

A Milestone Film Release

BLACK ROOTS

a film by Lionel Rogosin

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Crew

Produced and Directed byLionel Rogosin
Associate ProducerCarl Lerner
Director of Photography.....J. Robert Wagoner
Production Manager.....Bob Silverstein
EditorRuth Schell
Assistant EditorAnna Lomax
Special Assistant.....Maurice Schell
CameramenMel Garfinkle, Daniel Lerner, Michael Sullivan
Assistant CameramenSamuel Holmes, William Johnson
SoundmanRoland Mitchell
Assistant SoundmanClive Davidson
GafferDavid Howe
Production AssistantOzzie Brown
Set DesignerIlka List
Music ConsultantsAlan Lomax, Anna Lomax, Shunmugam A. Pillay
Co-Production.....Norddeutscher Rundfunk and Sveriges Radio Channel 2
Title of film "Black Roots" by.....Daniel Rogosin

Cast

Jim Collier
Rev. Gary Davis
Larry Johnson
Flo Kennedy
Rev. Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick
Wende Smith

Awards and Recognition

American Film Festival, New York, May 1972
Awarded Best Experimental Program, 1971, 7th Hollywood Festival of World Television
New York Film Festival, September 1970
Rochester International Film Festival, October 1970
American Film Institute Theatre, Washington, D.C., Black Culture Series, October 1970
Museum of Modern Art Film Library Series 1970
Leipzig Film Festival, November 1970

“Burning sincerity! Warm, earthy, peppery and humorous.”

- The New York Times

“Something special! The faces Rogosin caught in this film will remain in my memory for a long time.

There is a dream in these faces, a carelessness, a joy, an innocence, a blind trust in life,
and some of the cruel truth of our times.”

- Jonas Mekas, The Village Voice

“Very powerful! Truly beautiful and very well done! Lionel Rogosin, the maker of *On The Bowery, Come Back, Africa, and Good Times, Wonderful Times* has taken a small portion of the Black experience in America, chosen some fine-faced, musical militant types in New York, shown them with classic guitar musical accompaniment, and there you have it, the feel of the thing,

heightened with uncommonly good music...”

- Archer Winston, New York Post

“A compendium of Americana. It is simple and effective- a totally unpatronizing rap session with a cross-section of blacks about their experiences in the South, as well as urban and mid-America. Rogosin’s emotions appear to be so honest that he manages to stir in the viewer a genuine appreciation of black beauty, anger, sorrow, and pride. Few films about black America have had the power to lead our eyes to see with the help of a sympathetic white guide the reality in expressive faces which are the windows on black souls. Rogosin manages to do it, and he thereby makes ‘Black Roots’ a valuable contribution to the pitifully small supply of films which treat with any integrity the black experience in America.”

- Joseph Gelmis, Newsday

“Much depth of feeling! A rich expression of the Black experience in America. It lights up the screen with suffering, anger, and sometimes hope.”

- William Wolf, Cue

Synopsis

Lionel Rogosin's film *Black Roots* begins with a literal translation of its primary focus: vivid portraits of black Americans. As the camera slowly pans across a solid black background, the striking faces of young African Americans gaze directly into the camera's lens. Accompanied by an alternating jazz and traditional African score, the film plants itself in both the contemporary and the historical narratives.

The next scene opens in a small, dimly lit bar as a blues rendition of "The Story of Love" plays in the background. Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick opens with a story of unequal pay as seen through the eyes of a child on a tenant farm while "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out" is used to underscore the alienation he felt when even his family would not take him in when they finally left the farm.

Larry Johnson follows Kirkpatrick's story with an anecdote of his own. He recalls being a shoeshine boy at a white barbershop in Georgia. The owner would drive him to his house every day for lunch, except on the one occasion that his teenage daughter was present. Johnson was asked to ride the running board, but he did not realize until much later in life the degree of danger the man had put him in and the implications of his request. This prompts a heart-felt duet by Jim Collier and Wende Smith of "He Wants to be Somebody." The montage that accompanies this song is one that will set the precedence for future moments in the film. The beautiful and interesting faces of black America are captured candidly and edited together to showcase the variety and youthful exuberance amongst these individuals.

The film then introduces the audience to the vivacious Florynce "Flo" Kennedy. She says that "when you're growing up and you're black, you hardly even know you're black" and speaks of the first time she realized as a young girl that her race differentiated her from the other children in her neighborhood. She says that she and her sisters would run after the children who called them names after school and that the chase actually made coming home fun.

Kirkpatrick speaks again of the hardships he faced as a boy. He recounts being sent to live with his step-grandfather, who he claims was a mean and spiteful man. When his step-grandfather died about five years later, the relatives all insisted that a specific white customer be in attendance at the funeral. In the white man's shocking speech before the eulogy, he said, "Billy was a good nigger... We're all gonna miss Billy. If niggers got a heaven, then Billy's goin'...if." In a rare recorded performance, Reverend Gary Davis and the entire cast sing a rendition of "Hallelujah."

Flo Kennedy returns to speak about her father, a man who did not take prejudice lightly. They were the only black family in an all-white neighborhood. One day, the local Klu Klux Klan chapter knocked on the door and asked him to take his family out of the area. Her father left and returned to the door moments later with a gun. Kennedy attests that the KKK never bothered them again. Kirkpatrick also had a run-in with the KKK, but as an adult. He recalls men calling him and hanging up immediately until his five-year-old daughter answered and heard a death threat on the other end. The Klan then left a

decapitated chicken on the front lawn with a note that read, "You're next." The next evening, he approximates that fifty carloads of Klansmen drove by his house. Larry Johnson sings "How Long Has That Evening Train Been Gone."

Jim Collier then poses the question of why light-skinned black men had better jobs than darker-skinned men. He even recalls his friends changing their appearance to appear more "white." He says that, being one of the lightest-skinned kids in his high school, people hated him, but they simultaneously were jealous of him.

Kennedy recounts a humorous story about her mother, who was often mild-mannered, but occasionally lost her temper. While working as a housekeeper in order to provide her family with extra income after her father broke his hip, she was accused of stealing from her employer. Her mother had a hysterical fit, stripped off her clothing, and waved a sanitary napkin in her employer's face to prove that she did not need to steal anything from her. This was among many of the fond memories Kennedy has of her mother. She tells of her disastrous cooking and her long-standing desire to make the perfect "light rolls." She never succeeded, but Kennedy admires that her mother wanted life to be "fancy, beautiful, middle class, and lovely."

Larry Johnson says that his grandmother used to speak with him candidly about race and color. He was explicitly told not to marry a black woman because black women have black babies. He says that even his grandmother was "brain-washed." He says that even at the present day, he was not as attracted to a "really black woman."

In one of the most iconic moments from *Black Roots*, Reverend Gary Davis tells a parable-esque story of about a young black girl who was raised in a white household. She was married and still lived with the white family until she took the children out to play and reprimanded a young white girl. The girl went home and cried and her father shot the young black woman. Her husband, upon discovering his wife's body hanging from a tree, subsequently shot multiple people in a fit of rage and was later welcomed by the United States Army. Reverend Davis sings again.

Kirkpatrick then speaks of his leadership in rallying the other black men of his community together to protect their neighborhood. They worked in shifts for six months in order to keep the Klansmen out of the area. Jim Collier responds with his desire to go back to his hometown. He feels certain that he would be able to find the people who grew up with because he knows they did not go anywhere. He says he is thankful that joining the army allowed him to see other countries and have a new perspective on what his fellow Americans were doing to the blacks on the home front. His experience with the impoverished Portuguese people inspired him to rebel against authority and do what he feels is morally right.

A Statement from the Director

“In making *Black Roots*, it was my intention to convey the collective history and sociology of Black America. I decided that the most intensive distillation of this life style could be best expressed in the autobiographical sketches of several black Americans.

My casting took me six months to complete since I had to try to select people who would cover the entire spectrum of black America. My final choice included five people: the Reverend Frederick Douglass Kirkpatrick, Flo Kennedy, the Reverend Gary Davis, Larry Johnson, and Jim Collier. In the histories of these five people, tales of the hardships of sharecroppers, Klu Klux Klan raids, indignation and humiliation, as well as the warmth of family life and the humor which grew out of hardship of life in America, a pattern emerges which becomes the universal history of black America, a people and a culture not only of beauty, but of soul as well.

The form of cinema used in this film is an evolution of the forms and techniques used in my previous films: *On The Bowery*, *Come Back*, *Africa*, and *Good Times*, *Wonderful Times*. Whereas *Good Times*, *Wonderful Times* juxtaposed the dialogue of the middle class with the horror of war, which is harsh, concentrated on the relevancy of the human face and on dialogue since facial expressions, gestures and words of an individual are symbols of his personality and culture. A mosaic of many individuals can be both a psychological study of human nature and also a symbolic expression of the sociology of a culture both entertaining and beautiful.”

Lionel Rogosin

January 22, 1924 - December 8, 2000

“Reality - Life is Film” (Lionel Rogosin in a 1955 note)

As an independent producer, director and distributor, Lionel Rogosin was one of the founders of the New American Cinema movement. This informal group of filmmakers, including Morris Engels, Shirley Clarke and Sydney Meyers, sought to create a cinema free from the economic and structural shackles of Hollywood and to discard standard conventions of plot and structure. Inspired by Robert Flaherty (“*Man of Aran* had a profound effect on me and was a powerful motivation to my making *On the Bowery* and *Come Back*, *Africa*”) and the Italian neo-realists and equipped with lighter, more portable cameras, sound recorders and lighting setups, these directors shot on the city streets and focused on real life. One filmmaker who was strongly influenced by this movement was John Cassavetes, who said, in *The Film Director as Superstar* by Joseph Gelmis, “To tell the truth as you see it, incidentally, is not necessarily the truth. To tell the truth as someone else sees it is, to me, much more important and enlightening. Some

documentaries are fantastic. Like Lionel Rogosin's pictures, for instance; like *On The Bowery*. This is a guy who's probably the greatest documentary filmmaker of all time, in my opinion."

Rogosin experienced fascism firsthand as a soldier in World War II and vowed that he would continue to fight against it whenever and wherever he saw the threat of it reemerging. A *Newsweek* critic called Rogosin "a man of profound humanism." Rogosin wrote of his anti-fascist views, "This was the conviction that caused my anguish and indignation about apartheid in South Africa and racism in the United States." He decided to make films that expressed his political activism — he exposed oppression before it became fashionable and his subject matter was groundbreaking. His unique filmic approach brought him acclaim, but his empathy for the downtrodden, combined with a desire not to dramatize their plight, made it difficult to find financing for his film projects.

Born in New York, Lionel Rogosin (ro' geh-sin) was the only child of Israel and Evelyn Vogedes Rogosin. His father, a poor Russian immigrant with little education, started a sweater factory in Brooklyn at age 18 and made his first million dollars by the next year. Lionel grew up in the wealthy (and primarily non-Jewish) New York suburb of Port Washington, Long Island and was expected to join the family business. He went to Yale to study chemical engineering, but before graduating, he volunteered to serve in the Navy for two years during World War II.

Upon his return, he joined his father's successful Beaunit Mills, by then the industry leader in producing rayon fabrics. During this time, Rogosin traveled to war-torn Eastern and Western Europe as well as Israel. Rogosin writes of his experiences during this time:

I decided to join Beaunit Mills Inc. my father's corporation for several reasons, which originated on the bridge of my ship AMC 94 (Auxiliary Mine Sweeper) during a hurricane in Charleston harbor in 1945. Standing there in the calm between storms I meditated about my existence and the state of the universe.

I knew that I would soon leave the Navy and I felt I needed to formulate a plan for my future life. WWII had left me shaken and disturbed, I was aware of the holocaust and the horror of nuclear weapons that had been dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and I was not overjoyed by those events although we were told that nuclear weapons had ended the war with Japan. I was skeptical about that reasoning and after some examination I don't believe it was necessary. My reasoning then was that after such disasters going back to a normal existence was absurd. If everyone did not dedicate his life to profound changes in society and the cause of peace at least I would do so.

I wasn't sure how to proceed with this vision but I decided to be practical which meant to eventually join my father's business in order to have a financial base from which to function.

Rogosin quickly became president of the textile division but was unsatisfied with the work. Influenced at an early age by the film *All Quiet on the Western Front*, as well as his experience in the war and later travels, he was convinced that he needed to take a more active role in society. "I got restless, so

one day I wandered along the Bowery with a camera, and there you are... Of course, it wasn't as simple as that." He had seen the images of the Holocaust and had witnessed terrible racism in his own country, and after a brief stint as an assistant on a short film by Roger Tilton about square dancing, he decided to confront these ills with a camera.

In 1954 Rogosin resigned from Beaunit Mills and invested his own money — an estimated \$30,000 — in the production of *On The Bowery*. Although it received the Grand Prize for documentary film at the Venice Film Festival and was nominated for an Academy Award®, the film also had detractors. Many mainstream critics could not see past the film's rejection of Hollywood production values and actors. They considered the storyline weak (it had no formal plot), the cinematography gritty (focused on scenes of real squalor and poverty) and the acting rough. Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* described *On the Bowery* as "sordid and pitiful." But others recognized Engel's *The Little Fugitive* and *On the Bowery* as signs of the emergence of a new cinematic art form. Interestingly enough, Rogosin claimed not to have seen an American film for many years prior to making *On the Bowery*. "I was isolated at that time... you have to understand that above all, I've been inspired, motivated by life and not by films."

In 1956, Rogosin married Elinor Hart who, under her married name, became a well-known dance critic in the 1960s. With confidence based on the reception of *On the Bowery*, Rogosin decided to take a real chance. For several years he had considered making a film to protest apartheid. After meeting the secretary of the NAACP, Walter White, and South African writer Alan Paton (*Cry, the Beloved Country*), he decided this was something he had to do. In an incredibly courageous act of defiance, Rogosin entered South Africa on a tourist visa with his pregnant wife in tow. (Their eldest son Michael was born there during the making of the film.)

The couple lived in the country for a year, making friends and important connections while observing the political system of oppression. Even though film equipment had become more lightweight and portable, it was still impossible to film without attracting the attention of the authorities. They applied for a permit to film, on different occasions presenting their project as a travelogue to promote South African tourism or a documentary celebrating the music of the country. Despite bureaucratic delays, hostility and the great danger of being discovered, authorization to film was granted, and Rogosin quickly gathered together a cast and crew. The plot for *Come Back, Africa* was written under the guidance of two young anti-apartheid Africans, Lewis Nkosi and William "Bloke" Modisane, who appear in the film. Also making an appearance is the very young, very beautiful singer, Miriam Makeba.

After making the film, Rogosin helped Makeba flee South Africa and supported her financially, promoting her career in Europe and the US. After a performance at the Village Vanguard in New York she met Harry Belafonte, who convinced her to break her contract with Rogosin and come under his wing. Makeba later resented Lionel's original involvement and his contribution to her success was unjustly forgotten.

As with *On the Bowery*, Rogosin's aim was, "...to induce the actors to add their own experience, poetry and understanding to my bare outline, thus giving flesh and substance to the structure of my brief,

intense period of observation of their lives and problems.” Shooting in secret in restricted areas, or in public under the police’s noses by posing as a travelogue director, Rogosin and his crew spent their entire time terrified of being discovered and facing the consequences. Fearful that the South African film labs would realize their true intentions, the filmmakers smuggled the raw footage out of the country and developed it in the U.S., where Carl Lerner edited the film. Rogosin finished shooting and returned to New York, leaving cinematographer Emil Knebel to shoot additional footage as needed. Just as Knebel was finishing up, the South African government heard stories of the film and asked him to leave the country.

Taking its title from *Mayibuye I Afrika*, an African National Congress slogan, *Come Back, Africa* premiered at the 1959 Venice Film Festival. It received the Critics Award and great acclaim, but still faced some of the same criticisms applied to *On the Bowery*.

Finding no attractive distribution deal for his film, Rogosin took a ten-year lease on the Renata Theater in New York and spent \$40,000 to renovate and convert it into a film theater. The re-named Bleecker Street Cinema became the place to exhibit art and political films for the next twenty-five years. (Rogosin sold the theater in 1974 to Sid Geffen.) *Come Back, Africa* opened on April 4, 1960, less than a month after the infamous Sharpeville massacre. The film received some rave reviews and Time magazine chose it as one of the ten best films of the year. Despite critical success, the film failed to find an audience. “What I learned was that white people at the time really weren’t interested in what was going on down in South Africa.”

On September 28, 1960, Lionel Rogosin, Jonas Mekas and 21 other filmmakers became the founding members of the New American Cinema group. They created a manifesto emphasizing personal expression, rejection of censorship and the “abolition of the budget myth.” Their statement was simple: “The Official cinema of the world has run out of breath. It is morally corrupt, aesthetically obsolete, thematically superficial, and temperamentally boring.” Rather than a cohesive collective, the New American Cinema became a diffuse band of New-York based filmmakers, photographers, painters, dancers, actors and artists. They met frequently at the Bleecker Street Cinema in its early days, to discuss, as Jonas Mekas wrote, “dreams and problems of independently working filmmakers. Several small committees were created in order to explore the financing, promotion, and distribution of our films.”

At the time, he was busy preparing his next film — a protest against the horrors of war and a plea to promote peace. The film, three years in the making, became *Good Times, Wonderful Times*. Inspired by Joan Littlewood’s production of *Oh What a Lovely War!*, the film combined archival footage of 20th-century war, film of the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and scenes from a trendy London cocktail party. The conversation from the party reflected the apathy and hedonism of most of the people at the time. At one point, a guest actually observes, “If one looks at the world, war is one way of keeping the population down.” Once again, critics regarded Rogosin’s film either as a masterpiece or overly difficult. But *Good Times, Wonderful Times* was a success on college campuses and the film was one of the first to oppose the Vietnam War and helped inspire the antiwar protest movement.

Rogosin, finding it difficult once more to find a company to distribute a film ahead of its time, started his own company. Originally called Rogosin Films, and later renamed Impact Films, the new company promoted itself as “an internationally acclaimed collection of controversial features and shorts.”

Devoting his energy to his distribution company and distracted by the collapse of his marriage to Hart (the couple had three sons), Rogosin did not complete another film until 1970. Rogosin initially considered *Come Back, Africa* as the first part of a trilogy that would include a parallel study of racism against African Americans, entitled *Come Back, America*, and a final section on a newly independent country, such as India. With his funds depleted, he produced a one-hour documentary, *Black Roots*, featuring five black activists. The documentary, in fact, could be seen as a continuance of the shebeen scenes in *Come Back, Africa*. Their sometimes horrifying, sometimes humorous stories about growing up in white America were played against images of young blacks filmed on the streets of Harlem with music from John Coltrane, Ray Charles, Jimi Hendrix and James Brown. After receiving mixed reviews once again, Rogosin went on to film *Black Fantasy*, featuring one of the activists from the previous film, musician Jim Collier. Based on Collier’s stream-of-consciousness monologue, Rogosin strove to create something equivalent to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. With his next film, *Woodcutters of the Deep South* (1973), Rogosin sought to complete his *Come Back, America* series. This film focused on black and white workers struggling to overcome their own racism to organize against the Gulf Coast pulp and paper industry. All three films stripped cinema pretense away to create a direct, immediate cinema of social protest.

Rogosin’s last film was *Arab-Israeli Dialogue*, made in 1974. Again, starting out with a more ambitious project, he instead created a spare 40-minute film of a dialogue between Palestinian poet Rashid Hussein and the Israeli journalist Amos Kenan. Shot in two afternoons and combined with footage that Rogosin had shot in Israel in 1953, the film is a meaningful plea for peace and understanding.

Rogosin spent the next sixteen years trying to develop new projects, including a musical feature, *Noa Noa*, based on Paul Gauguin’s autobiographical book on Tahiti, and a police movie, *The Big Apple*, written by John Briley. Through it all, he remained devoted to a cinema of truth and meaning. After his death he was buried in the Forever Hollywood Cemetery — an ironic end for one of cinema’s great independents.

In a 2001 article about Robert Flaherty published after his death, Lionel Rogosin wrote these prophetic words:

Flaherty is relatively unknown today, but perhaps his work will re-emerge in the future, like the work of Villa Lobos, who said: “I write letters to the future, but nobody answers them.”

Lionel Rogosin was a filmmaker whose work was always ahead of its time and misunderstood by many. Only now, can we appreciate the courage of his life and the genius of his films.

Ruth Schell, Editor

“I watched Black Roots a couple of days ago after, how many years? Thirty? Something very strange happened. All the dialogue, the music of the dialogue more than the words, came back to me. It was like I could sing it with them because the way they talk is so musical.”

“We chatted a lot in the cutting room. By the time we got to make a film together, we were friends, so it was a relaxed environment. He was easy to work with. He knew Alan Lomax. Alan’s dad had the most fantastic collection of African American music: grassroots, blues, authentic tapes that he recorded live in the South. We got access to Alan’s collection and his idea was to do the history of African American music. So then he said, “Well, let’s start with a black screen and African music, the African roots.” So it started with a black screen, but then he came up with the idea of having those beautiful African American faces crossing the black screen and going from jazz to African roots... It was very organic because we looked at the rushes and the rushes took a life of their own. And his relationship to those characters and his intention with the film was an oral history from Africa to slavery to liberation. [It was] the skeleton of the film, if you will. The flesh and blood and heart was in the people in it.”

Regarding the Casting of Rev. Gary Davis

“I came to him and I could see, but he was blind and he led me.” — Larry Johnson on Rev. Davis

“Why would Rogosin pick Davis? To have a musician like Reverend Gary Davis in Black Roots is quite something because he represented the height of the musical culture...what he had within his reach was the entire breadth of American music at that time, maybe going back a century or more. Reverend Davis started out as a blues man, yet with his ears he picked up every genre of music that was available to him within reach. So that you had the country music, ragtime, jazz, country and western, blues, popular songs, medicine show songs, revival hymns, church music, church choruses, spirituals. And that was all in one artist....This musician had a repertoire of about three to four hundred pieces and it was growing because he said sometimes a song would come to him in a dream at night. There it would be and he would just mull it over in his mind and it would be ready.”

Bitter Sweet Stories **Talking about Black Roots**

A Rogosin Films Presentation.

Produced and Directed Michael Rogosin.

Edited by Michael Rogosin

Assistant Editor Heather Shapiro

Interviews of Ruth Schell and Gerald B. Leforte Zac Levy

Interview of Jim Collier Heather Shapiro

Graphic Design Heather Shapiro

With Jim and Cathy Collier, Allan Evans, Gerald B. Lefcorte and Ruth Schell

©2013 Michael Rogosin. 29 minutes. Color/B&W.

Renowned artist Michael Rogosin was born in South Africa in 1957 while his parents Lionel and Eleanor Rogosin were filming *Come Back, Africa*. This is Michael's fourth documentary, each one on the making of one of his father's films. He is currently editing the short documentary on the making of *Arab-Israeli Dialogue* while working on his feature documentary about his family. Michael Rogosin lives in Angers, France.

Milestone Film & Video

Started in 1990 by Amy Heller and Dennis Doros, Milestone has since gained an international reputation for releasing restored classic cinema masterpieces, documentaries and American independent features. Thanks to the company's work in rediscovering and releasing important films such as Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and his Brothers*, Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles*, Lionel Rogosin's *On the Bowery*, Mikhail Kalatozov's *I Am Cuba*, Marcel Ophuls' *The Sorrow and the Pity*, the Mariposa Film Group's *Word is Out*, and the films of Shirley Clarke, Milestone occupies a position as one of the country's most influential independent distributors. In 2014, Milestone was chosen by the Film Foundation to distribute *Martin Scorsese Presents Masterpieces of Polish Cinema*, a 21-film retrospective of restored classic films. The company's many awards include six Archival and Film Heritage Awards from the National Society of Film Critics; two commendations from the New York Film Critics Circle; the International Film Seminars' prestigious Leo Award; and honors from the Fort Lee Film Commission, Il Cinema Ritrovato, the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, and Anthology Film Archives. Doros has served on the Board of Directors of the Association of the Moving Image Archivists since 2009.