



GREY GARDENS

A FILM BY DAVID MAYSLES, ALBERT MAYSLES, ELLEN HOVDE, MUFFIE MEYER, SUSAN FROEMKE

A new 2K restoration made by the Criterion Collection in collaboration with
the Academy Film Archive at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

IN SELECT THEATERS STARTING MARCH 6

U.S. · 1976 · 94 MINUTES · COLOR · 1.33:1 FORMATS: DCP, BLU-RAY

Meet Big and Little Edie Beale: mother and daughter, high-society dropouts, and reclusive cousins of Jackie Onassis. The two manage to thrive together amid the decay and disorder of their East Hampton, New York, mansion, making for an eerily ramshackle echo of the American Camelot. An impossibly intimate portrait, this 1976 documentary by Albert and David Maysles, codirected by Ellen Hovde and Muffie Meyer, quickly became a cult classic and established Little Edie as a fashion icon and philosopher queen.

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ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

American documentary would be unthinkable without Albert and David Maysles. Pioneers in the art of nonfiction filmmaking, they spearheaded the 1960s movement known as Direct Cinema, an American variation of France's observational cinema verité, whose practitioners immersed themselves in particular worlds and established very close relationships with their subjects before filming. The Maysles brothers first gained attention with such entertainment-industry portraits as *Showman* (1963), about Hollywood producer Joseph Levine; *What's Happening! The Beatles in the USA* (1964); and *Meet Marlon Brando* (1965). But they really broke through to critical acclaim with *Salesman* (1968), a film about the lives of traveling Bible salesmen, and the epochal Rolling Stones concert documentary *Gimme Shelter* (1970), before going on to create the cult classic *Grey Gardens* (1976) and many other works. Throughout their joint career, they shared directing credits with editors, such as Ellen Hovde, Muffie Meyer, and Charlotte Zwerin, whose work in shaping the narratives of the films they worked on gave them as much of an authorial voice as the Maysleses themselves. After David Maysles died in 1987, Maysles Films was headed by Albert until his death in March 2015, continuing to put out movies and inspire future generations of filmmakers; its endeavors include not only its production company but also the nonprofit Maysles Documentary Center in Harlem, New York.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS: *GREY GARDENS*' FILMMAKERS TELL THE TALE

The tale of the making of *Grey Gardens* is “a love story on several levels,” according to director and cameraman **Albert Maysles**. “Certainly, there was a great deal of love between my brother [**David Maysles**] and I, to have devoted all our professional lives to the partnership that we had in making that film and other films. There’s a love story between my brother and myself and the two women . . . Most importantly, it’s a love story between the two women. With all of their recriminations and arguments and unhappiness, they had a bond of love. I think they would have done just about anything for one another. When Big Edie was on her deathbed, Little Edie reported back to us that, as she was dying, in her last moments, she turned to her mother and said, in effect, ‘What more would you like to say?’ Her mother turned to her and said, ‘There’s nothing left to say. It’s all in the film.’”

The Maysles brothers first became aware of the Beales in the early 1970s. That’s when they got a call from Lee Radziwill, sister of Jackie Onassis, with an idea for a film about her growing-up years, and specifically her family’s summers in the Hamptons. They began shooting this film at Radziwill’s expense, but the real inspiration came a few days into filming, when Radziwill got a phone call from her eccentric aunt and cousin, Big and Little Edie Beale. Said Albert Maysles: “She happened to get on the phone one day with them, discussing some problems that the Beales were having with the house and the Board of Health, because the house [Grey Gardens] was in such bad shape. So she said, ‘I’m going over there to talk to them. Do you want to come along?’ So even as we arrived we began filming, and looking at that footage later on, it had the same kind of truthfulness and spontaneity that everything else that follows does.”

Editor **Ellen Hovde** remembered: “David called me up and said, ‘Listen, we’re making this kind of home movie for Lee, but we think there’s another kind of film here. If you and I can sort of throw something together, we can show it to Lee and convince her that the real film is about her aunt and her cousin.’” After

a week and a half of shooting in the house, which at the time was in a particularly shocking state of squalor, they had enough footage for an hour and a half of film. However, after Radziwill saw the footage, she was so upset that she confiscated the negative and shut down the production. But the Beales enjoyed the experience and attention and kept in touch with the Maysles. Said Hovde: “A year later, the Beales sort of decided, along with Al, that they would like to do a film about themselves.”

To really capture the lives of these women with intimacy and authenticity, the filmmakers had to immerse themselves in their world without seeming intrusive, relying on their experiences in the Direct Cinema movement. Said producer **Susan Froemke**: “The relationship between Albert and David and the Beales was critical to what they got on film. The whole idea of this kind of film crew grew out of Bob Drew’s efforts with Time Inc. to re-create the format that was so successful for *Life* magazine, where you would have a great cameraman and a great reporter . . . That was the tradition that this was built on, but you can’t underestimate what goes on in the editing room, and Maysles has had a tradition of giving their editors director credits, really right from the beginning with Charlotte Zwerin and *Salesman*.”

Another one of those editors who worked on *Grey Gardens*, along with Hovde, was **Muffie Meyer**, who remembered: “We had about seventy hours of film, and about thirty to forty hours of additional sound, and Ellen and I spent months just talking about what the Beales meant to us, who we thought they were, and what was the truth—the real truth—in the situation.” These discussions included how to portray Big and Little Edie, and how much context to give the audience about their pasts: “The question was, What do we do to set up that they’re related to Jackie Kennedy Onassis, that they have this history with the town, and that they live in a neighborhood of extraordinarily rich people, of mansion after mansion after mansion? So we eventually came around to the idea that we would have a sequence close to the beginning that would use newspapers to introduce who they were, and to shoot some of the neighborhood, some of the surrounding mansions, to kind of visually set up the environment in which they live.” Added Albert Maysles: “We wanted to make it clear where we were but not get away from the essential story, which is of the two women. We also wanted to establish that they were Bouviers in a very simple, direct fashion.”

The filmmakers also had to make it clear that the house was in a state of ongoing decay, which they establish early in the film and then chart in a novel fashion—by way of a hole made by raccoons in a wall. Said Meyer: “It became significant that you see the hole up in the wall, so that you have a sense that there’s a kind of deterioration going on. And that hole you will see again, I believe twice more, but most significantly at the end of the film, where it’s enlarged a lot.”

It’s details like that that give the film its sense of time progressing, as otherwise there are few markers. Finding the film in the editing room was a challenge, since, as Meyer put it, “nothing really happened—that is to say, day after day, they would have the same arguments, the same songs, the same pleasures, the same kinds of interactions. And since a movie—particularly this kind of movie—has to have a beginning, middle, and end, one of the really difficult things was to try to find the story, the meaning, and the structure. After a while, it became very clear to us that the film was about a mother-daughter relationship.”

Big Edie died in 1977, and her daughter stayed at Grey Gardens for a number of years before moving to a cottage in Southampton, living in various spots in New York City, and finally settling in Florida in the 1990s. Thanks to her flamboyant personality and eccentric wardrobe, Little Edie became the film’s breakout star and a cult figure for decades afterward. Some years following her mother’s death, she even got a handful of singing gigs at the Manhattan nightclub Reno Sweeney. They were not well reviewed, but Meyer remembered them fondly: “They had a pianist, and she sang songs and told stories of her life to

sold-out, adoring crowds—largely gay, but not entirely—and she was a huge hit. And it wasn't, obviously, her singing ability per se. She told stories and connected with the audience. She was a true performer.”

It's this ability to connect with an audience, on the part of both mother and daughter, that is the key to the film's success, argued Hovde. “The reason that it works, I think, is that as theatrical as these two women are, they're being absolutely true. They're giving you the real picture of who they are and what they feel in a way that most people are unable to do, and that allows you to put yourself into the story.”

Said Meyer: “I think both of them saw the filming as a chance to tell their story, as a chance to show themselves as performers, as a chance to show themselves as personalities, and as a chance, really, in a way, to justify their existence and choices. And as such, I think it's very successful. I think you really do see what they want you to see.” Added Albert Maysles: “Somehow, they realized what most people don't understand if you approach them with a movie camera to record their ordinary lives. They understood that their lives were worth recording.”



THE LEGACY OF *GREY GARDENS*

Grey Gardens has proven to be something quite rare, especially for a documentary: an instantly identifiable American touchstone. Though responses to the film were initially bemused, its irresistible charms have made it one of the most beloved and acclaimed nonfiction films ever made (it was voted the ninth greatest documentary of all time in a 2014 poll conducted by the influential magazine *Sight & Sound*). Moreover, it boasts a legacy that can be traced all over the pop culture landscape, from television to theater to music. Its most direct descendants are the Broadway musical *Grey Gardens* (2006), which earned Christine Ebersole a Tony for her performance as Little Edie Beale, and the made-for-HBO drama *Grey Gardens* (2009), starring an Emmy-winning Jessica Lange and a Golden Globe-winning Drew Barrymore in the roles of Big and Little Edie. Additionally, references to the Beales have appeared everywhere from the Rufus Wainwright song “Grey Gardens” (from the 2001 album *Poses*) to the television series *Gilmore Girls*, *30 Rock*, and *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

Perhaps the film’s legacy can be felt most fabulously in the world of fashion. Little Edie Beale has proven an influential figure thanks to her richly textured, bohemian, anything-goes style of dress, which included items made from old tablecloths and curtains, skirts turned into capes, and all manner of scarves. There have been at least two *Vogue* spreads inspired by *Grey Gardens*, and in 2007 designer Marc Jacobs created the Little Edie bag for his fall collection. Says designer Todd Oldham: “Little Edie is just a total original. I can’t say that I knocked off anything line for line, but I definitely mopped a few of her color combinations... It must be in her DNA, but she always had the most amazing sense of proportion. The costumes were always well-suited to her frame and shape.” And designer John Bartlett: “When I’m thinking fashion, when I’m thinking about *Grey Gardens*, to me, what I always take away from it and what I always want to remember is that there are no rules . . . Edie reminds us—they both remind us—that you can be beautiful any which way, as long as you are expressing yourself.”

ABOUT THE RESTORATION

This new 2K digital restoration was undertaken in collaboration with the Academy Film Archive at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The original 16 mm A/B camera negative, held in the Academy’s collections, was used to create two separate 2K scans, of the A and B rolls, on a Lasergraphics film scanner. These were then assembled into a final master using the existing 35 mm blowup color reversal internegative (CRI) as a reference. In addition, a handful of shots in the final master were replaced from the CRI. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris, scratches, splices, warps, and jitter were manually removed.

The original monaural soundtrack was restored by Audio Mechanics in Burbank, California, under the supervision of the Academy Film Archive, from an existing 16-bit transfer made from the original 3-track magnetic tracks. Crackle was attenuated and clicks, thumps, and dropouts manually removed using Sonic HD, while hiss and hum were reduced using Cedar.