



## **P.O.V.'s "Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars"**

By Zach Niles and Banker White

Tuesday, June 26, 2007 at 10 p.m. on PBS (Check local listings)

### **Filmmakers' Statement**

Africa remains a mysterious and misunderstood place to many Americans, as it was for both of us before we visited the continent for the first time in 1993 as part of a study abroad program from Middlebury College in Vermont, where we met. Africa is a cradle of civilization and home to incredible biodiversity, yet it lives with the ghost of slavery and is suffering from modern-day disease, famine and civil war.

We each had our own trepidations as we approached our trips, which were re-enforced by media coverage that seems to tell only horror stories from that part of the world. But our fears were misplaced and we each came back with only positive experiences. We had made good friends, learned a lot about ourselves and had fallen in love with the music of the countries we visited.

Returning home, however, we were faced only with questions focused on the perceived dangers and poverty that we encountered. There was a general distrust of anything positive we would say. In many ways this was the seed, planted more than a decade ago, that brought us to make **Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars**.

We are both musicians and knew from our earliest discussions that music would be our entry point to tell a story that illuminated a more human understanding of the place and people. Music is a universal language that speaks in emotion; it transcends culture, language and almost any other gulf that we create and define ourselves by. We knew we could not look away from the modern tragedies plaguing the continent, so instead we moved towards the idea of focusing on musicians and giving voice to individuals who had been affected. The refugee emergency in West Africa, fueled by prolonged wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, was compelling because of the incredible size and cross-section of the population that was affected.

In the summer of 2002, after spending a month playing music in refugee camps in Guinea we met 'The Refugee All Stars Band' as they rehearsed in a mud hut in Sembakounya Refugee Camp set deep in the Guinean countryside. During our travels we had met many talented musicians with compelling stories, but we felt a special connection to the band from our first meeting and jam session. They were diverse in age and character, from a roguish rhythm guitar player in his 50s to an orphaned teenage rapper, but they had a common bond born through a collective history of war, loss and displacement. Their love and support for each other made them a family.

From our very first interviews we knew their story would not only be a celebration of what is beautiful about Africa, but what is beautiful about the human spirit — the strength to overcome adversity, the ability to forgive — and when you've found hope, the desire to share it with other

This is our first film and from the beginning, we would joke that Reuben (the band's leader) knew what we were doing there more than we did. He often said, half seriously, that the band had been



writing and practicing music just waiting for us to arrive. They immediately recognized this film as an opportunity for their stories and music to be heard abroad, and this project quickly turned into what could best be described as a creative collaboration between the production team and the band.

We became very good friends with ‘The Refugee All Stars,’ a relationship that continues to this day. We hope that this closeness translates into a film that helps to create an emotional connection between the viewer and these musicians whose circumstance and culture might easily let them be dismissed as “different” from us.

We hope that the experience of **Sierra Leone’s Refugee All Stars** will resonate for the viewer far beyond the scope of one band, one country, or one war. Around the world, senseless conflicts continue to rip apart the lives of innocent civilians but it can be difficult to feel real compassion when tragedy is seen from a distance. We believe that the story of ‘The Refugee All Stars’ closes that distance and helps us to look past our differences and embrace instead our common humanity. The idea that one life is worth less than another is at the root of much of the world’s woes. This film is an attempt in our own way to dispel this dangerous notion.

We are deeply grateful to all the members of the band and to their families for being so open with us and for having the courage to share some of the painful details of their lives with the world. The band has told us that it has been empowering to present themselves in the way that they wish to be seen – not as helpless victims, but as talented, loving, and ambitious people who refuse to accept the injustices around them. We have come to see them as speaking not only for Sierra Leone’s refugees, but for persecuted, underprivileged and forgotten people worldwide.

We feel very lucky to have met ‘The Refugee All Stars’ and cherish all that they have taught us. We are better people for having met them and we look forward to sharing their story with the world.

— **Zach Niles and Banker White**