

From the Director's Chair

Mel Stuart on Directing *Wattstax*

On the set of Wattstax are director/producer Mel Stuart (leaning over table), cameraman Roderick Young (in hat) and future DGA director-members (from left) cameraman David Oyster and soundman Richard Wells

Editor's Note: One of the groundbreaking musical documentaries was the 1973 film *Wattstax*. The film introduced a generation of young people to the talents of a number of African-American artists. We asked the film's director, Mel Stuart, to reflect on the challenges of turning the filming of a concert into a documentary

"A soulful expression of the living word" - that was the aim of a documentary I set out to direct 27 years ago.

Wattstax was originally conceived as a film of a concert commemorating the fifth anniversary of the Watts riots. The event was a concept of Al Bell, president of Stax records, who teamed up with Wolper Productions to secure funding from Columbia Pictures. At the time, Stax records could call upon some of the greatest names in gospel, blues and soul music such as the Staple Singers, Isaac Hayes and Johnny Taylor. The event also drew political activists including a young and relatively unknown Jesse Jackson. This lineup attracted 80,000 people to the L.A. Coliseum. I realized from the start that the best and only way for the film to reflect the black experience was to call upon the expertise and guidance of African-Americans like historian Larry Shaw and associate producer Forest Hamilton. In addition, I used predominately black film crews to cover the concert and the filming that followed.

The event was scheduled to run from noon to eight o'clock at night. Accordingly, a construction crew came to the L.A. Coliseum at the conclusion of a pro football game the night before and set up a stage in the middle of the field. Early the next morning construction was finished and we set up the main cameras and sound equipment. John Alonzo was the supervising cinematographer. By midday we were ready to start filming.

During the concert things went smoothly. The acts performed brilliantly, the camera and sound coverage was first rate. Twelve documentary crews wandered through the crowd getting reaction shots. We started editing the film and found, early on, that what we had was ... a "concert film." To me, that is not what a documentary is about. A concert film is glorified reportage even when produced with style. It certainly was not a full reflection of the black experience.

Larry and Forest and I began to plan how we could expand the concept. Luckily, some of acts were unable to show up on the day of the concert which enabled us to take the music into the community itself. In the weeks that followed, we filmed Johnny Taylor in a funky night club, The Emotions bringing a gospel song to a small church, and Little Milton singing a fantastic blues number by the railroad tracks in the shadow of the Watts Towers. The reality of the location performances added a vital dimension to the overall presentation. That was a good start, but more was needed.

Next, we decided to hear how people felt about the music. This led to improvised interviews with dozens of men and women that touched on every facet of the African-American experience. Film crews were sent into the streets, churches, barber shops and diners to talk with people about the connection between music and their existence and what it was like to be black in a white America. To this day, when I screen the film, I am awed by the wit, poetry and understanding of the reality of their situation that came forth from the people in the community. As a reflection of their viewpoint and of the times, there is one particular moment in the film which I found remarkable: a young woman sang *The Star-Spangled Banner* at the beginning of the concert, and as I looked at the enormous audience I saw that no one stood up during the song.

I felt we still needed one more element - something similar to the "chorus" in Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth*. We needed someone who could give an overall view of the African-American experience. Forest Hamilton suggested I go with him to a small club to see a young comedian named Richard Pryor. The next night we returned to the club with a film crew and after his show recorded two hours of extraordinary improvised insightful comedy. This was the glue we needed to hold the film together.

When the editing was nearly finished, I was suddenly hit with a production problem that has become the bane of producers today - acquiring music rights. I received a call from MGM telling me that I couldn't use a sequence in which Isaac Hayes sings his hit song "Shaft." There was a disagreement about publishing rights and Jim Aubrey, then president of MGM, would not listen to my pleas for a settlement. I was devastated! I had hoped to conclude the film with Isaac Hayes singing "Shaft" to 80,000 people at night in the Coliseum. There was no alternative but to have John Alonzo assemble a crew and shoot a different song on a sound stage with Isaac Hayes and his backup group. We combined the footage with various shots of the crowd and incorporated it into the film. (With the special effects available today, it would probably be much easier.) As a documentary filmmaker, it bothered me to create a non-event, but it was more important to end the film on a triumphant note.

The documentary was quite successful when it appeared in theaters at the time, and over the years has become somewhat of a cult film for African-American audiences. Unfortunately, because of, need I say, music rights problems, it has not been shown in a major venue on television or released as a video. Hopefully, someday, the rights problems will be cleared and this portrait of a particular time and a community will reach a wider audience.

Mel Stuart has just finished a feature documentary called *Running on the Sun*. Several weeks ago an African-American record company called Soulife asked Mr. Stuart to produce an updated version of Wattstax which would reflect the changes in the African-American community over the past 30 years.

<http://www.dga.org/index2.php3>