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## Chaz Ebert Celebrates *Life Itself* and Roger Ebert

By Shannon M. Houston

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Towards the end of a course on the works of Nietzsche and Freud, one student finally, bravely asked the question we all knew our philosophy professor did not want us to ask: “Which one got it right?” Our professor decided to bite, explaining that the person with the best theory—the more powerful theory—was the better of the two. And when someone else asked how you know that a theory—or that anything, for that matter—is powerful, the professor sort of smirked and said, “You shall know them by their fruits.”

These words come to mind during one of the most amazing scenes in [Life Itself, Steven James’s 2014 documentary](#) on the life and times of the late Roger Ebert. It’s one of those scenes that, were it to have occurred in a narrative film, we film critics would have rolled our eyes a bit, knowing that the filmmaker and screenwriter had taken the whole “suspension of disbelief” thing a bit too far. We see a picture of Roger Ebert with a fan, who’d asked him to take a photo with her, and her young niece. The eight-year-old little girl would grow up to make a film titled *I Will Follow*, about which Ebert would write a glowing review, not knowing at the time that he’d actually met the auteur decades before, and inspired her greatly.

How do you know the power and impact of someone like Roger Ebert? You know him by his fruits—Ava DuVernay is just one of them. Countless other filmmakers, many of whom appear in *Life Itself*, are also in some way or another the fruits of Ebert’s labor. It might sound like a cliché, but, through James’s lens, one does get the sense that nearly everyone he touched—physically or otherwise—left Ebert’s presence a little different. And the same can be said about the effect of *Life Itself* on its audience, which can only mean that the documentary captures something more than the fascinating, triumphant and difficult life of Roger Ebert—it captures his essence.

Almost two years to the date of his passing, *Paste* caught up with Chaz Ebert, who continues to celebrate the film and the legacy of her husband—a beloved movie critic who shared her love of life, the arts and of diversity, in the truest sense of the word.

**Paste Magazine:** Chaz, I saw that you recently headed up the SXSW panel, “The Future of Film Criticism: Diversify or Die.” I love that title, and I wanted to start out by talking about that a bit. Conversations like this can be both empowering and frustrating. What were your feelings when you walked away from the panel?

**Chaz Ebert:** I walked away feeling very hopeful, because we had such a good group of people in the audience, and their questions showed that they understood why diversity is a good thing. And they understood that when I was talking about diversity, it wasn’t

only racial or ethnic diversity. It means that there will more women writing about film, and it's also about people who are physically disabled, and talking about film from their standpoint. It's about sexual identity issues—you see more and more, especially in TV, that there are transgender characters and gay characters. So we've expanded the definition of diversity. And we talked about having the people who write about film and television start to mirror people in our society. So, I felt hopeful because we also talked about seeing changes.

And, for instance—and not that one person will change everything—but certainly Shonda Rhimes is making a big impression on people in Hollywood and around the country. We definitely see improvement. And then there's Ava DuVernay. Roger was a growing supporter of her. She started with a movie that she financed herself for \$50,000, and then came full circle with *Selma*, and got a lot of accolades for that.

And diversity really ties in with *Life Itself*, because Roger was a proponent of independent filmmakers and diverse filmmakers.

**Paste:** Yes, and it's funny you mention Shonda Rhimes because she recently won an award and said that she doesn't see herself as someone who embraces "diversity"—she calls it "normalizing."

**Ebert:** I saw that! Exactly! And even though we used the term, that's what I said too, and that's what I mean by saying that the people who write about our entertainment need to mirror our society.

**Paste:** You've said before that it's a different experience for you, almost every time you watch *Life Itself*. Do you still watch the movie? And, if so, what's the experience like for you now?

**Ebert:** I'm trying to think of the last time I watched it. In fact, I'm invited this week to a screening, and I don't know if I'm going to watch it. You know, I watched it recently and really enjoyed it! Now, I'm almost—*almost*—able to sit back and really enjoy it. But sometimes I watch it, and my heart strings get all entangled again, and I cry and I laugh, and I go through all the emotions all over again. Even though it's been almost two years—on April 4th it will be two years since Roger passed away—it still feels new. I'm in the process of healing, because time does help with that. But we were together for so long and we had such a big impact on each other's lives, so I don't know if I'll ever be "normal." But it does get better. I can say that for sure.

And I'm so proud of the film! I'm so proud of how he teaches us to accept what life throws at us with such grace and ease. That's something that, when I watch it, sometimes I look and just marvel at his courage and his bravery, and his gumption—he wasn't gonna let life defeat him. And yet, when he's ready to go, he tells me! He's ready to go. He's not afraid. And that's a beautiful thing too. Because, living through that with him—that took away my fear of death. When it is my time, I'm hoping that I do it as gracefully as he did.

**Paste:** There were so many great scenes in *Life Itself*, but two that were really memorable to me were very different. I loved the clip of Gene [Siskel] and Roger arguing in between takes, and then making the McDonald's jokes about each other.

**Ebert:** (laughs) Oh, yes!

**Paste:** And then, I was also really taken aback with the medical procedure that was shown. The film occupies these two spaces and navigates them so well—the great comedy and Ebert's sense of humor, and the realities of loss and pain. Did you always trust Steve James with this story? How did your relationship with him change over the course of shooting the film?

**Ebert:** We did trust him. And in fact, if Steve James's and Martin Scorsese's names hadn't been attached to this, we probably wouldn't have done it. We had been approached by some other people to do it, and Roger wasn't interested. He actually told people "no"—that he wasn't interested in having a film made about his life. But then Steve Zaillian [*Schindler's List* writer] and his producing partner Garret Basch came along, and they had read Roger's memoirs. They actually brought the project to James and Scorsese. And with all four of those names, we just said, "What?!" How can you say no to something like that?

And we knew that Steve James had the best reputation in the documentary filmmaking community. He's a man of integrity. We'd watched him over the course of 20 years and we knew that his reputation was stellar. So that's why we trusted him. And, even knowing that, we still had him come over, and sit down and talk to us about how he would make the film, before we said "yes." So by the time we agreed, we were pretty comfortable with the fact that we were turning our lives over to Steve James.

**Paste:** Ava DuVernay often talks about Roger's impact on her career, but I didn't know the story of their original meeting until I saw *Life Itself*.

**Ebert:** When she was *eight* years old! Can you believe that?

**Paste:** I loved that part. And I love that it follows with your granddaughter Raven talking about his impact on her. And then there's Gina Prince-Bythewood, another black filmmaker, who has spoken highly of him and the [website](#). Can you talk about his relationship to filmmakers—especially in terms of championing women of color—and how your personal relationship with him might have impacted things?

**Ebert:** Well, this goes back to what you mentioned Shonda Rhimes said, about normalizing. Roger didn't see what he was doing as something extraordinary, or something he was doing to right the wrongs of the past. He saw it as something normal and natural. Now, in his memoir he does talk about how he grew up in central Illinois and there were a few African-Americans in his school. They didn't necessarily hang out together all the time, but he said that, from the time that he became aware of race, a lot of the opinions he'd formed in his mind were based on books he read: Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and James Baldwin, and things like that. But he said that he never tried to approach the concept as if to say, "Oh, this is something outside of myself." It was normal and natural, and for him it was just about how you treat another human being. And that's what I loved about him. It wasn't about making a big gesture.

**Paste:** Sure. But it's interesting because DuVernay says that, knowing that he was married to you enabled her to trust him a bit more with her work.

**Ebert:** (laughs) Well I do like to think I had something to do with that, for sure! I must have had some subtle influence. I'm going to add another strong, black woman into the chain, since you brought some up, including my granddaughter Raven—they were very close. Oprah Winfrey! Oprah Winfrey says that Roger is the one who put her on the path to becoming a billionaire, because he told her to go into syndication.

**Paste:** Wow!

**Ebert:** They were on a date! They were at Hamburger Hamlet or something, and she was trying to make a decision. I think it was about whether to go into syndication, or take a very secure position with ABC. She said Roger sat down, got a napkin—a napkin she says she still has to this day—and wrote down all of the figures, and options she had. She took that napkin, and the next day told King World that she'd accept the syndication deal. So that's another one! (laughs)

**Paste:** I never knew that—what a great Oprah story! I also liked that the film has this small focus on music. You've talked a lot about watching movies with Roger, but it looked like music was also a big part of your relationship—there's mention of Leonard Cohen and Dave Brubeck. Did the two of you talk music as much as you talked movies?

**Ebert:** We did, we loved music. There was always music playing in our house, and we always talked about how music influenced mood in music. I have an obsession with sounds and vibrations, and I think that they are so related to everything in life. This also extends to music. So when Roger would have to go for hospital stays, he would spend the night before loading up music onto his iPod. It was as much a part of getting ready as anything else—what music we were going to play. Our first date was at the Lyric Opera, but we liked all kinds of music. Folk songs; we loved gospel music at Black churches. Music was a big part of our lives.

**Paste:** Another small thing that I noticed was the license plate on your car that read "Movies." Do you still have that? I hope this isn't too personal of a question, but I'm curious to know if there's another small thing like that that you have, which reminds you of Roger when you see it?

**Ebert:** It's a funny thing. I love having that plate, but sometimes I don't like it because people see it and make the connection. Sometimes when I'm out driving, I crave anonymity.

I'm sitting at my computer right now, and I have several pictures of him right around me. It's funny, I wasn't even aware of it until you asked, but here they are! And I'm looking at them every day. In one of them, he's sitting and he's giving me a "thumbs up."

Looking around though, probably everything reminds me of him in small ways. He was just so much a part of me. And certainly, anytime I'm doing anything working with young people, or emerging writers and filmmakers, I think of him. Because he was such a mentor, and it makes me feel good to continue carrying on the work that we both did.

**Paste:** What's next for you?

**Ebert:** April 4th will be the two-year anniversary of Roger's passing, and we will be making a big announcement just before then about some pretty exciting things we'll be doing to maintain his legacy. I'm also working with these students in Chicago through the Chicago Urban League and Columbia College's journalism program. And I'm making sure that writers of color are also getting a chance to apply for some of these fellowships and endowments for emerging writers and filmmakers. That's something that's very important to me.

And of course we still do Ebert Fest, which is coming up April 15-19. And I'm excited about that, because we're going to have several films that I think Roger would have liked. We try to have older films and new films, but I always try to choose films that I think would be in the spirit of something that Roger would have championed.

**Paste:** Well, we're excited about the announcement. And thanks so much! This was wonderful.

**Ebert:** Thank you.

*Life Itself* is now available on Blu-ray and DVD from Magnolia Home Entertainment.

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