Film Noir

Marlon Riggs' film *Tongues Untied* premiered in San Francisco November 3, 1989.

November 1, 2000

Marlon Riggs' film *Tongues Untied* premiered in San Francisco November 3, 1989, expanding personal narrative into cultural documentary -- a Riggs specialty. Sitting at the New York premiere a month later, I watched black men onscreen caressing and loving one another in a kaleidoscope of scenes, poems, dances. It was fabulous: a diverse gay collective whose members had survived taunts of *Coon!* and *Faggot!* and threats of bigotry, violence and the virus to grow proud and strong. I literally felt my isolation fade. The film captured our existence, long both ignored by homophobic black organizations and overshadowed by the white gay icons of American pop culture. Black gays who died of AIDS, such as writer Joseph Beam and fashion designer Patrick Kelly, weren't memorialized in the way of their white counterparts; blacks went unwritten in early AIDS history. Black men seeking entry into the gay community were challenged to prove that their loyalty was to being gay, not to being black. *Tongues* let us claim our whole selves. Now, six years after Riggs' death from AIDS, with new infections highest among our nation's young black gay men, his film is as relevant as ever, celebrating our history -- rich with snap queens, activists and literary divas -- and asking, "Is a brother loving a brother a revolutionary act or just one overlooked?" *Tongues Untied* reaffirmed our survival and demanded recognition, a breakthrough from which America can never retreat.

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