

DANTE JAMES

LIVING INTO YOUR DREAM

BY NITARA LEE OSBOURNE

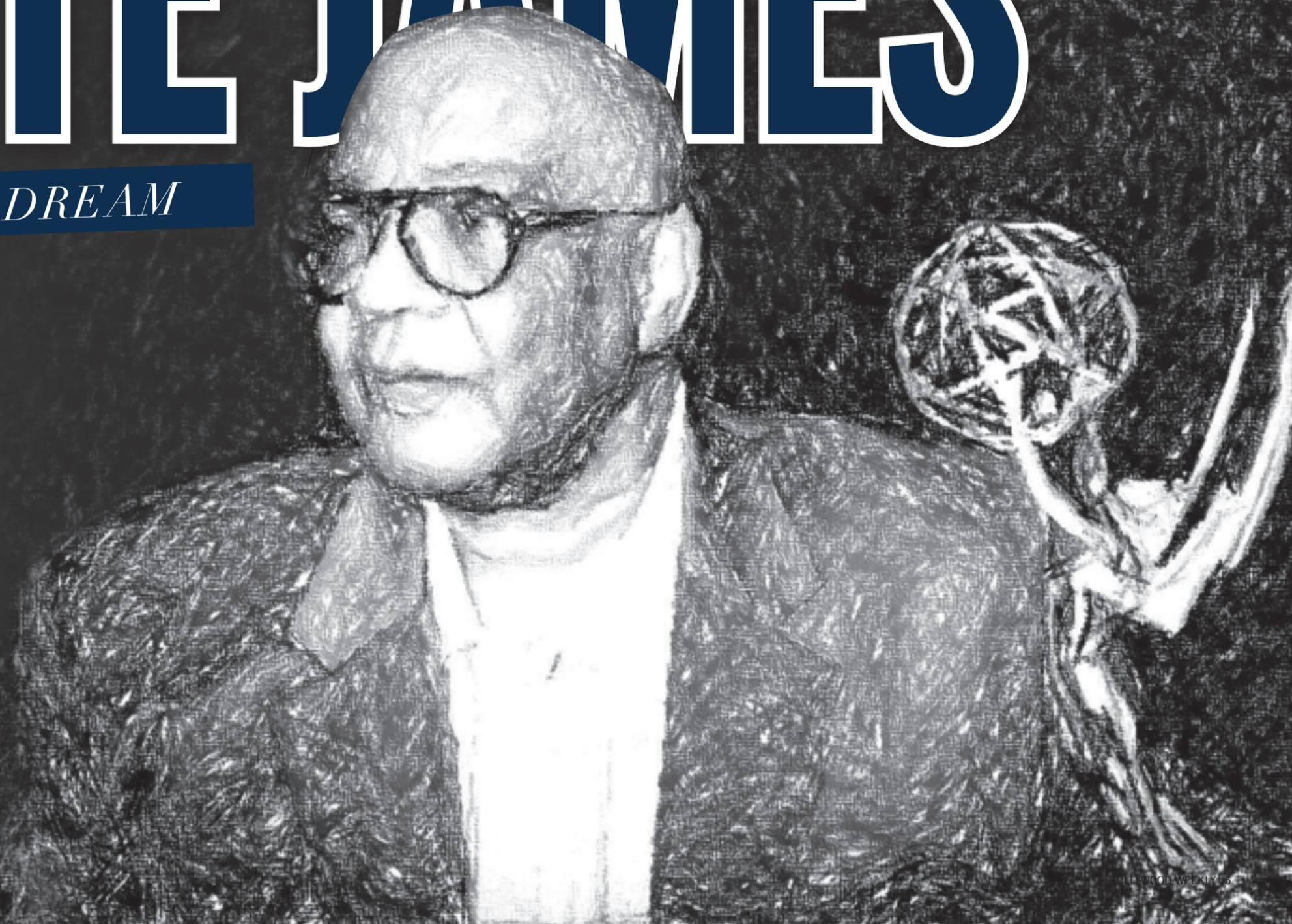
We often think of success as million dollar homes, global recognition, and more than enough money to do whatever it is that we choose to do. However, there are successful people who are making a living and living out their dreams.

Dante James is the epitome of class, conviction, and passion. He is definitely a success.

After all, he's a multiple Emmy winning filmmaker and has also received two DuPont Columbia Awards during the course of his career as a successful producer/director/writer. He won his most recent Emmy for the PBS documentary series *Slavery and the Making of America*.

I recently had the opportunity to interview this "moving and shaking" filmmaker and former college professor. By the time I was actually speaking with him, I was simply drawn into his world, as well as his approach to both his students and his work as a filmmaker. It's the humanity that he seeks to convey in his stories and what he sought to instill in his impressionable students. He was Artist-in-Residence and instructor at Duke University, but now he is currently only working as an independent filmmaker.

PHOTOS: PHOTO CREDIT: DEON T. HUNTER, D & A PHOTOGRAPHY, DAYTON OH





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In a Sunday morning interview, within his humble voice, I heard class in how Dante responded, conviction in his sincere tone, and passion behind the heartbeat of every word.

HW: Thank you for doing this interview, Dante.

DJ: Absolutely. I’m happy to do it.

HW: Great, well, I’m going to jump right in. In a March 14th, 2017 article in “Indie Soul Magazine,” you mentioned: “It has taken many years to marshal [your] own resources and cultivate a relationship with an investor who understands the importance of resources from black financiers.” Do you feel that is the challenge facing independent black filmmakers – that they don’t reach out to these investors or is it just that they don’t cultivate relationships?

DJ: That’s a... big question. First of all, I think that investors – either black or white, or whatever color they might be... are looking at the bottom line. Their question is: “How can I get my money back?”

HW: Right. Completely understandable.

DJ: It has taken me time to wrap my head around that – totally in a business context. As a filmmaker – you have this passion, you have these ideas, you have these stories that you feel just have to be told. And you’re hoping that other people – people with resources – feel the same way.

HW: That’s true.

DJ: It’s a process to identify people with resources, cultivate relationships, and educate them in terms of the need for the films and the business potential.

HW: That’s an honest response.

DJ: That’s the only way I know to be.

HW: I understand that you are a filmmaker and a former college professor. How have you balanced both fields? Have you given attention to both equally?

DJ: I think of myself as more of a filmmaker first. Film is about the journey of discovery. That’s what life is to me. When you get up in the morning, it’s a journey of discovery. Hopefully at the end of the day, that journey has helped me become a better human being. More fully human. And that’s the way filmmaking is. Discovery.

*DOING SOMETHING DIFFERENT
JUST TO BE DIFFERENT DOESN'T HELP
VIEWERS CONNECT TO THE MATERIAL.*

HW: And is that what you instilled in your students as well? The journey of discovery?

DJ: Absolutely.

HW: In that same "Indie Soul Magazine" article, you mentioned being "committed to making the strongest, and most creative statements possible in [your] films." Do you feel it's possible to do this in mainstream media or do you always feel stifled?

DJ: Mainstream has many definitions. I think that if it's mainstream in the context of PBS, then yes, I have experienced restraints and obstacles. This isn't a criticism of PBS. It's just the nature of how it's constructed.

HW: How so?

DJ: As an independent filmmaker, an African-American artist and activist, I want to make the strongest, most creative statements possible for... my culture... my people... and marginalized people regardless of color. PBS receives funding from the federal government and various government-related agencies. Consequently, they are impacted by politics. They are in a very difficult position. They have to make sure that their funding sources aren't threatened or upset with their content. What I see now in terms of mainstream media is a new freedom. Netflix, Amazon, and others are audience-driven. This makes very different relationships possible for diverse, creative projects from independents like me.

HW: Well, there was a big enough audience watching you to have won an Emmy for being a series producer.

Did you feel like you had "arrived" within your career at that moment or did you still feel like you had to prove yourself?

DJ: As an African-American, you have to constantly prove yourself, regardless of your profession. In terms of the moment we won for the slavery series, actually, it was a big relief because we had two other nominations that did not go our way. So, in that moment [just before the win], I was not happy. I was hoping that the [third] time goes our way and if not, that I would be able to mask my disappointment. (Chuckling) But we won and it was great for the entire team.

HW: What words of wisdom would you give to minority filmmakers – Black, Latino, and LGBT?

DJ: Foremost, it's to understand... and respect the subject matter. Always put the audience up front. Like some filmmakers – and this is not a criticism... it's just an observation. I hear a lot of filmmakers say, "I did this because I wanted it to be different." I can understand and appreciate the difference, but is being different in service of the viewers or in service of the filmmakers? I think it always has to be in service of the viewers... and the material. Doing something different just to be different doesn't help viewers connect to the material.

HW: Well, Dante, what a way to end this interview. It's been a pleasure.

DJ: Thank you for having me, Nitara. I enjoyed your questions.

INDIE SOUL MAGAZINE. (2017, MARCH 14). EMMY AWARD-WINNING BLACK FILMMAKER TO RELEASE TWO NEW FILM PROJECTS.

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