

Barnstormin'

A Film Treatment

Screenplay - Tom G. Robertson

BARNSTORMIN'

A Film Treatment

In 1919 Sonny Long left the hard time cotton fields of South Carolina for the high times of the Harlem Renaissance of the “roaring 20’s.” The young man from the country was raised by his grandfather who had been a slave. Sonny would go on to become an unlikely pioneer in a fledgling sport called basketball, barnstorming the countryside with the black teams in an era of bitter segregation. Having broken away from his Grandfather’s dream, Sonny finds himself in a whole new exciting and dangerous world torn between a torrid jazz singer and the share cropper’s daughter he left behind. He is haunted by the legacy of his grandfather he struggles.

Sonny’s story begins in 1985 at a family gathering to watch the NBA All Star game featuring Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, Julius Irving, and Michael Jordan. They are celebrating Sonny’s 85th birthday. The guys shoot baskets on a very old backboard and rim, comparing the towering new stars with the old days. “They wouldn’t be here without us!” old Sonny growls as he makes a feeble short two hand set shot. His great grandson Isaac gives Sonny a tape recorder to “tell his story.” When the party is over, Sonny’s wife of nearly 60 years shows him how to work the “new fangled” digital recorder. Alone, the old man begins to talk into the tiny recorder telling his story as we see it unfold on film.

Sonny grew up on his grandfathers’ cotton farm in South Carolina. Freeman was the name his grandfather took following the Emancipation. Freeman went on to work for his old master for nearly 20 years in order to save enough money to buy his own farm which he hoped to pass on generation to generation. Freeman had his heart set on leaving the farm to Sonny. There was one problem. Sonny didn’t want to farm cotton. He had dreams of big times in the big city where he could be “somebody,” maybe even a jazz musician. Sonny didn’t want to be just a “nobody” working fields. When Sonny left he also broke the heart of a sharecropper’s daughter named Sylvie, promising he would come back for her someday.

Harlem greeted the country kid with a big city slap in the face. On his very first day he was robbed by con men, drugged and dumped in an alley. All the money he had saved and even the few clothes he owned were gone. Alone and destitute Sonny found shelter in St. Phillip’s Church where he got a janitors job and a room where he could sleep. It was there that he discovered a new and exciting new game called basketball. Sonny’s room was behind the big recreation hall where a team called St. “C’s” played and practiced. Sonny became friends with two star players, Paul Robeson (who would become world famous as singer and actor) and “Fats” Jenkins, who helped teach him the game and the history of the “black fives.”

Sonny became obsessed with basketball practicing night after night. Paul and “Fats” also introduced him to the Cotton Club and Harlem night life...and a hot young singer named Sugar Rose. Soon Sonny moved in with Sugar and took up the Harlem high life with swanky nightclubs, jazz, and the hip uptown culture. But it was basketball that became Sonny’s passion. He soon joined the St. C’s team on the regional tour playing other black teams including the Smart Set Athletic Club, the New York All Stars the Alpha Physical Culture Club and the Loendi Five from Pittsburgh. The games were often played in big ballrooms and casinos as an added attraction to the dance that almost always followed. Sonny and Sugar Rose became part of the Harlem Renaissance social scene that included great jazz musicians like Billie Holiday and Duke Ellington, writers like Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston, and political activists Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Dubois. Life seemed an endless whirl filled with parties and basketball and jazz.

Sonny was stunned when ‘out of nowhere’ the sharecropper’s daughter Sylvie showed up in Harlem finding him living with Sugar Rose. Humiliated she runs away. Emotionally torn, Sonny begins to drink more and more as the glamorous life becomes empty and contentious. Off the court drinking begins to consume him. Sylvie brought back memories he could not shake. After his breakup with Sugar Rose, Sonny’s only real joy came with basketball. The crowds were small and there was no real money, but the “black fives’ played for the love of the game and for the Negro World Championship won by Sonny and the St. C’s Red & Black Machine.

Following the championship, Sonny was joined a new team called the Harlem Renaissance named after the Casino and Ballroom where they played. The “Rens” were paid real money and played 135 games a year. After they won the “Colored Championship” they were challenged to a “real” world championship with the New York Celtics, an all-white team.

Two weeks before the historic confrontation, a western union wire arrived. Freeman was dead. Sonny was devastated. He caught a train back to South Carolina for the funeral. He saw Sylvie at the funeral, but she would not speak to him. At the old farmhouse Sonny finds his grandfather’s diary and begins to read the powerful words of the slave that became a free man. Sonny is deeply touched. The images evoked by the words are forever etched into his mind. He realizes Freeman was the greatest “somebody” he has ever known. Sylvie will have nothing to do with him. Emotionally drained, he takes the train back to New York for the championship.

The game with the Celtics was historic and dramatic as the “black five” took on the best all white professional team in the country. In an exciting see-saw game, the “Rens’s” win. As the team celebrates at the Cotton Club, the words of his grandfather haunt Sonny. With the season was over he goes back to Carolina. Alone on the farm he builds a backboard and hoop to pass the time, trying to decide what to do. When Sylvie shows up they begin to put their lives back together. Sylvie realizes Sonny’s passion for “the game” and convinces him to play again. Sonny

keeps the farm but allows Sylvie's brother who fought in WWI to sharecrop the land. Sylvie and Sonny head back to Harlem.

For the next 20 years Sonny "barnstormed" the country with the Ren's as they made history winning more than 2000 games and earning a place in the Basketball Hall of Fame. Following the tradition of the "black fives" leagues spread across the country. Harlem became synonymous with black basketball as the Globetrotters, Harlem Magicians, and Harlem Stars all gained worldwide fame. Racial barriers came down and African Americans achieved greatness in the NBA. Sonny and Sylvie raised four kids and retired to Freeman's farm where Sonny celebrated his 85th birthday with Sylvie.
