

## Seeing Griffin Anew

Review of  
*Uncommon Vision: The Life and Times of John Howard Griffin*  
 A Documentary Film by Morgan Atkinson  
 Louisville, KY: Duckworks, 2010  
 DVD 55 min. / \$25.00

Reviewed by **Walt Chura, s.f.o.**

John Howard Griffin inhabits that shadowy realm of minor American literary geniuses, who, like Griffin's fellow Southerner, James Agee, produced only one "big book" with sufficient socio-political-cultural impact to assure him an enduring, if limited, readership. May Morgan Atkinson's new documentary film about him send readers back to and beyond *Black Like Me*. The "beyond" is the story of a man gifted with remarkable precocity, perseverance, and, dare I say, a providential "hand guiding [him] in the dark."

Atkinson's earlier documentary, *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton* strikes me as edgier, more agenda-driven than Paul Wilkes' *Merton: A Film Biography*. In his Griffin film, more like Wilkes' *Merton*, Atkinson sticks pretty closely to a chronological presentation of his subject's life, granted a patina of panegyric, again like Wilkes' work on Merton.

In contrast to Wilkes' Merton film, Atkinson interviews relatively few of those who actually knew Griffin, Dick Gregory being the only one known to me. One wonders, for example, did none of the other monks of Gethsemani, besides Fr. Louis, meet Griffin? Didn't Brother Paul Quenon? (Paul does make a silent appearance playing a monk of the Abbey of Solesmes, where Griffin spent time studying Gregorian chant.) The viewer is invited into the story through re-enactments of a number of scenes from Griffin's life and through the narration of much of the story in Griffin's own words. This establishes some bit of the intimacy lost in the absence of extensive personal reminiscences by those who knew him.

We learn that John Howard Griffin was born in Jim Crow Fort Worth, Texas in 1920 of a merchant class family. Nevertheless, from his earliest days, he heard disapproving conversations among family members about the lynching of African-Americans. Young John got slapped once by his grandfather when the boy used the "N" word referring to a black man passing by the family store. He never used it again.

From an early age, Griffin, whose mother was a piano teacher, learned to love music. This attraction plays a major role the development of his "vision."

Griffin was a precocious young man, with a photographic memory, who wanted to study classical languages and science in school, but they were not on offer in Fort Worth. At the tender age of fifteen, he had such a passion for learning that, on his own, he wrote to a French *lycée* asking

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to be admitted. He did not know French. Yet he was accepted and performed well. As Atkinson tells it, apparently directly after high school, he was accepted into a medical school at Tours. While there he encountered a doctor who was treating schizophrenic patients, with some success, partly by exposing them to Gregorian chant. Eventually, the interest in chant provoked by this experience would draw young John to the Abbey of Solesmes. Later, Griffin helped Jewish children escape from Nazi-occupied France by transporting them to safety in the hospital ambulance.

Finally leaving France, he returned to the U.S. and enlisted in the military. He served in the Pacific, where, posted alone on an island to watch for Japanese bombers, he spent his time listening to Beethoven on the radio, the beauty of which touched his soul to such depths of compassion that he felt he could never kill another human being. Ironically, the eventual Japanese bombing of his island not far from his position caused him brain damage which eventually led to ten years of blindness.

Returning to France after the war, Griffin was accepted to study music composition with Nadia Boulanger, who, nevertheless, finally told him he did not have the talent to be a composer. Deciding he might yet be a musicologist, he took himself to Solesmes where the monks invited him in to study Gregorian chant manuscripts.

While having no religious convictions, Griffin was inspired by the monks. Eventually, in April, 1947, while at Solesmes, his interior struggle resolved itself in a prayer asking God to “show me what you want me to do. I give myself . . .” Atkinson does not reveal at this point that this resolution and self-offering led Griffin to become a Catholic.

Ironically, it was also in 1947 that Griffin’s blindness became complete. He returned to his parents’ farmhouse outside of Fort Worth to “practice” living as a blind man. “Practice” was a spiritual skill he had been taught by the monks of Solesmes. John Howard Griffin became a master of this practice.

While still blind, he was inspired by John Mason Brown to begin writing. His first book, a novel entitled *The Devil Rides Outside*, was a slow starter but eventually became a best seller, in spite of lackluster reviews. Though now out of print, it is still easily available through used book dealers.

Atkinson covers the story of Griffin’s six weeks living as an African-American, as well as his embrace of photography as a means of sharing his gift not just of restored sight but of vision. Very briefly we hear of his mentoring of Tom Merton in the art of the camera and of the bonds between them. We see photographs of Griffin working in Merton’s hermitage on his never-to-be biography of his monk student. Griffin calls it his “monk like me” period. (The last section of the biography did appear posthumously in 1983 as *Follow the Ecstasy*; Griffin also wrote *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* [1970], as well as *The Hermitage Journals: A Diary Kept while Working on the Biography of Thomas Merton* [1981].)

John Howard Griffin died in 1980, at age 60, precocious even at death. Once blind, he died deaf, cut off from his beloved music.

In the end, Morgan Atkinson’s film leaves one too unsatisfied. There is still such a distance between us and his remarkable subject. Yet one must admit, the film “works” if the filmmaker’s intention was to leave us wanting more. Griffin once wrote, “When it comes to human beings, there is no ‘Other.’ The ‘Other’ is me.” I shall go in search of more of this “Other.”