



## Wild, Wild Life

by [Ronit Feldman](#)

The California Chicken Café, a favorite meeting place of young Hollywood movers, seems a curious birthplace for a documentary about rock stardom, manic depression and schizophrenia. But it's where aspiring film producer Jeremy Lubin, a native of Farmington Hills, was sitting in 2001 when a disheveled man with dirty skin and threadbare clothing approached and asked, "Do you know who I am?" Lubin didn't.

"I'm Wild Man Fischer," the man said, his voice fluctuating between childish exasperation and ragged despair. "I was discovered by Frank Zappa, and I was the first artist on Rhino Records. I made four albums, toured with Solomon Burke and did a duet with Rosemary Clooney."

Lubin listened to the barrage of names with suspicion. Could a man who looked as if he was homeless really have collaborated with the star of *White Christmas*? But a subsequent Google search verified Fischer's rant. It also provided a summation of his mental state. Institutionalized at 16 for threatening his mother with a knife, Larry "Wild Man" Fischer was diagnosed as a manic-depressive paranoid schizophrenic.

Intrigued by Fischer as a potential subject for a documentary film, Lubin and his then-roommate Josh Rubin — a Huntington Woods native who studied film at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts — tracked down *An Evening With Wild Man Fischer*, the debut album Frank Zappa produced in 1969 after discovering the vagabond songwriter on the streets of Los Angeles. They were floored. Not only did the cover art suggest a deliciously bizarre and irreverent sense of humor (a photograph of a grinning Fischer holding a knife to a cardboard cutout of his mother), but the music was even more entrancing: a concoction of glee and gloom delivered in a frazzled, knee-jerk warble. "We put it on the turntable," Lubin says, "and we just ... we had never heard anything like it."

Over the next three years, Lubin and Rubin would go on to create *Derailroded*, an 86-minute documentary about the intersection of genius and lunacy as exemplified by Fischer, the godfather of outsider music. Lubin produced the film, and he and Rubin share editing credits; both are 28. *Derailroded* has been shown at more than 50 film festivals and art-

house cinemas, and is in the process of being released domestically and internationally on DVD.

The film features extensive commentary by Frank and Gail Zappa, Weird Al Yankovic, Devo's Mark Mothersbaugh, Solomon Burke, Dr. Demento and *Lost in Space* child star Billy Mumy. There's also some archival footage from Fischer's early days, scenes from a recent L.A. club performance and bits of cartoon and puppetry that echo Fischer's capricious style.

The film does an effective job of transposing two very different vantage points. The first is how the world perceives Fischer's art: While some consider him reckless, others believe he's a genius. The second is the way Fischer perceives the world (in one scene he cowers beneath dirty bed sheets, terrified that Rubin and Lubin are in cahoots to kill him).

"It's not like he's Jimi Hendix," Rubin says, explaining the fractured response to Fischer's work. "But his mind, through his illness, has allowed him to have this portal to what it is to create art and what it is to be a true original. He's tapped into that. He's not a novelty act. He is not being funny or trying to be funny. He's expressing himself. He just doesn't have the filters that you or I have."

While some scenes are undeniably funny, the film is a sensitive and haunting portrait of a man who can't cope with the rigors of show business, yet repeatedly throws himself into its trenches. The manifold layers of Fischer's music and actions reveal a man who is candid, exuberant, skittish and scared.

In a phone interview, Fischer exudes the same nervous energy he shows on film, but his short, clipped sentences carry a downtrodden weight. Fischer, who turns 61 this month, has yet to see the film, which provides him with yet another source of paranoia.

"I'm a little bit nervous to see what kind of film they made of me," Fischer says. "I don't know what to expect. They could have painted me in a bad light. They could do whatever they want. It's scary. Everything is scary about show business."

The fact that *Derailroded* is a music documentary will only serve to endear it to the filmmakers' hometown. "Detroit's always been on the edge as far as music goes," Lubin says. "If any audience really gets it, just as a movie about an original kind of music that most people are not familiar with, I think Detroit will."

**9:15 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 5; and 1 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 6, at the Birmingham 8, 211 S. Woodward Ave., Detroit; 248-644-3456. Part of the Detroit Docs Film Festival.**