

Roger Ross Williams: The “Blackface” Interview



Roger Ross Williams

By **Kam Williams**
For *The Skanner News*

In 2010, Roger Ross Williams became the only African American to win an Academy Award for directing and producing the documentary *Music by Prudence*. Three years later, he directed *God Loves Uganda* which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival

latest offering, *Blackface*, a CNN short film about a minstrel Christmas character celebrated in the Netherlands known as Black Pete.

KW: What inspired you to make *Blackface*?
RRW: When I first saw a White Dutch person dressed up as Black Pete, I was both sickened and shocked.

“Blackface was never acceptable to the Black population in the Netherlands. They have been protesting against it since the 1930s. The majority of Black people were just afraid to speak up

to enormous critical acclaim before airing on the PBS series “Independent Lens.”
He recently finished shooting *Life, Animated*, an animated documentary inspired by Pulitzer Prize-winner Ron Suskind’s memoir about raising his autistic son.
And Roger has several works currently in development, including an interactive project called *Traveling While Black* and a feature documentary about the prison industrial complex for The Why? Foundation.
He serves on the artist advisory board for the Sundance Institute, and splits his time between upstate New York and Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
Here, he talks about his

It’s hard to stand next to someone who views your skin color and hair as a costume.
As a filmmaker, whenever I get that feeling, I want to explore what motivates people to engage in such offensive behavior and enlighten folks about its origins.
KW: Do you think that there’s malice towards blacks underpinning the Dutch Christmas tradition?
RRW: I think many Dutch just don’t know the history of Black Pete, that he is rooted in slavery, and how he was used to dehumanize a race of people.
Once they realize this, many stop, but those who continue are either in denial, insensitive or actu-

ally racists.
KW: Given the assassination in Amsterdam of Theo Van Gogh over his making a movie about Islam, my guess is that the Dutch probably aren’t very receptive currently to criticism of this nature.
RRW: After the film came out, I got death threats and had to have a bodyguard.
It was interesting because many of the emails I got started out by saying it was their tradition and an innocent children’s holiday and ended by calling me the N-word or a “stupid Black monkey.”
How is that not racist? It just takes one racist crackpot to commit an act of violence against me.

A Dutch woman even stopped me at the dog walk and told me I needed to “get over slavery” and that she would “die” for Black Pete.
KW: Do you think we live in an overly sensitive politically-correct age, where people have to fear offending others by behavior considered acceptable just a decade ago?
RRW: It’s not an issue of political correctness. It’s a issue of racism. Blackface was never acceptable to the Black population in the Netherlands. They have been protesting against it since the 1930s.
The majority of Black people were just afraid to

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Kendrick the King: Rapper leads Grammys with 11 nominations



PHOTO BY MATT SAYLES/INVISION/AP FILE

In this Sunday, Nov. 22, 2015, file photo, the Weeknd performs at the American Music Awards at the Microsoft Theater in Los Angeles. Kendrick Lamar, Taylor Swift and the Weeknd have earned top nominations for the 2016 Grammy Awards, including album of the year.

By **Mesfin Fekadu**
AP Music Writer

NEW YORK— Kendrick Lamar is the king of the Grammys: The rapper is the leading nominee for the 2016 awards with 11, including album of the year for “To Pimp a Butterfly” and song of the year for “Alright.”
Lamar, who won two Grammys earlier this year, is followed by Taylor Swift and the Weeknd, who

each earned seven nominations, including album of the year. “Butterfly,” “1989” and “Beauty Behind the Madness” will battle country singer-songwriter Chris Stapleton’s “Traveller” and rock group Alabama Shakes’ “Sound & Color” for the top prize.
Lamar’s “Alright” and Swift’s “Blank Space” are nominated for song of the year, a songwriter’s
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