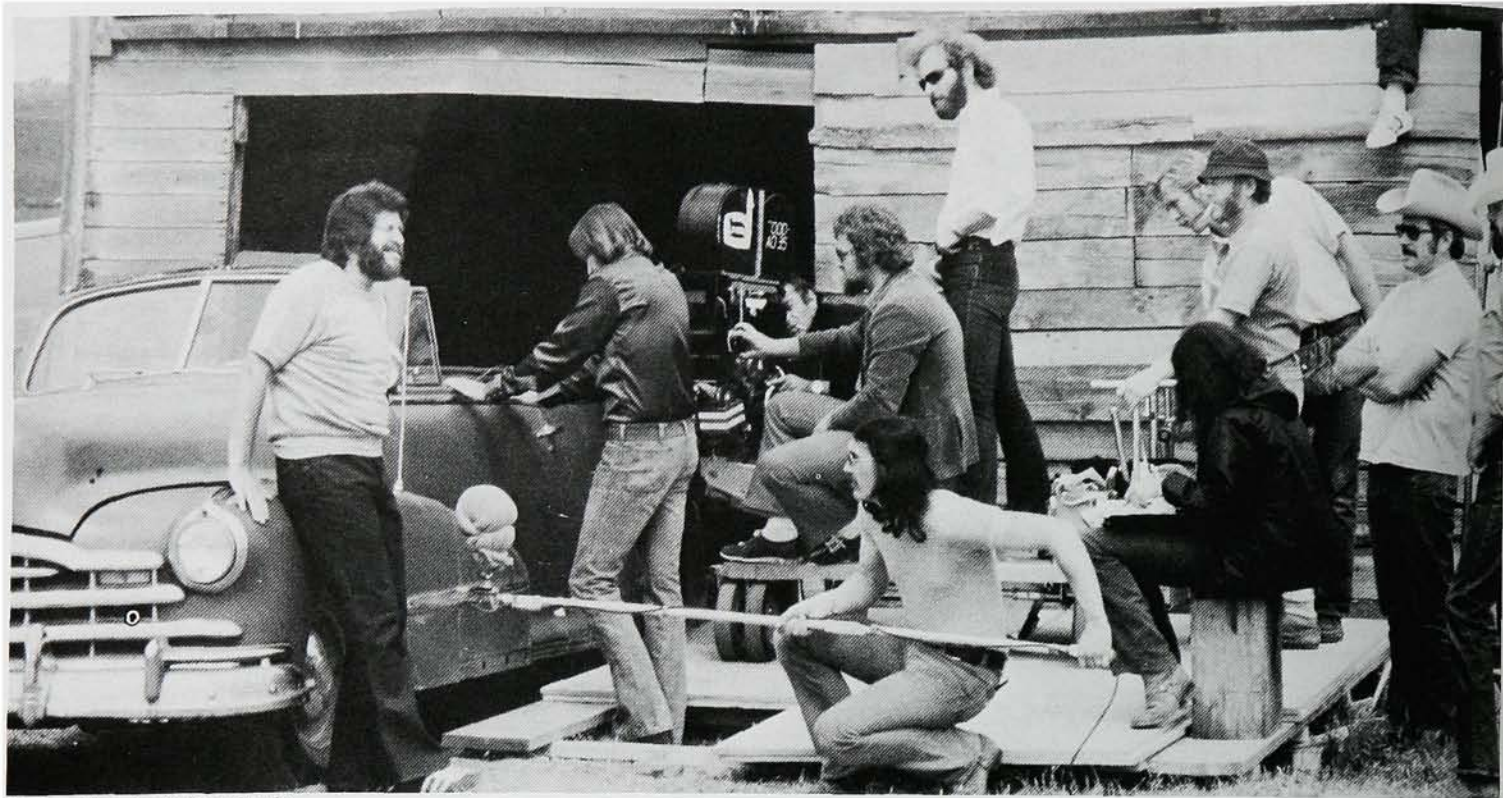


alberta in todd-ao

— by Harris Kirshenbaum



On location in *Spring Coulie*

David Acomba whips up a storm with "Slipstream"

Directed by David Acomba, screenplay by William Fruet. Director of photography: Marc Champion, editing: Tony Lower. Sound: Russel Heise, Post-production supervisor: Alan Lloyd. Music: Brian Ahern, Van Morrison, Eric Clapton. Starring Luke Askew, Patti Oatman, Eli Rill, Scott Hylands and Danny Friedman. Produced by James Margellos for Pacific Rim Films Ltd., Harold Greenberg, executive producer. Winner of Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Sound (for Alan Lloyd) Etrogs at 1973 Canadian Film Awards. Distributed by Cinepix. Produced with CFDC assistance.

It is really not very often in the day-to-day existence of the Canadian Film Scene that we witness a surprise success story. Yet there was probably no one more surprised at the outcome of the Film Awards than director David Acomba, whose film, *SLIPSTREAM* was awarded Best Film, Best Direction and Best Sound. Still, critics have had mixed reviews for the film, and at a screening a month before the awards, there had been no arrangements made for theatrical exhibition. At this point in time, though, distribution has been looked after, and a Toronto opening is imminent.

SLIPSTREAM is a most controversial film. Even more so now, with some members of the critics' community claiming it did not deserve to win the awards that it did. Yet the film has a style that is individual and a story to tell that cannot be denied in its reality. It is seriously flawed, and some of its glaring errors have drawn criticism that overlooks its many fine points.

The story involves a disc-jockey who broadcasts his daily programme from his remote farm house in the middle of the great Canadian plains. His style is distant and individual, and he has managed to set himself up to work independently, with no hassles. But as he becomes popular and the show catches on, the station manager begins to make demands about the kinds of things he does and the music he plays. His relationship with Kathy, who deserts her commune to come live with him, is a complex one that has been called one of the

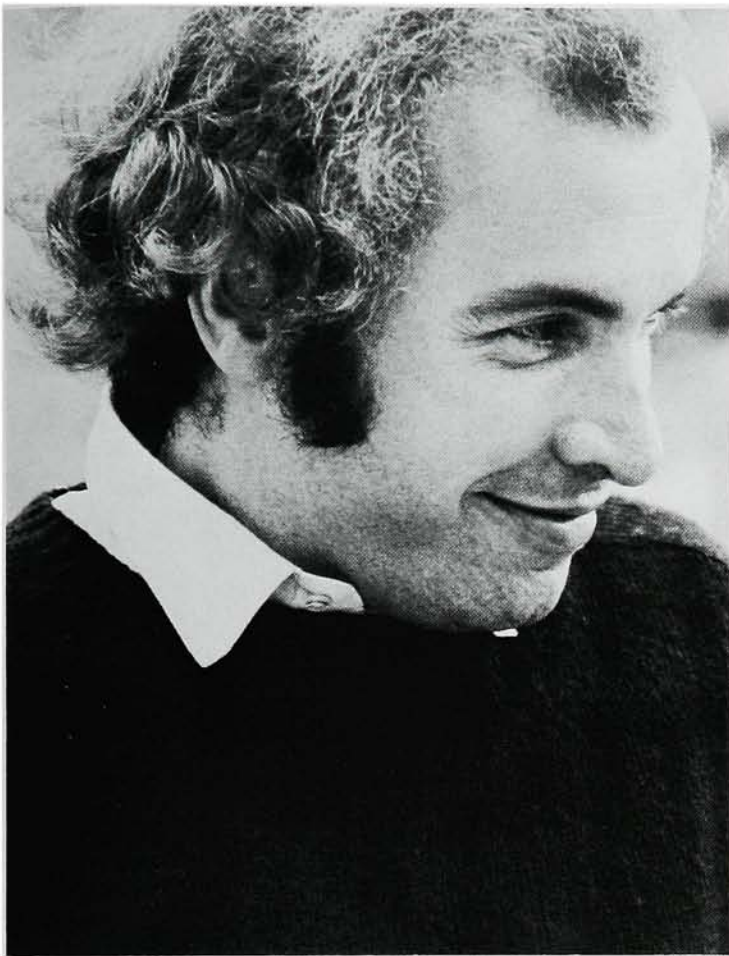
major problems of the film. But the situation has many possibilities, and Acomba does draw on some of them fully.

There are places in the film where the acting is inexcusable, and there are faults in timing and pacing that are purely directorial in their origin, which does make it seem strange that the film won the award for Best Direction. Yet no one argues that there are some of the most beautiful visual images achieved in this film. Marc Champion's photography is often breath-taking, and always under perfect control. The problems with the acting are not the faults of performers Luke Askew or Patti Oatman, who both give performances that could have been tightened in the editing to appear much better.

What makes the film successful for those who do like it is the battle that Mike (Askew) fights against the corporate media bullshit with which he is expected to fall into line. Several Toronto FM disc-jockeys, who will be involved with the opening of the film, have claimed that it's really their story, and that this is exactly the kind of thing that they have been put up against. The reality of the story is unquestionable, and the falling down seems to have been just in the execution.

Acomba's main interest is music, and he applies it beautifully in the film. He has been lucky that some of his friends are in the right places to help him obtain rights to the material he uses, and it all adds to the entity of the film.

CINEMA CANADA interviewed Acomba the day after the Canadian Film Awards, and what follows are his comments on a number of things.



David Acomba

ACOMBA: The two closest allied art forms are film and music. When those two things happen perfectly, there is a magic that cannot be created anywhere else. Now records are created in the same way as film. Little pieces are recorded and then cut and mixed together. Combining the two gives many more possibilities, and the magic can only happen if the music and recording happen in parallel with the film conception. Working with Van Morrison, we would record and shoot, and re-record and re-shoot until the final form was achieved.

I'm absolutely flabbergasted that Marc Champion did not win Best Photography. I do want to say that the film's winning Best Film has a lot to do with his work. He's largely responsible and should get a lot of credit. He's from France, and came over here about five years ago to try his luck. He does a lot of commercials and is doing another feature now.

CC: How did you get into this position where you're making TV Musicals and films about music?

ACOMBA: It's just because I really like music. I'm a frustrated musician, I can't play guitar or anything, and when I do those Television shows its like being a side man, like playing bass or lead guitar, except I'm doing video. I really get into it and have a good time.

CC: What was your training?

ACOMBA: I went to Northwestern in Chicago for undergraduate work, and they had a couple of film and television courses. After that, I couldn't get a job up here, and a station in Indianapolis let me work there for \$80 a week doing six live children's shows each week — you know, Johnny Jellybean and commercials for Burger Chef. I arrived as a stage hand and three months later I was studio supervisor in charge of all studio production. I went out to USC for film school which I hated. One of the worst experiences of my life. They didn't know what they were talking about. You were being taught by all these guys who really couldn't make it. I have to just get out and start working and doing my own stuff. Although I didn't like it, I learned a lot of things. Previously I didn't even

Photo: Baltazar/Koller



Patti Oatman

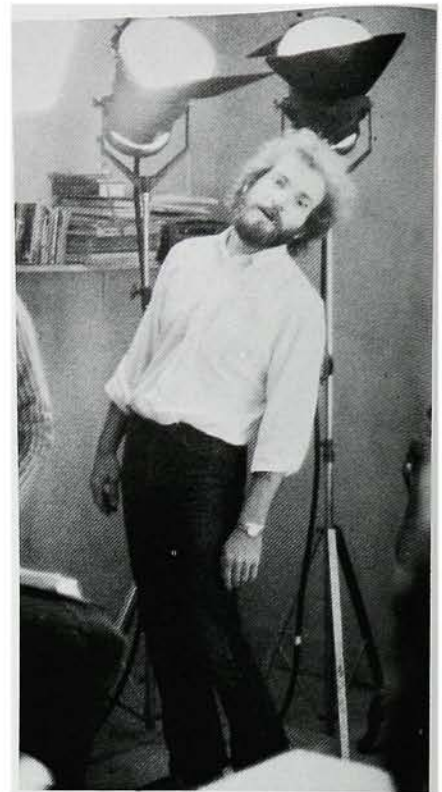
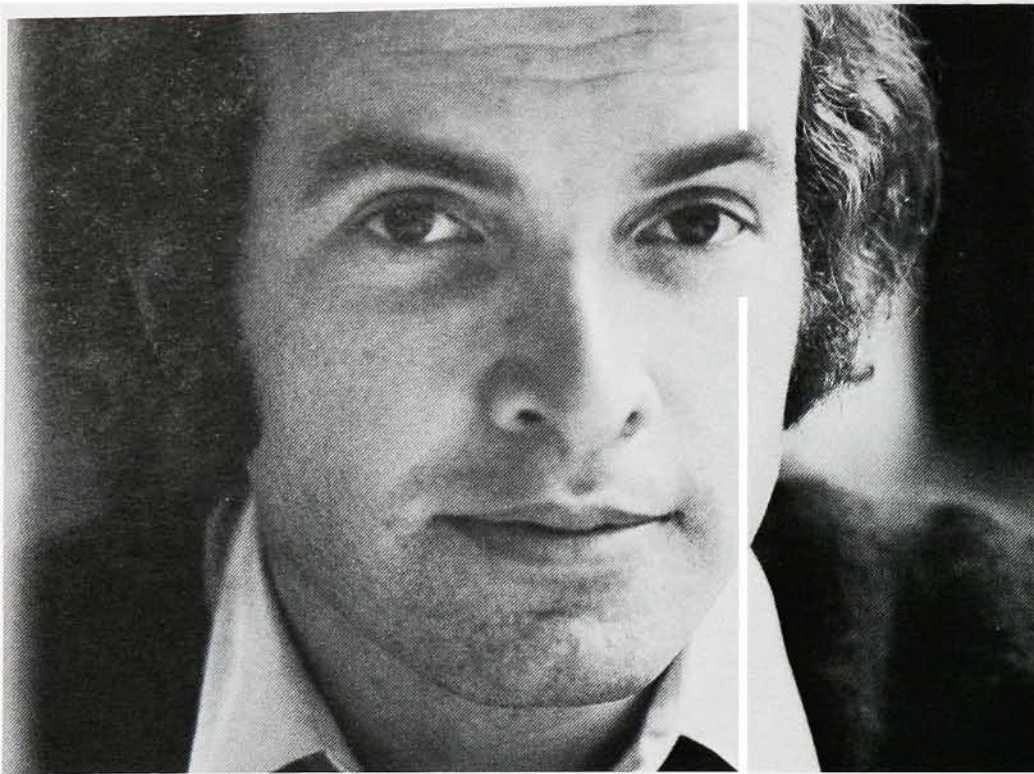
know what f-stops were. I completed the film thesis in 18 months and left. But it was a good place to make mistakes.

I bluffed my way into my first job here. CBC was looking for a director for a new show called Sunday Morning. I said I was a director who had worked in Chicago, which I had, but I hadn't done anything good. So I did that variety show, and worked 7 days a week, for \$200. People were on the show for the first time like Murray McLaughlin, David Rea, a lot of actors too, like Rosemary Radcliffe, Steve Weston, and Marvin Goldhar. I didn't have very much control until I brought in more rock and roll. I left that and went away for a while and came back to do the Mariposa Special and then Rock I and II. Then of course I did the Anne Murray show. Later I was offered a new contract to do 4 specials a year. But I turned it down.

Coming up, I'm planning a CBC special with Robert Charlebois. But they've been terrible about getting the show together. The CBC is supposed to belong to all of us. It's not theirs. They have no more right than you or I. There should be no problem getting access to the CBC. Let's go ahead and use it.

How about the special on the Louis Riel Opera? It cost 500 grand and nobody watched it. Three hours of air time!

The Global network just bought 36 Canadian films. The CBC has shown three. They're insane people. They're not crazy nice people. I'm at war with them. In order to negotiate my contract with them for the Charlebois Special I had to negotiate with four people. Four different people have to see and approve it, and make changes. Why couldn't I deal with just one person? There were a lot of problems getting them to agree to using Charlebois. I can't get along with them because I'm very single-minded. I've got my thing to get done, and it doesn't look right on their forms. When I was on the Elwood Glover Show, he asked me why it took a year to get the show together. That was one of the best openers I ever heard, but instead of cutting loose I just said that the things I do have to be very special, and it takes a long time. Some one has got to say the things about how badly it all works.



Two successful young Canadians talk about having to drive a Jiffy Coffee truck and stripping for a Bump and Grind review to make a living

To get SLIPSTREAM under way, Acomba approached the CFDC with “a schizophrenic 30 page outline” which was accepted because they were, at that time, very much into developing new forms of films. They were willing to back it if a writer worked on the script.

He found that there was not much encouragement from his cast and crew during the shooting, and it wasn't until later that he realized he can't get other people to be excited about something that is just an idea in his head. Since the film has been finished, Patti Oatman has changed her mind about it, and she now realizes what he was trying to get her to do during the shooting.

“I've found out that I can make more money driving a Jiffy Coffee Truck than I can directing at the CBC. I'd love to drive a cab, but I'd drive people crazy because I drive like a maniac . . . Canada does recognize talent. It just doesn't pay for it.

“I can't work on commercials, because I can't stand them. You can make a lot of money on commercials. I've never done one up here. I did one in the States and I just hated it. And I hate the whole principle – advertising is so dishonest.

CC: There was some criticism of the woman's part in SLIPSTREAM. What did you think of that?

PATTI OATMAN: I thought it was amusing. My character could have been a lot stronger.

ACOMBA: The scene where she hangs the curtains is the major crisis point. It's true that she is not a liberated woman, but Mike is not a liberated character either. He's a male chauvinist in every sense. At the beginning these are two unliberated people in the process of defining themselves. They are high-energy people confronting one another and not knowing why.

OATMAN: I think both characters are very strong and that's why they're attracted to each other. She has some kind of extra strength that he's attracted to. In that kind of situation they look for each other's flaws and try to correct them. In the movie, these attempts don't always work out. They both

realize they have potential and that the problem is they just don't belong. That's why there's reconciliation at the end. The only way to make improvements in male-female relationships is using your own experience to improve yourself. Like weeding out bitchiness or weeding out power trips. Talking a little more. The only way that women's libbers are going to be women is by realizing themselves, and realizing the games that they play. And the same with men. Common consideration is one of the things lacking today.

CC: How did you get your start?

OATMAN: When I first came to Canada I sewed costumes for 8 months, then I did my first play, then I was a dyer at Stratford for 9 months. I mixed formulas for colours for fabrics. I was in CHARLES MANSON which was a reasonable success. Then I did another play, then I worked in a sex boutique, then I made the movie, then I replaced a girl in a play, became a stripper, did another play at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, then I became a cashier, and now I'm doing a thing for CBC, The Collaborators.

CC: Where did you strip?

OATMAN: There's a group called Mainline. They're a solid band but they're not exceptional. I guess because of that they started a thing called the Mainline Bump and Grind Revue, which was strippers stripping to rock music or blues-type music. I did that for couple of months, in Waterloo and at Guelph at the university. Then I quit because I couldn't handle it. It was pretty weird.

But Van Morrison and Eric Clapton come to the aid of our struggling protagonists

Acomba's next film will be produced by Joel Dorn who produces records for Bette Midler and Roberta Flack. He will produce in a creative sense so that David can devote himself to being director. An article about Dorn appeared in Billboard saying he likes to make records like film directors make films. At the same time an article appeared in Canadian Film Digest where Acomba said he likes to make films the way record producers produce records.

“So we got our articles together and sat down and realised that we should do something. And he really loves the film.

Also, he gave me the money to transfer my Van Morrison videotape of "Cypress Avenue" to film so it could run as a short before SLIPSTREAM. That's going to be something else. Wait until you see it."

CC: *Have you seen the transfer?*

ACOMBA: Oh yeah. There are problems if you're trying to make it look like 35mm film, but if you're trying to just put it up as it is, which is a TV thing, it'll be great. It'll run just before the film in 3 by 4 ratio in the middle of the screen. All of a sudden you're going to be at the Fillmore East and he does *Cypress Avenue* for five minutes in an incredible dramatic performance which just stopped the show. And I had him just walk off the stage. Then it blacks out, the credits come on, and the film starts. Morrison's voice comes up again in the film, and the short will look like a part of the film. It will be a beautiful set-up piece.

Van Morrison is giving us deferred payment on the rights, NET gave me the rights for \$25. Hopefully, Morrison will be here for the opening which is being done with CHUM-FM. And the sound track album will be out soon.

Acomba managed to get the mind blowing Derek and the Dominoes cut for \$2,500

There was no way to know how that lightning scene would work out. We got a real prairie lightning storm. He plays Layla, we had a wind machine going, and we put it all together. One time we did highlight a lightning scene which is obvious to the discerning eye. I'm sorry about that now, because the first one really works. I'm going to try to correct that in the new prints. The chord change of the song comes at an incredible dissolve against the sky background, and she stands there leaning up against him slightly. And then what we do is dissolve to a morning shot with the rain clouds moving across the prairie away from the house, and as we dissolve the camera pulls back on them and they appear to dissolve into the clouds. That's the magic of combining the music and film that I'm talking about. But I don't agree with putting music to films in a direct translation.

I've always sort of hung around recording studios. Brian Ahern who did the music did some really beautiful things in the track. In the fire scene at the end, where he burns down the house, everything is very much in control. It is underexposed so the fire is very delicate against the black sky. It's very ceremonial and it's sort of a consummation of the whole thing. It's like burning incense, like it's just got to go. I wanted a chant behind it, out of the soul of the building, just crying out as it's being burned. Nothing was happening in the studio, and after hours of attempts, Brent Titcombe came up with this chant. Unbelievable. That was the basic track.

Eric Clapton hasn't seen the film. What happened is a friend of mine, Mary Martin, who used to produce Leonard Cohen and Van Morrison, is now head of A & R for Warner Brothers Records in New York. She's a Canadian. She was up here and saw the film in its early stages and really liked it. For someone to realise the core of the film and believe in it was really something, but she did. So she went to work for me to get the rights. She has friends in New York who she could talk to, so she arranged it. Because of the TV show, Van Morrison virtually gave me the rights for Astral Weeks which industry people have been trying to get for film and TV Specials, and he wouldn't give it away.

Working for NET in the States was a different kind of experience. They're into the Hollywood treatment and everyone likes that a little bit. When I got to the airport there was a black limousine waiting for me, I had a great hotel room, and all the records I needed for preparing the show. That was when NET still had money. New York Times called it the best rock show ever done. The Village Voice had a better review that was more analytical. One of the best things was the Van Morrison number.

And then there is that stock question, who do you admire?

Antonioni is one of my favorite directors. Parallels have been drawn between by film and ZABRISKIE POINT. But the performances in that were atrocious. The performances in my film are definitely award-winning compared to those in *Zabriskie Point*. But that film has so much more going for it. I've seen it five or six times. The moment in it which is so strong for me is when he's out in the desert, and he cuts to the old man drinking the glass of beer in the afternoon, with the light coming in through the chemical dust, and they're playing Patti Paige's Tennessee Waltz and the camera pulls out over the desert. That says a lot about America right there.

I've been looking for years for the soundtrack of JULIET OF THE SPIRITS and finally got it last year. The record absolutely recalls the entire film. 8 1/2 I just saw again, and it's definitely his best film. I didn't like *Roma* that much.

I'm not a film buff. I went to film school, so I can refer to the classics which I had to look at. Other filmmakers are more into the film culture than I am. I'm not a Peckinpah fan. I like images, I like strong images like in Bob Altman's BREWSTER McCLOUD. Just the image of a man flying in the Houston Astrodome, made the whole film. I think BONNIE AND CLYDE was a classic of American Film. I haven't seen LAST TANGO yet because I can't pay \$4.00 for it. I'll wait till it's over and see it at Cinemalumière for \$2.50. But I must see that. I've seen AMERICAN GRAFFITI which I liked because it's the only "nostalgia" film I can relate to because it's very light, it has visual humour.

Plus a few final words on Slipstream from its energetic creator

If you go to the film expecting a follow-up to *Wedding in White* or *Goin' Down the Road* as far as performance and as far as story line are concerned, you're going to be very disappointed. That's not its forté. My next film will have less of a story line, and maybe less acting. There are faults in the film. I know I have a lot to learn. But I'm only 28, so what the hell. It got four reviews in Edmonton. One very good review, one guy hated it (he used to be with the CBC and the censor board) and two rave reviews, one from a TV station and one from a Radio station. It originally got a restricted rating, so we agreed to one cut, which is not a big number for me, but they thought they humped a little too long, so we chopped off about 10 seconds. It doesn't destroy the essence of the scene.

That's another thing. Go see my film stoned. It's really nice. There are no prints in Canada right now, but we'll be running off a bunch of new ones soon. We're hoping to do a stereo mix as well, and maybe even use a Dolby system to cut down the tape noise. The system was used on the track of CLOCKWORK ORANGE and it makes a terrific improvement in the sound. I got master copies of Layla and Astral Weeks, which have far better sound quality than you could ever get from the records. This is one of the places where the recording business and film business can tie together.

We did another interesting thing on the film. I took a home videotape recorder into a club and shot the band doing the number. Then I could take it home and work over the shooting and editing in advance. Also the musicians took the tape home with them and they could sit around and get stoned and jam with it. It's a small black and white, low definition image, but it made it possible to work it all out. They could stop and go back and make new tapes.

I think music is the all-time art form. Each listener can develop his own images. That's why the radio serials that they tried on television didn't work. Because all of a sudden everyone was tied down to the same images which weren't theirs at all. I don't use music that way at all. I don't put interpretation on the music. In my TV shows, you never see shots of hands on guitars or pianos. What you see are performers' faces, because that's what's important — the artist expressing himself. ●