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THE ARTS

Mods & Rockers shows what was really groovy

The 1960s-tinged movie festival gives the silly a back seat to music documentaries.

By Steve Hochman, Special to The Times
July 12, 2007

THE Mods & Rockers Film Festival is getting real.

After seven years of emphasizing the fantasy and frivolity of the '60s — the annual American Cinematheque film series was, after all, launched to tap interest surrounding the first "Austin Powers" film — co-founder, producer and host Martin Lewis has put together a series this year that highlights some of the era's top music documentarians.

Well, that and a "lost" acid-fueled surreal farce featuring Jackie Gleason, Carol Channing — and Groucho Marx as God. But the rarely seen 1968 Otto Preminger-directed "Skidoo" is one of the exceptions this year, whereas in the past it might have been the rule.

"Before, many of the fiction films were the '60s as we wanted them to be," says Lewis, a humorist and pop culture historian. "We showed more films in which the theme was that the more gorgeous and nymph-like a girl was, the harder it was to find boyfriends, so they have to kidnap a pop star like Georgie Fame or something. That was a '60s that never existed."

This year's series, running Friday through Aug. 1 mostly at the Egyptian Theatre, focuses mostly on real events. "The unofficial subtitle this year is 'We Will Doc You,'" says Lewis, an unapologetic punster.

The focus grew from this being the 40th anniversary of the Monterey International Pop Festival, which not only set the tone for future rock festivals (notably Woodstock and Altamont) but also was the setting for the equally influential "Monterey Pop" film by D.A. Pennebaker — the same director whose 1967 Bob Dylan tour documentary "Don't Look Back" provided a serious counterpoint to the Beatles' fictionalized "real life" of "A Hard Day's Night."

The change in tone, Lewis notes, parallels changes in the celebrated decade and its pop culture, which in its eighth summer saw pop culture becoming more serious, more focused on matters of war and social change. The very act of documentary examination was part of it, says Pennebaker, who will appear as part of a July 19-21 retrospective of his work.

"It was kind of like when the fish decides to come out of the water and see what is going on," says the filmmaker, who turns 82 on Sunday. "The music was coming out of the water. That's what I noticed at Monterey. I wasn't thinking about that then. There were those fantastic performers and I was watching them. But when I got through the festival I saw from the other side that it was a little different, and I had to start working on that with the film.... It took us a while to understand what we were seeing."

Other documentary makers being celebrated are Peter Whitehead (whose "Led Zeppelin Live at Royal Albert Hall" shows Wednesday and who is the subject of the new "In the Beginning Was the Image" on July 27) and Tony Palmer (the festival closes with his controversial "All My Loving," which mixed then-groundbreaking footage of the Beatles, Cream, Jimi Hendrix and others with scenes from the Vietnam War). Also on tap are showings of "Atlantic Records: The House that Ahmet Built," several films marking the 50th anniversary of R&B-oriented Stax Records and a salute to pre-'60s songwriting team Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller with showings of the revue "Smokey Joe's Cafe" and Elvis Presley's "Jailhouse Rock."

And setting the tone opening night is the rare showing of "What's Happening," an inside document of the Beatles' first visit to America, shot by the Maysles Brothers ("Gimme Shelter"), that was held back so as not to compete with "A Hard Day's Night."

This year the real fish out of water might be "Skidoo." But it's in keeping with the series' previous offerings and, for Lewis, a guilty pleasure he's wanted to share since he saw it almost 40 years ago at a press screening in his native London.

"I was posing as a student critic, and at the end I must have been close to the only person left in the theater," he says. "I loved it. I was howling through it. But the review in the Times of London was the first example of a one-word review for a film. It said, 'Skidoo ... Skidon't.'"

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Mods & Rockers Film Festival

When: Opens 7:30 p.m. Friday with "What's Happening" and "Gimme Shelter"; runs through Aug. 1

Where: Most screenings at the Egyptian Theatre, 6712 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood

Price: \$7 to \$10

Info: <http://www.modsandrockers.com>

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