



**BLACK CHEROKEE**  
Directed by Sam Cullman and Benjamin Rosen  
TRT:22 minutes  
UNRATED  
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**LOGLINE (46 words):**

A meditation on family, inspiration, sanity and success, BLACK CHEROKEE documents the life and work of Otis Houston, Jr., a self-taught artist from Harlem who found his audience in the slow and steady stream of car-bound commuters passing through a renowned bottleneck on Manhattan's FDR Drive.

**SHORT SYNOPSIS (70 words)**

Fifteen years ago a self-taught artist from Harlem named Otis Houston Jr. uncovered a captive audience in the slow and steady stream of car-bound commuters passing through passing through a natural bottleneck on Manhattan's FDR Drive. A documentary short that pays homage to a New York City icon, BLACK CHEROKEE opens a lyrical window onto Houston's deep sense of duty, his raw charisma, and the dynamic beauty of his art.

**FILM SUMMARY (463 words)**

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.

## FILM CREDITS

<i>Directed and Produced by</i>	Sam Cullman & Benjamin Rosen
<i>Cinematography by</i>	Sam Cullman
<i>Edited by</i>	Sam Cullman, Benjamin Rosen & Lynn True
<i>Archival Footage</i>	"The Prophet", Igor Ibradžić, Dir.
<i>Colorist</i>	Alex Meillier
<i>Sound Re-Recording Mixer</i>	Chad Birmingham
<i>Post Production Sound Facility</i>	C5
<i>Featuring</i>	Otis Houston Jr. Otis Houston Sr. Cynthia Ali Ben Houston
<i>Special Thanks</i>	Mark Becker Purva Cullman John Kirby Jayeon Lee Jeff Miller Frank Ruy

## ***Filmmaker Bios***

### **SAM CULLMAN | director, producer, cinematographer, editor**

Sam Cullman is a cinematographer, producer and director of documentaries with over a decade of experience. He partnered with director Marshall Curry to co-direct, shoot and produce *IF A TREE FALLS* (2011) which was awarded the U.S.

Documentary Editing Award at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival and then later received a nomination for a 2011 Best Documentary Feature Academy Award®. Dubbed an “an exemplary piece of reporting” by Stephen Holden of the New York Times, and flagged as a Critic’s Choice by the Los Angeles Times’ Kenneth Turan who called it “one of the best documentaries of the year,” the film was released in theaters nationwide and broadcast by PBS on POV in the summer of 2011. More recently, Cullman produced and shot *THE HOUSE I LIVE IN* (2012). Directed by Eugene Jarecki, the film won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance 2012 and was released theatrically in fall of 2012 with a national broadcast on PBS to follow in 2013. Cullman’s cinematography has been featured in dozens of films and his credits also include *REAGAN* (2011), *KING CORN* (2006), and *WHY WE FIGHT* (2005). A graduate of Brown University (1999) with Honors in Visual Art and a second major in Urban Studies, Sam lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

### **BENJAMIN ROSEN | director, producer, editor**

Benjamin Rosen has been producing and directing non-fiction television and film for the past ten years. He began as a camera assistant to legendary documentary cinematographer Mark Benjamin (*SLAM*, *THE TRIALS OF HENRY KISSINGER*, *WHITE BOYS*, *THE LAST PARTY*), and assisted Doug Liman on the commercial hit, *MR. & MRS. SMITH*. In 2006, Rosen premiered his first feature documentary, *A STADIUM STORY*, at the prestigious Tribeca Film Festival. Jeffrey Lyons of NBC found the film to be “a fascinating look at an amazing episode in New York history,” and John Anderson at *Variety* determined that “Arthouse play and TV exposure seem assured, especially given the stylishness of the production.” In 2007 Rosen produced two documentaries for MTV’s award winning series, *TRUE LIFE*. In 2009 Rosen shot and produced 6 episodes for *THE FIRST 48*, A&E’s highly acclaimed documentary series on homicide investigations. He has produced various other non-fiction programming for MTV, VH1, A&E, and Food Network. Rosen is a graduate of Oberlin College.