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[i]NDEPENDENT LENS

**NEGROES WITH GUNS: ROB WILLIAMS AND BLACK POWER TELLS
THE FASCINATING STORY OF A FORGOTTEN CIVIL RIGHTS FIGURE WHO DARED TO ADVOCATE ARMED RESISTANCE TO THE VIOLENCE OF
THE JIM CROW SOUTH.**

**PREMIERES ON PBS'S *INDEPENDENT LENS*
THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING SERIES HOSTED BY EDIE FALCO
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 7, AT 10 PM (CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS)**

**"I just wasn't going to allow white men to have that much authority over me."
-Robert Williams**

(San Francisco)—Taken from the title of Robert Williams's 1962 manifesto entitled *Negroes with Guns*, **NEGROES WITH GUNS: ROB WILLIAMS AND BLACK POWER** tells the wrenching story of the now-forgotten civil rights activist who dared to challenge not only the Klan-dominated establishment in his small North Carolina hometown but also the nonviolence-advocating leadership of the mainstream Civil Rights Movement. Williams, who had witnessed countless acts of brutality against his neighbors, courageously gave public expression to the private philosophy of many African Americans—that armed self-defense was both a practical matter of survival and an honorable position, particularly in the violent racist heart of the Deep South. Featuring a jazz score by Terence Blanchard (*Barbershop* and the films of Spike Lee), **NEGROES WITH GUNS** combines modern-day interviews with rare archival news footage and interviews to tell the story of Williams, the forefather of the black power movement and a fascinating, complex man who played a pivotal role in the struggle for respect, dignity and equality for all Americans. **NEGROES WITH GUNS**, produced by Sandra Dickson and Churchill Roberts (*Freedom Never Dies: The Legacy of Harry T. Moore*) will air on the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens*, hosted by Edie Falco, on Tuesday, February 7, 2006, at 10 PM (check local listings), in conjunction with the celebration of Black History Month.

"I advocated violent self-defense because I don't really think you can have a defense against violent racists and against terrorists unless you are prepared to meet violence with violence, and my policy was to meet violence with violence." -Robert Williams

Born and raised in the small, segregated North Carolina town of Monroe, Williams grew up in an African American community in which brutalization by whites was an everyday occurrence. The Klan was a powerful force in Monroe, and African Americans there, as in most of America at that time, learned to keep a low profile in the face of white power.

But not Williams. As his wife, Mabel, recalls in the film, Williams's strong grandmother taught him to stand up for himself, and it was she who gave him his first gun. Says Mabel, "That was a symbol of their family's resistance against oppression." After graduating from high school, Williams enlisted in the Marine Corps, but was sorely disappointed when he was passed over because of his race for the training he wanted, in broadcasting. He returned to Monroe in 1956 and joined the NAACP, soon becoming president of his local chapter. With his fellow members, Williams waged a campaign to integrate the local public swimming pool.



Angered by Williams's audacity, the Klan stepped up its harassment of Monroe's black citizens. Williams decided to form the Black Guard, an armed group committed to the protection of Monroe's black community. Members were on call to keep the peace and come to aid of black citizens, whose calls to the police usually went unanswered. White men in Monroe traditionally were armed; Williams felt that the black community should take advantage of its right to be armed as well and not accept violence as inevitable.

Having a community of armed black citizens enraged Monroe's white leadership and created a powder-keg situation on the streets of the small town. Klan activity increased, and shots were fired into black homes. Meanwhile, Williams began a public relations campaign, outlining the violent situation in Monroe in editorials that ran in newspapers all across the South. The Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum throughout the region, and Williams became an increasingly visible figure in the movement.

Then, in 1958, Monroe was rocked by the so-called Kissing Case, an incident in which a black boy kissed a white girl during a kissing game. Two black boys—aged 8 and 10—were arrested, locked in jail and terrorized for six days, and eventually sentenced to reform school. As Williams's biographer, Tim Tyson, recounts, Williams "turned into kind of a one-man press office for the Kissing Case, and he managed to get this out to the front pages of newspapers all over the world." Because of the bad publicity, the judge commuted the boys' sentence.

Soon after, another big case strained Monroe to the breaking point. A pregnant black woman was chased through a field by a white man intent on raping her. Some black men in the community thought the Black Guard should take up arms against the offender, but Williams insisted that they trust the law. The offender was found not guilty and released. For Williams and the majority of Monroe's black citizens, that verdict was the last straw. As Williams recalls, it was after the verdict "that I made a statement that if the law, if the United States Constitution, cannot be enforced in this social jungle called Dixie, it is time that Negroes must defend themselves, even if it is necessary to resort to violence."

Williams chose not to align himself with the more prevalent nonviolent side of the Civil Rights Movement, headed by Dr. Martin Luther King. Williams did, however, support the intentions of the Freedom Riders, who were appearing all over the South throughout those years. In August 1961, Freedom Riders came to Monroe to assist Williams in his struggle and demonstrate that passive resistance rather than armed self-defense was the superior tactic. But on August 27, all hell broke loose. As several Monroe residents and former Freedom Riders dramatically recount in *NEGROES WITH GUNS*, droves of Klansmen poured into town, and by the end of the day, the Freedom Riders had been bloodied, beaten and jailed.

Williams spent the next eight years in exile, continuing his fight against racism. He was given political asylum in Cuba, and he began his Radio Free Dixie broadcasts, a unique combination of music and fiery black power rhetoric that, among other things, urged black soldiers not to fight in Vietnam. The broadcasts were heard as far away as Los Angeles and New York City. But Williams wasn't a communist, and an ideological falling out with Castro ended the Williams family's stay in Cuba. They then went to China, where they were greeted warmly by Mao. In 1962, Williams's *Negroes with Guns* was published, and it became an unofficial founding document of the black power movement.



The images found in this release are available to the press as high resolution downloadable photos with captions at www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos/

PAGE 1:
Left: Mabel and Robert Williams in Tanzania in 1969.
Photo: Robert Cohen/ITVS
Center: Robert Williams in Africa during the late 1960s.
Photo: Robert Carl Cohen/ITVS
Right: Robert and Mabel Williams target practicing in Havana, Cuba.
Photo: John H. Williams/ITVS

PAGE 2:
Left: Chairman Mao Tsetung with Robert Williams.
Photo: John H. Williams/ITVS
Center: Mabel and Rob at their home in Baldwin, Michigan (1996).
Photo: John H. Williams/ITVS
Right: (Front Row) Co-Directors, Sandra Dickson & Churchill Roberts of *NEGROES WITH GUNS*; (Back Row) Associate Director's Cindy Hill & Cara Pilon.
Photo: Kristen Bartlett/ITVS