

Livia Bloom Ingram

Righting and Re-writing the Historical Record: Re-releasing the Films of Madeline Anderson

Hello? This is Madeline Anderson. They said I should speak with Livia? It was April 22, 2015, when her distinctively high voice first reached my office phone. *Icarus Films* represents one of my titles, *I Am Somebody* (1970). It's on DVD for the educational market, *Icarus* has been good over the years. Well, I just found another film of mine. In a closet. A 16mm print. Likely the last. So I wondered: Would you take it?

Yikes; definitely not! If working for years in the museum world has taught me anything, it's that the only surviving print of anything belongs in an archive. To find a good home for the print, I phoned Dr. Dan Streible, director of the New York University (NYU) Moving Image Archiving and Preservation (MIAP) graduate program, where I am a guest lecturer. He, in turn, recommended Walter Forsberg, a MIAP graduate recently hired as media archivist for a museum so new that it was not yet open to the public: the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, DC. Like any startup, a new arts institution may be better resourced and lighter on its feet than the more established peers; instead of lengthy turnaround times for acquisitions, they may be able to move quickly to accommodate unusual opportunities. I contacted the museum with fingers crossed.

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When I was growing up, my dad, who worked in the film industry, would say that a good deal is a deal that's good for both parties. By that standard of mutual benefit, the NMAAHC and I made a good deal. First, Icarus obtained from Anderson the rights to distribute her "closet" film, *Integration Report I*. It turned out to have been made in 1960, a decade earlier than the other Anderson film that was already in the Icarus collection! Then, the NMAAHC acquired from Icarus not only the 16mm print, which they scanned and preserved, but also the rights to bring both *Integration Report I* and *I Am Somebody*, which they also scanned and preserved, into their permanent collection. They received on-site exhibition rights for the films in perpetuity, plus the right to exhibit *Integration Report I* globally via their website—a valuable license package. In return, Icarus then received brand new scans of both films plus a sum to cover the costs of licensing limited rights to Anderson's second film, *A Tribute to Malcolm X* (WNET, 1967). Icarus could then produce a DVD that included what Anderson calls "my three major films" to both non-theatrical and home entertainment markets, finally making her directorial oeuvre available to the general public.¹ NMAAHC curator Dr. Rhea Combs conducted an interview with Anderson that became a DVD extra, and Forsberg wrote preservation notes to accompany the release.

When *I Am Somebody: Three Films by Madeline Anderson* entered the world in 2018, lovingly produced and art directed by Jessica Lee, viewers had the chance to see and study all of Anderson's films together for the first time. Film programmers took up the cause of expanding film history by recognizing this unsung pioneer. They followed in the footsteps of longtime Anderson champions such as Jake Perlin by selecting her films for screenings and honoring her with accolades, including the 2019 Golden Gate Persistence of Vision award from the San Francisco Film Festival. As critics and members of the press took notice, Anderson's name increasingly appeared in articles on the pioneers of film studies, documentary history, labor studies, women's studies, and Black history. In 2020, the Library of Congress selected *I Am Somebody* for inclusion in the National Film Registry. At the time of this writing, Anderson is now recognized, and recognizes herself, as the first African American woman known to have directed a documentary film (*Integration Report I*).²

But let's back up: How did *I Am Somebody* make its way into the Icarus Films collection? And furthermore, how did Anderson's films even get made?

"We licensed the distribution rights to *I Am Somebody* from Moe Foner at Local 1199, the New York Health and Human Services Union," explains Jonathan Miller, longtime president of Icarus Films.³

"When Icarus Films signed *I Am Somebody* on March 25, 1980, our interest was in acquiring and releasing documentaries related to Labor Studies,

1 Madeline Anderson, "Mother, Filmmaker, Activist: Madeline Anderson in Her Own Words," transcript of an oral history conducted February 23, 2016, by Rhea L. Combs, PhD. Courtesy of the NMAAHC. Reprinted with permission in the *I Am Somebody: Three Films by Madeline Anderson* DVD booklet (Brooklyn, NY: Icarus Films, 2018).

2 Anderson, "Mother, Filmmaker, Activist."

3 Jonathan Miller, in discussion with the author, January 2021.

African-American Studies, History, and Women's Studies. . . . We met at Moe Foner's office, in the Union Building by Times Square. As far as I know, other unions weren't making films like this at the time. Maybe training films or promotional films, but not seriously."

I Am Somebody was in fact one of three films that Miller and Ilan Ziv signed from Foner and Local 1199; the other two titles were *Hospital Strike* (John Schultz, 1959) and *Like a Beautiful Child* (John Schultz, 1967). Schultz, who had worked under the journalist Edward R. Murrow at CBS, subsequently began teaching at Columbia University, so when the union asked him to direct their third film, he instead recommended Madeline Anderson.⁴

Anderson grew up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on "Barney Google's Row," an impoverished tract of homes condescendingly nicknamed after a billionaire cartoon character. She grew up loving movies and harbored early filmmaking aspirations, but when she enrolled at NYU, it was to study teaching. In her films, Anderson united the two practices: "I wanted to make films to teach. I wanted to tell people about the accomplishments of African Americans. And then I became politicized. I wanted to tell people about the struggle Blacks were facing to become equal citizens of the United States."⁵

A fortuitous job as a live-in babysitter for filmmaker Richard Leacock was Anderson's entry to the industry.⁶ In Anderson's words:

I told [Richard and Eleonore Leacock that] I wanted to be a filmmaker and they were so excited and supportive of me. . . . [Richard created] Andover Productions and he hired me to be his in-house production manager. That was the beginning of my career in the industry. . . . Ricky worked [with] Willard Van Dyke, D. A. Pennebaker, Shirley Clarke, and, later on, the Maysles brothers. I got to know all of these extraordinary filmmakers. They would look at films, they would critique films, and invite me to come and participate, so I ended up having this incredible informal education by some of the brightest minds in filmmaking. . . . Through Andover Productions, and using most of my salary, I directed and produced *Integration Report 1*.⁷

As Dr. Terri Francis explains, "[Anderson] titled the film *Integration Report 1* with the idea that it would be the first in a series of reports. Networks, however, did not show any interest in supporting the project. To view *Integration Report 1* is to feel the weight of its continued relevance as we continue to face police brutality amid job and housing discrimination as well as persistent inequities in educational opportunity decades later; it is also to mourn the subsequent films Anderson might have produced."⁸

4 "I Am Somebody: The Story of the Making of a Movie," *1199 Drug and Hospital News*, April 1970.

5 Anderson, "Mother, Filmmaker, Activist."

6 Anderson.

7 Anderson.

8 Terri Francis, "Within the Circle: Madeline Anderson's Cinematic Assemblages," *Seen*, no. 2, Black Star Film Festival (Spring 2021), <https://blackstarfest.org/seen/read/issue-002/within-the-circle/>.

Still, with her directorial debut under her belt and her experience at Andover Productions, Anderson became a professional editor and the second Black woman allowed to join the editors' guild. "Of the one thousand union members, ten of them were Caucasian women, and one African American woman, Hortense 'Tee' Beveridge," Anderson said. "[Tee] was a wonderful editor but she did car commercials. I was not interested in doing commercials, I wanted to make documentaries."⁹ Once she was a union member, Anderson was able to land a position working for National Educational Television (NET). With Ford Foundation support, the network created the storied program *Black Journal* (1968–1977), produced by William Greaves. Anderson was already working at NET when the program began; *A Tribute to Malcolm X*, her second directorial work, was made under *Black Journal's* aegis.

And then came her third film, *I Am Somebody*. In 1969, four hundred Black female hospital workers in Charleston, South Carolina, went on strike for union recognition and a wage increase, only to find themselves staring down the National Guard. The South African-born president of one hospital typified prevailing attitudes when he said that he was "not about to turn a \$25 million complex over to a bunch of people who don't have a grammar school education." His idea of making nice to his angry [B]lack workers—many of whom were the grandchildren of slaves—was to give them Robert E. Lee's birthday as an extra holiday."¹⁰

The workers' strike, which garnered national news headlines and the support of celebrities including Coretta Scott King and Jacqueline Kennedy, was organized with Local 1199, a union based in New York.¹¹ When it was founded by Leon Davis, this union was composed largely of white male Jewish druggists, but 1199 soon expanded to include hospital workers. It might appear that Local 1199 had no incentive to help organize and support a strike out of state, let alone make a film about it. But that wasn't how Moe Foner saw it. "It's no accident that the organization of hospital workers resulted in a coalition between the labor movement and the civil rights movement," he explained. "Dr. King; A. Philip Randolph; everybody."¹² Looking back later on the historical significance of the strike, he added, "Charleston was the most important civil rights event since Dr. King's death. I'd say that it was a reawakening of the spirit, a new possibility of changing things in the South by creating a union of [B]lack women workers, that the story had people in jail, escalating tensions, and the possibility of explosion."¹³

Anderson's own meaningful personal relationship to labor organizing dovetailed fortuitously with Foner's vision and funding strategy: "Foner broached the idea of a movie to Mrs. Coretta Scott King when she was in Charleston to lend her presence to the strike. [King] offered the sponsorship of the American Foundation on Nonviolence, which she heads.

9 Anderson, "Mother, Filmmaker, Activist."

10 Moe Foner, with Dan North, *Not for Bread Alone: A Memoir* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 68.

11 Foner, 66.

12 Michelle Miller, *Celebrate Moe!* (Service Employees International Union, 2002), DVD. Published with permission as an extra on the DVD *I Am Somebody: Three Films by Madeline Anderson* (Brooklyn, NY: Icarus Films, 2018).

13 Foner, *Not for Bread Alone*, 73.

Enthusiastic support for the project came also from the organization Reverend King had headed until the time of his death—the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.”¹⁴ The resulting film is thus notable in many respects: for the extraordinary people and events that it portrays; the courage and determination of its subjects; the artistry and vision of its director; the ambition and resourcefulness of its producer; and the extraordinary solidarity between individuals and institutions that enabled not only its creation but its re-birth today.

At a lecture I saw in college, the historian Howard Zinn was asked how a small number of people could ever hope to win the fight for social justice in the face of overwhelming odds. His response surprised me: “We are not alone; the artists, the musicians, the filmmakers—they’re on our side.”

I’m hesitant to draw conclusions about what this experience says about film distribution, archiving, or programming writ large because of the idiosyncratic nature of independent organizations and the enormous amount of timing, skill, goodwill, and serendipity that allowed this project to occur. The system we have for film production, distribution, exhibition, criticism, contextualization, and study is far from ideal, and successes are limited and rare. Perhaps the one thing it’s fair to generalize about is just how fragile all of this is. If this same situation were to come up today, it would play out very differently—or not at all. The museum colleagues on whom this relied have moved on in their careers; physical media is a less and less popular or necessary product; it’s increasingly difficult for a small distribution firm to spend this kind of staff time on a risky investment, as this one was even then. Still, there are valuable projects that our current moment facilitates: I’m excited about having just signed *Rocío* (2019), the first film by Darío Guerrero, co-founder of the Undocumented Filmmakers Collective, and about the perspective offered by the documentaries of Cameroonian director Rosine Mbakam, whose films I have also signed for North American distribution. In their own ways, these and other films carry on the struggles of the past, conversing with earlier films and collaborating on the fight for gender, racial, and labor equality with colleagues across space and time.

It’s also not time for a victory dance when there is much work still to be done. *Integration Report 1* and *A Tribute to Malcolm X* have yet to be recognized by the Library of Congress. Historical inaccuracies riddle descriptions of Anderson and her work, even in respected and well-intentioned sources. Anderson has described a film she made on Martin Luther King Jr. that remains lost.¹⁵ The work of countless marginalized artists will never see the light of day. The legacy of Moe Foner and *Local 1199* is often overlooked or forgotten, even in descriptions of *I Am Somebody*. The independent film ecosystem is increasingly fractured and imperiled, making releases like this one less and less likely. The struggle for labor, gender, and racial justice still faces violent and overwhelming odds.

It’s natural to feel alone—as hospital workers or cultural workers, as teachers or students, as individuals struggling to make a noise or a difference

14 “I Am Somebody.”

15 Anderson, “Mother, Filmmaker, Activist.”

in a crowded cultural environment. It's natural to see our work and the work of our time as isolated from others and from the work of the past. And yet the increasing attention to Anderson's films does illustrate possibilities for collaboration among individuals, companies, and institutions on the basis of overlapping and aligning missions and interests.

Curating, distributing, releasing, programming, promoting, presenting, championing: the work of bringing films to the world lies not simply in selecting films or projects but also in shoehorning artwork of value into public consciousness. A very small percentage of our task is having a Great Idea. The rest is logistics and pavement-pounding, perseverance and print traffic, contracts and budgets, research and documentation, negotiation and communication. Telling the world that a project is going to happen, that it's happening, and that it has happened requires that we right and re-right, write and re-write the historical record. If we're lucky, in this process we may find continuity, solidarity, and collaboration. We may find that we are not alone.

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