

## ROCK 'N' ROLL LIVES ON AT THE 2003 SUNDANCE/SLAMDANCE FILM FESTIVALS

By Vinca Liane Jarrett

January 16 to January 26, Park City, Utah – Having attended the Sundance Film Festival since 1989, what I was most struck by this year wasn't the movies, which have been written up by many journalists by and large to have been a teeny-bopper fest of youth downers; this year's festivals were marked more by the presence of a major music industry infusion, changing the once all film scene into more of an entertainment industry free-for-all. Private parties and larger concerts at which Bob Dylan, Debra Harry and De La Soul played are just small examples of super stars showing up to the world's largest scenester winter camp hosted by Park City every year. This article explores some of the better moments, and hypothesizes as to why music seems to be taking center stage over the hundreds of premiered film that the public once waited anxiously to hear the result about.

ASCAP was the true super star this year, taking over Slamdunk's prime real estate on Main Street (that festival was shortened to only a few days and a handful of films and bounced to the dungeon on Harry O's rock club), and setting up the "Music Café", where both its music celebs, as well as up and coming stars were showcased daily. Music producers, managers, composers and supervisors, as well as a host of celebrities from the film side sat in the café style room listening attentively to performances; waiting to do business between sets. Amongst the throng of performers were included Buddy & Julie Miller, Emmylou Harris, Paul Brady and Hispanic sensation Alejandro Lerner. The highlight of these acts was Judith Owen (who will play at Club Passims in Harvard Square Monday, February 3), a Brit living in LA and married to famed filmie Harry Shearer (THIS IS SPINAL TAP, THE SIMPSONS). Her uncompromising voice is reminiscent of music legend and Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Famer Joni Mitchell, but she characterizes her original tunes with an energy and urgency that could only come out of the new Millennium. More over, her sharp British wit gripped the audience's attention as fans such as Steve Buscemi (FARGO, THE BIG LEBOWSKI) watched on. Meanwhile on the other side of town, Judith Owen's original song was a highlight of the Sundance premier film, THE EVENT, starring New England's own Academy Award winning Olympia Dukakis (MOONSTRUCK, MR. HOLLANDS' OPPUS) and Parker Posey (PARTY GIRL, THE ANNIVERSARY PARTY), bringing the audience into its own mind at the intense film's closure. Not to worry filmgoers, THE EVENT is to be distributed by Lions Gate, not requiring purchase, similar to most of the films in competition at Sundance this year. A few fortunate music lovers had opportunity to see Judith Owen play again up at the Sundance Institute Tuesday, January 21 in a rare moment with husband Harry Shearer accompanying her on guitar. This is certainly a performer to keep your eye on.

Beyond the ASCAP CAFÉ, many venues and parties featured up and coming bands, as well as super stars. Over at the always popular Ciceros, The Brilliant Mistakes (who will play the Kendall Café in Cambridge in late February – check local listings) rocked the sold out house into the night. A mostly New England group of guys coming from Maine, this band had the unique ability to get its audience on the dance floor with its blues infused rockabilly sounds in record time. Also over at ASCAP were a series of music talks, including a case study of the Sundance premier of PREY FOR ROCK AND ROLL. Directed by music producer Alex Steyermark and written by Cheri Love Dog and Robin Whitehouse who developed the project as a rock musical off-off Broadway in New York at CBGBs, the panel explored the film's development and integration of the music and film process. Stephen Trask (HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH) produced the music. Trask was particularly busy this year, as he also wrote the original music for the Sundance premier of CAMP, a film by Todd Graff (as actor: THE ABYSS, DEATH TO SMOOCHY and as writer: USED PEOPLE and THE VANISHING). Another musical set at the famed Stage Door Manor performing arts camp in the Catskills, the film demonstrated the talent of a host of young nubile teenagers, showing the struggles of the wannabe performers. Quite

different from the real Stage Door Manor where actors that include Robert Downey Jr., Mary Stuart Masterson, Jennifer Jason Leigh and Jon Cryer began their training, CAMP is a terrific BRAVO Channel film. Although trying to capitalize on film successes of the past such as FAME, CAMP fell far short in its directorial efforts, albeit a thoroughly enjoyable romp for anyone who has grown up in the theater.

Other films to watch out for this year include the magnificent MILWAUKEE MINNESOTA written by R.D. Murphy and directed by Allan Mindel (producer: MY OWN PRIVATE IDAHO, JULIAN PO), premiering over at Slamdance, still the more comforting of the two major festivals in Park City and still honoring films not already picked up for distribution prior to the festival starting (a large percentage of Sundance's films were already signed to distribution prior to the festival, which explains why so few films were purchased this year as a result of the festival). MILWAUKEE MINNESOTA is a dark comedy centering around the murder of the main character, a champion fisherman played with finesse and passion by Troy Garity (A SOLDIERS STORY, BARBERSHOP), whose overbearing mother, Debra Monk (IN AND OUT, THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTRY) is murdered by a hit and run driver. The host of other characters include a traveling salesman played skillfully by Randy Quaid (MIDNIGHT EXPRESS, KINGPIN), a local businessman portrayed with darkness and love by Bruce Dern (THE GREAT GATSBY, MARNIE) and a freakish nomadic brother and sister skillfully acted by Hank Harris (MERCURY RISING) and Alison Folland (BOYS DON'T CRY, TO DIE FOR). This film is a case study in politics at Sundance. It was turned down, one might guess largely because its director and producers refused to "play the game" of hiring a publicist or producers rep. It was likely easy for Sundance to believe that if unrepresented, a film with so many stars attached must just be unworthy of its festival. Thankfully, Slamdance was there to pick up the pieces, and the film screened to a sold out audience (in fact people were sitting in the aisles), and a standing ovation was received at the film's end. Hopefully for the public, one of the smaller, but more intelligent distributors, such as Paramount Classics or Fine Line, will "discover" this film, because this could become the sleeper of 2003/2004, sharing a star with such films as LANTANA and LOCAL HERO, personal favorites of this writer.

Also at Slamdance this year was Massachusetts' own LITTLE HEARTS, a film short by Stephen Maing about a young Asian boy's integration into small town America with two poor White kids from the other side of the track. A coming of age flic, LITTLE HEARTS demonstrated that Stephen has a career as a filmmaker ahead of him, winning the Slamdance Audience Award for best film short. VARIOUS POSITIONS, another Slamdance discovery by Canadian filmmaker Ori Kowarsky and producer Karen Powell. A heart wrenching dramedy about a young man's need to find his identity, played authentically by Tygh Runyan (K-19 THE WIDOW MAKER), separate and apart from his Orthodox family, this film demonstrates skill both in story telling and filmmaking. The film also Stars Carly Pope (ORANGE COUNTY, SNOW DAY) as the love interest and newcomer Michael Suchanek as the younger brother destined to become a rabbi.

Back over at Sundance and worthy of note was the urban drama RHYTHM OF THE SAINTS by director Sarah Rogacki and written expertly by Cyn Canel Rossi. Starring Sarita Choudhury (MISSISSIPPI MASSALA, KAMA SUTRA) as the mother of newcomer Daniella Alonso, a teen who must escape a destiny that the inner city has ruefully planned for her, this film compels the audience to think about hard issues. An ensemble cast that demonstrates how important character is to story without missing a beat, includes Gano Grills (13<sup>th</sup> CHILD, SHAFT) and Ryan Donowho, the New York City subway bucket drummer. ALL THE REAL GIRLS by writer/director David Gordon Green (GEORGE WASHINGTON, A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES), tells the story of a small town guy played by Paul Schneider (THE ROUGH SOUTH OF LARRY BROWN) with a checkered past with the ladies, who finds his one true love, portrayed by the new IT girl, Zooey Deschanel (ALMOST FAMOUS, THE GOOD GIRL), and asks the hard press question can we recover our reputations and make a new start. Also starring is Patricia Clarkson (FAR FROM HEAVEN, THE BARONESS AND THE PIG) as the mother and a compelling performance by Ben Mouton (A TIME TO KILL, PASSIONADA) as the father. Finally, while this viewer didn't have an opportunity to screen it, Harvard professor Robb Moss premiered

his documentary THE SAME RIVER TWICE, which surrounds five characters from his famed RIVERDOGS who went to Berkley in the Sixties, and what they're doing now.

Making it political, The Creative Coalition, a New York based lobbying group for the industry, hosted a luncheon at the ETA mansion in Deer Valley with Ronnie Regan Jr. interviewing Harvard Law School graduate, composer, actor and now running for President of Panama, Reuben Blaze. This top-grade event was filmed for cable television, and Reuben spoke poignantly about his political and artistic beliefs. "Film and music is necessary not just as a means to entertain and escape, but to confront important issues," said the industry veteran who hopes to turn his attention now to helping his own country back on its feet in spite of U.S. controversy. Speaking again about music, Reuben noted that he left the law behind him, in spite of his Harvard education to become a "full time musician so I could compose what I felt through my music." An intensely private person, who had had to adapt to public life, Reuben has been an activist throughout his life, most recently in the Aids action movement. "I think we have an opportunity [not an obligation] to put attention on the subject at hand and this is what I chose to do..." Again, music played the key role in Reuben Blaze's development and in Park City this year.

The music rocked the festival this year, perhaps more because that industry is on the verge of collapse in light of its stance on attacking its core audience, the youth of America hooked on the web and NAPSTER, and because the larger record companies, much like the mafia, doesn't know how to change with the times, and music must find a new venue to capture its audience, and that venue has proven to be film. Also highly visible this year was the amass of product placement and designer labels. Parties hosted by Skky Vodka and Rayban and Volkswagon, not to mention Chrysler, dotted the festival with no better reason that to have a party. No films seemed to attach themselves to these products, and word on the street is Sundance is hurting due to its own loss of sponsorship by Mercedes. If these products can produce parties unauthorized and gather lines around the block just like a festival or film's party or for that matter an industry veteran such as Technicolor (which as usual threw one of the best parties – thank you Charlie Herzfeld), then why should they also provide sponsorship? The bottom line is much like the music, products are realizing that the best way to get people to know who you are is to be in a movie, and this sort of vertical integration is overtaking the industry faster than you can say video games. While Sundance remains a necessary corporate vehicle of the independent world to host the U.S.'s largest film festival of star driven movies, and Slamdance and a few much smaller festivals (No Dance, Digidance, Slamdunk, and Trauma Dance) cater to the undiscovered and frequently overlooked gems, music and product placement are quickly integrating themselves into this festival, and keep the crowds increasing and the audience coming back for more.

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