The Life and Legacy of James Blue
Oregon Filmmaker
Papers, films, and tapes of award-winning director James Blue ’53 gifted to UO Libraries

By Jason Stone

MAY, 1952. Theater marquees are touting the Eugene, Oregon engagement of MGM’s latest Technicolor, swords-and-sandals epic. Quo Vadis—shot on location in Rome with a cast of Hollywood stars, 30,000 extras, 32,000 costumes, ten hand-carved chariots, a whole pride of lions, and a then-astronomical budget of $7.6 million—is already a box office hit nationwide. Released the previous November, it garnered eight Academy Award nominations and ranked as the highest-grossing film of 1951.

But something unexpected happened when Quo Vadis came to Eugene. In our neck of the woods, the blockbuster that Life magazine touted “the most colossal ever” would not become the cinematic event of the season. Improbably, it got upstaged by a silent, black-and-white, 8mm film that had been shot over several weekends at impromptu locations around the University of Oregon campus. The filmmakers all were undergraduates. Props: popcorn, dry ice, a smoked mackerel, and a tube of toothpaste. Cast members: four. Total budget: $40.

In an era when “student films” were still mostly unheard of, this production—a parody of Laurence Olivier’s Hamlet—attracted much curiosity. An audience of 2,000 crowded the UO Student Union ballroom for the film’s debut. On hand was the project’s mastermind, producer-director-cameraman Jim Blue, a speech and theater major from Portland. As the silent footage screened, he provided a musical soundtrack via record player and narrated through a microphone.
By all accounts, Blue’s comedic riff on The Bard was a hit. “They laughed at Hamlet!” the national magazine *Movie Makers* reported. “Using a minimum of photographic equipment and a maximum of ingenuity, a group of Eugene, Oregon amateur filmers have gone a long way toward proving that ‘Home Movies Are Better than Ever.’”

A decade later, the same young director would make another auspicious premier. This time it was in the south of France. Filmed amidst the Algerian war for independence and featuring a cast of non-actors, James Blue’s hybrid “docu-drama” *Les Oliviers de la Justice* (“The Olive Trees of Justice”) was awarded the Critics’ Prize at the 1962 Festival de Cannes.

In April 2015, the University of Oregon Libraries was pleased to announce that the personal papers, media, and collected production materials of UO alumnus James Blue ’53 have found a permanent home in our Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA).

“The library regards it as a significant honor that we have been selected to steward and provide access to the material legacy of this important and award-winning filmmaker,” said Dean of Libraries and Philip H. Knight Chair Adriene Lim. “Oregon helped give James Blue his start, but his immense talent and groundbreaking work soon earned him international acclaim.”

The James Blue Papers are a gift of the Blue family. In addition to rare prints of Blue’s films—including the UO production of *Hamlet* and award-winning works like *The March* (1963) and *A Few Notes on Our Food Problem* (1968)—the collection consists of the filmmaker’s personal papers, production materials, photographs, correspondence, sound recordings, and more. This acquisition enables the UO Libraries to begin redressing the veil of anonymity which has threatened to obscure the director’s work in the years after his death.

Richard Herskowitz, chair of the UO’s James Blue Research Interest Group, believes that a change in perception is imminent. “When they can finally see his work, I think a lot of people are going to be asking themselves: How did we not know about this great American filmmaker?”

"AT ONE TIME, NO DOUBT," almost everybody who cared about cinematic arts knew the name Blue. While he lived, James Blue (1930–1980) was internationally recognized not only as a groundbreaking documentarian, but also as an educator, actor, film historian, and advocate for experimentation in the non-fiction form. He shot films in...
several languages, on five different continents. He received a Ford Foundation grant (1964), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1967), and an Academy Award Nomination for Best Documentary Feature (1968). His film *The March*, capturing the August, 1963 Civil Rights march on Washington, D.C. that culminated with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, was named to the National Film Registry in 2008 and earmarked for permanent preservation by the National Archives in 2013—placing it among the most honored and culturally relevant motion pictures in our nation’s history.

Behind this highly accomplished work was a complicated man. Listening to his friends and colleagues talk about Blue, it can be difficult to reconcile that their various impressions were all inspired by the same individual. However, the people who knew him best insist that these apparent contradictions are, in fact, the keys to unravelling his complex persona.

“James was an infuriating person: self-absorbed, loathe to accept criticism, autocratic,” recalls Janice Blue, who was married to the director for six tumultuous years in the 1970s. “He was also one of the innocents of the world, with a breath-taking sweetness and guilelessness.”

“Jim was always an outsider looking in,” the director’s brother, Richard Blue reflects. “Especially after our family moved from Oklahoma to Portland in 1942. From age 12 to about 16, he was unhappy, angry, rebellious. I think this alienation had a profound effect on his sensibility and empathy for people in other cultures, especially those who were isolated and powerless.”

This connection was not lost on observers of his day. Paul Sharits—a pioneer of “structural films” in the 1970s—noted: “While most documentary films intend to convince us of their veracity/validity, Jim’s work has the sense of probing, searching, and questioning.”

**EVEN NOW, DECADES REMOVED** from the cultural context in which they were created, Blue’s films retain this atmosphere of ardent yet broad-minded questing. Unfortunately, too few people in recent times have had the opportunity to savor it. Despite all the awards and acclaim that Blue garnered during his lifetime, over the years his work has become more and more difficult to find.

“The scarcity of some of this material cannot be overstated,” explains UO Libraries Curator of Moving Images Elizabeth Peterson. “For example, there aren’t any copies of *The Olive Trees* in any other American libraries, period, in any format. Knowing how few prints remain, I find myself holding the film cans of this work that won the Critic’s Prize at the Cannes Film Festival. It’s a rare, special feeling.”

Richard Blue continues: “After she evaluated our print of *Olive Trees*, Elizabeth advised us that it would require considerable restoration work. The cost would run into five figures. Luckily, with the generous support of director James Ivory [also a UO alumnus], the James Blue Alliance recently located two additional prints in France. We’ve been fortunate to get new copies printed from those. It involved the efforts of a large, international group of people, as befits the nature of my brother’s work.”
Even beyond the rarity of copies, there’s a myriad of reasons why Blue’s work is not better known today. Some of his most acclaimed films were produced for the United States Information Agency (USIA)—intended for foreign audiences only, they were therefore blocked from domestic distribution by Congressional statute. Other works were controversial: in France, the award-winning *Olive Trees* received critical barbs from both the political Left and Right. Especially later in his career, Blue produced many of his films in noncommercial contexts, using collaborative methods that could complicate issues of “authorship.” Most of the director’s work has never been released on DVD.

Also, for all his accolades as a filmmaker, Blue was probably most renowned as a scholar and teacher. Blue had started graduate school at the UO, but left when he received a scholarship to continue his studies at the prestigious *Institut des hautes études cinématographiques* (IDHEC) in Paris. Among the international cohort of students were several who became prominent filmmakers and lifelong friends. Blue considered his education to be a deeply formative experience; one that he hoped to share with others. In the course of his career, he taught and lectured at UCLA—where his students included Francis Ford Coppola and rocker Jim Morrison—Yale, Rice, SUNY-Buffalo, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the British Film Institute.

“[He inspired] film students to search constantly for the truths that underlie conventional wisdom,” says ethnographic filmmaker David McDougall. “He also found this process immensely exciting—an excitement that he communicated to those of us around him, students and colleagues alike.” Though many of his peers lamented that Blue was neglecting his own creative development by concentrating so much on teaching others, through his pedagogy he would exert a profound influence on an entire generation of media makers and scholars.

Turning to audio documentary, James Blue conducted extensive, in-depth interviews with leading figures of international cinema. His subjects included Alfred Hitchcock, Federico Fellini, Jean-Luc Godard, Milos Forman, Satyajit Ray, and Frank Capra. Blue wanted to create a dialogue among peers; an open and critical discussion of the creative process, cinematic theory and style.
Media studies scholar Gerald O’Grady has called Blue’s collection of recorded interviews—there are 70 in all—“one of the most important film history projects of the second half of the twentieth century.”

This history needs to be studied, and in order for that to happen, it needs to be preserved. With funding secured by the James Blue Project through the Office of Academic Affairs and the support of Senior Vice Provost Doug Blandy, Digital Collections Librarian Nathan Georgitis is now supervising the digitization and preservation of the tapes. John Fenn, associate professor in the UO Arts and Administration program, and Herskowitz will begin conducting research on their contents in the spring.

Blue also was an accomplished writer of film analysis. “I knew him as Blue the journalist,” recounts Gordon Hitchens, founder and publisher of the influential magazine Film Comment, where several of the interviews first appeared. “And for me he was a catalyst provocateur without whom Film Comment could not have found its thrust and purpose.”

MOST PASSIONATELY of all, Blue was a tireless advocate for what he called the “democratization” of media access and creation. He cared deeply about the plight of disempowered people and believed that change could be achieved by giving them opportunities to document their own lives. “James felt film should be as accessible as canvas and a paint brush.” Janice Blue explains. “He could never quite accept the elitism of film and the notion that only those with money and big budgets could shoot them.”

For Blue, these were more than just philosophical concerns. As time went by, he effaced himself to an ever greater degree as “the director,” instead seeking out new opportunities to collaborate and developing participatory methodologies that would turn “his” films into community projects. Years before the first video camcorders appeared on the consumer market, Blue pioneered the conjunction of Super 8 film with tape-recorded sound: inexpensive technologies that could be obtained and used even by non-professionals. In Houston he established the Southwest Alternate Media Program (SWAMP) to develop and support non-commercial artistic voices. This organization is still active and
vibrant nearly four decades after its founding. A more fitting tribute to the spirit of its founder can scarcely be imagined.

“Ecumenical, ecological, and economic.” This was Blue’s world view, memorialized by O’Grady. He believed passionately that creators could arise in any community on earth, and he worked tirelessly to advance his vision.

With little warning, cancer would cut short James Blue’s life at age 49. This is a tragedy. In the too-brief time that was allotted him, he’d managed to fit in more than a single lifetime’s worth of achievement. This is remarkable.


Want to learn more? A wealth of information is available at The James Blue Alliance (jamesblue.org) and The James Blue Project (jamesblue.uoregon.edu).

Many of James Blue’s films are available to view on the UO Libraries’ YouTube Channel, youtube.com/c/uolibrarieseugene.

Funding is still needed to process the James Blue Papers, to support the digitization and preservation of the audiovisual materials in the collection, and to promote greater awareness of Blue’s legacy. Contact Keri Aronson at 541-346-1890 or keria@uoregon.edu.

ON HIS DOCUMENTARY METHODS:
“Documentary does not mean document, but the use of document. The only definition of ‘documentary’ is the use of reality—or actuality, or some aspect of it—that goes beyond it, that interprets it.”
— From a lecture at Buffalo, New York, April 23, 1977

ON PERSONAL EXPRESSION:
“My principle belief has been that within the context of the limitations imposed by its sponsor, a film must be a personal one. I can say that I have not made a film that I did not believe in.”
—from a correspondence with A. Srivastava of the Cinema Workshop, New Delhi, 1971

ON HIS PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING:
“Instead of training people for a more than doubtful Hollywood career, we can channel them towards this awakening of a community conscience. There’s plenty of work for everyone.”
—From an article Blue authored in 1976

ON DEFINING SUCCESS:
“I start feeling guilty for not living up to [others’] standards of successful filmmakers making films . . . Then, a little switch goes click in my head and I know that I have to live out my own adventure my own way, and I am the only one who can do it—so my courage picks up.”
—from a letter to his wife Janice, dated January 2, 1972