



An Introduction to
**Black
on Black**

By Joe Saltzman

USC ANNEBERG

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CENTER

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Dean Ernest J. Wilson III and journalism professor Joe Saltzman hosted a screening of the landmark and award-winning 1968 TV documentary ***Black on Black***, produced by Saltzman, on October 27, 2008.

“This is an extraordinary program and the USC Annenberg community is proud to commemorate the 40th anniversary of this ground-breaking documentary first broadcast on CBS in Los Angeles, and then, nationwide in July 1968, less than three years after the infamous Watts riots,” Dean Wilson said.

University Professor Geoffrey Cowan led a discussion after the screening on how conditions have changed for African-Americans in the 40 years since the premiere of this documentary, which was hailed for its pioneering effort to capture the voices and experiences of black America during one of the most volatile times in the nation’s history.

Black on Black won six major awards, including the Edward R. Murrow Award for “distinguished television reporting and best documentary”; the Greater Los Angeles Press Club’s Best Documentary; Radio-Television News Directors Association’s Golden Mike; Associated Press Certificate of Excellence; the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Emmy and the first NAACP Image Award.

Along with Saltzman, the discussion featured political scientist Michael Preston, USC Vice Provost and author or editor of several books, including *Racial and Ethnic Politics in California and The New Black Politics*; and journalism and communication professor Félix Gutiérrez, co-author of *Racism, Sexism, and the Media: The Rise of Class Communication in Multicultural America*. This event was part of Visions & Voices: The USC Arts & Humanities Initiative and was co-sponsored by the Center on Communication Leadership and the Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs.

“Notwithstanding the many fine films which have been made during and since the ascendancy of the civil rights movement, Saltzman’s *Black on Black* gets inside the minds and hearts of its subjects as no other documentary has quite done,” said writer in residence Norman Corwin, who spent 15 years as chairman of the Documentary Awards Committee of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. “It demonstrates beyond peradventure of doubt, that nobody can speak as revealingly and cogently about how it is to be black in an essentially white world, than blacks themselves. It is a film that achieves high effect at ground level.”



Joe Saltzman

Joe Saltzman, director of the Lear Center's **Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture (IJPC)** project and the author of *Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film*, is an award-winning journalist and professor of journalism at the USC Annenberg School for Communication.

He received his B.A. in journalism from the University of Southern California and his M.S. from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. After working for several years as a newspaper reporter and editor, Saltzman joined CBS television in Los Angeles in 1964. For the next ten years, he produced documentaries, news magazine shows, and daily news shows, winning more than fifty awards, including the Columbia University-duPont broadcast journalism award (the broadcasting equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize), four

Emmys, four Golden Mikes, two Edward R. Murrow Awards, a Silver Gavel, and one of the first NAACP Image Awards.

He was among the first broadcast documentarians to produce, write, and report on important social issues, including *Black on Black*, a ninety-minute program with no written narration on what it is like to be black in urban America in 1967; *Rape*, a 30-minute 1970 program on the crime, which resulted in changes in California law; *The Junior High School*, a two-hour program on education in America in 1970; and *Why Me?* a one-hour program on breast cancer in 1974 that resulted in thousands of lives saved and advocated changes in the treatment of breast cancer in America. DVD and tape copies of the Saltzman documentaries are now available.

In 1974, Saltzman created the broadcasting sequence in the USC School of Journalism. During his tenure at USC, Saltzman, who has won three teaching awards, was associate dean of USC Annenberg for five years, and has remained an active journalist who has produced medical documentaries, functioned as a senior investigative producer for *Entertainment Tonight*, and written articles, reviews, columns, and opinion pieces for numerous magazines and newspapers. He's been researching the image of the journalist in popular culture for fifteen years and is considered an expert in the field. Saltzman was awarded the 2005 Journalism Alumni Award from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, the Alumni Association's highest alumni honor.

The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture is a gold mine of research possibilities. This Lear Center project was created to investigate and analyze, through research and publication, the conflicting images of the journalist in film, television, radio, fiction (novels, short stories, plays poems), cartoons, comic strips, comic books, commercials and other forms of popular culture to demonstrate their impact on the public's perception of journalists (www.ijpc.org).

An Introduction to *Black on Black*

By Joe Saltzman

I want to thank USC Annenberg for holding this 40th anniversary celebration, as well as Visions & Voices and the USC Arts and Humanities Initiative, the Center on Communication Leadership, and the Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs for sponsoring this event. I want to thank USC Annenberg's Lee Warner, Chuck Boyles and Jim Yoder for their help in making this video available tonight.

Before we get started, there is someone I want to introduce to you who is in the audience. First let me tell you something about him. Dan Gingold was one of the true pioneers of non-fiction television. He created the first successful TV newsmagazine back in 1964 called *Ralph Story's Los Angeles*, and it was one of the most popular programs in television history. It was Dan who fought to put "Black on Black" on the air and made it possible for me to do the documentary and if it weren't for him we wouldn't be sitting here today. Dan is the executive producer of *Black on Black* and a good friend. His guidance and counsel were indispensable to this project. Dan is here tonight with his wife Roz, and I'd like him to stand up and take a bow.

What I want to do tonight is to give you an inside look at how this documentary came to be and how it was put together.

When I was working in the CBS-Channel 2 newsroom in Los Angeles in 1965, I wanted to do a documentary on what it was like to be an



African-American living in an urban ghetto. So I put in one proposal after another to the news director urging him to let me do this documentary. He kept saying the time wasn't right. I talked so much about it that it was referred to by some of my colleagues at CBS as "Saltzman's N----- Project." Then the so-called Watts riots broke out shocking everyone in the country. It was one thing to watch rioting in the South and the North, but most people – even African-Americans in other parts of the country — could not understand why blacks would riot in Los Angeles.

It took the city by surprise and there was great bewilderment. People were scared and feared the unknown. One of the reasons the riots took the city by surprise was because news media seldom if ever reported on people of color unless they were involved in a crime, a sports event or a very unusual story. To CBS and other mainstream news media, people of color in the city of Los Angeles simply did not exist. So questions were asked: Why were the blacks so angry? Why did they hate the news media? Why were they rioting and burning their community?

You also have to understand what television looked like in the 1960s. There were few people of color on television or in TV newsrooms. When it came to African-Americans, there was Bill Cosby on *I Spy*, a popular TV detective show, and Diahann Carroll playing a nurse called Julia and that was about it. There were some sports and weather people of color on TV news, but not much else. So to try to do a 90-minute prime-time documentary with nothing but anonymous African-Americans was not an easy sell to the five CBS owned-and-operated stations who were being asked to finance it and broadcast it.



It was a difficult documentary to do. My conceit was to treat South-Central Los Angeles as if it were a foreign country, exploring the culture, the religion, the music, the hairstyles, the language, the customs, the daily life of what it was like to be black and live in an American city. The foreign country notion was not out of line. Most whites drove through South-Central Los Angeles on the Harbor Freeway traveling from one white community to another. USC students and faculty were warned not to venture off campus into the black community. Few whites knew anything about the large black community that made up a large part of the city.



I didn't want any Caucasian reporter or a written narration getting in the way of the residents' story. The idea was to tell the story through the eyes of the people who lived there, to form a narrative out of their own words and feelings, to tell their story without censorship or compromise. CBS management never understood the concept and up until two weeks before the program aired, they hoped we would use news anchor Jerry Dunphy to narrate the program. But thanks to Dan, we won the day and the documentary went on without any changes.



My goal was to get out of the way and let the urban blacks themselves tell their own story. I felt it was their documentary, not mine. So I spent hours with people in the community, simply watching, listening, looking and learning without any cameras or distractions. Only after I felt I understood the community and had all the pieces in place, would I then bring in the camera to actually shoot the documentary.

The news cameraman and soundman who were assigned to the program were among those newsmen who had to run for their lives during the Watts Riots when a mob set fire to their CBS camera truck. They didn't want anything to do with this project. I remember taking the cameraman and soundman to Gardena for lunch every shooting day so they could spew their racial hatred and then order them to keep their mouths shut when we went back into the ghetto. It was emotionally very difficult to be in the middle of such hatred – from the camera crew against blacks, and from the blacks against whites.

Even though the program was an enormous success and defined my career for the next 10 years, I wasn't prepared for the hatred that I didn't know existed in Southern California. The program begins in black. That meant that anyone watching the program would have no idea what the documentary was about. Yet the minute the show went on the air, hundreds of hate calls from people who were not even watching the program but had seen it advertised in *TV Guide* flooded the CBS switchboard. My life was threatened several times. Copies of the film donated to the Los Angeles Public Library were mutilated within days. I didn't realize how much racism there was in Southern California until I did this documentary. It was a real eye-opener.

I judged the success of the documentary not on how many awards it won or how good the critical notices were, but on its acceptance in the black community. The highest compliment I received was that no African-American believed a Caucasian was capable of producing such a program.



The prologue to *Black on Black* was one of the longest prologues if not *the* longest prologue in commercial television history. I wanted to give the audience a sense of what the African-American experience was all about before the documentary actually started.



I had heard two songs in the ghetto that most of the white community hadn't heard – one was sung by Lou Rawls called "Tobacco Road," and the other was sung by Nina Simone, called "Four Women." I was determined to use both songs in the documentary – CBS had a policy against using any recorded music in documentaries, but Dan and I ignored that policy. I remember I was driving around the ghetto when someone asked me if I had heard the longer version of "Tobacco Road" recorded live. I hadn't. It turned out there was a terrific opening on the longer version with Rawls laughing about various ghettos around the country with his audience chiming in. It was the kind of banter white Americans never heard before.

I decided to open the documentary in black so the audience could concentrate on that exchange. We decided to show white lights on the black screen as Rawls mentioned the ghettos around the country (some viewers thought they represented bullet holes, but that wasn't our intention). Production at the time was so primitive that the art department simply took a black cardboard, punched in the holes, and then created pull-outs to reveal the hole against a white piece of paper. I pulled out the various pieces of cardboard while the cameraman kept shooting.





A bigger problem was what to show while jazz singer Simone sang “Four Women” – four verses each summing up African-American women throughout American history. Since the sequence ends the documentary, I wanted it to be effective. We had shot specific footage for it but when we edited it, the video just didn’t work. It was getting close to deadline and we still didn’t have a solution. I remember how I woke up at four one morning scaring my wife, Barbara, saying “I’ve got the solution.” I had remembered seeing a Fremont High School art class while I was at the school. I got dressed and rushed to the school around 6 a.m. and waited for the art teacher. My notion was to give the students the four verses of the song and have them paint their impressions of each woman. The art work that we selected to illustrate the song and end the program is displayed for the first time ever in the East Lobby here tonight.

There were all kinds of problems that no one could predict. For example, TV technicians throughout the country used to cue up a program with first picture. *Black on Black* starts in black with audio only. It was a major problem making sure that technicians in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York and other cities cued up the program accurately. We had to send one advisory note after another to make sure they cued up the two-inch tape on first audio, not first picture since there wasn’t a picture, just a black screen. Each segment in the documentary also starts over a black screen and this also panicked technicians. That’s how primitive TV production was in those days. We had just gone to color and lost plenty of footage in the new film processing tanks used at the station in the early years – or we would end up with scratched film or developing spots throughout the image.



We also cut original negative – meaning if you made a mistake, there was no good way to fix it. The idea of cutting original negative today is ludicrous, but all of my documentaries were edited by cutting original negative and I still have nightmares over edits that were fractions of a second off and impossible to fix.



I knew from the start that I would need a “guide” to escort me around South Central Los Angeles, someone who would introduce me to people in the community, make sure it was safe for me – and eventually a camera crew – to go to various places within the community. In treating the documentary on urban blacks as if it were a foreign place, a guide seemed perfectly appropriate.



Much of the South-Central neighborhood was burned out. There were temporary trailers set up where things were slowly being put together by various administrative personnel from the community. There was one man we knew there named Truman Jacques. He had talked to me earlier about getting a job on television. The only job African-Americans could get on TV at that time was on a Sunday morning talk show created for people of color, and I told him Dan and I would help him get such a job (which Dan did – Truman was on Channel 2 for years on Sunday mornings). I told him my idea and he immediately understood what I was after, especially the part about a guide.



So we started interviewing people. I spent several days with him in the trailer talking to one young African-American male after another (we had agreed it should be a young man who was in touch with the peo-

ple who were primarily responsible for the rioting and could offer me some protection during the research and reporting phase of the documentary, and then during the filming). After a day-and-a half, he walked in: Donnel Petetan. I knew immediately he was the one. Everyone seemed to know him and respect him. He was good looking, he had a beautiful voice, and he knew the community inside out. Much to our surprise, he agreed to do it. And then he threw the first curve at us. I was driving a green Volkswagen Beetle and he “suggested” that he drive the car around for a week so that the community would get used to it. Truman and I both knew a scam when we heard it, but I thought it might not be a bad idea – Donnel in my car visiting the area we would be covering, making the car familiar to the neighborhood.

I asked him what would I do while he was driving around. He said I could stay at his house. There was a problem, however. His mother hated all white people (the only ones she had seen, of course, were police, insurance salesmen and other troublemakers). She was known throughout the neighborhood because she used her broom to “sweep” these intruders off her porch and out of the fenced yard. She *hated* whites. Donnel said he would speak to her and came back the next day to say that with certain ground rules I could stay at the house during the day.

The ground rules were: I could not speak to her. I could sit in the living room, walk down the hall to the bathroom, but would have to stay out of the small dining room between the living room and the kitchen and the rest of the house. I agreed to those conditions.



Being young and arrogant, I knew I had to get this woman on camera. But how? She was true to her word and ignored me completely with a look of scorn and anger. She was always cooking in the kitchen and as I sat there I tried to make conversation. But she ignored me. I pulled out some paper and she could see I was writing on it. I asked her what she was making. No answer. The next day I continued to ask her what she was cooking and gradually got her to tell me what she was doing.

What are you doing now, I would ask. Salt, she would answer. How much? About a teaspoon. I would ask, how much? She would repeat her answer. And it went that way for a full day. Me asking questions about the recipe, she spitting out short answers. She had asked Donnell if I was messing with her and he said no, the CBS man is really interested in everything about the community, including the food.

The next day I did nothing but take down recipes – and I took them down in great detail. She must have thought I was a bit slow because now she was shouting out very slowly (as if talking to a child) the details of the recipe several times to make sure I got it right. On the third day, she told Donnell it was all right if I sat at the dining room table since it looked very uncomfortable for me to sit on the couch taking notes. She even came in and sat down at the table once or twice to make sure I understood what she was doing and saying. At the end of the day, this woman – who wouldn't talk to me for almost three days except to reluctantly answer my questions about her cooking – asked me if I wanted a cup of coffee. When Donnell came in and saw us at



the table together he couldn't believe it.

The next day a break-through question opened up the floodgates. I asked her how she learned to cook so well and she started talking and didn't stop for eight hours. I sat there until we ran out of light taking notes as fast as I could. She told me when she was six, her mother got sick and all of her sisters and brothers had to go to school and her daddy had to work. So they rolled the mother's cot into the kitchen and her mother would tell her what to do to make the meals. A chair was pushed to the stove and she would stand on it and put the proper ingredients into the pot and this continued for much of her early childhood. Before she died, her mother told her she had become as good a cook as she was.

It was a Friday and now we were both at the dining room table, and occasionally in the kitchen together, talking and laughing. I had told her my wife was sick and that I was visiting her in the hospital every evening. It was getting late on Friday and Donnel wasn't home yet. Then she said something that was extraordinary, she offered me the family car to go home and see my wife. In a poor area, the family car is the family's most precious possession, a means of getting to work, of leaving the house, and she was offering me the family car. Just then Donnel arrived so I didn't have to take advantage of her generous offer.

I eventually got Donnell's mother to do an audio interview. Since the sound-man was an obnoxious racist, I had him sit in the CBS truck. I took a very long wire into her home, put her in her favorite seat and did an extensive audio interview figuring I could use the audio as voice-over if she refused to



do an on-camera video interview. She was relaxed and it all went so well that I was able to convince her to go on camera. During filming, I asked her, “Why do you hate all whites?” I told the cameraman to zoom into her face and I listened as she told me and the audience for the first time on TV how one African-American woman felt about whites and why.



I was also determined to shoot at night in the ghetto to show what “hustling” was all about. On that fateful night, Donnell drove an unmarked van and we parked in front of a pool room. We had covered the windows with a black cloth except for a small hole where we placed the camera so it wouldn’t be spotted. What we hadn’t counted on was on the second floor, someone had spotted a glare from the camera, thought we were narcs, and soon everyone in the pool room was rushing towards the van. Donnell panicked and put on the gas as the cameraman, the soundman, the camera and I were thrown against the back of the van. We were OK but what we didn’t know was that an interior part of the camera was damaged and everything we shot that night and the next day was out of focus. So we went back the next weekend in another van and were more careful about not showing the camera lens and got the shots.



When I was researching the documentary, I saw many instances of how the police treated African-Americans in the 1960s in South Central Los Angeles, from major beatings to minor harassment. It was the minor so-painful constant daily harassment that I wanted to capture on video. For example, not a day went by when a young couple driv-

ing in a car wasn't stopped by police. The policemen would order them out of the car, take the woman's purse and dump the contents on the sidewalk, wait to see if the man would cause any trouble, and then would leave laughing. We rented a van, covered the windows with a black cloth except for that small hole where we placed the camera and cruised the ghetto to find such harassment. That didn't last long. The first time we started shooting, the police called in our license plate and when they discovered CBS had rented the vehicle and was shooting a documentary in South Central Los Angeles including police treatment of blacks, they got furious. We were told to stop shooting or they would put us in jail. They told CBS to stop the documentary or real problems would occur. My press credentials were revoked. Since we only had a 15-day shooting budget, that pretty much stopped us in our tracks. That is why the section on police in the ghetto is carried mostly by the peoples' voices with whatever video we had used judiciously to make our point.

A few comments about the screening tonight. While there are no commercials, there is a break after the prologue for the title and the sponsor's name, and another break halfway through the documentary. The ending includes a long list of acknowledgments, and a few credits. The documentary aired in July 1968 and got one of the highest, if not *the* highest rating for a documentary in Los Angeles TV history. It was repeated in September 1968, but this time we were asked to end the program with a disclaimer saying the Los Angeles Police Department was working hard to do a good job in South Central Los Angeles. Relations between CBS News and the LAPD were at an all-time low because of the program and everyone was angry about that, so the disclaimer was ordered and tacked onto the end of the program.





One final thought. I'll never forget a letter I received from a father who lived in South Central Los Angeles who said that he and his wife, his children and their grandmother had watched *Black on Black* together and couldn't believe what they saw. It was the first time, he wrote, we actually saw people who looked and sounded like us on television. He said his mother started crying saying that she never thought she would have lived long enough to have seen "folks" on television. For a dozen years after the program aired, if someone heard I was in some way responsible for *Black on Black*, that person would come up to me and tell me pretty much the same thing.



This is the first time *Black on Black* will be screened in its entirety on a large screen with an audience. The picture may be a bit faded, but the program is intact and it will be interesting to see how an audience in 2008 responds to a program that was so controversial 40 years ago. *Black on Black* is an old-fashioned documentary in which the word is as important as the picture. There are no fast cuts or short sound bites and you really have to listen to the documentary to get its full value. In fact, CBS Radio ran the documentary in its entirety without any changes at all – the audio soundtrack tells the story with or without video.



So here is the 90-minute documentary we put together 40 years ago. I thank you for coming and I hope that *Black on Black* is as meaningful tonight as it was four decades ago.