

## Ross Spears

Ross Spears has been making documentary films for more than twenty-five years and is considered one of the most accomplished documentary filmmakers now working in the United States. He has won such prestigious awards as a Lyndhurst Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Tennessee Governor's Awards in both the Arts and Humanities, and an Academy Award Nomination for Best Feature Documentary. William Sloan of the Museum of Modern Art wrote that "Spears has made a lasting and significant contribution to American film. All of his works possess a rare vigor and discipline that is unique."

The films of Ross Spears deal primarily with the history and culture of his native region, the American South. Spears was born in 1947 in Johnson City, Tennessee. His mother was a respected teacher in the public schools, and his father was a lumberman and the mayor of the town during the 1960's. Ross Spears graduated as valedictorian of his high school in 1965, as well as Tennessee state tennis champion.

Ross Spears attended Duke University in the late 1960's where, planning to become a doctor, he studied both Literature and Pre-Med. His mentors included the writers, Reynolds Price, Helen Bevington and Wallace Fowlie. While at Duke, Spears' interests shifted to movies and upon graduation, rather than enter Duke Medical School, he attended the film school of the University of North Carolina, where he made his first film, *Howard*, in collaboration with Jude Cassidy in 1971.

Moving to Los Angeles in 1972, Ross Spears studied filmmaking at the California Institute of the Arts, receiving an MFA degree in 1974. His mentors included Alexander Mackendrick, Terry Sanders, Pat O'Neill, Mark Harris, and Don Levy. As part of his filmwork at Cal Arts, Spears wrote a script for a documentary film on the life and work of his favorite writer, the novelist-poet-screenwriter-film critic, James Agee (1909-1955).

Encouraged by his advisor, the Academy Award-winning filmmaker Terry Sanders, Ross Spears decided to produce his film on the life of James Agee. To do so he moved back to the East and divided his time between New York City and Tennessee. Spears founded the James Agee Film Project in 1974 as a non-profit media organization that would produce films that might contribute to an understanding of the South and its culture. With the help of Mary Jane Coleman, founder of the Sinking Creek Film Celebration, he approached the Tennessee Arts Commission, which awarded the James Agee Film Project a small grant to create a film for the national Bicentennial in 1976. A few donations from family friends, particularly Barbara Shulman, a Tennessee arts patron, helped the project along.

Jude Cassidy, who was a modern dancer in New York at the time, worked as Associate Producer on *AGEE*. His friend from Cal Arts, Anthony Forma, was the cinematographer. Two friends from Duke days, John and Diane Jennings, worked on sets, costumes, and sound. Fellow East Tennessean and classical composer, [Kenton Coe](#), did the musical score. Paychecks were few, but enthusiasm for the project kept it moving even during the slowest times.

[AGEE](#) was completed in late 1979 and premiered at the newly renovated Bijou Theatre in James Agee's hometown, Knoxville, Tennessee. *AGEE* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary the following year. It remains the

only film biography of a major American writer to be so honored. AGEE also won a Blue Ribbon at the American Film Festival in 1980 and was honored by special screenings at the Museum of Modern Art, the Robert Flaherty Seminar, the Kennedy Center and the White House.

A book based on the film AGEE was published by Holt Rinehard and Winston in 1984. Entitled James Agee: a Life, Ross Spears and Jude Cassidy were co-editors. The eminent psychiatrist and critic Robert Coles wrote additional text. Copies of the book are still available through Agee Films.

As editing work on AGEE was being completed, Spears began work on [The Electric Valley](#), a feature documentary on the history of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the nation's largest energy producer and one of the most controversial federal agencies ever created. Having grown up in the Tennessee Valley, Spears had heard TVA stories all his life - stories of TVA "bringing light to a dark land" and stories of TVA the heartless bureaucracy.

Funding for The Electric Valley came from The American Film Institute, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Altogether, the research, scripting, production and editing of The Electric Valley was a three year project. The film premiered at Vanderbilt University in 1983. The Tennessee novelist and historian, Wilma Dykeman, narrated the film and Kenton Coe did the original music. Political scientist, Richard Couto, provided essential help in research and scripting. Melanie Maholick was the editor; Anthony Forma, the cinematographer, and Jude Cassidy, associate producer. Jamie Ross assisted with production and editing.

The Electric Valley was called the "biggest independent film of the year" by the Museum of Modern Art. It was shown at the American Film Festival, the Los Angeles Film Festival, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Kennedy Center. It was broadcast on PBS in 1984 and shown throughout the world at theatres, conferences and international television. It remains the only feature film to be made on this controversial agency, which the writer Julian Huxley called "the largest social experiment ever undertaken in a non-totalitarian country."

While travelling through the Tennessee Valley to research and film The Electric Valley, a region that extends from Mississippi to Virginia, Spears noticed that his conversations with TVA interviewees often shifted to the subject of the American Civil War. He enlisted the help of Jamie Ross, a Charlottesville based writer, to develop ideas for a project that would explore the ways in which the Civil War is a part of the American memory and character. Thus began a collaboration that would span four films and two decades. While Spears completed production of The Electric Valley, Jamie Ross began work on a film would explore the ways in which "the Past is part of the Present," not only in the South, but throughout the nation. The title Long Shadows comes from his grandmother's saying: "Old sins cast long shadows."

[Long Shadows](#), the legacy of the Civil War, was completed in 1987 and premiered at the Sinking Creek Film Celebration in Nashville, Tennessee, accompanied by a unique prologue in 3-D created from old stereocards taken during the Civil War itself. The film's cast included Jimmy Carter, Studs Terkel, John Hope Franklin, and Robert Penn Warren. The writer and associate producer, Jamie Ross, developed the initial treatment of the film and forged a fundraising network that including eleven state humanities committees. Additional funds for the film were provided by the [National](#)

[Endowment for the Humanities](#). Kenton Coe wrote the original music. Neil Means joined Ross Spears in the editing. *Film and History* called Long Shadows "a visual and aural treat - an historical tapestry that is gracefully, eloquently, and subtly done." Cineaste called it "a profound vision of the war's meaning for the nation's national identity." Special screenings included the Museum of Modern Art and PBS.

In 1987 Ross Spears returned to the works of James Agee. Working with Silvia Kersusan, Spears created [To Render a Life](#), a film which dramatizes Agee and Walker Evans' book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, one of the extraordinary books of the 20th century. Spears spent more than three years filming with Obea, Alice and Anita Glass, a family living near the edge of survival in one of the richest counties in America, creating a portrait that paralleled Agee and Evans' portrait of Alabama sharecroppers in 1936. James Agee's rich prose provides much of the text of the film.

In addition to creating a close look at a family living in poverty in America, *To Render a Life* explores the making of documentary art. It features interviews with accomplished documentarians such as filmmaker Fred Wiseman, photographers Alex Harris and Jim Hubbard, and writers Ted Rosengarten and Robert Coles.

*To Render a Life* premiered in January, 1992, as the opening event at a conference exploring documentary and social justice sponsored by Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies. In 1992 *To Render a Life* won a Blue Ribbon at the American Film Festival and the Crystal Heart Award at the Heartland Film Festival. It was also nominated "Best Documentary of the Year" by the International Documentary Association.

Stuart Klawans of *The Nation* wrote, "*To Render a Life* is one of the very few recent American films that made me glad I went to the movies." Georgia Brown of *The Village Voice* wrote, "Extraordinarily effective, both as an inquiry into the ethics of rendering lives and as a closer look at American poverty."

In January, 1992, Ross Spears filmed the initial interview in what was to become his most ambitious project to date - a trilogy of feature length films telling the history of modern Southern literature. Following a good luck habit of beginning a project by filming a friend, Spears interviewed the writer Reynolds Price at his home in Durham, North Carolina. More than a year of research, scripting and fundraising with the assistance of Jamie Ross then followed before filming began in earnest on the project entitled [Tell About the South](#).

Narrated by former Poet Laureate, Rita Dove, *Tell About the South* is a three-part series that tells the story of modern Southern Literature from its beginnings after World War I until the end of the Twentieth Century. Part One of the series, entitled *Tell About the South*, explores the 1920's and 1930's. Part Two of the series, entitled *Prophets and Poets*, deals with Southern Literature from 1940 until the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960's. Part Three of the series looks at Southern writers from the Civil Rights Movement until the present.

A particular goal of the series was to explore the writings of both black and white writers within the same historical context. In *Tell About the South* Spears made the point that Southern literature is the product of two overlapping cultures: African-American and European-American.

*Tell About the South* is the first comprehensive overview of Southern literature and features the work of writers such as William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Robert Penn Warren, Ralph Ellison, Eudora Welty, Jean Toomer, William Styron, Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor and others. In *Tell About the South* Ross Spears has been able to film nearly every major living Southern writer, including Eudora Welty, William Styron, Alice Walker, Shelby Foote, Lee Smith, Willie Morris, Wilma Dykeman, Mary Lee Settle, George Garrett, Albert Murray, Reynolds Price, Ernest Gaines, Margaret Walker and many more.

*Tell About the South* was filmed by Neil Means and Peter Hawkins. Kenton Coe composed the original music, and Catherine Dee and Silvia Kersusan were associate producers. Jamie Ross performed a crucial role in raising the initial funding for the series and by editing and reviewing scripts as the film progressed. In addition, She directed one of the key filmshoots and conducted the interview with author, Pat Conroy.

Alexandria Searls, David Minckler and Shannon Worrell worked as researchers, writers and editors. Principal funding for the series came from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional funding came from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Southern Humanities Media Fund, the state humanities councils of Tennessee, [Virginia](#), Mississippi, Kentucky, South Carolina and North Carolina, and the Tennessee Arts Commission.

Part One of *Tell About the South* premiered at the [Virginia Festival of the Book](#) in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1997 and was broadcast on [PBS](#) in August, 1998. Lewis Simpson, Editor emeritus of *The Southern Review* called the film "A great story about a remarkable group of storytellers told by another remarkable storyteller. Truly a landmark documentary."

Part Two of the series, entitled *Prophets and Poets*, premiered in March, 1999, at the Virginia Festival of the Book. In April, 1999, it was screened at the Festival of Southern Literature in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Part Three of the series premiered in Atlanta in February, 2000 at the Atlanta Center for the Performing Arts during a one-day Southern Literature Festival, sponsored by Georgia State University, in which all three parts of the trilogy were shown. *Booklist Magazine* named the series an EDITORS CHOICE. PBS screening of the series will take place in spring, 2001.

In collaboration with the producer, Jamie Ross, Ross Spears has completed a four-part series for primetime PBS on the natural and cultural history of the Appalachian mountains. [APPALACHIA: A History of Mountains and People](#) is the first environmental history series ever made about any region of America. It will be shown on PBS in the spring of 2009.

[APPALACHIA](#) was funded by a major grant from the National Science Foundation, as well as additional funds from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Cherokee Preservation Fund, the Southern Humanities Media Fund, the Appalachian Regional Commission, Humanities Tennessee, the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the Tennessee Arts Commission, and the humanities councils of West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Pennsylvania.

Ross Spears also has completed five personal, autobiographical works. In 1993 he completed the short film [An Afternoon with Father Flye](#), a portrait of Father James

Harold Flye, who was a lifelong friend to James Agee and a close friend to Ross Spears from 1973 until 1983. In 1998, with the assistance of the editor Alexandria Searls, he completed *Toddlin'*, a portrait of his son Nicholas Spears at age 27 months old, as well as several other short films, as part of a collection entitled *Once a Child*.

September 16, 2008