

Milestone Film & Video presents:
Martin and Osa Johnson's SAGA OF THE AFRICAN VELDT

SIMBA THE KING OF BEASTS

"EXCITING ... THRILLING ... The elephant scenes are remarkable."
— The New York Times

*"Martin Johnson was a major wildlife filmmaker
— the best cameraman of the African explorers."*
— Elliott Stein, Village Voice

*"Mr. and Mrs. Johnson ... brought a technical expertise to their
work that gave their productions a lasting quality
A treasured and privileged glimpse into a forbidden world."*
— Kevin Brownlow, *The War, The West and the Wilderness*

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CREDITS

SIMBA, THE KING OF BEASTS: A STORY OF THE AFRICAN VELDT. Africa and USA. 1928. 83 minutes. Black & White. Recorded for the screen by Martin and Osa Johnson under the auspices of the American Museum of Natural History. Edited by Martin Johnson and Terry Ramsaye. Story by Martin Johnson. Titles: Terry Ramsaye. With George Eastman; the Samburu, Boran, Turkana, Meru, Kikuyu, Dorobo, Nandi and Lumbwa tribes; lions; zebras; crocodiles; elephants; rhinos and other denizens of the veldt. Acknowledgment is made of the contributions to this work by Carl Akeley and Alfred J. Klein. Restored from original 35mm material by Milestone. ©1928 Daniel E. Pomeroy. ©1992 Milestone Film & Video. Score composed by James Makubuya.

BACKGROUND

They were an unlikely pair to become international celebrities and America's foremost filmmaker-explorers. Martin Johnson first met the 16-year-old Osa Leighty in the small town of Chanute, Kansas while presenting lantern slides from his *Snark* voyage with Jack London. One month later they became husband and wife — launching a partnership that would take them around the world. Osa described their lives together in the title of her memoirs — *I Married Adventure*.

Journeying to remote and exotic regions, Martin and Osa Johnson produced, wrote and photographed films celebrating the natural wonder and native tribes of Africa, Asia and the South Seas. For SIMBA, they forded crocodile-infested rivers, braved stampeding elephants and stared down angry rhinos in order to film lions in their natural habitat, the veldt. Killing only for food, self protection or scientific study, the Johnson's became two of Africa's first conservationists.

It was Martin and Osa's films that directly influenced Frederick O'Brien to leave for the Pacific and write *White Shadows in the South Seas*. It was the memory of the lions in SIMBA on which Akira Kurosawa based Toshiro Mifune's character in RASHOMON. It can hardly be realized

today the enormous level of their popularity and the magnitude of their films and lectures on the world in the 1920s through the 1950s. SIMBA alone made an astounding \$2 million dollars around the world.

Although some of SIMBA's intertitles have dated, the Johnsons' camerawork *still* astonishes with some of the most spectacular images ever of African wildlife. The remarkable portraits of Kenyan tribes are also an invaluable record of that lost world — and the score (using traditional Kenyan melodies) by James Makubuya is just as amazing. Today, the restored SIMBA can be seen as the highlight of the Johnsons' career and a dazzling testimonial to the beauty of the “dark continent.”

“Life with the Lions:
Filming SIMBA with Martin & Osa Johnson in Africa”
by David Pierce

“I don't know of any couple that had so much and such continuous fun together.” — Lowell Thomas

In 1924, Martin and Osa Johnson left the United States for Africa with a mission — to take motion picture and still photographs of the vanishing wildlife of East Africa for the prestigious American Museum of Natural History in New York. In addition to studies for the Museum, they planned to work on feature films for commercial release. SIMBA, the only feature to emerge from this period, is in many ways their best film, and still has the power to amaze with its images of untamed Africa.

Martin Johnson had begun his travels in Independence, Kansas, where he worked in his father's jewelry store. At fourteen he left home and went roaming to Europe. When he returned, he spent two years immersed in photography while working for his father. In 1906, Martin offered his services in a letter to popular author Jack London. He landed the job of cook aboard London's schooner the *Snark* on his trip around the world. Despite his obvious ineptitude at this job (after nearly poisoning the crew, Mrs. London took over the food preparation), he became a valued member of the expedition.

During a stopover in the South Seas, Martin learned motion picture photography from some Pathé Freres cameramen, and he returned with footage of the cannibals of the Solomon Islands. With these films in hand he started a movie theater in Independence called the Snark No. 2 and lectured around Kansas seeking other places to set up movie halls. In the small town of Chanute, Martin announced his talk and films entitled “Trip Through the South Seas with Jack London.” It was a bright Saturday in November 1909, and a young girl by the name of Osa Leighty attended the show to see her friend Gail Perigo sing before the main attraction. Osa was sixteen at the time and the images of the “cannibals” made the schoolgirls leave. The next day Osa found out that Gail was hired by Martin Johnson to sing at his theater in Independence. On a visit to Independence to see Gail, Osa was introduced to the twenty-five year old Martin. It was a whirlwind courtship that ended in elopement only one month later, launching a partnership that would take them to the remote and exotic regions of Africa, Asia and the South Seas. Thirty years later after Martin's death, Osa described their lives together in the title of her memoirs — *I Married Adventure*. It was a telegram from their distributor Robertson-Cole who set them on their path when they wrote to Martin, “The public is tired of savages. Get some animal pictures.” Their career as wildlife photographers started with that cable. A few years later, the Johnsons were on their way to the South Seas to film **AMONG THE CANNIBAL ISLES OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC** (1918). Further trips to the Solomon Islands, Borneo and Africa resulted in the films **JUNGLE ADVENTURES** (1921), **HEAD HUNTERS OF THE SOUTH SEAS** (1922), and **TRAILING AFRICAN WILD ANIMALS** (1923).

Both Martin and Osa Johnson were experts at public relations, and they kept public interest in their expeditions high with a continual flood of articles, books, photographs, and movies for general

release as well as special edition films for their lecture tours. Forty years later, *Smithsonian* magazine would write: “They were movie stars of the first magnitude ... In the 1920s and ’30s the Johnsons’ films created a sensation. People stood in long lines to watch them and critics raved about them.” They delivered what people wanted to see: unknown places and people, with wild animals in abundance.

The Johnsons’ first African journey — where they set up camp in Kenya’s northern frontier — served mostly to whet their appetite for more. Their still photographs and the film, *TRAILING AFRICAN WILD ANIMALS* from that expedition impressed the American Museum of Natural History with the quality of their work and the sincerity of their purpose. Explorer-naturalist Carl Akeley, creator of the African Hall at the American Museum of Natural History and inventor of the elegant and extremely innovative Akeley camera specifically designed for filming wild animals, was an especially ardent supporter of the Johnsons’ work. He wrote that their pictures were “among the best pictures of wild life in Africa that I have ever seen. Just as photographs, they are magnificent. But, better yet, as natural history they are absolutely authentic.”

With this type of backing, Martin Johnson was able to extend his success beyond the world of popular entertainment. The American Museum of Natural History endorsed his African picture, and he gained a commitment from the Museum and Kodak-founder George Eastman to finance a five-year expedition to Africa to record the people and the vanishing wild animals of Africa. At their first meeting, the Johnsons failed to convince the elderly magnate of the importance of their expedition and left Eastman’s Rochester home depressed about their chances of realizing their dreams. However, halfway back to New York City on the train, Osa decided that they just hadn’t properly presented their case. So they got off and boarded the next train back to Rochester where they forced Eastman to meet with them again. Eastman was impressed by the young explorers’ drive and not only financed the trip but became a close friend.

“In a few more weeks my wife and I will be on the way to Africa again,” Martin Johnson wrote, just before leaving the United States. “We are going to spend five years making motion pictures in the wilds, and we will bring back with us a vivid portrayal of untouched Africa — a picture of the beauties of the last of the great continents to be explored.” Perhaps sensitive to his critics, he concluded that “thrills in plenty we will have — and I hope we’ll photograph many of them — but they are incidental to our main purpose, which is to secure a truthful, accurate, complete, and interesting picture of Africa as it is — not a picture of ‘The Adventures of Mr. and Mrs. Martin Johnson.’” The Johnsons took with them on the expedition nearly \$50,000 worth of camera equipment, including ten still cameras and ten motion picture cameras — mostly Bell & Howells, but also three Akeley cameras intended for wild animal work. A special set-up allowed two of the Akeleys to be mounted together with “one to be turned at the usual speed of 16 exposures to the second, while the other, operated by the same crank, will make 64 exposures to the second.” The second camera would provide slow-motion film to show details of animal motion.

Another Akeley camera was mounted on one of their six Willys-Knight cars for filming from a moving vehicle. Osa recalled in her autobiography, *I Married Adventure*, that “this was great fun, as it could be swung into position and focused before even the fleetest animal could get out of range.” Still another camera was fitted with a turret holding four lenses of different focal lengths, to allow for rapid changing in the field. In addition to the usual tripods was a structure fifteen feet high which allowed for three cameras to be mounted — one above the other. Besides the hand-crank cameras, several were fitted for remote electrical operation, so that the camera could be left in the open and controlled from a blind some distance away.

On April 12, 1924, the Johnsons’ expedition reached its headquarters for the next four years — Lake Paradise, five hundred miles from Nairobi. In addition to their equipment they had brought with them 235 porters and 250 crates of supplies. Their backer, George Eastman, described their home: “The lake itself is situated in an old volcanic crater, and above it, on a ridge to the west, are

located the houses that the Johnsons have built. The various houses, which are made of wattles, plastered with mud and thatched with straw, ...are on various levels following the undulations of the ridge. They consist of a living and dining room with a fireplace and a mud floor, a kitchen, a sleeping house for the Johnsons, a guest house, a bath house, a work shop in which an electric generator is installed, the photographic laboratory and a storehouse.”

Osa Johnson described the laboratory as “the most important building on the lot.” One room, “eighteen feet by twelve housed the big drying drums, storage cases, tables and racks, and the dark room, ten by fourteen feet was equipped with the special lighting, running water, developing vats, storage tanks and all the rest of the paraphernalia that go to make up an up-to-date motion picture laboratory.” During the dry season eight hundred gallons a day of fresh water was brought up from the lake by mules and heavily filtered before use. During the rainy months, rainwater was collected. Martin Johnson planned to use 60,000 feet of negative per year, so every few months fresh chemicals and film stock arrived from Eastman Kodak in Rochester. Osa recalled that due to the humidity, “after the films were dried on huge drums, they were patched in two hundred foot lengths, wrapped in special chemical-proof paper and then placed in tins which, in turn, were made completely air-tight with a coating of paraffin wax.” These were then shipped back to New York.

While today’s audiences are often jaded from years of Disney’s “True Life Adventures,” Mutual of Omaha’s “Wild Kingdom,” and innumerable “National Geographic” specials, photographing wild animals is not as easy as the casual observer would think. Martin Johnson discovered this for himself on his first trip to Africa. He and Osa saw thousands upon thousands of wild game animals from their railroad car as they headed from Mombasa to Nairobi. Johnson recalled, “it was the most wonderful sight that we had ever seen, and we could hardly wait to get off the train to start photographing. It looked so easy that we thought we might have our picture done in a few weeks — and have the world’s greatest animal picture at that, easily.” But disillusion came quickly. “Game was everywhere, but the stubbornly suspicious animals would not let us get within camera range. For the first three weeks we got nothing but extremely long range scenes, and, when I developed tests, I found that the heat waves that dance in the distances had distorted and practically ruined the pictures.” It took them four months before they understood what they were up against and were able to produce successful film footage.

Their basic method of photography for the dry seasons was to find a water hole not used by natives and construct a camouflaged blind in a spot downwind and preferably slightly uphill from where the animals would congregate. The blind was then left alone for a week to allow the animals to accept it as part of the landscape. Long hours were spent waiting for animals to arrive. To find animals that did their drinking by night or were suspicious enough to avoid the water holes, the Johnsons stalked the animals in the field. While this could produce good photographs, more often than not, it resulted in “nothing more to reward the effort than a handsome rear view of a vanishing animal with his tail waving good-bye as he goes over the hill.”

They were limited in the hours they could work, because of the heat, and because from the morning to about three in the afternoon, “with the sun nearly straight overhead, the shadows obscure details in the animal and at the same time make the general scene flat. Further, this is the worse period of the day for the shimmering heat waves which are the bane of African photography.” Another basic problem Johnson discovered was that “African animals have only two lines of action with reference to the camera. They either run from it or at it. Neither treatment is entirely satisfactory to the man behind the camera.” Martin and Osa Johnson were not light travelers. On every trip away from camp they were accompanied by a retinue of fourteen natives, including:

- 1) two camera bearers,
- 2) one tripod bearer,
- 3) one bearer with the different motion picture lenses,
- 4) one carrier for the Press Graflex and tripod,
- 5) one bearer with a case of loaded film magazines,

- 6) another with loaded still plate holders,
- 7) one bearer carrying the 4x5 Graflex with tripod,
- 8) one bearer with a case of odds and ends,
- 9) one bearer with lunch, two gun bearers, and
- 10) two trusted assistants: Boculy, the guide, and Bukari, their headman.

Photographing elephants was a special challenge, since pachyderms sleep during the day and eat in the evening and night hours. Johnson recalled that they “spent weary weeks following various small herds before we could catch them under light conditions which would permit the making of satisfactory pictures.” They became so experienced, that they “often got too close and so we probably spent more time getting out of their way than we did making pictures.” Starting with their filming of African elephants, Martin Johnson established regimented working methods for filming in the field. Each bearer had a task, he wrote. “Everyone knows their duty. They all withdraw to a shady spot behind me while I am making pictures, but each one on the alert should I wish any case. Each case is numbered, and I call for them by number. You see, I try to be alone as not to frighten the game, as they might see movement if so many were about me. Osa never comes up with the still camera unless I call her, although she always sets it up the first thing and is ready. Saunderson and the gun bearers crawl along the ground to get beside me in case of danger. I try to stand as still as I can, as animals who can’t see well can sometimes make out movement.”

One time during the filming of SIMBA, Johnson wrote, a bearer came “running to us. He said elephants were right near the pass. I hurried to climb a rock and saw a big bull [elephant] and a small bull walking along slowly in the open. I told my boys to follow and we scrambled along the rocky ridge at the top of the pass until we came to a sloping rock leading down to the ground. Here I set up my cameras and in a few minutes the elephants were about twenty-five yards below me, drinking at a mud pool that was under a ledge, so I could not photograph them. But soon they came out and stood still in a open bit where the light was fine. I ground off a couple of hundred feet, and while I was reloading they saw us. I can’t figure out, even now, what made the big bull so angry, but he was furious. Just as I got my Akeley loaded he came for the rock full speed. He tried to climb it but could not. He went back about ten yards and stood blowing air out of his trunk. He swayed from side to side. He pawed up the earth and lashed the air with his trunk. Then he came for the rock again but could not get up. All the time I was getting movies and Osa was getting stills.”

As the title of the film suggests, the focus of SIMBA is the lions of Africa. The motion picture takes place in British East Africa (now Kenya). The original program proudly stated that the film “is neither a staged nor a movie production but a record of actual happenings.” Of course, due to the working methods of the time, today it would be considered a staged documentary along the lines of Robert Flaherty’s NANOOK OF THE NORTH (1922) or Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack’s GRASS (1925) and CHANG (1927).

The first half of SIMBA is a travelogue, consisting of different animal studies the Johnsons made on the expedition. We see elephants, zebra, rhinos, giraffe, and hyena. The second half of the picture is given over to lions. Following scenes of lions in the wild, a native finds that a prized ox has been killed by a lion. After a ritual dance, the King and Queen instruct the warriors to go out and kill the marauding lion. The climax of the film shows Lumbwa warriors spearing lions. During the initial hunts, the natives speared a buffalo, but the bush was too thick for effective photography. They then shifted a few miles to a more open area. For this section of the film Johnson either purchased footage from photographer Alfred Klein or had Klein film the scene for him.

SIMBA plays very effectively today, but there are several aspects that date the film. The intertitles — in direct opposition to the dignified images of strong, beautiful people — refer to the natives in a manner that borders on condescension. The killing of animals, specifically the lions and rhino, is disturbing to many viewers in the ecologically aware 1990s. However, the Johnsons *were* early conservationists who only killed for: 1) food for their bearers who insisted the leaders of the

expedition provide the “pot,” 2) animal displays that the Museum of Natural History had requested as part of the expedition and lastly, 3) self-preservation. At the time of inferior telescopic lenses, most of their work had to be done closer than was naturally safe. When they were attacked, Martin and Osa would yell and make all the noise possible to persuade the animal to change route. Only when threatened, would they shoot. In their books and movies, the Johnsons were two of the first to preach the conservation of Africa and its wildlife and opposed the indiscriminate killing of animals for trophies and commercial profit. On the feminist front, Osa (in the Hemingway image of the jazz age) is portrayed as the perfect mate, both huntress and helpmeet. At the conclusion of the film, she fearlessly shoots a rhino saving Martin from certain death, and then retires to her tent to make a pie. By the way, George Eastman *did* confirm that “Mrs. Johnson is an exceptional cook, experienced and resourceful.” They enjoyed sharing recipes and cooking together (see below).

The Johnsons returned to New York in May 1927, to complete the editing of the miles of footage they had taken on the expedition. Soon after the premiere of SIMBA in January 1928, they were invited back to Africa — this time as the personal guests of George Eastman. They continued their life on the road, filming in remote areas of the Belgian Congo (now Zaire) and Borneo until 1937, when their commercial flight crashed on the way to a lecture date in Los Angeles. Martin Johnson was killed, and the famed partnership of two adventurers from Kansas ended.

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Motion Picture Copyrights and Renewals 1950-1959*

George Eastman and Osa Johnson’s Recipe for Mrs. Kelly’s Lemon Meringue Pie

6 eggs (separate yolks from whites)	2 cups hot water
2 cups sugar	Grated rind and juice of 1 1/2 lemons
5 heaping teaspoons flour	Salt to taste

Beat egg yolks well. Add sugar. Mix flour with enough cold water to make a paste. Then add to it the mixed egg and sugar and beat until creamy. Stir into the boiling water and when partly cooled add grated lemon and juice and stir until perfectly smooth.

For the meringue: Beat whites of eggs until perfectly stiff, then fold in 1/2 cup of powdered sugar.

Notes on the Music of SIMBA

The commissioned score for SIMBA was composed by James Makubuya, a musicologist and teacher at UCLA. The music was performed by Makubuya and his two daughters, Annette Nakku and Juliet Nabakka at Steve Schiff’s Pavilion Studios in Los Angeles. The score reflects the traditional folk music of East Africa — particularly Kenya, where much of SIMBA was filmed. Makubuya’s score features the music of the tribes the Johnsons filmed more than sixty years ago. Makubuya, Nakku and Nabakka sing in traditional Kenyan folk music styles and play the following instruments:

obokano (8-string bowl lyre)
adeudeu (bow harp)
madinda (xylophone)
awal (calabash rattle)
long necked drum and cone shaped drums

The score features caravan music, animal music (larakaraka), village vocal solo and choral music, dance choral music and war music.

Here are the meanings of the lyrics sung in the film:

1) Village Vocal solo

“Nzilakabua...”

‘Life’ is an experiment, you have to watch it,
as it unfolds in order to understand it.

- 2) “Yongilo...”
‘Yongilo’ is such a fine drummer,
The temptation to dance to his drum music is irresistible
- 3) “He-yo, Ho-le-o...”
Now that we have eaten,
We must work and work vigorously,
We must dance and dance vigorously.
- 4) “Ajulin...”
Come on Ajulin,
You have such beauty and power,
Persist and don’t let the evil powers defeat you.

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Selected Filmography

- 1) Jack London’s Adventure’s in the South Sea Islands (1913)
- 2) Among the Cannibal Isles of the South Pacific (1918)
- 3) Jungle Adventures (1921)
- 4) Head Hunters of the South Seas (1922)
- 5) Trailing African Wild Animals (1923)
- 6) Simba (1928)
- 7) Across the World with Mr. and Mrs. Johnson (1930)
- 8) Congorilla (1932)
- 9) Baboona (1935)
- 10) Borneo (1937)
- 11) I Married Adventure (1940)

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