

Amalie at 27— film-maker and feminist

By JANE HOWARD



Amalie R. Rothschild and her \$10,000 editing machine purchased with money from John Lennon and Yoko Ono

New York—You take a left under the latticed marquee of the old Fillmore East, climb one flight and enter Anomaly Films, Inc., Amalie R. Rothschild's film studios.

Color stills of Janis Joplin, the Beatles and Frank Zappa line the walls leading into the projection room. If you look at them hard enough, you can almost feel the floor vibrating from the sounds you know the rock stars put out below, before the building was locked and put up for sale.

Amalie Rothschild took the photos, some of them while she was still an M.A. student at the Institute of Film and Television of New York University. She knew a few people on the technical crew at the Fillmore and she began hanging around, taking shots during concerts, collecting bits of history.

At that point in her life, she was still pursuing still photography and the special effects of Joshua's Light Show combined with the frantic movements of a Joplin were ideal subjects.

Loving the rock sounds and the theatrical atmosphere, she moved on to the Newport Jazz Festival and Woodstock

and broke into commercial photography with her shots of Bob Dylan's famed Isle of Wight concert. Her work was used in *Rolling Stone* and in spreads in the *Village Voice*.

Put Amalie's work was beginning to pick up on another front, as she made her first documentary film, "Woo Who? May Wilson," for her master's thesis in 1968.

Considered an especially innovative film for a student, "May Wilson" captures the very soul of the Baltimore woman who left her country home at the age of 60 and plunged into the avant-garde lifestyle of a New York "junk sculptor." When Amalie moved to New York after receiving her B.A. in graphic design and still photography from the Rhode Island School of Design, she looked up the artist who was from her hometown, Amalie, also from Baltimore, is the daughter of Amalie Rothschild, the painter and sculptor.

"I identified with May Wilson... I went through some major changes in my life when I came to New York, too," the 27-year-old film-maker said. "And I admired her courage." "We came friends and I decided to make a movie of her. And this was before I knew anything about a women's movement," she said of her obviously women's lib-type subject.

"I really have to credit film school for getting me going as a film-maker," Amalie admitted. "The film was very

ambitious, considerably professional compared to the usual student film. And it would have been very expensive to make at the going commercial rates. I couldn't have done it."

But the film brought her work to the attention of a lot of people, among them leaders of the women's liberation movement, which was building rapidly.

"At the Fillmore I was getting my bearings as a person," she explained. "And, with the women's movement, I was getting a context in which a lot of things in my life fit... It gave me the confidence to continue, but back then we had no distribution. The distributor would look at my film and say, 'Sorry, dear, it's just not commercial.'"

But it was timely and it was recognized by the New York Film Festival in 1970 and by the Flaherty Film Seminar. It was also used in a USIA program and was given a CINE Eagle award. Later it was included in the Women Film-maker's Festival at the Whitney Museum in New York and in the first International Festival of Women's Films.

In March, 1971, Amalie began work on "It Happens to Us" a film on the emotional aspects of abortion, which placed her firmly in the ranks of the feminists.

"I'm a feminist," she asserts, "and at this stage in my career, I'm making films about women. These are things I

feel very passionately about. The most valid statement an artist can make in any field is that which he has experienced."

"My experience with abortion led me to make 'It Happens to Us.' The experience was a real revelation. It shocked me very profoundly that I had been as prejudiced as I had. I discovered my own blindness and ignorance."

"It Happens to Us" was the first film Amalie made through her own resources. She began filming it with her own funds, but they quickly ran out. "But that was the key," she said. "I had the rushes to show when I went to ask for grants."

The remainder she financed through grants totaling \$21,000.

During the filming of this movie, she set up her own company, Anomaly Films, and she began using all-woman crews, primarily to gain the confidence of the girls interviewed. "Since then it has become standard for me," she explained, "because I have found a lot of excellent technicians who for obvious reasons can't get jobs. It's fabulous to be able to give them paying jobs. We should be able to make a living out of this."

Other women film-makers believe they should be able to

See FILM, B6, Col. 1

FILM, from B1

make a living, too, so several of them, Ms. Rothschild included, have formed their own distribution company, New Day Films. The group joined other film-makers protesting the withdrawal of Costa-Gavras's "State of Siege" from the American Film Institute Theater festival this month at the Kennedy Center in Washington.

"In light of all the other actions this year—the cancellation of 'Sticks and Bones' on television, the threats to newspapermen who refuse to reveal their sources, the attempts at censorship—we had to do something. He (George Stevens, Jr., the AFI official who canceled the controversial film) was unwilling to compromise. The only power we had was to withhold our films."

Personal and political

Amalie's films have been called personal and political, and they are, although not in a critical sense. She has dealt only with subjects that have related to her own life—the ordeal of growing up female, of creating an independent lifestyle and a career.

The petite, blue jeaned brunette by her own admission could pass for 10 years less than 27, but her resourcefulness often extends far beyond her appearance. There was the time, for instance, when she was taking stills of Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention at the Fillmore and John Lennon and Yoko Ono gave a surprise performance. Amalie, who wanted to film the two "just for home movies," ran upstairs to her studio and grabbed her movie equipment. Later, when the Lennons found out they had been filmed, they offered to buy the footage.

"I figured I would gamble and ask a high price for it," she recalled. "Because if they said no, I'd just put it on my shelf as I was planning to do anyway." But after briefly haggling over her \$15,000 price, the superstars handed over \$12,500 and walked away with the film. Amalie immediately went out and bought herself a \$10,000 Steambeck editing machine, recognizing this as an opportunity she might never have again.

The Steambeck sits off a set of offices, a projection room and a viewing room, all of which Amalie and her husband, John Chester, built themselves out of the large hull above the theater. John, an electronics engineer, has his own company, Chaos Audio, across the hall from Amalie's studios. They met while she was taking photos

at the rock shows and he was working the sound system; now they collaborate occasionally on her films.

At the moment, Amalie is completing two technical films for a medical group, her first venture into commercial film. She would be jumping headlong into her nanced by a \$10,000 grant from the American Film Institute, but recipients of this maximum grant are expected to raise the remainder of their budgets themselves and Amalie's totalled \$35,000.

Roots of existence

She couldn't do it, so the institute allowed her to transfer the grant to a smaller-budget project, which will be a character piece on her grandmother, on growing old and on understanding the roots of one's existence.

"I want to preserve her," she said of the elderly woman who lives in Baltimore, "the essence of her... and how often does one get to know his roots? ... How she affected my mother and then me. And what is that process that we're all part of?"

Amalie signs her films "Amalie R. Rothschild," to distinguish herself from her mother, who doesn't use the "R." She is often known as Amalie Rothschild II, but prefers not to be. This independence, however, is not from lack of respect. Turning slowly through a book of her mother's sketches, entitled "Amalie Rothschild: Drawings," she stares, silently, then asserts, "I really do like her work." Amalie designed the book and took some of the snapshots in it and her sister Adrienne Miles, who lives near Frederick, and also is a still photographer and painter, took some shots of her mother's sculpture.

"She had as much to do with my development as a serious person," Amalie said of her mother, "as anything else. I mean, I always took what I was doing seriously and the encouragement was always there. And the discipline was handed down from her."

Her mother would probably approve of Amalie's statement, "If a work survives, it's because it's good, not because it's male or female." And although she says, "My rise as a film-maker coincides with a time when it is fashionable to be a woman," she confidently and realistically adds, "Some of us are getting a recognition which we all deserve anyway, but five years ago, we wouldn't have."