

Off The Menu: The Last Days Of Chasen's

(DOCURAMA)

The glamour of Hollywood can often be viewed through its eating establishments and there was no restaurant that could boast more star power than Chasen's. Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini—the team responsible for *American Splendor*, made their filmmaking debut with this 1997 documentary, following the activities of the staff during their final days on the job and looking back on the restaurant's 50-year history.

Dave Chasen began his career in vaudeville and attempted to become a movie actor, but later segued into the food industry, serving up home-made chili in his modest digs. As the years passed, Chasen's began trending towards a more upscale clientele, eventually becoming the place for the glitterati to be seen by the public and to party with their friends.

This is where the Rat Pack carried on into the wee hours and where a young Shirley Temple had a non-alcoholic drink named after her. It's the place where Ronald Reagan proposed to Nancy and where Orson Wells pitched a fit and tossed a can of flaming sterno at John Houseman.

At the last staff meeting, the waiters, captains and others recount some of their fondest memories and feelings, as do many of the famous customers. Elizabeth Taylor had the chili flown to Rome every two weeks while she worked on *Cleopatra*. Alfred Hitchcock dined at Table One every Thursday and left abruptly one evening when he was offended by the sight of a woman wearing a backless dress. Richard Nixon and mobster Mickey Cohen stared each other down over dinner from across the room. Donna Summer wrote "She Works Hard For The Money" about washroom attendant Onetta Johnson. The stories are endless and often touching.

Archival footage is intercut with interviews with the staff from the final week, the last post-Oscar party and the final day—April 1, 1995 when the restaurant shut its doors for the last time. Even sadder are the closing scenes depicting the funeral of

waiter Tommy Gallagher, who began serving the rich and famous in 1947 and who passed away a few months following Chasen's demise. He was buried in his waiter's tuxedo, with a "Reservations Required" sign and a Chasen's menu under his arm.

Off The Menu is a true Hollywood fable—a moving and often poignant look at a venerable institution that disappeared to make way for a modern Los Angeles mall, not unlike the careers of many of its patrons.



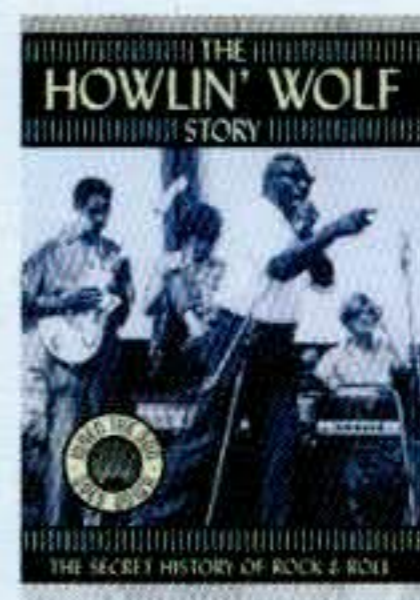
The Cry Of Jazz

(ATAVISTIC)

This odd, 35 minute film dates back to 1959 and has labored in obscurity until just recently. Juxtaposing radical political views with a soundtrack by Sun Ra.

Set in a Chicago apartment, several young black and white men and women involve themselves in a heated and passionate debate about the origins of jazz and the plight of the black race. Alex (George Walker), calmly and articulately describes the form and structure that makes up the basis of the genre and how it parallels the history of the black race in America. Negroes are depicted as the "only human Americans" and by virtue of their struggle, act as the country's conscience. Much of the philosophy pre-dates the Black Panther movement and is chillingly prophetic.

The only known footage of Sun Ra's Chicago period acts as counterpoint to the polemics, with much of the visual focus given to saxophonist John Gilmore. In an odd twist, the credits claim that the musical portions were recorded in Europe. Sun Ra aficionados will want to view this for historical perspective as will anyone interested in the attitudes that were instrumental in sparking the Civil Rights movement of the '60s.



The Howlin' Wolf Story: The Secret History Of Rock & Roll

(BLUEBIRD)

One of the most important figures in the blues world is, without a doubt, Chester Arthur Burnett aka Howlin' Wolf. At 6'3" and 300 lbs., Wolf was an imposing figure who alternated between loveable and warm and a performer who could be as hard as nails and a consummate professional.

This DVD not only tells Wolf's story, but also traces the history of the blues from the rural south to the streets of industrialized Chicago. He came up hard in Mississippi and following his parents' divorce, was raised by his mother who eventually threw him out of the house for refusing to work on the farm. He moved in with his uncle (who badly mistreated him) and at 13, ran away to rejoin his father, walking 75 miles without shoes. While working on the plantation, he met Charlie Patton, who taught him how to play the guitar and later traveled around with Robert Johnson. He toured extensively throughout the Cotton Belt, served in the military in the Northwest and eventually moved to Memphis where he became the hottest act at juke joints in West Memphis, AK. He had a 30-minute radio show and regularly turned over much of the program to his fellow musicians and friends. His first demos were cut for Sam Phillips at Sun Records and he eventually signed to Chess Records in Chicago. Wolf had \$4000 in his pocket (a small fortune for the times) and drove his own car out of the delta to the Windy City in search of a new life, as did Muddy Waters, Sonny Boy Williamson, Chuck Berry and others, all of whom found a home at Chess. When the black audience for the blues began to wane, Wolf was discovered by a new generation of white rock & rollers in England and those involved in the folk movement here in the U.S.

A minor car accident triggered kidney failure and Wolf was on dialysis for over ten years. This led to two heart attacks, yet he refused to stop performing. He went to England to record *The London Howlin' Wolf Sessions* which many consider to be the