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Film Forum's NYC Celebration Contains Multitudes

New York's star moment

By [Melissa Anderson](#) Wednesday, Jan 9 2013

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Film Forum/Photofest

Demure today but once revolutionary: Frank Simon's *The Queen*

"I was asking for something perfect and specific for my city," begins [Walt Whitman's](#) 1860 Gotham ode "Mannahatta." Six decades later, that poem would inspire [Paul Strand](#) and [Charles Sheeler's](#) *Manhatta* (1921), widely considered to be the first American avant-garde film. Strand and Sheeler's sublime 10-minute tribute to "Babylon on Hudson" provides the DNA for many of the titles in [Film Forum's](#) essential "New Yawk New Wave" series, a paean centered on the high holy years of independent filmmaking in the city, 1953 to 1973 (though some shorts programs include work dating as far back as 1905). Spanning the mayoralties of [Vincent Impellitteri](#) and [John Lindsay](#), the program not only reveals the vast number of cinema movements bubbling up during this 20-year stretch—whether in documentary, fiction, or a hybrid of the two—but also highlights a new kind of "star": the junkies, freaks, drunks, hustlers, queers, drag queens, and insurrectionists of all colors and professions indigenous to no other metropolis but ours.

One of those aforementioned flourishing film movements was the New American Cinema, a collective that coalesced in late 1950s and early '60s. Members Shirley Clarke—a onetime daughter of Park Avenue privilege who soon abandoned all posh comforts—and brothers Jonas and Adolfas Mekas (whose work also



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screens in the series) advocated for radical changes in U.S. filmmaking, eventually issuing, along with others, a manifesto that ended with this salvo: "We don't want rosy films. We want them the color of blood." Lysergic colors, in fact, dominate [Clarke's](#) kaleidoscopic "Bridges-Goround," a 1958 short whose kinetic vision of the city is echoed in the black-and-white "Skyscraper" (1960), a jazzy salute to the Tishman Building on Fifth Avenue co-directed with [Willard Van Dyke](#). Clarke's impeccable eye for NYC locales also animates *The Cool World* (1964), about rumbling gangs of African-American teens in Harlem—one of the first fiction features to be shot entirely on location in that neighborhood.

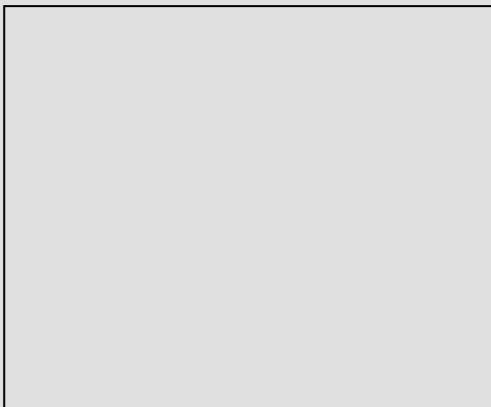
"New Yawk New Wave" also features several titles with filmmakers—whether real or fictional—losing control. The doofus documentarian who tries to chronicle a multiracial group of smack addicts living in a squalid downtown loft in Clarke's first feature, *The Connection* (1961), presages the director-as-provocateur played by [William Greaves](#) in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968). (Greaves began his career as an actor in the 1940s but switched to working



Paul America in *My Hustler*

Film Forum/Photofest

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behind the camera in the '50s, frustrated by the lack of roles for African Americans.) Asked to explain what he was filming by a permit-requesting cop in [Central Park](#), where most of the movie was shot, Greaves could only offer, "It's a feature-length we-don't-know." The result is a still-stunning truth-tweaking film-within-a-film-*within*-a-film. One level of this *matryoshka*-doll movie consists of two performers (who are occasionally, and for no apparent reason, replaced by others) playing Freddie and Alice, a bickering married couple: The wife is convinced her husband is making eyes at other men ("You just want the gay world, Freddie! G-A-Y!"). These Actors Studio histrionics are frequently interrupted by Greaves, who instructs his assistants to film the filming; off-site, the crew members, on the verge of mutiny, document themselves dissecting their director ("This is *bad* writing").

Beyond its heady interrogation of the filmmaking process, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*, shot one year before the [Stonewall riots](#), hints at the lavender revolution to come. "I don't know whether this is a butch fag or a faggy fag," the actor (Don Fellows) auditioning for Freddie confides to Greaves. That distinction is much clearer in [Andy Warhol's](#) droll *My Hustler* (1965), in which an effete, tubby middle-aged homosexual ([Ed Hood](#)) proudly shows off the gay-for-pay stud ([Paul America](#)) he's brought along for the weekend in [Fire Island](#).

Another kind of flaunting is the focus of [Frank Simon's](#) rarely screened documentary *The Queen*

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(1968), a riveting record of a 1967 drag beauty competition held at Town Hall. The emcee of the contest, and the occasional voiceover narrator, is [Jack Doroshov](#), a/k/a Sabrina: "I'm 24 years old, but in drag, I come on like 110. . . . Like a bar-mitzvah-mother thing." Indeed, the contest itself is about as risqué as a junior high homecoming dance, as depilated men in sky-high bouffant wigs show off matron-y floor-length dresses to the musical accompaniment of a tuxedoed combo. The real drama happens offstage: a trip to Mme. Berthé's Theatrical Costumes and Gown Rentals, chats in rundown hotel rooms among the contestants about boyfriends and gay life back home, a post-crowning moment when an indignant third-runner-up threatens Sabrina: "I'll sue the bitch!"

More imminent perils loom over the small-time, [Bronx](#)-born Jewish numbers-runner of the title in [Michael Roemer's](#) low-key comedy *The Plot Against Harry* (1970). Released after a nine-month stint behind bars, [Harry Plotnick](#) ([Martin Priest](#)) discovers his enterprise has gone down the toilet, almost kills his ex-wife in a car accident, meets a daughter he never knew he had, goes into a catering business with his schmendrick former brother-in-law, suffers ticker and tummy distress, and is summoned to appear before a congressional inquiry into organized crime. As [Harry](#) meanders from appointment to appointment in the five boroughs, the city—and the film—becomes nothing less than what Whitman sought: perfect and specific.

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