

## 2001 Sydney Film Festival

**Two fine examples of "direct cinema"**

**LaLee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton** directed by Susan Froemke,  
**Deborah Dickson and Albert Maysles Facing the Music** directed by  
 Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson

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*The following review completes the World Socialist Web Site coverage of the 2001 Sydney Film Festival.*

The Sydney Film Festival screened a varied assortment of documentaries this year. The more memorable of these were *LaLee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, a compelling exposure of poverty in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, and *Facing the Music*, which traces the impact of funding cuts to the Music Department at the University of Sydney, Australia's oldest and most prestigious tertiary institution.

Both films employ "direct cinema" techniques—a style first developed in the early 1960s that took advantage of lightweight handheld cameras and sound equipment to create more intimate and confronting work. Rather than using conventional editorial commentary, this technique drew the story and structure of each work from the personalities and situations being filmed.

Albert Maysles, one of the three directors of *LaLee's Kin*, was, together with his brother David (1932-87), an early pioneer of this method. The Maysles brothers made *Meet Marlon Brando* (1965); *With Love from Truman* (1966); and then the imaginative *Salesman* (1968), about four door-to-door Bible salesmen. These were followed by *Gimme Shelter* (1970)—also screened at the Sydney Film Festival—about the fatal 1969 Rolling Stones concert at Altamont Speedway in California, and a number of documentaries on European and American artists.

The two other directors involved in *LaLee's Kin* are Susan Froemke, who has made 17 documentaries—including works on classical musicians Seiji Ozawa, Vladimir Horowitz, Herbert von Karajan and Jessye Norman—and Deborah Dickson, best known for *Frances Steleoff: Memoirs of a Bookseller* and *Suzanne Farrell: Elusive Muse*.

Speaking in the mid-1960s, David Maysles attempted to define "direct cinema" this way: "Things as they come in real life are much more exciting than anything that you can invent on stage. Writers try to emulate life. They feel they have to have it under their control. We feel just the opposite. We observe and shoot things just as they happen... We are after an emotional response... [we] don't want people to say: 'It's a documentary, isn't it?' If we can achieve that, something will have been accomplished."

*LaLee's Kin* is a good example. Its central protagonist is 62-year-old Laura Lee (LaLee) Wallace, a lifelong resident of Tallahatchie County, one of the poorest counties in the US. LaLee, who is the great-granddaughter of a slave, has one surviving son, nine daughters, 38 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren. LaLee's son is in and out of jail and most of her daughters have been forced to leave the county in

search of work. The task of raising many of their children falls directly on LaLee.

While slavery was formally abolished in the state almost 150 years ago, poverty and oppression remain endemic for its black residents. Like most working class families in this poverty-stricken region, LaLee has little income apart from a meagre \$494 monthly disability allowance she receives from the government. And, like most of the county's inhabitants, her life is tied to the cotton industry. LaLee supplements her family's income by cooking and delivering hot lunches to workers in the local cotton mills.

Her neighbourhood, a collection of ramshackle dwellings inhabited by single parents, mainly women and their children, has no basic facilities. LaLee's home, a small portable dwelling, has no electricity or water and the children she cares for play among rusting and abandoned cars. Water is collected in buckets from a tap outside the local jail.

A giant of a woman, LaLee has an inner strength and sense of humour to match her large physique. The camera captures her jokes about her short marriage and the sadness and silent tears when she talks about her two dead sons. One of the more heartbreaking moments shows LaLee taking her grandson to his first day of school. She is thrown into despair when a teacher tells her that the boy cannot attend unless he comes with his own pencils. Back home, LaLee scrambles around for pencils and asks friends and relatives to assist with spare pens and paper—in fact, anything to ensure the child attends school.

*LaLee's Kin* establishes the connection between the lack of basic education facilities in the area and the cotton industry. The deprivation revealed in the film is so severe that some of the footage could easily have been shot in the poorest African countries.

LaLee, like her parents, spent much of her early life picking cotton and received little education. Schools were closed during harvest to make sure that all available labour, including that of the children, was mobilised. While mechanisation of cotton picking enriched large-scale farmers and local textile mill owners, thousands of black workers were laid off and forced to emigrate north in search of work. Those left behind were trapped in a permanent cycle of illiteracy and poverty.

The local school is conducting a desperate fight to maintain its existence. It has one of the lowest grades in the county and has been put on the state's probation list. As Reggie Barnes, superintendent of the school and another key figure in the film, explains, Mississippi allocates \$30,000 a year per prisoner but only \$2,000 a year per pupil. Much of the film focuses on Barnes and his teachers' heroic efforts to lift test scores at

the school and thus prevent it being taken over and further downgraded by the state. Barnes says that many first year pupils have never read a book, or been read to, and cannot count or tell the difference between colours.

That the school is able to function at all, and in the end succeeds in being taken off probation after the students attain higher grades, is a testimony to the extraordinary dedication and enthusiasm of the teachers. The film ends with one of LaLee's granddaughters moving to live with relatives in Memphis where her school grades improve and she can begin to dream about getting a job that has no connection with the cotton industry.

*LaLee's Kin* is a damning exposure of life for countless black working class families in the rural south. Audiences able to watch this important film, however, should also understand that the problems confronting LaLee and her extended family are not restricted to Tallahatchie County. Mass retrenchments, hospital and school closures and the destruction of limited government welfare and social aid programs are forcing hundreds of thousands of American workers into the desperate hand-to-mouth existence endured by LaLee.

Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson are talented documentary filmmakers, perhaps the best produced in Australia in the past two decades. Previous films include their award-winning trilogy on Papua New Guinea's highland tribes— *First Contact* (1983), *Joe Leahy's Neighbours* (1988) and *Black Harvest* (1992)—and *Rats in the Ranks* (1996), an exposé of inner city council politics in Sydney.

*Facing the Music*, their latest work, explores the impact of government cutbacks on tertiary education as seen through a year in the life of Anne Boyd, Professor of Music at the University of Sydney. Boyd's department, which has been subjected to a decade of funding cuts, faces closure unless something can be done to reverse its financial circumstances.

An internationally acclaimed composer, Boyd is determined to maintain the department but has no real political experience and has never had to fight the university administration. In fact, in the opening sections of the film she opposes demands by other academic staff for protest strikes and even crosses a picket line to report for work. "We're a community of academics. If we can't think of something more dignified to do than a strike, we should all give up," she tells one union meeting. Teaching, she adds, is a privilege and staff should work longer hours.

But this call for greater individual sacrifice cannot save the department. Soon after the strike, the faculty faces a \$1.2 million deficit, with Boyd's department having accumulated a \$70,000 debt in two years. She begins phoning banks and other businesses touting for corporate sponsorship. After these appeals fall on deaf ears and the cutbacks continue, Boyd, who has increased her teaching from six to 20 hours a week, decides to join new strike action and protests. On the picket line, she turns back trucks and cars; at rallies she agitates against the government cuts.

Confident of securing support from the university administration, Boyd is deeply shocked when the chancellor's door is closed to her and other academics protesting the cuts. She breaks down some weeks later after a tense meeting with the dean of the Faculty of Arts who humiliates her in front of her colleagues for publicly defending the Music Department.

Anderson and Connolly chart Boyd's experiences, skillfully moving between the increasing personal pressures and problems in the department and the musical talents of its students whose rehearsals, performances and compositions are woven through the film. The music, including some of Boyd's own remarkable compositions, reinforces and reminds the audience of the cultural heritage and creative talent under threat.

One of the film's more poignant moments is an emotional tutorial with a student composer. The composition fails to measure up to Boyd's rigorous standards and she sharply criticises the piece. The young girl unsuccessfully tries to hold back her tears before quietly tearing up her composition—both teacher and student obviously distraught over the bleak

future facing the department.

*Facing the Music* demonstrates Boyd's extraordinary teaching skills. She studied under Peter Sculthorpe, one of Australia's leading composers, at the University of Sydney in the 1960s before attaining her PhD at York University in England. After lecturing at the University of Sussex for five years, she became the founding head of the Department of Music at the University of Hong Kong in 1981 and was appointed Department of Music head at Sydney University in 1990.

In a passionate and inspiring lecture on Beethoven, Boyd explains how the German composer was walking with Goethe one day when the two men were confronted with a group of aristocrats. Goethe bowed and moved aside to let them pass but Beethoven refused, marching right through the middle of them. In an obvious expression of her own attitude to today's powers-that-be, Boyd delights in telling her students that Beethoven bluntly informed Goethe that the aristocrats should step aside because artists were the most important individuals in society.

Although the film mainly focuses on Boyd, it also captures the commitment and sacrifice of her fellow academics. Their dedication and protests, however, fail to reverse declining funds and staff members begin to break under impossible work pressures. Boyd takes stress leave and resigns as head of department to spend more time composing. Winsome Evans, assistant professor of music, although no less devoted than Boyd, is more reserved and reluctantly agrees to replace her. Not long after her appointment, Evans suffers a heart attack.

While it is sometimes painful to watch the breakdown in staff morale, Connolly and Anderson succeed in creating a deep sense of anger and outrage over the destruction of the department. According to most recent reports, plans have been announced to finalise the department's closure and relocate it to the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. Boyd and other staff members, with the support of students, are resisting the plan.

Those able to watch this valuable film will draw obvious connections between the events chronicled and the wanton destruction of university departments and courses across the country. Fortunately for local audiences, *Facing the Music*, which was voted the most popular documentary at the Sydney Film Festival, has been given an Australian cinema release and is currently screening in Sydney and Melbourne.



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