

THE INVISIBLE CITY (1979)



Jean-Pierre Gorin, Jean-Luc Godard's collaborator on his most political films, came to teach in San Diego around the same time James Blue arrived in Houston. In an interview about his "live and let live" attitude towards doctrinaire Marxists, Gorin said "They don't bother anybody. They are just over there teaching, but where is life?"

Where is life? could be the motto James Blue used to guide his life and career. He was following that compass when he went to Hollywood, and he was following it when he left. What he wanted wasn't something the studios could help him with. He wanted to explore not just the power of storytelling, but the power of community created by the bond between storyteller and audience. He was interested in the implications of that power, who should wield it, who should be taught how to wield it. He was more interested, in 1979, in passing the talking stick around the circle than with holding his place as head man.

The Invisible City is the most difficult of James Blue's films to write about. His most ambitious film, it is arguably the one made for the smallest audience. It has no script, or rather, he shares scriptwriting duties with the

audience, eliciting feedback from each episode which he then incorporates as he goes along to the next. *E pluribus unum*. We, the viewers, can make television. We, the citizens, can change our city. James Blue brings everything he has: his skills as an artist, his belief in democracy, his formative brush with want as a child of the Depression, his curiosity about a new medium, video. He does this not as a pitch man or performer, but as a scientist who has set up an experiment, and is intently observing the results. Will this work?

In the resulting five hour/five episode interactive public television documentary, James Blue and Adele Santos take us on a tour of a bifurcated city growing like a weed. Petroleum politics had raised oil prices, and Houston was an oil town. Skyscrapers going up, unemployment going down. One thousand new residents were arriving per week. But the filmmakers see two cities. Visible Houston, which boasted that it had no income tax and no state tax, was inhabited by high wage earning, well educated citizens. Invisible Houston, which complained that the most basic city services did not exist, was inhabited by low wage earning, poorly educated citizens. Both categories of citizenry had jobs, thanks to the boom, but a hard working resident of the invisible Houston could be living in a car, or a tin shed, or a house better suited to a wrecking ball.

Blue shows us images of deteriorating housing, but, as before, the images which interest him most are the faces of the people. He shows us the bureaucrats behind their desks, the experts with their statistics, and he shows us the people living in sheds or in cars. The mother with four children who was told an apartment flooded with water was the only one within her price range. The social worker, fighting to contain her anger, who was witness to the mother's distress and helplessness. In *Who Killed The Fourth Ward?*, Blue presented himself as an isolated guerrilla media maker. This time he armors up and presents himself as an academic working with NEH money and in concert with a team of social scientists and grad students. Yes, the poor are always with us, but shouldn't they have someplace to live? In *The Invisible City*, James Blue continues to stitch together a vision of television as town hall.

Ed Hugetz remembers the first time he heard Blue speak at Rice University. First, we are going to build an audience, he told six curious students, scattered throughout an otherwise empty auditorium. Then, we are going to become filmmakers. I am struck that James Blue prioritized building an audience so highly. It confirms what we see throughout *The Invisible City*. He is not trying to make a film. He is trying to make a community. To do this, he reverse engineered the entire filmmaking process. He includes his subjects as collaborators. He includes himself/reveals himself on camera. He chooses public television over theatrical release. He chooses video over film. He tells us what his plan is, and asks the KUHT television audience, after each one hour episode, to contact the station with feedback about where the story should next go. He shares his power as writer-director-producer as elaborately, flamboyantly and comprehensively as possible.

The Invisible City was produced at the Southwest Alternate Media Project (SWAMP), founded by James Blue in 1977. SWAMP still exists today. Its mission statement incorporates the lens of plurality which Blue and Santos used in *The Invisible City*. “The Southwest Alternate Media Project (SWAMP) promotes the creation and appreciation of film, video, and new media as art forms of a multicultural community.”

James Blue did not know *The Invisible City* would be his last film. While he was making it, he was recruited by the Center For Media Study at SUNY Buffalo to start a documentary program there. He was planning to make a film about Buffalo using the same approach as *The Invisible City* when he died of a swiftly moving stomach cancer on June 14, 1980.

Adele Santos, the co-creator of *The Invisible City*, was teaching at Rice University when she approached James Blue with the idea to examine Houston’s housing crisis in a film. Recently retired from her position as dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT, Santos continues to teach. Her firm, Santos Prescott and Associates, is based in San Francisco.

I saw the fifth, culminating, episode of *The Invisible City* on March 13, 2014 in the Schnitzer Museum of Art in Eugene, as part of the James Blue Tribute.

Brian Huberman and Ed Hugetz, colleagues of James Blue during his Houston years, opened the evening with an introduction via Skype.

Coming up next:

At 7:00 PM on April 23, 2014 in Eugene, at the Schnitzer Museum of Art, reknowned ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall will introduce *Kenya Boran*, which he co-directed with James Blue in 1972. The screening is free.

More information about other James Blue Tribute events [can be found here](#).

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Notes On James Blue is a blog kept by Anne Richardson, of **Oregon Movies, A to Z**, to cover the 2014 James Blue Tribute. The six month long Tribute, organized by Richard Herskowitz, celebrates the bequest of James Blue's films to the University of Oregon by **The James and Richard Blue Foundation**, a 501 c3 non profit organization dedicated to preserving the legacy of filmmaker and film educator James Blue.

Notes On James Blue is supported by **The James and Richard Blue Foundation**. All thoughts, opinions and errors, however, belong to Anne Richardson, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Foundation.