

DIRECTIONS

Black and White

By Ellen Maguire

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About halfway through Keith A. Beauchamp's documentary "The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till," the film cuts from Emmett's mother, Mamie Till Mobley, calmly describing her 14-year-old son's mutilation for whistling at a white woman -- his head had been split side to side, and one eye left hanging from its socket -- to a grisly photograph of his corpse. When the movie was shown at the Hamptons International Film Festival last October (it opens at Film Forum in Manhattan on Aug. 17), the sudden appearance of the photograph drew a collective gasp from the audience, followed by audible sobs.

Much has been written recently about how Mr. Beauchamp's "Untold Story," along with the efforts of Till's cousin Simeon Wright and Alvin Sykes of the Emmett Till Justice Campaign, helped to reopen the unsolved 50-year-old case of Till's murder in Money, Miss., leading to the recent exhumation of his body. Less has been said about the role played by the picture that the Jet magazine photographer David Jackson took at Till's funeral, after Ms. Mobley insisted on an open casket. It was published in September 1955, a week before an all-white jury acquitted Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam of the murder; three months later, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus, and later she linked that decision to her shock at seeing the images of Till's brutalized body.

In 1981, Mr. Beauchamp, then 10, stumbled across the photograph in his Baton Rouge, La., home. "My parents, like many parents, used it as a warning: 'Don't let what happened to Emmett Till happen to you,'" he said. Sixteen years later, he decided to research Till's murder, and carried the photograph with him everywhere. "I couldn't get the picture out of my head," he said. "That's why I made the film." So the story came full circle: decades after the photograph was widely credited with galvanizing the civil rights movement, it inspired a film that could eventually help bring about justice in Till's case. "You can listen to the story all you like," Mr. Beauchamp said. "But it's the photograph that cuts like a knife." ELLEN MAGUIRE

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