

New Bay Area Docs Shine in 2008

by David L. Brown

THE BAY AREA DOCUMENTARY COMMUNITY is powerfully represented in this year's *POV* season on PBS, as the prestigious Emmy-winning series airs three superb social issue docs and one of the finest biographical music docs ever made – all from Bay Area documentarians: Robert Elfstrom's 1969 vérité classic, *Johnny Cash: the Man, His World, His Music* (August 5); *The Judge and the General* (August 19) from Elizabeth Farnsworth and Patricio Lanfranco; *Freedom Machines* (Encore presentation September 9) from Jamie Stobie and Janet Cole; and *Soldiers of Conscience* (airing October 16) from Gary Weimberg and Catherine Ryan.

Walking the Line

Veteran filmmaker Bob Elfstrom is one of the country's best documentary director/cameramen, having shot and directed docs since the early 1960s. In 1968, a friend asked Elfstrom to make a film about Johnny Cash, just when the country star was emerging from substance-abuse problems with the support of new wife June Carter. The period also saw Cash's first crossover success with the award-winning hit album, 'Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison,' which quickly went gold and earned Cash the Country Mu-



photo J Cash Estate

Singing his heart out in Johnny Cash, circa 1972.

sic Association's Entertainer of the Year award. Public Broadcasting Library, the precursor to PBS, provided funding.

Elfstrom's masterful film shows above all that the filmmaker (and the soundman, Alan Dater) succeeded in establishing a rare bond of trust with the temperamental singer. In scene after scene, a comfortable Cash reveals intimate truths about himself, his music, his sharecropper youth, and his philosophy. Elfstrom's filming creates an intimate connection with the 'man in black' without ever seeming intrusive or losing the objective eye of the 'direct cinema' style that Elfstrom and veteran Bay Area filmmaker Bill Jersey pioneered, along with Leacock, Pennebaker, and the Maysles Brothers. One of Elfstrom's favorite scenes comes after the opening concert sequence: Cash hunting in a dry riverbed with a rifle. He shoots a crow, finds that the shot broke its wing, then, while cradling the injured bird, writes a love song to the crow on the spot.

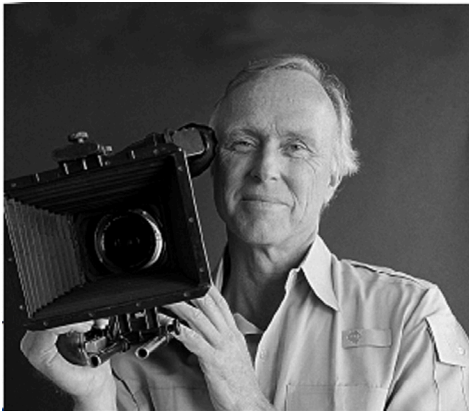
Johnny Cash includes rousing concert performances of some of Cash's best-loved songs in various venues, including prisons and Indian reservations that show that the artist's vision and commitment

extend beyond the traditional role of entertainer. The film also captures Cash recording 'One Too Many Mornings' with a young Bob Dylan (in his 'Nashville Skyline' period), and trading reminiscences with one of his closest friends, rockabilly legend and fellow former sharecropper Carl Perkins. After Perkins sustains injuries that prevent continuing a solo career, Cash takes him into his band.

Evocative scenes depict Cash bantering tenderly onstage and offstage with his wife June, and giving generous and thoughtful attention to the aspiring songwriters and singers who seek him out. The film also follows Cash as he returns to the Arkansas town and cotton fields where he grew up and still enjoys down-home moments with old family friends.

Director Elfstrom remembers: "My camera, my sound recordist Alan Dater, and I were having a wonderful relationship with Cash. It was like a dance. In a way, he was directing the film, drawing us from concert to concert, from stage to backstage, and to a van driving around the country. It was like the kid is having a comeback and he knew his music was crossing over and taking off." Elfstrom, describing his subject as "an American treasure, a poet laureate," reports that he had never before seen Cash in concert – but, during the making of the film, they became life-long friends.

The film is filled with wonderful music and touching, revelatory moments – all beautifully shot with a single camera and edited by Larry Silk. Elfstrom's handheld camerawork of the performances, as though mounted on a jib arm, seems to float smoothly from the front to the side to a perfectly framed shot behind



Bob Elfstrom with his beloved Arri.

formances, making the film seem like a three-camera production.

Elfstrom was fortunate to be filming during 1968, according to Cash, “the best year of his life.” *Johnny Cash: The Man, His World, His Music* comes closer than any film to getting inside the man who ‘walked the line’ in music and life. It is also one of the best documentaries ever made on a singer-songwriter who changed the face of popular music in the late 20th century (including Chuck Berry, Lennon-McCartney, and Dylan).

An Explosion of Truth

The Judge and the General, co-directed by East Bay journalist Elizabeth Farnsworth, is a compelling detective story, as well as a tale of transformation (always a powerful theme in documentary). The film is also a riveting exploration of one of the most horrible periods of human-rights violations in modern history, with an unlikely hero bringing justice when all seemed lost. In 1998, conservative Chilean Judge Juan Guzman was assigned the first criminal cases against the country’s ex-dictator, General Augusto Pinochet. Guzman had supported (and even toasted) Pinochet’s 1973 coup – waged with US support as an anti-communist crusade – that left Salvador Allende, the democratically-elected president, and thousands of others dead or ‘disappeared.’ Both the opposition and human rights activists expected little from Guzman’s investigation, especially since Pinochet had legislated his own immunity from prosecution before his ouster.

Farnsworth and Chilean co-director/

journalist Patricio Lanfranco bring to the film decades of reporting on Chile, which pays off richly as they trace the judge’s descent into what he calls ‘the abyss,’ where he uncovers the horrific past – including his own role in the tragedy. Guzman acknowledges his own naiveté, after the film captures most of his investigation through contemporary and archival footage, witness testimony, secret military audio tapes (Pinochet: “If you kill the bitch, you get rid of the offspring”), and scenes like the exhumation of victims. He admits that his investigation “made me acknowledge how blind I had been... I would say it opened the eyes of my soul.” His growing awareness and devotion to finding truth and rendering justice are powerful, hopeful and even redemptive themes.

Following their subject for three years, the filmmakers weave the past and present seamlessly to capture the judge’s journey of conscience as he gradually awakens to the atrocities committed against the Chilean people. Under heavy guard, Guzman spent seven years on his investigation. An especially dramatic moment occurs when he admits to uncovering past documents written in his own hand denying writs of habeas corpus sought by families of the missing victims of the coup. And then his journey leads to discovering the bodies of those victims.

One victim was alleged by Pinochet officials to have died in a truck accident, but the camera shows Guzman discovering that the disinterred corpse had been shot in the head. Other horrors are shared by survivors and witnesses. A helicopter crew chief tells of attaching 200-pound railroad rails to dissidents, who were then thrown out of the chopper door into the ocean. With Guzman as a witness, the camera dramatically captures divers finding the rusted rails in water a mile from shore. An elderly couple recalls being forced into a *Sophie’s Choice*-like decision to sacrifice either their activist daughter or young grandchild. A former secret police torturer, Osvaldo Romo, nonchalantly describes his techniques for extracting information, including electrical shock – taught by the CIA, an

important supporter of the coup (with major encouragement from Henry Kissinger) and subsequently of the military dictatorship’s terrorism. One can easily make the link between the torture and terrorism of the US-trained Chilean secret police and the scandalous horrors of Abu Ghraib.



photo Courtesy Guille

General Pinochet’s coronation day.

The Judge and the General is not Farnsworth’s first film work in Chile. In 1970, at age 26, she was hired as an assistant on *Qué Hacer*, a documentary about Allende’s presidential campaign, directed by Saul Landau, Raul Ruiz, and Nina Serrano. She says she has been haunted ever since by what happened in Chile. Most of the best footage of Chile in the early 70s comes from this film, according to Farnsworth. She and Lanfranco had worked together producing reports for the ‘NewsHour with Jim Lehrer.’ Meeting Guzman in 2003, they realized that his investigation was the story they had been waiting to tell. NewsHour typically uses voice-over to guide viewers through complex stories, but here the main characters tell the tale themselves. Farnsworth explains: “Our toughest job in editing was sticking with this mode of story-telling and keeping the present in the forefront while also flashing back to the past to explore the context of the crimes.” The powerfully-told tale is a tribute to the co-directors’ experience and skill. The film is admirably shot by, among others, the Bay Area’s Vicente Franco and Michael Anderson. Blair Gershkov’s editing is also very strong and evocative.

Co-director Farnsworth says, “I was especially interested in the phenomenon of

the ‘Good German,’ the conscientious person of high ideals who goes along with state terror because it offers safety and order in a time of chaos.” Adds co-director Lanfranco: “I was driven to explore more deeply the nature of hope. How could people have dared act if justice would, in fact, return, and gather evidence at a time when they could have been killed in retaliation.” Guzman sums up his investigation eloquently: “A wounded country needs to know the truth.”

The ending of the documentary, weaving dramatic news footage with emotional sound bites, is moving and cathartic: Pinochet is arrested in London and indicted in Chile, and his secret service chief, Manuel Contreras, is also arrested. Michelle Bachelet, former victim of the dictatorship, is elected President with a promise to transform hatred into understanding and tolerance. In the parallel transformation of the judge who indicted the general and the transformation of Chile itself, *The Judge and the General* offers hope, healing, and the emergence of long-concealed truth and long-denied justice.

These exemplary documentaries remind me, once again, how proud I am to be an active member of the Bay Area documentary community. Tune in to PBS for POV: www.kqed.org. (First of a two part article, see you in Sept.)

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