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The Maysles Maze: Documentarian's Daughter Searches for Dad

Celia Maysles famous father and uncle helped define the documentary genre for a generation of filmmakers.

Her first film rattles some family ghosts.



David and Albert Maysles shooting *Grey Gardens*, their 1975 documentary about “Big Edie” and “Little Edie Bauvier Beale

By Tom Roston

A sizable portion of New York's documentary filmmaking community was packed in at the Maysles Alumni Holiday Party at the Half King Bar and Restaurant on 23rd street. That it was happening in January didn't seem to faze anyone. “We couldn't get our act together,” said a fast-talking Xan Parker, a nine-year veteran of Maysles Films. Working her way through the crowd, holding a pint of Brooklyn Lager, Celia Maysles, a fresh-faced 28-year-old former social worker, approached director Bruce Sinofsky (Brother's Keeper), and threaded her fingers through his shoulder-length hair as he talked with producer Henry Corra. Mr. Sinofsky greet-

ed the brightly smiling Ms. Maysles with a quick question, “When am I going to see your film?”

It was a common refrain that evening, and no wonder; her directorial debut, *Wild Blue Yonder*, which premiered at the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam in November, was made without the help—and, in fact, according to Celia, faced the concerted resistance—of her uncle Albert Maysles, the man widely considered to be the D. W. Griffith of the non-fiction form, and for whom almost everyone at the party had at one time worked.

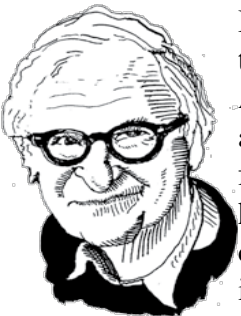
“These are some of the busiest people in New York,” Celia said,

scanning the crowd that gathered between tables piled high with coats. “And they dropped everything to help me.”

Wild Blue Yonder, which is getting its U.S. premiere this week at the South by Southwest Film Festival in Austin, Texas, is Celia's journey to come to terms with her late father, legendary documentarian David Maysles, who, along with his brother, Albert, made such seminal 1960's and 1970's films as *Salesman*, *Gimme Shelter* and *Grey Gardens*. Celia's father passed away in 1987 as a result of complications caused by the mixing of a cold medication and a MAO-inhibiting antidepressant. She was 7 years old.

“I think people are nervous,” said Ms. Parker, a producer on *Wild Blue Yonder*, who was also a recipient of Celia’s affectionate finger comb that evening. “Maysles is like a dysfunctional family, so you kind of know each other’s secrets, but you never know the whole story.”

Celia’s story could have gone unnoticed: a life of privilege and loss lived in the shadows of a legendary name. Over the past decade, as documentaries have secured a place on the art-house circuit as a reasonable thing to pay \$11.50 for on a Saturday night, the Maysles name has grown in stature. The younger set of documentary filmmakers need their icons to emulate or tear down, and the Maysles brothers, along with old-school filmmakers such as Frederick Wiseman, D. A. Pennebaker and Barbara Kopple, have fit the bill.



Interviews with the 81-year-old Albert Maysles are usually of the fawning variety; he tends to receive the living icon treatment reserved for the likes of Martin Scorsese. And although Albert continues to produce films—such as *The Gates* (which he co-directed with Antonio Ferrera, now airing on HBO), about Christo’s saffron-colored art installation that blanketed Central Park—he is best known for the films he made with his brother more than 30 years ago.

In the Maysles iconography, one black-and-white photograph stands out: It shows Albert, the older brother, holding a camera and David with headphones covering his ears, both with tussled gray hair and beaming, benevolent smiles. They stand close

to each other, brother-mavericks joined at the hip.

But now, out of the blue, along comes David’s daughter, Celia, to tell her own story, and to put a new spin on that sepia-toned image. Not that that was her intention.

“It’s not good to talk shit about people,” Celia told me in the Chinatown editing suite of Corra Films, which produced *Wild Blue Yonder*, and where she now works. “I have sworn to myself that no one was allowed to say anything bad about Al. The viewer would have to watch him and come up with his or her own conclusion.

“The point of this story is me finding my dad. I wanted people to know how hard it was to lose a parent. To have such a complete void,” she said. “If I could do what my dad did, it would be like getting to know him through the process. From the fund-raising and the frustrations and the filming, I’d get to walk in his shoes.”

Growing up on the Upper West Side, living in the opulent Aphthorp building on West 79th street, attending private schools such as Calhoun and Chapin, it would seem Celia lived a life of leisure. But according to her mother, Judy, “The kid had a pretty shitty early childhood, as much as it was wonderful one.” Sitting in the Aphthorp apartment beside a table filled with family photographs, Judy Maysles teared up as she recalled her early years with David and their two young children (Celia has an older brother, John). Judy was diagnosed with breast cancer when Celia was an infant, and received a year of chemotherapy. When Celia was 4, David had a heart attack. He died three years later.

At the time, tensions erupted between Albert and Judy. About a

week after David’s death, Judy told me, she met with Albert and asked him for a sum of money over a five-year period, so that she could find her footing. According to Judy, she was soon contacted by Albert’s lawyers and told she

“The [Maysles] Christmas parties were sacred. It was one of the few things left over from my dad.”

-Celia Maysles

owed him money. (Albert Maysles declined to be interviewed for this article.) In Celia’s film, Albert says to her, “Your mother wasn’t willing to settle out of court, so this became a whole court case that cost us \$350,000 in the settlement plus the same amount of money in legal expenses. When it was all over we owned all the films.” (Judy says the \$350,000 figure is not accurate.) Celia contends that her mother never tried to turn her against her uncle. In fact, the only thing she recalls from the legal wrangling was having a hysterical fit because she thought her mother was being “mean” to her uncle.

Over time, the family developed a code of silence regarding David. “Whenever my mom would start to talk about my dad or tell stories, she would get tears in her eyes,” Celia said. “And I was really protective of her. Kids don’t like to see their moms cry.”

Despite the raw nerves, Judy would still take Celia to the annual Maysles holiday party, hosted by Albert. Judy would stay to one corner and avoid interacting with her brother-in-law. For Celia, it could be “excruciating,” but she went partly to be closer to her uncle. “The Christmas parties were sacred,” she said. “It was one of the few things

left over from my dad.”

The Maysles holiday party had been a movable feast, hosted in the 1960’s at David and Judy’s apartment in the Apthorp, later held at Albert’s duplex in the Dakota or on the roof of Maysles Films’ offices on 54th street. The cast of revelers was an ebb and flow of documentarians, with the occasional interloper (when the Maysles shot the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue, Christie Brinkley dropped by; Diane Keaton came once—and is said to have fled quickly).

And there in a corner was always Judy, who insisted on attending “just to let everyone know that I was still around,” she said. Celia said that being at those parties, listening to stories from her dad’s colleagues, was one of her inspirations for making her first film.

The seeds of *Wild Blue Yonder* were sown in Celia’s sadness over losing her father, which became evident when Celia was a junior in high school. That year, her mother was again diagnosed with cancer; the doctors believed it had reached her lungs. While Judy was in the hospital, Celia maintained her poise. But when doctors gave Judy a clean bill of health and sent her home, Celia took a turn for the worse. “She just crashed,” Judy said. “She had been afraid I was going to die.” Celia checked herself into a clinic for depression. “When I got really sick, it became clear that a lot of my issues were from my not having my dad,” she said. Celia and her therapist decided she would reach out to her uncle by interning at Maysles Films the following summer, before college. “The internship was anticlimactic,” she said. “Al would give me a kiss and that would be it. I’d be answering phones.”

At Lewis & Clark University,

Celia took a course on documentary film, and on the first day, when the professor took role call, he asked her, “Any relation?” It was one of the first times Celia realized her father’s lauded position in the documentary film world.

After graduating and working for two years as a social worker with the mentally ill and commercial sex workers in Portland, Ore., Celia sold her Portland house to fund the film

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about her father.

At first, Albert was accommodating. As seen in the film, niece and uncle start out with an embrace. “I’ve got to hug this woman a lot, you know? Make up for lost time,” the elder Maysles says. But his assistance could be comical. When Celia asked her uncle if she could borrow a microphone, he gave her a B&H electronics store catalog instead.

Albert initially sat for several interviews with Celia. But when she made clear she desperately wanted to look at, and potentially use, footage of her father, Albert, as he explains on camera, was reluctant to let her use any footage, partly because of the legal settlement with Judy and partly because he was making his own autobiographical film.

Their onscreen interactions become increasingly tense, until Celia is shown hounding Albert into an elevator. Their final interaction is over the phone, when Celia sobs into the receiver: “What better context is there than a daughter’s search for her father?”

Although the unraveling relationship with her uncle—that “beautiful obstruction,” as *Wild Blue Yonder* executive producer Henry Corra calls him—gives the film a dose of dramatic tension, Celia comes into contact with many of her father’s associates and friends, who gradually give her a more complete picture of him.

She begins the film by literally going into a basement to rifle through boxes of her father’s stuff. She interviews D. A. Pennebaker, longtime Maysles filmmaker Susan Froemke, Jeanne-Claude and Christo, and even her father’s psychotherapist.

She weaves the interviews together with footage of herself going to places in her father’s past, as well as with audio interviews of David Maysles by journalist Bob Sitton. Celia cries several times in the film, sometimes letting out a sob while hearing a story about her dad, and while talking to her own therapist. “It’s odd for me to think that [no one] other than you ... was left sad by David Maysles,” Mr. Sitton tells her, after explaining what a generous bon vivant her father was. Getting to look at any material that would show her living and breathing father on film became Celia’s Holy Grail.

“I had interviewed all these people and I still felt like I didn’t know him,” she said. “I just wanted to see him.”

Eventually Celia stumbled upon a library kept by a friend of her father’s that included a trove of film footage of David. The rough footage appears toward the end of *Wild Blue Yonder*; we see a sleepy David, asking his unseen interviewer (artist Larry Rivers) questions that might as well be directed toward his own adult daughter. “Why do you want

to know the answers?" he asks. "I'm not sure I want to know. I like the fantasy of what it might be."

The footage provided her with closure. "I got my pain out through making the film. I think I really got to know him," she said. "I also got

"There are three sides to every story - my side, your side and the truth."

-Judy Maysles

to know myself."

Particularly, Celia got to know herself as a filmmaker. She has been embraced by a documentary filmmaking community that has many connections to her father. When she went to interview Henry Corra, who worked with her father for seven years, he instead became her closest filmmaking confidante. Xan Parker, who had once been Celia's boss when she was an intern at Maysles Films, became another ally and producer on her film.

Celia could not be immune to some of the war stories she heard, such as the debacle caused when Bruce Sinofsky and his filmmaking partner, Joe Berlinger, ended their landmark 1992 film, *Brother's Keeper*, with a credit acknowledging David Maysles. (Both Mr. Berlinger and Mr. Sinofsky had gotten their start in documentaries with Maysles Films.) According to Mr. Sinofsky, Albert was upset about the credit, and asked them to take David's name off the film. "He said, 'It's clear you're trying to ride the Maysles coattails,'" Mr. Sinofsky said. "I told him I could have named it after Mussolini if I wanted to." "Albert is not a nice man," Mr. Sinofsky said. "And he's fearful that if someone else gets his or her name in a book, it's erasing his name." Celia said the difficulties she en-

countered with her uncle were "a blessing in disguise. I am really grateful to him. I owe him everything. If he had just been like, 'Here, take this,' I would have known this much of my dad." But, because he made things difficult for her, she said, "I had to reevaluate their daily lives. If my dad's brother had been doing this to me, how had he been with him?"

When the film was slated for the Amsterdam screening last November, said the festival's director, Ally Derks, "I got a phone call from Maysles' office asking why I screened the film, because they were worried about the film, and the way Maysles was portrayed in it. But they never asked not to show the film."

Celia says she sees room for healing the rift with her uncle. "Believe it or not, I have hope," she said. "In some way, I guess I am talking to Al in the film. I want him to see me as a human being. I put myself out there, hoping that he would relate to me a little bit and have some compassion toward me. I hope he responds in a positive way."

Albert's only public reaction to *Wild Blue Yonder* can be found in the film itself, and in two brief online interviews. In one of them, appearing on the Web site the Reeler, he said, "Unnecessarily, I come off badly. . . . Actually, I think the film is fairly well made." He denied having threatened to block the film. "I guess I could have, but no," he said. "I don't want to hurt her. She's my niece! I'd love to help her out." And Albert Maysles issued the following statement to *The Observer*: "I'm happy for Celia that she has made a film about her father, who was my partner and best friend, as well as my brother. I had offered to work with her on it and was sorry

that she decided not to do so, and I wish her all the best. As it happens, I am now working on my own autobiography—*Handheld and From the Heart*—with my son, Philip, which we expect to finish next year. "Can we ever know the whole story? That's a question that's posed to every documentary filmmaker. "There are three sides to every story—my side, your side and the truth," Judy Maysles told me.

And, for 70 minutes, Celia gets to tell her side.

"I want my dad to be alive again amongst the film community," Celia told me at the Maysles Alumni holiday party. (Albert continues to have his own holiday gathering, while this offshoot started four years ago.) And to that end, she dug into a plain canvas bag that'd been strapped to her shoulder all night and handed Mr. Sinofsky a DVD of the film.

"I'll watch it tomorrow," he said. Reached by phone at his home in Montclair the next day, Mr. Sinofsky sounded wistful. "I liked it quite a bit," he said. "It was actually shocking to see David so alive. He was like a second dad to me." He recalled that after David died, Judy had asked him to be a "male influence" for Celia and her brother John. So he took her to Andrew Lloyd Webber's roller-skating Broadway show, *Starlight Express* and, afterwards, to a meal at Bobbie Rubino's Place for Ribs. Celia wore what looked like "a pretty Christening dress," Mr. Sinofsky remembered.

"I wish I could have done more," he said.