



**For Immediate Release**

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## **Tales of Tobacco Form Southern Saga of Filmmaker's Family In P.O.V.'s "Bright Leaves"**

Acclaimed Filmmaker Ross McElwee Crosses His Native North Carolina  
In Search of a Lost Family Legacy in New Documentary Premiering August 23 on PBS

Ross McElwee believes in movie magic. He is one of the great ironists of American film. In his 1986 breakthrough **Sherman's March**, named one of best movies of that year, and in such subsequent works as **Time Indefinite** (P.O.V.) and **Six O'Clock News**, McElwee weaves psychological, familial, and social realities into wry meditations infused with Southern charm on the power and futility of life itself. But – dogged, disarmingly sincere, and with a sure instinct for revealing the oddities of the American experience – McElwee's latest film is perhaps his most richly layered look at family, folklore and the art of filmmaking itself.

In **Bright Leaves**, having its national broadcast premiere on public television's P.O.V., McElwee returns with another gothic tale – one that popped up from deep in his own family's past, involving "bright leaf" tobacco, a forgotten Hollywood potboiler starring Gary Cooper and Patricia Neal, a man named Duke whom everyone remembers, and another man named McElwee whom almost no one remembers. Along the way, **Bright Leaves** passes through the beautiful, rich farmlands of North Carolina, sewn green with the tobacco that may be the world's best, and worked by proud people wrestling with society's changed attitudes toward smoking.

Ross McElwee's **Bright Leaves** airs **Tuesday, August 23, 2005** at 10 p.m., as part of the 18th season of public television's P.O.V. series. P.O.V. is American television's longest-running independent documentary series, and is PBS's premier showcase for point-of-view, nonfiction films. P.O.V. continues through September 13. Also airing on August 23 is a short film by Jason DaSilva, **A Song for Daniel**.

North Carolina produces more tobacco than any other state. The planting of a particularly tasty strand called "bright leaf" was the state's salvation after the Civil War, and two men – both penniless war veterans – were the visionaries who brought it about. One was James B. Duke, whose name and fortune remains one of the most storied and prominent in the nation, and whose ancestors still dominate the foothills of North Carolina. The other was John Harvey McElwee, who lost out to the brass-knuckled business practices of Duke, and whose ancestors – including ultimately the filmmaker – took an inexorable slide from mansion to middle-class gentility.

Filmmaker McElwee who, oddly enough, grew up in a suburban bungalow not much more than a block from the fabulous mansion of the Dukes (now a museum), had heard family stories about John Harvey's tobacco fortunes. But with a grandfather, father, and older brother who were doctors, the family's tobacco past seemed remote. That changes when McElwee, needing one of his periodic "Southern fixes," visits John, a cousin he's never met. The visit kicks off **Bright Leaves**, as



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McElwee discovers that John is an avid and accomplished collector of movies and movie memorabilia. Naturally he's anxious to show his cousin something he believes will interest him, and McElwee, ever-skeptical, nevertheless goes along for the ride.

Doubt vanishes when John screens the only surviving print of a movie long forgotten, despite its solid Hollywood pedigree. "Bright Leaf," starring Gary Cooper, Patricia Neal, and Lauren Bacall, tells a melodramatic "Citizen Kane"-style story about a self-made tobacco baron who is ruined by a richer and more ruthless rival and who, in the end, can do no more than bring his own estate down in flames. Based on a novel about the North Carolina tobacco country, the film's parallel to John Harvey McElwee's unfortunate fate is striking, at least as far as the two cousins – his great grandsons – understand it.

Discovery of a Hollywood tale based on his own family sends the filmmaker across North Carolina on a many-faceted journey. He wants to find out the truth of old John Harvey's downfall, but also the provenance of the Gary Cooper movie and just how closely it might have been drawn from the family history. Along the way, he muses about the "might-have-beens" of tobacco history, about his family's complicity in launching a habit that has come to be seen as so pernicious, and about of the fates of winners and losers in capitalist America. He passes through the tobacco-cultivated Carolina countryside in wonder that such fertile land could nourish such a troubling harvest.

McElwee visits aunt Elizabeth King – John Harvey's sole surviving grandchild – who relates the family version of history: John Harvey's secret bright leaf blend, successfully marketed as "Durham Bull" tobacco, was stolen by a McElwee employee and sold to James Duke. Duke, in turn, marketed the blend under the Bull Durham brand, using his financial and political clout to muscle John Harvey McElwee into bankruptcy. A local historian in Statesville, where McElwee finds the old family mansion turned into a parking lot, confirms much of the tale – John Harvey won in court again and again, only to have victory overturned on appeal, presumably due to Duke's backdoor influence. The filmmaker, cousin John, Aunt Elizabeth and even the local historian feel a rising conviction that the movie "Bright Leaf" did tell John Harvey's story.

In his inimitable way, McElwee follows the clues – and his own reflections – in every direction. He talks with people such as grower Howard McPherson and auctioneer James McDougal, who proudly raise and sell tobacco, but who admit to "mixed feelings" about the trade, often from their own families' experiences with cancer. He talks to teenage beauty queens riding in "Tobacco Day Parades" soon to be rechristened "Farmers' Day Parades." He takes a ride with his friend, novelist Allan Gurganis (*Oldest Confederate Widow Tells All*), who tells of his own roots in tobacco farming. He visits the former Duke mansion with his friend Charleen, who recalls her adventures as an eight-year old, surreptitiously riding her bike on the mansion grounds. He discovers a tiny, barren park named after John Harvey, contrasting it with the huge Duke Homestead State Park and other monuments to the Duke name. He even takes his son, Adrian, along as a soundman for a hospital interview with a cancer-stricken smoker.

That's the other thread running through **Bright Leaves** – McElwee's ongoing ruminations about the role of home movies and photos in his family's life and history, about the filmic legacy he's leaving his own son, and, of course, about his own obsession with capturing life on film. His thoughts take him to film professor Vlada Petric, a visit that turns into a madcap Brechtian *cum* Marx Brothers lecture on film fundamentals. McElwee even manages to talk to the last surviving star of "Bright Leaf," Patricia Neal, who is more informative about her love affair with Cooper than about the old film's sources.

Ultimately, McElwee locates the 80-year-old widow of the man who wrote the book on which the movie, "Bright Leaf," was based. What she tells him adds an unexpected twist to McElwee's investigation of the family history – and to his own meditations on filmmaking.

**Bright Leaves** is an impressionistic journey across the social, economic, and psychological terrain of North Carolina's tobacco country by a native Carolinian, whose roots in the land and its famous

bright leaf tobacco go deeper than he knew. **Bright Leaves** is also another chapter in McElwee's ongoing investigation of films as ever-more-critical carriers of personal, family and social legacies.

"**Bright Leaves** is a subjective, autobiographical take on cigarettes and their troubling legacy," says McElwee. "As with each of my films, members of my family and close friends appear. Some of them have been showing up in my films for over 25 years now. This adds a dimension to my work, a record of how much – or how little – my family and I have changed over time."

#### **About the filmmaker:**

##### **Ross McElwee Director/Producer**

Ross McElwee has made seven feature-length documentaries as well as several shorter films. Most of his films were shot in his native American South, among them the critically acclaimed **Sherman's March**, **Time Indefinite** (which aired on P.O.V. in 1994), and **Six O'Clock News**. **Sherman's March** won numerous awards, including Best Documentary at the Sundance Film Festival, and was cited by the National Board of Film Critics as one of the five best films of 1986. McElwee's films have been shown in festivals worldwide, and have received retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the American Museum of the Moving Image, and États généraux du film documentaire in Lussas, France. In 2000, **Sherman's March** was selected for a Cinéma du Réel retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and four of his films were featured in a selection of western documentaries shown for the first time in Tehran, Iran. The Library of Congress National Film Registry has chosen **Sherman's March** for preservation.

A native of North Carolina, McElwee graduated from Brown University and earned an MS in filmmaking from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He began his career in his hometown of Charlotte where he was a studio cameraman for local evening news, housewife helper shows, and "gospel hour" programs. He later worked shooting films for documentary filmmakers D.A. Pennebaker and John Marshall. McElwee started producing and directing his own documentaries in 1976. McElwee has been teaching filmmaking at Harvard University, where he is a professor in the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies, since 1986.

#### **Credits:**

Producer:	Ross McElwee
Associate Producer:	Linda Morgenstern
Director:	Ross McElwee
Editor:	Ross McElwee, Mark Meatto
Cinematographers:	Ross McElwee

**Running Time:** 1:56:46

#### **Awards & Festivals:**

- PRISM Film Festival Award, 2005
- Cannes Film Festival, Director's Fortnight, 2003
- Toronto International Film Festival, 2003
- New York Film Festival, 2003
- Rotterdam International Film Festival, 2003
- Sydney Film Festival, 2003

## **A Song for Daniel**

**A Song for Daniel**, by Jason DaSilva, compares a routine day of two nine-year-old Iraqi boys: one living in Baghdad and the other born and raised in New York. It offers a profound examination of culture and race through the eyes of Iraqi youths living on opposite sides of the world.



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and now in its 18th season on PBS, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running series on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing Tuesdays at 10 p.m., June through September, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought over 220 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and now has a Webby Award-winning online series, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V is available online at [www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov).

### ***P.O.V. Interactive*** ([www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov))

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. It also produces a Web site for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of P.O.V. films through community-based and educational applications, focusing on involving viewers in activities, information and feedback on the issues. In addition, [www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov) houses our unique *Talking Back* feature, filmmaker interviews and viewer resources, and information on the P.O.V. archives as well as myriad special sites for previous P.O.V. broadcasts.

### ***P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education***

P.O.V. provides Discussion Guides for all films as well as curriculum-based P.O.V. Lesson Plans for select films to promote the use of independent media among varied constituencies. Available free online, these originally produced materials ensure the ongoing use of P.O.V.'s documentaries with educators, community workers, opinion leaders and general audiences nationally. P.O.V. also works closely with local public television stations to partner with local museums, libraries, schools and community-based organizations to raise awareness of the issues in P.O.V.'s films. *Youth Views*, P.O.V.'s youth engagement program, expands these efforts by working directly with youth service organizations.

Major funding for P.O.V. is provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Educational Foundation of America, the Ford Foundation, PBS and public television viewers. P.O.V. is presented by a consortium of public television station including KCET/Los Angeles, WGBH/Boston, and WNET/New York. Cara Mertes is executive director of P.O.V./American Documentary, Inc.



Support for P.O.V. is provided by Starbucks Coffee Company. Starbucks has a rich tradition of supporting the arts and independent film and celebrates the fact that numerous points of view can be discussed over a good cup of coffee. Starbucks is committed to offering the highest quality coffee in grocery stores nationwide.

### ***American Documentary, Inc.*** ([www.americandocumentary.org](http://www.americandocumentary.org))

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, on line and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback, to educational opportunities and community participation.

**TAPE REQUESTS:** *Please note that a broadcast version of this film is available upon request, as the film may be edited to comply with new FCC regulations.*