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Postscript: Albert Maysles, 1926-2015

By Richard Brody
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The filmmaker Albert Maysles, one of the crucial artists of modern documentary filmmaking—or, simply, one of the most important filmmakers of the past half-century—died on Thursday night, at the age of eighty-eight.

I saw Maysles—or, rather, Al, since I had the privilege of knowing him casually—for the last time in September, at a memorial celebration of Robert Drew, the producer who, with "Primary," in 1960, revolutionized American documentary filmmaking. Al was one of the cameramen whom Drew brought onto the project (along with Ricky Leacock, Terence Macartney-Filgate, Bill Knoll, and D. A. Pennebaker) to film the campaigns of John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey for the Wisconsin primary. I discuss the film

in this clip; the first shot in it, one of the most justly famous creations in all documentary filmmaking, is Al's handiwork.

Al Maysles handled his camera with a fluid yet forthright, light yet ardent touch—from the start, he was a sort of Impressionist portraitist: he wanted to capture the most evanescent of appearances, because he saw that they contained and revealed the deepest of emotions and motives. He let his own eye and hand yield to his own impulses and inclinations because he wasn't, he knew, separate from the events that he filmed or isolated from the participants whom he filmed— rather, he was inextricably connected to them both.

In three features that he made between 1968 and 1975—"Salesman," "Gimme Shelter," and "Grey Gardens"—Al, working with his brother David (who recorded sound), revolutionized documentary filmmaking. ("Grey Gardens" opens today at Film Forum, in a new restoration.) At a uniquely flamboyant and performative moment in American life, the Maysles brothers collaborated closely with people who were performing for their intended audiences—and for the Maysleses themselves.

The Maysles brothers' underlying obsession was, in effect, something that wasn't there: the barrier between performance and life. They saw and captured the magic moment when the performer made electrifying, charismatic contact with the audience. For the Maysleses, the performer and the audience are as inseparable as the participants in a documentary and the documentarians. That's why, in their easy-going, humanistic, and graceful way, the Maysleses were among the exemplary modernists of the era, including themselves in the onscreen action and making their presence felt, physically as well as ethically, as audaciously as any avant-gardist.

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I met Al in his studio on West Fifty-fourth Street, in late 1984 or early 1985. I was working for Tibor Hirsch, a director best known for commercials, who was turning his attention to documentaries and hired me to work on them. To view and cut the 16mm.-film footage that Tibor shot, he rented an editing room from the Maysleses; the cataloguing and the editing were my responsibility, so I spent lots of time at the studio, and Al was frequently there. When these projects were being wrapped up, I mentioned to Al that I was taking a job as an assistant producer with an ad agency. Soon thereafter,

Al called me at the agency: he told me that he kept his studio afloat by filming TV commercials, and he wanted to come up to the office to bring over a copy of his commercial reel. Of course, I invited him over and was thrilled to see him, but I was also profoundly embarrassed: I was in my mid-twenties, a young assistant producer, and this director, one of the handful I admired most of all, was there pitching me his work when I felt that any agency should pitch itself to him and pray that he accepted. Naïve of me, I know; what I didn't realize was that there had been a gap in his work at that point—he hadn't made a feature since "Running Fence" (1977).

Things picked up for him immediately thereafter, and the last thirty years of his life were a time of unremitting production. But when Al came to my office, he brought, along with his reel, a great gift, which I cherish to this day: a cassette of his 1966 film "Meet Marlon Brando," in which the Maysleses film Brando being interviewed by journalists for a press junket relating to the release of the film "Morituri." Brando overturns the process and turns each interview into a sublime and riotous performance; it's the role of a lifetime as well as a documentary portrait worthy to stand alongside Shirley Clarke's "Portrait of Jason," from the same year.

Al Maysles developed his art in the time of one filmmaking revolution, he made another, and he has had a crucial hand in fostering a third, which is ongoing and is centered on New York right now. The credits for his film "Iris," which was screened at the New York Film Festival last year and will be released next month, include the name of another cinematographer, Sean Price Williams, who, in turn, is the cinematographer for many of the best and most significant independent films of the past decade, fiction and documentary—including "Frownland," "Yeast," "Fake It So Real," "The Color Wheel," "Young Bodies Heal Quickly," "Listen Up Philip," the Safdie brothers' forthcoming "Heaven Knows What" and Alex Ross Perry's new feature, "Queen of Earth." Sean worked with Al Maysles for many years and emphasizes the importance of that work in his own career. Al Maysles's legacy endures in his own films, in the films of others, and in movies yet to be made.

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