



A Showcase of Black Film Talent

Description

12th Montreal Black Film Festival succeeds spectacularly

By **Byron Toben**

It's amazing how the indomitable Fabienne Colas has managed to found and grow the Montreal International Black Film Festival since 2004, attracting not only some important films and documentaries not ordinarily shown here, but personal attendance by celebrities like Spike Lee as well.

This year's edition (September 28 to October 2) occupied 23 time slots showing 14 films and 18 short (2 to 22 minute) films.

Thrown into the mix were a Black Market Master Class, a career achievement award to Canadian filmmaker Clement Virgo and Black Fem'Art, an ongoing exhibition of art works by 10 young black women.

The opening film at the huge Cinema Imperial was *Maya Angelou And Still I Rise* by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack, who spoke at a post showing "talk back". Ms Coburn Whack, winner of three Emmy Awards and a producer on the Oprah show, premiered this documentary at the Sundance festival.

I had known Dr Angelou as a famous black writer like, say, Toni Morrison, but never had the occasion to read her books. This film opened up the many other aspects of her life... born in St. Louis, grew up in Stamps, Arkansas, lived in New York, California, Europe and Africa, this tall and charismatic lady worked as a dancer, actor, singer and civil rights activist. She became friends with Dr Martin Luther King Jr and James Baldwin.

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I felt a nostalgic trip in watching the film as I had met Baldwin for an evening on a trip to London through a Trinidadian filmmaker friend. I had visited the Purple Onion in San Francisco, where she often performed. I had



listened to a lecture by Bayard Rustin of March on Washington fame, whom she had encountered. I had wanted to be a cartoonist/playwright like Jules Pfeiffer, whose wife Judith was instrumental in getting her to write her first book *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1969) followed by six other auto biographical books, not to mention a host of poetry collections, film and TV creations, culminating in several honorary doctorates for this high school drop out. During a silent period in her early teens, she read most of Shakespeare and Dickens.

She famously appeared reciting an original poem at Bill Clinton's inauguration, the first such since Robert Frost at JFK's inauguration. (Bill's youthful home in Hope was some 50 miles from Stamps.) Through all of this, she managed to fit in two husbands, several lovers and one child whom she stuck by through many years of his restricted mobility due to a car accident.

If this film gets commercial release in Montreal, I would certainly be eager to see it again.

On the last day of the Festival at the intimate former NFB theatre, I was pleased to see *Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement*. This was produced by the amazing Laurens Grant, who impressed at the 2015 BFF with her film about the Black Panthers, so influential despite government suppression from 1966 to 1980. This current documentary follows the spate of shootings by police of unarmed young black men.

Sadly, the answer to Rodney King's question after his brutal beating by LA police in 1992 "Can't We all Just Get along?" is no. He died in 2012, at 47, six months after the shooting of Trayvon Martin in Miami.

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Modern technology played a part in making both these events nationally famous, and there has been an explosion of cell phone recordings of police over reaction since. Eric Garner's chokehold in New York and Michael Brown's in Ferguson, Missouri sparked a zillion twitters, one of which, *Black Lives Matter*, became a rallying cry for many spontaneous demonstrations throughout 2014 to 2016.



Like the Occupy Wall Street assemblages of 2011-12, the BLM manifestations were largely local and spontaneous with little central co-ordination and designated leadership. It is also youthful, as older leaders like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton are dismissed.

Unfortunately, in some circles, it is mistaken as a violent group advocating killing police officers. Rather, the protesters are non violent, in the spirit of the Freedom Riders of the 60s (another documentary made by Ms Grant).

The title stems from an invitation to some BLM spokespeople to meet with congressional leaders in Washington, D.C., after they were thanked as having “awakened their understanding”.

The **Montreal International Black Film Festival** ended on October 2, 2016.

Visit MontrealBlackFilm.com for other films they screened.

Read a [McEntyre essay about Maya Angelou](#).

Images: Creative Commons

Byron Toben is the immediate past-president of the Montreal Press Club.

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