



Ken Burns has been making films for more than thirty years. Since the Academy Award-nominated *Brooklyn Bridge* in 1981, Ken has gone on to direct and to produce some of the most acclaimed historical documentaries ever made.

The late historian Stephen Ambrose said of his films, "More Americans get their history from Ken Burns than any other source." A December 2002 poll conducted by *Real Screen Magazine* listed *The Civil War* as second only to Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* as "the most influential documentary of all time," and named Ken Burns and Robert Flaherty as the "most influential documentary makers" of all time.

In March, 2009, David Zurawik of *The Baltimore Sun* said, "... Burns is not only the greatest documentarian of the day, but also the most influential filmmaker period. That includes feature filmmakers like George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. I say that because Burns not only turned millions of persons onto history with his films, he showed us a new way of looking at our collective past and ourselves."

Ken's films have won ten Emmy Awards and two Oscar nominations, and in September of 2008, at the News & Documentary Emmy Awards, Ken was honored by the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Here, he talks about his latest film, "The Central Park Five," co-directed by his daughter, Sarah, and her husband, David McMahon.

Kam Williams: Hi Ken, thanks for the interview. I'm honored to have the opportunity to speak with you.

Ken Burns: Not at all.

KW: You'll be happy to hear that the "Central Park Five" was the #1 documentary on my Top 100 Films of 2012 list. <http://aalbc.com/blog/index.php/2012/12/29/100-films-2012/> And it was also #1 on my Blacktrospective 2012 list, an annual assessment of the best in black film.

<http://aalbc.com/reviews/blacktrospective-2012.html>

KB: Wow! Thank you for that. What was your number one feature film?

KW: "Zero Dark Thirty."

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KB: What was your #2, "Lincoln?"

KW: No, that didn't even make my Top 100 list at all.

KB: Wow! Why not?

KW: I'd had some problems with the film that I can't go into right now, because I'm lucky enough to be interviewing Ken Burns. This interview's supposed to be about you, not me.

KB: I understand, but I'd love to discuss the rest of your list over lunch sometime.

KW: That'd be great. I told my readers I'd be speaking with you, and asked them to send in questions which I'll be mixing in with my own. Children's book author Irene Smalls asks: What interested you in this story? Was there a personal connection?

KB: The personal connection, simply, was my daughter, Sarah. She was too young to have heard about the actual crime, but learned about it in the summer of 2003. She then just began obsessing about the case to the point that she had to write a book about it. And she had two people around her, her husband, David, and her father who were saying, "Hey, it's also a film." And that's how it got made. However, in a larger sense, I do remember the climate at the time that this happened, and it was with resignation that I looked at this "Crime of the Century" as Mayor Koch called it. We were wringing our hands, asking, "What happened to our city? What happened to our youth? Have we lost them?" As it turned out, that wasn't the case. But they served out their full sentences and were never considered for early parole, because they refused to admit any guilt, since they were not guilty. Yet, when they were exonerated thirteen years later, the story got almost no coverage. It's a very complicated case which Sarah became preoccupied with as a senior in college, and she never could let it go.

KW: Irene also asks: What does this documentary seek to do: re-publicize the event, further vindicate the boys, or something else?

KB: The documentary asks two essential questions. First, how could such a gross miscarriage of justice have taken place in a progressive city in the North at the end of the 20th Century by using the sort of language employed by a Jim Crow city in the South at the beginning of the 20th Century when lynching was prevalent? And the second question is: Who are these five boys, because they were robbed of their voices instantaneously. Their confessions were coerced, so they had no voice and were hated by everyone. If you were one of the Central Park Five back in 1989, you were one of the worst human beings that had ever lived. In fact, they were no longer considered human, but a wilding wolf pack of brute beasts. So, we were compelled to tell the story as accurately and as journalistically as possible, asking those two questions.

KW: Were you at all concerned about including the boys' "confessions" in the film because of the possibility that some people might see them as guilty?

KB: No, we fully accepted the possibility that some people could come into this film already thinking they were guilty. The police and prosecutors refused to cooperate with us at any time, and we bent over backwards to include their point-of-view throughout. What I think happens over the course of the film is that you gradually get to know these kids who had never been in trouble before, who had no record, who had never been arrested, and who were just trying to cooperate with the police when the questioning began. But then all of a sudden these 14 and 15

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year-olds found themselves prime suspects, along with a developmentally-challenged 16 year-old who was eventually tried as an adult and convicted. This was just too big a mountain to overcome for them.

KW: By the time I turned 25, I'd been profile-stopped just for being black at least a couple dozen times either while either walking or driving.

KB: Sarah's original title for the film was Born Guilty. Evidentially, we do not have a fair criminal justice system. It favors those who can afford it. And more often than not, people of color are condemned to the worst kind of treatment. There is a "driving while black" phenomenon and a crime of just being a black person in a white neighborhood. Trayvon Martin would be alive today if that were not the case, I'm very, very sorry to say. This case is merely one of the loudest, grossest cases of that type.

KW: Editor/Legist Patricia Turnier asks: What message you want the public to take away from the film?

KB: I don't think we want to telegraph how the audience should feel. Rather, we want people to understand what happened, and to form their own opinions. But clearly there is something wrong with a criminal justice system which could permit such a miscarriage of justice. And not only did it let that transpire, but when the real rapist came forward to confess, the press didn't apologize for its hyperbolic prose encouraging a rush to judgment, and the prosecutors and police didn't admit to their coercion of the confessions, or to their ignoring of exculpatory evidence. Even now, it's been ten long years since the Central Park Five were exonerated, and they're still awaiting redress from the civil suit they launched against New York City. Ten years is an awfully long time, especially after you've been robbed of thirteen years of your life. So, it's been thirteen years of justice denied, followed by ten years of justice delayed, which we know also amounts to justice denied.

KW: Marcia Evans says: I absolutely have much to say about this heart-wrenching film. It sent me through numerous emotions to the point I shared it with my therapist. The film disturbed me to my core. It was interesting to hear all the moaning and groaning in the theater and comments afterwards from both black folks and white folks.

KB: I love Marcia's response to the film. We get those moans and groans wherever we show it... mothers of 15 year-olds of any color, standing up, in tears, and anxious about their own sons' safety.

KW: Marcia says: Most people are unaware that the City of New York even had the nerve to try to intimidate you and your daughter after you made the movie. Would you talk about the subpoena?

KB: Yes, the City of New York subpoenaed all of our outtakes and notes for the film in an attempt I believe, cynically, to delay the trial and to fish for inconsistencies. This is a legal tactic as old as the hills. But we were intent to make sure that our difficulties were not blocking out or overshadowing the decades-long Kafkaesque hell these five men have been put through. So, we've had to engage legal counsel and defend ourselves in a lawsuit that isn't just about us, but about journalists everywhere. We shouldn't have our work impounded by the state just because it feels it might be helpful to make their case.

Written by Kam Williams

KW: What was it like co-directing with your daughter and son-in-law?

KB: It was a joy!

KW: Editor Stephen Fay would like to know how you were influenced by Jerome Liebling, your photography professor at Hampshire College.

KB: I don't recognize the person I was when I met Jerome Liebling from the person I am now. Our parents are our greatest influences but, for me, after them it was without a doubt, unhesitatingly, Jerry, from his social consciousness to his fierce sense of injustice to the quality of his images to his understanding of the strength of a single image to convey complex information. I'm just sad that he didn't have a chance to see this film, because his signature is written all over it.

KW: Speaking of Hampshire, I had a friend named Liz Dreesen who was there at the same time as you? Do you remember her?

KB: Yes I do! Small world!

KW: Well, she's a surgeon in North Carolina now. Steve Kramer asks: Would you consider making a film about the comic book industry, and specifically about William F. Gaines, the demise of EC Comics and the start of Mad Magazine, and how Mad has influenced a generation or two of artists, writers and filmmakers.

KB: You're talking to one right now. *Mad* Magazine was hugely important. We get lots of suggestions of what our next project should be, and it's interesting that comic books are way, way up the list, in the top ten, if not the top five. It's a great topic which we may get around to, but I already have my next seven lined up and in various stages of production.

KW: Harriet Pakula-Teweles says: How would you describe the critical qualities for a memorable documentary to an aspiring filmmaker?

KB: For too long, documentaries were expository, telling you what you should know, which the last time I checked was just called homework. Or they were just in the moment, championing some evanescent thing happening right now. The essence of any good film, whether it's made by Steven Spielberg or by Ken Burns, is how you tell a story. And that's a critical point. If you can tell a story well, you have everybody's attention. We are all storytellers in our ordinary lives. And filmmaking is just a heightened version of that in which you have a thousand things going on and easily a million decisions to make, no exaggeration. So, the simple answer is: Tell stories well. And the answer to how you achieve that is: There are a million different ways.

KW: Your work has been characterized by your father-in-law as "an attempt to make people long-gone come back alive." I thought that was a terrific description. Where did that approach to filmmaking come from?

KB: My mother died when I was 11 years-old. There was never a moment in my childhood when I wasn't aware of her impending death and then, after she passed, that she had died. I remember speaking to him about it, and he said, "What do you think you do for a living? You wake the dead! You make Abraham Lincoln, and Jackie Robinson and Louie Armstrong come alive. Who do you think you're really trying to awaken?" That was almost twenty years ago that he said that. It had a profound effect on me.

Ken Burns "The Central Park Five" Interview: Legendary filmmaker discusses his latest documentary

Written by Kam Williams

KW: The Ling-Ju Yen question: What is your earliest childhood memory?

KB: Playing among the studs of a dark room my father was building at our tract house in a development in Newark, Delaware in around 1955.

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

KB: [Chuckles] A guy who's 60 years-old and has bags under his eyes from working too long.

KW: If you could have one wish instantly granted, what would that be for?

KB: Oh my goodness! World peace!

KW: What's it like to have an app named after you, the Ken Burns Effect.

KB: It's very flattering. Steve Jobs showed me this effect that would allow people to pan their photographs a decade ago when it was in development. I thought it was very cool, but I didn't want to do any commercial endorsements. So, we ended up striking a deal where he gave a lot of free equipment to non-profits in my name. That assuaged my conscience, the name stuck, and now the technological tail wags the dog, with people coming up to me saying how I've saved their wedding, bar mitzvah or birthday party. That makes me feel happy.

KW: It's kind of funny to hear your name associated with something seemingly as fleeting as an app, when I associate you with solid, sober productions built to last.

KB: At the end of the day, all meaning accrues in duration. No amount of MTV cutting or Youtube sensibility is going to be permanent in the way that things that are lasting endure. I'm sure the work that you're proudest of and the relationships that you care the most about have benefited from your attention. If something's done well, then people will respond to it. That's the only arbiter in the end, although many people like to superimpose critical schools of thought on art. Without ever dumbing-down, I'm trying to make a film for everybody. I'm aiming high. And if you do reward me with your attention, I am honor bound not to violate your gift to me of that attention. So, I have to work as hard as I can to make the best possible film.

KW: Lastly, the Tavis Smiley question: How do you want to be remembered?

KB: Oh, I want to be remembered as a good father. I have four daughters, and they are my most important co-production. I just want to be a good father because it's a tough job, and I love that more than anything else.

KW: Thanks for a great interview, Ken, and I hope we can find the time to do lunch.

KB: I'd love it, Kam. Take care.

To order a copy of The Central Park Five on DVD, visit:

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/B00AZMFG48/ref%3dnosim/thslfofire-20>