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ART/CULTURE

ROADSIDE THEATER: TELLING THE TALE OF OTIS HOUSTON, JR.

Peter Madsen speaks with directors of "Black Cherokee"

Text: [Peter Madsen](#) / Portrait: [Grace Villamil](#)

Otis Houston, Jr., is an artist. Nearly every morning, he performs right where the FDR bottlenecks by the Triborough Bridge. Since 1997 morning commuters have alternately glimpsed the now-58-year-old in various positions: standing completely still with fruit in his mouth, constructing temporary monuments out of street trash, and every now and again, working out a boxing routine while clad in adult diapers.

One of these early-morning motorists—they must now number in the millions—is filmmaker [Ben Rosen](#), who first noticed Houston on a drive to visit family in New England. Years passed, and then came the night when Rosen and longtime friend and fellow filmmaker [Sam Cullman](#) were shooting the shit at a bar, wondering what subject could sustain a short documentary for the two to put together—a much needed reprieve from the years-long commitments of full-length documentaries. Sam, also a native New Yorker, had spied Otis now and again, and the two had one of those Eureka! moments.

Titled [BLACK CHEROKEE](#)—as the native South Carolinian, part descendent of the tribe has dubbed himself—the pair's 22-minute short documentary trails Otis as he goes about his morning performances, attending his janitorial job, and caring for his aging, Alzheimer's-afflicted father. BLACK CHEROKEE sold out its premiere screening last month at the DOC NYC festival. The filmmakers are still trying to land a distribution deal, in addition to finding an appropriate means of streaming/selling the short in its entirety. [We at Periscope will update this article as news develops.]

I recently interviewed Ben and Sam in Williamsburg on the eve of the short's premiere. While both were very forthcoming, I don't quote Sam until the fifth question.



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How did you first encounter Otis?

Ben: I had periodically seen Otis for years... I was so curious about who this guy was. One day I decided to bike up and see if I could hunt him down. His spot is hard to locate, and when I got there he had gone. But I talked to some street guys and they knew about him. I left my card with a few of them and a few weeks later, I got a call from Otis. He was immediately very enthusiastic, energetic, and open to the idea of doing some kind of a film project.

Before you went to find him, can you recall your first Otis sighting? Did he have a watermelon on his head as he does in the documentary poster?

Ben: No, he didn't have a watermelon on his head. After he called me back, I set up times to meet him on the highway, and I wasn't going to bring a camera; I just wanted to establish some sort of relationship before we launched into a film. I can't remember exactly what Otis was doing, but his father was with him.

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Otis is his father's caretaker.

Ben: Yeah, his father, who is stricken with Alzheimer's disease, becomes a big part of the story. When I first met him he was still able to walk on his own, but he was considerably slow and a little bit demented.

How so?

Ben: I remember there is a little patch of dirt and grass, and his father was bent over, weeding. I thought that was very unusual, and I kind of felt like his dad was just conjuring up something from his past, as if some synapses in his brain told him that he should be weeding. But it's funny because one of Otis's routines at this spot is he sweeps up the dirt every morning before he performs.

I pulled so many goddamn weeds on my parents' farm.

Ben: Pulling weeds can be a very meditative thing; you can lose sight of the world. I've enjoyed gardening at my parents' place, and I love weed pulling.

Sam: What Ben is talking about is this inner-meditative thing. All Otis's work is about an alternate reality and hoping to elicit it in other people.

Ben: And also about echoing the past with the imagery of the watermelon on his head or of him fishing—he'll sit there with a fishing pole; his father took him fishing when he was a kid. He incorporates his father into his artwork. There were other times, several years since we met him and he was bound to a wheelchair, when Otis would wheel him down the FDR and feed him watermelon. His father loves watermelon. In an obvious and effective way, Otis is bringing his own life and history into his artwork, his performances.

The image of Otis feeding his father his favorite fruit is so sweet. I bet it gave chills to countless people.

Sam: Or it might just freak them out, like, "What the hell is going on?" Later in his father's life, Otis would have to tie his legs to the wheelchair so he wouldn't wander off into traffic if he were to take his eye off him for just one second.

So what are the ranges of Otis's performances?

Sam: Otis incorporates fruit into a lot of his pieces because he promotes a healthy lifestyle and healthy living. You know, he went to prison for drugs, and he tries to put that past behind him. So he's got a lot of fruit on him at any one time, and once some cops confiscated it from him. He went to the precinct commander in tears and said, "Once you take a man's food away, he's ready to die."

Ben: There is quite a wide variety to Otis's performances. A more contrasting example of them would be when he would put on a diaper and nothing else and struck a boxing stance: fists raised, in a diaper. So that is more on the provocative end of his imagery, and then he has these quiet, touching moments with his dad. Other times he'll just be sitting cross-legged by a tableau of flowers, engrossed by the newspaper. But I would still characterize that as a performance.

Sam: ...The thing about his performances is they are really, really hard to describe. As an audience member you encounter him as you enter this natural bottleneck in traffic, where you have 30 seconds to focus your attention on this mysterious and unusual person on the side of the road who is trying to communicate with you.

And this is someone who is not asking you for money.

Sam: And he's not asking you for money. In fact, one of his skits is he tries to bait you with money. This scene is in the film: He takes out a big wad of singles and waves them in front of people, and it's pretty crass. Some people are like, "Give me some!" and he'll be like, "Fuck you! I can't even pay rent! Why do you want money from me?" [I laugh.] He's playing with people's expectations: he's giving you something instead of asking for something.

So the narrative is Otis came out of prison in '97 and devoted his life to art.

Sam: I don't think he initially thought it was art. He had gotten out of prison, he was trying to figure out what the fuck he was doing, and he would go down there in the mornings just to gather himself before work, like a kind of refuge where he could check in with himself. Otis showed us some early footage that some NYU student named Igor Ibradžić took of him riding an exercise bike down there. I think that opened him up to the reality that he could have a captive audience in the form of these commuters. And so he's been there pretty much every day since. Imagine the kind of dedication it takes to do something every day.

Ben: It's inspiring that he's so dedicated to something that has nothing to do with money and it has everything to do with what I think is a pure form of creativity and a unique form of communication, or self-therapy, or whatever. So, he's definitely operating outside of traditional forms of art, or he's at least completely outside the art world, and he has enabled himself a certain profound freedom that is rare. You're not going to see something like this in the art world where what is hung in a gallery is so dictated and influenced by the



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Photo: (via PERISCOPE - ROADSIDE THEATER: TELLING THE STORY OF OTIS HOUSTON, Jr.)
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CSC Funk Band. <http://t.co/MFXb71DR>



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What kind of responses does Otis get from passersby?

Ben: When you're down there with him, there's a honk and a smile and a wave and a thumbs-up every ten seconds. My take-away impression is that people know and love him. People know that he's doing something unusual and special, and people appreciate the fact that he's doing it for them. Otis tells a story of a school bus going by and the school kids are all pushed up against the windows, smiling at him. That's when some tears will start leaking out of his eyes, and he says, "That's all I need to keep going."

Is making money in the art world any goal of Otis's?

Sam: I think it is. He would like to be more known than he is.

Ben: It's tricky because he makes these assemblages of found objects, these sculptures that get taken down by sanitation workers.

Such structures would seem so out of context before the white walls of a gallery.

Sam: Well, if the art world wanted to, they could jump on these sculptures that he leaves behind for commuters. I think they could sell that. Don't you think?

Ben: We are hoping to sell the film online soon, and we'll share with Otis whatever profits come from that effort. We have a handshake agreement right now; we haven't exactly figured out how we are going to do it.

Sam: It's really unusual for documentary filmmakers to pay their subjects—there's just a ton of ethical and logistical reasons why this gets tricky and is not done. And while documentary film is by no means lucrative work, we would like to split any future profits with Otis as we begin to sell the movie. Otis has never really been in a position to make money off his art and we'd be thrilled if this film could be the humble beginnings of that for him.

I love how Otis and his performances are so easy to miss. I mean the millions of New Yorkers who don't commute on the FDR every morning have no idea Otis exists.

Sam: Right. These commuters are coming from Westchester County and wherever else and aren't the typical Downtown/Chelsea art appreciators. But they are Otis's audience and we have the feeling they would do anything to support him. We think people would be inclined to pay a few bucks to download the documentary.

Ben: Or what we might do is, create an online tip jar for Otis, something that is removed from our film entirely. That way people can finally get in touch with him.

That's a great idea.



Links

BLACK CHEROKEE
<http://blackcherokeefilm.com>

Tags: #shortfilms #documentary #BlackCherokee #OtisHoustonJr #BenjaminRosen #Sam Cullman

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Benjamin Rosen · Oberlin College

Periscope magazine interviewed Sam and me about BLACK CHEROKEE. Read me talking!

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