

# SHORTS

## Al Neil: A Portrait

"There will always be people who want to present their own vision, their uniquely personal vision of things. Whether it's on film or canvas or as sculpture. They will never be absorbed by my industry." - David Rimmer, 1978.

In certain ways, *Al Neil: A Portrait* seems to summarize all of David Rimmer's previous film work. At the same time, it is quite strikingly different from my film that, to my knowledge, he has made in the past. This possible paradox may be resolved by suggesting that the ostensible subject of this film, jazz musician Al Neil, is the living embodiment of Rimmer's own wide-ranging cerebral explorations. As a result, the filming of this subject, this remarkable human being, has jettisoned Rimmer's work to a new plateau. In this sense, *Al Neil: a Portrait* is clearly a landmark, both for Rimmer's filmmaking and for alternative Canadian cinema.

Arguably, Rimmer's films have always challenged conventional Western ways of thinking, particularly Cartesian dualism. In other words, his films have continuously offered us opportunities to break through and transcend the rigid categories and boundaries which Western thought has drawn around such apparent opposites as self and other, life and death, space and time, mind and body. In the place of this dualism, Rimmer poses an Eastern orientation centered in wholeness and integration - the fluidity of yin yang. In his films, this wholeness is often experienced in meditative repetitions, the dissolution of "realistic" images into abstractions, the quiet contemplation of a seemingly minimal frame, the dissolution of normal time. Through these techniques we are reminded of the arbitrariness in our own mental sets, and the fragility of our perceptual biases. Not surprisingly then, Rimmer has come to be known as a metaphysical filmmaker. This label may carry with it the sense of abstract and cerebral mind-games that are witty and provocative, but bloodless. It is precisely here that *Al Neil: A Portrait* changes everything.

There are certain works of art - especially among those which unfold through time - that erect subtle barriers by which to dissuade the unready members of the audience. For example, Thomas Pynchon's novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, sets up a series of such barriers, challenging its readers to either struggle through these difficult sections and thereby gain access, as initiates, to subsequent illuminations, or to lay aside the book. Similarly, the opening passages of *Al Neil: A Portrait* erect subtle barriers of displeasure for the audience, as if to say, quite openly, that this film is not for everyone. The initial piano music which Al Neil plays seems harshly dissonant. The style of the film may immediately disappoint our expectations of a Rimmer work. It seems like a documentary, but then it seems to be subverting our expectations of that form. The "takes" of Al Neil at the piano may seem boringly long, the lighting "incorrect," the close-ups of his face and hands disconcerting. The man himself appears bizarre, slovenly, and his music equally off-putting. In other words, quite early on, the film tends to sort the audience into those who have mentally

turned-off and stay only for politeness, and those who have passed through their own displeasure, relinquished any rigid expectations or categorical mind sets, and are open to further unfoldings.

Subsequent early passages are even more challenging, offering us visual and auditory experiences that are unsettling, frightening, grotesque, even painful. At the same time, these passages are gradually revealing of the complexity of the man, Al Neil, through his surroundings, his possessions, his words and gestures, his music. The style of the film warns us away, unless we are also prepared to move into closer touch with our own core feelings, our own inner being. For those who are open, the film's center of pain and illumination is simultaneously a personal, inner journey for the viewer. There, for a few extraordinary moments of the film, we are in almost total, harmonious empathy with the human being on the screen. Real time, space, dimensions, individual differences momentarily fall away. We are privileged to share, through the illusions of film, the central agony of death which is at the root of human life. Once we have shared in the depths of this pain, the film releases us into its final passage. The lighting is transformed. Al Neil, surrounded by an audience, plays his incomparable music - which we now hear as though for the first time, with transformed senses; music which releases us into extraordinary heights of joy and a celebration of life.

*Al Neil: A Portrait* is the most intricate, powerful and personally rewarding film I have seen in years. Unfortunately, this is only a review. A beautifully complex work like this film deserves a full critical response as impassioned and intelligent as the work itself.

Joyce Nelson ●

## Al Neil: A Portrait

d./ed./cam./sc. David Rimmer sd. rec. Richard Payment asst. cam. Ron Precious, Chris Gallagher col. 16mm running time 40 min. dist. Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre. (Produced with the assistance of the Canada Council - 1979).

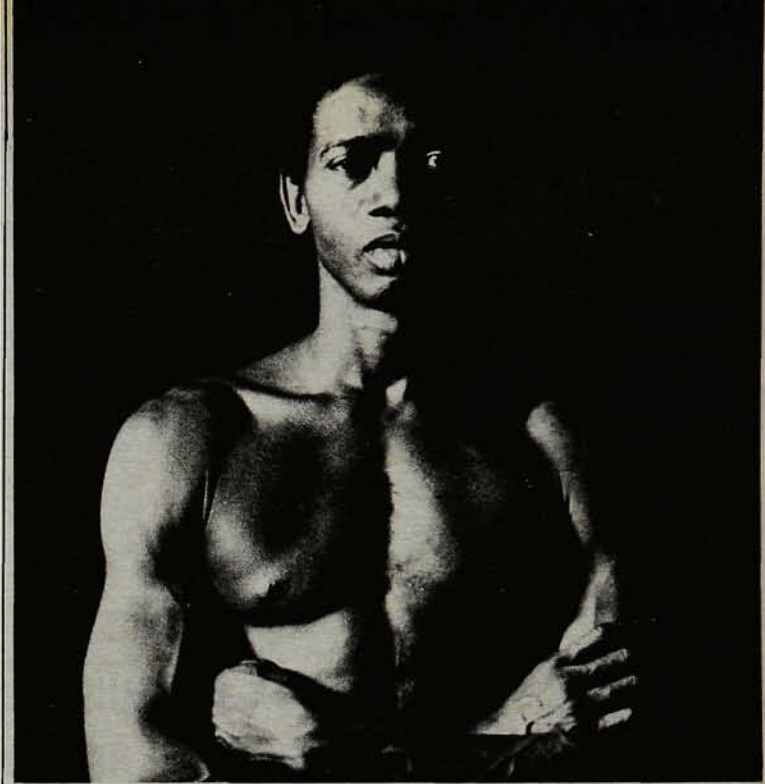
## Granville: A Portrait

"I'm your boogie man, boogie man... uh uh... turn me on..." Granville Johnson's black muscular hips roll and grind to the disco beat as he slowly peels down the top of his jeans. He parts his full lips provocatively with his tongue, dark eyes flashing out at half-bored, half-drunk bar patrons half-watching his performance.

That's Granville's business - to turn you on, in the cheap strip joints and massage parlors that line Vancouver's downtown Granville Street.

Producer-director Tony Westman has nicely played the Granville/Granville St. parallel into a compact, powerful, 15-minute film that is as impressionistic as it is documentary. *Granville: A Portrait* depicts not so much the life of a man as it does the sex-for-sale lifestyle.

Westman has taken actual incidents from Granville's experience as a stripper and masseuse and presented them both allegorically and realistically.



● Granville Johnson: the painful reality of his life as a stripper

After watching Granville strip and seeing him hustled by both male and female patrons after his show, we are confronted with a rather disconcerting, disorienting scene - Granville falling through space, eyes and mouth opened wide in fear, arms and legs outstretched. The camera then zooms in on his face covered with beads of sweat and contorted with pain. Granville is being wheeled into a hospital emergency room, asking himself, "What have I done? What have I done?"

While making the film Granville did in fact suffer a painful knee injury. Westman has used this incident as the catharsis through which Granville confronts his inner emotional suffering and turmoil caused by the lifestyle which both attracts and repels him.

There is much food for thought, much irony in this 15-minute portrait. Value judgments made from a safe, self-righteous, middle class world no longer seem to apply. The fine, up-standing doctor that treats Granville's knee injury turns out to be an insensitive lout: as a pillar of society, you would never expect to find him patronizing a massage parlor, but he does.

Granville, on the other hand, displays the integrity and sensitivity you would expect to find in the doctor. He may be a prostitute, but he is deserving of respect.

The film's visual imagery is as fast-paced as the night life of Granville Street. Headlights, spotlights and street lights flash in and out of focus to the beat of heavy metal music. Reality and fantasy are neatly juxtaposed to paint a portrait of the world's oldest profession in fresh strokes.

Carrying the lead role, Granville does himself justice, drawing out his character with the smooth professionalism of one who has done it all before. Under Westman's direction, he takes what could have been a flat, voyeuristic perspective and works it into one that is painfully real. Real enough that you may find yourself understanding this man who sells his sensuality and intimacy - at least as much as he understands himself.

Glenda Bartosh ●

## Granville: A Portrait

p./d./sc. Tony Westman asst. sd. Mark Smith, Rick Patton, Mike Goodman p. man. Doug White make-up Sandi Cooper mus. "Boogie Man" - Casey & Rich, "Car Wash" - Stevie Wonder, "I Feel Like Making Love" - Rodgers & Ralphs l.p. Granville Johnston, Mali Bowman, Gry Chamberlain, April Curtis, Fran Gebhard, Eloise Melihersik, Cynthia

Osler, Gary Pogrow p.c. Beluga Productions (1980), made possible by a grant from the Canada Council col. 16mm running time 14 min. dist. Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre.

## Flowers in the Sand

For those who deplore the violence and the grimness that overwhelms both large and small screens today, this is the other warm, human side that is seldom seen.

Daniel is in his twenties, mentally retarded, and living on an island with his caring mother. He yearns to attend training school on the mainland but it means travelling on the ferry by himself. He wishes for courage to go on the 'big boat', but it is his new summer friend, 12-year-old Grace, who shows him how to make his dreams come true.

A tight, spare script with every word counting, and first-rate acting performances from David Eisner as Daniel and Cree Summer Francks as Grace, make an infinitely affecting film which deserves a wide audience.

The production values are all there. The island - across from Toronto, as those who live in the city will easily identify - is pictorially beautiful and peopled with characters who seem to belong in this green and rural retreat so near to a large metropolis. Little telling things remain in the mind's eye - David's pleasure at finding a friend; the exploration of the old lighthouse and the ritual of wishing; a busybody neatly etched in two knowing looks and a few words of dialogue. Dan Hill composed the music score and sings out over the closing credits.

Now, where can one see a 27 1/2 minute film these days? The echo comes back loud and clear - on television. Let's hope that some knowing network will snap up this little gem. At the end of a screening attended by a disparate group of people, many eyes were being mopped up. It may be corny - but once in a while, a nice film comes along...

Pat Thompson ●

## Flowers in the Sand

d. Leon Marr sc. Christine Cornish mus. Dan Hill d.o.p. Robert Fresco p. Leon Marr, Christine Cornish (with assistance from the Canada Council) l.p. David Eisner, Cree Summer Francks, Denise Ferguson, Robert O'Ree, Barbara March, Dan Nennesy, Laura Press col. 16mm running time 27 1/2 min. p.c. Ikon Kino Films Production, 1981.