

# Film

By James P. Murray

## William Greaves: Documentaries Are Not Dead

Many people are unaware that a lot of people make movies outside of Hollywood: on campuses, in the ghetto, in corporate skyscrapers, in shuttered motel rooms and on military reservations. For training, for fun, for hobby, for profit, amateur and professional, skilled and untrained motion picture lovers do their thing.

Yes, there is an independent filmmaker and many Blacks have opted for this route to circumvent the Hollywood establishment.

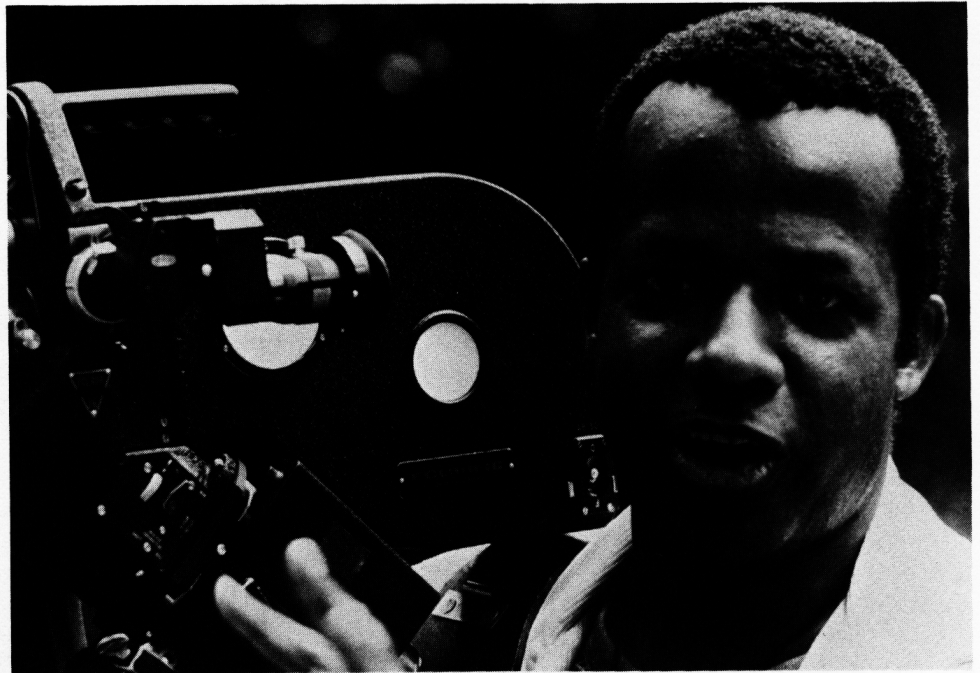
If such Blacks do manage to get by the establishment, one man who certainly can take much of the credit is a prolific filmmaker who grew up in Harlem and acted in the theater as well as motion pictures with moderate success. As a young man who had majored in engineering at City College, he competed with Poitier and Belafonte for stage parts and played a featured role in the 1949 film *Lost Boundaries* before becoming interested in film production. His name is William Greaves.

Greaves took additional courses in filmmaking at City College, the New School and with several noted filmmakers, but he ran into problems.

"It was pretty clear to me back in 1952," he explained, "when I was trying to break into the industry that there was a wall of racism and discrimination that I could not possibly penetrate."

Like Melvin Van Peebles, he had to do his penetrating abroad. As an apprentice at the National Film Board of Canada, he learned all aspects of filmmaking and worked as a writer, chief editor, assistant director and director during his 10 years there. He was involved with nearly 80 films in a technical or creative capacity during that time.

Returning to the United States in 1963, he became a producer for United Nations television before starting his own production company with the production of three films for the United States Information Agency. For a few months later, William Greaves Productions subsequently leased the services of its name-



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sake to National Educational Television in New York where he moved from co-host to executive producer of their *Black Journal* program, a unique Emmy-award winning, black-oriented network news show.

After two years, he returned home and began actively (and successfully) seeking out contracts to produce films independently. In 1970 alone, he won 10 major awards for various films and television productions—all dealing with the black man, his problems, ambitions and future in America.

Yet sensitive to the problems confronting other ethnic minorities, Greaves produced *Voice of La Raza*, a film dealing with prejudice and job discrimination affecting 10 million Spanish-speaking Americans. Mexican-born actor Anthony Quinn starred in the documentary which was contracted by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and like so many before it, won a film award for William Greaves.

Two superstars in their own right were key to another Greaves production last year. Most of the heavyweight title fights down through the years have been known more or less as "the fight of the century." But when

Muhammed Ali, a poet and Joe Frazier, a nightclub singer met in Madison Square Garden, they were promised \$2.5 million apiece just to show up and go 15 rounds. That had to make the fight something special.

No rights were sold for television use, so when filmed highlights were shown in theaters across the nation a few weeks later, reaction was impressive. And especially impressive and gratifying to Bill Greaves, who had made the fight as real as film can be real. Later in the year, he began work on a recently completed feature film also based on the title fight.

Greaves, like Gordon Parks, has a son actively involved in a career in the film business (as well as a brother). When interviewed one afternoon in his West 54th Street offices, his son was editing film for an upcoming production in a nearby room.

"Personally, I have earned something of a reputation of being an independent," he said. "It is because of this independence that we have been successful and when we are approached to do films, there is not too much of a tendency to constrain us. They feel our films will be good. Secondly, because the impact of our films

often trades on its being innovative and independent in thinking, we are accorded a degree of freedom. Again, *Black Journal* under my executive producership was considered very militant and a radical kind of show. Everyone thought we were going to be thrown off the air. It came to pass that the shows were of sufficient quality and spoke of information that not only the black community wanted to hear but the white community was utterly fascinated with.

"There are probably three different areas in black films," Greaves continued. "One is the Hollywood area. It fulfills the Hollywood establishment's commercial requirements. Then you've got what you would call the public service type of film—the documentary ranging from the public affairs film on television to sponsored films for various institutions, some of them educational, some with social welfare objectives, some for the government. The last is clearly the independent cat who is out there. He's got himself a grant of four or five thousand dollars to make a film or he's begged, borrowed or stolen enough money from relatives and he goes out and does his thing."

Who is the real independent?

"He's more often the product of a film workshop or a film school or some black community center that's got this equipment lying there to be used," Greaves said. "I think this area is the most honest, the most unfettered. It's in this area that you get the freest kind of expression. But herein also lies a problem. The overwhelming majority of people working in that area are not that experienced so that those films are almost always deficient technically or artistically in one way or another but they are still the most candid in a way."

Speaking on the public affairs area, he said, "I think it's in the public affairs sector that you get both the professional and the candor. Expression, they call it 'Black Consciousness.' You have a certain amount of institutional influence on the films but they are of a much better order than let's say Hollywood. There's much less uptightness about certain kinds of issues being aired. Of course, it changes when you are doing public affairs for a commercial network or for educational television. Educational television will give you a more candid film. I think the

best illustration of that is the work we did with *Black Journal* and the work that continues there."

Can an honest black film be made in Hollywood?

"Yes and no. The major part of the answer is no—absolutely not. That has to be qualified because Hollywood is a strange animal. That is to say, if it comes to pass that the filmmaker is either so talented or so sensational, then he is accorded a range of freedoms and license which the other guy, though successful, will not be given. For example, Melvin Van Peebles does *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song*. He could have been seriously stopped as a result but as it turns out, for some strange sort of chemical reason, it caught on like wildfire and maybe it's because it's a very good film."

"Whatever the reason," he continued, "Melvin is now moving very rapidly. Now, in these circumstances, it's easier for him to get money to do another film which is bizarre and unorthodox as *Sweetback*. It's the bizarre and unorthodox that has made him successful and Wall Street guys and investors are people who are interested in making money so they would put up their money for the bizarre and unorthodox from Melvin Van Peebles, not from anybody else. The next fact is that the white America and more specifically, the racist American mind, considers anything that relates to black manhood or freedom of expression for the black community as bizarre and unorthodox. Therefore, it's conceivable that Van Peebles could emerge as a very free agent in Hollywood. Having said that, he would be, more or less, the exception to the rule."

Asked if he felt black filmmakers were successful in communicating their ideas on film, he replied, "I don't think we've had any difficulty in communicating our intentions to either the black or the white community. I think it should be pointed out that I have been making films for 21 years. Film-making is like medicine, architecture, or like any sophisticated professional enterprise. The individual has to go through a number of developmental stages. You're in a communications medium where you are trying to communicate ideas. The efficiency and the clarity with which you communicate your ideas is a function not only of the content of your ideas but your

operational experience with the medium. So that you would use the language of film, the grammar of film, the syntax of film, the whole vocabulary of film and you would be able to make a proper translation into cinematic language of what it is inside your head."

How important is the white audience to the black filmmaker?

"Let me say that I came into motion pictures because I was very uptight, very angry with the way Black people, the Black experience was depicted, if it was depicted at all. I would say that the bulk of my films are geared to dealing with the Black experience in one way or another or those events which touch upon the Black experience."

"Having said that," he continued, "I'm certainly interested in some issues which are in different areas as well. For example, largely creative and artistic areas because I am also an artist and a businessman in that I have to make sure we have a financial base to operate on. So that I am not enslaved by the need to do only Black films because I recognize that I may subvert my intention of doing films for Blacks by not having a good enough base to proceed on. I'm not that much of a prisoner to Black films although it is my center of gravity."

Resistance to being swallowed up in the hollow machinery of Hollywood is rare among all filmmakers. Yet Bill Greaves has shown that success on the outside is not at all impossible. With over 200 films to his credit, he has become one of the top documentary filmmakers in the country.

And despite much of the mediocre fare that some in the industry have placed before the public, he sees greater things in the future: "I certainly think there is a future for black films, a bright one. I think it will be something like the same thing that has happened with black music. Our music, our speech, our behavior and general life styles have been unique but accepted and absorbed into our society. Just like there is a steady growth and acceptance of new black publications, I feel the same will happen with black films. I think the initial reaction to the black films that have been released in the past few years is suggestive of a trend in even more activity that is just beginning to show itself." ■