



BRILLIANT

He knew President Kennedy, was a great pal of Truman Capote, and captured the Rolling Stones and Beatles on film.

He was the man behind the film, *Grey Gardens*, which is now the Tony-winning toast of Broadway.

Considered by most to be the godfather of the modern documentary film, Albert Maysles, along with his brother, David, practically invented the art form. Here, in an exclusive to *Brilliant* magazine, Maysles gives insight into his career as a filmmaker that's inspired three generations of film auteurs.

by LANCE AVERY MORGAN
Photography COURTESY OF ALBERT MAYSLES

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I had parallel filmmaking careers,” remarked Norman Mailer about Albert Maysles. “He’s a fascinating man and he’s quite smart.” Of course, Norman Mailer, 84, arguably one of the most prolific writers of the 20th century, was a contemporary of Maysles, 80. Maysles’ life has been so intertwined with notable political and entertainment figures that he would be intimidating if his demeanor and sensibility weren’t so kind and his passion for documentary filmmaking so full of soul and purpose.

A trim, compact man given to wearing a black cashmere sweater and gray trousers, Maysles has a thick shock of silver hair and his signature black horn-rimmed glasses sit neatly on his face as he reflects on his career when I caught up with him at the New Milestones Film Festival benefitting the Travis County Mental Health and Mental Retardation. He was there surrounded by fans who revere him. Even French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard once called Maysles “the best American cameraman.”

Maysles’ career was an integral part of a one-two punch. His brother, David Maysles, who died in 1987, was the soundman and supervising editor while Albert was the cinematographer, and both shared directorial duties. Their films were revolutionary in the 1950s and set the path for generations of filmmakers. In their documentaries, the drama of human life unfolds as is, without sets, scripts or narration. Before the Maysles brothers, documentary filmmaking usually contained a voiceover to guide the viewer’s journey. Maysles broke that tradition by letting the story play out naturally... sometimes tragically so.

“In fiction, the director is God, and in non-fiction God is the director,” Maysles likes to quote suspense filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock. When asked about comparing his work to the current reality television craze, he comments, “Reality TV is not real at all. It’s controlled and there’s very little value to be gained from that because they focus on the dysfunctional. It reflects the mistake that a story being told has to have a conflict with good versus bad. In my films, we just tell the story.” When asked if he considers himself to be voyeuristic, he vehemently denies it and shares, “I’m a dedicated observer, just noticing what people are doing and recording their lives with respect and discretion. My guiding force is to see what’s happening honestly. That’s sometimes difficult for some people to comprehend—the difference between exploitation and an honest attempt to understand.”

Born to Eastern European Jewish immigrants in Boston, he understood persecution from an early age. Knowing that his education could be a factor of self improvement, he graduated from Syracuse and Boston Universities. Maysles says, “I started out as a psychologist and always liked to listen instead of talk. It helped me become a keen observer and that has served me well.” He made his first film in 1955 when he took a 16mm camera to Russia to film patients at several mental hospitals and the resulting film, *Psychiatry in Russia*, started him down the path to creating modern cinema verité.

In 1960, Maysles and a team of filmmakers went where only news crews were used to going—backstage of the Kennedy presidential campaign. In *Primary*, the film focused on Kennedy’s road to the White House, while campaigning against Hubert Humphrey in the Wisconsin primary race, a pivotal primary because it was Humphrey’s home state. “There’s a part of that film where I captured Kennedy’s point of view by holding the camera above the back of his head as he was passing through the crowds,” says Maysles. “I enabled the viewer to feel what it was really like to be him in that situation with so many people.” With its ground-breaking, no-frills technique, the film gives equal time to Humphrey, but it’s readily apparent that Kennedy’s magnetism and the calm campaign-trail grace of his wife Jacqueline would lead them to an eventual White House win. It aired as an ABC news special and is considered by many to have been a deciding factor in Kennedy’s defeat over Nixon in the 1960 election.

And when the British invaded the United States... the British bands that is, the Maysles brothers were there to record it on film. Their forays into the world of music ranges from *The Beatles in the USA* (1964) to *Gimme Shelter* (1970) starring

the Rolling Stones. *The Beatles in the USA* covers the breathless reception of the arrival of Beatlemania to the states, as well as the band’s historical appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Also in the turbulent 1960s, the silver screen’s tough guy was the subject of *Meet Marlon Brando*. Then the Maysles set their sights on writer and social gadabout Truman Capote in the film, *With Love From Truman*, commissioned by National Educational Television. Capote,

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the literary set — and jet-set — phenomenon was interesting fodder for any filmmaker. With the recent biopic films on Capote that tried to capture his true essence, the Maysles film is a genuine glimpse into the man behind the legend. “As Capote came out of the screening room, he had tears in his eyes,” recalls Maysles. “He said it was the best thing ever done of its kind.” They filmed Capote in the Oak Room at the Plaza Hotel, one of his favorite venues, as well as other New York sites reflective of

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his idiosyncratic life, such as his home in Sagaponok and the Random House offices where he was interviewed by *Newsweek*. That project sparked a friendship that begat a coveted invitation for the Maysles

brothers to Capote's party of the century, his Black & White Ball in 1965, at Manhattan's Plaza Hotel.

The press that swirled around the party for a year leading up to it noted that only 500 guests were invited. The Maysles brothers made the guest list. It would be an understatement to say that Capote was the boy of the moment with his widely touted novel, *In Cold Blood*, being the best selling book of the year and his flamboyant interviews on the late night talk show circuit. It's interesting to note that the Maysles' approach to filmmaking, turning reality into art, mirrored Capote's literary point of view when he wrote *In Cold Blood*. "It was a great evening," says Maysles. "Everyone seemed to be there. Years later, after I met and married my wife, the subject of Truman's party came up, and, to both of our surprise, we were each there and we didn't know it at the time."

But how could the Maysles brothers top their Capote film? The answer came in the seminal film, *Salesman*, about Bible salesmen. The film captured the heartbreak of four unyielding door-to-door salesmen who deal with constant rejection from potential bible-buying customers, their homesickness and eventual burnout as they travel the country selling very pricey bibles to low-income Catholic families. Its Willy Loman-esque quality strikes a nerve with almost any viewer. "There are two extremes in filming," shares Maysles. "Exploitation on one end of the spectrum and overprotection on the other. We never had problems avoiding both extremes because of our respect for people."

After chronicling those subjects of modest means, the Maysles stepped back into the world of music with *Gimme Shelter*, which ranks, in many rock historian minds, as one of the best films, reflecting the drop-out generation of the 1960s. It's a film that wrapped up a very turbulent 1960s when the Rolling Stones and Jefferson Airplane gave a free concert in Northern California, east of Oakland at Altamont Speedway. About 300,000 people attended, and the organizers placed Hell's Angels in charge of security around the stage. With pool cues and knives on hand, Hell's Angels did as much damage as the troublemakers in the crowd. They spent the concert beating up spectators, killing one. Maysles' film juxtaposes performances, violence, Grace Slick and Mick Jagger's attempts to simmer things down, with close-ups of young listeners dancing and doing drugs. Not only is the concert and audience footage peerless, the film also takes a look at the Rolling Stones band members as they watch concert footage and reflect on what happened.



he Maysles' foray into pop culture may have approached its zenith in 1975 with the film, *Grey Gardens*. It is shabby gentility at its best, and perhaps, also at its most uncomfortable. Expert statistics point toward most Americans being three paychecks away from homelessness. This film illustrates how fortune and beauty can evaporate and the effects it can have on those who had plenty of both. Former New York socialite Edith Bouvier Beale, aunt to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and a one-time belle epoch beauty, was close to 80 when the film was made. She and her daughter, Edie, then in her mid-50s, comprise a pair of odd recluses. Complete with double-digit cats and raccoons, they live in Grey Gardens, a ghoulish, dilapidated 28-room mansion in East Hampton, New York. "We really hit it off with them, and they trusted us," says Maysles about the experience.

In the film, Edith is an eccentrically witty former singer. Her daughter, Edie, is verbose and dresses oddly with trademark ensembles that include scarf-like concoctions around her head. The women address the camera, talking over each other, moving from the present to events that happened decades before as if they'd just occurred. It's a tour de force look at the basics of mother-daughter relationships and the circumstance of having to make do. The documentary developed such a cult following that it was made into an off-Broadway play in 2005 and then became a Tony award-winning Broadway musical last season. That film project might best define Maysles' overall vision that, "documentary has to give us knowledge...and truth." The fictional film depiction of *Grey Gardens* is in the works. "We are talking to Jessica Lange and Drew Barrymore to star as the Edies," confides Maysles.

Truth in relationships is vital to Maysles. He had friendships with some of the most pivotal personalities of the past 50 years, including Muhammad Ali, Leonard Bernstein, Jimi Hendrix, Vladimir Horowitz, Wynton Marsalis and several hundred more. Among many other projects, Maysles teamed with the artist Christo and Jeanne Claude several times to document their artistic triumphs, including *Running Fence*, *Islands*, *Umbrellas* and several more, including most recently *The Gates* (of Central Park). Maysles' work has not gone unnoticed and over the years many accolades have been bestowed — The Emmys, The Academy Award nominations, the recognition from the Library of Congress. But to Maysles it has always been about the work...what shows up on the screen.

These days, Maysles is still working out of his Manhattan offices on a daily basis. Currently, he is sharing his inspiration on a multitude of projects. One of them, *In Transit*, is about trains as a metaphor for life. "I've had experiences on trains," says Maysles. "Even in childhood and back in 1944 when I went off to war. The film reminds me of my early



Filming "Beatles in the USA", mid-1960s



Mayles brothers filming "Gimme Shelter"



Mayles brothers with Truman Capote, mid-1960s



Filming "Salesman", 1960s