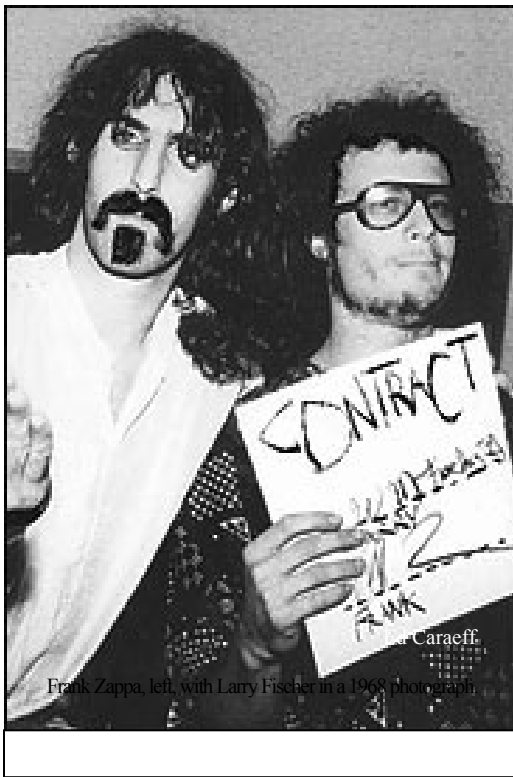


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FILM REVIEW

A 60's Singer-Ranter Who Fell Short of Fame

By STEPHEN HOLDEN



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Opens today in Manhattan.

Directed by Josh Rubin; director of photography, Bryan Newman; edited by Mr. Rubin, Jeremy Lubin and Howard Leder; music by Wild Man Fischer; produced by Mr. Lubin; released by Ubin Twinz Productions. At the Two Boots Pioneer Theater, 155 East Third Street, East Village. Running time: 86 minutes. This film is not rated.

Outsider art is the gentle, nonjudgmental term applied to the output of musicians like Larry (Wild Man) Fischer, the psychotic songwriter and performer (found to be both paranoid-schizophrenic and bipolar) who is sympathetically profiled in Josh Rubin's documentary portrait, who watches this sad, disturbing film with us will agree that what Mr. Fischer does is art, whether outsider or any other kind.

Some of the most extravagant claims on his behalf come from Mark Mothersbaugh, the lead singer of Devo, who compares Mr. Fischer to van Gogh. The dreaded word "genius" is trotted out. Be assured, there's no sign of that.

Musically, Mr. Fischer occupies the same marginal territory as Daniel Johnston, another troubled musician whose raw, jingly effusions are also revered by a fervent cult. Mr. Johnston, who is much less aggressive than Mr. Fischer, also happens to be the subject of an adoring documentary, "The Devil and Daniel Johnston," shown earlier this year in the New Directors/New Films series in New York. That film showed how easily pity can masquerade as adulation.

Once a skinny, wild-eyed hippie with a mischievous grin, Mr. Fischer with a bush of unruly gray hair and a distant resemblance to David Crosby. Years ago on the streets of Los Angeles, where Mr. Fischer was peddling made-up songs on the spot for spare change. Signed to Zappa's Bizarre record label, he put out a double album, "An Evening With Wild Man Fischer," in 1968 that sold 12,000 copies and made him a minor figure of the psychedelic era. The album cover showed him holding a butcher knife to a cardboard cutout of a woman labeled "Larry's Mother."

At the height of his notoriety, he appeared on "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In" as a noisy, grinning kook dragged offstage by Ruth Buzzi. The closest he came to rock star glory was an appearance at the Rose Bowl on a bill with Janis Joplin and Joan Baez.

"One thing you've got to remember is that he actually is a wild person; Larry is dangerous," Zappa declares in an old interview. Their relationship ended when Mr. Fischer, in a rage, hurled a bottle that barely missed striking Zappa's daughter, Moon Unit.

The movie, which includes generous snippets of Mr. Fischer's singsong rants (one of the best known is the nagging, childish ditty "Merry-Go-Round"), tells the unhappy story of his life in and out of mental institutions, and of how his allegedly promising recording career fizzled out.

Years after the Zappa fiasco, he was given a second chance. His spontaneous jingle for Rhino Records, a Los Angeles record store that expanded into an independent label, became the company's first single and was followed by three albums, "Wildmania" (1977), "Pronounced Normal" (1981) and "Nothing Scary" (1984). Each sold fewer copies than the one before. "We wanted to give him his 'Sgt. Pepper,'" says one of his producers, Bill Mummy, with an apparently straight face.

Mr. Fischer eventually went to live with an aunt and later to an institution for the mentally disabled. There he received medication that treated his psychoses but curtailed his creativity - a happy or unhappy ending, depending on how you look at it.