



Danny Lyon

PHOTO BY DANNY LYON

Subversive Americana

Photographer and filmmaker Danny Lyon will be at the Hollywood Theater on July 18 for a screening of his groundbreaking films, 'Willie' and 'Murderers'

BY EMILY GREEN
SENIOR STAFF REPORTER

After five years of correspondence, local artist Vanessa Renwick has convinced her favorite photographer to come to Portland and screen two of his films.

Danny Lyon, 76, is well-known for capturing pivotal moments during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement in photographs, as well as for embedding himself within various subcultures in order to capture his subjects on film. The result was an unparalleled record of subversive Americana in the 20th century.

He was a member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the younger, more radical branch of the Civil Rights Movement that was instrumental in direct actions such as the Freedom Rides. And in 2016, it was Lyon's photos of Bernie Sanders at a 1962 Chicago University sit-in that surfaced during the campaign. Lyon also famously joined the Chicago Outlaws, a motorcycle gang, in order to photograph its members for his collection, "The Bikeriders," published in 1968.

More recently, he published a book on climate change called "Burn Zone," which details the degradation he's witnessed in New Mexico – as well as all the contact information, including addresses and phone numbers, of people he deems responsible, such as the Koch brothers.

But it is Lyon's portrayal of men living within the walls of America's prisons and jails that Renwick has worked diligently to bring to Portland.

At 7:30 p.m. on July 18 "Willie" (1985) and "Murderers" (2005) will screen at Hollywood Theatre, located at 4122 NE Sandy Blvd. Following the screening, Lyon and Renwick – each a firebrand in their own right – will lead the audience in what's likely to be a provocative discussion.

"Murderers" is a 30-minute film featuring interviews with five men convicted of murder, and "Willie" is an 82-minute film profiling Willie Jaramillo, a childlike man who bounces between a life of substance use and time in jail for low-level offenses. This fall, its sequel, "Wanderer," featuring Willie's younger brother Ferny, will premier in New York.

Renwick selected "Murderers" and "Willie" for their cinematic beauty and empathy-producing qualities, she said. They also share a common thread:



Left, the arrest of Taylor Washington in Atlanta in 1963, which was the high school student's eighth arrest for protesting at Lebs Delicatessen.

Right, Police in Clarksdale, Miss., in 1963.

PHOTOS BY DANNY LYON

Michael Guzman, Willie's childhood friend, was a convicted murderer featured in both films.

These works followed Lyon's first foray into the prison system in 1967 and 1968, when he spent 14 months inside the Texas penal system to produce the book "Conversations with the Dead."

The event is co-sponsored by Renwick's production company, The Oregon Department of Kick Ass, and the Portland Museum of Modern Art.

Lyon spoke to Streetroots from his home in Bernalillo, N.M., a town with fewer than 9,000 residents that lies about 10 miles north of Albuquerque just east of the Rio Grande. It's also where "Willie" was filmed.

Emily Green: Many of your images are now considered historic. Do you think these films carry a different message today than they did in earlier decades?

Danny Lyon: If you want to send a message, go to Western Union. Do you know what that's from? I don't know the director – it's from Hollywood.

I don't think I make message films. But I did hope to destroy the prison system.

"Murderers" is about guys who either murdered someone or were convicted of murder, and it does try to humanize them because you don't meet people like this. I liked these people; they were very interesting. Some of them I knew well, some of them I didn't.



"Willie," the feature film, is not a message film. It's kind of sad. It's about a single person. You see him both as an adult and you see him in and out of prison and jail, but you see him also as a child, and I think there is something sad about not being a child anymore.

If I'd do footage of you now, and if you were fortunate enough to have a father and mother who shot 80-millimeter film of you when you were 7 or 8, you could probably do something very poignant, because the fact that we're constantly morphing as human beings – there is something sad about it. Because in the end, we die, which is really awful. I think "Willie" does a lot of that, it goes back and forth in time, and he's a very powerful character.

I don't know what the message of that is. Longevity is a good thing. He's dead. I made a sequel, but Willie died.

I met him when he was about 12 and filmed him, and I used that footage, and I filmed him again at length when he was a teenager. He was kind of remarkable. And then I saw him again on a street corner, about two miles from here, where I'm sitting, and he had just come out of prison, and he was a full-fledged adult with tattoos, and he looked different.

Nancy and I bought his gravestone, and he's in the local cemetery. Almost everybody in that film is here in the local cemetery. It's all kind of sad. That's the other side of life. He only lived to be about 40 or something like that.

E.G.: I want to ask you about something you wrote on your Bleak Beauty blog. You wrote a message to the Parkland Students, under the banner that "Chuck McDew is dead." You said it was a myth that Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. led the Civil Rights Movement, and I was wondering if you'd be willing to elaborate on that statement and what it means for today's youth.

D.L.: I was very excited, as I think millions were, to see these kids on television fighting back. And I was terribly moved by that. I did a blog then, and it reminded me so much of the early days of the Civil Rights Movement, which I was part of and witnessed – I was 20 years old and ended up in jail with Dr. King. We didn't hang out together. I ended up as a bigger SNCC person (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), and seeing this first-hand, this amazing uprising and very successful period in American history where what was a grassroots uprising of mostly young people, including high-school people, really did not only change America, but changed the world, by the way.

There were different organizations in the Civil Rights Movement. There were four of them, and SNCC was the "point of the spear," that's a term from Africa. They were the ones on the front lines. They were the kids. They were the younger people. Dr. King was older, he was a minister, and there was criticism of his leadership.

In Albany, where I was in jail with him, he would show up and huge numbers of people would appear, you know, the way Bernie Sanders would show up in Portland and he'd get 10,000 screaming people, but then Dr. King would leave and all those people would go home. And SNCC, the young people, had a very different

attitude, they went to Portland, they stayed, they organized, they got involved with gangs, they got involved with schools, and they literally changed the lives of people who then became full-time activists.

I think what happened going forward is once he was martyred – basically they forgot about the Civil Rights Movement after it happened. Then years later, started making films about it, and all they did was show the same speech over and over and over. Everybody knows about "I have a Dream."

I was there when he made that speech. I was probably within 200 or 300 feet of him because I was SNCC, and I was on the podium, and I didn't even listen to him.

I had zero interest in it. This might horrify everyone, like turning your back on Lincoln during the Gettysburg Address, which some people did I guess. But I listened to John Lewis because he spoke for the young people, and that's how people felt.

I think what happened in the media, they see King, they see a great leader, and it's a terrible mistake, because this has been drummed into our brains ad nauseam by NPR and everybody who's documented the movement on major corporate television, that a leader will arise. Basically, the message to the Parkland kids is: Don't wait for a leader because it's never going to happen. You have to do it yourselves. Which I think they started to do.

Chuck McDew, by the way, was one of the first chairmen of SNCC, and a friend of mine, and he died recently. So many of the great leaders at SNCC have died recently. Julian Bond died, tragically, a year ago. I still can't believe he's gone. Tom Hayden, who was a leader of the radical left died recently, Muhammad Ali died. They're my generation – I'm the same age as all of those people.

E.G.: I asked our staff photographers what they would ask you, given then chance. I have a couple questions from them.

From photographer Ben Brink: How you do you see your style of "new journalism" in comparison to the instant gratification of many of today's photographers? They shoot, and then move on, with many photos being worth more than a single great photo in today's click-driven photojournalism.

D.L.: There have always been photographers who have taken lots of pictures; people who have motorized cameras.

These phones are kind of astounding. You can take really good movies, and you do what they call bursts, where you can take 10

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PHOTOGRAPHER, FILMMAKER
AND AUTHOR OF "BURN ZONE"