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Mods And Rockers Festival: Lennon-Instigated Film Gets US Premiere! (40 Years Late!)

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The 8th annual Mods & Rockers Film Festival will come to a grand conclusion on Wednesday with the (very belated) US Premiere of a film instigated in 1967 by John Lennon. The controversial film -- presenting the Beatles, Hendrix, Who, Cream, Pink Floyd and Frank Zappa juxtaposed with incendiary footage of the Vietnam War -- created outrage in the British establishment when it was first seen in 1968. The film was then rejected by every American network and distributor because of its volatile mixture of rock music and politics. The Who's Pete Townshend recently described the film as "one of our Great Treasures ..." Acclaimed filmmaker and writer Tony Palmer is flying to Los Angeles from London specially to present the US Premiere of his film. In this blog -- written exclusively for Huffington Post -- Palmer recounts how John Lennon personally challenged him to make this film when he was a 25-year-old nascent filmmaker -- and the long and winding 40-year road to its US Premiere ...

It began, inevitably, with John Lennon. There I was in 1964, a happy little student at Cambridge University, sent along by the University student newspaper *Varsity* to report on a press conference being given by four lads who had risen to some prominence in the pop world (in which I had no interest whatsoever) and were announcing the out-of-town preview of their new film, *A Hard Day's Night*, at the Regal Cinema, Cambridge.

Silly questions, silly answers, I thought smugly, lurking at the back and refusing to be a part of this nonsense. Afterwards, when the formal part of the 'event' broke up, I was milling around when a large tap on the shoulder -- followed by a not-so-silly question -- "Why didn't you ask any questions?" -- confronted me with Mr. Lennon. "Because it was all pretty silly", I said. He agreed, and asked me what I did. "I am a student", I replied. "Of what?" he said. "Moral Sciences", I said. "Well now, that's what I call pretty silly", he said, and we both laughed. It was ...

He asked if I would show him around the University that afternoon. "Big place", I said, and in any case I didn't fancy being mobbed by his fans. "Then I'll come in disguise", he said. "Come and pick me up at 2pm in the hotel lobby where I'm staying".

At 2 o'clock I presented myself, to be met by a man in a long brown raincoat, shabby fedora, and unkempt (and obviously false) beard. "This is ridiculous", we both thought, and the 'disguise' was gleefully abandoned. King's Chapel, the Wren Library, the Bridge of Sighs -- and we were not mobbed. He was most grateful, he said at the end of the 'tour', and when I next came to London, please call him on the number scribbled on a scrap of paper and thrust into my hand. I explained that that might not be for some years, since I still had to finish my studies. "Yeah, in 'Moral Sciences'", he chortled.

In fact, almost two years passed (during which time The Beatles had graduated from being 'very popular' to Kings of the Universe) before I went to London to work for the BBC. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained", I thought, so I telephoned the number on the scrap of paper, thinking it must surely be well out-of-date by now. But not so.

A young lady answered the phone. Her voice was chirpy until I said "John Lennon said to call" whereupon the voice immediately entered its pained 'I've heard this 300 times already this morning' mode. I persisted, explained a little of the background, and eventually she reluctantly said she would pass on the message -- but couldn't say exactly when. Imagine my surprise, therefore, when about an hour later the phone rang and the voice announced itself as Derek Taylor, sort-of responsible (he said) for Beatles publicity, and could I come over tomorrow lunchtime for a little brown rice with John.

Now I would hesitate to say that as a result of these chance meetings, Lennon and I became firm friends. More like good acquaintances, I would say, whose paths crossed from time to time, and always with a particular purpose or need in mind. But as I began to write regularly on pop music for *The Observer* newspaper in London (for 7 years eventually), inevitably I would write about The Beatles; and the fact that I managed to write in joined-up sentences and about their musicianship rather than the length of their hair, confirmed Lennon's suspicion that maybe I was someone he could trust.

Some of my columns about them were reprinted as liner-notes on various of their albums around the world, and at one point I was even asked to draft a biography about John & Yoko, which I wrote, in longhand, and I'm kicking myself now that I never kept a copy. Eventually, this was set aside because, I was told, I was not paying enough attention to Yoko. Well, enough said ...

Meanwhile, as I mentioned, I was working away at the BBC, and was being rapidly promoted within the department then called 'Music & Arts'. After making films with Ken Russell and Jonathan Miller, my first major solo effort (which I had inherited because the person who was due to direct it had been fired by the BBC) had some success. It was in fact the first BBC documentary to be networked in the USA, as a "Bell Telephone Hour" --

although I think this was more to do with the subject matter (it was the first-ever full-length film portrait of Benjamin Britten) than any intrinsic merit in the film itself.

However, in 1967 this gave me -- if not exactly carte blanche for my next project -- certainly a degree of freedom that I probably little deserved.

And over yet another bowl of brown rice I just happened to mention this 'dilemma' to one Mr. Lennon. "Easy", he said. "I know what you must do". He was exasperated (he explained) by the presentation of rock 'n' roll on BBC Television (where it was condescendingly called "pop music") and by the fact that a great number of up-and-coming musicians whom he admired were finding it almost impossible to get seen by a mass audience. TV was only interested in "the charts", he said, and these were not "chart" musicians.

I vividly recall him saying to me: "You've got to do something to get these guys exposure on television. They're hammering at the door, except that the guys on the inside are deaf. And probably dumb and blind as well."

I must say that I had never really thought about this before, because (a) my main preoccupation was in classical music; and (b) although I knew of most of the musicians he mentioned -- and had certainly listened to their music -- I didn't personally know them.

"Easy", he said. "I'll make the introductions. You make the film. And what's more, I've got the perfect title for you -- and you certainly have my permission to use it -- *All My Loving!*"

And thus it was that I embarked on a roller-coaster ride in late '67 down the path that Lennon mapped out for me, and thereby met and filmed some of the greatest musicians of the day.

Lennon was quite right; incredible though it seems now, until the moment I filmed them, most of them had never appeared on British television, (let alone television anywhere else in the world) except in the odd fluffy 3-minute pop vignette -- surrounded by gyrating teenagers. And the film that I put together I'm told no doubt contributed to the change that overwhelmed British television in its wake. (It certainly changed my life.) It suddenly made serious rock music a necessary part of television and a phenomenon which deserved, indeed demanded, to be taken seriously.

Before *All My Loving*, which was transmitted by the BBC in early November 1968, contemporary music was represented on the BBC by *Top of the Pops* which slavishly adhered to 'the charts' (and who knew how those were engineered -- and by whom?) And by a weekly confection titled *Juke Box Jury* in which four, usually monosyllabic "showbiz personalities", opined on each new disc and ultimately judged each recording to be a "hit" (signified by the crisp trill of a bicycle bell) or a "miss" (consigned to oblivion by a cartoon-like klaxon).

The chairman of this virago was a charming man named David Jacobs. But when, within a few weeks of *All My Loving*, his show *Juke Box Jury* was dropped by the BBC because it was finally realised that (a) it had nothing to do with the music of the late sixties, and (b) it was in itself a ludicrous excuse for 'entertainment' - the said David Jacobs (whom I had never met before) came up to me at a party, jabbed his finger into my ribs, and said: "you've ruined my career!"

What Lennon wanted was for his mates -- those whom he admired, those who (as he told me, emphatically) had something to say both musically and on the state of the world in which they found themselves -- to get onto television, and he was using me to make this happen.

"Go and see Jimi Hendrix" he said. He also pointed me to The Who, at their most auto-destructive. Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention. Cream -- featuring the technical wizardry of Clapton, Bruce & Baker. Donovan. Eric Burdon and The Animals. He would personally contribute to the film, he told me. So would Paul, George and Ringo.

Curiously, Lennon never mentioned The Stones. I added Pink Floyd because I had been at school with Roger Waters, and suddenly we had a cast list. And what a cast list! Although we certainly didn't realise it at the time.

All I told the BBC was that I thought I had the possibility of making a film about contemporary music in the late sixties which would 'explain' what it was about and why it had some significance. "Wonderful" said the Executives, having little or no understanding of what was to come. Hardly surprising, since I didn't either.

But in the course of the filming over several months in 1967 and 1968, I came to realise what to us now seem blindingly obvious. First, that these were musicians of considerable technical skill. And second, that they were (without exception) unnervingly articulate about what they saw as their role in society and about their ambitious plans to use their music and influence to change that society.

This was, of course, the time of the Vietnam War, and already rock musicians were becoming heavily involved in the campaign against that war.

But even that did not flag to the BBC Executives that what I was filming might turn out to be an all-out attack on the very values that the BBC Executives espoused and held dear. I'm exaggerating, of course, but in 1968 there was certainly the smell of revolution in the air, and the musicians Lennon had recruited were among the more visible (and audible) progenitors of that revolution.

So there I was -- in Worcester, Massachusetts, filming Hendrix, one of the politest men I had ever met; at the Fillmore West in San Francisco at the feet of Cream; in a basement studio in New York with Frank Zappa; in an abandoned water-pumping station in the East End of London with Pink Floyd; in Peoria, Illinois, at the opera house with The Who; with the Who's co-manager Kit Lambert (son of Constant Lambert - founder of Britain's "Royal Ballet") at the Beverly Hills Hotel (from which, incidentally, he later skipped out without paying the bill!) And of course the EMI studios at Abbey Road -- with George Martin and the lads themselves.

Who would have believed all this? Simply because I had refused to ask a question at that press conference in Cambridge in 1964!

When the film was eventually edited, then the fun really began at the BBC. The Executives were horrified. "You mean, these 'youths' can speak?! In joined-up sentences?! Preaching revolution?! And using unrepeatable four-letter words?!" It looked as if my film would be shelved, perhaps indefinitely. I honestly came to believe that the film would never see the light of day.

The then Head of BBC Television programmes, David Attenborough (the naturalist -- and brother of actor-director Richard Attenborough), wrote a memo (which I still have) saying that as long as he was in charge, this film would only be transmitted over his dead body! I am happy to report that he is very much alive, and that subsequently he and I became the best of friends.

However, at the time, Lennon was furious, and (as far as I recall) threatened to dynamite the BBC! Not a very wise thing to admit nowadays, but I doubt if he meant it literally. My career was obviously finished. I would have to seek employment elsewhere.

And then a second extraordinary coincidence happened in this curious story ...

I mentioned earlier that I had inherited the helm of my first major film because the man who should have directed it had been fired, and that its

subject matter was Benjamin Britten.

In 1962, while I was still a student at Cambridge, a friend had taken me as his guest to the newly rebuilt Coventry Cathedral (re-creating what had been blitzed in World War II by the Germans) for the World Premiere of what my friend described as "a large new choral work by Benjamin Britten" which turned out to be his famous *War Requiem*. While there, I was introduced to a somewhat harassed record producer named John Culshaw. In his role as chief classical producer of the British recording company Decca - he had persuaded Britten to record all his major works for that company. (Thank God he did - because these represent an absolutely invaluable archive of recordings.) Hence Culshaw's presence that day in Coventry Cathedral.

Flash-forward to 1966, and almost my first job upon entering the BBC was to assist Humphrey Burton in Vienna where he was making a film to be called *The Golden Ring* about Sir Georg Solti's recording of *Gotterdammerung* - produced by none other than John Culshaw! And when I finished up directing my magnum opus on Benjamin Britten, who should be at Britten's home in Aldeburgh supervising another recording of Britten's but John Culshaw!

And then in the spring of 1968 when my film *All My Loving* looked like being scrapped, who should be appointed as the new Head of Music at BBC Television but John Culshaw!

He sought me out and asked me what I had been doing since last we had met. Inevitably he asked to see *All My Loving*. I think it shocked him. Well at least it surprised him, but he saw that this was precisely the kind of film which the "Music & Arts Department" should be making and, since as he told me it was his 'honeymoon period' at the BBC, he went into battle on its behalf.

Eventually, various compromises were agreed. As far as the language was concerned, if I took out two "fucks", they would allow me three "pisses"!

And as to the general level of violence in the film, it could be shown but only after suitable audience 'warnings' and also only after "*The Epilogue*".

Again, it seems unbelievable to us now, accustomed as we are to round-the-clock television, that in the Britain of 1968, there were only three TV channels, and for the most part, these all closed down at around 10.30 in the evening! And on the BBC at least, before 'Close Down' the evening concluded with "*The Epilogue*", all-purpose, prayers and religious homilies for the night. *All My Loving* could only be shown AFTER the official 'Close Down' of the night's television!

Of course, when the press got wind of this, the advance media coverage was considerable and the audience figures for that screening were probably far greater than would have been the case had the film been shown without any fuss.

What surprised me however, were the reactions. I had thought that the popular press (i.e. the weekly pop music magazines and the British daily tabloids) might react favourably, but that the so-called 'quality papers' (the British 'broadsheets') would be outraged. I was wrong. The pop music press clearly didn't understand a word of it; the popular daily press were puzzled but thought something had been said, although they weren't quite sure what. But the quality press went overboard in praise. "Who were all these people?" they kept asking, and "where have they been hiding?" and "why had the BBC apparently hitherto refused them a voice?"

McCartney sent me a telegram -- that said simply: "This is just great. Absolutely what we meant."

Ultimately, the film caused a hell of a stir, but then I suspect Lennon knew it would. Lennon was very pleased with the results and suggested we celebrate - with several bowls of brown rice! Actually, he sent me some champagne ...

Years later, our paths crossed again, this time in New York, and Lennon asked me if I was "doing anything useful"! What I SHOULD be doing, he informed me, was a whole series of films about the development of popular music in the United States.

He gave me four reasons why I should do this. (A) Because the story needed telling. (B) It was a remarkable story. (C) No one else was attempting it at that time. (D) Many of those I would need to interview were on their last legs and might not see out the year! So he instructed me to "get on with it"!

And so, over several more bowls of brown rice, the idea and shape of what eventually became an enormous 17-hour TV series about the history of American popular music was born. "And, by the way", he said, "I think I have the perfect title for you -- *All You Need Is Love*. And so it was. But that's another story..."

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