

DISPATCH

The Disorder of Life: James Baldwin on My Shoulder

Karen Thorsen

Abstract

Filmmaker Karen Thorsen gave us *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*, the award-winning documentary that is now considered a classic. First broadcast on PBS/American Masters in August, 1989—just days after what would have been Baldwin’s 65th birthday—the film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 1990. It was not the film Thorsen intended to make. Beginning in 1986, she and Baldwin had been collaborating on a very different film project: a “nonfiction feature” about the history, research, and writing of Baldwin’s next book, *Remember This House*. It was also going to be a film about progress: how far we had come, how far we still had to go, before we learned to trust our common humanity. The following memoir explores how and why their collaboration began. This recollection will be serialized in two parts, with the second installment appearing in *James Baldwin Review*’s seventh issue, due out in the fall of 2021.

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After two months of phone calls and occasional faxes, I sat down facing the entrance to wait for James Baldwin. It was April 1986, and this was The Ginger Man: the fabled watering hole across from Lincoln Center named after J. P. Donleavy’s 1955 novel of the same name—a “dirty” book by an expatriate author that was banned in Ireland, published in Paris, censored in the U.S., and is now considered a classic. Appropriately, Baldwin called the place his “New York office.”

Also appropriately, Baldwin was late. I had been forewarned by some who already knew him to expect this; indeed, I nursed iced water for close to forty minutes before he appeared in the doorway, searching the room for his not-yet-met collaborator-to-be. My first thought was an astonished, “He’s tiny!” quickly followed by a rush of delight: reactions inspired by his unexpectedly diminutive

stature and the unforgettable grin that lit up the room as soon as he spotted me. He felt epic.

In my mind, he had always been larger than life. I first read him in college: I had signed up for an African-American Studies elective; *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) was the first book assigned. It was a head-on collision. I was young, white, and female, just returned to Vassar from a junior year in Paris and a summer of back-packing, still processing the countless reminders of my status as an “Ugly American.” He was young, Black, and male, still living in Paris and still processing the countless reminders of his status as an unwanted “Native Son.” He was, of course, far more wounded than I, but back then I was struck more by our similarities than our differences. We had both grown up poor, witnessed injustice, and felt shame for our nation; we had both escaped to France, trying to gain perspective on our own deeply conflicted identities. He felt like a fellow traveler. And—for me, most impressive of all—he was a writer, a good writer, the one thing I’d always said I wanted to be ever since I learned to read.

The impact stayed with me.

Like him, I found work as a New York-based writer-for-hire—first in book publishing, then magazine journalism—and finally returned to Paris where I once again severed connections and tried to start over, this time as a screenwriter and aspiring filmmaker. I hitchhiked to the Cannes Film Festival and fell in with a crowd of French *cinéphiles* who took me to dinner up in Saint-Paul de Vence, a medieval walled village perched in the hills above Nice. On the way into town, they pointed out the farmhouse where James Baldwin had been living since 1971, a seventeenth-century refuge from pain after the assassination of his friends in the 1960s. When I shared my admiration for the man and his work, they told me that Baldwin often hung out at La Colombe d’Or, the restaurant where we were about to eat ... but we didn’t see him.

That near miss in the Alpes-Maritimes led me to reread *Notes of a Native Son*—where I found new layers of content that matched my own evolution. There it was, staring at me, in Baldwin’s “Autobiographical Notes”: he wanted “to re-create out of the disorder of life that order which is art” and “to own a sixteen-millimeter camera and make experimental movies.”¹

It was what his biographer, David Leeming, later called “a lifelong fascination with the cinema.”²

The fascination began with Baldwin’s extraordinary, nearly five-year friendship with Orilla (‘Bill’) Miller, a teaching intern at P.S. 24 on East 128th Street in Harlem. Despite his stepfather’s palpable disapproval, this college-age white woman became the young Baldwin’s mentor. Starting when he was in sixth grade, she made him her “assistant.” She directed his first play; she took him to see plays and films, both uptown and downtown; she schooled him on politics and society, both local and global.

He wrote about the films they saw together in both *Notes of a Native Son* and *The Devil Finds Work* (1976). Plenty of people went to “the movies,” he recalled, but for him the experience was life-changing: those Saturday afternoons in the dark were

“my first entrance into the cinema of my mind.”³ Like the books from the library on 135th Street that he read so obsessively, “they had something to tell me.”⁴

When Baldwin was 12, he and Bill went to see the 1935 version of Dickens’s eighteenth-century historical fiction, *A Tale of Two Cities*. It struck him like thunder: the death of the peasant boy, the guillotines that chopped heads turned the book that he had already read and reread into absolutely believable life. Cinema of the mind, indeed. “My first director,” as Baldwin called the film’s actor-turned-MGM director, Jack Conway, “was instructing me in the discipline and power of make-believe.”⁵

He and Bill also saw the 1932 drama *20,000 Years in Sing Sing*, starring the not-yet-famous Spencer Tracy and newcomer Bette Davis. Now, even more than the heartbreak behind bars, it was Davis who stunned him: he had been repeatedly told by his stepfather that his bulging “frog-eyes” were ugly—those “big world-absorbing eyes” so eloquently eulogized by Amiri Baraka at Baldwin’s funeral a half-century later—and yet here was an actual movie star, a *white* movie star, with eyes that looked just like his ... *and* his mother’s!⁶

The sight filled the young misfit with hope. “Perhaps I could find a way to use my strangeness,” he wrote about his reaction to Bette Davis. “My infirmity, or infirmities, might be forged into weapons.”⁷

From age 10 to 14, films helped shape Baldwin’s future. Then came a detour: driven by a mix of stepfather pressure, sexual panic, and a strong dose of self-loathing, he “found the Lord,” became a boy preacher and no longer indulged in such “ungodly activities.” He and his beloved Bill Miller lost touch, but later reconnected and remained friends for life. She had given him a gift beyond measure, the “language of the camera”—what he ultimately came to call “the language of our dreams.”⁸

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Slowly but surely, Baldwin became one of my touchstones, both for artistic guidance and for how to live *life*. Over the next several years—between my own forays into the world of film—I went on a Baldwin binge. *Nobody Knows My Name* (1964), *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *No Name in the Street* (1972), *The Devil Finds Work*. All nonfiction, all focused on what Baldwin called his “central premise, which is that all men are brothers,” all probing the “horror of the black condition,” all urging us to “trust our common humanity.”⁹ All “obeying the dictum laid down by the great Ray Charles ... tell the truth.”¹⁰

At times, to be honest, I struggled. The sentences were so long, the ideas so dense, so elliptical—and with so many commas!—I sometimes had to start a paragraph over just to digest its conclusion. Sometimes he referred to events not yet familiar to me; sometimes he critiqued films that I hadn’t heard of. Sometimes I winced: twinges of shame. White guilt. Outright pain. Even so, I kept reading.

These innocents who believed that your imprisonment made them safe ... are your brothers—your lost, younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing reality and begin to change it.¹¹

Such fervent lucidity! Every line I read rang true. It was painful truth, yes: between injustice now and future ideals, between what is and what *could* be, it was hard to avoid mental whiplash, even harder to see a clear path toward change—but he won me over.

It was Baldwin's ability to embrace contradictions that got me, his capacity to dissect the dualities that fill our lives, to analyze both the factors that caused them and the fruit they bore. For me, it was mind-expanding; for him, it was survival. In his life he was forced to confront these dichotomies on a near-daily basis: pain laced with love, horror infused with hope, "questions louder than drums" explored with impeccable objectivity.¹² Plus his commitment to artistry and the risks that came with it: existential screams of consciousness in those long paragraphs built like jazz that were so incredibly, painfully costly.

Baldwin understood "the price of art."¹³

"Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor," he wrote in his searing essay "Fifth Avenue, Uptown," in *Nobody Knows My Name*.¹⁴ This almost laughable irony was and still is a given, particularly for those he described as "captive populations," people victimized simply by the color of their skin. It is also, he took care to point out, a given for artists—especially for Black artists.¹⁵

He made this point clear for me in his essay about the writer Norman Mailer, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy": like Mailer, as I was beginning to understand, I had the luxury of white privilege, centuries rich with stories of "struggling artists" who had conquered the odds—but for many, including Baldwin, this was uncharted territory. "To become a Negro Man, let alone a Negro artist, one had to make oneself up as one went along ... The world had prepared no place for you, and if the world has its way, no place would ever exist."¹⁶

As with so much of his writing, Baldwin spoke from his own experience as a Black American, and wound up with the universal. Was he speaking to me? Obliquely, yes. Was it one more sign of white hubris that I presumed such an honor? Probably. But even as I became more aware of the nearly unbridgeable chasm that separated our lives, he bridged it. His message was simple: all people struggle, all people suffer, all are connected.

You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoyevsky and Dickens who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive.¹⁷

James Baldwin did far more than "expand my mind." He validated my confusions, he gave voice to my fears, he supported my quest as a developing filmmaker.

He focused on "the condition of the artist," the state you find yourself in once you have chosen to be one. In his essay on Mailer, he stated bluntly, "A writer who is worried about his career is also fighting for his life."¹⁸ In "The Northern Protestant"—his essay about Ingmar Bergman, "one of the very few genuine artists now working in film"—both he and Bergman agreed that artists are "always on the very

edge of disaster.¹⁹ In *The Devil Finds Work*—as part of his critique of *Lady Sings the Blues*, the Hollywood version of Billie Holiday’s life—he underscored the hard fact that “the film suggests nothing of the terrifying economics of a singer’s life.”²⁰

But this terror wasn’t just about financial survival. This was about artistic achievement, the struggle for meaning. Purpose. He wrote about “the glory and torment of every writer”: the hope that their experience “might be turned to good account”—and the fear that grips their “wilderness of the soul” when great content doesn’t follow.²¹ He described how artists are “always on the very edge of great things,” always “trembling on the edge of great revelations.” How their real *raison d’être* is “to disturb the peace.”²²

He made disturbing sound good. And as for that “wilderness of the soul,” I had barely begun to explore it—but despite all the pitfalls, I wanted in.

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Baldwin also described how easy it is for artists to fall short. Particularly when dealing with “the arid plains of Hollywood,” the “machinery” that required the sale of the soul.²³

When he dismissed *Lady Sings the Blues* as “empty as a banana peel, and as treacherous,” that was just one example.²⁴ He accused it and so many other Tinseltown “products” of existing only to make money, to stifle emotional truth. He blasted “the brutally crass and commercial.”²⁵ He bristled at scenes that he deemed “pure bullshit.”²⁶ He pitied the screenwriters, paid to turn serious content into “hints of reality, smuggled like contraband into a maudlin tale.”²⁷

He had been down that road himself, more than once.

Despite his disgust with Hollywood’s “absolutely appalling distance from reality,” he never stopped trying to add his own storytelling skills—and a reflection of the life *he* knew—to the film industry’s undeniable whitewash (#ScreensSoWhite!).²⁸ “Black people need witnesses,” he stated repeatedly, “in this hostile world which thinks everything is white.”²⁹

Over the course of his lifetime, he made deal after deal. But it wasn’t until 1985, when Baldwin was 60, less than three years before his death at age 63, that he got to see his words come to life on screen: the PBS/American Playhouse production of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, adapted from his first work of fiction published more than thirty years earlier. Directed by the now well-known Stan Lathan, the result touched him deeply. “I’m very, very happy about it. It did not betray the book ... I still see myself there.”³⁰ Baldwin didn’t write the PBS script for *Go Tell It*—it was adapted by Gus Edwards and Leslie Lee—but he *did* write a number of screenplays that were never produced.

His first attempt was a teleplay adapted from his 1955 autobiographical essay, “Equal In Paris” (first published in *Commentary*, then in *Notes of a Native Son*), about his time in a French jail due to a friend’s stolen bedsheet. Written in 1957 in collaboration with Sol Stein—the “high school buddy, editor, novelist, playwright” who had edited *Notes* for Beacon Press—the script turned Baldwin’s protagonist into a heterosexual male with a love interest in hopes that it might appeal to

U.S. Steel Hour, the Emmy Award-winning series which had already broadcast one of Stein's plays.³¹ It didn't. A drama about a Black man in Paris was beyond the pale.

Trouble was, all of Baldwin's content was 'risky.' Beginning in 1957, he wrote multiple drafts of a script from his 1956 novel, *Giovanni's Room*—with Marlon Brando initially slated to play the role of David, the ambivalent lover, then (as Brando aged) Guillaume, owner of the gay bar where much of the drama unfolds.³² In the 1960s Baldwin sold the rights to his interracial steamy 1962 novel, *Another Country*, stipulating himself as the screenwriter—but funding never materialized and no script was written. In the 1970s he filled the first few pages of a leather-bound notebook with plans for a film version of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, his 1974 novel about a pregnant 19-year-old whose fiancé has been unjustly arrested and jailed—reflecting on which scenes to cut, how to turn certain monologues into scenes, when to use Tish's voice as voiceover. He even listed potential directors: François Truffaut, Louis Malle, Gordon Parks, Lloyd Richards... And the cast, he noted, should include Ruby Dee. But again, no film was made—that is, not until 2018 when director Barry Jenkins turned *Beale Street* into an Academy Award nominee.

The closest Baldwin came to the "business" of filmmaking was in 1968, when Columbia Pictures tapped him to adapt Marvin Worth's production of Alex Haley's "as-told-to" bestseller, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Friends and family advised him not to take the gig, but he couldn't resist. Malcolm had been his close friend; he felt like "the custodian of a legend."³³ He had already outlined the draft of a play based on Haley's book—with Elia Kazan as director—so a screenplay would be a natural continuation. "An act of love."³⁴

In his words, he was "both fascinated and challenged" by Hollywood.³⁵ Part of him hoped he could "change this town"; part of him had "grave doubts and fears" despite "the distances covered since *Birth of a Nation*."³⁶ His fears were justified. Month after month—despite the near-constant pain caused by current events, from the targeting of Black Panthers to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.—Baldwin battled the studio, insisting on writing the Malcolm script his way "or not at all."³⁷ His employers responded by hiring a "technical" co-writer to review his scenes. The result was beyond painful. "My scenes were returned to me, 'translated' ... all meaning was being siphoned out of them."³⁸

Tensions escalated. Baldwin wanted to cast the little-known Billy Dee Williams as Malcolm; the studio wanted a star. Baldwin was determined not to betray Malcolm's narrative; his producers were disenchanted with the writer they had hired. Biographer David Leeming explains their logic bluntly: Baldwin's 200-page treatment "read more like a novel than a screenplay. Furthermore, his presence was disruptive, his working habits deplorable, and his life-style expensive."³⁹

Despair set in.

Weighed down by assassinations, friends imprisoned, love gone wrong, Baldwin tried to solve his problems with sleeping pills. The overdose nearly killed him, but friends rushed him to the hospital just in time; not long after, he left Hollywood, taking his screenplay with him. "I simply walked out," he wrote later. "I did not wish to be party to a second assassination."⁴⁰

The fallout didn't end there. Warner Bros. bought Columbia's rights to Haley's book; producer Marvin Worth and Baldwin's co-writer, the once-blacklisted Arnold Perl, jumped with it. In 1972, under the Warner logo, Worth released *Malcolm X*, an Oscar-nominated documentary directed by Perl and narrated by James Earl Jones. The same year, Baldwin published his own version of Malcolm's life: *One Day, When I Was Lost*, based on his original screenplay, pre-Perl. Over the next two decades, award-winning luminaries from David Mamet to Sidney Lumet tried to adapt Baldwin's script. Lumet's version was to feature Richard Pryor as Malcolm and Eddie Murphy as Alex Haley—an intriguing prospect—but again, no go. It took the director Spike Lee, with Marvin Worth as producer, to make it happen.

By the time Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* was released, it was 1992—and Baldwin had been dead five long years. Lee wanted to credit Baldwin as one of the writers, along with himself and the late Arnold Perl; Baldwin's family said no, because Lee hadn't filmed Baldwin's script exactly as written. As for Lee's film, it went on to win multiple awards, and even now, almost thirty years later, both the 1992 feature and the 1972 documentary are available on Amazon Prime.

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Despite his hopes, Baldwin failed to change Hollywood in his lifetime—"it was a gamble I knew I might lose, and which I lost"—but he helped shape its future.⁴¹ And, inadvertently, mine.

Four years after publishing his screenplay on Malcolm, he wrote *The Devil Finds Work*. Both a cautionary tale and a personal memoir, it was also an ode to film-making. His passion leapt off every page. His affection for what *could* be—for the "language of our dreams," for the creative possibilities inherent in film, for the intensely private joys that he had discovered way back in boyhood—was still with him. And I knew just what that meant.

With his words as fuel, I put myself through my own version of film school.

I joined a French team on a feature film shoot in Asia. I launched a Super 8 Film Festival that played in New York, Houston, and Paris. I co-wrote a screenplay that got optioned (twice) by Hollywood—but then the producer died and the option died with him. I won a Financial World Silver Medal by writing an annual report for Warner Communications, then fell in love (almost) with the studio's maverick-but-brilliant head of production, the late great John Calley. I flirted with advertising: I wrote, directed, and/or produced a year's worth of commercials—including one "starring" Bill Cosby (yes, he was difficult) for Jello Pudding Pops.

And in the midst of all that, I met the legendary filmmaker Albert Maysles: the man who, ten years later, would make my collaboration with James Baldwin "possible"—and who would, after Baldwin died unexpectedly in 1987, become the executive producer of my first feature-length documentary, *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*. I certainly knew who he was. I admired the nonfiction films that he made with his brother, David. I had stood in line to see their Rolling Stones tour de force, *Gimme Shelter* (1970); I had been deeply moved by *Grey Gardens* (1975), their mother-daughter portrait of two "upper crust" recluses in a decaying

East Hampton mansion. I was soon to be amazed by *Running Fence* (1977), their exploration of Christo's breathtaking art installation that crowned sheep pastures and hillsides all the way down to the Pacific. But...

Fate was knocking, and I wasn't listening. My mind was firmly focused on fiction.

Thanks to my various film gigs, I learned a lot. My writing skills helped, my naïveté was a plus, and my disenchantment with the commerce required by art was deep. On a far lesser scale than any of Baldwin's battles, this was my own love-hate dance with Hollywood. And yet even so, I still believed—as artists must—that I might prevail. Not just to make a mark, but to make a *difference*.

Trouble was, and is, I'm female: white, yes, but female. I like to joke that if only I had big hair I would be head of a studio, but the real truth is—even though my parents took care to assure me that women could achieve whatever they set their mind to—I found it hard to advance.

My achievements peaked when I scored a call-back from Jane Fonda's assistant, asking for a meeting because her boss liked the film treatment I had sent them. My first screenplay, *Territory*—the one whose producer died—was a dramatized version of Clarence Darrow's last case, a 1931 rape-and-murder whodunit that pitted East Coast socialites against Hawaiian natives. (Guess who won that fight?) My second script, *Common Sense*, offered a different experiment in historical fiction: a fantasized six-month slice-of-life that fit neatly into the events of its time. My subject was Thomas Paine, the bankrupt British-born corsetmaker who, after shipping out to the Colonies, wrote the essay that launched the American Revolution. Set in New York's rural outskirts, it was about wartime love and the ethics of infidelity—with a female spy as the leading role.

Perfect for Fonda, right? I never even made it up to her office. Our meeting took place in her NYC lobby, while she was en route from one pitch to the next. When she lowered her sunglasses, I knew it was over.

Was it time to give up? My freelance life was hard to maintain, I had to scramble for money and withstand rejection. I found myself losing steam—and, once again, turned to Baldwin. Maybe his struggles, his persistence, his refusal to abandon his vision, could help. I flipped through his pages, skimming the phrases I had starred in red ink:

“The typewriter would be there, staring at me...”⁴²

That helped. So did:

“About a year and several overflowing wastebaskets later...”⁴³

Just knowing that someone with his talent hit roadblocks was enough to sustain me.

Marking up books is a habit of mine. When I read something I like, I start folding down corners of pages—and, if folded corners start to accumulate, I go back with a pen and start underlining, writing in margins. I even switch colors when I reread an old favorite: it gives me a timeline of my own evolution.

It also means that I don't often share books. My copy of *The Devil Finds Work* is especially dog-eared: on page after page, I've marked whatever struck me during my latest reading—including one passage that hit me during my frustrations with Hollywood. That particular segment was part of Baldwin's critique of the Academy Award-winning drama *In the Heat of the Night* (1967). It's his description of a feeling he had while watching Sidney Poitier and Rod Steiger trying to find common ground, the feeling of "something choked and moving, something sensed through a thick glass, dimly," "something strangling, alive, struggling to get out."⁴⁴

That passage spoke to me somewhere deep in my psyche.

I felt like Steiger and Poitier: full of promise, maybe, but stuck. Again, I had found a description of roadblocks—but this one went deeper. It focused on our search for identity, our need to understand who we are. How we need to accept each other before we can accept ourselves. How our fulfillment depends on this—but we have yet to face the truths that will help us achieve it. I wanted to achieve that *and* artistic fulfillment.

Maybe there was a way to do both.

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I decided to try documentaries. I knew that docs paid less than fiction, but I wasn't earning enough as it was... And the few female filmmakers I knew in the doc world told me they felt respected.

My first gig-for-hire was a film about money (irony noted!), with the Oscar-winning painter-turned-filmmaker Francis Thompson as producer and me as his screenwriter. Francis and his partner Sasha Hammid had won their Oscar for the 70mm multi-screen wonder *To Be Alive!*, co-directed for the Johnson's Wax Pavilion at New York's 1964 World's Fair: an understandable win. But their lyrical 1957 short film, *N.Y., N.Y.*—a entire city reflected through special lenses, prisms and mirrors, even on the back of a spoon—was my inspiration. Our subject was "The Fed"; I wrote a script that followed a single dollar bill through the system. The end result, alas, was a bit more literal than we had imagined. Hardly surprising: our client was the federal government, and our vision of finance was more poetic than theirs. Even so, the film did win a Cine Golden Eagle ... and my future husband was part of the film crew.

Then came another life-changer. I went to see Albert Maysles, the documentary filmmaker who had come up to me at the end of one of my Super 8 Film Festival screenings to thank me for the films I had chosen and to give me his business card. "Come by our office sometime." A few years had passed since that first encounter, but Albert remembered—and within a few weeks, after an interview with his younger brother, David, I had a job offer.

The Maysles Brothers were already famous. In collaboration with their co-directors/ editors, they produced groundbreaking documentaries which swiftly became cult films, then classics. These were docs, yes, but instead of intoning some fact-heavy lesson, they felt more like fiction. Each film explored human nature—and each film revealed life "as it happened," without scripts, sets, or imposed direction. And they all, as Al Maysles put it, had "the power of truth and the romance of discovery."⁴⁵

The pair called their approach Direct Cinema. In the tradition of Russia's *kino-pravda* ("cinema truth"), Britain's free cinema and France's *cinéma vérité*, Al handheld his camera and David strapped on his synch-sound gear in order to capture real life as it unfolded before them. Their goal was to remain unobtrusive, to record people's lives, and to rely on the power of editing once filming was done. Narration—the traditional documentary tool of the time, where some anonymous voice told viewers what to think—was *not* an option.

When I began to learn more, I was embarrassed by how little I knew. I had been so focused on the world of fiction that documentaries felt like a distant cousin—and yet here was a form of filmmaking that checked all my boxes. Relatively affordable. Ethically rigorous. Anti-establishment. The opposite of the studio system. It was like Super 8 filmmaking on a grander scale, a way to explore human emotions and craft a strong narrative with minimal artifice. Power to the People.

The irony for me was that Maysles Films had no need of a screenwriter—but I jumped at the chance to be part of their entourage. To earn my keep, I served as "film rep" and grant writer, soaking up the philosophy that defined my new job. It was a great place for learning. The office was a penthouse, full of windows, with a huge open floor plan: at one end, Albert and David sat facing the room; desks for the rest of us lined the remaining walls. Everyone heard almost everything. We even ate lunch together, sharing stories, trading laughs, often squeezed round a large single table. Sure, there was friction, petty jealousies, even nasty gossip and family infighting—but overall, and certainly more than anywhere else, this was filmmaking done right. Art hung on all available surfaces; music often played in the background; a large roof terrace was perfect for parties. Plus, down the hall, smaller rooms pulsed with the thrill of production: editing suites, equipment alcoves, racks crammed full of canisters with intriguing film titles—and a screening room where we could hold private meetings.

I felt as if I'd finally come home. Everyone there was some shade of eccentric; the brothers were benevolent bosses. David was the extrovert: he loved hanging with artists; he valued flamboyance; he had a big heart. Albert was quieter, still water runs deep. His mind was keen, his soul was wise; he soon became my close friend and mentor.

In my mind, Al resembled Baldwin's description of the great Ingmar Bergman, only warmer. He too was "possessed by a vision"; he too "was not to be sidetracked."⁴⁶ He too didn't want "to be guilty of the world's indifference"—and, perhaps most important, "what he saw when he looked at the world did not seem very different from what *I* saw."⁴⁷

Now I had *two* mentors: Albert Maysles in his corner, just a few yards away—and James Baldwin, still on my shoulder, the sustaining presence whom I'd never met. I couldn't help comparing the two.

Albert Maysles: "Knowledge of the real world is exactly what we need to better understand and therefore love one another. It's my way of making the world a better place."⁴⁸

James Baldwin: "The unexamined life is not worth living." "If you can examine and face your life, you can discover the terms in which you're connected to other lives." "Neither of us, truly, can live without the other."⁴⁹

They both believed in human potential—and they both believed in truth-telling as a way to unlock it.

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What's the best way to communicate truth?

In our “World-According-to-Maysles,” it was simple: find a compelling character, someone you like to listen to, someone believable. Someone with light in their eyes and warmth in their voice, someone with passion about their particular take on the universe. Someone *interesting*. In other words, a good storyteller. And then follow that person or persons until something happens—which, as Al Maysles would assure you, *will* happen.

It also helped, as the brothers knew well, to focus on a celebrity, someone with name recognition. They didn't *just* do that—their extraordinary 1969 film, *Salesman*, a surprisingly moving feature-length portrait of four door-to-door Bible salesmen, is ample proof of their fascination with human nature of all stripes—but since celebrities often become famous *because* of their talent and inherent charisma, it made sense to film them.

It was Albert who started it all. He began as a college professor, teaching psychology—but after falling in love with cinematography during three trips to Russia, he switched to filmmaking. He joined forces with *vérité* pioneers Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, and D. A. Pennebaker; their first production was *Primary*, a behind-the-scenes glimpse of John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey, two presidential candidates competing for the Democratic nomination. Released in 1960, after Kennedy defeated Nixon, the film transformed the world of nonfiction journalism—and inspired Albert and David to make their own films. From 1963 on, many of their subjects were artists, from Marlon Brando and Truman Capote to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones—all filmed with minimal intervention. Personal truth was the goal.

The two brothers became an institution. In order to fund their art, they began making “real people” commercials and corporate films—and by the time I joined the team, client meetings were as frequent as celebrity sightings. The best times for me were my own “close encounters” with the writers and filmmakers who dropped by our office, and the hours I spent in our edit rooms.

I got to sit beside some of the greats: Charlotte Zwerin, Kathy Dougherty, Ellen Hovde, Muffie Meyers, Susan Froemke, Deborah Dickson... Looking over their shoulders while they drove the Steenbecks, adjusting image and sound one frame at a time, I learned the patience that goes with long hours of screening, the challenge of choosing what scene should go where. I learned the anguish of an inaudible word and the joy of figuring out how to save it, the thrill found in moments that light up the screen. To this day, even though digital editing no longer involves the physical cutting of film, I can still hear the sound of a guillotine splicer—and I'm *still* awed by the difference two frames can make.

I took pride in the fact that I was a Maysles filmmaker. Beyond my grant-writing, beyond sharing opinions on rough cuts, I'd even managed to make a film for one of our corporate clients: a dubious honor, but still...

I wondered how to put it all to good use.

Outside of the office, I was still developing my own projects: a book version of my first screenplay, *Territory*; a new script about a Love Canal teacher/activist and chemical waste; a rewrite of my Thomas Paine drama. But, much like Baldwin's film ventures, my efforts led to signed contracts without end result, and I kept working at Maysles.

Then fate intervened. Someone sent a letter to our penthouse office—I have no idea who, I no longer have the letter—suggesting a number of famous people as ideal subjects for a Direct Cinema portrait ... and James Baldwin was on the list.

My heart literally skipped a beat. *That* was what I wanted to do. I had no idea where in the world Baldwin was, but I figured he was still writing; his book on the Atlanta child murders, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985), had just been published, along with a huge tome of collected essays, *The Price of the Ticket* (1985). They were on my to-buy list. Without further research—remember, these were pre-Google days, you couldn't find information with the tap of a finger—I broached the idea to Albert and David. After a brief back-and-forth, they agreed that if I could raise the money for a film on “James Baldwin Today,” they would helm it with me as producer.

I went home that night, elated. Both to share my news with Doug, that wonderfully smart, funny guy from “The Fed” crew whom I was now living with—and to dust off the Baldwin books still lining my bookcase, to flip through the pages and my notes in the margins, just to refresh my memory. To make sure that his words still held their original magic.

They did.

Finally, I'd found a path that matched my convictions—but first, I had to find Baldwin.

Note to the Reader: Part Two will explore my collaboration with Baldwin. For 22 months, from early 1986 to his death on 1 December 1987, we worked on a *cinéma vérité* version of his next book, “Remember This House.” For 25 months, from 1 December 1987 to January 1990, we worked on his posthumous biographical portrait, *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket—cinéma vérité passé*. His presence was constant throughout, his contribution substantial. It continues to this day.

Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, “Autobiographical Notes,” in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) (New York, Beacon Press, 1990), pp. 7, 8.
- 2 David Leeming, “Introduction,” in Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. xix.
- 3 James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York, Dial Press, 1976), p. 8.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 6; Karen Thorsen (dir.), *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* (Maysles Films & PBS/American Masters, 1990).

- 7 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, pp. 8, 7.
- 8 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, Dial Press, 1963), pp. 29–30; Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 34.
- 9 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, pp. 45, 60; James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York, Dial Press, 1972), p. 97.
- 10 Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 120.
- 11 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, pp. 23–4.
- 12 Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 193.
- 13 James Baldwin, “The Northern Protestant,” in *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) (New York, Dell, 1986), p. 138.
- 14 James Baldwin, “Fifth Avenue, Uptown,” in *Nobody Knows My Name*, p. 59.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 James Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” in *Nobody Knows My Name*, p. 183.
- 17 Jane Howard, “Doom and Glory of Knowing Who You Are,” *LIFE Magazine*, 54:21, 24 May 1963, p. 89.
- 18 Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” p. 171.
- 19 Baldwin, “The Northern Protestant,” pp. 134, 143.
- 20 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 107.
- 21 Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” pp. 176, 177.
- 22 Baldwin, “The Northern Protestant,” p. 143; Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” p. 176; Studs Terkel, “An Interview with James Baldwin,” *Almanac*, WFMT, Chicago, 29 December 1961, in *James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (New York, Melville House, 2014), p. 31.
- 23 Baldwin, “The Northern Protestant,” p. 133; Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 96.
- 24 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 99.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 29 Thorsen (dir.), *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*.
- 30 Leslie Bennetts, “James Baldwin Reflects On ‘Go Tell It’ PBS Film,” *New York Times*, 10 January 1985, Section C, p. 17.
- 31 Baldwin, “Preface,” 1984 edition, in *Notes of a Native Son*, p. xxix.
- 32 An account of this collaboration, by South African filmmaker Michael Raeburn, appears in *James Baldwin Review*, 5 (2019).
- 33 Grace Nagata, “Interview with James Baldwin, ‘I Can’t Blow This Gig,’” *Cinema*, 4:2 (1968), p. 3.
- 34 David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 298.
- 35 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 96.
- 36 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 297; Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 99; James Baldwin, “Carmen Jones,” in *Notes of a Native Son*, p. 46.
- 37 Nagata, “Interview with James Baldwin,” p. 3.
- 38 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 97.
- 39 Leeming, *James Baldwin*, p. 300.
- 40 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 99; Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 11.
- 41 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 95.
- 42 Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” p. 177.

- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 178.
- 44 Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 56.
- 45 Albert Maysles, <http://mayslesfilms.com/albert-maysles/> (accessed 15 June 2020).
- 46 Baldwin, "The Northern Protestant," pp. 135, 136.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- 48 Albert Maysles, <http://mayslesfilms.com/albert-maysles/>.
- 49 Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 63; Terkel, "An Interview with James Baldwin," p. 31; Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, p. 121.

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Contributor's Biography

Karen Thorsen is an award-winning writer/filmmaker who finds inspiration at the intersection of art and social justice. Her heroes are game-changers, the artist/activists who shape history; her films tell stories without narration, weaving first-person narratives with archival treasures. Thorsen began as a writer. After

graduating from Vassar with a year at the Sorbonne, she was an editor for Simon and Schuster, journalist for *Life* and foreign correspondent for *Time*. Screenwriting followed, then directing. Her first feature-length documentary was *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* (1990), produced with Maysles Films and PBS/American Masters. Now considered a classic, it has been honored in twenty-five countries. Recently remastered in WideScreen 2KHD, the new 'Digital Baldwin' is a centerpiece of the *James Baldwin Project's* nationwide series of community forums on racism, discrimination, and the meaning of brotherhood. Supported by the Ford Foundation, NEA, and others, these film screenings and 'talkbacks' have already reached tens of thousands. Beyond Baldwin, Thorsen's credits include broadcast productions, museum installations, documentary shorts, and interactive media—often in collaboration with DKDmedia's Douglas K. Dempsey. Their films have screened on six continents and in six museums on the National Mall; permanent installations include the Smithsonian Museum of American History, George Washington's Mount Vernon, Great Platte River Archway, and Pilgrim Hall Museum. Recognition ranges from multiple THEA and festival honors to Parents Choice and the Oscars short list. Thorsen's current projects include *Keep It Lit!*, a digital design-your-own James Baldwin curriculum (with the National Writing Project); *Inside the Glass House: Exploring Philip Johnson*, an interactive mix of long- and short-form documentaries with photogrammetry, point clouds, and 3D imagery (with the National Trust for Historic Preservation); *Thomas Paine: Voice of Revolution*, a feature-length documentary and museum app (an NEH "We The People" project); and *Joe Papp in Five Acts*, a feature-length documentary codirected with Tracie Holder that premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival and will be on PBS/American Masters.