

Tony Palmer

For The Love Of Music



by Ken Shane

Tony Palmer met John Lennon while he was still in school at Cambridge. Later he moved to London, became a film producer for the BBC, and renewed his relationship with Lennon.

Palmer went on to direct several seminal rock and roll films, including Cream's *Farewell Concert* and Frank Zappa's *200 Motels*. He is perhaps best known to popular music fans for two films that he made based on suggestions from his friend John Lennon. In 1968 *All My Loving* became the first film to feature artists like Zappa, Pink Floyd, Jimi Hendrix, and The Who. But his greatest achievement came in 1975/76 with the BBC airing of his seventeen-hour documentary history of popular music, *All You Need Is Love*. Though the film was a sensation in the U.K. and Europe, it has never aired in the United States.

The five-disc DVD set of *All You Need Is Love* was released in the United States on May 13.

You started in the film business working with Ken Russell and Jonathan Miller. Tell me about how you got there.

I was at Cambridge University and I thought I ought to go and do something useful, and not mess around being an academic. I thought I'd try for the BBC. By this time Ken had made his famous film about Elgar, so all the way through the interviews I said if you take me I want to work with Ken Russell. They took me, and I thought I was going to work with Ken Russell. In fact they sent me off to do something completely different. I was rather cross.

Eventually I did work with Ken, and I made a film called *Isadora*, about Isadora Duncan. *Isadora* was a big success, and the BBC told me that Jonathan was going to make a film about *Alice In Wonderland*, and they

were very nervous about letting him loose, because it was quite a big project. They wanted me to make sure that Jonathan didn't go completely off the rails.

Going back to your days at Cambridge, it was there that you met John Lennon following a press conference. Some time later, Lennon suggested a film idea to you.

It was three or four years further down. I'd come to London from Cambridge, and I was working for the BBC. We renewed our acquaintanceship. He complained to me frequently that the great musicians who he admired couldn't get on BBC television, never mind American television. He said they were not treated with the respect that they deserved, and he gave a list. I said I know who these people are, but they are never going to get in a film of mine. He said he would make the introductions, and I would do the film, and get it on the BBC.

So we made a film called *All My Loving*. We got John's permission to use the title. And that had a certain impact because it was the first film on British television that said, you might not like this music, but you can't ignore it. You can't treat it with less respect than it deserves, in terms of the musicianship of the guys.

We sort of kept in touch. I wrote some liner notes for some of The Beatles

LPs – *Yellow Submarine*, I remember. And then he came to New York. It's one of those mad coincidences. I can't remember where it was, but I was actually walking down the street and walking the other way was one John Lennon. He stopped me with a phrase I've never forgotten, "Are you doing anything useful these days?" We went off to lunch, and after that lunch, he told me that what I really should try to do was an overall survey of popular music. As we got up to leave the restaurant, he said he had a great title for me, *All You Need is Love*, because that's what it's all about.

I thought it was crazy. No one series can turn in all of that. What we certainly didn't realize at the time is that we were getting to people who were dead soon after. It was extraordinary to get them. I was in Memphis a couple of years ago, and all the places that we filmed that were important to Memphis, not just Sam Phillips studio, but Beale Street and all that, gone. Parking lots or Wal-Marts. So again, quite by chance, in '75 when we filmed it, it was the last moment that we could get some sort of record of those places.

The range of live performance footage in the film is remarkable.

I'll give you a perfect example of that, talking about things that were extraordinary at the time, but in retrospect are even more extraordinary. Obviously I knew who Muddy Waters was. Jagger never stopped talking about Muddy Waters. The reason we got so many people is that we went to wherever they were. So we were in

club over on the west side."

I made sure to get there early because I was sure the club would be packed. I was amazed to find that he was playing for about ten people. It was the same for B.B. King when we filmed him. Nobody there. Jerry Lee Lewis playing in a fourth-rate Holiday Inn. This is one of the great heroes of rock and roll. Now you can't imagine how these people could have played in those two-bit, out of the way places, but that was their life at that time.

Although I was very aware of their music, I'd never heard these people discuss their lives and careers in the way they do in your film.



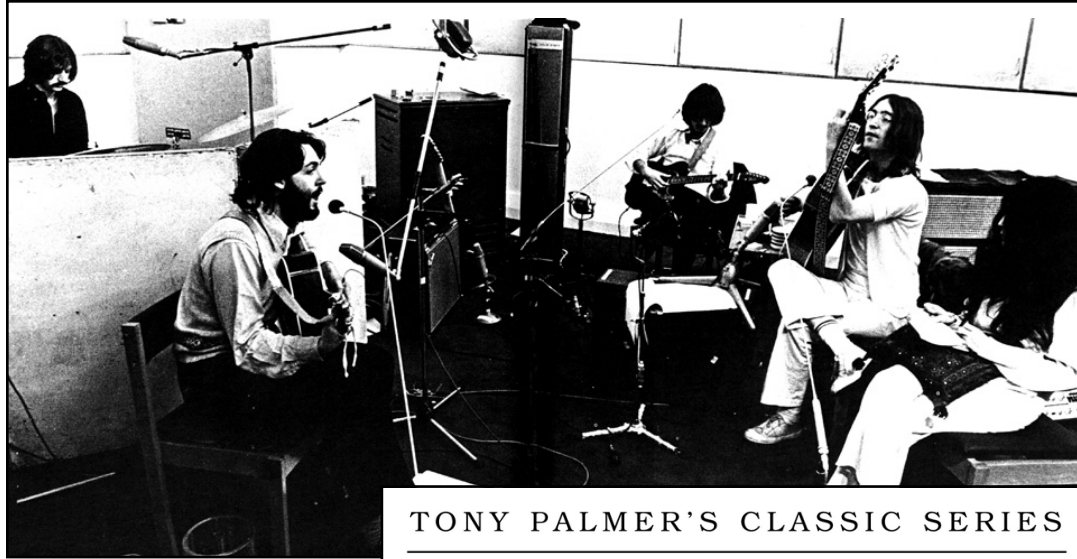
Chicago, and I got hold of Muddy's phone number. I'm now speaking to Muddy Waters on the telephone, and I remember that I stood up. I was so in awe of him. I explained what we were doing, and he said "Sure, come on over, I'm playing tomorrow night in a

I remember interviewing Jimi Hendrix. At the end of the conversation, he thanked me very much. I told him it had been a real pleasure, and very, very interesting. He shook my hand and told me that I was the first person that he'd talked to who clearly loved what he did, and clearly treated him like a gentleman, to which I remember asking why would I not? He told me that there were all kinds of people who wouldn't bother.

I learned that if you treated those people with the respect that they deserved, not just as human beings, but as great musicians, there was nothing that they wouldn't do for you. **Tell me about some of the people you got to comment on the music.**

One of the things that we were keen to understand was how and where all

ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE, AS WELL AS MANY OTHER FILMS BY TONY PALMER, IS AVAILABLE THROUGH AMAZON. FOR MORE INFO, INCLUDING A BIOGRAPHY OF THE FILMMAKER AS WELL AS A HISTORY OF HIS WORK, YOU CAN VISIT TONYPALMER.ORG



TONY PALMER'S CLASSIC SERIES
THE STORY OF POPULAR MUSIC

John Lennon

'A monumental achievement. Thank you.'

Bing Crosby

'Magnificent...the editing is truly outstanding. A priceless archive.'

Pete Seeger

'Its colossal emotional, intellectual and historical range is breathtaking'



the myths came from. What I did was to make a list of the topics, ragtime, jazz, blues, and so on. I told these people I wasn't asking them to write a script, just to write a 2,000 word essay on why the music was important from their point of view. I now had these sort of school primers. They didn't become the script for the film, but they gave me a point of view so that I didn't get completely lost. I had wonderful teachers. Jack Good talked about rock and roll. Derek Taylor about The Beatles. Jerry Wexler about soul. If they didn't know, who would? **I was almost frightened for you in the segment where you talk to Phil Spector. What was that like?**

He talks about his father blowing his brains out. I didn't know about that, so I didn't know that's what he was going to say. I didn't go into any of the interviews with an agenda. Phil kept us waiting for quite a long time in his house. If you don't go in with an agenda, people tell you all kinds of odd things.

In terms of a hardened agenda, what



was in the back of my mind was that most, if not all, of the essays that I'd commissioned mentioned that you couldn't even begin to understand why this music was as it was, and as important as it was, without grasping the fact that it had a social, political, and philosophical context. That it really represented the aspirations of, the needs of, the desires of, certain people. It was more than just notes on the page.

The really stinging attacks on the series when it came out all went along the line of questioning why we were devoting 17 hours to this rather trivial pursuit, as if it had great meaning. I said, I'm sorry guys, but it does. If you're going to make films about 20th century music, and I made films about Stravinsky, but I also want to make films about Muddy Waters, and B.B. King, and so on. They make as valuable a contribution. I felt passionately about it then, and having put it aside for 30 years, when I went back to re-master it last year, I realized that's what we were driving for then, and that's what still makes it relevant.

When I spoke to friends in the U.K. and I told them I was going to be speaking with you, they remembered this series as "monumental." Was it

strictly a business issue that kept *All You Need Is Love* from ever airing in the United States?

No, I can tell you the sad history in the United States. PBS have been loyal supporters of mine over the years. They've shown a lot of films of mine. I was told many years later that they absolutely panicked about this. Seventeen hours was virtually their entire season. That was problem one. Problem two was the chapter entitled "War Songs." You've got an IRA song in there, and a provisional song. You've got Leonard Cohen reading poems about destroying governments, from East Berlin. So it's politically loaded and they got very, very nervous about that.

They were prepared to take some episodes, and they were prepared to take other episodes heavily cut. I felt that I had a responsibility to the people who had given me their trust, whether it was Muddy Waters, or Jerry Lee Lewis, or Paul McCartney, or whoever it was. They'd allowed me into their sitting rooms, and I wasn't going to mess about with what they felt was important to say by presenting an emasculated version of it.

It's ironic that the length probably wouldn't bother them today, but the political content would make it even harder to get *All You Need Is Love* on the air today.

It's not sound bites. I think that's the essential difference between my film and some of the other films out there. There was a dreadful series on the BBC last year called "Pop Britannia," which dealt with British pop music. I would never criticize someone else's film, but it was typical of what is now thought to be acceptable. Sound bites. At the end, you don't remember a word of what anybody says. If someone wants to say something, and it's a complicated idea, let them say it. If you treat the audience as idiots, they'll respond in that way. The audience is not stupid.

In the last 20 years your films have pretty much dealt solely with classical music. Have you ever looked around at the current pop scene and thought that you would be interested in making a film about it?

Yes, and I've had one or two big disappointments. I was going to make a film with Kurt Cobain and Nirvana. I couldn't do it right away because I was working on something else, but I

said I would do it in six months. He died. So yes, I've been tempted, and I'm not saying that nothing that's happened in the last 30 years is of interest. It's not that I've turned my back on it, quite the contrary.

What is your opinion on the major rock films, *The Last Waltz* for example, that have been made since you made *All You Need Is Love*?

As always, there's good, bad, and indifferent. I happen not to be a Scorsese fan, so you're getting me on a dodgy subject, and I haven't seen the Stones film (*Shine A Light*), so I can't comment on that. I thought that he was handed such wonderful material on Dylan that he couldn't help but be successful. We've now gotten accustomed to rock and roll being taken seriously. To the extent that it is taken seriously I think it is very important. As far as I'm concerned, the more the merrier. If they find an audience, if they're well made, that's wonderful.

Anything else on the drawing board?

I want to do something about Buddy Holly. Next year is the 40th anniversary of his being killed. I know there's a feature film, and the feature film isn't bad, but I want to do something about him.

