



Centre Film Festival Life Achievement Award
Presented by Kevin Hagopian to Tony Buba
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In the 1980's, a new spirit began to energize the American documentary cinema. A generation of documentary directors, cinematographers, and producers- Errol Morris, Jennie Livingston, Michael Moore, Joan Churchill, Ross McElwee, Adam Curtis, Raoul Peck -- is now justly celebrated for films that added more verbs to documentary's foundational one, which is to inform: these filmmakers showed us that documentaries could now be to anger, to grieve, to mock, to irritate, to muse, to outrage, to tickle.

Tony Buba was already hitting each of these notes in his short films, beginning in 1972. In 1988's *Lightning over Braddock*, an autobiographical portrait of his hometown of Braddock, Pennsylvania, he hit them all, and gave the documentary cinema as we know it now- a vital, passionate, and subjective genre- a single film in which all those verbs became active. *Lightning over Braddock* rewrote the narrative of the decline of the industrial Northeast from a tale of pity and passivity to one of grit, and humor, and agency. "This is what the documentary can do", said *Lightning over Braddock* to a generation of filmmakers and scholars. "Now, go do it yourself, where you live, among the people you care about."

If I had to categorize Tony as a filmmaker, I'd say, think of Walker Evans meeting Mark Twain for a beer at the local. Like Evans, the great documentary photographer of the 1930's, Tony lets his subjects be themselves, in all their strange and unfathomable humanness. Documentaries aren't supposed to have characters- but Tony has created some of the most wonderful characters in the history of the cinema. Tony delights in the absurd, but never at the expense of these wonderful weirdos. His characters, like Sweet Sal, the screwball kingpin of Braddock's lower depths, in the film of the same name from 1979, are three-dimensional, sometimes even four or five-dimensional, and Tony lets them be their endlessly interesting, odd, real selves. (That's the Mark Twain part.)

It was once said of Bruce Springsteen, another great chronicler of the working classes of the Northeast, that what makes his art so great is that he loves the people he depicts, whatever they do, whether he agrees with them

or not. The part of Tony's website that tells you how to contact him for personal appearances is titled, "Invite Tony Over." And you get the feeling he'd like to meet you as much as you'd like to meet him.

The New York Times called him "the chronicler and the conscience of post-industrial America, and the New Yorker last month named *Lightning over Braddock* one of the 62 most important documentaries ever made. Tony has since become what he never imagined he'd be- an institution, receiving prestigious grants, and having his films screened in and commissioned by the nation's -- and the world's -- most prestigious museums and galleries.

The second stage of Tony's career grew naturally out of what he had discovered in the first. Activism on behalf of ordinary people drives his choices now. Black steelworkers in Pittsburgh fighting their corporate bosses and their unions in the 1940's, 50's, and 60's; the Amistad refugees from slavery, working class people losing access to what minimal healthcare they'd had, when their local hospital closes down, as small regional hospitals are doing all over the nation. Old people, who become invisible and economically disposable in a country that too often values youth over age only because youth is cheaper to hire. And now, in his latest short, "The Window," he speaks to and for all of us who have been marooned economically and socially by COVID, and by hatred. I mentioned a catalog of verbs earlier. Tony still uses them all, and his films add another, one we desperately need right now: the verb "to love."

Tony, in order to ensure that you have to keep making films, we've made sure that this honor does not come with any actual money. Tony, the history of the movement you helped to create is still being written-- and we demand that you keep on writing it.

To Tony Buba, teacher, mentor, activist, photographer, filmmaker, even ringleader, The Poet Laureate of the Rust Belt, the Centre Film Festival is very proud to name you the recipient of our first annual Life Achievement Award.