



Charlotte Zwerin, 72; Worked on Stones Film 'Gimme Shelter'

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Charlotte Zwerin, who was in the vanguard of American documentary filmmaking for four decades as an editor and director and who collaborated with David and Albert Maysles on the landmark "Gimme Shelter," has died. She was 72.

Zwerin, whose documentaries frequently focused on visual artists and jazz legends, died of lung cancer Jan. 22 at her home in Manhattan.

Zwerin's talent for structuring narratives in the editing room earned her a co-director credit after she edited the Maysleses' documentaries "Meet Marlon Brando" and "A Visit with Truman Capote" (both 1966).

"When it comes to editing documentary material, she was the best by far," Albert Maysles told The Times this week.

Zwerin's most notable collaborations with the Maysles brothers as co-director were "Salesman" (1969), a feature-length chronicle about four Boston-based door-to-door Bible salesmen; and "Gimme Shelter" (1970), a feature-length documentary on the Rolling Stones' 1969 American tour.

The tour ended with the Stones' notorious free concert at Altamont Speedway in Livermore, Calif., where members of the Hells Angels, serving as security guards, brawled with out-of-control fans in the crowd of 300,000 and stabbed a black teenager to death after the youth charged the stage with a gun.

After learning that the Rolling Stones wanted to view footage of the concert, Zwerin suggested to

the Maysleses that they film the Stones' reactions to what they were viewing in the editing room and use that sequence as a structuring device for the documentary.

“It gave us a way to let the audience know right away that what they were about to see was something very disturbing and not just a music documentary,” she told the New York Times last year.

Stephen Lighthill, one of the cameramen for the film, said in an interview with Salon.com in 2000 that Zwerin had been “the real hero of the making of the film.”

“I was stunned with what she got out of my footage,” Lighthill said. “She compressed it and gave you a sense of a buildup of the tragedy that you otherwise wouldn't have.”

Zwerin told the New York Times that using the teenager's death to her professional advantage had caused her many sleepless nights.

“But what happened, happened, and, yes, you're taking advantage of it. But as a filmmaker, you can't just walk away from something like that,” she said.

Among the other films Zwerin co-directed with the Maysleses are two on the artist Christo: “Running Fence” (1978) and “Islands” (1987).

Zwerin told the New York Times that she had quit working with the Maysleses because they would not let her produce. “They cast an awful long shadow, and it came time for me to get out of it,” she said.

Among Zwerin's solo films are “De Kooning on de Kooning” (1981) about the abstract expressionist painter Willem de Kooning; and “Sculpture of Spaces: Noguchi” (1995), a look at sculptor Isamu Noguchi's gardens, playgrounds and other public spaces.

Tapping her lifelong love of music, she made, among others, “Thelonious Monk: Straight, No Chaser” (1989), a portrait of the eccentric and enigmatic jazz pianist; and “Ella Fitzgerald: Something to Live For” (1999), a biography of the legendary First Lady of Song that was

originally shown as part of the PBS “American Masters” series.

“She was definitely the filmmaker I wanted for that film,” said Susan Lacy, creator and executive producer of “American Masters.”

“She was a great storyteller, a great editor and she really knew and loved jazz: It was her world. I think she made one of our best films ever.”

Describing Zwerin as “very laconic, witty and wise,” Lacy said Zwerin was a pioneer woman in the documentary field and “a mentor to many women filmmakers.”

“I adored Charlotte,” Lacy said. “She was a great person and a great loss to the filmmaking world.”

Born in Detroit in 1931, Zwerin fell in love with film and music at an early age. Her passions for both were fueled when her mother took her to downtown Detroit to see what was billed as “Big Band and a Movie” -- a live band performance that preceded the feature film.

After attending Wayne State University, where she launched a film society, she moved to New York City in the mid-'50s.

There she became the librarian for the CBS documentary series “The 20th Century.” She was later promoted to assistant film editor but left, she told the New York Times last year, because women were expected to wear hose and heels and fill subsidiary roles.

She joined Drew Associates, whose founder, Robert Drew, was a pioneer of cinema verite, or direct cinema, in which documentary filmmakers used hand-held cameras and unobtrusive techniques to capture reality on film. She met the Maysles brothers there.

Zwerin, who also worked early in her career as a film editor for ABC and NBC, returned to NBC in 1984 as a producer for the magazine show “First Camera.”

Last spring, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City presented a retrospective of her work.

She leaves behind an unfinished portrait of a fellow Detroit native, jazz pianist Tommy Flanagan.

Zwerin, who was divorced from jazz critic Michael Zwerin, is survived by her brother, Charles Mitchell, and sister, Margaret Tesone, both of Detroit.

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