

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

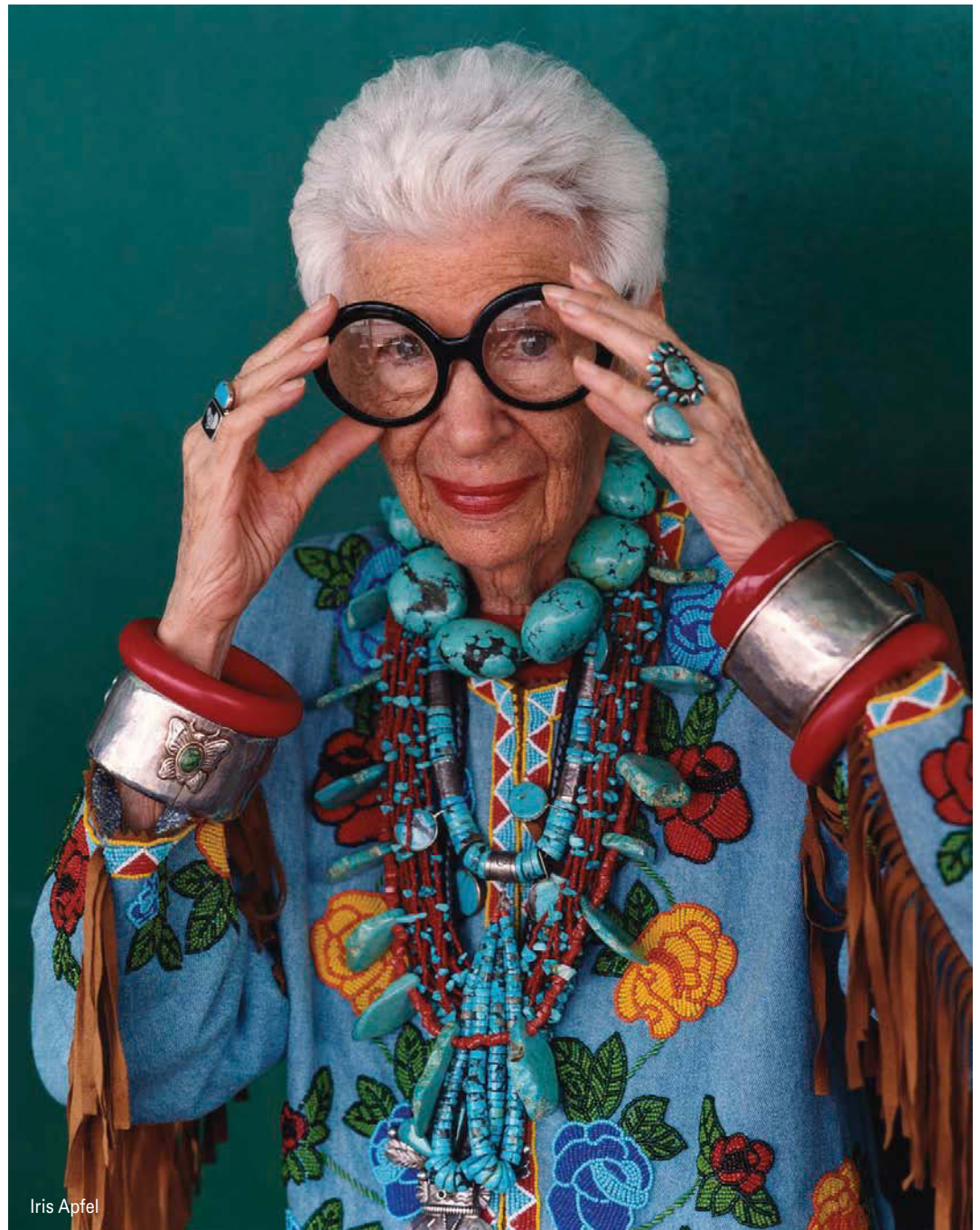
Iconoclasts Albert Maysles and Iris Apfel Team on Documentary

“**W**e are in the throes of making a portrait film of Iris Apfel in all her stylish splendor,” reads the Maysles Films web site, the online home of pioneering documentarian Albert Maysles. The notice comes with a link to a film trailer, cut by New York-based editor Lynn True, featuring the fashion icon and self-declared “geriatric starlet,” now in her 91st year, in her trademark round, black glasses. “I think style is all attitude. Attitude, attitude, attitude,” Apfel declares at the beginning of the work-in-progress documentary, clearly in her element.

Along with his brother David, Maysles is one of the forerunners of *cinéma vérité*'s North American cousin, direct cinema, which relies on the handheld camera. The best known collaborations from the brothers include the legendary *Grey Gardens* (1976), which documents the relationship of a reclusive mother and daughter living in a decaying East Hampton mansion, the 1970 Rolling Stones documentary *Gimme Shelter*, and *Salesman* (1968), which was named to the National Film Registry in 1992.

Maysles was first drawn to film Apfel by a close-up photo that ran as a full page in the weekly *New York Observer*. “That face is really something special,” he says of the decision to begin filming Apfel despite having secured only partial funding for the project. “You see that face of Iris’ and you’re immediately engaged. She is such a character. She’s in her 90s, full of sparkle and energy and love of life. She wants to be an eccentric, and it’s charming.”

As a filmmaker, Maysles has enormous appreciation for the full-frame portrait. “So many professional photographers are interested in doing something that is so-called



Iris Apfel



Apfel and Albert Maysles

'unique,' or at least following the fashion. Rather than go with the full picture, photographers will shove the person to one side or the other, and it's terrible," he laments. "It's not the way we look at people—it just puts them further away from us. When you close-up on a person, with a full frame, you're that much closer to the feeling of the person, that much closer to what the person is experiencing."

While the majority of footage captured for the project has been shot with a pair of Sony PMW-EX1 XDCAM cameras, supplemented by a Panasonic AG-AF100 camcorder, Maysles has begun experimenting with the palm-sized Sony HXR-NX30. "Thirty or 40 years ago, when I built my own camera, fully synchronized it weighed 26 lb.," he recounts. "This camera weighs only 3 lb. It's also very sensitive to light, so you don't have to worry about shooting in adverse conditions."

Nick Canfield, who serves as a camera operator and has been working with Maysles going on three years, is

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Iris Apfel launched a line of jewelry on HSN called Rara Avis.



responsible for organizing and backing up the nearly 200 hours of footage acquired for the project so far, transcoding it into Apple ProRes 4:2:2 format in preparation for editing within Apple Final Cut Pro. “The EX1s are our go-to camera for pretty much any environment,” he comments. “On the majority of our shoots we have no sound guy, and run shotguns and lavalier mics right into the cameras. These days everybody loves to go DSLR, but it’s nice to have a real video camera.”

Capturing the experience, and humanizing it, is what is most important for Maysles as a filmmaker. “It’s important to have the kind of relationship with people where they feel they can just go on and don’t have to worry about being self-conscious in front of the camera or feel that it’s putting them off. That person becomes a human being,” Maysles says. “You can have

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—Albert Maysles, director

all the technical savvy in the world, be a perfect technician, and the amateur without any technical training will capture it better because an amateur is doing it for the love of it, and that’s the connector. That’s what gets it across.”

“Whatever footage that I shoot, it has to be the real thing,” Maysles insists. “When I first meet someone, they have to catch something in my eye. Who exactly that person is, that’s what I’m out to [show]. To capture in a heart-to-heart fashion the experience of that person. I don’t need any narration to tell what’s going on—it explains itself. There are a couple of primary characteristics that define my special talent. One of them is getting access to people. I really like people. Whenever I might be prone to dislike them because of their politics, or whatever, I give them a break. My mother always used to say, ‘There’s good in everybody,’ and I’m always looking for that.” **dv**