



It can be hard to separate an artist from his art. Can anyone listen to "Beat It" these days and not feel a little...icky? Stories of Phil Spector's "eccentricities" are a little more disturbing to hear now that someone is dead. So when one learns that a performer one once thought of as merely screwy and eccentric is in fact, batshit crazy, it can kind of take the fun out of the art.

We first became acquainted with the work of Wild Man Fischer because Dad, being a Frank Zappa fan, had the album *An Evening With Wild Man Fischer* and he thought we'd get a kick out of it. Hearing Larry "Wild Man" Fischer shriek songs about killing Jennifer Jones, (in a tune with the imminently singable chorus, "Miss Jennifer Jones is lying dead on my porch, doo doo doo doo") or singing the incredibly catchy "Merry Go Round" (as good a pop song as "Sugar, Sugar" or anything by The Turtles) only became more entertaining once we learned that Frank Zappa had "discovered" him singing for dimes on the streets of Los Angeles. Obviously, Wild Man Fischer wasn't a normal guy, but then again, 1960s drug use turned a lot of normal guys into kooks, and really, if he was making records and hanging with the likes of Frank Zappa, he couldn't be that bad off, right?

Well, the documentary *Derailroaded: Inside the Mind of Larry "Wild Man" Fischer* puts that notion to rest. The tale Fischer sings about in the song "The Wild Man Fischer Story," about being committed to a mental institution--twice--is absolutely true. Whether his stint in the hospital merely exacerbated his condition or in fact, caused it, is perhaps open to debate. But the fact that the guy suffers from extreme paranoid schizophrenia is undeniable.

Filmmakers Josh Rubin and Jeremy Lubin weren't aware of Wild Man Fischer's work until they accidentally met him when he approached them in Los Angeles with stories of past record deals and a friendship with Frank Zappa. An Internet search proved that the guy wasn't *just* some crazy, homeless-looking crackpot, and after listening to Fischer's first album, the filmmaking friends decided to make a movie about the guy. And it's a terrific piece of work. They've obtained rare photos and clips, including Fischer's appearance on "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In," (Fischer comments in the film that there's no way he's more famous than Ruth Buzzi. The director disagrees.) as well as interviews with famous fans, his family, and people who have worked with him. After a falling out with Zappa, Fischer was able to eventually put out more records with the help of Barnes and Barnes (of "Fishheads" fame) and Bill Mumy provides some good insight into what it was like to work with Fischer (very trying, to say the least.)

But its interviews with Fischer's brother, David, that perhaps offer the best glimpse into just why Fischer became such an outsider. Putting it simply, David Fischer just doesn't get it. During his interview (in which he wears a "NASA" jacket--we never find out if he's actually in NASA, or perhaps, just thinks he is) he offers that he doesn't think his brother is a very good singer (yeah, and?) and openly mocks his thoughts of putting out another record. Granted, this brother was witness to Larry Fischer's more violent episodes (he really did pull a knife on his own mother) and perhaps can't see past that behavior to the brilliance of some of his songs.

The filmmakers include many conversations with Wild Man Fischer now, and during some of these his paranoia, depression, and anger are very apparent--and hard to watch. While he does have a sympathetic aunt who gives him shelter and actually encourages his singing, it becomes clear that Fischer can not go on living without real medical help, which he eventually gets (thanks in large part to the filmmakers themselves). Crazy artists aren't a rarity, and some may argue that they are, in fact, the norm. But in the end we wonder if, despite the pleasure many may have gotten from listening to Fischer's songs, is something like "Let's Do the Taster" really worth the years of mental torture he went through?

At the screening, Lubin and Rubin (AKA the Ubin Twinz) spoke about working with Fischer, and helping to get him into an assisted living home, and we really applaud these two fans for doing more for Fischer in the past couple of years than any of his other collaborators seemed able to do in the past. The filmmakers also spoke about hopes for a DVD release, with a commentary track from Larry Fisher himself, as well as a possible release of an accompanying soundtrack album. We've got our fingers crossed for this, as giving Fischer the chance to witness his own success with a clear head might just be the best ending we could think of for his troubled career.

That, and a re-release of "Merry Go-Round" making it to the top of the charts.

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