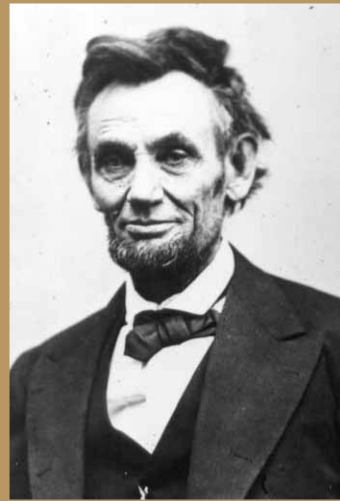
Ken Burns' America
RECONSIDERED

BY GARY R. EDGERTON

Ken Burns laughs now about the apprehension he felt on Sept. 23, 1990, the day "The Civil War" premiered on prime-time television and changed his life forever. He had just completed a two-month promotional tour, a grueling process at which he is particularly adept, being a highly quotable and charismatic speaker and storyteller. He checked out of his midtown Manhattan hotel on that Sunday morning and began the long drive back to his home in Walpole, N.H. Suddenly seized with misgivings, he remembers thinking long and hard about the remarks of several reviewers who predicted that "The Civil War" would be "eaten alive," going head-to-head with major network programming over five consecutive nights. That evening, he and his family were "completely unprepared for what was going to happen" next. The first episode attracted an astonishing 14 million viewers, while the full program reached nearly 40 million people by Thursday, the largest audience ever for a public television series. As Burns reminisced in one of our interviews together, "I was flabbergasted! I still sort of pinch myself about it. It's one of the rare instances in which something helped stitch the country together, however briefly, and the fact that I had a part in that is just tremendously satisfying."

So much about Burns' career defies the conventional wisdom. He became one of public television's busiest and most celebrated producers during the 1980s, a decade when the historical documentary held little interest for most American TV viewers. He operates his own independent company, Florentine Films, in a small New England village more than four hours north of New York City, hardly a crossroads in the highly competitive and often-insular world of corporately funded, Public Broadcasting Service-sponsored productions. His 17 major specials so far—



(Left) Richmond militiamen, 1st Virginia Regiment in 1859 from "The Civil War," courtesy of the Valentine Museum, Richmond, Va.; (center) Billie Holiday in 1958 from "Jazz," courtesy of Paul J. Hoeffler; (right) Abraham Lincoln in 1865 from "The Civil War," courtesy of the Library of Congress.

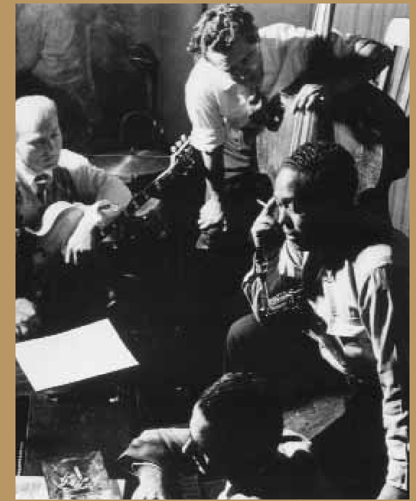
"Brooklyn Bridge" (PBS, 1982), "The Shakers: Hands to Work, Hearts to God" (PBS, 1985), "The Statue of Liberty" (PBS, 1985), "Huey Long" (PBS, 1986), "Thomas Hart Benton" (PBS, 1989), "The Congress" (PBS, 1989), "The Civil War" (PBS, 1990), "Empire of the Air: The Men Who Made Radio" (PBS, 1992), "Baseball" (PBS, 1994), "The West" (PBS, 1996), "Thomas Jefferson" (PBS, 1997), "Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery" (PBS, 1997), "Frank Lloyd Wright" (PBS, 1998), "Not For Ourselves Alone: The Story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony" (PBS, 1999), "Jazz" (PBS, 2001), "Mark Twain" (PBS, 2001) and "Horatio's Drive" (PBS, 2003)—are also strikingly out of step with the special effects and frenetic pacing of most nonfiction television. Instead, he utilizes filmic techniques that were introduced literally decades ago. Most remarkably, however, 70 million Americans have now seen "The Civil War;" 50 million have watched "Baseball;" 30 million "Jazz;" and all of his other TV productions over the last decade averaged an estimated 15 million viewers during their debut telecasts. The cumulative popularity of Burns' biographical or quasi-biographical histories is striking by virtually any measure, and they have, over time, redefined the place of documentaries on prime-time television.

Who Owns History?

Ken Burns is an admittedly controversial figure in historical circles. He has single-mindedly pursued his dual obsession with filmmaking and history for more than a quarter-century now, anticipating a much broader surge of interest in all things historical among the general population. During this time, Burns has emerged as the signature figure for a much larger trend in historical programming, primarily because of the unprecedented success of "The Civil War" as well as the consistently robust showings of his other television specials. He likewise has become a lightning rod for professional historians to express a spectrum of pro and con reactions about the growing popularity of films and television programs about the past, overshadowing the one-time preeminence of written histories alone.

Burns' position as a historical documentarian essentially straddles two well-established and typically distinct professions. He is a highly accomplished television producer-director, and as he often characterizes himself, "an amateur historian" with a wide-ranging interest in American history but no special scholarly training or specialization in any particular area. His work habits, nevertheless, do have a great deal in common with many standard academic practices. His preparation for each historical documentary includes the disciplined rigors of thoroughly researching his subject, writing grant proposals, collaborating and debating with an assortment of scholarly advisers, composing multiple drafts of the offscreen narration, and gathering and selecting the background readings and the expert commentaries. The final, 372-page script for "The Civil War," for instance, was its 15th version.

Burns is, accordingly, an able if "self-taught" historian, but he is not a professional historian. In contemporary America, the term professional suggests a person who has made a lifetime commitment to a specialized career and, thus, belongs to an exclusive and highly select group. A professional historian, in this way, is a scholar who belongs to the academy. An amateur, in contemporary terms and by contrast, is not to be taken all that seriously; he or she is considered a beginner, a dabbler, or in the worst-case scenario, a dilettante. "I just wanted to say that I wasn't a historian in

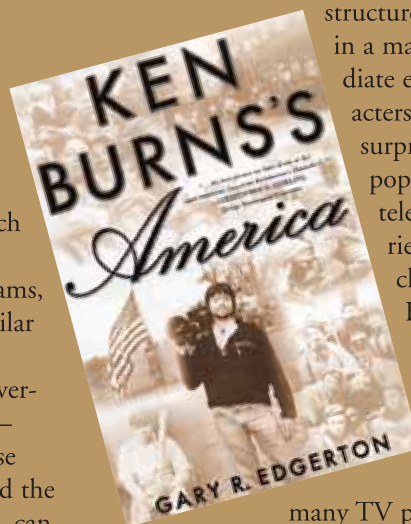


(Left) Lindy Hoppers in 1938 from “Jazz,” courtesy of Cornell Capa; (center) three Confederate soldiers captured at Gettysburg from “The Civil War,” courtesy of the Library of Congress; (right) Charlie Parker in 1949 from “Jazz,” courtesy of Herman Leonard.

the traditional, professional sense,” admits Burns, “and I think it may have been a little insulation or armor that would protect me.” In today’s parlance, he is more precisely a popular historian rather than an amateur, who uses the power and influence of film to reach well beyond a scholarly audience with his television histories.

Finding a Place for Popular History Alongside Professional History

The mutual skepticism that sometimes surfaces between popular and professional historians is understandable and unfortunate. Each usually works with different media (although some scholars do produce historical TV programs, videos and films); each tends to place a dissimilar stress on the respective roles of storytelling vs. analysis in relaying history; and each tailors a version of the past that is designed for disparate—though overlapping—kinds of audiences. These distinctions are real enough. Still, the artist and the scholar, the popular and professional historian, can complement each other more than is sometimes evident in the expressions of suspicion, defensiveness and even on occasion, scorn, that too often arise on both sides.



Professional history typically rejects the mythmaking of popular history. This tradition, which dates back to the second half of the 19th century, recasts the study of history inside the larger framework of scientific inquiry with an allegiance to objectivity (albeit modified these days), a systematic and detached method of investigation and the pursuit of new knowledge. The much older legacy of popular history, in contrast, is far more artistic and ceremonial in approach. It is usually consensus-oriented, narrative and biographical in structure, and intended to link producers and audiences in a mainly affirming relationship based on the immediate experience they share together around the characters and events of their cultural past. Most surprising today, the highest-profile examples of popular history in America originate on prime-time television, and many of these made-for-TV histories eventually find their way into the country’s classrooms as tools to help stimulate learning. Burns’ work, in particular, can serve as a useful point of departure for further analysis and debate about the subjects he covers.

I currently teach a class on “Television Histories as Collective Memory,” where my students and I are discovering how and why so many TV producers recreate prime-time history—disguised as entertainment—to clarify the present and imagine the future. For example, Burns designed “The Civil War” as a kind of delivery vehicle to explore our national legacies of race and prejudice, the changing roles of women and men in

society, big government vs. local control, and the personal struggle for meaning and conviction in contemporary life. My "Television Histories" class begins with the basic assumption that TV is the principal means by which most people learn about history today. Just as television has profoundly affected and altered every aspect of contemporary life—from the family to education, government, business and religion—the medium's nonfictional and fictional portrayals have similarly transformed the way millions of viewers think about historical figures and events.

Ken Burns, for instance, is arguably the most recognizable and influential historian of his generation, even though he isn't a traditional scholar. He reverses the usual academic hierarchy, trusting first the lessons found in art (photographs, film clips, period music, paintings, etc.) before turning to the scholarly record to fill in the details of his vision of American history. His is undoubtedly a speculative approach; but then again, filmmakers, professional historians and viewers like you and I are all amateurs when it comes to detecting the human traces of lives once lived among the emotional resonances of the past.

Burns, overall, articulates a version of the country's past that conveys his own perspective as a popular historian, intermingling many widely held assumptions about the character of America and its liberal-pluralist aspirations. Like other documentarians of his generation, he, too, addresses matters of race, gender, class and regional division. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, he presents an image of the United States eventually pulling together despite its many chronic differences rather than a society coming apart at the seams.

Exploring the past is Burns' way of reassembling an imagined future from a fragmented present. "The Civil War," in particular, reaffirmed for the members of its principal audience (which skewed white, male, 35 to 49 and upscale in the ratings) the relevance of their past in an era of unprecedented multicultural redefinition. This aesthetic reintegration of the past into the present is one of the central purposes of popular history. For Burns, it is a process of reevaluating the country's historical legacy and reconfirming it from a wholly new generational outlook.

As historian Barbara Fields reminds us in the final episode of the series, "The Civil War is in the present as well as the past." In this one sense, at least, all history is contemporary. We can never escape our own time or set of ideological predispositions; and within this context, no one has ever before drawn more Americans to history through the power and reach of prime-time television than Ken Burns.

Gary R. Edgerton is professor and chair of the Department of Communication and Theatre Arts at Old Dominion University. He co-edits the Journal of Popular Film and Television and has published widely on the relationship between media, history and culture, including Ken Burns's America *(2001). He recently was selected to receive the 2004 American Culture Association Governing Board Award for Outstanding Contributions to American Cultural Studies.*

Photo courtesy of Ann Peterson.