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## IRASCIBLE, IRREPRESSIBLE *IRIS*

Inside the Affectionate Documentary from Albert Maysles



Iris Apfel in *Iris*

Capping a career that spanned more than half a century of filmmaking, legendary documentarian Albert Maysles' last finished film was 2014's *Iris*, about nonagenarian textile designer and fashion icon Iris Apfel. The film premiered last fall at the New York Film Festival, where Maysles and Apfel spoke afterward to an adoring and enthusiastic crowd. Distributed by Magnolia Pictures, *Iris* arrives in theaters in limited release on April 29.

One of the pioneers of direct cinema, cinéma vérité's North American counterpart, Maysles was awarded a National Medal of Arts by President Barack Obama in 2013. Serving as

director, co-director or cinematographer, Maysles collaborated on at least 75 movies over the course of his lifetime, including, alongside his brother David, who died in 1987, the beloved *Grey Gardens* (1976), about a reclusive mother and daughter living in a decaying mansion in the East Hamptons, the Rolling Stones concert documentary *Gimme Shelter* (1970), and *Salesman* (1968), which was named to the National Film Registry in 1992.

Apfel, the quick-witted, flamboyantly dressed 93-year-old style maven who has had an outsized presence on the New York fashion scene for decades, proved to be an ideal subject for Maysles. More than a film about fashion, the documentary

is a story about creativity, portraying a singular woman whose life-sustaining enthusiasm for fashion, art and people is an inspiration to all. "I feel lucky to be working," the self-declared geriatric starlet says in the film. "If you're lucky enough to do something you love, everything else follows."

Maysles passed away in his home in New York on March 5, at the age of 88, prompting an outpouring of mourning and affection from filmmakers around the world. Shortly before his death, *Digital Video* spoke with Maysles and his daughter, painter and photographer Rebekah Maysles, who served as a producer on *Iris*, in addition to her work on archive preservation and redevelopment at Maysles Films.



Carl and Iris Apfel

**Last time we spoke, in 2012, you were just beginning production on *Iris* using the Sony PMW-EX1 XDCAM camera, supplemented by a Panasonic AG-AF100 camcorder.**

**Rebekah Maysles:** Yes, we primarily used the EX1.

**And AI, are you still experimenting with the Sony HXR-NX30 HD camcorder?**

**Albert Maysles:** Yes. The NX30 is very light, and it has all the features I need.

**Rebekah, you were a producer on *Iris*?**

**Rebekah:** Yes, along with Laura Coxson and Jennifer Ash Rudick. We're a really small team, so everything was a group effort.

**What was one of the biggest challenges?**

**Rebekah:** One of the things that was definitely a juggling act was Iris' schedule. Her schedule always shifts and she's always doing so many different things, so trying to catch up with her wasn't always easy.

**AI, going in you said you wanted to make a portrait of Iris. What were some of the things you wanted to capture in order to accomplish that?**

**Albert:** Well, capturing those eyeglasses was not a challenge. They were just so wonderful, you had to ask yourself, "Who is that behind those wonderful



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Carl and Iris Apfel



glasses?" I wanted to get a sense of her ideas on fashion, and it turned out that just being with her was such a pleasure, as I think it would be for the audience. Every moment was so full of her whims and charms.

**Your relationship with Iris appears warm, almost flirtatious.**

**Rebekah:** The funny thing is that they had never met before. They are both New York icons, so everybody assumes they knew each other, but they didn't start to become friends until after they began working on the film. They really hit off, right from the start. One big part of that is they are both double the age of anyone else working on the film, so there's this kind of camaraderie.

**And, of course, everybody does flirt with AI a little bit. Please talk about composition. The footage appears very natural, yet also very carefully composed. How did you achieve that?**

**Albert:** I always try to make people comfortable—listen and watch—and that comes across very early. With Iris, it happened right away. I could feel that she had a lot to give and I had a lot to take. I never asked any questions or tried to direct her in any way. She knew where she was going.

**So she led her own performance, if you will.**

**Albert:** Yes, absolutely. It wasn't my intention one way or the other. Whatever she was to do was under her control. I tried to capture those moments in such a way as to familiarize ourselves with her.

**How much did you think about the composition of what would appear in the frame?**

**Albert:** It just kind of comes naturally to me. I'm constantly looking to see if there is some element

that will contribute to an understanding of her with my left eye, but with my right eye I am focused on her as she's doing whatever she's doing. So I'm inclined not to miss a thing.

**The film is so intimate. And as Rebekah mentioned earlier, you had just met. How were you able to achieve that level of intimacy?**

**Albert:** My mother gave me good advice as a child—she said, "There's good in everybody." And with that expectation, I was able to, more than normally, look for that and prepare to get it.

**It appears that you have made a good friend.**

**Albert:** With the hopes that she would make a friend with everybody who sees her in the film. The response that we've had so far—we've had a couple of showings—they just adored her.

She makes a connection with people in her trade, with anyone at all. Anyone who has the slightest inclination towards liking people, she offers herself to them.

**Did you feel any special pressure to dress up for Iris?**

**Albert:** No, no, no.

**You have your own costume well established.**

**Albert:** Right.

**How did you handle shooting some of the larger public events, such as Iris' appearance with Tavi Gevinson?**

**Albert:** It's all the same way. Somehow people sense a kind of sympathy on my part, and whether they're being filmed or not, I'm accepted as part of the environment. They don't get distracted by my presence.

**Rebekah:** The hardest thing was to convince people

that we didn't have a large crew. There were only four of us at any one time, but trying to convince institutions that we wouldn't be a problem could be difficult. And then once they saw us, they'd be like, "Oh, okay."

**So most of your crews would be fairly small? Camera operator, sound person and you two?**

**Albert:** I operate the camera, and then the sound person, and then another person.

**Rebekah:** Yeah, and then there would be another camera as well. There are some really fantastic DPs with us who have worked under AI for quite a few years. But we always worked with the same group of people, which was nice, and that was really comforting for Iris, too.

**AI, what is your advice for budding documentarians?**

**Albert:** Get everything that's interesting as it is happening so that you don't need narration. The narration is something that people fall back on. Because they didn't get it to begin with! The determination on my part is to get everything while it's happening rather than try to create it. It's already created for you. The authenticity of being totally for real.

**What about the full-frame portrait you spoke of in 2012? Are you seeing more of that now?**

**Albert:** They don't use enough of the extreme close-up, although it's coming more into fashion. But then they go a little bit too far and use just the eyes, which is okay for a moment but it's better to see the full face. That's close enough. If there's something else going on, if there's a conversation with somebody, something is more likely to be happening, and it's recordable.

**Rebekah:** It was a real labor of love. We all really loved working with each other, and we asked a lot of favors and people were really wonderful.

**Albert:** It was a wonderful experience all around. **dv**

 [Read DV's previous interview with Albert Maysles here: www.creativeplanetnetwork.com/iris.](http://www.creativeplanetnetwork.com/iris)