



Pictured at last year's Full Frame Documentary Festival is filmmaker St. Clair Bourne, who died this weekend.

Photo by Eugene Hernandez/indieWIRE

Remembering St. Clair Bourne: 1943 - 2007

by indieWIRE (December 16, 2007)

Acclaimed filmmaker **St. Clair Bourne** passed away yesterday (Saturday) at the age of 64. The documentarian, who died from complications following surgery, had been working on a film about civil rights photographer Ernest Withers, according to an [obituary](#) by Richard Prince (fourth item), in addition to a film about the Black Panthers. Bourne's many films included "**Making 'Do the Right Thing'**," "**Paul Robeson: Here I Stand!**," "**Let the Church Say Amen**," "**In Motion: Amiri Baraka**," "**The Black and the Green**," "**Langston Hughes: The Dream Keeper**," "**New Orleans Brass**," and "**John Henrik Clarke: A Great and Mighty Walk**," among numerous others. A biography [on his own website](#) indicates that St. Clair Bourne was born in Harlem on February 16, 1943. After a time in the Peace Corps, Bourne studied filmmaking at **Columbia University**, but was subsequently expelled for demonstrating on campus. Shortly thereafter, he produced public television's first Black public affairs program, "**Black Journal**," later forming the film collective, **Chamba**. He served as a guest lecturer at the **UCLA** film department in the mid-70s, created documentaries for L.A.'s **KCET** and was on the selection committee of the Los Angeles film festival, **FILMEX**.

St. Clair regularly shared thoughts, tributes and information via his frequent *Chamba Notes* email dispatches, so in that spirit, we decided to publish an email from that we received tonight from his good friend, filmmaker **Floyd Webb**.

We invite others to share their thoughts about St. Clair Bourne and his films in the comment space at the bottom of this page.

Hi Eugene,

Thanks for getting in touch. What can I say? I am shocked to the core by his passing.

I can tell you how I met him and what my experience was.

I first heard of **St. Clair Bourne** when he was producing for "**Black Journal**," the first black public affairs television series in the United States that began in 1968. I met St. Clair in the mid 1980s between his two films, "**In Motion: Amiri Baraka**" and "**The Black and the Green**." I am not really sure how

we met, but I think it was through **Jim Taylor** of the **Community Film Workshop** in Chicago. It might have been through Professor **Abdul Alkalimat**, who was head of **Timbuktu Books**. My memory fails me.

St Clair had come to town to prepare for a production he was doing and he always made an effort to hire black technicians and crew people at a time when people always said there were none. He went out of his way to find good people of color to work with. He was a hard taskmaster, he expected the utmost in professionalism from you.

We got along really well because of our mutual taste in music (duh sho nuff blues) and barbecue and backgrounds as social social activists. I was pretty much a cultural activist with roots in the black nationalist community. Like St Clair, I had been involved in sieges of college buildings in the name of making Black Studies part of the curriculum. We had both been either suspended -- in my case -- or expelled -- in his -- for being part of the mass movement for Black Studies (he in 1967 and me in 1972). He became pretty much a big brother and mentor to me, as he was to so many up and coming filmmakers. We shared a commitment to social justice in deed and action. We did not always see eye to eye, but we were able to respect each other's points of view.

I had lived through the Panther years in Chicago, and had immigrated to Tanzania. I had gone with the intention of aligning myself with the liberation movements of Frelimo or the ANC. St. had worked in South America with the Peace Corps. St. was one of the few people I met who knew anything about Umkonto Wa Sizwe, the military arm of the ANC. We always had a lot to talk about. We knew a lot of people in common who were expatriates abroad in Europe and in Africa.

He was one of the first people to see my experimental film, "**Flesh, Metal, Wood**" when I was working with **Chicago Filmmakers** and the **Community Film Workshop**. He was very encouraging of that rough hewn early work. These were the years of Chicago's first black mayor Harold Washington. There was a progressive tone in Chicago back then. I had founded and was also head of the **Blacklight Festival of International Cinema**. St Clair was doing a journal titled **Chamba Notes**. It was a major source of information for us back then. Saint scoured everything he could find related to Black international film news and pulled it all together into Chamba Notes. The Notes were our Internet.

Between me doing the festival and him doing the notes a lot of calls passed between us.

We would spend hours on the phone comparing notes, passing on phone numbers and info on films we had seen. We shared information and resources because I was always going to festivals around the world in my capacity as festival director. I became a frequent visitor to his big apartment on 105th and Broadway going to and from Europe and Africa back then. For me, his home was the crossroads for information on the black film world.

I did production stills for his film "**Big City Blues**" in Chicago, worked with him on "**Making 'Do The Right Thing'**," and did animation and 3D effects for him on the Wesley Snipes documentary production of "Dr. Ben." We travelled together to a festival in Kenya, East Africa and presented films in the Western Provinces and other areas there. Travels with St. Clair Bourne are legend, ask anyone who has ever spent any time with him at festivals and after screenings.

St. had the kind of social commitment that a lot of people thought was better left in the 1960s. He was bold enough to say whatever was on his mind and confronted the issues of exclusion and forces of cultural domination head on. You could not help but like him. As serious as he was he also had a wry sense of humour. Like Harold Washington, St. had this ability to metaphorically smack you with one hand and then have you laughing so hard afterwards you forgot he did it.

Did he get the recognition he deserved? I keep hearing people ask this question. Hell, did he get the opportunities to do work that he was deserving of is the better question. It does not matter. St. never stopped working and as hard it got, he continued and struggled through. When St. had down time he was always thinking of things to do to bring people together and to share information. In New York, he helped found the **Black Documentary Association** (BDA) and in LA he was instrumental in founding the **Black Association of Documentary Filmmakers** (BAD). His mission was to leave something behind that others like himself could benefit from. He never compromised his principles and beliefs and never lost his sense of humour.

St. Clair was diagnosed with a tumor on his brain a few years back. He told me it was a bit of a concern but that it was benign. Recently he had starting having some issues with coordination. He called me after he came back from Mississippi after attending a New Media conference. He spent the night in the hospital while he was there. When he got back to New York a decision was made for him to go into the hospital to have the tumour removed. He went in for the operation on Thursday Dec 6. I spoke with his sister, Judy on Friday Dec. 7th, not wanting to bother him in the hospital. She was reassuring, he was having a few issues that were expected to pass. She was hoping he would be coming home the following Sunday or Monday.

His recuperation was not as rapid as expected and he was preparing to be transferred to White Plains, NY for rehab on Friday, Dec 14th. On Friday morning he had a blood clot in his lung. He was stabilized and was under observation. He died Saturday morning.

There will not be a funeral. His family is participating in a cremation and the interring of his ashes.

There will be a public memorial later in January, the time and date will be announced.

Meanwhile, the Independent film community is discussing how best to remember him in the coming weeks of holiday. I have suggested we do a big New Years Day's bash in his memory New Orleans style and dedicate the New Year to his spirit.

I hope this is helpful Eugene. I am just telling it like I remember it. Let me know if you need anything else.

Floyd Webb