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From The Times

April 18, 2008

Tony Palmer on John Lennon, Phil Spector, and how he televised the revolution

It all started with a challenge from John Lennon. As his epic TV history of pop music is reissued on DVD, Tony Palmer recalls dodging bullets, facing a furious Aretha Franklin, and surviving Russian roulette with Phil Spector

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It all started with a chance encounter with John Lennon in New York in the early Seventies. "Doing anything useful?" he said with his customary directness. Over a "delicious" lunch of brown rice, the plot was hatched. "There will be no escape," he warned me, as we mapped out one of the most foolhardy ideas devised by man – nothing less than the entire history and development of popular music. "It's what's needed," he kept telling me. "Something that pieces together all the various elements that have gone into making rock'n'roll: country, jazz, blues, ragtime, music hall, soul – it's easy!"

Lennon had been my mentor once before. I first met him in Cambridge in November 1963, and some years later, after I had joined the BBC, he complained to me frequently that many of the great musicians he admired simply could find no place on a BBC dominated by *Top of the Pops*, *Juke Box Jury* and gyrating nubile, musicians such as Jimi Hendrix, Eric Burdon, The Who, Frank Zappa, Pink Floyd and Cream, none of whom had at that time been seen on TV. "I had a duty," Lennon had told me then, "to find a way to get them there by fair means or foul."

He made the introductions and gave me the title: *All My Loving*. The BBC hated it. David Attenborough, then the director of television and since a good friend, wrote a memo saying that "over [his] dead body would the film ever be shown". After six months on the shelf it was rescued, if that's the word, by John Culshaw, the BBC's new head of music programmes and a friend of Benjamin Britten and mine. It was eventually shown, after the Epilogue, in 1968, after Paul Fox, the controller of BBC One, had suggested a compromise: "I'll trade you two f***s for three pisses," he said.

So here am I in New York, four years after *All My Loving*, thinking the unthinkable. I realised that my ignorance of the subject was matched only by my stupidity in attempting such a task. Lennon again came to the rescue: "Get some clever people to write down why such-and-such a subject is important to them. Use that as a starter. Oh, and if you need a good title, how about *All You Need is Love*? That's what it's all about anyway, or the lack of it. Cheerio . . . and have fun!" What we needed first was money, since something on this scale was not going to be cheap.

Enter Paul Fox again, by then the boss of Yorkshire Television. He brought in Cyril Bennett, his equivalent at London Weekend Television, whose new controller of entertainment was one Michael Grade. Tell us what you have in mind, said the three wise men. I mapped out individual episodes on the blues, jazz, the musical, ragtime, country, the Beatles, glitter rock . . . in all, I said, about 16 episodes. Their eyes glazed over. I could see them thinking: "Man's an idiot."

"Are you seriously asking for 16 hours of primetime television?" one said. "Yes, why not?" I replied.

Grade thought that his uncle, Lord Delfont, might be willing to fund it. Bernie Delfont, the tap-dancing impresario who ran every end-of-the pier show in the country as well as EMI, was. "My boy," he said between cigar puffs, "it will be a pleasure."

Had Lennon and McCartney, EMI's No 1 artists, let it be known that the series had their approval? I never found out, although George Martin told me years later that he had been told by the management to give me whatever I needed.

And so I wrote to "those clever people" asking them for 2,000 words on what their particular subject meant to them – George Melly on the blues; Leonard Feather, the great jazz historian; Paul Oliver, the expert on American traditional music; Jack Good, the producer of *Six-Five Special*, the first British rock'n'roll TV show; Humphrey Lyttelton; Derek Taylor, the Beatles' press officer; Stephen Sondheim; the journalists Nik Cohn and Charlie Gillett; Rudi Blesh on ragtime . . .

These were not to be "scripts" for the films, I explained, but a reference point from which I could begin my journey. Together with a brilliant sergeant major, Paul Medicott, we set about making lists – every artist we could think of who should be included if humanly possible. For the episode on swing, for instance, we thought we must include Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, Woody Herman, Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Lionel Hampton . . . well, that would do for a start. Eventually we had a list of nearly 500 artists. The astonishing thing is that, thanks to Medicott's organisational genius, we filmed nearly all of them.

We crisscrossed the United States, north, south, east and west; travelled to West Africa and up into the Sahara; to the lakes around Salzburg for the origins of operetta; to Coventry Cathedral and Mike Oldfield's hideaway on the Welsh borders; to Liverpool and Northern Ireland where, surrounded by men with Armalite rifles, we filmed IRA and Provo songs while the Troubles raged. We drove into the Navajo desert to film Bo Diddley, who threatened to shoot anyone white. We played Russian roulette with Phil Spector, and sat while Brian Epstein's mother spoke publicly for the first and only time, in tears, about her beloved son. We toured Harlem with John Hammond, who had discovered Billie Holiday.

At his insistence, and in spite of his tracheotomy, we interviewed Richard Rodgers about his fantastic partnerships with Oscar Hammerstein and Lorenz Hart; heard the jazz pianist Earl "Fatha" Hines patiently explaining that he was "a tool" of Al Capone. There was Eric Clapton playing a heartrending version of *Layla*; Lonnie Donegan delivering "the performance of a lifetime" (he told me) of *Rock Island Line*. We had Roy Rogers, the TV cowboy; Bill Wyman, in tears while describing the funeral of Brian Jones; a furious Aretha Franklin; the folk singer Pete Seeger describing what it was like to be spat at for his "communist sympathies"; McCartney, accompanying himself on guitar, singing *Yesterday* for the first time in public. "I wanted to do something special for you," he told me.

What a great musician (my notorious comparison between him and Schubert, mocked at the time – 1968 – has long since proved to be correct). I hope I have been able to repay in small measure the colossal debt we owe him and Lennon.

VIDEO: POP MUSIC
How the revolution was televised



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Looking back more than 30 years later, I can see there is much I omitted or didn't understand fully. I think that was inevitable, especially as I had less than £1 million in the budget and only five months in which to film. The entire series of (eventually) 17 films was completed in less than a year.

My biggest omission came towards the end when, having finished filming but not finished editing, punk rock burst upon the scene. I begged for more money and more time, but these were refused. The series was already scheduled on television around the world, and I don't think Bernie Delfont cared much for Sid Vicious. You can see why.

But what strikes me is how lucky we were to get to so many people (and places) that were gone shortly afterwards. The 96-year-old ragtime pianist Eubie Blake remembering talking to Scott Joplin; the 94-year-old Irving Caesar, who wrote the words to *Tea for Two*; the 100-year-old Irving Berlin. Yip Harburg (the lyricist of the Great Depression song *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime*) and Hoagy Carmichael (*Stardust*) reliving the Thirties; the blues pianist Roosevelt "Honeydripper" Sykes on his slave parents; Liberace on Elvis . . .

They are all gone now, as are many of the places that have such a resonance in the story. Sam Phillips's studio is a parking lot. New Orleans and its seedy clubs vanished after the floods. Historic Memphis and Beale Street, so crucial in the story of ragtime and the blues, bulldozed. The Cavern, gone. The Grand Ole Opry, now a theme park.

Even while filming I had the occasional glimpse that what we were doing might have lasting significance. I obviously knew who Muddy Waters was, for instance, if only because Mick Jagger constantly mentioned his name, but we couldn't find him. And then, while filming in Chicago, I noticed that he was playing in a club on the West Side. Somehow, my assistant, the indefatigable Annunziata Asquith, managed to find a phone number and we spoke. "Sure," he said, "come on over." Fearing that the club would be packed, we arrived very early to set up our equipment (if only I had had today's compact digital equipment! This was slow colour film that needed mountains of lights).

It would not be true to say that there were more people in my crew than in the audience, but that is what it felt like. Here was an iconic figure, more or less forgotten at the time (1975). The same went for B.B. King, who couldn't stop thanking me for having taken the trouble to seek him out. Likewise Dizzy Gillespie and, most astonishing of all, Jerry Lee Lewis, who we found playing in a Holiday Inn on a side stage as guests were checking in.

I think now that what persuaded so many great artists to take part was simply this: we were treating them with the respect they deserved, not only as artists but as human beings. It had nothing to do with money – we paid them a pittance, and all the same amount, regardless of their "status" (Lennon's idea again). Partly this was a consequence of us going to them, and not summoning them to a studio, and partly because they trusted me not to kowtow to focus groups or illiterate television commissioning editors, or reduce what they had to say to soundbites.

What they had to say, then and now, is important. Their story is a crucial part of the social history of the 20th century in the United States and Europe. Aaron Copland, the great composer, once said to me: "In a hundred years, when people want to know what it was like to be living in the 1960s in the United States, they won't be listening to my music. They will be listening to the Beatles." Not entirely true, perhaps, but he has a point.

Perhaps the real contribution that the series made was to demonstrate that it was possible to make extended studies of "popular music" without frightening the horses – and television executives. When I brought the finished films back to the three wise men there was some discussion about the best time to schedule them. "Saturday at 10.30pm," Cyril Bennett pronounced.

My heart sank. "But that's right opposite *Match of the Day*," I protested. "Precisely," said Bennett. "We intend to blast them off the screen." Madness, I thought, but at least I should be grateful for 17 hours of ITV.

After week six – and before we had got to the juicier episodes with the Beatles, the Stones and so on – a jeroboam of Bollinger arrived at my house with a note from Bennett: "We did it. We

buried them!"

Palmer's close encounters of the strange kind

PHIL SPECTOR

"Turn up at 7pm sharp," said the voice ominously. Having nervously passed through a chained fence (electrified?), past snarling guard dogs and gun-toting security (and this is Hollywood?), we were frisked and allowed to enter the vast mansion of Phillip Spector. He kept us waiting for five hours, but was polite, even charming, wearing an absurd frizzy wig and somehow dazzled by the lights we had put up to interview him. It was disconcerting to be told: "You know, my father blew his brains out in front of me when I was a child. Don't you think that would have affected my music?"

SAM PHILLIPS

Standing in the tiny Memphis studio where, 20 years earlier, he had recorded Elvis performing a song for his mama's birthday, the reclusive Sam still seemed unaware of the historical significance of that moment. Equally, as Elvis himself remembered, Sam remained unaware of what he had contributed to that moment. Normally, Phillips recorded gospel, the blues, hillbilly country music, "always with a beat", he told me. Into that brew he added a voice of genius, and popular music was never the same again. There is still a Sam Phillips/Sun Records Studio in Memphis. But it's not the original. Last time I was there the original was a parking lot.

LEONARD COHEN

We were in a squalid little café in East Berlin. Two Stasi heavies stood right by the camera. Cohen suddenly grabbed a black girl student, also in the café, told me to start filming, and began reading a poem about "the killers in countries such as this". Mercifully the Stasi men's grasp of English was somewhat limited. But the angry look in Cohen's eyes was unmistakable. It was a courageous act of defiance, reinforcing Cohen's view that popular music had a duty to be the social conscience of a generation otherwise cowed into silence by political hypocrisy.

All You Need is Love is on at the BFI South Bank, London SE1 (020-7928 3232) on May 3, 4.
 Buy it from www.allyouneedislovedvd.com

HAVE YOUR SAY

His statement about Sun Records now being a parking lot is simply not true. And he says it twice! That's a shocking error for a director of a pop music documentary to make.

Maggie Dawson, London,

What about "Ready, Steady, Go"? It's long overdue for official release on DVD. Keeping it unreleased is just aiding and abetting pirates.

Bill Peter, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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