

---



# AMERICAN MASTERS



---

Press Contact:

Natasha Padilla, WNET, 212.560.8824, [padilla@wnet.org](mailto:padilla@wnet.org)

Press Materials: <http://pbs.org/pressroom> or <http://thirteen.org/pressroom>

Websites: <http://pbs.org/americanmasters>, <http://facebook.com/americanmasters>, [@PBSAmerMasters](https://twitter.com/PBSAmerMasters),  
<http://pbsamericanmasters.tumblr.com>, <http://youtube.com/AmericanMastersPBS>,  
<http://instagram.com/pbsamericanmasters>, #AmericanMastersPBS

## ***American Masters – Norman Lear: Just Another Version of You***

*Premieres nationwide Tuesday, October 25 at 9:00 p.m. on PBS  
(check local listings)*

### **Directors' Notes**

As filmmakers that most often create observational documentaries about regular people unknown beyond their immediate communities, we looked at telling the story of the very public Norman Lear as a new challenge. After all, the man has spent over 60 years in the spotlight, recently travelled the country promoting his new autobiography and maintains legions of loyal fans who still watch his groundbreaking shows in re-runs. What could we bring to his admirers that they didn't already know? And how could we explain to younger viewers the colossal impact of his work on today's popular culture?

As we got to know Norman (who had no editorial control of the film), we found a deeply complicated and at times contradictory man. Despite his fame and fortune, he has little time for flattery but instead possesses a keen interest in his own flawed nature, and a penchant for what he calls "the foolishness of the human condition." In making the film we experienced a nonagenarian of bottomless curiosity who regularly reaches out to the rising talents in theater, TV and film to learn more about their own approach to their craft. Emotional but not sentimental, he's a man looking forward at all times, frequently uttering the phrase "over, next" when he deems that it's time to move on. This worldview was as surprising as it was refreshing

and inspired us to try our own unconventional take on the tried and true documentary biography genre.

During early conversations with him we noticed Lear's frequent references to early childhood – and especially vivid recollections of himself at age nine, when his father Herman went to jail for a phony bond scheme and his mother Jeanette sold every stick of furniture and took his sister Claire to live with her in a faraway town. For reasons that are still unknown to him, Norman was left behind, shuttled for years between relatives in Connecticut and Brooklyn who had their own problems to deal with.

Left largely to his own devices, Lear experienced a boyhood that was a combination of deep loneliness and the exhilarating freedom to explore and observe the world around him through the harsh but liberating lens of reality. He would later bring that unvarnished eye to his own work.

Understanding Lear's early life was crucial to a more intimate reading of his work as a creator, writer and producer of television and film. At times Archie Bunker is an obvious stand-in for his own small-minded and bigoted father. *Divorce American Style* (written by Lear) is partly an absurdist take on his parents' own failed marriage. In fact everywhere you look in Lear's work there are both direct and loose ties to the lessons he learned as a young boy out there on his own, struggling to make sense of societal paradoxes and the frailty – and ridiculousness – of human nature.

Lear's own self-professed childlike view of the world led us to introduce a kind of Norman "alter ego" into the film. The nine year-old boy who appears now and again on the screen lives in what we call "The theater of Norman's life," and assists us in the retelling of crucial moments in Norman's narrative. This element represents how much Lear's childhood has stayed with him and is meant to express his ever-youthful outlook. And, why not? Even at 94, Norman Lear views himself as a mere work in progress. And like any other wide-eyed kid, he remains as surprised as the next guy at the miraculous twists and turns his life has taken on the way to this very moment.

– Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady

#### **A Note on the Music:**

The song "16 Tons" is significant to Lear, who fondly remembers it in his autobiography *Even This I Get to Experience*. Having written for the Tennessee Ernie Ford variety show in the 1950s, Lear is fond of Ford's 1955 rendition of the tune, which to us represents Lear's challenging childhood and dogged pursuit of success. We asked R&B star Anthony Hamilton and hip-hop producer J. Period to re-imagine the song, which is heard during the closing credits.

###