

For the Love of Documentary: The Making of *The Black Eagle of Harlem*

by Billy Tooma

The Black Eagle of Harlem is a study in biography and forgotten history. Col. Hubert Fauntleroy Julian – aviator, soldier of fortune, and arms dealer – led a life of high adventure, finding himself at the center and periphery of major world events. Julian drew headlines wherever he went, generated a fair share of controversy – but most importantly – fought against racial attitudes and shattered countless stereotypes. He flew before Charles Lindbergh, traveled to Ethiopia before most Americans had seen their own Grand Canyon, and pushed for the advancement of his race even while many of his own people vilified him with accusations of being a flamboyant charlatan. Julian’s Zelig-like ability to adapt and take on multiple personas helped him persevere in the face of adversity. The challenge of telling the most honest version of Julian’s story is what drove this project. The documentary spawned from this study utilizes a combination of interviews, archival materials, voiceovers, and original artwork to recreate the amazing – sometimes unbelievable – life of the Black Eagle, one of the 20th century’s most intriguing icons.

The first time I heard about Hubert Julian was during an interview with Philip Chamberlin for my first documentary, now titled, *Clarence Chamberlin: Fly First & Fight Afterward* (2011). Philip mentioned how Julian, whose moniker was the Black Eagle, would have Chamberlin fly him around New York City in the 1920s so he could perform parachuting stunts. He would get himself arrested, have Chamberlin bail him out, then proceed to do it all over again. That was *it*. That was the end of the story. Philip had nothing left to say beyond that short anecdote (he also mistakenly said Julian was from Jamaica rather than Trinidad). Chamberlin himself, in his autobiography *Record Flights* (1928), dedicated a short paragraph to

Julian, calling him by an earlier stage name: the Ace of Spades. Hubert Julian did not factor into that documentary originally, but has since been included in the recut version.

The second time I encountered Hubert Julian was when several individuals, linked to me via Chamberlin, sent queries regarding the Black Eagle – had I ever looked into the man’s life? It was early December 2014 and I was in search of my dissertation’s subject. More serendipitous than coincidence, as I look back at that moment now, I thought, at the very least, Julian’s story might be an interesting read. His Wikipedia page was sparse, but I found that an autobiography had been published in 1964 and a biography, by John Peer Nugent, in 1971. I realized, after purchasing used copies of both books, that Julian’s life was lacking a clear, concise, and credible story. A Kindle-exclusive book, from 2014, by Guy E. Franklin, was more a listing of factoids, debunking stories Julian told in his autobiography, culled from some newspapers and websites like Ancestry.com than a true biography. An honest version of his story, uninhibited by misinformation, tall-tales, and outright lies of past retellings, did not exist.

What finally led me to choose Hubert Julian as my dissertation’s subject had little to do with the color of his skin; I never saw it that way – ever. Yes, he was a black man, but his story, while inextricably linked to his race, extends far beyond it. I was discovering, through my rudimentary research, that Julian lay upon the same ash heap of history’s forgotten ones. I found Chamberlin in that same pile. I am a storyteller. I am interested in characters who radiate vigorous personalities. And while Julian’s race and story walk hand-in-hand, I, a first-generation American of Assyrian and Italian descent, felt and still feel a kinship with the man. It cannot be put into words, but it is there; it exists. The challenge to do his life justice, to retell his story by filling in the holes and finding out what was fact and what was fiction is what ultimately led me

to choose Julian as my subject. His iconic fire, seen and felt by millions around the world during his lifetime, had been nearly extinguished; I was going to pour as much fuel onto it as possible.

A quick search on the Internet yielded a PBS documentary from 1987. *Flyers in Search of a Dream* profiles, over the course of one hour, the lives of several black aviators of the 20th century. The likes of Bessie Coleman, James Herman Banning, and, surprisingly, Hubert Julian, were featured, with a little under ten minutes dedicated to the latter. He was mocked, called flamboyant, and generally regarded a failure as an aviator (and I realized that, on an aesthetic level, the filmmakers had used archival materials out of context). I was shocked at the way in which the talking heads of the film tossed his exploits, where aeronautics were concerned, aside, and ignored completely the rest of his adventures about which I had read. This leads to the issue brought up by Jonathan Haslam that “the biographer is perhaps better employed ‘exposing’ rather than ‘imposing’ moral judgement.” It became clear, after those sixty minutes had lapsed, that I just did not *want* to tell Julian’s story, rather, I *needed* to tell it. By making this decision I knew I was tasking myself with weeding through the many falsities, half-truths, and inconsistencies in order to create a compelling story, anchored in fact, which would show that the Black Eagle was a legitimate contributor to the history of aviation, and, that once he hung up his wings, found himself at the center and periphery of major world events, infusing his flair for the dramatic all along the way.

A bit of deception arises when one searches for scholarship on Julian. Excluding the aforementioned biographies and PBS documentary, there is little else to find. What exists includes several essays and entries found in anthologies and an encyclopedia. Anyone who has read his autobiography, however, will at once see that each of the texts in question are simple regurgitations of it. Even then it becomes a scavenger hunt of sorts: “the historian chooses, and

ultimately determines, from a multitude of conflicting sources what constitute the facts of history” (Haslam). Special attention should be placed upon the information regarding Julian having gone to England to study medicine before WWI and his receiving a pilot’s license in Canada after the 1918 armistice. Both instances are false; they *never* happened. People have been buying into these stories since Julian started telling them back in the 1920s. It was also outside the scope of David Shaftel, author of a 2008 article for the Smithsonian Institution on Julian, to understand that the Black Eagle *was* in Trinidad when he witnessed the American aviator, Frank Boland, die in a plane crash rather than him being in England at the time and making up having been witness to the event. Even Henry Louis Gates, in his co-authored *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (1999), fell victim to this misinformation. In short, there is no modern-day scholarship on Julian which relies on primary sources outside of the autobiography. I knew what my mission was upon this realization.

Primary sources were vital if I was going to craft the documentary’s screenplay. A cold search, in early January 2015, produced Newspapers.com. A free preview showed that there were potentially hundreds of articles featuring Hubert Julian. I was able to access *The New York Age* and *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* for a small fee. This information was readily available to anyone who wished to seek it out. None of this was new material, lost to history, and now suddenly being rediscovered in someone’s basement. David McCullough points out that “though I’ve never written a book where I didn’t find *something* new...it’s more likely you see something that’s been around a long time that others haven’t seen.” It was plain to see that there was just too much information out there for any one person to sift through, but it was up to me to make sense of what I was finding. *The New York Times* was next, but resulted in less than the ones that preceded it. Then I discovered *The Chicago Defender’s* and *The Pittsburgh Courier’s* archives.

The puzzle that was Julian's life was beginning to take form. I learned that his first parachuting stunt was two months *prior* to the one he claimed it to be, which makes sense, because he got more press coverage the second time.

There was one newspaper archive, however, to which I could not gain access. *The New York Amsterdam News*' database belongs exclusively to ProQuest. No college or university I am, or ever have been, affiliated with, was able to help me directly. Thanks to the wonderful crew at Drew University's Library, I learned that Seton Hall University would provide me the access I needed. Once done there, in June 2015, the core of my research was accomplished. Hubert Julian's life, between 1922 and 1983, was accounted for on a near month-to-month basis. The trick now was how to put it all together. There had to be a narrator controlling the story. There had to be direct quotations from the Black Eagle himself. And there had to be direct quotations from the newspaper articles. All of this was quite clear. An interesting story, seeped in facts, was needed. I had to take the biographies, cross reference them with the newspaper articles, and determine the most honest version of Julian's life. That took weeks to accomplish and when I started to write the actual screenplay, after eight months of research and outlining, the process was still ongoing as I had to ensure I was maintaining objectivity. But to delay the writing any longer would have hurt me more than helped. McCullough calls research seductive, that the love of it can create the "tendency...to wander off on tangents," and Brian Jay Jones says something similar, pointing out that he knows he is ready to write once "I can sit down and make even just a chronological outline of my subject's life." I had the bulk of research completed. I had Julian's life written out in front of me. It was time to write.

I am a relatively disciplined person when I have to be. But what I did in order to write *The Black Eagle of Harlem* between September and December 2015 goes beyond what I have

done in the past. Every Friday, between eight in the morning and twelve noon, I wrote. Nonstop. No breaks. Just writing. Every week. Sometimes I would add a Saturday morning to my routine if the previous day's work called for it. Jones wrote *Jim Henson: The Biography* (2013) in his basement office, with a huge whiteboard, illustrating the biography's outline, at his disposal. McCullough has what he calls "World Headquarters," a small building in the back of his property, void of a computer, telephone, and even running water. My "war room" was my basement. It provided me with the quiet and lack of distractions necessary for me to write uninterrupted.

I had to be mindful of the story I wanted to tell. Always wanting to start at the end of Julian's adventures, I wrote a prologue, placing him in a United Nations prison in the early 1960s. Geoffrey C. Ward seems to disagree with this approach when he says that "You should not assume that either the audience or anyone in the film knows how it's going to end up....It's less interesting, to me anyway" (Bernard and Robin 139). I agree with him to a certain extent. While I do not believe you should give away the ending to your story at the very beginning, if you tease your audience with a tidbit of things to come, they will be drawn into the story quicker. Sheila Cullen Bernard writes that as "long as the underlying chronology remains intact, you can enter and exit the story where you like" ("Documentary"), so I took that approach when crafting the very beginning of the screenplay. I have done this before in my first documentary, however, I kept it short and to the point. The prologue of *The Black Eagle of Harlem*, though, is more in-depth and I extended the drama to allow an audience to really understand that they are about to watch the life story of a man who talked his way out of every jam he ever got into, but not at that moment up on the screen. It is this desire of mine to make sure that viewers are aware that no

one, not even the focal point of the documentary, is safe. I am not trying to create dread. I am trying to create a moment of suspense.

Bernard writes that even though filmmakers may have extensively outlined their story, they should also let the natural flow of the creative process take its course and not be stifled. She points out that “the best documentaries evolve in ways the filmmakers can’t anticipate” (“Documentary”). For example, I planned out, well in advance, the type of visual mixture necessary to tell the story. To bring in a commissioned artist to render images for me only served to benefit the storytelling process. It was a much better alternative than finding miscellaneous photographs which would not make any sense up on the screen: “In moderation, b-roll can be useful, but it can also be a weak alternative to images that specifically and dynamically advance your story” (Bernard, “Documentary”). If I went the route that Ken Burns advocates for, then instead of viewers having their eyes gazing upon a wonderfully drawn picture of my subject, they might be looking at a newspaper clipping reporting on said moment. While I have included periodicals as visuals (as well as photographs and newsreel footage) I did so via a balance between what I call traditional archival materials and reimagined archival supplements.

Burns says that, for his films, illustration is something he wants to *avoid*. He claims that it “is the thing that keeps it running at a rather superficial level” (Cunningham 27), then goes on to make it clear that *photography* is what will resonate with an audience because of its preserved realism. The major aesthetic brought to *The Black Eagle of Harlem* is the use of illustrations, but just because an idol of mine and I do not see eye-to-eye does not mean either of us are doing anything wrong. Burns has always been certain to point out that style and storytelling comes from an *organic* process, which is what brought me to the use of original artwork. I did not intend to build upon the use of illustrations that was started with my second documentary, *Poetry*

of Witness (2015); it happened in an organic manner, entrenched in necessity. Viewers *need* to *see* Hubert Julian, the titular Black Eagle, parachute down into Harlem, New York, wearing a crimson jumpsuit while playing a saxophone. There is not a single photograph that captures the moment. So my style, grown from a sequence of perceiving what works and what does not work, characterizes how I believe the story should be represented and presented to an audience.

Najee R. Smith is a twenty-one-year old undergraduate at Essex County College whose talents extend far beyond his years. He was introduced to me in November 2015 by an adjunct colleague of mine when I asked her if she could recommend an artist for my documentary. We hit it off right away. Najee has this uncanny ability to treat his eyes as if they were a camera's lens. I commissioned him, based off of my estimates, for two hundred pieces of original artwork. He signed his contract and began working in February 2016. We would sit together, go over my notes, chapter by chapter, and he would have deadlines of seven to ten days. This went on until July when he handed me his final batch of what we were calling the First Round, those images I absolutely had to have. Between August and September he completed the Second Round, and finally, in early December, Najee gave me a handful of images I realized could be utilized in place of stock photographs. He produced, in all, around one hundred and ninety pieces of artwork, ten under my estimate.

The archival materials: photographs, newspaper clippings, and newsreel footage, were easy enough to acquire once I knew where to look. A dozen or so photographs of Julian were found via a simple Google search. Nearly fifty visual pieces, however, called for me to visit the Library of Congress' Prints & Photographs Division. It was the same place McCullough had discovered the photographs of the Johnstown Flood. You can imagine my utter glee standing in that work area, making copies of photographs which had not seen the light of day in probably

half a century. The newspaper clippings were easy enough because I had saved every single article I had come across. A simple PDF to JPEG conversion was all that was needed. The only newsreel footage that actually features Julian speaking, that I could find in a useable state, comes from the British Pathé archive. It is a wonderful thirty-second clip with Julian, complete with his fake English accent, speaking on the plight of the Ethiopian people. While I was able to obtain a relatively modest collection of archival materials, my initial gut feeling of needing an artist was definitely validated. I could not have made this documentary without Najee's artwork. There was never going to be enough visual material without it all.

Because I have always been fascinated by the way Burns makes a documentary, I knew I wanted to include voices other than that of the narrator's and interviewees. Burns says that "A hallmark of my style is not just a third-person narrator, but something I pioneered, which is a chorus of voices speaking many different things from the past – first-person voices" (Cunningham 34). I found several individuals who I thought had interesting-sounding voices and who could help me tell Julian's story. A Drew University classmate of mine, David Hunscher, provided the voice of the historically white newspapers. Former student of my mine, and actor in his own right, Raymond Spencer, recited direct quotations from the historically black newspapers. Rebecca L. Williams, my Humanities Division colleague, was more than willing to provide the voices for Bessie Coleman, journalist Thelma Berlack Boozer, and Julian's widow, Doreen. Shaheed K. Woods, introduced to me by a mutual friend of ours, performed the pivotal role of Julian himself. With just that thirty-second newsreel clip he was able to replicate a very Black Eagle-sounding voice which humanizes the subject greatly. These were all recorded between the middle of February and very beginning of March 2016.

There was only ever one name for me regarding who would provide the narration. Michael Vila was the narrator of my first documentary, but had since moved out of New Jersey. But once I called and asked him if he would be willing to come back for a long weekend to help me out he did not even hesitate. Over the course of Memorial Day Weekend the two of us sequestered ourselves in my basement and Michael proceeded to record his entire part. It was tedious. It was grueling. It was hot: the central air conditioning in my house had stopped working, but we got through it.

The interviews were conducted between the end of March and the very end of May. I knew who I needed to get early on. Joshua Stoff, Curator of the Cradle of Aviation Museum in Long Island, New York, came on as my aviation expert. Guy was the only living biographer of my subject and I was able to find him via Facebook. David came on board after I found his email and sent him my proposal. John Gruesser, Professor of English at Kean University, and I had met, quite by accident, at a conference one year before I conducted his interview. His book, *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing on Africa* (2000) covers parts of Julian's exploits. My colleague, Akil Kokayi Khalfani, Professor of Sociology, rounded out my cast of experts. But, without this final individual, the documentary would be sorely lacking. Quite by accident, via another Google search, I found Mark Julian, the Black Eagle's son through his third marriage. Mark and I communicated for the first time right before Christmas 2014 and we have been on this journey together ever since. The words and phrases he used during his interview touched my heart, and I know that audiences will immediately connect with him. I followed Burns' model of interviewing: "They never see the questions in advance, so every talking head in any film I've made is a happy accident of trial and error" (Cunningham 28). The only thing I did differently was send each interviewee a very brief outline of the

subjects I was going to be addressing. So for David, who was well-versed in Trinidadian literature and Julian's time in Ethiopia, would address those areas rather than get into the aeronautical aspects of the subject because that is where Joshua fit in. For them just to have that little bit of information prior to sitting down for the camera helped them form abstracts which we brought into concrete statements during the interviewing process.

The editing of the documentary began in June. I set up different phases in order to be successful in this endeavor and not go insane in the process. The first thing to do was piece together the third-person narration, followed by the first-person voiceovers. This took several weeks. Not only did I have to listen to each recording, I also had to choose which takes sounded best, and sometimes I had to splice multiple takes together. The second phase, the laying in of the interviews, was next. It was necessary to watch each one at least twice, cut out anything that was not completely relevant, and then decide how to fit the chosen clips into the film's editing timeline. This part was not difficult so much as it was time consuming in that I had to make sure not to overwhelm the documentary with talking heads. The result is a very well balanced sprinkling of interview clips throughout the film with each individual having nearly equal speaking time (a happy accident). The visuals were next.

If anyone ever tries to tell you it is easy to lay visuals into a film's editing timeline please let them know they are full of it. This is, by far, the hardest part. But, truth be told, it can be the most fun as well because it is at this phase when all of your hard work during the filmmaking process starts to really feel like it is paying off. It is hard in that you begin marrying yourself to specific visuals for specific moments. Then you need to figure out just how long you want to stay on a particular image before moving on to the next. Once this is all accomplished you have to bring movement into the mix. I believe in utilizing the pan and scan function, manipulating the

imagery to move up and down, zoom in and out, whatever is necessary, in order to create a dynamic look to the film. This, together with the voice work, generates a flow that can quicken or slow the pace of a film depending upon how the filmmaker wishes it. I chose to have constantly moving imagery, at varying speeds, because I see my documentary as a living, breathing entity that needs room to spread out and expand its reach towards an audience.

I love the use of music in a Ken Burns documentary. The consistent playing of the “Ashokan Farewell” in *The Civil War* (1990) completely ties an audience to the film. If you remember nothing else from that work you will remember that haunting melody. But Burns has his soundtrack generated at the beginning of a project’s editing phase rather than at its end (Cunningham 25). I fear this process because as an editor I may become too much a slave to the music and cut the visuals and audio in a way which does not make sense. Obviously this works for Burns, but for me I need the freedom to edit without musical tunes influencing me. My first two documentaries were scored by Will Lewis, a musician who can produce quality unlike any I have seen before meeting him or since. Will and I can powwow for a few minutes and he can compose, off the fly, a brief glimpse of what our back and forth bantering inspires him to think of. I have told him, time and again, no one else will ever score my documentaries. But *The Black Eagle of Harlem* is a three and a half hour film, surpassing both of my previous documentaries in runtime by far. It dawned on me that if Will and I changed up the way in which he scores my films, creating specific music for specific scenes, he could still produce an amazing soundtrack without taking up so much of his time and charging me more money than I was willing to spend. We came up with the idea to have him create piano-based themes, six in total, ranging from a happy tune to one of dread. The fact that he was able to do this within a month and deliver a week before Thanksgiving 2016 shows how professional he is. Once I had the soundtrack I was

able to lay it into the film's timeline, finally getting to add some sound effects at the same time in order to spice up a few moments.

There is a sense of relief when the filmmaking process comes to its conclusion. Feelings of euphoria mixed with dread are present as well. I do not know what people will think of this documentary. Those who I have screened it for tell me they think it is wonderful, but I often question their critiques, mostly out of anxiety. But the moment when the end credits flash and the words "A Film by Billy Tooma" can be seen is when I can take in a long breath and feel vindicated. It is *my* film. Yes, others were absolutely necessary for it to be created, but, in the end, as Burns puts it: "it's really important to know that I'm the cipher who stands in for a great number of very talented people who also make up this style..." (Cunningham 18). Every decision was mine. This cannot be stressed enough. What I have created is a dissertation unlike anything else done in the Arts & Letters program at Drew University. I placed a lot of pressure on my shoulders. If I failed then no one else would probably ever be allowed to follow my lead in the future. But I did not fail. This documentary is my most ambitious one, and it is held together by a strong story, voiceovers, visuals, and a musical score which combine for a perfect storm of cinematic beauty. It reinforced my long-held belief that documentary is scholarly. I do not have to write book reviews, critical analysis essays, or books if I want to practice and hone my academic interests. Documentary has given me an outlet to create and educate at the same time. No one can take that away from me because all I would need to do is show them the work I have been able to accomplish and let it speak for itself. For the longest time I described my work in documentary as a "professional hobby." I no longer see it that way. Documentary is my form of academic scholarship and I will continue working in the medium until it no longer satisfies my storytelling urges.

The immediate results of *The Black Eagle of Harlem* are that it fills a niche in the study of Black History as well as globalizes the notion of what it means to be of color. Julian may not have espoused the same messages as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Malcolm X, but his contributions to society and culture cannot be denied. The Black Eagle was an everyday fixture in the minds of those in and around Harlem, and once he took his show on the road, both stateside and internationally, the worldwide community knew his name. Julian reinvented himself as he saw fit. He saw himself as a person who had so much to accomplish, regardless of his race. In all, the Black Eagle was an eccentric character who drew attention, both positive and negative, wherever he went. He saw himself as a man of the world, a cosmopolitan in the truest sense of the term's modern definition.

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