



DID YOU WONDER WHO FIRED THE GUN?

A TRAVIS WILKERSON FILM

SYNOPSIS

Alabama, 1946. S.E. Branch, the filmmaker's great-grandfather, murdered Bill Spann, a black man. The murder has become hidden family lore and when Wilkerson sets out to unravel the mystery, he encounters obstacle upon obstacle, destroyed records and everyone refusing to talk. He's accused of bringing shame upon the family, shaking up old trouble nobody wants. The ghosts are real in Alabama. This isn't a White Savior story. It's a White Nightmare story.

TRAVIS WILKERSON USA **2017** 90 MINUTES



FILMMAKER BIO

A chance meeting in Havana with legendary Cuban film propagandist Santiago Alvarez changed the course of Travis Wilkerson's life. He now makes films in the tradition of the "third cinema," wedding politics to form in an indivisible manner. In 2015, Sight & Sound called Wilkerson "the political conscience of American cinema." His films have screened at scores of venues and festivals worldwide, including Sundance, Toronto, Locarno, Rotterdam, Vienna, Yamagata, the FID Marseille and the Musée du Louvre. His best-known work is an agit-prop essay on the lynching of Wobbly Frank Little called "An Injury to One," named one of the best avant-garde films of the decade by Film Comment. His most recent fiction feature, "Machine Gun or Writer?" premiered at Locarno 2015 and was awarded Best International Feature at DokuFest (Kosovo). It has since screened worldwide and was recognized as one of the finest films of the year on numerous lists including La Furia Umana and DesistFilm. His writings on film have appeared in Cineaste, Kino!, and Senses of Cinema. He has taught filmmaking at the University of Colorado and Film Directing at CalArts, and was the inaugural Visiting Fellow of Media Praxis in the Pomona College Media Guild. Presently, he is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Film at Vassar College. He is also the founding Editor of Now: A Journal of Urgent Praxis.



REVIEWS

The Village Voice

"It's hard not to experience [it] and not get shivers up your spine - from fear, from anger, and from the beauty of Wilkerson's filmmaking."

Bilge Ebiri

Artforum

"one of the strongest works in a chilling Sundance Film Festival."

Amy Taubin

Film Comment

"More than a mining of the director's ugly family history, it's closer to a public exorcism, in which Wilkerson personally owns up to the sins of his kin while symbolically standing in for the sins of his country and race."

Eric Hynes

Sight and Sound

"one of the most powerful reckonings in recent American cinema."

Jordon Cronk

The New Yorker

"Genre-expanding... It fills the current American landscape with the hatred, oppression, and violence that also scars its history. In effect, the film's story is of the ongoing political coverups that amplify ongoing political crimes, the S. E. Branches who are living today and the Bill Spanns who are dying. It's an enormous story, one that, in the telling, nearly effaces Wilkerson's presence onstage. With the documentary's many byways of unre-solved family conflict and stifled memory, it could be twice its seventy-minute running time, but Wilkerson's purpose appears to be less a matter of personal history than of personal confrontation with history—and a quest for the personal basis of political action."

Richard Brody

Screen Daily

"The feelings of guilt, shame and anger shape Did You Wonder? into an intense, hypnotic experience."

Allan Hunter

The New York Times

"Directed by the resolutely independent American filmmaker Travis Wilkerson, this nonfiction movie recounts the 1946 murder of a black man by one of his white relatives. Serving as the movie's narrator — and making the expressive most of his deep, darkly insinuating sepulchral voice — Mr. Wilkerson sifts through the personal and the political, travels down eerily lonely Alabama byways and deep into anguished history. The result is an urgent, often corrosive look at America's past and present through the prism of family, patriarchy, white supremacy and black resistance.."

Manohla Dargis

STATEMENT TO THE NEW YORK F.F.

AS PRESENTED TO ACCOMPANY THE SCREENINGS AT THE 2017 NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL

It's a strange sensation when my work is included in significant forums. I make very modest films. I really regard myself as nearer to an amateur filmmaker. As such, as the origins of the word suggest, I'm offering a version of my love to the films I make. I'm also offering the second most sacred thing we can offer: my labor.

This time I offered my love and my labor to a film that I wished somehow to be corrective. A film about the worst of my family.

I didn't do this simply to be provocative or masochistic even, but rather because the only thing I believed I might be able to offer the Spann family, and to the community in which he lived, whether intact or destroyed - the sincerest acknowledgment I could that what SE Branch did was wrong, part of a long history of abusive behavior towards those in positions of lesser power than he. In Alabama, in the 1940's, this meant he directed his abuse and violence against black people first and foremost, but also against women of all races. I discovered how deeply interconnected these specific forms of oppression were.

It seems to me pretty clear that if you can't take meaningful account of oppression if you can't name and confront it; if you can't make your position on it clear, you allow it to go on. This is as true for a country as it is for a family. I've long believed that US society hasn't been honest about itself, its abuses, its militarism. And I'm also convinced the present moment we find ourselves in is a result of that failure.

But everything begins in the family. And so I tried to deal with mine.

INTERVIEW IN HYPERALLERGIC

After the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012, the filmmaker Travis Wilkerson began thinking more and more about a family legend. In 1946, S.E. Branch — the great-grandfather everybody told Wilkerson he resembled as a child — shot and killed Bill Spann, an unarmed African-American man. The reason why remains a mystery. Branch was charged with first-degree murder, but somehow the charges disappeared. Equipped with a variety of materials — a newspaper clipping about the murder, old home movies, Spann's death certificate, stories from neighbors and relatives — Wilkerson brought his camera down to Dothan, Alabama to begin facing what happened all those years before.

Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?, which will screen on September 29 and October 1 as part of the New York Film Festival, is more than a cold-case investigation. Wilkerson is less concerned with the process of gathering information than in confronting the emotional impact this story has had beyond his family. When he attempts to find where Spann was buried, the information cannot be found. His journey breaks off to include an interview with Ed Vaughn, a local civil rights activist, which leads Wilkerson to detail the forgotten nearby roots of Rosa Parks's early activism. What he follows is a societal cycle of purposeful forgetting, of which Wilkerson does not remove himself, that continues today. *Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?* is necessarily polemical in a way few other films are at the moment.

In a recent conversation, Wilkerson talked about the ambivalence he sometimes felt while telling this story, the struggle of working with a limited amount of factual evidence, and how he dealt with a story that offers no catharsis.

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Craig Hubert: Did you have hesitations about making this film?

Travis Wilkerson: Sure. Whenever I work on something it usually begins with some kind of a question I want to ask, and I don't necessarily know if it will develop into a project. But I have also been making films for long enough that it often does. So I'm always thinking of what the larger ramifications will be for me and my family, for individual relationships. A number of times while I was involved in it I had really ambivalent feelings about it at those moments as well. There were moments where I felt a critical language directed toward me in terms of the sense of being disloyal to the family, so to speak, really stung and made me think about what I was doing. But I would also talk it out with other people who were involved in this process — my mom, my siblings, one of my aunts. It always felt like the most loyal thing I could do in regards to the family was to be sincere and honest about what I believed in and what I thought was right and wrong. That was an expression of fidelity to family values too, even if they were not always enacted as such.

CH: At the beginning of the process of making this film, did you have a place you felt you needed to arrive at?

TW: When I undertake a project, and I'm conscious at a certain moment that I'm working on a project, I always think it's important and very ethical to have a fairly clear sense of what you're developing, altering, and pivoting...

INTERVIEW IN HYPERALLERGIC

but nonetheless a genuine position on what you're making. I don't think to hide behind a project in terms of one's intent or views is a more ethical position at all. So I definitely had a notion that I wished to have a critical outlook.

But at the same time, I go where the project takes me. I may have a view about that journey, I may have a critical outlook to the journey, but I definitely try for it to be a journey. And this film, more than any other, by far, the chronology is accurate to the process more or less. There are of course small licenses taken for storytelling purposes. But fundamentally it follows the chronology of the experience, from a real lack of awareness to all of the facts I'm ever able to gain, which is fairly early on, to the power of the emptiness. Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun? (image courtesy Travis Wilkerson)

CH: The film deals with the absence of facts about what your great-grandfather did in really interesting ways. Can you talk about the balance between what is there and what is not?

TW: The most important piece of evidence was the original newspaper article, which is the closest that we get to any kind of formal accusation, so to speak, with any kind of narrative account [of the murder]. Then there is the death certificate of the person who was killed, which has a lot of numbers and facts, a lot of specific things that ended up shaping where I went and what I tried to find. Beyond that, there were not many other facts to uncover. People were either not willing to share them or they had been erased. I encounter this in every single project I've done because I'm interested in certain marginalized or neglected or forgotten pieces of history that I think are significant. I think we have a naive notion about how much facticity and how much documentary evidence of things really exist, especially if they were really suppressed or oppressed. What I encounter over and over again is that there is a tremendous absence of information, and then what we can do with that absence is try to make sense of the absence itself, use the absence as a form of evidence.

CH: Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun? was originally presented as a live performance. I'm curious why you initially decided on that form for this project, how it came to be a single-channel video (the way I watched it), and some of the changes that occurred during that transition.

TW: I came to the project in a very roundabout way. I had received a grant from Creative Capital to work on this project and they have a central element in their process where, on two different occasions, you come to what they call retreats and you're one of some 20 to 40 different artists, maybe even slightly more than that, who present these seven-minute excerpts of their work. They prefer some version of live sharing with images accompanying as opposed to simply showing a clip from a film, for example. And when I went to it and started watching others, I quickly realized why — in that room, with a person sharing, in the same physical space as you, it had a different electric charge than the people who were showing a clip and sitting down. It had a completely different presence. So on the first retreat, I had prepared a short little voice over and at a certain point, I got emotional. It was the first time I had even presented the project in any kind of context publically, and I was in this big room with all these people. I started spontaneously leading those who would participate in a chant of the man's name who was killed, Bill Spann. It was very abrupt and I don't even know now what led me to do it, but as soon as I sat down, I knew it did something different. It's a different kind of commitment on the part of the...

INTERVIEW IN HYPERALLERGIC

artist to be in the room and make the proclamation with sincerity.

The following year, I had to do it again. I planned to just show a clip, but the audio didn't work because of some mistake I made while uploading her material. I had to make a voice over again, but this time without any notes. It was completely spontaneous, and it had, again, this effect of opening it up for me. So then I thought, let's see what happens if I try to do the entire thing that way. I did it at a few film festivals, where it was closer to two hours and physically very, very tiring. It's tiring and weird and you feel embarrassed and ashamed. I didn't enjoy it at all; I found it very humbling and humiliating. I turned to the single-channel version simply because there was no way for me to keep doing it like that. It was the only way for me to disseminate it more broadly. I think the film does its own thing and gives people a little more space to get frustrated and disagree because I'm not in the room and challenging them. It's more open to the viewer, perhaps, but less charged.

Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun? (image courtesy Travis Wilkerson)

CH: Since the project has been completed have your thoughts about what happened changed in any way? Not a moment of catharsis — the film is clear that no such moment can occur — but some kind of new understanding?

TW: No, not really. I'm really touched that people are moved by the story, as much as they have been because it does have a confrontational element. The issue of catharsis I thought about a lot because, I thought, what happens if I do encounter people who want to talk to me from the family and they are really kind? And we have this moment on screen where there's this healing? I thought, well, if that happens it would be beautiful and I would embrace it. But I didn't want to depend on it because that also seemed in a way false to all of these other incidents that don't have any catharsis. What is the catharsis anyway? Someone in my family, more or less, destroyed another family. How can I possibly calculate what the healing can be out of that except for the gesture of saying that it was wrong and hope trying to stop it from happening again? Which, obviously, is not happening at all. How can I be a positive presence in the world as a member of this family? I don't feel like I've solved that puzzle yet.

STILLS



STILLS



CREDITS + LINKS + CONTACT

CREDITS

DIRECTOR/WRITER/EDITOR/CINEMATOGRAPHER

TRAVIS WILKERSON

FUNDING

CREATIVE CAPITAL

CANADA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS

LINKS

STILLS

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/extremelow/albums/72157659745652160>

TEASER

<https://vimeo.com/226573699>

FILMMAKER'S WEBSITE

<https://www.traviswilkersonfilms.com>

CONTACT

exlow@mac.com