

Ken Burns

Historian and Filmmaker

Ken Burns is a celebrated American documentary filmmaker of the 1980's and 1990's who gradually amassed a considerable reputation and a devoted audience with a series of reassuringly traditional meditations on Americana. Burns' works are treasure troves of archival materials: He skillfully utilizes period music and footage, photographs, periodicals, and ordinary people's correspondence, the latter often movingly read by seasoned professional actors in a deliberate attempt to get away from a "Great Man" approach to history.

Like most non-fiction filmmakers, Burns wears many hats on his projects, variously serving as a writer, cinematographer, editor, and music director in addition to producing and directing. He achieved his apotheosis with PBS' *The Civil War* (1990), a phenomenally popular 11-hour documentary that won two Emmys and broke all previous ratings records for public TV. The series' companion coffee table book--priced at a hefty \$50--sold more than 700,000 copies. The audio version, narrated by Burns, was also a major best-seller. In the final accounting, *The Civil War*, became the first documentary to gross over \$100 million. Not surprisingly, it has become perennial fundraising programming for public TV stations around the country.

Ken Burns arrived upon the scene with the Oscar-nominate *Brooklyn Bridge* (1981), a nostalgic chronicle of the construction of the fabled edifice. The film was more widely seen when rebroadcast on PBS the following year. Though Burns has made other nonfiction films for theatrical release, notably an acclaimed and ambiguous portrait of Depression-era Louisiana governor *Huey Long* (1985), PBS would prove to be his true home. He cast a probing eye on such American subjects as *The Statue of Liberty* (PBS, 1985), *The Congress*, painter *Thomas Hart Benton* (both PBS, 1989) and early radio with *Empire of the Air: The Men Who Made Radio* (PBS, 1992).

Ken Burns returned to longform documentary with his most ambitious project to date, an 18-hour history of *Baseball* which aired on PBS in the fall of 1994. He approached the national pastime as a template for understanding changes in modern American society. Ironically, this was the only baseball on the air at the time as the players and owners were embroiled in a bitter strike at the time.

Burns' most recent film, *Unforgivable Blacknes: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, became one of the most highly anticipated documentaries of the year. The film snagged four Emmy nominations, including Outstanding Directing for a nonfiction special and Outstanding nonfiction special.