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Film Reviews: Derailroaded (2005) - By Cary Conley

Posted on Friday, April 01, 2011 @ 14:21:19 Mountain Daylight Time by Duane



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Derailroaded is the word Larry Fischer uses to describe his life, an accidental but appropriate perversion of the term "derailed." And "derailed" is a perfect definition of Fischer's life for over 60 years now. Growing up unloved and misunderstood, the sometimes violent paranoid schizophrenic was committed to a mental institution as a teenager. Surviving horrors such as experimental drug therapies and shock treatment, he was eventually released only to be told by his mother he was no longer allowed to live with the rest of the family. So, still a minor, Larry took to the streets, playing his unique brand of music for 10 cents a song in order to survive.

Playing on the grimy streets of southern California, Fischer had already established a bit of a reputation due to his erratic behavior,

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### Derailroaded (2005) - By Cary Conley - ...

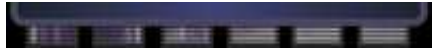
but also his exuberant performances, before he was officially discovered by Frank Zappa in 1965. Zappa was able to produce a double album of "Wild Man" Fischer's music before a paranoid break by Fischer forced Zappa to sever ties with him. That double album, entitled "An Evening with Wild Man Fischer," sold only 12,000 copies and has become a highly sought-after collectible for the small but rabid fan base of Fischer and the musical genre now known as "outsider music."

Outsider music is music that falls far outside the norms of what most people would define as music. This genre of music typically ignores the normal standards of musical composition and lyrics. Few outsider artists have ever made a name for themselves outside of a small cult following, but readers may know of Wesley Willis, Tiny Tim, and Syd Barrett. The Beach Boys' Brian Wilson and Charles Manson himself are also mentioned as musical artists considered a part of the outsider genre, although I would argue that Manson appears on this list more because of who he is rather than any particular musical style he may have. Wild Man Fischer's music is primitive (many times strummed on an off-tune guitar) and folksy but catchy, funny and wildly entertaining. Many times his songs are unintentionally poignant as he sings about his broken life with the directness and naiveté of a child. The songs are short--many times only a verse long--and Larry screeches, pops, and cracks through the lyrics like a banshee on crack. Sometimes when he feels good--or, as Larry puts it, has "the pep"--he sings exuberantly, jumping and spinning and flailing about with a huge smile on his face; it's easy to see how this gentle giant could attract a following. But other times, during one of his manic depressive and paranoid episodes, he speaks of the airplanes following him, or the sounds in the other room and of "them," the unknown people that are out to kill

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## Derailroaded (2005) - By Cary Conley - ...

him. As wonderfully happy as his singing can be, these breakdowns are heartbreakingly sad.

Director/producer team Josh Rubin and Jeremy Lubin have created a fascinating documentary that chronicles Larry's life from childhood until, at the age of 60, he finally gives in and begins life at an assisted-living facility. They also document the people who truly loved Larry and cared for him until they either died, like his Aunt Josephine, who loved him unconditionally, or were driven away by his erratic and unpredictable behavior. Because Larry is a paranoid schizophrenic, he always finds a way to destroy the good things in his life. Whether it is Frank Zappa who tried to mold him into a music star or Bill Mummy (of "Lost in Space" fame) who recorded two more albums for Larry, his paranoia always won out in the end. While the overarching story of "Derailroaded" is Larry's story, along the way the filmmakers also document the wreckage of relationships a mentally ill person may inadvertently leave behind. The film is as much about the people who care for Larry as it is about Larry himself. The film also defines a musical genre that most mainstream listeners either dismiss or are entirely unaware of. This peek into the lives of a handful of musical geniuses--or talentless hacks, depending upon which side of the line you fall on--is also quite interesting.

In the end, this documentary is an excellent accounting of one man's life of on-again, off-again music. The film documents the highs ("An Evening with Wild Man Fischer," his live shows at The Whisky and other Hollywood bars, his joyful street performances) and lows (the death of his beloved Aunt Josephine, his time in a mental institution) as well as the people who love him unconditionally and attempt to care for him even as he disappears for weeks or months at a time. It makes for an emotional rollercoaster ride as

The DVD comes with a full package of extras, with perhaps the best being a commentary with Rubin and Lubin. The commentary almost becomes another film entirely as the two filmmakers document the trials and tribulations of making an independent film that stars a mentally ill character. Along the way, the filmmakers describe lessons they learned about filmmaking along with a great deal of hard work. They even had some immense good fortune that helped the film along. The commentary itself is worth the price of admission.

"Derailroaded" is being released on DVD this March. For more information, go to <http://www.derailroaded.com> or to purchase this DVD, go to <http://www.seeofsound.com/p.php?s=MVD5049D>.

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