

## LAST WORD

## Louis Gossett Jr.

With TV and film projects on the go and a one-man show in the works, the energetic star is loving his full life  
By Suzanne Wintrob

After seven decades in Hollywood, Louis Gossett Jr. is thrilled to finally have some forced downtime. “Here’s that rainy day!” the Brooklyn, N.Y.-born actor chuckles about pandemic lockdown from his home in Atlanta, where he moved last year to be close to the set of *Watchmen* – the HBO series that has just earned him an Emmy nomination.

At 84, Louis is using his newfound calm to talk up his latest movie, *The Cuban*. He plays Luis, a musician with Alzheimer’s disease whose memory is reawakened by a young nursing-home attendant (*Degrassi’s* Anna Golja) who loves Cuban jazz. Despite a lifetime portraying characters with powerful dialogue – think *Roots* and his Oscar-winning turn in *An Officer and a Gentleman* (right) – Louis speaks volumes in *The Cuban* with his expressive eyes.

As the Canadian indie film opens in drive-in theatres across the country, Louis chats with us about music, sports and how he inspires his grandchildren.

### THE EYES HAVE IT

You deliver [the dialogue] in your mind. It’s the challenge of the artist. Sometimes the best moment, even when you have lines, is the line you don’t say.

### ON PLAYING LUIS

I wanted to do this film for the challenge. One of my favourite scenes in a movie was seeing [a catatonic] Robert De Niro coming round in *Awakenings* and I wanted to see if I could do that. The young [producers] followed me from coast to coast! They voted for me so I paid attention, read the script and I was stricken.

### DRIVE-IN DAYS

I remember them back in Irvine, Calif.

The [waitresses] were all young actresses who learned how to roller-skate. They’d come to your car with ice cream and put the food on the window and get the money and they would never fall down! They were amazing, those kids.

### ON BROADWAY AT 17

I wanted to be a doctor or a professional athlete but I fell into [acting]. My high-school teacher saw something pure. He said, “Go tell your mother, ‘What have I got to lose [by auditioning for the play *Take a Giant Step* without any formal training]?’” So I went up there and I got the part! It’s amazing.

### FAMILY TIES

I talk to my two sons (left, son Satie with Dad) on FaceTime every day. And on weekends, I speak to the rest of the family. I love them all. I have eight grandchildren and three great-grandchildren! It’s a big thing with their personalities, what they like and what they don’t like. They all like Paw Paw – that’s my nickname.

### SPORTS FAN

I don’t like [empty stadiums]. They should save all those great athletes and wait for this pandemic to go away and then have a reunion the likes of which they will never experience in life. Let them have a year off. Then they can start from scratch. Those athletes are too valuable.

### MY ERACISM FOUNDATION

Always, when we survive harsh times, the key... is mutual co-operation for the salvation of us all. It takes mankind to save mankind. This generation that’s showing up in the town squares the past couple of months, they know it’s working.

### TEACH THE GRANDKIDS

I keep their minds wide open. If I hear their minds are closing up, I make sure they hear from me to open their minds back up. There’s no such thing as impossible – that’s my motto.

### RHYTHM OF LIFE

When the producers of *The Cuban* literally chased down his car at the Toronto International Film Festival, Louis was intrigued by their enthusiasm. And after reading the script, he was dazzled not only by the story but also by the chance to return to his musical roots. “I’m part of the old folk music era of Joan Baez and Judy Collins,” explains the guitarist and singer-songwriter. “I was into

that folk thing called the hootenanny. The very first song that was sung at Woodstock by Richie Havens (left) – I wrote that song! It was called “Handsome Johnny.” The residuals kept me from being homeless two years later!” Now the Hollywood legend is developing a one-man show that will look back on his life through words, video and music: “I’m working on it very carefully, making sure I don’t lie, brushing up on my guitar work and getting back onstage. I’ve been working on it all my life but it will come out soon. In the meantime, one day at a time.” **H**

