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BLUES PEOPLE

Conversation with Carlos Bustamante about Skip Norman

Beginnings

Volker Pantenburg: How did you come to the dffb?

Carlos Bustamante: I was in Berlin in 1963. I had temporarily dropped out of my studies in the USA—first “Dramatic Art” at the University of Arizona and then “Theater Arts” at Northwestern University. On my very first day in the youth hostel I met a man and his wife who had just arrived from Africa. He was American and she was German, but I think she had grown up in Kenya. So it happened that we quickly got to know each other. They had found an apartment and I lived with them. At some point I went back to my family in Mexico, but we stayed in touch. A few years later I was eager to see them again. I arrived in Berlin and brought my first experimental films with me—[Dan and Joann](#) (1965), which had been shown at the Ann Arbor Film Festival, and [Chip Gets His Diploma](#) (1966). Both Klaus and Gabriele Ritter lived at Kaiserdamm number 10, and Klaus said: “Here at the end of the street, at Theodor-Heuss-Platz, there is a new film school. And then he showed me this magazine by Andi Engel—KINO—which had an ad for the dffb. I went there immediately, and Helene Schwarz, the secretary, said: “Unfortunately, the application deadline is over, but if you bring your application by Monday, I can still bring it in...”

VP: The first year students had started in September 1966 and were already busy...

CB: Right.

VP: ... and thanks to Helene Schwarz you could still apply for the second year.

CB: As far as I remember, me and my girlfriend came to Berlin in December 1966, just before the entrance examination, which took place in February. I was wondering when I met Skip for the first time—I really don't know because you meet so many people in the first week at the academy. But one thing I can remember has to do with Farocki. At the dffb you often met in the hallway on the fifth floor, where the black phone was. And at some point Harun came—I don't know if I knew him yet—and said he needed help: "Can you come along? We want to shoot something quickly." We went right down and a few blocks away. And on the way to the location the first conversation with Skip took place. I assume we were talking in English, because my German was very bad. On this occasion he asked me if I could do the camera for him... This was the project that turned out to be *Blues People*.

VP: So this was the first time you met?

CB: Right. On the dffb archive website I saw that Holger (Meins) was originally supposed to be the cameraman. But the shoot was scheduled and postponed several times. I have no idea when we finally shot. The last application states December 27, 1967 to January 1 or 2, 1968, but I know for sure that I was not in Berlin at that time. We were all at the Exprmntl-Festival in Knokke—except for Skip, that is.

VP: Are you in the footage of the riots that Claudia von Alemann shot in Knokke? One of the protesters throwing leaflets?

CB: No, I wasn't there for the leaflets. I took part in this action with the sparklers and in the election of "Miss Knokke." At the festival, I hung out mostly with people like Jud Yalkut, Yoko Ono, Shirley Clarke and Jean-Jacques Lebel. We spent most of the time stoned in different hotels...

VP: That was at the end of December '67.

CB: Yes. As I said, this date is in the last log-in of the shoot, but it must have been postponed once more. Anyway, it was a weekend. We hardly knew each other, but we trusted each other.

VP: Did you know Norman's first dffb film *Riffi* at that time?

CB: No, I never saw that film. I can't remember seeing anything by Skip or Harun before. From Helke (Sander) yes, but not from those two. And I knew a film by Enzo Edschmid. I was a big fan of his *Der Tod vom Sokrates* (*The Death of Socrates*) (1967).

Blues People

VP: It's amazing to learn that at the time of shooting *Blues People* you two had just met. It is such an intimate film. I always thought that to make a film like this, you need people you're very close friends with.

CB: I was surprised about that, too. Maybe there had already been a screening of one of my first films. I wonder why Skip asked me to work for him. The only answer I've found lately: We were good at talking in English. I watched the film again for the first time in many years and before that I had seen *Dutchman* (director: Anthony Harvey) from 1966. *Dutchman* is the exact opposite of Skip's film. Skip is so loving—that's how I remember him. A very gentle, calm person. With Harun I can remember outbursts of anger, especially in Knokke. But Skip was always a very calm and balanced person. During the shooting of Georg Lehner's *Zwei kluge Männer und die Treue einer Frau* (*Two Clever Men and the Faithfulness of a Woman*)—that was in 1972 in Venice—the prop man wanted to beat me because I refused to take off my baseball cap in a church where we were shooting. Before the man could strike, Skip jumped between us and eased the situation. Skip was the camera assistant.

Madeleine Bernstorff: Which *Dutchman* movie do you mean?

CB: There's a film that, like *Blues People*, is based on the play by LeRoi Jones. I found a pretty bad version on YouTube, where the image is sometimes pixelated—but I was interested in how it was made in 1966. I don't know if Skip had seen the film, but I knew the play from theater studies. LeRoi Jones for me was someone who belonged to the beats. As far as I remember, Godard also uses an excerpt from *Dutchman* in *Masculin féminin*. Somewhere there is a short sequence in the metro with a piece of dialogue from LeRoi Jones' play...

MB: In spring 1968, Skip exchanged letters with an agency in New York about the rights to *The Dutchman*, in which Skip develops in detail what he intends to do with his film. In this context, he specifies the term “the black man” with the phrase “me and all the other mes” and thus situates himself. He is denied the rights because the agency had already granted the filming rights. *Blues People* is possibly named after LeRoi Jones’ book *Blues People. Negro Music in White America* published in 1963. LeRoi Jones called himself Amiri Baraka from 1967. A German translation was published in 1969 under the title *Blues People. Schwarze und ihre Musik im weißen Amerika*.

VP: Theater was an important background to Skip Norman: Before he came to the dffb, he studied German language and literature in Göttingen. And in the above-mentioned autobiographical short text he also writes that he played on various stages in Göttingen. As I understand it, the theater has been more formative for him than the experience of cinema.

CB: That’s right. My impression was not that Skip had an enormous movie background. With other people it was immediately obvious. Skip, on the other hand, came from literature and the theater. Maybe that’s why there was this connection between us. But also because I had already read LeRoi Jones, even though I had never seen a performance.

VP: Do you remember the shooting of *Blues People*? Did you know what kind of movie it was going to be or was the agreement more or less: “Look, I’ll shoot something this weekend and everything else will follow”?

CB: I don’t know exactly. Skip told me that it was going to be very intimate, but of course I didn’t know how it was going to come together. What impressed me a lot: He insisted that we listen to Bach the whole weekend. The Brandenburg Concertos sounded from some corner. That surprised me very much—especially when you see the film. It’s all about the blues...

VP: A technical question: the masking of the image in *Blues People*, when you only see the eyes of Skip Norman and Li Antes...

CB: This was done with the matte box of the camera. That’s why the edges are out of focus. If that was done in post-production, it would be really sharp. I’m not sure if we

actually shot with the Arri ST as it says in the application. It could be, this is the Arri with the three lenses. But I can't remember so concretely. Every camera had a matte box like that at that time. So you could put black cardboard in front of it and partially cover the picture.

VP: Were you involved in the further work on the film? Or did Skip finish the film on his own after the shooting?

CB: Do you know the story about the Geyer works and all the excitement? The way Skip told it—I wasn't allowed to be in the meeting—he was called to a meeting with the head of Geyer-Werke, Mr. Geyer himself, and Heinz Rathsack, the director of the dffb... I forgot to ask Georg whether he showed the film or whether it was watched on the editing table. Georg Lehner was the projectionist for our films at the time. The background was: Apparently a young woman, 16 years old, in the film laboratory, who was checking the negatives, was shocked at the sight of the genitals in the pictures. She reported her find, and the film was subsequently classified as pornography. That is why this meeting came about. Skip was there. I don't remember where I and someone else were waiting for him. And then Skip—with a grin on his face—came from the meeting. Rathsack had been very impressed by the film and defended him. Actually, Rathsack was really a special person. He was a great person. When I looked at the production registration on the internet, it seemed a bit unusual to me: Rathsack is registered there as a lecturer. I don't know what that means, Rathsack actually did not belong to the lecturers. We all had different lecturers. With me it was Erwin Leiser, Ulrich Gregor and Peter Lilienthal.

VP: Maybe this was some kind of protection? The director of the dffb writes his name in there...

CB: Perhaps Skip had told him what he was planning to do. That remains a secret.

MB: There's something about this in the dffb file. Originally, Skip Norman was in the Lilienthal group. However, in September 1967 he already states that he would like to have Dr. Rathsack as supervising lecturer for this film: "I intend to experiment independently. As a lecturer I seriously thought of Dr. Rathsack. But I don't know if he would agree."

VP: In other words, in this meeting, Rath sack defended Skip Norman and said to Geyer: “Everything is fine: this is art, not pornography.”

CB: Exactly. In retrospect, I’m surprised: the critics at the time didn’t mention the two photographs of the brutal lynchings. The shock concerned only the genitals.

VP: The violence is not objected to, it doesn’t scandalize.

CB: You get used to the violence, but this tenderness... And then of course the intimacy between black and white. That was unheard of.

MB: Have you been to showings of *Blues People*?

CB: Maybe once.

MB: Can you remember the first time you saw the movie?

CB: No, not really. I may have seen the film on the editing table. I wasn’t there at the 1969 screening in Oberhausen, for example. I don’t know whether the film was shown at the beginning or the end of the Short Film Festival. I was there for part of the festival, but not for that screening. By the way—the protestant church liked the film very much. I remember that we were pleased about it.

VP: Oberhausen evaluated the coverage of the festival at the time. And they state that *Blues People* was mentioned in many articles, never as a pornographic film. The film was understood as it was supposed to be.

CB: We were surprised that the film didn’t get an award because the echo was so strong. But in the end it did not win anything.

MB: Jochen Schmidt says in the Oberhausen report booklet: “Rarely has a film been dialectically so on point.” And then there was the seven-page report by Dr. Albrecht, which can be found on the dffb-archiv page: Dr. Albrecht, Cologne, April 16, 1969: “Analysis of the film ‘Blues People’ under the aspect ‘Is it pornography?’ The last section VIII is unmistakable and even underlined: “In conclusion, it must be stated that, based on the analysis and taking into account the relevant legal circumstances, the

question of whether 'Blues People' is pornography must be answered with NO."

CB: I had nothing to do with that, but it was a good defense. It seemed very important to me in this film that there is so much black film – I think only Godard did something similar before. At the beginning and at the end for several minutes. At some point it seemed natural to us, but it was a very strong gesture from Skip. I only knew it from *Le Gai Savoir* with Léaud and Juliet Berto in the studio.

MB: Yes, Dr. Albrecht states in his report that 53% of the total length is black film. And he goes on to say: "The drastic naturalism of the representation is obviously not intended to convey stimulating fantasy stimuli, but on the contrary to prevent them."

Li Antes

MB: What do you know about Li Antes, who plays the female lead in *Blues People*?

CB: Actually nothing. I think she was Skip's girlfriend at the time. And I met her—as far as I remember—on the weekend of the shooting. I think it was in her apartment, because in my memory Skip lived in a shared flat in the Reichsstraße, together with Michael Geissler and Dörte Völz. Dörte was a professional editor and Michael was in my year. I visited them often and can remember that Skip's door was sometimes open. He had a small room like the others. But I can't remember that we were really friends. That's why I would be interested to know when the film *Ihre Zeitungen* (*Their Newspapers*) was shot, in which Skip made the camera.

VP: *Ihre Zeitungen* is from 1967–68 and was made—like other dffb films of the "Gruppe 3"—as part of the anti-Springer campaign. According to shooting schedules, it was shot in December 1967 and then again in February '68.

CB: That could be.

VP: Before the attempted assassination of Dutschke at Easter. But to come back to Li Antes: Is she Danish or did she have a close relationship to Denmark?

CB: I have no idea. I really don't.

VP: In one of the documents that Madeleine found in the dffb files, a short text by Skip Norman entitled *Autobiographische Erläuterungen (Autobiographical remarks)*, he writes: “I went to Denmark in the winter of 1965 to get my trip to the States financed. I worked in a small metalworking factory. During this time my interest in film grew.” And later in *Strange Fruit* he filmed a speech by Bobby Seale, the co-founder of the Black Panther Party, in March 1969 in Copenhagen. I somehow assumed that Li Antes was his connection to Denmark. Maybe he had met her there.

MB: The dffb files are illuminating in this respect: He had written his application to the dffb in Denmark, where he had lived for almost two years. His very first, unrealized project was meant to play in Copenhagen at the train station. There are two different addresses. Skip also recommends Li Antes as a dffb student in one of his letters.

CB: To have different girlfriends was normal back then. But Li and Skip were really a couple for a while. At some point he told me that they broke up. About a year later, she killed herself. It was suicide. I only know that from hearsay. I didn't know her very well.

Vau

VP: I would like to know more about the film *Vau*, which Skip directed together with Jean-Francois LeMoign. It is a strange film. Like *Blues People*, it also has genital close-ups. *Vau* was, I think, shot a year earlier than *Blues People*.

CB: Who shot this? Skip?

VP: There are no specific credits, but I assume that he made the camera. It's a much more muddled mix of Wilhelm Reich, all kinds of political stuff, and then a very general form of sexualization.

MB: And there are political performances in public space.

VP: The brief summary of the film's content on the dffb-archiv site is quite apt: “A film essay of the 1968s—sexual liberation, Vietnam war and anti-Springing campaign are the topics. The close-ups of sexual organs are followed by shots of activist performances. In the voice-over, passages from *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) by Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), among others, are quoted.”

CB: You might have to ask Christian Ziewer. I think he was closer to LeMoign. I didn't know him well, but in my memory there was the Diogenes Studio Theater in the 60s. It was a small experimental theater where they performed Ionesco and similar authors. Ziewer was somehow affiliated with this.

Context dffb

CB: I don't know if that holds true for Skip, but with some students you could always argue about theory. Holger, for example, had very precise ideas about how to film people. He thought it was absolutely necessary to take close-ups with a handheld camera, because the slight movement of the camera adds a personal touch. Under no circumstances should you use a telephoto lens, that would be voyeurism. We did an experiment, a kind of competition, with black leader: I took black leader and inserted a single photogram in the middle. Although it was so short, you managed to see the image. Holger responded by doing the same with white: many meters of blank film, and in the middle a photogram of Mao Tse-Tung. In this case the picture was not recognizable. I remember he was very enthusiastic about this experiment. I had read William Burroughs and Grey Walter and was interested in such perceptual phenomena.

MB: So you tried things out on the editing table...

CB: No, such experiments were done in projection. We had—not very often, but now and then—ideas that were quickly implemented and which Georg could then project in the cinema. In this case, it was a projection.

VP: Can you say something about the different groups and fractions at the dffb? As far as I see, Skip Norman participated in different contexts. There are the politicized people around "Group 3," for example: Farocki's *Ihre Zeitungen*, Helke Sander's *Brecht die Macht der Manipulateure* (*Break the Power of the Manipulators*) and some other films that were part of the campaign against Springer. Who was close to Skip?

CB: I do not know. You found each other. Georg Lehner, for example, was more involved with Wolfgang Petersen, probably because of his interest in classical film. I myself spent a lot of time with Michael Geissler, who was more radical. He talked a lot about marijuana or certain problems concerning drugs. But when it came to collaborating, we worked together with everyone. The splits and factions—that seemed almost

accidental to me. For example, I recall how Holger and Straschek approached me and wanted me to work with them because I had presented something. Straschek's way of putting it was quite funny: They had both seen my film *Am Ende der Krankheit. Eine Pflicht-Montageübung* (1967), a card game situation in which I had only used a bare light bulb. Some spectators felt reminded of Rembrandt, even if it was merely my negligence in taking care of the lighting more carefully. In any case, Straschek said: "We do not agree with the content of your film, but we would like you to become assistant to Mr. Meins."

VP: Here's a list of the 1967 students: Gaston Bart-Williams, Thomas Giefer, Georg Lehner, Kaspar Streiff, Philip Sauber, Eike Gallwitz...

CB: Eike Gallwitz was someone special. He wrote a beautiful book.

VP: *Die Spur* (*The trace*).

CB: Right. It's about a journey. I wasn't part of this, but Georg was on that trip. Eike's wife—I don't know if they were still together at that time—killed herself, too. Probably around 1969. At some point she was in some kind of—I don't know if it was an official cult, but it was a group of young people who collectively committed suicide with gas with the windows closed. That's what Georg told me.

MB: Was Skip or were you yourself involved with Gaston Bart-Williams?

CB: Yes, he was a strange person. He came from Sierra Leone. We met from time to time, but we weren't really close. He seemed a bit like a mafioso type to me.

MB: I once spoke to his widow, she lives near Cologne. He was a writer; I quoted from his letters to the dffb in my text on "Transnational Learning" on the dffb-archiv webpage: Gaston Bart-Williams writes that he is opposed to the "color theory and its dangerous undertones of color fixations, which have misled and prejudiced the European consciousness regarding color." He also finds it problematic that the dffb keeps the film prints because he—coming from the Third World—needs the prints to work with them in those countries.

Vietnam, Voice of the Lumpen

CB: I think you should talk to Elsa Rassbach about Skip. I don't know if they knew each other, but Elsa was very active in this anti-war group. Have you talked to her yet?

MB: No, but this book here—*A Breath of Freedom. The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany* (2010) by Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke—argues that there was a close connection between the Black Panthers and the West-German student movement. Certain texts from the Black Panther Party appeared in translations in small publishing houses, such as the booklet *Black Power* from Oberbaumverlag. The question is whether Skip already brought his interest in them with him. Did it occupy him? How long did it last?—Höhn and Klimke's book also covers the official activities in the GDR... Angela Davis, Paul Robeson were officially supported, and at the same time there was a *deep racism*... The photo of Honecker with Angela Davis in 1973 at the World Youth Festival in East Berlin is well-known. There is an interesting film about the World Youth Games, where you can see her—two heads taller—towering over everyone.

A connection to Skip Norman could be K. D. Wolff. He was co-founder of the Frankfurt magazine *Voice of the Lumpen*, which tried to organize African-American GIs in the spirit of the Black Panther Party. And some people, like him or Bernward Vesper, had spent time in the USA, and this experience politicized them. There were groups and magazines in many cities where the US Army was, like *Voice of the Lumpen* in Frankfurt, who tried to organize the American and African-American GIs. Or to support desertion. Elsa Rassbach was involved with the magazines *Where It's At* and *Up Against the Wall* here in Berlin. My question is whether you can remember how Skip positioned himself in this context.

CB: I never had the feeling that he belonged to any group. He was not a lone wolf, but—let's say, almost all people were fanatical in some respect, in one way or another. I can remember Hans-Rüdiger Minow. We once happened to be on the same plane and Hans-Rüdiger told me: "Bustamante, Germany will be in flames this summer!" which made me laugh. Skip was not very political, but of course he had an opinion about the Vietnam War. I happened to be in Konstanzer Straße a few times for my film *De Oppresso Liber* and met Elsa there. There was this office. And she told me about the demo, which I then filmed.

MB: Which office do you mean?

CB: By *Americans Against the Vietnam War*. This was in Konstanzer Straße, which was also the apartment of Elsa Rassbach. The shots for *De Oppresso Liber* were taken because Elsa asked me if I could film how a demonstrator burns his draft notice in front of the US military headquarters in Dahlem. She knew I had a Bolex. So I went there, and I was so impressed that I hesitated for two months or even longer to give them the footage until I had the idea for the film. I don't know what they did with the material. It was much more material than finally ended up in *De Oppresso Liber*.

VP: Did you and Skip watch *De Oppresso Liber* together? I assume that these dffb films were known to each other.

CB: We weren't that close at the time. When I think about it: Almost every week you worked with different people, you were always on the road. Sure, when you saw each other, you drank coffee. At that time, the cafeteria was in the SFB building, and that's where people met, on the third floor, in Pommernallee. There were always conflicts with the SFB people...

MB: If you look at how much Skip has worked, in various productions...

CB: That's true, but it's true for all of us. We didn't have real classes, compared to how people are learning now. Charly Völsen showed us how to load film into the cassettes and clean the lenses. The other day I had to think about him because I was shooting a video and suddenly a lid of one of the lenses fell down. That was Charly's first lesson: If you are shooting in the mountains and something falls out of your hand, it is gone. But all these lessons were very hands-on: how to set up a tripod, how to put film material into the camera, etc.

MB: Charly Völsen was also the lecturer for the basic course in 1971, in which the film *Women's Camera* was made: a wonderful camera tutorial from a female perspective, shot by Ingrid Oppermann, Barbara Kasper, Tamara Wyss, Brigitte Krause, and Gardi Deppe.

VP: The most effective learning took place in the work, it was in the practice.

CB: Right. Everyone had an idea of what they wanted to do. I made many films as a cameraman. Sometimes I'm in the credits, sometimes not, but it doesn't really matter. Michael Geissler was important for me. Through him and also through Harun I got to know the city. The same with Straschek and with Holger. It was very important for me because they could drive. I didn't have a driver's license anymore. And so you experienced the city in those early days, before everything changed: Ah, this is where we shot this. And: Ah, this is what it looked like at that time!

VP: But not everyone did both camera and direction like you, Skip Norman and Holger Meins did. Was that an additional bond between you? The fact that you worked so regularly both as filmmakers and as cameramen?

CB: I do not know. I had shot before, I knew certain things. But I was clueless about the professional level. At some point, Skip stopped working as a cameraman. He still did for his own films, but I can't remember if he did the camera—say, in '69—for other people. He wasn't one of the students who got kicked out in November '68. We did some stuff together from time to time, but I don't remember him as a cameraman for other people. I did less and less myself, but still I kept going. My theory is: I was Holger's assistant, and after Holger went underground, I followed in his footsteps.

VP: A simple question: In his dffb period from 1966 to 1969, did Skip Norman fly regularly to the USA? After all, it was expensive.

CB: I do not know. I don't think so.

VP: He made his films around 1970 in Washington.

CB: I don't know much about this phase. We did a few small things together and a big WDR production by Georg Lehner. Georg and his wife were friends with Skip in the 70s. When I came back from the USA, they prepared a dinner for us.

MB: Excuse me if I insist. Can you remember events where Black Panther solidarity played a role? You didn't go to such events?

CB: No. He told me about it, but he was really very gentle. He was never boasting: I was there and there at this political event—as many other students would have done. Skip

was older than all of us. I think he's six or eight years older.

VP: He was born in 1933.

CB: You see, that's eight years. He was much calmer. And he knew exactly what he was doing. Every now and then we had—not quarreled, but had a different opinion—but that also belonged to these times. I can't remember him being emotionally extreme, but he was enthusiastic about Frantz Fanon. The first time I heard the name, he had just discovered it, too, and said that it was an important text. He read a lot, just like Straschek did. But then again, everyone read. I just thought of Bitomsky, who was also “a Bookworm.”

MB: During the 1970–71 shooting of *Für Frauen 1. Kapitel* with the women's team around Cristina Perincioli, Skip, who was the lighting technician on this film, was reading Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*. That's what Cristina Perincioli told me.

Strange Fruit / Cullen Maiden

VP: So did you both graduate in '69?

CB: No. my graduation was one year later, in 1970.

VP: In Skip Norman's graduation film at the dffb, *Strange Fruit*, there are some trick sequences a little similar to the ones in *De Oppresso Liber*, although less extreme. Photographs that pulsate like flicker. At the beginning of the film, there is once more a long black image. And then the photo of a black person flashes up briefly. The years 1950 to 1968 are shown—but these numbers also appear so short that they cannot be discerned—then the black reappears; then, for a split second, again the portrait of this black person and a shattered window in the foreground, as if a projectile had penetrated it. Again the black image, and this alternation is repeated, each time a little longer. Finally one understands: This is a kind of dedication to this black man who was probably killed by the police. I had to look up who this is, but I'm sure that at the time, everyone realized that the photo shows Bobby Hutton, the treasurer of the Black Panthers, who was killed in a police shootout in Oakland on April 4, 1968 at the age of 17.

After this start, *Strange Fruit* goes back and forth between two things: on the one hand, a speech by Bobby Seale in Copenhagen, and on the other hand, long parallel travelings in Dahlem and Steglitz along the consulate and the American barracks. And at the end, all of a sudden the film changes abruptly from black and white to flashy colors—the logos of *Esso*, *Shell*, *Coca Cola*, *IBM* are filmed—but before that, a long shot of a NATO flag. In voice-over, one hears an agitational text against the NATO, which is declaimed by Cullen Maiden...

CB: That's the same actor who is the narrator in *Blues People* as far as I remember. I'm not one hundred percent sure, I never met him. But I do remember his name.

VP: Maiden was an African-American writer and singer with a very interesting biography. He was born in 1932, so he belongs to the same generation as Skip Norman. I found some information about him: "Born in 1932, Cullen Maiden was an African-American who grew up in Cleveland, Ohio but at the time of his graduation he was already following many pursuits—singing in various choirs, forming his own R'n'B group..." And then: "Like many artistically talented African-Americans, Maiden found he could get far more work in Europe than the United States so, in the late 1960s, he joined the Komische Oper Berlin where he gained a favourable reputation for his portrayal of Porgy in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. He also worked in Scandinavia"—yet another link to Skip Norman—"and finally settled in London." Apparently he was in Berlin in the 1960s.

MB: In East Berlin.

VP: At the Komische Oper, exactly. As I said, *Strange Fruit* ends with the call against NATO and the First City National Bank, which appears in various dffb films.

CB: I remember that I was often with him in the trick room at this time. It might have been the period of my graduation film. It's possible that we shared the trick room and he would occasionally show me what he was doing.

VP: There are trick sequences, for example, when Bobby Seale talks about the Black Panthers' "Breakfast For Children Program": We see photographs of children having breakfast, and the image has this flickering quality.

CB: I don't know if I have ever seen the film. But I remember working in the trick room and then on the editing table.

Jonatan Briel

MB: Skip says he continued working with Jonatan Briel after his time at dffb.

CB: Briel is dead, unfortunately. He was a great man. He made the film *Wie zwei fröhliche Luftschiffer* (1968). In the early 1980s I lived next to Harun in Holsteinische Straße, and Jonatan lived not far from there. I don't know if he continued to make films. Now and then we met while shopping or somewhere else. He was a very intelligent, very sensitive person. As far as I know, he died of AIDS in 1988.

VP: In 1984 the publication *dffb-volljährig* was published. Skip answered the question: "In your professional practice, is there any collaboration with graduates or academy students?" as follows: "I hope to continue my working relationship with Jonatan Briel."

CB: Yes, Jonatan was something special. Unfortunately, he has fallen into oblivion. At the beginning I did not like him. I had done tests for my Vietnam film and they were so bad that I threw them away. Months later they turned up in a film of his. I was shocked. In retrospect it was funny, it was like kindergarten. We mingled with each other and there were arguments. But this was not malicious, it was part of the process of learning and challenging each other.

Political cinema and commissioned works

VP: What is your impression, how did Skip later feel about his early films like *Blues People* or *Strange Fruit*? Did this time as a filmmaker still play a role or did he lead a completely different life?

CB: I do not know. For me, it later became important later to liberate myself from a certain dffb attitude—for example by making the film about Haskell Wexler in 1980 for WDR. The majority of dffb students demanded a certain purity—both in your attitude and in what you do. These dogmatic ideas, as they were advocated by Straub and Straschek, for instance, they somehow separated me from the world I knew before. My Vietnam film, *De Oppresso Liber*, is cinema for me. I can reject that in retrospect, but it

is concerned with ideas of narration and action. And then all of a sudden it said that when you do a traveling, you're not allowed to pan or zoom (although Straub does zoom in *Othon*). When I made the film on Wexler, it was important for me that Wexler made political films, but at the same time he also made advertising and Hollywood feature films: that was "impurity."

VP: In the filmography that Skip Norman compiled for *dffb-volljährig* in 1984, many small commissioned films are listed. I find it interesting that he does not suppress these works. You could also say, "these minor jobs are not part of my filmography." But here for example, there's a film for the Muscular Dystrophy Association Columbus, Ohio: *Fight for Freedom*. (I emailed them once, but they never answered.) Or *Public Service Announcements* for the Ohio Department Of Mental Health And Mental Retardation; *Trespass* for the Consolidated Rail Corporation Philadelphia and so on. These are jobs, I assume, but the work is nevertheless taken seriously. And then, interestingly, there's also a point of contact with Allan Kaprow, with his *Warm Ups* film, where Skip also did the camera. That was in 1975.

CB: Yes, I was in Mexico at this time. Kaprow was already a household name for me. But I wasn't really familiar with his work.

VP: The producer was the Literarisches Colloquium, West Berlin 1975. Today, unfortunately, it is "courtesy Hauser & Wirth" and only available under art market conditions. Other movies as cameraman in this time are *Glutmensch* (1974) by Briel and Lothar Lambert's *Eins Berlin Harlem* (1975) ...

Before/After: Göttingen, USA, Cyprus

MB: Let's jump back in time. Did he ever tell you anything about his time in Göttingen in the early 1960s?

CB: No.

MB: Then another leap forward: in 1974–75 he taught at the dffb for two years. Did you notice any of that?

CB: No, I was not in Germany at that time.

VP: Did you have continuous contact throughout the seventies?

CB: No. Let's say from '72, or maybe from '71 to '78 I was not in Berlin. I don't know what Skip was doing during that time. At some point he returned to the USA to do his PhD.

VP: The return to the USA took place in 1975. One wonders: what are the reasons for such a fundamental decision? I find it interesting to start a bachelor's degree again at 43 years, then do an MA and then a PhD in ethnography. Visual anthropology becomes a very important point, he seems to have a kind of partisan anthropology in mind. He wants to let people have their say and no longer talk about them as documentary filmmakers.

MB: In this context, he also applies as a lecturer with a letter to the dffb.

VP: And Skip was then again in Berlin in 1987–88 as a Fulbright Scholar. Did you meet each other in this period?

CB: I can't remember that.

VP: His project then was an ethnographic study of the Maybach Ufer. I suppose he was interested in the markets there. This was a book project. It would be very interesting to find his notes and research.

MB: Skip had also used recordings by a music ethnologist from the 1940s for *Blues People*. There is a long line of (African-American) interest in Visual Anthropology. Franz Boas, who came from Germany, had taught at Columbia University. And he was quite important to Harlem Renaissance authors, such as Zora Neale Hurston, for example. There are films by Zora Neale Hurston from the 1930s. She traveled to the southern states of the USA, had to spend the nights in her car and filmed what was around her: Plantation workers, children's games, baptisms etc.

CB: At that time, the 1980s, I was in another world. I was working more as a photographer, and I had applied to the UdK, then HdK. I never met Skip during that time.

VP: How did you get back in touch?

CB: I was at his wedding.

VP: There's a very nice photo series by Carlos.

CB: His wedding with Jael Geis. I did not know her before.

VP: And what about the decision to go to Cyprus? It's strange that someone who has lived in West Berlin, a politically divided city, for a long time, should then go to Cyprus of all places, where another confrontation like this one is taking place. A divided island, claimed by two different countries.

CB: It may be that he identified with the Turkish part. At that time, this part was the victim.

VP: Did religion play a role for him? The title of his dissertation is: *An Examination of Centenary United Methodist Church Using the Photograph as Artifact*. There is this idea of using photography as a genuine research tool in the context of Visual Anthropology, but the subject is a congregation, a particular Methodist church.

CB: At the wedding there was a priest, a Methodist. Jael came from a Jewish family. Skip was very moved by the history of the Jews. But we did not talk about religion.

Blackness / dffb / Racism

VP: Is there anything else you would like to say about Skip?

CB: Yes, he was a very loyal, decent person. At that time I didn't understand what it meant to have black skin. I had read about it and knew stories about it, but I don't think anyone at the dffb was aware of what racism is.

MB: In conversation with Gerd Conradt, Skip says that Holger Meins was treating him in a very special way. One hears a certain nuance when he positively characterizes Holger: He says: "He was one of the few people who was totally relaxed in terms of dealing with a foreigner, especially a black person. There was no real racism in Berlin and in the academy at the time, but there was a kind of standoffishness for people who

had not really had any experience with a black person.”

CB: Maybe that’s why he wanted me to do the camera for *Blues People*. He indicated that he didn’t want to do it with a German.

Madeleine Bernstorff and Volker Pantenburg spoke with Carlos Bustamante on July 3, 2020 in Berlin.

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