



Jean-Yves Dion and Frank Cole in the Sahara.

And survive she does. The man puts himself through the most rigorous paces in the interior shots and then puts himself (the filmmaker) into the middle of the Sahara Desert, where he risks his life to provide a series of stunning exterior images to parallel the equally claustrophobic interior sequences. In the room, for example, we witness a snake slithering helplessly and aimlessly across the hardwood floors, while in the desert, we see Cole himself, crawling helplessly along the grains of endless sand. In the room, we hear the sound of wooden matches being struck and eventually extinguished as the snake slithers over them, while in the desert, we see a jeep being doused with gasoline and set on fire as the camera slowly and gradually pulls away; the jeep a flickering speck on the infinite horizon of the Sahara.

The landscapes of both the interior and exterior environments of the filmmaker are painstakingly etched to create an overwhelming sense of despair. Even the landscape of the filmmaker's body and head is examined by the camera's (or filmmaker's) eye. A less-gifted artist could be charged with mere self-indulgence. Yet Cole's vision is so daring and psychologically complex, that by turning the camera on himself in this unsparring manner, he almost creates a distorted image for (and of) the viewer. Allowing this series of terrifying, lonely and sometimes beautiful images to wash over oneself, is to open up emotionally to a cinematic world which cries for some sense of understanding and passion. This is a sparsely populated world that Cole has created, and since the

camera is aimed directly at himself, *A Life* is filmmaking at its most daring and revealing.

The film's emotional core comes from Cole's sadness and desperation; yet one leaves this experience with a sense of fulfillment, a sense that there is a life beyond the mere survival which Cole painfully explores. This is a film of lasting value and Cole must be commended for the bravery of his vision. As well, it must be mentioned that Jean-Yves Dion's desert photography, Carlos Ferrand's interior photography and Vincent Saulnier's sound design are of a level and quality so far beyond anything seen in recent years, that *A Life* represents some kind of culmination in the world of independent Canadian cinema.

One hesitates to bandy about such words as "masterpiece" in describing anything, but *A Life* comes about as close to it as anything this writer has seen in some time. And time, as always, will declare the final verdict. *A Life* seems destined for some kind of enshrinement in the history of Canadian film.

Greg Klymkiw •

A LIFE p. 14. *Is. led.* Frank Cole d.o.p. (*desert*) Jean-Yves Dion d.o.p. (*room*) Carlos Ferrand sl. *mus.* Vincent Saulnier sd. ed. Lya Moestrup. Jean-Yves Dion sd. ed. Adrian Croll art d. Elie Abdel-Ahad assoc. p. Robert Paegle a.d. Richard Taylor asst. cam. Mark Poirier asst sd. Tamara Smith still photo Paul Abdel-Ahad cont. Léa Deschamps props Anne Milligan cost. des. Jennifer Thibault p. asst. David Balharrie with; Anne Miquet, Heather O'Dwyer, Abderrahmane Ghis, Mr. and Mrs. Fred Howard. Produced with the assistance of the Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council, NFB and Gary Nichol Associates Ltd.

André Gladu's Liberty Street Blues

"Jazz came up the Mississippi from New Orleans, it didn't come down the Allen expressway from York University"

— Jazz guitarist Peter Leitch

For an art form purported to be the 'Universal Language', music is largely dependent on a sense of place for its identity. Perhaps for this reason, Dixieland or New Orleans jazz never made much sense (to me anyway) in a Canadian context. My experience of Dixieland was of a bunch of middle-aged amateurs creating a cacophony on tunes such as *When the Saints Go Marching In*.

But I have seen the light (*Hallelujah!*), or at least the light passing through André Gladu's new film *Liberty Street Blues*, a documentary about New Orleans jazz which succeeds brilliantly in showing how rooted, socially relevant and swinging this music really is.

As well as being an excellent primer on black music in the crescent city, the film continues the recent Quebec fascination with things marginal in American culture. At the outset, Gladu draws parallels between Montreal and New Orleans; both cities are apart from their surroundings (both physically and culturally), with a unique ethnic mix and (con)fusion of cultures which results in fertile ground for experimentation and the growth of new creative forms.

Stylistically, *Liberty Street Blues* shares little with the films of the NFB's *Americanité* series (of which is it not strictly a part). Absent are the docudrama and collage elements of, for instance, Jacques Godbout's *Alias Will James*. Instead, Gladu offers the film equivalent of the recent "Day in The Life" photojournalism books. The centrepiece of this day in the life of black New Orleans is the annual parade organized by the Young Men's Olympian Aid and Social Pleasure Club, an organization which had its origins in the immediate post-Civil War era. And at the centre of the parade is the music, as played by the Tuxedo Brass Band. Our guide to the proceedings is Dr. Michael White, introduced as a professor at Xavier University and clarinetist with the Tuxedos. (Not in the film, but noteworthy, is Michael White's role as head of a New Orleans board of education program called *Jazz Outreach*, designed to give students an appreciation of their and the city's musical heritage).

We meet Michael White warming up his clarinet on the morning of the parade. At the same time of day, Gladu crosscuts to a variety of scenes; from the market where vegetable and pie vendors hawk their wares with musical cadences, to the street-rapping proprietor of a shoeshine stand, to young girls playing complicated clapping/rhyming games in a schoolyard. The effect is to reinforce what Michael White states in his car on the way to the parade: that this music, New Orleans jazz, grows out of the soil of the delta and that it has a strong social function in addition to being the precursor of the art form that Charlie Parker and others elevated beyond the general comprehen-



Sadie Colar and Michael White in *Liberty Street Blues*

sion of the public.

The parade itself is no mere entertainment; there's a strong element of affirmation. On the surface, there wouldn't seem to be a great deal to celebrate in a city where 40 per cent of black students don't finish high school and where 48 per cent the citizens live below the poverty line. But, of course, that's what makes the event both a communal celebration and an act of defiance. That the parade takes place at the pleasure of the authorities is made clear by the fact that the participants have only four hours in which to hold the event, including the time-honoured custom of stopping along the way at various community centres and institutions for a little imbibing. Gladu underlines this fact by panning back to indicate the presence of a white, mounted policeman trailing the parade at a distance. During the parade sequences, Gladu makes good use of a handheld camera, giving the viewer the impression of being in the midst of the musicians, dancers and participating onlookers.

Like the parade, the film makes judicious use of time-outs. In this case, it's in the form of side-trips to a variety of musical settings which reinforce the notion of the music as a socially cohesive force. First stop is a jazz house party featuring Dr. White's Original Liberty Jazz Band. Eighty-eight-year-old bass player Chester Zardis offers some instruction in slap bass technique (early funk?) and a few phrases in French, a reminder of the ethnic diversity within New Orleans' black community. Banjo player Danny Barker, who played with Jelly Roll Morton, offers his interviewer (Gladu) a taste of beans and rice and talks about how music has been his passport to a wider world. And best of all, pianist and singer Sadie Colar, a spry 70-ish, relates a terrific anecdote about playing the blues, her severe, church deacon father and the jazz-loving parish priest.

The atmosphere here is warm and nurturing, as it is later in the film when we sit in on a rehearsal of the five-man *a cappella* group The Zion Harmonizers. But there's a different reality in Congo Square and in the clubhouses of the 'Black Indians'. Here music plays a more elemental role. Rival groups, the White Cloud Hunters and the White Eagles, compete and challenge one another not with violence, but through ritualized confrontation involving music, generally percussion-based. This sequence leaves the impression (how accurate?) that New Orleans is the only place in North America where skill with a conga drum replaces skill with a weapon among inner-city youth gangs. The music of New Orleans, Gladu seems to be saying, is such a strong force for social coherence that it successfully sublimates the violence that would normally pervade such a dispossessed community. Here, perhaps, the film indulges in a bit of idealisation/romanticism that is generally avoided elsewhere.

Gladu brings it all home with an end-of-day

sequence that parallels the opening. The fruit and vegetable vendors, the street artists and the lighting all switch to minor, twilight key. The parade disintegrates and the participants and spectators filter home through the dusk. And Sadie Colar, still going strong, sings one final chorus of blues.

André Gladu, whose earlier documentary work focused on visual artists (*Pellan, Marc-Aurèle Fortin*), has crafted an insightful document of a community and its musical traditions which succeeds equally well both as a musical and sociological portrait.

Frank Rackow •

LIBERTY STREET BLUES *p.* Eric Michel, Jacques Vallée *d. res.* André Gladu *a. d. / p. man.* Ginette Guillard *cam.* Martin Leclerc *cam. asst.* Carole Jarry *ed.* Monique Fortier *sd. ed.* Claude Langlois *asst. sd. ed.* Sylvie Masse *mix.* Jean-Pierre Joutel *sd.* Claude Beaugrand *asst. sd.* George Porter *admin.* Joanne Carriere, Gaetan Martel, Jacqueline Rivest *consultants* Michael White, Michael Smith, Ben Sandmel, Nick Spitzer, Lynn Abbot, Tad Jones, Ulysses Ricard. Produced and distributed by the National Film Board of Canada. *colour.* 16 mm, 80 min.

Greg Hanec's Tunes a Plenty

Although Greg Hanec's *Tunes a Plenty* has some of the same deadpan humour that distinguishes other Winnipeg features like John Paiz's *Crimezone*, Guy Maddin's *Tales From Gimli Hospital* and Hanec's earlier *Downtime*, this second feature seems a throwback to an earlier tradition of Canadian movies. Eschewing '80s post-modernism, the film looks and sounds like a lost child of the CFDC "low-budget features" programme of the earlier '70s. The requisite realist signifiers are all there: the unmodulated photography of nondescript basements, living rooms and back offices, the sound of flat speaking voices competing with the sharp scrape of kitchen utensils across an arborite table. As I watched and listened, my recollections were of Don Shebib's *Rip-Off* and Clarke Mackey's *The Only Thing You Know*.

Tunes a Plenty is about a garage band in self-imposed exile. The title is not particularly apt. Although songs make up a considerable portion of the film's running time, the title hints at a jauntiness never aimed for and fails to suggest the downbeat tone achieved. Early on, the band's leader, M.C. (played by Hanec himself) dismisses a would-be manager who might offer a gig or publicity. The scene is significant because it signals the way the band, under M.C.'s initiative, turn away from others, especially women. Some of the best scenes counterpoint the testy harmony of the band as they rehearse in dark basements with the greater irritation engendered by individual member's

contact with employers or girlfriends. As he demonstrated in *Downtime*, Hanec is especially adept at expressing inner city ennui, the unaffected camera placements and editing allow us to catch the cryptic words and missed eye contact that undercut understanding between male and female.

The film has a thin anecdotal narrative line you might reluctantly at first associate with American films of the rock group genre (*The Buddy Holly Story, La Bamba*) but it drops even this tentative connection to convention when the anticipated career-making audition sequence fails even to materialize. (I wonder though if this is really such a remarkable break with narrative practice or merely a case of a Canadian convention - the tendency or urge to fail - replacing an American one?)

Tunes a Plenty may deliberately ignore the anticipated climaxes of standard narratives in this genre, but it possesses an odd rhetoric all its own. Here is where it suffers in comparison with the earlier *Downtime* which benefitted from Mitch Brown's more generous characterizations and quirky dialogue.

As a musician as well as filmmaker, Hanec wants to use the movie to dramatize the frustration of trying to be an independent rock artist. The argument here is the overworked one about the need for integrity in a world where, as Hanec's mouthpiece, M.C. puts it, "all that work and effort just boils down to how you advertise yourself in some stupid video or poster." M.C. is a purist for "original" songs whereas his bassist, Cal, urged by his girlfriend who arranges the promised audition, sees no harm in doing "covers". (Lest this seem an obscure topic, CBC radio recently examined the phenomenon of "clone" or "tribute" bands who make a living playing note for note imitations of defunct groups: Grand Funk Railway or Gary Lewis and the Playboys - take your pick of instant nostalgia.) Occasionally Hanec makes something of this theme. He nicely deflates the pretensions of M.C. for instance when one of his "originals" comes over the car radio and a companion who can't tell the difference says, "This is you? Sounds alright. I thought it was just another record." A visit to an abandoned weatherbeaten shack in the middle of the prairie later inspires M.C. to say, "this is a dead dream, but at least it's still standing," then gaze up to the sky and ask, "but what happens to my dreams?" The same instant connection to emptiness and disappointment, dipping into self-pity, informs the lyrics of M.C.'s songs.

Unfortunately though, the tone of self-deflation which might give this theme the shading and humour it needs, isn't maintained. Instead, a lack of distance emerges between Hanec the filmmaker and musician and his screen persona. Following one last charming scene in which M.C. rediscovers his enthusiasm for music after having sold his instruments ("the first time I've ever made money out of music"),

the film climaxes with a clumsy sequence that calls into question the self-mockery that animates the earlier scenes. M.C. is now a church organist leading a choir in a hymn-like rendition of one of his songs condemning commercial radio. He's become a kind of master of ceremonies but the event is fantastical and absurd. The banality of the rapidly scribbled, unrevised lyrics ("A.M. radio is no good/But there are some good tunes / The people who program are turning us into fools") is made worse by the pretentious setting and transcription.

Marred by its gauche rhetoric, *Tunes a Plenty* still has its eyes and ears alert to the lives of these second cousins of beat. The movie validates their existence and Hanec is to be commended for keeping the realist aesthetic vital.

Howard Curie •



Greg Hanec directs and takes the lead role in *Tunes a Plenty*

TUNES A PLenty *p. d. / sc. / ed.* Greg Hanec *p. man.* Greg Hanec, Colleen Dragen, Marion Malone *cam.* Les Sandor, Greg Hanec, Kevin Ferris, Darryl Somersall *add. cam.* Ray Impey, Barry Gibson *sd. rec.* Larry Tascona, Barry Gibson *sd. asst.* Gary Jarvis *add. rec.* Greg Hanec, Dwayne Crowe *band seq. mix.* Glenn Seburn *app. sd.* Marion Malone *asst. ed.* Ray Impey, Barry Gibson *cont.* Richard O'Brien, Ray Impey, Dwayne Crowe *makeup* Shawn Wilson, Sharlene Fwankevich *p. assts.* Robert Levesque, Dave Pratt *lab.* *Ad-Can Labs sd. services* Wayne Finucan Productions *sd. mix.* Clive Perry *titles* Kenn Perkins Animation Ltd. *cam. and rec. equip.* Winnipeg Film Group, Long and McQuade. *Thanks to:* Dale and Randy Jamz, Joe Krolik, Steve Comic Service, St. Matthews Anglican Church, Mr. Steak (Canada), Ian McLeod, Kris Johnson, Glenn and Corie Seburn, Allen's Tombow, Margaret Redston, John Paiz, John Paskovich, Mike Mirus, Winnipeg Film Group, Film Manitoba, CIDO, Manitoba Arts Council, NFB. *music by* Greg Hanec, Ray Impey, Brent Marcinshvyn, Glenn Seburn, Ted Youd. *l. p.* Greg Hanec, Ray Impey, Barry Gibson, Bob Nelson, Jennifer Redston, Matt King, Patti Harris, Murray Moman, Michelle Hughes, Maureen McGregor, Andre Bonner, Wally Buraconak, Gary Jarvis, Randy Jamz, Dwayne Crowe, Dale Jamz, Perry Trylinski. Produced by the Winnipeg Film Group in association with CIDO. *running time* 103 minutes *colour.*