

# IDA PIONEER AWARD

## REALITY TV'S ORIGINAL TAG TEAM: ALAN AND SUSAN RAYMOND

BY SHELLEY GABERT

As reality programming proliferates and cop and family dramas remain meat-and-potatoes staples on the television menu, it may be hard for some to wrap their minds around a time when this was not the case. Emmy and Academy Award-winning filmmakers Alan and Susan Raymond remember, though, because they were there on the frontlines and ushered in a film-making and storytelling style that changed documentaries and the television landscape forever.

If that claim seems a bit too dramatic, rest assured that it can most definitely be backed by the Raymonds' amazing body of work—both under the banner of their company, Video Vérité, which they formed more than 30 years ago, and in the early years of their career.

While attending film school at New York University, Alan worked for Drew Associates, where he was responsible for synching the films before the double system was perfected, and he watched and learned from Robert Drew, Albert Maysles, Richard Leacock and DA Pennebaker. After graduating, he went to work for an independent production company in Chicago, Mike Shea Films. At that time, Susan was an undergraduate at DePaul University; the two met and married in 1966 and then moved to New York. Their professional and personal lives have been intertwined ever since.

Together they've made many award-winning documentaries on important tent-pole subjects such as crime, literacy, the educational system, children, religion and war that have aired on PBS, HBO, BBC and ABC News. But none of their projects has had quite the impact of *An American Family*, a 12-part PBS documentary series that aired in 1973 and that focused on the Loud family of Santa Barbara, California. Somewhat shocking material at that time, the series drew record audiences for PBS and major media attention, and the Louds became some of the



TOP: Alan and Susan Raymond on location in Bosnia shooting their 1999 film *Children in War*. Courtesy of Video Vérité Archives  
 BELOW: Alan and Susan Raymond, 1980, working for ABC News. Courtesy of Video Vérité Archives

first reality show celebrities.

"This was really the first time a television show took on a dysfunctional family, and Lance Loud [the eldest son of Pat and Bill Loud] was one of the first openly gay people ever to appear on television—that was somewhat controversial," says Alan, who spent seven months filming the series, along with Susan, who handled the sound. "Remember, this was a time when there were only three broadcast networks and PBS."

In his book *An American Family: A Televised Life*, author Jeffrey Ruoff describes the series as using an "episodic, multiple-focus structure common to soap operas. The first episode introduces the seven members of the Loud family and the central story line, and the next 11 programs follow their activities in the summer and fall of 1971." The filmmakers traveled to New York with Lance, and captured the beginning of the end of the Louds' marriage when Pat asked Bill for a divorce. The relationship between producer Craig Gilbert and the Raymonds also grew acrimonious—they're still not on speaking terms—but working on this series became a project that would be part of their legacy.

*An American Family* remains a seminal nonfiction series and prototype of the fictional family dramas, prompting *TV Guide* to designate it as the original reality TV series and one of the "50 Greatest TV Shows" of all time. Even Matt Groening, creator of the long-running *The Simpsons*, called the series an influence. "We want to believe we helped create Homer Simpson, but we do feel that we changed the family dynamic that moved very far away from *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Donna Reed Show* and definitely introduced more of a confessional type of television to American audiences," says Susan.

After *An American Family*, the Raymonds launched Video Vérité, and in 1976, made *The*

*Police Tapes*, a groundbreaking documentary that captured the daily lives of cops in the high-crime area of the South Bronx. "We were riding and shooting in the back seat of the cop car at a time when this wasn't allowed because there was a blue line of silence, and most cops didn't trust the media," Susan explains. "No one had seen this kind of footage before, but now these shots are a staple of television."

At that time, PBS only showed the documentary locally on WNET, telling the Raymonds that it wasn't up to PBS' technical standards. "But we always felt like they didn't want to encourage this kind of documentary filmmaking and reporting by people like ourselves, who were using this inexpensive equipment that would then and now democratize and level the playing field of filmmaking," Alan notes. *The Police Tapes* was later acquired by ABC News and went on to win Primetime Emmy Awards, a Columbia duPont Award and a George Foster Peabody Award. The film also inspired Steven Bochco when he created *Hill Street Blues*, which, in turn, inspired the long-running series *COPS*.

The Raymonds later received an Academy Award nomination for their 1991 film *Doing Time: Life Inside the Big House*, and then, in 1994, won an Oscar for their feature documentary *I Am a Promise: The Children of Stanton Elementary School*, which followed a year in the life of a troubled inner-city school in North Philadelphia. The couple moved with their son to Philadelphia in 2000 and made it their home base. That year, they won another Emmy Award for *Children in War*, a documentary they made for HBO, and they also wrote a companion book that was published by Harper Collins.

In the late 1990s, the Raymonds traveled to Bosnia three times during the war, as well as to Rwanda, Israel and Northern Ireland. And like in most of their other films, they worked as independent filmmakers in these countries. "In retrospect, it probably wasn't the wisest decision for both of us, as parents, to travel to these war-torn countries," Susan admits. "It's very demanding logistically — and as parents — to make these type of year-in-the-life films, but that's the life we have chosen."

Their film *The Congregation*, which aired on PBS in 2004, was a portrait of a progressive Methodist church in Philadelphia, which allowed them to actually work from home and live a "normal" family life. Years earlier, in the fall of 2001, Lance Loud asked the Raymonds to make a film of the final year of his life. He had been living with HIV for many years and then was diagnosed with an HIV/Hepatitis C co-infection and entered hospice care, where he died at age 50 in December 2001 in Los Angeles. Interviewed for an article in the December 2002/January 2003 Documentary, Susan spoke of their relationship with Lance and how emotionally involved they were with him and the film. As Alan said, "You sit there at the Avid watching the footage, and you start to cry."

The Raymonds had already produced *An American Family Revisited: The Louds Ten Years Later*, which aired on HBO in 1983. *Lance Loud! A Death in An American Family* aired on PBS in 2003, marking the 30th anniversary of the historic series and a milestone in the Raymonds' lives as well.

Alan notes, "Every time we screen a film with Sheila Nevins at HBO, she always prefaces it by saying, 'I don't know how you two can be married and work together.' But we really do trust each other, like to be together and still enjoy each other's company." Early on as newlyweds, they decided that working together was much better for them as a couple. Alan had taken a job at Bill Jersey's Quest Productions and began working on a film about the 1968 US presidential election. "Alan was off on the election trail and never home, and that wasn't how we wanted to live," Susan says. "For us, the shooting of the film is the fun part--and we wanted to share the work and not have to leave one behind while shooting on location. It was one of those 'If you can't fight them, join them' kind of situations."

Susan went on the road on the campaign film, started out as a grip and then worked her way into sound, while Alan became a producer. Gilbert then hired them to work at PBS, where they became a camera-and-sound team and worked on documentaries like *The Triumph of Christy Brown*, which aired in 1970 on WNET.

"I'm not sure I could work with anyone else other than Susan in terms of making our films," Alan maintains. "Certainly some of the films favor one or the other of us in terms of subject matter. She is very passionate about making the film we're working on now about dyslexia, and I was crazy about making *Elvis '56* [1987], but compromise isn't really in our vocabulary and we have made films our way."

"If we hadn't been so stubborn, we may have been further down the line," Susan adds. "But we have fought for our vision." She has retired from doing sound after being injured carrying the equipment during production on *Children in War*, but they keep making films. In 2008, they produced *Hard Times at Douglass High* for HBO, which profiled a historically black high school in West Baltimore.

The Raymonds were recently interviewed for the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences' Archive of American Television, and many of their films are in the permanent collections of the Paley Center for Media, the Museum of Modern Art and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

Now, a whole new generation of viewers will be able to experience *An American Family* through an HBO feature about the making of the series titled *Cinema Vérité*. The film, which was shot this past summer, stars Tim Robbins and Diane Lane as Bill and Pat Loud, with Thomas Dekker as Lance and James Gandolfini as Craig Gilbert. Directed by Sheri Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, who made the critically acclaimed feature film *American Splendor*, *Cinema Vérité* will show the tension between Gilbert and the Raymonds, who will be played by Patrick Fugit and Shanna Collins. "There has always been Craig's version, the Louds' version and our take on the making of this film, and they're often not in-sync," Alan explains. "And while the other two have spoken out, we have remained mum."

The Raymonds did serve as consultants on this movie, giving notes on several drafts of the script, spending a few days on the set in a home in Tarzana, California, and instructing some of the actors about how filmmakers work.

In a bit of odd synchronicity, their new film for HBO, *Journey into Dyslexia*, is tentatively scheduled to air in May 2011, the same month that *Cinema Vérité* premieres. "It's an out-of-body experience," Alan admits. "We spent a lot of time with the actors playing us. To the extent we were able to influence it, we did; but ultimately it's a work of fiction and really a new interpretation of the filming of this landmark documentary series." ■