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PBS'S INDEPENDENT LENS TO PREMIERE *MR. SOUL!* ON FEBRUARY 22, BRINGING AMERICA'S FIRST BLACK VARIETY SHOW BACK TO PUBLIC TELEVISION

*Critics Choice Award-winning Documentary Celebrates Groundbreaking PBS
Series "SOUL!" and Its Trailblazing Producer and Host Ellis Haizlip*



(San Francisco, CA), January 25, 2021 — In 1968, America's first Black variety show, "SOUL!," helmed by producer and host Ellis Haizlip, premiered on public television. The pioneering series ran for five years, cementing itself as not only a vehicle to celebrate African American artistry, community and culture but also as a platform for political expression and a powerful force in the fight for social justice.

The historic show makes its way back into homes across the U.S. as the subject of Melissa Haizlip's Critics Choice Award-winning documentary ***Mr. SOUL!***. Melissa Haizlip—the niece of Ellis—portrays in exquisite detail a revolutionary time in American culture and entertainment through vibrant archival footage and interviews with numerous Black luminaries who appeared on "SOUL!," or were impacted by it. The film will premiere February 22, 2021 at 10:00 p.m. ET ([check local listings](#)) on PBS's anthology documentary series, *Independent Lens*, and an

extended theatrical version of the film will be available on the PBS Video app.

While chronicling the journey of "SOUL!," filmmaker Melissa Haizlip recounts the life and contributions of the late Ellis Haizlip, who was steeped in the New York City arts community prior to creating the show. Ellis quickly stepped into the role of host of his creation, where his earnest demeanor, low-key interviewing style, and his passion for the Black artistic community and their works—including books, the spoken word, music, film and dance—culminated in a show that depicted the Black experience in a bold and unapologetic way. Haizlip's creation shifted the media focus from what was then uniformly images of inner-city poverty and violence, to instead shine a light on the vibrant contemporary Black Arts Movement.

Initially produced for New York public television, "SOUL!" with its singular focus on the Black community, was utterly groundbreaking. It quickly became a nationwide forum to showcase

African Americans' profound contribution to the arts. By 1970, the weekly show—each episode a mix of performances and interviews—was broadcast by 72 PBS affiliates across the country. This film celebrates the genesis of “SOUL!” from inception, through its rise as a cultural force, to its final episode in 1973, after the series lost public funding, a casualty of changing political sensibilities.

With award-winning performer Blair Underwood providing the voice of Ellis Haizlip, *Mr. SOUL!* features not only archival performances from music legends such as Al Green, Stevie Wonder, Earth, Wind & Fire, and Patti LaBelle, but also spoken word performances from The Last Poets and Sonia Sanchez, dance performances by Carmen de Lavallade and interviews with James Baldwin, Nikki Giovanni, Muhammad Ali and Maya Angelou, among many others. Artists such as Harry Belafonte, Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson and activist and former Black Panther Kathleen Cleaver share their recollections about the show and its tremendous impact on them and their careers.

“SOUL!” broke new ground in entertainment, and its impact is still being felt today, as it inspired an entire generation of artists who watched at home as young people, with rapt attention, never missing the show every week,” said filmmaker Melissa Haizlip. “I hope the story of Ellis Haizlip and his inclusive creation continues to inspire the Black and brown communities and artists from every background collectively to express ourselves and make our own art; art that reflects us and our own worldview, and that we never compromise our creative vision.”

“With *Mr. SOUL!*, Melissa shines a light on a one-of-a-kind creative visionary, and his truly important cultural creation,” said *Independent Lens* Executive Producer Lois Vossen. “We are delighted to bring the story of Ellis Haizlip and SOUL! back home to public television.”

Hailed as “enthraling and illuminating” by the *New Yorker* and “singular and captivating” by *Variety*, *Mr. SOUL!* has been a continued staple of the documentary awards circuit, receiving a Cinema Eye Honors Nomination for Outstanding Debut Feature, a Critics Choice Documentary Award for Best First Documentary Feature, an IDA Documentary Award for Best Music Documentary and the Audience Award for Best Feature at AFI Docs, among others.

Visit the [Mr. SOUL!](#) page on *Independent Lens* for more information about the film.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER:

Melissa Haizlip (director, producer, writer)

Melissa Haizlip is an award-winning filmmaker based in New York. Her work responds to pressing social issues at the intersection of racial justice, social justice, activism, and representation. Female transformation and empowerment are at the core of all of her ideas, with the goal being to advocate and amplify the voices of women and people of color. Melissa’s feature documentary, *Mr. SOUL!*, won the 2020 Critics Choice Documentary Award for Best First Feature

Documentary. The film is nominated for the 2021 Cinema Eye Honors for Outstanding Debut Feature. In 2019, *Mr. SOUL!* was awarded as a finalist for the inaugural Library of Congress Lavine / Ken Burns Prize for Film, a new, annual prize that recognizes a filmmaker whose documentary uses original research and compelling narrative to tell stories that touch on some aspect of American history. The film won Best Music Documentary at the 2018 International Documentary Association Awards. *Mr. SOUL!* premiered at Tribeca and screened at 50 festivals, receiving 16 Jury and Audience Awards for Best Documentary, and the 2019 FOCAL Award for Best Use of Archival Footage in an Entertainment Production. Melissa directed and produced *Contact High: A Visual History of Hip-Hop* and produced *You're Dead to Me* (2013) directed by Wu Tsang, about a grieving Chicana mother coming to terms with the loss of her transgender child on Día de los Muertos. The film won Best Short at the 2014 Imagen Awards, and screened at over 50 festivals and museums. Melissa's two-channel art films have been exhibited by the Hammer Museum Los Angeles Biennial, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, and Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Melissa has been awarded grants from the Ford Foundation JustFilms, National Endowment for the Humanities, International Documentary Association, National Endowment for the Arts, Black Public Media, Firelight Media, ITVS, Awesome Without Borders, and Puffin Foundation. Melissa went to Yale University. She's currently producing a docuseries on women in hip-hop for Netflix.

CREDITS:

Director	Melissa Haizlip
Co-Director	Sam Pollard
Writer	Melissa Haizlip
Executive Producers	Blair Underwood Chaz Ebert Stan Lathan
Producer	Melissa Haizlip
Co-producer	Doug Blush
Director of Cinematography	Hans Charles
Composer	Robert Glasper
Music Supervisor	Ed Gerrard



Associate Producer	Vince Johnson Leonard Joseph David Magdael
Consulting Producer	Laurens Grant
Editors	Giovanni P. Autran Blair McClendon Annukka Lilia

ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 PM. 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, Acton Family Giving, Ford Foundation, 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: [facebook.com/independentlens](https://www.facebook.com/independentlens) and on Twitter [@IndependentLens](https://twitter.com/IndependentLens)

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