and African American experience for a broad audience, including the Emmy Award-winning documentary **THE AFRICAN AMERICANS: MANY RIVERS TO CROSS**, as well as the documentaries **AFRICAN AMERICAN LIVES**, **BLACK AMERICA SINCE MLK: AND STILL I RISE**, **AFRICA'S GREAT CIVILIZATIONS** and **RECONSTRUCTION: AMERICA AFTER THE CIVIL WAR**.

THE BLACK CHURCH: THIS IS OUR STORY, THIS IS OUR SONG is a production of McGee Media, Inkwell Media and WETA Washington, D.C., in association with Get Lifted. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is the writer, host, and executive producer. Dyllan McGee is executive producer. John F. Wilson is executive producer in charge for WETA. Bill Gardner is the executive in charge for PBS. Stacey L. Holman is the series producer and director. Christopher Bryson and Shayla Harris are producer/directors. Deborah C. Porfido is the supervising producer. Kevin Burke is producer. Robert L. Yacyshyn is the line producer. Christine Fall is the archival producer. Major corporate support for **THE BLACK CHURCH: THIS IS OUR STORY, THIS IS OUR SONG** is provided by Johnson & Johnson. Major support is also provided by Lilly Endowment Inc., Ford Foundation, and by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, PBS and public television viewers.

About WETA

WETA is the leading public broadcaster in the nation's capital, serving Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia with educational initiatives and with high-quality programming on television, radio and digital. WETA Washington, D.C., is the second largest producing-station of new content for public television in the United States, with productions and co-productions including PBS NEWSHOUR, WASHINGTON WEEK, THE KENNEDY CENTER MARK TWAIN PRIZE, THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS GERSHWIN PRIZE FOR POPULAR SONG, LATINO AMERICANS and ASIAN AMERICANS; and documentaries by filmmaker Ken Burns and scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., including FINDING YOUR ROOTS WITH HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR. (Seasons 3-6), BLACK AMERICA SINCE MLK: AND

STILL I RISE and RECONSTRUCTION: AMERICA AFTER THE CIVIL WAR. Sharon Percy Rockefeller is president and CEO. The WETA studios and administrative offices are located in Arlington, Virginia. More information on WETA and its programs and services is available at www.weta.org. On social media, visit www.facebook.com/wetatvfm on Facebook or follow [@WETAatvfm](https://twitter.com/WETAatvfm) on Twitter.

About PBS

[PBS](http://pbs.org), with more than 330 member stations, offers all Americans the opportunity to explore new ideas and new worlds through television and digital content. Each month, PBS reaches over 126 million people through television and 26 million people online, inviting them to experience the worlds of science, history, nature and public affairs; to hear diverse viewpoints; and to take front row seats to world-class drama and performances. PBS's broad array of programs has been consistently honored by the industry's most coveted award competitions. Teachers of children from pre-K through 12th grade turn to PBS for digital content and services that help bring classroom lessons to life. Decades of research confirms that PBS's premier children's media service, PBS KIDS, helps children build critical literacy, math and social-emotional skills, enabling them to find success in school and life. Delivered through member stations, PBS KIDS offers high-quality educational content on TV – including a 24/7 channel, online at pbskids.org, via an array of mobile apps and in communities across America. More information about PBS is available at www.pbs.org, one of the leading dot-org websites on the internet, or by following [PBS on Twitter](https://twitter.com/PBS), [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/pbs) or through our [apps for mobile and connected devices](#). Specific program information and updates for press are available at pbs.org/pressroom or by following [PBS Pressroom on Twitter](https://twitter.com/PBSPressroom).

About McGee Media

McGee Media was founded by award-winning filmmaker Dyllan McGee to produce documentary content that is innovative, compelling, and immersive. Every story is born from a vision of a more fair and equitable world. Whether it is the sweeping history of the African-American experience, or the intimate personal stories of the hundreds of women who made up the feminist movement, McGee Media uses television, film, and digital media in radical new ways to inform and inspire. Recent projects include FINDING YOUR ROOTS WITH HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR., Seasons 3-6 (PBS), RECONSTRUCTION: AMERICA AFTER THE CIVIL WAR (PBS), AFRICA'S GREAT CIVILIZATIONS (PBS), BLACK AMERICA SINCE MLK: AND STILL I RISE (PBS), MAKERS (Verizon Media), ONCE & FOR ALL (AOL), FIRST IN HUMAN (Discovery), and RANCHER, FARMER, FISHERMAN (Discovery).

About Inkwell Media

Inkwell Media was founded by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to produce sophisticated documentary films about the African and African-American experience for a broad audience. The six-part PBS documentary series THE AFRICAN AMERICANS: MANY RIVERS TO CROSS (2013) earned the 2013 Peabody Award, an Alfred I. duPont-Columbia Award, a News and Documentary Emmy Award and a NAACP Image Award. Inkwell Films has co-produced FINDING YOUR ROOTS (Seasons 1-6), RECONSTRUCTION: AMERICA AFTER THE CIVIL WAR (2019), AFRICA'S GREAT CIVILIZATIONS (2017), BLACK AMERICA SINCE MLK: AND STILL I RISE (2016), BLACK IN LATIN AMERICA (2011), FACES OF AMERICA (2010), LOOKING FOR LINCOLN (2009), AFRICAN AMERICAN LIVES 2 (2008), OPRAH'S ROOTS (2007) and AFRICAN AMERICAN LIVES (2006).

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