

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

ADGER COWANS INTERVIEW  
*A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Adger Cowans**  
**Photographer and friend**  
**Interviewed by John Maggio**  
**Total Running Time: 1 hour 32 minutes and 33 seconds**

START TC:01:00:00:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

All set? Adger Cowans interview, take one. Marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Adger Cowans  
Photographer and friend

## **Early Life**

01:00:17:15

ADGER COWANS:

Well, I think, first of all, Gordon came from a family with a lot of love. His mother and father. They were very, how shall I say? They were very humanitarian-type people. Even though they were very poor and they were dirt farmers, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So, he had a lot of love from his family. I think that's what made him strong, but on the other side, I think the

thing that made Gordon who he was is the fact that he was born dead. And when Dr. Gordon said, who was a young doctor at the time, they threw him aside and said, "He's dead." And Dr. Gordon said, "Well, let me try something." He filled a bucket full of ice and threw Gordon in there, and he popped alive. I think, from that moment on, he was living life as full as he could. You know, people say you don't remember these things, but I think the body remembers everything. I think, as a young person, that was part of what drove him, this idea of being successful at whatever he was. I think all those things came in there because he traveled, he went around, he knew things. He played the piano. He played basketball, that kind of stuff. I think that all of that together, you know, made him as confident as he was. When you come from a family of love, and I do come from that, too, you're not afraid of anything in the world, you know, racism, whatever it is because you know who you are. I think he knew who he was.

01:01:59:08

ADGER COWANS:

I mean, if you're dead... supposedly dead, I'm sure that he was in limbo between this world and whatever the next one is. Um, and I think that remembering-- he has a memory in his sense memory of being away and coming back. He never really talked about it. When I would talk to him about it, sometimes he would glaze over. I think in his sense memory, there were things that he did remember about that experience.

01:02:36:15

ADGER COWANS:

I think with most artists, you're chosen. It isn't something you choose. You're chosen because of your particular sensitivity. I think that once he saw, you know, this photographer and it was like, "Oh, wow. I can do that and it's a great thing to do." That, you know, kind of thing. And I think that that's part of being an artist is something you're chosen. You might say, "Well, I'm going to be an artist." Fine, but when it comes down to it, what you put out there, either it works or it doesn't. If it connects with other people, then there's something going on. If it doesn't, it doesn't connect. There's a lot of artists nowadays, you know, would-be artists, I say, who go to school, they learn all the techniques, you know, how to mix color, et cetera, they do these paintings. A lot of times, these paintings are based on other things that they've seen. There's no original vision. I think to have an original vision is something you're given by the creator or God or whatever you want to call wherever we come from because we're all down here, you know, and we're all connected to everything that's in the universe. So, I think that energy, just like some people have a feeling for doing whatever it is. "Well, I want to be a doctor." They're dedicated to that because they want to help people. It's something that's in your system. I think when you're an artist and you're a creative person, it's something that chooses you.

01:04:16:12

ADGER COWANS:

Gordon was a workaholic. Many times, he called me at 2:00 in the morning. I said, "Pops." He'd say, "What you doing?" Said, "I'm sleeping." He said, "Listen to this." He reads something or he say, "You're going to come over tomorrow." And we sit and talk about all kinds of things, but he was most definitely driven.

**Racism**

01:04:45

ADGER COWANS:

You know, you have anger for a moment. You have laughter for a moment, but all these emotions happen in a moment. Now, you can hang onto them. I think if you hang onto things like anger, it only affects you. Doesn't affect anybody else. So, you have to let it go. When you're an artist, things happen so much around you and so fast, and you're taking things in and then you're putting things back out there. And I think he realized at some point, and he had plenty of chances to be angry and to hold onto it, but I don't think... It went into his work. We talked about it many times. Sure, he'd be mad at this for a moment or this person, but it would pass because something creative would come along, a word, a sound, an image, a music, whatever. And that captures his heart more than being angry.

**Inspiration**

01:05:49:21

ADGER COWANS:

Well, it comes from the creator, it comes from... People say, "God," all these names. When you're creating and you're in that point of creating, there's no anything. There's no-- You don't think, "Oh, God," or this. You create this thing. You're a translator. Something comes through you and you feel it or you don't feel it. You know, maybe you respond-- People feel all kinds of stuff. They don't necessarily respond to it, but I think artists always respond to it. That's the main difference. There's a response that you want to take this thing that you feel in your heart and your soul, and you want to give it back. The artist makes things. You don't know anything about the artist. People talk about, "Oh, Picasso did this in the Blue Period. He felt ..." You don't know anything about the artist. People know nothing about the artist. They only know what the artist puts out there, which is an abstraction from what the artist has computed. So, he's giving you this essence that he feels. You see? And you can get that, but you can never get to the artist.

01:07:09:16

ADGER COWANS:

Okay. It's selfish in the sense that you do it alone. You know, you can create something... you can create something with somebody else. Yes, you can, but when the artist creates something directly from his own emotion, it's not guilt. How can that be guilt? Maybe it is. Maybe some people say, "Oh, I should do it because I feel guilty about this. When I was growing up, such and such

happened. So, this is a payback." But the energy that you receive from being an artist is something that you are tuned to. It's in your particular spirit or DNA. Nobody knows what that is. Even you don't know what it is until it happens to you and you're able to respond to it or not.

01:08:04:22

ADGER COWANS:

You know, it's just... people make up all these ideas and concepts about what it is. What is art? I don't know what art is. I really don't. I've been an artist all my life. To me, an artist is a person who creates from the spirit, create from within. It happens and you create. And people get it. Some people get it. Maybe a lot of people get it. Maybe nobody gets it, but that doesn't mean you're not an artist because you're creating from the spirit, your spirit within. I think that's the honesty-- How close can you come to that emotion that you felt, that you can translate? When you show it to somebody else. I mean, the reason I became a photographer is because it was like a poor man's psychology. I was a person that didn't like to talk. I was a real wallflower. Now, with my big mouth, but those days I was very, you know-- I liked to look at things and observe things because that's how I learned.

01:09:14:01

ADGER COWANS:

I learned from watching people's movements, how they blinked, how they moved, how they crossed their legs, how they shook my hand. They look at me or did they look away? All these things meant something to me, it had a

feeling attached to it. So, if I showed a person a photograph that I made and they looked at it and had started talking, I would listen to what they said. It could be, "I hate it. I don't like it." That's that person talking about how they felt about this image. So, they're not talking about me. They're talking about themselves. So, it became a doorway into people's heads, a sort of poor man's psychology and I like that because it helped me. It helped me that I come close to what I was feeling. If somebody said, "Oh, I love that," that made me really feel good because I loved it, too. That's why I did it, but if they looked at it and said, "I don't know what this means." Well, I knew what it meant when it was coming through me. If you don't know, maybe you're not looking deep enough or maybe you haven't experienced enough in visual terms to understand what this is. Your visual history is relaxing or not. I don't know.

**Gordon Parks' character**

01:10:38:18

ADGER COWANS:

He had to go through getting kicked off of the trains. He had to go through hanging out with the bums. He had to go through all these different forms of life that was different from when he grew up. But when you're traveling around the world and you're in a place where you've never been before, the first thing that you have to do is observe. And the more you observe, the more you understand what's going on around you. If you jump into a situation, you start talking to him about who you are and what, you're not learning. You're

spewing out your ideas and your thoughts and more, when, in fact, you don't really learn a lot because you're running your mouth, but if you're in a situation you've never been before and you have to watch everything that's happening, you become an observer. Most artists are observers of life.

01:11:31:23

ADGER COWANS:

I think most photographers are, you know, because you have to see what's going on in order to capture it. If you run your mouth, I've heard people say to photographers, "Oh, man. That was a great picture." Well, when you were saying it was a great picture, you missed it because you were talking about it. You should have shot it and then say, "Look at this. This is a great picture." You-you-- So, Gordon and his observation. He observed lots of stuff. I mean, being around him, I know that he was a person that looked at everything, the way he dressed, what he had on, what things look like, his house, all that. It was all about seeing.

### **Meeting Gordon Parks**

01:12:18:16

ADGER COWANS:

Hmm. Well, when I said that I told my parents, "I wanted to go study photography." Well, I had a scholarship in music, but they told me it wasn't going to get me the full scholarship, so I went back to high school and

finished, brushed up on my math and everything and said, "Well, I didn't want to go back to high school and brush up on my math and English." I went to talk to my English teacher. She said, "Adger, this is a good opportunity for a Colored boy." Well, that's what they said at that time. They called you colored. And it was, because they were giving me a full scholarship. I was really good, you know, in music. My teacher, Mr. Freitag, in German, he taught me how to play the trumpet without pushing hard. He said, "Work from the diaphragm," and I could read music good. I could read up. I could transpose. I just had a natural feeling about music, but I didn't want to go back to high school.

01:13:14:06

ADGER COWANS:

So, I'm sitting around that summer in the house, and my sister's boyfriend had a magazine, one of the few magazine. So, maybe it was Modern Photography, probably one of those. In it they said, "Ohio University gives degree in photography." So, I showed it to my mother. I said, "Look, Ma," because they want you to go to college and be a doctor, a lawyer, Indian chief, which I wasn't interested in. So, she said, "Well, you have to show it to your father." My father came up and he said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "I'm going to study photography." He said, "That's crazy. Kodak makes a camera. They send it to you. You send it back, roll of film." He said, "What you talking about?" I said, "Yeah, but I have a degree." He just shook his head. He said, "That's crazy." He said, "Why don't you get a real job doing something that's worthwhile?" So, my mother, being an amateur photographer, "Oh,

Honey. That's what he wants to do." So, I went to school. So, I guess it was maybe my second or third year and my uncle said ... I said, "I don't know what I'm going to do when I get out." He said, "Why don't you find somebody Black that's doing what you want to do," a negro in that time. He said, "Why don't you find a negro who's doing what you want to do?" I said, "I don't know any. All my teachers are White. All the workers White. Ansel Adams, Weston." I said, "And there are no Black photographers I know."

01:14:47:20

ADGER COWANS:

He said that, so I asked Walter B. Allen, and he said, "I think there's a guy at Life magazine." That year, they had published a big book on Life magazine photographers and Gordon was in the back. So, I wrote him a letter and told him I was in school. We went back and forth to New York a lot on the weekends to hear jazz. So, I tell him I'd be in New York. He said, "Well, call me." So, I called him up. He met me and we talked. He said, "Well, why don't you call me when you get out of school?" So, when I got out of school, I went to New York. I was staying in the Y on 34th street. I called him up. I said, "I'm in New York." He said, "Where are you staying?" I said, "The Y." He said, "Get out of there. Get out of there." He said, "Meet me." He said, "Get the train and meet me." So, he picked me up. I went to the house and I met his son, Gordon, Jr. and David and Toni. You know, I liked his son Gordon. We got to be real good buddies right away. So, he told me, said, "Why don't you work with me at Life magazine and live here with my family?"

01:15:54:01

ADGER COWANS:

And that was it. So, I worked with Gordon all that summer and Gordon, Jr. and I got to be tight. At one point, Gordon came home and Gordon, Jr. and I were out playing in the pool with some girls. He said, "You guys got to get your own place." He said, "You got to get out." We were having too much fun, too much fun. But that's how I met Gordon.

01:16:24:20

ADGER COWANS:

I kind of knew what he looked like from the picture. So, he told me to get on the train and that he would pick me up. So, I got on the train and I got off at White Plains. He wasn't here. I was standing around, looking for him. I said, "You know ...". And I look up and I see this Corvette. Powder blue Corvette with a white leather interior and a Black guy smoking a pipe. I said, "I'm going to be a photographer for sure." And he came and said, "Mr. Cowans?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Gordon Parks." And I got in the car and we drove to the house.

01:17:04:05

ADGER COWANS:

He had a split-level house, which I had never, ever seen before and a driveway where you ride around and around, a swimming pool. I mean, I'm a poor kid from Ohio. What do I know? So, and I was totally impressed by not only the

things he had, but the way he was. He reminded me a lot of my own father in the sense that he was very disciplined. Gordon Jr, he has [inaudible] said, "Oh, Jax," because he asked me what my nickname was. I said, "Ajax." So, he called me Jax. Forever he called me Jax. He said, "You and Gordon going to clean out the swimming pool and cut the grass." Yeah, he was like, you know, I felt like he was a father to me, but he was also, I would say, my creative father in the sense that I learned all these things from him. Mostly, not about photography because I was a photographer when I got out of school. I had a degree in photography, so I knew a lot about photography. He gave me a test one day. We were at Life magazine. He said, "Mr. Cowans, do you know how to load 4x5 film holders?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Okay. We're going in the dark room." So, we go into the dark room. He gives me about four holders. He's got two or three. He cuts the light out. He says, "You're making a lot of noise over there, Mr. Cowans." He said, "Let me know when you're finished." But I shot with a 4x10. Piece of cake. I said, "I'm finished." I said, "Turn the light on." He said, "I'm not finished yet."

01:18:41:14

ADGER COWANS:

He never tested me about anything having to do with photography after that. He never tested me about anything dealing with photography. He knew that I knew what I was doing. Then I kind of showed him some new techniques in photography that were new at that time. You have to understand, photography was not an art when I started. Photography was a hobby. That's

why my father was having a fit. "You going to study a hobby?" Photography was a hobby in the 50s. Ansel Adams, all those guys. Nobody saw their work. There were no books on photography when I started in photography. So, it was all kind of up in the air. I mean, we used to see Clarence H. White, Jr, whose father, Clarence H. White Sr. was part of that group with Ansel Adams. They used everything, they shot everything in f/64, super sharp. So, he had a lot of his father's work that he would show. Then he had actual prints that Ansel Adams and Weston had made. We saw those prints. Then that's the first time that I think that, when I was looking at Weston's work, I thought how beautiful a photograph can be. They're almost three dimensional, the tones and the tonality and the silver blew me away. I thought it was so, so beautiful. Really, I said, "I want to do that." You know, I was always interested-- I wasn't interested so much in making a living is my problem. I was just interested in taking pictures, things that moved me more than, "I got to get a job." I did later on. I got a family and all, but I was more concerned about what can I do with this thing? How can I do something that hasn't been done because it was still such a new art and still is to this day, I think.

01:20:40:07

ADGER COWANS:

He taught me about life. That's what I learned from Gordon. I watched the way he dealt with people. Sometimes, I would hear conversations on the phone. I mean, I was, you know-- He didn't shield anything or filter anything when I was around because I think he trusted me number one and he treated

me like a son. Me and Gordon, Jr. would be there. He'd be talking about all kinds of stuff. So, I would see how he dealt with things and how things would happen around him and how he dealt with them. That's more how I learned about life and things. I learned a lot from my father and grandfather, but dealing with a man who's totally creative like that. I saw how he worked. He was a working horse, man. I mean, he had a work ethic that was just incredible. So, I learned that from him, discipline. So, I stayed focused on what you're doing. Don't bullshit. People know when you're bullshitting. If I do something, he'd say, "Don't bullshit a bullshitter." But it was more about life that I learned than about photography.

01:21:59:07

ADGER COWANS:

He wasn't a photographer who would jump in and just start taking pictures of what was going on. He would wait. He would get to know the situation and the people, you know. We photographed one job. We photographed... What's this guy's name? Can't think of his name, but he was a painter. We went to his loft. Gordon told me to go over there and set up the camera and something. And I was over there a half an hour or so. He was over there talking to the guy, talking to him about music, was talking to him about painting, the wives, this type of painting and this and that. He was just talking to him. He didn't even have his camera on him or nothing. He was just talking to this guy about, you know, his work and who he was and when he started and like that. So, it was even after that, was after he talked for what seemed like 45 minutes. I

was like, "Got to set up and going to shoot. Okay. Get him over in the corner," and click. No. He was over there talking, talking, talking, talking.

01:23:06:01

ADGER COWANS:

Yeah, I met him-- I got out of school in 1954 to '58, so I met him in... It must have been '56 or '57. I was still in school. I think I had another year and a half to go.

### *Segregation Story*

01:23:27:09

ADGER COWANS:

Color was new at that time. You know, and I think that a lot of people were very insecure about shooting in color because color wasn't perfected. It was still a lot of things that could go wrong with it, et cetera, et cetera, but in school, I learned to process ektachrome. So I mean, I was really a big colorist. I knew about color. So, he was experimenting with color and using color to tell the story as opposed to black and white, but he was basically a black and white photographer.

01:23:59:12

ADGER COWANS:

Marty Forester made a lens for him that was an f/2, I think it was f.2, which was a fast lens for that time. That allowed him to capture those low-level light

pictures. At that time, low-level light pictures, people weren't taking those things. The only person was doing anything in that area of using low light without flash was Roy DeCarava. He had all those series of pictures and he was shooting tracks with like 250. It wasn't 400 yet, you know, and he was pushing it, but Roy had a certain point of view and a certain elegance about what he was doing and what he believed in his photography. So, he had a very, how you say, honed-down, focused image. Gordon was wide open to all that, but yet, he was going with these cops in the place. He told me, he said, some of these places he went in, it was scary. He'd say, "I was right behind these guys and the guys were shooting guns, man."

01:25:10:10

ADGER COWANS:

And he was right there. That one shot of the guy kicking the door in, he talked about that shot. He told me what it was about and how he got it and what he felt, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Because I would always ask him, "How'd you feel?" I was always concerned about the feeling. How did you...? Were you scared? Were you this? Were you that? Well, what's the feeling tone? When you photographed Malcolm X, I said, "Malcolm," I said, "What was that like?" He said, "Well, Malcolm," he said, "I talked to Malcolm a long time and Malcolm became really tight friends." And Malcolm was one of Gordon's friends because he talked to him, talk talk. He didn't just started shooting, talk. "How are you," blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. You know, the series with

that... The crime series, you know, the poor woman. What's her name? The Fontenelle series. Great. Gordon was there for days before he shot.

01:26:15:07

ADGER COWANS:

He didn't shoot that. He didn't go in. "Okay. Next day, we're going to shoot." He was a week over there talking to them. He got involved in the family dynamics of the Fontenelles, you know, who they were, who he was. He felt for this man that was having a hard time finding work. He felt for the children. He felt this stuff. Gordon was a very, in his work, also, he's a humanitarian. You think about the series he shot in Brazil, the Flávio series, how Gordon, what that was all about, how he went back and got the guy housing. That whole thing. That was all about a feeling that Gordon had about human beings. I think that everybody's got demons. I think Gordon had some demons. I think he had some regrets about things that he could have done better that he didn't. I think that one of them was about his children because he was gone all the time. I think he loved his children, but I think he also missed them. He wasn't able to really give them who he was giving to the rest of the world out there. And that happens with a lot of great men. They give to the world but their family suffers because they're not there. They're for the people. I think Gordon had a little bit of that going on in his head.

01:27:37:06

ADGER COWANS:

Yeah. I mean, after that-- I was with Gordon when he stopped working at Life magazine and he became the Gordon Parks. Before, he was Gordon Parks, the great photographer, but then he did the movie and *Choice of Weapons* and all the other things he did and then they did *Shaft* (1971). Then, he became a real world star, I would say.

### **Marriage to Sally Alvis**

01:28:06:20

ADGER COWANS:

She was always concerned about the boys. "Come in and eat. Do this. Do that." But she's a very sweet person, but I think that... she was a very straight-ahead type of woman. She understood who Gordon was, but she didn't understand much, I think, about his work, the actual work. It was her whole, "You going to take pictures? Well, you go ahead. Do what you got to do." And then, Gordon had a lot of attractions to a lot of people that she wasn't included in. I think a lot of the time she herself kind of held back. She was there with the children. And um, she wasn't interested in all the social life that Gordon was creating by being around all these different people. I think that that became a separation. I think Gordon wanted her to be more involved in what he was doing to understand what these things was that he was involved, but I don't think she really wanted to be involved with that. She

cared about him and their life, and I don't think the outside stuff like that, she didn't really care about.

01:29:30:01

ADGER COWANS:

And I think that, you know, a lot of times with men who do things like that, you know, it's hard unless your wife is involved in your creative life. A lot of times the creative life is separated, you know, the family life and the creative life is separate. It's hard to bring those things together. As a man traveling in the world doing stuff like that and you couldn't always take your family with you. He took his whole family to Paris. That was the experience. I mean, Gordon, Jr. and I, he told me all the stuff that happened to him and all these people we met and everything. It was great. You know, but I think that... just, it's hard. I'll say it's just hard to have a creative life and a family life where they intermix and your family and everybody understands what you're about and what you're doing.

01:30:34:04

ADGER COWANS:

You know, I mean, even in my own life, to have my children understand the work that I'm doing, the importance of the work I'm doing, where they see it as important. I mean, my son is 54 now. He understands what I've been doing all this time and what this work is all about, but he didn't when he was small. But now... and his mother was an artist, too, so he had it from both sides. So,

he now understands what the importance of this work was all about, you know, but it took all of these years. Well, it takes time. I don't think that an artist, necessarily, is going to be understood by everybody and sometimes there are the people closest to you don't understand what it is you're doing.

02:31:22:08

ADGER COWANS:

But I think it was... one of the problems I think that Gordon had in his life, one of the things that I think bothered him was that he couldn't be more. When Toni started taking pictures, ugh! He was really, really like... he didn't want to be excited. He didn't really want to be excited about it. I mean, I really actually taught Toni photography, but and when she took the first pictures, she showed them to Gordon. And at first, he was like, "Well, you need to do this and you need to do that and [inaudible]." Gordon was a mumbler. He was a good mumbler. But after a while, Toni got better. He finally curated a show that Toni and I were in together at the Gordon Parks Gallery, but I think he wanted Toni, he spent a lot of money on her being a classical pianist, you know, but she just, when it came time to her to go walk on the stage, she just faded. She just couldn't do it.

01:32:24:17

ADGER COWANS:

You know, she just didn't have the... Some people can go on stage, they'll be nervous as hell, and they get on stage and it goes away, but Toni, she was a

bunch of nerves. Couldn't do it. And that really-- Gordon was really, because he spent a lot of time. She was going to do all this great piano, and she was a great musician. She had great musical talent.

**Gordon Parks, Jr.**

01:32:53:19

It's hard, and then Gordon Parks, Jr. coming up behind Gordon. Gordon Jr. and I were really like this. And so he's, "Jax," he said, "See, I'm not going to be a photographer," he said, "Because of Pops." I said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "You like taking pictures. What you talking about, man? You can learn it." So, we're both lived in the same building on 87th street. So, I would teach him photography, show him stuff and show him stuff and stuff and he would talk. So, finally, he started getting some work, you know, but he didn't want to use Gordon Parks, Jr. I said, "What's wrong with you?" I says, "Your father is one of the greatest photographers and you're not ..." He said, "Mah!" So, for a long time, his name was Gordon Roger. That was his-- Gordon Roger. Gordon Roger. That was middle name. Gordon Roger. He would never use Parks. And he worked on a picture with... What the actor? Um... Brando. He worked on a movie with Brando. Brando told him the same thing. So, then he started using Gordon Parks, Jr. and then he got out of doing still photography stuff and he started doing movies. He did movies before Gordon, Sr.

01:34:12:09

ADGER COWANS:

People don't know that, they still ascribe some of Gordon Parks, Jr.'s movies to Gordon Sr., but Gordon Jr. was the first one to make movies. He did *Aaron Loves Angela*, *Three the Hard Way*, several films. Gordon kind of helped him financially on the first one a little bit, but I think that, you know, he was afraid because his father had such a big name that was going to overshadow but it didn't because finally he became a filmmaker. But he did great still photography. So did David. David did a whole book on the war and stuff, beautiful stuff. Then Toni started really late, but she did some nice pictures, some very nice pictures.

***Shaft***

01:35:04:17

ADGER COWANS:

There was no competitiveness or anything like that. I mean, Gordon... I was supposed to work on *Shaft*, but I was doing a movie with Faye Dunaway. They kept fooling around with doing Gordon's movie. He said, "Well, what are you doing, Jax?" I said, "I'm in California." He said, "Well, come back. I want you to work on this movie." I said, "Okay." So, I came back and then they fiddled and fiddled and fiddled and fiddled. You know how movies are. They fiddle and fiddle. Two weeks, three weeks, four weeks. So, I got this other picture. I said,

"Pops, I got a picture." He said, "You better take it because I don't know when we're going to start." I said, "But you know I want to work with you on it." He said, "I know," he said, "But if you got a job, you better take it because I don't know when they're going to do this." So, I finally took the picture working with Faye Dunaway. I think it was about three weeks after that they started *Shaft*. Now, I wanted to get off that and go do *Shaft*. They said, "Nah. Union. [inaudible]. You got to finish this job." So, anyway, I never got to work on *Shaft* with him.

### **Gordon Parks, Jr.'s death**

01:36:12:02

ADGER COWANS:

I was working on a movie and, being me, I was like late, fooling around, because I know they weren't ready to do this shot. It was just like early in the morning. So, I took my time and I got in a cab. I thought, "I'd better get a cab and go to work." I got in the cab and I looked down. I never read *The New York Times* and *The New York Times*, it was open to a page. I saw Gordon, Jr.'s picture. I said, "What?" Picked it up and said, "Gordon, Jr. Dies." Well, I didn't believe it. I was like, "Nah! Gordon's too smart. Gordon, Jr.'s too smart." He'd gone to Africa and he loved to raise quarter horses so he bought this ranch that had quarter horse and was shooting movies and everything. He came back and said, "Jax, we're going to make movies in Africa and bring them

back." We were all excited and everything. So, I couldn't believe it at first. I couldn't go to work. I told the cab, I said, "Go up to UN Plaza."

01:37:17:06

ADGER COWANS:

I went up and Gordon was in there crying and I started crying. We were like, "Oh!" I said, "Pops, I don't believe it." He said, "I don't either, Jax. I don't know." He said, "What you got to do?" I said, "I'm working on this movie." He said, "Oh, okay." He said, "Well ..." I said, "No. I'm going to stay here with you." So, we went downstairs in the basement where Gordon, he had a lot of Gordon's stuff. We started looking through, so he's just crying and looking through his stuff. It's like really got me, because we was like this. It messed Gordon up. I think after that, he and I became closer because Gordon, Jr. and I were close. So, he kind of melded over to me because I was like a son, too. So, then we started spending a really lot of time together after that. He would call me about all kind of stuff. I'd go over there and stay at the house sometime. He'd be in there working and I'd be in the couch sleeping. He'd wake me up at 3:00. "Read this." "Oh, God! Okay." Especially when he was working on the story. What was it? Sun Stalker about John, what's his name? The English painter. He wrote a book called *The Sun Stalker*.

### **Gordon Parks' process**

01:38:50:12

ADGER COWANS:

Yeah, he really liked Turner's work. A lot of people saw he was writing a book about Turner. He's a photographer and he [inaudible], but it was a great book. It's a great book. So, we talked about making a movie. I said, "You going to let me help me ..." I says, "You know how much I love light and everything." I said, "Can we co-direct?" He said, "I don't know, Jax." He said, "I don't know." But I said, "We're going to co-direct." He says, "Okay. All right." He said, "We'll co-direct." But of course, he died and it happened. But because I had a sense about light, too. We always had this thing about light, how light affected things and are important. But Gordon, he was a... cropper. You shoot a picture, Gordon would crop it. I mean, I said, "Wait a minute. I don't want to crop." It was one picture we argued about all the time.

01:39:38:14

ADGER COWANS:

He wanted to crop it. I didn't want to crop it. So, I started showing it to different people in the group and everything. So, half the people with me. More people with me than they were with Gordon. I said, "See? See, see, see?" But he wanted to crop it. It was a picture of three, four ladies with black umbrellas crossing the street. It's in my book. I have my book here. And he felt that I should cut the truck out that's turning the corner in the snow, but it's a truck that's got oil, it's going there. I said, "Best part of the story, Gordon." He said, "Yeah, but this is a picture." I said, "Nah. Nah. You got to ..." I

said, "Okay. I won't cut out the whole truck." I said, "Just put part of it in." He wanted just the ladies with the, right? I said, "It's a great shot." I said, "But that's not my shot." I said, "That's your shot. You see it that way." I said, "I see the whole thing, the truck turning in the snow and turning up, and the ladies going across." I says, "It's a whole photograph." I says, "The whole thing." I say, "Yeah. This is good. I can just do the truck and that's a nice shot. This is nice shot but the two together makes a great photograph." That was my argument. Oh, we argued about that at one time, that and the other. But I liked that about that Gordon would tell you how he felt about it, you know, and from his [inaudible], he was really into cropping.

01:40:59:02

ADGER COWANS:

"You don't get it here, you can crop it like this." But, he also knew what he was doing with the camera. But Gordon, he wasn't a dark room guy. Gordon never printed no pictures. Maybe in the beginning, but when I knew him, he never... *Life* magazine printed everything. He knew what he wanted. He'd say, "No. It's too dark. It's too light. Do this. Do that." But Gordon didn't print nothing. He didn't process anything because I think that way of working at *Life* magazine where they processed everything and then you go look at it and you like, you doing underexposed, overexposed, whatever. That was all dark room stuff. But he never had... He didn't have a dark room when I first met him up in White Plains. He didn't have a dark room. He didn't have a dark room on any of those three places that he lived, you know, because working for *Life*

magazine, that's sweet. He probably, "Here. Here's 20 roles. Show me the contacts," or, "Shoot this one, this one, that one, that one." I mean, that's a prime way you would want to work, especially at that time. But I grew up working in a dark room. I loved the dark room. I love printing and I printed for a lot of people in New York because they liked the way I printed.

01:42:25:08

ADGER COWANS:

He had a good eye. I put things together. I mean, you look at the pictures. I mean, the gothic picture. He knew how to put that together and make it work. He knew when he was shooting Flávio with him laying in the bed that that was a great, great picture. There was a feeling in that picture. It was Red Jackson looking out the window. There's a feeling in that. And that's... I learned about feeling. That's where he was at was about the feeling, but a lot of photographers shoot because, "Oh great, composition, great this, great that. Oh, that's there or there. Looks great. Looks great." But it's devoid of the heart. I mean, I teach my students you don't take pictures with your eyes. Your eyes only see. You take the picture, you press that button because you feel something, not because your eyes tell you it's time. It's your heart that tells you it's time to take that picture because you feel it. You feel this and this are connected. Your eyes like looking at it, but you don't press the button because it looks great. You press the button because it's oh! Well, where is that oh come from? It comes from your heart. Take pictures with your heart through your eyes.

01:43:46:19

ADGER COWANS:

They all were, all the ones that were good. All the ones that said something in their work. Roy DeCarava's photographs's another great example of a great photographer. Even though he had this one point, this laser beam point of photography. When he pressed the button, it had something going on there. There was something. The composition of the picture spoke. More than it was good composition, it spoke of feeling. I mean, I teach my students. I'm a big person. If it ain't got feeling, it ain't working. I don't care how composed is, even an abstract picture has feeling. Well, it's all abstract anyway. So-called realism is still only abstract. We abstract all of these things from life. It is the life itself. It's the piece you take out of it. So, it's abstract, but they say, "Oh, realism over ..." "I don't get abstract." People say, "I don't get abstract." Look at it. Wait, wait, wait for it. Feel it. Nowadays, it's even worse because people can flip, flip, flip, flip, flip, flip, flip, flip. "Oh, this thing." Flip. "Oh, I don't like this. Flip, flip, flip. They never take the time to sit and let the image come to them or they go to the image. That kind of thing doesn't exist. Well, it does with the great ones, but that idea of looking at a photograph.

01:45:23:22

ADGER COWANS:

They look through photographs, one after another, boom! "Oh, I like her hand in that picture." I mean people-- That's why I hate motor drive. Click, click,

click, click, click, click, click. "I got one. He's got his hand almost to ... Oh, that's a good one. Cut that one out, out of 392 pictures." That's not a photographer. You time. That's why the great ones... Even though Ansel Adams was working with an 8x10, there was a certain point that he pressed that button. You look at Weston's pictures, there's a certain moment that he pressed that button. All of them. Cartier-Brusson, a master. Come on. What you talking about? You look at any of his photographs. They're filled with emotion. Yeah, the compositions are great. Well, that's photography. You should be good at composing, good at exposure, good at that. That's automatic. The thing you have to work for is the feeling. The right moment for that feeling. You look at some photo, and you look at your contacts. You say, "Oh, that's the picture." Two seconds after, that ain't the picture. It's almost the picture, but this is the picture because of the placement of her hand or her arm or her leg or where you're looking. It's that moment of feeling that's so important and Gordon's got it all through his work.

### **Using a camera as a weapon**

01:47:04:09

ADGER COWANS:

Well Gordon felt that the camera, and I feel that way too, words are one thing, images are something else. And an image can speak volumes whereas words are limited, but they both deal with the imagination. But I think an image is

much more proper because you don't need words; if you get the image right, you don't need words. And I think Gordon came from that school of... but he was a photojournalist but I think visually, it was in the picture. And that that power, the power to show something moves people, and I think that he was very much aware that he could change things by doing the pictures that he did, especially dealing with Black people and segregation, et cetera, et cetera, that these pictures, when people saw them, they could see what was going on, they could see the racisms, they could see whatever. But he never showed negative images of Black people. That's very important.

01:48:15:23

ADGER COWANS:

You know, he showed Black people always as beautiful, elegant, just like anybody else, people. Not drug addicts, you know, needles in their arm and all the negative things that were going on that are still going on, he didn't shoot that. He tried to deal with Black people as people, like they are. And I think he knew that the... take the Flavio story. That camera was important in the Flavio story. That story went all over the world, and people felt for that kid based on those photographs that Gordon did. And that he showed that... the humanity of this man and it touched people, and he knew how powerful that was. And I think that that's what he wanted to do with his camera is to change people's ideas and concept of what they believe as opposed to what you actually see.

01:49:18:12

ADGER COWANS:

I mean, the woman standing in front of a sign that says Colored, she's a nice looking woman. She ain't no bandana wearing, you know, mammy looking. They loved to show that image, Black women as mammys, you know, with the bandana or the big lips or even watermelon, all those negative images to say that's who we were. But it's interesting, all those pictures weren't made for Black people, they were made for White people. Those images were made for White people to see, this is the way Black people are. They eat watermelons and they chew tobacco and they do this and they're crime ridden and sex, these images were made for White people to make us appear negative. Take American history, for example. The same American history that I learned, which was brainwashed history, is the same thing that White people learn, so they brainwash themselves. I tell White people that all the time, I say, "You're brainwashed. You think you learned American history because you learned about George Washington and this... you didn't learn anything about Black people."

01:50:27:02

ADGER COWANS:

And this history of this country is based a lot on what Black people did, not only as slaves but as inventors, as people who founded cities, as people who did ... I mean, the sweeper. Who invented the sweeper? A Black man. Who

invented air conditioning? It's a Black man. The things that we use ... what's his name, the real Elijah McCoy, people used to say, "Oh, the real McCoy." You ever heard of that word? Oh, that's not the real McCoy, or that's the real McCoy. Elijah McCoy invented a way to oil machinery, metal machinery while it was in motion. Before that, they had to stop and oil these things up. Trains, you got these guys, my grandfather was an oiler. He worked on the railroad, the long cans with oil. When the trains would stop, they would oil them because metal rubbing against metal would heat up and it would jam up. So Elijah McCoy invented-- he revolutionized the whole industrial world. But did you learn about that in school? But who invented the light bulb?

01:51:40:14

ADGER COWANS:

Who made it burn? See? You don't know who made it burn, but he's the one that made the light bulb burn. He invented it, but it wouldn't burn very long. Who was the scientist that he made it burn? See, there's a lot of history that's there, but they're not going to tell you. They only want to tell you that Black people are negative.

01:52:04:05

ADGER COWANS:

Well, same thing. Gordon, he'd go to these places, who was this Black man? They didn't care that he was a photographer for *Life* Magazine. They didn't give a ... he's a Black man. Negative. What's he want? What's he doing here? He ... Stryker, the story of Stryker in D.C., a good, great example. And Gordon

felt oh, I'm in D.C., America. I can go in the store, I can go to movies. Well, he couldn't. People would have you sitting and waiting all day long. "Oh, we don't have your size." "What do you want? Oh, I'm sorry. We don't serve Colored." I mean, even in my time when I was in the Navy in Virginia and I used to thumb home sometimes, you could not go to a restaurant. If you were hungry, if you went to the back door of the restaurant, you know, they would serve you through the back entrance. You couldn't come inside. Say I wanted a hamburger. They'd make you a hamburger and wrap it up and give it to you and you'd pay them. You couldn't sit in a restaurant.

01:53:15:02

ADGER COWANS:

All these things came later on, you see. So Gordon was privy to all that, too. He had to put up with all that, too. But he cut through all of that. And I think the reason that he was able to cut through is because he didn't internalize the negativity. He didn't bring it into his heart, he kept it right there, he kept it out here. He didn't let it touch his center, his creative center.

01:53:43:20

ADGER COWANS:

But they always want to show that somehow we are less, and actually and too, we're more. But they're not going to say that. If you look at all the negative things that people have done to African Americans in America, it would turn your stomach, the real truth. Tulsa, Oklahoma, I'm working on a

film now about that. And it just destroyed a whole town, happening there, it happened in West Virginia, it happened a lot of places. And some of these places they put up signs saying that, "And this day this and this and this," but they always say riots. Tulsa wasn't a riot, it was a massacre. They killed all these people and they called it a riot. "There was a riot, the Black people were rioting." The Black people were protecting themselves, but they always say a riot because when they say a riot that means oh ... just like now, Black Lives Matter. These people are marching peacefully. Some of them, not all of them, but most of them marching peacefully. They say, "Oh, they're rioting again." They're not rioting. And then the Ku Klux Klan is infiltrating. "Come on, let's burn this down," they blame it on the Black people.

### **Gordon Parks' impact**

01:55:09:23

ADGER COWANS:

They were important for White people to see, because White people still, I think in some places, see Black people as animals or negative or just not as human beings. If they say that Black people are human beings, then they have to say that they are devils, and they're not going to say that. They're not going to say all the negative things that they've done to Black people in this country. They don't want to say that. They would rather say that Black people are animals and they had a right to it by Jesus, by the bible, all these things. They

make all these excuses up. But I tell everybody, who founded America? Where did the people come from that founded America? Where did they come from? They came from England, but where in England? They came out of the English jails. They were criminals.

01:56:06:14

ADGER COWANS:

And England said, "Well, what do we do with all these criminals?" They said, "Send them to the New World." Nobody knew what the New World was and people were afraid. They're still oh, the earth is flat, they still were afraid that where were they going? They didn't know where they were going, but they were getting them out of England. "Send them to the New World." And most of them came over and died because they didn't know how to do anything. They didn't know how to grow food, they didn't know how to do anything. They didn't know how to keep out of the rain, they just didn't know. And so who taught them? The Indians. And then we had Thanksgiving, and Thanksgiving they showed the pilgrims with the Indians and how nice they're being to the Indians. They don't show the fact they didn't know shit.

01:56:49:22

ADGER COWANS:

And the Indians saved them, saved their lives. They taught them how to grow food, how to do this and do that, and then they had Thanksgiving. And then they just brought food and there's ... but they don't show that. Macy's Day

parade, what's that about? They show White people dressed up like Indians. Where are the real Indians? They still got some real Indians in America, you know. But it's always, that's the problem with where we're at in this country.

01:57:19:12

ADGER COWANS:

There's this negative attitude that we are better when in fact, we all are human. Color has nothing to do with it. You got two eyes, two ears, a nose, you shit, you bleed, you die, you love, you laugh, you wash up, you do everything. You hate, you know, you live, you love, you raise ... We all are human beings, and to come to that one denominator seems very difficult for the people who have the money. The people who have the money want to keep it, they don't want to say ... they don't want to share that. So they set up this false dialog to keep you from achieving anything because if you achieve, then you don't need them anymore. If you achieve on your own, you don't need their money, you can make your own and then you're free. You don't have to have a job working at Mickey D's or wherever making 20 cents a day, you don't have to do that if you define your own destiny because you had the willpower within.

01:58:28:03

ADGER COWANS:

And that's one of the things that Gordon was really, really good at doing, showing that the power resides in you, not somebody else, and you have the

ability to define your own destiny. And that's what every human being has, not just Black people, but all human beings have the right to define their own destiny based on who they are and what they feel. You don't have to let anybody enslave you and take your mind and use your energy to make money and give you a paycheck at the end of the week for \$55 or \$100 or whatever. And if you use your own ingenuity, you can make much more on your own. You don't have to be dependent. America's made its money on other people's energy, and that game is over.

### **Gordon Parks' relationships**

01:59:26:07

ADGER COWANS:

Well, he was comfortable in his own skin. When you're comfortable in your own skin you have no problem traveling the world. It's only if you see yourself as less, or if you see yourself as more, or you're better. But Gordon saw himself as another human being. He didn't put himself above anybody. And when you don't, you can travel with the high and you can travel with the low because neither one of them, there's no difference, a human being's at the low ... There's a guy who told me, he said, "Adger, you can marry a poor woman or you can marry a rich woman. They both need a man." So it's you, it's your humanity. And he had the ability to go up and down because to him there was no difference between high and low, we're all human beings.

02:00:26:07

ADGER COWANS:

Working on the movies I learned one great lesson, and that is, especially with the stars, people in front of the camera. They're human beings first before they're Mr. so and so and Miss so and so. And that became very, very clear to me early on, and I think one of the things that helped me in the business was I treated everybody the same. I didn't make any difference because this was Faye Dunaway or this was ... I treated them all like people. "Hi, how are you, I'm your photographer, blah blah blah." I didn't say, "Oh, I'm so happy to be working with you Miss so and so. Oh!" And when you do that to anybody, what do they do? They say, "Oh, yes. Well, are you going to kiss that ... could you go just a little bit lower? Let me get my ass up a little higher before you ...," I mean, it's natural. If somebody's going to go all googly eyed and all twitty, what are you going to do after a while? It gets boring. That's why I think some stars after a while, they change up the people they're working with.

### **Working in fashion**

02:01:35:22

ADGER COWANS:

Well, at the time he was doing it when fashion was the way-- he loosened it up a little bit. Because in the old days it was like stiff, very stiff. But he got the models to moving and walking and some slow shutter stuff, and he tried to

create a feeling tone about it that was different than what was going on in fashion at that time.

02:02:01:23

ADGER COWANS:

I don't think he made a distinct difference between journalism and the so-called ... well, that came later on in fine art. It's all fine art if it touches people. If it touches people, it's fine art as far as I'm concerned. But he didn't have a problem moving between those things.

### **Malcolm X**

02:02:28:17

ADGER COWANS:

I think it really bothered him about Malcolm X, you know, because they had formed a very close relationship, and he was godfather to his daughter and all this. And I think Gordon was very disheartened in America. He felt that America was better than that. He always had this feeling about, you know, that we could be better as people together. And I think that when Malcolm got killed, he was ... we talked about it. He was disheartened. It's like shit, here we go again with the same old shit. After all of this, we haven't gone anywhere, we're still on first base. And I think that it... it kind of knocked the wind out of him a little bit, and it was hard to knock the wind out of Gordon. He usually bounced back easy. But in talking about it and when I talked with

him about it, he just shook his head, he just thought it was terrible because he got to know the intelligence and the smarts and the humanity side of Malcolm X. Malcolm X was ... he wanted people to be better. He wanted everybody to be better. He wanted White people to get their foot off of Black people's neck, leave us alone and we'll be alright.

02:03:54:02

ADGER COWANS:

You know, he did preach self awareness, and he used history, and he used White people's history, and they didn't like that. They didn't like that he was telling the truth. He didn't like that he was freeing up people's minds. The same with Martin Luther King. Why do you think they killed both of them? Why do you think they killed the Kennedy brothers? Same thing, they wanted a better country and they said, "Let's stop the bullshit and let's open this up." They said, "Oh, no. You're not going to do that." It's so interesting that they all got killed around the same time. There's a movement afoot to keep Black people in a certain place, and now it's terrible. They're just killing anybody anywhere they want to, they shot this guy a couple of days ago in the back. He was getting in his car. Seven times. Okay, he said, "Don't get in the car." What do you mean, don't get in the car? How about once in the back, or how about in the leg? He wasn't a criminal. What about in the hand? But oh, no. In the back seven times. How are you going to shoot somebody in the back seven times, in the back?

**Gloria Vanderbilt**

02:05:16:14

ADGER COWANS:

They were creative spirits, that's what the connection was. She understood Gordon's creativity, and he understood hers. That wouldn't work in a marriage. Gordon thought it would. Because I asked him, "Why don't you marry her? What's wrong with you, marry this woman, she's crazy about you. I can smell it in your shoes, man. What are you ...?" And he felt that the distance of where he came from and where she was coming from, that he couldn't quite bring that together as a marriage because in a marriage, that's different. Boyfriend and girlfriend can free flow, but if he married her, then all of what he had belonged to her and all of what she had belonged to him. And I think that he kind of had a little bit of cold feet about what that meant if they really tied the knot. And he felt the distance was too much, that's what he told me, of where he came from and where she came from.

02:06:20:08

ADGER COWANS:

He loved her and they were like ... I mean, I was there when they were both there sometimes, and she loved Gordon. "Oh, Gordon, this and ..." It was all creative, it was about creative stuff. It wasn't so much about the love thing. Yeah, it was there but it was more about the creative process, two creative

minds coming together. But they came from very different ends, and I think that that in some ways kind of backed Gordon off. That was what I got when I talked to him about it.

02:06:53:07

ADGER COWANS:

Well, yeah. Women loved Gordon because he was a gentleman and he was very complimentary to women, and he was a good looking man, you know, and he dressed well and spoke well. And he loved women. There's some men that don't love women, but he loved women just as women. And I think that that's evident too, in his work. Some of the figures that he did, and just the way that he dealt with women in general, the way he dealt with his daughter, the way he dealt with our friend Eleanor, and just other people. But he had that ability to relax people. I mean, if you went over to Gordon's house and he was there, you know, and he was going to eat or something, he'd say his favorite trick, "Oh, you want something to eat?" I'd say, "I don't know, Pops." He said, "I will make some bean soup."

02:07:53:17

ADGER COWANS:

That was his favorite. He'd go in the refrigerator and he'd throw everything in there and make this bean soup and put some wine in it, and sit down and eat. It was just one of his things. And he was a pretty good cook when he was cooking what he was cooking. But that was his way of relaxing you. "You want

something to drink?" And he'd call most of us, "Hey, Champ." He'd call me hey, Champ. He'd call all men hey Champ, what are you doing, as if you're a champion and you can be a champion, whatever. Hey, Champ. But I think that he just had that kind of personality to draw people ... When you have a lot of energy, you draw people. And he had a lot of energy, and that energy is circulating. And just like animals. If you have the right energy and you walk in a room and a cat is there or a dog, if they like you they'll come up to you because they feel your energy. If they don't like you, they'll go the other way. It's a great signal. You watch animals. But Gordon had that kind of energy, a dog would come and lick his hand. Yeah, he just had that kind of loving energy.

***Shaft and Leadbelly***

02:09:18:02

ADGER COWANS:

Well, I think for African Americans they loved the movie, they loved the movie. It was a very well made movie and it was Gordon's story, it was a Black man's story, and a Black man that won as opposed to dying. That's why when they made *Shaft*, Shaft was a hero. Shaft don't get killed, Shaft's a hero because ... and before that time, in all the movies whenever the Black man was about ready to, he got killed. Even in the ... what's the movie with Tony Curtis and what's his name? He's running to catch the train, the Black man, he

don't get on the train. He's winning all before that. Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis, whatever that movie was where they're running to get on the train and somehow he can't get on the train and he's falling off. Anyway, but before that, all through the movie he's the hero but then in the end ... And in most movies where Black people were, in the end the Black people get killed for some reason, the Black men gets killed for some reason. He never can really get over ... so when Shaft comes along, Shaft's a hero, and he wins.

02:10:33:22

ADGER COWANS:

Oh, yeah. I remember... Everybody's going... everybody's going, "Shaft, Shaft," everybody was singing in the streets, "Shaft." Yeah, it was a good movie because it was a good movie and he won. You know, that's what was great about it.

02:10:50:06

ADGER COWANS:

Yeah. I think he thought it was going to be a big hit, yeah. Of course, of course. I mean, he even did a little small role in there. Yeah, I think he thought it was going to be a hit because it had all the earmarks of a Hollywood hero. He kicks ass and he wins. They can't kill him, you know, the bad guys can't kill him and the good guys are on his side there with him, but he walks and talks bad all the way through the movie. There's no movie where he's saying, "Oh, please. Don't hurt me." He's always through the movie, he's a bad dude. And

that was something that at that time, Black people needed to see. They needed to see a Black hero, somebody winning. Because in real life, we knew that Black people win all the time. But to see it in a movie for everybody to see, that was a first, most definitely. And Gordon was very much aware of what he was doing in that movie.

02:11:55:00

ADGER COWANS:

I don't know if Gordon was doing himself, I don't think so. He was creating a character, but he gave the character things that a lot of Black men do, you know, Black men who know who they are. There's no problem going with the rich or the poor or the Black or the White. Women are women, it doesn't matter about the color. A woman is a woman. So being able to go in and out of these worlds Gordon did do that, but I don't think he based the character on who he was, he based the movie on who the character was. Because then we come back again later on with Samuel L. Jackson playing Shaft, the same attitude. He's a Black man, sure of himself, knew what he was doing, and he had no problem. He wasn't scared of White people. A lot of movies had the Black people scared of the boss man or this ... no. Because it's not true in life. Black people aren't scared of White people, that's something they dream up. Oh, I'm going to go in and terrorize them, and they get killed.

02:13:11:01

ADGER COWANS:

Oh, yeah. Soundtrack, Isaac Hayes, yes. Yes and Gordon knew that. Gordon knew that. Gordon was very involved with the music, working with Isaac Hayes. He wanted... I remember going over to the studio and he was saying that he wanted this rhythm, he wanted this thing that matched. He was very, very concerned with the music, and they worked good together. Isaac Hayes really respected Gordon a lot, and they worked good together on that. Oh, yeah. The music was really important.

02:13:44:22

ADGER COWANS:

Well, it set the tone for the whole movie. First of all, it dealt with freedom, it dealt with movement, and the freedom of movement of the character, but freedom of the movement of the music, too. The music was like, you wanted to pop your fingers to it. It was like going to church. You go to church and they sing, oh you want to rock with it. You go hear a band somewhere and they're playing blues, you want to rock with it. You want to get ... And that movie made you want to move as opposed to watch. And that was sort of ... so dynamite, people were singing it up and down the street. Everybody ... [singing] "Shaft, Shaft." It was just that kind of music. Yeah, Isaac Hayes' music was very important, and Gordon will tell you that.

**Hollywood**

02:14:37:10

ADGER COWANS:

Gordon didn't let-- When people did shit, Gordon didn't let it bother him like that. He'd find a way around it or do something else. He didn't internalize it and say oh, I wish it can ... I was so ... no, he'd go "okay, fuck it. We'll do this." Or "oh, okay. All right, you going to do that? I'm going to do this." He continually moved ahead with that energy as opposed to die with it. That was one of the great things about Gordon, you know, he had that ability to adapt. And when they finally did release the movie, it was a hit. He picked those characters really good. He had the characters down, he had them down. And I thought it was one of his best movies.

02:15:32:20

ADGER COWANS:

In some ways I liked it better than *Shaft* because it was grittier and it dealt ... because *Leadbelly* (1976), it was scary. Leadbelly was a bad motherfucker. They didn't show in the movie how bad Leadbelly was. Leadbelly was a bad motherfucker. They ain't sure how bad he really was. But he played that guitar. I mean, you think of guys like Howlin' Wolf, another dude, cut you as soon as he look at you. But those guys had something with their music, all those blues guys did. And Gordon got that certain quality of Leadbelly, and the characters were great. You believed those characters, the White ones, the Black ones, all of them. It was one of those movies where the characters were really great. The setting, the music, all of it was great. I like that movie, too. I

think that's one movie that should come back and they should play it again because I think it was that good.

02:16:42:05

ADGER COWANS:

*Shaft* was a Hollywood movie. Yeah, everybody rocked with it. *Leadbelly* was a more serious movie, yet it was still a Hollywood ... there was a more seriousness to it because it was this guy's life, Leadbelly's life who was a prisoner, had been in prison and who rocked the whole world with his music because there was something in it that grabbed people. It's always about grabbing people and their feelings and their emotions that makes something work or not work. You have to deal with human emotion and we all have it. There's something about going in the movie theater and life's going on on the movie screen going, as opposed to looking at television or Netflix or whatever. There's a different feeling going to the theater and waiting for the lights to go out and the screen to light up, and you go into that world.

### **Last years**

02:17:49:02

ADGER COWANS:

He felt really great, you know, to be honored by all these other African American photographers. He felt really honored by that, and I think the shooting of the hip hop guys was a throwback to the jazz photograph that Art

Kane shot, they used the same steps and everything. So they just made it historical in the same spot, and they used Gordon. They didn't use me, they didn't use Tony Barboza, they didn't use this one, they used Gordon. He had the name and they wanted that name. Gordon Parks photograph, all the hip hop guys, oh ... he didn't know nothing about hip hop. But he photographed all these guys and they loved it because it was Gordon Parks.

02:18:32:03

ADGER COWANS:

The iconic Gordon Parks, and this was in the last part of his life. So of course it meant even more that he was still alive because a lot of people, "Oh, is Gordon dead?" And people say that to me, "Adger, I thought you were dead." Come on, stop it. They say, "Well, you did so and so and so and so and so and so, and we thought you were dead." I said, "I'm not dead, not yet." Once you pass 65, 70, 75, people think oh, he's got to be dead at 75. It's just the attitude. But I think everybody loved that it was Gordon Parks and they all respected, they all knew who he was. Because he could have been ... if Coltrane had been a photographer, it had been the same thing. Coltrane photographed us, wow! But it's that kind of attitude, he had that kind of cache.

### **Criticism and Roy DeCarava**

02:19:31:21

ADGER COWANS:

I don't know. I never could figure out what it was that ... I mean, Roy didn't like Gordon at all, and I tried to get from him why he didn't like Gordon. And I tried to get from Gordon why he didn't like Roy. He said, "I don't dislike Roy," he said, "I never have." He said, "Roy dislikes me." He said, "I never say anything about Roy," and he said, "I really like Roy." But if you ask me what the problem was, I think, and this is me, this is not anybody else, Roy was a monk and Gordon had the whole world. Gordon worked for *Life*, he had the whole world. Roy had this much, Gordon had this much, and I think there was some professional kind of thing going on in there because Roy felt that Gordon was a handkerchief and a house nigger. He felt that ... not house nigger nigger, but he was ... he felt that he didn't do Black people right, that he in some way worked for *Life* Magazine and *Life* Magazine dictated a lot, and that Gordon really wasn't down with the people as Roy was.

02:21:04:20

ADGER COWANS:

But that's the only thing I can ... There was a meeting one time where Gordon and Roy got into an argument, and then people built it into more than what it was. I won't go into all of it but it wasn't true, the stories that came out of there. But Roy walked out of the meeting and told Gordon he felt that Gordon was like, he didn't want to be bothered with him, and he walked out of the

meeting. And I think it had to do partly with the fact that Roy felt that the establishment really didn't give African American jobs. And yet Gordon had worked in these ... And at the time I had, too. I had done stuff for the *New York Times*, [inaudible] Magazine, I traveled all over for people. Nobody said anything about that. I didn't say anything about it in the meeting because the meeting was about giving more African Americans photographers jobs, and quit giving all the jobs to White people. And that's what the meeting was about, but it got all out of hand and Roy and Gordon got into ... actually Roy more than Gordon got into a scuff.

02:22:22:05

ADGER COWANS:

But I think that for me, I think one of the things that people didn't understand about Gordon, Gordon grew up poor, really poor at a time when racism was at its height. And he survived that. Roy didn't go through that. Roy went through Harlem and grew up with his mother, his mother raised him, and he grew up in Harlem at a time when the Harlem Renaissance was beginning to happen, and it was a different time, you know. You can't put them in the same room. People say oh, ... I said, "Gordon suffered much more as a Black man in America doing what he did than Roy did." I mean, it's hard to say who suffered the most or how they ... but I think that New York City, at the time that Roy grew up, was different than the time when Gordon grew up in Kansas, and they both suffered as Black men in terms of the art world, recognizing their work et cetera, et cetera. But I think that they were just two

different people. I don't know why they didn't get along. The only thing I can say is some kind of jealousy because Gordon had the world, and Roy was a monk.

02:23:43:12

ADGER COWANS:

Roy didn't want to work for White people. He told me he didn't want to work for ... I got him a job to do some album covers for somebody and he didn't want to do it. He said, "I don't want to work for White people." He said that at one point in his life. Well, I think he mellowed out more once Roy got married, he kind of smoothed out there a little bit and he started teaching. And his wife was very much into his work, she understood what it was, where a lot of people didn't. And she began to bring Roy's work forward. As a teacher, he was good as a teacher. He was a very good teacher, but Roy was bitter in some ways. Gordon was never bitter like that. Roy he had a hard time at one point, he was very bitter. I mean, I spent time with Roy before he got married when he lived on Sixth Avenue.

02:24:43:16

ADGER COWANS:

When I first got out of school I went and I met Roy. And I spent a lot of time talking with Roy, so I know how he felt and I know what he said to me. He probably wouldn't say that today if he was alive, you know, but I remember many occasions he said he hated White people. He didn't want to be bothered

with them anyway, because I don't know. But yet he was one of the first people... he and Eugene Smith and I forget who else was involved, they had one of the first galleries to show photographer's art on 84th Street back in the day when nobody else did. So Roy knew about the art of photography, very much so. I don't think Gordon, at the time, was thinking of photography so much as art as more as journalism. It was great journalism, but it was art, too. But Roy had a visual acuity that was different than everybody else. He used photography to speak what he wanted to say.

02:25:55:09

ADGER COWANS:

You know, he hated color. I hated color, too. When we talk about color it kind of messes things up unless you're shooting color for color. But when you take a situation as basic black and white and you shoot color, you might as well shoot black and white. Color doesn't add to it because the color is just the color of black and white. But if you shoot color for color dealing with color as color, that's different. I mean somebody like Pete Turner, let's say, and his color. He's great. But he didn't try and take journalism and shoot it in color. To me, I'm basically a black and white photographer. I think the truth of black and white is more true than color.

### **Gordon Parks' relevance today**

02:26:45:08

ADGER COWANS:

The time was always right, it's just the time has changed now because people are beginning to see the humanity in the work on a larger scale. They know the movies, they know this, they know that, but I think the establishment, the galleries and museums are starting to collect ... Even my work they're starting to collect because they realize they've been ignoring it all along. I mean, I have my book here which is ... I mean, I was what, 79 years old before I had my first book published of 50 years of my photography? It should have been done when I was 40 or 45. But that's, again, I mean, I don't have any work in the Museum of Modern Art. And when I told them they said, "Oh, no. We have your work." I said, "No you don't." They said, "I think we have a couple ..." I said, "You don't have it." I met Szarkowski when he got the job at the Museum and he said, "Oh, Adger, we have to collect your work." He never did. His best friend who's my uncle-in-law, had a party and invited him and asked him if he had bought my work.

02:28:02:08

ADGER COWANS:

He said, "Oh, yeah. We're going to get Adger's work." And I took my work out there three times. I thought that was enough, I ain't going back ever again. So my point and feeling now about the Museum of Modern Art, I ain't giving them shit, and I don't want them to buy shit, I don't want anybody to sell any of my shit to them. My new deal, is ... he said, "Oh," I said, "I'm not interested

in the Museum of Modern Art." I said, "They totally ignored me, embarrassed me actually." They asked me to bring work, I bring it in, they give me my book back saying, "Oh, if somebody's interested I'll call you." They didn't say we enjoyed looking at your work, nothing. Just ... I say if they're going to do that, then I don't want to be in the collection. I don't want to say all of a sudden now I want to be in the collection so I can say I'm in the Museum of Modern Art.

02:28:51:13

ADGER COWANS:

I'm talking about reciprocity here, you know? You don't want it? Okay. Now don't come and tell me you want it now because you changed your mind or now is the time et cetera, et cetera and I'm getting some publicity and people are talking about my work and "oh, we should have it." No, you should have had it a long time ago. You should have had it in the '60s. Why are you talking about it now it's important? Now it's important to get Black people's ... yeah, it was important back then. You think that because you're the Museum of Modern Art that I have to be or that I need to be in there or I want to be in there? I don't care. I never cared, that's the problem. I never wanted to be a star, I never wanted to be the latest flavor. I stayed underground most of my artistic life because it's about the work. I'm in the history and stuff, I don't need all the rest of that stuff. I don't care. I'm only doing this because of Gordon, really. It's about Gordon, it's not about me, I don't care. I never have. Because I don't think that that's important. I think the most important thing

for an artist is to do the work. Even if they get it after you're dead, at least you did it. You know, if people start getting your stuff while you're alive and you become the big poo pah, you don't get anything then. You're going to dinners with this one and lunch with so and so, and over here, "oh we're having him for lunch," and then you become the latest flavor. "Oh, let's put him on the cover of so and so." I don't want any of it, I don't care.

02:30:40:03

ADGER COWANS:

I've been a star all my life before any of this shit. I was a star in my own family. I don't like the whole idea in the first place, that they separate and pull one or two of you out of the bushes and hold you up, "Oh, well we got one." And they actually got 50. Okay, I'll be in it. But don't pull me out and talk about blah blah blah blah. I don't know, I guess I've always been different, and part of it had to do with Gordon because he realized that I had, you know, a certain point of view. I mean, both Romy and Gordon wrote about my work, which I'm really happy about. One of the greatest painters of all time and one of the greatest photographers wrote about my work. That's good enough, man. That's good enough. I don't care what anybody, that's ... we're better.

02:31:40:04

ADGER COWANS:

You know, that's great, that's great. And they were serious about it, they talked to me about it. What's better than that? I don't need to be criticized by such and such of the *New York Times* and so and so of the [inaudible]. I don't

care what they have to say Gordon said, Romy said. What are you going to say about that? Ain't nothing you can say about that. When I did the water show in 1981, I photographed a surface as a water, and I did a show at Green Street and this guy who owned Green Street put up the money. And Gordon came, he said, "You got a seller or what? This is all your people. What are you doing?" He said, "He has some great stuff." He said, "Nobody's done anything like this." He said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Oh, we're trying to sell," but we didn't sell anything.

END TC: 02:32:33:06