

Of the Sorrow Songs: Baldwin, *Vérité*, Hope

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I'm more writer/filmmaker than film historian, making a cinematic leap: I see *cinéma vérité* as a modern-day incarnation of Sorrow Songs—especially when I consider James Baldwin.

The connective tissue here is *vérité*. Truth.

In multiple essays, Baldwin reminds us of the Socratic dictum “The unexamined life is not worth living.”¹ He understands that examination—both individual and collective—requires truth. He also understands that truth can be both liberating and painful; that it requires both internal and external “soul-searching”; and that because we have been (and are still being) “denied our official history,” our task is to “correct the delusions” and “excavate” the real truth, courageously and persistently, as best we can.²

For Baldwin, this search for the truth is not simply a means of getting from one day to the next: it is life-saving. Literally. The pain and suffering found in the “great wilderness” of ourselves is the bridge that connects us “with all the people who were alive, who have ever been alive.”³ This connection, this understanding, is crucial. “If we face our own life, we can discover the terms in which we’re connected to other lives”—“and if we understand ourselves better, we will damage ourselves less.”⁴

He admits this isn’t easy: it means we must examine our lives today in the context of shared human history. “Know whence you came,” he urges. “If you know whence you came there is really no limit to where you can go.”⁵ This is Baldwin at his hopeful best—but with his promise comes a warning. “The price of this is a long look backward, an unflinching assessment of the record.”⁶

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Unflinching? That would be a good way to describe Sorrow Songs.

Born of oral traditions brought from Africa, the communal singing that enslaved people handed down through generations, these were the songs that W. E. B. Du Bois describes as “the sifting of centuries,” songs that “tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world.”<sup>7</sup> They also told a deeper truth: the history “beneath appearances” where we “hear the meaning behind the words.”<sup>8</sup> Not just as a description of Black circumstances, but “as a way of overcoming them.”<sup>9</sup>

“It is only in his music,” Baldwin insists, “that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story.”<sup>10</sup>

Deprived of homelands, cultures, languages, families, the enslaved turned to music, searching for a “response to that absolutely universal question: Who am I? And what am I doing here?”<sup>11</sup> It was a search for identity, for an understanding of self and other that began on the auction block. Before the Civil War, these songs were called spirituals, sacred folk tunes with unknown composers. Often sung *a cappella* and led by one person, many were back-and-forth exchanges, a call-and-response between leader and group. Along with “unflinching assessments,” they offered hope, solace, and a sense of community—and, sometimes, secret strategies, coded messages that plantation owners dismissed as meaningless.<sup>12</sup>

After the Civil War, the music evolved. In Black churches, spirituals became hymns, published works with solo and choral arrangements; in the fields where Black sharecroppers toiled, they went from work songs and “field hollers” to what we now call the blues. Visceral and cathartic, these were still Sorrow Songs: they shared unbridled emotions—pain, hope, even joy—in a time of bondage. They continued the tradition of truth-telling, the journey that carried us into a new form of church music called gospel—a twentieth-century fusion of blues and religion, with musical instruments and improvisation as part of the mix—and the more secular form of improv known as jazz.

For Baldwin, these songs are his roots. His muse.

Much as Dickens and Dostoyevsky help him understand human suffering on an intellectual level, the emotions he hears in music speak to his soul. From the gospel songs of his childhood to the tunes that spill out of windows and are sung on street corners, they shape his writing—“the long song of Baldwin’s work” as poet/professor Ed Pavlič describes it—in both form and content.<sup>13</sup>

“Baldwin made sense of the world,” Pavlič tells us, “via an unceasing dialogue with what he heard in Black music.”<sup>14</sup>

Beginning with his first novel, it helps him beat writer’s block. “I listened to Bes-sie Smith and to Fats Waller and they carried me back to what I myself had been like when I was a little boy—and gave me the key to the language which gave me *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.”<sup>15</sup>

From that moment on, music infuses his work. His fiction is filled with the lives of musicians. He uses their music to express emotions, to shape the mood of a narrative. He names songs, quotes lyrics. Even his essays are lyrical: his images are poetic, his sentences resemble long musical phrases. He understands rhythm, repetition; like the refrains in old spirituals, he reinforces his message by repeating phrases. But it doesn’t stop there.

Baldwin’s dialogue with Black music helps us understand *him*.

His words, both written and spoken, are his own version of Sorrow Songs. They reveal vulnerabilities; they share pain and joy; they signal potential. By exploring the past, they help guide our future: eloquent roadmaps with subversive power. Like poetry, they offer layers of meaning; like sermons, they mean different things to different people. They bypass the rational, they appeal to emotions without interference. And despite the disappointments, the dangers, they hold cause for hope.

Truth-telling that transcends barriers.

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Subversive? We could say the same thing about *cinéma vérité*.

Film may seem a far cry from Sorrow Songs, but surprisingly, Baldwin’s “life-long fascination with the cinema” kicks in not long after he learns to appreciate music.¹⁶ His earliest memories of movies begin at age seven, first with a glimpse of Joan Crawford (both onscreen and off), then with repeated sightings of Tom Mix and his horse (a Saturday cowboy serial)—but tickets are hard to afford. It isn’t until he turns ten, when a college-age teaching intern takes him under her wing, that he encounters serious cinema.

He writes about the discovery as life-changing: those Saturday afternoons in the dark are “my first entrance into the cinema of my mind.”¹⁷ Like the church music that fills much of his weekends, like the books that he reads so obsessively, films appeal to his senses. Again, the connection is emotional. Intuitive. Beneath the layers of melodrama and romance, they promise a new form of narrative that has “something to tell me.”¹⁸

He dreams of owning a 16mm camera, of making his own films. He transforms his prose, both fiction and nonfiction, into screenplays. He signs contracts with producers, he spends time in Hollywood. He writes film reviews, blasting “the brutally crass and commercial.”¹⁹ He becomes famous, so famous that documentary filmmakers want to make films about *him*. He discovers *cinéma vérité*, a new style of filmmaking made possible by the advent of lightweight, handheld cameras: films that explore human nature, that reveal life “as it happens,” without scripts, sets or imposed direction. This feels like a gift. Finally, a way to indulge his passion for film without betraying Socratic principles: onscreen explorations of self and other that, like the Sorrow Songs, like the blues, search for truth.

But truth can be elusive—especially when filmmaker and subject have conflicting agendas.

In 1969, Baldwin’s first foray into long-form *vérité* is with a British film crew. They want a literary portrait without political diatribes. He wants a bully pulpit. They see him as an expatriate in Paris, a Black American who has found freedom from racism and writes about it for white people. He sees them as a tool, a way to respond to his critics, primarily Black people. For him, these are fraught times: the assassinations of Medgar, Malcolm, Martin; the persecutions of Black Panthers; the frustrations of his Hollywood gig, his screenplay about Malcolm X; his inability to free his friend Tony Maynard from jail; his struggles to complete *No Name in the Street* ... plus the increasing number of “Black Revolutionaries” who accuse him of hating his masculinity, hating his blackness.

The filmmakers don’t know that, only a few months before, Baldwin had attempted suicide. Friends find him with an empty bottle of sleeping pills, rush him to a hospital ... and he returns to the fray.

One result of all this is *Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris* (1970), a 26-minute slice of history that delivers far more than its original premise. The film bristles with tension—especially when two young Black Vietnam draft dodgers insert themselves into the mix. More interested in pleasing them than the film crew, Baldwin uses his screentime to denounce Western colonialism. He’s right, of course; but the real drama lies in the personal friction, the vulnerabilities exposed on both sides of the camera.

Like the call-and-response of a field holler, it’s personal that reveals universal. Truth.

It takes a full decade before he ventures back into *vérité*. After rejecting a 1979 script by British filmmaker/*vérité* pioneer Dick Fontaine—a script that, in Baldwin’s eyes, tried and failed to “define him”—he agrees to let Fontaine and his wife, the African American Hungarian actress Pat Hartley, film him on a trip through the South, revisiting people and places from the civil rights movement.²⁰ In many ways, the project makes sense: the collaborators share similar world-views; they believe in the power of film. It’s also a marriage of convenience. For the filmmakers, Baldwin’s presence will help open doors; for Baldwin, their impetus (and their funding) will further his research for “Remember This House,” the *New Yorker* article and McGraw Hill book he is contracted to write.

The result is mixed. Completed in 1982, the 91-minute *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* is a historical treasure—an invaluable record of civil rights activists, leaders, and writers, sharing recollections and insights—but Baldwin’s own insights are strangely absent. At its best, the film honors those whose contributions are too often unrecognized; it provides painful proof that this struggle, our struggle, is far from over. At its worst, it feels distant. Almost hopeless.

The journey begins with legendary poet/professor Sterling Brown giving Baldwin his marching orders: “Don’t forget, you’re not a sociologist. You’re a visionary and you’re a reformer.”²¹ It’s a promising start—but then comes breadth over depth, a multitude of encounters intercut with archival footage, live music and Baldwin himself as “guiding witness” ... listening.²² More whistle-stop tour than excavation of truth, it’s a critical time capsule, a portrait of survivors at the dawn of Reaganism, with moments of *vérité* brilliance. The front-page newspaper sketch of a young thug with a gun contrasts with the child who interrupts filming to ask about dinner; the threat of assassination feels real when white supremacists with a loudspeaker disrupt Baldwin’s speech at a conference. But these are exceptions. True *vérité* requires more time with its subject ... and patience. Except for Baldwin’s courageous response at the conference, the few moments where he is given room to expound feel contrived. One of the film’s through-lines is filmed after the fact, back at Mikell’s in New York, where Baldwin shares observations—and liquor—with his brother, David. Ranging from incensed to sardonic, their exchange feels almost weary. Diluted: in part by the length of the journey, in part by the pressures of being on camera, in part by their pain over the state of their nation. And in part by the booze.

Is that why the filmmakers cut away from Baldwin at what seem like key moments?

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At the time of its release, *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* doesn’t get great reviews.

“Something is missing,” says the *New York Times*.<sup>23</sup>

“Easy irony,” “little insight,” says the *Washington Post*.<sup>24</sup>

Four years later over lunch, Baldwin shares his reaction. “I was not at my best,” he confesses. “I blame myself as much as the filmmakers. I let the weight of the struggle, the loss of Malcom and Martin, of Medgar, get to me. I lost focus. I almost lost sight of hope.”<sup>25</sup>

For me, the word “almost” is key. I see *Grapevine*—like so many of Baldwin’s efforts—as a Sorrow Song, a cry of loss and frustration. But it’s not without hope.

It searches for light in the darkness. It makes history feel searingly personal. It shares courage in the face of failure. It obeys both Socrates’ dictum and the words of Ray Charles: “Tell the truth.”<sup>26</sup> And by telling the truth, it’s subversive: it may help us keep history from repeating itself.

How is Baldwin able to withstand the darkness? How is Bessie Smith able to sing when “my house fell down and I can’t live there no more”?<sup>27</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois explains: “Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things.”<sup>28</sup> Baldwin understands this.

The tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, [but] it always must be heard. There isn’t any other tale to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that he is able to write “Sonny’s Blues,” the fact that he is able to write at all, confirms the presence of light.

As the credits roll at the end of the film *Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris*, we hear Baldwin’s voice, reminding us—and himself—of an essential truth: “A despairing man doesn’t write.”<sup>30</sup>

Or sing.

## Notes

- 1 James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) (New York, Dell Publishing, 1986), p. 12; James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York, Dial Press, 1972), p. 63.
- 2 James Baldwin, “*The Black Scholar* Interviews James Baldwin,” in Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (eds.), *Conversations with James Baldwin* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1973), pp. 150, 151; James Baldwin, “The Creative Process” (1962), in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction (1948–1985)* (New York, St. Martin’s/Marek, 1985), p. 316.
- 3 Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” p. 315; Baldwin, qtd. in Karen Thorsen (dir.), *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* (Maysles Films & PBS/American Masters, 1989).
- 4 James Baldwin, “An Interview with James Baldwin” (1961), interviewed by Studs Terkel, in *James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn, Melville House, 2014), p. 31; Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” p. 317.
- 5 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, Dial Press, 1963), p. 22.
- 6 Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” p. 318.
- 7 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) (Middletown, DE, Millennium Publications, 2014), p. 118.
- 8 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 113.
- 9 James Baldwin, “Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption” (1979), in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Pantheon, 2010), p. 124.
- 10 James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) (Beacon, Beacon Press, 1990), p. 24.
- 11 Baldwin, “Of the Sorrow Songs,” p. 125.
- 12 Baldwin, “The Creative Process,” p. 318.
- 13 Ed Pavlić, *Who Can Afford To Improvise? James Baldwin and Black Music, the Lyric and the Listeners* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2016), p. 17.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 15 Baldwin, qtd. in *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*.
- 16 David Leeming, “Introduction,” in Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*, p. xix.

- 17 James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York, Dial Press, 1976), p. 8.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- 20 David Leeming, *James Baldwin* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 353.
- 21 Sterling Brown, qtd. in Dick Fontaine and Pat Hartley (dirs.), *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* (USA, 1982).
- 22 Pat Hartley in conversation with the author, New York City, January 2024.
- 23 Vincent Canby, "Film: Revisiting Civil-Rights South," *The New York Times* (March 3, 1982).
- 24 David Remnick, "Well-Spoken Grapevine," *The Washington Post* (June 29, 1982), p. B11.
- 25 James Baldwin in conversation with the author at The Ginger Man in New York City, April 1986.
- 26 Baldwin, *No Name*, p. 120.
- 27 Bessie Smith, "Backwater Blues" (1926), *Bessie Smith Songbook* (Milwaukee, WI: Frank Music Corp., 1994).
- 28 Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 112.
- 29 James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues" (1957), in *Going to Meet the Man* (New York, Dial Press, 1965), p. 139.
- 30 Baldwin, qtd. in Terence Dixon (dir.), *Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris* (UK, 1970).

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### Contributor's Biography

Award-winning filmmaker **Karen Thorsen** finds inspiration at the intersection of art and social justice. For over a decade, she worked with Albert and David Maysles, and Albert Maysles was Executive Producer of Thorsen's first feature-length documentary as producer/director, *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*. Thorsen's films—often in collaboration with Douglas K. Dempsey—have screened on six continents and in six museums on the National Mall. Most recently, they co-directed the Play-on-Film *Nice Man Cometh*: a collaboration with Michael Tucker and Jill Eikenberry. Thorsen's *Joe Papp in Five Acts*, co-directed with Tracie Holder, is now on PBS/American Masters.