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New film unveils untold story of one of baseball's greatest

August 18, 2021 - by Tiffany Johnson





Just last month “39 Seconds,” a film about Black baseball legend John Wesley Donaldson premiered at the Riverview Theatre in Minneapolis.

Presented by production company 612IM, the film Wesley Donaldson uncovered the story of Donaldson, a man whose athleticism, leadership, and innovative impact changed the game of professional baseball forever.

In the film, Donaldson’s character is played by Leonard Searcy, a notable actor in the Twin Cities scene and beyond. “I played the main character John. I also helped with putting some pieces together,” said Searcy.

“39 Seconds” is, in part, a documentary that tells a story of the many trials, tribulations, and milestones experienced by Donaldson both on and off the field. While born in the segregated South,

baseball would provide a way for Donaldson to make an impact throughout the U. S., including many noteworthy events in the Midwest and even right here, in Minnesota.

One scene in the film recollects Donaldson's challenges leading a Black baseball team to a game in Duluth, Minnesota, in 1920 shortly after the tragic lynching of three young Black men: Isaac McGhie, Elmer Jackson and Elias Clayton. This event is now memorialized at the Clayton, Jackson McGhie Memorial in Duluth, Minnesota.



Courtesy of Society for American
Baseball Research
John Wesley Donaldson

While 612IM is not a Black-owned company, staying true to the essence of the film, director and writer Paul Irmiter partnered with some of the city's most esteemed Black actors, producers, and directors, altogether boasting an outstanding and diverse cast and crew. "When we [Searcy and Irmiter] first met, he'd put up a post on Facebook that said, 'I'm telling a Black story but I'm not Black,'" shared Searcy.

Some of the folks who partnered with Irmiter include notable Black artists and organizations in the Twin Cities like Film Narrator Payton Woodson, Line Producer Bianca Rhodes, Assistant Director/Voice Director Kevin West, along with casting by Sha'Cage and E.G. Bailey. The film was produced in collaboration with Tru Ruts.

The score was written and performed by Jim Oestereich.

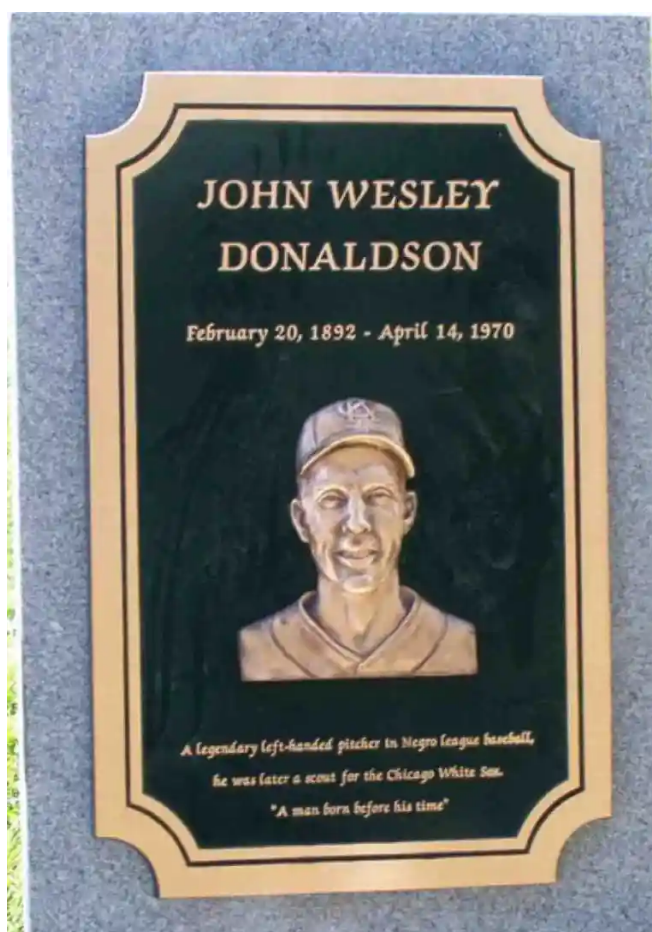
Despite COVID-19 restrictions, many community members and artists alike showed up to view the premiere and learn about the life and legacy of Donaldson. The diversity of the audience who

witnessed the film itself stood as a reflection of a community coming together for a common good, despite cultural differences.

The film was followed by a brief Q & A wherein Oestereich—who is White—shared with the audience his experience scoring a film of such cultural importance and grave realities about our country; the segregation and racism that consistently tore at Donaldson, and the prevalence of these racist attitudes that still preside today.

Oestereich, like the film itself, reminded the audience that these stories are not just Black stories but also America's stories. They are ours as a country to own, acknowledge, and to share with others as honestly as we can.

This is where change begins.



MSR News Online
John Wesley Donaldson died at age 79 in Chicago and was buried in an unmarked grave in Chicago's Burr Oak Cemetery. In 2004, Jeremy Krock raised enough money for a headstone in collaboration with the Negro Leagues Baseball Grave Marker Project.

“The reason why we say Donaldson is the best baseball player that no one has ever heard of, is he did so many things in life, but he was buried in an unmarked grave,” said Searcy.

Many years later, the grandson of a filmmaker would uncover 39 seconds of Donaldson pitching in a silent reel, in black-and-white. While this is the only live footage of Donaldson in action known to date, thanks to Irmiter and his amazing team, we can now relish in Donaldson’s life and great impact in sports and our country again.

Find more information about future screenings of “39 Seconds” at www.39secondsfilm.com.

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