



## PROFILE: *William Greaves*

by Lillian Jimenez

*I interviewed William Greaves because he is probably the most prolific Black Independent Producer in the country today. He has produced over 200 documentaries, has won over forty international film festival awards, has won an Emmy as Executive Producer for BLACK JOURNAL (the former WNET television show), and received four other Emmy nominations. An entire evening was devoted to the screening of Greaves' films at the recent Paris Film Festival of Black American Independent Filmmakers. On February 27th, the entire festival will be shown at Joseph Papp's Public Theatre. As was the case in Paris, an entire evening at the Public Theatre will be devoted to the films of William Greaves.*

*He currently teaches acting for film and television at the Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute and has occasionally substituted for Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio. In February, 1980, he was inducted into the Black Film-*

*makers Hall of Fame and is currently Executive Producer on a feature film (for Universal Pictures), starring Richard Pryor, Cicely Tyson and Vincent Price.*

*Whenever I'm critical of the racial stereotypes that continue to be perpetuated by the media industry in this country, I'm constantly told that "this dilemma still exists because there just aren't enough qualified Third World filmmakers". Certainly William Greaves and others disprove this assertion. Because of series like BEULAH LAND (NBC), films like FORT APACHE — THE BRONX (Time and Life Productions) and CHARLIE CHAN (Zoetrobe) which continue to foster negative images of Third World people, more pressure must be brought to bear on the industry so that talented, qualified Third World filmmakers get an opportunity to remedy this deplorable situation.*

Lillian Jimenez



## WILLIAM GREAVES

I was born a poor Black boy. I grew up in Harlem on 135th Street and Lenox Avenue. I was a little ragamuffin and a Harlem hoodlum — if that helps anybody.

**LJ:** What do you mean by Harlem hoodlum?

**WG:** People always assume that if you were from Harlem or the South Bronx that you're into all kinds of scenes. I did belong to a group called Panthers, which was not the political Panthers of the 60's, but another group. It was a very beautiful group of kids, a club. I also grew up in the South Bronx. Do you know Dawson Street and Prospect Avenue? That used to be my turf too. I think that they are marvelous areas, because if you can thread your way through all the problems and pressures that are laid on people of those areas by the larger society, you had a good training in living. And I must say that my happiest moments were spent in those environments. It wasn't until I finally left that I realized how terrible they were supposed to be.

**LJ:** But when you say that you were brought up in those areas, you're talking about a specific time period. What were the years, decades you were living there?

**WG:** Well, in the thirties, forties.

**LJ:** What I keep thinking about is that I grew up on 134th Street between Amsterdam and Broadway, which is not that far from where you grew up. When I was a very little girl the neighborhood was pretty good. Even when we went to 125th Street, it didn't look quite as bad as it does now.

There wasn't the influx of drugs. At least in my mind as a child, I didn't see a lot of that. I'm thinking that when you were raised in those areas, even in the South Bronx, they weren't as bad as they are now. What are some of those differences that you can see now; and when you talk about the social pressures, what are you talking about?

**WG:** I think that drugs have been absolutely devastating in those areas. Out of the drugs comes not only the destruction of health, but crime factors. Out of the crime factors you get a variety of social problems that follow in the wake of crimes, particularly when you look at crimes in a racist society in which they announce that this person is a criminal, this person is Black, ergo all people who are Black are criminals. Consequently there is a negative response on the part of the larger white population to a lot of the so-called minority group programs. As Malcolm X said, "Democracy in a racist society is Fascism." Have you ever heard of that expression? These are some of the things that become a problem in the wake of drugs and crime occurring in a racist society in a particular ghettoized area.

**LJ:** Tell me a little about these factors that applied pressure in the Harlem community in the time when you were growing up.

**WG:** You have the traditional economic: unemployment, deterrence of one kind or another of upward mobility — economically, professionally, educationally. I grew up with a group of kids who were so bright; they wanted to be something, they wanted to be people with

stature and significance. They wanted to make contributions of one kind or another, but they were thwarted and cancelled out by the "system" — by the discriminatory practices in education. You talk about this busing today; I remember when Black kids were holed up in one or two schools in Harlem — couldn't go anywhere else to get an education. If you couldn't get into those schools, that was it.

On the plus side, of course, there was a lot of warmth up there, a lot of parties, a lot of fun, a lot of marvelously interesting people who were highly supportive of me, of young people at that time. I was most privileged and lucky to have been on the receiving end of a sequence or series of very interesting older people who imparted knowledge to me, stimulated my mind, encouraged me, supported me emotionally in one way or another. These were people who were doing the work of institutionalized agencies, but they were doing it for nothing.

Basically the whole thrust of my life has been that of putting my knowledge and skills at the service of the Black community, the minority groups of this country — as well as the country as a whole, because we're not living in a vacuum. We can pursue the pure or ethical meaningful existence that we like as a group in this country, but if the more total community has not progressed we have a serious problem. So I have a very aggressive interest in the reformation of a lot of things: the body politic itself, the whole American society, because I feel that my interests aren't going to be served unless the interests of all people are served. That's been the thrust, and that leads me as a theatrical person, former actor, songwriter into the whole area of documentary as an educational tool, public affairs programming for television, and of course into feature films that are in one way or another substantive in quality. I have become progressively aware of the fact that the whole entertainment field, feature film in particular, whether or not the subject matter addresses social issues directly is nonetheless an important social event. That is to say the happiness, the delight, the entertainment of people is a social exercise. I didn't always feel this way. I used to think that if a film didn't have some kind of content, it was of no consequence. But that isn't true, because people work hard all day, they go through various types of pain and suffering and so on, and sometimes they do need relief in the same way that someone needs sleep or a laugh — something to break up the tension of a moment. So I'm not as hostile as I used to be toward entertainment films. As a matter of fact, I've come to like them. I even find myself going to see comedies a lot, to break the tension that I sometimes feel that I'm under. There's considerable tension running the company.

**LJ:** Tell me a little about how you got involved in acting.

**WG:**

I had a background in art as well; I was a painter. I was given a special scholarship to the Little Red Schoolhouse at the WPA project in Harlem, where I used to paint, do pottery on the wheel and all kinds of things. I also began studying trumpet, and I started



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writing songs. But my father was one of these no-nonsense guys who felt that art and music were for the birds, that a Black kid could never make a living at them. That's how I got to Stuyvesant High School. But my heart was in art and its related cultural expressions. That was on 7th Avenue and 50th Street. Do you remember the Roxy Theatre? It was a big theatre at one time. Gordon Heath, was doing the narration, and he was acting in a thing at the American Negro Theatre up in Harlem. He thought I was the type for a particular part, and said, "Why don't you come up and audition for this part?" Well, I went up there and I auditioned. I got the part and I got rave reviews and I said, "Oh Jesus, this is fascinating." Then I began to become an actor; and in the course of becoming an actor; involved as I was also with Afro-American history, a sense of dignity of Black people, I began to find myself in conflict with the theatre and the motion picture industry. Fortunately, I looked like the "new Negro"; I was a young all-American boy type, so I was getting parts that were not the typical stereotypical parts — I mean Uncle Toms and stuff like that. But occasionally they would ask me to play these parts, and it was at those moments that I found myself running head-on against various white producers who claimed they were friends and great supporters of Black people, but who were misrepresenting us, and I resisted playing those roles. I never played them. As a matter of fact, I was in a play Jose Ferrer was directing with Gloria Swanson. There was a part in there for this Uncle Tom and I said I didn't want any part of it. I quit the show; it was the last thing I did on Broadway. As a matter of fact I only went to two days of rehearsals once I saw what they were serving. To make a long story short, I decided that I would move to the other side of the whole production process.

**LJ:** When you began to have an interest in the technical aspects of film, what were people's attitudes? Did you encounter any obstacles?

**WG:** When I first started, they said, "Gee, how are you going to get into films?" They were intelligent people, they saw what the situation was. Here's America, prototype of South Africa as we understand South Africa today, a wall of resistance to the upgrading of people in jobs and so on. How would it be possible for a Black man in this society to contemplate a future in the writing, directing and production of films? And they were right; except that because I had a deeper understanding than they did of history, I knew that there were other places in the world beyond America. I realized that I wasn't captive to America; this is my country and I live here, but my God, if they're going to start making lampshades out of me, I'm not buying as much as I can — I'll resist. So I went elsewhere; I went to Canada.

**LJ:** Why did you choose Canada?

**WG:** Because there was the National Film Board of Canada. It was a prestigious, very highly qualified film studio, the most important one in the whole world for documentaries. I had been featured as an actor in a feature film called *Lost Boundaries*, and one of the people who had worked on the feature was connected with the Film Board. He was my contact.

**LJ:** When you came back to New York, what was the kind of milieu that you came back to?

**WG:** The reason I came back was because I felt that America was changing, that America was going to make it as a country. It was not destined to become a social disaster area, which is what I had thought it might become. The impact of the Supreme Court decision in 1954 and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and all of the various social sit-ins and civil rights struggles in general — I was very encouraged by this, that Blacks and Whites were working more collaboratively and supportively in something that the survival of the country depended. So I thought it was time for me to come back and lend my media support to this kind of concern.

**LJ:** Tell me a little bit about how you got the company started, did you encounter any problems or find any areas of support from people?

**WG:** When I came back from Canada, I came by way of the United Nations. I became an Information Officer in films and radio for a specialized agency of the United Nations in Canada, an agency called the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). I came back to America because they wanted someone at U.N. Television who new about aviation but also was a filmmaker to make a film for them about the flight of an airliner around the world. Alistair Cooke was the host of the show. So Alistair and I went around the world making this film, in which he appeared and I directed and produced it and wrote it along with him. Shirley Clarke — she's a very outstanding, female filmmaker who made the *COOL WORLD* and a number of other things — introduced me to George Stevens Jr. who was doing a lot of innovative work in government films for the U.S. Information Agency. When he saw my work he became very interested in working with me. He wanted me to do films for him on my own and from there I went on to setting up my own company because in order to do films for him, I had to have a company. I was able to get a loan from the Small Business Administration. Frankly, I would say that without government backing, I would not have achieved very much success as a filmmaker because the private sector was absolutely dragging its feet in terms of opportunities for Blacks in Hollywood, on Madison Avenue or in industrial films. The private sector was very hostile to the idea of Black filmmakers, and it still is. It's true, I'm an Executive Producer for Universal on a feature film and that's marvelous. I'm delighted, but I'm also aware of the fact that I'm the only one in a major studio out there. But, my God, if I can't be an Executive Producer on a feature film, who can? For instance, with my track record I defy you to find... if you take the track record of most of the other Executive Producers out there I'll bet you that my track record is more extensive in film and theatre, in essence more substantive than theirs. I won't say all of them, but probably 90% of them; same thing with Directors, my background in dealing with acting problems is much deeper than the average Hollywood director. Yet, I'm having difficulty getting a Hollywood film to direct.

**LJ:** Should other Third World filmmakers go after government contracts for films?

**WG:** I think this is very important for people from



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minority groups that are into the media. Basically, Third World people in America are relatively poor. Sometimes we get so hung up and bogged down in our anger or rage at how things are going in this country that we don't make use of all the opportunities that are available for filmmaking in most of the federal agencies. Funding can also be gotten through the Endowments of the Arts and the Humanities and the various State Councils for the Arts. These are primary sources of financing for minority film and tape producers. I think it's stupid of us to turn our backs on money from these areas. In point of fact, this money is actually our money to begin with. I mean we pay our taxes. The various minority groups of this country represent roughly 1/4 of the entire population.

**LJ:** How about your move into feature films?

**WG:** I did my first feature in 1967, and I had difficulty getting distribution for it because at the time it was very avant garde or whatever you want to call it. It was the kind of film that people now associate with Jean Luc-Godard, or Altman.

**LJ:** But wasn't there a desire on your part to break into Hollywood?

**WG:** Very much so. But not to make exploitation films. I was continually sending material out there. But they were turning it down because it was too healthy. They wanted junk food, dope, opiates. Eventually a promoter named Jerry Perenchio came to me with an offer to do a feature film on the first Muhammed Ali & Joe Frazier fight for him. I made the film and it went throughout the country, played in quite a few theatres; it played on television about four times. It got some very great reviews. Then I did another film called *THE MARIJUANA AFFAIR*; that we shot down in the West Indies with money from the West Indies. I had to go outside of the country to get financing. Finally Ned Tanen and Thom Mount at Universal, both of whom have been very supportive of my work, identified me to be the filmmaker to do the *MESBIC* feature out there. But that feature, for a variety of reasons never got going; Ned and Thom were impressed with the quality of my work on that project and so when the Richard Pryor film came along they asked me to be the Executive Producer. They have indicated to me that they're interested in having me make other features for them as Producer/Director. The Pryor film is called *THE FAMILY DREAM*. We haven't finished it yet. There's some additional shooting that has to be done. It should come out sometime in early summer. I have been interested in doing features all along. It's only within the past two or three years that I've had a shot at it. Without people like Mount and Tanen punching for me I would have had great difficulty out there.

Where does William Greaves Productions and William Greaves go from here?

**WG:** William Greaves Productions is involved with a number of films that we're under contract for right now.

I directed four dramatic films for television last summer that will play shortly. I have the feature at Universal and by next fall I will have done about 10 other documentaries. Then William Greaves is going to take a rest for a while and hopefully some of the people that work with me will be sufficiently capable to handle the production work that will be coming in. William Greaves will progressively move in the direction of directing & producing feature films independently and in Hollywood. We'll make interesting substantive documentaries for organizations like the National Endowment for the Humanities or the National Endowment for the Arts. I see myself doing a couple of interesting documentaries a year — either investigative reporting or some kind of essay or artistic type film as well as doing highly theatrical, exciting, entertaining yes commercial feature film with or without social content.

**LJ:** How do you feel when Black or Hispanic filmmakers make only films that deal with racism?

**WG:** I think it's unfortunate when an artist can't function with a degree of freedom to pursue universal themes. I think that this is one of the tremendous, perhaps even oppressive burdens of the so-called minority group filmmaker. It is a fact that this person carries not only the normal load of creative enterprise that all artists carry but he or she must also carry the added weight to the racism of this country. The Black and Brown artist has always got to have one eye cocked on this problem and should from time to time address it. But, it's also true that we artists can't really become artists unless from time to time we extricate ourselves from the pressures of racism. It's truly a balancing act; I think that it requires considerable maturity on the part of the artist. I think that the individual artist should not turn his or her back on racism in this country; but the artist should not turn his back on other needs and problems of America. The artist in his or her maturity has to integrate all of these elements into creative equation. It's judgement, with a degree of flexibility and patience and at the same time aggressiveness. You have to weigh these things off against one another.

**LJ:** Do you feel that William Greaves has gotten his just do?

**WG:** Frankly No. But I'm not bitter and I'm not going to run out and do something crazy. The answer is no. But I've made this "no" work for me. It's forced me to exceed myself at times. Clearly anyone who has had the number of distinctions that I've had, should literally be making feature films and highly prestigious documentaries with good budgets as a Director and Producer. This is not happening. I do occasionally connect this or that interesting project but I don't do it with the degree of backing that one associates with a Francis Ford Coppola or Stanley Kubrick. But who knows, maybe my day will come.