

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 26, 2021

Contact: Lisa Jordan

610-349-8583

lisa@touchstone.org

Valley-wide Song Project Nominated for Regional Emmy

“Lehigh Valley be Free” video featuring more than 30 musicians is up for a Mid-Atlantic Emmy on September 25

BETHLEHEM, PA – Fourteen months after it debuted during a summer of protests and a pandemic, a socially-distanced collaboration of dozens of musicians from across the Lehigh Valley is going for a regional Emmy award.

The Lehigh Valley Song Project’s music video, from Bethlehem’s Touchstone Theatre, features more than 30 performers – ranging in age from students to musical veterans, and representing styles from rock to Hip-Hop to bluegrass to Latin jazz. The musicians separately recorded their parts for the original song “Lehigh Valley be Free,” and producers stitched together videos of those performances into a 7-minute celebration of community and solidarity.



Guitarist Liliana Cunha, in the “Lehigh Valley be Free” video.

The Mid-Atlantic Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences announced on August 5 that “Lehigh Valley be Free” had been [nominated for a regional Emmy Award](#) in the category of “Arts/Entertainment – Short Form Content (Single Story).” The winner of the Emmy will be announced in a virtual awards ceremony on September 25, which happens to be 14 months after the “Lehigh Valley be Free” video debuted online on July 25, 2020.

Liliana Cunha, now a senior at the Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts, contributed an electric guitar solo to the song. When she heard about the Emmy nomination, she said, “I texted my mom – I said, ‘Look at this! Isn’t this so cool?’ [...]”

“It’s amazing – that it’s getting seen by people, getting some recognition,” she added. “That’s awesome.”

The song project also helped kick off Touchstone’s 2020 iteration of Festival UnBound, a community festival of arts and dialogue. The 2020 festival featured outdoor events, concerts, and theatre, with most events also offered via livestream for a COVID-safe experience.

A year later, 2021’s Festival UnBound will take place in September and October, with events at Touchstone’s new outdoor Barrio Stage, in the Charles A. Brown Ice House, and at other venues around Bethlehem. More details about this year’s festival are available at <http://touchstone.org/festival-unbound>



Bassist Bakithi Kumalo, left, and guitarist Dana Gaynor in the “Lehigh Valley be Free” video.

The Lehigh Valley Song Project included many of the region’s most notable musicians, including: bassist Bakithi Kumalo, from South Africa, who performed on Paul Simon’s celebrated “Graceland” album and now lives in Bethlehem; drummer Kevin Soffera, who’s toured and recorded with rock bands Seether and Breaking Benjamin; singer and percussionist Camille Armstrong, who performed and toured for 10 years with the off-Broadway show “Stomp”; folksinger and arts educator Dave Fry; and award-winning jam band leader Dana Gaynor.

Some of the project’s other contributors are just at the beginning of their musical careers, including singer Maanya Gope, now a sixth grader, of the Community Music School – Lehigh Valley & Berks, and clarinet player Nick Suarez, who’s now in 12th grade, representing the Young People’s Philharmonic of the Lehigh Valley.



Maanya Gope, left, and Nick Suarez in the “Lehigh Valley be Free” video.

The entire project is a great reflection of the Lehigh Valley’s music community, said Rick Flores, president of the Greater Lehigh Valley Music Association.

“Neighbors assisting neighbors – in times of great division, with a spirit of compassion and love – are what define our local scene when it is at its healthiest,” Flores said. “These past several months have tested that, so to see this idea come to fruition with such support and high production quality is inspiring!”

Bev “BC” Conklin, frontwoman of The BC Combo and one of the Lehigh Valley’s best-known blues singers, said collaborating with the project’s “plethora of musicians” wasn’t just fun – it was inspiring.

“It’s about the energy of working together, for common good,” she said. “To be able to be a part of this recording – it’s a moment of history.”

Touchstone’s leadership was inspired by similar socially-distanced collaborations during the first summer of the COVID-19 pandemic and recruited Michael Duck, an Ensemble Affiliate at Touchstone, to lead the project. Duck wrote “Lehigh Valley be Free” with local singer-songwriter Kira Wiley, who also helped produce, and with creative oversight and input from Touchstone’s Artistic Director, Jp Jordan. Producer Jason Reif, of Bethlehem’s Freestone Productions, handled the video’s engineering, mixing, and editing.

“The song talks about the sacrifices we’ve been making to help keep our neighbors from getting sick, but really it’s a celebration of what we want the Valley to be,” Duck said.

“We were singing about how everybody needs freedom from disease, freedom from hunger, from hatred, from violence,” he said. “And the fact that we were singing those words during the summer when ‘Black Lives Matter’ became a household phrase – that made it even more powerful.”



Bev “BC” Conklin, in the “Lehigh Valley be Free” video.



Matthew Mosley, performing as “GR3YSON” in the “Lehigh Valley be Free” video.

For Matthew Mosley, a Hip-Hop artist who performs under the name “GR3YSON,” the project coincided not only with the protests following George Floyd’s killing, but also with Mosley becoming a father.

“I got to reflect on most of what I felt that summer, after having my twins and seeing the protests – everything going on was crazy, and I wanted to rap about it,” said Mosley, who contributed a rap verse to “Lehigh Valley be Free.”

Afterwards, he said, “seeing the video made me happy to know I wasn’t alone” – that there were others “in my area that felt the same way.”

The Lehigh Valley Song Project is sponsored by Highmark Blue Shield and the Martin Guitar Charitable Foundation. To learn more about the Lehigh Valley Song Project or to watch the “Lehigh Valley be Free” video, visit <http://touchstone.org/lvsp>. Donations to support the song project and similar future projects can be made at <https://bit.ly/LVsongproject>

About Touchstone

Founded in 1981, Touchstone Theatre produces and presents both original and classic productions, with a dedication to the renewal of theatre as a vital art form. Touchstone works to foster collaboration on a local and national level through educational and youth empowerment programs, using theatre as a community-building tool. Visit us on the web at www.touchstone.org

###