



CNN Films and Magnolia Pictures present

A Kartemquin Films and Film Rites Production in association with KatLei Productions

LIFE ITSELF

A film by Steve James
118 minutes

Official Selection
2014 Sundance Film Festival
2014 Cannes Film Festival
2014 Sheffield Doc/Fest

FINAL PRESS NOTES

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SYNOPSIS

Acclaimed director Steve James (*Hoop Dreams*) and executive producers Martin Scorsese (*The Departed*) and Steven Zaillian (*Moneyball*) present **LIFE ITSELF**, a documentary film that recounts the inspiring and entertaining life of world-renowned film critic and social commentator Roger Ebert – a story that is by turns personal, funny, painful, and transcendent. Based on his bestselling memoir of the same name, **LIFE ITSELF**, explores the legacy of Roger Ebert's life, from his Pulitzer Prize-winning film criticism at the Chicago Sun-Times to becoming one of the most influential cultural voices in America.

ABOUT THE FILM

Acclaimed director **Steve James** (*Hoop Dreams, The Interrupters*) and Executive Producers **Martin Scorsese** (*The Departed, Raging Bull*) and **Steven Zaillian** (*Schindler's List, Moneyball*) present LIFE ITSELF, a documentary film that recounts the inspiring and entertaining life of world-renowned film critic and social commentator Roger Ebert – a story that is by turns personal, wistful, funny, painful, and transcendent.

Based on his bestselling memoir of the same name, LIFE ITSELF explores the impact and legacy of Roger Ebert's life, from his Pulitzer Prize-winning film criticism at the Chicago Sun-Times to becoming one of the most influential cultural voices in America.

The filmmakers were granted unprecedented access to Roger and Chaz during the final four months of his life. In that time, they captured Roger's fighting spirit, his sharp sense of humor, and the ways he directly inspired filmmakers, family and fans. The response to Roger's unexpected passing in April 2013 was immense and profoundly moving – front page news not just in Chicago, but worldwide. Influential filmmakers and politicians reflected on Roger's legacy – everyone from Spike Lee, and Michael Moore to President Obama, who said, "When he didn't like a film, he was honest; when he did, he was effusive – capturing the unique power of the movies to take us some place magical." Roger was an avid supporter of independent film, and an early champion of the work of iconic filmmakers, and LIFE ITSELF interview subjects, such as **Werner Herzog, Errol Morris** and **Martin Scorsese**.

Roger himself became an iconic force when he joined with Gene Siskel to create one of the longest running, most influential television shows in history, making Chicago the cultural center of film criticism. The film features candid and insightful interviews with many of the principal producers of the show, along with the first ever feature documentary interview with Siskel's wife, Marlene.

In the wake of Roger's illness and disability, Roger's writing grew creatively and in importance – transcending film criticism. Using his blog, and social media, Roger became a must-read commentator, thoughtfully addressing the political and social issues of our time. His public defiance of cancer and the resulting disfigurement literally and symbolically put a new face on the disease, and brought inspiration to countless thousands in the disabled community and beyond.

Despite his "leave of presence," his body of work stands as a great populist monument, accessible inspiration for the next generations of film lovers. LIFE ITSELF gives a definitive document of the flesh and blood man who forever changed what it meant to be at the movies: Roger Ebert.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT – STEVE JAMES

I first encountered Roger Ebert like most of the rest of America did: when he was co-host of *Sneak Previews*, the PBS incarnation of his groundbreaking television show with Gene Siskel. I was in film school at Southern Illinois University and stumbled across the show one night. My first thought was: “Why is there a television show devoted to reviewing movies?” My second was, “And why does it feature two newspaper guys from *Chicago*?” Having fallen in love with the reviews of Pauline Kael and being steeped in more scholarly film criticism in school, I initially found the show an entertaining curiosity. But it didn't take me long to see just how smart and savvy Ebert and Siskel were, and to revel in the show's appeal. Yes, their arguments were entertaining and informative. But particularly valuable to me was the way in which Roger infused his analysis of a film with his own personal experiences and worldview. He struck me as someone who'd be great to have a beer (or three) with and just “talk movies.” I'd learn a lot but never feel patronized.

I never did drink a beer with Roger. By the time we actually met at a Toronto Film Festival dinner in 1994, he'd long since given up drinking. Nine months earlier, when the first film I directed, *Hoop Dreams*, premiered at Sundance, Roger and Gene had taken the unprecedented step of reviewing the film during the festival – before we had distribution or even *hope* of distribution for this three-hour documentary. Their review galvanized festival goers and distributors and played a huge role in the film securing a theatrical release.

But it didn't stop there. Roger and Gene continued to bang the drum for the film when it was theatrically released, then when they featured their Oscar picks, then when *Hoop Dreams* failed to secure a Best Documentary nomination, and even a couple more times.

Through the years, Roger and I remained friendly, but were not close pals. He continued to review my work, and was supportive. Ever the skilled social media guy, he tweeted about *The Interrupters* right before its premiere at Sundance in 2011.)

Last year, producer Garret Basch and executive producer Steve Zaillian approached me about doing this film. After I read Roger's remarkable memoir, I was ready to leap in. Working with my longtime partners at Kartemquin Films, producer Zak Piper and I started shooting the film in December of 2012. We'd planned to film Roger going to screenings, throwing a dinner party with his wife Chaz, leading a very active life. But in our final meeting before filming, he complained of a sore hip. The very next day he was diagnosed with a hip fracture and hospitalized.

As a result, most of the filming we did with Roger took place in the hospital or during his several months of rehab at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. We couldn't have known then, that Roger would be with us only four more months. But during that time, he showed his trademark wit, good spirits, and toughness. I hope the film captures that.

We also were able to interview a few of Roger's closest friends, who go back to his college days and his first year in Chicago. We talked to the key producers of the Siskel & Ebert shows in all their various incarnations. We conducted the first ever interview with Gene Siskel's wife, who provided a candid account of Gene and Roger's relationship. We talked to film critics Richard Corliss and Jonathan Rosenbaum who were Roger's contemporaries, and to critic A.O. Scott who had grown up watching the show. And finally, it was a thrill for me to interview filmmakers who's work Roger championed, but who also had become friends of his in some fashion. Roger was such a lover of films and filmmakers that he became friends with Martin Scorsese, Errol Morris, Werner Herzog, Ramin Bahrani, and Greg Nava, among others.

Roger made it clear to me on several occasions that he wanted the film to be honest account of his daily travails, and of his past. He and Chaz encouraged everyone we wanted to interview to be cooperative and candid. I decided early on that, despite my admiration for him, I really wanted the film to show the flesh and blood man.

During filming, I was really struck by his relationship with Chaz. They've always appeared to have a great marriage, but witnessing it up close, I really came to understand that she had been many things to Roger: his great love, the person who helped him find true happiness and contentment, and his rock through the many medical challenges of recent years.

Finally, I really saw the making of this film as my chance to develop a friendship with Roger. That process was happening, but was cut short by his death. I feel his loss personally, along with the legion of fans, colleagues, and admirers who felt like they really knew him and had been touched by him. And so, at best he will be with us in spirit only when the film premieres at Sundance 2014. For me, there is a kind of cosmic poetry in that timing. It was twenty years ago that *Hoop Dreams* premiered at Sundance, and Roger became that film's biggest, most influential champion. I owe him a lot. Perhaps this film is one modest way I can pay him back.

- Steve James

INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

Roger Ebert – Author, journalist, film critic.
Chaz Ebert – Wife of Roger Ebert
Raven Evans – Roger’s step-granddaughter
Ava DuVernay - Filmmaker
Ramin Bahrani - Filmmaker
Richard Corliss – Film critic
Nancy De Los Santos – Producer of Siskel & Ebert
Bruce Elliot – Friend of Roger Ebert
Thea Flaum – Producer of Siskel & Ebert
Josh Golden – Friend of Roger Ebert
Werner Herzog - Filmmaker
Marlene Iglitzen – Wife of Gene Siskel
Donna LaPietra - Producer of Siskel & Ebert
Rick Kogan – Friend of Roger Ebert, journalist
John McHugh – Friend of Roger Ebert
Errol Morris - Filmmaker
Howie Movshovitz – Friend of Roger Ebert, journalist
Gregory Nava - Filmmaker
William Nack – Friend of Roger Ebert, journalist
Jonathan Rosenbaum – Film critic
Martin Scorsese - Filmmaker
A.O. Scott – Film critic
Roger Simon – Friend of Roger Ebert, journalist

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

STEVE JAMES - Director, Producer, Editor

Steve James is best known as the producer-director of *Hoop Dreams*, winner of every major critic's prize of 1994, as well as the Directors Guild of America Award, and the Peabody and Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards. *Hoop Dreams* was also named to the Library of Congress National Film Registry. Other award-winning films include *Stevie*, which won numerous festivals and landed on a dozen ten best lists for 2003; the miniseries *The New Americans*, winner of the 2004 IDA Award for The Best Limited Series; *At the Death House Door*, which won numerous awards at festivals and was nominated for a Directors Guild of America Award; and *No Crossover: The Trial of Allen Iverson* for ESPN's Peabody and IDA award-winning "30 for 30" series. James' 2011 film, *The Interrupters*, was his fifth to premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, won more than a dozen awards on the festival circuit including the top prize at the Sheffield Film Festival. It took the two top Cinema Eye Awards and won the Independent Spirit Award. *The Interrupters* was named "Best Documentary of the year" in both the IndieWire and Village Voice national critics' polls. Recently, it was awarded the duPont-Columbia Journalism Award and an Emmy.

ZAK PIPER - Producer

Zak is an Emmy-winning independent producer who most recently co-produced the critically acclaimed film *The Interrupters*, which premiered at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival. The New Yorker, Chicago Tribune, Entertainment Weekly, and LA Times all hailed *The Interrupters* as one of the year's best films. The film was the recipient of a 2013 duPont-Columbia Journalism Award and an Emmy Award at the 34th News & Documentary Emmy Awards, among a dozen other distinctions. Previously, Zak co-produced *At the Death House Door*, which premiered at the 2008 SXSW Film Festival and went on to win awards at numerous international festivals. He was also Associate Producer of *Prisoner of Her Past*, a co-production with the Chicago Tribune. Currently, he is producing *63 Boycott* with director, Gordon Quinn.

DAVID E. SIMPSON - Editor

David E. Simpson is a producer, director, and editor who has crafted award-winning documentaries for over twenty-five years. His most recent directorial work was *Milking The Rhino*, which aired nationally on PBS and screened at dozens of festivals on six continents. Other directorial successes include *When Billy Broke His Head.... and Other Tales of Wonder*, which won a jury award at Sundance, *Refrigerator Mothers*, and *Halsted Street, USA*, both of which took national honors. Yet more extensive is Simpson's list of editing credits. Alongside Steve James, he edited *The New Americans*, winner of the 2004 IDA award for The Best Limited Series.

Other editing credits include Kartemquin Films' *Bill T. Jones: A Good Man* for American Masters, *Forgiving Dr. Mengele* (Special Jury Prize, Slamdance), the Peabody Award winning *Terra Incognita*, and feature docs for PBS' Nova and Frontline series, including *Shtetl* (grand prix, Cinema du Real).

MARTIN SCORSESE - Executive Producer

Martin Scorsese is an Academy Award-winning Director and one of the most prominent and influential filmmakers working today. He directed the critically acclaimed, award-winning films *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Goodfellas*, *Gangs of New York*, *The Aviator*, *The Departed* and the 2010 box office hit *Shutter Island*. Scorsese has also directed numerous documentaries including *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan*, *Elia Kazan: A Letter to Elia* (both films garnering Peabody Awards), *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through American Movies*, *Il Mio Viaggio in Italia*, *Public Speaking* starring writer Fran Lebowitz and the documentary for HBO: *George Harrison: Living in the Material World*. Most recently he directed Academy Award and Golden Globe nominated film *Hugo*, a 3D adaptation of Brian Selznick's children's book, for which he won the Golden Globe for Best Director. Scorsese currently serves as Executive Producer on HBO's hit series *Boardwalk Empire* for which he directed the pilot episode. His latest film, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, was released on December 25, 2013 and was nominated for 8 Academy Awards including Best Picture, Best Actor for Leonardo DiCaprio and Best Director for Scorsese. He is the founder and chair of The Film Foundation and the World Cinema Project, both non-profit organizations dedicated to the preservation, restoration and protection of film.

MICHAEL W. FERRO, JR. - Executive Producer

Michael W. Ferro Jr. is a well-known Internet technology pioneer based in Chicago. Michael is the creator, founder and investor of many companies including Click Commerce, Merge, highi, High School Cube, and Wrapports.

Wrapports is Michael's media technology company whose publication holdings include the Chicago Sun-Times—the home of Roger Ebert. Michael felt compelled to support this endeavor to pay homage to the life of his favorite film critic.

GORDON QUINN - Executive Producer

Gordon Quinn, Artistic Director, is the co-founder of Kartemquin. He has been producing documentaries and mentoring filmmakers for five decades. A passionate advocate for independent media makers, he is a noted expert on issues of fair use, ethics, and storytelling in documentary.

JUSTINE NAGAN - Executive Producer

Justine Nagan, Executive Director, has led KTQ since 2008, guiding strategic vision and daily operations while serving as the Executive Producer on new films. She directed *Typeface* (2009) and was Associate Producer on the Peabody award-winning *Mapping Stem Cell Research: Terra Incognita* (2007).

KAT WHITE - Executive Producer

Kat White is a principal in KatLei Productions and has enjoyed a multifaceted career supporting the film and dramatic arts. In addition to serving as an Executive Producer on *Life Itself*, a documentary on film critic Roger Ebert, she is an Executive Producer on Kartemquin Films' *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*. Broadway involvement presently includes: *Kinky Boots*, *IF/THEM*, and *Rocky*. Past theater credits include *Macbeth*, starring Alan Cumming, and *Somewhere in Time*. Past film credits include *Grace is Gone*, *The Promotion*, *Drunkboat*, *Ca\$h*, and *The Merry Gentlemen*.

MARK MITTEN - Executive Producer / Co-Producer

Mark Mitten is an Emmy award winning producer who has developed a wide variety of media and entertainment projects. In addition to serving as an Executive Producer on the Roger Ebert documentary, *Life Itself*, he worked as a producer on NBC's hit television series, *The Apprentice*. After serving as Chief Brand Officer for Chicago's 2016 Olympic bid, Mitten directed, co-wrote and produced a documentary entitled, *Making Big Plans: The Story of Chicago's Olympic Dream*. Prior to pursuing these creative endeavors and others, he was a partner at McKinsey & Company, where he consulted a variety of Fortune 100 companies.

CREDITS

Directed by Steve James

Produced by Zak Piper, Steve James, Garrett Basch

Executive Producers: Martin Scorsese, Steven Zaillian, Michael W. Ferro, Jr., Gordon
Quinn, Justine Nagan, Kat White, Mark Mitten

Executive Producers, CNN Films: Vinnie Malhorta, Amy Entelis

Co-Producers: Emily Hart, Mark Mitten, Josh Schollmeyer

Supervising Producers, CNN Films: Courtney Sexton, Lizzie Kerner

Cinematographer Dana Kupper

Music by Joshua Abrams

Edited by David E Simpson, Steve James

Post-Production Supervisor: Ryan Gleeson