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After 15 Years, a Roadside Performer Is Getting the Spotlight

By [COREY KILGANNON](#)



Julie Glassberg for The New York Times Otis Houston Jr., who calls himself Black Cherokee, performs along the side of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive near 125th Street.

Before social media made it easier to reach an audience, Otis Houston Jr. had [already figured out a way](#) to catch the attention of thousands of people every day.

“I come down here to the highway so people can see me – if you’re an artist, that’s what you want, people to see your work,” he said on a recent Friday as he stood along the side of the highway, which in this case was the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive near 125th Street.

Since 1997, Mr. Houston, 58, a performer, sculptor and poet who calls himself “Black Cherokee” because he is, in fact, part Cherokee, has created something of a performance art space next to the southbound lanes of the F.D.R. Drive, in the shadow of the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge. Just about every day, he puts up hand-scrawled signs with cryptic messages and sets up offbeat exhibits, often with discarded objects he has picked up.

Then as traffic crawls by – remember, this is the F.D.R. Drive during the morning commute — he strikes odd and provocative poses. He does it for the amusement, and, he insists, education, of drivers. Among other things, Mr. Houston is known for doing exercises and reciting poetry.

Soon, Mr. Houston will gain an even wider audience, because his quirky shows and unusual stage will be

featured in a short film.

“He’s an absolute icon; everybody knows him,” said Benjamin Rosen, 36, who, with another New York City filmmaker, Sam Cullman, 35, has made [“Black Cherokee,”](#) a 22-minute documentary that will be screened on Nov. 15 as part of a documentary film festival called [DOC NYC](#). “This is such an unlikely place for doing art and being creative. It’s such a drab place, and he’s this oasis of creativity.”

Mr. Rosen and Mr. Cullman were visiting Mr. Houston recently at his usual spot. Wearing blue farmer-look overalls, he was posing with an apple wedged in his mouth, remaining as still as a statue and expressionless as cars passed.

Many drivers slowed and honked, waved and yelled hello. Many seemed to know him by his first name, or his nickname. Eventually, Mr. Houston relaxed, laughed loudly and began shouting hello back.

“He has a captive audience,” Mr. Cullman said. “He had this genius idea to use this method to make a connection to people.”

Because of Mr. Houston’s antics and where he performs them, people might assume he is a mentally ill, homeless man. The documentary shows that is not the case.

He is “trying to be a legitimate artist in an unlikely place,” Mr. Cullman said.

His material includes signs of his own making. “The man who was too proud to run,” reads one. “The Comeback Kid,” reads another.

“They seem, at first, sort of whimsical, and you don’t know what it’s about,” Mr. Cullman said. “There’s clearly a social satire and commentary behind it.”

The filmmakers met Mr. Houston in 2007, after spotting him along the roadway.

Ever photogenic – many commuters know him as man who balances a watermelon on his head — Mr. Houston has achieved some notoriety over the years. But the film offers a view of him away from the highway. It reveals that Mr. Houston, who perhaps millions of people have seen only as a street spectacle, is a serious, sensitive family man, which is highlighted by poignant scenes of him caring for his dying father.

He grew up in Greenville, S.C., and came to New York as a teenager in the late 1960s. He described how he began dealing drugs and spent time in prison for drug-related offenses in the 1970s and 1980s. While in prison, he took an art class, and, after his release, began making art. He started exercising near his F.D.R. spot, which is two blocks from his apartment in East Harlem, and then began using the space as an atelier, to use Mr. Rosen’s term.

Mr. Houston, who works part-time as a custodian at a health club in Manhattan, uses a broom and rake to keep the area tidy. The police have ordered him to remove his items, and have given him summonses for disorderly conduct. Mr. Houston says he always explains in court that he is not causing problems and has succeeded in having most of the summonses dismissed.

Mr. Houston, a vegetarian, talks about the importance of eating right and avoiding liquor, cigarettes and drugs. He often poses with pieces of fruit, he says, to promote good nutrition.

His main subjects are “God, exercise, and be nice to people.”

He said, “I’m just trying to express the way I feel.”

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2.

- Otis Houston Jr.
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This is not a movie

This is not a act

This is fact

I thought it would take twenty years
but I (we) did it in 15

Time everything good take time

Black Cherokee

Now you know me

PEACE

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3.

- Ameeta
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Takes one artist to acknowledge another!

I have seen Otis numerous times alongside FDR holding up various
messages and holding poses,sometimes in costume,

never knowing who he was but did think of him as smart to have chosen this venue with captive audience
of passing drivers and passengers! Did make it a point to look for the message of the day!

Cannot wait to see this documentary and know this iconic New Yorker up close! Now Otis will be
performing on the big screen AND the FDR!

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4.

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Otis on the big screen? I can't wait!

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- Ivan Van Crane
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Sunday mornings, on the way to church, we always checked the updated messages, art work group set-ups, and live sculpture performances of -finally now I know the name- of Mr. Houston Jr. In the last couple of years, construction must have been hard on him. He had to move a lot around...

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6.

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Good for him. It's this sort of thing that adds color and life to a place.

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7.

- Shellys46
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You have been an oasis in the midst of a ride exacerbated by drivers who have little respect for others on horrible roads that never seem to improve. And, now that I know you better, a true icon of what makes NYC so great. Here's hoping you receive the respect you obviously deserve.

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