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Film History/Historiography

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I Remember Harlem

First aired on February 1, 1981 *I Remember Harlem* was a four-part series chronicling the history of that great neighborhood. From its origins as a Native American fishing village to one of the greatest African-American neighborhoods in the country Miles uses first-person interviews and archival footage to showcase the vibrancy and dynamism of Harlem. The series ran for four nights on WNET/13 in New York where it received critical praise from the New York Times. The film also went on to win several awards and is recognized as one of Miles' best films.

The project began in 1978 just after Miles' had completed his first film *Men of Bronze*. Miles received a grant from WNET's Independent Documentary Fund to produce a 90-minute film on the history of Harlem. As a native Harlemiter Miles had always been fascinated by: "The way things change and the way people forget the past."¹ Miles originally envisioned the film to

¹ Garisto, Leslie. "Some Positive Thinking about Harlem." New York Times, February 1, 1981, Late Edition (east Coast), <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed March 13, 2011).

be about his own remembrances of Harlem. He grew up on 126th street near the Apollo Theater. His mother ran a boarding house so he became familiar with some of the most prominent African-American musicians of the 1930's and 1940's. He was later given a job by the Apollo theater's projectionist who taught him how splice and rewind 35mm film.² Miles lived in Harlem for thirty years before his building was demolished when he later moved to Queens. But he frequently visited and conducted research at the Schomburg Institute for Research in Black Culture located at 135th st.

Miles was a methodical researcher and he began assembling photographs and footage of Harlem from the National Archives, the Schomburg, and Hearst Movietone (Positive). Miles was adept at using archival footage, but quickly ran into problems trying to find positive images of Harlem. He said in a New York Times interview:

Nearly every photo they'd pull out would have to do with people rioting...I'd ask, 'Don't you have any shots of everyday life - people going to school, going to church?' And they'd say, 'Gee, that's going to be hard to find.'³

However, Miles persisted compiling nearly 50 historic photos. He often walked the streets of Harlem stopping to speak with anyone over sixty. He would pull out a photo of a building or landmark and ask "Do you recognize this?"⁴ Miles collected these experiences and interviewed several Harlem residents for the film. As Miles interviewed residents he realized that every person he spoke to had a different memory or experience of Harlem. Miles also interviewed such notable Harlemites as James Baldwin and Gordan Parks. From these interviews

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Miles and his team realized that an hour and a half could not fully encompass the entire history of Harlem as well as the differing views of its residents. Miles and WNET approached the Station Program Cooperative (SPC) which had recently been given \$1 million dollars for use in minority programming. The SPC awarded Miles \$290,000 to continue *I Remember Harlem*.⁵ By the end of 1980 the film was completed. The four-hour program would run on four consecutive nights on WNET/13 as part of their "Non-Fiction Television" series.⁶

Miles' film was an effort by WNET/13 to appease Black leaders who had boycotted the showing of a Swedish film about Harlem. The film was thought to be too negative by residents even though a panel discussion followed the screening in a effort to balance the negativity.⁷ Miles' film paints a decidedly better picture of that neighborhood and ends on a hopeful note. While most reviewers found his documentary to be enlightening and informative. New York Times critic John O'Connor had this to say: "Mr. Miles has assembled a valuable document, providing insights not only into Harlem, but also into a major city and, indeed, into American history."⁸ However, not every critic was happy with the film. Billy Rowe, who writes a column

⁵ Garisto, Leslie. "Some Positive Thinking about Harlem." New York Times, February 1, 1981, Late Edition (east Coast), <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed March 13, 2011).

⁶ O' Connor, John. "TV Weekend; Harlem Recalled and a Visit to the Afghans." New York Times, January 30, 1981, Late Edition (east Coast), <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed March 13, 2011).

⁷ Garisto, Leslie. "Some Positive Thinking about Harlem." New York Times, February 1, 1981, Late Edition (east Coast), <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed March 13, 2011).

⁸ O' Connor, John. "TV Weekend; Harlem Recalled and a Visit to the Afghans." New York Times, January 30, 1981, Late Edition (east Coast), <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed March 13, 2011).

for *The Skanner* (a Portland newspaper), was unhappy with the message of the film. He also felt Miles left out significant historical moments and cites Clayton Riley, the screenwriter, as missing several key points. While he gives PBS an "A for Effort" Rowe ultimately thinks the film is "best forgotten."⁹

While Rowe makes some valid points it is important to remember that *I Remember Harlem* is not a documentary strictly based in fact. It is more based in memory, the memory of the residents who lived there and Miles' own experiences. Rowe seems to represent the lone voice of critical dissent as other reviews (even as late as 2001) applaud Miles' work and it seems that audiences today still find the film moving and informative.

Perhaps the most important thing about the film is the fact that it is about African-Americans. During a time when Hollywood films were moving back toward racial stereotypes and there was a lack of African-Americans in all levels of the film industry Miles represents an important milestone in African-American television history. He was the first African-American independent producer to work with WNET and all of his films were about the African-American experience, in the United States and abroad. Though he is perhaps not as recognizable as Henry Hampton, Miles' film provides a cultural record of African-American history at a time when African-Americans were literally being left off the screen.

⁹ Rowe, Billy. "Billy Rowe's Notebook: 'I Remember Harlem' is best forgotten." *The Skanner* (1975-1988), February 25, 1981, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed March 13, 2011).

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