

Film Tribute: In Appreciation, Roger Ebert is Why I'm Here

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on April 4, 2013 - 6:11pm

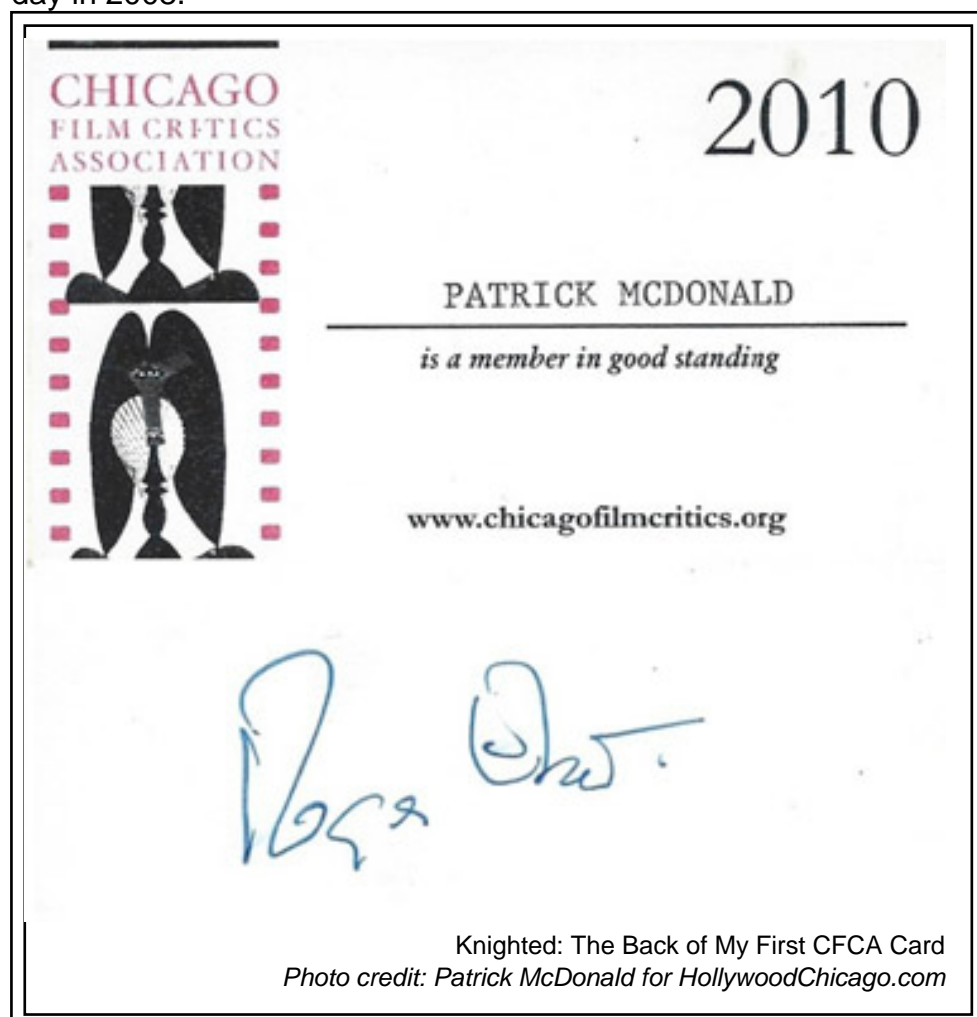
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CHICAGO – When I first walked into the Chicago film critic's screening room in January of 2008, Roger Ebert was sitting there, in the seat where he always held court. I had met him only a couple times earlier, as just a film buff and his admirer. It was the first time I was to join him as a fellow film critic, and it didn't seem possible.

The film was Woody Allen's "Cassandra's Dream," as I was playing out my own dream. After the film was over, I went over to Roger Ebert, knelt down – as if to be knighted – and said, "This is my first professional screening as a film critic, and I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you." He looked up and squeezed my hand, as by that point cancer had taken away his ability to speak. It is impossible to communicate how that gesture filled my soul.

Through the years, I saw him at that seat, and other movie theater seats throughout the city. We "spoke" several times, but I couldn't help thinking that this giant of cinema arts had to listen to everybody, but never could feed back, after years of being the most influential film critic and communicator in media history. He always listened and always gave his famous "thumbs up," if you happened to grace him with something he enjoyed. I remember a red carpet, where he and his incredible wife Chaz were walking towards me. He stopped, gave me the thumbs-up, and shook my hand as a colleague. I countered with, "you're the handsomest man here tonight, besides me." He shook with a laughter, pointed at me as to say, "thanks, pal."

But his influence was beyond my lucky acquaintance with him. It is in the film addicted boy in me, from a small town in Indiana, who absorbed his reviews and watched his TV show eagerly, every Saturday at 6:30pm. It is in the the early adult phase in my life, lost in the big city and working in advertising, calming my cinema soul with his stellar recommendations every Friday. It was in the blogger who began in 2000, reviewing everything I saw and finding my voice through his inspiration. It is in the profession, when it all came full circle, that brave January day in 2008.



Roger Ebert was also a political progressive. He championed causes and fought against the forces of the sometimes more vile opposition, always with a deference to the beautiful English language, which he wielded with a sure and steady hand. I was always happy that he was a voice of reason, and I remember during the period 9/11/01, when he wrote an editorial to turn the rubble site into a working farmland again, to symbolized the resolution of the American Dream. I wish they would have taken his advice.

One more story – I just happened to be at the Chicago Theater, when they dedicated a permanent appreciation marker for Roger in 2005, right near the same spot where he and Gene Siskel had done the opening for their show, and before Roger had lost his voice. At the ceremony afterward in the Chicago Cultural Center – which I crashed – the overwhelming response he had to this honor was awe-inspiring. As he moved down the center aisle to the reception, he glanced right at me, as if to say, “your turn.” Two and a half years later, I took my seat in the same room, with the same man. It was my turn, but I wouldn’t have been there without him.

They called early cinema “The Magic Lantern.” But in movie history, there is no one who lighted up the art form through his knowledge and evaluation more than Roger Ebert, and that is true magic. There is no better tribute or way to acknowledge my appreciation, then to continue to honor his legacy through the continuance of my film journey. Rest in peace my brother, and “thanks, pal.”

Roger Ebert, 1942-2013



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