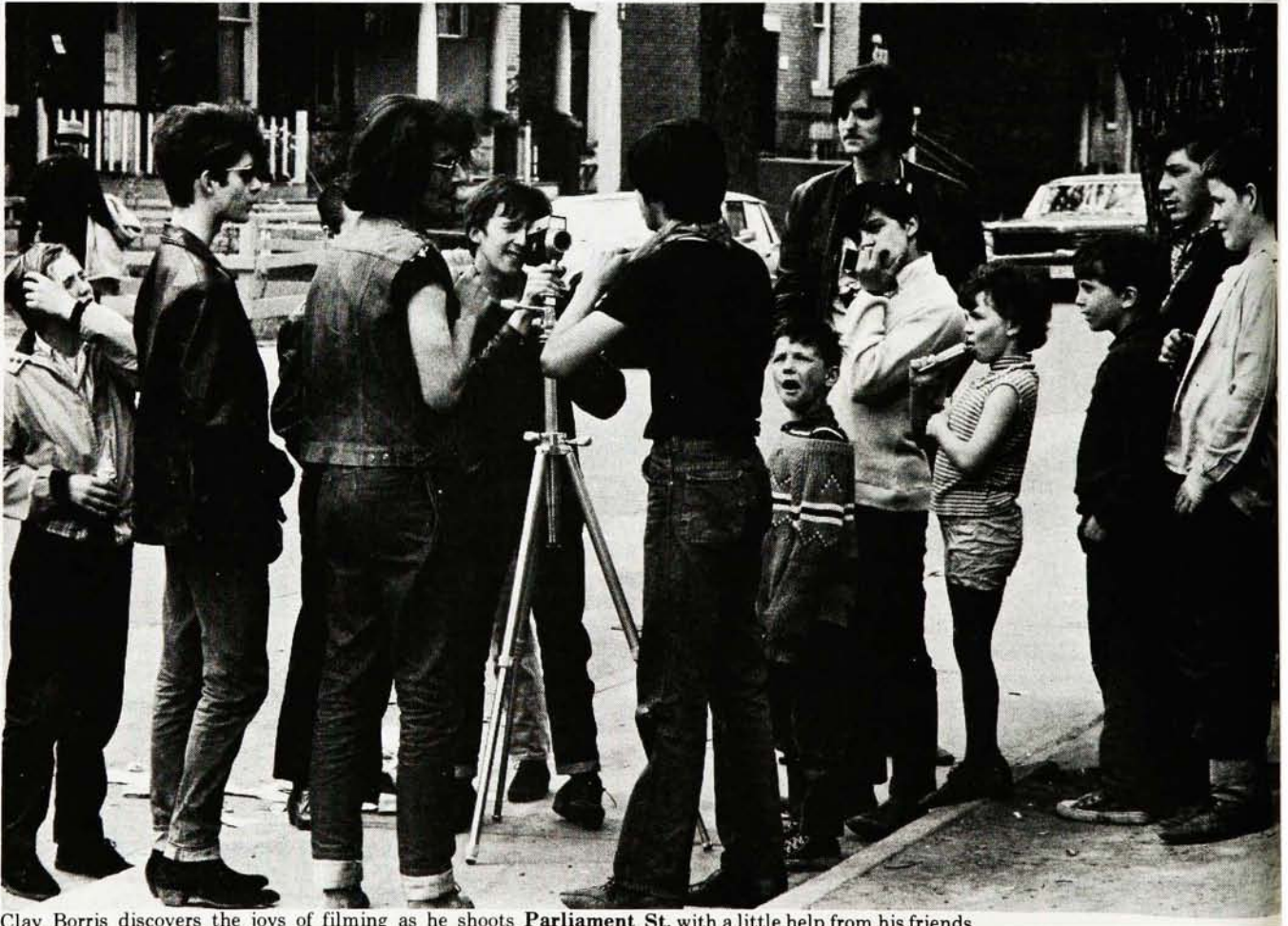


clay borris

# we do it our way

**It started as therapy of sorts and turned into a consuming passion. But how many films can you make about your family? Pretty many, according to Clay Borris et al.**

by Patricia Thorvaldson



Clay Borris discovers the joys of filming as he shoots *Parliament St.* with a little help from his friends

**Clay Borris:** I always use my family in my films. My first film, **Parliament Street** was about me and my neighborhood in Cabbagetown, the next film, **Paper Boy**, was about me and my experience as a paper boy. My brother Jerry played in that. Then **One Hand Clapping** was about my sister, and now **Rose's House** is about my mother, and my mother plays herself. And I haven't told people but my next film is going to be about my brother Gary, and he'll play himself.

I haven't told people because as soon as I mention it people say, "Why don't you get away from making films about your family?" But what they don't understand is that we've broken new ground. We're making different kinds of films and we're doing it our way. And it's working for us. If it hadn't been working we wouldn't have had four nominations at the Canadian Film Awards for **Rose's House**, right? It's working.

**John Phillips:** The way we did **Paper Boy** has become the format for functioning as a company and as a creative team and we've used it ever since – the whole idea of using people Clay knows, constructing the films organically from people's experiences, step by step. We've almost got it down to a science.

**Clay Borris:** When you think about it, the chances of John and I getting together were so slim, one out of a hundred or something, eh? I'm from a French Canadian Catholic upbringing and John's from a... what did you call it?

**John Phillips:** A straight, normal, somewhat academic, intellectual kind of background.

**Clay Borris:** He's more educated than I am, so you know, the idea that we're together is really weird. It comes in handy though. He takes care of all the writing of applications – stuff like that. It's a good combination.

**John Phillips:** We have complementary skills and complementary personalities. I'm the cameraman and Clay's the director. My personality doesn't require my telling people what to do. Clay's does. I'm a quieter kind of guy and Clay's noisier. I have the more intellectual orientation and Clay has the more instinctive wisdom about things, and it just works out.

**Clay Borris:** I met John through Point Blank, the free school that George Martell started in Cabbagetown in 1966. George was my social worker. He was the only one who believed I had something on the ball, that I would do something with my life. I was sixteen at the time, working at this place, splicing film and dreaming about making movies, and George encouraged me. He'd say, "Hey Clay, why don't you get some film and make a movie about your life". "Yeah, yeah," I'd say, but I was thinking about it. Then I met John and he helped me out.

**John Phillips:** I was a fairly recent draft dodger in Canada and I'd got a job at Point Blank teaching photography. I'd never done film before but Clay wanted to make this film and it was more exciting than the other things that were going on. I knew some people at the National Film Board and so I got them to help Clay out with equipment and film. That was **Parliament Street**. Clay shot it first in Super 8, then the Department of Education saw the film and liked it, and asked us to shoot it again in 16mm, which we did. And it's virtually identical to the one in Super 8.

**Clay Borris:** **Parliament Street** was really popular. In those days it was really something for a young guy to make



Jerry Borris and Sue Hall take a break during the filming of **Paper Boy**

a film. You know, Drop-out From Cabbagetown Makes A Movie. It was on television with pictures of me in the background. I was on radio. Anyway, it all got to me and I took off for Vancouver and California for a few weeks. And it was two and a half years before I made another film.

You see, what happened was that I went through a change on that trip. I was a Cabbagetown hood – you know, a regular, tough, Cabbagetown guy. But the trip changed something. For the first time, when I got away from it I could look back and see the way I was, why I grew up in the slums, what my background was. I'm French Canadian from New Brunswick. My parents were poor. My mother ran a rooming house and I hung around with tough guys. It was weird. I grew up a lot.

**John Phillips:** Meanwhile, while Clay was tripping around in California, George and I took **Parliament Street** to Montreal and showed it to a few people at the NFB. They liked it and wanted to meet Clay, so when he got back he went to see if we could get some help for the next film.

**Clay Borris:** I went to the Film Board and saw Tom Daly and he gave me the stuff we needed to do **Paper Boy**. I told him I didn't work with scripts, that I had it all in my head, and he gave me the stuff anyway. We actually got to be good friends. He really helped me out. In fact, it was Tom Daly who suggested I do a film on my mother. He met her one day when I was shooting **Paper Boy** and thought she was a pretty interesting character. And after we'd thought about it a bit we started to realize it could be a hell of a good film – a rooming house run by this French woman. It made a lot of sense.

So we applied to the Canada Council for some money to do **Rose's House** and in the process ended up making a film for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation about my sister. In fact, it was incredible how that happened. See, to get money from the Canada Council, I needed references, so I asked this producer at the CBC, George Robertson, who he would suggest. And he suggested this guy called Ross McLean. I had no idea who Ross McLean was, but George showed him **Parliament Street** and **Paper Boy** and Ross McLean liked them. One day he called me up and asked me to do a film for one of his shows. He asked me if I had any ideas, and right there on the spot, I thought of my sister and I said, "We'll do a film on my sister. She's a deaf-mute. But we're going to do it differently. It's not going to be a technical deaf-mute film. It's going to be about what it's like having a deaf-mute in the family." He said okay.

The thing was, though, that we'd never done a sound sync film before – the other two films were silent. This

*Patricia Thorvaldson was the editor of the National Film Board publication Pot Pourri until it ceased publication last year.*

time we were doing sound sync and color. But we weren't worried about that. That's one thing. We never, never worry about the technical part when we're doing a film. We just went to this rent-all place and asked this guy to teach John how to run the camera. It's a good thing that John was a photographer for years. He learned fast. And my wife did the sound. She took a two-hour course in sound. You have a beep. You have a clap. That's all there is to it.

**John Phillips:** We had all these pieces of paper telling us how to do it.

**Clay Borris:** So we shot the film in about three days and then we had to show it to Ross McLean. It was the scariest time ever – we were so nervous. Then just to see those words come out the way they should was really an excitement. It worked. The colors were there. Everything was there, right? And Ross assigned us an editor, and we'd never worked with an editor before. We know all about it now, but in those days... There he was pulling stuff and holding it in his teeth, throwing pieces of film over his shoulder, and I'm having no idea how he did it. All I know is it worked. We made it into a 27-minute film for television called **One Hand Clapping**, and it was popular, and articles were written about it. We were really happy.

Finally the money came in for **Rose's House** – \$17,000 from the Canada Council and later the same from the Ontario Arts Council. I asked my mother if she wanted to be in the film and she thought I was nuts. "You crazy?" she



The crew: John Phillips (camera), Clay and Julia Borris (sound) on location for **One Hand Clapping**

said, "I can't read. I can't write. I can't even talk. I can't do that." But I assured her there'd be no problem, that a lot of the film would be improvised on the spot, and finally she agreed. A lot of the film came from memories I had of some of the things that went on in that house. A lot of it was from memories my mother had. We all talked about it a lot.

**John Phillips:** There were certain key scenes that we knew we wanted to work into the film, like the episode with the gay guys upstairs. That scene was key because it was a strong memory for everybody in Clay's family, and it was dramatic in nature, and it also gave us a chance to show how Rose handles things.

**Clay Borris:** But we realized that we needed some kind of a story line, and that's when we brought in Paulette Jiles who spent a lot of time with my family and talking to my mother. It was Paulette who suggested the scene with the waitress who comes looking for a room and who talks to my mother about her life in New Brunswick. So Paulette put the story line together, though there were a lot of things that are in the film that weren't in the script.

**John Phillips:** But the script was useful to us in terms of the complexity of shooting the film. There were times we would have been lost if we didn't have a script to keep track of everything. But Paulette was a little shocked when she saw the film – it was so different. Yet we were really glad she wrote it and we used it to our advantage.

**Clay Borris:** We shot most of the film at my parents' house. We had the whole place changed around for months. We'd walk in and say, "Hey, mom, we're filming tonight eh?" and she'd say, "Oh Christ, where are my clothes." We always made sure she kept the clothes she was wearing in the film in a separate closet and never touched them except when we were filming. Then we'd be in the middle of filming and my father would come home and want his supper and we'd have to stop everything while Rose made his supper. My parents really found out what it's like to make a film.

But everybody helped, threw in ideas. If somebody gives me an idea and I like it I'll use it. Actually, George Martell is a big help in the films we do. He was a really big help for the social worker scene in **Rose's House**. George built that scene. He knew the questions to ask, he knew the things my mother would say, how she'd react, and the scene really works.

**John Phillips:** We were so thrilled at the time. We sensed something important was happening and we were concerned about whether it would come out technically and we were so happy when it did.

**Clay Borris:** That social worker scene was totally improvised and it really worked. The other scene we improvised was the scene with my mother and the waitress talking about my mother's life. That's also one of the best things in the film. Paulette plays the waitress. I was just sitting there looking at her one day and it just came to me that she'd be great for the part. I had to talk her into it, and when we were shooting she had to have everybody out of the room, she was that afraid. But there she was, nominated for Best Supporting Actress at the Film Awards. She just loved it. It was the first time she'd ever acted. And my mother thought she couldn't do it and she was nominated for Best Actress – it's an incredible thing.

Do you realize what a combination of people are involved in **Rose's House**? It's really amazing. A drop-out who's making a film about his mother, a draft dodger who's the cameraman, a French Canadian housewife, George Martell, social worker and radical whatchacallit, Willie Dunn,

who's an Indian, Paulette Jiles, a poet and novelist. All these crazy people together.

**John Phillips:** The thing is it wasn't arbitrary. You couldn't go out and get a collection of people like that just off the street and expect anything to happen. There's a continuity here because all these people knew each other and really loved and understood each other, and when the time came to get together for the film, it really worked.

**Clay Borris:** Willie Dunn did the music for *Rose's House* and for *Paper Boy*. He actually wrote the theme song for *Rose's House* in about twenty minutes right in front of us. The guy was amazing.

**John Phillips:** The other song in the film, *The Dreamer*, he'd already written years ago. He'd been saving it for a special occasion and so giving us that song was an important, serious gesture for him. We really love it.

**Clay Borris:** After we shot the film, we ran out of money. We needed about \$15,000 to finish it and couldn't find it anywhere. We were broke and in debt. All the money we had had gone for equipment and production expenses.

**John Phillips:** Then, out of the blue, we got a job working for Browndale making films about emotionally disturbed children, which is what we've done for two years now almost non-stop.

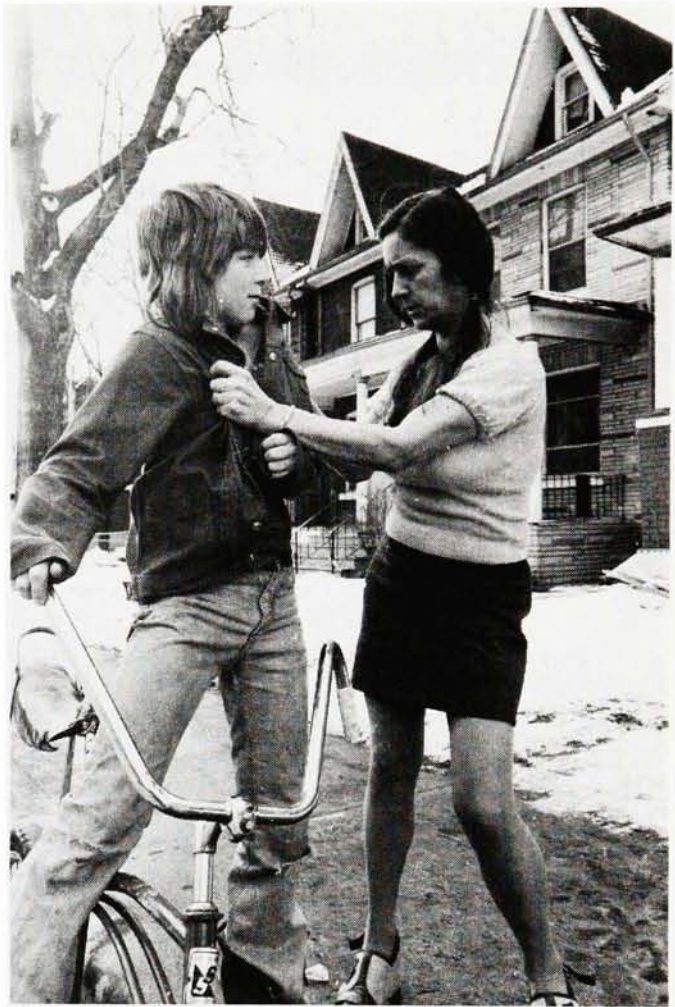
**Clay Borris:** John Brown was really good to us. We made eight films for him, but when we needed to do some work for *Rose's House*, he never stood in our way. It was still on our mind all that time that what we wanted to do was finish *Rose's House*. So about a year ago we decided to go to the Ontario NFB regional production office and talk to Beryl Fox.

**John Phillips:** So we entered into a year of negotiation about what kind of production deal we could make. It was quite a long, drawn-out affair. It was difficult because we were trying to set precedents within the Film Board on the kind of co-production agreements they would make with freelance filmmakers. Well, it finally turned out that they weren't prepared to do any profit sharing, so they bought us out for a not particularly exciting sum. But we agreed to it because we needed their help to finish the film.

**Clay Borris:** I think we should mention here, too, that if it wasn't for Beryl Fox, *Rose's House* probably never would have gone through. Thanks to her the film is finally finished.

**John Phillips:** The film is finished, and it's good. The sound was improved a lot at the Board, and some other technical things too. And I think they're going to do a good job of distributing it. Well, we're going to see that they do a good job of it. We're really going to push them. Actually, what we want to do, and we're negotiating that now, is to take the film around New Brunswick to community halls and get the real grass roots reaction to it. So many people are thinking of moving from there to the city; it will be a way of producing a lot of discussion and thought on the subject.

**Clay Borris:** So that's the way we make films, and that's the way we're going to keep making them. All I want is for people to accept the fact that we make films like *Rose's House*, and we want to keep doing that for a while. And I just hope we don't have too many problems getting money without a detailed script. Our films are based on what happens right there with the characters building the film as we go along. I know somebody said, "C'mon Clay, even Norman Jewison can't ask for \$100,000 without a complete script", but that bugs me. It really bugs me. Be-



Ronnie Maltais, cousin, plays P'tit-Jean to Rose's Rose

cause people have seen every film I've done and I've never worked the way everybody else does. And they like the films, right? I mean, here's this guy who makes films this way, and the films are good. Let's give him the money to do something.

**John Phillips:** Our goal isn't just to be successful, or just to make films. We have a very high and directed goal, which is to make films that are absolutely, totally unique. We're very ambitious to do extremely honest films. In other words, if it takes an extra year or two to do a film that we feel is important, it doesn't matter. We're not going to go running off and do something else because somebody's tempting us with something. We know what we want to do. We've got three or four really great ideas. We're just waiting until we're good enough to do them.

**Clay Borris:** See, I don't think there's anybody who's made movies about his family as much as I have, and have made them really successfully. People really like them. And some day I'll have this incredible collection of all these films made about my family and myself. But it just doesn't happen very often. Young filmmakers practically never think of making films about the things they know. But to each his own, you know. It's a competitive business. We do it our way. They do it their way. Films get done every day. Hundreds of them. Somebody's doin' something right, right? □

For a review of *Rose's House* by John Katz, see p. 38.