­­

Text

Description automatically generated

**Contact:** Christy Riddle **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Phone:** (662) 846-4336

**Email:** criddle@deltastate.edu

**Award-winning Delta State University faculty and student film project to air on Mississippi Public Broadcasting**

**CLEVELAND, Miss. —** “I Want to Be at the Meeting: Sacred and Secular in the Mississippi Delta” will air on Mississippi Public Broadcasting this month. The film will air statewide on regional public television stations on Friday, September 13 at 7:30 p.m., and Sunday, September 15, at 5:00 p.m.

The film features Grammy-nominated artist Jontavious Willis, recent Delta State Delta Music Institute alumnus Tae’Angelo Carter, and vocalists from the Coahoma Community College Choir as they present a night of powerful gospel performances rooted in the musical traditions of the Mississippi Delta.

“If I had two words to describe our project, it would be ‘Interdisciplinary’ and ‘joyous,’” said the film’s producer Don Allan Mitchell, who teaches English and runs the Honors Program at DSU. “It all started with a concert I booked and produced for the Spirit of the Blues Initiative, funded by the Lower Mississippi Delta Initiative three years ago, right as we were all emerging from the isolation of the pandemic.”

In order to keep people safe post-pandemic, the university decided to live-stream the concert in October 2021. The concert’s steering committee and the Delta Center for Culture and Learning enlisted Delta State digital media, film, and animation students Anna Schmitz, Trey Wright, Cooper Oguz, and Chyanne Hewitt to run the stream as well as film the production for use in their digital media classes.   
  
When Boston filmmaker Ted Fisher, co-producer of the film, looked at the unedited footage, he saw the raw materials that could lead to a great short documentary. Mitchell said, “As a documentary director, Ted finds ‘diamonds in the rough’ all of the time and is a great believer that digital media editing is a powerful learning and teaching tool for students learning new media skills. The added bonus is that Ted loves to tell Mississippi stories just as much as I do, and, as a live music fan and performer, he knows that even with the awkward camera angles we were having to use due to social distancing measures, we could show the passion and intensity of Jontavious Willis and the Coahoma Community College Choir as they performed selections from the Black Gospel tradition.”

Willis, a blues performer from Greenville, Georgia, has been hailed by blues legends Keb’ Mo’ and Taj Mahal as “a great new voice of the 21st century in the acoustic blues.” His newest album, West Georgia Blues, was recently released on Strolling Bones Records.

Mitchell explained, “The purpose of the Spirit of the Blues grant was to show the clear connection between the blues and Black gospel music, and when I told Jontavious we were hiring him to play traditional gospel music, we immediately began to talk about his roots in his grandparent’s church. He was totally down with the idea.”  
  
The collaboration also featured the Coahoma Community College Choir which Mitchell described as “the world’s greatest two-year college choir.” Dr. Kelvin Towers, the Chair of the Fine Arts Department at CCC and the Director of the Choir, is well-known throughout Mississippi and the Mid-South as both a director and music educator.

Mitchell continued, “Dr. Towers has always been a great partner with initiatives we’ve put together at Delta State. He sees the value in a close working relationship between DSU and CCC, as demonstrated by Tae’Angelo Carter’s move from CCC to the DMI program at DSU, after he finished his coursework at Coahoma. Like Jontavious, Tae’Angelo speaks on how intertwined sacred and secular music is within Black music. Singing, calling, and responding in front of church congregations from an early age is a common thread.”   
  
Not only did Delta State students take part in filming and editing the production, but the documentary also served as an interdisciplinary learning lab in other ways; the film screened for Brazilian music students at Delta State University’s partner institution the University of Caxias do Sul. DSU students participated in an online panel discussion for that event, and were also members of a panel about the film when it screened in Texas.   
  
Recent Digital Media alumna Anna Schmitz had this to say about the project: “I’m thrilled to have been part of a team where I was able to contribute to a great project. Working with Ted Fisher and Don Allan Mitchell was a pleasure, and the whole project gave me great experience in the world of film and documentaries. A highlight was the support we received from Delta State to attend the Boomtown Film Festival in Beaumont, Texas, where we won second prize in their Reel Faith category.”   
  
Mitchell said, “This is my very favorite type of scholarly activity, and it shows how new media is tearing down traditional academic silos. Mississippi Public Broadcasting has always had education as its mission, so it is also a joy for me to have Taiwo Gaynor and his team broadcast a Delta State and Coahoma Community College faculty and student project. I look forward to fostering similar interdisciplinary projects in the future. The joy of this project was not only the musical performances, but also, it was a joy for me to put very creative people together, and, as our students say, ‘let them cook.’ And man, did they cook!”

To find the local MPB affiliate in your area, visit the Corporation of Public Broadcasting MPB Station Finder for Mississippi at <https://cpb.org/cpb-station-finder/Mississippi/TV>. For more formation about the film, visit the IMDB link at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt29344841/>. To contact Don Allan Mitchell, email [amitchell@deltastate.edu](mailto:amitchell@deltastate.edu).  
  
  
Cutline: Grammy-nominated artist Jontavious Willis and the Coahoma Community College Choir are featured in “I Want to Be at the Meeting: Sacred and Secular in the Mississippi Delta,” a film produced by Delta State faculty and students. The film will air on Mississippi Public Broadcasting in September.

###

**About Delta State University:**Delta State University is a four-year public institution whose nearly 2,700 students come from most U.S. states and more than 45 countries. Acknowledging its beginning as a teacher’s college, the University sustains excellence in teacher education while continuing to expand offerings in traditional as well as unique fields of study. Programs such as those available through the Delta Music Institute, the Commercial Aviation Department, and the Center for Interdisciplinary Geospatial Information highlight the University’s commitment to meeting the evolving needs of the students it serves with world-leading, industry-acclaimed programs. Situated in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, Delta State offers top-notch academic programs in business, arts, sciences, nursing, education, and more. DSU Athletics has won 14 national championships, 70 conference championships, and 37 regional titles.