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## Historian Ruth Feldstein's Book-Turned-Documentary to Premiere on PBS

By Lawrence Lerner

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**Editor's Note:** Shortly after this story was published, actor Cicily Tyson passed away at age 96. In the wake of her death, we sat down with Professor Ruth Feldstein to talk about Tyson's life and legacy [here](#).

In 2014, Rutgers University–Newark History Professor Ruth Feldstein published an award-winning book on the impact of six Black female performers on the Civil Rights and second-wave feminist movements. The next year, she was approached by various people interested in optioning her work for a documentary film.

"I was definitely surprised, flattered and honored when filmmakers showed interest," said Feldstein.

On Monday, Martin Luther King Day, PBS' American Masters series will premiere *How It Feels to Be Free*, a documentary film based on Feldstein's book, *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford University Press).

The film's world premiere caps a five-year journey started when filmmaker Yoruba Richen reached out to Feldstein in early 2015. Richen, who is Founding Director of the Documentary Program at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY, was the first to contact Feldstein and the only person whom the historian met with in person.

"After talking with Yoruba and seeing her larger body of work, it was clear that she just 'got it,'" said Feldstein. "She was the perfect person to give this project to. She's a great filmmaker and really understood how to tell a story attending to the intersection of race, sex and gender."

Feldstein's book examines how six legendary performers—Nina Simone, Lena Horne, Miriam Makeba, Abbey Lincoln, Diahann Carroll and Cicely Tyson—helped advance the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, while making gender central to those struggles. The risks they took, and demands they made, not only were instrumental to the fight for racial equality but became integral to second-wave feminism, and black feminism in particular.

The book, which won the Benjamin L. Hooks National Book Award and the Michael Nelson Prize of the International Association for Media and History, attracted media attention when it was published, along with rave reviews. Feldstein wrote the book to shine a light on women whose voices, though heard as performers, had been marginalized in politics and culture.

"It's important that we think more broadly about what constitutes politics, to see how transformative these women were in the way they embodied two of the most transformative social movements of the 20th century: civil rights and women's liberation," said Feldstein.

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The book is also an outgrowth of Feldstein's personal experience. As a child, she'd heard stories about her activist father participating in the March on Washington and working in Alabama during Freedom Summer. Her mom, meanwhile, remained at home caring for three young children while pregnant with Feldstein, making her dad's political activism possible. Over time, Feldstein, trained in U.S. Women's History, thought more about the central role that women played during the Civil Rights movement and throughout history.

That the PBS documentary airs on Martin Luther King Day is no coincidence and speaks to yet another reason Feldstein embarked on her book project: to address how

the dominant narratives around civil rights and MLK Day center around men and freedom songs such as "We Shall Overcome" and "This Little Light of Mine," while glossing over women's contributions and confrontational tunes such as Simone's "Mississippi Goddam."

"That we're offering a different kind of narrative with this film, on this of all days, seems really meaningful," said Feldstein.

Transitioning the book to film has been a learning experience for Feldstein and is enabling her to reach a wider audience with this important material. Grammy Award-winning recording artist Alicia Keys is the project's executive producer, while Feldstein serves as one of the producers, consulting on interview subjects, archival materials and fundraising grants.

Feldstein has yet to see the final cut of the film. On Monday she'll watch the premiere at home with her kids. Meanwhile, she's full of excitement and gratitude for the experience.

"With Yoruba and the entire production team, and Alicia Keys at the helm as executive producer, I feel the material couldn't be in better hands," said Feldstein. "I'm so grateful to have a team so committed to getting the story out there in such a thoughtful way."

View a trailer and more information about *American Masters: How It feels to be Free* on [PBS.org](https://www.pbs.org).



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