

T BONE BURNETT ROBERT REDFORD JACK WHITE  
PRESENT A FILM  
DIRECTED BY BERNARD MACMAHON



# AMERICAN EPIC

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

THE FIRST TIME AMERICA HEARD ITSELF

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**AMERICAN EPIC Premieres May 16 on PBS in the US and May on BBC in the UK**

**Broadcast includes a three-part historical documentary and *The American Epic Sessions* feature-length film starring Jack White, Taj Mahal, Elton John, Nas, Beck, Rhiannon Giddens, Ana Gabriel, Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, Steve Martin, Alabama Shakes and more**

**Companion Soundtrack, 100-Song Box Set, and other music products to be released by Sony Music's Legacy Recordings and Columbia Records, and Third Man Records on May 12<sup>th</sup>  
Companion book to be released by Touchstone on May 2<sup>nd</sup>**

April 18, 2017 – **AMERICAN EPIC**, a film series produced by **Allison McGourty, Duke Erikson** and Director **Bernard MacMahon**, explores the pivotal recording journeys at the height of the Roaring Twenties, when music scouts armed with cutting-edge recording technology captured the breadth of American music and discovered the artists that would shape our world.

**THE AMERICAN EPIC SESSIONS** is a feature-length film showcasing an all-star roster of contemporary artists, led by **Jack White** and **T Bone Burnett**, replicating this early recording process on an original 1920s electrical recording system and paying tribute to those great artists of the past.

PBS and BBC Arena announced today that the **AMERICAN EPIC** three-part historical documentary will air in the U.S. on PBS on Tuesdays May 16, 23 and 30 at 9 p.m. (check local listings). In the U.K. the episodes will air on BBC in May. **THE AMERICAN EPIC SESSIONS** will air in the U.S. on PBS on Tuesday, June 6 at 8 p.m. (check local listings) and in the U.K. on BBC in June.

On May 12<sup>th</sup> Sony Music's Legacy Recordings will release a companion soundtrack, 100-song box set, and additional archival recordings from the 1920s and 1930s. Columbia Records will release new studio performances from **THE AMERICAN EPIC SESSIONS**. Third Man Records, the independent record label founded by **Jack White**, will release **THE AMERICAN EPIC SESSIONS** soundtrack and a selection of **AMERICAN EPIC** archival recordings from the series on vinyl.

On May 2<sup>nd</sup> Touchstone will release **AMERICAN EPIC**, a companion book to the series featuring behind the scenes stories and exclusive and unpublished photos.



The **AMERICAN EPIC** historical documentaries are a journey back in time to the "Big Bang" of modern popular music.

In the 1920s, as radio took over the pop music business, record companies were forced to leave their studios in major cities in search of new styles and markets. Ranging the mountains, prairies, rural villages, and urban ghettos of America, they discovered a wealth of unexpected talent. The recordings they made of all the ethnic groups of America democratized the nation and gave a voice to everyone. Country singers in the Appalachians, Blues guitarists in the Mississippi Delta, Gospel preachers across the south, Cajun fiddlers in Louisiana, Tejano groups from the Texas Mexico border, Native American drummers in Arizona, and Hawaiian musicians were all recorded. For the first time, a woman picking cotton in Mississippi, a coalminer in Virginia or a tobacco farmer in Tennessee could have their thoughts and feelings heard on records played in living rooms across the country. It was the first time America heard itself.

Virtually no documentation of these extraordinary events survives and nearly ninety percent of the recording masters have been destroyed. A vital part of American cultural history has been lost.

Over three episodes, narrated by **Robert Redford**, **AMERICAN EPIC** rescues this history. The remarkable lives of these seminal musicians are revealed through previously unseen film footage and photographs, and exclusive interviews with music pioneers, their families and eyewitnesses to the era.

**AMERICAN EPIC** represents a ten-year odyssey undertaken by director **Bernard MacMahon** and producers **Allison McGourty** and **Duke Erikson**, and audio engineer **Nicholas Bergh** that involved tracking down countless long forgotten musicians, restoring the music that they recorded and reassembling the technology that created it. Along the way they brought some of the most important figures in contemporary culture to help them on their quest. Executive Producers **Jack White**, **T Bone Burnett** and **Robert Redford** have lent their support to what Redford calls "America's greatest untold story".

**Starring: The Carter Family, Memphis Jug Band, Elder Burch, The Williamson Bros. & Curry, Dick Justice, Charley Patton, Hopi Indian Chanters, Joseph Kekuku, Lydia Mendoza, the Breaux Family, Mississippi John Hurt, and Blind Willie Johnson**

In **THE AMERICAN EPIC SESSIONS**, the team has reassembled the very first electrical sound recording system from the 1920s, and invited **Jack White** and **T Bone Burnett** to produce an album of recordings by twenty of today's greatest artists. In this beautifully filmed musical feature, these artists are given the chance to pass through the portal that brought the world into the modern era.

Engineer **Nicholas Bergh** has reassembled this recording system from original parts and it is now the only one left in the world. The system consists of a single microphone, a towering six-foot amplifier rack, and a live record-cutting lathe, powered by a weight-driven pulley system of clockwork gears. The musicians have roughly three minutes to record their song direct to disc before the weight hits the floor. In the 1920s, they called this "catching lightning in a bottle." All the musical performances in this film are live. The audio you hear is taken directly from the discs they were recorded to, with no editing or enhancements.

**Starring: Alabama Shakes, The Americans, Ana Gabriel, Ashley Monroe, The Avett Brothers, Beck, Bettye LaVette, Bobby Ingano, Elton John, Frank Fairfield, Jerron "Blind Boy" Paxton, Los Lobos, Lost Bayou Ramblers, Nas, Pokey LaFarge, Raphael Saadiq, Rhiannon Giddens, Steve Martin and Edie Brickell, Taj Mahal, Jack White, and Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard.**



Director **Bernard MacMahon** explained, “**AMERICAN EPIC** is a love letter to the United States. It’s the story of one of the great moments in American history – when the voices of working people, minorities, and rural people throughout the country were first heard. It celebrates all I admire about the country – its rich culture, technological innovation, entrepreneurship and its freedom of speech.”

“In **AMERICAN EPIC** we can examine how important the fact is that when phonograph records were invented, for the first time ever, women, minorities, poor rural men and even children were given the opportunity to say whatever they wanted in song, for the whole world to hear, shockingly without much censorship,” said **Jack White**. “What they were allowed to say on phonograph recordings, they were not allowed to speak in public or in person. That is an astounding thought.”

**Nas**, who records the Memphis Jug Band’s 1928 song “On the Road Again” said “When you hear me saying it, you might think I wrote it, because it sounds like something today. These guys are talking about carrying guns, shooting something, protecting their honor, chasing after some woman who’s done them dirty...it’s the same as rap music today, so it just tells you something about American culture, American music...It didn’t start with hip hop, it started a long time ago. It started with America.”

“This is the story of a profound act of democracy - when the poorest people in our country were recorded and their stories, their songs, and their voices broadcast around the world,” said **T Bone Burnett**. “These early pioneers set a course that led to the extraordinary library of Jazz, Blues, Country, Bluegrass, Rock and Roll, and Hip Hop that is Our Music. This is the story of the United States - a kid leaves home with nothing but a song and conquers the world.”

“This is America’s greatest untold story,” said **Robert Redford**. “It’s an account of the cultural revolution that ultimately united a nation.”

Producer **Allison McGourty** said, “We traveled the length and breadth of America, from Cleveland, Ohio to the Gulf of Mexico, and from New York to Hawaii, in our quest to discover the identities and stories of America’s earliest recorded musicians. We captured testimonials from the last living witnesses and direct descendants of America’s musical pioneers. This is the last time their story can be told before everyone who was there is gone.”

“Our mission was to capture the true spirit of the artists and to bring the atmosphere of their surroundings to life through archive,” said Supervising Editor **Dan Gitlin**. “We wanted to visually celebrate the raw power of their music.”

Producer **Duke Erikson** said, “The more we found out about these recordings, the more we realized how little was known about how they were recorded. We became obsessed with figuring it out, with actually finding the machine that was used to record this amazing music.”

“Early electric recording is very interesting to me” said engineer **Nicholas Bergh**, “because it literally transformed the way the whole world communicated and it essentially enabled the record companies to set up recording sessions all over the country, where everyday people could record their songs and then have those songs distributed across America.”

**Taj Mahal** said about recording for **THE AMERICAN EPIC SESSIONS** “To be back at the front of the recording industry is incredible. The same machines my heroes and mentors have played on, and that this industry got jump-started from? I'd certainly like to be a part of that. As far as I'm concerned it's the sound, and I don't think you can get any better than vinyl. You can get clean, pristine, but you can't get that juice.”



**Beth Hoppe**, Chief Programming Executive and General Manager, General Audience Programming, PBS, said, “We wanted to share this uniquely American story with our audience because of its exploration and celebration of original forms of music and early technologies. PBS has broadcast concerts and documentaries about a diverse variety of music genres over the years, and **AMERICAN EPIC** captures the foundation of American music history through the lens of some incredible untold stories.”

**Anthony Wall**, executive producer for BBC Arena, said, “When Bernard and Allison took me through their ideas and research, I didn't hesitate to say yes. Arena has always been committed to this music but **AMERICAN EPIC** is the most comprehensive account of how and why it came to be recorded in the first place that I've encountered. The combination of the multi-ethnic context and acutely researched individual stories make it irresistible. The accompanying **SESSIONS** film is a delight. It's a joy to see the respect and excitement so many of today's best musicians bring to the discipline of recording in the same way as their heroes of decades ago.”

**Stephen Segaller**, executive in charge for WNET, said, “It's not often that you're pitched a project that is entirely fresh, immediately visual, and seems likely to change your whole understanding of cultural history. **AMERICAN EPIC** is that project – a documentary series that gives us an amazing narrative of cultural enterprise and creative energy, touching on deep American history – and a recording sessions vérité film that keeps on outdoing itself as artist after artist revels in the old-time music and brings it to new levels.”

**Adam Block**, President of Sony Music's Legacy Recordings, said, “Simply put, Legacy exists in no small part to preserve and perpetuate our country's musical heritage. For us, **AMERICAN EPIC** is a celebration of the men and women who established the foundation of virtually everything that we as an industry do today. It is one of the most remarkable cultural, technological and of course musical journeys of all time.”

**Mark Williams**, President of A&R for Columbia Records, said, “Listening to the incredible artists that contributed to **THE AMERICAN EPIC SESSIONS**, we see a direct link with the musicians of the past. As if time hasn't existed and the same spirit, truth and soul of the earlier performers are as much part of the present as it is the past. This record isn't a tribute record as much as it is a continuation of the same story and messages that have been passed along to great artist of today.”

**AMERICAN EPIC** is a production of BBC Arena, Lo-Max Films Ltd., Wildwood Enterprises, and THIRTEEN Productions LLC for WNET. Director: Bernard MacMahon. Producers: Allison McGourty, Bernard MacMahon, Duke Erikson, Adam Block, and Bill Holderman. Executive producers: T Bone Burnett, Robert Redford, Jack White, Anthony Wall for the BBC, and Julie Anderson for WNET. Stephen Segaller is executive in charge for WNET. Bill Gardner, VP of Programming & Development, oversees the project for PBS. The series is written by Bernard MacMahon & Allison McGourty & Duke Erikson and William Morgan.

Funding for **AMERICAN EPIC** is provided by the Anne Ray Foundation, The Family of Mackinley Sillerman, Ann Tenenbaum and Thomas H. Lee, Pacific Islanders in Communications with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Jody and John Arnhold, The V & L Marx Foundation, Rosalind P. Walter, and public television viewers.



**AMERICAN EPIC** will be available on Blu-ray and DVD on June 13 from PBS Distribution; visit [shopPBS.org](http://shopPBS.org) or call 800-PLAY-PBS, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The series will also be available for digital download.

**AMERICAN EPIC** companion soundtrack, 100-song box set and other music products will be released by Legacy Recordings, Columbia Records, and Third Man Records on May 12<sup>th</sup>. For these releases, **Nicholas Bergh** refined a transfer process using a mix of both modern and vintage equipment in order to extract the remarkable resolution from the records that is often missed. This ‘reverse engineering’ approach to the transfer process enabled the restoration team of Grammy Award winning engineer **Peter Henderson, Duke Erikson** and **Joel Tefteller** to get the resulting audio closer to the original performance than ever before. This is not “remastering,” in the normal sense, but something closer to fine art restoration. The intent is not for people to marvel at the antiquity of these discs, but rather to experience them as vital, immediate performances that speak to us as directly as they did on the day they were recorded—not simply great art for their time, but great art for all times.

The companion book, **AMERICAN EPIC**, will be available May 2 from Touchstone. **Bernard MacMahon** and **Allison McGourty**’s fascinating account, written with the assistance of prize-winning author **Elijah Wald**, continues the journey of the series with a behind-the-scenes look at the incredible journey across America searching for these recordings and eyewitness accounts. It features additional stories, exclusive never-before-seen photographs, and unearthed artwork. It also contains contributions from many of the musicians who participated, including Taj Mahal, Nas, Willie Nelson, and Steve Martin all of which will reveal a new understanding of America to the world and future generations.

PBS International, the co-production and distribution arm of PBS Distribution, is distributing **AMERICAN EPIC** to broadcasters and media companies worldwide. Several international broadcasters including BBC (United Kingdom), ARTE/ZDF (France and Germany), Canal Plus (Spain), and Channel 8 (Israel) have already signed on to air the film in their territories.

For more information on the overall initiative visit [www.americanepic.com](http://www.americanepic.com). For information specifically about the documentary series and recording studio film visit [www.pbs.org/americanepic](http://www.pbs.org/americanepic). The social media hashtag is #AmericanEpic.

#### **About PBS** □

**PBS**, with its over 350 member stations, offers all Americans the opportunity to explore new ideas and new worlds through television and online content. Each month, PBS reaches nearly 103 million people through television and over 33million 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’ broad array of programs has been consistently honored by the industry’s most coveted award competitions. Teachers of children from pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade turn to PBS for digital content and services that help bring classroom lessons to life. PBS’ premier children’s TV programming and its website, [pbskids.org](http://pbskids.org), are parents’ and teachers’ most trusted partners in inspiring and nurturing curiosity and love of learning in children. More information about PBS is available at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org), one of the leading dot-org websites on the Internet, or by following [PBS on Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) or through our [apps for mobile and connected devices](#). Specific program information and updates for press are available at [pbs.org/pressroom](http://pbs.org/pressroom) or by following [PBS PressRoom on Twitter](#).



### **About BBC Arena**

Celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, *Arena* is the world's longest running arts documentary strand. Anthony Wall has been a director since 1978 and series editor, succeeding Alan Yentob, since 1985. *Arena* is dedicated to arts and culture high and low, from Visconti to Hip Hop, from Dylan and The Beatles to Nelson Mandela. In 2000, *Arena* was given the Special Medallion at the Telluride Film Festival for its contribution to "cutting edge film making". It was there that Werner Herzog, a fellow medallion recipient, declared *Arena* to be "the oasis in the sea of insanity that is television." Other awards include the Prix Italia, Primetime and International Emmys, the Peabody, nine BAFTAS and twenty-five nominations, six Royal Television Society awards and numerous honors from all over the globe.

### **About Lo-Max Films**

Lo-Max Films, founded by Allison McGourty, Bernard MacMahon and Duke Erikson is an award winning film and music Production Company. It handles the direction, editing and music composition for the *American Epic* series. It has compiled the music releases and developed, with Nicholas Bergh at Endpoint Audio Labs and Grammy Award winning audio engineer Peter Henderson, the innovative audio transfers and restoration on the archival titles.

### **About Sony Music Entertainment**

Sony Music Entertainment is a global recorded music company with a current roster that includes a broad array of both local artists and international superstars. The company boasts a vast catalog that comprises some of the most important recordings in history. It is home to premier record labels representing music from every genre, including Arista Nashville, Beach Street, Bystorm Entertainment, Columbia Nashville, Columbia Records, Day 1, Descendant Records, Epic Records, Essential Records, Essential Worship, Fo Yo Soul Recordings, Kemosabe Records, Legacy Recordings, MASTERWORKS, Polo Grounds, RCA Inspiration, RCA Nashville, RCA Records, Reunion Records, Sony Classical, Sony Music Latin, Star Time International, Syco Music, Vested in Culture and Volcano. Sony Music Entertainment is a wholly owned subsidiary of Sony Corporation of America.

### **About Columbia Records**

One of the most respected and successful record labels in the world, Columbia Records is home to established superstars and exciting new talent. Columbia Records is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Sony Music Entertainment.

### **About Sony Music's Legacy Recordings**

Sony Music's Legacy Recordings, the catalog division of Sony Music Entertainment, is home to the world's foremost library of historically significant commercial recordings, a peerless collection of works by the most important musical artists of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. Across a variety of platforms, the label offers contemporary music fans access to thousands of meticulously restored and remastered archival titles representing virtually every musical genre including popular, rock, jazz, blues, R&B, folk, country, gospel, Broadway musicals, movie soundtracks, rap/hip-hop, world music, classical, comedy and more.

Founded in 1990 by CBS Records (rebranded Sony Music in 1991), Legacy has expanded on its original mission (preserving and reissuing back catalogs of Columbia Records, Epic Records and associated CBS labels) to provide new and innovative avenues for artist and repertoire exposure including Grammy winning curated retrospectives, social media campaigns, Oscar winning soundtracks, new talent signings and groundbreaking campaigns for established artists and catalog. Following the creation of Sony BMG Music Entertainment in 2005, Legacy assumed responsibility for recordings from the archives of the BMG family of labels (including RCA Records, Arista, J Records, Jive, Profile, Silvertone, Sony BMG Nashville and Windham Hill, as well as imprints including Bang!, CTI, Mainstream, Monument, Ode, and others).



### **About Third Man Records**

Third Man Records was launched by Jack White in Detroit, MI in 2001, and in 2009 opened its current Nashville, TN location which houses a record store, novelties lounge (featuring the Third Man Record Booth), label offices and distribution center, photo studio, and the world's only live venue with direct-to-acetate recording capabilities. Third Man is an innovator in the world of vinyl records and a boundary pusher in the world of recorded music, aiming to bring tangibility and spontaneity back into the record business and issue releases that leave no doubt in the minds of listeners that music is indeed sacred. The American Epic vinyl releases will be pressed in Third Man's brand new state-of-the-art pressing plant in Detroit, MI.

### **About WNET**

WNET is America's flagship PBS station and parent company of [THIRTEEN](#) and [WLIW21](#). WNET also operates [NJTV](#), the statewide public media network in New Jersey. Through its broadcast channels, three cable services (KidsThirteen, Create and World) and online streaming sites, WNET brings quality arts, education and public affairs programming to more than five million viewers each week. WNET produces and presents such acclaimed PBS series as [Nature](#), [Great Performances](#), [American Masters](#), [PBS NewsHour Weekend](#), [Charlie Rose](#) and a range of documentaries, children's programs, and local news and cultural offerings. WNET's groundbreaking series for children and young adults include [Get the Math](#), [Oh Noah!](#) and [Cyberchase](#) as well as [Mission US](#), the award-winning interactive history game. WNET highlights the tri-state's unique culture and diverse communities through [NYC-ARTS](#), [Theater Close-Up](#), [NJTV News with Mary Alice Williams](#) and [MetroFocus](#), the daily multi-platform news magazine focusing on the New York region. In addition, WNET produces online-only programming including the award-winning series about gender identity, [First Person](#), and an intergenerational look at tech and pop culture, [The Chatterbox with Kevin and Grandma Lill](#). In 2015, THIRTEEN launched Passport, an online streaming service which allows members to see new and archival THIRTEEN and PBS programming anytime, anywhere: [www.thirteen.org/passport](http://www.thirteen.org/passport).

### **CONTACT:**

Brian Moriarty, DKC Communications, 212-685-4300; [brian\\_moriarty@dkcnews.com](mailto:brian_moriarty@dkcnews.com)

Aliza Rabinoff, DKC Communications, 212-685-4300; [Aliza\\_rabinoff@dkcnews.com](mailto:Aliza_rabinoff@dkcnews.com)

Natasha Padilla, WNET, 212-560-8824; [padilla@wnet.org](mailto:padilla@wnet.org)

For images and additional up-to-date information on this program visit: [pbs.org/pressroom](http://pbs.org/pressroom) or [thirteen.org/pressroom](http://thirteen.org/pressroom)

