

## Strange days

Reverential documentary charts the troubled life and distorted times of LA's 'godfather of outsider music.' By David Sheppard.



Though championed by Zappa and, briefly, Solomon Burke – who bestowed the 'Wildman' soubriquet – his recording career is one of rock's wonkiest. His debut, *An Evening With Wild Man Fischer*, was his only success, despite its alarming, blade-wielding 'Wildman' cover. A 1968 appearance on hit TV comedy Rowan & Martin's *Laugh-In* (reprised in all its lime green and acid orange glory here), saw Fischer beguile the mainstream, but after this fleeting bout of celebrity his fragile psyche would zigzag from untamed euphoria – in his own memorable

phrase, he "had the pep up" – to bouts of self-sabotage.

Rubin's documentary retraces Fischer's fortunes via candid interviews with Zappa's widow Gail and spiritual heirs such as Devo's Mark Mothersbaugh and 'Weird' Al' Yankovic, along with producers-cum-counsellors Barnes & Barnes and Rhino Records boss Harold Bronson, who together oversaw Fischer's brief post-punk renaissance. A bespectacled shrink adds Jungian insight, but the rest of the footage – and the film's heroic heart – belongs to Fischer alone.

In numerous archive clips, heckler-baiting stage performances or hand-held interviews document him bursting ferociously into song, or fretting obsessively about sinister helicopters glimpsed from a bedroom window. Now 61, he cuts a grizzled but oddly avuncular figure, swerving from vulnerability to gruff but endearing belligerence with delirious pronouncements about his *derailroaded* career ("I'm Wild Man Fischer, I'm a rock star!").

Equal parts hilarity and heartbreak, the film offers a final, poignant irony. Fischer ultimately swaps his semi-

vagrant life for the sanctuary of an LA care home and medicated equilibrium. But there's a price to pay. He has lost the "pep". The fine line between madness and genius rarely has been so acutely drawn.

### SKIP TO...

Wild Man goes way out there... and back.



Larry drops in...



...tunes up...



and freaks out.



Larry today, sans "pep".

### Derailroaded



SUBTITLED *INSIDE THE MIND OF LARRY 'WILD MAN' FISCHER*, director Josh Rubin's portrait of the profoundly bi-polar Fischer is a warm, occasionally disturbing but always compelling rummage behind the 'freak' exterior of the one-time Frank Zappa acolyte and his singular, almost 40-year "career".

The neglected son of a repressive family (he would later buy a year's pass to Disneyland in order to "soak up family love"), Fischer was in and out of institutions throughout adolescence

and subjected to shock treatment after threatening his mother with a kitchen knife. Returned to the community at the height of hippiedom, he sought solace in music and would wander LA's Sunset Strip singing in his unique ursine bellow, selling spontaneously composed 'songs' to passers by for a dime.

While similarly damaged figures, such as Syd Barrett or Daniel Johnson, are embraced by the cloak of cult rock eulogy, Fischer remains an outsider even among outsiders.