

For Immediate Release:

NEW DOCUMENTARY

“NEGROES WITH GUNS: ROB WILLIAMS AND BLACK POWER”

TELLS THE FASCINATING STORY OF FORGOTTEN CIVIL RIGHTS FIGURE WHO DARED TO ADVOCATE ARMED RESISTANCE TO THE VIOLENCE OF THE JIM CROW SOUTH

*“I just wasn’t going to allow white men to have that much authority over me.”
– Robert Williams*

(Gainesville, FL) Filmmakers Sandra Dickson and Churchill Roberts, who previously collaborated on the critically acclaimed FREEDOM NEVER DIES: THE LEGACY OF HARRY T. MOORE, announced completion of their latest one-hour documentary, **NEGROES WITH GUNS: ROB WILLIAMS AND BLACK POWER**. Taken from the title of Robert Williams’ 1962 manifesto entitled *Negroes with Guns*, the film tells the wrenching story of the now forgotten civil rights activist who dared to challenge not only the Klan-dominated establishment of his small North Carolina town but also the non-violence-advocating leadership of the mainstream Civil Rights movement. Williams, who had witnessed countless acts of brutality against his neighbors, dared to give public expression to the private philosophy of many African Americans -- that armed self defense was not only a practical matter of survival but also an honorable position, particularly in the violent, racist heart of the deep South. Featuring a jazz score by Terence Blanchard (BARBERSHOP, 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.

“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 that experienced brutalization by whites as 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 Robert Williams. As his wife Mabel recalls in the film, Robert's grandmother was a strong woman who taught Robert to stand up for himself and it was she who gave him his first gun. Says Mabel, "She gave it to him because that was a symbol of their family's resistance against oppression." After graduating from high school, Robert Williams enlisted in the Marine Corps but was sorely disappointed when he was passed over for the training he wanted, in broadcasting, because of his race. He returned to Monroe in 1956 and became active in the NAACP, becoming president of his local chapter. With his fellow members, Williams waged a campaign to integrate the local public swimming pool.

Angered by Williams' 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 were usually 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.

"We were never looking for trouble. As long as you peaceful, we peaceful. You become violent, we become violent. We weren't attacking anybody, just protecting ourselves." – Richard Crowder, member of Monroe's Black Guard.

Having a community of armed black citizens enraged and terrified Monroe's white leadership and created a powder-keg situation on the streets of the small town. Klan rallies increased in frequency and attendance, 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 throughout 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. The girl involved casually mentioned the incident to her mother who instantly alerted both the girl's father and the police. Two boys – aged 8 and 10 -- were arrested, locked in the jail for six days and terrorized, and eventually sentenced to reform school. As Rob Williams' biographer Tim Tyson recounts, Wilson "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 their 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 Guard should take up arms against the offender but Williams insisted that the Guard trust the law. But 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' angry words sent tremors of fear throughout the white community and also put off many mainstream Black civil rights activists, who knew that Williams' philosophy would not play well among their liberal white supporters. The NAACP suspended him from his post but Williams kept agitating for change in Monroe, despite ever-mounting threats.

Although Williams chose not to align himself with the more prevalent non-violent side of the civil rights movement, headed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Williams supported the intentions of the Freedom Riders who were arriving in those years throughout the South. 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 27th, all hell broke loose in Monroe. 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. Rob Williams, who had supported the newcomers by providing housing and other help, did not go downtown to join them. Instead, he stayed at home and wound up probably saving the lives of the Stegalls, a white couple who mistakenly drove into the black part of town and met an angry mob, fired up by what was happening downtown. According to Williams, he encouraged the couple to stay put for several hours and then released them, when the mob had quieted, but by the end of the day Williams and his family were on the run from the FBI who charged Williams with kidnapping.

As we see through extensive newsreel footage from the era, Williams spent the next eight years in exile, continuing his fight against racism. He was given political asylum in Cuba and 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 Robert wasn't a communist and an ideological falling out with Castro ended the visit. The Williams family next went to China where they were greeted warmly by Mao. In 1962, Williams' *Negroes with Guns* was published, and became an unofficial founding document of the Black Power movement.

By 1969, the political landscape in the U.S. had changed significantly and Williams was able to return home. The kidnapping charges against him were dropped and the Nixon

administration, intent on opening up diplomatic relations with China, enlisted Williams' advice. Many expected him to step into a leadership role in the Black militant movement but instead he became a Ford Fellow in China Studies at the University of Michigan and later retired to a quiet life as a writer and community activist. He died of cancer in 1996, just as he intended -- an old warrior but not thankfully not a martyr for racial justice.

NEGROES WITH GUNS is not only an incisive look at a truly fascinating man but also a thought-provoking examination of our notions of patriotism and the acceptable limits of dissent. Rob Williams' conviction that people have a right to defend themselves against brutality may seem like a natural and obvious response today but, as the film shows, it was a concept so radical in its time that it scared not only whites but many blacks as well. But, as the film shows, Williams prevailed. He got to live out his days peacefully fighting for his convictions instead of being killed during the dangerous days of the Civil Rights battle. Perhaps best of all, he lived to see Monroe integrated, with black and white children swimming in the same public pool, unaware of the battle it took to make such a seemingly simple thing possible. His beliefs inspired a generation of Black radicals who in turn altered American history.

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Featured Interviewees, in order of Appearance

John H. Williams, Rob's brother
Mabel Williams, Rob's wife
John C. Williams, Rob's son
Beatrice Colson, Monroe resident
Yusef Crowder, former member of the Black Guard
Roy Crowder, Monroe civil rights activist
John McDow, Black Guard member
Tim Tyson, author of *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*
Julian Bond, chairman of the NAACP
Phil Bazemore, Monroe resident
Constance Lever, British-born civil rights activist
Vann Secrest, Monroe resident
James Forman, civil rights activist/former Freedom Rider
Pat Coffey, Monroe resident
Clayborne Carson, historian
Ron Stephens, historian

About the Filmmakers

SANDRA DICKSON (Co-Director/Writer) has co-produced and written documentaries for national distribution on PBS. Her works include *Giving Up the Canal*, *Campaign for Cuba*, *Last Days of the Revolution* and *Deciding Who Dies*. These documentaries have been distributed internationally as well as on video. Her most recent film was the critically acclaimed *Freedom Never Dies: The Legacy of Harry T. Moore*, winner of the Erik Barnouw Award for Outstanding Historical Documentary. Sandra Dickson has received grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the North Carolina Humanities Council, Freedom Forum and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. She is Co-Director of The Documentary Institute, The College of Journalism and Communications, The University of Florida.

CHURCHILL ROBERTS (Co-Director) has co-produced and directed a number of PBS documentaries including *Giving Up the Canal*, *Campaign for Cuba*, *Last Days of the Revolution*, and *Freedom Never Dies: The Legacy of Harry T. Moore*. These documentaries received several awards as well as national press coverage, including reviews in *The New York Times*. He has received grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, The North Carolina Humanities Council, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and Freedom Forum. He is Co-Director of The Documentary Institute, The College of Journalism and Communications, The University of Florida.

NEGROES WITH GUNS: ROB WILLIAMS AND BLACK POWER

Directed by	Sandra Dickson and Churchill Roberts
Associate Producers	Cindy Hill and Cara Pilson
Writer	Sandra Dickson
Music by	Terence Blanchard
Editor	Dan Spiess, Digital Lighthouse
Director of Photography/Offline Editor	Cindy Hill
Director of Research	Cara Pilson
Chief Project Consultant	Tim Tyson
Additional Project Consultants	Clayborne Carson Pat Coffey James Forman Ron Stephens
Executive Producer and Consultant	Charles Hobson