

LES BLANK, DOCUMENTARIAN



LES BLANK:

HE'S BEEN DIRECTING
AND PRODUCING INDIE FILMS
FOR OVER FOUR DECADES
(TWICE AS LONG AS THE SUNDANCE FILM
FESTIVAL HAS BEEN IN EXISTENCE).

BUT WHY?

By MARY BETH DI CORI

Les Blank's career in film making has spanned six continents. With a zoom lens, a viewer might notice he's filmed in nearly every American state. Without careful tallying, Blank figures 47 of them. He's documented Alabama's Butch Anthony, who sees art in abandoned hog pens (a film in preparation), Texas blues artists Lightnin' Hopkins and Mance Lipscomb, and Hawaiian composer Auntie Irmgard Farden Aluli. He's filmed Cajuns and Appalachians.

Through his work, Blank sees "simple, loving people of the Earth," who don't have money, an education, or self-consciousness, possessing certain values and attitudes that touch him. "There's something we're losing in America as everybody goes after material goods like big houses. There's a warm thread of connectedness among people you don't see anymore. There's something we should hang onto as the world gets more complex."

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Showing the world to people in ways artists see is something art has the power to accomplish. Blank references German film maker Werner Herzog's statement at the end of *BURDEN OF DREAMS*. Herzog believes that articulacy "is what poetry or painting, or literature, or film making is all about"... that artists work as chroniclers. Blank shares Herzog's belief that "without articulation, humans are simply cows in the field."

"Art has the power to transform whole systems of comprehension. It can shuffle values and redirect a person," says Blank, who credits *SEVENTH SEAL* for getting him into movies.

"If I hadn't seen that film, I don't think it would have happened. When I saw it, I was a grad school drop-out, had some personal problems, was unemployed and very depressed, and was considering becoming a fighter pilot. When I came out of the theatre, I could see more clearly than when I went in. I knew if I couldn't be a writer or director, I'd be happy to sweep the floors of a set for a writer or director."

Admittedly, Blank wouldn't want to sweep some sets' floors. More often than brooms, he has been handed national awards and honors. He has been honored with the American Film Institute's Maya Deren Award (given for outstanding lifetime achievement as an independent film maker). His film *BURDEN OF DREAMS*, earned him the British Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary, the Golden Gate Award for "Best of Festival" at the San Francisco Film Festival, and the Grand Award at the Houston Film Festival. Blank won Grand Prize at the Melbourne Film Festival and a Special Jury Award at the U.S. Sundance Film Festival for *IN HEAVEN THERE IS NO BEER?* and the Golden Hugo at the Chicago Film Festival for *THE BLUES ACCORDIN' TO LIGHTNIN' HOPKINS*. He won Blue Ribbon Awards at the American Film and Video Festival for *DRY WOOD*, *HOT PEPPER*, *ALWAYS FOR PLEASURE*, *GARLIC IS AS GOOD AS TEN MOTHERS*, *BURDEN OF DREAMS*, *GAP-TOOTHED WOMEN*, *THE BEST OF BLANK*, *J'AI ÉTÉ AU BAL (I WENT TO THE DANCE)*, *YUM, YUM, YUM!*, and *MARC AND ANN*. *THE MAESTRO: KING OF THE COWBOY ARTISTS* was awarded "Best of Festival" at Sinking Creek (Nashville).

Additionally, Blank's *GARLIC IS AS GOOD AS TEN MOTHERS* and *CHULAS FRONTERAS* were selected for inclusion in the U.S. Library of Congress' National Film Registry. Films deemed "culturally, historically, or esthetically important" are included. To have had two films selected is an honor that has only been awarded to three documentarians in history.

Major retrospectives of Blank's have been shown in New York's Museum of Modern Art, Minneapolis' Walker Art Center, and Los Angeles' Filmex. Internationally, retrospectives have been shown at London's National Film Theatre, Paris' *Cinematheque Francais*, Augsburg's Independent Film Week, Leipzig's Film Festival, Bulgaria's Sofia Music Film Festival, and Mexico City's *Cineteca Nacional*.

Feature articles about Blank have appeared in *American Film*, *Downbeat*, *Film Quarterly*, *Image Magazine*, *the Los Angeles Times*, *Mother Jones*, *the New York Times*, *Premiere*, *Rolling Stone*, *Take One*, *Village Voice*, and *Video Review*. Feature segments have been featured on CNN and National Public Radio.

His work has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, the American Film Institute, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Ford Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, BBC, and PBS.

Les Blank films will inspire you to invite some friends over, cook up one of your own family recipes in no hurry, and play some live music. You might even think about cows and value shuffling.

LES' FAVORITE TEA:

FINE GREEN TEA OR OOLONG WHEN SOMEONE LIKE DAVID HOFFMAN BREWS IT FOR ME...

BLACK TEA AND TUOCHA PU-ERH (CAMEL'S BREATH TEA) MADE BY SILK ROAD TEAS.



LES' FAVORITE GARLIC DISHES:

USUALLY THE SIMPLEST, LIKE ROASTED GARLIC ON BREAD OR FRENCH PEASANT DISHES LIKE CHICKEN WITH 40 CLOVES AND BRAISED LAMB SHANKS WITH WHOLE CLOVES



LES BLANK RETROSPECTIVE

ALWAYS FOR PLEASURE

58 MIN / 1978

An intense insider's portrait of New Orleans' street celebrations and unique cultural gumbo: Second-line parades, Mardi Gras, Jazz Fest. Features live music from Professor Longhair, the Wild Tchoupitoulas, the Neville Brothers and more.

THE BLUES ACCORDIN' TO LIGHTNIN' HOPKINS

31 MIN / 1969

The great Texas bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins is captured brilliantly in this deeply moving film. Blank reveals Lightnin's inspiration features a generous helping of classic blues. Includes performances at an outdoor barbeque and a black rodeo; and a visit to his boyhood town of Centerville, Texas.

BURDEN OF DREAMS



BURDEN OF DREAMS

94 MIN / 1982

An extraordinary feature-length documentary about the messianic German director Werner Herzog struggling against desperate odds in the Amazon basin to make his epic feature, Fitzcarraldo. Burden of Dreams was honored with a British Academy Award for Best Documentary of 1982, and many critics consider it Blank's most awesome film.

BUTCH ANTHONY

8 MIN / WORK IN PROGRESS

About the life and work of Butch Anthony, a self-taught artist from the small southeastern Alabama town of Seale. Butch is a rare individual with a unique ability to see the potential in objects that others take for granted. He is now considered one of the top naïve artists in Alabama, and, with his works shown in museums around the country, is becoming a national treasure. Blank's camera follows Butch to various folk art festivals around the South, and visits the friends and artists who inspired him to create art. Blank also observes Butch's life in Alabama's rural landscape. From 'coon hunting to calling up alligators and digging up fossils, Butch Anthony shows us a South not known to many.

CHULAS FRONTERAS

58 MIN / 1976

A complex, insightful look at the Chicano experience as mirrored in the lives and music of the most acclaimed Norteño musicians of the Tex-Mex border, including Flaco Jimenez and Lydia Mendoza.

GAP-TOOTHED WOMAN

31 MIN / 1987

A charming valentine to women born with a space between their teeth, ranging from lighthearted whimsy to a deeper look at issues like self-esteem and societal attitudes toward standards of beauty. Interviews were conducted with over one hundred women, including model Lauren Hutton and Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

GARLIC IS AS GOOD AS TEN MOTHERS

51 MIN / 1980

A zesty paean of praise to the greater glories of garlic. This lip-smacking foray into the history, consumption, cultivation and culinary/curative powers of the stinking rose features chef Alice Waters of Chez Panisse, and a flavorful musical soundtrack. The SF Chronicle called this paean to garlic "a joyous, nose-tweaking, ear-tingling, mouth-watering tribute to a Life Force." Nothing less than a hymn to the stinking rose of the kitchen, this lovingly photographed documentary is an odyssey of garlic feasts

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alternated with uniquely individual interviews of garlic aficionados.



IN HEAVEN THERE IS NO BEER

50 MIN / 1984

A joyous romp through the dance, food, music, friendship, and even religion of the Polka. The explosive energy and high spirits of the polka subculture are rendered with warmth and dedication to scholarship in this journey through Polish-American celebrations. Polka stars like Jimmy Sturr, Eddie Blazonzyck and Walt Solek are featured.

INNOCENTS ABROAD

84 MIN / 1991

A warmly amusing look at a bus-full of American tourists on a whirlwind tour of Europe. The eclectic soundtrack includes Mozart, Bob Dylan, Sandy Denny, Jonathan Richman, others.

JAI ETE AU BAL (I WENT TO THE DANCE)

94 MIN / 1989

The definitive film on the history of the toe-tapping, foot-stomping music of French Southwest Louisiana. Includes many Cajun and Zydeco greats, featuring Michael Doucet and Beausoleil, Clifton Chenier, Marc and Ann Savoy, D.L. Menard, and many others.

JULIE, OLD TIME TALES OF THE BLUE RIDGE

11 MIN / 1991

80-year-old Julie Lyon, sister of Old Time fiddler Tommy Jarrell, lights up this gem of a film as she spins tales of her Appalachian childhood in North Carolina — and her first romance.

THE MAESTRO: KING OF THE COWBOY ARTISTS

54 MIN / 1994

What happens when a dedicated husband and father quits his job, adopts the persona of a Western-Movie Singing Cowboy, takes on the entire art establishment (including Christo and Andy Warhol), and refuses to accept money for his art? Meet Gerry Gaxiola, AKA The Maestro, an ex-wage slave who gave up everything to make art for art's sake. The Maestro's story could inspire a whole new generation of Van Goghs.

MY OLD FIDDLE

17 MINS / 1994

The long-awaited sequel to *Sprout Wings and Fly* (Les Blank's first film about this homegrown Appalachian fiddler and raconteur) is a gentle celebration of mountain living, a once-thriving American way of life. This portrait showcases Tommy's unpretentious folk wisdom and reminiscences. The soundtrack features his singing and fiddling, spiced with a visit to the Smithsonian to test-drive an authentic Stradivarius violin.

PUAMANA

38 MIN / 1991

Aloha! This gentle portrait of Auntie Irmgard Farden Aluli, one of Hawaii's best loved composers, focuses on Hawaiian women's contributions to family structure, art, music and dance. An intimate glimpse into the real culture of the islands.

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SPROUT WINGS AND FLY

30 MIN / 1983

This touching tribute to Appalachian culture profiles legendary, old-time fiddler Tommy Jarrell. His unpretentious folk wisdom is interlaced with family scenes and reminiscences, plus plenty of old-time music.



THE SUN'S GONNA SHINE

10 MIN / 1969

A lyrical recreation of Lightnin' Hopkins' decision at age eight to stop chopping cotton and start singing for a living.

SWORN TO THE DRUM

35 MIN / 1985

When you think of Latin percussion, think of Francisco Aguabella. Perhaps the finest Afro-Cuban master percussionist still living, he has become synonymous with his instrument — one of the highest compliments a musician can receive. Indeed, what Carlos Santana is to the guitar, Aguabella is to the conga drum. Carlos Santana reveres him. Bill Graham honored him. Katharine Dunham wouldn't let him go home to Cuba for 5 years. Dizzy Gillespie, Frank Sinatra and Peggy Lee swear by him. He's a master of Bata (the sacred Santeria drumming tradition), Abaqua and Yeza, and secular Afro-Cuban jazz and salsa styles. Discover this enigmatic Cuban drummer, a virtual Rosetta stone of African culture, who has been highly influential in the growth of Latin jazz, pop and fusion in the U.S. Francisco Aguabella's passion and fire on the conga drums are absolutely contagious and not to be missed.

THE TEA FILM (WHITE FEATHERS, BLACK BONES)

60 MIN / WORK IN PROGRESS

A one-hour documentary that follows the world-renowned American tea importer, David Lee Hoffman, to some of the most remote regions of China in search of the finest handmade teas in the world. Not since Robert Fortune clandestinely made his way through the tea growing districts of China in 1843 to steal plants and seeds for the British Empire has a westerner attempted to gain access to the hidden world of tea, where farmers have been making it for generations. As the Chinese open their doors to the global marketplace, Hoffman opens their eyes to their own ancient tradition that links them, and all of us, to the distant past, while introducing the west to one of China's finest cultural gems — the artistry and exquisite taste of fine, handmade tea.

A WELL SPENT LIFE

44 MIN / 1971

Many people consider Texas bluesman Mance Lipscomb to be the greatest blues guitarist and songster of all time. This glowing portrait of the legendary musician (also life-long husband and sharecropper) is among Blank's special masterworks. Instead of growing bitter, tough times made Lipscomb sweet.

WERNER HERZOG EATS HIS SHOE

22 MIN / 1979

Yes, German film director Werner Herzog really does eat his shoe to fulfill a vow to fellow filmmaker Errol Morris — boldly exemplifying his belief that people must have the guts to attempt what they dream of. Inspiring.

YUM, YUM, YUM

31 MIN / 1990

Les Blank marries his passion for spicy, down home food and his love for Cajuns and Creoles in this mouth-watering, exploration of the cooking and other enthusiasms of French-speaking Louisiana. Features tangy music, Marc Savoy, Paul Prudhomme, and other great cooks.