

THE GREAT FLOOD

Film by Bill Morrison, Music by Bill Frisell
An Icarus Films Release

"Critic's Pick; Sublime!" –The New York Times

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LOGLINE

The Great Flood is a film-music collaboration by Bill Morrison and Bill Frisell based on, and inspired by, the catastrophic Mississippi River Flood of 1927 and the ensuing transformation of American society.

SYNOPSIS

The Mississippi River Flood of 1927 was the most destructive river flood in American history. In the spring of 1927, the river broke out of its banks in 145 places and inundated 27,000 square miles to a depth of up to 30 feet. Part of its enduring legacy was the mass exodus of displaced sharecroppers. Musically, the "Great Migration" of rural southern blacks to Northern cities saw the Delta Blues electrified and reinterpreted as the Chicago Blues, Rhythm and Blues, and Rock and Roll.

Using minimal text and no spoken dialog, filmmaker Bill Morrison and composer/guitarist Bill Frisell have created a powerful portrait of a seminal moment in American history through a collection of silent images matched to a searing original soundtrack.

Music performed by Bill Frisell, Guitar; Ron Miles, Trumpet; Tony Scherr, Bass; Guitar Kenny Wollesen, Drums.



ABOUT THE FILM

The Mississippi River Flood of 1927 was the most destructive river flood in American history. In the spring of 1927, the river broke out of its earthen embankments in 145 places and inundated 27,000 square miles. Part of its legacy was the forced exodus of displaced sharecroppers, who left plantation life and migrated to Northern cities. Musically, the Great Migration fueled the evolution of acoustic blues, including artists who witnessed the flood such as Charley Patton (*High Water Everywhere*) and Memphis Minnie (*When the Levee Breaks*), as well as to electric blues bands that thrived in cities like Memphis, Detroit and Chicago, becoming the wellspring for R&B, rock, and developing jazz styles.

Filmmaker Bill Morrison first met Bill Frisell while Morrison was working in the kitchen of the Village Vanguard in the early 1990s. *The Great Flood* is their third film project together and their first full-length work.

Much of Morrison's work in *The Great Flood* is based on actual footage of the 1927 flood, including source material from the Fox Movietone Newsfilm Library and the National Archives. All film documenting this catastrophe was shot on volatile nitrate stock, and what footage remains is pock marked and partially deteriorated. The degraded film stock figures prominently in Morrison's aesthetic with distorted images suggesting different planes of reality in the story—those lived, dreamt, or remembered. In *The Great Flood*, the bubbles and washes of decaying footage is associated with the destructive force of rising water, the film stock seeming to have been bathed in the same water as the images it depicts. These layers of visual information, paired with Frisell's music, become contemporary again. *The Great Flood's* imagery is visible through history's prism, one that dances with the sound of modernity.

For the score, Bill Frisell has drawn upon his wide musical palette, informed by elements of American roots music but refracted through his uniquely evocative approach that highlights essential qualities of his thematic focus. For *The Great Flood*, Frisell performs on guitar with Tony Scherr on bass, Kenny Wollesen on drums and Ron Miles on trumpet.

In the spring of 2011, as the Mississippi River was again flooding to levels not seen since 1927, Bill Morrison, Bill Frisell, and the band traveled together from New Orleans, through Vicksburg, Clarksdale, Memphis, Davenport, Iowa, St. Louis and Chicago bringing *The Great Flood* home again.

Q&A WITH FILMMAKER BILL MORRISON

By Livia Bloom, Icarus Films
May 28, 2013

LIVIA BLOOM: *What brought you to this project, The Great Flood?*

BILL MORRISON: I was first introduced to the subject by John M. Barry's account of the 1927 Mississippi River Flood, *Rising Tide*. I had been looking to collaborate with Bill Frisell on a long-form project, and was searching for a topic that would hold historic and artistic interest for both of us. At a dinner party in Baton Rouge the year after [Hurricane] Katrina, I was told about Mr. Barry's book. Soon after reading it, I approached Frisell with the idea.

Where did you source the incredible historical footage in The Great Flood?

The opening shot to *The Great Flood* is a CGI visualization of the 1927 Mississippi River Flood terrain that was produced by the Illinois eDream Institute, NCSA at University of Illinois. The other footage came from archives all over the country, including the National Archives, the Library of Congress, Fox Movietone Newsreel outtakes from MIRC University of South Carolina, University of Georgia Libraries, the Hoover Presidential Library and stock houses like Global Imageworks, Historic Films and Streamline Films.

We looked at a ton of footage—I don't know how many hours, or even if it's instructive to break it down in terms of hours. I do know that we only used footage for which there existed a film master, and that this was the first time any of this footage was scanned to an HD platform. For some of the footage for which there were no reference copies, it was probably the first time this footage had been viewed since it was shot.

What surprised you most about the footage you found?

I still find it shocking that the some of the footage even exists. Firstly, it must have been very difficult to travel in and out of the area, carrying heavy film equipment in perilous conditions, while shooting 35mm nitrate negative. It's also shocking that what was shot actually depicts the events as described in accounts: sharecroppers being held to work on the levees at gunpoint, the terrible conditions of the levee camps, politicians manipulating media for personal gain, towns being dug out after the flood, and perhaps most amazingly, African Americans boarding northbound trains to leave the South for good. These images depict real events as they were happening. I find it just amazing.

How did the film's musical score come into being?

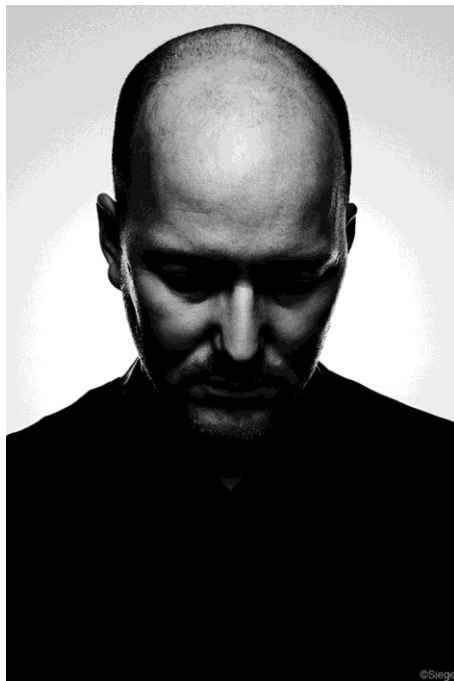
Again, *The Great Flood* was always conceived as a collaboration with Bill Frisell. So the choice of composer pre-dated, and informed, the choice of subject matter. This is a very rare relationship to music in film. I first heard the themes Bill had written when he performed them at the Village Vanguard in April of 2011.

The next month, I went on tour with the band as they made their way up the river, playing gigs in New Orleans, Oxford, Memphis, St. Louis, Iowa City, and Chicago.

As fate would have it, the Mississippi reached levels during those weeks that hadn't been seen since 1927. We got to experience what it was like to stand on a levee and wonder if it would be able to hold the approaching crest. It was a quiet, creeping, and insidious type of anxiety that was shared by all citizens of the region, and I feel it informed Bill's music. That tour also gave me a lot of time to discuss the music with Bill, and ample material with which to shape a rough cut of the score from the various recordings of sound checks and performances that were made by our sound engineer Claudia Englehart along the way. As Bill re-wrote the final version and I cut my first draft, we both worked from the same rough edit of recordings that were made during that tour.

In September 2011 we premiered the live piece at the University of Illinois' Krannert Center. We continued to tweak it throughout its touring life for much of the next year, and finally arrived at the version that you see today.

ABOUT BILL MORRISON



Over the past twenty years, **Bill Morrison (director, editor)** has built a filmography of more than thirty projects that have been presented in theaters, museums, galleries and concert halls worldwide. His work often makes use of rare archival footage in which forgotten film imagery is reframed as part of our collective mythology.

Morrison's work often combines archival material with original footage to create unique visual tapestries that are set to contemporary music. He has collaborated with some of the most influential composers of our time, including John Adams, Laurie Anderson, Gavin Bryars, Dave Douglas, Michael Gordon, Henryk Górecki, Bill Frisell, Vijay Iyer, Jóhann Jóhannsson, David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Steve Reich, among others. *Decasia*, his feature length collaboration with composer Michael Gordon, was described by J. Hoberman in the *Village Voice* as "the most widely acclaimed American avant-garde film of the fin-de-siècle."

Morrison's films are in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, The Nederlands Filmmuseum, and The Library of Congress. He is a Guggenheim fellow and has received the Alpert Award for the Arts, an NEA Creativity Grant, a Creative Capital grant, and a

fellowship from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts. His work with Ridge Theater has been recognized with two Bessie awards and an Obie Award. *Spark of Being*, his adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* with composer Dave Douglas was recently honored as the Best Experimental / Independent Film of 2011 by the Los Angeles Film Critics Association.

"One of the most adventurous American filmmakers" —Robert Koehler, *Variety*

ABOUT BILL FRISELL



Described as being "at the very epicenter of modern American music" (BBC), Bill Frisell's career as a guitarist and composer has spanned more than 35 years and over 250 recordings, including 40 of his own albums. He has collaborated with a wide range of artists, filmmakers and legendary musicians, but it is his work as a leader that has garnered increasing attention and accolades.

Frisell's latest recording, *Big Sur*, is his debut for Okeh/Sony Masterworks and features music commissioned by the Monterey Jazz Festival composed in the spectacular and mysterious environment of Glen Deven Ranch in Big Sur. "*Big Sur* is more than just a musical recording. It's a sonic novel—instrumental storytelling of the highest caliber delivered by an amazing storyteller. It's Bill Frisell at his best." —*DownBeat*

The album features strings/drums instrumentation in a newly-assembled quintet made up of Bill's long-time musical associates from his groups The 858 Quartet and Beautiful Dreamers: Jenny Scheinman, Eyvind Kang, Hank Roberts and Rudy Royston.

Frisell's recording catalog has been cited by *Downbeat* as "the best recorded output of the decade." It includes his recent albums for Savoy: *Sign of Life* with the 858 Quartet, his trio recording *Beautiful Dreamers*, and his interpretations of the music of John Lennon, *All We Are Saying*.

Frisell's Nonesuch output spans a wide ranging wellspring of musical expression, from original Buster Keaton film scores to arrangements of music for extended ensembles with horns and strings (the Grammy-nominated *History/Mystery*, the Grammy-winning *Unspeakable*, *Blues Dream* and *This Land*); interpretations of work by other classic and contemporary American composers (*Have a Little Faith*); collaborations with the acclaimed rhythm section of bassist Viktor Krauss and drummer Jim Keltner (*Gone*, *Just Like a Train*, *Good Dog*, *Happy Man*). Other releases include an album with Nashville

musicians (*Nashville*), the solo album *Ghost Town*, an album of Frisell's arrangements of songs by Elvis Costello and Burt Bacharach (*The Sweetest Punch*), two trio albums with jazz legends Dave Holland/Elvin Jones and Ron Carter/Paul Motian; and a collection of traditional American folk songs and original compositions inspired by them, *The Willies*. The Grammy-nominated *The Intercontinentals* is an album that combines Frisell's own brand of American roots music with the influences of Brazilian, Greek, and Malian sounds. His album *Disfarmer* was inspired by the work of the mid-century rural Arkansas photographer Mike Disfarmer.

Floratone is Frisell's cooperative group of the same name featuring collaborators Matt Chamberlain, Lee Townsend and Tucker Martine with whom he has recorded two albums. Their debut album was described as a "studio-collaged musical masterpiece" (*Guitar Player*) and "some of the most riveting music to emerge this year" (*NPR*). *Silent Comedy* (Tzadik) is a solo project produced by long-time musical colleague John Zorn. The music is filled with complex harmonies, delicate phrasing and wild noises.

Recognized as one of America's 21 most vital and productive performing artists, Frisell was named an inaugural Doris Duke Artist in April 2012. He is also a recipient of grants from United States Artists, Meet the Composer, and National Performance Network. Currently he is the Guest Curator for the Roots of Americana series at Jazz at Lincoln Center and Resident Artistic Director at San Francisco Jazz.

"After decades of trodding such a brave and singular path, maybe Frisell deserves his own genre. How about 'friz'?" *Jazz Times*

ABOUT THE BAND

A Denver, Colorado native, **Ron Miles (cornet)** has played with Bill Frisell in a number of recording and live situations including his current quintet; their celebrated quartet from the mid-nineties groups that perform in Frisell's collaborative multi-media pieces with artist Jim Woodring's *Mysterio Sympatico* and *Probability Cloud*, his septet and with the group that interpreted Frisell's arrangements of songs by Elvis Costello and Burt Bacharach. He has appeared on such recordings as *Blues Dream*, *Quartet* and *The Sweetest Punch*. Miles has recorded as a leader for Gramavision with two releases, *Woman's Day* and *My Cruel Heart*. More recently he recorded a CD, entitled *Heaven*, a duo recording for Sterling Circle Records on which Bill is his guest. His albums *Laughing Barrel* and *Stone/Blossom* feature his quartet with Brandon Ross, Anthony Cox and Rudy Royston. Miles also plays with clarinetist Don Byron, vocalist Madeleine Peyroux, and has worked with drummer Ginger Baker and guitarist Charlie Hunter. He also serves as Coordinator of Jazz Studies at Metropolitan State College in Denver, Colorado.

Born in New Haven CT, **Tony Scherr (guitar, bass)** is one of the most in-demand sidemen in New York City. As a bassist, guitarist, or singer, he has worked with Bill Frisell Trio, Sexmob, John Lurie's Lounge Lizards, Willie Nelson, Rickie Lee Jones, Ani DiFranco, Jason Collett (Broken Social Scene), Rufus Wainwright, Norah Jones, Madeleine Peyroux, Jesse Harris, Richard Julian, Sasha Dobson, Shawn Colvin, The Abrams Brothers, and Teddy Thompson, among others. Scherr has made two records of his own music, both released on Smells Like Records: *Come Around* (2001) and *Twist in the Wind* (2008). His current band, the Tony Scherr Trio, with Anton Fier on drums and Rob Jost on bass, has been playing various steady Monday night residencies at different venues in NYC since 2006. They currently play every Monday at The Living Room, where they recently recorded a live album. "Tony Scherr has a few different profiles as a musician, each of them sharp-honed...and generously melding into the others." –The New York Times

Kenny Wollesen (drums, vibes) is a ubiquitous presence on the New York downtown scene. His projects include collaborating with Cyro Baptista on the Sound of Community Project, playing bass drum with the marching band Himalayas, playing vibes in a plethora of John Zorn bands, playing drums regularly with Sexmob, Love Trio, Bill Frisell, U-Roy and he is a founder member of Wollesonic Laboratories.



IN THE PRESS

LOS ANGELES TIMES

By Gary Goldstein, January 30, 2014, 3:40 p.m.

Film Review: An evocative look at "The Great Flood" of 1927

In The Great Flood, experimental filmmaker Bill Morrison assembles a collage of silent, archival footage of the devastating flood along the Mississippi River in 1927.

"The Great Flood," an all-archival clip documentary revisiting the events and effects of the devastating Mississippi River flood of 1927, is by turns hypnotic, playful, wildly evocative and even a bit trippy. But most of all it's a unique, highly immersing audio-visual experience that would be as at home in a museum as it is in a movie theater — and that's a first-order compliment.

Experimental filmmaker Bill Morrison (*Decasia*, *The Miners' Hymns*) has masterfully assembled a collage of silent, monochrome archival footage of this largely forgotten catastrophe — call it the Hurricane Katrina of its day — in which the Mississippi's levees broke in 145 places, engulfing 27,000 square miles of land from southern Illinois to New Orleans. It resulted in the Flood Control Act of 1928 and the widespread migration of African Americans, many of whom were sharecroppers, to Chicago and other Northern cities.

Morrison organizes his footage, much of which is decayed in ways that lend the picture a vibrant, strangely artistic glow, into mostly successive chapters: "Swollen Tributaries," "Levees," "Evacuation," *"Aftermath"* and so on. These clips provide a rare and riveting snapshot of a place and time — how people lived, worked, traveled, dressed (boy, were hats popular!) and, in this case, survived. Perhaps most notable is the era's clear racial divide.

Memorably enhancing the movie's time capsule vibe is a bravura sequence that whips and zips its way through an entire 1927 Sears Roebuck catalog.

Guitarist-composer Bill Frisell's wall-to-wall, bluesy-jazzy soundtrack beautifully reflects and unifies the visuals while also helping to personalize this distinct endeavor. It's a terrific achievement.

LA WEEKLY

By Chuck Wilson, January 27, 2014

Film Review: "The Great Flood"

In the spring of 1926, it began to rain in the Deep South, and it kept on raining, for months, in a relentless torrent that must have felt biblical. For *The Great Flood*, his gorgeous new found-footage documentary, filmmaker Bill Morrison has plumbed America's newsreel archives to stitch together a visual collage of a flood that ultimately submerged 27,000 miles of land, displacing 1 million people. Here are sights few alive have seen: black sharecroppers toiling in the cotton fields of the early 1920s (though in their look these scenes could well be the slave years); African-American men being forced at gunpoint to shore up the levees; tents lining the coast for miles, the biggest campout in U.S. history. And there are the floodwaters themselves, turbulent, terrifying, insanely beautiful. All of this ancient footage is silent, of course, yet *The Great Flood* is an aural feast. Jazz guitarist/composer Bill Frisell has created a score steeped in the blues tradition of the region, which means that its inspiration comes from the faces onscreen — mournful yes, but also, amazingly, full of humor and joy. Destined for a long life in museums and history classes alike, this is cinema as art, and a classic.

VARIETY

By Ronnie Scheib, January 8, 2014

Film Review: "The Great Flood"

"The Great Flood," the latest documentary from found-footage impresario Bill Morrison, revisits the catastrophic 1927 event that inundated an area of some 27,000 miles along the Mississippi. Morrison incorporates nitrate deterioration into his work's very structure, so that the washed-out, shimmery grayness of the floodlands seems to penetrate the film stock itself. The water imagery, with its sinuous flow, casual surrealism and dreamlike, ominous quality, underscored by jazz guitarist Bill Frisell's bluesy, elegiac score, slowly reveals a racial divide eerily similar to the one informing Spike Lee's magisterial Katrina doc "When the Levees Broke." An art piece, a sociopolitical document and a musical meditation, "Flood" should strike chords with niche audiences.

For much of the film, newsreel cameras capture the flood's devastation. In some places, only the tops of trees visibly break the gleaming gray expanse of the water. In other places, partially submerged businesses still function just above the waterline. A bedraggled dog finds precarious purchase on a floating piece of tin; a couple waves from atop their car moments before it is swept downstream; tent cities spring up on isolated hillocks.

In a curious insert, Morrison sets countless pages of a 1927 Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalog flashing by in dizzying, rapid-fire succession. It's a pyrotechnic display of the casual affluence reigning elsewhere during these Roaring '20s, and a more creative, contemporaneous indicator of the times than seen in most era-in-a-nutshell montages.

Each section of the film, introduced by chapter headings and separated by fades-to-black, inches toward its own disintegration as the film stock becomes progressively distorted, stippled or bordered with black striations. It's no surprise that the director of "Decasia," that acclaimed paean to the beauty of decomposing silver nitrate, should be fascinated by the imagery's erosion, but in this context, the film's ability to resist the forces of entropy takes on a peculiar mournful resonance.

Although almost entirely exposition-free, with only the scantest introductory historical note, a submerged narrative begins to surface. Differences in how blacks and whites are treated accumulate a collective weight: Rowboats rescue white families one at a time while blacks are picked up en masse, and accommodations for evacuees differ significantly.

A section titled "Sharecroppers" follows black field workers through the entire process of cotton harvesting — picking cotton overseen by white men on horses, riding in wagons full of bulging sacks, and manually rolling heavy bales onto and off ships. Another segment, "Levees," shows blacks forced at gunpoint to endlessly fill up sandbags at riverbanks in a futile attempt to hold back the tide. The visits of various portly, cigar-smoking politicians — among them a post-presidential William Howard Taft, hobnobbing with wizened black survivors for photo ops — plays like a caricature of things to come.

The flooding of the cotton fields and utter destruction of poorly constructed homes triggered a mass migration of blacks from the South to the North; extended clips show them loading their few salvageable possessions onto railroad freight cars and flatbeds. The film ends with a long parade of African-Americans, spiffy in their stylish Sunday best, exiting a Northern church, far from the scruffy poverty down South.

Morrison has always closely collaborated with musicians, but here the helmer goes one better, making music the ultimate product of the Great Flood. The film's intricate sound/image mix (conceptualized during Morrison and Frisell's voyage down a providentially swollen Mississippi) comes full circle with the inclusion of footage of indomitable black musicians, their names spelled out onscreen, strumming guitars or pounding pianos in makeshift camps, while Frisell's score incorporates the profound changes jazz would undergo on its voyage North.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Steve Dollar, January 8, 2014

Film Review: "The Great Flood"

Archival wizard Bill Morrison's latest film finds lyricism in disaster: the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. The event has been memorialized in many songs, so it's fitting that the filmmaker collaborates with jazz guitarist Bill Frisell, whose droplet-like notes are well-suited to the theme. The music provides an analog for the grainy celluloid images of a catastrophe that changed the country. Also showing is Mr. Morrison's 2002 "Decasia," composed from decayed found footage dating to the silent film era, which was recently added to the National Film Registry.

THE DAILY BEAST

By Marlow Stern, January 6, 2014

"Hauntingly Poetic Documentary Recounts the Worst Flood in U.S. History "

Bill Morrison's documentary chronicles the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 by stitching together lost footage of the historic disaster into an elegiac visual poem.

In the coming months, much ink will be spilled over Noah, filmmaker Darren Aronofsky's \$130 million religious epic depicting chapters 6-9 in the Book of Genesis—a catastrophic 370-day flood that God unleashed upon the earth to punish "the wickedness of man," with the aim of beginning anew using the microcosm of Noah's ark.

But a new, decidedly less CGI-heavy film chronicling the most devastating flood in U.S. history—a flood that actually happened—will quietly hit theaters this week, and is worthy of your eyeballs.

Directed by experimental filmmaker Bill Morrison, *The Great Flood* documents the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, the most destructive flood in U.S. history that killed 246 people across seven states and left more than 1 million homeless. After heavy rainfall during the summer of 1926, most of the Mississippi River's tributaries had reached their capacity and, in early 1927, the river breached its levees in 145 locations, flooding 27,000 square miles from Cairo, Illinois, to New Orleans, Louisiana, and inundating hundreds of towns. The flood caused more than \$400 million in damage (\$5.4 billion today).

Morrison's film consists almost entirely of recovered black-and-white footage shot of the actual flood, with celebrated jazz guitarist Bill Frisell's moody, minor chord-heavy score laid over it (there is no diegetic sound, just Frisell's bluesy tunes, which coalesce with the haunting imagery). The footage, shot entirely on 35mm nitrate negative, was obtained from archives all over the country, including the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Hoover Presidential Library, and various stock houses. Much of it has

never been seen before. And, since the film stock is pockmarked and deteriorated—likely due to the flood itself—the bubbly, degraded footage creates a hypnagogic and, at times, photonegative effect.

The film opens with a CGI recreation of the flood, featuring aerial shots of the devastation, filmed in stark black-and-white. Entire areas are blanketed with water as far as the eye can see—that is, until you spot the occasional rooftop or tree poking up from the deluge. Then, the archival black-and-white footage kicks in of rural Mississippi prior to the flood—tight shots of African-American sharecroppers, including men, women, and awfully young children, feverishly picking cotton while an imposing white foreman on horseback looks on. In one unforgettable shot, a mother and her young boy, who can't be older than seven or eight, are seen hauling gigantic canvas bags of cotton, bigger than even their own bodies, and awkwardly smiling at the camera. Later, scores of black men are roll giant bushels of cotton onto a steamboat. The men are, amazingly, captured from a variety of different angles, from bird's eye to eye-level to low-angle shots.

There is no text in Morrison's film save placards—white text against a black background—that serve as chapters. The "Swollen Tributaries" segment displays footage of the rising Allegheny, Illinois, and Cumberland Rivers in mid-to-late 1926, which resulted in substantial flooding. There are stunning, Malick-esque close-ups of rain beating down leaves, soil eroding, and trees and homes being swallowed up by the vicious tide. A line of Model T's is pictured with water up to the windshields, while a man clutches a tree for dear life.

The Great Flood is packed with poignant imagery. Hundreds of black sharecroppers are captured digging up and fixing levees at gunpoint; horse-drawn carriages (paging de Blasio) powering through a flooded, house-lined street; schoolhouses submerged in water; a middle-aged black woman breastfeeding her baby aboard a handmade evacuation raft; a wide, static shot of cattle herders marching an entire horde of cattle through the flood, with water up to the cattle's snouts and lassoes around their necks; and shots juxtaposing the (mostly black) farmhands traveling to refugee camps on makeshift barges with all their belongings with those of the (all-white) gentry clad in their Sunday best looking mighty inconvenienced while waiting for the railroad train to arrive and take them to safety.

The most infuriating section is titled "Politicians," and focuses on Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, Secretary of War Dwight F. Davis, and Governor of Pennsylvania Gifford Pinchot first surveying the damage by speeding train, peering through sets of binoculars while casually puffing away at cigarettes and pipes in dapper three-piece suits, and later smiling for ridiculous photo-ops in front of groups of soiled, poor white children and elderly black women at refugee camps. In another

scene, the pols casually look on—again, in immaculate suits and trilby/boater hats—as a bunch of muddy, overall-wearing black sharecroppers fix the levees. Politicians, they're just like us!

But the film ends on a positive note with The Great Migration—scores of African-Americans boarding railroad trains packed with all their belongings and riding off to the north, where they settled in cities like Detroit, Memphis, and Chicago, spreading jazz and blues music there (which eventually evolved into R&B and rock 'n' roll). The film's final shots are set in Missouri and Chicago as blues musicians Big Bill Broonzy, Son House, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Robert Lockwood Jr. are seen playing slide guitar as a group of black men and women dance in ecstasy to the music. By book-ending the film with depressing Jim Crow-era footage of Mississippi and shots of ecstatic guitar playing, Morrison's film suggests that the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 was, without question, a blessing in disguise for many African-Americans.

When recently asked what new ideas or emotions his film offers, 12 Years A Slave filmmaker Steve McQueen said, "I was just interested in telling the truth by visualizing it. Visualization of this narrative hasn't been done like this before, and I think that's the thing. I mean, some images have never been seen before. I needed to see them. It's very important. I think that's why cinema's so powerful."

Like McQueen's film, which captures the horrors of American slavery, "The Great Flood" is a fascinating time capsule of bygone era in this nation's history; an elegiac visual poem that should be required viewing in U.S. history classes throughout the country.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

By Neil Genzlinger, January 7, 2014

"'The Great Flood' Explores Tragedy on the Mississippi in '27"

This probably isn't the kind of compliment the filmmakers want to hear in the week of its theatrical release, but "The Great Flood," a beautiful exploration of the Mississippi River flood of 1927, almost demands to be enjoyed using high-quality headphones. Its soundtrack is an artwork in its own right, one worth savoring as you would a fine recording.

This wordless movie, a documentary that is more like visual poetry, is the work of Bill Morrison, created from old newsreels and other film records, like his earlier work "The Miners' Hymns." Here his collaborator is the guitarist and composer Bill Frisell, whose score (performed by Mr. Frisell, Ron Miles, Tony Scherr and Kenny Wollesen) meshes with the images so evocatively that it seems as if they were born together.

The flood was devastating, especially to what remained of the Mississippi Delta's sharecropper economy, so much so that it helped change the country's demographics, fueling the northward migration of blacks that had already been underway. With just the occasional bit of text on the screen, Mr. Morrison conveys the destruction and the aftermath, although he is sparse enough with the details that viewers might want to prepare by reading at least a summary of the disaster.

The film and Mr. Frisell's music are elegiac over all, but there are sparks of humor in the mournful journey: a rapid trip through a Sears catalog of the period; a look at government officials visiting flood zones for photo ops, much as they might today.

Mr. Morrison's résumé includes an entire movie about decaying film stock ("Decasia"), and his fascination with the phenomenon is evident in "The Great Flood." A number of the film fragments he employs are beginning to deteriorate, and he happily leaves the eroded images as they are. Mr. Frisell's music seems actually to be calling forth the flaws, like a modern-day digital effect. It's a sublime, somewhat eerie touch in a striking experiment in music and moviemaking.

TIME OUT NEW YORK

By Steve Smith, December 31, 2013

Film Review: "The Great Flood "

FOUR STARS! Bill Morrison has a knack for the illuminated séance, fashioning lustrous meditations like 2002's *Decasia* (recently added to the National Film Registry) from ancient, decaying celluloid and newly commissioned music. With "The Great Flood," Morrison focuses on the Mississippi River deluge of 1926–27, which caused widespread devastation but also jump-started the birth of electric blues and rock & roll by sending black Southern migrant workers to Chicago and other Northern cities.

Fittingly, Morrison taps Bill Frisell, an ingenious jazz guitarist and composer known for bluesy rusticity and emotional directness, to score his migratory chronicle. Slow, steady-gaited music perfectly paces early images of sharecroppers at work. When Morrison's footage pans slowly across scratchy, decaying vistas of waterlogged fields and towns, Frisell and trumpeter Ron Miles cry and howl in aching concord.

The flood images are stark, conveying all the terror and pity that modern disaster footage imparts. But Morrison and Frisell infuse the film with warmth and, where appropriate, a touch of wit, causing its subject to breathe anew.

FILM CREDITS

The Great Flood

Directed and edited by Bill Morrison

Music by Bill Frisell

Produced by Phyllis Oyama

Production Year: 2013

Release Year: 2014

Running time: 80 minutes

An Icarus Films Release

All music composed by Bill Frisell, except "Ol' Man River" composed by Jerome Kern, adapted and arranged by Bill Frisell.

Musicians:

Bill Frisell, Guitar

Ron Miles, Trumpet

Tony Scherr, Bass, Guitar

Kenny Wollesen, Drums, Vibes

Claudia Engelhart, Live sound engineer

Production: Mississippi Flood Terrain and Map Visualization

University of Illinois

Illinois eDream Institute

Advanced Visualization Lab,

National Center for Supercomputing Applications:

Director, Professor Donna Cox

Research Artist: Robert Patterson

Research Programmers: Alex Betts, Stuart Levy

Media Specialist: Jeff Carpenter

CyberInfrastructure and Geospatial Information Laboratory:

Director, Professor Shaowen Wang

Staff Scientist: Yan Liu

Postdoc Researcher: Kai Cao

Graduate Students: Su Yeon Han and Yanli Zhao

Archivists: Judith Aley and Susan Hormuth

The Great Flood was commissioned by Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (World Premiere); Wexner Center for the Arts at The Ohio State University; Carnegie Hall; Symphony Center Presents, Chicago and Hopkins Center, Dartmouth College.

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