

JIMI PLAYS BERKELEY (USA 1971)

Emile Wennekes

R: Peter Pilafian.

P: Peter Pilafian, Michael Jeffery.

K: Joan Churchill, Eric Saarinen, Peter Smokler.

S: Baird Bryant.

B: Peter Pilafian.

Musiker: Jimi Hendrix, Billy Cox and Mitch Mitchell.

P: Dor Jamm Productions / Douglas Music Video / Electric Lady Studios.

DVD-/Video-Vertrieb: New Line Cinema. Palace Video (VHS, UK, 1985). Warner Reprise Video (VHS, USA, 1990).

UA: 13.09.1971 (New York City, USA).

55min (49min), 35mm, Volor, Mono.

›You know what soldiers I'm talkin' about‹. Jimi Hendrix at Berkeley

Shortly before his untimely death in September 1970, Jimi Hendrix gave two Memorial Day concerts in Berkeley, California – stage performances that provided the primary source material for the film *JIMI PLAYS BERKELEY*. For die-hard watchers of rock concert footage, this very first movie to feature Hendrix as its principal subject could be – at first glance at least – of little interest. Nevertheless, this 1971 Peter Pilafian ›rockumentary‹ is a unique artifact within the ›Hendrixology‹ of (concert) films, rare TV show appearances and posthumously created documentaries.

In the Hendrix literature, the movie in question is generally referred to as »a more or less straightforward concert film« [1] that is said to contain »some of the best Hendrix concert footage« ever [2]. The fact that it also shows images of protesters trying to get free admission to the concerts, as well as some footage of politically motivated rioting, places the concert coverage in a more hybrid category, one which includes observational documentary features in a direct cinema style, typical for the time. One need only mention the hand-held camera

documentaries by contemporary Donn Alan (D.A.) Pennebaker - the person behind the Monterey Festival documentary, that featured Hendrix' iconographical guitar sacrifice within the performance of *Wild Thing*.

Although his career was short-lived and his repertoire easily surveyable, a relative amount of audiovisual material featuring Jimi Hendrix has survived, varying from lengthy concert presentations to shorter performances, some interviews and also some backstage footage. This is partly due to the fact that Hendrix was obviously on the verge of becoming involved »in the making of concert film [and] documentaries for distribution in cinemas and other outlets - something being done by relatively few rock acts at the time, The Beatles' *Let It Be* being a notable exception«, as Ritchie Unterberger rightly points out in his recent book on Hendrix [3]. Like the Hendrix discography, much of the audiovisual material is available in different media, compilations and contexts - footage is constantly issued, re-issued and ripped-off in various formats and distributed under comparable titles.

JIMI PLAYS BERKELEY was the first opportunity to watch Hendrix perform at length on screen. In spite of its 49 minutes, the movie presents much more live footage of Hendrix than the iconographical, yet short appearances in documentaries about Woodstock and Monterey. Hendrix's manager, Michael Jeffrey, played a crucial role in the decision to get involved in concert films. It was he who assigned producer Peter Pilafian to the job. »Basically Michael Jeffrey wanted coverage of this concert«, Peter Pilafian recollects in the booklet. »We had full access to Jimi because we were working for Jeffrey.« But: »We were there to get concert coverage, not to make a behind-the-scenes, personal documentary about Jimi.«

JIMI PLAYS BERKELEY is said to have never been intended as a finished theatrical film: »like so many entities associated with his rich legacy, JIMI PLAYS BERKELEY took form in the turbulent vacuum created by Hendrix's untimely death. That it became a commercial property when other footage of Hendrix concerts languished elsewhere in vaults or left unclaimed was due entirely to the maneuvering of Jimi's manager Michael Jeffrey«, to quote author John McDermott, the catalog director of the Hendrix's estate [4].

The film takes us back to the time of major open air festivals, with their spirit of free love, ›flower power‹, drug consumption and massive, yet usually peaceful protests. This atmosphere is well documented, but most of all we see a highly gifted musician and performer at the peak of his physical virility, dressed in a psychedelic outfit featuring headband and wide sleeves [5]. We see a lefty playing his white Stratocaster consequently upside down, presenting a multimedial interaction between music and body movement [6]. It is poignant to realize that this performance took place hardly four months before Hendrix's death.

For the three piece Berkeley concerts Hendrix was reunited with his old army mate Billy Cox on bass and Mitch Mitchell on drums. The concert coverage was shot during two performances that the trio gave on May 30, 1970, in the Community Theater in Berkeley. The film is a mix of both concerts and offers nine songs:

1. Johnny B. Goode
2. Hear My Train A-Comin'
3. Star-Spangled Banner
4. Purple Haze
5. I Don't Live Today
6. Hey Baby (New Rising Sun)
7. Lover Man
8. Machine Gun
9. Voodoo Chile (or ›Child‹ as it spelled here).

For some reason the song that underscores the billing sheets in the opening sequence, *Straight Ahead* (at that time still known as *Pass It On*), is not listed anywhere. It should be noted, however, that this particular performance is the opening song of the audio album with the same title *Jimi Plays Berkeley*; the record presents the entire second set of the evening and is not identical to the film soundtrack.

The shooting of the event was done in an improvisational, better yet even, a reactive way. The Pilafian crew used four cameras for the concert shoot: »someone in the balcony of the theater [who was freakingly zooming in and out - EW] and most importantly, someone right in front of Jimi at the edge of the stage.« There was obviously no stage-based script, no clear plan beforehand for takes and cuts. Pilafian's crew had to react to everything as it happened, just like the two musical sidemen had to react to what their leader was up to: Hendrix did not decide on set lists in advance, but opted »instead to operate solely by feel, reading his audience and reacting accordingly.« The cameramen reacted in turn spontaneously to the subsequent events on stage, at one point even wildly shaking the camera during a stretched tremolo (in *Star-Spangled Banner*). The later cutting and editing was done in a comparable way, not directly »subsumed within the song hierarchy« - for that matter becoming more a parameter of the event itself rather than being »a parameter of the music« - to touch base with Nicholas Cook. The sound of the concert was professionally recorded with Wally Heider's mobile recording truck; Abe Jacobs was designated to engineer the location recording.

The film is comprised of six structural elements:

a) Backstage footage: rare, intimate shots of Hendrix in his stretched limousine, accompanied by his cuties Devon Wilson and Colette Mimram; their arrival at the artist's entrance of the Community Theater; the comprehensive sound check, this time scrupulous in the knowledge that everything would be recorded.

b) Concert footage of the two »fly-outs«, as the band called these weekend concerts, »that required them to fly out at the last minute« [7], leaving weekdays for recording in the Electric Lady Studios in New York City's Greenwich Village.

Augmenting this basic material there is footage that was originally intended as peripheral: a glimpse of what was happening around Berkeley at the time. But it is this added material, documenting place and period of the concerts, which makes the footage unexpectedly poignant. One could here deduce four additional categories:

c) Footage of Hendrix's reception, such as street interviews;

- d) Footage of Woodstock price protesters;
- e) Footage of illegal break-in attempts by people demanding free admission before and during the concerts; and finally:
- f) Berkeley riot footage.

The ways in which *JIMI PLAYS BERKELEY* addresses the viewer can be situated between ›observational‹ and ›interactive‹ – to cautiously refer to a typology suggested by Bill Nichols to represent reality in documentaries [8]. The observational approach can be seen in the footage of the performances and in the riots. The more interactive angle is demonstrated in the footage of Hendrix's reception and within the attempts to enter the venue alternatively.

Relevant to the aforementioned, additional categories, we can conclude that the footage about Hendrix's reception, as well as the topical footage of resident protesters against the showing of Michael Wadleigh's Academy Award winning Woodstock film, was shot outside, all in front of a nearby cinema theater. This material offers some quotes about Hendrix by participants, but – more hilarious and capturing the sign of the times – youngsters postulating that »all music must be free«, while a pet is showing a proclamation that reads: »The people made Woodstock, Warner Bros. makes profit«.

The protesters argued that three and a half buck was too high a price for a movie ticket. This sequence even becomes thrilling when someone who is obviously not sympathizing with this point of view starts an argument that almost leads to a scuffle. These images basically catch the period's political atmosphere, but have nothing directly to do with the simultaneous Hendrix concerts, albeit that, like in the challenged Woodstock movie, Jimi also performed his controversial rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner* during these Community Theater concerts. This, however, can hardly be interpreted as a narrative wink. As if Hendrix – the hero of many a revolutionary of the time – had suddenly joined the capitalist's camp, here represented by Warner Bros...

The theme of the ticket price - now between \$3.50-\$5.50 - also lies behind the attempts to illegally enter the concert venue by jumping over the fence and break-in through the roof. Within this specific category of footage the perspective - presumably unintentionally - changes from observational to interactive. Not only in answering the questions about their motivation to illegally break in, but especially in the protester's attempt to make the film crew their accomplice, by suggesting that they all would crash the venue together, pretending they are members of the crew. This particular footage demonstrates one of the most fundamental anthropological dilemmas on a documentary level: you can not only observe, but being there, is being part of the scene, subsequently influencing it, eventually even becoming part of the narrative.

The final category presented here is the Berkeley riot footage. In a way this material appears even more alien than that of the previous category. Jimi was not present at the riots either, in fact he hadn't been in Berkeley since he was a toddler. Furthermore, the material was not filmed by Pilafian's crew, but was purchased several months afterwards from a news cameraman named Johann Rush, who is separately credited for his material. It was not Peter Pilafian who championed the incorporation of Rush's material, but filmmaker and writer Baird Bryant. He was given a free hand in the editing process by Pilafian. Bryant was previously one of the twenty camera operators involved with the Maysles brothers' shocking Stones documentary *GIMME SHELTER*. He was also the cameraman who shot the cemetery trip scene in Dennis Hopper's *EASY RIDER*. Confronted with a lack of concert material and Jimi already deceased, Bryant broadened the scope to fill in gaps with the film's more political message: it was editor Bryant who spliced footage of the student demonstrations into the performance of the song *Machine Gun*.

But: *who* edited precisely *what* in the version of the film now available will probably remain hidden in the silent tombs of history until the end of time, buried beneath layers of unreliable oral history, perhaps only to be objectified by sources in barely accessible archives. In broad outlines, the production history continued as follows. Dissatisfied with the material Pilafian and Bryant offered him, the manager of the deceased Hendrix hired John Jansen, sound engineer at the Electric

Lady Studios, to re-cut the material once more and to better synchronize the images with the sound; Jansen, however, is not credited at all. Michael Jeffrey - credited as executive producer - apparently later finished the job. Jeffrey ultimately launched a movie with a running time of well under an hour, presenting it in an extended network of colleges and independent theaters, where upon it rapidly gained cult status.

The combat images of Johann Rush show the University of California campus and other places in Berkeley in the weeks preceding the concerts, when they were turned into a battlefield where students - armed with stones, metal rods and a huge catapult - were fiercely fighting the National Guard in full battle gear, wearing helmets, shields and gas masks. This was all triggered by - then Governor - Ronald Reagan and his ominous response to student protests like the one at Kent State in Ohio the previous year: »if there has to be a bloodbath, let's get it over with«. The student protests resulted in 128 injuries and one death.

The Rush material offers very dynamic eyewitness footage and is already present during Hendrix's introductory dedication of the song *Machine Gun*. He dedicates it to »all the soldiers fighting in Berkeley [...] know what soldiers I'm talking about [...] and dedicate it to other people that might be fighting wars too, but within themselves, not facing up to the realities.« Note here that there is no reference made at all to the Vietnam War, something he did however address in the second set with the words: »and oh yeah, the soldiers fighting in Vietnam too«.

The lyrics differ in each performance of *Machine Gun* - Jimi apparently had some Lego building blocks for every tune and text, the components of which are slightly altered in every rendition. The text boils down to the following:

Machine Gun / Tearing my body all apart [2x]

Evil man make me kill you, baby

Evil man make you kill me

Evil man make me kill you

Even though we're only families apart

Well, I pick up my axe and fight like a farmer [2x]
But your bullets still knock me down to the ground

The same way you shoot me down baby
You'll just going just the same
Three times the pain / and your own self to blame
O Machine Gun

Let your bullets fly, my friend
'cause I know all the time you're wrong baby
And you'll be goin' just the same
Three times the pain / and your own self to blame
O Machine Gun.

In many respects the *Machine Gun* sequence is the most adventurous and most telling of *JIMI PLAYS BERKELEY*, alternating diegetic and non-diegetic use of the music. At the start of Jimi's verbal introduction to the song we immediately see shots of the riots, these continue to underscore the guitar riff that forms the musical opening of the song. As soon as Hendrix starts singing his first stanza, however, it is he who gets all the visual attention. This occurs with heavy zooming into often unfocused details, all covered in a blue stage lighting that gives the scenery a blurred psychedelic effect.

With the first guitar intermezzo, the riot images rapidly return; the next vocal passage («I pick up my axe») keeps underscoring the riots. Jimi is once again pictured when he starts his guitar solo, this time rotated ninety degrees, as if the screen has been turned on its left side. At the last stanza («Let your bullets fly») Jimi keeps being cameratized. During the song's climactic closing guitar solo with its »crash-and-burn extravaganzas« [9], feedback and virtuoso whammy bar technique, Hendrix is yet again the primary subject on screen.

The Berkeley protests were directed against the Vietnam War, but did indeed become larger in the process, to become a general anti-war, anti-government movement. The fact that Hendrix – at least in the filmed version – did not address Vietnam specifically, perhaps signifies that he was tuning in to an even higher level of abstraction, which makes *Machine Gun* a song as »a protest against all pointless death« [10]. A distressing fact in regards to his own sudden death. But by cutting in these concrete riots scenes, editor Baird Bryant appears to have cut away other possible narrative layers.

At other moments, however, the documentary-like inserts not only illustrate or comment on the performances, but add extra meaning as well. A striking example is the *Star-Spangled Banner* track, one in which a black kid gets his saxophone lesson in the open. While Hendrix let his guitar yawl »And the rocket's red glare, bombs bursting in air« etc., an obvious hint to the civil rights movement is made. A hero for left wing intellectuals, Jimi was a black man who was barely allowed to enter the front door of southern state theatres during his lifetime. The saxophone playing kid in the street echoes enigmatically the introduction, elsewhere in the film, of himself as: »Yours truly on public saxophone«.

These and many more references make *JIMI PLAYS BERKELEY* an intriguing film, of which we definitively haven't heard the last. Would the film have been constructed solely around the backstage and the concert footage, the definition of »a straightforward concert film« would indeed have made sense. But due to the incorporation of the here suggested, extra four peripheral categories the film is situated in a hybrid framework, it is a sub-genre, neither straight concert film, nor straight documentary. Jimi may be the primary subject of the film, but in the hands of Pilafian and Bryant, he became as much of an object himself, as the Berkeley riots and the resident protesters.

JIMI PLAYS BERKELEY is not a concert film and not a documentary, but it does document Jimi's biotope in a broad scope.

Notes:

- [1] Charles Shaar Murray (2001) *Crosstown Traffic: Jimi Hendrix and Post-War Pop*. London: Faber & Faber, p. 70.
- [2] Charles R. Cross (2005) *Room full of Mirrors: A Biography of Jimi Hendrix*. New York: Hyperion, p. 295.
- [3] Richie Unterberger (2009) *The Rough Guide to Jimi Hendrix*. London: Rough Guides, p. 199.
- [4] John McDermott, »Jimi Plays Berkeley: The Long Strange Cinematic Trip«. DVD MCA/Experience Hendrix DVD Booklet.
- [5] Designed by Emily »Rainbow« Touraine.
- [6] Cf. Nicholas Cook (1998) *Analysing Musical Multimedia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 263.
- [7] Cross 2005, p. 297.
- [8] Bill Nichols (1991) *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- [9] Murray 2001, p. 263
- [10] Unterberger 2009, p. 195.

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