

OFFICIAL SELECTION  
13th THESSALONIKI DOC FESTIVAL  
2011

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20 MILL VALLEY  
FILM FESTIVAL

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2011

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# Deaf Jam

A FILM BY JUDY LIEFF

"...a riveting documentary..."

- Karin Badt, HUFFINGTON POST



DEAF JAM IS A SPONSORED PROJECT OF CITY LORE, BOWERY ARTS AND SCIENCE AND THE NEW YORK FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS (NYFA) EDITED BY KEIKO DEGUCHI  
SOUND DESIGN BY TOM PAUL CINEMATOGRAPHY BY MELISSA DONOVAN AND CLAUDIA RASCHKE-ROBINSON ORIGINAL MUSIC BY IAN MILLER AND TOM PAUL  
ADDITIONAL MUSIC BY CYRO BAPTISTA AND VIEUX FARKA TOURÉ DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY JUDY LIEFF CO-PRODUCED BY STEVE ZEITLIN EXECUTIVE PRODUCER FOR ITVS, SALLY JO FIFER  
DEAF JAM IS A CO-PRODUCTION OF MADE-BY-HAND, LLC AND THE INDEPENDENT TELEVISION SERVICE (ITVS) [WWW.DEAFJAM.ORG](http://WWW.DEAFJAM.ORG)



## **SYNOPSIS**

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In ***Deaf Jam***, Aneta Brodski seizes the day. She is a Deaf teen introduced to American Sign Language (ASL) Poetry, who then boldly enters the spoken word slam scene. In a wondrous twist, Aneta, an Israeli immigrant living in the Queens section of New York City, eventually meets Tahani, a hearing Palestinian slam poet. The two young women embark on a hearing/deaf collaboration, a performance duet that is a metaphor for the complex realities they share.



## FILM SUMMARY

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Filmmaker Judy Lieff explores the beauty and power of American Sign Language (ASL) poetry in ***Deaf Jam***, the story of deaf teen Aneta Brodski's bold journey into the spoken word slam scene. Longing to explore and fully participate in the hearing world, Aneta dives into ASL poetry, a vibrant three-dimensional art form where body movements convey meaning. ASL poetry liberates a deaf poet from the confines of spoken language. There is no paper or text. Rhymes are measured in hand shapes and meter in movements. Images cut and dissolve as its verses transcend all spoken word.

Introduced to ASL Poetry at the Lexington School for the Deaf, Aneta, an Israeli immigrant high school student living in New York, welcomes the chance to perform with "spoken word" poets. With ties to rap and hip hop culture, the U.S. National Poetry Slams for youth are widespread, but Aneta is among the first Deaf teens to brave that highly verbal arena.

Passionate, fearless and expressive, Aneta works hard at her craft and in a remarkable twist of fate, meets and then collaborates with Tahani - a hearing Palestinian slam poet. Poetry, friendship, and respect transcend politics as the two young women create a hearing/deaf duet - generating a new form of slam poetry that speaks to both the hearing and the Deaf.

Utilizing high-energy music, animated graphic text and other innovative techniques, *Deaf Jam* illuminates ASL poetry's extraordinary potency and power. It is a three dimensional language that exists, like dance, in space and utilizes cinematic concepts such as close-ups, wide shots, cuts and dissolves. In the hands of a talented poet, shapes in relation to one another create the visually stunning equivalents of rhythm and rhyme.

***Deaf Jam*** aims to revitalize this unique and endangered art form. Taking us inside a fascinating and vibrant world where self-expression and cultural identity are fiercely pursued, *Deaf Jam* may change the way we think about the non-hearing world forever. It provides a vehicle for empowering Deaf youth, and expands the social images of the Deaf community.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

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The film had its origins in a series of arts-in-education workshops and public programs called *The Poetry Dialogues*, funded by The Rockefeller Foundation. The Dialogues

created a team of deaf poets comprised of talented high school students from the Lexington School for the Deaf, JS 47 and Murray Bergtram, three Deaf high schools in New York City. Filmed over a period of four years, the story begins at Lexington School for the Deaf in Jackson Heights, Queens where poetry workshops were being led by internationally renowned ASL storytellers and poets – Peter Cook, and Manny Hernandez. The goal of the project was to revitalize an endangered art form – ASL poetry - and empower Deaf youth. A two-camera crew including Claudia Raschke-Robinson, Melissa Donovan, Marcus Burnett, and Martina Radwan shot most scenes. Scenes outside of school were shot with a single camera by either the film crew or by the characters in the film. *Deaf Jam* was shot in 30p on the Panasonic DVX100A and edited on Final Cut Pro. Additional footage was shot on Digital 8, and DVCam. Funding for the film came from foundations, State and Federal Grants, and the ITVS Open Call fund of the CPB (Corporation for Public Broadcasting). *Deaf Jam* will have its U.S. broadcast premiere in the 2011/2012 season of the PBS series *Independent Lens*.

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

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I am thrilled to be sharing ***Deaf Jam*** with you. It has been a long and interesting journey bringing this project to fruition, and meeting Aneta Brodski - the deaf teenager who joined me on this journey - has made it all the more rewarding.

The idea for ***Deaf Jam*** began while I was a visiting artist teaching video/dance workshops to deaf high school students at Marlton School in Los Angeles. During one of my residencies, my students created video poems and I became privy to the extraordinary world of American Sign Language Poetry. I also was invited to a crowded teen poetry slam that was bursting with enthusiasm and talent. It occurred to me that it would be great if deaf poets were involved in that exciting youth movement filled with honest self-expression and political awareness.

I learned that few, if any, deaf poets had ever participated in the slams. In fact, most hearing teen poets I spoke to had never seen ASL poetry but were intrigued by the language. In the midst of my research I met Steve Zeitlin, Executive Director of City Lore, and Liz Wolter, a literature and English teacher at Lexington School for the Deaf. City Lore, a non-profit organization, was in the midst of producing a biennial poetry festival in Manhattan that included Deaf poets and ASL scholars. Liz had been facilitating ASL poetry electives at Lexington school, bringing in renowned Poets, and producing some video poetry projects in collaboration with New York City poet guru, Bob Holman. Through Liz and the umbrella of City Lore, the Deaf Jam project and documentary moved forward.

What I learned in the process of making this film was that most deaf students have not been exposed to ASL poetry – an engaging and creative form of expression - and that many deaf students are born into hearing families where sign language is not practiced. What began as a mission to bring together hearing and deaf teens through poetry, became an initiative to revitalize an endangered art form.

One could say that ASL poetry is truly an American art form and part of our cultural heritage. To quote Bob Holman: “The poetry needs to be seen in order to take its place in the World of Poetries.” It is my hope that **Deaf Jam** will contribute to making that a reality. Inspired by the making of the film, a monthly ASL slam night was established at the Bowery Poetry Club by a colleague of one the project mentors, Robert Arnold. That series began six years ago. Doug Ridloff has continued to carry the torch and hosts the monthly series that is now simultaneously web cast.

Communication and self-confidence are crucial to success in life, and empowerment lies in emphasizing what is unique to oneself. For the Deaf, many educational systems are focused on merging the Deaf into the hearing world without providing education about their cultural identity. I hope this film will inspire a new generation of deaf poets and provide a window into an extraordinary art form.

## **BIOS – KEY PERSONNEL**

**Director/Producer Judy Lieff**, dancer, filmmaker, and teacher earned her M.F.A. in dance & experimental film/video from the California Institute of the Arts following a career as a professional dancer. Judy has produced, directed, and edited many short dance films that have garnered awards and screened internationally. She is a six time grant recipient for dance/media projects and has over eight years of experience working in the film industry in both production and post-production on commercials, industrials, shorts, and Electronic Press Kits for Feature films. Lieff began her relationship with the Deaf community through the making of an experimental cine-poem, DUTIES OF MY HEART. The film became a catalyst for four consecutive grants to teach video production workshops she designed for deaf teens. She is the recipient of a National Dance/Media fellowship from the Pew Charitable Trusts and two New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) independent film grants. *Deaf Jam* was awarded finishing funds from the Independent Television Service Open Call competition and is Lieff's first feature length film.

**Steve Zeitlin, Co-producer**, served as co-producer of FROM MAMBO TO HIP HOP, a documentary about the South Bronx funded by ITVS and broadcast on public television across the U.S. as part of the Voces series of Latino Public Broadcasting. He received his Ph.D. in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania, and is the director

and co-founder of City Lore, an organization dedicated to the preservation of New York City's—and America's—living cultural heritage.

**Keiko Deguchi, Editor**, cut award-winning documentary films such as Jeremiah Zagar's IN A DREAM, Linda Hattendorf's THE CATS OF MIRIKITANI, and John Valadez and Cristina Ibarra's THE LAST CONQUISTADOR. Her most recent film, TO CATCH A DOLLAR: MUHAMMAD YUNUS BANKS ON AMERICA, was shown at Sundance Film Festival 2010. She is the recipient of the James Lyons Editing Award at Woodstock Film Festival in 2008.

**Tom Paul, Sound Designer** has over fifteen years of experience working as a sound designer and re-recording mixer. His credits include: THE FOG OF WAR (Academy Award Winner Best Doc), BORN INTO BROTHELS (Academy Award Winner Best Doc), O HOMEN DO ANO (Berlin and Toronto Int'l Film Festivals), and IN A DREAM (Emmy nomination) among many others.

**Claudia Raschke-Robinson, Director of Photography**, has over ten years of experience working as a DP on a variety of productions documentaries, features, television, and Broadway and Art Installations. Her credits include: *Mad Hot Ballroom*, *Sister Rosas Passion*, *My Architect*, *Kiss Me Guido*, and other well known feature-length documentaries.

**Melissa Donovan, Director of Photography** has worked in the commercial, independent and documentary world, earning critical praise from the New Haven Film Festival and the HD Film Festival. Donovan recently completed work as the DP on the PBS documentary, "Finding Billy Elliot," which premiered on WNET in December 2008 and "Between the Folds," directed by Vanessa Gould for Greenfuse Films, which was honored with Audience Choice Awards from the NHFF and the RIIF.

## **ASL POETRY**

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The visual power of sign language poetry as a tool for self-expression resonates for both hearing and Deaf poets. In the United States, many schools now offer sign language as a foreign language option. Just as English has become the dominant language of use globally in business, communications, and other fields, American Sign Language has become the

default language among signers internationally (e.g. SignMark, the Finnish deaf rap artist who is signed with Warner Music Record Label, uses ASL in all of his songs in order to reach a wide deaf audience. See <http://signmark.biz/site/en/bio>). Overall, the public's interest in sign language is growing.

Deaf poetry has been described "as a kind of writing in space... a language in motion, and, like oral poetry, truly inseparable from its realization in performance." (Edward S. Klima and Ursula Bellugi, "Poetry Without Sound," 1983). There are features in ASL poetry that are analogous to literary poetry. The similarity of hand shapes, for instance, acts as alliteration, and using the same hand shape repetitively works as rhyme. In ASL poetry, a dramatic visual art form, the poets use body language, rhythm, and movement to create a cinematic equivalent to oral poetry.



## **OUTREACH**

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*90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents. Many of these children are brought up in households where sign language is not used and their most effective form for communicating their deepest thoughts is closed off.*

## **MISSION**

**Deaf Jam Reaches Out** is a two year national initiative that aims to engage Deaf communities in the U.S. and beyond, revitalize the endangered art form of American Sign Language (ASL) poetry and storytelling, and empower deaf youth. The goal is to cultivate communities of young ASL poets and link them with their hearing peers

engaged in the burgeoning spoken word movement. The intention is to inspire deaf teenagers to use ASL poetry as a rich expressive medium for communication, and to provide deaf teens with the tools and motivation to participate in poetry slams - competitions of verbal artistry that have become an international phenomenon. Currently there are slam scenes in Canada, Germany, Sweden, France, Austria, Israel, Switzerland, Nepal, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, the Czech Republic, Sarajevo, Bosnia, Denmark, South Korea, India and Greece (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poetry\\_slam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poetry_slam))





## **EXHIBITION AND CREDITS**

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Exhibition Format: DigiBeta, Hard Disc, DVCam, TRT 70 minutes  
Sound Format: Dolby LtRt  
Production Format: MiniDv 30P, DVCam, and Digital 8  
4:3 letterbox

World Premiere: **13<sup>th</sup> Thessaloniki Documentary Film Festival**  
U.S. Broadcast Premiere: **PBS Independent Lens, 2011/2012 Season**  
German Broadcast: **BR's magazine "Sehen statt Hören"**  
("To see instead of to hear" ; for hearing impaired viewers)

Festivals:

North America Premiere	<b>Woodstock Film Festival – (in competition)</b>
California Premiere	<b>Mill Valley Film Festival</b>
	<b>Boston Jewish Film Festival – Center piece film</b>
	<b>Starz Denver Film Festival</b>
	<b>NY Jewish Film Festival @Lincoln Center</b>
Nordic Premiere	<b>35<sup>th</sup> Goteburg International Film Festival</b>
	<b>2012 Atlanta Jewish Film Festival</b>
	<b>2012 San Diego Jewish Film Festival</b>
	<b>San Francisco Independent Film Festival</b>
	<b>San Sebastopol Documentary Film Festival</b>
	<b>Jewish Museum High School Film Festival</b>
	<b>Jacob Burns Center – Westchester Jewish FF</b>

A Production of Made-By-Hand, LLC  
A Film by Judy Lieff  
Co-Produced by Steve Zeitlin, City Lore  
Edited by Keiko Deguchi  
Camera by Melissa Donovan, Claudia Raschke-Robinson  
Sound Design Tom Paul  
Featured Characters Aneta Brodski, Tahani Salah  
Animation/Graphics Scott Kawczynski, Vidlits, Cassidy Gearheart  
Original Music by Ian Miller, Tom Paul  
Additional Music by Cyro Baptista, Vieux Farka Toure and various artists  
Produced and Directed by Judy Lieff

**Deaf Jam** is a co-production of *Made-By-Hand, LLC* and the Independent Television Service (ITVS), with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

## **CONTACTS:**

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## **PRESS:**

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### **Thessaloniki Film Festival:**

"The most compelling films at the Thessaloniki festival this year all featured compelling individuals ... Similarly, Judy Lief's Deaf Jam, about the phenomenon of the deaf getting into the poetry-jamming movement, is a riveting documentary simply because the deaf Israeli teenager at the center of the film, Aneta Brodski, is so charmingly expressive, especially when she pantomimes the sperm and egg dance that led to her birth.: "And that is me!"

By Karin Badt  
**Huffington Post**



" ASL poetry relies heavily on visuals and movement, and Lief's film follows suit, with lensing on a variety of digital formats, colorful tech wizardry and fast-paced cutting. A hip soundtrack further adds to the pic's street cred for hearing auds."

By Boyd Van Hoeij,  
**Variety**

**Woodstock FF**