

Frozen in 1974: Leon Russell and Les Blank's "A Poem Is a Naked Person" (Michael's Rock and Roll Posse)

In a July, 2015 Posse posting about the summer movies "Love and Mercy" and "Amy," I noted (in "Brian, Amy, and Leon"):

This has been a remarkable summer for movies about rock and roll subjects—with harrowing depictions of Brian Wilson and Amy Winehouse, and a forthcoming movie that is more joyous, featuring Leon Russell. Although I include mention of all three, the Leon Russell movie has not yet come to Santa Fe or Houston, so I will set it aside as a bookend to the two others, which I saw in rapt and horrified attention in Santa Fe within two weekends of each other. Both left me exhilarated and saddened beyond belief.

I then summarized:

I have not yet seen "A Poem Is a Naked Person," the Les Blank documentary on Leon Russell, but all the preliminary word on the film is that it is—almost of necessity—a more triumphant and uplifting work than the films I review here. After all, Russell played the piano as an intermittent member of The Wrecking Crew, and wrote one of the most haunting rock and roll songs ever recorded, "A Song for You" ("And when my life is over, remember when we were together, we were alone, and I was singing this song for you"). Although it was covered most famously by another doomed bulimic, Karen Carpenter, Russell's long and fruitful career (he is 73, and still recording and touring) is more of an exemplar than the brief and doomed Amy, Kurt, and Karen. I will look forward to the movie and its noteworthy subject, and I will rejoice.

We are back in Houston for the school year, and last night saw "A Poem Is a Naked Person," the snakebitten (literally) documentary by and about Leon Russell, one of the first films made by the late Les Blank, considered by many to be the most successful music documentary filmmaker. He certainly made several dozen, among them two chosen to be included in the National Film Registry list, of the nearly 500 movies of all sorts preserved by the Library of Congress. Over the years, I have seen about a dozen of his films, across musical genres, and these

wide-ranging interests and topics not only made him the Ry Cooder of musical filmmaking, but he filmed a movie featuring the regional music aficionado Cooder in 1988. (The entire list of his work is at <http://lesblank.com/>.) My favorite Blank film has always been “*Chulas Fronteras*,” about the Texas Mexican American musicians Flaco Jimenez and Houston’s Lydia Mendoza. The film was made two years after the Leon Russell film, and is a staple of Chicano film festivals and *veterano* Chicano cultural gatherings; I have seen it about a dozen times, and never tire of the wonderful music it recorded. When I first moved to Houston, I also heard both Jimenez and Mendoza play in small, intimate Mexican nightclubs in Houston, in memorable and stirring concerts. (Jimenez, born in 1939, is still alive and playing; he is also taking victory laps for various musical honors.)

This film has not been as lucky, inasmuch as it ran afoul of various legal issues, personnel disputes, bad blood between the film’s subject/producer Russell and Blank, and a common occurrence in film music—fights over musical rights, copyrights, and royalties. If I understood some of the 40 years’ worth of pissing matches in the provenance of this film, Russell held the rights (it was apparently a sort of “work for hire” and Blank simply kept the final version of the film in a mouldering sort of file, waiting for the right moment to work it all out, which never came in his lifetime. (He died in 2013.) It was left to his son Harrod to pick up the pieces and reassemble the work, which was almost an orphan project, and he restored it for its recent 2015 release at the SxSW Film Festival. Harrod Blank has a Houston connection, having made his own documentary films, specializing in art-car films such as “Wild Wheels” and “Driving the Dream,” and sponsoring his own painted-art cars in Houston shows. (Española, NM may be the low-rider capitol of the country, but Houston is Ground Zero for painted car shows and competitions.) Harrod appeared at last night’s showing at the Museum of Fine Art-Houston, and answered questions after the movie.

“A Poem Is a Naked Person,” of which I had seen snippets over the years, reminds me of a scattered and low budget version of “Alice’s Restaurant,” with a vague narrative format, rollicking musical numbers, and genuine oddities. Russell apparently commissioned Blank, then a rising and promising filmmaker who had never made a full length movie, to follow him on a rambling tour, in his Tulsa recording studio, and in a Nashville recording studio. Not all the venues and participants were identified, but it is a bizarre entourage, even by 1974 low-rent standards. I lost track of the various oddities, but they included a number of Russell’s “Deliverance”-resembling neighbors along Oklahoma rivers and the Grand Lake of the Cherokees, where he was building a house with a wonderful psychedelic pool (the young guy painting it in the movie was in the audience, and

he became famous as a t-shirt artist and Armadillo World Headquarters poster designer and artist Jim Franklin). There was a bungling bricklayer, guys riding a tractor-trailer, a guy who swallowed glass from his (too-many-beers) glass, water snakes and pool scorpions, a confusing riff about the native peoples near where Russell grew up in Oklahoma (complete with a non-native totem pole), musicians hanging out, lots of smoking various substances, and the most unusual but riveting National Geographic channel-like scene where a snake devoured a chick. (I could not make this up.) Believe me, I am not spoiling this for you by outlining the many rambling “plot-lines” in this rock and roll Ripley’s Believe It or Not. And adding to the travelogue-ish nature of the film, a number of the native-English-speaker figures had their words (usefully) added to the screen, and in one memorable scene, the printing was upside-down.

But the music made up for the kind of hillbilly celebration, I think, that was at the fringes. Among the many musicians appearing were a clean-shaven Willie Nelson, country singer George Jones, J. J. Cale, Eric Anderson (more on him to come), and others. The music, most of it pretty poorly produced in the film, outside the studio work, which is wonderful, also included concert footage and spontaneous songs. Listening to Russell’s gravelly-voiced versions of his “Tightrope” and “A Song For You,” as well as other songs sung in smoky and crowded firetrap venues reminded me of just how many rock and roll singers with terrible voices I admire—Dylan, Neil Young, Russell, Dr. John, and others with oddly-affecting styles and mannerisms.

It was worth seeing, if only for its frozen in time photography of concerts without security or cellphones, a talented singer and extremely good piano player at the center, and a backstage pass to 1970’s-era rock concerts. Russell, who in 1970 was already a successful, rising studio player and member of “The Wrecking Crew,” where he backed dozens of singers to create hundreds, became a singer and prolific songwriter, writing songs covered by many singers. Forty years later, he had long-ago peaked and was only intermittently performing, when his career was resuscitated by Elton John in 2010; they collaborated on “The Union,” Russell’s 34th studio album and the first he had made in a decade and a half. There was an HBO documentary movie about their project, which is almost a bookend to the 1974 film. The next year, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

I noted the appearance of Eric Anderson in the film, and he, like Russell, was also becoming known as a gifted songwriter, whose work has since been covered by a number of equally gifted singers, in his case Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Wyclef Jean, Lou Reed, and others. *A propos* the reptilian references in the movie, I would note

that by his own admission, he has had a snake-bitten career, although he escaped the fate of the doomed chick. His website notes, about the fateful 1972-74 period of the film:

For Andersen, every big break seemed to be followed by crushing disappointment. The premature death in 1967 of his newly acquired manager, legendary Beatles' mastermind Brian Epstein, took a toll. But six years later, one of the most baffling events in the history of contemporary music occurred—a career-changer that still haunts Eric from the shadows. In 1973, during a corporate shakeup at Columbia records, 40 master recording tapes for a highly anticipated release mysteriously and inexplicably disappeared. Never before or after has a record company lost a complete album. Although the tapes resurfaced 16 years later, his career had been forever altered by the event—no plausible explanation has ever been given.

In 2015, a documentary about his work (“The Songpoet”) was released. As I was buoyed by the pending appearance of the Leon Russell movie, hidden away for so long, I look forward with great joy and anticipation to the film about Eric Anderson's life. It is more than a little ironic that these two young competitors who appeared in this lost film of 40 years ago, both get their cinematic due so much later.

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