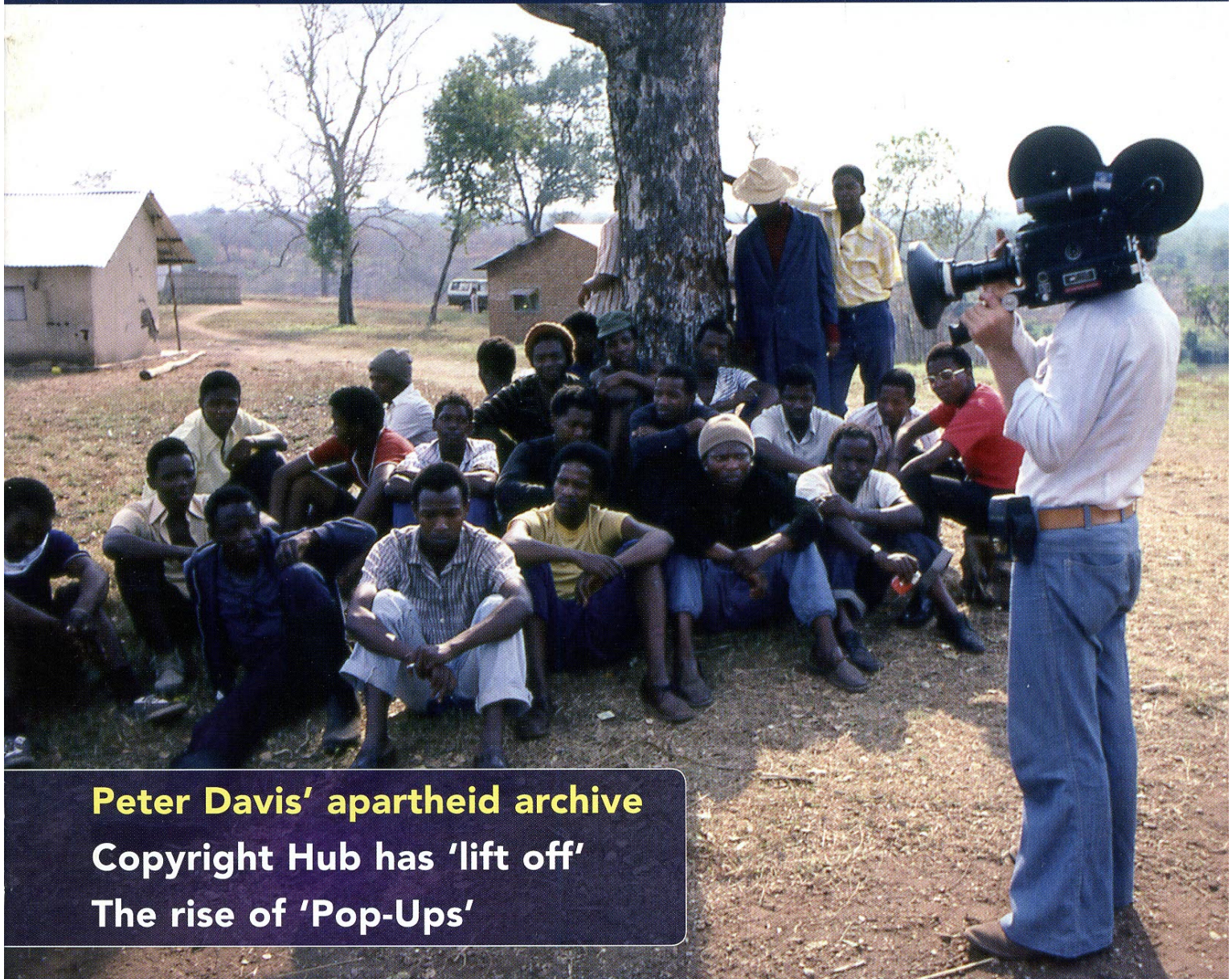


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Copyright Hub has 'lift off'
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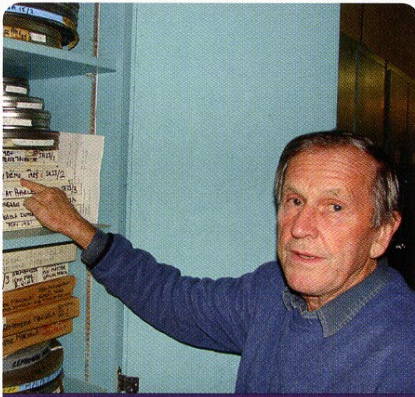
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Peter Davis – three decades of filming the world of apartheid

Lynn Schoch on the origins of IU Bloomington's wonderful archive



Peter Davis with some of his collection before it found a home in the controlled environment of the IU Libraries' Ruth Lilly Auxiliary Library Facility.

Among the holdings of Indiana University's (IU) Black Film Center/Archive is much of the life's work of Peter Davis, including his unique film records of South Africa before the end of apartheid.

Today an iPhone and the right app can capture breaking news anywhere and

broadcast it instantly around the world. In 1960, it would have taken a team of five or six just to capture the news, but Peter Davis entered film journalism at another such moment of technological breakthrough. The handheld camera that could record sound made it possible to replace a crew of six with just two. That meant journalists could be dispatched just about anywhere – down the street, across the globe – and the difference in cost was a fraction of what it had been.

Davis began his career working for Swedish Television. He produced a series about his native Britain – British public schools, the famous Chelsea Royal Hospital for pensioned soldiers – intimate interviews offered mostly without comment.

At the same time, the new technology allowed him to go further afield – to Belize, to Jamaica and, importantly, to Cuba, where he recorded rare footage of the early days of Castro's Cuban revolution.

A 1974 project for the humanitarian agency CARE took Davis to 14 countries in Africa

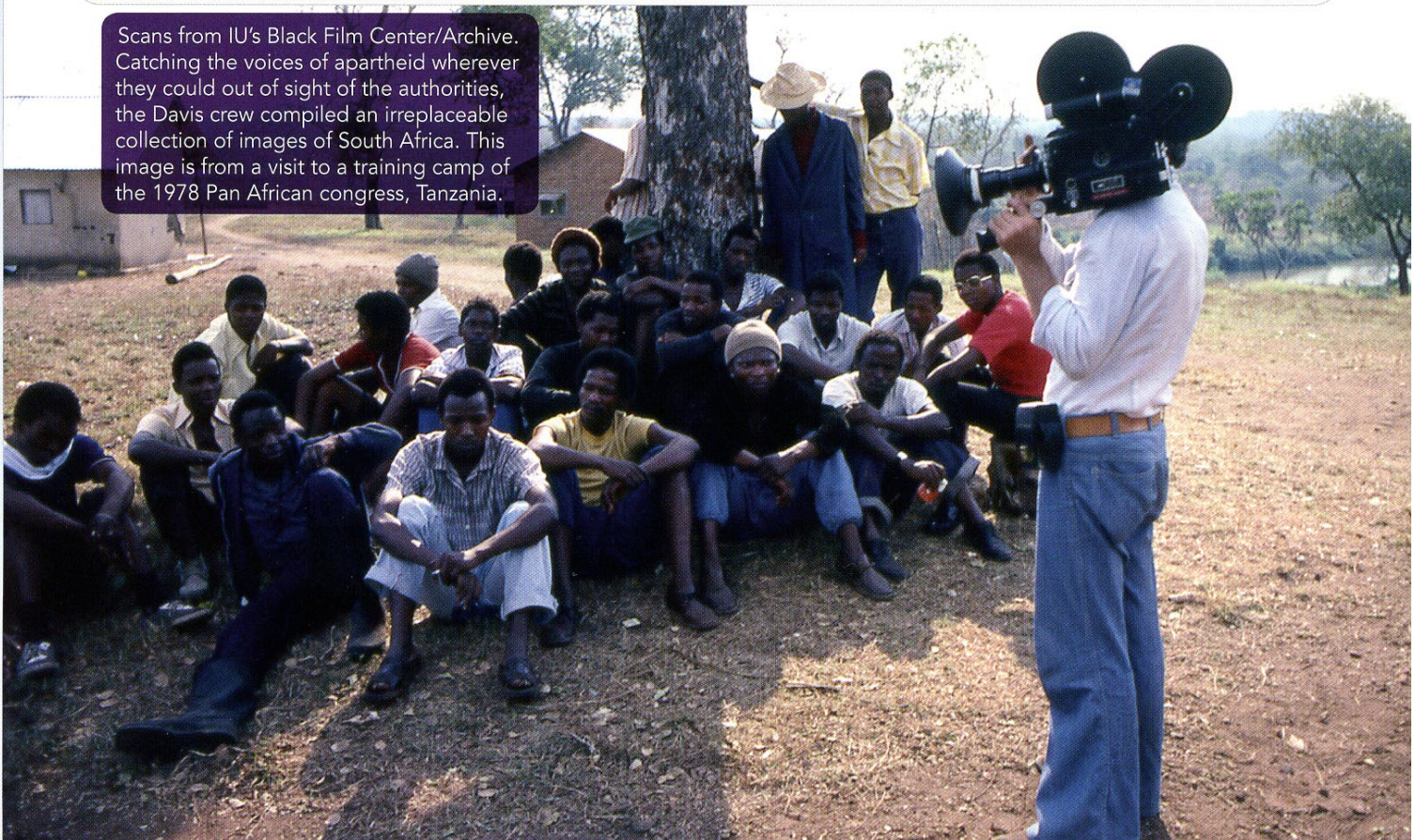
in 28 days. He didn't set out to observe the difference in the lives of the oppressed and their oppressors in Africa, but seeing it defined his career for the next three decades. Davis produced 12 full-length documentary films of his own and worked on many for other producers, all especially rich in the history of apartheid.

Propaganda battle

"I never believed that apartheid would be beaten on the battlefield," Davis wrote in a 2008 article for African Activist Archive Project. "I concluded early on that the critical struggle over apartheid would be above all else a propaganda battle."

South Africa limited what Davis could film. To get into the country, Davis chose a subject that would appeal to the apartheid censors – the history of the Afrikaners. He called the film *White Lager*, a reference to the circling of covered wagons that the Boers used to protect themselves as they moved into hostile territory. But the image became a metaphor for a ruling minority constantly trying to keep the conquered

Scans from IU's Black Film Center/Archive. Catching the voices of apartheid wherever they could out of sight of the authorities, the Davis crew compiled an irreplaceable collection of images of South Africa. This image is from a visit to a training camp of the 1978 Pan African congress, Tanzania.



at bay, the formerly oppressed becoming oppressors.

Davis said his strategy was to talk only with Afrikaners, and that worked until he and his crew talked to one too many dissenters in that group. Special branch police arrived at their hotel room in the middle of the night, took them to prison and the next day expelled them forever, or so the government intended. The day they left South Africa was 16 June, 1976 – the first day of the Soweto Uprising.

He finished the film using film libraries in the U.K., most notably the collection of International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, which had collected materials since the mid-'50s in support of the anti-apartheid movement. *White Laager* appeared in 1977 when the memory of the Soweto Uprising and police brutality that resulted in the death of hundreds of prisoners, including Steve Biko, was still fresh.

Davis' next project was to tell the other side of the story in a documentary he called *Generations of Resistance*. It followed 70 years of protest against apartheid. Because he was blacklisted, he could not enter South Africa legally. The crew of two began their work in Zambia and Tanzania.

Winnie Mandela interview

Finally, a bit of luck enabled the Davis crew to get into Lesotho, a country completely surrounded by South Africa. From there, they slipped into the supposedly independent province of Transkei and from

there could reach most of South Africa without passing through border crossings. One interview Davis wanted badly was with Winnie Mandela, then the wife of Nelson Mandela, but the authorities made phone contact impossible. The Davis crew slipped across the Transkei border and drove ten hours to the township where she lived.

"We found Winnie at her small cinderblock house busy helping a young student with her schoolwork, but she broke off to receive us," Davis said in a brief memoir. "We started the interview, arranging with one of Winnie's friends to have each ten-minute can of film spirited away as soon as we had shot it, in case of accidents. Halfway into the interview, Winnie raised her hand – a car had stopped outside the house. "The Special Branch," cautioned Winnie. But our luck held, and incredibly, they drove away again."

American social activist Bayard Rustin tried to make the same crossing a few days later and was caught by the South African police. Davis used the Transkei route again later to collect materials for documentaries on Winnie and Nelson Mandela.

With the ending of apartheid, Davis was once more allowed back into the country. He and co-producer Daniel Riesenfeld investigated the impact of the media on the historical process. Davis completed part of this project at IU Bloomington, with the help of the African Studies Programme, which developed print materials, and radio and television, which helped prepare the film. The result was the 1994 two-part documentary, *In Darkest Hollywood*. Davis explored the role of movies as a force both supporting and attacking the oppressive regime.

Influence of movies

In the '50s and '60s, the occasional depictions of black South Africans – in South Africa and in Hollywood – mostly avoided politics, as if apartheid didn't exist. Hollywood continued to avoid the issues into the 1980s. It took the violent repression of the mid-1980s to inspire producers and directors of fiction films to pay attention and fill the void of information. More than 30 years of stereotypes, misinformation and lack of knowledge were followed by incisive films like *Cry Freedom*, *A Dry White Season* and *Mapantsula*.

Davis' sojourns in Africa produced 2,000 reels of film and 40 boxes of notes, research, photographs and outtake stills. The Black Film Center/Archive and the African Studies Program at IU brought Davis and his irreplaceable documentary materials to Bloomington. "Their support was critical in keeping the archive intact and making it useful as a historical resource," Davis said. All materials are now available to scholars and researchers in IU's Black Film Center/Archive.

During his travels, Davis met Dolly Rathebe, whose jazz singing career took off after she appeared in a 1949 all-black film, stalled throughout the period of apartheid and then blossomed when apartheid ended. From 1989 until her death in 2004, she was a symbol of artistic achievement in the face of adversity. Davis recorded this triumph in his 2007 *Travels With Dolly*. This musical interest fuelled a study of another musical star. Davis conducted extensive interviews with the friends and family of Hoagy Carmichael, tracing the musical career of Indiana's most famous songwriter.

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Archive Programme Pitching Competition

Inspiring a new generation of filmmakers to love footage!

Aspiring students and start-up documentary filmmakers are invited now to pitch their ideas for any form of production which will include lots of archive footage.

To the Victor the spoils

Six finalists will be invited to make a five minute pitch during the conference Battles of the Archives being held at BAFTA on 28th October

(see page 21). The winner of this selection process will receive 10 minutes of 'free' footage donated by a FOCAL International library member. Plus, Prime Focus will sponsor the production of a 5 minute taster tape, including online, grading and sound desks. Spring Films will then endeavour to place the completed taster tape with broadcasters, with the possibility of a programme being commissioned.

Deadline 14th October

For more information and entry form:
www.focalint.org