

# THE AGRONOMIST

A JONATHAN DEMME PICTURE

RADIO HAITI  
HAITI INTER

# THE AGRONOMIST

DIRECTED BY **JONATHAN DEMME**

ORIGINAL MUSIC BY **WYCLEF JEAN / JERRY "WONDA" DUPLESSIS**

A long-cherished personal documentary project from Academy Award-winning director Jonathan Demme (**The Silence of the Lambs, Philadelphia, Melvin and Howard, Stop Making Sense**), **The Agronomist** is a celebration of an extraordinary man - journalist, broadcaster and human rights activist **Jean Dominique** - and his tireless fight against injustice and oppression, the story of his uncompromising crusade for liberty and democracy in the vibrant country of Haiti.

Demme shot many hours of footage with Dominique over fifteen years. Their joint project was tragically cut short in April 2000 when, in the turmoil leading up to elections in Haiti, Jean Dominique was assassinated outside his radio station, Radio Haiti Inter.

**The Agronomist** is not a 'whodunnit', as the investigation into Dominique's murder is ongoing. Rather, it is a portrait of a remarkable man, his extraordinary wife and partner Michèle Montas, and their beloved Haiti.

**The Agronomist** recounts Jean Dominique's extraordinary career not only as a true investigative journalist but also as a the director of Haiti's Ciné Club - interweaving his life and work with the testimonies of family, friends and colleagues who worked together in the fight of the Haitian people against injustice and oppression. Under the guidance of his widow, Michèle Montas, Radio Haiti Inter continues to exist as Jean Dominique's invaluable legacy to his country. However, it is currently off the air indefinitely following numerous death threats against the staff.

Jean Dominique purchased the lease on Radio Haiti Inter, Haiti's oldest radio station, in 1968. Prompted by the social and political circumstances of his country, he set about making innovations that revolutionised national radio communication. Most significantly, he introduced the use of Haitian Creole, the language of the majority of Haitians, at a time when the French-speaking elite had a monopoly on broadcasting. For the first time, all of Haiti's people could receive the news and disenfranchised socio-economic portions of the population were empowered to become participants in the country's political movements.

Through his innovations Dominique defined himself as a militant activist for democracy, a stance echoed in his own charismatic reporting. His daily editorials debated vital political questions and spoke freely about controversial issues of the day. He remained a voice for democracy throughout the days of the Duvalier regime that prevailed in Haiti from 1956 until 1986, a vital player in the country's often violent political struggles, both friend and foe to those fighting for power. His outspoken and uncompromising work did not go unnoticed by the dictatorship. Radio Haiti Inter was shut down several times in this period and Dominique forced into exile in 1980 and again in 1991.

His return from his first period in exile from 1980-1986 was testimony to his significance to the Haitian people. After six years in Manhattan, a crowd of 60,000 gathered at the airport in Port-Au-Prince to welcome him home and to urge him to continue his battle for democracy.

Although his professional life was primarily based in radio, Dominique was by vocation and training an agronomist. His heart remained close to the agricultural majority of the population, whom he attempted, through his broadcasting, to inform and to draw into political debate and action. In addition, Jean Dominique was passionate about film and is credited with making one of the first Haitian documentaries in the early 1960s. He served as the director of Haiti's Ciné Club for many years and his film reviews were broadcast in Creole on Radio Haiti Inter.

## CREW

DIRECTOR **Jonathan DEMME**

PRODUCED BY **Jonathan DEMME / Peter SARAF / Bevin McNAMARA**

EDITED BY **Lizi GELBER / Bevin McNAMARA**

ORIGINAL MUSIC BY **Wyclef JEAN / Jerry "WONDA" DUPLESSIS**

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER **Daniel WOLFF**

ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS **Edwidge DANTICAT / Lizi GELBER**

CAMERA **ABOUDJA / Jonathan DEMME / Peter SARAF / Bevin McNAMARA**

SUPERVISING SOUND EDITOR **Nicholas RENBECK**

MUSIC EDITOR **Suzana PERIC**

MUSICIANS **ROBERT AARON / Jerry "WONDA" DUPLESSIS / Melky JEAN / Wyclef JEAN**

A **CLINICA ESTETICO** PRESENTATION

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I approached Jean Dominique in 1991 to propose a "portrait documentary" as an excuse to get to know this amazing man I had met only once previously. He was in exile. He was bored. He agreed. We became friends. His life and his vision of a democratic Haiti got swept up in his country's turmoil over the next ten years. This film is a tribute to a great guy and his unfulfilled dreams.

- Jonathan Demme, 12 August 2003

## JONATHAN DEMME BIOGRAPHY

Director, screenwriter and producer **Jonathan Demme**, has 18 films to his credit, including **The Truth About Charlie, Beloved, The Silence of the Lambs** (for which he won an Academy Award), **Philadelphia, Married to the Mob, Something Wild, Swimming to Cambodia** and **Melvin and Howard**, for which he was named Best Director by the New York Film Critics. Additional producing credits include **Devil in a Blue Dress, Household Saints, That Thing You Do!, Ulee's Gold** and **Adaptation**.

Demme's films have been nominated for 20 Academy Awards. **The Silence of the Lambs** received five Academy Awards in 1991 - for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Screenplay Adaptation. His films have won screenplay Oscars twice, **Melvin and Howard** (Best Original Screenplay, 1980) and **The Silence of the Lambs** (Best Screenplay Adaptation, 1991), and two of the Best Actor awards of the 1990s went to **Anthony Hopkins** (The Silence of the Lambs, 1991) and **Tom Hanks** (Philadelphia, 1993).

A strong advocate of human rights, Demme has produced and directed a number of documentaries about the Haitian plight, such as the acclaimed **Haiti: Dreams of Democracy, Haiti: Killing of the Dream, Tonbe Leve** and **Courage and Pain**. In addition, he directed the documentary **Cousin Bobby**, and produced the Academy Award-nominated biography **Mandela**, as well as **Into the Rope!, The Utmost**, and **One Foot on a Banana Peel, The Other Foot in a Grave**. He is also producing **Beah: A Black Women Speaks**, a documentary on the life of Beah Richards, with Lisa Gay Hamilton, who is making her directorial debut with this project. He recently completed **The Agronomist**, a documentary on the Haitian radio journalist **Jean Dominique**, who was assassinated in April, 2000 on the steps of his radio station.

Demme's creative talents have also lured him into the musical domain. He directed the Robyn Hitchcock concert film **Storefront Hitchcock** as well as the award-winning Talking Heads concert film **Stop Making Sense**. He has directed Artists United Against Apartheid's **Sun City**, Neil Young's **The Complex Sessions** and music videos for **Bruce Springsteen, Les Frères Parent, The Neville Brothers, KRS-One** and **The Feelies**, among others. He also produced **Konbit**, an album of Haitian music.

## **THE MURDER OF JEAN DOMINIQUE**

### **Head of Radio Haiti Inter**

Jean Dominique, boss of the privately-owned Radio Haiti Inter, was shot dead as he arrived at the station in the Delmas suburb of Port-au-Prince on 3 April 2000. The outspoken pro-democracy political commentator had exposed scandals involving politicians and businessmen and had often received death threats.

Six months later, the station protested against the slowness of the official inquiry into the killing. "I don't know what's holding it up, but something obviously is," said his widow Michèle Montas, who also raised doubts about the fate of an alleged accomplice, Jean Wilner Lalanne, said to have died of breathing problems after an operation in June. His body vanished from the hospital morgue in November before it could be autopsied. In September, Judge Jean-Sénat Fleury withdrew as investigating magistrate after receiving threats.

The justice ministry claimed four unnamed suspects had been arrested and charged with killing Dominique.

The murder enquiry ran into many obstacles in 2001. The new investigating judge, Claudy Gassant, was threatened by armed government officials, including Millien Rommage, a member of parliament for President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas party, top police official Evens Saintune and presidential security men. Gassant frequently criticised the minister of justice for failing to provide him with proper protection. The dispute at one point caused the judge to resign, but he returned to his post a few days later after local and foreign pressure.

The investigation identified a leading Fanmi Lavalas senator, Dany Toussaint, as the main suspect in the murder, but the Senate several times blocked moves to involve him in the enquiry. Toussaint's supporters staged demonstrations against what they said was a "conspiracy" against him and called for Gassant's arrest. The senator's lawyers also mounted a procedural offensive to slow down the legal process. They brought six lawsuits before four different courts - civil, summary, appeal and supreme.

Paul Raymond and René Civil, two leaders of pro-Lavalas grassroots organisations, held a press conference on 28 September despite the fact that Judge Gassant had issued a warrant to arrest them for questioning. At the same time, it was found that police had given no orders to execute warrants for the arrest of Richard "Cha Cha" Salomon, Toussaint's right-hand man, and Franck Joseph, his bodyguard, both accused of involvement in the murder.

On 9 November, Panel Rénéus, a major suspect, was lynched by demonstrators in the presence of Judge Gassant the day after he had been arrested. Gassant said police had handed Rénéus over to the crowd. In December, Raymond and Civil finally obeyed the judge's summons to appear for questioning after President Aristide had spoken to their lawyer.

As each new obstacle to the investigation arose, civil rights organisations and Radio Haiti Inter, now run by Dominique's widow, demanded that state institutions do their duty and not hamper the enquiry.

By 2002, no new arrests had been made. The investigating judge was changed. In January, the Senate rejected a request for Toussaint's parliamentary immunity to be lifted.

Those who ordered the killing were not only left untouched by the law but were free to intimidate Dominique's family. His widow, Michèle Montas, who had demanded punishment of the killers for more than two years, was the target of a Christmas Day shooting in which the attackers killed a security guard at her home.

Montas announced on 23 February this year that she was closing the radio station because its staff had received many threats. She then left for the United States.

The Haitian media is still being threatened by government supporters, especially members of "grassroots organisations", an informal network of armed militants who terrorise government opponents. Louis Joinet, the UN Commission on Human Rights independent expert on Haiti, said there was a fear that, "tomorrow, the only options for the critical journalist in Haiti will be self-censorship, exile or death".

Since Jean Dominique's murder, another Haitian journalist, Brignol Lindor, has been killed and 30 or so others have fled into exile abroad.

## **REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS**

### **Don't wait to be deprived of news before you stand up and fight for it**

As of 1 August, 19 journalists had been killed around the world so far this year, 10 of them in Iraq. More than 130 others were in prison, 26 of them in Cuba, where they were sentenced to between 14 and 27 years after sham trials.

Seizures of newspapers, physical attacks and censorship are still routine in half of all countries and a third of the world's people live in nations where the media is not free.

Reporters Without Borders, founded in 1985, is an independent organisation that defends the right to inform the public and to be informed, as established in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It works every day to obtain the release of imprisoned journalists by informing the media of press freedom violations, by helping media that are being intimidated and repressed and by lobbying international bodies.

Reporters Without Borders has nine branches worldwide (in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom), offices in Abidjan, Bangkok, Istanbul, Montreal, Moscow, New York and Tokyo, and more than 100 correspondents in other countries.

You can read all the latest news about press freedom and Reporters Without Borders at the website [www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org)

## **AN INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN DEMME**

### **Q: How did you meet Jean Dominique, and when did you decide to shoot a documentary about his life?**

Demme: I originally became interested in Haitian art and music through a store in Manhattan near my home called Haitian Corner. I decided to visit Haiti in 1986 and fell in love with the country and the Haitian people. I was so inspired by the growing democracy movement that was exploding in the wake of the collapse of the Duvalier dictatorship, that I made a documentary called *Haiti: Dreams of Democracy*. While making that film, everyone encouraged me to go Radio Haiti Inter and talk to Jean and Michèle. I did, and some of that footage of them on the air is in *The Agronomist*.

In 1993, after the coup that toppled the democratically elected government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, I learned that Jean and Michèle were in exile in New York. I wanted to get to know this man who I had briefly met and been so impressed with his passion and intelligence and dramatic flair. I called him and with the flimsy excuse of wanting to make a documentary about a journalist in exile, began videotaping conversations with him about Haiti, the coup, his life, the radio station and anything else that came to his mind. We did this periodically over the course of a little more than a year and then Jean returned to Haiti after Aristide returned. With all the complications of restoring the radio station to working order, dealing with an occupied country trying to get back on track towards democracy and everything else in his and my life, we never finished this small film about a journalist in exile.

When Jean was assassinated April 3, 2000, the only response to the anguish and anger of losing such a dear friend and extraordinary man was to finish the film. Now it was a much bigger story about his life, his marriage and partnership with Michèle Montas, the radio station and about the country to which he dedicated his life and work and which he affected so deeply.

### **Could you be precise about the sources of the images? How many interviews?**

### **When did they take place, etc? Where is the tv footage of political events coming from? Etc.**

We interviewed Jean 15-20 times between 1993 and his return in 1994. The interviews all took place in New York city and in nearby Rockland County, NY. In addition to the interviews with Jean there is material included in the film from many different archival sources including news agencies and libraries around the world as well as documentaries about Haiti and two dramatic Haitian films: *Mais, Je Suis Belle* and *Anita*.

**For you, what was most striking in Jean Dominique's attitude?**

**His perseverance, his strong sense of justice, or something else?**

Jean Dominique and Michèle Montas are extraordinary examples of what individuals can accomplish by sticking to their principles with bravery, perseverance and a commitment to helping people. Jean was also extremely dramatic, smart, funny, entertaining and wonderful to spend time with. Michèle is all of those things in her own way.

**The movie is critical about US Government attitude towards Haiti.**

**Have things changed? Grown better or worse?**

I didn't set out to make a film critical of US policy in Haiti. I set out to make a film about a man whose life story happens to encompass much of the recent history of Haiti. A history that is inexorably intertwined with the United States. Jean spoke bluntly about what was apparent to him as the truth.

**Your filmography is extremely varied: fiction, non-fiction, musical performance films, and so on.**

**How do you choose between these genres? Are you less interested in fiction than before?**

I love making documentaries and I love making narrative dramatic films and I love going back and forth between fiction and non-fiction. In one form you get to create a whole world and the people in it from imagination and the collaboration of lots of other artists. In the other you get to tell a real story with the person who lived it. I can't imagine having to choose one over the other.

**Since the success of Michael Moore's films, it seems that documentaries are growing in popularity.**

**Do you agree? Would you say documentaries can, in some way, change reality?**

I think there has always been an enthusiastic audience for documentaries. Recently there have been an awful lot of really fantastic theatrical documentaries that have been successful. I think a lot of documentaries are best suited to television and some are made with a theatrical audience in mind. When there are good theatrical films with dedicated distributors behind them, audiences find them.

**Do you have a personal involvement in the human rights movement apart from your movies?**

I tend to speak out about what I believe in and I believe in justice and human rights for all people. As an American citizen, I exercise my right to free speech along with most other Americans and when I think that my government is doing things that are harmful to folks at home or in other countries, I feel compelled to stand up and say that I think it's wrong and that this is not what I want the government that represents me to do.

**Could you write a few words about the music in the film?**

**Who are those musicians, and what is your involvement with Haitian music?**

If you spend any time in Haiti it is impossible to avoid the infectious music which is such a part of everyday life for everyone. Music imbued with the beat of its African roots and steeped in the traditions of the Vodoun religion makes itself known everywhere you go. From traditional *Compas* to *Ra-Ra* to *Vaccine* to contemporary pop, music is as much a part of expressing yourself in Haiti as anything else.

Wyclef Jean is one of the great musical geniuses of our time, using his talent to become one of the biggest hip-hop stars in the world. He is also deeply attached and committed to his homeland of Haiti. Along with Jerry 'Wonda' Duplessis, Wyclef composed an original score to the film inspired by the story and his love of Haiti. He also contributed four original songs from his upcoming Creole language album, *Welcome to Haiti*.

**Did you ever feel threatened during the making of this movie?**

No. The Haitian people are by and large very friendly and very interested in folks from other countries who come to visit theirs. There has been a lot of violence in Haiti - they have endured a disproportionate amount of abuse and exploitation and with that has come a disproportionate amount of violence, but every country contends with violence - but there is almost no history of violence against Americans. The only time that there was a question of security was after Jean was killed: we accompanied Michèle around Port-Au-Prince and it was necessary for her to have an armed security detail with her. That brought home to us the danger that she was in and it was unsettling to be in the presence of so many guns, but we never felt personally threatened.



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