# BLUE PERIOD

## A marriage, a divorce, a renewed friendship and death

BY JANICE BLUE

I saw James Blue on television the other night. There he was, bigger than life, in his last film *The Invisible City*, giving us the hard facts on Houston's unplanned growth and housing crisis. Seventy-five hours of interviews whittled down to 60 minutes and stronger frame-by-frame than anything on *60 minutes*.

*"This poor lady here. She lives in a garage and she don't have no bathroom. She's a poor lady and she pays $17 a week. No water, no gas, no nothing."*
an ACORN worker in the Second Ward
from *The Invisible City* (1979)

If the Chamber of Commerce were to accuse James of "airing America's dirty linen in public," it won't be the first time for those words. That's exactly what the late Allen Ellender of Louisiana charged on the floor of the U. S. Senate after he saw *The March*, James' documentary on the 1963 civil rights march on Washington.

As I sat there watching images of poverty in this land of plenty and listening to James narrate in his strong, clear, dramatic voice, I found myself waiting for him to reappear on the screen. It was really nice when he did. There was a strange kind of intimacy about it all. Curled up on the couch, I felt like Lauren Bacall watching an old Humphrey Bogart film.

James would love the comparison. "I'm a frustrated actor," he'd admit on occasion. "Most directors are," he'd throw in, just to cover himself. It was more than coincidence that he had his film students at the Rice Media Center, one spring day in 1975, rehearse and shoot a scene from Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep*. It was supposed to be an exercise in lighting and staging, but James cast himself wholeheartedly in the role of Philip Marlowe, rather Humphrey Bogart.

*"Was I any good?"*
"You were terrific."
*"Do you really mean it?"*
"I really mean it."

Someone once described his profile as a "stage actor's delight – strong jaw and a nose like half a hatchet." Of his enthusiasm before a film audience, another critic recently wrote, "You had the idea he enjoyed hearing himself."

"When I think of James, I see him enjoying the *hell* out of whatever he was doing. He'd get up and say a little something before a movie at the Rice Media Center, and it would invariably make me think I was going to see one of the greatest films ever made. Never mind that he didn't always turn out to be right," recalls Jim Asker of *The Houston Post*, a Rice student during the early seventies.

James loved an audience. He missed the stage from his days as a drama student at the University of Oregon. James' father likes to tell the story of driving from Portland to Eugene, Oregon. A stranger recommended that he and his wife see *Death of a Salesman*. "They say this young kid who plays Willy Loman is better than that guy on Broadway, what's his name, Lee J. Cobb," the man said.

"Well, that young kid is our son," Harry B. Blue told the man proudly.

But James Blue's last public performance would be his most dramatic. He appeared before a group of medical students in a London hospital and told them how it felt to be told he was terminally ill with cancer. No script. No lights. No camera or tape recorder. Three weeks later, on June 14, 1980, he died.

But Bogarts and Blues don't die. We don't let them. They have too much stage presence in our lives.

*"... if some future archeo-anthropologist should take a carbon dating of his remains then the radioactive isotopes will spell out he is here now*
*give or take two minutes ... "*
from a poem by Hellar Grabbi (1965)

James was a talented filmmaker, a great documentarian and a revered teacher. He was all of these things. But I hope he is remembered as one of us, someone who lived, loved, struggled and sometimes failed. James was not a marble statue.

But I know the temptation. The first time I saw him, early in 1968, he was standing in a corridor at the Smithsonian in front of an Oriental rug exhibit with a group of male friends. From a distance, I thought, "He's the most beautiful person I've ever seen." The hair – those beautiful wild waves. To me, he looked like Michelangelo's *David*. Like many who knew him I, too, put a pedestal under this mythical sculpture. I was in awe of him. Years later, when we worked to make ours more a relationship of equals, he would sheepishly admit to a friend, "I miss the pedestal."

After the shooting of *The Big Sleep*, I remember asking James, "Now, what would that movie be like without Lauren Bacall?" I was always bringing up examples of couples that worked together. Hepburn and Tracy. Ullman and Bergman. Woodward and Newman. "Why not us?"

I was interested in making films before I met James. In 1966, I traveled abroad for one year. I wanted to go to the National Film School of Poland at Lodz, but lost my nerve – whoever heard of women directors in the early sixties? Film people that year in Europe kept saying, "You want to be an actress, not a director." In Italy, I hitchhiked to the Cinecitta Studios outside Rome to see if I could get a job on the set of *The Taming of the Shrew* and they said, "Go over to the other building. They need a stand-in for Elizabeth Taylor."

I admired James' films and wanted to work with him. My friend, Lisa Suter Taylor, now the director of the Cooper Hewitt Museum of Art, understood both the intensity and timidity with which I approached filmmaking. The first thing she told James when she heard we were getting married was, "I'm so glad Janice will finally get to make films."

"Oh no," he corrected her on the spot. "Filmmaking is my career. She's going to have to find something else. There can't be two filmmakers in the family.

I was shocked and hurt but did not make an issue of it. I thought time would change things. In the early years of our marriage I heard myself say over and over, "No one will work harder for you. Please trust me."

Then, I read *Zelda*, the biography of the wife of F. Scott Fitzgerald.

*"Scott had very fixed ideas of what a woman's place should be in a marriage: "I would like you to think of my interests. That is your primary concern, because I am the one to steer the course, the pilot."*
*What then, Zelda asked him, did he want her to do.*
*"I want you to stop writing fiction." He could not tolerate another encroachment on his literary territory...*
*Scott wanted her to be what he called a "complementary intelligence." That was not at all what she wanted to be...*
Zelda, p. 274

For a good while afterwards, I signed my letters Zelda Blue.

But we made some progress. James bought me a Super 8 camera on our trip to Japan for EXPO '70 and I started shooting vacation films and home movies. One early documentary stands out. To get James to take a break from his film commitments and help with a house project, I shot a film of him building a sundeck on our house in Los Angeles. It was the only way I could think of to get that deck built.

I took all my Super 8 gear and tapes and joined James in Kenya in 1972. He was three months into a documentary on the Boran, a traditional tribe experiencing the conflicts of modernization. I was ready to do a "home movie." I went off with my own guide and translator on foot and went out of my way not to get involved in the 16mm project that James and David Mc Dougall were shooting. But as we compared notes at the campsite, two themes emerged. They were telling their story through three generations of men in the village and I was filming the women. James told me the women didn't want to be filmed. "They curse us and shout, 'May the wild beast strangle you.' "

It was true. In this traditional society, the women could not relate to western men, especially those wearing earphones and carrying a backpack with a 16mm Eclair rigged to it. I discovered that being a woman was the greatest asset in documenting the women in the tribe. They would freely talk about childbirth – in fact, they would squat down and demonstrate how midwives assist the mothers, they would talk about their acceptance of their husbands taking younger wives as they got older and were "used up," and they showed me how they perfumed their bodies with a special incense before lovemaking.

When I bought this incense at the market (as a souvenir, of course), the women giggled. Even though I was almost 30 and most of the women married in their teens, they regarded me as a young bride. They would joke and tease me, "Are you married to the tall, skinny one (David) or the old, fat one (James)?" James was in his early forties at the time but they called him "jarso," meaning gray-haired. They called me "elephant feet" and "ostrich legs." They had an uncanny way of zeroing in on your most distinctive features.

My Boran experience led me to do films about women and to join the feminist movement. For the next two years as I showed my films around the country, I tried to help other women overcome F-stop anxiety. In the summer of 1973, I was invited to Arden House, a week-long seminar where filmmakers met with public television executives. It was the first time I ever got to ask, "Is it okay if I bring my husband along?"

Choosing to do women's films took the pressure off our mutual careers but I always had the feeling James and his friends looked on it as the ladies auxiliary of filmmaking. He encouraged and helped me organize a film festival of women directors at the Rice Media Center. However, when the 12 Sunday nights rolled around, neither he nor his colleague joined the packed audience. They never failed to attend the "real films" that were shown there the rest of the week.

Around this time, Estelle Changas, Kay Loveland and I were turned down for our proposal to do a documentary on Sissy Farenthold's 1974 race for Texas governor. Screenwriter Eleanor Perry wrote our letter of recommendation and James thought our proposal was one of the best he had ever read. He loaned us the equipment after Kay and Estelle decided to put their own money into it.

James had a sense of justice and for the first time was beginning to understand the problems women filmmakers faced. He freely admitted that godfathers like Colin Young helped his career. In 1975, after I produced *Just Like a Woman*, a magazine pilot for KPRC-TV, James told me to apply to the National Film School of England which Young now headed. "You need the training. In two years you'll be at the networks," he said. But Young rejected my student application and the pilot I worked on for five months didn't get funded. It was a low period. We separated and I went from film to newsprint. I guess I have Colin Young to thank for *Breakthrough*.

A year ago, two years after our divorce, James and I had lunch together. He talked about his latest project, *The Invisible City*, a film he was making with his friend, architect Adele Santos. As we were leaving our table, I turned to him and said, "I'm glad you finally learned to trust women," pleased that I could not only say it but mean it.

*Breakthrough* ran a story with dozens of video images when their film came out (September 1979). I told someone on the paper that this story showed as much about the quality of our relationship as it did about Houston's deteriorating housing situation.

*"Their shared pasts did not give them grounds for the future, both had admitted that, but it gave them an intimacy that was immune to further alteration."*
Zelda, p. 351

James and I met and married on the crest of feminism's second wave and we were tossed into the seventies. My emerging feminism was not the only obstacle in our path. I had to deal with the extreme possessiveness of many of James' male friends. Our marriage was a threat to their relationship. Several of them went out their way to advise him against marriage. I confronted one of them who simply said, "Well, we're just thinking of Jim's film career. We think getting married will take away from his projects. Why don't you wait until after he does his Mid-

West feature?"

Reading *Zelda* helped me figure out their attitudes, so alien to the way our parents and my friends reacted to our relationship.

*Scott said that he realized his friends were unanimous in advising him against marriage to Zelda and that he was used to it.*

*"No personality as strong as Zelda's could go without getting criticism...I fell in love with her courage, her sincerity, and her flaming self-respect, and it's these things I'd believe in even if the whole world indulged in wild suspicions that she wasn't all that she should be...I love her and that's the beginning and end of everything ... "*

Zelda, p. 60

On our wedding day, the best man cried. I was deeply touched. Two years later, he told me why: "I thought I'd never see James again.

For our wedding waltz, the Georgetown band played – what else – *Love is Blue.* My mother cried as I danced in her 1935 Harlow satin wedding gown. George Stevens, Jr. filmed us in Super 8. James and I were married in Washington, D. C. on Thanksgiving Day 1968, and soon after, moved to Houston. Our packed VW van was as full of dreams as possessions. It was our covered wagon. We camped along the way and slept under the stars – like the pioneers or so we thought.

I left behind the American Film Institute and James finished editing a documentary modestly-titled *A Few Notes on Our Food Problem.* It was two years of his life on a 40-minute reel. When it was nominated for an Academy Award the next year, I remember the filmmaker Charles Guggenheim teasing James, "You'll never win an Oscar with a title like that." He didn't but Charlie did that year for *Robert Kennedy Remembered.*

James' film career during the sixties could have taken him to Hollywood. After all, he was only 30 when he directed a feature film *The Olive Trees of Justice,* which was awarded the Critics Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1962. A *New York Times* review praised the film: "Mr. Blue should definitely be making films somewhere." And Pauline Kael, the former *New Yorker* critic lamented, "There is little interest in the work of gifted, intelligent men outside the industry like James Blue who are attempting to make inexpensive feature films as honestly and and independently as they can."

Whether James turned his back on the industry or they backed him up against the wall is a mystery. I know his experience as assistant director on the film *Hawaii* had something to do with his decision. Even though *Olive Trees* was made in the midst of the Algerian Revolution, the experience of working in Algeria with friends from his Paris film school days was less stressful than directing an ASC (American Soceity of Cinematographers) camera crew off in Tahiti. "I know they were thinking that (producer) Walter Mirisch was bringing in some boy-genius, so they were ready to run over me," he once told me. He said it was a "near mutiny" until Mirisch sent back accolades on the first rushes. I must admit I never did see *Hawaii* but as James used to remind all of us, "The first four and a half minutes are mine."

His friends would continue to wonder why he gave up Hollywood for Houston. George Stevens, Jr., the former director of the American Film Institute, said James was "the youngest person ever to retire from film directing." The late Bob Hughes, another filmmaker, pressed him about not doing features. James wrote me that evening from London (January 2, 1972): "I start feeling guilty for not living up to his and other standards of successful filmmakers making films...Then, a little switch goes click in my head and I know that I have to live out my own adventure my own way, and I am the only one who can do it – so my courage picks up..."

James loved the idea of coming to Texas. So much was already going on on both coasts. They were covered, so to speak. In January 1969, Texas was new territory for his ideas about film and a film culture. His philosophy was quite simple. He wanted to see film become "a democratic art." In a eulogy at James' funeral service, Richard Blue said, "My brother was a democrat, in the best meaning of that word." James felt film should be "as accessible as canvas and a paint brush," – as inexpensive as possible. Super 8, he believed, was the key to the film revolution.

He could never quite accept the elitism of film and the notion that only those with money and big budgets should shoot them. I don't know if James originated the following thought, but I heard him say it so many times that I feel he is the author: "We live in a new age of scribes. In the early days, people went to scribes, calligraphers, high priests and shamans to have their letters written. Today, people go to filmmakers to do their films. In the 20th century, we risk becoming a society of visual illiterates."

Fortunately for James, he met Dr. Gerald O'Grady, a medieval scholar and a 20th century thinker, someone influenced by Marshall Mcluhan and someone who shared James' vision. Gerry interested the art patrons Jean and Dominique de Menil in backing a media center for Houston. The de Menils generously endowed it for five years (1969-1974) – first at the University of St. Thomas, then, at Rice.

It seemed like the golden age of media. Directors came with their films. Years before Donahue taped his first show, James would run up and down the aisles at the Media Center, involving the audience in a dialog with a visiting director – Roberto Rossellini, King Vidor, Francis Ford Coppola, Shirley Clarke, Milos Forman, Ivan Passeur, George Stevens, Sr. Later, in California there would be Jean Renoir, Frederico Fellini and others.

James was inquisitive, curious about everything and had a kinetic energy that would not allow him to sit and read for hours. So he learned by asking questions, making relationships, and conducting interviews. In a tribute to James in this issue (see page 24), Gerry O'Grady says, "He learned more from conversation than anyone I've ever met." James made conversation an art.

"If I learned anything from James Blue," a friend recently wrote me, "it was about the intensity of enjoyment possible in one's work." While a virtue, it would annoy some of the people who worked around him. He was always the first one at the Media Center in the morning and the last to leave at night.

A great challenge was to get him to take a vacation. In one interview before our marriage, he told a reporter, "I've never learned to take a vacation. I mean I take a month or so off and I think about one thing – work. I wish I were working. That's the only time I really feel good."

At our wedding dinner, I asked him where we were going for our honeymoon. He drew a blank – obviously, the matter had not even occurred to him. Then he turned to his best man who, in turn, drew a map to Mte. St. Agathe, a ski area in Quebec's Laurentian Mountains. It was the first and last time we ever skied together.

He denied himself but he never learned to say no to others. If a student asked him to critique a film, if someone wanted to tour the Rice Media Center, if he was asked to judge a film festival in Tours, France, give a lecture in Juneau, Alaska, preside over a conference in Canberra, Australia, or teach a course at Yale, Columbia, the Museum of Modern Art or the National Film School of England, he would do them all.

There was a dark side to this restless creativity. He was wearing himself out. That was the price for people pulling you in all directions and permitting it to happen.

I was surprised to hear James quoted in an interview saying, "I wish I were in Buffalo more often and I could settle in. I'm over-committed to too many areas and projects." (*Spree*, Winter 1979) The writer, George Sax, observed that the Victorian gray-frame house James occupied for over a year still looked like he was moving in. "Blue seems to be caught between two simultaneous flight patterns, both coming to roost and taking off at the same time."

There is always the unfinished business when someone dies suddenly. I will always be grateful for his phone call to me last Christmas before he left for a teaching post in England. We talked for almost an hour. At one point, I said to him, "Let me tape this . You're making me feel so good." Those documentary instincts still intact, I recorded the conversation.

He was full of compliments about *Breakthrough*, particularly last fall's election issue. "You've got something that stirs things-up. Texas is ready for it. And the quality of journalism is way beyond all the alternative sixties hype. You're creating an alternative that is a force... You did it on your own with the help of a lot of friends, but you organized it. I have total admiration for you, Janice, and I'll help you in any way I can...If I could come back and deliver newspapers for you, I would do that, too."

I'm glad we were able to re-establish our friendship in the last year. Our marriage was over, but what we had started building was a true, equal friendship – a rare thing in or outside a marriage.

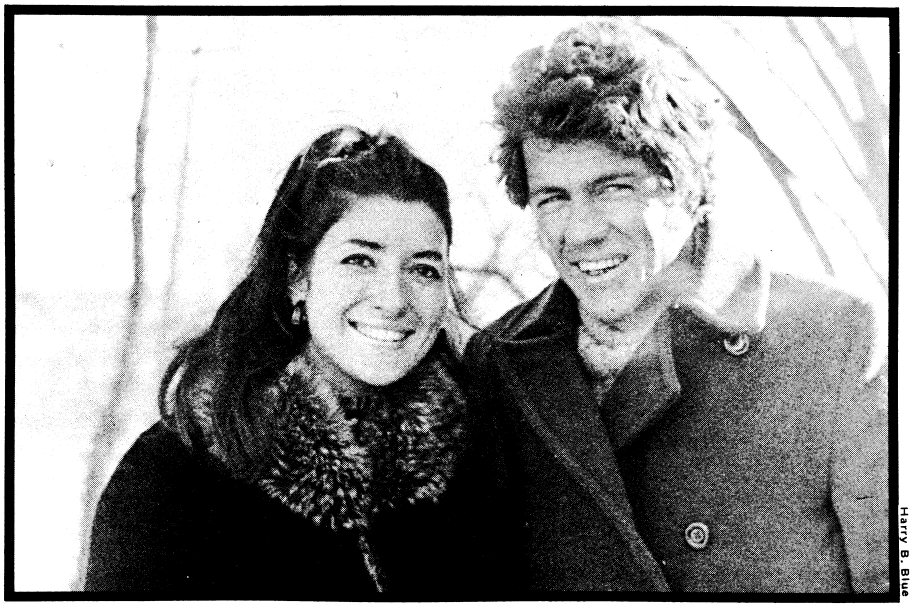
James was an infuriating person, self-absorbed, loathe to accept criticism, autocratic. He was also one of the innocents of the world with a breath-taking sweetness and guilelessness.

I will always remember our first date – which I had arranged. James was over a half hour late and I was sure I had made a big mistake. Finally, I heard his steps outside my Georgetown apartment. I was ready to apologize for my boldness, when he smiled and said, "Well, do you like my neck tie?"

All I could do was stare at the busy red and gold paisley design while he finished his sentence. "The guys in the editing room picked it out for me. They thought you'd like it."

I wish I could say I'd framed it like Cecil Beaton did with the rose that Greta Garbo kissed, but I didn't. I sold it at a garage sale in 1973.

I let go of a real treasure.



Harry B. Blue

*Leaving Washington for Houston, Janice and James Blue, December 1968:* **"Our packed VW van was as full of dreams as possessions . . ."**