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Career Achievement Award: An Independent for All Seasons: William Greaves

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William Greaves is one of the most respected independents in the film and television production field. In addition, he is considered the dean of independent African-American filmmakers and through the years has helped to launch the careers of many young Black filmmakers. He has produced more than 200 documentary films, eight of which have won more than 70 international film festival awards, an Emmy Award and four Emmy nominations.

Greaves was inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame in 1980; he won an Emmy for his work as executive producer of the classic public affairs TV series *Black Journal* and a Special Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers in 1986. Among other honors, he's been the subject of a special homage from the first Black American Independent Film Festival in Paris.

When an African-American artist in almost any field is honored, the tendency is to recognize his or her efforts separate from the mainstream. In Greaves' case, nothing could be further from the truth. He has been acclaimed as "a thoroughly original, multi-faceted American artist" and has enjoyed success across the full spectrum of the entertainment arts as a producer, director, writer, editor, cameraman, actor, dancer, drama teacher and songwriter. For example, Greaves has been a longtime member of the Actors Studio in New York, which honored him in 1980 with its first Dusa Award, alongside such well-known alumni as Robert DeNiro, Jane Fonda, Marlon Brando, Sally Field, Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman and Ellen Burstyn.

As one of the young filmmakers who came up under his mentorship, I can look at the life and works of Greaves as a means to understanding the artistic and social development of American cinema as well as race relations in America. Born and raised in Harlem by Caribbean parents, he was exposed to African culture and history through the many Black cultural centers that existed during that time of segregation. Through his love of social dancing, he performed in professional dance groups, then acted with the American Negro Theatre, appearing in such landmark productions as *Garden of Time* and *Henri Christophe*, as well as in Broadway productions like *A Young American*, *Lost in the Stars* and *Finian's Rainbow*. He went on to act in the first wave of movies in the late 1940s made for Black audiences, including *A Miracle in Harlem* and *Souls of Sin*.

But despite a promising career as a featured actor in the hit movie *Lost Boundaries*, with Mel Ferrer and Canada Lee, and full membership in the Actors Studio, Greaves considered most of the roles offered him to be racially insulting. He was slated to appear in the Broadway revival of *Twentieth Century*, starring Gloria Swanson and Jose Ferrer, but when he learned that he would be playing a stereotypical bumbling porter, he quit on the spot.

Greaves decided to get behind the camera, where he could control what appeared on the screen. He studied film production under Hans Richter at the Film Institute at the City College of New York. However, discrimination again raised its ugly head. He worked as an apprentice with the documentarian Louis de Rochemont, but, faced with the almost impenetrable wall of racism in the motion picture industry, Greaves left the US in 1952 to study and work in Canada.

This decision to leave was based on several realities that confronted Greaves. His strategy was to learn filmmaking from the ground up because his goal was not just to produce and direct films, but to change the

stereotyped representation of African-Americans and, in the process, change the representation of Whites as well. As Greaves saw it, this could be done directly through documentary films or indirectly through feature films. Documentaries offered him, he felt, a more realistic opportunity to achieve his goals. He was particularly drawn to the ideas of film pioneer John Grierson, who set up Canada's National Film Board, and his writings about the documentary and its use as a social force.

Greaves applied for a grant to study in Canada, but despite letters of endorsement from de Rochemont, Elia Kazan, Reuben Mammoulian and Don Mulholland of the National Film Board, he was turned down. So he started as an apprentice editor at the National Film Board and during his eight-year stay there he moved through various jobs--assistant editor, sound editor, location manager, chief editor, writer and director. He also taught acting at studios he formed in Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa. A good example of Greaves' NFB documentary work is *Emergency Ward*(1959), which he directed and edited. It documents the events of a Saturday night at a Montreal hospital emergency room. Greaves humanizes his subjects--patients, doctors and orderlies and combines the tripod set-up approach used in the feature films of that time with the hand-held camera style that came to characterize the cinema verite documentaries of the 1960s.

The constant stream of documentary work in Canada provided Greaves with the experience he wanted and needed. His decision to go into documentary, he says, was a happy one because it demands intellectual growth, technical craftsmanship, a hard-nosed respect for research and a sensitivity to human behavior. It was in Canada where he also met and married his wife and filmmaking partner, Louise Archambault. When the racial climate in the US began to heat up in the early 1960s, he felt prepared to return home and mount a new offensive. The opportunity came when a United Nations agency asked him to direct *Cleared for Takeoff*, a film about a transglobal flight by a major airliner; Greaves moved back to New York to take the job.

Greaves' love of African culture and his film training in Canada enabled him to take advantage of opportunities that were opening. He formed his company, William Greaves Productions, in 1964 and began to make films for the US Information Agency, which, because of the impact of the Civil Rights movement, was producing films about the changing racial struggle in the country. For one of his earliest works for the agency, *The First World Festival of Negro Arts*, Greaves documented the historic gathering in Senegal in 1966 of artists and intellectuals like Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes and Katherine Dunham. For the next decade in Africa, this film was the most popular USIA production.

Greaves followed this film with another breakthrough documentary *Still A Brother: Inside the Negro Middle Class*, which, though completed in 1967, did not air on public television until April 1968, three weeks after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Extremely controversial for its time, and still interesting today, the film examines a segment of the Black community for its views on assimilation by "good Negroes" and the rise of Black militancy.

William Greaves has always maintained his crusade to create non-stereotypical Black images in the American media, but where he made the most impact was arguably his position as executive producer of the public television series *Black Journal*. The Civil Rights movement, based on principles of nonviolence and petitions to the larger society for justice, was beginning to run its course as the marches, violent resistance and government inaction thwarted activists. Thus, planned and spontaneous rebellions, generally sparked by a symbolic incident, but also caused by a long list of unjust conditions, erupted in cities with large Black populations, like Detroit, Newark and the Watts section of Los Angeles. A specific complaint coming out of those uprisings was the lack of a Black presence in the electronic media and the negative distortion that took place when Blacks were represented.

It was out of these conditions that the *Black Journal* series was created in April 1968, following King's assassination. The idea for the series was enthusiastically approved as an overdue response to both the Kerner Commission Report on US race relations, which called for the media to "expand and intensify coverage of the Negro community," and to the growing mood for self-determination in Black communities around the country. With Greaves and former Chicago radio news reporter Lou House as co-hosts, the series went into active production in May, had its premiere broadcast in June, and earned both critical acclaim and an unprecedented (for public television) viewer response.

The first show's segments consisted of an interview from an Oakland prison with Huey Newton on the future of the Black Panthers, a report on the Poor People's Campaign in Washington, DC, a satirical skit about the use of Blacks in advertisements, an essay on the view of the future by graduating Black college seniors, a profile of a Harlem-based manufacturer of African style clothing, a portrait of a Black jockey, and coverage of an address by Coretta Scott King at Harvard University.

Despite the success of the series, questions of assignments and editorial points of view became points of dispute among the staff. The issue came to a head when 11 Black members of the production staff demanded that the White executive producer be replaced by a Black one, citing the National Educational Television (the precursor to PBS) press statement that *Black Journal* was produced "by, for and about Black people." Greaves became the new executive producer and set that tone of being the sole electronic representative of the "Civil Rights movement on the air." Because there were extremely few freelance technicians of color due to the difficulty of finding work regularly, Greaves established The *Black Journal* Film Workshop to fill this void. Another important change that occurred was staff editor Madeline Anderson's promotion to public television's first Black woman producer.

While serving as executive producer, Greaves continued to operate his own production company, but he realized that he had to make a choice--become a full-time television executive or retain his independence as a filmmaker. In 1970, he left *Black Journal* and proceeded to produce and direct a variety of films. Some of them were sponsored by government agencies, including *Voices of La Raza* for the Equal Opportunity Commission, *On Merit* for the Civil Service Commission and *Where Dreams Come True* for NASA.

Many of Greaves' films explore the lives of extraordinary African-Americans, famous and forgotten. Prominent among them are *Booker T. Washington: The Life and Legacy* (1983), *Frederick Douglass: An American Life* (1984), *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice* (1989) and his most recent film, *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey* (2001), about the legendary United Nations Under Secretary General and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. Greaves also produced and directed the cinema verite fight movie, *Ali, The Fighter* (1973), featuring Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. In addition to the production of documentaries, television programs and features, Greaves' company distributes its own library of films on video and DVD to universities, libraries, schools and cultural institutions throughout the US.

Currently, Greaves is completing *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take Two*, the second of an originally planned series of five avant-garde films, all shot in 1968. A sequel to *Take Two* *Take 2* was filmed in November in New York's Central Park, using the same actors from the 1968 shoot. *Take Two and Take 2 1/2*, which Greaves is co-producing with Steven Soderbergh and Steve Buscemi, will both be ready for theatrical release in 2005.

Greaves has weathered the storms of racism and film industry changes without losing his vitality, optimism and courtesy. His body of work has been pivotal in shaping Black filmmaking, while embracing many styles of world cinema, often before they became prominent. He has been a strong force against racism, but many of

his films have addressed topics other than the African-American experience, proving that cultural authenticity does not mean being restrictive. William Greaves reflects his world--and our world--through his films.

WILLIAM GREAVES SELECT FILMOGRAPHY

Emergency Ward(1959)
Wealth of a Nation(1964)
The First World Festival of Negro Arts (1966)
Symbiobiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One (1968)
Still a Brother: Inside the Negro Middle Class (1968)
Black Journal(1968-70)
Voice of La Raza(1972)
Ali, The Fighter(1973)
From These Roots(1974)
Where Dreams Come True (1979)
Booker T. Washington: Life and Legacy (1983)
Frederick Douglass: An American Life (1984)
Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice (1989)
Ralph Bunch: An American Odyssey (2001)
Symbiobiopsychotaxiplasm: Take Two (2005)

Career Achievement Awards

1985. Pare Lorentz
1986. Fred W. Friendly
1987. Richard Leacock
1988. David L. Wolper
1989. Jacques Yves Cousteau
1990. Frederick Wiseman
1991. Bill Moyers
1992. Walter Cronkite
1993. Robert Drew
1994. Albert Maysles
1995. Marcel Ophuls
1996. Ted Turner
1997. Henry Hampton
1998. Sheila Nevins
1999. Michael Apted
2000. Charles Guggenheim
2001. Jean Rouché
2002. Ken Burns
2003. Sir David Attenborough

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