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BLACK PUBLIC MEDIA'S PITCHBLACK FORUM & AWARDS RETURNS TO HARLEM

**Acclaimed documentary filmmakers Stanley Nelson and Marcia Smith
will receive the BPM Trailblazer Award at the April event**

NEW YORK (February 19, 2026) — Filmmakers **Stanley Nelson** and **Marcia Smith** have been selected as [Black Public Media's](#) 2026 Trailblazers. The married duo, documentary filmmakers and co-founders of Firelight Media, will receive BPM's most prestigious honor at the **PitchBLACK Awards** on Thursday, April 30, at 6:30 p.m.

The PitchBLACK Awards ceremony also celebrates the winners of the **PitchBLACK Forum, the nation's largest pitch competition for independent filmmakers and creative technologists creating Black content**. The Forum takes place Wednesday, April 29, from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and creatives will take the stage to vie for up to \$150,000 in production funding. [Registration](#) is required for the PitchBLACK Forum, which can be attended in person or virtually; tickets for the awards program go on sale via Ticketmaster in March. Sponsored by **Netflix** and **PBS**, PitchBLACK returns to The Apollo Stages at the Victoria in Harlem for the second year in a row.

Director Stanley Nelson and writer-producer Marcia Smith have shaped modern documentary storytelling and the field around it, pairing revelatory films with lasting infrastructure that helps other artists thrive. Nelson is widely regarded as a leading chronicler of the African American experience in nonfiction film, work that has earned him a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship, a Peabody recognizing his body of work and the National Medal in the Humanities. Smith has helped advance documentary filmmaking as a writer, producer and nonprofit leader, earning recognition for her work and leadership including a Writers Guild Award, a Muse Award and BlackStar's Luminary Award. Through Firelight's Documentary Lab, they have helped launch the careers of more than 100 nonfiction filmmakers of color and built Firelight into a nationally respected home for nonfiction work by and about communities of color.

BPM's Trailblazer Award is presented to documentary filmmakers whose body of work and commitment to mentoring emerging filmmakers producing Black stories are exemplary. Past recipients include **Michèle Stephenson & Joe Brewster** (2019), **Marco Williams** (2021) **Orlando Bagwell** (2022), **Yoruba Richen** (2023), **Sam Pollard** (2024), and **Lillian E. Benson** (2025).

"Not only has Marcia and Stanley's prolific body of work set superior standards for the field and blessed the world with a plethora of important African American stories, their dedication to creating new opportunities for other underrepresented and underserved media makers has made it possible for the industry to grow in ways that better reflect its increasingly diverse audiences," said **Leslie Fields-Cruz**, executive director of Black Public Media. "Black Public Media is thrilled to bestow our highest award on these two independent media titans."

In honor of Nelson and Smith's remarkable accomplishments, BPM will present a two-week, online retrospective of their films, Monday, April 27, through Sunday, May 10. The 2026 BPM

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Trailblazer Retrospective may include *We Want the Funk!* (2025), *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* (2015), *Freedom Riders* (2010), *Jonestown: The Life and Death of People's Temple* (2007), *A Place of Our Own* (2004), *The Murder of Emmett Till* (2003), *Marcus Garvey: Look for Me in the Whirlwind* (2000), *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords* (1999) and *Two Dollars and a Dream* (1989). All PitchBLACK registrants will receive free, on-demand access to the slate of films on the [BPM website](#) throughout the streaming window.

Through its PitchBLACK initiative, Black Public Media (BPM) has awarded more than \$2 million to 26 film and immersive projects since 2015. Many have gone on to national primetime premieres on public media broadcast and streaming platforms.

Each year, the PitchBLACK Forum & Awards draw leaders from public television, commercial television, documentary film, emerging media and funding worlds. At the Forum, five documentary film teams will pitch their projects in the morning, followed by five immersive media teams in the afternoon, with projects judged by panels of industry professionals.

Winners will be announced at the PitchBLACK Awards on Thursday, April 30. The event will feature an Artists' Chat with Nelson and Smith about their careers and the future of public media, moderated by NPR journalist and podcast host **Brittany Luse**. The recipient of BPM's 2026 Nonso Christian Ugboke Fellowship, a memorial award named for BPM's first director of digital initiatives recognizing under-30 artists in immersive media, will also be announced. Held in-person, the PitchBLACK Awards will be broadcast at a later date by NYC Media.

Sponsors also include Andscape, PBS and Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN). Additional sponsorship opportunities are available by contacting Tonya Thomas at: tonyat@blackpublicmedia.org.

Since 1979, BPM has funded and helped distribute quality film and immersive work while developing creatives. The national nonprofit also produces and distributes original content, including its signature series, *AfroPoP: The Ultimate Cultural Exchange* and its digital offshoot, *AfroPoP Digital Shorts*.

To learn more about PitchBLACK, visit blackpublicmedia.org or follow BPM (@blackpublicmedia) on Instagram, Facebook and TikTok.

ABOUT THE AWARDEES

Stanley Nelson is the foremost chronicler of the African American experience working in nonfiction film today. His documentary films, many of which have aired on PBS, combine compelling narratives with rich and deeply researched historical detail, shining new light on both familiar and under-explored aspects of the American past. A MacArthur "Genius" Fellow, Nelson was awarded a Peabody for his body of work in 2016. He has received numerous honors over the course of his career, including the 2016 Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Academy of Television Arts Sciences. In 2013, President Barack Obama presented Nelson with the National Medal in the Humanities.

Nelson's latest documentaries include *Sound of the Police* for ABC News Studios/Hulu, and *Harriet Tubman: Visions of Freedom* and *Becoming Frederick Douglass* for PBS. His previous documentary *Attica* for SHOWTIME Documentary Films was nominated for Best Documentary Feature at the 94th Academy Awards® and earned him the DGA Award for Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Documentary. In 2021, Nelson also directed *Crack: Cocaine*,

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Corruption & Conspiracy for Netflix and *Tulsa Burning: The 1921 Race Massacre*, with co-director Marco Williams for History, which was nominated for three Primetime Emmy® Awards.

Nelson's feature for American Masters, *Miles Davis: Birth of the Cool* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2019, marking his tenth premiere at the prestigious festival – the most of any documentary filmmaker. The film won two Emmy® Awards at the 42nd Annual News and Documentary Emmy Awards and was nominated for Best Music Film at the 62nd Grammy Awards. His film *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* (2016) won the 2016 NAACP Image Award. Other notable Nelson films include *Freedom Riders* (2010, three Primetime Emmy® Awards and included in the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress), *Freedom Summer* (2014, Peabody Award), *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords* (1999, Emmy-nominated), *Jonestown: The Life and Death of People's Temple* (2006, Tribeca Film Festival Special Jury Prize) and *Marcus Garvey: Look for Me in the Whirlwind* (2000, Sundance Premiere). *The Murder of Emmett Till* (2003) uncovered new eyewitnesses and helped prompt the U.S. Department of Justice to reopen the case.

Marcia Smith is co-founder and former president of Firelight Media, which produces documentary films, provides artistic and financial support to emerging filmmakers of color and builds impact campaigns to connect documentaries to audiences and social justice advocates. Under her leadership, Firelight Media was honored with a MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions. Firelight Media's flagship Documentary Lab program has supported more than 100 emerging filmmakers over the past decade, who have premiered at festivals such as Sundance, and gone on to earn numerous festival, Peabody and Emmy awards.

She has written several films alongside documentarian Stanley Nelson including: *Tell Them We Are Rising: The Story of Black Colleges and Universities*; *Through the Fire: The Legacy of Barack Obama*; *Freedom Riders*; *Jonestown: The Life and Death of the Peoples Temple*; *Marcus Garvey: Look for Me in the Whirlwind*; and *The Murder of Emmett Till*. Smith received a Primetime Emmy nomination and won the Writers' Guild Award for best nonfiction writing for her work on *The Murder of Emmett Till*, and was honored with a 2016 Muse Award from New York Women in Film & Television, as well as the 2019 Luminary Award from BlackStar Film Festival. She will also serve as the writer for Firelight's upcoming four-hour documentary series, *Creating The New World*, on the transatlantic slave trade.

Smith is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, sits on the Peabody Board of Directors (East Coast) and is a member of the Board for Martha's Vineyard Film Society.

ABOUT BLACK PUBLIC MEDIA (BPM)

BPM supports the development of visionary content creators and distributes stories about the global Black experience to inspire a more equitable and inclusive future. For 45+ years, BPM has addressed the needs of unserved and underserved audiences. BPM-supported programs have won five Emmys®, 10 Peabodys, five Anthem Awards, 14 Emmy® nominations and an Oscar® nomination. BPM continues to address historical, contemporary and systemic challenges that traditionally impede the development and distribution of Black stories.

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