

# KINO LORBER

---

*Sam Pollard Presents*

## Bill Traylor: Chasing Ghosts

A film by Jeffrey Wolf

Executive Produced by Sam Pollard  
Produced by Jeffrey Wolf, Daphne McWilliams,  
Jeany Nisenholz-Wolf and Fred Barron

**\*\*WINNER! Jury Prize for Freedom Award at 2019 Fine Arts Film Festival\*\***

U.S. | 2020 | 75min | Color | English

**Distributor Contact:** Clemence Taillandier, [clemence@kinolorber.com](mailto:clemence@kinolorber.com)

**Publicity Contact:** David Ninh, [dninh@kinolorber.com](mailto:dninh@kinolorber.com)

Kino Lorber, Inc., 333 West 39 St. Suite 503, New York, 10018, (212) 629-6880

## Synopsis

***Bill Traylor: Chasing Ghosts*** is a feature documentary film exploring the life of a unique American artist, a man with a remarkable and unlikely biography. Bill Traylor was born into slavery in 1853 on a cotton plantation in rural Alabama. Using historical and cultural context, the film is designed to bring the spirit and mystery of Traylor's incomparable art to life. After the Civil War, Traylor continued to farm the land until the late 1920s. Aging and alone, he moved to Montgomery and worked odd jobs in the thriving segregated black neighborhood. A decade later, in his late 80s, Traylor became homeless and started to draw and paint, both memories from plantation days and scenes of a radically changing urban culture. Traylor devised his own visual language to record the stories of his life, translating an oral culture into something original, powerful, and culturally rooted. He made well over a thousand drawings and paintings between 1939-1942. Traylor witnessed profound social and political change during his life spanning slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, and the Great Migration. The transcendent surprise is while Traylor kept to himself leading an unassuming life, he was nurturing a remarkable creative gift that would not be expressed for decades. Tap dance, evocative period music and spoken word are used in dramatic and surprising ways in the film, balanced with archival photographs and footage, insightful perspectives from Traylor family members, and Traylor's striking drawings and paintings, to reveal one of America's most prominent artists to a wide audience.

## Relevancy

The film reflects a tumultuous time of a forgotten world and its marginalized people, still reverberating today. A new lynching memorial and Legacy Museum from Bryan Stevenson's Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) opened in Montgomery in 2018 just blocks from where Bill Traylor used to sit and work. The film is a compelling human narrative that gives voice to a man who endures a long life of extreme hardships during an era of legalized racial indignities, to become one of America's most prominent artists, exhibited in museums and collections worldwide. In 2020, the City of Montgomery honored Bill Traylor by dedicating an historical marker at the corner of N. Lawrence and Monroe St. where Traylor used to work. The film is a starting point for educational components including the neglected period of Reconstruction in American history, African-American Southern history, along with cultural elements of music, dance, style and relationships. And the overarching theme of art and creativity as expression and documenting a life is profound.

## About Bill Traylor

Bill Traylor was born around 1853, on an Alabama cotton plantation owned by John Traylor, near Pleasant Hill, Alabama, in Dallas County, close to the Lowndes County line. Born into slavery, Traylor was about twelve years old when the Civil War ended, ending his legal servitude but not the basics of his way of life: he continued to live near his birthplace for another six decades, working as a farm laborer and contract farmer for the Traylor family. In the late 1920s, his rural livelihood ended by poor harvest and bad health, Traylor moved to Montgomery, where he worked odd jobs in the segregated black neighborhood. A decade later, in his late eighties, Traylor became homeless and started to draw, both past memories from plantation days and current scenes of a radically changing culture. Traylor's life spanned slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow segregation, and the Great Migration—which led most of his children away from the South. When he died in 1949, he left behind more than 1,000 drawings and paintings made on discarded cardboard.

In 1939, in Montgomery, a local artist named Charles Shannon saw Traylor drawing and recognized the self-taught artist's remarkable gifts. Shannon, along with other members of a progressive artists' coalition called the New South, gave Traylor paints and pencils and bought paintings and drawings from him over the next four years. Another forty years would pass before the art world took notice of Traylor's enormous legacy, which comprises the largest known body of drawn and painted images made by an artist born into slavery. Traylor's life and work compel us to examine the genius of an old and infirm black man making his art on a street corner in Montgomery, Alabama.

## Director's Statement

My introduction to artist Bill Traylor came with the 1982 watershed exhibit "Black Folk Art in America" at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. I had applied for a small grant to film the opening, and interview the featured living artists who attended. Traylor's iconic art was used for the exhibit's poster and still hangs in my office. Since encountering Bill Traylor's art almost 40 years ago, I have long contemplated his work, wanting to unravel and dig deeper into his world. Today, Bill Traylor is one of the most celebrated self-taught artists, with one of the most remarkable and unlikely biographies.

*Bill Traylor: Chasing Ghosts* strives to broaden our understanding of this period of transformation, a time when black people prospered as business professionals in Montgomery, in spite of living through the fear and volatility of Jim Crow South that

impacted daily life. Traylor created his own visual language as a means to communicate and record the stories of his life. Traylor's art is the sole body of work made by a black artist of his era to survive. He made well over a thousand drawings and paintings on discarded cardboard between 1939 and 1942.

Bill Traylor did not begin to draw until he was in his 80s; and when he did, his burst of creativity demonstrated a unique mastery of artistic technique. Without setting out to do so, he became a chronicler of his times.

Trailer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkdi1o7VrLU>

Website

<http://billtraylorchasingghosts.com>

Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/billtraylorchasingghosts/>

Instagram

<https://www.instagram.com/billtraylorchasingghosts/>

Twitter

<https://twitter.com/billtraylorfilm>

IMDB

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9108510/reference>

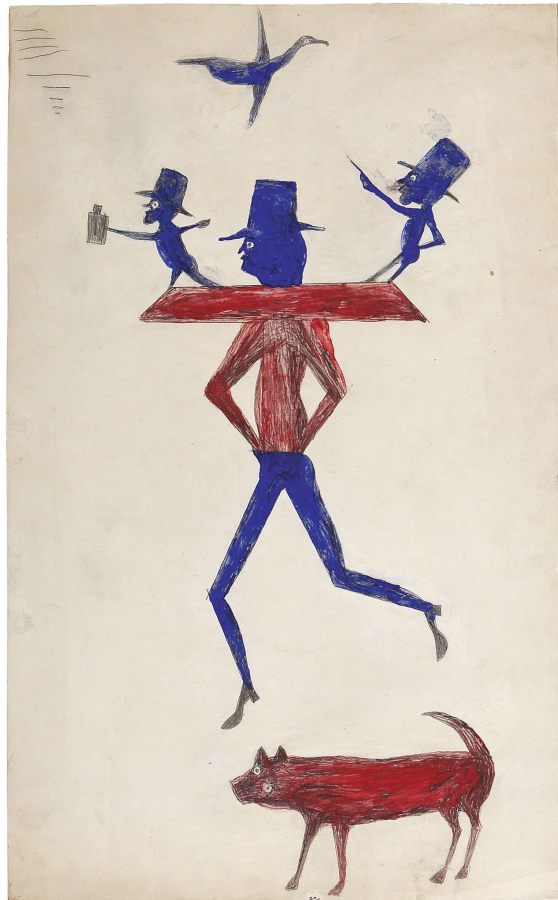
# THE NEW YORKER

By Peter Schjeldahl

October 1, 2018

## The Utterly Original Bill Traylor

*Born into slavery in the eighteen-fifties and buried in a pauper's grave in 1949, the Alabama artist amazes today.*



Traylor's "Man with Yoke," circa 1939-42. Photograph by Bonnie H. Morrison / Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum

Bill Traylor, the subject of a stunning retrospective at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in Washington, D.C., “Between Worlds: The Art of Bill Traylor,” was about twelve years a slave, from his birth, in Dallas County, Alabama, in 1853 or so, until Union cavalry swept through the cotton plantation where he was owned, in 1865. Sixty-four years later, in 1939, homeless on the streets of Montgomery, he became an extraordinary artist, making magnetically beautiful, dramatic, and utterly original drawings on found scraps of cardboard. He pencilled, and later began to paint, crisp silhouette figures of people and animals—feral-seeming dogs, ominous snakes, elegant birds, top-hatted men, fancily dressed women, ecstatic drinkers—either singly or in scenes of sometimes violent interaction. There were also hieratic abstractions of simple forms—such as a purple balloon shape above a black crossbar, a blue disk, and a red trapezoidal base—symmetrically arrayed and lurkingly animate. Traylor’s style has about it both something very old, like prehistoric cave paintings, and something spanking new. Songlike rhythms, evoking the time’s jazz and blues, and a feel for scale, in how the forms relate to the space that contains them, give majestic presence to even the smallest images. Traylor’s pictures stamp themselves on your eye and mind.



*“Man and Large Dog (Verso: Man and Woman),” circa 1939–42.* Photograph by Matt Flynn / Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum



*"Untitled (Yellow and Blue House with Figures and Dog)," from 1939. Photograph by Gene Young / Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum*

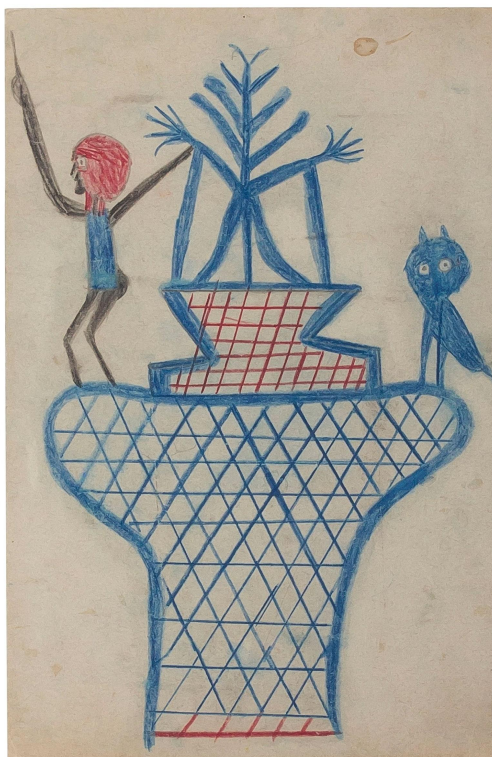
Charles Shannon—a painter and the leader of New South, a progressive group of young white artists in Montgomery—noticed and befriended Traylor in 1939, providing him with money and materials and collecting most of the roughly twelve hundred works of his that survive. New South mounted a Traylor show in 1940. Nothing sold. The support ended amid the disruptions of wartime in 1942. All of Traylor's subsequent art is lost. He died in 1949 in Montgomery, and was buried in a pauper's grave. (A handsome headstone was installed in March of this year.) Few people knew anything of Traylor until 1982, when work by him was the sensation of "Black Folk Art in America," a show at the Corcoran Gallery, in Washington. And yet some of the pictures might have entered the Museum of Modern Art in 1942, on the occasion of a little-noted solo show at the Fieldston School, in the Bronx, had Shannon not disdained an offer, from the museum's director, Alfred H. Barr, of one dollar apiece for small ones and two dollars apiece for the large. (This datum bewilders, given Barr's famous appreciation of what was still termed "primitive" artistry. What did he think he

was looking at?) Shannon and his heirs, after he died in 1996, disseminated the cache through sales and donations—twelve museums and thirty-nine private collectors have lent work to the show.

How should Traylor's art be categorized? What won't do are the romantic or patronizing epithets of "outsider" or "self-taught," which belong to a fading time of urges to police the frontiers of high culture. These terms are philosophically incoherent. All authentic artists buck prevailing norms and develop, on their own, what matters in their art. Traylor is one of three dazzling moderns in America—with Martín Ramírez (1895-1963), a Mexican-born inmate of a California mental hospital, and Henry Darger (1892-1973), a Chicago janitor—who especially swamp the designations. How to square assessment of such work with conventional judgment is a problem increasingly addressed by certain museums. "Outliers and American Vanguard Art," a show this year at the National Gallery, interspersed recognized professionals with discovered amateurs. In point of attraction, the outliers pretty well blew the pros away. If there's a quality that sets Traylor, Ramírez, and Darger sharply apart from more acculturated artists, it's that they most compare in spirit to great art of the historical canon. They missed out on mediocrity.



"Red Man," circa 1939–42. Photograph by Matt Flynn / Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum



"Untitled (Basket, Man, and Owl)," circa 1939. Courtesy Bethany Mission Gallery, Philadelphia

The Smithsonian curator, Leslie Umberger, spent seven years preparing for the Traylor retrospective. Her effort bears fruit not only in the graceful installation of a hundred and fifty-five pictures organized by sixteen recurring themes—from “Horses & Mules” through “Chase Scenes” and “Dressed to the Nines” and on to “Balancing Acts & Precipitous Events”—but also in a remarkable catalogue, which exhaustively lays out what can be known of Traylor’s life, in its historical context, and of the references in his art. An introduction by the African-American painter Kerry James Marshall sounds a note of challenge to superficial perceptions of an artist who was so embedded in Southern black history and culture and forced, while he lived, always to reassure whites of his subservient harmlessness. Umberger and other critics have adduced careful veilings of provocative content in Traylor’s work. Scenes of men chasing men with rifles or hatchets may or may not encode, in sportive guise, memories of plantation brutality. The figures are indistinguishable in form and color. Perhaps the artist’s one clean shot at racism is a drawing of a diminutive white man holding a colossal and menacing black dog by a leash.



*“Yellow Chicken,” circa 1939–40.* Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum / The Museum of Modern Art. Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource



*"Untitled (Event with Man in Blue and Snake)," from 1939.* Photograph by Gavin Ashworth / Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum

Marshall writes, "The way I see it, Bill Traylor has always been the property of a White collecting class." He poses the question of whether white and black viewers can conceivably see the same things in the work of an artist like Traylor. He thinks not. There's no immediate help for that, but the sore spot that it touches may usefully be kept in mind. At issue are not relics of a remote civilization but living roots of perennial social and political realities.

Traylor was the fourth of five children, born on the plantation of an owner whose last name they were assigned. He gave different answers for the year of his birth but insisted on the date: April 1st, which, of course, is April Fools' Day. (Umberger told me in an e-mail, "Blacks without birth records often selected something their mother thought was close, maybe she knew the month—it's more likely she recognized the change in the light and foliage of early spring.") There was a good deal of the trickster about Traylor; he was given to telling truths but, in the great formula of Emily

Dickinson, telling them slant. In 1863, his family was moved to a nearby plantation belonging to his owner's brother. Traylor remained there until about 1908 as a laborer—he was, at one point, a member of a surveying crew—and perhaps as a sharecropper. By 1910, he was a tenant farmer near Montgomery.

Traylor had three wives and at least fifteen children. What became of the first two wives isn't known. The last one died in the mid-nineteen-twenties, after which he moved alone to the city and subsisted on odd jobs and a small welfare stipend, often sleeping in the back room of a friendly undertaker's funeral parlor. The welfare ceased when Traylor was found to have a local daughter—who, however, hardly welcomed him. Nearly all his other children had joined the northward Great Migration of the nineteen-tens and twenties. In his last years, Traylor visited some of them in Detroit and other cities but always soon returned to Montgomery. In 1992, a number of his family members sued Shannon for possession of the art. An out-of-court settlement granted them twelve drawings.



*"Untitled (Radio)," circa 1940–42. Photograph by Gene Young / Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum*



*"Untitled (Man Carrying Dog on Object)," circa 1939–42. Photograph by Mike Jensen / Courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum*

The works are kinetic in their appeal: athletic and choreographic. A drinker swigging from a bottle curls backward as if about to spiral. (Shannon quoted Traylor as having said, "What little sense I did have, whiskey took away." But plainly neither that nor anything else impaired the humor and subtlety of his imagination.) Sinuous rabbits extend legs that sometimes look human in their paroxysms of flight. When figures preen, you feel that they've just added inches to their height. Gravity tugs at some elements and ignores others. Why do so many characters point fingers, either as a meaningful gesture—perhaps occult, as a hex—or at things unseen? (It seems that no one can decide.) Houses and strange open structures teem with runners and shooters, chasers and chased, and birds and animals keeping their own mysterious counsel. You can't know what's happening, but, at a glance, you are in on it.

There is some gorgeous color film footage in the show, shot by the Swiss-American New York artist Rudy Burckhardt in 1942, while he was in the Army, as he explored the

streets of Montgomery at the boundary of white and black areas. Smartly dressed citizens of both races stride or stand. Umberger told me that she can't help straining for a glimpse in the film of Traylor at his sidewalk post. He was surely there. This makes for an apt analogy. Traylor's art generates a presence at once mighty and fugitive, forever just around the corner of being understood.

## Crew Bios

### *Jeffrey Wolf*

DIRECTOR, PRODUCER

Jeffrey Wolf made the acclaimed documentary, *James Castle: Portrait of an Artist*, an award-winning film that delves into the life and creative process of the artist James Castle, as told by family members, artists and members of the deaf community. *Bill Traylor: Chasing Ghosts* is Wolf's second feature length documentary. He has also made short films about the artists James 'Son Ford' Thomas, Martin Ramirez, Elijah Pierce, and Gregory Van Maanen. As a writer, his articles and art reviews have appeared in many magazines and catalogues. His photographs have been included in numerous publications. As a feature film editor, Wolf is recognized for his film work with prominent directors such as Arthur Penn, Sidney Lumet, Leslye Headland, John Waters, and Ted Demme. Films include *The Ref*, *Beautiful Girls*, *Holes*, *Life*, among others.

### *Sam Pollard*

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Sam Pollard has produced/directed the acclaimed documentaries, *Slavery By Another Name* for PBS, *August Wilson: The Ground On Which I Stand* for American Masters, *Two Trains Runnin'* for Reel South, and *Sammy Davis Jr., I've Gotta Be Me* for American Masters. In 2019 Pollard co-directed the six-part series *Why We Hate* for The Discovery Channel, and was one of the directors on the 2020 HBO Series *Atlanta's Missing and Murdered: The Lost Children*. Pollard's documentary *MLK/FBI* premiered at the 2020 Toronto Film Festival and the New York Film Festival. His recent documentary *Black Art: In the Absence of Light* premiered on HBO February 2021. Pollard is also an accomplished feature film and television video editor, and documentary producer/director. Between 1990-2010, Pollard edited films for Spike Lee including: *Mo' Better Blues*, *Jungle Fever*, *Girl 6*, *Clockers*, and *Bamboozled*. Pollard and Lee co-produced *Four Little Girls*, about the 1963 Birmingham church bombings; and the award-winning four-part documentary *When The Levees Broke*.

### *Daphne McWilliams*

PRODUCER

Daphne McWilliams, an independent filmmaker, began her documentary career in 1995 as producer for Oscar-nominated and Emmy-winning *Four Little Girls*, directed by Spike Lee, about the 1963 Birmingham church bombings. McWilliams has since produced, among other works, two episodes for *The Blues* (Martin Scorsese,

2003), *The Curious Case of Curt Flood* (Spike Lee, 2011), *Slavery by Another Name* (Samuel D. Pollard, 2012), and *Maynard* (Pollard, 2017) about Atlanta's first African American mayor. She produced the documentary *Black Art: In the Absence of Light* (Pollard), which premiered on HBO February 2021. Her directorial debut, *In a Perfect World*, garnered festival awards and premiered on Showtime in 2016. The documentary explores what it means to be a man raised by a single mother. *In a Perfect World* is both a personal view of her son's coming-of-age and a series of impressionist portraits of what it is to be men raised solely by mothers.

## *Fred Barron*

PRODUCER, WRITER

Fred Barron was Executive Producer on *Seinfeld*, created *Caroline in the City* and wrote/executive produced *The Larry Sanders Show*. His BBC series *My Family* has been one of the longest running shows in British television history. Barron's shows have won Emmy, Cable-Ace, BAFTA and Royal Television Society awards.

## *Jeany Nisenholz-Wolf*

PRODUCER

Jeany Nisenholz-Wolf began working in documentary films as an Associate Producer for the 2008 acclaimed documentary *James Castle: Portrait of an Artist*. Previously she consulted with Joyce Scott on her memoir *Entwined: Sisters and Secrets in the Silent World of Artist Judith Scott*. Her publicity consulting includes work on Robert Osborne's *85 Years of the Oscar*, and with authors Jeffrey Lyons, Bill Moyers, and Helen Caldicott. She has worked extensively with author/photographer Paola Gianturco on six of her photo books documenting women's lives around the world. Other photographers include Andrea Baldeck in collaboration with Mütter Museum and fine arts photographer Sandi Haber Fifield. Nisenholz-Wolf continued her almost 30 years work as a publicity and communications consultant in the publishing industry up until her current work as a producer.

## *Henry Adebajo*

CINEMATOGRAPHER/DP

Henry Adebajo, in 2001, was nominated for an Emmy for his work on the documentary *Half Past Autumn—The Life and Works of Gordon Parks* for HBO directed by Craig Rice, and in the same year, the documentary *On Hallowed Ground—The Championships of the Rucker*, a basketball documentary program directed by Kip and Kern Konwiser, won a Sports Emmy for best documentary subject. In 2016, Henry was invited by acclaimed director Raoul Peck to contribute to the production for *I Am Not Your Negro*," a documentary based on an unfinished work by

the author James Baldwin. This film was nominated for an Academy Award in the documentary class in 2017. Other recent projects include the documentary *Maynard* about Atlanta's first black Mayor Maynard Holbrook Jackson and *Black Art in the Absence of Light* for HBO, which premiered on HBO, both directed by the award-winning director Sam Pollard. Also for HBO with director Raoul Peck, the soon to be released "*Exterminate All the Brutes*."

## *Keith Reamer*

EDITOR, MUSIC EDITOR

Keith Reamer is a NY-based motion picture editor. He has been in the film industry for more than thirty years and, since his start, has cut over 50 features and documentaries. His credits include: *I Shot Andy Warhol*, *Songcatcher*, *Three Seasons*, *American Swing*, *Amreeka*, *Stephanie Daley*, *The Music Never Stopped* and *The China Hustle*. He has recently co-directed, with William Murray, the documentary, *Made a Movie, Lived to Tell*.

## **Kino Lorber**

With a library of over 4,000 titles, Kino Lorber Inc. has been a leader in independent art house distribution for 35 years, releasing 30 films per year theatrically under its Kino Lorber, Kino Repertory and Alive Mind Cinema banners, garnering seven Academy Award® nominations in nine years. In addition, the company brings over 350 titles yearly to the home entertainment and educational markets through physical and digital media releases. With an expanding family of distributed labels, Kino Lorber handles releases in ancillary media for Zeitgeist Films, Cohen Media Group, Greenwich Entertainment, Artsploitation, Palisades Tartan, Menemsha Films, Raro Video, and others, placing physical titles through all wholesale, retail, and direct to consumer channels, as well as direct digital distribution through over 40 OTT services including all major TVOD and SVOD platforms. In 2019, the company launched its new art house digital channel Kino Now which features over 1000 titles from the acclaimed Kino Lorber library. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Kino Marquee initiative was launched in 2020 pioneering "virtual theatrical" releases of art house films with revenue shares that allows audiences to support almost 400 local independent theaters.