

Prepared Statement of
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Committee on Education and Labor
Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities
U.S. House of Representatives

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Madame Chairwoman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

It is an honor for me to appear before you today, and I am grateful that you have given me this opportunity to express my thoughts on the programs of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Let me begin by saying that I am a passionate supporter of the Endowments and their unique role in fostering creativity and scholarship and the transmission of the best of our diverse culture to future generations.

Few institutions provide such a direct, grassroots way for our citizens to participate in the shared glories of their common past, in the power of the priceless ideals that have animated our remarkable republic and our national life for more than two hundred years, and in the inspirational life of the mind and the heart that an engagement with the arts and humanities always provides.

For all of my life, I have been a student of our nation's fascinating history and rich cultural legacy. I have been foremost a filmmaker, but I also think of myself as an amateur historian—"amateur" in the classic sense. That is, one who engages in the study of a subject out of a deep and abiding love.

And, for more than 30 years, I have been producing historical documentary films that shed light on facets of that subject I love so dearly, American history and culture. These films range from the construction of Brooklyn Bridge and the Statue of Liberty to the turbulent life of the demagogue Huey Long; from the serene simplicity of Shaker architecture to the jubilation and spontaneity of jazz; from the sublime pleasures and unexpected lessons of our national pastime, baseball, to the terrible watershed experiences of the Civil War and World War II. Over this time, I have been able to realize my hope of sharing what I have found so compelling and enduring about our epic American story.

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to work closely with both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts. Nearly all of my films have been produced with the support and encouragement of the National Endowment for the Humanities, either at the state or national level. On other occasions, I have enjoyed support from the National Endowment for the Arts. I first received an NEH grant in 1979, as I embarked on my first project, a film about the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge. The application process was not unlike the building of that bridge—a complex, demanding, and time-consuming process. But, at this very early stage of my career, the experience of competing successfully for an NEH grant helped me set high standards of excellence... in filmmaking, writing, scholarship, and even budgeting.

Over the years, I would apply many times to the NEH for support on a variety of projects. Working with NEH staff and humanities scholars ensured that my projects stayed true to

rigorous intellectual standards and reached a broad, receptive audience of Americans. This interaction has been a powerful influence on my work, even when my applications have not been successful. On the few occasions in my professional life when I did not enjoy Endowment support, I tried—with decidedly mixed results—to duplicate the arduous but honorable discipline the NEH imposes on every project that comes its way, simply because I thought it would make my films better.

Without a doubt, my work would not have been possible without the Endowments. My series on the Civil War, for instance, could not have been made without early and substantial support from the NEH. The NEH provided one of the project's largest grants, thereby attracting a host of other funders. Many applicants find that grants from NEH or NEA are a kind of "seal of approval" that signify excellence. Especially early in my career, this coveted imprimatur helped me to convince private foundations, corporations, and other public funders that my films were worthy of their support. NEH involvement helped me in every aspect of the production, and, through unrelated grants to other institutions, they helped restore the archival photographs we would use to tell our histories. Much of the seminal research our scholars provided also came from NEH-supported projects. And NEH's interest in our progress ensured at critical junctures that we did not stray into myth or hagiography. I am extremely grateful for all those things.

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In a filmed interview several years ago, the writer and essayist Gerald Early told us that "when they study our civilization two thousand years from now, there will only be three things that Americans will be known for: the Constitution, baseball and jazz music. They're the three

most beautiful things Americans have ever created." His wonderful, smile-inducing comment made me realize that my professional life in a way has been a series of projects that have tried to honor that statement of his. We grappled with many Constitutional issues in our Civil War series (the Constitution's greatest test) and in many other films, including, I might add, a history of this great institution, the Congress; explored our national pastime and its exquisite lessons in our series on baseball; and more recently we struggled to understand the utterly American art form of jazz.

In producing all these films we were reminded daily that the true genius of America is improvisation, our unique experiment a profound intersection of freedom and creativity, for better and for worse, in nearly every gesture and breath. We discovered that nowhere is this more apparent, of course, than in jazz – the subject of a 2001 documentary series we made with support from both the NEA and the NEH. To me jazz is an enduring and indelible expression of cultural diversity and our nation's great genius and promise. Jazz was founded by African-Americans, people who have had to improvise even more than other Americans. And in that struggle, they were able to create the only art form we Americans have ever *invented*, jazz music, out of which, nearly every other musical form that we enjoy today has sprung. R& B, soul, rock, hip hop, rap all have their ancestry in jazz music.

Jazz offers a prism through which so much of American history can be seen — it was a curious and unusually objective witness to the Twentieth Century. It was the soundtrack that helped Americans get through two world wars and a devastating Depression. It is about movement and dance, communication between artist and audience, suffering and celebration.

Most of all, the story of jazz is about race and race relations and prejudice. It is an uniquely American paradox that our greatest art form was created by those who have had the peculiar experience of being unfree in a free land, and during the production we began to suspect that African-American history might actually be at the heart of American history – not something we should separate and segregate into the cold month of February. Jazz musicians, Black jazz musicians in particular, carry a complicated message to the rest of us, a genetic memory of our great promise and our great failing, and the music they created and then generously shared with the rest of the world. Fittingly, both Endowments helped preserve and transmit this important story by providing major support that made our jazz documentary series possible.

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The Endowments were a tremendous help to my work and their recent initiatives continue to provide crucial support where it is most needed – in the preservation of America’s cultural legacy and engagement of Americans in their intellectual growth. I am especially impressed with the work of both Endowments in helping teachers bring Shakespeare, jazz and American history to life in the classroom.

NEA Chairman Dana Gioia and NEH Chairman Bruce Cole have each brought new vigor to the missions of their respective agencies. Chairman Dana Gioia, a poet, has developed popular programs that engage hundreds of thousands of high school students in the recitation of poetry and the pleasure and power of great language spoken well. The NEA is bringing literature back into public discourse through The Big Read, introducing hundreds of thousands of students to their first live performance of a Shakespeare play, and giving our military veterans a voice to

write their own stories through Operation Homecoming. Their Shakespeare and Jazz in the Schools educational toolkits have reached thousands of teachers and millions of students.

NEH Chairman Dr. Bruce Cole, an art historian, has made the study and understanding of American history an even greater emphasis at his Endowment. Through the *We the People* program, the NEH has confirmed its leadership role in encouraging greater knowledge of American history and culture... among young people as well as their parents and teachers. Through public programming (like my documentary films), scholarship, education programs, state humanities councils, preservation efforts, challenge grants, and special projects such as *Picturing America*, that provide teachers with iconic American works of art as signposts to American history, the Humanities Endowment has helped address one of the greatest needs of our time -- a deeper and richer understanding of our shared past.

The historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. has said that we suffer today from “too much pluribus and not enough unum.” Few things survive today that remind us of the Union from which so many of our personal as well as collective blessings flow, and, in work such as my own, we are challenged to maintain and strengthen our commitment to inclusion of all communities who have contributed to this great nation. And it is hard not to wonder, in an age when the present moment consumes and overshadows all else – our bright past and our dim unknown future – what finally does endure? What exists in America today to encode and store the genetic material of our civilization, to inspire our children to learn the great stories of history and literature and to master and create art? I believe the Arts and Humanities Endowments provide one clear answer.

