

Gordon Parks to Receive DaimlerChrysler's 2003 "Behind the Lens" Award

- DaimlerChrysler recognizes Hollywood's "Behind the Lens" artists
- Pioneer in Black filmmaking, Gordon Parks, honored

March 13, 2003, Beverly Hills, Calif. -

Gordon Parks, an award-winning photographer, author and director of the original movie "Shaft," will receive the DaimlerChrysler "Behind the Lens" Award on Sunday, March 9, 2003, in Los Angeles. Parks is being recognized for his trailblazing accomplishments in photography, film and the literary arts.

"A creative genius, Parks remains one of our nation's most influential African American artists," said Frank Fountain, Senior Vice President – Government Affairs and President of the DaimlerChrysler Corporation Fund. "His work has served as a beacon in arts and culture."

The "Behind the Lens" Award was created in 2002 by DaimlerChrysler to recognize and celebrate the achievements of individuals who work behind the scenes in the entertainment industry. Award recipients are chosen by an advisory panel of entertainment professionals.

Parks, 90, boasts several "firsts" in his career. He was the first African American to write, direct, and produce a film for a major motion picture company. The film, "A Learning Tree," was among 25 films placed on the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress in 1989. Parks' place in film history was further solidified when he directed the hit movie "Shaft" in 1971.

According to casting director Reuben Cannon, the first "Behind the Lens" recipient, Parks' recognition also celebrates others whose names may be unknown, but who have made significant contributions.

"The creative contributions of African Americans who work behind the scenes have been largely overlooked by the entertainment industry," said Cannon. "I am especially grateful to DaimlerChrysler for taking the lead by instituting this award to bring awareness to the public and to those in the industry."

In addition to directing films, Parks has published 12 books, including three autobiographies. He has composed orchestral music and film scores, and wrote a ballet about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was the first African-American photographer to work at LIFE and Vogue magazines.

Born in Fort Scott, Kansas, Parks attended a segregated elementary school and an integrated high school where the aspirations of young blacks were often dismissed. Nevertheless, he was able to achieve significant success during a career spanning more than 60 years. During this period, Parks received many awards, including the Guild for High Achievement from the National Urban League in 1980; the NAACP Hall of Fame Award; the Spingarn Medal in 1972 (NAACP); Frederick Douglass Gold Medal in 1984; the National Medal Arts Award in 1988; and, the American Society of Magazine Photographer's Award in 1995. He has been awarded honorary degrees from 13 institutions, including Syracuse University, Boston University, Rutgers University and the University of the District of Columbia.

Parks also has the distinction of having two New York-area schools named in his honor: the Gordon Parks Media Center at John F. Kennedy High School, and the Gordon Parks Academy in East Orange, N.J. The Gordon Parks Academy is a magnet school specializing in radio, animation, film, and television.

The March 9 event at the Beverly Hills Hotel is by "invitation only." An array of Hollywood actors, directors, and producers have been invited to celebrate Parks, including several from his early films.

Gordon Parks Biography

(1912-) Photographer, writer, filmmaker, composer, musician

Gordon Parks is a creative genius, an award-winning photographer, writer, and film-maker. All told, Parks published 12 books, including three autobiographies. He is a composer of orchestral music and film scores, plus he wrote a ballet, *Martin*, about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In his many endeavors Parks further earned a reputation as a renaissance man. He was the first African American photographer to work at *Life* and *Vogue* magazines, and the first African American to work for the Office of War Information and the Farm Security Administration. Additionally, Parks was the first African American to write, direct, and produce a film for a major motion picture company. His film *The Learning Tree* was among the 25 films placed on the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress in 1989. Parks in his 1990 memoir, *Voices in the Mirror*, admitted that, "I've liked being a stranger to failure, since I was a young man and I still feel that way. I'm still occupied with survival; still very single-minded about keeping my life moving - but not for fame or fortune."

Gordon Parks rose from a childhood of poverty in a segregated society, yet he never exploited his background as vindication for poor performance. Likewise he refused to bow to convention. He excelled in multiple artistic fields, and he used his creative talents to better the world around him. He was born Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks on November 30, 1912, in Fort Scott, Kansas, to Andrew Jackson and Sarah Ross Parks. Parks, the youngest of 15 children, described his parents as hard working, always providing, and God fearing people who were forgiving, compassionate, and active models of love.

Parks attended a segregated elementary school, and in high school the school he attended was integrated, although it maintained exclusive and discriminatory policies toward black students. African American students were barred from attendance at social functions and from participation in sports. The school further dismissed any aspirations beyond the menial for its children of color. Yet Parks maintained in *Voices in the Mirror* that he was "taught how to live honorably and how to die honorably."

Parks's mother died when he was 16, an event that changed his life and catapulted him into the world unexpectedly. He moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, to live with his sister and her family, but he had altercations with her husband. After a brief period, Parks was evicted by his brother-in-law and found himself thrust upon his own resources, homeless in a cold Minnesota winter, with very little money. For nearly a week he spent his nights riding the trolley line from St. Paul to Minneapolis and back again. Parks, who demonstrated some musical talent even as a youngster, eventually acquired a job playing the piano nightly in a brothel for tips. He held the job for two years. Then, in 1929, he got a job as a busboy. Parks wrote of those times in his memoir; he said that he worked in a "Minnesota club as a busboy in the day, and [as] a general lackey at night." He nurtured a desire to succeed, and he became an avid reader at the club's library. However, he was forced to seek employment again and to quit high school when the "panic and depression [the Great Depression]" set in. Parks resumed his employment as a bordello pianist. There, he once said of himself, "[T]he music I fed them was filled with my mood, and it seemed to soothe their souls. Friends began calling me 'Blue,' because of the blues I played." One of the numbers frequently requested of Parks was "No Love," a song that he composed after an argument with his future wife.

Parks moved to Chicago for a brief while, but he returned to St. Paul where a white band leader, Larry Funk, heard Parks play his composition "No Love." Funk was taken by the music. He not only played the song on national radio, but he also invited Parks to join and travel with the band. Parks accepted the offer, and he stayed with the group until 1933 when the band dissolved in New York. Parks once again was jobless and broke. He soon joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, but he left that employment in 1934 and returned to Minneapolis. Upon his arrival he worked as a waiter, but he wished to promote his song writing. The following year, he took a job once again as a pianist and he used the opportunity to showcase his own tunes. In time he became a waiter on the North Coast Limited, a transcontinental train, which to him represented the "Minnesota Club on Wheels." It was on this job, while riding the train, that he was inspired to become a photographer.

Develops Talent for Photography

Parks's interest in photography was triggered while leafing through magazines one day, on a run on the North Coast Limited. He related his experience in *Voices in the Mirror* wherein he explained that he found one article in particular with photographs of migrant farm workers. The pictures, taken by photographers of the Farm Security Administration, depicted "stark, tragic images of human beings caught up in the confusion of poverty...." The images, he went on to write, "saddened me." He began to read more about photography and to visit art museums, to study the works of

others. Ultimately it was a newsreel of the Japanese bombing of the U.S. gunboat Panay, by photographer Norman Alley, that affected Parks the most. After viewing the film he was "determined to become a photographer." Three days later, he bought his first camera: a \$7.50 Voightlander Brilliant. Parks said, "[The camera] was to become my weapon against poverty and racism." Parks's first photographs immediately attracted the attention of the Eastman Kodak Company, which sponsored a showing of Parks's pictures in the company show windows.

Parks studied art and learned to capture and to convey powerful images with his camera. Because of his work on the North Coast Limited, he frequently found himself in Chicago during layovers on train runs between Minneapolis and Chicago. Whenever he was in Chicago he occupied himself by taking photographs of the people and the tenements of the city's south side. The pictures were reminiscent of the ones of migrant workers that had inspired him earlier, and the subject of the Chicago tenements developed into a particular favorite of Parks. Those early pictures foreshadowed what was to become his documentary style, a style that would mature remarkably soon after, when Parks relocated from St. Paul to become a full-time resident of Chicago.

While still in Minnesota Parks approached Frank Murphy, the owner of a women's store in St. Paul, about displaying some photographs in Murphy's store windows. Parks had seen some pictures in Vogue, and he wanted to try his hand at fashion photography. Murphy agreed to display Parks's pictures which were eventually seen by Marva Louis, wife of Joe Louis - heavyweight boxing champion of the world. She urged Parks to move to Chicago where he could profit not only from her encouragement but also from her well-connected lifestyle and her involvement with the South Side Community Art Center. Parks's itinerary in Chicago included "photo shoots" of Chicago's wealthy society matrons, as well as visits to the south side slums, where he captured many poignant moments with his camera.

In 1941 Parks's eloquent depictions of Chicago's poor earned him a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship. He was the first photographer to be so honored. For his fellowship Parks was apprenticed for one year to Roy Emerson Stryker at the Farm Security Administration in Washington, D.C. Parks was appalled at the bigotry and racism that permeated the bureau, and he set about to document the conditions with his camera. He took one particularly memorable photograph of Ella Watson, a poor, black, government charwoman, posed against the U.S. flag with broom and mop in hand. The Farm Security Administration was later absorbed by the Office of War Information, and Parks was assigned to Selfridge Field in Michigan to cover the newly formed 332nd Fighter Group - a squadron of black pilots.

Parks resigned from federal employment in 1944 and moved to New York City. In New York he applied for work with Harper's Bazaar and was rejected because of racial prejudice. With the intervention of a fellow photographer, Edward Steichen, however, Parks secured casual-ware assignments for Glamour magazine. Six months later he received an assignment with Vogue.

While freelancing at Vogue, Parks joined Roy Stryker's photography team at Standard Oil Company in New Jersey. Parks's work with Standard Oil involved photographing corporate officials, and he was also assigned to develop a documentary series on rural America. Privately, Parks created a photographic essay on gang life in Harlem, and he used this piece, which focused on a young gang leader named Red Jackson, to secure a position on the staff of Life in 1948. Parks remained with Life until 1972. During that time he completed over 300 assignments. He used his art to document poverty in Harlem and Latin America, as well as the 1960s black civil rights movement in the United States. He did articles concerning the Black Panthers (a militant civil rights organization), the Ingrid Bergman-Roberto Rosellini love affair, Broadway shows, personalities, fashion, and politics. Some of Parks's works from those years include "Crime Across America", and the "Death of Malcolm X". Phil Kunhardt Jr., then an assistant managing editor at Life, told Smithsonian magazine of Parks at that time: "[A]t first he made his name with fashion, but when he covered the racial strife for us, there was no question that he was a black photographer with enormous connections and access to the black community and its leaders. He tried to show what was really going on there for a big, popular, fundamentally conservative white magazine." Kunhardt further concurred with Malcolm X's autobiography: "Success among whites never made Parks lose touch with black reality."

Book Publishing Emerges

In addition to his photography, Parks began to draw word pictures and thus embarked on a second career as a writer. In his earlier works he incorporated his knowledge of photography. He published his first book in 1947 - an instructional manual entitled Flash Photography. That book was followed by a second manual in 1948, Camera Portraits: Techniques and Principles of Documentary Portraiture. In time, while he continued to work at Life he was encouraged to write about his early life in Kansas, and out of that beginning he developed his best-selling novel, The

Learning Tree, which was published in 1963. The Learning Tree is a fictionalized account of his own childhood in Kansas. The book ends with the death of his mother. As fiction, the book tells the story of a black family in a small Kansas town during the 1920s. The story focuses on a young boy named Newt Winger. Parks related in his third autobiography (*Voices in the Mirror*) that the title and the inspiration for the novel grew out of his recollection of a conversation he had with his mother when he was young. He asked her whether the family had to stay in Fort Scott forever, to which his mother replied, "I don't know, son, . . . but you're to let this place be your learning tree. Trees bear good fruit and bad fruit, and that's the way it is here. Remember that."

In 1966, Parks published the first of three autobiographies, *A Choice of Weapons*. It tells of his struggle to survive whole after his mother's death. The title "came to him after President John F. Kennedy's assassination," according to Parks. Quoted in *Afro-American Writers after 1955*, Saunders Redding said that, "It is [a] perceptive narrative of one man's struggle to realize the values (defined democratic and especially American) he has been taught to respect." The theme of the book is evident in an article in the *Detroit News* in which Parks said, "I have a right to be bitter, but I would not let bitterness destroy me. As I tell young black people, you can fight back, but do it in a way to help yourself and not destroy yourself." Following this first autobiography he combined the imagery of two art forms, poetry and photography, for a subsequent book entitled *Gordon Parks: A Poet and His Camera*, which appeared in 1968.

During the 1970s Parks published three more books combining photographs and poems: *Gordon Parks: Whispers of Intimate Things* and *In Love*, in 1971, and *Moments Without Proper Names* in 1975. The latter book portrays the unique suffering of African Americans and offers a response to the pain. In *Afro-American Writers after 1955*, Parks said of the book, "The first part . . . says more of what I want[ed] to say, what I felt was necessary to say. The back part . . . is the beauty part. It is simply what it is - the beautiful moments." In 1971, he also published *Born Black*, a collection of essays on personalities of the black struggle for civil rights including Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Huey Newton, and Stokeley Carmichael. In the various essays Parks included a discussion of the black Nation of Islam, as well as the situation of a family in Harlem. From 1970 to 1973 Parks was also involved in the founding of *Essence* magazine for black women.

Parks is particularly skillful at interweaving his various interests and endeavors, as is illustrated by his book *Flavio*, which was published in 1978. The book evolved from a photo essay that Parks developed in 1961 while on assignment from *Life* to document the poverty in Rio de Janeiro. This he did by scrutinizing an impoverished family, the Da Silvas. The Da Silvas had a 12-year-old son, Flavio, who was dying of bronchial asthma and malnutrition. The original photo essay, "Freedom's Fearful Foe: Poverty," appeared in the June 16, 1961 issue of *Life*. Public response to the article was overwhelming; people sent money and offers of adoption. Most significant, as Parks related in *Voices in the Mirror*, was an offer from "the Children's Asthma Research Institute [in Denver]: without charge we will definitely save him. All you have to do is deliver him to our door." As a result of the publicity Flavio was brought to Denver for treatment and eventually returned home in good health. Parks remained in contact with Flavio, and out of the experience came the award-winning biography of Flavio.

In 1979 Parks produced a second installment of his own life story, *To Smile in Autumn, A Memoir*, which spans the years from 1944 to 1978. *Afro-American Writers* said of the book, "[I]t combines passages from his poems, journals, and letters with recollections of wives, children, lovers, and career assignments."

In 1981 he published a second novel, *Shannon*. Unlike *The Learning Tree*, the novel *Shannon* was targeted at adults. It is an historical novel, set in New York. The book chronicles the O'Farrell family's rise to prominence; it broached a variety of social issues: the labor problems of World War I, the powerful influence of the Catholic Church in the Irish community, and the conflict between the rich and the poor.

Parks's third memoir, *Voices in the Mirror*, was published in 1990. In it he offered a retrospective overview of his life, from his poor beginnings in Kansas to his many triumphs both in America and abroad. In 1996 in *Glimpses Toward Infinity*, Parks's twelfth book, this talented and artistic author incorporated poetry, photography, and something new - samples of his own paintings.

Film and Music Careers Develop

During the years when Parks worked at *Life*, he discovered yet another creative outlet - a film career. Initially he served as a consultant on several Hollywood films. Eventually he produced his first film, a documentary on Flavio, after which he made three other documentaries, including *Diary of a Harlem Family* and *Mean Streets*. He was the

first African American to produce, direct, and score a film for a major Hollywood studio: Warner Brothers. The film, released in 1960, was *The Learning Tree*, based on Parks's original novel of the same title. Donald Bogle in *Blacks in American Films and Television* divides Parks's films into two general categories: commercial dramas, and personal "romances." In the first category, *Shaft* and *Shaft's Big Score*, were released in 1971 and 1972 respectively. Also among Parks's commercial dramas was *The Super Cops*, released in 1974, in which he focused on contemporary men of action caught up in urban life. Parks's first film, *The Learning Tree*, was also the first of his personal romance films, followed by *Leadbelly* in 1976 and, to some degree, Solomon Northrup's *Odyssey* in 1984. Most of Parks's films, excluding *The Super Cops*, present assertive black males facing those social and political elements that rob them of their manhood. In *Voices in the Mirror*, Parks recounted his disappointment with Hollywood as he struggled to get Paramount to distribute and promote *Leadbelly*, the story of the folk and blues singer Huddie Ledbetter. Parks also produced an autobiographical film, *Gordon Parks: Moments Without Proper Names*, which was televised on PBS in 1988.

Parks wrote many musical compositions, including blues tunes and popular songs in his early career, and frequently incorporated his music into his films. Conversely, he wrote several film scores and then adapted the music afterward for their separate release. Among these were *Tree Symphony* from *The Learning Tree*, and "Don't Misunderstand" from *Shaft's Big Score*. He composed *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, *Piece for Cello and Orchestra*, *Five Piano Sonatas* and *Celebrations for Sarah Ross and Andrew Jackson Parks*. He created the music and libretto for a five-act ballet entitled *Martin* in 1989. The ballet, which was a tribute to Martin Luther King Jr., premiered in Washington, D.C. *Martin* later aired on national television on King's birthday in 1990. Parks was the executive producer of the television presentation. He also directed and photographed a documentary that preceded the ballet. He blended his multiple interests in photography and music yet again when he produced a portrait of jazz musicians for a 1996 issue of *Life*.

Wins Awards and Honors

Parks was honored many times for his bold and creative visions. He was named Photographer of the Year by the American Society of Magazine Photographers in 1960, and in 1964 he received the Philadelphia Museum of Art Award and the Art Directors Club Award. That same year he won the Mass Media Award and an award for outstanding contributions to better human relations; both awards were bestowed by the National Conference of Christians and Jews Brotherhood in 1964. Two years later, in 1966, he received a Notable Book Award from the American Library Association for *A Choice of Weapons*. The following year, in 1967, he received the Nikon Photographic Award for promotion of understanding among nations of the world. Parks received an Emmy Award for best television documentary for his *Diary of a Harlem Family* in 1968, and in 1970 he was honored with the Carr Van Anda Award from Ohio University School of Journalism. He was inducted into the Black Film Makers Hall of Fame in 1973. The list goes on: Spingarn Medal from the NAACP in 1972; first place at the Dallas Film Festival in 1976 for *Leadbelly*; Christopher Award for best biography in 1978, for *Flavio*; and Guild for High Achievement from the National Urban League in 1980. The NAACP Hall of Fame Award and the Frederick Douglass Gold Medal went to Parks in 1984, and he received the American Society of Magazine Photographers Award in 1985. Parks was the Kansan of the Year in 1985, and for that distinction he received the Governor's Medal of Honor from the State of Kansas. In 1988 he received both a Commonwealth Mass Communications Award and a National Medal of Arts.

Between 1968 and 1996 Gordon Parks received honorary degrees from 13 separate institutions: Maryland Institute of Fine Arts in 1968; Pratt Institute in 1981; Syracuse University School of Journalism in 1963; Boston University School of Public Communication in 1969; Colby College in 1974; Lincoln University in 1975; Rutgers University in 1980; Kansas City Art Institute in 1984; Art Center College of Design in 1987; Hamline University in 1987; American International College in 1988; Savannah College of Art and Design in 1988; and the University of the District of Columbia in 1996.

John F. Kennedy High School in New York City honored Parks with a media center in his name, and *The Learning Tree* Schools were established in his honor. In January of 1998 *Jet* announced that the Stockton School in East Orange, New Jersey was renamed to become the Gordon Parks Academy - a magnet school of radio, animation, film, and television.

Personal Notes

Parks married Sally Alvis in 1933. The couple, who divorced in 1961, had three children: Gordon Parks Jr.; Toni Parks Parson; and David Parks. Parks Jr., the first born, was a film director like his father. He died tragically in an airplane crash in 1979 while filming on location in Africa. In 1962 Parks married Elizabeth Campbell - They have one

daughter, Leslie, and they were divorced in 1973. Parks's third marriage, in August of 1973 to Genevieve Young, also ended in divorce, in 1979. Parks has three grandchildren (Alan, Gordon Parks III, and Sara) and one great granddaughter, Dannah.

Parks, who resides in New York City, is still trying to find the meaning of life. He is still in love with life, because "nothing is more noble than a good try," according to Parks in the "Epilogue" to *Voices in the Mirror*. He revealed further that he has "been given several names - Mr. Dreamer, Mr. Striver, and ... Mr. Success ... the first two fit rather well; the third has a slight feel of discomfort." He summed up his life in *Visions* as follows:

I've known both misery and happiness, lived in so many different skins it is impossible for one skin to claim me. And I have felt like a wayfarer on an alien planet at times - walking, running, wondering about what brought me to this particular place, and why. But once I was here the dreams started moving in, and I went about devouring them as they devoured me.

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