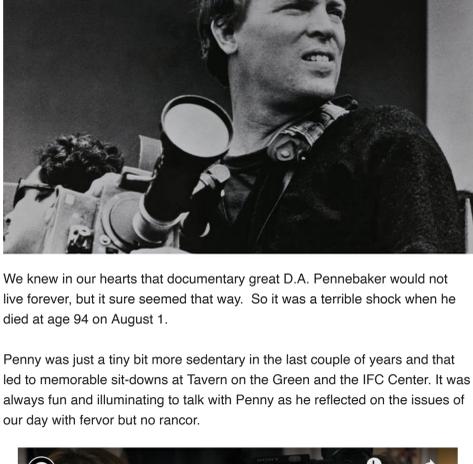


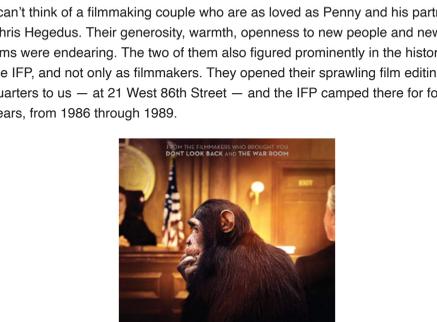
# INDIECOLLECT

D.A. PENNEBAKER  
[1925 - 2019]

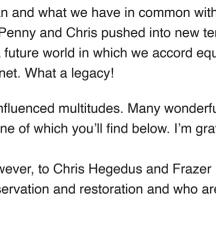


We knew in our hearts that documentary great D.A. Pennebaker would not live forever, but it sure seemed that way. So it was a terrible shock when he died at age 94 on August 1.

Penny was just a tiny bit more sedentary in the last couple of years and that led to memorable sit-downs at Tavern on the Green and the IFC Center. It was always fun and illuminating to talk with Penny as he reflected on the issues of our day with fervor but no rancor.



I can't think of a filmmaking couple who are as loved as Penny and his partner Chris Hegedus. Their generosity, warmth, openness to new people and new films were endearing. The two of them also figured prominently in the history of the IFP, and not only as filmmakers. They opened their sprawling film editing quarters to us — at 21 West 86th Street — and the IFP camped there for four years, from 1986 through 1989.



I was particularly moved by the last movie Penny and Chris made together, [UNLOCKING THE CAGE](#), about Steven Wise's campaign to gain human rights for chimpanzees and other non-human animals. It's about what makes us human and what we have in common with our fellow creatures and sentient beings. Penny and Chris pushed into new territory with this film, opening the door to a future world in which we accord equal rights to all the inhabitants of our planet. What a legacy!

Penny touched and influenced multitudes. Many wonderful eulogies and obituaries followed, one of which you'll find below. I'm grateful for them all.

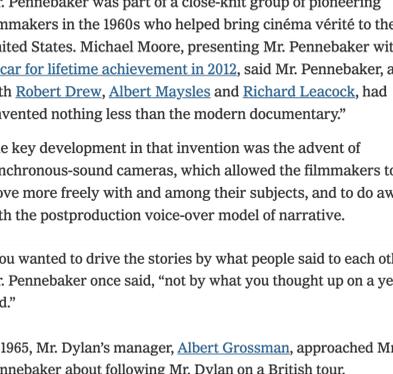
I'm most grateful, however, to Chris Hegedus and Frazer Pennebaker, who know a lot about preservation and restoration and who are making sure that Penny's films live on.

Meanwhile, we vow to carry on the Pennebaker/Hegedus spirit at IndieCollect. Thank you for inspiring us always....

Sandra Schulberg and the IndieCollect Team



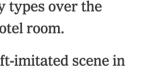
## D.A. Pennebaker, Pioneer of Cinéma Vérité in America, Dies at 94



The filmmaker D. A. Pennebaker in 2016. One of his best-known projects, "Dont Look Back," documented Bob Dylan's 1965 tour of England. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

By John Williams

Aug. 3, 2019



D. A. Pennebaker, the groundbreaking documentary filmmaker best known for capturing pivotal moments in the history of rock music and politics, including Bob Dylan's 1965 tour of England and Bill Clinton's first presidential campaign, died on Thursday at his home in Sag Harbor, N.Y. He was 94.

His death was confirmed by his son Frazer.

Mr. Pennebaker was part of a close-knit group of pioneering filmmakers in the 1960s who helped bring cinéma vérité to the United States. Michael Moore, presenting Mr. Pennebaker with an [Oscar for lifetime achievement in 2012](#), said Mr. Pennebaker, along with [Robert Drew](#), [Albert Maysles](#) and [Richard Leacock](#), had "invented nothing less than the modern documentary."

The key development in that invention was the advent of synchronous-sound cameras, which allowed the filmmakers to move more freely with and among their subjects, and to do away with the postproduction voice-over model of narrative.

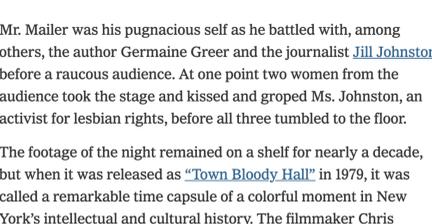
"You wanted to drive the stories by what people said to each other," Mr. Pennebaker once said, "not by what you thought up on a yellow pad."

In 1965, Mr. Dylan's manager, [Albert Grossman](#), approached Mr. Pennebaker about following Mr. Dylan on a British tour.

"I didn't really know much about Dylan," Mr. Pennebaker [told The A.V. Club](#) in a 2011 interview. "I had heard one of his songs on the radio."

"Dont Look Back," the ensuing movie, is regularly cited as one of the best documentaries ever made. Between brief performance clips, Mr. Pennebaker's camera follows Mr. Dylan, as he antagonizes the press ("I don't need Time magazine," he tells a Time reporter), outruns mobs of fans and loudly types over the voice of Joan Baez while she gently sings in a hotel room.

The movie, in black and white, begins with an oft-imitated scene in which Mr. Dylan flips through a series of cardboard placards that display the lyrics of his song "Subterranean Homesick Blues." That opening was Mr. Dylan's idea.



Dont Look Back Video by Dont Look Back

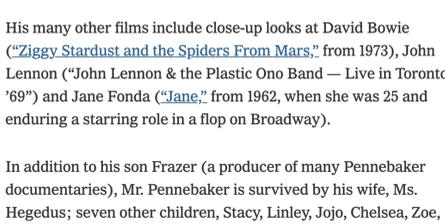
The critic Pauline Kael pointed out in *The New Yorker* in 1968 that the entire movie was more complicated (and compromised) than some viewers might appreciate.

"Sequences that in a Hollywood movie would have been greeted with snickers — like Bob Dylan in the throes of composition — got by because of the rough look," [she wrote](#). "Audiences seemed to accept the new cinéma vérité invention that the camera was an intruder in the idol's life, though it must have been obvious that Dylan had arranged to star in this film."

Mr. Pennebaker had absorbed these techniques in 1960 while working on the crew of "[Primary](#)," directed by Mr. Drew, which followed Hubert H. Humphrey and John F. Kennedy campaigning in Wisconsin for the Democratic presidential nomination. Decades later, while preparing to make "The War Room," about Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign, the Pennebaker found that politicians had become decidedly less accessible and more wary.

"I could see right away that you couldn't actually occupy space with a person who intended to become president in a very interesting way," he told *The A.V. Club*. "They were constrained to act; as soon as the camera appeared, they had to pretend to be something else."

Mr. Pennebaker focused instead on George Stephanopoulos, James Carville and other then-little-known (and less camera-shy) operatives. The result, Janet Maslin [wrote in \*The New York Times\*](#), was "a revealing film and an invaluable document."



The War Room Trailer Video by Pennebaker/Hegedus

His political films are now part of the canon, but the scenes from Mr. Pennebaker's catalog that still circulate most widely are of pop culture figures in action: Jimi Hendrix lighting his guitar on fire in "Monterey Pop"; Elaine Stritch in "Original Cast Album: Company," exhausted and straining to record "The Ladies Who Lunch" while Stephen Sondheim and others look on in despair; Mr. Dylan showing up the softer-edged singer Donovan in a hotel room crowded with their hangers-on; and the actor [Rip Torn](#) (who died last month) attacking Norman Mailer with a hammer at the end of "Maidstone" (1970), one of three eccentric movies directed by Mr. Mailer, for which Mr. Pennebaker served as a cameraman.

Mr. Mailer's films from that era are mostly notable as oddball vanity projects ([in \*The Times\*](#), Vincent Canby called "Maidstone" "a very mixed bag" that "doesn't make a great deal of sense"), but Mr. Pennebaker's relationship with the author would pay dividends down the line. In 1971, he accepted Mr. Mailer's suggestion that he film a panel discussion that Mr. Mailer was holding at Town Hall in Manhattan. The topic would be the state of feminism.

Mr. Mailer was his pugnacious self as he battled with, among others, the author Germaine Greer and the journalist [Jill Johnston](#) before a raucous audience. At one point two women from the audience took the stage and groped Ms. Johnston, an activist for lesbian rights, before all three tumbled to the floor.

The footage of the night remained on a shelf for nearly a decade, but when it was released as "[Town Bloody Hall](#)" in 1979, it was called a remarkable time capsule of a colorful moment in New York's intellectual and cultural history. The filmmaker Chris Hegedus, Mr. Pennebaker's third wife (they married in 1982) and creative partner, edited the footage, which she once called "incredibly rough."

"There was no such sexual tension going on between Norman and Germaine in it," Ms. Hegedus said, adding, "I almost edited it as a love story, in a certain way."

Mr. Pennebaker liked to maintain the image of a journalist for hire. Discussing the genesis of his 1989 documentary about the rock band Depeche Mode ("[Depeche Mode 101](#)"), he said, "Somebody called us up and said, 'Would you like to film Depeche Mode?' and I sort of said, 'What's that?'"



Hal Prince, left, director of the original Broadway production of "Company," and Elaine Stritch, the show's most indelible star, in Mr. Pennebaker's documentary about the increasingly tense recording sessions for the original cast album. Pennebaker/Hegedus Films

Donn Alan Pennebaker, known as Penny to friends and colleagues, was born on July 15, 1925, in Evanston, Ill., to John Paul Pennebaker, a commercial photographer, and Lucille (Levick) Pennebaker.

He served in the Navy and studied engineering at M.I.T. and Yale. After working as an engineer for about a year, he was shown "[N.Y., N.Y.](#)," a short, impressionistic color film by his friend Francis Thompson chronicling "a day in New York," as the subtitle says.

"In about 15 minutes I saw right away that filmmaking was what I was going to do for the rest of my life," Mr. Pennebaker said in a 2006 interview about that moment.

Thompson's work motivated Mr. Pennebaker to complete the color documentary short "[Daybreak Express](#)," not quite six minutes of footage of elevated train tracks along Third Avenue in Manhattan. Opening against a blazing orange sunrise, the film is set to music by Duke Ellington.

Mr. Pennebaker would go on to work with Mr. Drew making films for Time-Life before branching out to make his own features.

His many other films include close-up looks at David Bowie ("[Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars](#)," from 1973), John Lennon ("John Lennon & the Plastic Ono Band — Live in Toronto '69") and Jane Fonda ("[Jane](#)," from 1962, when she was 25 and enduring a starring role in a flop on Broadway).

In addition to his son Frazer (a producer of many Pennebaker documentaries), Mr. Pennebaker is survived by his wife, Ms. Hegedus; seven other children, Stacy, Linley, Jojo, Chelsea, Zoe, Kit and Jane, all with the surname Pennebaker; 13 grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

Mr. Pennebaker believed that the best documentary films were those in which the filmmaker's presence is least felt.

"If you're setting up lights and tripods and you've got three assistants running around, people will want to get you out as fast as they can," Mr. Pennebaker [told \*Time\*](#) magazine in 2007. "But if you go the opposite way, if you make the camera the least important thing in the room, then it's different. I've left it on the floor. Sometimes I'll shoot with it on my lap. Other times I'll put it on a table and turn it on. You don't make it a big issue."



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