Black Filmmaker Interviews: Jessie Maple Patton

The Black Film Center & Archive holds hundreds of rare interview recordings documenting the stories of Black film artists. In our ongoing monthly series, "The Black Film Center & Archive Presents: Black Filmmaker Interviews," we will widely publish one previously-unreleased interview from our collections.

In recognition of her recent passing, the Black Film Center & Archive dedicates this month's Black Filmmaker Interview release to filmmaking pioneer and author Jessie Maple Patton, recorded with then-BFCA director Audrey T. McCluskey on September 20, 2005 at Indiana University, Bloomington.

https://media.dlib.indiana.edu/media_objects/41688175k
Mrs. Jessie Maple Patton posing by the BFCA's Simplex 35mm Projector.

Courtesy photo provided by the BFCA and approved by the family.

With her feature debut *Will* (1981), Mrs. Maple Patton is recognized as the first Black American woman to write and produce a full-length film independently. She also holds the distinct honor of being the first Black woman to join the International Photographers of Motion Picture & Television Union, a struggle she detailed in her book *How to Become a Union Camerawoman* (1977). With the 20 West Theatre in Harlem (which she founded and managed from 1982 until its 1992 closure), Mrs. Maple Patton worked tirelessly to showcase and promote the work of other Black filmmakers during a historical period of growing independent Black moviemaking work.

*Please also see the "In Memoriam" section below, for the statement from Mrs. Maple Patton's family.*
It was such an honor for the Black Film Center & Archive to participate in the In Frame Project this past week, at the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures, in Los Angeles. Additionally, Amber Bertin (BFCA’s Archivist) and Rachael Stoeltje (BFCA’s Interim Director) were provided a fantastic tour of the Regeneration: Black Cinema 1898-1971 exhibition, by Curator J. Raul Guzman. This exhibit includes seventeen items on display from the BFCA’s collections, such as the tap shoes worn by the sibling dance duo Fayard and Harold Nicholas (pictured). The exhibit continues until July 16, 2023. More information is available on the Academy Museum’s Regeneration site.
A bonus highlight of our trip was being welcomed by Dr. Jacqueline Stewart, the Academy Museum’s Director. It was also amazing to dine with and see the films by the accomplished filmmaker Lourdes Portillo. The BFCA appreciates everyone at the Academy Museum for such a wonderful visit! There were so many good discussions and tours! We look forward to future collaborations and engagements.
Janet Jackson

On May 16, we wished happy birthday to multi-hyphenate superstar Janet Jackson (born 1966)! Among the best-selling music artists in history and a pop culture icon, Ms. Jackson began her screen career on television with recurring roles in series like Good Times (1977-79) and Diff'rent Strokes (1980-84), as well as the variety show The Jacksons (1965-77) alongside her famous siblings. Jackson made her feature film debut in John Singleton’s Poetic Justice (1993) alongside fellow musician Tupac Shakur. The Black Film Center & Archive holds original promotional material for Poetic Justice, including a making-of featurette with rare interviews with cast and crew.
Janet Jackson stars as Justice, a reclusive young woman who works as a hairdresser in South Central L.A. and writes poetry to cope with past tragedies in “POETIC JUSTICE,” a Columbia Pictures Release.

(Poetic Justice promo photo and featurette screenshots from the BFCA General and Mary Perry Smith Collections)
May 22 marked the birthday of pioneering feminist filmmaker Bridgett M. Davis! The author of two novels and the NYT Editors’ Choice memoir The World According to Fannie Davis (2019), Ms. Davis currently teaches creative writing and screenwriting at Baruch College, CUNY. Her debut feature Naked Acts (1996), a gem of ’90s independent filmmaking, recently celebrated its 25th anniversary with a screening at the IU Cinema in February. The Black Film Center & Archive was honored to host Ms. Davis for a Master Class prior to the screening.
Happy birthday to actor and musician Benjamin “Scatman” Crothers (1910-1986)! A self-taught guitarist and singer known for his dynamic eyes and raspy-voiced, free-form scat singing, Crothers began his film career in dozens of (mostly uncredited) roles through the 50s and 60s. He found more substantial roles in blaxploitation titles like Detroit 9000 (1973), Black Belt Jones (1974), Truck Turner (1974), Coonskin (1975), and Friday Foster (1975). In the final decade of his life, Crothers gained wider mainstream fame for his appearances in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1975), The Shining (1980), and myriad TV guest and voice roles, including as the title character in the Hanna-Barbera cartoon Hong Kong Fooey (1974).
(Portrait from the Mary Perry Smith Collection; DVD screenshots from Black Belt Jones and Truck Turner from the Black Film Center & Archive General Collection)
Happy birthday to writer, poet, and film editor Thomas Penick (1948-2016)!
Penick graduated UCLA’s film program in 1971 during the height of the L.A. Rebellion, a period of fiercely independent and oppositional Black filmmaking work. In addition to directing the short 69 Pickup (1969), Penick served as production manager and editor on his friend and fellow UCLA grad Charles Burnett’s feature My Brother’s Wedding (1983). Penick would work in the editing departments at MGM and Paramount through the 70s and 80s, working on Ivan Dixon’s The Spook Who Sat by the Door (1973) and Gordon Parks’s Leadbelly (1976), plus various TV series and trailers.

(Photo from the UCLA Film & Television Archive)
"Be blessed. Hug the hugless, love the loveless. Feed the hungry, help the helpless. Encourage the sad and always give an encouraging word.” ~ Jessie Maple Patton
ATLANTA, GA, USA, June 1, 2023/EINPresswire.com/ -- It is with happy memories and deep sorrow that the family of Jessie Maple Patton announces her transition. She passed away peacefully, at the age of 86, surrounded by family on May 30, 2023 at her home in Atlanta, GA.

Jessie is recognized as the first Black woman to write and produce a full-length film independently. She also holds the distinct honor of being the first Black woman to join the filmmakers' union. Her films, books, and unapologetic push to highlight discrimination and injustices within the news and entertainment industries will remain for generations to come. The world through Jessie’s lens offers views of humanity that are often overlooked due to race and power dynamics.

Jessie's Visual History has been captured and made available by The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Her 1981 film Will, featuring Loretta Devine, is currently being digitized by The Smith Center for the Digitization and Curation of African American History (NMAAHC/Smithsonian). A portion of her archives are housed at the Black Film Center & Archive (Indiana University Bloomington).

Jessie loved her family and left an extensive group of family and loved ones to cherish her legacy including husband Leroy Patton, only daughter Audrey Snipes, and grandson Nigel Snipes. She also leaves her Sisters: Lorrain (Al) Crosby, Peggy (Fred) Lincoln, Debbie (Dave) Reed, Camilla (Richard) Clarke Doremus, and Stephanie (Michael) Robinson. Jessie's extended family includes adopted daughters Alma (Roosevelt) Speight, E. Danielle (Brandon) Butler, and a host of loving nieces, nephews, cousins, and friends.

E. Danielle Butler
EvyDani Books, LLC
email us here

We extend our deepest condolences to the entire family of Mrs. Jessie Maple Patton. We are committed and dedicated to honoring her legacy. ~ BFCA
Matterport Scan - We've Gone 3D!

Can’t physically visit our office? How about a virtual visit instead? The BFCA office on IU Bloomington's campus was recently given a Matterport 3D scan courtesy of the Indiana University IU3D Team. Check out this unique interactive virtual tour, featuring our space, amenities, and several featured items from our archival collections, such as the item pictured below! (Simplex 35mm Projector donated by Jon and Jennifer Vickers from the Vickers Theatre and the collection of Kenneth Marks).

Click the link below and then the play button in the bottom left corner for an automated tour or click around and explore the space at your leisure. 

https://bfca.indiana.edu/about/virtual-tour.html

For more information about the BFCA, please visit our website www.bfca.indiana.edu. To subscribe to our blog, please visit our blog.
page [https://blogs.iu.edu/bfca/](https://blogs.iu.edu/bfca/) and click on “Subscribe” in the bottom right of the screen. Please consider ways to give, to continue our efforts and supporting our mission. We sincerely thank you all for your support. We would not be able to complete all of our wonderful programs and awesome events, without your help.

Warmest regards,
BFCA Interim Director and Staff