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## Film Review

### *Baseball: A Refuge From America*

*Baseball*, A Film by Ken Burns; Produced by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick; Written by Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns; Supervising Film Editor Paul Barnes; Narrated by John Chancellor; Cinematography Buddy Squires, Ken Burns and Allen Moore; Senior Creative Consultant John Thorn; Supervising Sound Editor Ira Spiegel; Florentine Films; Public Broadcasting Service Home Video; Turner Home Entertainment, Cat. No. B5318; Nine Innings (Volumes); Running Time Eighteen Hours and 54 minutes; 1994, Price not stated.

*Baseball* is a warts and all celebration of a game, or more correctly, something much more than a game – something, which should be more aptly described as a phenomenon – which has come to be regarded as the United States of America's national pastime. *Baseball* is a nine volume, or as it is presented, Innings set of films which examines the evolution of this American game. The combined running time of this series is six minutes shy of nineteen hours. The First Inning examines the 1840s to 1900. The next seven deal with the first seven decades of the twentieth century in turn. The Ninth Inning concerns itself with the period 1970 to the early 1990s<sup>1</sup> - prior to the 1994 lock-out which brought about a cancellation of that season and the accompanying World Series.<sup>2</sup>

In the Sixth Inning, entitled 'The National Pastime: 1940-1950', a brief reference is made to a Japanese soldier who was killed on a war ship off the coast of Formosa on 26 December 1944. The sequence runs for barely ten seconds. It may seem odd to include a reference to a dead Japanese soldier in a documentary on American baseball. The reference occurs in the context of material concerning Pearl Harbour, World War II and various American players who served in the forces during that war. The Japanese soldier was Eiji Sawamura. In 1934 Babe Ruth<sup>3</sup> led a team of 'All-Stars' on a tour to Japan. While still a high school student Sawamura had the distinction of striking out 'the Babe', Charlie Gehringer, Lou Gehrig and Jimmie Foxx, holding the Americans to one run. Ken Burns, and his production team, decided to honour the memory of this great Japanese pitcher – who had the 'stuff' to match it with the best that America could offer.<sup>4</sup>

The thread that ties *Baseball* together is the issue of race. In the preface to *Baseball: An Illustrated History*, the book which accompanies this documentary series, producers Ken Burns and Lynn Novick state 'The story of baseball is also the story of race in America, of immigration and assimilation.'<sup>5</sup> For example, *Baseball* refers to the anti-Semitism encountered by Jewish players, and of how several such players changed their names in attempting to avoid, or hide, from such abuse. The first stellar Jewish player was Hank Greenberg, who played with the Detroit Tigers from 1930 to 1945. He once said, 'I come to feel that if I, as a Jew, hit a home run I was hitting one against Hitler' (Fifth Inning).

The major aspect of race in baseball, if not all aspects of American life, of course, is the experience of black or African-Americans; of how they were excluded from playing in the majors until 1947, following a so-called 'gentleman's agreement' of owners and opposition from white players in the 1880s. Even in the more 'enlightened' times of the 1980s and 1990s African-Americans assume a disproportionately small percentage of baseball's managerial positions. *Baseball* pays homage to African-American players who experienced discrimination and segregation, who plied their trade in the Negro Leagues and on barnstorming tours.<sup>6</sup>

There are two heroes in *Baseball*. The first is Jackie Robinson, the first African-American to put an end to baseball's segregation when he played for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. The second is Branch Rickey, 'baseball's Leonardo da Vinci' (third Inning), who revolutionised baseball not once, but twice. The first time was when he invented the farm system during his twenty three-year managerial career with the St. Louis Cardinals. The second and more significant was, as the Dodgers' general manager, his signing of Jackie Robinson. Approximately half of the Sixth Inning is devoted to this dramatic and momentous event.<sup>7</sup>

Red Barber, the Dodgers' play-by-play broadcaster/announcer, recalls how Rickey was haunted by an incident which had occurred in 1903, when he was manager of Ohio Wesleyan University's baseball team. The team was scheduled to play in South Bend, Indiana. Its star player was African-American Charles 'Tommy' Thomas. Thomas was denied entry to a hotel at which the team, or rather Rickey, wished to stay. Rickey threatened to take his trade elsewhere unless Thomas was allowed to share his room. The hotel relented. After checking in and attending to the needs of other team members Rickey found Thomas crying in his room.

Rickey told Barber that Thomas said 'its my skin, if I could just tear it off, I would be just like everyone else'. Barber remembers Rickey saying to him, 'all those years I have heard that boy crying. Now I am going to do something about it' (Sixth Inning).

Again, according to Barber, Rickey asked of Robinson 'Do you have the gutz not to fight back ... The only way you can be the first man to do this, the first black man, is you have to promise me that for three years you will not answer back. You cannot win this by a retaliation. You can't echo a curse with a curse, a blow with a blow' (Sixth Inning). Robinson agreed to this request.

On 15 April 1947 Robinson turned out for the Dodgers, going hitless, in his first tentative step along the path to a Hall of Fame career. *Baseball* repeats a conversation that occurred at 1574 Fiftieth Street in Borough Park later that night. The fifteenth of April 1947 was the occasion of the Jewish Passover. Part of the ritual of this occasion is where the youngest male asks 'Why is this night different from all other nights?' Before the head of the household could answer the youngest male answered the question by saying 'Because a black man is playing in the major leagues' (Sixth Inning).<sup>8</sup>

John Thorn said that for him 'baseball's finest moment is the day Jackie Robinson set foot on a major league field for the first time. I'm most proud to be an American, most proud to be a baseball fan when baseball has led America rather than followed it. It has done so several times, but this is the most transforming incident. Jackie Robinson is my great hero among baseball heroes and he's my great hero as an American. He is an individual who shaped the crowd' (Sixth Inning).

Gerald Early observed 'You can almost divide American history in the twentieth century before Robinson and after Robinson. America was defined by baseball; this was our national game. So the drama of this moment, of Robinson coming in is enormous because of the game being tied to the national character; the game being tied with America's sense of its mission and its destiny' (Sixth Inning).

George Will points to 'The heroism of Jackie Robinson, playing the game that requires such astonishing concentration, and such equipoise – a combination of relaxation and concentration – to play it with his intensity under the pressures he felt; on the field from racism, on the field from racism from the stands, off the field. The pressure to be, in the awful phrase of the day "a credit to his race". To do all that, all that he did under

all that pressure, is not just one of the great achievements in the annals of sport, but one of the great achievements of the human drama anywhere, anytime' (Sixth Inning).

*Baseball* is a social history. It intertwines a narrative which examines the sport itself; the players, teams, managers, magnates and other characters who have performed in its drama; and how it interconnects, fits in or reflects the American character, mores and way of life. In the First Inning the series' narrator tells us

It is played everywhere; in parks and playgrounds and prison yards in back alleys and farmers' fields; by small boys and old men, raw amateurs and millionaire professionals. It is a leisurely game that demands blinding speed ...<sup>9</sup> It follows the seasons, beginning each year with the fond expectancy of spring time, ending with the hard facts of autumn. Americans have played baseball for more than 200 years. While they conquered a continent, warred with one another and with enemies abroad, struggled over labour and civil rights and the meaning of freedom.

Shortly after, the narrator says

At its heart lie mythic contradictions, a pastoral game born in crowded cities, an exhilarating democratic sport that tolerates cheating, and has excluded as many as it has included. A profoundly conservative game that often manages to be years ahead of its time. It is an American odyssey that links sons and daughters to fathers and grandfathers; and it reflects a host of old age American tensions, between workers and owners, scandal and reform, the individual and the collective. It is a haunted game in which every player is measured against the ghosts of all who have gone before. Most of all it is about time and timelessness, speed and grace, failure and loss, imperishable hope and coming home.

The major difference between books and films, as means of communication, is that the former relies on words –which must be read! – while the latter combines images and sound. With respect to images *Baseball* mainly relies on photographs and films, with occasional 'viewings' of documents and paintings; such as Willie Mays' famous 'over the shoulder' catch in the 1954 World Series.

Particularly in the early Innings, but all the way through the series, *Baseball* makes extensive use of still photographs. What is interesting

here is not so much that such photographs are reproduced; but rather, the manner of their reproduction and depiction on the screen. The style of *Baseball* is to first focus on a particular small aspect of a photograph. *Baseball's* camera will then slowly pan over the photograph, highlighting and drawing the viewers' attention to another, and other, interesting features. It will then pull back, exposing the photograph's vista, and then re-focus on a particular aspect. *Baseball* both hovers over and lingers in its presentation of photographs. The image holds for a few seconds, and then a few more, and a few more again. The effect, which also results from the mixing of sound (see below), is to gently pull the viewer, as it were, into the image; to evoke a feeling that one was there, looking on, when the photograph was taken; to derive an understanding of the psychological make-up and characters of the leading performers that strutted baseball's stage.

The major staple of *Baseball* is film, or moving pictures. There are, of course, film clips of great players and great teams displaying their skills on the diamond – not only in the majors but also the Negro Leagues and the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League.<sup>10</sup> Many of the great plays, or dramatic moments which occurred in World Series games, especially in more modern (television) times, are re-aired. There are also film clips of a large variety of other activities associated with baseball. These include fans delirious with happiness following their team's success, Babe Ruth standing on a second floor window ledge signing baseballs and casually flicking them out of his hand to a mass of fans below struggling to obtain such a 'valuable' possession, Lou Gherig's 'luckiest man' resignation speech, the first inductees to the Hall of Fame, the tearing down of the Polo Grounds and Ebbets Field, Sandy Koufax announcing his retirement because his pitching arm was no more, and funeral processions in honour of former star players. There are also film clips of baseball being played in local communities and in fields, by adults and children, of both sexes, across the century as it were. We even see a clip of a baseball scoreboard at a schoolyard on a snow swept winter's day.

The overall appeal of *Baseball* is enhanced by the use of sound and music. Sound has been mixed with various photographs and silent movie clips in helping to evoke time past (see above). The 'sweetest' sound in baseball, of course – well, everyone would agree with this except kill-joy pitchers – is that of bat on ball as a home run is belted out of the park.

Photographs and films of homeruns are mixed with this most beautiful of sounds. Sounds of crowds milling at the stadium and cheering on their team are integrated with photographs and silent movies. Images of baseball played in local communities are accompanied by the sound of happy voices and laughter, of the wind rustling grasses and trees. We see a trolley car outside a stadium and hear a bell ring; a boat and the sound of waves and seagulls crying; bat making and the sound of machines and the quiet banter of workers; the sound of flash bulbs popping as images of the first Hall of Famers change from moving pictures to photographs; and the nasal tones of a hot-dog merchant selling his wares – ‘hot dog, hot dog’.

Each Inning is accompanied by music appropriate to its period. Numerous versions of baseball’s seventh inning stretch anthem ‘Take Me Out To The Ball Game’ are played throughout the series. We hear it fast tempo, slow tempo, jazzed up and with different combinations of instruments. The best, and most enveloping, is slow tempo without words. We also hear various songs celebrating great players such as Babe Ruth, ‘Joltin’ Joe DiMaggio, Jackie Robinson and Willie Mays. The juxtaposition of music with images is both imaginative and, at times, amusing. Film of the construction of Yankee Stadium is accompanied by ‘Rhapsody in Blue’. In a segment dealing with minor league clubs experimenting with new promotions, in an attempt to arrest declines in attendance, we hear the strands of ‘Anything Goes’. Film of the demolition of Ebbets Field is accompanied by ‘Old Langsyne’. The ‘best’ example, however, concerns Earl Weaver, the Baltimore Orioles’ manager from 1968 to 1982. There is a clip of him disputing an umpire’s call, where he puts on a temper tantrum which would do any three-year-old child proud. As we watch this spectacle we hear the uplifting tones of ‘Lets Get Together’.

*Baseball’s* presentation is enlivened by the use of voice overs and specially filmed interviews with contemporaries and an assortment of, mainly academic, commentators. More than forty persons spoke the words or read out statements of persons long dead. Such reproductions range from Walt Whitman’s mid-nineteenth century celebration of baseball,<sup>11</sup> Arthur Goodwill Spalding on being a magnate, John Montgomery Ward railing against the reserve system, Ty Cobb’s observation that ‘Baseball is something like a war’, Shoeless Joe Jackson’s grand jury testimony following the fixing of the 1919 World Series,<sup>12</sup>

Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis' statements concerning baseball governance, through to players and others concerning highlights which occurred on the field of play.

Filmed interviews were conducted with over ninety contemporaries and various commentators. Former players from the Negro Leagues reminisce about their playing days, stars that they played with or against, the conditions under which they worked, the discrimination they experienced,<sup>13</sup> their importance to African-American communities, and the significance of Jackie Robinson's hurdling of baseball's colour bar. New York governor, Mario Cuomo ruminates on the sophistication of baseball's scouting system when he received a higher signing-on fee than Mickey Mantle - US\$2000 versus US\$1100 – on his way to a brilliantly short and undistinguished career in the minors. Ted Williams and Mickey Mantle recall moments and events associated with their respective Hall of Fame careers. Players from the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League talk about their time in baseball's sun. Marvin Miller—who Studs Terkel regards as the third most important person to change baseball, after Babe Ruth and Jackie Robinson (Eighth Inning) – talks about the activities of the Major League Baseball Players' Association.<sup>14</sup> Curt Flood discusses factors associated with his unsuccessful legal challenge to the reserve clause and the discrimination he, and other African-American players, experienced. At one stage, he said, 'I am pleased god made my skin black. I wish he had made it thicker' (Seventh Inning).

One of the major strengths of *Baseball* is how the various commentators, in reminiscing about great players and great games, are able to convey the emotion and passion that is visited upon fans; that exhilarating, uncontrollable rush of pure joy in celebration and awe of a wondrous piece of play.

The narrative, at the beginning of each Inning, sets the different periods in their respective international, national and baseball contexts. The series leisurely meanders through various on and off the field events that have combined to produce the phenomenon of baseball. In the Third Inning a voice-over quotes the *Los Angeles Times*:

'Why is baseball?, you ask. Because it is like charity, it never failith, it is always there except on Mondays and wet grounds. And to the man who is too old to keep up with the attempt to civilise football, and too young to need so soothing a sedative as golf; who works hard when he works, and wants to rest

hard when he rests; who wants a drama which is as full of surprises for the actors as it is for the audience; who wants a race that cannot be fixed like a horse race; who is so genuine an American that he wants something to kick about without meaning it, and something to yell about that everyone around him will think more of him for yelling about; to that man baseball is the one great lifesaver in the good old summer time.'

In the Seventh Inning John Thorn says 'There is no certainty in American life. We seem to reinvent ourselves every twenty years or so, and what baseball does is it gives us the illusion that something lasts. That in all of America where everything is so rapidly spinning all around our heads there is one constant'. A commentator in the Ninth Inning says 'It is passed along from parents to children ... I went to ball games with my mother. She passed along her sense of the game; I will pass it along to my son. It is a family heirloom. It is America's family heirloom because it goes back so far. But the thing that is most important about that is that we respect the people of other generations in baseball, perhaps more than we respect other generations in other fields in this country. We have been called a disposable society, but we don't dispose of Babe Ruth, we don't dispose of Walter Johnson; we treat them as though they are equal and contemporaries though they're dead. That is a special thing to hand onto children.'

In the Eighth Inning Donald Hall speculates 'It may be that the most American thing about baseball is that it, as we the fan take it, it is a refuge from America. I think that when we go to baseball we are going away from the America of our daily lives. We go to something that we now consider pastoral, although in the past every one considered baseball the city game. It now seems to us historic and connected with the past. So that you could tell what America is like by looking at baseball and saying that the daily life of America is the opposite of this'.

In producing an epic like this there are invidious problems concerning balance and choice. What should be the balance between baseball as play or activity, as sport or competition, as entertainment, as drama, as work or occupation, as a business or industry, as a site of struggle over civil, legal and racial rights, as a national pastime connected with broader cultural themes, or as a playing out of the comedy of life? What should be the balance between the uplifting and dastardly, the normal and odd-

ball, the serious and the funny? What should be included and what should be left out? What should be the balance between events on and off the diamond? What images and sounds should be used in producing various segments? Others may have made different choices and highlighted other aspects than those of Ken Burns and his team. As the series unfolds, and various segments cascade across the screen, it is difficult to reach any other conclusion than *Baseball* has got it just right. To borrow a baseball term, Ken Burns, with the backing of his team, has pitched a perfect game.

The final two images of *Baseball* are Babe Ruth hitting a home run, with *that* sound, and trotting around the bases in that ‘tippy-toey’ style of his; and young children, probably less than ten, of both sexes, running the bases and touching down on home plate. The final sounds, as the credits roll-on, is a voice-over of Reverend Jesse Jackson’s eulogy at Jackie Robinson’s funeral. *Baseball* is documentary film making and social history at its best.

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## Notes

- 1 The respective Innings, their titles and running times are as follows – The First Inning: Our Game: The 1840s-1900, 115 minutes; The Second Inning: Something Like A War: 1900-1910, 107 minutes; The Third Inning: The Faith of Fifty Million People: 1910-1920, 120 minutes; The Fourth Inning: A National Heirloom: 1920-1930, 117 minutes; The Fifth Inning: Shadow Ball: 1930-1940, 126 minutes; The Sixth Inning: The National Pastime: 1940-1950, 151 minutes; The Seventh Inning: The Capital Of Baseball: 1950-1960, 134 minutes; The Eighth Inning: A Whole New Ballgame: 1960-1970, 116 minutes; and The Ninth Inning: Home: 1970-Present, 148 minutes.
- 2 For accounts of this dispute see Kenneth M. Jennings, *Swings and Misses: Moribund Labor Relations in Professional Baseball*, Praeger, Westport (Connecticut), 1997 and Daniel R. Marburger (ed.), *Stee-Rike Four!: What’s Wrong with the Business of Baseball?* Praeger, Westport (Connecticut), 1997.
- 3 For accounts of the life and career of Babe Ruth and his impact on baseball see Kal Wagenheim, *Babe Ruth: His Life and Legend*, Owl book, New York, 1992 (first published 1974); and Marshall Smelser, *The Life That Ruth Built: A Biography*, Bison, Lincoln, 1993 (first published 1975).
- 4 For some snippets on Eiji Swamura’s career see Robert Obojski, *The Rise of Japanese Baseball Power*, Chilton, Radnor, 1975.
- 5 Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *Baseball: An Illustrated History*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1994, p. xvii. The book is excellent and a fine read. But this is definitely a case where the film – or rather, nine films – is much better than the book.
- 6 For accounts of the Negro Leagues see Robert Peterson, *Only The Ball Was White:*

*A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992 (first published 1970); and Mark Ribowsky, *A Complete History of the Negro Leagues: 1994 to 1955*, Citadel Press, Secaucus, 1997 (first published 1995). Also see Mark Ribowsky, *Don't Look Back: Satchel Paige in the Shadow of Baseball*. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1994.

- 7 See David Lipman, *Mr Baseball: The Story of Branch Rickey*, G Putnam's Sons, New York 1966; Harvey Frommer, *Rickey and Robinson: The Men Who Broke Baseball's Color Bar*, Macmillan, New York, 1982; Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and his Legacy*, Vintage Books, New York, 1983 and Jules Tygiel (ed.), *The Jackie Robinson Reader: Perspectives on an American Hero*, Dullton Books, New York, 1997.
- 8 According to the ritual of this Jewish religious occasion part of the answer is 'Because we were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Eternal, our God, brought us forth thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm'. *Haggadah*, Sinai Publishing, Tel Aviv, 1961, pp. 12-15.
- 9 That which has been deleted says 'The only game in which the defence has the ball'. Both cricket and rounders are sports where 'the defence has the ball'. The First Inning acknowledges baseball's links with these two English sports. Soccer's goal keeper and ice-hockeys goal tender are other examples of where defenders have the ball, or puck. Also, what are we to make of defences in American football who can intercept a pass or retrieve a fumbled ball?
- 10 For details concerning female players see Barbara Gregorich, *Women at Play: The Story of Women in Baseball*, Harvest Original, San Diego, 1993.
- 11 'Well – its our game; that's the chief fact in connection with it: America's game; it has the snap, go, fling of the American atmosphere; it belongs as much to our institutions, fits into them as significantly as our Constitution's laws; is just as important in the sum total of our historic life.'
- 12 For details of the 'fix, or the 'Black Sox Scandal', as it became known see Eliot Asinof, *Eight Men Out: The Black Sox and the 1919 World Series*, Owl Book, New York, 1987 (first published 1963); and Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Golden Age*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1971, pp. 294-310. The First Inning included a comment from the New York Times: 'The aim of baseball is to employ professional players to perspire in public for the benefit of gamblers'.
- 13 In the Fifth Inning there is a segment dealing with the problems Negro Leaguers experienced in finding accommodation, purchasing food and visiting rest rooms when they were on the road. One of the visuals used to accompany this segment is that of a vehicle travelling down a road and approaching a bridge with an overhead sign which reads 'Good By – Hurry Back'.
- 14 See Marvin Miller, *A Whole Different Ball Game: The Sport and Business of Baseball*, Birch Lane, New York, 1991. For further information on unionism and industrial relations in baseball see James B. Dworkin, *Owners versus Players: Baseball and Collective Bargaining*. Auburn House, Boston, 1981; Lee Lowenfisch, *The Imperfect Diamond: A History of Baseball's Labor Wars* (Revised Edition), Da Capo Press, New York, 1991 (first edition 1980); Jennings, op. cit.; and Marburger, op. cit.