

Ground-breaking documentarian DA Pennebaker dies

By Richard Phillips
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D.A. (Donn Alan) Pennebaker, one of the masters of American contemporary documentary filmmaking, died last week, a few weeks after his 94th birthday.

Known as “Penny” to his family and colleagues, Pennebaker leaves behind a legacy of more than 40 films and an enormous archive of unreleased material that will hopefully be seen in future releases by Chris Hegedus, his wife and life-long artistic collaborator.

Born in Illinois in 1925, the son of a commercial photographer, Pennebaker served in the Navy during World War II. After the war he studied and worked as an engineer before directing his first film—*Daybreak Express*—a five-minute work about a subway station in New York and set to music by Duke Ellington—in 1953.

As the 1998 article below explains, it was the beginning of a more than 60-year career and one that set new standards in documentary filmmaking. Pennebaker pioneered the use of handheld cameras and eschewed narrations or editorial comment to achieve an immediacy and closeness not previously achieved in documentary filmmaking.

With early collaborators—*LIFE* magazine editor and journalist Robert Drew and Richard Leacock—he developed “observational” political documentaries that in the beginning were sold to the television networks. *Primary* [1960], the first of these films, covered the Democratic primary race that year between John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey in Wisconsin.

The reserved and quietly spoken Pennebaker will probably be most remembered for his music documentaries, which charted the emergence of contemporary rock, particularly during the mid-1960s and early 1970s. These are important cultural records of that period.

Pennebaker’s *Monterey Pop* (1968) and the performances of Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Otis Redding, the Mamas & the Papas, Jefferson Airplane, The Who and others are some of the most electrifying live performances captured on film from that era.

Behind-the-scenes tour footage and concerts by Bob Dylan (*Don’t Look Back* [1967]), John Lennon (*Sweet Toronto* [1971]) and David Bowie (*Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* [1973]) and a long list of other musicians, including Depeche Mode, Little Richard and Chuck Berry, were filmed by Pennebaker.

The recipient of numerous awards, Pennebaker was given a lifetime achievement Oscar in 2013, in recognition of his contribution to documentary filmmaking. In the 1998 Sydney Film Festival article below, Pennebaker and Hegedus speak about their careers, filmmaking experiences and artistic influences.

This is the last in the series of articles on the 45th Sydney Film Festival first published 12 August 1998.

“Pennebaker and Hegedus: Seminal figures in American documentary film”

American documentary filmmakers, D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus were featured guests at this year’s Sydney Film Festival. The

festival screened several of Pennebaker’s ground-breaking early films—*Primary* (1960), on the John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey battle for the Wisconsin primary; *Jane* (1962), about a Broadway musical; and the first-ever rock documentary, *Don’t Look Back* (1966), starring Bob Dylan.

In 1976, Pennebaker began his professional and personal relationship with Chris Hegedus. Hegedus, a camera operator at the University of Michigan Burns Unit, moved to New York in the mid-70s and began making avant-garde art films before meeting Pennebaker. During their twenty-year partnership, the two filmmakers have made scores of rock and jazz music films and several political documentaries including, *The Energy War* (1978), *Town Bloody Hall* (1979) and *The War Room* (1993). Many of these, including their most recent film, *Moon over Broadway*, a documentary on the production of a Broadway musical starring Carol Burnett, were screened at the festival.

Pennebaker is a seminal figure in modern American documentary filmmaking, and credited, along with Richard Leacock and Albert and David Maysles, as a founder of “direct cinema.”

“Direct cinema” emerged in the 1960s out of new developments in filmmaking technology. Lightweight, professional-quality 16-mm cameras and new sound recording equipment provided new mobility and high quality on-location sound. The invention of crystal synchronization in 1960 and later radio microphones made it possible for the camera and sound crew to cast off the restrictive cables that had tied them together like Siamese twins and hampered their movement. The invention of high-speed colour film in the late sixties and multi-tracking sound editing equipment further revolutionised documentary filmmaking.

“Direct cinema” provided a realism, honesty and immediacy not previously seen in documentaries. The new genre was defined not just by its technical finesse but a different aesthetic—its non-interventionist approach. There was no commentary or voice-over narration—people and events spoke for themselves. This to a great extent directed the evolution of each film.

Pennebaker and Hegedus introduced each of their films at the festival. I asked Pennebaker at one screening to comment on his first film, *Daybreak Express*:

“After I graduated from college, having done an engineering degree, I went back to my early sources—my records—and decided I would start making films with this music. I had no exact idea of what I wanted but I’d collected a lot of 78 jazz records in my youth. All the best jazz players were from Chicago but they were never played on the radio, so in order to hear them you had to buy what was known as ‘race records.’ RCA labelled these with a yellow label. You could get them for a nickel.

“*Daybreak Express* was my first film and was based on a Duke Ellington record. I knew Duke very slightly through a friend and I showed him the film. He said, ‘kid, you can have the record.’ In fact, he arranged with RCA for that.

“The film was made with a certain amount of youthful exuberance. It’s

a short film, only five minutes, and is a ride on the elevators in the New York subway. The subway was laced with these elevators and wonderful pictures of laughing girls running through the snow and other images. It was just such an amazing collection of 20th century craziness.

“After I’d shot the film I didn’t know what to do with it. It was shot on drugstore film that you buy over the counter and I didn’t know how to edit properly or anything. So I had the film around for many years and would show it on a projector and play the record. When Ricky Leacock and I went into business we decided we needed an official film to release and so we put *Daybreak Express* on 35mm.

“Somebody told me to take it to the Paris Theatre in New York. I took it over, they looked at it, said it wasn’t bad and offered to buy it for \$50. I thought, there is a lot more to it than that, and asked them whether they rented films. They said they did, for \$25 a week, and would show it before the main feature, but it might only last a week. I thought it over and decided to rent it to them. By some quirk of fate a movie came to the Paris Theatre called *The Horse’s Mouth*. It was so popular they screened it for a year, so my short film was shown for about a year.”

Pennebaker explained the difficulties facing filmmakers in the late 1950s at another screening.

“The initial documentaries were silent with voice-overs or fake sounds added at the sound studios. The question for us was how to get synch sound.

“We were convinced this would make all the difference but the equipment did not exist. The system had never been designed to accommodate what we were trying to do. We had to develop cameras that you didn’t plug in the wall, and synchronised recorders that could carry enough tape to run with two or three rolls of film. The equipment we developed was very primitive but it was our attempt to tackle the problem of filming people in the real world.

“With *Primary* we did not have an editing machine. We were literally splicing film and tape together on a piece of wood with pins in it. All we had was a viewer with a synchroniser, which you could slow down or speed up and bring the sound into synch. Some of the shots were even taken with a wind up camera, but we figured out how to put it into synch.

“The most extraordinary epiphany of this whole process, and we never got over it, was getting synch sound for the first time. It was like lifting a veil. When we sat there at night in the hotel room projecting the film, at first the sounds would be way out then they would gradually match up. As the words began to fall out of their mouths in synch, you stopped looking, listening and bringing both elements together in your brain. It was extraordinary. No one had ever done this before in documentaries and we all knew we had achieved something important.”

I asked Pennebaker to comment on his work with French director Jean-Luc Godard in 1968.

“I ran into Godard in Paris—he used to hang around the Cinémathèque which had shown a couple of our films. He saw *Primary* and wanted to make a film with us. The idea was that he would go to a small town in France and he would rig it up with all kind of things happening: people would fall out of windows, people would shoot other people, whatever. We would arrive one day on a bus or something with our cameras and then film whatever we saw happening around us.

“Anyway, this idea never happened, but then somebody at PBS, in those days it was known as PBL, decided they wanted Jean-Luc to make a film in America and we were brought in. It was to be a combination of what Godard called documentary and real life.

“Jean-Luc was very keen to make this film, which he wanted to call ‘One AM’ (One American Movie). Godard was, and still is, one of my very favourite filmmakers but he was convinced that America was about to burst into revolution like the student uprisings in France in 1968. He kept saying we have to hurry and get to California because this is where it is going to begin.

“I asked, what was going to begin? ‘The revolution you fool,’ he told me. I said I didn’t think so, but we sort of went along with it. We interviewed [Tom] Hayden and others, including Eldridge Cleaver, who had just written *Soul on Ice*. Cleaver was deciding what to do with the rest of his life at that point. We fell into his clutches and paid him some huge amount of money to interview him. I think this was the money that got him into Mexico and then North Africa.

“Of course Godard was very serious about the prospects of revolution in America but towards the end, when he realised that he misjudged everything, he lost interest in the film and abandoned it.

“At that point I was left with a contract that said ‘you will deliver’ by a certain date a film by you and Godard. So, I had to finish it. I called it ‘One PM’ or ‘One Perfect Movie.’ Godard referred to it as ‘One Pennebaker Movie.’ I think there is a copy of it at the Cinémathèque in Paris but I don’t think it is one of Jean-Luc’s favourite movies.

“It’s interesting though because it provides a sense of the strange mood in America at that time. It was very peculiar because it wasn’t just Jean-Luc, there were numbers of people who did think something was going to erupt in America. Nixon was right to be paranoid.”

At another screening Pennebaker commented briefly on early critical response to his films.

“Various people began calling our films ‘direct cinema,’ others called it *cinéma vérité*, but nobody really knew what to call them. Some even called it ‘fly-on-the-wall’ but this wasn’t right, at least I never wanted to be a fly on the wall, it’s a kind of disgusting idea.”

Taking up this issue Chris Hegedus said: “I am sure there are rules in documentary film making, but we do not know what they are. Certainly there are no special rules for dialogue-driven plot and this is what most interests us about these films. We are not journalists and don’t try to distance ourselves. We look for how the various characters interact and determine what happens.”

Pennebaker added: “Maybe there are filmmakers who can make films about people they don’t like but I’m not one of them. I have to like the people and the work that they do. In any case it’s foolish to think they are never aware of the camera. We like to think that we take a cautious outside view, but what happens is that you become a fan of the people you are filming.”

Chris Hegedus explained the difficult situation facing serious documentary filmmakers in the US:

“It’s very hard to make independent documentary films in the US. Government funding has just about dried up and most television outlets are not interested in the films we want to produce. Television is celebrity based and to get any financial backing from them you have to select a subject considered virtuous, or one that they mandate in their corporate foundation. We don’t usually make these kinds of films.”

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