

Los Angeles Filmforum presents
Filmforum 50, program 16: *Star Spangled to Death*
Sunday July 5, 2026, 1:00 pm
At 2220 Arts + Archives

Los Angeles Filmforum is the city's longest running organization dedicated to weekly screenings of experimental film, documentaries, video art, and experimental animation. 2026 is our 51st year. www.lafilmforum.org

In celebration of the 250th anniversary of the United States, and in honor of the late Ken Jacobs, we present his epic tribute to the United States of America.

"Is an epic film shot for hundreds of dollars! Combining found-films with my own more-or-less staged filming, it pictures a stolen and dangerously sold-out America, allowing examples of popular culture to self-indict. Racial and religious insanity, monopolization of wealth and the purposeful dumbing down of citizens and addiction to war oppose a beat playfulness. A handful of artists costumed and performing unconvincingly appeal to audience imagination and understanding to complete the picture. Jack Smith's pre-Flaming Creatures performance as The Spirit Not Of Life But Of Living (the movie has raggedly cosmic pretensions), celebrating Suffering (rattled and impoverished artist Jerry Sims) at the crux of sentient existence, is truly a visitation of the divine. Assisted by Nisi Jacobs" – Ken Jacobs

"A scathing, lyrical, ambivalent celebration of motion pictures as well as an impassioned political diatribe, Ken Jacobs's 6½-hour assemblage "Star Spangled to Death" is sui generis — a bargain-basement mash-up that variously evokes "Greed," "Howl" and "Moby Dick."...

"Jacobs, who died last October at age 92, began "Star Spangled" in the mid-1950s and showed it in various forms for decades before finishing a digital version in 2004. Simply described, the movie juxtaposes all manner of found movie footage with Jacobs and his friends — notably the artist Jack Smith — cavorting through various, often derelict, Manhattan sites.

"Call it cultural dumpster diving or bricolage. On one hand, Smith and his castmates, including an emaciated embodiment of suffering played by Jerry Sims, are festooned with trash and inhabit a land of broken toys and bemused spectators. On the other, "Star Spangled" incorporates a trove of cinematic detritus — vintage cartoons, soft-core pornography, educational films, political promos and jungle safari travelogues, not to mention "Going to Heaven on a Mule," the spectacularly offensive 15-minute blackface finale from the 1934 Al Jolson vehicle "Wonder Bar."

"Rather than use brief clips from campy old films to score easy political points," Dave Kehr wrote in a 2004 review in The New York Times, "Mr. Jacobs brilliantly and generously allows much of the borrowed material to play out in its entirety, at which point it indicts itself." The effect is a vast American pageant in which not just Jolson but Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller, Mickey Mouse and the cast of Oscar Micheaux's "Ten Minutes to Live" share a time-space continuum with Smith, crowned with a paper bag and brandishing a mop, materializes in one sequence on the Bowery to consternate a meeting of winos... - J Hoberman, The NY Times, April 1, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/01/movies/star-spangled-to-death-museum-of-modern-art.html>

Special Thanks to Azazel Jacobs

Screening:

Star Spangled to Death

By Ken Jacobs, Made 1956-60/2003-04, digital, 434 minutes

In four acts, with durations:

Part 1 – 1 hour, 53 min.

Part 2 – 1 hour, 41 min.

Part 3 – 1 hour, 35 min.

Part 4 - 2 hours, 5 min.

"Organic, living organism that grew and grew over the period of 47 years.

"Ken says, "The film is done; it weighed on me all those years." But I wouldn't take that for the last word. Maybe the only film I know that is Artaud: Monumental Song of Despair & Hope. Of epic proportions, incredibly complex in meanings. It's an absolute masterpiece that will be seen differently by every viewer. The greatest found-footage film. No found-footage film can be made after this one; add to it Joseph Cornell, Bruce Conner, Julius Ziz, and Bill Morrison. A film that contains some of the most cinematic and grotesque film material from the first 100 years of commercial cinema.

"A film that is not about avant-garde. A film that is not like Brakhage or the last Bruce Elder, who create their own worlds of their own making. This one creates a world according to Ken Jacobs out of bits of the banal, clichéd, grotesque, vulgar, dripping sentimentality that is being sold to the people as real food and everybody feeds on it and even enjoys it and then dies.

"Ken Jacobs: "It is a social critique picturing a stolen and dangerously sold-out America, allowing examples of popular culture to self-indict."

"So Ken takes a knife and cuts it all open. Irreverently and lovingly and with a skill of a good surgeon he reveals it all to us from the inside, and we do not know whether to laugh, cry, run out screaming, or applaud.

"And there is Jerry and Jack wrapped in it all, trying to live in it, to exist one way or another—you have to be Jack to still dance through it all at the same time as you cry and starve. Yes, this is a film that sums it all up and you almost hate it, but at the same time you know it's all true, it's all true, this is all the America we live in, our home, the official America of the 20th century, here it is on the plate, so eat it and then vomit it all out.

"Luckily for me, this is not my America in this film: I live in another America, the America of my dreams." - Jonas Mekas, The Brooklyn Rail, <https://brooklynrail.org/2004/07/film/sdf/>

Los Angeles Filmforum screenings are supported by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors through the Los Angeles County Department of Arts & Culture, the Department of Cultural Affairs, City of Los Angeles. We also depend on our members, ticket buyers, and individual donors.

Coming Soon:

Sunday July 12 - Yoko Ono's film "RAPE" and a talk on it by Jennifer Doyle

Friday July 17 – Co-presenting *L.A.X.* by Fabrice Ziolkowski, at the Philosophical Research Society

Sunday July 26 – Films by Yoko Ono

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