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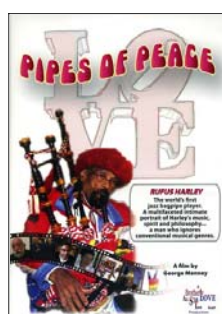
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## Rufus Harley: Pipes of Peace

**Rufus Harley - Published: November 8, 2007**

By [Samuel Chell](#)

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Rufus Harley  
*Pipes Of Peace*  
B.L.A.S.T.  
2007

Not too many subjects would seem more assured of cinematic success than a profile of the world's first and only recognized jazz bagpiper—whose life story ended, moreover, with his appropriation of the title “International Ambassador of Freedom.” On the other hand, when a title says it all (“Mouse plays flute to seduce elephant”), the film

director's task can be all the more daunting, since everything that follows is necessarily anticlimactic. On the whole, filmmaker George Manney has constructed a warm and compelling picture of Rufus Harley, transforming him from a mere curiosity or musical freak into an emblem of a city, a nation, and an ethos of peace, love and harmony.

Born in North Carolina in 1936, Harley moved to Philadelphia, where he became proficient on woodwinds, studying under the same teacher as John Coltrane. But it wasn't until John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963 and his witnessing the Scottish Black Guard bagpiper corps in the funeral procession that Harley discovered his voice and vocation. Shortly after obtaining his own set of pipes, he was signed to a contract by Atlantic Records, and the result was *Bagpipe Blues* (Atlantic, 1964), the first of four albums released on the prestigious label during the last half of the 1960s. He guested on albums by saxophonists Sonny Stitt and Sonny Rollins and flutist Herbie Mann, but by the 1970s the novelty had worn out, leaving behind a unique musician who was little more than a curious footnote to the decade of the Age of Aquarius.

The instrumentalist's comeback began with appearances on recordings by artists with a broad-based appeal—first, Laurie Anderson and later, The Roots. Soon Harley was back, not simply as a musician but as a kind of homespun philosopher and promoter of political good will, becoming a virtual poster-child for American values and democratic, multicultural ideals by the time of his death from prostate cancer in August 2006.

The filmmaker tells Harley's story by cutting in space rather than time, alternating among an extended interview with a fully costumed and equipped Harley in his working space, footage from a 2004 or 2005 Brotherly Love All-Star concert, and numerous interviews with associates of the late musician-phenomenon. From the interviews, but primarily from Harley himself, we piece together the bigger picture, learning some fascinating details such as Harley's defying Celtic traditions by playing the instrument on the left side of his body rather than the right and re-tuning the drone from A and D to Bb and Eb in order to accommodate the flat keys favored by jazz musicians.

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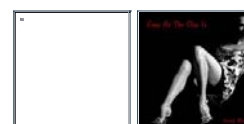
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***“Proudly calling attention to the ‘us’ in the words ‘music’ and ‘Rufus,’ Harley uses the bagpipes and their sound as an iconic but loud and clear message: ‘To be American is to be every nationality.’”***

Although there are a sufficient number of recognizable names and faces, the most eloquent statements are by Harley’s son and daughter, whose very presence is visible testimony to the love and admiration professed by all of the interviewees. Legendary jazz producer Joel Dorn is our primary source of information about Harley’s early recording endeavors as a jazz pioneer, while Laurie Anderson attests to the impact of Harley after his reincarnation as a phenomenon in world music circles.

Of those interviewed, the most articulate is the barely credited, keyboardist/composer Joshua Yudkin, who offers illuminating anecdotes while addressing Harley’s specific language. Making the connections between music, mathematics and physics (in layman’s terms), he doesn’t so much “explain” Harley’s philosophy as confirm the method to the apparent madness that enabled the eccentric musician to extract from his multi-colored musical bag a message of peace, love and harmony for all who belong to the human community—whether Philadelphia’s, America’s or the world’s.

For this reviewer, the lingering impression is Harley’s emphasis on the music of the bagpipe as a maternal, nurturing language. He dismisses the diversity of “doh-re-mi” and embraces exclusively the bagpipe’s distinctive “mi” sound as the phonetic equivalent of every child’s cry for its mother and as a semantic reference to the first-person pronoun. But it’s not the egotistical self that the bagpipes administer to. Proudly calling attention to the “us” in the words “music” and “Rufus,” Harley uses the bagpipes and their sound as an iconic but loud and clear message. “To be American is to be every nationality,” he proclaims, and the pipes and their song are suddenly transformed into irrefutable evidence clinching his case.

The case for *Pipes Of Peace* as a film is not quite so non-problematic. In the manner of the day, Manney edits frequently, as if to avoid at all costs the viewer’s impatience at protracted talking heads. Then there are those hit-and-run shots (guitarist Pat Martino, Governor Ed Rendall) that have little justification other than to give the film and its press kit some *cachet*. And conspicuous by its comparative absence is the bagpipe music of Rufus Harley himself—either in terms of some extended concert footage (why is it that jazz is seen as anathema in movies?) or the soundtrack, which employs an original score ranging from smooth jazz to the abstract sounds of voices plus effects. (To be fair, the copyright fees independent filmmakers are forced to pay are often prohibitive, sufficient in themselves to sink a worthy film project.)

For those *All About Jazz* readers sufficiently intrigued by the film to seek out Rufus Harley’s recordings, there’s some consolation: all four of the 1960s Atlantic recordings have been reissued, in a limited edition, as *Courage: The Atlantic Recordings* (Rhino Handmade, 2006), and the 1967 session widely regarded as the bagpiper’s masterpiece is once again available as *Re-Creation Of The Gods* (Transparency, 2006). The discs are relatively scarce, and there are no guarantees they’ll be around for long, so best not to postpone any search for the elusive strains of this extraordinary Pied Piper, who certainly must qualify as an American original—a member of the same

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Production Notes: 53 minutes. Color and stereo sound. Formatted for Worldwide distribution. Premiered September 27, 2007 at Wildwood By The Sea Film Festival. A Brotherly Love All-Star Tour Production film; produced and directed by George Manney. Interviews and commentary by Kenneth Gamble, Laurie Anderson, Stephen Caldwell, Joel Dorn, Odean Pope, Byard Lancaster, Tommy Conwell, Stewkey, Charlie Gracie, David Ivory, Dee Dee Sharp, Messiah and Noah-Harmony Harley, Charlie Gracie Jr. and Josh Yudkin. Cameo appearances by Pat Martino and Gov. Ed Rendell.

Visit Rufus Harley on the web.  
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*Chell is a champion of the composers of the American Songbook and the musicians who keep it alive. [More about Sam...](#)*

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