



WILLIAM GREAVES

Filmmaker

James V. Hatch, Interviewer
Hatch-Billops Collection
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You were born in Harlem?

I was born in Harlem before all of you, on October eighth, a Libra, actually in Flower Hospital in Manhattan, and then was removed after several days to Harlem by my parents.

Would you give your parents' full names?

My mother's name, Emily Phyllis Muir Greaves. My father's, Hannibal Gilbert Garfield Wilburforce Greaves, more commonly known as Garfield Greaves.

And they came to New York or were they born here?

Both parents came from the West Indies. My father by way of the now infamous Panama canal. He worked on the construction of the Canal under General Goethals. Goethals was the army engineer in charge and my father carried out his wishes with dispatch until he got sick of it and came to America. My mother came from Jamaica, from Port Antonio.

Were either of them in the arts in any way?

My father used to play the guitar but, unhappily, not listening to his father, he came home late one night strumming the guitar up the path of Harrises' village in St. Lucy, Barbados and when he arrived at the doorstep of his house, he was met by my grandfather who promptly took the guitar from him and smashed it over his knee. My grandfather was a very strict West Indian gentleman and brooked no indiscipline.

You, it is rumored, began to draw at the age of four. Is that true? Have you ever gone back to it?

I drew continuously and obsessively from the age of four through sixteen or seventeen and then left it behind and went into other things.

In your elementary school days do you remember any teachers who were very important to shaping your life?

Oh yes. There was a music teacher at Frederick Douglass Junior High School in Harlem, a man named Mr. Dixon. He and his wife were very supportive. You have Brock Peters' picture on the table there. Brock and I were in the glee club at Frederick Douglass and Mr. Dixon used to periodically invite us to his house and his wife would serve us tea and crumpets. He was a very, very supportive person. My art teacher, Mrs. Sherwood, was another. William Artis, who was a sculptor, took an interest in my work. When I was at the Y.M.C.A., I was about fourteen at the time, he brought me to Augusta Savage's Federal Art Project on Lenox Ave. and I used to do sculpting down there, working

with clay. I also did pottery on the wheel at the Y.M.C.A. Ernest Crichlow was also one of my art teachers at the Y.M.C.A.

I was the youngest person at the Augusta Savage art school, which was for adults. I had no business even being there but Artis decided that I had some talent so he was going to bring me. One day I was kneading up my clay when this woman came in and she seemed not to be dressed like the other women were. I thought she had a housecoat on. Then Artis said, "Well, are we all ready?" Everyone in the class said, "Yes." He said, "All right, Miss So and So, we are ready to begin." This lady takes off this kimono and she is stark naked. There I am, a fourteen-year-old kid. What to do?! I just couldn't even look at the woman. It was a trauma. I came out of a very Christian, Pentecostal, West Indian straitlaced family. And here I was, in this room with this naked lady. Artis realized my distress and he figured that the best way to deal with this was to simply take me right to the center of the storm. I had wanted to leave the room initially. He said, "Bill, I want to make sure you get this angle of the body correctly. Come with me". He took me by the arm and took me up to this lady. He said, "You see how her back is sloped like this and her legs?" I could hardly see the woman I was so shy! Well, anyway, that was my introduction to sculpting, to live models. After that I became very sophisticated, very urbane. I went back to 135th Street and Lenox Avenue where all my cronies hung out, boasting, telling them about this naked lady.

Was Norman Lewis there?

I believe he was. Bob Blackburn was there I think. I used to see him floating through and I think Crichlow was floating around.

Do you have any specific memories of Augusta Savage?

No I don't. I was only fourteen. Everything was a blur other than William Artis and I noticed Blackburn because he had those thick glasses even then. After that I was selected as one of the seventy-five best child artists in New York State. I got a scholarship to the Little Red School House on Bank Street and began painting and drawing down there on Saturday mornings.

Did you come in contact with Ronald Joseph by any chance? He was at the Harlem Community Art Center and was a mentor to Bob Blackburn.

No. I was so young. I was really basically interested in basketball and boxing but for some reason I hadn't let go of my painting and drawing. The moment I finished I ran for the gym.

Was it your own idea to go to City College and try engineering?

I wouldn't say that it was foisted upon me by my father. Actually I was really interested in being an artist but my father thought that was a very frivolous notion and one not to be encouraged. He kept insisting that I learn a trade. That was a big thing in the West Indian community at that time. "Boy, you must learn a trade." I was going to go to Music & Art High School and when he heard that I was pointed in that direction it really freaked him out so we compromised and I went to Stuyvesant High School. At Stuyvesant, which was a science oriented school, I began to be pointed in the direction of engineering. Since I graduated in the top ten percent it was very logical that I would go to City College and study engineering. I went there for about a year and a half. I

started off with a bang and then my enthusiasm tapered off. Partly because I thought I would soon be drafted in the army and partly because a friend of mine was dancing with a group that I saw rehearse quite a bit. Cleante Desgraves, my friend's sister, and Josephine Premice and some other girls whose names I have forgotten, were in the group. I sort of thought that Josephine was cute. Belle Rosette was a wonderful Haitian dancer and this was her group. I was always in and out of the Desgraves' house as a kid. Professor Marc Desgraves, Sr. was a French teacher. He used to teach his son Marc, Jr., myself, Josephine Premice, and some other kids Haitian history every Saturday morning in his house. Some of the kids were in Belle Rosette's dance group. I think Josephine Premice and my friend, Marc Desgraves, Jr. had a crush on each other. I used to observe them dance with Belle Rosette's group and then Josephine and Marc went over to dance with a man named Asadata Dafora. It was at that juncture that I was drawn into this because I used to like dancing anyway, social dancing. Dafora's group had some pretty girls in it and I started dancing with Asadata Dafora. We danced at various concerts, Carnegie Hall, Town Hall and so forth. From there I went into Pearl Primus's dance group and danced with her group at Town Hall, Carnegie Hall, Madison Square Garden, the Roxy Theatre. After the Roxy engagement in 1944 or 1945, that was the end of my dancing career.

You learned your dancing by doing it with these groups?

Yes. What happened was that I already had a feel for dancing. The Lindy Hop and all that foolishness at the Savoy, the Renaissance Ballroom, the Golden Gate. At the Harlem Y.M.C.A. they used to have basketball dances. Out of all that there came a feel for movement and it was very easy for Asadata to take that and convert it to these very African movements. But it was with Pearl Primus that I really got formal training, I also studied dance with a woman she worked with named Nona Sherman.

Was Gordon Heath narrating the Pearl Primus program?

Yes, as a matter of fact Gordon was the narrator at the event at the Roxy Theater. Gordon is very dignified, so he brought all this dignity to the event. He spoke over the microphone on African history and one thing and another, and then the group came out and we did our dancing. Just at that time Owen Dodson, the poet, was doing a play at the American Negro Theatre. It was 1944 or '45, right?

Yeah. Primus was '44. You're right.

So it was 1944. Gordon said, "Listen, have you ever acted before?" And I said, "Acting--I don't know anything about acting, other than high school acting." Now that I think of it, I remember a moment in a play that I had acted in in junior high school. In junior high school Mr. Dixon had me in a play because I apparently spoke Spanish pretty well at that time. I had won the medal in Spanish in school. So they gave me this part to play in this Spanish play, I can still remember it now, I don't know what the circumstances were, but someone had cheated somebody out of something, and the last line of the play was, "Banderos! Esso es los que son" or something like that. And that was my line. This was the big graduation play that we put on, and at the end of it, here comes the curtain line, and I said, "Banderos! Esso es".... which actually

sounded like S.O.S. because I forgot the rest of the line! I couldn't remember the rest of it, and all the Spanish-speaking students and Spanish-studying students at Frederick Douglass Junior High School in Harlem, roared! There were kids in the graduating class that knew that I had blown it. And I was so ashamed, it was just terrible! I don't think I acted after that in school.

Well, Gordon persuaded me to go up to the American Negro Theatre and audition for a part in Owen Dodson's *Garden of Time*. It was a funny situation -- there was a whole room full of people there, all these actors, they all were very professional. I thought they were very professional and I was a greenhorn coming in there. But they gave me the script to read, and I read this part but I had no sense of what it was; they would give me the cue and I would answer them, and my acting was just simple because I had no sense of what acting was, you see. And I got the part, not only did I get the part, but apparently I was at that time so natural and so untouched by acting systems, techniques and procedures, that I was what you would call "a natural," and I walked away with all the reviews. I had a royal flush of all these reviews, all the New York critics, *The New York Times* wrote wonderful things. And I thought, "Jesus." I wasn't doing anything. I was just on the stage having conversations with whoever would talk to me and I didn't think there was anything special about that. I said, "Well, next time, I'll show them what acting really is."

Then I got this part in the next production, which was *Henri Christophe* with Fred O'Neal playing Henri Christophe. And somehow or other, they decided that they would give me the part of Dessalines, this young, radical, Haitian patriot, a real nationalist. I started playing this part and had this sword and I would cut up all these white people. Abe Hill, who was the head of the American Negro Theatre at the time, was a nice guy, a very bright man, but something of a frustrated actor. He got ahold of me, and he was going to teach me acting. Abe would give me all the inflections that I was supposed to use and all the movements that would help me to create a mean spirited character as far as white people were concerned because Dessalines hated their oppression of black people. Anyway, I got on the stage for this production, and I went through all these bizarre histrionics, total overacting. The critics just really destroyed me, and they said this play wasn't too impressive (I mean, it had problems), but "the worst was William Greaves"!!!

But the interesting thing was that I don't believe I really learned my lesson, because at the Shubert Theater I had auditioned again. There was a big thing called the John Golden Auditions in New York, and about fifteen hundred or two thousand actors entered the audition. Then they boiled it down to thirty actors that they would put on at the Shubert Theater and these actors would compete in scenes to win this big competition. And I was one of the thirty winners. Then the Shuberts were producing a play called *A Young American*, and they cast me in the role of this young American, he was supposed to be a brilliant young black composer who was being discriminated against. I went and opened the play in Chicago, and again, I thought I was just a terrific actor. I played this part, and I apparently was just dreadful because they had to close the show. (Maybe the play wasn't too good either.)

Gee, as a matter of fact, I think Paul Robeson came to see the show, he was a nice man. I remember going to the home of... Margaret Goss Burroughs. She has had a situation not unlike Hatch-Billops in Chicago. Margaret Goss came backstage and probably said to herself, "He looks like a decent young man, he

probably needs some guidance." Margaret took a liking to me and invited me to her house for various parties and events that they were having during the period that I was in Chicago. Paul Robeson showed up and he never mentioned the play to me. But after that I think I got better and better as an actor. But it was a very bumpy beginning, shall we say.

Well, you must have, because you played in Finian's Rainbow.

Yes. That's right.

And Lost in the Stars.

Yeah.

Now, at the same time, you began to act in film.

Yes.

I have here the first film, The Fight Never Ends with Joe Louis.

Actually, I had worked on a number of films before that but in smaller parts. There was a studio, a place called The Suntan Studios, and it was run by a very close friend of Paul Robeson who was a major football player, a man called Fritz Pollard, who was a big name in that game at one time. I think he went to Brown University. He had this casting agency called Suntan Studios, which used to supply all the various black films that were being made with extras and bit players. I was sent by him to these various companies and I became involved in these different productions. I don't know what the productions were. All I knew was that I was on a set and the lights were on.

And then finally I got this part in *The Fight Never Ends*; William Alexander was the producer, Joseph Lerner was the director, and Joe Louis was in it and he was a major figure in it. I played a young hoodlum named Franky who was badly influenced by my brother or something like that (I've forgotten all the details of it.) Harold Tillman played my brother. That was my first role, you know.

And Ruby Dee was in that?

Well, I keep hearing that Ruby was in it. I don't know. I can't remember. I think I saw the film once. I've seen Ruby's name on some of the promotion material.

You know, it may be part of the things that get written down that are not true.

Yeah. There was the Tyler Film Collection. Do you know about the Collection down in Dallas, Texas? There is a man down there, Dr. William Jones, who is the head of the Southern Methodist University Southwest Media Archives. One day, someone called him up on the phone and said, "Listen, I've got a whole warehouse here of films up in Tyler, Texas. It's all dusty and dirty but there's tons of this stuff up here. I'm gonna throw it out, but I figured since you people are in the film business, the University might be interested." So he went over there, opened the door to this warehouse, and all this dust went flying around and there were these cases and cases and cans and cans of films. Dr. Jones whistled and said, "Wow!" He knew they were the crown jewels and he had them removed to Southern Methodist University. In this whole body of work were these black films that were done during the 1930s and the '40s. And in that group were three of them that I had roles in. It got a lot of publicity

in the media about six years or seven years ago. This big nationwide jewelry combine down in Texas called Zale, sponsored a big event that celebrated the finding of these films and the restoration of a very important part of black history. They flew me down there to participate in this historical event and I was met at the airport in this long, white Cadillac driven by this white chauffeur. I said, "Now I have arrived." To be met by a white chauffeur in a white Cadillac in the deep South, this was true progress! I was taken all over Dallas and wined and dined and feted. It was a very auspicious time. Ossie Davis came down and Harold Tillman, who played my brother in the film, and was now a judge in Houston, and he and I reminisced. But I don't recall our talking about Ruby being in the film. But I did see her name in connection with it, so she must have had a part in it.

In '48 and '49, I'm sure, one of these films was A Miracle in Harlem.

Oh, yeah.

And another was Souls of Sin, which Powell Lindsay directed. Is there anything that you would like to say about either of them?

Yes, I would. *Souls of Sin* actually was a very charming film that I had done. William Alexander was the producer, and he was the quintessential independent movie producer. He really was a wheeler-dealer and he was unstoppable, not in any way intimidated by the notion that he was black and "couldn't" make movies because of his blackness. Of course, America was in a virtual apartheid state, both in mind and in fact. Blacks simply weren't in the production end of the Hollywood industry. I mean, that was the end of it, and any notion that a black person could get into that aspect of the industry was considered ludicrous.

Bill Alexander marshalled his energies and his friends and he raised money and he made these films. He also put out a newsreel on the black experience during that period, called *The All-American Newsreel*. Bill got ahold of Powell Lindsay, who was a very talented director and writer in New York black theatre at the time. Powell wrote the script about two characters, one was a brother named "Dollar Bill" who was the young black man in Harlem trying desperately to get to the top of the world through crime, and the other was this country bumpkin "Alabam'," who played the guitar and sang and no one thought that he would ever become anything and then he ends up becoming a big star. I played "Alabam'," and was obliged to put on a southern accent and southern-farm behavior. From the acting point of view, it was a nice challenge. Billy Allen played a little girl in this production.

When I saw the film the first time, I almost crawled underneath my chair because seeing myself acting on screen is already a difficult problem because we all have these neurotic notions of ourselves, these idealized images of ourselves, and then we have to look at the reality on the screen and its unfolding and it sometimes becomes a very severe, depressing experience. I was kind of corny in it, but I was earnest and the audience understood and felt compassion appropriately.

That was an interesting experience, shooting that, because it was really shot on a shoestring, and when they speak of Robert Townsend and Spike Lee doing these films on a shoestring, I mean Bill Alexander was quite adept at that. That film played, though, throughout the black film circuit, which was

some 1,200 theaters throughout the country at the time. I don't know how much everyone here knows about America at that period, but black people couldn't sit in the regular orchestra of white theatres throughout most of the country; they had to sit up in the black section. So rather than subject ourselves to that kind of indignity, we catered to films that were made by blacks about black subject matter that had a degree of dignity and went to these theatres in the black community. This film played that circuit.

The other film, *A Miracle in Harlem*, was at that time considered a very prestigious film because it was the first film that was done to so-called "Hollywood standards," but it was done independently by the Goldberg brothers; they had a company called Herald Pictures. It was done at the intercession of the NAACP who were very concerned with the image of black people at that time and aggressively tried to have some sort of impact. It was right after the war and everyone swore that America was going to become the truly democratic society that all the war propaganda and the United Nations propaganda suggested. So the Goldbergs financed this film, and I played the romantic lead and Sheila Guyse played the part of the girl. The biggest role was played by Hilda Offley who played the grandmother. Juanita Hall, Stepin Fetchit and Monte Hawley were also in it.

Stepin Fetchit was just absolutely wonderful in this production. When you saw him in the context of the total black society, you said, "Gee whiz!" This is one good actor, it's too bad that he had to be isolated. That Hollywood with its Nazi master-race mentality could reach into the black community and just extract that one archetype to the exclusion of others, so that what you got was a distorted view of Black America. But seeing him in his real habitat, he was wonderful. He was a nice guy, very simple, dignified, and clearly a wonderful actor who had been exploited and misused by those fascists in Hollywood.

*That same year, 1949, you had that film, **Lost in the Stars**, and then you did **Lost Boundaries** with Canada Lee and Mel Ferrer.*

Yes. That's right.

Any memory of that?

Well, I have quite a memory of that movie because I got a call last week from Keene, New Hampshire, where the film had been shot, from a professor of film, Dr. Larry Benaquist, who has decided to call together the tribe of all the people who worked on **Lost Boundaries** forty years ago. He is having this big get-together in celebration of the forty-year anniversary of **Lost Boundaries** since, apparently, nothing else that big has happened in Keene since.

Forty years ago (actually, I think it was 1948), Louis Derochement, an eminent documentary filmmaker, who then had been producing a very popular newsreel series in the theatres called **The March of Time**, also had done many feature films. **Boomerang** was one; **The House on Ninety Second Street**, **Walk East, Beacon** and **the Whistle** and **The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone** were some of his films.

He raised the money through the **Reader's Digest** and some other source to do a film on a true-life story of a black family living in New England who were very lightskinned and were passing for white. When the war came around, the father, who was the doctor for the town, decided that he would take a com-

mission in the navy. In the process of doing a background investigation of him the navy discovered that he was black, and they sent this intelligence investigator to see him, and he asked the doctor in this very dramatic, critical moment, "Doctor, do you have Negro blood in your veins?" And Mel Ferrer, who played the doctor, had to confess, *mea culpa*.

It was at the time, a very powerful film and it was very, very successful and ran on Broadway for six months at the Astor Theatre. And interestingly, at the time that it was on Broadway, I was also playing the romantic lead in *A Miracle in Harlem* on Broadway and I had a play that I was featured in on Broadway, *Lost in the Stars*. So I had these three things going and I was sort of bouncing around very arrogantly, I guess. There were these wonderful episodes of very attractive young women chasing me around Broadway and me fleeing for my life!!

Great.

Canada Lee was in this film and it was wonderful. Canada was just a wonderful guy. It was a very good experience and I'm looking forward to going back up to Keene in July. Mel Ferrer's flying in from Europe, Carlton Carpenter (he was a movie star and did a number of films with Debbie Reynolds) and Susan Douglass are coming.

But the real-life doctor that the film was about just died this year, at the age of eighty-four.

In 1950, if I have it right, you returned to film school at City College. Where'd you get all this information?

We have spies. You really left acting as your major thing. Like you say, here you are on Broadway being chased by women, you've got three shows, and zippol! You turn and go in another direction.

Well, I did that because I was absolutely fed up with racism in America. I had had it up to here. I had the very good fortune of studying African history with a wonderful man named William Leo Hansberry, who opened up this door to these ancient African civilizations that nobody knew anything about. DuBois had some sense of it, but Hansberry was considered the preeminent scholar on African history by people from Oxford and Harvard and various other places. The President of Harvard wrote him a wonderful letter to that effect, saying that he was the ranking authority on African history.

He took me all the way back into Ancient Ethiopia, ten thousand years ago, the Kebra Negast, Sulayman Empire, the Azanian civilization of South Africa, the Monomatapa Kingdom in Central Africa, and Zimbabwe, Mali, the whole ball of wax, Punt, Lower Egypt, the relationship of Ethiopia to the rest of Africa. He spoke of Isis and Osiris who were originally the Prince and Princess of Ethiopia who went down the Nile and colonized Egypt from the sea. This is 6,000 B.C. He spoke of kings like Piankhi and Tarharka, all of these wonderful characters in African history. And I said, "What the hell is going on here? Why don't I know about all this?" Then I was studying at the Schomburg and reading about Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey and these ex-Africans who were rebelling against this nonsense called "slavery." I said, "This is outrageous."

The thing that really turned me off was Jose Ferrer and Gloria Swanson.

They had cast me in a play, I didn't know what my part was, and they said, "You've got a part in this play," and I said, "Fine." So I showed up at rehearsal, and they had me playing this Pullman car porter, "Yuck, yuck, yuck" stuff. I was supposed to laugh and say, "Boss" and that kind of foolishness, and I said, "This is outrageous!" So I said to myself, the only thing left for me to do is to get behind the camera, because unless we take control of this medium and start making these movies, we're going to be victims of this kind of psychological warfare interminably.

And it's still being perpetuated, unhappily, by Hollywood, using some of our most gifted people. Anyway, that was the thing that veered me away from being in front of the cameras and onstage to the study of film, and also, there was the whole McCarthy era, which was full of a lot of foolishness and viciousness again. We had to say, "I am not a member of this, and I didn't do that and did not associate with this person." And I liked Canada Lee, I liked a lot of other wonderful people, and I just didn't like that kind of intimidation. So that was one of the reasons I left the country in 1952, after I studied filmmaking at City College and a place called The New Institute for Film.

When I tried to get into the industry here, I absolutely couldn't get support in the white movie industry except from Mr. Derochement, who used to let me hang out in his editing rooms as an apprentice. But other than that, I couldn't get into the industry. I was really forced, if I wanted to continue in the industry, to leave the country. I considered going to Cinecitta, which is the movie studio in Rome where Vittorio DeSica had a group of young people working. I had to decide to go either there or to go to Canada, and I chose Canada because it was close by and a friend of mine, Lou Applebaum, who was the composer on *Lost Boundaries*, was up at the National Film Board of Canada. I wrote to him and he introduced me to Donald Mulholland, the head of production at the National Film Board of Canada.

I applied to the John Hay Whitney Foundation for a scholarship and at that time they were giving fellowships to people who were interested in singing and dancing. They weren't interested in the black presence in the mass communication media. They were only interested in supporting black people who sang and danced. So they turned me down but I decided I was going to go to Canada anyway. I went up and got odd jobs in Ottawa, scrubbing floors, washing windows, while I was at the studio as an apprentice. They decided that I was so committed that they took me on staff and from that point on I worked in production, first as a "go-fer," then up through the different skills in filmmaking.

Were there any other black filmmakers in the Film Board up there at that time?

Yes. He was Canadian, Ron Alexander. He was a laboratory technician who then moved over to the sound department as a sound recordist. He was the only one.

Tell me about your involvement with music.

My uncle gave me a saxophone which my father, I believe, pawned because we were in the middle of the Depression and we didn't have anything to eat then. So that saxophone had to go. He himself played the trumpet and he let me play his trumpet. I began studying trumpet later and I had the distinction of having begun my trumpeting career at the same time as Mr. Miles Davis.

He and I studied with the same teacher. He became Miles Davis and, as a musician, I became a disaster. A man named Charles Colin was our teacher. I took up trumpeting to a point but I didn't like the idea of constantly bending my lips on the mouthpiece. I found it very discomforting and I decided that I'd just as soon write music as play it. So I started writing music, that's how I got into songwriting.

You've written one hundred songs?

Yes.

And they are mostly in what genre?

They are popular songs. My stuff was recorded by Buddy Johnson, Arthur Prysock, Al Hibbler, Sy Oliver, Eartha Kitt and Donna Hightower. At one point I really wanted to be a songwriter but I got so involved with acting, I left that behind. I didn't pursue songwriting after 1952, when I think I wrote my last song. It was a song that Eartha Kitt recorded called *African Lullaby*, which my wife, Louise, told me she heard up in Canada, before we met. It was on the other side of *Ce Si Bon*. It sold a million records and I got a free ride.

How did you meet Louise and when did you meet?

I was teaching acting in Montreal and Louise arrived. This exquisitely lovely apparition arrived in my acting group and despite my firm determination not to get married, we got married.

You were there as a film editor until 1960?

No, I started off at the Film Board as an assistant editor, assistant director, sound effects editor and then became a film editor, the chief editor of our production unit and then I became a writer and a director at the Film Board. I worked on a total of eighty films during that period and then left the Film Board. I had started teaching acting in Ottawa and then formed a dramatic group in 1955 when the Board moved to Montreal. I developed it and had branches in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto. I used to commute to these cities on a weekly weekend basis, to these acting studios. We put on productions and then when the Recession occurred in Canada, (this was after I left the Film Board) I took a job at the United Nations with a specialized agency called the International Civil Aviation Organization and I became a public information officer. What that meant was I produced films, radio programs, and wrote articles on aviation for the monthly magazine.

*Was your first film as a director a documentary, *The Emergency Ward* in 1958?*

No. I had directed a couple of other films before that, i.e., working on my own film rather than simply working on someone else's film as an editor or sound editor. One film I did called *Putting It Straight* was on malocclusion. It had to do with teeth. It was a nice little film. Then I did another film on ecology, it was called *High Arctic*. I did another film on asbestos called *Magic Mineral*. Another film that was never produced was on radioactive isotopes. They had a big atomic plant up at Chalk River and I did a script on radioactive isotopes. And another script on an apple. It was called *The World of Malus Pumula*, which is the Latin word for apple. It dealt with the various ways in which one can perceive any physical object. One can look at it from a chemical perspec-

tive, one can look at it from the perspective of physics, the perspective of art, etc. It was going to be an experimental film.

As a matter of fact, **Emergency Ward** is going to be shown this summer because the Film Board is celebrating fifty years of existence and there is going to be a whole round of documentaries from the National Film Board at the Museum of Modern Art and I think that **Emergency Ward** will be one of the films that they will show. That was made in 1958.

Did you ever work with Norman MacLaren?

I didn't work with Norman but Norman and I were in the same unit. The Film Board was divided into about five basic units. Each unit had a particular portfolio or mandate. One did government sponsored films, another did science films. Our unit was the creative unit and we did all kinds of artistic type films. Norman was the leading light in our unit. A very brilliant, humble guy. He was really a tour de force in genius and humility. A kind of an Einstein-type presence.

*That film, **Emergency Ward**, was seen by Shirley Clark and did that have something to do with your coming back to the U.S.?*

Yes. Shirley Clarke saw **Emergency Ward**. She was very impressed with it. Actually I had already come back to the U.S. before I met Shirley, to work at the U.N. The film section of the United States Information Agency was headed by George Stevens, Jr. This was all during the whole Kennedy period. Shirley started ranting and raving to George about my film and she said to me that when George learned that I was black he just freaked out because he wanted to have some black creative people involved in the film section output. It was a wonderful opportunity for him to put substance into the agency's program and he did ask me to do a film for him. I was at the U.N. at that time and I had to leave my job to do this film. We set up our own company to do this film and it was a wonderful opportunity for me too. Then we did two or three films for them after that.

Was that in 1964?

Yes. We first did a film called **Wealth of a Nation**. It was about freedom of individual expression but it started out by being a film about dissent in America. This was in 1964 and the deeper we got into this subject, the more controversial it became. We had people like Madeline Murray, who advocated banning prayer in the public school system, and various other people. Then the USIA realized that they couldn't do that film without getting into a lot of hot water with Congress. They decided that the film they were really interested in was a film on freedom of individual expression, which is what we did. It became very popular. Several years later we did another film for them, which I think is the best film we did for them. It was on the First World Festival of Negro Art which was the event that took place in Dakar, Senegal in 1966. Leopold Senghor was the president. You had many prestigious people there such as Duke Ellington, Leonard De Paur, Langston Hughes, Katherine Dunham, Alvin Ailey, Frederick O'Neal. Aimee Cesaire and Alioune Diop were there and quite a number of other distinguished people from the African

Diaspora. They congregated in Senegal and celebrated the re-emergence of the African presence in world history and civilization.

And you were there as a one-man camera crew?

Yes. The USIA called us up and said, "Something is going on over there in West Africa. Why don't you take a camera over and shoot this and give us some newsreel footage." I went over and when I realized what it was I began screaming at the top of my voice that we needed much more footage to make this film. This needed a major production. This was a major historical event. It was **not** a newsreel event. The Russians were there and they had a twenty-man crew! The Italians had a large crew! The Belgians, the French, everybody was there! And the Americans had only me. Actually, I had a French cameraman and myself. I trained the young Senegalese driver who was assigned to me to take sound and he took to it like a duck to water. I got a second camera that I could operate myself so I was co-camera as well. We made this film with a three-man crew.

The Russians were making the official film of the festival. But when the Senegalese authorities saw the film that we had done they turned away the Russian version and used our version; our version had an empathy and a stronger sense of identification with the event. I used the sense of Langston Hughes's poem, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* and the phrasing of that poem to write the commentary for the film. I still had enough traces of arrogance that I invited Langston to the editing room to see this picture in the fine-cut stage and hear my commentary. Langston Hughes was an incredibly great human being. He was so wonderfully supportive. He encouraged all kinds of people. He would write me notes and he would come and see me acting at the American Negro Theatre and would say, "Gee, you did a very good job." He saw the film and he liked it very much. He is in the film too.

What's the name of the film?

It's called *The First World Festival of Negro Arts*. We have shown it at the New York Public Library, the Schomburg. While I was shooting the film I took Langston to a place in Senegal called Rufisque. We took him to the water's edge, to the ocean. It's really primordial stuff, you are right there at the beginning of time. We filmed him walking along the beach among the fishermen. We shot that and then we put his poem over that and from the poem moved into the events of the Festival, paraphrasing and using moods and rhythms of the poem to describe the event.

What does that footage look like? Is he reciting the poem?

No, I'm reciting the poem. He is walking along the shoreline with his coat over his shoulder. We see him later on with Duke Ellington. The film became the most popular film for the USIA in Africa for at least ten years. I was in Martinique last year and saw Aimee Cesaire who is now mayor of Fort de France and I showed the film to him and he was absolutely delighted, he hadn't seen it. I believe we sent him a video of it. As a matter of fact I saw Alvin Ailey just recently on the bus and we talked about his seeing it.

*How did you become the executive producer and get involved with *Black Journal*?*

We did an hour and a half film special about the black middle class called *Still a Brother*, which I did in collaboration with Bill Branch. That film was an attempt to show that black people were making strides professionally, culturally, psychologically, because it was right at the height of riots and urban disorders. We did this film on the black middle class to track their mental mechanisms and how they were dealing with this business of the social adjustment and transformation of American society through protest. The black people on the streets were not confused at all about which way America should go. But there seemed to be a lot of confusion and misidentification among the black middle class or the Black Bourgeoisie as E. Franklin Frazier called them. They had all kinds of psychiatric pathologies as well as frustrations and realizations that while they had the income of the white middle class, in point of fact, that's all they had. All these issues were looked at and in particular, the issue of their ongoing mental enslavement in America. Even though slavery had ended in 1865 the black middle class was still mentally enslaved.

What were they doing about that? The network, NET (National Educational Television), felt it was very radical and they didn't know whether they should put it on the air. But events were moving so rapidly at that time that by the time they were ready to put it on the air it synchronized very well with the emerging middle-class participation in the civil rights revolution.

Out of the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders came the realization that one of the factors involved in the riots and the destabilization that was taking place in America, fostered by the Afro-American response to American racism, was the fact that black people were not properly revealed in the media. The media was distorting our image, stereotyping us whenever they showed us and most of the time we did not have access to or substantive input in the media. The country did not know who we were or what we were, what we wanted, what our concerns were. The black community was even unable to talk to itself through the electronic media.

So the Carnegie Endowment, taking this line of thinking, set about doing a whole series of research studies and they, in conjunction with the Ford Foundation put up money for a national television show on the black experience. NET approached me to be the co-host with Lou House who later became known as Walli Sadiq, they approached the two of us. They chose me because of the success of *Still a Brother* which had been nominated for an Emmy and had won the first prize at the American Film Festival. They had a white producer initially, Al Perlmutter, but after two installments of the *Black Journal* series there was a palace revolt by the black staff led by Kent Garrett, Charles Hobson, St. Clair Bourne and others who all felt that the show should be black controlled. They all agreed that I should be the one to take over as the executive producer because of my experience in film production in Canada, with work on over eighty films under my belt, and so I took over and we put out the show every month. We were nominated for the Emmy the first year and we won it the second year.

Did you win it for a specific show or just a program?

For the series itself. It was a very nice experience. I used to tell the other producer-directors on the show, "This is the best time of your life because you

are never going to get another situation in which you will be so protected and will have the creative freedom you are enjoying now," both ideologically and artistically. St. Clair Bourne and most of the others realized later on that this was a great period. That show became the flagship show for a number of other local black television shows all over the country. They were modeled after that show. Like *It Is* is the only show I know of today that reminds me of **Black Journal**. However, Gil Noble does not have the kind of budget that we were working with that would permit him to send crews out. We had Stan Lathan, Kent Garrett, Tony Batten, Madeline Anderson, Lou Potter, St. Clair Bourne, Bob Wagoner, Horace Jenkins, Jimmie MacDonald, Leroy McLucas, all these people moving about the country and around the world. We sent a crew to Vietnam to do a film on the black soldier and another crew to Ethiopia to do a film on Ethiopian history.

All of these various young people were actually developed into filmmakers on that show. None of them had any real experience in filmmaking so they had to develop within that show. We had a wonderful production coordinator named Peggy Pinn. Under Peggy we set up the **Black Journal** training school and we used to bring in young talented black and Hispanic kids and train them as filmmakers. A number of the filmmakers who are functioning now in the industry came through that program which later became known as the Educational Television School.

Also at **Black Journal** we called a conference after we had been going for two years and I and another producer from Philadelphia named Lionel Monagus called together all the black producers from other black shows in localities from all over the country to Racine, Wisconsin. We got some money from the Ford Foundation and we discussed the problems of the black presence in the media, the black shows, various methodologies by which we could enhance and increase our presence and influence in the media and we formed an organization called the National Association of Black Media Producers. I was offered the presidency of that, which I declined because I had my own company and I also had the show. So we elected Tony Brown. Tony was in Detroit and had a show out there and when I left **Black Journal** I recommended Tony as my replacement. He really wanted to do it very much so it was a very good match. He was a very brilliant young producer. He also then went on to Howard and became the head of the communications department. His career came through the **Black Journal** track as well. Of course, **Black Journal** went out of business in the mid seventies and he set up **Tony Brown's Journal** which is a variant of **Black Journal**.

What year did you leave the show?

In 1970.

Who were some of the film producers that came out of that?

Stan Lathan, St. Clair Bourne, Kent Garrett, Madeline Anderson, Horace Jenkins, Jimmy MacDonald, William Gaddis, Leroy McLucas, Osborn Smith, Babatunde Horatio Jones.

Any women?

Yes. Madeline Anderson, Angela Fontanez and Hazel Bright.

What was the budget you had to work with?

Our budget was \$500,000 a year, it could have been a million, maybe.

Now your own business, which you were doing at the same time and are still doing. You have made, written and produced around two hundred documentaries?

I don't know how many documentaries we have done at this point but I know I had done eighty at the Film Board and we did roughly about a hundred of these film segments that were for **Black Journal** and we did something close to a hundred out of our own company.

Four a year?

Yes. Something like that.

Your company is twenty-two years old?

Twenty-five years old. We set up the company in 1964 and we did productions free lance; then we were incorporated in 1968 or 1969.

This is a long life for a company that does that kind of intense work with you being involved in every shot.

Yes it is and if we are not careful we will be out of business this year. Making movies is one of the most treacherous, most costly, most frightening enterprises in its financial aspects. One is constantly being confronted with costs that you did not budget for. My definition of an independent producer is someone who is about to go bankrupt. One day Louise and I were going about merrily doing our work and our accountant arrived and said, "I want to talk to the both of you." We went into our screening room. He said, "Shut the door." Very somberly he said, "I think you are going bankrupt. You are, in fact, bankrupt. What do you want to do?" I said, "Well, we are just going to charge ahead." That's what we did. That was 1970.

In 1980 you were elected to the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame. Was that specifically for documentary or for long life in the film business?

I think more for long life. There is a terrific attrition rate in the industry. For example, we purchased three editing machines in 1971. We made a cinema verite feature film with Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier that required having multiple cameras, so we had to have these machines that display all these cameras that are used to perceive a real life moment simultaneously.

After we finished that film we said, "Listen we've got three film editing machines, what do we need them for?" So we took the Yellow Pages and did this laundry list of all the film producing companies in New York and we sent out "For Sale" cards to all the producers, about one thousand. Then we sold one machine. Two or three years later we said, "Let's do another mailing to sell this other machine," because we had more financial problems. We had made carbon copies of the lists, so we took the next page and stuck the labels on all these envelopes and we got back almost one half of these cards that said, "No longer at this address." Then a couple of years later we had to sell the third machine and we got back practically the whole list. There is a tremendous turnover of companies and entrepreneurs in the film industry.

It is so incredible that you do not dare to look at the statistics. If you look at the statistics you'd go out of business. It is one of the most high risk areas.

There was a fellow named Alan Trustman, I think, who was a lawyer. He wrote an article ten years ago in a film magazine in which he discusses the film business and he said that the odds at the gaming tables at Las Vegas are better than they are for feature film production success. I think the odds at the gaming tables are 36 to 1 whereas in the film industry it's substantially higher than that.

You went to India and China for a film festival. What was it?

It was called **Black American Cinema** and this was a whole section that was part of the International Film Festival in New Delhi. It was comprised of twenty films. Ten documentaries and ten features. I was the head of the delegation that was invited to India by the government of India and the Indo-U.S. Subcommission on Education and Culture. I was asked by both of these entities to make the choice of the films and the selection of the people who would come with us. We took Cicely Tyson, Ruby Dee, Ivan Dixon, Michelle Parkinson, and Donald Bogle who was our "resident" film scholar, with us to India.

We met with the press and showed our films at the festival and did a lot of television appearances and interviews. After the festival was over in New Delhi we were sent by the government of India to Bombay, Calcutta and Trivandrum in Kerala, in the south. It was extremely successful. The Indians really enjoyed having us and we enjoyed being there. Cicely and Ruby were just wonderful handling themselves with the media.

After the tour the government of India asked me to do a workshop at the Film Institute in Puna, which I did, and after that I went to China. The United States Information Agency asked me to do a lecture tour on filmmaking in America and also show some of the films my company has made. I stayed in China for about one month. It was a great experience. They are just incredible people. Louise joined me in China and we were banqueted, etc. We went to five major studios, saw films, and I conducted an acting workshop in Beijing with the most talented young people in the country. The people who finally end up at the top in China are incredible heavyweights because of the fierce competition due to the large population.

They really know a lot about us but ironically, we don't know much about them. The people in the American Embassy in Beijing said that by the year 2020 China would be one of the top three or four countries in the world. There is a tremendous explosion of business and building. I never saw so many cranes in my life. Perhaps they have been moving too fast and what you are witnessing now is the strain of that speed. They are into a dead sprint into the twentieth century.

Did you ever meet Martin Luther King, Jr.?

I met Martin Luther King, Jr. thirty three-thousand feet above the earth in an airplane. We were flying down to Atlanta and I was very moved by his capacity to absolutely focus on you. He looked at you with a kind of radar, X-ray eyes that you didn't mind because you didn't feel threatened, you didn't feel that there was a gun that was aiming at you to fire away. It was a wonderful kind of capacity to identify and empathize. I don't even recall really what we talked about. I think I was shooting *Still a Brother* or *In the Company of Men* and I was in Atlanta in 1966 or 1967.

I am told, that at these sessions in African history I took at the Ethiopian Library in Harlem, which became the Charles E. Seifert Library, conducted by Hansberry, that Malcolm X used to show up periodically. At that time I didn't know him. It was 1950, '51. I was told by the head of the library, Taiyi Seifert, that he used to come to the sessions. It's possible that he came after I left and went to Canada. I certainly don't recall ever seeing him.

Could you give us an overview of your relationship with Sidney Poitier and Julian Mayfield?

Sidney and I go back to the very early years at the American Negro Theatre. (Actually, I was there before him.) Then we were both in a play called *Freight* directed by a man named John O'Shaughnessy. We got to know each other at that time. Sidney and I used to hang out all up and down the streets of Harlem. Two of our favorite restaurants were The Ritz on 136th Street and Seventh Avenue, and Jenny Lou's which was the place everybody went to on 135th Street and Seventh Avenue. Jenny Lou's was for real and was owned by a straight ahead, very funky, down-home woman named Jenny Lou. She was an Earth Mother. She made the most incredible bacon and eggs, ham and eggs, biscuits and home fries. This lady was outrageous! Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, everybody at one time or another came to Jenny Lou's because she was open all night. Sidney and I and other actors used to go there and have tea and toast because we couldn't afford anything else!! Jenny Lou's was around the corner from the American Negro Theatre so we used to all go there after the theatre was over. If we were really flush with money we would order some bacon and eggs.

At that time Sidney considered me something of his idol. He sort of looked up to me because my career was launched before his. Of course, Sidney has since gone on to become my idol. We occasionally reminisce about that period. As a matter of fact, he married my girlfriend, Juanita, so we really knew each other quite well. We have talked a number of times over the years about the possibility of doing something together but I have never really been able to come up with something that was sufficiently attractive to him.

Julian Mayfield, of course, was a very gifted young actor who became a writer; Julian had the young juvenile lead and I had the second juvenile lead in *Lost in the Stars*. I also understudied Julian. We toured around the country, and as young actors the world was stretching out in front of us and we thought that we were going to become major stars and all. Julian then went on to become very interested in the social and political aspects of life in America, but it didn't really get fully articulated until after *Lost in the Stars*. He then went over to Ghana and I didn't see him too much after that. I did see him when he was on his way to Ghana. He came up to Canada. We had great fun. We were a very good group of young people, I think, in that we stimulated each other. We really challenged each other's intelligence in one way or another. I think that out of it came, not only a consensus of how we might relate to the media and to America, but also a kind of individuation where each one of us realized more and more how individually viable we were. It was a good time in America, anyway, because America was on a democratic roll at that time, moving out of its apartheid state. It had come off of the triumph of the Second World War. The rhetoric of democracy and one world, the

United Nations and all that. It was in a mode of exploration of the new technologies that had come out of the Second World War that were now being deployed into the industrial infrastructure. Everything looked very hopeful. In Britain and Europe the United States had done the Marshall Plan. America was very optimistic.

There were some films done on race relations, one of them being *Lost Boundaries*; there was also *Intruder In The Dust*, *Home Of The Brave*, *Pinky*, *Gentleman's Agreement*, addressing problems of discrimination, chiefly against Blacks but also against Jews. The country itself was in a good mood. There were people like Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Paul Robeson, and A. Philip Randolph all agitating for more equity and fairness in society and the body politic which eventually led to the Supreme Court decision in 1954. There was a kind of optimism that went diametrically against the apartheid-type situations of black people. On the one hand, we were focusing on the positives that were in place in America at that time, but at the same time we were being frustrated by this negative, oppressive, morbid absorption by white America with the need to retain us in second-class citizenship status. That was the America that Julian, myself, Sidney were facing and we were dialoguing with each other on all of these paradoxes. I think that we all benefited from each other.

Ossie Davis? I knew Ossie but I didn't hang out with Ossie at that time. Ossie and Ruby had gotten married and had gone home. But Julian, Sidney and myself were single and were running around.

Running through all that you've said, there seems to be a strong love-hate relationship with America.

Listen, love-hate, of course. I didn't create America, I helped to create it with my labor, unpaid labor. I can't even say that because my people are from the West Indies and we did the same thing for the British there, but I identify very strongly with the African American because I am an African American. So, there is a lot of unpaid labor here, that's for openers. But beyond that there's the fact that there have been a number of atrocities committed and perpetrated here. Anybody who doesn't face up to that fact is crazy. And there are a lot of crazy people in America who do not face up to that fact. Particularly the white American will not and can not deal with it. The stuff is so horrible that I guess they feel, who wants to deal with that? It's generally pushed down into the basement. I tend not to push it into the basement for the simple reason that I feel the necessity to report on it. I have to report on it because I'm making movies on these subjects all the time so I am fully aware of this. So if you pick up any traces of hate it could conceivably come out of that.

Having said that, this could have been a reversed situation. Indeed it was reversed in ancient Egypt. I can take you to the New York Public Library and show you works by various scholars of the nineteenth century and you will see Ethiopians and Africans mistreating Europeans, mistreating the Jews in Ancient Egypt. My old professor, William Leo Hansberry, made this painfully clear. He said, "Genius and gentility, stupidity and savagery are not now or have ever been the private preserve of any one race and group of people." You've got to know that, otherwise you can't relate to America in the most healthy way which is what I would like to think that I do. It is important that America becomes conversant with its history, with African history so that it is

empowered psychologically, emotionally, philosophically and spiritually, to move forward. You take the analogy of psychology; one has to become aware of all the warts, one has to go through that dark tunnel of agony and pain of self discovery, of realizing that you are the repository of tremendous anger, rage and hostility and ugliness towards your parents as well as the participant in all of the wonderful happy moments that you've had with them when you lived there, were moved by them, felt grateful to them, etc. Until you address those issues within yourself, you are in no position to deal with the outside world in a productive, creative, constructive way.

My relationship to America is along those lines. It is what we've tried to do with our films, to make films that in some way nourish and enhance the level of consciousness within the country and within ourselves as African Americans, and trigger more positive responses to the future.

Do you have films for rent?

Yes, we rent our films and videos to schools, colleges, business organizations, libraries, cultural centers, government agencies and the like.

The status of the producer and director, of the black producer-director in the last forty years -- can you take us from that to now, to perhaps twenty years from now, of the black producer-director?

We had that whole period, "the Oscar Micheaux period." Micheaux, Spencer Williams, Bill Alexander, Noble Johnson, and various others were doing films for a captive black audience. There were about 1,200 theatres around the country. A lot of white producers also were very active in this area of servicing the black community with black film products. And then came integration which dismantled that network of distribution and exhibition. The black producer went into an eclipse and a decline. Then out of that came people like myself, and chiefly myself because at one point I was the only one making films at the beginning of the 1950s and I was out of the country in Canada. But nothing really happened until the civil disorders of the 1960s. I don't even think Gordon Parks or Melvin Van Peebles were in place as filmmakers at the start of the 1950s. Not until after these urban disorders and the civil rights demonstrations... the sit-ins and so on did black filmmaking have a resurgence.

With the legislation of Congress, all of that created a climate which was much more affable to the emergence of black filmmakers. I came back to America in 1963 and worked in U.N. television. That's how I got into black television journalism which then led to a great number of people moving into television. That was the beginning of black film people in film on television, at that time. With the National Endowment for the Arts and the Humanities, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and all of the new financial backing from the Small Business Administration, those agencies and the U.S. Government had a wonderful program which made it possible for minority group-owned companies to secure government contracts. It was called the 8(A) Program. That program kept our company alive for years. One of the reasons why we did not go bankrupt was because of the films we made for various government departments like the Department for Education, HUD, NASA, Department of Labor, etc. There were about five or six black companies that owed their existence for a protracted period of time to that program.

During the television explosion of blacks in the media, Hollywood was going into a decline in terms of its box office grosses. In the process of analyzing the causal factors involved in the decline, the marketing people in Hollywood discovered that demographically there had been substantial shifts in the urban populations across the country. That in fact twenty, thirty, forty, even fifty percent of some of the major markets were Black and Hispanic markets. That gave rise to what is called the "blaxploitation" film. Films began coming out of Hollywood that were targeted to this new market which helped to bring Hollywood out of its economic doldrums. However, the marketing analysis later revealed that black people would turn out to see motion picture products irrespective of whether or not blacks were in it or had made it if those products contained certain types of theatrical elements. Dynamics, if you will. If they were action, occult, mysterious, if they had danger, suspense, sex, etc., then black audiences would go and see them. You didn't have to have any blacks in them. **The Exorcist**, **Star Wars** and **Jaws** don't have any black people. Nonetheless, blacks went to these films in larger numbers than whites. Blacks really don't discriminate the way most whites and some ethnics do. We're a bunch of pussycats as far as consumership goes.

Hollywood is a very nepotistic, inbred, in-group kind of place because there is so much money involved. Everybody is trying to get into Hollywood so you've really got to know somebody who knows somebody to get into Hollywood. The moguls there said, "Well, listen, what are we knocking ourselves out for making all these black films? We've got to hire all these black crews and talent. If we make the "right kind of film," black people will come to see it, Hispanics will come to see it, all the Third World peoples in this country will come to see it. And all the white people will come to see it. We can even take these films and send them overseas and they will make a fortune." The rest is history.

What about big box office hits like Eddie Murphy?

These are the kinds of films being targeted and produced today. Into this equation has come, once again, the "Black Comic." The "Black Comic" has always been a major hit in America ever since the days of the minstrel show. You can see at a glance that upgrading that person into a Hollywood product would click because America likes to laugh at black people because of the racism angle. Enough of America likes to laugh at black people to think of it in commercial terms.

Beyond that, because of the pressures here and now, the budget, the deficit, ecology, crime, drugs, etc., people, (white, black, all Americans) want to get away from the pressures of life in America today and they naturally gravitate towards comedy. So you get a lot of comedy shows on television and a lot of comedy movies.

Of course, into that equation steps an Eddie Murphy, making over one hundred million dollars a year or whatever it is that he makes. The black presence right now has been largely one tied to humor in the mainstream Hollywood product. Occasionally more serious products are done like **Cry Freedom** or **A Soldier's Story**, but typically, we are woefully under-represented in the serious film in the director corps in Hollywood. I don't think that there is more than two percent of black directors and writers, maybe I'll

give them three percent at this point. The percentage of black actors is very, very low in terms of playing major roles. In television the black presence is better from the standpoint of being in front of the camera and perhaps behind the camera as well. But look at the demographics of Los Angeles, which is a largely black, Asian and Hispanic community, so much so that you have a black mayor; something like almost fifty percent of L.A. is Third World.

If you look at the employment profile of the major studios in Hollywood, it's appalling. To be centered in the middle of a community where over fifty percent are black, Hispanic and Asian, you have three or four percent employed in the unions. And on the managerial and decision-making levels, you have less than one tenth of one percent. Ashley Boone, who was one of the major figures in the strategizing and marketing of *Star Wars* and a number of other major films, is black. He is one of the few black executives operating in Hollywood and he is not even operating now. I just read an article called "Hollywood's Dirty Little Secret," published in *Premiere Magazine*, in which they said that in the recounting of the history of the particular studio where he was one of the major executives, he is not even mentioned. That's how bad it is in Hollywood.

Right now we are talking about Spike Lee and Robert Townsend. Yes, it's wonderful but Spike Lee is only one guy. This is dreadful! If there are two hundred operating directors in Hollywood at least twenty of them should be black. If America were operating in its most egalitarian sense, shorn of its historical encumbrances, there should be at least twenty percent of the congress that are people of color.

Spike Lee is certainly now in a position to present a project to a studio and make a deal with them. He could conceivably even set up a limited partnership outside of the studio and raise money privately. He could set up a limited partnership with thirty-three partners and finance a production in that way. But he's only one of his kind and the unhappy fact is that there are all these wonderfully talented, young, black filmmakers.

There's an organization called The Black Filmmaker Foundation which has something like one hundred talented, black filmmakers who are desperately trying to get money and funding to do various things. The bulk of their financing is coming from their membership. You would think that Eddie Murphy or Richard Pryor would have long ago done something for them. But they don't do that. I personally feel that a lot of our stars and other wealthy people suffer from the slave mentality that we were talking about earlier.

Would you believe this character up in Canada, Ben Johnson, they found all these steroids in him? And he has a \$250,000 car!! What an obscenity! The thing that's so beautiful about the Jewish and the Italian communities is the fact that they really and truly treasure their talent and history, they foster it. The Japanese treasure their talent and history. You are not going to go anywhere without a value placed upon the intelligence that is developing within your society. If America allows itself to tumble into this terrible situation in education, and it is getting worse, we are going to be outflanked by all these other countries who really value the genius within their communities.

You were talking about, in one of your papers, seeing the Third World, India, as a market for filmmakers.

Sure. I think the Third World is a natural market for black Americans because the Third World is very zeroed in on America, in terms of the black community here. While we might not be aware of it, they are very much aware of America's black population and they assess America by how we are treated here. They know just about what to expect when Americans come over to make their deals, they filter what the white American is saying opposite what they know is happening here. I think that there is a lively interest in the Third World about the black community that we, from a commercial point of view, certainly can tap. And because we do get so much attention there.

Unfortunately we as black people don't think commercially in terms of the Third World. The Third World really doesn't think that intently in terms of having commercial relationships with African Americans because nothing they have seen in the media has told them that we are in any way commercially viable. The curious thing is that America in the twenty-first century has a major advantage in having resident within its borders the African American, because he or she is a natural bridge to this Third World market which is going to become progressively competitive.

As Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, India, the European Common Market and the Soviet Union become progressively economically and commercially competitive with the United States, the ace in the hole that America has is its African-American population. The potential of this group is incredible and if it is sufficiently developed it can relate to these markets overseas in a competitive way. That is, if the world is still involved in the capitalistic formation of economics.

The only unfortunate thing is that it seems that Black America suffers from being American.

I think we should be American. I don't think we need to separate ourselves from white America when we go overseas. But one of the things that we have to be clear about is that we are African Americans and we still have a lot of struggle and work to do here in America to make it the democracy it's supposed to be. That is reality.

I guess I didn't say it right. What I meant was because we are American we have ethics about work and hustle, which is very American.

That goes with the territory. The Koreans are really giving the black community the greatest lesson that they will ever get. We have had all these various opportunities around of being able to collaboratively pool our resources and we have not done that. Now, it is true they do have lines of credit extended to them, in some instances, from Korea, but I know for a fact that a lot of those early immigrants followed the path of the early Jewish immigrants and the early Italian and the West Indians. You just bunch yourself up in a room and develop a very serious work ethic and a cooperation ethos and you build your capital and build your assets and you can enjoy yourself later on. The notion of sacrifice, pain and suffering, which is something Americans avoid like the plague. It is unknown in America except for the very poor and the unlucky.

Black Americans have suffered tremendously and I guess we're passing through a period of "rest and recuperation." We are a pleasure-seeking group

of people. We are in danger of it being our Waterloo in the twenty-first century.

But we also went through slavery and it is time to enjoy something.

That's right and the irony is that that is true but that's not the reality. It's doubtful that White America is going to give us ten trillion dollars in reparations due us, valid though that idea may be. If you were to mathematically compute and sit down from Day One of the arrival of the first African slave and run it up on a computer up to 1989 and you take the going wages for each decade and move it through the numbers of slaves here, you can arrive at a figure that would boggle your mind, of unpaid labor in trillions of dollars. A lot of very intelligent white Americans don't want to deal with that fact of slavery and mathematics. They don't even want to hear about that because they know what the ramifications are. I think that realistically we will never be able to "collect that money," especially with the cosmic dynamic of human greed running so wild in the world today.

The Great Society of Johnson was an attempt to somehow address certain grievances but the costs of the Vietnam War and the escalating costs of running a society began to mitigate against the possibility of America pursuing that kind of guilt money. Even those whites who know about the debt don't want to relate to it, much less pay it. I think that our problem as African Americans is never to forget our slave history but also never to get bogged down in the history of the horrors of slavery too deeply because we become very depressed, morbid, very hateful. Our problem is to tap only as much of these horrors that we need for strength and inspiration, to try and see what we can do to impact today's situation.

We should stress the voting and economic thing and look to the future and try to learn lessons from the Korean community, the Jewish community, etc. Try to learn from these other minority groups who have managed to figure out and find ways to move forward without losing the creative, artistic and cultural power and potential we have achieved to date.

Realistically speaking, there has been a sustained vilification campaign targeted on us which no other minority group in this country really experiences. Other people say, "Why can't you be like the Koreans or the Jews?" The Jews in this country have their own religion, their language, a preserved history where we don't enjoy that.

It seems to me that, as a people, we must continue to be vigilant, to be on the lookout for anti-Black propaganda which abounds in this country. Most of it is so insidious it catches you off-guard. It's important to keep in mind that the primary concern of the American popular media is not the welfare of the African-American community -- it's money. More often than not, in a consumer-based economy like ours, that means pandering to humanity's basest instincts. If the society happens to be racist, it's bad for minorities, especially the most vulnerable ones. It is sometimes difficult for us as black people within this society to recognize the strategies directed against us and the constantly changing forms in which various negative images are presented. Nor are we always fully aware of the psychological power of these images and how they cripple our thinking and actions.

True, we as a people have physically survived a four-hundred-year-long holocaust on this continent. But my guess is that our physical survival is due

to the racial genius, the conscious and unconscious memory of our pre-slavery experience. Our collective psyche is probably still programmed by the various spiritual and intellectual achievements of the outstanding civilizations of Africa, civilizations whose cultures stretch back into the furthest reaches of antiquity. Ethiopia and Egypt are merely the tip of that remarkable cultural iceberg we call the Black Experience. Having said that, we now have to get on with the business of creating a viable and productive psychological environment for ourselves today, and tomorrow. We can't just pat ourselves on the back for having physically survived a four-centuries-long holocaust, spectacular though that may be. We must learn how to convert, use, and effectively exploit our past and current adversities for our cultural evolution in this society. As filmmakers and producers, it is our task to empower ourselves in the powerful electronic media as other groups have done. We need to do this in order to develop a supportive cultural environment for ourselves, while enriching the larger American culture of which we are a part.

How do we do this?

Since we live in a greed-driven society, we have to keep in mind that there are powerful, sometimes even sinister, commercial interests at work in the media today ready to exploit us or, for that matter, any group that will permit it. They use a variety of devious tactics to achieve their ends. They will offer fame and fortune to any among us who effectively portray negative aspects of the black experience that can be commercially exploited in our racist society. The black media person must become increasingly conscious of this in order to avoid being used in this way no matter how attractive or lucrative the deal may be. We must be hip to those, black and white, who use progressive and black nationalist rhetoric as a smokescreen for the production of racially destructive films and television shows. Often we may have the best intentions when we make these kinds of films, but good intentions are not enough. If we don't develop a more sophisticated critical sense, we may find ourselves in a new kind of slavery -- psychological and mental slavery -- a far more dangerous form than physical slavery.

So, to repeat myself, we black producers must be tough on ourselves. We must be careful about what we put on the screen. Working in the electronic media means we have the power to help prevent a possible psycho-spiritual holocaust of our people. It is also an opportunity to lay down a positive cultural foundation which will be truly liberating and enlightening and which will permit our people to make the kind of major contributions to human civilization that our ancestors did.

Let me formally end this by thanking you for a lovely documentary again.

SELECTED FILMS AND VIDEOS

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY WILLIAM GREAVES
between the years of 1958 and 1990

- Resurrections: Paul Robeson** one-hour television pilot for cable, starring Moses Gunn 1990
- A Tribute to Jackie Robinson** 18-minute videotape for The Jackie Robinson Foundation 1990
- Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice** one-hour film for "The American Experience" public TV series (WGBH), with Toni Morrison on camera 1989
- That's Black Entertainment** 60-minute videotape produced by Skyline Entertainment 1989
- The Deep North** one-hour television program on racism for WCBS 1988
- Black Power in America: Myth or Reality?** one-hour film for TV funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, with Franklin Thomas, Clifton Wharton, Jr., Dr. Mary Berry, Arthur Ashe, Mayor Tom Bradley, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Don King 1986
- Take the Time** 16-minute film for The American Cancer Society, with Phylicia Rashad 1987
- Golden Goa** 40-minute film for the Government of India 1986
- Fighter For Freedom** 18-minute film of Frederick Douglass for the National Park Service 1985
- Frederick Douglass: An American Life** 30-minute film for the National Park Service 1984
- A Plan for all Seasons** 40-minute film for Social Security Administration, with Bob Hope and Marie Osmond 1983
- No Time for Privacy** 16mm film for The American Cancer Society, with Harry Belafonte 1983
- Booker T. Washington: The Life and the Legacy** 30-minute film for the National Park Service, with Maurice Woods and Al Freeman, Jr. 1982
- Space for Women** 30-minute film for NASA, narrated by Ricardo Montalban 1981
- Bustin' Loose** feature film for Universal Pictures, starring Richard Pryor and Cecily Tyson 1981
- Where Dreams Come True** 30-minute film for NASA, narrated by Ricardo Montalban 1979
- In Search of Pancho Villa** 15-minute film for Anthony Quinn 1978
- Opportunities in Criminal Justice** 35-minute film for The National Urban League, narrated by Bill Cosby 1978
- Nationtime: Gary** 90-minute film on the First National Black Political Convention, with Jesse Jackson, Amiri Baraka, Richard Hatcher, Charles Diggs 1977
- Just Doin' It** 30-minute pilot for TV series funded by the Corporation for Television 1976
- From These Roots** 30-minute film for The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, narrated by Brock Peters, music by Eubie Blake 1974

- Whose Standard English?** 24-minute film for Dillary University 1974
- Power Vs. the People** 36-minute film for Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 1973
- On Merit** 23-minute film for the Civil Service Commission, narrated by Ruby Dee 1972
- Voice of La Raza** 40-minute film for the Equal Opportunity Commission, with Anthony Quinn 1972
- Ali, The Fighter** feature-length 35mm documentary film for Guts, Inc., with Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier 1971
- The Fight of the Champions** 35mm short on the first Ali-Frazier fight for Perenchio-Cook 1971
- Choice of Destinies** one-hour television special for WNBC, with Leon Bibb 1970
- Black Journal** twenty hour-long programs for the National Educational Television series 1968-70
- In the Company of Men** one-hour film for Newsweek 1969
- Take One** 90-minute 35mm experimental feature 1968
- Still a Brother: Inside the Negro Middle Class** 90-minute television special for National Educational Television 1968
- The First World Festival of Negro Arts** 40-minute film for USIA 1966
- Wealth of a Nation** 25-minute film for USIA 1964
- Cleared for Takeoff** 16mm film for UN Television, with Alistair Cooke 1963
- Emergency Ward** 30-minute film for the National Film Board of Canada 1958



William Greaves and Sadie Brown Amparado in a scene from *Garden of Time* by Owen Dodson as produced by the American Negro Theater, 1945.