

# Onstage, in the race, from the earth, in the Bronx (twice)

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## FULL TEXT

Has the Apollo Theatre, which for 85 years has showcased the greatest African-American performers from Billie Holiday to Pharrell Williams, more importance as a shrine to past greatness or as a vital cultural powerhouse? That's a question posed by Roger Ross Williams's entertaining and celebratory *"The Apollo,"* which chronicles the iconic Harlem venue, a compendium of its greatest hits, a capsule history of American music and culture, and a mirror of eight decades in the struggle for racial justice.

Williams offers a generous selection of vintage clips, which includes a 17-year-old Ella Fitzgerald at amateur night debut forgetting the lyrics to her song and resorting to the scat that would make her famous; a less successful amateur night debut, in which 13-year-old Lauryn Hill was booed off the stage; Aretha Franklin blasting out "Respect"; and 12-year-old Stevie Wonder astounding the crowd with his rendition of "Fingertips (Pt. 2)." Almost every Motown star is featured in the film, making it a rewarding complement to Benjamin and Gabe Turner's "Hitsville: The Making of Motown."

Today the board of directors ponders how to maintain the theater as a living institution. One project is a multimedia staging of Ta-Nehisi Coates's book *"Between the World and Me."* Shown intermittently in development and rehearsal stages, the production dramatizes the author's letter to his teenage son about the perils of being black in America. It is an indication that, though steeped in the past, the Apollo still confronts the issues of the present-day.

"The Apollo" debuts on HBO on Nov. 6 at 9 p.m. and can also be seen on HBO NOW, HBO GO, HBO on Demand, and partners' streaming platforms.

Go to [www.hbo.com/documentaries/the-apollo](http://www.hbo.com/documentaries/the-apollo).

### ON THE HUSTINGS

Before she was elected to Congress, in 2018, where she became an outspoken member of the Squad of four newly elected, progressive women of color and a target of President Trump, Ilhan Omar was making history in a quieter way. Running for the Minnesota House of Representatives, in 2016, she hoped to become the first Somali-American Muslim woman to win elected office in the United States.

Norah Shapiro's *"Time for Ilhan,"* a suspenseful, as-it-happened account of the campaign, draws on a long line political documentaries, beginning with Robert Drew's *"Primary"* (1960) and provides a first-hand, candid look at the strategy, setbacks, missteps, and triumphs of Omar's unlikely victory. It also shows a young woman learning how rough the process can be, especially to outsiders. She was more than equal to the challenge and continues to be so as her ongoing success has drawn hostility and bullying from the highest places.

"Time for Ilhan" screens as part of the Bright Lights series on Nov. 5 at 7 p.m. at Emerson College's Paramount Center. A discussion with the director follows the screening. Co-presented with the Boston Women's Film Festival, the Center for Women's Health and Human Rights and the Council on American-Islamic Relations and part of the Power to the People series.

### ALL THAT GLITTERS

The raging fires consuming the Amazon rain forest have drawn recent media attention. What may be a more insidious danger is investigated in Reuben Aaronson and Sarah DuPont's *"River of Gold"* (2016). Along with war correspondents Ron Haviv and Donovan Webster and biologist activist Enrique Ortiz, the filmmakers travel along

Peru's Madre de Dios River to find an apocalyptic wasteland of mud, toxic waste, and abandoned mines, the aftermath of a ruthless search for gold. Though the mines are operated by impoverished workers, the billions of dollars in profits go to phantom speculators linked to mobsters, human traffickers, and drug dealers. The danger of defying this element is made graphically clear when henchmen threaten the team while they interview laborers in a squalid boom town. Yet despite the risk of retribution, local volunteers resist the despoilers; and the film ends on a hopeful, if admonitory note

"River of Gold" will be available for streaming online for 24 hours beginning Nov. 6 at noon. A panel discussion featuring experts from the Amazon Aid Foundation, Human Rights Watch, and Survival International follows the screening.

*Go to [amazonaid.org/conservation-x-labs-screening](http://amazonaid.org/conservation-x-labs-screening).*

### **BRONX CHEER**

As can be seen in Danny Gold's "*The Bronx, USA*," a surprising number of famous people sprang from that hardscrabble borough, and many of them are on hand to sing—sometimes literally—its praises. Producer George Shapiro leads the celebration as he returns to visit the old neighborhood, with a cadre of childhood friends. He finds the place changed but also the same, with many old landmarks remaining but the demographics different and the old tight-knit, communal spirit seemingly lacking. His opinion improves when he and the gang visit their alma mater, DeWitt Clinton High School (class of 1949), and find the students there very much like they were back in the day—poor, of immigrant stock, but hard-working and pursuing their dreams.

Also interviewed are Alan and Arlene Alda, Carl and Rob Reiner, Melissa Manchester, Grandmaster Melle Mel, and Chazz Palminteri. Not all the recollections are rosy: Though General Colin Powell has warm memories of growing up in the South Bronx as a kid, he expresses dismay at the community's turn for the worse in the 1970s, when it fell victim to drugs, crime, arson, and neglect.

*"The Bronx, USA" can be seen on HBO, HBO NOW, HBO GO, HBO On Demand, and partners' streaming platforms.*

### **Bronx cheerless**

The decline of the South Bronx in the 1970s that's briefly noted in "*The Bronx, USA*" is examined in detail in Vivian Vázquez Irizarry and Gretchen Hildebran's "*Decade of Fire*." The subjects interviewed recall a neighborhood that was once safe, thriving, and diverse, until it was redlined and left unprotected by city government. Nearly a quarter-million people were displaced, basic services cut back, and a wave of fires, many set by arsonists hired by landlords to collect insurance, destroyed 80 percent of the housing stock. Demonized by the media and by movies (Daniel Petrie's "*Fort Apache, The Bronx*," 1981, gets a special mention), the African-American and Latino residents who were the victims of the devastation took the blame.

Through the efforts of grassroots organizations and community activists the South Bronx slowly recovered. But now it faces a new threat—developers who want to gentrify the area.

*"Decade of Fire" premieres on Nov. 4 at 10 p.m. on "Independent Lens," on PBS, PBS.org, and the PBS Video App. Peter Keough can be reached at [petervkeough@gmail.com](mailto:petervkeough@gmail.com).*

Credit: By Peter Keough Globe correspondent

Caption:

From "The Apollo."

## **DETAILS**

<b>Subject:</b>	Womens health; Documentary films; Human rights
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<b>Location:</b>	Peru; Minnesota; Madre de Dios River; United States--US
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<b>People:</b>	Powell, Colin L; Trump, Donald J; Petrie, Daniel; Wonder, Stevie; Palminteri, Chazz; Fitzgerald, Ella; Hill, Lauryn; Melle Mel; Williams, Roger Ross; Omar, Ilhan; Reiner, Rob; Coates, Ta-Nehisi; Franklin, Aretha (1942-2018); Holiday, Billie (Eleanora Holiday) (1915-1959)
<b>Company / organization:</b>	Name: Public Broadcasting Service; NAICS: 515120; Name: Human Rights Watch; NAICS: 813311; Name: Survival International; NAICS: 813311; Name: House of Representatives-Minnesota; NAICS: 921120; Name: Council on American-Islamic Relations; NAICS: 813319; Name: Congress; NAICS: 921120
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