

VITAL Viewing

WETLANDS PRESERVED: THE STORY OF AN ACTIVIST ROCK CLUB

Directed by Dean Budnick

The Wetlands Preserve club ushered in a musical renaissance while located south of the Holland Tunnel prior to the development of Tribeca. In an era when few New York nightclubs were thriving and hippie music was considered passé at best, founder Larry Bloch built a club based on the tight union between sounds and society, one that combined "one-third music, one third community and one-third activism." The club put its money where its mouth was, annually ponying up a \$100,000 for its non-profit Center for Social and Environmental Justice.

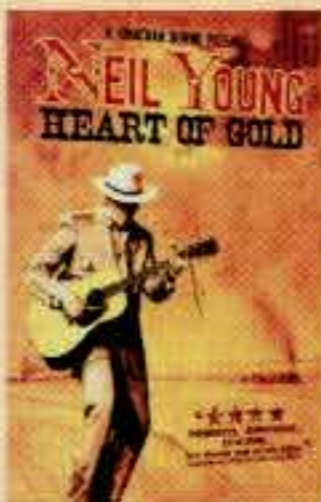
The list of bands that took the humid stage ranged from jam, hardcore and folk to ska, hip-hop and rock (with kaleidoscopic combinations of any and all). The film captures 14 complete songs from the likes of Ben Harper, Phish, Dave Matthews Band, Blues Traveler, Sublime, the Disco Biscuits, Fishbone, Joan Osborne—inhale for more air—moe., Pearl Jam Robert Randolph and the Family Band, Spearhead, 311 and Project Logic. They are all brought to life through engrossing animation courtesy of the RES Media Group who commissioned over a dozen animators to create unique motifs for each sequence utilizing still photographs, visual art and live footage. Full disclosure: the documentary is directed by *Relix* senior editor Dean Budnick. Budnick expertly handles the daunting task of interviewing the many subjects who could speak to the club's storied history without letting the anecdotes bog-down what viewers came for: the music.

"I always believed we should have a pay by waistline policy," quips Jake Szufnarowski, Wetlands Preserve staffer from 1995 to 2001. "Fat Gov't Mule fans would be 600 [capacity] and skinny ska fans would be 800-900." According to legend, Phish once played to 1,200 but many of those were rotated in-and-out.

In many respects, founder Bloch was a combination of Don Quixote fighting windmills and *Saturday Night Live* creator Lorne Michaels, a man who achieved many groundbreaking goals with an original blueprint but whose vision extended well beyond—and above—the club's humble but hallowed walls. When Rome ain't built, build it.

The club would be sold to Jammys and Green Apple Music Festival co-founder Peter Shapiro in the late 1990s and he ushered in the era of power jam sessions, band battles and other innovations while continuing the organic flow of the environmental activism. Encroaching gentrification forced the club to sell for real estate development.

In the closing credit sequence, *Wetlands Preserved* details the continuing social and environmental activism of its former club owner and workers. The club's spirit prevails while the documentary delivers an honest, well-researched and creative portrait illustrating that no idea is either too absurd or impossible. "Info sheets, flyers for protests, alcohol and music," says Tim Barry of Avail. "There's nothing better than that." ★ *Randy Ray*



NEIL YOUNG: HEART OF GOLD

Directed by Jonathan Demme ● Paramount

In 2005, Neil Young lost his father, recovered from a brain aneurysm and recorded the stripped-down *Prairie Wind*. So it seems only appropriate for Young to also visually document this deeply transitional period, hiring Jonathan Demme to capture a series of performances at Nashville's historic Ryman Auditorium. Assembling an all-star backing band—which includes Emmylou Harris and

his wife, Pegi—Young stylistically recreates the Ryman's *Grand Ole Opry* days, performing *Prairie Wind* in its entirety before returning to his back catalog. While Demme initially relies on a series of interviews to introduce his characters, he quickly shifts gears, allowing Young to carry *Heart of Gold's* narrative structure through his off-the-cusp stage banter and *Prairie Wind's* deeply revealing lyrics. In the end, *Heart of Gold* unfolds into an autobiography-style look into both Young's mind and writing process, without conforming to traditional documentary techniques.

★ *Mike Greenhaus*



LEO KOTTKE Home and Away Revisited ● MVD Music

Video

Home and Away Revisited revives a 1988 Leo Kottke performance from the home video dustbin. The medium

is well suited to Kottke, then nearly 20 years into his career as a wry acoustic guitar virtuoso. As a raconteur, Kottke is nearly unmatched, his self-effacing anecdotes intercutting his complex instrumentals with perfectly timed humor. Treats abound, like a trip to meet songwriter Eddie Reeves to discover the true origin of the romantic "Rings" (later recorded for 2005's *Sixty Six Steps*, with Mike Gordon), a spontaneous picking session with legends Doc Watson and Chet Atkins at a photo shoot, and an encore take on Duane Allman's "Little Martha." Kottke's songs are at centerstage, filled with breathtaking finger-picking runs, like "Air Proofing Two," where Kottke juggles rhythm, melody and the all-important throughlines. Like *Prairie Home Companion* without fellow Minnesotan Garrison Keillor, *Home and Away* is a simple, effective presentation of Kottke's button-down mind and nimble fingers.

★ *Jesse Jarnow*



BLACK CROWES Freak 'N' Roll... Into the Fog ● Eagle Vision

This DVD finds the reunited Black Crowes in good form at The Fillmore (complete with retractable horn section and soul singers) throwing

down their signature southern-fried blues-rock. Although *Freak 'N' Roll* is pitched as the ultimate lineup, the entirety of the songwriting lies with the Brothers Robinson. Beyond that the only truly essential member of the band is keyboardist Eddie Hawrysch without whom the *America* and *Southern Harmony* records would not carry the same weight. This reunion incarnation of The Black Crowes is probably as tight as they've ever been. Shot in High Definition DV, the picture at times is simply too stark for the grit of the music and is often balanced out by scattered post-production effects and randomly inserted off-stage footage. Regardless of some curious shooting and editing choices, *Freak* is a faithfully captured full show of Crowes originals and well-placed covers. ★ *Jack Chester*