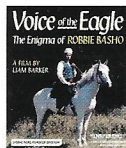




Karma chameleon: guitar maestro Robbie Basho finds "a certain kind of peace".



WHAT WE'VE LEARN'T

- Robbie took his new surname from 17th century Zen poet, Matsuo Basho.
- During a spiritually important concert for Native American elders at Cochiti Pueblo in New Mexico, Robbie was distracted by "a conversation between a witch and goblin on [my] back". "The Indian people struggled to understand the music," explains Robbie's concert promoter, Clive Adams.
- Much of Basho's later music was inspired by the landscape of old America, yet while touring the US in the early '80s he told his driver to bypass the Rocky Mountains due to an inner ear infection.

American styles and philosophies, were made to bring happiness, to silence the whisperings, ease the pain; a penance for those past lives. Music was, explains guitarist Glenn Jones, "the one place he found a certain kind of peace".

One of the many impressive aspects of Liam Barker's 2015 documentary on Basho is how well it captures this sense of a multiple, ever-shifting personality, an ancient tortured soul, and a self-taught seeker of knowledge and solace, never comfortable in his own skin.

Adopted as a young boy by Baltimore doctor Daniel Robinson, and raised as Daniel R. Robinson Jr, Basho moved through life adopting new masks, guises, and costumes. Rather than attempt one clear portrait of this of mercurial and contradictory man, Barker enlists different people to tell their own personal versions of Basho's story. Students and supporters such as Glenn Jones, Henry Kaiser, and Windham Hill label-owner Will Ackerman provide the pattern of recording dates; members of Basho's extended family talk of the strange house-guest with personal hygiene issues who practiced tai-chi

on the front lawn. In terms of bigger names, Country Joe McDonald remembers the shy 12-string guitarist, never entirely at home on the Berkeley folk scene, while Pete Townshend talks in rhapsodies about Basho's guitar playing – "beautiful, eloquent, profound... melancholy" – and his extraordinary and unique voice, "a cross between a Jewish cantor, the mullah calling for prayer, a street singer and an opera star..."

"I've totally been influenced by him," Townshend says. "you can hear it in my work."

It's also Townshend who provides the way in to the most mysterious aspect of Basho's life, his time as a sufi in Meher Baba's Sufism Reoriented school, under the strict guidance of a woman called Murshida Ivy Duce. Sufism was Basho's path out of darkness, but it also closed him off to the outside world. As the documentary progresses we meet more of Basho's sufi friends, but they provide as many questions as answers. Basho died in February 1986, when a simple traction manoeuvre by his chiropractor caused his vertebral artery to tear. As the film nears its end, both Kaiser and Jones mention a cache of reel-to-reel tapes that disappeared following the death. A few scenes later, we see those tapes, in the possession of sufi

Joel Alpert. They do not look well cared for.

It's unclear what will happen to these tapes, but hopefully some positive karma is due to Basho and his legacy. As one of his sufi friends puts it, "I hope he now has a new life that is rewarding, as a result of the efforts he went through."

Strength of strings

The mercurial 12-string guitarist lives again! But can a new documentary absolve the pain of his past lives? By **Andrew Male**.

Voice Of The Eagle: The Enigma Of Robbie Basho

★★★★★
MVD. DVD

ROBBIE BASHO believed he'd lived multiple lives, lives he was being punished for during his brief time on this Earth. The Baltimore-raised guitarist and

singer also imagined he could hear other voices, whispering witches and ghouls who he needed to bargain with before playing his music.

Existing in a state of almost constant physical and mental pain, the result of a car crash in his college years and disastrous experiments with LSD which "opened a gateway [I] could not close", Basho made music as a salve, a balm. His ever-ascending 12-string ragas, folk-operatic songs of love and longing and elaborate fairy-tale-like narratives, woven together from Japanese, Indian, Buddhist, Persian and Native

"I've been totally influenced by Basho. You can hear it in my work."

PETE TOWNSHEND