

It may seem incongruous that one of the most insightful and vital films about culture, place and legacy in 2020 is such a quiet piece of work, and one about folk music at that, given the necessary volume surrounding Black Lives Matter uprisings in the midst of a pandemic and the (constantly) unnecessary noise of so called discourse on the Internet. But, then, 2020 has been that kind of year.

Filmmakers Rob Curry and Tim Plester have followed up *The Ballad Of Shirley Collins*, their brilliant portrait of the folk legend of the title, with a project whose roots lay in that film's genesis and release. *Southern Journey (Revisited)* sees the filmmakers following in the footsteps, almost literally, of Collins and her collaborator Alan Lomax on the late 1950s cross-North America pilgrimage that resulted in the capture and release of some of the most spellbinding indigenous music ever committed to tape. Over the course of the film, audiences spend time with the descendants of the original musicians and those keeping the folk flame alive. It's a beautiful piece of poetic portraiture and one of the remarkable aspects of it is how it folds and refracts time through a variety of filmmaking devices. There's a relaxed approach to the film that echoes both the feeling of the original recordings and the places that the film visits. There's no statement as to the purpose of the trip, just some context of the original trip and the result is a film that isn't politically overt in any sense and is all the more moving and powerful because of that. It would have been easy to lean into caricature and cliché, playing on the audience's preconceptions about the places and people that are encountered but it eschews that. It's commitment to the timelessness of American folk art also means it becomes a film that is very much of the moment, giving time without judgement to the complexities and grey area realities of life in America in 2020, particularly in relation to legacies from the Lomax recordings era and before. Rob and Tim spoke to the *Quietus* about their film and what they hope audiences find within it.

You've spoken about how your love of the music from the 1959 Lomax/Collins field-trip fed into your film about Shirley Collins. When did you know that dealing with it in that project wasn't going to be enough for you?

RC: *The Ballad Of Shirley Collins* started out as a film about "a singer who couldn't sing", so in that context her past was going to be very much the focus of the narrative. However, as the film slowly turned into "the singer who regained her voice", the past inevitably got left behind somewhat, and so I think we knew from back then that we hadn't really done the *Southern Journey* part of the story full justice. The way in which the chance to rectify that came along though was very opportunistic!

TP: When we first set ourselves the task of organising a boutique North American release for *The Ballad Of Shirley Collins*, we quickly settled upon the notion of trying to screen it primarily in locations where we knew Lomax and Shirley had made field-recordings back in 1959. When a number of the venues enquired about the possibility of physical Q&A's with the filmmakers (remember this is a pre-pandemic world we're talking about here), we were struck by the additional notion that if we were going to be there anyway; showing the film in different towns every night, racking up the mileage, eating the cornbread, re-

tracing the route to some degree, then maybe that ought to be something we should be trying to document. It was a classic case of two birds with a single stone really. At a certain point it almost became rude not to.

It feels very much a road movie in its tone and how it moves along. Was the plan to just make a film out of what you got on your travels with the Shirley film or did you respond as you went and, like Wil E. Coyote, lay more track as you went along?

RC: I'm not sure it was as thought through as either of those options. Though it definitely features a great many cars and at least one train.

TP: I think it's fair to say that we had our romantic rose-tinted Jack de K rouac spectacles on to some degree. The lure of the open road is obviously one of the bedrocks upon which American culture is constructed - embodying something of that inherent pioneering spirit, whilst also offering up an escape route to redemption and new horizons. I guess there are any number of deliberately elusive road movies that we could cite as conscious or unconscious inspirations for our approach to the film, but chief amongst them would probably be James Szalapski's Heartworn Highways (1975) and John T. Davis' Route 66 (1981). Both of them openly freewheeling and music-heavy travelogues. Both of them quickly and mostly forgotten.

Were you were genuinely interested in 'making it up as you go along', in the most positive sense of that phrase?

RC: We worked very hard to make the film agenda-less. We went there knowing that when Lomax and Shirley had taken their trip back in '59, by-and-largely white southerners voted Democrat and black Southerners voted (when they could vote) Republican. We also knew that the stereotypes about Southerners were way too reductive to paint the whole picture. So we wanted to explore the transformation in voting patterns and the reality behind the clich s. But, much like on the '59 trip, our mission was to find people with a connection to the music, so the politics was very much a by-product of that rather than the starting point.

TP: When in doubt, we tend to subscribe to the Werner Herzog school of malleable documentary filmmaking. For if there's three important things we've learned from the teachings of The Bavarian Duke over the years, it's that chickens are fiendishly stupid, we all have a "dwarf" inside of us, and - perhaps most relevantly in this case - if you turn up somewhere with the right equipment and the right state of mind, willing to trust in your instincts and in the magical warp-and-woof of the universe, then there exists a strong possibility that something of interest will manifest itself within the parameters of your camera lens. In that respect at least, the making of this film was something of an act of faith. We'd been forced to employ a similar tactic when making our short film Here We'm Be Together a few years back, and so had a modicum of know-how operating amidst such terrain, but Southern Journey (Revisited) proved itself to be an undertaking which took things to a completely different level in terms of operating mostly on-the-hoof. Although we'd done plenty of background

research, and knew the recordings in The Lomax Archives intimately, we were still flying by-the-seats of our pants for large portions of the trip, and we were keen for the finished documentary to reflect that raw kinetic energy in some way.

Can you talk about the editing process in terms of the tone you wanted and photo effects to create the feeling of then and now blending so seamlessly, creating wonderful parallels and links?

RC: On one level the edit was really simple in that we shot the film in a single block, and then just had to work with what we'd got on the road and combine it with the materials from 1959. I guess you could say it started before filming though, as we went through the archive materials – basically a bunch of photos Shirley and Alan took, plus a few beaten-up old maps and, of course, hundreds of hours of audio recordings. We tried to identify buildings they'd visited and then track them down on the ground. It was then a question of matching them with the archive from that location.

Can you talk about the conception of the sound design, which is remarkable, creating this feeling of timelessness where it's unclear at points what are contemporary versions and which are the 'originals'?

RC: It was really the driving focus of the edit I suppose you'd say. How to find ways to weave 1959 and 2018 into a single, interweaving, entity. So photos from "then" juxtaposed with interviews from "now" blend into video from "now" scored by music from "then" to create an alternate reality that transports you to someplace in-between for 80 minutes.

TP: By encouraging people we met to read out Shirley's recollections of the trip (from her 2005 memoir *America Over The Water*) on-camera, we also sought to add a further manufactured layer of interconnectedness to proceedings. You're hearing an English woman's thoughts from 1959 interpreted and filtered through contemporary Southern voices.

Was there an internal or external pressure to make it more directly 'relevant' to now?

RC: We had no external pressures in this film! There really wasn't anyone to answer to, and our lovely Exec Matthew Shaw was happy just to let us get on with it. I think the fact that we were visiting an area so solidly identified with the Trump era meant that we couldn't really avoid addressing that in the film, but that side of things taking equal prominence to the music just happened organically in the edit as everyone we met on both sides of the divide was so generous and articulate in sharing their thoughts with us. And then events sort of imposed themselves on the film through no action of ours in the wake of the George Floyd killing. The final third of the film, which is set in Mississippi, was shot and edited before the BLM protests, but it's incredible how much they reflect all the issues that have arisen. It really reflects how the issues that are coming up in the protests go way back before the '59 trip and the civil rights era to the colonial era and how emancipation was handled.

What do you hope people take away from the film?

TP: The United States is such a vast country, and we can be guilty of forgetting that oftentimes. It's become common knowledge that a large percentage of the American population don't possess a passport, but the deeper reality of that (and this is something that our trip really helped underscore for me) is that many Americans rarely even leave their own state, let alone leave the country. The repercussions of that are clearly something which is going to have some effect on the way you might view the world, and make decisions about what's important to you and your family.

RC: We've talked a lot about politics, but one thing we really hope people take from the film is how incredible, diverse, entertaining and meaningful American roots music is in all its varied forms. In terms of the politics, in a way it's a strange film to have made as two British people, but in a way it's us making a film about the issues around Brexit in a different setting. For me, the message is that the people are never the problem, it's the powers at work at a higher level. I hope it demonstrates that what connects us is much greater than that which divides us, and we'd do well to remember that more often!