Learning What Story To Tell: An interview with Caroline Richards about The Parkinsons and Music Documentaries.

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I spoke to Caroline Richards about her superb music documentary *The Parkinsons: A Long Way To Nowhere* during her lunch break from working deep on the three-years and counting edit of Julien Temple’s long-awaited film about Cuba, *Habaneros.* The fact that the eagerly anticipated film is near completion and her film about an early noughties rock n roll band that shone brightly across the London and UK music scene is the topic of conversation, meant she was surprisingly chipper for someone coming off another night of 4 hours sleep.

Richards’s film is her first as director but it is not the work of an amateur. It shows the steady and focused hand of someone who has worked in music documentary at the top end for a significant period of time. The film cleverly sets up the question of why it matters that there’s a film about a band that didn’t make it. I was asking this question while watching it as the film smartly answered that question by becoming a sweet, thoughtful, entertaining and insightful film about creativity, the importance of art and music as a way of life, the crushing neo-liberal, capitalist moment and what it means to believe in making music or following musicians and committing to it. All the while never forgetting its commitment to entertain. The footage of the band is exhilarating and provides perfect evidence for the filmmaker’s claims through the film that this was a live band par excellence.

I really wanted to talk to Caroline about the film because it’s smart and moving, nostalgic in in the right ways and a breath of fresh air at a time when there are more and more music documentaries than ever but it’s harder than ever to find the really good ones. This is a really good one.

DN/NF: At the outset, the film places the band alongside their idols, The Sex Pistolsand The Cramps*,* but then the reality of their experience doesn’t match their ambitions. The film takes the gap between their hope and the reality very seriously. Was that structure something you knew was going to be how you approached the film or did it come out of the process of making it?

CR: Right from the beginning I had a clear idea of the narrative. Mainly because I knew them [the band] quite well. I’d followed the band quite closely at the time. What I set out to do, was what I ended up with. The one big revelation, I guess, was Pedro the bass player. He was always the quiet, shy one. I wasn’t even sure if he’d want to be interviewed. I thought, if I can just get twenty minutes with him it would be enough. Once I started interviewing him, he really opened up and I never realised how difficult he found it those times, the pressures of not having any money and waiting for a record deal that, obviously, didn’t happen.

DN/NF: So, when you were setting out to make the film, you knew the focus and questions you were hoping to get answers to, from day one?

CR: Pretty Much. I was open minded as well, trying not to ask them closed questions. What was good was they were so frank, very honest. They didn’t ask me to make any changes when they saw the first rough cut. When you’re dealing with things like nudity (the band became infamous for their naked live performances) you wonder if they will be happy for it [the footage] to be seen. Their families are probably going to see it. If they had asked me “please, can you remove that shot?” I would have been happy to remove it. But luckily they didn’t do that. It was great in that respect.

DN/NF: It shows they obviously trusted you as a filmmaker to let you do that…

CR: Yeah, and right from the start there weren’t any expectations of what we wanted to do with it. I’d just accumulated all this footage that I’d shot myself or people had donated and I said to them that we had to do something with it, put it all together somehow. Initially I thought I’d just make a hundred copies and sell them at gigs, maybe do a little screening in a back room of a pub, and I never expected to be doing cinema screenings or anything like that. It happened very organically.

DN/NF: It’s a really kind film, but an honest film. A lot of films about a band that ‘didn’t make it’ can be quite judgemental and critical, whereas you give the band a lot of space to tell their stories and it becomes clear there’s a multitude of small reasons why it never quite happened for them. You give the band space to be honest about that and I guess that comes from your relationship with them. Were you just a fan who ended up shooting their gigs or did you know them otherwise?

CR: My introduction to the band was that I knew their manager, David, and he kept saying “you have to come along and see this band, they’re crazy”. Everybody says that about bands they are managing or bands they are in so you think “yeah yeah, I’ll get round to it”. Then, the first time I saw them it was the most insane gig I’ve ever experienced. Gigs were such a passive experience around that time. You’d stand there and clap and just idolise the band you were watching. But, the first Parkinsons gig I went to was crazy and the audience were really involved. You weren’t just standing there, it was a bit scary and really, really exciting. I hadn’t seen anything like that, ever really. If felt like what we’d all been waiting for in London. I’d missed the whole Britpop thing, which I imagine was really exciting for people going to gigs in ’94, ’95. So, to see a band like The Parkinsons it was like ‘wow, this is ours’. Then other bands emerged from that. What also helped [the film] is that the band are so down to earth and not pretentious. They were frank and weren’t thinking about how they would come across. I guess that’s because of the low expectations of what we might do with [the film] so it didn’t really seem like a big deal.

DN/NF: I think it definitely works in the film’s favour. There something really genuine about them as people, which makes it much more than just a film about a particular band. It is representative of so many other bands [in similar situations]. One of the things that’s really beautiful about the film is how it’s a film about the harsh realities of being a working musician or a creative artist, now, but all the time really. It feels like it’s part of the trend of films like *Miss Sharon Jones!* (Kopple, ), which is really interesting in terms of her band making a day-to-day living, and then something like *Lost In France* ( , ), about Chemikal Underground. They all play on the idea that if you are a ‘name’ or have infamy or a small level of fame or column inches that you must be mega-rich when the realities are just the opposite. Your film is never ‘woe is us’ but it’s really insightful in terms of what it takes to survive…

DN/NF: It was really insightful for me as well because when you have a band like The Parkinsons who are liked, but who don’t have any money, there are people saying “oh you should come and play in Leeds, or, come back to Glasgow” and you think, “that sounds great, why wouldn’t they do that?” but then you realise there are travel costs, hotel costs, the cost of giving up work for however many weeks you will be on tour. It never really occurred to me, just how difficult it is to make ends meet. So, when they said they were living on five pounds a day, but they were in this lavish tour bus on their UK tour, it really hit home how that must really mess with your mind. You’re doing something you love and there might be a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but there might not be. Everybody wants there to be a band like The Parkinsons, people want them to be touring all the time. One thing I was keen to avoid in the film was being too analytical, so it’s nice if you say it touches upon a lot of subjects, because you hope to leave a few questions unanswered, let people ponder some of the things that come across rather than tell them what they should take away from it. Hopefully it works.

DN/NF: I think so.

CR: The band were so much fun, I wanted to make the documentary fun to watch, rather than too ponderous on what went right or wrong for them.

DN/NF: It is really enjoyable, and definitely took me back to a very fun period of my gig going life and serves as a great reminder of how important music is in life, and the importance of live music and small venues where a band like The Parkinsons can earn a living. The connection they have with the people who follow them is so deep and they do provide something that is so rare, particularly now in terms of live bands and that special, visceral experience…

CR: One of the saddest things watching the film is realising how many of these venues no longer exist and have been replaced by flats or Crossrail. It’s really sickening. I remember what an amazing time it was in the early 2000s. I might be wrong but it felt like the last great guitar music scene in London. There was loads of bands to see, loads of venues to go to. We really miss that now. This subject’s been done to death but it’s particularly sad when you see so many venues that are no longer there.

DN/NF: Also, not just venues for bands but the cultural significance of bands that London picks up before other places. In 2000, 2001 you’ve got bands like The White Stripesand The Strokesbecoming big here in the UK before anywhere else. The Parkinsons are a Portuguese band and London’s always been a place where it’s always been about what’s good and what they like and without those venues, how’s that going to happen? The film reminds you it was a place where 3 Portuguese guys and a Scottish guy can make a band and have a real impact. That’s exciting.

CR: Music is our greatest cultural export in the UK. What is the legacy going to be, today? I can’t see it. I don’t really know what’s going on. I edited a documentary about the Irish band The Strypes, a brilliant live band, who’ve got three really good albums out but it’s really hard to find people who’ve actually really heard about them or know their music but if they’d been around 20 years ago they would stand up against a lot of the successful bands of that time.

DN/NF: A feeling I got from the film was how bands are a place for lost souls or outsiders, that attract lost souls to them and can become a focal point for a community. Your film reaches out beyond the band to the fans. There are interviews with fans and a focus on one fan in particular. It’s really lovely. Was that something you always wanted to make sure of, that the people who orbited the band and were so affected by them were included in the documentary?

CR: Absolutely, certainly. Around that time when they were first in London it did feel like a gang. There was the nucleus of the four band members but there was also this tribe [around them] and you would see certain characters at every gig. It was an inner circle, but a very large inner circle. In the DVD extras, there are the ‘Bad Girl’ t-shirts that the drummer designed. People would wear that t-shirt with pride - It was a bit of a naughty image without being overly offensive – and you’d turn up [at a gig] and feel like “yes, we’re part of this Parkinsons gang”. The moment [in the film] that epitomises it is the Cargo gig, where they are thrown off stage. Everybody in that room felt so protective towards the band. Alfonso was quite literally thrown off the stage and hit the wall. I can’t still picture this in my memory and it was a case of “don’t you dare hurt him”. They came over from Portugal and brought all this excitement to people, “how dare you treat them like this?”. They were amazing times.

The motivation for me was that there was all this footage and I didn’t want it to gather dust somewhere. Initially, when they first split up in 2005 I approached them about doing something with all the footage. At first I was just going to compile the best moments and get them to introduce the clips. They weren’t really into that at the time because they’d just split up and wanted to look forward rather than back. I waited a few years, collected some more footage [from fellow fans], saw what else was out there. When I suggested making the film again, in 2011, they were excited by the idea. It was a blessing in disguise that they said no the first time because I was in a better position to make a better film. I’d been working on music documentaries in the meantime as an editor and I learned a lot from that. It all worked out.

DN/NF: You’ve been an editor for the last few years for arguably one of the greatest music documentary filmmakers who’ve ever lived, and documentary filmmakers period. I wondered what you learned from that experience [of editing Julien Temple’s films]…

CR: A great training ground without doubt. I’ve learned so much. One of Julien’s big things is to get away from the ‘rockumentary’ clichés. He’s not interested in knowing what bass guitar or what amp the band are using. He likes to get to know the people. It’s not just learning to tell a story, it’s learning what story to tell. Certainly, *Oil City Confidential* [Temple’s film about Dr. Feelgood] was all about getting to know the people behind the music.

DN/NF: There is a real confidence in your film that you could ascribe to being around a filmmaker like Temple, but your film doesn’t feel derivative. It has your individual stamp on it.

CR: I love filming gigs, but I’m not too confident with interviews. I tend to just put the camera down in what I think is the best place possible and try not to be too fussy.

DN/NF: You are selling yourself short there, you do a fine job with the interviews.

CR: Most I filmed myself. It’s quite obvious which ones are lit properly. Once I’d got a very good rough cut I decided it was worth asking one of my friends whose a great DoP to redo a couple with me. We lit them properly and recorded the sound properly. That was really worthwhile. It was Victor’s interview, most notably. It looks a lot nicer than the others. Plus a couple of shorter ones that needed a bit of professionalism added.

The whole thing is a self-funded labour of love. It’s just me and a camera. I edited it, obviously. If I had a massive budget it would have been great to pay a cameraman to film it all with me but it was a blessing in a way to not have that because I think sometimes people can be too self-conscious if they’ve got ten lights and a big camera on them. I’ve seen it before where an interviewee tells you all these great stories and you agree to come back the following week to record the interview and when the lights go up they are like a rabbit in the headlights. Filming it the way I did made the interviews more relaxed.

I filmed all the establishing shots in their home town, Coimbra in Portugal, back in 2012. Some of my shots were a bit ropey so my friend came with me to redo the shots nicely. It gets the film off to a good start.

DN/NF: Absolutely. I imagine that’s one of the benefits of being your own boss in terms of the timeline and the approach. More money and time in filmmaking would always be good, but sometimes there is a freedom to doing it solo at your own pace that means you have space to put it together as you go along, how you like.

CR: We are talking about low-budget independent filmmaking and it really helped me to do a recce shoot to have something to cut with. Then, when I went back to Coimbra the second time I knew exactly which shots I needed to replace. It saved a lot of time, especially when calling in a favour from a friend. I didn’t want to go to Portugal to film a lot of stuff we didn’t need. We filmed all the replacement shots in about half a day I guess.

DN/NF: This is your first film as a director. Is it the start of something or just a passion project and editing is still the career path.

CR: 100% a passion project and editing is my thing. As an editor I love being as collaborative as I can. The last thing I want to feel is like an operator. I want creative input. This certainly isn’t a stepping stone to get directing work. It’s a one-off. It’s been stressful, but a lot of fun as well.

DN/NF: It’s a great one-off. It might be the *Night Of The Hunter* [Charles Laughton’s famous sole directing credit] of music documentaries. It’s a sweet and insightful film and a great addition to the music documentary genre.

CR: I never really expected the film to interest anyone outside their fan base. I really just wanted to show people a band I love. My favourite live band ever. I felt like I owed it to their legacy and I wanted to show them how good they were. They hadn’t seen most of the footage. They didn’t know some of the gigs had even been filmed. It’s the closest they can get to seeing what it was like for us in the audience.