

On Screen

Films & DVDs

Robbie Basho, Berkeley, California, 1977



Voice Of The Eagle: The Enigma Of Robbie Basho

Liam Barker (Director)

Liam Barker Film Production DVD 2019, 87 mins
How many times have you given a pass to indifferent film making because that was the only way you were going to get to see one of your favourites on the screen? Despite being a first-time director, Liam Barker manages to avoid rookie music bio mistakes such as breathless narration and deadening pacing in his 2015 film *Voice Of The Eagle*, as he follows the life and artistic merits of the ur-American primitive guitarist and singer Robbie Basho.

Born in 1940, the individual who became Robbie Basho was orphaned early and adopted by a Baltimore physician. He was given the name Daniel R Robinson Jr, and grew up disconnected and insecure. While making a stab at fraternity living at University of Maryland, College Park, he

picked up the guitar in order to play folk songs and meet women. In the process he fell in with Ed Denson, Max Ochs and John Fahey, a cadre of campus discontents and blues aficionados. During the mid-1960s they all moved across country to Berkeley, California, where Robbie, an unabashed Asiaphile with mystical leanings, adopted the name of the Japanese poet. He developed an approach to acoustic six- and 12-string guitar playing which fused non-standard tunings with a prescient taste for Indian and Japanese influences; he synthesised these to compose opened fantasias. Basho also sang in a florid, quasi-operatic style well matched to the extravagant romanticism of his mystical lyrics. His sheer unusualness probably limited his audience, which never grew very large despite moving from Fahey's Takoma records to Blue Thumb, Vanguard and Windham Hill, which was

formed by a former student. All of Basho's records were out of print when he died in a freak chiropractic accident in 1986.

Barker uses interviews with a deep field of acquaintances, followers, family members, healthcare providers and spiritual fellow travellers to tell Basho's story. He gets around the tedium of talking heads by having his subjects interact with Basho's instruments and belongings, visit key locations and provide demonstrations. The partner of the chiropractor who killed Basho defends his colleague, who is accused by Ochs of using a whiplash-inducing manoeuvre, by performing the actual treatment on a patient.

Chronic pain, both physical and emotional, dogged Basho for much of his life. The former was the consequence of a car accident, but at least as galling were acid flashbacks and supernatural experiences, which he understood to be

visits from spirits he'd contended with in previous lives. The Who guitarist Pete Townshend, like Basho a follower of the mystic Meher Baba, proved invaluable in helping Barker to gain access to Sufism Revisited, the religious community that Basho joined in the late 60s. Several of his fellow Sufis appear in the film, and it's clear that his association with them was an essential stabiliser. He found people who shared his belief in reincarnation, but encouraged him to take care of himself and gently coached him not to talk to spiritual messengers onstage.

Barker also found members of Basho's family, who shed some insight into his enduring fascinations with music and spirituality. These sources enable *Voice Of The Eagle* to evoke both appreciation for Basho's music and empathy for his deeply troubled life.

Bill Meyer

Keyboard Fantasies: The Beverly Glenn-Copeland Story

Posy Dixon (Director)

LUCA/Liv Proctor 2019, 60 mins
Glenn Copeland, born in 1944, is one of countless musicians who have found their music resurge in popularity after decades of relative obscurity. One can partially thank Ryota Masuko, the man behind SHE YE YE Records in Japan. At the beginning of Posy Dixon's *Keyboard Fantasies: The Beverly Glenn-Copeland Story*, we hear Copeland read the email that started their exchange, and eventually got Copeland's 1986 release *Keyboard Fantasies* out into the world. "It was a very emotional experience," Masuko speaks of his time listening to the album. And immediately afterwards, we're presented with the title sequence – images of trees awash in pastel colours as Copeland's "Sunset Village" plays: an opportunity for viewers to become acquainted with the gentle

resplendence of Copeland's new age pop music.

Dixon's *Keyboard Fantasies* is a documentary comprised of typical elements: talking head interviews, concert performances, archival photos and footage. This straightforward approach is likely due to necessity: Copeland's life story isn't widely available, so it makes sense that we're presented with him recounting a personal history for a good portion of the film's hour-long runtime. It helps that he's so charming, able to look back on life's hardships and pleasures with a sort of joy, something that seems to persist due to how appreciative he is of how his life's turned out.

As we learn more about Copeland's life, we get a sense of how fearless he was, and how his tenacity aided in him knowing more about his identity. He initially thought he was a lesbian, and during his time at Montreal's McGill University, dated

a woman – an act that was illegal in 1961. Around this time, he was sent to see a physician who placed him in an institution that conducted conversion therapy, but ran out the building and later announced his departure from McGill.

During the opening of *Keyboard Fantasies*, one gets a sense that the story presented will simply follow Copeland's journey from child to obscure artist to beloved musician. There are images of him standing in front of a packed concert hall at the beginning of the film, footage of which is later shown in the documentary's final stretch. It's a clever sleight of hand that sets expectations for the film's intent. And while it certainly does follow an expected trajectory, *Keyboard Fantasies* is also about a more universal theme: of the need for support systems that cross generational lines.

Copeland knows now that he's a trans man and he isn't shy about sharing his

experiences. At one point, we see him talking with a group of people, one of whom is an expat in the Netherlands who expresses gratitude to speak with a trans elder. "You're teaching me," Copeland lovingly responds. "We're meant to live in a community that is multigenerational, that's how we survive."

We learn that Copeland's mother was "100 per cent in [his] corner" when he realised he was trans. "She went through a process of understanding something she had no references for," she states. And in the film's final sequence, Copeland symbolically passes on the support and hope he received from her to an audience of primarily young people: he performs "Deep River", a spiritual that his mother sang when he was a child. He describes his life's purpose earlier in the film, and does so in succinct terms: "For me, it's about encouraging youth."

Joshua Minsoo Kim

Jeff Dooley