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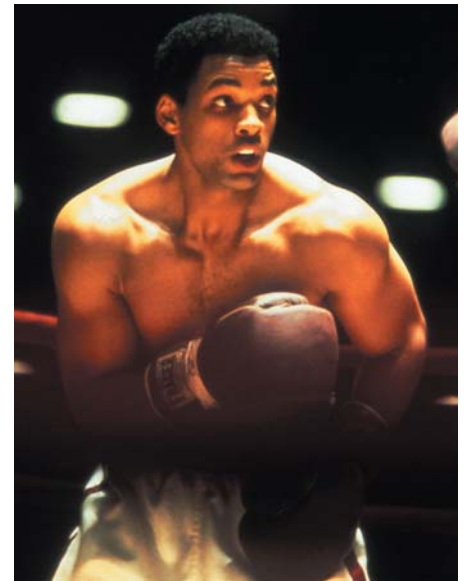
BIOGRAPHY®: Will Smith



the idea book
for educators

Biography.com/class

Before he was a “fresh prince” in Bel Air or a man in black fighting aliens on the big screen, Will Smith might have become an MIT-educated engineer. But much to the excitement of his future fans, he turned down a scholarship to the prestigious school to pursue an unexpected career in rap music. As this high-energy episode of BIOGRAPHY demonstrates, this was just the beginning of several unexpected decisions the prolific entertainer would make. The program chronicles how a charming Philadelphia teen who loved music became a platinum recording artist, television celebrity, and Oscar-nominated actor all before the age of 35. Clips from Smith’s music videos, like Grammy-winning “Parents Just Don’t Understand,” and his films, including the biopic *Ali* and action-packed *Independence Day*, offer an energetic view of Smith’s work. Family members, co-stars, and entertainment insiders offer intimate glimpses of the man away from the spotlight, his personal challenges, and how he has become the entertainment powerhouse he is today. Fans and new students alike will be inspired by how Will Smith willingly took risks to pursue his dreams and stand on his principles at any cost.



curriculum links

BIOGRAPHY: *Will Smith* would be useful for high school Performing Arts, Current Events, and Journalism courses. It also would be an excellent addition to after-school events and programs. As this episode contains some language and mature references, educators should preview the program before showing it to their students.

vocabulary

Students should identify the following terms. Visit www.merriamwebster.com for definitions.

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| acclaim | milestone |
| altruism | squander |
| diligent | trendsetter |
| insatiable | unconventional |

pre-viewing activity

On a large piece of paper or a chalkboard, ask the class to answer the following question: What words would you use to describe Will Smith?



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discussion questions

1. How would you describe Smith's family upbringing and how did it influence his career?
2. Why do you think role models such as boxing champion Muhammad Ali and Guion Bluford, the first African-American in space, were important for a young Smith?
3. How did financial success become a wake-up call for Smith?
4. Why do you think Smith was able to transition from rap to television? To film?
5. One of the interviewees called Will Smith "unconventional." In what ways is this true for his career?
6. What would you say were the major turning points in Smith's career and what were their impacts?
7. What would you say were some of the biggest risks Smith has taken in his career?
8. How does a biography differ from other forms of documentaries?
9. Who are some of the people interviewed for the documentary and what is their relationship to Smith? Who else do you think should have been interviewed for the program?
10. If A&E® were to do a biography on you, who would be interviewed about your life? What do you think they would say?

extended activities

1. **Compare and Contrast:** In groups of 3-5 students and using the library, compare and contrast Will Smith, the rapper and Will Smith, the movie star. Topics to compare and contrast might include: how the press has written about him, characters he has portrayed, work he has created, and events that have occurred in his personal life. Present your analysis on a posterboard or in a PowerPoint presentation to the class. Students can then participate in a class discussion of the characteristics they think are key to personal and professional success.
2. **Create Your Own Biography:** As a class, brainstorm and discuss what makes a good biography and identify key features of a film biography. On the chalkboard or a large piece of paper, create a list of questions one could ask interviewees about a person's life. Next, students should partner up and create a biography of each other by first interviewing their partners to learn their general life stories and to determine potential interviewees. For instructions on conducting an interview, consult **The History Channel®** Classroom's Oral History Guidelines online at:



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extended activities

History.com/classroom/oralhistguidelines.pdf. Students should then construct a short biography of their partner in written, oral, or film form, and present it to the class.

- 3. What's Going On?:** As the program stated, Smith was born in 1968 during the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement. What else happened in Smith's lifetime? Using the program, the Internet, or the library, as a class create a timeline of at least 15 key events that have occurred in Smith's career. Next, in groups of 3-5 students, choose an event from Smith's life and research what else was happening in the U.S. during this time. Groups should present their findings creatively to the class and bring in at least one primary source or artifact from the year they researched.



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websites & books

websites

The official website of Will Smith:
www.willsmith.com

For a list of Smith's film and television career, you can check The Internet Movie website:
www.imdb.com

books

Students can see another medium into which Smith has entered, by reading his children's book. *Just the Two of Us* (Scholastic, 2001).

Ogg, Alex and David Upshal. *The Hip Hop Years: A History of Rap* (Trans-Atlantic Publications; Book & CD edition, 1999).

Robb, Brian. *Will Smith: King of Cool* (Plexus Publishing; 2000).

Sound Recordings – Audio CD

A compilation of 1970s music that inspired the rap phenomenon. *Just the Two of Us* (Rhino/Wea, 1997).

A collection of Smith's top selling music. *Will Smith: Greatest Hits* (Sony, 2000).

① For additional resources, visit us online at Biography.com/class

