

BLACK CHEROKEE

By Sam Cullman and Benjamin Rosen

Otis Houston, Jr.'s life changed when he left prison for the second time in 1997. In his forties and committed at last to leave his days as a drug hustler and user behind him, Otis returned to his family in Harlem. He found a job as a janitor at a boxing gym on Wall Street and began to rebuild his life. In the mornings before work, he would walk just a few blocks to the East River to center himself. Taking in the choppy waters and the steady stream of cars slowed down in their morning commute by a bottleneck on New York's FDR Drive, Otis began a ritual that would evolve into a kind of a stage, and ultimately, a central focus in his life. A performer at heart (he had been writing poetry and singing songs — soul classics set to his own lyrics — since he was a child), Otis saw an opportunity in the reliable and captive audience of morning commuters and he began to develop and present a series of performances for them.

Shot more than a decade after Otis began to develop this uniquely homemade craft, *BLACK CHEROKEE* documents the artist's life and work at a time marked by great productivity and connection with his audience who have come to love and look out for his near-daily presence along the FDR. Feeding off these encounters, Otis is also keenly aware of many peoples' assumptions that he's either mentally ill or homeless or both. He bristles at these categorizations but is compelled to confront them on his own terms when his father falls sick with late-stage Alzheimer's during this period. Otis' long struggle to find success and be taken seriously as an artist becomes enmeshed in the equally central challenge of caring for his beloved father. His work begins to deal directly with issues of sanity and health — going so far as to experiment with bringing his father with him to these sessions along the FDR. Exploring the juxtaposition of a son who lives partly in fantasy for his art, and a father who has been lost to dementia as a result of his disease, Otis cannot abandon one passion (his father) for another (his art). Right up until the moment that his father passes, he fights furiously for the common ground amongst these two worlds.

At its core, *BLACK CHEROKEE* is an observational film whose verité elements are influenced and stretched by the work and approach of this unique artist at a critical point in his life. A meditation on art, inspiration, sanity, legitimacy, family, addiction and success, the film pays homage to a New York City icon and opens a lyrical window onto Houston's deep sense of duty, his raw charisma, and the dynamic beauty of his art.

CONTACT:

Sam Cullman

917.921.0975

sam@yellowcakefilms.com

more info at www.blackcherokeefilm.com