



SXSW Film Festival

Derailroaded

An Ubin Twinz production. Produced by Jeremy Lubin. Executive producer, Faithe Raphael. Directed by Josh Rubin.

With: Larry "Wild Man" Fischer, "Weird Al" Yankovic, Solomon Burke, Mark Mothersbaugh.

By JOE LEYDON

As discomfortingly fascinating as listening to a couple's heated argument at a table near yours in a restaurant, "Derailroaded" considers the fleeting notoriety and frustrating obscurity of Larry "Wild Man" Fischer, a deeply troubled eccentric whose unique brand of "outsider music" apparently generates equal measures of jeering derision, anxious dread and genuine admiration. Filmmaker Josh Rubin's understated yet unmistakably sympathetic docu could parlay the curiosity factor into limited theatrical runs. Overall, though, pic seems best suited for homevid and music-oriented cable networks.

Rubin intros Fischer as shaggy vagrant temporarily house-sitting for an ailing relative. His manic talk of burnt-out stardom initially sounds like the ranting of a madman. As "Derailroaded" progresses, however, pic reports that, while Fischer is a paranoid schizophrenic, he really did have a brush with fame as a novelty act in the 1960s and '70s, and still can draw a cult following to his rarely held concerts.

Discovered by Frank Zappa as a Los Angeles street troubadour, Fischer recorded with Zappa (then split from him over "creative differences"), and even had a memorable network TV guest spot on "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In." He scored his biggest hit on the U.K. record charts, with a bizarre sing-songy ode to Rhino Records.

But despite his occasional triumphs, including a recorded duet with Rosemary Clooney, Fischer's chronic instability and delusional outbursts made him an ever more socially unacceptable outcast.

"Weird Al" Yankovic, Solomon Burke and Mark Mothersbaugh (of Devo) are among the interviewees who wax eloquent over Fischer's idiosyncratic songwriting and vocal stylings. However, aud is left to wonder whether Fischer -- whose raspy, ragged singing voice sounds like a cross between Jim Morrison and bad plumbing -- is being warmly embraced or ironically satirized, even when folks who claim to wish him well pay their respects.

Interviews with relatives shine a harsh light on Fisher's hellish childhood (he was committed to a mental hospital while still in his teens) and hint strongly at an insatiable need for love and, more important, attention.

Melancholy ending reinforces overall impression of "Derailroaded" as a cautionary tale of what happens to a novelty act once the novelty has worn off. Tech values are solid, with effective use of archival footage. "Laugh-In" snippet is priceless.

Camera (color, DV), Bryan Newman; editors, Rubin, Jeremy Lubin, Howard Leder; music, Larry "Wild Man" Fischer; sound, Torrel Alexis. Reviewed at South by Southwest Film Festival (24 Beats Per Second), March 19, 2005. Running time: 86 MIN.