

The Black Experience from L.A. Auteurs

Curated by
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As Los Angeles became the center of the film world, it was only natural that interested African-Americans would eventually migrate to this developing industry. However, during the formative years of American cinema, the involvement of L.A.-based Blacks was restricted to brief appearances in front of the camera and marginal service jobs as maids or on clean-up crews at the various studios. The conception

Until the early 1960s, the majority of the celluloid images of Blacks coming from Hollywood were stereotypical, distorted, and negative. More than anything, the films produced by whites during this time provide a strong barometer and record of the prevailing attitudes and racism throughout the country.

There were, however, a few independent producers, many of them Jewish, who teamed with enterprising Blacks to produce a small body of entertaining films which were specially marketed for the Black community. By Hollywood standards, these films had low production values, but they satisfied an audience hungry to see a more realistic reflection of their daily life. The bulk of these Black films have disappeared, like much of early white American cinema, due to the disintegration of the nitrate-based film stock. However, some copies have surfaced in private collections both in Europe and the U.S., with the most notable being the Tyler, Texas, Black Film Collection which was uncovered in 1983 in an old warehouse some 85 miles east of Dallas.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 8:00

<i>Broken Earth</i> , Clarence Muse	1939	16mm	17:00
<i>Paul Lawrence Dunbar</i> , Carlton Moss	1972	16mm	22:00
<i>A Haunted Oak</i> , John Simmons	1970	16mm	3:30
<i>Four Women</i> , Julie Dash	1978	16mm	7:00
<i>Water Ritual #1: Urban Rite of Purification</i> , Barbara McCullough	1979	16mm	4:00
<i>Picking Tribes</i> , Sandra Sharp	1988	16mm	7:00
<i>Oscar Micheaux: Film Pioneer</i> , Carol Munday Lawrence	1981	16mm	29:00
<i>Burn Heads</i> , Bart Mallard	1992	16mm	22:00

AT HOLLYWOOD MOGULS

and production of films hardly touched the daily lives of most Black Angelenos, due to a lack of training, little or no access to technology, and the impoverished economics of the Black community in general, which inhibited the raising of start-up capital.

However, beginning in the mid-1920s, a few Blacks began to produce and direct films in the Los Angeles area. For the mainstream Hollywood community, this small Black cottage industry was virtually invisible and unknown. Many Black performers, however, floated between these two worlds. Later, when Hollywood producers discovered that some of their Black actors were involved in mounting independent productions, they threatened to sever any possibility of them working in future mainstream productions. From their perspective, these Black films could drain the revenues coming from the Black audience and block the development of a monopoly on the exhibition and distribution of films.

Between 1940 and 1970, film productions controlled by African-American producers were few and far between, except for the cowboy serials and an occasional release from the indestructible, phenomenal film director, Oscar Micheaux. The prospects for Black women were even more bleak. Unlike their white peers, Black women were for the most part unable to mount independent film productions (though we do know that novelist/anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston worked briefly as a contract writer at Paramount Studios in the late '40s).



Four Women



Water Ritual #1: Urban Rite of Purification



It would not be until the 1970s, that a crop of Los Angeles-based Black filmmakers would surface. After receiving training from the major film schools in the region, this group of filmmakers produced a small body of alternative films that dealt with the African-American experience. Though not all native born Angelenos, these filmmakers spent a significant period of time in the Los Angeles area and some of their cinematic vision would be influenced by their residency.

Two of the most prominent Black filmmakers from the early period are Clarence Muse and Carlton Moss, both of whom produced a significant body of work from the 1930s until the 1980s. Muse was born in Baltimore in 1889 and started his entertainment career as a singer at Palm Beach cafes and on Hudson River boats. In 1929, he was invited by Fox Studios to play the role of Nappus in *Hearts of Dixie*; this role would be the beginning of his appearance in over 40 films. Eventually, Muse used his film hiatus time to produce, write, and direct Black-cast films such as *Broken Strings*. Additionally, he used his ranch in Perris, California, as the location for some films, and he offered his ranch to other Black productions for a nominal fee. His last major appearance was in 1976 in Michael Schultz's *Car Wash*.

From the beginning of his film career, Carlton Moss worked behind the camera. Born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1910, Moss relocated to New York City after

graduating from Morgan College in Baltimore. Upon his arrival in the Big Apple, Moss became involved in the theatrical community. By World War II, Moss was working as an information specialist with the War Department. There he scripted *The Negro Soldier*, the seminal work on Black soldier participation in the war. The film was directed by the soon-to-be Hollywood-bound Frank Capra. Moss went on to Fisk University where he set up the first film program at a Black college. Moss eventually moved to Los Angeles, and went on to produce over eleven documentaries and dramatic films, including *Frederick Douglas*, *George Washington Carver*, *Paul Lawrence Dunbar*, and *Gift of Black Folk*, to name just a few. In June, 1993, Moss retired from the University of California, Irvine, after 25 years as a film professor.

Moss also helped other Black filmmakers, including John Simmons. While a graduate student at USC, Chicago-born Simmons directed *House on Cedar Street*. After receiving his M.F.A. in 1976, Simmons worked as director of photography with Moss on a number of productions. This invaluable apprenticeship provided a strong foundation for Simmons' visual sense before he moved into the Hollywood community, where he worked on such productions as *Cosmos* (with Carl Sagan), *I Remember Beale Street*, *Richard Pryor: Here and Now*, and countless commercials for a variety of prominent clients. In 1992,

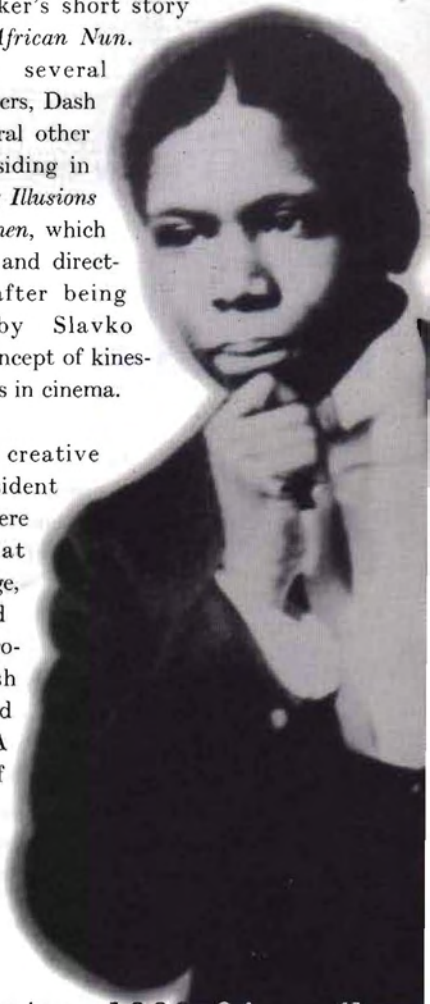
Simmons conceptualized the innovative visual image for the opening credits for the television sitcom *A Different World*. Most recently, Simmons has begun to chart a new course as a director of music videos and has rapidly distinguished himself as one of the most innovative filmmakers on the scene today.

Julie Dash burst upon the national scene in 1992 as a new talent with the American Playhouse release of her highly acclaimed feature-length film *Daughters of the Dust*. Behind this first feature, however, was a significant body of work. Beginning her film studies at the Studio Museum of Harlem in her hometown of New York City, Dash eventually relocated to L.A. in 1974 where she entered the AFI Advanced Studies Program. Dash received her M.F.A. from UCLA where she adapted Alice Walker's short story *Diary of an African Nun*. Inspired by several major filmmakers, Dash produced several other films while residing in L.A., including *Illusions* and *Four Women*, which she conceived and directed in 1978 after being influenced by Slavko Vorkapich's concept of kineshetic responses in cinema.

After seven creative years as a resident of Atlanta where she taught at Spellman College, Dash completed seven more productions. Dash recently moved back to the LA area. As one of the premier

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Paul Lawrence Dunbar



The Black Experience *continued*

African-American women directors, Dash has been in the vanguard of capturing and creating images about African-American women's lives.

Also from UCLA is Barbara McCullough, whose goal as a film and video artist has always been to use media technology to explore both the specifics of her own cultural environment, as well as the universal aspects of the human condition. As a graduate student, McCullough directed the experimental work *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* in 1979. The recipient of many awards, McCullough's work has been screened extensively in the United States and abroad. She is presently completing two works—*Horace Tapscott: Musical Griot* and *Fears*—while working as a special effects production manager for Digital Domain.

After a highly successful Hollywood career as a performer (which included a major role in *The Learning Tree*, the seminal Black work by director Gordon Parks), Saundra Sharp moved behind the camera, releasing her first film, *Back Inside Herself*, in 1984. The following year, Sharp made *Life is a Saxophone*, and in 1988, she completed *Picking Tribes*, which is an experimental semi-animated film in which she discusses her dual ethnic heritage as African and Native American. The film has garnered many awards and has aired on The Learning Channel, PBS, POV, and Independent Eye.

In 1981, Carol Munday Lawrence distinguished herself as the first Black woman to independently write and produce a national television series. After starting her media career as an Associate Producer at WGBH-TV in Boston, Lawrence moved to the San Francisco area where she founded Nguzo Saba Films. Over a fifteen year period, she produced 25 award-winning films, including *Oscar Micheaux: Film Pioneer* starring Danny Glover. This film is of particular importance in that Lawrence was able to cinematically capture the significance of the pioneer Black film director. Lawrence moved to L.A. in 1987 and has been

extremely active in the feature film area, working on, among other things, *To Sleep with Anger* and *Cotton Club*.

With his recently completed 16mm film, *Burn Heads*, Bart Mallard has clearly demonstrated that the ability to capture an aspect of the African-American life on film is not the exclusive domain of Blacks. The award-winning film is an exciting and visually demanding documentary on Warren Lewis, a Black barber from Memphis who cuts hair with fire. Mallard completed his undergraduate studies at Memphis State University in 1983 and moved to L.A. the following year. Through the UCLA Extension short film program, Mallard directed *Only Natural*, which won the Grand Prize at the Aspen Film Festival. He followed this work with his very surreal documentary.

Mapping Territories *continued*

L.A. Nickel An early view of homelessness which does not cut corners: the frightening terror, despair, and hopelessness of daily life in urban Los Angeles is punctuated through the harsh video images and audio tracks.

Four or Five Accidents One June... Roddy Bogawa's meditation along a delivery route is framed by the wandering language of a narrator and visualized through palm tree-dotted and sun 'n' smog landscape of San Diego.*

Don from Lakewood Shot on video using Pixelvision, this real-life phone conversation, perversely animated through shadowy figures, represents the mental, fictional, and mind-fuck spaces created by phone in the southland.

The Works 2 Quoting from texts by Reyner Banham and Mike Davis, this two-part video essay gives us a view of the golden, imagined utopian Los Angeles of the past and a view of the paranoid vision of Los Angeles of the present.

*Although San Diego-based *Four or Five Accidents One June ...* falls outside of the Los Angeles area, I feel, like others, that Roddy Bogawa's film captures a totally Southern Californian sensibility.