

THE GLOBE AND MAIL OBITUARY

Filmmaker Roger McTair focused his lens on the lives of Black Canadians

by James Cullingham
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Roger McTair made an indelible contribution to his adopted home, documenting the lives and struggles of Black Canadians in a series of groundbreaking films, as well as writing poetry, columns and short fiction, and influencing countless young people as a professor.

“Roger speaks to us in many ways,” said Carl James, a professor who holds the Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community & Diaspora at York University’s Department of Education, “through films, teaching, a book, poetry and activism. His contribution is quite significant and not only to Blacks, but for Canadian society as a whole in understanding how it became a multicultural society.”

Part of an influx of newcomers from the Caribbean, Mr. McTair came from Trinidad and Tobago to a rapidly changing Canada in 1970. It was a new era of official multiculturalism that was ripe for exploration. His films told the stories of Canadian civil rights heroes, examined the roles of women and painted insightful, nuanced portraits of Black communities, such as Buxton, Ont., and Toronto’s Jane-Finch neighbourhood.

He died in Toronto on April 8 from complications of Parkinson’s disease. He was 80.

Mr. McTair’s oeuvre is distinguished by “its honesty and its clarity in being both a celebration of Blacks and Black communities and an analysis of racism in Canada,” said Rita Deverell, co-founder of Vision TV. “There is an awareness of what is. Nothing is vague or affected.”

Conrad Oliver McTair Jr. was born on Oct. 7, 1943, in Port of Spain, on the island of Trinidad. His father, Conrad Oliver McTair Sr., was a police officer. His mother, Nora Eleutha Rogers died when he was 10. He and his four younger sisters were raised largely by Naomi Rogers, their mother’s sister. Known first as “Jr.,” the boy adopted the name Roger by the time he was 12.

He grew up on the edge of Port of Spain, with easy access to the countryside.

“He could do an entire James Brown routine,” his sister Dionyse McTair said, laughing heartily at the recollection of Roger in his younger days, a nascent storyteller and entertainer. “He would sing Please, Please, Please with a sheet on his shoulders instead of a

cape. But it wasn't just about entertainment. He made sure we were exposed to theatre and jazz. He was very present and protective." Ms. McTair, a retired teacher, came to Canada from Trinidad and Tobago in 2016 to care for her brother.

Mr. McTair was not close with his father, but developed a strong bond with an uncle, De Wilton (DW) Rogers, a founding member of Trinidad and Tobago's People's National Movement (PNM), which led the country to independence in 1962. Mr. Rogers imbued his nephew with an interest in politics, social justice and a love of literature, learning and music.

In 1970, Trinidad and Tobago was in political tumult. Leftist students took to the streets. The government declared a state of emergency and imposed a heavy police presence, arresting protest leaders. At this point, Mr. McTair's father advised him to leave the country. Roger McTair heeded the advice from a father from whom he was otherwise estranged, and flew to Canada in late 1970.

Mr. McTair had been working as a copywriter in Trinidad and Tobago. In Toronto he embarked on film studies and graduated from Ryerson Polytechnic Institute (now Toronto Metropolitan University) in 1976. He later garnered a certificate in Television Production from Ryerson and took additional credits in Greek history and English literature at the University of Toronto.

In the 1970s and 80s, he raised awareness of community issues along with colleagues in the Black Education Project, a Toronto group created to address racial inequalities in education. In 1988, he was a founding member of the Black Film and Video Network.

Mr. McTair made documentaries from 1976 until 2000. He formed Prieto-McTair Productions with Claire Prieto, his spouse, and they had a son together. (After their relationship ended, she married and she now goes by Claire Prieto-Fuller.) Through that company and other entities, including the National Film Board of Canada, Mr. McTair directed, researched and, in some cases, wrote enduring films.

For the NFB he directed the feature documentary [Home Feeling – Struggle For A Community](#) (1983) along with Jennifer Hodge, who is also credited as the writer. The film investigates police relations and employment challenges in Toronto's Jane-Finch neighbourhood.

Mr. McTair was the sole director of [Journey To Justice](#) (2000), another NFB production, which knits together histories of six Black Canadians who struggled for equity and respect by speaking out against discriminatory laws and practices. The film includes a moving portrait of Viola Desmond, a heroine in the fight against racism in Nova Scotia. Ms. Desmond has

since become widely known; she has been featured on a postage stamp and, since 2018, on Canada's \$10 bill.

Mr. McTair's film *Home To Buxton* (1987) is a chronicle of generational links to a southwestern Ontario village tied to The Underground Railroad.

Ms. Deverell, a Governor-General's Award recipient and chancellor of Lakehead University, emphasized the impact of Mr. McTair's films. "Home To Buxton was one of Vision's first acquisitions. I am struck that I am still recommending it to people 35 years later."

From 1997 until 2014 Roger McTair was a professor in various media and communication programs at Seneca College (now Seneca Polytechnic) at its York University campus.

Mark Jones, dean of Animation, Art and Design at Sheridan College, says Mr. McTair was a masterful communicator. The two men were colleagues at Seneca for more than a decade.

"He insisted on the necessity of good storytelling," Mr. Jones said, "Because he was a Black man he was symbol of inclusion and diverse perspective at a time he was one of the few Black faculty members. He was proud of his background and ethnicity. He didn't shy away from it."

Mr. McTair was also a regular contributor to the Toronto Star's Opinion page, writing insightful columns about race.

As his health failed and Parkinson's was diagnosed, Mr. McTair retired from Seneca in 2014. But he continued telling stories. *My Trouble With Books*, a collection of short fiction, was published in 2018.

"He had a keen sense of wanting clarity and a kind of perfection, which is why it took him so long to finish the book!" Ms. McTair said.

A collection of Mr. McTair's poetry is currently under consideration by a British publishing house.

Ever the filmmaker, Mr. McTair also wrote a documentary treatment for a prospective film titled *The Black Male*. "He had that project in his head for many, many years," said his son, Ian Kamau Prieto-McTair, an artist, designer and writer.

Mr. Kamau Prieto-McTair said the film would have touched on aspects of his father's life, including his left-leaning political views and "living through the Civil Rights era, having a son, living in a world that isn't necessarily built for you ... what all that means coming from a small country like Trinidad [and Tobago]. Some projects faded. That project never left him."

In his final years with his health failing, in the frequent company of his sister and son, he read while he could and continued to savour music, including jazz, European classical and Calypso. He reflected on many books about a vast array of subjects and contemplated the world around him.

“He was a keen observer of human nature, a very complex thinker. He knew a lot of people who knew parts of him as a teacher, a writer, a filmmaker or a community activist. He was all of it,” Ms. McTair said.

Mr. McTair leaves his son, Mr. Kamau Prieto-McTair; sisters, Dionyse McTair, Colline McTair, Lorna Demorest and Ruth Collins; grandsons, Emmanuel and Kyle Porther; aunt, Ms. Rogers; and nephew, Gabre McTair.

In 1993, Mr. McTair received an Award of Merit from the City of Toronto. In 2017, Toronto Metropolitan University Image Arts established the Roger McTair Award to support an aspiring Black filmmaker.