Family Name
Macky Alston
76 minutes, color, film, 1997
First Run/Icarus

Description
Family Name opens with a close-up on a black-and-white photo of a white man. As the camera pulls back, we see that the photo includes a younger man as well. In a voice-over, director and narrator Macky Alston introduces the picture: his grandfather's name was Wallace McPherson Alston, and he was a preacher. His father's name was Wallace McPherson Alston, Jr. and he is also a preacher. His own name is Wallace McPherson Alston III, he says as the camera cuts to a color photo of the three generations of Alston men, and he dropped out of the Seminary at the age of 23. The last statement is illustrated by newsreel footage of a street demonstration with signs Stop the Church!

As the camera concentrates on a color photo of a happy family, Macky continues, in a calm and composed voice, that he has always felt like an outsider in his family, "probably because I am gay." For a long time, he says, that was something he felt he could not talk about. His father was involved in the Civil Rights Movement, Macky says as we see footage of a little blond boy riding a bicycle, and when he was five, deliberately enrolled him in a predominantly black public school in North Carolina. As black-and-white photos of a black girl in a schoolyard and of five-year-old Macky alternate, he says that AIt was there that I first met black children with the same last name as me. Again, I felt like it was something I couldn't talk about.

Recently, Macky asked his dad about their family history and he gave him a book, he tells us as we see him thumbing through it in his apartment. The Alstons were one of the largest slave-owning families in North Carolina. "Everybody knows it but nobody talks about it." I want to know the story behind my family name, Macky says, the camera zooming in on his profile as he drives in his car.

We see footage of Macky going through family photos and driving in his car and through fast-food places alternates with the credits of the film. Over a detailed map of North Carolina, Macky says that his ancestors settled in that area during the 1700s. "I know nothing about this area but was invited to a family reunion right in the middle of it." The camera takes us to the reunion, where people mingle, eat, and talk. Eugene Alston presents a chart, unreadable for the camera and the viewer's eye, of the Alston family. He says it starts with John and Mary, who came to this country, and can be followed to Charlemagne and Alfred the Great and to Adam and Eve. As Macky walks among the guests filming, in a voice-over he says that everyone at the reunion referred to the book his father had given him to find out how they are related. The camera cuts to a newspaper page with the title "Family Name." Family Secrets and Macky says that the next thing he knew, the reunion was in the paper and his hope of returning quietly home was over.

The camera cuts to a plate announcing Alston Grove, Congregational Church and to a group of black people walking into the church, singing. A smiling black woman in a

close-up says that her name is Vanessa Alston and that AI may possibly be a relative of Macky Alston. She then briefly introduces her sisters to the camera, and, in a voice-over, Macky says that she has invited him to their family reunion.

As the camera slowly follows his path over the map of North Carolina, Macky says that Vanessa lives forty miles away, near Chatham County, where a branch of his family moved around 1800. Cutting to the black Alstons' reunion, the camera shows us people who cook food, laugh, talk, and eat. "I feel a little conspicuous saying that I'm an Alston, too," Macky narrates in a voice-over. As we see young black girls dance for the numerous guests, he says that the white Alston reunion and the black Alston reunion were held just miles apart within the same week but did not know of one another. He interviews an older lady Alston and asks her from behind the camera if she thinks that there is a chance they might be kin. It might be because Ain slavery time, everything happened! she says laughing. Back over the dancing and singing, Macky's voice-over continues that he is fixating on his name now: "how it connects us, how it separates us and what it all means."

The camera cuts to the portrait of a white man with a solemn look. From Macky's voice-over narration, we learn that that is his great-great-uncle John Jack Alston, who owned so much land and slaves in Chatham County that people called him Chatham Jack. As Macky drives through town, the camera focuses on Alston Avenue, Alston Chapel United Church, and Alston Technical Park. Then it focuses on and scrolls down a page in a phone book filled with Alstons. Slow motion footage follows black people in the streets as Macky says that he is looking for "a lost cousin or descendant of a slave my family once owned."

"What does it make you think when you see me, the descendant of the people who enslaved your people?" Macky asks from off-camera as we see a house and a black man sitting in front of it. "Just you," Anthony answers. "Do you feel you inherit the pain?" "No." With the camera now in a close-up on him, Anthony says that a lot has changed over the last 100 years in terms of slavery. "Do you feel you finally are respected?" Macky asks. "Yeah. Yeah."

As Macky drives through a grove, he says that he next tried to see the house of Chatham Jack, about which the legend has it that that is where Jack killed his slaves. Some of his white descendants later said that Ablack people are going to burn our house to the ground for that.

We see Macky and a black woman arrive at a house, walk around it and talk. Macky says that a couple of days later he got a call from Reverend Delores Alston Perry to meet at another plantation in town. Why did she call him? Macky asks. She was trying to find out about the Alston family and she doesn't know much, Delores explains. Macky then asks how she does not have a problem with him being white. As if in disbelief, Delores first repeats the question, then, the camera in a close-up of her face, declares, "No." I don't have a problem. Macky continues interrogating, as if for the camera to document the Reverend's responses. Doesn't she feel any anger? "I don't feel any anger, Delores declares with the camera in a close-up of Macky's face.

As he drives through town again, Macky narrates, in a voice-over, that he expected the white Alstons to be guilty and the black Alstons to be angry, and asked questions to provoke these types of responses, trying to prove something. Before he left the town, the local paper printed a letter to the editor about what he was doing, which the camera shows us line-by-line. The letter reads that he must be a great disappointment to his father.

In a voice-over accompanying images of his father reading a sermon, Macky says that his dad preached for years but never said anything about his ancestors. It turned out that the father knew one of them: Macky's great-great-grandfather Thomas Alston, who actually held slaves. From focusing on Macky thumbing through family photo albums, the camera zooms in on one of the pictures, leaving Macky out of its lens. The picture shows his father holding him as a baby, and three older Alston men.

The camera cuts to a close-up of a man's hands nervously playing with his eyeglasses. AI had no idea he'd be so nervous talking about this, Macky says in a voice-over. We see his father sitting in a church hall, talking with a nervous smile. The father says he remembers him (Thomas Alston) as a "grumpy old man drooling at the mouth." The two had no relationship, Macky's father says, because "I didn't care for him very much." He was out of it by the time I met him. The sequence ends with a scrutinizing close-up on an old photo of Thomas Alston.

Driving in his car and looking into the mirror to face the camera, eyes only, Macky says that he was told to talk to his grandmother, who knew AGreat-gran, as all called him, pretty well.

From off-camera, Macky asks an elegant older lady sitting in front of a portrait of a young woman to talk about flavor in relation to family. She says she does not know what to say. As the two of them ride in the car, Macky, in a voice-over, says that he decided to take a different approach and take his grandmother to the plantation house where Thomas grew up, hoping that she would open up and share secrets. As she sits in the car, she says she remembers the house, and things in the kitchen. Macky says that they would have had slaves, right? "I don't know." I don't know, his grandmother repeats. We cut back to the photo of the Alston men, their names labeled on the picture, as Macky says that she lived in the same house.

His grandmother walks towards the house, which, she says, is now in a college campus. "You make me so nervous," the grandmother laughs. She runs into a policeman, who is suspicious of the looking at and filming of the house, and explains to him that she is Ms. Alston and that the house was grandparents Alstons.' Turning her back to the camera, she tells the policeman that "it's the ancestors," they want to take pictures of the house, but she understands his position. Macky and she look at the house, but she refuses to peek in. Back in the car, in a voice-over, Macky says that Atrying to get her to talk about the slaveowners in our family is a greater challenge than I thought.

"Just one more stop that I am going to make I ask her to show me Great-gran's grave,"

Macky narrates as we see them walk into a graveyard. His grandmother walks among the graves, talking, almost to herself, which one belongs to whom. Gentle piano music takes over her words. As Macky and she walk away from the camera, in a pensive voice-over Macky says that "when I came out to my parents two years ago, they asked me not to tell my grandmother." And so far, I never have.

With the camera in his car set for a close-up on his face, Macky says that every step of the way he has been asked why he is doing this. He lived and kept secrets for a long time as a gay man, he says, and he knows the feeling and how it contorts the sense of self. Over footage of a small gathering in a living room, Macky says that he gathered family and friends in New Jersey, where his parents live, to talk about his findings and visit with grandmother, and that this is the first time his sisters had heard of AGreat-gran, the slaveowner. Macky's father tells his sister he is glad that she is more excited about this than he is. She says she is resentful that the family history has not been passed down as it should have been, with people accepting the changes that took place in their lifetime. As the camera moves for a close-up of her face, she says, I don't mean to make you defensive, dad. The father interrupts, "I'm not defensive, I'm not defensive." All his life, he tells her, he has tried to break away from the bigotry, prejudice and meanness of the familial Southern life; there is a bad side and a good side to that life. His daughter now interrupts him to say that AYeah, but it is us. Macky asks his father why he has never talked about slaveownership and how he would feel talking about it. The camera zooms in for a close-up of the father's face as he says that if he were not invading a person's privacy, he would be fascinated to do it. We should be careful poking into somebody's intimate family background and into the baggage of slavery, segregation and injustice, he says.

Over a newspaper clipping of a black woman in traditional African dress, titled "Teller of Tales, Singer of Songs," Macky says that his mother gave it to him while he was at Princeton. The traditional storyteller had the same name as his sister, Charlotte Alston. As we see her perform, in a voice-over Macky narrates that she was at first disinterested in his project but then invited him to her house in Philadelphia. Interviewed in a close-up, Charlotte says that the project did not connect with her because she is not a birthright Alston but married someone who had the name. Over a wedding picture of her and a black man, a man's voice starts narrating that his name is Fred Oliver Alston, Jr. Interviewed in a close-up as well, he explains that the name Fred comes from Frederick, which means "peaceful chieftain, peaceful leader"; Oliver has to do with peace, too; and Alston is Afrom the old village. "So technically my name means 'peaceful chieftain from the old village.'" Plus, Fred says, it was his father's name, too, so he knows he is related to the Alstons. A black-and-white photo on which the camera focuses serves to illustrate his story.

In a close-up of Jeff, Charlotte and Fred's son, Macky asks him from off-camera if he knows where the Alstons come from. Jeff guesses they spread from North Carolina but admits he does not really know. And he has never been there, he answers Macky's documenting questions. Then Macky's voice-over tells us that Charlotte and Fred were divorced when Jeff was a child, that he lives with his mom in Philadelphia, and that Fred

lives a block away from Macky in New York City.

As the camera finds Inez, North Carolina on the map, Macky says that this is Fred's hometown and that his own ancestors settled there in the 1700s. "I am guessing Fred's family got their name from my ancestors," Macky says. Back in the interview close-up, Fred says to Macky, whom the camera does not see, that when he heard about him and Carolina, he thought of the brotherhood between the sons of slaves and the sons of slaveowners. As the camera moves between the still image of a young black woman, a net cast over her head and half-naked body, and Charlotte's face, she says, "Suppose you got snatchedand they asked you, 'What's your name?' and told you 'We're gonna change that.'" If you worked on an Alston plantation, your name was Alston; if you got sold to the Johnson plantation, your name became JohnsonYsometimes your first name was changed. Over newsreel footage of black riots and the police confronting the people, Charlotte says that the reason for the racial tensions, especially black and white, is the way the present was begun with relations between those who were here and those who were brought here.

Over a black-and-white photo of Jeff, a voice-over interview takes place. ANot an angry bone in your body? Macky asks. ANot towards you. Not to say that I'm not angry. Very much, Jeff tells him. "Why?" "So much happened in this country." Back in his car with the camera set for a close-up, Macky says that with Fred and Charlotte he has finally succeeded, he has finally got black Alstons to feel comfortable enough with "this white Alston," just to talk, and I am comfortable enough so that I can listen.

As the camera witnesses Jeff's high-school graduation in Philadelphia, in a voice-over he tells the story of a history lesson he had and how the discussion turned to the idea that black males are stronger than whites. A girl had a hard time formulating what she wanted to say but finally said that "maybe it is because they are closer to the apes." He was at first caught and stunned, Jeff says, and the teacher went right away to another topic. Jeff said he wanted to address the previous topic, but the teacher just said to write it in their journals. "I didn't even write about it," Jeff concludes the story before the camera cuts to the praise he is given as a graduating young athlete, artist and talent.

Macky asks Fred and Jeff to tell him about the graduation day. Fred gave his son a record of classical music composed by black musicians because music is such an important part of his life, but, Jeff says, he has not listened to it yet because he does not have a record player. Over a slide show of photos of the two Alstons playing music, Fred relates that he was a pioneer black classical music instrumentalist in an orchestra. Newsreel footage of the New York riots illustrates his story how the '70s taught him what riots meant and what people needed to be made to listen to other people who also wanted to live, to work, to have the American dream. So being in the orchestra is also a political statement for him.

As we see footage of Fred walking toward Jeff's house, meeting his son at the door, and Charlotte coming out to see them off, Macky says that Fred has asked Jeff if he wants to go South and see where his father grew up. "I'm sort of amazed, and completely flattered,

that they have invited me to come along." In the car, he asks why Jeff wants to take the trip. Jeff explains that this is the first time he is thinking about the self and his place in society, as a person, as a black male, and "it's a reference for me." The camera catches Jeff's face in the mirror as Macky asks him if he thinks he will be able to relate to those people. Jeff says he will try to come away with something from everyone, and to "steal their wisdom," from that time, you know.

We next see the three arrive. Fred meets his relatives in an emotional scene. He introduces Jeff to his family. Chatting with the North Carolina family, Fred says he never knew that Tuscalom was next door. In a voice-over, Macky relates that Tuscalom is an old Alston plantation in the area. He says that Fred was born in the family of farmers who worked the land his family owned. "As I get closer to proving that my family owned Fred's family, I want to know the truth but it makes me a little nervous," Macky confesses. The camera follows Fred who takes Jeff around the graves of relatives. Fred's soft voice explaining which grave belongs to who blends into the gentle soul music of the soundtrack. "Here used to be my great-grandfather's house but it's gone." It's gone, he says. Fred says that he knows back to 1840; his great-grandmother was born during the time of slavery but those who knew never confirmed who was a slave. It must have been painful for grandparents to discuss the issues of slavery, Fred concludes. The camera shows us a close-up of his face as he looks at his father's grave, takes his glasses off and nervously holds them in his hand.

Over an old black-and-white photo of a colonial house, Macky says that the next day they went to the courthouse to find the proof they were looking for. There was a plantation next to Fred's family's homestead; in the slave list preserved in the courthouse, Fred's great-grandfather was listed under his nickname. The camera focuses on the register book, where AJim is circled, as the soul music soundtrack takes over again. Then it lets a hazy photo of a black woman, a slave ancestor of Fred's, fade into the clipping picture of Charlotte. "From the day I received the clipping about Charlotte from my mom, I suspected that the name Alston connects us through slavery," Macky says. "Now I have no doubts." It is no coincidence that Charlotte, Jeff and Fred Alston and Macky Alston have the same last name, he declares as the camera focuses on a family picture of the three black Alstons.

Macky's pensive voice-over continues over images of a group of white children playing outdoors, shown both in the summer and in the winter. He says that, as a child, he spent his vacations on a plantation owned by his mother's side of the family. ASigns of slavery were everywhere, for instance, the rocks slaves carved out by hand and the tenant farmers whose families had been there time out of mind, Macky says. "I never thought about it." What went on here? Back in his apartment, Macky continues confiding in the camera, "I know there are kids of mixed race born to slaves and masters." But after months of searching for a connection between Fred's family and mine, I found no records, no anything. I want to find someone who through slavery might actually be my cousin.

The camera cuts to a blotch of color and then zooms out to show the painting it is part of a black couple with no faces. In a meditative voice-over, Macky's father says that he

always liked this painting, “Black woman, black man,” because he felt that is how white America sees black America.

As we see Macky look at a magazine and then follow him while he looks at other paintings, he says that he found an artist, Charles Alston, whose skin Ais almost as light as mine. Charles died in 1977 but Macky says he is looking for everything he can find about him and is Afascinated by it. The camera shows a collage of some sketches and the beginning of a film, titled “A Study of Negro Artists,” in which black artist workshops and black men walking with signs “I am a man” are documented. Macky’s voice alternates with that of Charles. Macky explains that “his art,” one piece of film, and his taped interviews is all he has from Charles. Then he lets Charles’ voice from the taped interviews take over musing over the question of whether the artist should include the fact that he is a black male in his art. “I wish I could have known him,” Macky concludes.

Macky introduces the taped interview footage of Charles he is about to show with the little biographical information he found on the artist in a book about his art: born Charles Henry Alston, called Spinky. We see Charles explains to someone off-camera how he decided to go back south and see the rural and the urban scene. There, he took the photographs which became the beginnings of his paintings, the artist explains as the camera shows us both photos and paintings. Charles’ interviewer says that it all began in 1907 in North Carolina, and asks what his parents’ names were. Charles says that he is glad he is not a Junior and that his father was an Alston. In a voice-over, Macky explains that Charles’s father’s name was Primus and he was born in a North Carolina town, possibly as a slave who got his name from one of Macky’s relatives.

As the camera focuses on a woman talking in a home, Macky informs us that he visited Charles’ studio assistant Gilbert. They had a conversation about “race and color.” Gilbert says that, You tell someone, ‘You are black; you are white’; and you look at someone like my mother, you are deceiving your eyes, as the camera shows a picture of a young fair-skinned woman with a baby. ADefinitions in this country really didn’t work very well, Gilbert says.

After a few meetings, Macky tells us in a voice-over, Gilbert arranged a meeting with Spinky’s sister Rousmaniere Alston and half-sister Aida Winters. We see the two older ladies sitting in a living room next to each other watching Charles’ tapes, which “breaks the ice,” Macky explains. The camera watches with them, interspersed are some of his paintings. Over photos of Charles posing with black men or conversing with white women, Macky says that “the Alstons were members of the black cultural elite but they were also welcome in many white circles.” Spinky Alston was often the only black man in the company of high white society.

Back to the conversation with Charles’ sisters, Macky admits that Gilbert is not afraid to ask the questions he does not dare ask. “Did you guys ever pass for whites so that you could get jobs?” she says. Aida declares she never passed because she did not want to; Rousmaniere talks about using the name Ruth. Macky asks Aida if she ever considered it and she says no. When he asks why not, all she says is “Why?” in a rhetorical and almost

ironic tone. At one job, she says, “they might have thought I was white, and I never told them any different.” She gave them a downtown address and rode on the train in that direction when her coworkers got on, but then crossed and went home uptown, Aida remembers. “And I got a lot of interesting comments from people not knowing I was colored,” she says as the camera concludes the sequence with a black-and-white photo of her as an elegant young woman.

Talking about their father and his church, holding a cross, Rousmaniere answers Macky’s question if he was a slave with a matter-of-factly “I don’t know.” Macky asks if their father ever told them anything about that. Rousmaniere takes a long time, avoids the camera with her eyes, and fidgets nervously with the cross before she says, No he did not.

We next see Aida pull out a few sheets filled with longhand writing from underneath Spinky’s art books. Macky explains that they contain the address Primus delivered in North Carolina on the 25th anniversary of the day of emancipation. The camera focuses on the papers and on a photo of Primus, and Macky reads the address: “In those dark days we were not regarded as human beings but as stock or cattle.” The speech goes on to talk about how black families were separated and children taken away from their parents, Asome taken so far that they never found their way back home. The camera takes us through a slide show of Charles’ paintings and of black-and-white photos of groups of slaves.

Gilbert asks Aida if her family ever talked about slavery. Aida denies by nodding her head. As if to help the camera document it, Gilbert continues, “And as far as you know, everybody was free, always.” Aida answers yes, with the silent agreement of Rousmaniere, whom the camera turns to but she chooses not to say anything.

Drawing a draft of his family tree and looking at the map of North Carolina, Macky says that, to find out if they are cousins, he needs information about Primus’ parents, of which Aida and Rousmaniere have no idea. Driving through Carolina with the camera set up for a close-up of his face again, Macky talks about Athe power of finding that artist and his sistersY I wonder if I find out that we are related, what kind of a conversation would we have then, having that knowledgeY

At the Charlotte Public Library, Macky meets Betty Alston, a librarian and a cousin of his. As we see them look through files, Macky explains in a voice-over that there is no information about Primus’ parents but that he and all his family are listed as Amu for mulatto. Aida and Rousmaniere have given him the names of three people who might know about Primus, Macky says as we see him visit a house and meet a friendly middle-aged woman. In her yard, she shows Macky a chair which once belonged to Reverend Alston, and which she got from her mother who got it from his wife. From off-camera, Macky asks her who Reverend Alston was and, sounding like a child reciting a poem, she tells him that Reverend Alston was the founder of St. Michael’s Episcopal Church and was married to her cousin. Having no idea who Primus’ parents were, she sends Macky to her sister.

The camera cuts to two older women interviewed in a street in front a paper factory and a parking lot. They describe what they remember of Reverend Alston's house (illustrated for us by an old photo of it) and Macky says that it has been bulldozed over. As we see the two women visit the modern-day church once founded by Alston, Macky reads a newspaper article from 1910, which describes the black and white procession of people coming into the church with Primus' coffin. Old and modern-day pictures of the church and juxtaposed, and an excerpt of Charles' taped voice saying that he remembers the funeral is inserted.

The women visit Primus' grave, which says 1856-1910. Asked if he was born a slave, one of them says, "I'm sure he was because he was four years old when the slaves were freed." Then the two of them go on to talk about talking about slavery: "Our parents just never told anything about those days." Why should we ask. And the answer was just 'Go play!'

Next we see the two women in front of a building, holding a huge book and practicing how to open it to a specific page. In a voice-over, Macky says that he went to the courthouse to look for Primus' death certificate and thus find out about his parents. He even set up the shot to add drama, he confesses, but when they opened the page, Primus' parents were listed as "unknown." Finally, he found an archive which said that Primus Priss Alston was born just outside of Pittsboro, on land owned by Macky's great-great-great-great-uncle Chatham Jack Alston. Macky handed out fliers around the town looking for more information.

Over family tree drawings and old photos of Alstons, Macky explains that he met with the Episcopal Church's history committee. On the list of Chatham Jack's slaves, there were three Alstons as domestic servants, including fifteen-year-old Primus, he says as we see the archive. Could Primus' family have been owned by Jack and given to his granddaughter as a wedding gift, Macky stipulates over an old wedding picture.

With the committee standing in front of the church telling Chatham Jack's story, the camera focuses on photos of a desolate, decrepit house with "Keep Out!" signs. In a voice-over, one of the committee members relates the legend of how Chatham Jack had a favored servant boy who lived in the house with him. One night, Jack knew he would gamble and drink, and gave the key of his box with money to the boy, ordering him not to give him the key under any circumstances. A good servant, the boy did not give him the key. Chatham Jack ended up killing the boy, pushing him down some stairs. As the legend has it, on certain nights a stain appeared on the stairs where the boy was pushed, and gave Chatham Jack away.

The camera Ablacks out and Macky says that his cameraman ran out of film but the committee members Akept right on talking. The rest of their talk is over a portrait of Chatham Jack, a man with a solemn look. AHe really had a reputation. He had lots and lots of slaves. A lot of descendants, too, one of the committee members explains.

As we see Macky and a few other people arrive at a grove and start cutting through the

shrubbery, Macky asks himself if Chatham Jack was Primus' father. Jack was buried in the outskirts, and Macky went to his grave with the owners of the land to find out. As they look for the grave in the bushes, the owners say how Jack was well liked by his slaves. His neighbors even disapproved of his being so nice to the slaves, giving them names and taking them everywhere he went. Finding the grave, Macky sees that Chatham Jack died three years before Primus was born, so he could not be his father. Facing the camera, Macky says, "I give up and go home."

As we see him look through old photos in his apartment again, he narrates how months go by but he cannot give up the search. He says to Aida and Rousmaniere, What if the only connection is that my people were the slaveowners and your people were the slaves. Aida answers, "What can we do?" That's the way life was. Just thank god that life has improved a little bit.

Delving into the archives, Macky says that he had to go back, "there's got to be something that I've missed." In the registry, he relates, he finds that Primus and Amelia, his mother, bought adjacent pieces of land; Amelia's was later split between Primus' brothers and sisters. Macky also found the documents of the Alston plantation in Pittsboro, where among the slaves listed were Primus and his entire family. They belonged to Chatham Jack's son, Nathaniel, and his wife Patsy. The plantation was on the river outside of Pittsboro where Macky knew Primus was born. "My ancestor Nathaniel Alston owned Primus." But is there more? Macky asks. Over old photos of the family at a table and a servant with a baby on her lap on the floor, he relates how he pieced together that Patsy was sickly during her married life and had no children. In such situations, it was common for white men to turn to their slaves for sexual gratification. Primus' mother Amelia was a domestic servant there and was "easily accessible to Nathaniel," Macky says. The camera cuts to Aida, "If my mother was raped, and my grandmother was raped, and so on and so forth, and now everything is coming out and everything is hitting the fan."

As Macky walks among Alston graves and wanders around a green field, in a meditative voice-over he says that evidence suggests that his cousin Nathaniel was Primus' father. But I'll probably never be able to prove it. But I believe it's true. He wants to take this knowledge back to Primus' only living child Rousmaniere but cannot because she has recently died, Macky says over a black-and-white picture of her during his interview, on which the camera focuses as if to study her face.

Over images of his father playing guitar with a small group, Macky, in a pensive voice-over, asks himself, "What am I trying to do? Make amends? Does finding out the truth about history really change anything?" His father, Macky says, devoted his life to change for the underprivileged. In an interview, a continuation of the one we have seen before, his father recalls a memory from his time in the navy. He made a derogatory remark about the intelligence of a person and was called on it by a friend. At that point, he "woke up." Over footage of his father being honored with an award, Macky says that he never thought his father struggled, since he only saw the honors and awards. Then, over images of the father with a child, Macky briefly tells the story of his dad's life: was involved with

the Civil Rights Movement; mobilized people to fight poverty in Alabama; born in North Carolina, enrolled his children in the first black public school. He also struggled with the gay issue, Macky says, but looked at the prejudice and started speaking up for gay rights. Interviewing his father, in a voice-over over the family picture from the beginning of the film, Macky asks if, living in that time, he would have refused slavery and to own slaves. The father says he hopes his faith and moral upbringing are strong enough to say yes, but to be certain in that stance "would be to be historically arrogant and to take a stance against everything and everyone you knew would be to have no perspective on the self." "I think you can't ask that question. A better question is Where do you stand now? Are you making a stance now?" he says.

Over a slide show of black-and-white pictures of all the people he has met, in a reflective voice-over, Macky says that a lot has come out of this track; he has found out all these connections. He draws them on a chart, which begins with Macky and Dad, and asks,"What am I going to do with them?"

The camera cuts to Reverend Delores Alston's church where her black congregation gathers. Macky says he promised to give her anything he found, and gave her Primus' address. The people in the church nod their heads as she reads that "the time has come for man not to be judged by the color of his skin."

The camera follows Fred and Jeff, and Macky relates that they visit Cherry Hill, where white Alston ancestors used to live but which is now a foundation for classical music. Macky says he offered to do a concert for Fred, and the two made and distributed flyers inviting all Alstons and the community. The camera documents the arrival of Macky's family, and his sister Charlotte as she meets her cousin Jeff. Fred has asked that the concert begin by ringing the old slave bell, Macky tells us. A poem-prayer is read as the musicians play, and the camera documents white and black Alstons sit together and listen. As people mingle and talk after the concert, Macky in a voice-over says, "If I've learned anything during the three years of this search, it is that change can happen in subtle ways." The Alstons talk and promise to meet each other again, Macky says. "I tend to look for drama, for revelation. But whatever has happened here is also something."

Interviewed, Fred says that the first thing he did when he came here was to speak. It was difficult because there was a long line of black men in the South who, in order to live, had to keep their mouths shut, Fred says. "I was taught that as a survival mechanism and I survived."

Over a copy of the New York Times' National Report, Macky says that he has received calls from Alstons all over the country, asking what it was like to be at the concert and if there would be another one the next year.

Over images of a black man teaching Macky how to rollerblade, Macky says he has also met Vincent Alston, who has been doing the same kind of research but on the black side. He was diagnosed with HIV and AIDS ten years ago, Macky says. Over the image of their two figures against the sun, Macky thinks out loud, "Meeting these people has been

just the beginning. I wonder what we'll do now."

The film ends with a collage: the black Alston women singing at the reunion, Delores talking about love and harmony in everyone, photos of Charles, the interview with Macky's father who says that it is the time when "things are fulfilled and things divided will be reconciled," and finally a performance by Charlotte who urges to "Get in touch with your soul."

"In his research, Macky Alston discovered that his great-great-grandfather was illegitimate. He was not an Alston by blood. So Macky Alston is not really an Alston after all."

Style/Structure
In this film, the interview serves as a device for Macky Alston to take on an identity and social place of his own. He goes in search of himself, by interviewing many other people. He wants to connect with African-American southerners because he believes that his elite, white family had an oppressive relationship with them. His roots are intertwined with theirs. From the start and throughout the project, both implicitly and explicitly Alston tells viewers that he is on a personal quest for meaning and selfhood. Public exposure of past unjust relationships will release him from a denial that, for him, echoes with denial of his homosexuality.

This puts his subjects in the position of enabling his search, and they are sometimes understandably reluctant to publicly expose long-hidden concerns for his benefit. Alston uses the hesitations and pauses to show how forbidden the historical and emotional territory he entered was. He said in a PBS interview,

I think the film is definitely as interesting for how people are not talking about the issues within the context of the film as it is interesting for what people do say. The silences I find to be extremely eloquent, to be very interestingY. The very pregnant pause, the thirty seconds of expensive film rolling before somebody actually says something. That is pure eloquence to me as to how they are making up their mind whether or not they are going to tell the truth; or they're deciding how the actually feel about something.

Along with interviews, Alston uses confessional narration, in which he highlights his awkwardness, misunderstandings and false assumptions. Ross McElwee had honed this technique in Sherman's March, also as a privileged scion of the South returning home for reconsideration of the past as preparation for his own future. Like McElwee, Alston leaves the viewer hanging at the end; the search for connections has not yielded a coherent narrative. What has been established is that denial of connection has been a fact of power and control over generations. Alston has clumsily attempted, by pursuing the truth of his past, to address this, and he has discovered more good will than not in his journey.

Background on Director/Film
Before Family Name, Alston had directed and produced a large number of short

documentaries: Catching Up With the Ward Boys, a 10-minute follow-up to Brother's Keeper, commissioned by American Playhouse and broadcast nationally on PBS in May 1994; and Chakra: A Celebration of India, for Jacques D'Amboise's National Dance Institute. Prior to directing, he worked as a documentary film editor, with credits including Dancing, the eight-part series for WNET and the BBC, and Something Within Me, the Sundance Film Festival triple-award winning documentary about a school of the arts in the South Bronx.

In interviews, Alston said that he could recall the problem of silence around race bothering him as early as kindergarten, when he first met African American Alstons, and being struck by the way everyone knew not to talk about it. AOur feeling has always been that the personal is a window into the historical and the universal; in presenting a strong narrative that has emotional content and narrative drive, you bring in viewers who are less interested in traditional documentary, and you spark a conversation that a more traditional documentary would spark, said producer Nick Gottlieb.

The Ford Foundation contributed major funding for the film, and also, as was typical of Ford's strategy at the time, invested heavily in its outreach. Many other foundations contributed smaller amounts. Among taxpayer-funded entities, the New York State Council on the Arts provided early funds, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting provided crucial and substantial finishing funds.

Production Context

Family Name's approach to race relations in the U.S. was indicative of a period in which the intense public politics of the civil rights movements had subsided, but deep problems remained. Many whites believed that African-Americans had achieved enough economic and social status to no longer need special policies. Although racism and other power inequalities continued, even affirmative action had been severely weakened. Alston acts as a member of a generation that has lacked a way even to talk about dividing lines of race and power in the society. The earlier history is constantly invoked, however, since both his father and mother were involved in the civil rights struggles.

His approach of personally exemplifying the issue and acting it out is, explicitly in the film, a legacy not so much of the black civil rights movement but of the gay rights movement. His experience of liberation as a gay man led him to the strategy he used to address his relationship to a multiracial society.

Reception

The film debuted at the Sundance Film Festival, where it won the Freedom of Expression award. It also won the IFP Open Palm Award for Best Debut Feature Film; the Silver Apple Award from the National Educational Media Network; the Bermuda International Film Festival Grand Jury Prize; the North Carolina Film Festival Best Feature Award; and Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame (2nd Prize, Cross-Cultural Films). It was part of the 1997 season on P.O.V., where hundreds of viewers registered their powerful reactions to the film on the film's Website, which also linked viewers to off-broadcast activities. It was also used in American Documentary's Television Race Initiative, which establishes

long-term relationships with community leaders to extend the social action of race-related films broadcast on P.O.V. Extensive outreach and educational materials were distributed with these activities. Alston believed that this use of his film was its vindication.

As he said in the PBS interview,

"Documentary filmmaking has such an interesting tradition of making media to affect social change--to document social change movements or to be used in grassroots organizing...For the past year and a half I've been traveling with the film doing workshops and seminars and screenings to spark dialogue around issues of race and its roots and how different individuals hook into that history and its legacy in the United States today all over the country. We've been doing it in schools and in churches, and in synagogues, in retirement homes, in museums and history centers. Now with the broadcast we are really stepping it up thanks to this Television Race Initiative as well as our educational partner, Facing History and Ourselves, which is a teacher training organization for middle and high school teachers."

At one community college, an administrator reported the film triggering campus-wide activities and discussions; "Family Name has forced us to raise the question consistently in our ongoing discussions: Can we face the future honestly if we are dishonest about our past?"

Discussion:
Macky Alston shows us a quest with many blind alleys. What do we learn from the process he shows us? How would you conduct a search like this? Macky Alston says change happens in subtle ways. Do you see this in the film?

Further Reading
www.pbs.org/independents/forum/sept98_forum.1.html. The web site features an extensive interview Macky Alston gave to PBS, discussing both form and content of the film.

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