

GenEc DVD Review

Sunday, May 15, 2011

"Derailroaded: Inside The Mind Of Larry 'Wild Man' Fischer" (MVD)

In the 43 years since the release of the Frank Zappa-produced double-LP, "An Evening With Wild Man Fischer", people have reacted to Larry Fischer in many different ways. Many folks have simply laughed off the man and his music as a bad joke, as if he were just another sick stand-up comic whose schtick went on far too long. Many others hear his shout-laden vocals and shake their heads in "turn that thing off" disgust. A few people - including many well-regarded musicians and critics - have treated him as a misunderstood and seriously under-appreciated genius. The general public, of course, remains blissfully unaware of him at all, and would most likely reject him if they did somehow happen to stumble across his recordings.

But after watching this unexpectedly well-done documentary - unexpected in part because Fischer is such a minor figure in the history of rock music that it's surprising any documentary exists at all, but also in part because of the care and comprehensiveness with which the production team known as the Ubin Twins approached their subject - it strikes me that Fischer is neither someone to be laughed at nor someone to be saddled with a genius label that he could never hope to live up to. Larry Fischer is, as the blurb on the front of the DVD case would have it a "Manic Depressive. Paranoid Schizophrenic. Rock Legend."

Larry Fischer is still alive, but not well. It's tempting to speak of his "Wild Man" Fischer persona in the past tense, because it seems extremely unlikely that he will ever perform in public again; more on that later. There is nothing particularly "funny" or "comedic" about a seriously mentally person baring his naked emotions in public. He may seem humorous when heard on records, but the Ubins make the viewer painfully aware that there was a very tortured soul and damaged mind behind the "weirdness" of Wild Man Fischer. For those who may be unfamiliar with his work, Fischer wrote odd little songs, which he would sing to passersby on the streets of Los Angeles, charging them a dime to hear a swear-to-God-it's-original song. Many of these songs were more like short snippets of lyric and melody, which often had the potential to be developed further into full-length songs, though he apparently felt satisfied with them in what sounds to me like an unfinished state. But they are, when all is said and done, the products of a manic-depressive paranoid-schizophrenic.

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About Me

Tom Bingham

Feel free to contact me at mason2042 at gmail dot com

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That DVD-cover blurb is fact, not just a way to sell discs. He has indeed been institutionalized at certain points in his life, and the diagnosis is real, not imagined.

At their best, Fischer's songs are honest, heartfelt expressions of a mentally ill man's authentic thoughts and feelings, showing creative turns of phrase and set to simple, often semi-spoken melodies. His delivery of these songs is that of a man with an untrained voice, filled with passion, sometimes crying out in misery, at other times overflowing with an enthusiasm and energy that more controlled singers could never hope to attain. He expresses his emotions by shouting out individual words or short passages, often at unpredictable moments. I can understand the temptation to credit him as a genius, because his songs and singing -inconsistent though they be - are unique and sometimes quite touching, as if every fiber of his being is contained in these songs and shouts. It is difficult not to be moved when he sings of being "derailroded" (his way of saying "derailed"), being pushed off his intended show-business career track by the machinations of a corrupt record industry. In true paranoid fashion, his suspicious mind believes everyone - even those relatively few people who have tried to help him - are out to get him at every turn. It's no secret that elements of the commercial record industry are corrupt, but (a) he is not being singled out for special punishment, and (b) his failure to become as famous as he sometimes claims to be, or as wealthy as he feels he should be, has more to do with the fact that he performs his songs in a manner which few people in the mainstream audience would find appealing than it does with music-biz rip-offs.

The Ubin Twins - Josh Rubin is credited as Director, Jeremy Lubin as producer; I suspect there was no such clear-cut division of labor while the film was being made - originally envisioned this project as encompassing a number of schizophrenic rock stars, including Daniel Johnston, Wesley Willis, and Roky Erickson. But someone else was filming a documentary on Johnston, Wesley Willis passed away, and it became abundantly clear to the Ubins that Fischer had a fascinating enough story to justify a feature-length (86 minutes) film of his own. They uncovered a great deal of footage of Fischer on the streets, performing before audiences, and living his daily life, going as far back as the pre-Zappa era. They were granted permission to include Fischer's appearance on "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In" (previously known through an almost unwatchable Youtube clip). They interviewed a tremendous range of Fischer's friends, associates, and supporters. Frank Zappa had unfortunately died several years before the Ubins developed their interest in Fischer, but his widow Gail Zappa is here. Mark Mothersbaugh of Devo, Dr. Demento, Weird Al Yankovic, Solomon Burke (who gave Larry Fischer the "Wild Man" appellation) all add their insights. Most significantly, Bill Mumy (whose name Fischer consistently mispronounces as if it were spelled "Mummy", rather than the correct way, "Moo-mee") and Bob Haimer (a/k/a Art and Artie Barnes) - better known as Barnes & Barnes,

under which name they not only recorded the classic "Fish Heads", but also produced two albums for Fischer - talk openly about their love for and difficulties working with Larry Fischer.

Further insights come from Larry's long-suffering brother, David Fischer, his aunt Josephine, with whom Larry was living while much of the film was being made, the highly respected Princeton Clinical Psychology Professor Dr. Louis Sass, Howard Bronson of Rhino Records (whose first release as a label was Fischer's song about Rhino's L.A. record store), comix artist Dennis Eichhorn (co-author of the graphic novel "The Legend of Wild Man Fischer"), and Irwin Chusid, the world's great expert on "outsider music". Fischer virtually typifies the "outsider" genre, which is populated by amateur singers and songwriters who believe they are doing fine, solid, acceptable work, but who are so far outside the mainstream that they don't necessarily understand why the mainstream doesn't accept them. And there are lengthy interviews and candid shots of Larry Fischer himself, letting us see straight through to his inner core.

This film was first shown on the Festival circuit about a half-dozen years ago. The Wild Man Fischer we see in 2004 is an old man (looking much older than 60), lost, still bitter about his lot in life. We learn at the very end of the film that he has entered a home where he has been put back on medication. The meds have calmed him, the home provides a shelter and food, so his needs are being taken care of in many ways he neglected to take care of himself. Then, the saddest words in the entire movie come on the screen - He has "lost the pep", the enthusiasm which may have been his most endearing aspect as a performer. He is still Larry Fischer, but he is no longer "Wild Man" Fischer. Sad, yes. But the fact that he may have found something resembling peace may be as close as the film could ever have to a "happy ending".

The DVD is jam-packed with extras. There are outtakes, a trailer, performances (including Weird Al singing Fischer's signature tune, "Merry-Go-Round"), an overlong interview with the late X-rated comedian and action-movie star Rudy Ray Moore (who had no knowledge of Fischer's work or mental condition, but thought he showed potential as a novelty singer). There are two commentary tracks, one in which the Ubin Twins discuss how the film came together, a second one of telephone conversations with Fischer. The first is quite interesting, the second strikes me as uncomfortably exploitative. There is also a four-page booklet of reflections by director Josh Rubin.

I can't imagine anyone with an interest in Wild Man Fischer living without this DVD. I doubt it will make many new converts to the man's music, but it is worth seeing by anyone with an interest in the relationship between the arts and mental conditions.

Posted by Tom Bingham at 4:46 PM

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