

FFanzeen: Rock'n'Roll Attitude With Integrity

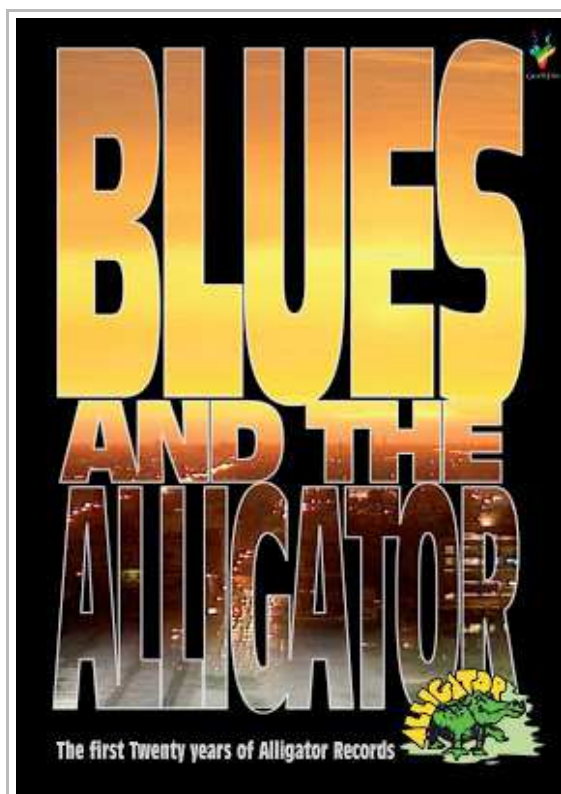
Through the writings and photography of Robert Barry Francos, a view of the arts and culture, including everyday life.

SUNDAY, MARCH 10, 2013

DVD Review: Blues and the Alligator

Text © Robert Barry Francos / FFanzeen, 2013

Images from the Internet



Blues and the Alligator: The first twenty years of Alligator Records

Directed by Jim Downing

Gazell Films

52 minutes, 1991 / 2010

Gazelle.net

MVDvisual.com

This documentary is fascinating in its own way, and unsatisfying in others, leaving me more questions than answers. Filmed in 1991 on the 20th Anniversary of the label (hence the title), there are some issues that may have been accepted then that raised some eyebrows on me.

But first, let me whine for just a minute. As the talking heads parts go, this is pretty *whatever*. After working for a mostly jazz specialty label that sometimes released Blues called Delmark, based out of a Chicago record store, Bruce Iglauer rebelled when the label owner, Bob Koester (also interviewed), refused to sign Hound Dog Taylor (d.

Blog Archive

- ▼ 2013 (14)
 - ▶ May (1)
 - ▶ April (5)
 - ▼ March (3)
 - DVD Review: Molly Hatchet, Live at Rockpalast 1996...
 - A College Memory: Singing with Harry Chapin
 - DVD Review: Blues and the Alligator
 - ▶ February (2)
 - ▶ January (3)
- ▶ 2012 (36)
- ▶ 2011 (100)
- ▶ 2010 (151)
- ▶ 2009 (78)
- ▶ 2008 (70)
- ▶ 2007 (22)

About Me

Robert Barry Francos
 Currently living in Saskatoon (email at RBF55@msn.com for address). From 1977-88, I used to publish a print version of a music magazine in New York called FFanzeen, which dealt with the wide-ranging independent music scene. I also photographed many bands from the period (and since). Now I write this blog, and have a column at jerseybeat (dot) com (slash) quietcorner (dot) html. And the beat goes on.

[View my complete profile](#)

[Some of my photos](#)

[Jersey Beat magazine](#)

1975).

We see shots of Bruce listening to music, the inside day-to-day workings of the Alligator office, brief interviews with him and some of his staff, and more importantly, with some of the musicians. The artists often comment on how the Blues, especially in Chicago, is an urban sound (I agree: Delta Blues is more rural) that African-Americans relate to strongly. We are reminded of this by b-roll footage of Chicago slums and its poorer inhabitants.

However, what really is impressive, and makes this worth a view, is the live performances, nearly all of which are shown in their entirety, rather than clips. There's an old black and white video clip of Hound Dog Taylor doing the classic "Shake Your Money Maker" at an open-air festival to start off, and then throughout we see music played live in the studio, live in the Alligator offices, and showcased at the B.L.U.E.S. Etcetera club by musicians like Lonnie Brooks, Ronnie Baker Brooks, Lucky Peterson, Kenny Neal and Billy Branch.

One of the only women signed to Alligator, the largest Blues label in the world - and, ironically, she is one of their largest sellers - Koko Taylor (d. 2009). We see her sing the "Star Spangled Banner" at the opening of a White Sox game, and join in on the Etcetera stage with Lonnie Brooks. She is also the only female musician in the entire documentary, even though Katie Webster (d. 1999) had been attached to Alligator for two years at the time of the filming.

Someday, I believe, sociologists may (and should) study this film for various reasons. For example, what I said about the role of women in the Blues. Even in the flick, they mention that it's rare for women to sing the Blues; while more men have been signed over the years, the list of Blues women through the history of the genre, especially in the last 40 years since the label founded, is actually substantial.

However, what I found the most interesting about this documentary is the racial oxymorons that run throughout. We're shown the slums of Chicago, black musicians, and told how the Blues are the soul of the black people. And yet, all the workers at Alligator are white. All of the audiences at the live shows are not only white, but obviously middle class and above. That does not mean to me that white people have no right to be there, because the Blues can touch anyone (I give you Johnny Winter, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Bonnie Raitt and Ana Popovic, as examples). No, what I mean is it seems like perhaps the filmmakers are trying to make some kind of comment on gentrification of the music. Or perhaps they were just projecting unintentional or cultural racism for the time. I am certain that Iglauer has the truest of intentions, and even left a good job to record an unknown Black Blues musician, but it also seems odd that none of his staff (as of 1990, anyway) were of color.

I would have liked to have seen more of what motivated Iglauer, what hardships he had to go through to get the label started (other than that he left Delmark, there is nothing about the risks he took, for example), *how* he signed the likes of Hound Dog and Koko, what he does for promotion, the reaction of the Black audiences to the sounds, and, well, I could go on.

Certainly, I could recommend this with a clear conscious for the musical parts alone, but I do so hesitantly due to the rest.

[Life and Blog of Gary Pig Gold](#)

[Lethal Dose by Donna Lethal](#)

[Blitz! Magazine: Mike McDowell](#)

[Tom Bingham's blog](#)

[G-Mole: Bruce Farley Mowat](#)

[Suburban Voice: Al Quint](#)

[Blog of Lance Strate of General Semantics/Media Ecology Association](#)

[Who Really Cares blog of Craig Davison](#)

Somewhere, I hear James Brown singing..."I don't want nobody to give me nothing / Just open up the door, I'll get it myself..."

You can see the entire film for free here:

Posted by [Robert Barry Francos](#) at 12:01 AM 

Labels: [Alligator Records](#), [Billy Branch](#), [Blues](#), [BLUES Etcetera](#), [Bruce Iglauer](#), [Chicago Blues](#), [FFanzeen](#), [Hound Dog Taylor](#), [Kenny Neal](#), [KoKo Taylor](#), [Lonnie Brooks](#), [Robert Barry Francos](#), [unintentional racism](#)

Reactions: interesting (0) cool (0) informative (0)

No comments:

Post a Comment

Enter your comment...

Comment as: ▼