

# Donald and Wendy Woods Cry Freedom

by Karen Moline

To look at Donald and Wendy Woods you'd have no idea that their lives are the basis for Sir Richard Attenborough's acclaimed film *Cry Freedom*. Donald, a fifth-generation white South African, was the young editor of the East London Daily Dispatch. His liberal conscience was finally awakened to the reality of life for his black countrymen after meeting Steve Biko, the charismatic leader of the Black Consciousness Movement. They may have been virtual neighbors, but their lives were worlds apart, and yet Donald and Steve and their families forged a bond that became a profound and extraordinary friendship. To those in power, however, Steve remained a threat. Arrested on his way to a rally in Cape Town, Biko was interrogated, beaten, tortured and placed in prison, where he died on September 12, 1977. He was only 30 years old. Donald insisted on an inquest and subsequently exposed it as a charade, thus provoking a banning order from the government, which in effect meant he ceased to exist. That he could not work, write, speak publicly or be with more than one person at a time did not prevent him from secretly writing the story of Steve's life. His family was spied on and harassed by the secret police, and when their lives were threatened, Donald, disguised as a priest, escaped. Wendy followed with the five children a day later. Given U.N. passports and diplomatic im-

munity, they flew to London to begin a new life.

"The great strength of the proposal I received from Donald Woods was its contemporary yet historically contained story, beginning with the first Biko/Woods encounter in 1975 and ending with the Woodses' escape two years later," said Attenborough, whose 1982 epic film, *Gandhi*, earned him an Academy Award for Best Director. "Within that was a subject which not only permits examination of the obscenity going on under the name of apartheid, but also a glorious opportunity to fulfill the primary requirement of cinema, which is to entertain." *Cry Freedom* stars Kevin Kline as Donald, English actress Penelope Wilton as Wendy and, in an amazing transformation that already has him touted for an Oscar, St. Elsewhere's Denzel Washington as Steve Biko.

I had the good fortune to meet Donald and Wendy eight years ago when I worked for their first publisher, Paddington Press, and I consider them role models and mentors. Donald, who has worked indefatigably on the lecture circuit to inform America about the real South Africa, is a humanitarian in the truest sense of the word. He has written four books: *Biko*, *South African Dispatches: Letters to My Countrymen* (a collection of editorials), *Filming With Attenborough: The Making of Cry Freedom* and his autobiography,

*Asking for Trouble*. Wendy, a talented writer as well, is a woman of unusual spirit.

Perhaps, if you walk down lower Broadway in Manhattan, you'll see a sprawl of graffiti that reads: *BIKO LIVES*. In the epic *Cry Freedom*, Steve Biko indeed lives again.

**KAREN MOLINE:** Tell me how your material got to Attenborough.

**DONALD WOODS:** *Cry Freedom* is based on two books, *Biko* and *Asking for Trouble*. A friend of mine who knew Dickie [Attenborough] phoned after *Gandhi* and said to send everything. It was such a wild idea that I didn't really take it seriously. But on the other hand, there's a chance in a million.

**WENDY WOODS:** I didn't believe it, because we've had so many people approach us before and it hadn't gotten off the ground. We'd learned that films are very difficult things to make happen, and you don't ever believe that someone like Dickie is going to make a movie about you.

**DW:** The odds against a book—or two books—being made into a movie distributed by Universal and directed and produced by Sir Richard Attenborough are astronomical. I feel very lucky.

**KM:** How do you think your lives will change as a result?

**DW:** It's helped me with my work, which is to put pressure on South Africa. It adds fuel to what I'm trying to do, whether it's lecture tours or arguing for sanctions. In that sense it hasn't changed my life; it's made it more purposeful.

**WW:** And I've had some recognition and a lot of encouragement, so I hope to be able to do some more writing. The publicity from the film will give Donald the momentum to work in a way in which he wasn't able to before.

**DW:** Let me give you a practical example. I run a little thing called the Lincoln Trust, which has evolved into a scholarship fund for black exiles from South Africa—young people who need an education. At the moment I've got twelve serious applicants on our books, but our foundation is tiny and it's got no funds. If the film is successful, I will be able to raise money for these scholarship funds in a way I wouldn't have been able to before.

**KM:** How have you been supporting yourselves since *Biko* was published?

**DW:** By writing articles and books, but mostly by lecturing in the U.S. There's a very well-developed circuit here, and I've

been coming over twice, sometimes three times a year. Without that we'd have been sunk. We got out of South Africa with just £400, which was about US\$600 then, for a family of seven. Royce Carlton telephoned me straight away and said, "I'm a lecture agent and I can set you up for 38 lectures," and I said, "Grab every one you can." That literally put us on our feet again. If I'd worked on another newspaper it would have been very difficult to earn real money. Basically, I'm glad that phase is over. To suddenly find you've got to start a new career at 44 is both scary and stimulating.

**WW:** People in Cape Town and Johannesburg considered East London, where we lived, as backwater, and Donald's colleagues were always asking why he didn't come up to where the action is. It was a small-town newspaper—the population of East London was 60,000—but very prominent because the management allowed Donald a lot of leeway. He had much more freedom, so that's why he was cheeky and took a lot of risks.

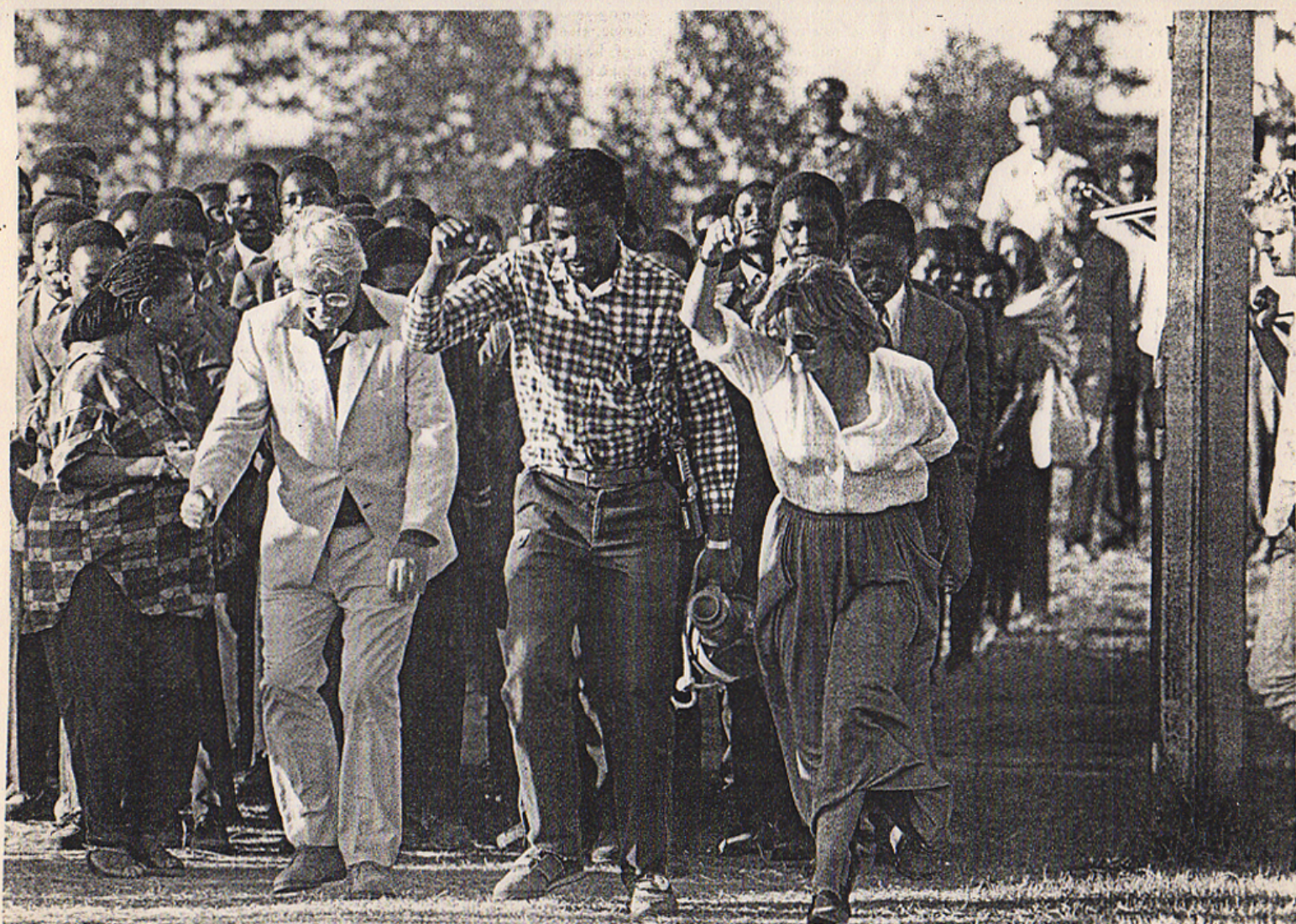
**KM:** Do you think the menace from the South African police comes across strongly enough in the film?

**DW:** Of course, it condenses what we experienced over a number of years into about two and a half hours, so to that extent it can never convey the constant feeling of menace. But I think within those limits it does very well. What the film does convey is a sense of being in South Africa, not only through the scenery in Zimbabwe but also—and I don't know how Dickie's done this—in the accents, the way the dust rises in some places....



WENDY AND DONALD WOODS. PHOTOGRAPH BY DMITRI KASTERINE.





DONALD WOODS, STEVE CHIGORIMBO AND WENDY WOODS TEACHING ZIMBABWEAN STUDENTS A CHANT ON THE SET OF *CRY FREEDOM*.

WW: Dickie goes after every little detail. He told us it had to be filmed in Africa because of the light and the countryside and the feel of the place.

KM: You were hired as consultants for the film. Did one of you have to be at the shoot at all times?

DW: Yes, and questions were constantly referred to us. We didn't realize we'd have to be there all the time and work very hard with a person who's used to working hard. There's a commitment to serve totally. We innocently thought it would be quite easy. WW: Donald was down there for all three months of shooting, and I was there for six weeks. Dickie'd ask us, "Why do policemen wear this?" or "Are the poles for traffic lights plain white, or black-and-white bands?" and "What do the postmen wear?" It's amazing; you think you're going to be able to remember and you just can't. We'd have to phone South Africa, and it's scary for the people inside because the calls are monitored, and others know what's going on and who's talking and that it's helping the film.

You see, Dickie consults in the full sense of the word. "Darling, come and have a look at this room; does it look believable, is there anything that's not right here?" I mean, he would hound us, and we were often caught napping. We'd take a cursory look and say it was okay, and he'd go, "No, that's not enough, angel, is there anything here," and we'd say no, and then he'd come back and say, "Would an old man in a township take off his shirt?" and then we'd realize that maybe he shouldn't be doing that and we

hadn't picked it up. He was not going to let anything go. He was fantastic.

KM: I love how Attenborough calls everybody "darling."

WW: Yes, and "poppet," or "angel"—so many endearments, and to anybody at all. Not only is he like that naturally, but it's actually more efficient when you're working with people; it's easier to get the best out of them if you're nice. You don't get what you want if you are nasty.

Dickie told me his favorite part of the whole process was directing, and you could see it. He'd walk on the set and take his breakfast—he has a childlike enjoyment of eating his sausage and egg in the morning, and he loves his tea and a piece of cake. . . . Then you go on the set and he'll have sussed it all out beforehand so he wouldn't waste any time. . . . Then he'd go to Penelope or Kevin or whomever and talk intensely to them and say, "This is the feel I want; what do you think?" And then he makes the feeling grow and no one is allowed to disturb it. You're not allowed to make a noise or let the feeling evaporate; he gets it going and then says "action" so quietly that the whole thing flows. And he absolutely loves it. It's as if he looks at the world with new eyes every time he comes to the set.

People always say Dickie runs off in all directions; he just goes everywhere in his mind. But he's totally committed to whatever he's doing. If he's drinking a cup of tea, he enjoys it perfectly, and if he's doing something incredibly complex involving some hideous problem, he solves it with equal dedication. He is so exuberant and

switched on, and never indifferent. He may get tired, but you see that only occasionally. When he knew there was going to be a half-hour break he'd sit there and have a catnap, but if someone said "Dickie" or "Sir Richard," he'd be awake straight away.

DW: Dickie got a bad case of the flu in Zimbabwe; there was a break once while the lighting chap was setting up, so Dickie snuck into a room to lie down and catch 20 minutes' sleep. But there was this cockney carpenter hammering and sawing outside the window. Someone went to this chap who was hammering and said to him, "You know, you're waking Sir Richard up." So this chap said, "Well, does he want to fucking sleep or does he want to make a fucking movie?" Dickie laughed and came out to make the fucking movie.

WW: One of the things that I've found so instructive is that Dickie's simply not daunted by anything at all. He's not exempt from disasters, and things do go wrong, but if someone says something simply can't be done, he just moves into another track. There's no way he's not going to do it.

KM: Like orchestrating the crowd scenes in Zimbabwe? What was it like filming there?

WW: Zimbabwe struck me as a lovely place to be as a South African. There are still white colonial types who seem to be living there just as well as they ever did, who have been left alone in this liberated type of state. Certainly there are tensions and hostilities—there can't not be between whites and blacks—but they're all

trying very hard to make a go of things. In South Africa, there's still so far to go to get to that point; it is quite depressing.

KM: Do you think major upheavals will happen soon?

WW: I've given up trying to predict. Everyone I've spoken to says that it can't last another five years, but they're all exiles who've come out after a crisis. It could go on for another 20 years or suddenly take a turn and change overnight.

What we hope the film will do is engage and manipulate emotions. Once you have people's feelings you have them; they can't go back to the way they felt before.

KM: Did it feel strange filming so close to South Africa?

WW: Definitely. You know, you forget what little details go into making a place. When we first got to England, I remember thinking that everything there was so small; the staircases were narrow, the doors so little. . . . When I got back to Africa I looked at all these yards and thought, You're wasting this space! The horizon was so far. . . . In England it is just over the nearest building. It was only then that I realized I had been missing that feeling of not being constricted, that wonderful, wide-open space.

KM: What happened to your house after you were forced to leave South Africa? Were all your possessions seized by the government?

DW: Our possessions, clothes, books, furniture—all of it was confiscated. They couldn't take the house, because it belonged to the company, as did my car.

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