



## **JOSH RUBIN AND JEREMY LUBIN:**

**WILD MAN'S BLUES** by KJ Doughton (2005-08-07)

Which current film does the best job of squeezing tear ducts and prompting a misty-eyed case of the weepies? "Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants?" "Cinderella Man?" "Stealth?" (Just kidding on that last one.)

All bets are off until you've seen the finale of **DeRailed**. A frazzled, unkempt schizophrenic huddles next to his bed-bound, dying aunt, the only person who seems to understand his illness. She calls him Larry. She insists that he will never be abandoned. And even as she weathers the unforgiving scourge of cancer, this loving, silverhaired woman comforts her bewildered, frightened nephew. In a fit of either anxiety, or exhaustion, Larry passes out beside her.

"Derailroded" got to me. Blindsided me. Unleashed a flood of tears.

Maybe it's because I work at a mental hospital. Maybe it's because "Derailroded" exposes the terror of living with mental illness – and the difference that a selfless, knowing relative can make.

Most people, however, will probably see "Derailroded" for its pop culture significance. Director Josh Rubin and producer Jeremy Lubin followed underground music legend Larry "WildMan" Fischer during four long years of mood swings, dysfunctional relationships, and hair-raising a cappella croonings.

For the uninformed, Fischer was once an L.A. street musician willing to write and sing to passers-by for ten cents a song. His startling vocal delivery (think of a shrieking seal having its whiskers yanked out one by one with a pair of pliers) caught the attention of eccentricity magnet Frank Zappa. Suddenly, Fischer became a fringe celebrity, boasting a record deal, tour, and major label albums.

On a late July day in Seattle's colorful Capitol Hill district, Lubin and Rubin attend the Puget Sound premiere of "Derailroded," at the Northwest Film Forum. Aging boomers with ponytails and fading tattoos pack the facility's modest theater. One fiftysomething woman sports a tank top silk-screened with Zappa's familiar mug – all dark eyebrows and fuzzy soul patch. Illustrator Pat Moriarty, who contributed a startling animated passage to the film, is in attendance.

Also lurking about is Dennis Eichhorn, co-author of the cartoon compilation book "The Legend of Wild Man Fischer." Eichhorn's comic, written with the help of fellow penmeister J.R. Williams, is sardine-packed with hilarious anecdotes concerning how Fischer's colorful "Wild Man" mystique came to be. One segment details how Fischer toured Spokane, immortalizing the appearance by defecating in a fan's closet. "The more I learn about Larry Fischer," Eichhorn admits, "the more impressed I become with his talent and songwriting. He really is truly a unique artist. I hope the film and, hopefully, our book, add to the heightened appreciation of his work that seems to be occurring in the world today."

Rubin and Lubin (their last-name similarities prompted the production moniker "Ubin Twinz") stand center-stage. The former sports long, curly hair and has a mellow, laid back vibe. Meanwhile, Lubin is clean-cut and wears a Gram Parsons t-shirt, playing Felix Unger to Lubin's Oscar Madison. Both came into the Fischer foray three decades later than most of their Seattle audience members. Too young to experience their subject's initial launch into stardom, the duo of filmmaking twenty-somethings encountered the animated songwriter during an unexpected L.A. face-off.

"I was eating at the California Chicken Café on Melrose," recalls Lubin. "This guy comes up off the street. His skin is soiled, and his clothes are in tatters. He says, 'Do you know who I am? I'm Wild Man Fischer!' He then talked about making records, and working with Frank Zappa, and so on. I was so intrigued that I did a Google search on the guy. As it turned out, everything he said was true."

Indeed, the story of Wild Man Fischer is a factual doozie, proving that truth is light years stranger than fiction. Fischer's collaborations with Zappa resulted in the 1968 double album, "An Evening with Wild Man Fischer." Released on Bizarre Records, the unique recording features hypnotic, oddball shards of fascinating sound. Like a persistent tapeworm clinging to its host's intestinal lining, "Merry Go Round" has an infectious chorus that will forever impale itself to your memory. Fischer's yelps and wails make up the raw essence of existentialism –Edvard Munch's "Scream" painting committed to vinyl.

The undeniable, eccentric power of "An Evening with Wild Man Fischer" still holds up, thirtyseven years following its initial release. Lubin, who was rooming at the time with his future filmmaking partner Rubin, found the record four years ago at a Los Angeles record store for \$30 dollars, shortly after completing his fateful, fact-finding web search on Wild Man. Upon hearing the disc's warped, wounded rantings, the duo was mesmerized. "We knew we had to do a film on this guy," confesses Lubin.

Before their quarry would sign a contract to do the film, however, Fischer demanded that the Ubin Twinz earn his trust. "He called all the time," recalls Rubin. "Two to three times a day. That happened for a year, before he would agree to the movie. We had to work for his friendship."

"Derailroded" provides a synapse frying acid-hit of pop culture history, detailing Fischer's tiedyed, hippie-laden climb to counterculture fame. The frizzy-haired, mutton-chopped versebarker rubbed shoulders with Janis Joplin and Joan Baez during celebrity-packed concert stops. Fischer alienated Zappa after allegedly throwing a glass bottle dangerously

close the musical mentor's baby daughter. This would prove to be the first of many relationship kiss-offs. Before his behavior turned sour, the singer's high-energy mania (or "triple-pep," as Fischer affectionately dubs it) attracted the attention of other musos and record industry honchos who took turns working with the bipolar talent. One-time "Lost In Space" cast member Billy Mumy, who eventually created production team Barnes & Barnes, recorded several projects with Fischer. "Wildmania," "Pronounced Normal," and "Nothing Scary" resulted from these collaborations, making up the singer's work with Rhino Records in the late seventies and early eighties.

But for all of his underground fame and recognition as a pioneer of Outsider Music, the Wild Man Fischer Story can also be perceived as a tragedy. As "Derailoaded" opens, we're introduced to Larry as he turns to the camera with a wary stare. He's concerned about snipers.

He looks older than he did on the infamous cover of "Evening..." where he's attacking a cardboard likeness of his mother with a kitchen knife (allegedly, the notorious illustration was based on an actual event). Gray hair sprouts every which-a-way, from sideburns, beard and scalp. He could pass for David Crosby after being assaulted with an electric cattle prod. Looking bewildered and frightened at the San Diego estate that he's housesitting for a relative, Larry tilts his head upward, like a startled bird. "There go the helicopters," he proclaims, eyes wide with paranoia.

Lubin searches for a familial, "nurture" link to Larry's condition by interviewing the artist's older brother, David Fischer. Unlike Terry Zwigoff's "Crumb," however, where neuroses and mental illnesses drop from Robert Crumb's family tree like fall leaves, "Derailoaded" reveals merely an absent father (who died during Larry's youth) and a mother struggling to raise her children.

"Our mother was over her head, trying to deal with her kids," acknowledges David, appearing level headed and perfectly normal in his curly gray hair and NASA jacket. On two occasions, the Fischer matriarch committed Larry to a mental institution, where he received shock treatments and was medicated with Thorazine.

Despite these dire roots, Fischer flourished for a time as the counterculture jester. He was shrined "Wild Man" by legendary soul singer Solomon Burke. His bizarre, compelling compositions became regular fixtures on the Dr. Demento Show. Clad in yellow tank top, shades, and afro, Fischer performed with Ruth Buzzi on Rowan & Martin's popular "Laugh-In" TV show. He joined the front ranks of the Outsider Music pantheon, next to Tiny Tim and Daniel Johnston.

But was he really a genius? Some would argue that the Wild Man couldn't carry a tune. What, then, was the songwriter's appeal?

Enter Dr. Louis Sass, who appears in the film to offer an enlightening commentary on why society is fascinated by mental illness. Historically, he reminds us, odd behavior has always been a big draw. During the 18th Century, visitors of London's Bethlehem Royal Hospital (aka Bedlam) were allowed to gawk at patients for a one-cent admission fee. And while a certain perverse voyeurism definitely fuels this need to observe all things unusual, Sass suggests that we are also touched by the vulnerability of these images. Indeed, after watching Larry act out his dynamic palette of emotions, including fear, anger, jealousy, sorrow, and a yearning for fame, honest viewers might confess to seeing parts of themselves in this cinematic mirror.

It doesn't hurt, however, to be a fan of oddball entertainment, and the Ubin Twinz certainly qualify. "Wild Man Fischer is a fringe artist," explains Rubin. "They don't call them Outside Musicians because they're on the inside mainstream. Not many people know about him. That's the main reason for us doing this project. We felt that it was our duty to tell his story to the world. Who wants to tell a story that everyone's heard? Who wants to tell the Michael Jackson story? This is the stuff that interests us."

And therein lies the most fascinating of the many questions posed by "Derailoaded." Was Wild Man Fischer merely a vulnerable pawn exploited by the music business, or was he a genuinely talented artist whose collaborators truly cared about the man? Lubin's film makes a case for the latter explanation. For one thing, "Derailoaded" makes clear that Fischer's records sold few copies, and reaped fewer revenues. "Evening..." sold 12,000 copies, but by 1984, his album "Nothing Scary" only managed to turn over 2,000 units. Clearly, there was no windfall to be pillaged through Wild Man's material, despite the singer's claims that Zappa and others ripped him off.

{End of Part I}