

Acclaimed documentary filmmaker Ken Burns focuses on American history and culture

PIONEER

ALL FOR ONE

Spanning a nearly 50-year career, documentary filmmaker Ken Burns still loves to tell a good American story

BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO

COURTESY OF EVAN BARLOW

Ken Burns' illustrious career would make a compelling film, which is a little ironic given he reigns as one of the most acclaimed and influential documentary filmmakers in the United States. The New Hampshire resident laughs at the notion and mentions one made about him in 2017, but he quickly confirms his happy place is where it's been since his father gave him his first Super 8mm Camera at 17: behind the scenes.

It wasn't until he arrived at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, however, that the possibility of making films as a career crystallized. Given his then untapped interest in American history, it's no surprise his senior thesis, *Working in Rural New England*, was a documentary about a living-history museum. Along with two college friends, Burns co-founded Florentine Films, and after reading David McCullough's book on the making of the Brooklyn Bridge, he landed on the iconic New York span as the subject of the company's first major documentary.

Brooklyn Bridge was released in 1981, earning Burns an Oscar nod and catapulting him on a long and red-hot trajectory into the upper echelons of documentary filmmaking. Meanwhile, his partnership with PBS places his takes on American history into living rooms across the country. Though the content of his films is as vast and nuanced as the country they portray, the prolific filmmaker says there is a common theme.

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"I've spent almost 50 years of my life making films about the U.S., but I also make films about us, the lowercase, two-letter plural pronoun, us. The message of all my films is one of union and of coming together. *E Pluribus Unum*, out of many, one. They (my films) are all about the one," says Burns.

It's a simple notion to pull back the curtain, but the work is neither easy nor quick. In August, a special for PBS spotlighted a behind-the-scenes look at the making of one of Burns' most beloved series, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* (2009), which took more than six years to produce and was filmed in some of the country's most magnificent natural settings.

NECESSARY ELEMENTS

Shaking American history by the lapels with rigorously researched facts and uncovered details is a hallmark of Burns' films, some of which have taken more than 10 years to produce. These films made him the standard-bearer of the genre, but what they don't do is tell you what you should know. Instead, Burns says, his focus is, and has always been, on telling a good story.

"We don't concentrate on being educational or entertaining," he says. "A good story well told is entertaining. Since I've chosen American history as my subject, there's some educational value, I suppose. It's just required to be a good story."

No matter the subject, Burns says he and his team submit to the process and surprise of discovery, solving the puzzle of how to use information to do visual and storytelling justice to complex subjects. Viewers are treated to history transformed from cold dates and a list of names and places to humanized and heartfelt narratives with characters that ebb and flow, and story lines that braid together and unravel throughout the film's timeline.

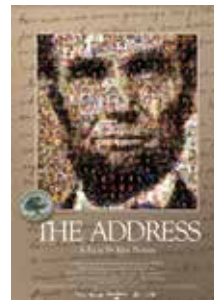
Dramatic panning and zooming over photos and documents – often referred to as the Ken Burns effect – and archival footage add movement to static states. Cut in riveting musical scores and velvety-voiced narrators such as actor and longtime Burns collaborator Peter Coyote or actor Keith David, who lent his voice to *Muhammad Ali*, and it's easy to forgive a student for using Burns' documentaries as their American history crib sheet.



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Left to right: From the Burns' documentary *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History*; Muhammad Ali fight scene; advertisement poster for *The Address*

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AMERICA'S STORYTELLER: SEVEN HIGHLIGHTS OF KEN BURNS' DOCUMENTARY MAKING

[Brooklyn Bridge](#) (1981)
[The Civil War](#) (1991)
[Jazz](#) (2001)
[The National Parks](#) (2009)
[Jackie Robinson](#) (2016)
[Muhammad Ali](#) (2021)
[Benjamin Franklin](#) (April 2022)

unvetted “facts” swirling the Internet. According to Nielsen Live +7 data, Burns’ 10-episode *The Vietnam War* (2017) reached 39 million unique viewers, while *Country Music* (2019) reached 34.5 million unique viewers during its eight-night premiere run. Burns attributes the numbers to a starvation for information and, while he tries to keep his own political beliefs at the door, he believes a good story might be able to change something.

The breadth and depth of his work, approaching 40 documentaries, has earned Burns dozens of major awards and accolades, but what he’s most proud of is being a father to his four daughters, calling himself “a dad before a filmmaker on any list of importance.” He’s collaborated with his eldest, Sarah Burns, on several projects, with many more already under way in the Florentine Films pipeline, a creative conduit that’s populated with endless prospects, including Benjamin Franklin, a deep dive into the life and influence of America’s bifocaled founding father, which airs in April.

“If I were given a thousand years to live, I wouldn’t run out of topics in American history,” he says. “I love making films. It’s like a million problems, and I don’t mean that pejoratively, I mean the friction of storytelling. I love putting my head on the pillow at the end of the day if I’ve made a film better. It’s just really exciting.”

“Burns’ influence within documentary filmmaking is second to none. His compelling storytelling and unique topics continue to spark curiosity among viewers of all ages,” says Sylvia Bugg, chief programming executive and general manager of general audience programming for PBS.

So influential have his documentaries become, in 2019 Burns launched a one-stop resource for sixth- to twelfth-grade teachers called “Ken Burns in the Classroom” on PBS LearningMedia, offering ready-made lessons and content on historical topics and events explored in his films.

Julie Pesano, an English Composition and Literature Instructor at De Anza College in California, has taught Ernest Hemingway’s short story *A Clean Well-Lighted Place* for

years. She recently used PBS materials and clips from Burns’ *Hemingway* (2021) to explore the connection between the author’s own mental illness and his characters’ sense of despair.

IT’S A FAMILY AFFAIR

“The film really resonated with students in ways I didn’t imagine. The Burns documentary helped them connect the short story’s ‘nothingness’ to their own existential pain and the many facets that contribute to mental health. I have seen more and more of my students recognizing their challenges and reaching out for support.”

Whether in a classroom or the living room, viewers tune in by the millions to the multi-part, multi-hour series, remarkable in an era of shortened attention spans and bite-sized bits of