

Jack Johnson Documentary on PBS Tonight

Written by Robert Ecksel
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Ken Burns' latest documentary, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, airs tonight, Monday, and tomorrow night, Tuesday, January 17-18, 9:00-11:00 p.m. ET, on your local PBS station. If the fight game is the right game for you, check it out.

For twenty years the film-maker Ken Burns has turned his Midas touch upon some certifiable American icons. It started with *Brooklyn Bride* in 1981 and it's been a nonstop ride ever since.

The Civil War

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Baseball

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JAZZ

,
Thomas Jefferson

,
Mark Twain

,
Frank Lloyd Wright

,
Huey Long

,
Thomas Hart Benton

,
Lewis and Clark

,
The Shakers

and

The Statue of Liberty

are just a few of the subjects that have inspired Ken Burns.

And now it's Jack Johnson's turn.

Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson, beautifully written by Geoffrey C. Ward, gives Burns an opportunity to do what he does best: weave archival material, still photos and old time black and white footage into a vibrant patchwork quilt, and bathe it all in the era's jazzy syncopations.

The life of Jack Johnson is the Great Man Theory of History in action and has been the subject of books, Broadway plays, films, operas, you name it. *Jack Johnson: The Movie* is coming to a theater near you. The Jack Johnson documentary is here now.

The new Ken Burns film provides commentary by Stanley Crouch, Gerald Early, James Earl Jones, Jack Newfield, George Plimpton, Randy Roberts, Jose Torres and Bert Sugar. The *Unfo*

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Unforgivable Blackness

soundtrack is by Wynton Marsalis, ably seconded by the likes of Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton. Keith David narrates the film. Samuel L. Jackson provides the voice of Jack Johnson. The voices of Billy Bob Thornton, Ed Harris, Courtney B. Vance, Studs Terkel, Eli Wallach, Joe Morton, Kevin Conway and Amy Madigan add to the choir.

Ken Burns performs his magic and makes everything milkshake smooth. *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* doesn't feel like history. It goes down like dessert.

According to Burns, "Johnson in many ways is an embodiment of the African-American struggle to be truly free in this country - economically, socially and politically. He absolutely refused to play by the rules set by the white establishment, or even those of the black community. In that sense, he fought for freedom not just as a black man, but as an individual."

Unforgivable Blackness is not geared for fight fans, let alone boxing historians. Its audience is inner city kids who don't read, won't read, can't read, but who need to know about a proud fighting black man named Jack Johnson.

The President and CEO of PBS, Pat Mitchell, said this: "Once again Ken Burns has helped us look back into the history of our country to understand its promise and its failings. Here, in the remarkable story of the life of Jack Johnson, the brutality of boxing pales compared to the brutality of racism. Because of the strength of his character and the level of his skill, Johnson was literally able to fight back, setting an example for so many others. Unfortunately it is a story that has been largely lost. PBS is proud to present this film, and we hope that Jack Johnson and his accomplishment become a lesson for future generations of Americans."

James Earl Jones, who played Jack Johnson in "The Great White Hope" on Broadway and in the film, said "(Johnson) wouldn't let anybody define him. He was a self-defined man. And this issue of his being free . . . was very relevant."

Ken Burns added: "Johnson's story is more than the story of a tremendous athlete, or even one who broke the color line. It is the story of a man who forced America to confront its definition of freedom, and that is an issue with which we continue to struggle."

Boxing thanks Ken Burns for his efforts on behalf of the champ and the sweet science. His *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* may not break new ground, it may not win boxing many new adherents, but it revives a major figure in the history of the fight game, who was also a major figure in the history of race relations. With an open heart, a great story and dazzling digitized footage, Ken Burns brings Jack Johnson to life, smartly, aesthetically, honestly.