



Still a Brother:
Inside the Negro Middle Class
Director: William Greaves
USA 1968
90 mins
16mm

A BFI National Archive print

71
Director: Paige Taul
USA 2022
19 mins
Digital

Regular Programme

Silent Cinema: The Cat and the Canary
+ intro by Patrick Stanbury of Photoplay
Sun 1 Nov 15:15

Seniors: Deep Cover + intro by film critic
Kambole Campbell
Mon 16 Nov 14:00

Projecting the Archive: Noose (aka The Silk Noose) + intro by Josephine Botting,
BFI National Archive curator
Tue 17 Nov 18:10

Restored: Valerie and Her Week of Wonders Valérie a týden divů + intro by
writer Virginie Sélavy
Sun 22 Nov 15:15

Relaxed Screening:
The Watermelon Woman
+ intro and discussion
Mon 23 Nov 18:20

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Still a Brother: Inside the Negro Middle Class

+ intro by Matthew Barrington, curator of film at the Barbican Centre

Shooting outside the box: William Greaves in ten films

Cinema history is full of those whose long careers have become footnotes, referenced in catalogues, out of circulation and at risk of further falling into obscurity. For some this may be down to shifts in taste, falling out of sync with audiences; for many, it was simply a case of timing, emerging at a moment when your very presence was deemed a challenge to the status quo. For William Greaves, it was linked to his curiosity and desire to expand boundaries of form and content, and his own refusal to be boxed into limitations founded on racial prejudice.

Across his career, Greaves always created work which sat outside of expectations; he was defined by his artistry and his refusal to accept the paths set out for him. Greaves was born in Harlem in 1926, and as a young man was drawn to art, initially as a dancer, performing African routines; he later developed a career as a singer-songwriter. At home he was surrounded by the vibrant cultural outpouring of the thriving Harlem Renaissance, which would convince him to abandon a career as a scientist and seek out the emerging American Negro Theatre. He spoke of seeing Oscar Micheaux distributing and marketing the films he had shot and produced in the streets of New York; this was fundamental in sparking his own interest in building a career in cinema.

1. Miracle in Harlem (1948)

An early role for Greaves the actor saw him play Jim Marshall, a respectable businessman, in this 'race film' which drew from some of the social issues facing Black communities. Centred on an extortion plot, it contains some elements of social realism alongside still-prevalent racial stereotypes, best reflected by the presence of the vaudevillian Stepin Fetchit (his character was known as the 'laziest man in the world'). Despite developing a name for himself on the stage and studying at the famed Actors Studio alongside Marlon Brando and Anthony Quinn, Greaves would abandon acting after growing tired of the limited roles offered him. He left the US to study documentary filmmaking at the NFB in Canada in 1950.

2. Emergency Ward (1959)

Greaves would spend the next decade in Canada, developing his knowledge of editing, sound recording, scripting and directing. Overseen at the time by the Scottish filmmaker John Grierson, the NFB would be closely associated with direct cinema. *Emergency Ward*, a 30-minute short capturing the comings and goings at the busy Montreal General Hospital, engages with the staff and patients with a mixture of intimacy and distance. Greaves would leave Canada as the civil rights movement emerged; he sought to use his newfound skills to document and explore the changing state of the US.

3. The First World Festival of Negro Arts (1968)

Greaves found work at the largely propagandistic United States Information Agency, which he convinced to let him travel to Dakar, Senegal to document the World Festival of Black Arts to make a short news item with a skeleton crew. Lacking lighting equipment or sound recordists, he would follow a far larger Soviet crew to ensure he could film what he wanted, and the result was this 40-minute impressionistic account of the festival, capturing the spectacle of the celebrations and the many important figures present.

4. Black Journal (1968-70)

While continuing to develop short projects and establish William Greaves Productions, Greaves was approached to present *Black Journal*, a magazine show launched to counter perceived racial bias in US broadcasting in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. After a coup instigated by Black staff, Greaves was installed as executive producer; he would play a major role in choosing the show's stories and its hires, giving the likes of St. Clair Bourne, Kathleen Collins and Madeleine Anderson crucial experience in filmmaking. The series would develop a broad, international focus on Black stories, covering a wide range of issues affecting Black people in the US and across Africa and the Caribbean.

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5. Still a Brother: Inside the Negro Middle Class (1968)

The year 1968 was a particularly productive one for Greaves, and this documentary featuring the reflections of wealthy, successful and well-educated Black individuals is an example of how his films were exploring subjects no one else was interested in. In this feature-length documentary, aired on National Educational Television, Greaves moves beyond the act of countering negative stereotypes, drawing a deeper, complex portrait of how success serves 'the Black community', while simultaneously critiquing and pulling apart the notion of any such singular entity. The film also reflects Greaves's interest in subverting the idea of the documentary, through the inclusion of an extended docufiction sequence focusing on a group of Black Republicans.

6. Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One (1968)

Capping off Greaves's 1968 is the film for which he is best known. Shot in Central Park and funded by a former student, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* is an experiment in which he develops a script about an extramarital affair and challenges his actors and crew to repeatedly find new ways to capture the sequence. Greaves himself features in the film, guiding the actors and generating a degree of chaos. Inspired by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, he attempts to instigate conflict and measure the effect on the film itself as it is being produced.

7. In the Company of Men (1969)

Across his career, Greaves often developed films funded by one source, and he would have to find a balance between the commission and his own artistic and political aspirations – this documentary is a prime example. Commissioned by *Newsweek*, Greaves films a series of role-playing workshops where long-term-unemployed Black workers engage with white factory managers who fired some of the people in the room. They are invited to perform as one another and try and understand what motivates each other's actions. Greaves's skill was taking a premise which could almost be a workplace training video and using the process to document the deep racial tensions in 60s America, while pointing to the possibility of change through empathy.

8. The Fighters (1974)

A staggering achievement, this vérité documentary traces the circus surrounding Muhammad Ali vs Joe Frazier, Ali's first fight since being stripped of the World Heavyweight Champion title – a match dubbed the 'Fight of the Century'. Much of the film focuses on the debate around how the fight is being broadcast and the dislocation between the promoters and large sections of Ali's African American fanbase, aghast at the extortionate fees to watch. The second section of the film is a virtuosic piece of filmmaking; Greaves films the full 12 rounds from 12 separate cameras, capturing the encounter free from the media glitz and commentary and presenting a raw, gruelling standoff between two legendary sportsmen in all its glory.

9. The Deep North (1988)

Across the 80s and 90s Greaves would continue to find ways to work, producing films with Richard Pryor and developing educational documentaries of important Black American historical figures. In this documentary, Greaves would return to his interest in psychodrama; he again films a workshop series, where therapists invite people of various ethnicities to recount their experiences and encounters with other racial groups. They are then guided to respond by roleplaying the anecdotes being told by group members. The film shows Greaves as a deeply humanitarian filmmaker, working to expose the dark elements of American history while also finding formal ways to explore these ideas filmically. It underlines his optimism that hope can defeat hate.

10. Once upon a Time in Harlem (2026)

For this film, completed by his son David and granddaughter Liani (Greaves died in 2014, aged 87), Greaves held a salon with remaining members of the Harlem Renaissance in Duke Ellington's townhouse in 1972. Shot with the idea that it would be developed and produced after his death, *Once upon a Time in Harlem* traces the arc of Greaves's own life from his roots in this artistic epicentre of Black America. It pays tribute, but like many of his works also creates a space for discussion and interrogation; across the span of this gathering, criticisms of legacy and intense debates on the present day take place. It is a wonderful postscript and new window on Greaves's work in film.

Matthew Barrington, *Sight and Sound*, September 2026