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TIFN Roadshow: 'When I Rise'

By [Jordan Gass-Poore](#) on February 8, 2013 - 11:30am in [Local Indies](#)



In 1957, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that obscenity is not protected by the First Amendment, but segregationists in the Texas Legislature deemed it legal to threaten to withhold state funding from a public university for casting an African-American female opposite a fellow Caucasian male student. The 1950s was a decade that opened the door to equal and fair education for all Americans, but continued to be slammed in the faces of some, like University of Texas at Austin distinguished alumna [Barbara Smith Conrad](#), the subject of the 2010 film [When I Rise](#).

Conrad, a mezzo-soprano from Center Point, Texas, was cast as Dido in Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas*. However, she was soon replaced by a Caucasian student. The casting move made headlines nationwide, gaining the attention of the King of Calypso himself, [Harry Belafonte](#), who offered Conrad a deal she did refuse: He would pay for her music education anywhere in the world if she chose to leave the university. But despite being spat on by another student while walking through campus, she graduated from UT in 1959.

Don Carleton, executive director of [UT's Dolph Briscoe Center for American History](#), and his team came up with the idea for *When I Rise* after Conrad, who now lives on the Upper West Side in New York, was the subject of an oral history project at the center in 2006. The award-winning film premiered at SXSW 2010 and screened on the PBS series [Independent Lens](#) a year later. It's since been picked up by the international distributor Mercury Media, based in London.

Those closer to Texas can see *When I Rise* as it continues its 13-city tour with the [Texas Independent Film Network](#) this month. Here in Austin, the documentary [will screen on Monday night](#) at Violet Crown Cinema, and tickets are still available.

I chatted recently with Carleton about the development of *When I Rise* and Barbara Smith Conrad's role in the production.

Slackerwood: How did you meet Barbara Smith Conrad? How did you hear about her story?

Don Carleton: The Briscoe Center has a major collection of American music archives: papers, recordings, photographs. One of the things we're really strong in is the history of Negro spirituals, music that is related to the African-American experience in the United States. We have a collection documenting an awful lot of that, but the spirituals are of great interest to Barbara. Barbara became an ambassador of sorts for our collection. She's an expert in Negro spirituals, so she started working with us in the late 1990s. We set up a program for her to be working with us as an adviser and really an ambassador for our program and that's how I got to know her.

What is her current involvement with the Briscoe Center?

Carleton: She's still very much in that role as our ambassador, as a representative for us in terms of acquiring collections and just getting the word out about what we do, and also advising us about what we should do to document the history of this kind of music. We have her papers; we have a very major archive documenting American history, and among the thousands of collections that we have are her papers -- that's the collection of the reasonable materials that she collected over a lifetime, as a professional, documenting her career.

Does Barbara ever come back to Austin?

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Carleton: Oh, yes. We have her come down. She is a distinguished [alumna] of the university, she was given that award in 1985, and she comes down frequently to conduct master classes over in the school of music. She also comes down and does things for [the Briscoe Center] as well. She's given some lectures and she's done some performances for the Briscoe Center. Of course, she worked very, very close with us for, gosh, a period of a year and a half shooting this film.

Slackerwood: When and how did the idea for *When I Rise* occur?

DC: It was in 2005. [Barbara Smith Conrad] was here doing a concert for [the Briscoe Center] on campus and my associate director, Alison Beck, was looking in the audience and watching how they were reacting to [Barbara's] performance. [Barbara's] such a warm person. We just realized that she was a person that would be a great subject to do a documentary film on. We'd been thinking about getting into that area of documentation anyway, and we thought, "Gee, her story is very compelling and this would be a great way for us to get into that kind of an enterprise." We publish books, we do exhibits and special programs, but this would be a film that we would do.

Slackerwood: What was Barbara's reaction to the idea of a documentary about her life?

Carleton: She wasn't against the idea. I had to persuade her because she wasn't sure... She wasn't sure her story was really something that people would be that interested in, but I knew that wasn't the case. We finally convinced her that this would be a great thing to do, and she's been extremely cooperative and supportive.

Slackerwood: What did the UT administration think about the film?

Carleton: They couldn't be more supportive. In fact, they provided some of the financial backing for us to get started to do a trailer that was absolutely essential to our ability to seek outside funding. The president's office, President Bill Powers [Jr.], provided a good chunk of that money and no strings attached. The president didn't see the film until it was finished.

Slackerwood: What has been the reaction to the film from international audiences?

Carleton: Racial discrimination is a human rights story, and people all over the world can identify. It's also a story of a woman persevering in a man's world, particularly when she was facing her obstacles in the 1950s. There's a women's rights story, as well as human rights: Race, gender, all those things have a universal connection; no matter what country you live in you can identify with those kinds of things. It's also a story of reconciliation and healing, which also has a universal appeal.

Slackerwood: How did the film become involved with the Texas Independent Film Network?

Carleton: I think Ryan [Long] really liked the film, from my understanding. He approached us and asked if we'd be interested in doing this and we said absolutely because the whole reason we did the film was to share Barbara's story with as wide of an audience as possible.

Visit the *Texas Independent Film Network* [web page](#) for a full screening schedule of *When I Rise*.

confusing

Submitted by Dan North on February 8, 2013 - 5:20pm.

The AFI link above lists a different director for this film- did Carlton not direct this? I saw it on PBS and loved it.

Clarification

Submitted by **Jette Kernion** on February 8, 2013 - 10:30pm.

Carleton served as an executive producer on the film. The director is Mat Hames.