



[Selwyn Jacob](#) was born in Trinidad and Tobago and has been living in Canada since 1968. He earned his Masters Degree at the University of Southern California and then embarked upon a combined career as an educator and filmmaker. He became a teacher and eventually a principal. He later began his career as a producer and as an independent filmmaker. In this capacity, he directed *Remember Amber Valley* in 1984 and *Carol's Mirror* in 1991. He directed and produced *The Road Taken* in 1996.

Selwyn Jacob is an award-winning filmmaker who has been working in Vancouver for the NFB Pacific and Yukon centre since the late 90's. In that regard, Selwyn Jacob joined the National Film Board of Canada in 1997 as a Cultural Diversity Producer. He produced many films and documentaries throughout his career. His documentaries chronicled many subjects regarding Chinese Canadians and Canadian soldiers in World War I, among others. He produced and

## **Exclusive interview with Selwyn Jacob: The Producer of the documentary on Harry Jerome**

Written by Patricia Turnier

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covered crucial projects such as The Journey of Lesra Martin, the story of the former street youth who helped, along with other Canadians, Rubin “Hurricane” Carter to be released from prison. The character and life of Lesra Martin was also portrayed in the famous movie “The Hurricane” starring Denzel Washington as Rubin Carter and Vicellous Reon Shannon in the role of Lesra Martin.

Jeni LeGon: Living in a great big way is among one of the most acclaimed documentaries of Selwyn Jacob. It is about the first Black women actresses in Hollywood who signed long-term contracts with a major Hollywood studio, MGM. The agreement was to earn between 1 250\$ and 4500\$ per week for a five-year period. Jacob’s more recent productions include Between the Laughter, a film about Stephen O’Keefe’s journey to become Canada’s first deaf stand-up comedian; My Father, My Teacher, an exploration of the relationship between Inuvialuit filmmaker Dennis Allen and his father.

In April 2009, Jacob began working on the production of the documentary Harry Jerome[1] with director Charles Officer. The documentary is based on the critically acclaimed book by author Fil Fraser entitled Running Uphill. The film explores the turbulent life and career of the record-setting icon African-Canadian track and field star. At one time Jerome was the fastest man on the planet and he is considered the Canadian Jessie Owens.

The late Jerome competed in three Olympic Games and made history by winning the bronze medal in Tokyo in 1964. The athlete brought a lot of pride to Canada. He was recognized as a national symbol of excellence in the sports world and in the community. Jerome is immortalized by a beautiful statue in Vancouver’s Stanley Park and by the multi-sport Harry Jerome Centre in BC.

Jacob was reviewed in several publications such as 'Who’s who in Black Canada' (Dawn P. Williams, 2002), “Choosing the Road Taken”, New Trail (University of Alberta Alumni publication, 1997). Selwyn Jacob gave us a legacy and we are looking forward to his next contributions. This interview was conducted in 2009.

**Patricia Turnier talks to Selwyn Jacobs:**

**P.T. How did you start your career as a filmmaker and a producer?**

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**S.J.** I remember years ago when I was thinking of registering to film schools, all of my contemporaries were going to universities. They were studying things like art, science, engineering, law and medicine. None of those disciplines appealed to me. I wasn't brave enough to say to people this is really what I want to do. It seemed so farfetched that I thought people would laugh and the last thing you need is to be discouraged. I even didn't tell my parents what I really wanted to do. I said that I would earn a BA which I did. I got a bachelor of education to become a teacher. When I graduated from film school, I had to make a decision to become a filmmaker.

Actually, I knew in my heart that I wanted to do this ever since I was 11 years old, after seeing my first movie. At that time, I didn't see any images of Blacks on the screen and I told myself I wanted to contribute in this field by becoming an actor. Afterwards, I realised that it is not the actor who decides which story needs to be told. I have to say that I suffered a lot because people feel the need to belittle you when you chose a field in the arts. I didn't have any mentors so that didn't help.

At the time, most people had a very limited perception of the profession. Some thought that filmmaking was only about having a lab to work on the process of the film. They had a very abstract concept of what it is. Very few people in my surrounding were knowledgeable on the part of story telling or being able to use the latest available technology.

The closest person I met in Edmonton as a mentor was Fil Fraser, who wrote "Running Uphill". He produced about three feature films in the mid-seventies. This is how I became fascinated with his work. We became good friends and we maintained our companionship. His work definitely inspired me. When I became a producer in Alberta, I made a film ("We Remember Amber Valley") about the Black La Biche community, which no longer exists. I researched this community and discovered that they had come from Oklahoma.

They arrived in Alberta in 1910. I met those people and I wanted to tell their story. This is how I made my first documentary in 1984. This short movie about Amber Valley became a living archive. I was the only Afro-Canadian filmmaker at the time in that province. I had to find a way to get people to work with me. It wasn't easy to get support, either in the form of grants or otherwise. I told myself that I would have to make this film on my own. I became the producer of my own movie. It was therefore part of my job to get the money that I needed in order to produce the movie.

It became a turning point for me. When I did this film, it gave me the opportunity to put my producing and filmmaking experience on my resume. Four years later, I made my next movie. Eventually, my second piece of work ended up at the Toronto Film Festival. I didn't expect that so soon. So, progressively, this is how I became involved in filmmaking.

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