

Milestone Film presents
Charles Burnett's
**MY BROTHER'S
WEDDING**



MY BROTHER'S WEDDING A CHARLES BURNETT FILM
STARRING EVERETT SILAS RONALD BELL JESSIE HOLMES
PRESERVED BY THE PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE WITH THE COOPERATION OF CHARLES BURNETT
PRESERVATION SUPPORTED BY A GRANT FROM THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS.
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www.milestonefilms.com milefilms@aol.com (201) 767-3117

My Brother's Wedding. 1983 and 2007. USA. 1:33:1. Color. Director: Charles Burnett. Starring: Everett Silas and Jessie Holmes. 110 and 81 minutes. Preserved by the Pacific Film Archive with the cooperation of Charles Burnett Preservation supported by a grant from The National Endowment for the Arts. ©1983 and 2007 Charles Burnett Productions.

CREW

Directed by Charles Burnett
Written by..... Charles Burnett
Produced by Charles Burnett, Gaye Shannon-Burnett
Co-Producer..... Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen
Associate Producer Brigitte Kramer
Supervising Producer..... Earl C. William Sr.
Production Manager Thomas M. Penick
Assistant Production Manager..... Lance C. Davidson
Production Coordinator Ruth E. Cassius
Line / Stunt Coordinator / Casting Supervisor Garnett Hargrave
1st Assistant Directors Julie Dash Fielder, Ronald Hairston
2nd Assistant Director..... Camelia Frieberg
1st Assistant Camera..... Omar El Aide, A.J. Fielder
2nd Assistant Camera..... Lynn Smith
Sound Mixers..... Veda Campbell, Arthur J. Lopez
Editor..... Thomas M. Penick
Executive Editor Charles Burnett
Associate Editor Christine Renee Penick
1st Assistant Editor Adrienne Williams
2nd Assistant Editors..... Steven Wright, Rex Stuart, Christopher J. Penick,
Wanda West, Julie Feiner, Douglas H. Penick,
John Ellis, Bryan Bellamy, Cheryl Thompson,
Angela Nellyon Sims
Gaffer Amy C. Halpern
Best Boy Tony A. Brown
Prop Master / Set Decorator Penny Barrett
Make-Up Artist Clifton Johnson
Assistant Make-Up..... Stacey Evans
Sound Effects Supervisor Edward M. Osborne
Electricians..... Tom Smith, Jeanine Moret
Script Supervisor..... Maryse Leon
Wardrobe Supervisor..... Gaye Shannon Burnett
Stills..... Victor Hargrave, James Wyatt, Tony Glenesk
Negative Cutters Joy Rencher, Beth Conwell
Mixers Hiroakizom Yamamoto, Mark Rozett
Sound Transfer Lewis Countee, Stanley Carr
Music Transfer..... Paul Quan

CAST

Everette Silas.....	<i>Pierce Mundy</i>	Victor Hargrave.....	<i>Police #2</i>
Jessie Holmes.....	<i>Mrs. Mundy</i>	Rita Williams Bell.....	<i>Injured Mother</i>
Gaye Shannon-Burnett.....	<i>Sonia Debois</i>	Terrence Allen.....	<i>Terrence</i>
Ronald E. Bell.....	<i>Soldier</i>	Tony Brown.....	<i>Walter's Friend</i>
Dennis Kemper.....	<i>Mr. Mundy</i>	Brilla Cherry.....	<i>Angela's Friend</i>
Sally Easter.....	<i>Mrs. Richards</i>	Suzette Ry.....	<i>Barbara</i>
Hobert Durham Jr.....	<i>Mr. Richards</i>	Lionell Hardy.....	<i>Drunk</i>
Angela Burnett.....	<i>Angela</i>	Ronald Hairston.....	<i>Man On Bus</i>
Tim Wright.....	<i>Big Daddy</i>	Brenda McGrew.....	<i>Baptized Girl</i>
Cora Lee Day.....	<i>Big Mama</i>	John McGrew.....	<i>Pastor's Aide</i>
Monte Easter.....	<i>Wendell</i>	Glenn Standifer.....	<i>Pastor #1</i>
Frances E. Nealy.....	<i>Mrs. Debois</i>	Charles Drake.....	<i>Pastor #2</i>
Sy Richardson.....	<i>Mr. Debois</i>	Marvin Elkins.....	<i>Viewer #1</i>
Garnett Hargrave.....	<i>Walter</i>	Archie Hamilton.....	<i>Viewer #2</i>
Margarita Rodriguez.....	<i>Maria</i>	Frederick W. Penick.....	<i>Viewer #3</i>
Jackie Hargrave.....	<i>Hattie</i>	Marian A. Penick.....	<i>Viewer #4</i>
Lynda Gypcy Lewis.....	<i>Judith (Pregnant Lady #3)</i>	Dian Yvonne Laster.....	<i>Viewer #5</i>
Denise Elliot.....	<i>Cheryl (Lady In Accident)</i>	Idrece Elliot.....	<i>Sister's Baby</i>
Ross Harris.....	<i>Mr. Bitterfield</i>	Douglas H. Penick.....	<i>Pallbearer</i>
Julie Bolton.....	<i>Rape Victim</i>	Inez Drake.....	<i>Lady In Church</i>
Charles Bracy.....	<i>Walker</i>	Roman Bate.....	<i>Man On Floor</i>
Stacey Evans.....	<i>Jean</i>	Adrienne Williams.....	<i>Woman In Church</i>
Nate Hardman.....	<i>Babe Brother</i>	Thelesa Christopher.....	<i>Woman In Church</i>
Debbie Williams.....	<i>Babe Brother's Wife</i>	Kimberley Lowe.....	<i>Pregnant Woman #1</i>
Henry G. Sanders.....	<i>Beat-Up Man</i>	Regina Hamilton.....	<i>Pregnant Woman #2</i>
Helena Springs.....	<i>Angry Woman in Car</i>	Myrtle S. Penick.....	<i>Wedding Member</i>
Lucious Walker.....	<i>Jack Ace</i>	John Ellis.....	<i>Pallbearer</i>
Taglito Atpay.....	<i>Mr. Cook</i>	Marjorie Carpenter.....	<i>Wedding Member</i>
Ed Prevost.....	<i>Mr. Shaw</i>	Tracy Carpenter.....	<i>Wedding Member</i>
S'Jon C.L. Blackwell.....	<i>Sleeping Boy</i>	Cozette Perrin.....	<i>Wedding Member</i>
Javier.....	<i>Robber #1</i>	Ki'Yo Carter.....	<i>Wedding Member</i>
Larry White.....	<i>Robber #2</i>	April Caldwell.....	<i>Bridesmaid</i>
Kal Isaacs.....	<i>Robber #3</i>	Tiffany Pinder.....	<i>Bridesmaid</i>
Kalita Bradley.....	<i>Woman Robber</i>	Maria Crawford.....	<i>Wedding Member</i>
Herman Graham Jr.....	<i>Funeral Director</i>	Shaune Arnold.....	<i>Bride's Stand-In</i>
Demean Hall.....	<i>Sister</i>	Ruth E. Cassius.....	<i>Wedding Member</i>
Mickie Washington.....	<i>Sister's Daughter</i>	Yzella Cassius.....	<i>Wedding Member</i>
Gene Cherry.....	<i>Gene</i>	Edward Warmasley.....	<i>Wedding Member</i>
Dian Cherry.....	<i>Diane</i>	Byron Warmasley.....	<i>Wedding Member</i>
Charles Anderson.....	<i>James</i>	Valon Lyles.....	<i>Wedding Member</i>
Jerry White.....	<i>Millie</i>	Fred Kaiser.....	<i>Caretaker</i>
Tamiko Hairston.....	<i>Millie</i>	Grover Johnson.....	<i>Chaffeur</i>
Boston Farley Jr.....	<i>Bob</i>	Thomas F. Stone.....	<i>Pallbearer</i>
John R. Lampkin.....	<i>Liquor Clerk</i>	Benjamin Williams.....	<i>Pallbearer</i>
James Washington Jett.....	<i>Mr. Jett</i>	Dione Bacon.....	<i>Boy #1</i>
Robert T. Wester Jr.....	<i>Elmo</i>	James Bacon.....	<i>Boy #2</i>
Tashia Cherry.....	<i>Angela's Friend</i>	Lawrence Jackson.....	<i>Ambulance Driver #1</i>
Allahn Diva Wright.....	<i>1st Baby</i>	Tom Pruitt.....	<i>Ambulance Driver #2</i>
Rashawn Robinson.....	<i>Baby In Car</i>	Stephanie Elliot.....	<i>Ambulance Attendant</i>
Tina Jolly.....	<i>Church Woman</i>	Michael Roby.....	<i>Ambulance Attendant</i>
Thomas M. Penick.....	<i>Dead Body</i>	Lewis Brown.....	<i>Man With Gun</i>
Rosalind Burroughs Cluster.....	<i>Sheila</i>	Dr. Henry Gordon.....	<i>Singer With Harmonica</i>
Clifton Johnson.....	<i>Police #1</i>	Mark Smith.....	<i>Funeral Singer</i>

BACKGROUND

“*My Brother's Wedding* is a tragic comedy that takes place in South Central Los Angeles. The story focuses on a young man who hasn't made much of his life as of yet, and at a crucial point in his life, he is unable to make the proper decision, a sober decision, a moral decision. This is a consequence of his not having developed beyond the embryonic stage, socially. He has a distinct romantic notion about life in the ghetto and yet, in spite of his naive sensitivity, he is given the task of being his brother's keeper; he feels rather than sees, and as a consequence his capacity for judging things off in the distance is limited. This brings about circumstances that weave themselves into a set of complexities which Pierce Mundy (Everett Silas), the main character, desperately tries to avoid.” — *Charles Burnett*

“*My Brother's Wedding* fits no genre. The film asks viewers to find *its* rhythm and move to it. What the Italian neorealists accomplished in the years after World War Two, and what a handful of daring Iranian directors have done more recently, Burnett—a one-man African-American New Wave—achieved with his first two features: he gave a culture, a people, a nation new images of themselves.” — Nelson Kim, *Senses of Cinema*

At the 1981 Berlin Film Festival, *Killer of Sheep* made a belated, but critically acclaimed debut, winning the esteemed Critics' Prize. Interestingly, it was a fairly conservative public television network Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (known for their emphasis on *Das kleine Fernsehspiel*— small family dramas) that saw it there and commissioned Burnett to make another film. With additional money from a Guggenheim fellowship and further support from England's Channel 4, the \$80,000 budget was raised.

My Brother's Wedding began production in 1983. Burnett wrote, directed and produced this low budget independent film on location in the area of South Central Los Angeles where he grew up. Like *Killer of Sheep* and *To Sleep with Anger*, the locale and the personality of the neighborhood was as important as the characters. As he told James Ponsoldt in a recent *Filmmaker* magazine issue, “Growing up, it was a constant clash. If you were from the South, people called you ‘country.’ It was a negative more than a positive. But if somehow you let those [Southern] values seep in, through osmosis or whatever, you look at your life and realize [they are] relevant... In the neighborhood where I grew up, the neighbors were like extended family. That's all missing now — most of it. Los Angeles is so urban now, but it used to be full of vast, open spaces. It was rural — like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn! You could see for miles. City Hall was the biggest building. You could see the mountains every day. You could have chickens, rabbits, ducks — anything — in your backyard. It was a great place to be at that time. It felt country. There was a sense of community.”

The film examines the differing duties of family and friends as well as the complexities of class within the black community. Trouble soon followed as the lead actor Everette Silas refused to continue acting until he was paid a larger salary. That took some time to settle but after a few more scenes were shot, Silas disappeared. He was found a few months later, having become a preacher in New Orleans. All in all, it took a full year of on-and-off shooting before the editing process began.

Burnett submitted a rough cut of the film — now past the original completion schedule — to Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen. Against Burnett's better judgment and wishes, ZDF decided this version was good enough. The “unfinished” film was shown at the New Directors/New Films festival in New York to mixed reviews, discouraging distributors and tragically relegating the film to relative obscurity. Film critic Armond White called this “ a catastrophic blow to the development of American popular culture... The

'suppression' of *My Brother's Wedding* damaged the cultural awareness of American artists (Black and white) who learn from other contemporary achievements... American pop never got the chance to benefit from Burnett's experimentation and plangent worldview." Other critics including Michael Wilmington of the Los Angeles Weekly as well as Dave Kehr and Jonathan Rosenbaum of the Chicago Reader also championed the film to no avail. The film was essentially lost to history, screened only infrequently at Burnett retrospectives.

"People see a rough cut of it and I keep telling them I'm going to go back... So that's what I'm going to do. It needs recutting."

With the preservation by the Pacific Film Archive, Milestone was able to acquire the rights and work out a scenario where Burnett and editor Ed Santiago were able at last complete a digital "final cut"— from 115 minutes to a trim 82. (Both versions will be available on the DVD release.) *My Brother's Wedding* now is ready to be seen for what it has always been: funny, heartbreaking ... and timeless.

"The least known of Charles Burnett's first three features (the other two are *Killer of Sheep* and *To Sleep With Anger*) and in some respects my favorite focuses on the family pressure exerted on a young man in Watts (Everette Silas) who works at his parents' dry cleaners--pressure to abandon his disreputable ghetto friends and adjust to a more middle-class existence. This struggle is pushed to the limit when he has to choose between attending his older brother's wedding to a woman from an affluent family and attending the funeral of his best friend, a former juvenile delinquent. Burnett's acute handling of actors (most of whom are nonprofessionals) never falters, and his gifts as a storyteller make this a movie that steadily grows in impact and resonance as one watches. If a better film has been made about black ghetto life, I haven't seen it." — Jonathan Rosenbaum, *The Chicago Reader*

"Filmmakers can change the way we view certain areas. That's what Charles Burnett does with South-Central Los Angeles. For Burnett, Watts, the site of "My Brother's Wedding," isn't a terror-ridden urban jungle. It's an everyday place where ordinary people lead ordinary-though sometimes agonizingly hard-lives: a realm of families and strife, friendship and conflict, work, hell-raising and, sometimes inevitably, death and grief.

This is a Watts sometimes steeped in absurdity, sometimes marrow-deep in rage... There's a brisk easiness to Burnett's Watts. It's both Anywhere, U.S.A., and an urban homeground of harsh specificity. And Burnett, a filmmaker who works in a determinedly low key, keeps focusing on the slight details that will sting it to life: a little girl's somnolent, sassy flirting, the way an anguished father curls up on a plain bed, the sun hitting a bottle of vodka held inches off the floor." — Michael Wilmington, Los Angeles Times



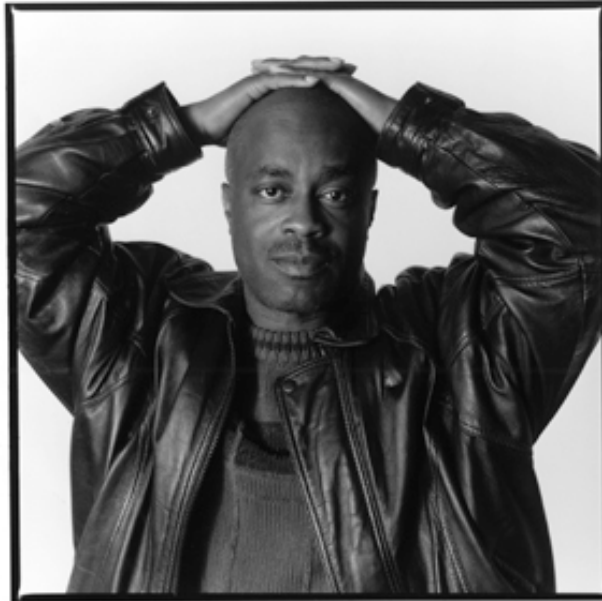
SYNOPSIS

In this tragicomic work of realism, Pierce Mundy (Everette Silas) is employed at his parents' South Central dry cleaners with no prospects for the future — his childhood buddies are all in prison or dead. Pierce's best friend Soldier (Ronnie Bell) is just getting out of jail. Pierce's brother Wendell (Monte Easter), an up-and-coming lawyer, is busy planning a wedding to a snooty upper-middle-class black woman named Sonia (Burnett's wife, Gaye Shannon-Burnett, who co-produced the film). Pierce navigates his conflicting obligations and his mistrust of the upper crust while trying to figure out what he really wants. Pierce's pious, bible-quoting mother (Jessie Holmes) provides both comic relief and a heartfelt moral backbone to the film.

"The story focuses on a young man who hasn't made much of his life as of yet, and at a crucial point in his life, he is unable to make the proper decision, a sober decision, a moral decision. This is a consequence of his not having developed beyond the embryonic stage, socially. He has a distinct romantic notion about life in the ghetto and yet, in spite of his naive sensitivity, he is given the task of being his brother's keeper; he feels rather than sees, and as a consequence his capacity for judging things off in the distance is limited. This brings about circumstances that weave themselves into a set of complexities which Pierce desperately tries to avoid." — Charles Burnett

Charles Burnett

(1944 –)



Born in Vicksburg, Mississippi on April 13, 1944, Charles Burnett moved with his family to the Watts area of Los Angeles at an early age. He describes the community of having a strong mythical connection with the South as a result of having so many Southern transplants, an atmosphere which has informed much of his work. He attended John C. Fremont High School, where he ran track and was in the electronics club, where he befriended fellow electronics enthusiast and secretly aspiring actor Charles Bracy (*The Million Dollar Rip-off* 1976), who would later work on and act in a number of Burnett's films, including *Killer of Sheep*. Burnett and Bracy graduated in the same class and both went on to study as electricians at Los Angeles City College. Bracy left school early to take a full time job so as not to financially burden his mother and Burnett soon lost interest with the idea of being a professional electrician. "They were very strange people," Burnett says of his electrician-to-be peers, "They told awful jokes. They were dull people. Didn't want that. I was always interested in photography and looked into being a cinematographer and started taking creative writing at UCLA." He decided to pursue a Master of Fine Arts in filmmaking at UCLA where he was greatly influenced by his professor Basil Wright, the English documentarian famous for *Night Mail* and *Song of Ceylon* ("life wasn't an abstract thing with him, he saw poverty, he saw what was going on, and it shows in his films"), and by Elyseo Taylor, creator of the Ethno-Communications program and professor of Third World cinema. "A lot of good things came out of it. All the people attending the course were there making films in response to false and negative images that Hollywood films were promoting... The focus was on you telling *your* story and working out an aesthetic." Burnett cites Jean Renoir, Satyajit Ray, Federico Fellini and Sidney Lumet (*The Pawnbroker*) as other important influences.

Working alongside Julie Dash, Haile Gerima, Billy Woodbury, Larry Clark, and Jamaa Faraka (then known as Walter Gordon), Burnett described the UCLA film school as an "anti-Hollywood" environment with a "kind of anarchistic flavor to it" in which there was a shared disdain for the Blaxploitation vogue of the day and a propensity toward filmmaking that was "relevant or extremely well done, original." Clyde Taylor of New York University would later label this group of radical black film contemporaries the "LA

Rebellion.” Some later articles called the group the “LA School.” Although there was no conscious impetus among any of the filmmakers to expressly declare themselves part of a “rebellion,” there was much comradery and exchange of ideas and labor between the filmmakers. Burnett was the cinematographer for Gerima’s *Bush Mama* (1979), worked crew and camera and edited Dash’s *Illusions* (1982) and was the screenwriter and cinematographer for Woodbury’s *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984).

Burnett and his contemporaries took their time at UCLA, staying in the program as long as they could, taking advantage of the free film equipment and making film after film. Burnett made a number of seminal films at this time, the most notable of course being his thesis film, his first feature, *Killer of Sheep*. The precursor to *Killer of Sheep* was *Several Friends* (1969), which was originally planned as a feature but ended up a short. The film was a series of loose, documentary-style vignettes sketching the lives of a handful of characters, mostly played by amateurs (Burnett’s friends) living in Watts. Much of the film’s theme and aesthetic (even some of its actors) ended up in *Killer of Sheep*.

My Brother’s Wedding began production in 1983. Burnett wrote, directed and produced this low budget independent film that examines the family connections and personal obligations facing Pierce, a young man trying to keep his best friend from going back to jail while dealing with his older brother’s approaching marriage into a bourgeois black family. *My Brother’s Wedding* uses both comedy and tragedy to explore the way that class figures into the American black experience. Burnett submitted a rough cut of the film to its producers, who against his wishes, accepted it as the final cut. The unfinished film was shown at the New Directors/New Films festival to mixed reviews, discouraging distributors and tragically relegating the film to relative obscurity.

In 1990, Burnett wrote and directed the haunting family drama, *To Sleep With Anger*. Danny Glover, parlaying his recent stardom from *Lethal Weapon* to get funding, co-produced and starred in this critically lauded film as the charming but mildly supernatural Southern family friend, Harry. Harry insinuates himself into a troubled family, forcing inner turmoil to the surface. Burnett received acclaim in America and abroad for the film. In 1991, it won Independent Spirit Awards for Best Director and Best Screenplay for Burnett and Best Actor for Glover. The Library of Congress later selected this film (in addition to *Killer of Sheep*) for its prestigious National Film Registry. The National Society of Film Critics honored Burnett for best screenplay for *To Sleep With Anger*, making him the first African American to win in this category in the group’s 25-year history. While the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Burnett’s movie reminded viewers of Anton Chekov, *Time* magazine wrote: “If Spike Lee’s films are the equivalent of rap music — urgent, explosive, profane, then Burnett’s movie is good, old urban blues.” The film also received a Special Jury Recognition Award at the 1990 Sundance Film Festival and a Special Award from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. Both Burnett and Glover were nominated for New York Film Critics Circle Awards.

Burnett’s next film, *The Glass Shield*, (starring Lori Petty, Michael Boatman and Ice Cube) was a police drama based on a true story of corruption and racism within the Los Angeles police force. While the film went over well with critics, it was not a commercial success. Terrence Rafferty explains: “[*The Glass Shield* is] a thoughtful, lucid moral drama with a deeply conflicted hero and no gunplay whatsoever. Mirimax’s fabled marketing department tried to sell it as a hood movie, dumping it in a few urban theaters with the support of miniscule ads whose most prominent feature was the glowering face of Ice Cube (who has a small role in the picture).”

After this was Burnett’s short, *When It Rains*, which was chosen as one of the ten best films of 1990s by the *Chicago Reader*’s Jonathan Rosenbaum. Rosenbaum went on to choose *Killer of Sheep* and *To Sleep with Anger* as two of the Top 100 American Films as *Alternate to the American Film Institute Top 100*.

Burnett made his television debut with his acclaimed 1996 Disney Channel film, *Nightjohn*. Based on the novel by Gary Paulsen, *Nightjohn* is a period piece about a slave's risky attempt to teach an orphaned slave girl to read and write. *New Yorker* film critic Terrence Rafferty called *Nightjohn* the "best American movie of 1996." The TV film received a 1997 Special Citation Award from the National Society of Film Critics "for a film whose exceptional quality and origin challenge strictures of the movie marketplace."

Burnett's work also includes the 1998 ABC two-part mini-series *Oprah Winfrey Presents: The Wedding*, starring Halle Barry and Lynn Whitfield; the 1999 ABC telepic, *Selma, Lord, Selma*, about the 1965 civil rights marches in Alabama and the infamous "Bloody Sunday;" and the 1991 documentary about U.S. immigration, *America Becoming*.

In 1997, the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival honored Burnett with a retrospective, *Witnessing For Everyday Heroes*, presented at New York's Walter Reade Theater of Lincoln Center. Burnett has been awarded grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the J. P. Getty Foundation, as well as a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship (a.k.a. "the genius grant"). Burnett is also the winner of the American Film Institute's Maya Deren Award, and one of the very few people ever to be honored with Howard University's Paul Robeson Award for achievement in cinema. The *Chicago Tribune* has called him "one of America's very best filmmakers" and the *New York Times* named him "the nation's least-known great filmmaker and most gifted black director." Burnett has even had a day named after him — in 1997, the mayor of Seattle declared February 20 to be Charles Burnett Day. Burnett more recently directed a documentary on Nat Turner and one chapter of the six-part documentary, *The Blues*, a production of Martin Scorsese's CPA Productions with Off-Line Entertainment. His newest film, *Nujoma: Where Others Wavered*, a biopic of the first Namibian president Sam Nujoma, is now in post-production.

Charles Burnett lives in Los Angeles just west of his old South Central neighborhood. He met his wife, costume designer Gaye Shannon-Burnett, when she starred in *My Brother's Wedding*. They have two sons, Steven and Jonathan.

Filmography

Killer of Sheep (1977, 80 minutes.)

Starring Henry Gayle Sanders, Kaycee Moore, Angela Burnett, Charles Bracy and Eugene Cherry.

The acclaimed first film finally had its theatrical premiere on its 30th anniversary. One of the biggest indie successes of the year, it played for 12 smash weeks in New York and will have grossed \$500,000 by the end of its run.

"The film setting is South Central Los Angeles. It takes place some 10 years after the Watts disturbance; the job reality was terribly disappointing then and the outlook today is no better. The film concentrates on the internal make up of a worker who, because of the condition of his job, which requires an individual to suspend sensitivity, to be able to accept the slaughter of animals without any emotional defect which is characterized by anti social behavior. His situation is compounded by the fact that his environment is not conducive for the establishment of a normal healthy social attitude. In short, the fundamental problem is centered around the quality of his life. It has produced insomnia and, in spite of the continuous onslaught of negative images, the

character is still basically a moral person and never thinks of conceding or being consumed by immorality; he can choose between right and wrong.

“The opening scene, the theme of which, illustrates the basic problem and its consequence, tells of a little boy being told that surviving is beyond any moral judgment, that right and wrong only extend as far as the family. The consequence of such a notion is that it can cause one to have a confused mental state if one is very sensitive; one has to grow to abandon basic feelings.

“These people are not from the bourgeoisie; life is resolved on a physical level. Their needs are simple and direct; however, because of the historical circumstance, they lack the means and especially the time and pastime to engage in anything other than struggle. The idea of movement is not upward but lateral.

“The optimistic note, though it appears as a paradox, is that in spite of the image of killing, there is a strong reverence for life. There are kids everywhere under foot, though they witness everything. The last two scenes draw on this combination of images; a young teenage pregnant girl who is crippled tells of the joy she has of knowing that she is expecting a baby. Then the next image is the killing of sheep which is supposed to create a strong contrast with the previous scene, hoping to emphasize the sense of reverence by irony and juxtaposition.

“The slaughter house does not pretend to be anything beyond what it is; simply a horrid place to work which causes psychological problems, however, because of its nature, it automatically assumes certain similarities to the outside world.

“The music (there is a lot of it) is almost forced on the structure of the film; looking back, a lot of it seems unnecessary. It was supposed to act as an integral part of the story; apart from the classical music, the rest of the music was the kind that Stan’s, the main character, life was shaped and dominated by. The music of William Grant Still and Paul Robeson was to create by association an extension of Stan’s basic problem to a more general one that is an ongoing historical one.

“The cast was originally non-actors. Henry Sanders who has been in other films, was a last minute replacement after my main character failed to get his parole in time. Charles Bracy, who plays himself, got involved with acting and has since had jobs acting. Kaycee Moore has turned to acting as well. My little niece, Angela, has been involved with several other films and in fact, everyone in the community wants to become an actor or write his life’s story.”

— Charles Burnett, 1980, 5630 Edgemar Avenue, Los Angeles, California 90043 in a written statement for MoMA’s What’s Happening? series

Restored by UCLA Film & Television Archive. A Milestone Films release.

My Brother’s Wedding (1984 and 2007, 115 and 82 minutes. Color.)

Starring Everette Silas and Jessie Holmes.

Preserved by the Pacific Film Archive at the University of California, Berkeley. The director’s cut was edited by Charles Burnett and Ed Santiago.

To Sleep with Anger (1990, 102 minutes.)

Starring Danny Glover, Paul Butler, Mary Alice, Carl Lumbly, Sheryl Lee Ralph.

“At first we seem to be in an acutely observed middle-class soap opera, witnessing the generational disputes between the family patriarch (Paul Butler) and his wife (Mary Alice), and their two

married sons (Richard Brooks and Carl Lumbly) ... Enter Harry (Danny Glover), a smiling charmer from the old days in the Deep South.... Is Harry in fact an evil spirit, setting a curse upon the house? ... Glover, in what may be the best role of his film career, makes him an unforgettable trickster, both frightening and a little pathetic ... a catalyst to explore the conflicting systems of belief — Christian, magical, materialistic — that collide throughout the movie.” — David Ansen, *Newsweek*

The Glass Shield (1994, 109 minutes.)

Starring: Michael Boatman, Ice Cube, Elliott Gould.

Michael Boatman plays a young, naive African American man who is the first of his race to be assigned to the Los Angeles Edgemar station, located in the heart of the beleaguered inner city. He finds himself in a precinct where violent, racist and corrupt cops have closely bonded against outsiders or any interference. The new recruit's only ally is the sole woman (Lori Petty) in the Edgemar ranks. Burnett's hard-hitting film examines what it really means to be *persona non grata* in one's chosen profession and community, and what a man will give up to fit in.

The Annihilation of Fish (1999, 108 minutes.)

Starring: Lynn Redgrave, James Earl Jones, Margot Kidder.

Charles Burnett directed this offbeat comic romance about a pair of aging eccentrics whose imaginary companions sometimes interfere with their "real" lives. Fish (Jones) is an elderly Jamaican expatriate who has spent much of his adult life in a mental institution in New York. One of the clearest manifestations of Fish's madness is Hank, an imaginary nemesis whom Fish must often beat until he obeys. After he's released, Fish heads to Los Angeles, where he takes a room in a boarding house run by Mrs. Muldroone (Kidder). Living across the hall from Fish is Poinsetta (Redgrave), an older woman who may be crazier than Fish: she drinks a great deal, loves to listen to Puccini, and is convinced that the long-dead composer is following her around (and is in love with her). The film has yet to be released.

Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property (2003, 58 minutes.)

With Ossie Davis, Henry Louis Gates, Carl Lumbly, Alfre Woodard.

The story of the violent confrontation and of the ways that story has been continuously re-told during the years since 1831. It is a film about a critical moment in American history and of the multiple ways in which that moment has since been remembered. Nat Turner was a "troublesome property" for his master and he has remained a "troublesome property" for the historians, novelists, dramatists, artists and many others who have struggled to understand him.

Warming by the Devils Fire (2003)

Part of the documentary series, "Martin Scorsese presents the Blues." A tale about a young boy's encounter with his family in Mississippi in the 1950s, and intergenerational tensions between the heavenly strains of gospel and the devilish moans of the blues.

Nujoma: Where Others Wavered (2007, in production)

With Carl Lumbly, Danny Glover and Ron Smerczak.

A feature film on the life of Sam Nujoma, the first president of Namibia and former president of the South West African People's Organization.

Short Films

Several Friends (1969, 45 minutes).

In his humorous and realistic slice-of-life short, a young man and his friends deal with family life, a string of broken appliances and the boredom of unemployment in South Central Los Angeles.

Restored by UCLA Film & Television Archive. A Milestone Films release.

The Horse (1973, 13 minutes).

Adapted by Burnett from a short story he had written, this lyrical short film is a meditation on race relations and a coming-of-age story. On and around the porch of an abandoned, disintegrating farmhouse, a group of white men and a young black boy sit vigil over a horse the day it's to be put to death by the boy's father. Although it was shot in Northern California, Burnett has called this a "kind of allegory about the South."

Restored by UCLA Film & Television Archive. A Milestone Films release.

When It Rains (1995, 13 minutes).

On a New Year's Day mission to save a mother and daughter from eviction, a self-designated "urban griot" sets out on a citywide quest for money. His search turns into a superbly comical, outrageous expedition in the course of which he encounters a good Samaritan, a would-be enforcer, a mute ex-Black Panther, an angry shrew and, finally, great jazz. Critic Jonathan Rosenbaum chose this short as one of the "Ten Best Films of All Time" calling it "a near miracle!"

A Milestone Films release.

Dr. Endesha Ida Mae Holland (1998, 14 minutes)

From prostitute to Ph.D., civil rights activist, playwright, and professor, the film chronicles in her own words, Dr. Holland's fight against racism and injustice.

Olivia's Story (1999, 14 minutes)

This film explores the importance and vitality of a Korean family living in America. Olivia's family is a strong one — there is a sense of balance between the two contrasting cultures that must coexist together within two generations. The young children and their "American" ideals complement the fond and personal memories of the elders. The film reveals the possibilities of such a union — not only are the two cultures integrated but these two cultures serve to bring the two generations together as well. Ultimately, *Olivia's Story* asserts the idea that the acceptance of a culture, whichever one it may be, comes from the understanding of it.

Quiet as Kept (1007, 5 minutes)

A short film about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the everyday struggles of a family trying to survive despite the lack of support and their displacement from friends and family.

TELEVISION PRODUCTIONS

America Becoming (1991, with Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, 90 minutes.)

Taking its title from a poem by Langston Hughes, *America Becoming* looks at the US, as the nation becomes increasingly diverse — evolving from a primarily white country into a multicultural society of diverse ethnicities and nationalities. How is the nation relating to new waves of migration from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Central and South America? *America Becoming* documents the lives and relationships of America's newcomers and established residents in six communities: Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, Miami, Monterey Park, California, and Garden City, Kansas.

Nightjohn (1996, 96 min.)

“Charles Burnett's emotionally overpowering, almost perfectly realized fifth feature, *Nightjohn*, is his first wholly accessible movie ... In this intense drama of courage and humanity in the face of the brutality of slavery, a plantation slave named Nightjohn (Carl Lumbly) defies the law by teaching another slave, a 12-year-old girl named Sammy (Allison Jones), how to read and write. The only other slave on the plantation who even knows the alphabet had a thumb and forefinger chopped off as punishment ... Working with a theme akin to that of Ray Bradbury's novel (and Francois Truffaut's film) *Fahrenheit 451*—though it's given a substantially different edge by being set in the past rather than the future — *Nightjohn* views illiteracy as a central adjunct of slavery. Yet the film isn't merely a history lesson about people who lived some 165 years ago but a story with immediate relevance. Part of what's so wonderful about it is its use of fairy-tale feeling to focus on real-life issues, not to evade or obfuscate them. *Nightjohn*'s ambience is placed at the service of myth—myth that embodies a lucid understanding of both slavery and literacy. Sammy and Nightjohn may sometimes come across as superhuman, but the world they inhabit and seek to change is in no sense fanciful.”

— Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Chicago Reader*

The film was winner of the 1997 National Society of Film Critics Awards, Special Citation, “for a film whose exceptional quality and origin challenge strictures of the movie marketplace.”

The Final Insult (1997, 54 minutes)

In this very low budget, European-financed work in digital video, filmmaker Charles Burnett takes a bitter, ironic look at a megalopolis coming apart at the seams due to poverty and ghettoization. Box Brown is a low-paid employee who one day receives a letter from the IRS summoning him to pay back taxes. He loses all his worldly possessions except his car — which he barely manages to save. A new life dawns for him, on the street. Surrounded by other homeless people who wander aimlessly, trudging along with their few possessions in shopping carts, Box Brown fears the day he will lose his car, the sole guarantee of his freedom. He soon experiences the racial and economic discrimination rife in Los Angeles. Destiny deals him the final blow when a pitiless gang grabs his last “treasure.”

The Wedding (1998, miniseries, 240 minutes.)

Starring: Halle Berry, Eric Thal, Lynn Whitfield, Carl Lumbly. Presented by Oprah Winfrey.

“Under Oprah Winfrey's imprimatur, this is a sensitive, multilayered adaptation (by Lisa Jones) of the expansive novel by Dorothy West, one of the last surviving members of the fabled Harlem Renaissance. Set among the upper-class African American community of Martha's Vineyard in the mid 1950s, moving back and forth in time, it follows the romantic travails of a beautiful light-skinned African American woman (Berry) who is torn between her white fiancé and a divorced

African American man below her station who comes into her life. Originally shown in two parts.”
— *Leonard Maltin’s Movie and Video Guide*

Selma, Lord, Selma (1999, 94 minutes.)

Starring: Mackenzie Astin, Jurnee Smollett, Clifton Powell, Ella Joyce

In 1965 Alabama, an 11-year-old girl (Jurnee Smollett) is touched by a speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. and becomes a devout follower. But her resolution is tested when she joins in the march from Selma to Montgomery that became infamously known as “Bloody Sunday.”

Finding Buck McHenry (2000, 94 minutes.)

Starring Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis.

Davis is Mack Henry, a school janitor and Dee is his wife. A young white boy, Jason, is a baseball fanatic but doesn’t have skills to make his community team. Mack Henry agrees to become the coach of a new team, and Jason becomes convinced that the kindly janitor with an eye and feel for baseball is really Buck McHenry, a legendary pitcher from the old Negro Baseball Leagues.

Milestone Film & Video

Milestone enters its seventeenth year of operation with a reputation for releasing classic cinema masterpieces, new foreign films, groundbreaking documentaries and American independent features. Thanks to the company’s rediscovery, restoration and distribution of such important films as Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep*, Mikhail Kalatozov’s *I am Cuba*, Marcel Ophuls’ *The Sorrow and the Pity*, and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache*, the company has long occupied a position as one of the most influential independent distributors in the industry. In 1995 Milestone received a Special Archival Award from the National Society of Film Critics for its restoration and release of *I am Cuba*. *L.A. Weekly* chose Milestone as the 1999 “Indie Distributor of the Year.” On January 2, 2004, the National Society of Film Critics awarded Milestone Film & Video their prestigious Film Heritage award. In December 2004, the International Film Seminars awarded Milestone its prestigious Leo Award, named for indie distribution pioneer Leo Dratfield and the New York Film Critics Circle voted a Special Award “in honor of 15 years of restoring classic films. In 2006, Milestone/Milliarium won for Best Rediscovery in the Il Cinema Ritrovato DVD Awards for its release of *Winter Soldier*. In November of 2007, Milestone will be awarded by the Fort Lee Film Commission the first Lewis Selznick Award for contributions to film history.

Such stellar contemporary filmmakers as Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Woody Allen, Steven Soderbergh, Thelma Schoonmaker, Jonathan Demme and Dustin Hoffman have co-presented important Milestone restorations.

In 2003, Nadja Tennstedt joined the company as director of acquisitions and international sales. Victor Vazquez joined in 2007 as publicity coordinator and head of the creative department.

“Since its birth the Milestone Film & Video Co. has steadily become the industry’s foremost boutique distributor of classic and art films — and probably the only distributor in America whose name is actually a guarantee of some quality.”
— William Arnold, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“Milestone Film & Video is an art-film distributor that has released some of the most distinguished new movies (along with seldom-seen vintage movie classics) of the past decade”
— Stephen Holden, *New York Times*

Monona Wali's Interview with Charles Burnett

The Independent, October 1988

Monona Wali: When you were growing up, what did you think you were going to do?

Charles Burnett: I didn't know really. I thought I'd join the service, because my friend Bobby and other guys were going into the service.

MW: Why didn't you?

CB: We were forced to take a position against the war. Before I got out of high school, a recruiting officer came around. When I turned 18, I didn't go down and register immediately, even though they stress if you don't do that you can get arrested. I didn't take it seriously. When I did go down to register, they gave me the third degree, and I was really angry. A lot of things began to gel. I was aware of institutionalized racism, because in school I became very aware of it – the way they wanted to shove us into shop class – the whole attitude of “well, you're not going to do anything anyway...”

When I did go to register at the draft board, there was this lady who noted every mark, like scars, for identification purposes. She was very rude, and I'm thinking I'm doing them a favor, right? She acted like they owned me. I was in school at the time they wanted to draft me, so I got a school deferment, but I had to go down to the draft board anyway. There were long lines – zigzagging up the stairs and in twos and fours. It was like a dream. And there were these guys hollering at you like you're already in the service. There was this blonde kid, typically collegiate American guy, walking up and down and cheering us on: “We've got to fight for this country.” And we were looking at him, thinking, “What is the matter with this guy?” It was one of the first times that someone pointed and said, “You're an American, and you have obligations.” He was saying that you were supposed to support his way of life – freedom. I'm saying “*What?* Freedom? At the same time the police would call you “nigger” in a minute. You would walk down the street, and they would pull you over. It was rumored that the L.A. police recruited southern whites to dominate the Black community.

MW: Did you get your deferment?

CB: I got a deferment. But the whole Army business was a joke, because they would only take kids who didn't have any prison record or police record. They took the core – the potential – of the Black community. All these guys who were fighting each other and wanted to prove themselves physically went to jail. It was a double whammy.

I was in line at the store not too long ago behind this huge guy. I recognized some of his features. Then he turned around and said, “I know you.” I said, “Yeah, you look familiar. Where do I know you from?” He said, “You don't recognize me. We went to school together, but I was really thin at the time. During the time I was drafted, I gained weight by eating a lot. I drank a lot of salt water to get high blood pressure, and then when I got huge I couldn't get my weight down.” He was big as a door. And when I was at the Toronto Film Festival I ran into a guy I hadn't seen in a long time, and I said, “What in the hell are you doing way up here in Toronto?” And he said, “I came up here to dodge the draft and made a living and stayed.”

MW: Was this during the sixties?

CB: Yes. I had just finished high school. I was a product of that pre-Civil Rights Movement. You really felt your limitation. Your reality was a few square blocks. You felt this was your only world, and the only way to get out of it was to join the service. But that was when the war in Asia started to blossom, and the draft wiped out my whole neighborhood.

MW: Kids you grew up with?

CB: Kid who were friends died in the service, and I remember one particular case—actually two cases. One guy was killed and he had a twin brother. The troubling thing was I didn't know which twin was killed. And there was another kid who was one of these guys that detonated mines. One of the mines went off and blew him to nothing. When they brought his remains home, they didn't open the casket. That left an impression. That was after the Watts riot, and people had had enough police harassment.

MW: Was that 1964 or '65?

CB: The summer of '65. At the time of the riots I was at Los Angeles City College. I would catch the bus—looking for summer jobs—and come back towards South Central and see smoke columns—back to reality right? It was very strange because the first night of the riot I didn't know what was going on. The riot started after the attempted arrest of Marquette Frye—we went to junior high school together.

MW: Where were you living during that time?

CB: In South Central—99th and Towne, off Avalon and Century. During the last stages of the riot I could see the National Guard stationed at the corner from my window. During the day I would observe the results of frustrated people, and at night I would go out in the street and witness the destruction.

MW: Did you participate?

CB: No. Actually it was just a few people. There were more people standing around. It only takes a few people to do damage. It relieved a lot of pressure. It also hurt the community. It dispersed the community because before that there was a center. When those areas were destroyed all the stores were closed, and it took a long time for the businesses to move back in. But there was a migration of the middle class just before the Civil Rights Movement. The Watts riots really speeded up the process, leaving a vacuum—moral, economic, political. Watts lost its center

MW: You were going to college at the time? What were you studying?

CB: Electronics. I don't know why, but I became disenchanted with it. I was lucky though, because I had a writing class at LACC with Isabelle Ziegler—a really great person—and I became interested in storytelling. I also had a feeling of waiting to find out what went wrong when I was growing up.

Some of the kids I grew up with disappeared—violently—or went to jail. It was a tightly knit community. When I went to college, I began to see another world—that there's something more to life than thinking that by the time you're 20 you're going to be dead. In the community, the only world is a few square miles. And then I saw all these other people who seemed healthier—enjoying life—particularly when I went to UCLA. Still, South Central was an interesting area. Most of the people were from the South—Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama—mostly Mississippi and Arkansas.

MW: What about your family?

CB: They're from Mississippi. I was born there but my family moved to L.A. when I was just a child during the migration of people moving north and west because of the war. At the time, L.A., was very racist and segregated. It was like South Africa and still is in many ways. In the forties, you have to live east of Central Avenue. I was told there were areas you couldn't go.

The thing that influenced me when I was a kid was that everyone was working all the time—strenuous work—and there was a healthy attitude about it. My family and neighbors used to raise chickens and grow food. But grow was a rejection of the kind of works the parents did, particularly domestic work. There was a stigma attached to what they did. Your parents worked hard and always said, "I don't want my kids to work hard like I do. I want something better." As a consequence, they sort of sheltered their kids. There was also a negative attitude about the past.

When I was growing up I used to work during the summer for a friend's father who was a carpenter. Everyone was a plasterer or carpenter, or something like that. I used to admire those guys in many ways. There was a man named Bland who had big arms with veins like ropes—I always wanted big veins—and big hands. I remember Bland keeping the cement mixer going, and I'd try to mix...forget it. That kind of work is bad on the heart. These guys were young and strong at one time,

but later on they just crumbled from the strain. Bland died early. The dug scene wasn't as bad as it is today, and people had a sense of coming to terms with their lives much better than they do now. There wasn't anything like the random violence today. People would fight, but only on an extreme occasion were people killed. There was some sense of limitation.

[MW: Did you get into a lot of fights?](#)

CB: Everybody had to know how to box. You had to know how to protect yourself. You couldn't go around whining. It's how you carried yourself that got you through the day. And then, in the area I grew up, there were a lot of gangs. I lived right in the center of it, so I couldn't avoid taking sides. You had to identify with one group or another, even if you weren't part of it. The gangs weren't connected to drug trafficking, like they are today. It seemed then that the law was very hard on pushers. Alcohol was the thing.

[MW: The worst?](#)

CB: No. there were some pills like reds, fender benders, uppers and downers—I never took any of the junk. The reason they called it fender bender was because they would get in the car and bang into something.

A lot of the guys were sent to juvenile camp and got physically big, really muscular and exaggerated their physical strength. There was an emphasis on physique and physical prowess—being able to knock somebody out with one punch.

[MW: Did this affect the way boy and girls got along—or didn't it?](#)

CB: Relationship with women were strange then, very strange—a lot of myths, false notions. There was really a dichotomy of sexes. When we were young, groups of boys would do things like going to the swamp—Devil's Dip.

[MW: Where was that?](#)

CB: L.A. had a lot of undeveloped areas that you could walk or ride a bicycle to. Devil's Dip was where Southwest College is now, which used to be an oil field. There were steep hills, and we'd take our bikes and fly down the hills. There were metal shops in junior high school where you could make metal bows. So we'd go out with beebie guns and bows into these swamps for the sheer adventure of it. Girls couldn't come along. We couldn't participate in their world and vice versa.

When we got older there was this notion of a rap—a way of talking to a girl. You talk her into dating, you talk her into going out with you—talking nonsense: “Oh baby, I love you” and this and that. The younger guys didn't know what was going on and would ask, “How'd you get that girl?” “Well man, you have to have a rap.” “What do you mean, a rap?” “I can't tell because, he, you might steal my woman.” Then the older guys would say, “Your rap's not better than mine. I'll take your woman anytime.” So there was a mystery. It was a difficult period for a lot of guys because, in a sense, nothing was real. All these obstacles were generated by myths, cultural myths that no one really stopped to analyze. You just had to live through it.

[MW: What kind of family did you have?](#)

CB: My mother worked all the time. She had a job at Good Samaritan Hospital as a nurse's aide. She left the house at four in the morning and sometimes didn't get back until the evening. So we grew up on our own somewhat, with the help of my grandmother. She had to quit work to help out.

[MW: What about your father?](#)

CB: He was in the service, so it was a one-parent family.

[MW: He never came home?](#)

CB: Except one or two occasions. That was it. He didn't have any impact at all.

[MW: Did you go to church when you were a kid?](#)

CB: Yeah.

MW: Was your mother religious?

CB: My grandmother was. If you can go to the movies you can go to church—that's how she thought. There was a strong moral sense of good and bad still in the air. My grandmother had a great influence.

MW: When did you start going to the movies?

CB: At an early age. They had these 10 cent shows during the summer where they showed old time black and white serials. It was a social thing. Invariably there would be a fight. First you'd see the movie. Then between that and the second show, you'd gather in the lobby or the bathroom with your friends. So would the guys from the other side. Then all hell would break loose. You'd go there to pose and posture.

MW: Was there any types of movies you preferred?

CB: I liked a lot of old Hollywood films. Most of the kids in the neighborhood were overwhelmed by the scary movies like the original *Frankenstein* and *Werewolf*. Every time they screened everyone would go to the theater. I missed what they called "race movies"—by Oscar Micheaux, Spencer Williams—films made by Blacks about Blacks. That was missing from my experience until later.

MW: Did you think about the kinds of roles Blacks played in the movies you saw?

CB: They used to show Tarzan movies. And there was Tarzan who would pick up these Black guys, throw them across the river, and out-run them. He'd wipe out a whole village of Black warriors and we'd cheer, "Yeah! Yeah!" We used to yell, "Get him, Tarzan!" Yeah, get him, Tarzan!" Identity crisis, right?

You know what that reminds me of? *Hearts and Minds*. There is a Black guy in *Hearts and Minds* who's shot as a talking head—from the top up. He talks about a battle he was in against the North Vietnamese when they asked for air support. When the jets came, they hollered, "Yeah, jets! Yeah, jets!" But the jet dropped the canister with napalm on them instead of the Viet Cong. Then the camera reveals that he was burned and maimed by they napalm.

MW: How did you decide you wanted to make films?

CB: I always wanted to get involved in photography when I was in high school. I didn't have a camera, but this guy I knew had one—a regular 8 home movie camera—and his was the first camera I ever looked through. Somehow it was there, in the back of my mind—something that wasn't really formed yet. And when I went to City College I worked in the main branch of the L.A. public library downtown. I worked in the evenings and usually had a couple of hours to kill, so I'd go to a movie. So it was that, combined with studying writing. At the time, the arts became very fashionable. So it was just a matter of finding the right medium. There a lot of people were involved in plays, and lots of people were writing poetry.

MW: Were your friends doing that, or was it mostly your friends in college?

CB: Mostly the friends in college. The Watts Writers Workshop was blooming. Until—it was rumored—an FBI informant burnt it down.

MW: Were you part of the Workshop?

CB: No, but people I knew were. It's hard to explain how things like Malcolm X had an influence on taking me in a certain direction or toward a form of expression, but somehow it did.

MW: Was he a hero for you?

CB: He made a strong impression. The mosque that the police attacked wasn't far from where I lived. Across the street was the famous night cub called the Five-Four Ballroom. The police and the media saw the Muslims' political positions as a threat. There was a shootout at the mosque. We used to go by and look at the bullet holes in the building. Years later, when I was in East Berlin, walking down the streets where you can still see bullet holes in the walls, the mosque in L.A. came to mind.

It was a time of choosing. Some people supported, some denounced Malcolm X. He was building self-confidence, because he'd demystify whiteness. I never start disliking people just because of race, so I never took on the hate aspect of the philosophy. But Malcolm X had a lot of presence, and there was an element in his character that you could borrow from. His story was incredible. He went through the same things as the man on the street. His story is a familiar one, like so many people who started the wrong way. However, his story departs from the familiar one because he took a negative experience and changed it into a positive force.

MW: He was one of the only voices speaking loudly and clearly.

CB: I found that people I knew gravitated toward Malcolm X, as opposed to Martin Luther King. I think he spoke about a different need. He said, "If some so and so spits in my face, he's not going to spit in nobody else's face." That's what people wanted to hear. Because you get tired of people kicking you. Particularly when the double standard was so apparent and second-class citizenship was such a part of one's life.

MW: But were you ever part of any group?

CB: I've never been part of any group. There were a lot of guys that joined the Panthers because it offered a direction for young people and tried to give them a focus. You were like part of an army. You had a uniform—a black leather coat and tam. I couldn't take a lot of it seriously because I knew some of the guys who joined the Panthers, like this guy Jerry. We were in school together. He was a nice guy, in many ways, but he didn't have any direction. One day I ran into Jerry at Avalon and 97th. He was in his black leather jacket recruiting for the Panthers. I listened to his rhetoric and said to myself, "Here's this brother. You couldn't get him to sit still in class for two seconds." He was carrying Mao's *Little Red Book*. While we were talking the police drove by. The L.A. police were notorious for shooting people at the slightest provocation. They used to look for confrontation. So the police drove by, and Jerry made eye contact. He stopped talking like a pit bull seeing another pit bull, or like Japanese fighting fish in the same fish bowl. I thought, "Let me get away from this fool." I used to run track, and I'd jog to the store to keep in shape. Later that night I was running down the street and all of a sudden police cars raced out of the alley and surrounded me. The police jumped out of the cars with guns drawn but saw that I wasn't the person they were looking for, jumped back in the car, slammed the door and zoomed off. What happened was that Jerry and another Panther tried to shoot a policeman on Central Avenue. Jerry got killed during the exchange.

MW: When you went to UCLA, you already knew you wanted to make films?

CB: Yeah. But it's sort of strange, because I knew if I told people I wanted to be a filmmaker and make movies, they would think I was nuts. Even years later, whenever I told people what I was doing, I felt a little strange. If you said you wanted to be a lawyer, that's fine, a doctor, that's fine, but a filmmaker—what? That was *not* a Black man's job at that time, even though there were people like Bill Greaves and Carlton Moss, who had been around for a long time.

MW: What year did you go to UCLA?

CB: Around '67.

MW: So was going to UCLA a turning point in your life?

CB: The turning point, I think, was earlier. I used to think that UCLA was like the twilight zone. At LACC there were working class people, really practical people, pragmatists. They went to night class because they were working during the day. And it was cosmopolitan. There were all sorts of ethnic groups. UCLA was mostly white, and I noticed the liberty these people had. When I was in South Central, if the police drove down the street and smelled dope—marijuana, anything—he went through your pockets and dusted your pockets looking for evidence. If there were any seeds or any residue of marijuana, you'd be picked up and taken away. When I went to UCLA, some students were doing it in

the open and were not paranoid. I was paranoid. I said, “What are these guys doing? They must be crazy!” The security guard would go through the hallway, ignoring everything. His only interest was seeing if the doors were locked. I said, “Damn!”

MW: Who else was there then?

CB: As for other Blacks in the department—Bob Grant was there, John Henry, Don Blackwell.

MW: *Killer of Sheep* is one of the few realistic films about the Black community. What were you thinking about the films you were seeing at UCLA?

CB: I saw a lot of films concerning the working class. But the issues were idealized, and the conflicts were reduced to problems between management and labor. Management exploits the workers, and the union goes on strike. These films had a built-in resolution. Those weren't the kind of films I was interested in, because they didn't represent the experiences that I had gone through, the things I saw, or how I saw working people in my neighborhood. The issues are completely different. What was essential was finding a job, working, making enough money, and then, at the end of the day, coming home and still trying to show signs of life. How does that affect the family? What are the consequences of not having time to spend with the family?

MW: Isn't that what *Killer of Sheep* is about?

CB: It's about how Stan, the main character, loses his sensitivity and still tries to maintain a certain kind of dignity. You can see at the very beginning that this kid is traumatized by a fact of life. The father tells the little boy, “If you see your brother's in a fight, you help him, whether you brother's right or wrong. You don't stand and watch. You go and help your brother.” Which is OK, but you can imagine what effect this has if you have a conscience and are developing a moral concept. It was that kind of conflict that I was interested in trying to portray. How do you work in this environment? How do you maintain a certain amount of dignity? I wanted to show what price it takes to survive. How you survive is a personal choice. I don't think a film should tell you A happens, and then B, and then C will necessarily follow. Life isn't necessarily that simple. Films have a tendency to generalize, to reduce complex issues.

MW: You've mentioned that in your own community people didn't feel that their stories were important.

CB: The perception of what stories are about generally comes from Hollywood or from something commercial. Ordinary things that have meaning are lost. Stories make it possible to reveal that we share a common fate.

MW: Do you perceive a shift between *My Brother's Wedding* and *Killer of Sheep*?

CB: There are obvious stylistic differences, but the concerns are the same. It portrays a different aspect of a problem that I was concerned with, and I think it demanded certain style.

MW: How would you describe that style?

CB: First of all, it's about values. For example, the main character, Pierce, is not that emotionally mature. Philosophically, he looks at life in terms of the haves and the have nots and gets frustrated with people who don't care about poor people. He romanticizes the poor for the wrong reason, and he hates the middle class for the wrong reasons. He sees things in black and white. His problem is not being able to formulate a realistic view of life. He vacillates and wavers and the wrong moment.

In *My Brother's Wedding*, three different things are going on at the same time: the wedding, his friend getting killed, and Pierce's promise to his mother. The conflict evolves: Pierce has got to be at his brother's wedding at the same time as his friends funeral, and he can't decide which is most important. So, he's no help to anybody. It creates a conflict—a crisis—because he's not able to evaluate things. If he had made a decision and not made promises he couldn't keep, he wouldn't have created a sad situation. Whereas *Killer of Sheep* is about a guy—in order to survive and to keep the

family together—has to be focused. For Stan, every day is a crisis. Pierce is like an accident waiting to happen. That film is more satirical. You see what he's going through and what the problem is. It's plotted to lead to a definitive conclusion. *Killer of Sheep* wasn't, but drifts off into a comment about being born again and sticking to the struggle. *My Brother's Wedding* comes to an end by focusing on the necessity of making a decision.

MW: With that kind of resolution in *My Brother's Wedding*, I missed the open-ended structure of *Killer of Sheep*. I missed that lack of resolution. *My Brother's Wedding* seems to fit into a more standard conception of what a movie is. Was that intentional?

CB: No. It was made in 35, for a large audience. But that wasn't why the two films end differently. *My Brother's Wedding* could only take that form. The story almost dictates it. *Killer of Sheep* is supposed to look like a documentary. And in *My Brother's Wedding*, my concern was to make it tense and claustrophobic, to make things seem in relief, up close. It's like rushing head on into a wall. The metaphor is running blindly—a man who refuses to take control of his life. These guys are rushing into life with limited knowledge. No, it's not so much knowledge they lack, it's wisdom.

MW: Pierce's brother and the girl he marries don't seem very wise either.

CB: They were the other extreme, with no soul, no morals or wisdom. *My Brother's Wedding*, I think, was more moralistic than *Killer of Sheep*. It is more didactic.

MW: It strikes me that *Killer of Sheep* is really a tragedy. There are some very funny moments, but, ultimately, there is a sense of utter hopelessness. Have you been criticized for that?

CB: It depends on the audience. It's not a film for everybody. It's not a film that entertains. It's more sociological. It's meant to provoke a discussion. There are people who live on the edge. Not only does Stan continue to struggle, but he does so without falling into an abyss or becoming a criminal or doing other anti-social things. When I was invited to talk at Harvard, some of the Black students were very concerned about getting good jobs and being productive citizens. For them, what's substantive is the illusion of progress. They are interested in how to arrive, and they thought images of struggle should be about that.

MW: That reminds me of Greek tragedy and how a community does not like to see their own circumstances as tragedy.

CB: But classical Greek tragedy is about conflict involving kings, not the common people, which limits how tragedy is considered.

Also, some Black people don't like to deal with the past. Slavery, for instance, is sort of stigma. I wanted to do a story about slaves. I have a book of slave narratives. I happened to mention to some people that I was interested in that period, and the first thing they came out with was, "Why that? Forget about the past. Everyone knows about it." That's one of the fallacies—that people assume that everyone knows about history. But if you ask some people who Martin Luther King was, who Malcolm X was—it's recent history—they don't even know.

MW: Has there been any place that you thought you could live—other than L.A.? It seems to me that you a lot of attachments here.

CB: True. If you live in a place where all your formative years take place, you sort of draw from that. But, I would like to live in a safer place. I don't think at this point my living in another place would be a problem. It could be a positive thing. For example, there were some Russian writers who wrote most of their good work in exile.

MW: What about living in Africa?

CB: Actually, I was talking to Haile [Gerima] about that. I haven't visited Africa, and I have a strange feeling about it.

MW: A lot of people draw their identity out of Africa and try to go there to find something unique.

CB: It's a very scary idea for me. I don't know how to describe it—like visiting a sacred ground. You want to go back. Because those are your origins—but there's an eerie feeling of touching the soil.

MW: [How do you support yourself?](#)

CB: Until recently I had a nine-to-five job working at a talent agency. But I was doing film at the same time, and it was very difficult.

MW: [Tell me about the projects you've worked on since *My Brother's Wedding*.](#)

CB: At one point CBP [the Corporation for Public Broadcasting] gave me \$11,000 for script development for a film I wanted to do about the death of a girl, a true story.

MW: [What was it called?](#)

CB: It didn't have a title as such. It was based on a murder that happened here, and I wanted to make the girl a hero, because she stood up and everything right and still got killed.

MW: [Who killed her?](#)

CB: Gang members. She saw the murder of a cab driver. The police came to her to testify, and she agreed. When the defense attorney learned of her existence as an eyewitness, he told his client, who was in jail. He called her from the jail and harassed her. But when the girl's family complained about the harassment the police said their hands were tied: "We can't do anything until something physical happens." Finally the guy in jail had his brother kill her.

I presented this story to CPB, and they accepted it. But when I started corresponding with them about and got their comments, I saw they wanted to take it in another direction. I thought, "What the hell is this? All the guts are taken out. This wasn't the story we agreed on. Let's do another one." And I started writing another story. In the other end, the same thing happened.

MW: [Does the second project have a title?](#)

CB: *To Sleep with Anger*.

MW: [What is it about?](#)

CB: It has to do with Black folklore being superimposed on a situation today. It's about a family. There's Gideon and his wife—about 70 years old—their kids and grandkids. He's retired and his wife's a midwife. He worked at different jobs, laid track and things like that. They're from the South, they grow food, and they're a little old-fashioned, very moralistic. The sons went different roads. One son is a lot like the father. The other one is more materialistic or buppie kind of guy. And there is some sibling rivalry between them. And then there is a grandkid who listens to his father tell animal stories.

There is a Georgia fold character named Hairy Man. An old friend Harry comes to visit. He's an evil spirit embodied in a human being. Gideon and he knew each other years back, but Harry admits that he's a stranger now. Still, Gideon invites him in. So Harry stays, and the family is continually disrupted. Gideon gets ill after a party, and Harry emerges as the center of the family. And while Gideon is still alive, Harry has a friend of his propose to Gideon's wife. Harry is also domination Gideon's younger son—Babe Brother—the materialistic one, who adopts him as his spiritual father because he couldn't identify with his own father. Harry is everything: a gambler and maybe a murderer—he may have killed somebody in the past. Gideon's wife worries that maybe Harry is really bad, and she confronts him after this other guy proposes to her—it's like a satire—and he's very honest about the whole matter. He tells them, "I told you, I am not the person you knew. I intend to leave." But he wants to take Babe Brother. The two brothers fight about it, and the mother is injured, and they take her to the hospital. Gideon isn't part of this because he has become unconscious from his illness; he's gotten worse and worse since the party. When they come back from the hospital, Harry is waiting to get the son but ends up dying on the kitchen floor. And they can't get rid of him *then*. So it's a continual battle to get rid of Harry.

MW: [Is this a real character in Black folklore?](#)

CB: Yes, it's a mythical character. What happens is that, in order to escape him, you have to out-trick him. I was trying to establish some sort of continuity between the present and the past by using contemporary situations, combined with this folklore character. I started doing that, but CPB didn't like the idea that I was combining fantasy and reality after seeing the first draft. Now I'm working with Cotty Chubb, who will produce the film.

MW: [In this film, will you deal with conflicting philosophies like those in *My Brother's Wedding*?](#)

CB: Yes and no. The characters are different and it hints at what's taking place: the supernatural elements and the cultural elements. These characters have all these conflicts from the past that are also part of their lives today. It's also about racism.

MW: [One thing that strikes me is that you're just as much a part of a community as you are a filmmaker. Many filmmakers that I know make films fitted with references to film. Your references are to life.](#)

CB: Earlier I explain some of the problems when I was growing up. I identified with lost of kids that didn't make it. Life cheated them. It was a waste of people, and it continues—even more so now. I arrived at the notion that you owe it to somebody to do something. I also think that's entertaining, because what's entertaining is not car chases and stuff like that, but the subtle things that happen between people.

MW: [That's why you're an independent.](#)

CB: There are a lot of independents who have a unique point of view—like Haile Gerima, Victor Nuñez, Julie Dash—who find the fact of being independent allows them to choose their subject matter regardless of the commercial success. For example, Victor Nuñez, who lives in Florida, makes films about Florida. One of the bad things about Hollywood is that you lose your perception of what a story is—whatever that means—and the implications of what a story does and what it's for. There is a notion that the sillier the story is—they don't put it in those terms, they say “entertaining”—the more people will go see it. They don't have any obligation to the public. I feel that I have one.

MW: [What has that cost you, in terms of your own ability to make films?](#)

CB: It hasn't cost me too much. Life is a struggle, and I'm engaged and trying to do something that's very difficult—make sense out of life, explore things, grope about and dig out meaning in these events.

MW: [Do you think you're an optimist?](#)

CB: It depends.

MW: [A pessimist? Are you a cynic?](#)

CB: I think I'm very pragmatic. I'm a cynic on one hand, because I know that the only way I can make films is to do it myself—cynical in that sense. But I'm optimistic about my own ability. I know the world's a struggle—like the guy in *Killer of Sheep*, the only thing he can do is try and continue to try. That's the metaphor of Sisyphus, pushing his rock up the hill. You can't turn round and swim back now. You're too far gone....