

# WHO'S DON OWEN?

What's he done, and what's he doing now?

by Natalie Edwards

*A Montreal winter: on location for the Ernie Game.*



Quotations in this article are from Toronto, Montreal and New York newspapers, and magazines as noted, as well as transcribed from Owen's talks at a Toronto Film Society Seminar in May 1970, film class notes and taped personal interviews.

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Personally, I don't give a damn about film as film. I want to communicate with it. As a poet, the only people I reached were my fellow poets. I think it's important not just to make good films, but films that audiences want to see.

Said Don Owen to Howard Junker of the *Montreal Star* in 1964. This relative newcomer to the National Film Board's Unit B was being interviewed by the venerable *Star* because at 30, with only two small but worthy little black and white NFB shorts to his name, he had just shot a full feature-length film called *Nobody Waved Goodbye* (showing the NFB's intended first feature, *The Drylanders*, in the shade), and was about to make history (Canadian) with it.

Times passes. It's almost a decade since 1964. Those who don't say "Who's Don Owen and what's he done?" may be saying, "What's Don Owen doing now?"

He started out like many a potential film maker thinking he was something else — maybe a poet. And he went to University of Toronto as people do now, taking whatever interested him, skipping the important-paper bit, the degrees. No grants, so he worked summers for Forest Rangers, in a mine, as a fire spotter. He naturally ended up as a CBC stagehand. And he hung around the Greenwich Gallery and worked at being a poet, just like Irving Layton and Leonard Cohen. And maybe had second thoughts about his poetry. About Leonard Cohen he said in a *Saturday Night* article:

I could get used to the idea that he was a better poet than I was, but he always seemed to leave the gallery with the most interesting woman there, the one I'd spent all evening trying to get up enough nerve to say hello to.

And he discovered film.

Living in Toronto when I was a teenager there was very very little film to be seen. Well, that's not accurate. I was not aware of film, that's all. I came from a working class background and found my way into writing somehow and it took me a while to discover what film was all about. That took place when I started attending meetings of the Toronto Film Society. I saw a few of those masterpieces . . . and suddenly I began to realize what the fantastic potential of the medium was. And then the TFS had a series on Sundays in which they showed 2 or 3 works by one director — and I remember seeing Max Ophul's work, three films I think, something staggering, and the whole kind of possibility of film began to bloom for me. So it wasn't long after that that I took the opportunity of going down to the Film Board in Montreal to work, and it was there that I began to learn how to put a film together.

In Tom Daly's Unit B of the National Film Board were Colin Low, Roman Kroiter and Wolf Koenig when Don Owen joined it. Daly became a kind of guru for Owen, taught him, encouraged him, let him develop. Daly, himself influenced by Grierson, now heavily influenced Owen, who was ripe for hard work and a direction for his creative energies.

When I went to the Film Board . . . I felt like a man who was desperately escaping from some terrible misery because I was very unhappy in Toronto. I was working as a poet and I had come to realize that my work was pretty poor, and I felt very badly about it and of course I . . . sort of dried up — all those things having to do with a relatively emotionally mixed-up childhood.

## Runner (1962)

His first film, *Runner* was a black and white 12 minute short about Bruce Kidd.

A film that was in praise of an athlete, but praising him in a rather lofty way . . . I was interested in the idea of the Pindarian Ode . . .

and so on . . .

Classically constructed, with a commentary written by W. H. Auden at Owen's request, the film was described by the British Film Institute in 1964 as a poem. ". . . it is a film about running or the runner. Matching a very apt quasi-Greek commentary by W. H. Auden, the camera focuses on legs, feet, balancing arms, the body in motion. The style is Spartan, spare and very disciplined; this matches perfectly the control and grace of the runner, and results in a poem to the human body in motion which is wholly successful."

Actually, not quite, according to Owen.

There is a sense in which *Runner* is a kind of perfect film with a very very serious flaw, and that is the commentary is just too dense to understand.

Owen is grateful to the National Film Board for the training he got with them, and the freedom to work without time or commercial pressures.

After I'd finished shooting the film the executive producer, Tom Daly, put me in a cutting room by myself and said, cut it. And left me alone for two months.

In this first film Owen's talent of marrying the technique and style of a film to its subject matter, in this case a classical construction to the sense of discipline and single-mindedness of the runner, was already apparent.

Meanwhile, about 1960, the new light-weight, sync-sound, hand-held cameras created *cinéma vérité*. Godard's *Breathless* in 1959 was revolutionary; in 1961 Cassavetes made *Shadows*. Owen, at this time, added to his experience by working with the French Unit of the NFB as a cameraman on films like *September 5 at St. Henri* (a documentary of a day in a working class district) and *La Lutte* (on wrestling). He liked the French Unit's spirit and use of improvisational techniques.

## Toronto Jazz 1964

*Toronto Jazz* is my first example of working in a candid tradition. It was a film in which I did a lot of experimenting with *cinéma vérité*, with the idea of shooting things just off the cuff. In a sense I think *Toronto Jazz* is a less successful film, in fact it's considerably less successful — it just never worked.

There are lots of good things in it nevertheless, like seeing 1964 Toronto again, the streets and trees and buildings (now so changed), the nightclub life, Michael Snow as a little-known artist and musician, Don Francks in one of the ups of his bobbing career. But most of all the film is interesting as part of Owen's work for illustrating the way he again uses a technique that harmonizes with his material. The casual hand-held camera, unscripted dialogue, the scenes whose length is determined only by their interest, the improvisational inventiveness, all are themselves like the jazz they are showing: spontaneous yet controlled. Mind you, it doesn't quite work. Owen, the poet, is not quite a jazzman on film. But by 1972 he had a firm grasp on this technique for his recent film *Cowboy and Indian*, which has, incidentally, the same subliminal theme: the nature of the creative male, his surroundings, ambiance, the landscape of his creative life.

## Nobody Waved Goodbye 1964

Now, with a 12 minute and a 27 minute film behind him, Owen was assigned a half-hour documentary about a probation

officer and a juvenile delinquent, calculated to be shot in 3 weeks for about \$30,000. And he shot *Nobody Waved Goodbye*. In five weeks (spread out over a year). For \$75,000.

I proposed it as a kind of half-hour story film, and on the original budget it's a half-hour story film called *First Offense*. I started shooting and in the first three days we shot almost half our budget of film and I was already into deep trouble because we were doing something that hadn't been done before, certainly at the Film Board anyway.

John Spotton, who was also Owen's cameraman on *Runner*, just kept shooting . . .

. . . and I kept on ordering more film. It so happened that all the people were away so that in fact there was nobody at the NFB to say don't send any more film. They kept on sending film and I kept on shooting and the story kept on getting more elaborate and more elaborate, and I added scenes — the great thing about improvising is you're really writing the script while you're shooting — so the thing grew. And when I came back to Montreal four weeks later, I was then something like \$10,000 over budget, and I shot 50,000 feet of film instead of 25,000 feet, and I said: I shot a feature.

The NFB didn't fire Owen, and with co-producer Kroiter's backing, Daly's defense, and encouragement from all of Unit B, they let him finish the film. However, the NFB never did quite know how to handle the 80 minute bastard he gave them, so they slipped their surprise feature almost unheralded into Toronto and Montreal in December 1964. And it died.

I was really broken by this. I mean it really shook me. It shook my confidence, terribly.

*Nobody Waved Goodbye* had been shown at the Montreal Film Festival in the summer of 1964, but Gilles Groulx' *Le Chat Dans le Sac* won, and the Canadian Film Awards judges refused to name an overall 1964 Film of the Year claiming there was just nothing good enough. However, the film won the CIDALC award in Mannheim, Germany, and the Flaherty Award, the British Academy award for best feature length documentary in London, and in September 1964 Judith Crist considered it the highlight of the New York Film Festival.

There was nothing more deadly in 1964 than the word local. And this was a local show. Bob Fulford commented in the *Star*: "It seems too bad that the National Film Board is bringing its latest feature into town in such an apologetic way . . . It was made here with a local cast and a local director; it's subject is middle-class Toronto suburban society and an adolescent's revolt against that society . . . But the Film Board is bringing it here in something like secrecy. No publicity campaign that you can notice . . ."

Times have changed, and you have to remember 1964 to recall how disheartening the words *Toronto* and *Canadian* were also when Frank Morriss said in the *Globe*: "It is a sad, dreary, Owen directing Julie Biggs and Peter Kastner in *Nobody Waved Goodbye*."



ineffectual but sometimes moving little film the New Yorker theatre is showing for Christmas. *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, a NFB feature movie made in Toronto with a cast of Canadian actors, illustrates the plight of teen-agers . . ."

In the States however, the problems the film dealt with were more common, or at least more acknowledged, and as big broad and superficial films were common-place, so this lean, honest and original work was a refreshing change. In April 1965 Dan Rugoff distributed it through Cinema V, spending \$70,000 (almost its original cost) on promotion, and deliberately keeping its low-budget Canadian art-film origins quiet. And the New York Critics loved it.

It was hailed as "an exceptionally fine movie" by the *New Yorker's* Brendan Gill, "commensurate in the purity of its intentions, and even in the artistry of its execution, with 'The Catcher in the Rye'." (And oddly enough now shares the fate of Salinger's book by also being offered in high school courses.) *The New York Post* found it a film that views "a contemporary reality with shocking cinematic clarity" and is "alternatively fine and uncomfortably simple." Crowther of *The Times* found it "admirably put forth." *The Daily News* liked the "spontaneous effect" of the improvised dialogues. *Time's* reviewer found the poetry in the film: it "conquers its simple ideas and tangled verbiage with cool cinematic assurance, turning a problem play into a poem." And in the *Herald Tribune* Judith Crist declared "it is a film you should not miss . . . it is a 'small' movie — and a universal one . . ." and put it on her Ten Best List for the year.

And so it came back home, and did well, grossing \$5,000 a week at the Nortown in Toronto compared to the meagre \$3,500 in two weeks it made on its first appearance at the New Yorker.

*Nobody Waved Goodbye* was very important to me personally, because it was the first film that I made that really took off, and was very successful.

In terms of style, Owen worked hard on this film to develop the extraordinary marriage of spontaneity and control he desired.

I was trying to search for the kind of flexibility that you have in candid films, with the formal aspect that *Runner* had . . . a very controlled kind of improvisation.

To do this he used his own story outline, wrote an analysis of the motivations of each character in each scene, and took the actors aside individually explaining only their own motivation to them.

. . . and telling them two totally different stories of what was going to happen, so they often didn't know when they came together and started to talk that they had two different kinds of information.

Peter's surprised laugh when Julie tells him she's pregnant was

*Alexis Kanner in the Ernie Game.*



authentic. Owen extended his own experiences, using the personalities of his responsive cast, and the result made the film seem very honest.

The film tries to get at something in North American life, and get at it with a certain honesty. There are mistakes in it. It was made in a rush and it gets talky in places. It needs a little more control — possibly a compromise between improvisation and written dialogue.

And this is the cinematic problem central to Owen's work: how to retain the natural and keep it under control. How to make movies like jazz — spontaneous and responsive, yet artistically formed, defined and limited. Maybe how to live that way. Godard was making films like that: *Breathless*, *Une Femme est une Femme*, *Vivre sa Vie*. In an interview in *Objectif*, Owen said:

J'admire beaucoup Godard, et bien que je n'essaie pas de le copier, j'aimerais arriver à avoir la même approche que lui vis-à-vis de la mise en scène."

As the first National Film Board feature to open in New York, *Nobody Waved Goodbye* made history. The Film Board continued Owen's training, and Owen concluded:

Actually the film was under-praised in Canada and over-praised abroad.

### Three shorts: 1965

Now if you're somewhat fancifully minded, it's fascinating to note what the Film Board set this inspired and unruly guy to next. First, he was sent to the top of the girders on a New York construction site where the famous Caughnawaga Mohawks of Quebec work, to film *High Steel*, and before he got that cut and finished, he was bundled off to zap around two provinces preparing a film on four poets on a university tour, which eventually appeared as *Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen*, and had to be completed by Don Brittain when Owen was shipped off to Africa to Ittu, Nigeria, to shoot a documentary on a young CUSO Doctor, Alex McMahon and his wife, *You Don't Back Down*.

*High Steel* taught him to handle 35 mm. color, and its use in the film is careful and effective. He loved the adventure, and he didn't fall off the girders.

This was a very scary film to make. But one of the most important aspects of film making for me is the adventure that's always been involved in it. Shooting on the steel meant we had to go up 24 stories and we were shooting off very narrow beams . . . and so we felt at once heroic and foolish at the same time.

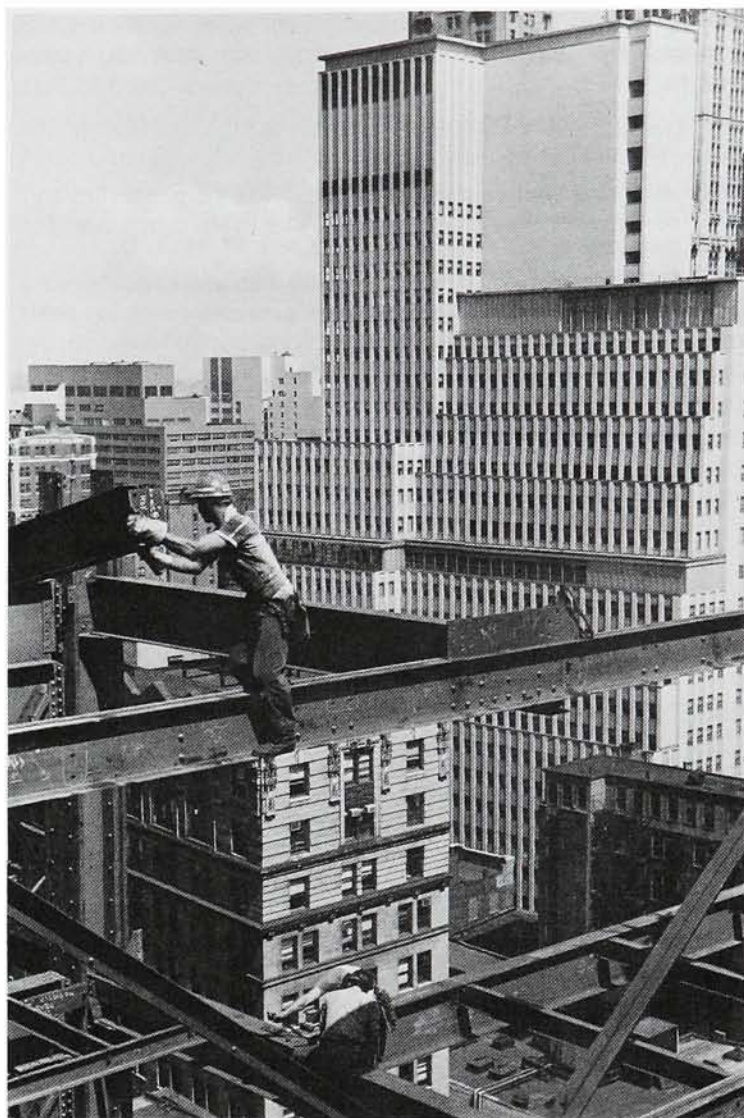
Owen wrote, directed and edited it himself, picking up a Canadian Film Award as "best editor" for it. It was also his first 35 mm. theatrical short.

It's a very challenging form because it's a chance to compress a great deal of material into a very short and lyrical form and you don't structure it the way you would a dramatic work.

It was shown on CBC-TV May 1965, and had wide theatrical distribution.

The one-night-stands with the performing poets were hectic — so rushed in fact that it was almost impossible to film. At least for Owen. So instead he got stoned a lot with his friend Leonard Cohen, and shot the Pierre Berton interview, the performance, parties and make-up room sequences, while Don Brittain shot the rest, including some fascinating footage of Cohen musing about himself in a hotel room. *Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen*, is a good film portrait, but Owen considers it mostly Brittain's film.

Filming *You Don't Back Down*, Owen didn't even get lost in Africa, though the Biafran war was about to start. Driving through a crowd of Ibos in the midst of a political rally, their



NFB *High Steel*

car was stopped and surrounded.

Then they started to rock the Volkswagen, back and forth, and there was a moment when I felt — sheer panic — then somebody laughed, and they all laughed, and the tension was broken and they (*the crowd*) opened up and we drove on. But you could sense that fantastic tension everywhere. It was a great experience.

*You Don't Back Down* is 28 minutes, shot in 16 mm. black and white.

In a sense I suppose the big experience for me in this film was making the film, going there, and being like the central character, rather square, and protected, and innocent, and coming up against death and — incredible things.

The work that Owen did on these three shorts, plus an effective CBC Telescope on *Monique Leyrac in Concert*, greatly increased his technical competence and prepared him for something unique and personal again.

### Notes for a Film About Donna and Gail, 1966

Using the successful candid style of *Nobody Waved Goodbye* and 16 mm. black and white, Owen began a probe of the schizophrenic nature of friendship in a pair of working-class girls, Donna and Gail, and, as he experimented with several film styles in order to try to capture the elusive nature of his subject, he logically titled the 48 minute result, *Notes for a Film about Donna and Gail*.

This remains his favorite film, despite the fact he is usually very fond of whatever he's just been working on. Unlike

**Nobody Waved Goodbye**, which linked actor Kastner's experiences with Owen's own knowledge of rebellious adolescence —

I did come to put a lot of my own life into. People say the boy is very much like me . . .

. . . **Donna and Gail** was not so noticeably a personal film and has never been criticized as the later **The Ernie Game** was, for self indulgence.

The film is visibly organized in Godardian sections; there's a prologue, and episodes of the two girls meeting, settling their apartment, working, dating, and breaking up, followed by an epilogue. The naturalistic factory sequences are memorable, and quite unique in Canadian film, and the performances by Jackie Burroughs as Gail and Michèle Chicoine as Donna are downright remarkable. Although several styles are implemented (direct interview, voice-over interview, story-telling, candid camera) basically Owen still is experimenting with a compromise between the spontaneity of improvisation and the tighter control of scripted dialogue (using Gerald Taafe's "charming script").

I'm after the real honesty of the situation. And as you work with actresses in the environment of the story, you begin to find ways of doing what is real that even the best writer couldn't, at his desk.

As an undercurrent to the girl's relationship, while the narrator (read by Pat Watson) ponders their attraction to each other, and their effects on each other, he also reveals something of his own lonely problems, and of how studying the girls aids him in understanding himself.

In a lecture to a night class on film Owen explained that he was fascinated with the subject because the separate natures of the girls were like parts of himself: the practical, hard and realistic; and the imaginative, immature, responsive, yet separate. He said in **Take One** of the film, that it

. . . expresses my own particular kind of schizophrenia — my teeter-tottering between two worlds . . .

Martin Knelman, writing for the *Toronto Star* in 1968, described the film as "intimate, spontaneous, personal, probing . . . the film is a study, a sketchy and unpretentious effort" whose scope he felt revealed "what we ought to be doing in film in this country right now."

**Notes for a Film About Donna and Gail** won in the medium-length category at the Montreal International Film Festival in 1966, and received a General Information Award, Canadian Film Awards, 1967.

When I started to make **Donna and Gail**, I was starting to make a film in which I had to solve all the problems because they were completely new ones in terms of what I wanted to do. I found myself out in areas where I didn't have any examples to fall back on, to do the kind of film that I wanted. And somehow that was the moment for me of really becoming a film-maker. Nothing I'd done before that really touched that level.

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By this time in Owen's work, after six years and six films with the NFB, several themes are apparent. One concerns the middle class. He told Dusty Vineberg of the *Montreal Star*:

The middle-class isn't something I despise. After all, most people want to get married, have children and aspire to that kind of life. But how are we going to survive that kind of life? How do you live a life where you don't destroy your children, which is creative and meaningful, and where there is love, in a society in which all obvious needs are satisfied?

He remains interested in this problem, how you survive and make your life meaningful in an affluent society. After all, he says, if all the social revolutions are successful, what you end

up with is well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed people. And once you've achieved that, then what . . .

About his African film, **You Don't Back Down**, he said:

Nobody caught on but it is really a film about my basic theme. The McMahons are from a very middle-class background. These people are forced to reconsider their values, and that's good.

And **Nobody Waved Goodbye** was highly praised for its sensitive comprehension of the middle-class. His *au courant* awareness caught the drift of the times accurately.

**Nobody Waved Goodbye** was the story of a young man from a middle-class home who had a banjo and ran away from home to sing songs. (*It was*) just around the time Dylan was about to start singing. I don't think he was on the market. But it certainly wasn't based on Dylan, it was just my intuition about what was going on. And it preceded the whole movement.

And finally, **Rosedale Lady**, the film he should be making now, may once again examine middle-class values.

There's a sense in which **Rosedale Lady** is a reprise of **Nobody Waved Goodbye**. **Nobody Waved Goodbye** is about a young kid breaking out of a well-to-do middle-class home and going out and becoming a thief. And this is the story of a thief breaking his way into an establishment family . . . and taking up a role in society as a kind of responsible person.

Another theme is the complexity of his own character, the nature of a divided personality. First explored in **Donna and Gail**, who represented two aspects of his psyche, he prods it further with Ernie of **The Ernie Game**, who represents the oil-and-water-in-one combination, creating a character so in flux and so evasive of self-understanding that he can only be a loser. This was to be a trilogy, but Owen said:

The third film I lived through. That's what I've been doing. The idea of the film, **Going to Gail'sville** it was going to be called, was about going to the country to live, something I'm doing right now.

However there are a lot of uncompleted projects in every film maker's life.

All the things I wanted to do and never did, eh . . .

But meanwhile Owen became drawn to some highly personal impressions written by Bernard Cole Spencer about mental hospitals and mental illness, that the NFB might use for a documentary on mental health.

I didn't even know at the time why I was interested in it. It was as though my sensibility was excited by it in an unconscious kind of way.

## The Ernie Game, 1967

. . . originally it began as a story of a man who was presumably a schizophrenic and as I started to work on it I became aware first of the appalling ignorance on the subject . . . the whole nature of insanity is so far away from our understanding. It's like another human existence.

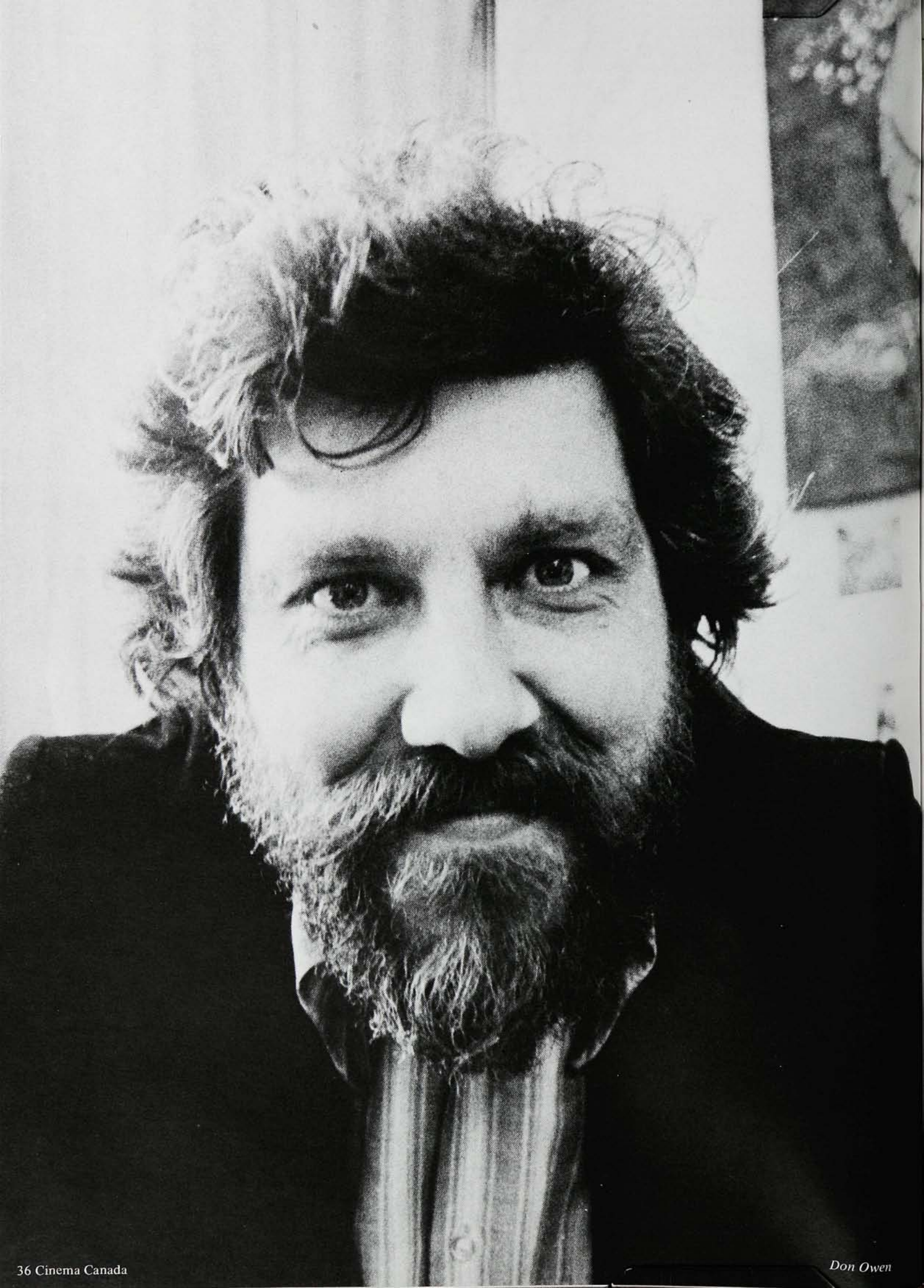
He decided to use the **Donna and Gail** characters again to help interpret the character of Ernie.

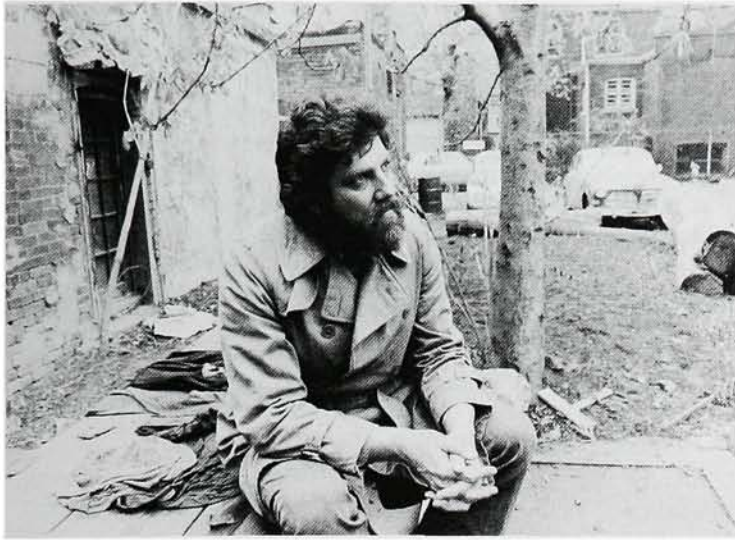
I wanted to suggest what a schizophrenic was without telling you, and the way I suggested it was to show the relationship between the two girls . . . two people who are totally opposite in qualities, because that's what schizophrenia is, the inability to resolve one's impulses going in opposing directions. We all have it. We're all schizophrenic. To an extent.

A co-production between the NFB and the CBC, **The Ernie Game** was intended to be one of a number of such efforts (including **Kelly's Waiting for Caroline**) to be shown on CBC-TV (Festival) and then released to movie theatres: a Centennial Project.



*"Don Owen directing Judy Gault in The Ernie Game."*





... an astonishing amount of pressure was put on us, both Ron Kelly and myself. I mean we really had a sense that it just had to be fantastic. And we had **two** sets of executives to deal with: the CBC and the NFB ...

The big budget also made people nervous. Shooting was delayed while Owen replaced an ill director for some adventure-some filming of the formation of a volcanic island off Iceland, and again when he was required to shoot a scripted documentary about an adopted boy, **A Further Glimpse of Joey**, for the NFB.

I was about to shoot **The Ernie Game** ... desperate to get going on it, and the Film Board said to me, before you shoot **The Ernie Game** you have to shoot this film ... (*It was*) partly to make me get more experience working with actors because they were afraid in such a big budget film ...

Owen prepared a 140 page script, and had a nine week shooting schedule and a budget of \$265,621. The 86 minute 35 mm. color feature took somewhat longer and went over budget. It was shown on CBC-TV November 8, 1967.

*Time* called it a "... low budget production (\$300,000)" and rated it "not-to-be-missed." But that December Senator Fournier, a Conservative from New Brunswick, called it and Kelly's **Waiting for Caroline** (which went \$190,000 over budget) "indecent, immoral and repulsive ..." and hoped the films would "never again be shown in Canada or anywhere else," as he bitterly complained to the Senate about their cost. The third projected CBC-NFB co-production was not made.

Despite Senator Fournier's help, the film only ran two weeks at Cinecity in Toronto in October 1968, and a subtitled version didn't open in Montreal until February 1969. Columbia distributed.

Owen said in **Take One** in 1967:

**The Ernie Game** is very modern, very contemporary. The things that it deals with are things that are the preoccupation of the psychedelic generation ... sanity, insanity, consciousness.

The film was beautifully shot in Eastmancolor by Jean Claude Labrecque, with Owen carefully guiding the psychological effects of color. Background music was by the then little-known Kensington Market. Leonard Cohen sang a song in a party sequence that suggested a poetic key to the film: "It's hard to hold the hand of any man, who's reaching for the sky just to surrender ...".

In style, Ernie's complex and enigmatic character, and the film's open-ended construction belong to a coolly observant, unromantic novel, and Owen admits to trying to use film personally as if he were writing a book. He experiments with film poetry too, capsulating clues and statements in certain symbolic little scenes like Ernie kissing and trying to know and love the cold-reflection of himself in a mirror, or the double-

edged sequence of Ernie shooting people with an empty camera, watching with delight his momentary influence as they react.

**The Ernie Game** excited contradictory responses in viewers and critics. At the time Gerald Pratley wrote in the *Toronto Telegram*, "**The Ernie Game**, viewed in a press preview, is an utter failure ... The character of Ernie Turner in the film, monotonously played by Alexis Kanner, is a totally uninteresting young man ... He walks through the picture, aimless and foolish, and leaves us quite unmoved ... And it is doubtful that he has any appeal for the younger generation which is supposed to be turned on to this kind of outcast, anti-hero."

At the other extreme Mark Slade, a young man writing for the *Montreal Gazette* the same day, gave a four column praise-laden eulogy to the film: "His dilemma is the dilemma of his age ... he is trapped in a social experiment which, in a mindless zeal for success, has long since dropped any pretension to human value." Slade sees Ernie: "As many sided as an insect's eye, this fellow wanders awkwardly into our psychotic space, stays awhile, makes us laugh, makes us cry, then recedes behind the drugged blur of an upstairs window. To live with him much longer would be unbearable; he can hardly live with himself."

People in fact reacted to **The Ernie Game** as they would have reacted to Ernie. Clyde Gilmour in the *Telegram* found "The foolish, self-absorbed drifter of the title role, played with undeniable skill by Alexis Kanner of Montreal, is a boring and irritating character," and appears to have small tolerance for "This parasitical fellow, with his condescending smile and his allergy to soap." While *Toronto Star's* Patrick Scott called it "... an unalloyed disaster" and claimed it must "rate as the largest pile of garbage committed to film since the invention of the nickelodeon."

Joan Fox, in the *Globe*, noted "A little warmth in this study would have worked wonders," typifying the irritation felt by many viewers who wanted to, but just couldn't, take Ernie. Owen's cool, anti-sentimental, anti-romantic direction denied direct empathy with the character.

I was determined to be kind of very cold and outside the character.

Owen's skill at luring the audience into caring and then alienating them the moment they did, kept the character remote, unknowable. It perplexed the audience with the same kind of dual reactions to Ernie that Ernie had himself to society. This induced something like schizophrenic sensations in the audience resulting in uneasiness, irritation, insecurity. It also perfectly illustrates Owen's technique of matching the style of his film to its subject. (McLuhan was then saying, the Medium IS the Message!)

Bob Fulford observed in the *Star*, 1967: "**The Ernie Game** exemplifies Owen's method as well as his central theme — it's open-mesh filming, lots of gaps, lots of questions unanswered. It demands participation."

At the Berlin Film Festival in June, 1968, critic Elvira Reitze praised the film "... so full of gags and pain," while at home, the wonderful Wendy Michener, whose death was such a sad loss to Canadian film criticism, called it "nothing less than the best English-Canadian fiction film to date and, what's more, a strikingly original, highly personal and engaging film," and after her fourth viewing, added, "all those who can't stand weakness or failure will probably despise both Ernie and the film."

What it's all about were all the things that were wrong with me.

An Etrog for best director was awarded Owen at the 1968 Canadian Film Awards, after **The Ernie Game** was pronounced Best Feature.

(**The Film maker**) must expose himself, and that involves the possibility of great pain. When I made **The Ernie Game** I went through what Ernie went through. By the time I finished I was exhausted.



By this time Owen needed a break and his family life needed mending.

Working at the Film Board one tends to neglect one's life. It's (*the NFB*) inaccessible, so you tend to go out there and stay out there. You are away a lot. By the time I left I had a real patch-up job to do on my life . . . on my marriage.

Separated from the Film Board, Owen did a brief stint for the United States Information Agency scripting *The Real Big Society* with a group of lower east side kids, then with a Canada Council Grant, took off to "study film making abroad" travelling to London, Paris, Rome and Berlin to meet film makers and study techniques during actual filming. The family settled in Ibeza, (Santa Eulalia) Spain, for 10 months of peace and rest.

He sounded confident on his return. He told Melinda McCracken in the *Globe*:

I'm willing to try anything once. Any drug or experience. It's an obligation you have to your sensibility as an artist. I have to keep changing. I change my appearance about every six months. My hair gets longer or shorter. I get fatter or thinner. Even with a family, I have to keep this insecurity and change in my life. You can do both.

On Judith Crist's recommendation, he was asked by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, N.Y. to make a film about their gallery, and given free reign as long as he included the important works.

### Gallery: A View of Time, 1968

*Gallery* is a classic, inventive and dazzling 14 minute color trip in the Albright-Knox, synthesized with a vivid and unusual sound track using electronically magnified footsteps, typewriter sounds, children's voices and twentieth-century noises, generally for harmonic, though occasionally for contrapuntal, effect. McCracken reviewed it in the *Globe* as "a work of art in itself," and it satisfied the gallery well, justifying the opinion of Smith, the Gallery director, that "Owen is the best" and of Houston, a member of the Board, who felt "he's probably the most promising young film producer in America."

This work proved that Owen has mastered cutting, editing, filmic rhythm, organization, structure, original sound, and the ability to unite all these and say something explicit (about the gallery, its architecture, its uses) and implicit (about modern art, its connections with modern life, its sources) with control and style and with beauty.

He'd already established a reputation as a director who brought tremendous realistic performances out of actors (Peter Kastner and Julie Biggs in *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, Michèle Chicoine and Jackie Burroughs as Donna and Gail, Alexis Kanner as Ernie, and Judith Gault as the later Donna), and now with further proof of his skills as a film maker and a shelf of awards behind him, where were the great Canadian films he should be making?

### Three CBC Telescopes, 1971

*Snow in Venice*, *Richler of St. Urbain* and one on Coughtry in Ibeza.

. . . it meant going to Europe and shooting three films in three weeks in three totally different locations: one in England, one in Spain and one in Italy . . . No script . . . I just shot them right off the cuff.

The two screened on Michael Snow and Mordecai Richler are good film portraits, carefully constructed, cut and balanced, resulting in apparently casual, slightly unorthodox, entertaining programs.

Owen's skill at matching film technique to the characteristics of the film's subject worked particularly well capturing artist-

musician-film-maker Michael Snow, whose extraordinary film *Wavelength* was the prizewinner at the Venice Biennale. The style of *Snow in Venice* involved a careful blending of the necessary factual, biographical aspects, a quick look at the Biennale itself (the camera literally rushing around and past things, a scoopy view), some camera trickery with a projected image (raising the question of just what an image is), and a long concluding section just following Snow around as he photographed himself with his Polaroid, while he tried to place a moving blurred portrait of himself in front of a focused background of classic tourist shots of Venice. This section of the *Telescope* expands Snow's statement that "it is central to his art to collaborate with chance," by doing just that as it observes Snow trying to solve the problem he has just set himself, also illustrating his comment that "the artist makes up the rules of the game and then attempts to play it."

*Richler of St. Urbain* . . . was just when he was finishing *Horseman*, he was struggling through that tidying-up work. I really got to like him enormously.

The main effort of this *Telescope* portrait was discovering the interest in the character, letting Richler reveal himself, his way of life, his thoughts.

Another one on *Graham Coughtry in Ibeza* which never got finished. I still have only the cutting copy of it now. But it's one of my very favorite films. It's very weird, strange - a peculiar film. (*Actually*) it's finished, but the CBC refused it, so it never got test printed. It's just really very poetic landscape description with some very new things evolving with the camera.

### And after that?

Then I did some commercials. I thought it was great. I learned a tremendous amount about time in film, like how much you can get into a ten-second shot.

### Cowboy and Indian, 1972

In 1972 Owen, under a contract from NFB, made *Cowboy and Indian* for an amount neither he nor the NFB care to mention. "The most expensive," says a critic, "home movie ever made." Maybe the best too.

I figure it's like a home movie.

Here in *Cowboy and Indian* Owen pulls together his special ability to view a subject in the subject's manner, to comprehend and communicate the creative person's life, to suggest creativity, to film in an apparently informal, casual, relaxed manner which in reality covers a well-constructed, symmetrical, totally unified skeleton under the loose flesh of the body of the film. The work is truly organic.

This style, begun with *Toronto Jazz*, extended with portraits of Cohen, Snow, Richler, Coughtry, really swings here. As in *Jazz* itself the seemingly haphazard, relaxed improvisations within the rhythmical framework, sometimes work really well, sometimes not. The result is a look at the life and times of two artists (here, as in *Donna and Gail*, he uses the contrast between types to accentuate the individual characteristics of each), Gordon Rayner and Robert Markle, their work, their environments and their way of life, that will stand as one example of how to treat the elusive subject of artists, by avoiding the clichés so often found in informative little films busily proliferating for educational TV, high school film libraries, etc.

"An artist's life is exemplary," says Michael Snow, and indeed it does epitomize what contemporary people are beginning to realize is a desirable way of life. And *Cowboy and Indian* is every boy's dream come true, it seems to be the perfect life: a world of fun, inventiveness, friends, food and love. In the absolute core of the film Markle's wheezy irresistible laugh seduces the audience into joining him, and when, by the end of the central section, the casual chaotic crowd

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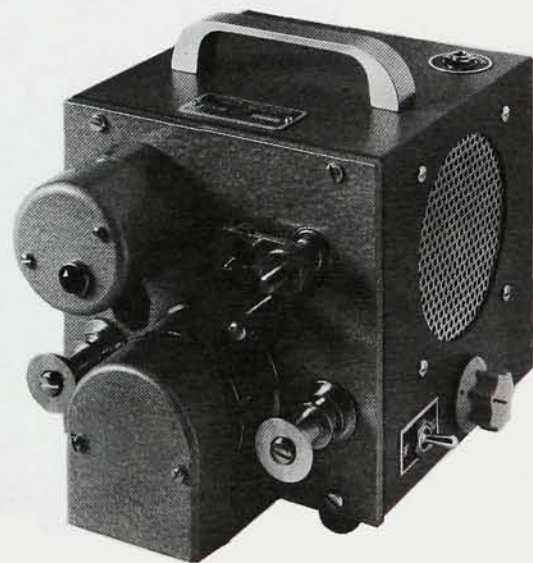
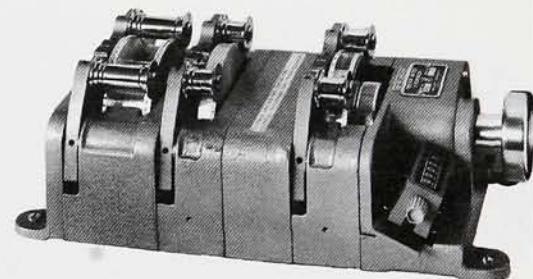
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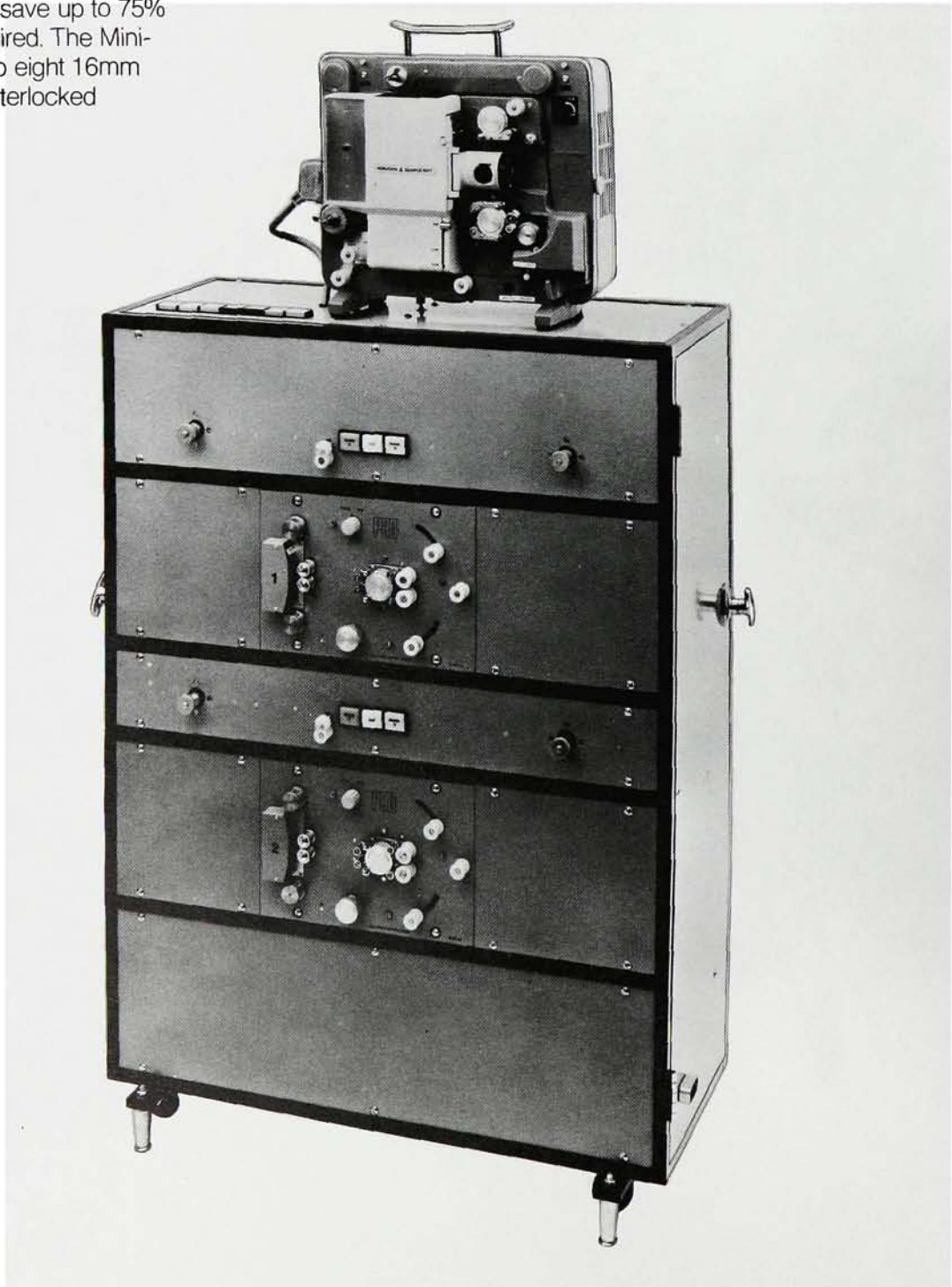


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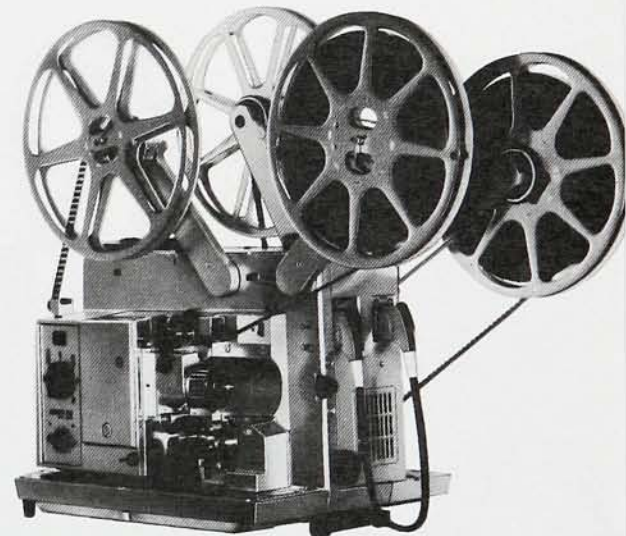
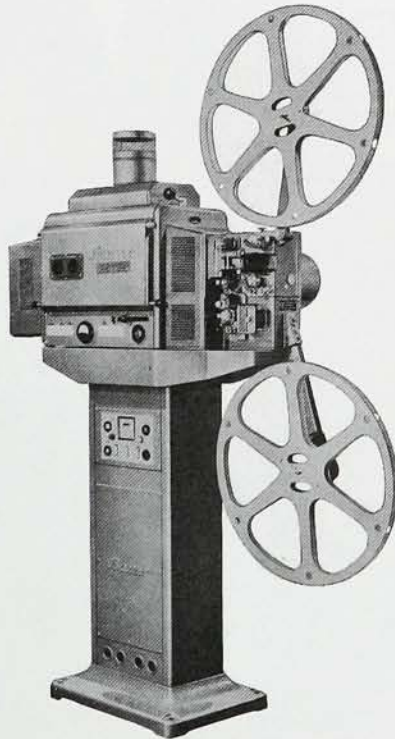
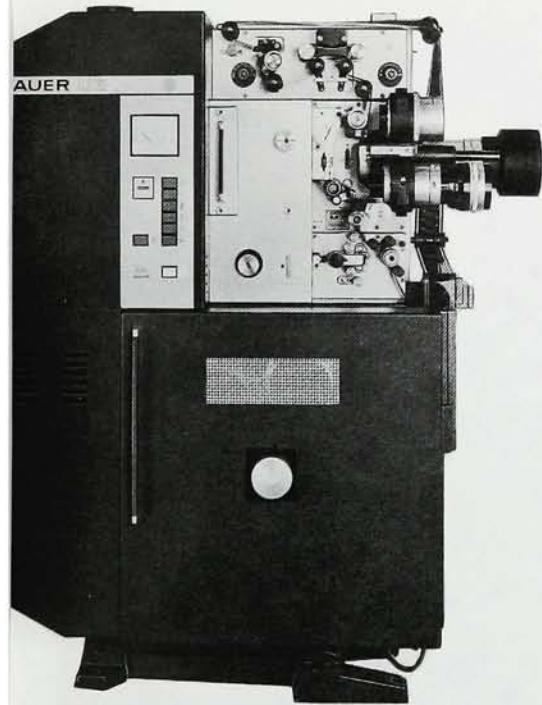
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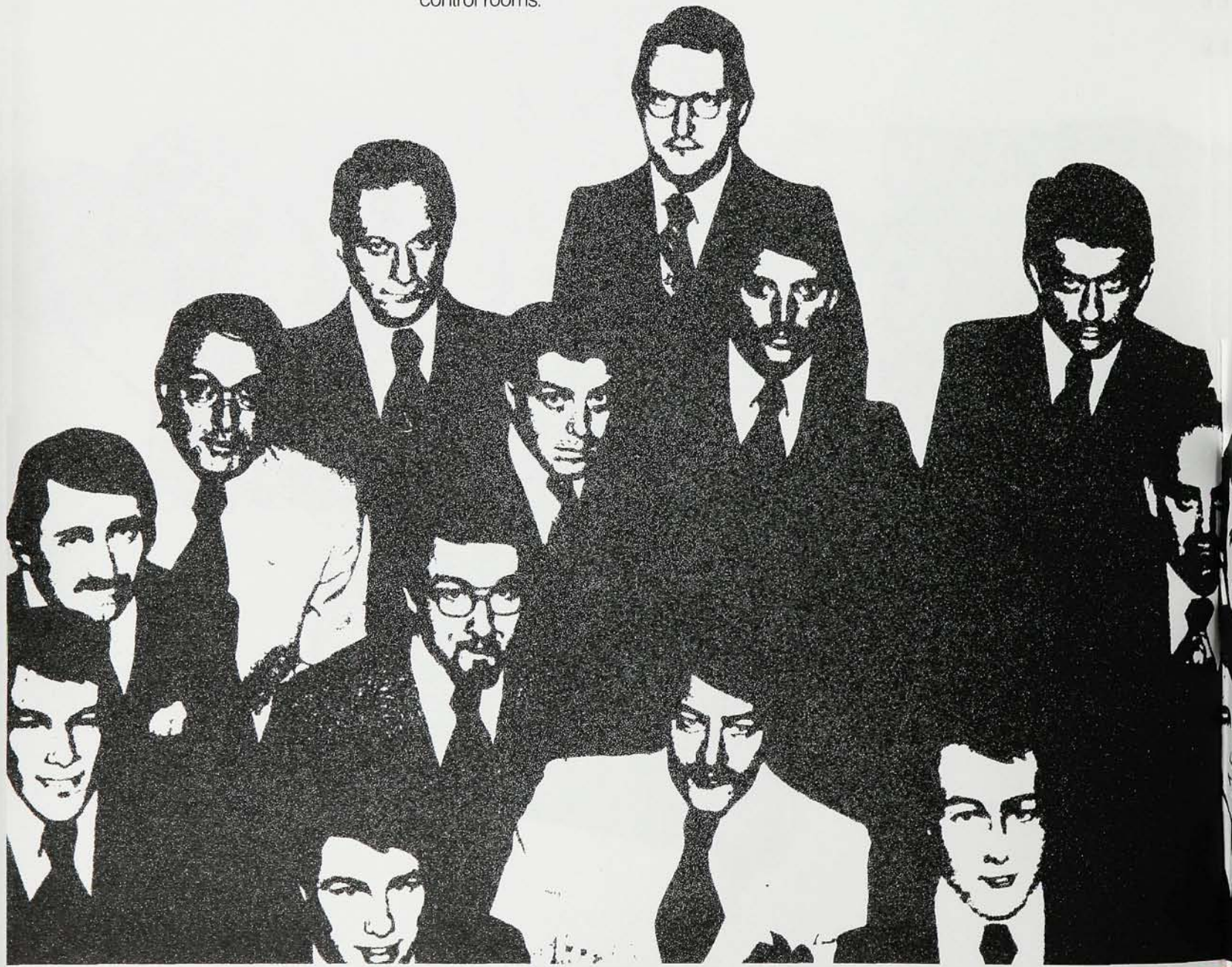
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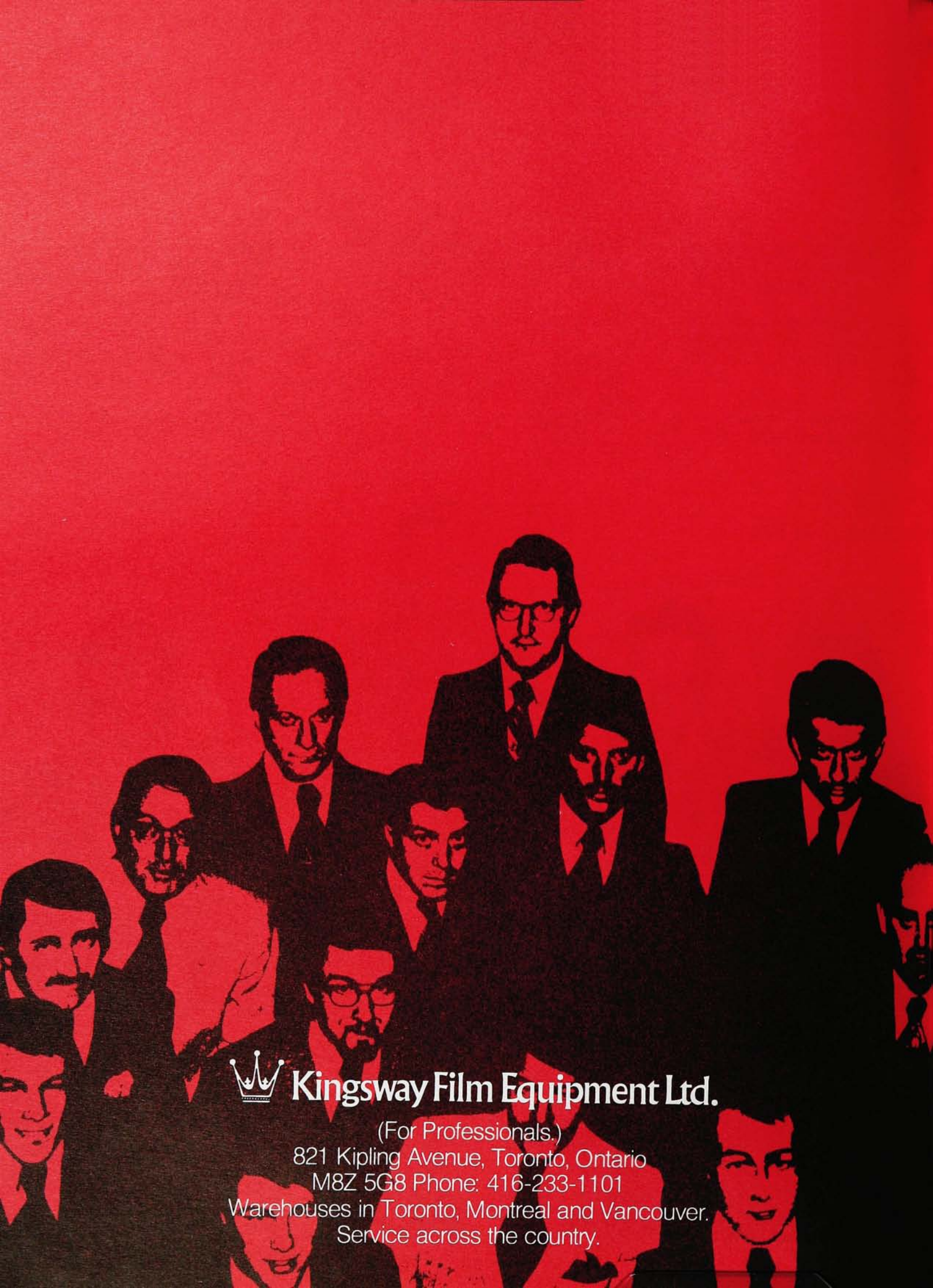
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around the dinner table encourage the filming crew to join them with "Put down the camera!" the invitation is an open one that includes the audience, suggesting: join us, it's great.

Reactions to the film have varied. Some find it incoherent, unfamiliar, they don't understand the language; and some women find it maddeningly chauvinistic, refusing to see the artists as artists, but only as males whose cozy existence is made comfortable by the women quietly in the background.

(Some) women have very negative reactions to the film because the men are such male chauvinists in a way. You really see it in the film. And in a sense that's what they are. They make that work.

It's a dream world; a perpetual party. And it's hard to make it work.

I went back to the NFB to make this film, and it's a really funny thing, the film was shot and then, while I was cutting it, my whole life just kind of fell to pieces. My wife left, and I had the children, and to cut film, and cook, and it was the beginning of all that experience. Now I find it very easy, but then . . . , porridge on the film . . . .

Suzanne, who, as a dutiful daughter in a large French Canadian family had accepted a "motherly" role nearly all her life, now left Owen and the children, and travelled to India to follow her guru.

Why shouldn't she do it. I think it's the only thing to do. I think it's what it's all about, you know.

Which is true, and he does, although somewhat wryly he comments:

The thing is I feel like I'm one of the martyrs to women's liberation.

Concerning Women's Lib he also says:

I think the most exciting thing right now is Women's Lib.

## Rosedale Lady 1973?

I don't want to tell you what it is. Briefly, though, it's a film that attempts to examine some of the aspects of the new nationalism in Canada. Essentially, it's a thriller involving the takeover of a Canadian company by a large American conglomerate. This also involves a portrait of a very Toronto family and in a way the American thing is used in a sense to define the Canadian thing. We may not know who we are but we're beginning to know who we're not. Norman Snyder is the writer. We're just completing the third draft of the script, which we hope to start shooting in the fall. The earlier attempt to mount the film on a low budget was a mistake, and we've now decided to do the film in a proper professional way, with stars and technicians experienced in feature film making.

Sounds like an Owen film — contemporary, somewhat controversial, and Canadian, but not in a limiting sense. Owen doesn't feel he'll have any difficulty in acquiring renewed CFDC backing for part of the cost of the revised film. He is, however, on the lookout for a producer.

## Meanwhile

At present Don Owen lives quietly in the country near Green River, Ontario, with two sons, and a cat; alone. Here he writes poetry, shoots film, and meditates.

There are times when I don't do anything. Don't even think. I just sit, or go for walks and my life is very empty and I love it. I think it's a very hard thing to learn to acquire space in your life. I learned a lot this summer about that.

### Is he content?

I've gradually been more and more pursuing possible ways of dealing with that question — of not so much happiness but, some ultimate solutions for my life, through meditation maybe,

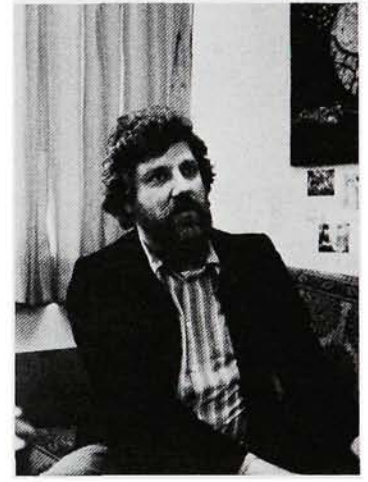


photo: Frederik Manter

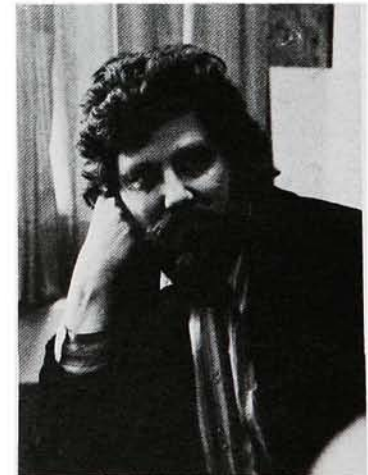


photo: Baltazar/Koller

or just sitting — really what I do.

To me Owen seems warm and considerate (though I believe him when he says he can be difficult and cold); a quietened man laying in stores of energy for a creative burst somewhere in the near future.

And this time I feel different in my life. Well, I just want to get working. I've been lying low for a while, but I'd like now to go into a period of intense work.

**He hasn't been exactly idle, however.**

I've been teaching myself to be a cameraman. I shot about fourteen little films about two to five minutes long about small towns; each one is a portrait of a different small town, Green River, Locust Hill . . . , they're really documentations for the future of what it was like here. For the sound track I had people about 75 or 80 talking about life in their time; they talk about life in the town, and all you see are the streets and the buildings. Sometimes during a conversation between two people the camera goes back and forth between houses and you have the sense that the houses are speaking. But it's really the life of the houses. I've sold some to the CBC. They're really meant to make one film — an hour long film all about small towns.

**He should be in demand by all the threatened communities to try to help them capture something of what they were before they disappear into condominiums and conformity.**

Also I've just finished an hour-long special for CTV on the St. Lawrence River. It's part of a series on the geographical regions of Canada. It was shot and cut very quickly and maybe it shows it, but personally I think it was a kind of homage to my former wife, Suzanne, who is now in New Zealand. What I know about French Canada I learned from her, and the film contains my love and admiration, with a few misgivings. The film is inspired by a phrase from Gilles Vigneault which would translate as "You think it's a woman, but it's a river." I really enjoyed making this film.

\* \* \*

**Summing up for me, Don Owen concludes:**

When I look back on my work now I feel a great detachment from most of it. **High Steel** and **Gallery** seem OK because of the careful craftsmanship that still stands up. **Notes for a Film about Donna and Gail** has a certain compassion that still seems

valid. In **The Ernie Game** I still like the alternation of 'gags and pain.'

It takes a long time to get off the ego trip aspect of film-making and learn what you really have to bring to the craft. I see myself now as being really a catalyst for other people's talents. The knack is to encourage, surprise, challenge the writer, cameraman, actor or editor to give the best they can, so now in making films I'm trying to provide spaces where people can do their own thing.

In a certain sense a film director is the only person on the set who can't do anything. He's totally at the mercy of his collaborators and chance. Most of the really good stuff in film-making seems to come out of the blue. It starts to rain — and you keep on shooting — and it looks better than what you had in mind. It's a curious combination of insisting and accepting. So as well as collaborating with a great number of people you are also in a way collaborating with chance.

Finally, I love making films because of the group spirit involved. There's a certain point at which the film takes over and the commitment becomes complete for everybody. You can feel the excitement and unity of people working together — in a sense you kind of disappear into the group. That's why I'd like to make comedies.

Let me explain:

We lived in Ibeza a couple of years ago in a small town, a fishing village, where a few other Canadians lived, like Graham Coughtry. At the end of a long winter, there was a very desolate feeling in our group of friends. People were very strung out, for reasons I can't even remember now. Then around the middle of March a Marx Brothers film, in Spanish, showed at the local Cinema. I think it was **Night at the Circus**. The audience was about a third expatriate, Canadian, American and British, and the other two-thirds were Spanish farmers. The film completely took us over. Everybody laughed. All the way through. And when the film was over, everybody was beaming. And for days afterward you could see people going around looking changed. It somehow saved us.

I realized that if cinema has anything, like an icon it has a kind of transforming power. If it's really good, and it's got the magic, it can lift you up and help you and that's a very great thing. A privilege. I don't think I'll ever be able to reach that plane, but it's this possibility that keeps me making films. And why I always dream of making a comedy.

## Two Owen films at Science Centre

The Ontario Film Theatre continues its Canadian Cavalcade series in June, with Harvey Hart's **Fortune and Men's Eyes**, Mireille Dansereau's **La Vie Rêvée** (Dream Life), and Peter Rowe's **Neon Palace**. The Wednesday night screenings are organized and moderated by Ontario Film Institute President Gerald Pratley.

On June 27th, two short feature films by Don Owen will be shown: **Notes for a Film about Donna and Gail** (1966) and **Cowboy and Indian** (1973). Owen will participate in a discussion after the screening.

Paul Almond's **Act of the Heart**, with Geneviève Bujold and Donald Sutherland, will be presented on July 4th for the Ontario Film Theatre audience. All showings are at 8 P.M. at the Toronto Science Centre.



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