

Wilson documentary explores 'Senator No'

UNC-TV doc on Sen. Jesse Helms
airs Jan. 15

compiled by Q-Notes staff

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — "No American politician is more controversial, beloved in some quarters and hated in others, than Jesse Helms," declared *The Almanac of American Politics* as the arch-conservative Republican neared the end of his 30-year U.S. Senate career.

On Tuesday, Jan. 15, at 9 p.m., UNC-TV premieres "Senator No: Jesse Helms," a 90-minute

biographical documentary from independent filmmaker John Wilson. The film chronicles Helms' life from his humble childhood in Monroe, to his two decades as an outspoken print and television editorialist, to his five contentious terms in the U.S. Senate and the fierce political battles that landed him there.

"Whether you like him or dislike him," political scientist Larry Sabato says in the film, "he was at the heart of the conservative movement that changed America from the 1970s to today."

The documentary traces the origins of Helms' politics, from his Southern Baptist roots in the Jim Crow South to his political baptism in North Carolina's racially charged 1950 U.S. Senate race between liberal Frank Porter Graham and conservative Willis Smith. Trumpeting Old South values as an editorialist and politician, Helms crashes headlong into the civil rights movement, communism, abortion, gay rights — virtually every major issue of his time.

Footage and transcripts of Helms' "Viewpoint" editorials on WRAL-TV include one in which he calls the 1964 Civil Rights Act "the single most dangerous piece of legislation ever introduced in the Congress." In an interview for the documentary, Helms says, "It was taking liberties away from one group of citizens and giving them to another. I thought it was bad legislation then and I have had nothing to change my mind about it."

From the moment he arrived in Washington in 1973, Helms pushed hot-button, social issues to center stage. His notorious political action committee, the Congressional Club, became the largest in the nation with its pioneering use of direct mail and negative television ads. His "New Right" political movement played a leading role in mobilizing Christian conservative voters and electing Ronald Reagan in 1980. Two decades later, as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Helms became the first legislator from any country to address

the United Nations Security Council. This from the man a Canadian newspaper once called "redneck primitive."

In the twilight of his career, Jesse Helms had a very public — and intriguing — reversal on international AIDS relief after meeting with U2 lead singer and activist Bono, who tells the story in an on-camera interview. "He said he was ashamed of the way he had thought about the AIDS pandemic," Bono recounts. "You would never hear a politician admit they made a mistake, let alone use the word 'shame.'"

Filmmaker John Wilson had unique access

to Helms, vast archives of film, video, photographs and documents spanning his 60 years in media and politics, and a diverse group of Helms allies, opponents and observers. At the core of "Senator No" are comments from Jesse Helms himself, selected from extensive on-camera interview sessions.

Others appearing in the documentary are Helms' wife Dorothy, Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Delaware), Tom Ellis and Carter Wrenn of the Congressional Club, former Charlotte Mayor and Helms challenger Harvey Gantt, Moral Majority founder

Jerry Falwell, direct mail pioneer Richard Viguerie, journalists Rob Christensen (*The News & Observer*) and Fred Barnes (*Weekly Standard*), Helms' former high school principal Ray House, and Patsy Clarke, mother of an AIDS victim and founder of Mothers Against Jesse in Congress (MAJIC).

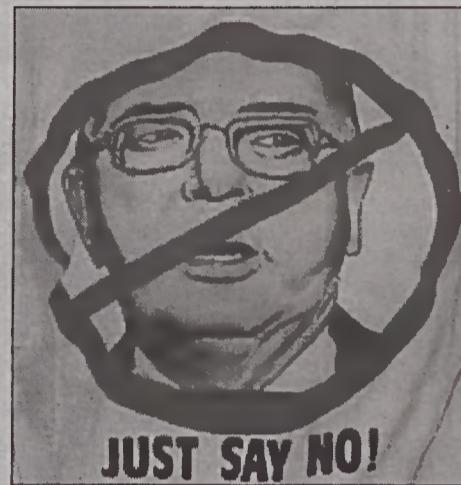
Actor Will Patton ("Remember the Titans," "No Way Out") narrates "Senator No: Jesse Helms," with an original music score by Chris Frank of the Red Clay Ramblers. The UNC Center for the Study of the American South served as fiscal sponsor.

"People have very strong, somewhat rigid feelings — either positive or negative — about Jesse Helms," said Wilson. "My goal with the documentary is to present viewers with accurate, balanced information that will challenge those sentiments. I anticipate it will make some viewers uncomfortable, but hopefully in a positive, provocative way."

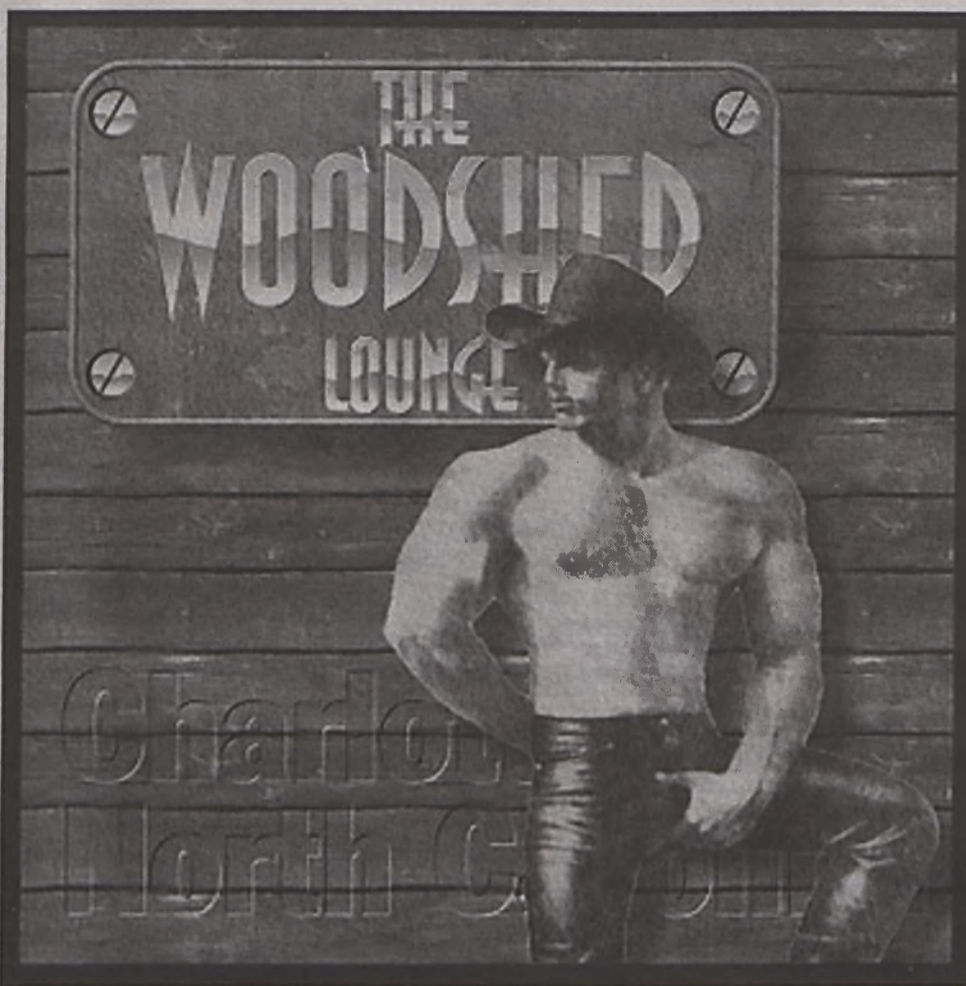
Wilson has written, directed and produced three previous documentaries that premiered on UNC-TV. Charles Kuralt narrated Wilson's "Dr. Frank: The Life and Times of Frank Porter Graham," which won a regional Emmy and numerous other awards, and was selected by The Museum of Modern Art for its "New Documentaries" series.

He also made "North Carolina's Research Triangle Park: An Investment in the Future," a history of the most successful research park in the world, and "North Carolina Nurses: A Century of Caring," which documents the growth of the profession in the first state to pass a nurse registration law. ■

info: www.unctv.org/senatorno



Former Sen. Jesse Helms became famous as 'Senator No' for his negative stances on many social issues like LGBT rights and the 1980s AIDS epidemic.



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