

Mon Jan 11 |8:30 pm|

Jack H. Skirball Series

\$11 [members \$8]

Billy Woodberry

And When I Die I Won't Stay Dead

Best Investigative Documentary, Doc Lisboa

US Premiere

Preceded by:

Marseille après la guerre

<http://www.redcat.org/event/billy-woodberry>

Billy Woodberry introduces the US premiere of his long-awaited new film *And When I Die I Won't Stay Dead*, a feature-length documentary about jazz-inspired beat poet Bob Kaufman, sometimes called the "American Rimbaud." Woodberry's landmark 1984 film *Bless Their Little Hearts* was honored with a jury award at the Berlin International Film Festival and was selected for preservation by the National Film Registry. The program begins with *Marseille après la guerre*, a short montage crafted from images found in a longshoremen's union hall.

In person: Billy Woodberry

"One seminal, under-heralded African-American cultural figure salutes another in *When I Die, I Won't Stay Dead*, Billy Woodberry's profile of beat-poet Bob Kaufman: an oral biography nimbly combining rich, varied archival footage with talking-head present-day interviews; a heartfelt, quietly inspiring attempt to shed light on a compellingly enigmatic individual ('most of what was known about Kaufman's life and biography was shrouded in myth and legend.')

– Neil Young, *The Hollywood Reporter*

"In *And When I Die*, an informative and affectionate overview of Kaufman..., Woodberry contextualizes the deeper social currents through which the poet's leftwing principles were radicalized (Kaufman was involved in the National Maritime Union), and which he channeled through his writing." – *Slant Magazine*

Marseille après la guerre

(10:20 min., 2015)

"In 1944, Ousmane Sembene was drafted into the Senegalese tirailleurs (a corps of the French army)...

After the war, he returned to his home country of Senegal and in 1947, participated in a long railroad strike on which he later based his seminal novel, *God's Bits of Wood*.

Late in 1947, he stowed away to France where he worked at a Citroën factory in Paris and then on the docks at Marseille, becoming active in the French trade union movement. He joined the Communist-led CGT and the Communist Party, helping lead a strike to hinder the shipment of weapons for the French colonial war in Vietnam...

Five years ago, while searching the history of the National Maritime Union, a radical union of sailors founded in the 1930s, we came across a cache of photographs of the docks and dockers in Marseille, taken by one of the National Maritime Union photographers. These photographs evoke the memory of Ousmane Sembene and of his book, *Le Docker noir...*; they held a deep meaning and connection to Sembene, his life, his experience and his creative work as one of the founding figures of the New African Cinema of the 1960s.

While Sembene does not appear in the photographs, they represent and evoke the world he knew and experienced, a world of solidarity, fraternity and struggle. To find them in the collection of the National Maritime Union of the United States is a revelation and a reminder of a world that once existed." – Billy Woodberry

Music by Moussu Telei Jovents, a group of radical musicians from Marseille.

And When I Die I Won't Stay Dead

(89:00 min., 2015)

Born in 1925 and considered "the American Rimbaud", Bob Kaufman contributes a singular voice to the poetic-political imaginings of world literature. *And When I Die, I Won't Stay Dead* is a journey into the ferocious beauty of his work, and his insistence that poetry is fundamental to humanity's moral survival. "The legacy of Kaufman's poetry provides the dominant note in the film I ultimately made. But given my strong commitment to struggles for political justice, my film also weaves his artistic triumph as a triumph of radical politics surviving and inspiring against all odds. It is only justice to the facts of Bob Kaufman's life and times that this film must attempt to recall and chronicle the countless odds he faced to find his voice and project his vision." (Billy Woodberry)

Production Notes

Considered “the American Rimbaud,” and kindred to Lorca and Breton in the 20th century, Bob Kaufman (born in 1925) contributed a singular voice to the poetic-political imaginings of world literature.

Kaufman’s talent, as photographer Jeremy Breningstall put it, equaled or exceeded his Beat peers, but few are aware of his publications or his role. The absence where Kaufman should be in contemporary literature is unfortunately reminiscent of other absences in white-dominated U.S. culture, akin to the exclusion of sculptor Richmond Barthe in accounts of Frank Lloyd Wright’s famous Falling Water residence, or painter Norm Lewis from explications of the New York Abstract Expressionists.

And When I Die addresses this gap by approaching Kaufman as a complex, worthy and compelling subject. The film’s documentary style eschews facile conventions, using an organic logic to shape its content, providing the first in-depth narrative of Kaufman’s sojourn. Woodberry has gained access to an unprecedented variety and volume of rare archival and privately-held materials, and has conducted original interviews with poets, artists and scholars many of whom knew Kaufman and were present during the creation of his unique, incantatory and lyrical oeuvre.

From its first moment, the film signals an originality befitting its subject. The simple title sequence is followed by a photo of Kaufman as a beautifully handsome, slightly defiant-appearing young man. We then see footage of the San Francisco Bay and skyline. Behind the shroud of fog, the city looms mysterious and stately. The vista shifts to historical footage of bustling, narrow streets in San Francisco in the 1950s. The views of rainy sidewalks and vintage American cars become the shadowy interiors of bars and cafes in North Beach populated by young patrons. Deep, slow, contemplative notes of Charlie Mingus’ bass play over the sound track. He is joined by pianist Jaki Byard and a band of inimitable horns with Dannie Richmond on drums. The song “I Left My Heart in San Francisco” has never been rendered so bittersweet.

Like Kaufman’s jazz-influenced poetry, the film syncopates time and transports viewers into the heart of a world. A.D. Winans, poet and friend of Kaufman, relates his return to the city following military service, and his awareness that “something pretty wild” was happening. The film’s early chapters, so to speak, immerse viewers in the heady life of artists in North Beach, whom Kaufman in his poem, “Bagel Shop Jazz” called “night creatures” whose “coffee dreams (are) crushed on the floors of time.” With a sense of reciting heroic events of

an ancient culture, interview subjects such as Winans, Jack Hirschman and Eileen Kaufman recall life circulating cafes such as The Co-Existence Bagel Shop, the Coffee Gallery, Twelve Adler Museum Café, Café Trieste, Vesuvius and more, accompanied by visual perspectives of the storied hangouts .

The film features Kaufman's poetry throughout, read during interviews or from segments by actors Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee and Roscoe Lee Brown. These lines accumulate and lend the documentary an incantatory power. For instance, the segment detailing his incarcerations, *How old is suffering?... This atmosphere of shrieks and private hells*, conveys Kaufman's story in multi-sensory ways. Through the poems, historical footage and inclusion of rare records and documents, Kaufman emerges from the background to which he'd been consigned.

The film follows Kaufman's move in the early 1960s to New York's Greenwich Village and introduces the context of repression and persecution in the U.S. during the height of the Beat movement and folk music revival. Campaigns of harassment against Kaufman are documented, including dozens of police arrests in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles, and involuntary shock treatment after he was incarcerated in Bellevue.

And when I die introduces Kaufman's surviving sisters in New Orleans and his boyhood home on "rue Miro" in the distinctly Creole Seventh Ward. Kaufman's years as a young labor radical with his first wife, Ida Berracol Torres, are traced. In the post-WWII witch hunts, after twenty years as a merchant marine and activist in the National Maritime Union, Kaufman, along with others, was expelled from the union and prohibited from being present at any U.S. port. He went on to become an organizer for Progressive Party Presidential candidate Henry Wallace in 1948. The film reveals that FBI files on Kaufman and harassment against him began at this time, and he was under constant surveillance.

Kaufman takes on dimension, along with the complex intersections between his life and work. After abandoning political organizing, his rebel heart responded to the aesthetic of resistance in be-bop. His books, *Solitudes Crowded With Loneliness*, *The Golden Sardine*, *Watch My Tracks*, and *The Ancient Rain* were published by New Directions and City Lights. His drug and alcohol abuse were part of common life in Beat and North Beach society. Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones, called Kaufman - his fellow black Beat - "the maximum Beatnik" for refusal to make concessions to dominant culture. But Kaufman transcended that movement, particularly in works such as *The Ancient Rain*. And - a hopeful sign - contemporary artists such as

Swiss singer and musician Irene Aebi are providing new settings for the poems in art songs and recordings.

Kaufman returned to San Francisco, and various friends discuss the veracity of the story of his vow of silence after the 1963 JFK assassination. Kaufman died of emphysema in 1986, celebrated by the North Beach community in a daylong commemoration that ended in boats on the water of the Bay from which his ashes were tossed. Hirschman relates that on the mourners' return to shore, "a giant rainbow appeared."

The film offers a lavish trove of images of Kaufman from photographs, art films and archival movies. The final footage holds the surprise of Kaufman's voice. He is shown wearing bellbottom pants and a loose white peasant shirt, reading aloud in intense close-up. An exhausted-sounding Kaufman is then heard in voice-over reciting from "Will You Wear My Eyes?" After the reading ends, the screen goes blank and silent as if the poet has asked us to carry on in his absence, until, on screen, the wrinkled golden green expanse of the Bay appears for the last time.

Director's Bio

Born in Dallas, Texas, **Billy Woodberry** is an independent filmmaker who has taught at the School of Film/Video and the School of Art at the California Institute of the Arts since 1989. His feature film *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1984) is an essential work of Los Angeles cinema, informed by Woodberry's familiarity with Italian neo-realism and the work of filmmakers in Cuba, Brazil, India and Africa. It won the Interfilm ecumenical jury award at the Berlin Film festival and was added to the Library of Congress' 2013 National Registry of Films. Woodberry has appeared in Charles Burnett's *When It Rains* (1995) and provided narration for Thom Andersen's *Red Hollywood* (1996) and James Benning's *Four Corners* (1998). Woodberry's two-hour video, *The Architect, the Ants, and the Bees*, was part of "Facing the Music," a 2004 group exhibition, video and multimedia installation at the REDCAT gallery documenting the building of the Walt Disney Concert Hall and the transformation of downtown Los Angeles. His work has screened at the Viennale, DocLisboa, Amiens International Film Festival, Camera Austria Symposium, Harvard Film Archive, Human Rights Watch Film Festival and Museum of Modern Art. Billy Woodberry has taught at the California Institute of the Arts since 1989.

Curated by Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud. Presented as part of the Jack H. Skirball Series.