

JANIS



Howard Alk: From Janis to Magic

by George Csaba Koller

Howard Alk cuts an imposing figure on your consciousness. Portly frame carrying a black, heavy bearded visage, with equally dark and powerful eyes sending shiny darts from behind clear glasses. Circles around eyes prove heavy dues have been paid, people embraced, energies encountered. Allen Ginsberg comes to mind, yet Alk and Ginsberg seemed to have had a run-in about something, which the latter refuses to discuss. But you *know* that they've *known* each other, just as Janis and Howard met when she was still walking the crust with us, just as Bob Dylan and Alk spent many days and nights together cutting *Eat the Document*, an absurdist non-documentary about that other living legend.

"I was a political filmmaker," begins Alk. With *The Murder of Fred Hampton*, *You Are What You Eat*, and *American Revolution II* behind him, you don't doubt it, but rather view this energetic entity with a certain kind of awe acquired from having lived on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in summery love days, and having

read *Cinéaste* and *Filmmakers' Newsletter* for years. Today Alk is a Canadian landed immigrant and president of Ottawa's Legion Films, in which company Donald Buchsbaum, Jack Christie, Daniel Lynch and Malcolm MacTavish are also involved. It must have been a big move for the 43-year-old Alk to leave the States and its problems behind him and start fresh in our capital.

Originally up here two years ago finishing *Luxman Baul's Movie* which he shot in India, Alk got involved with Crawley Films, who ended up hiring him to co-direct and edit *Janis*, the rock movie that's been racking up big grosses all over North America recently.

Alk, Buchsbaum, Christie and company put together an enigmatic package called *Phantastica* recently, and attempted to raise the half-a-million needed to do really trippy things like fly Dennis Hopper and Emmett Grogan to Colombia where they would ingest coca leaves with natives and talk about their experiences on camera. A truly impressive proposal of supra-human proportions, other drugged globe trotters mentioned in it were Michael J. Pollard, Gregory Corso, Jerry Garcia, Hugh Masakela and Owsley Stanley, the 'former underground chemist', who made a mint in San Francisco before LSD was outlawed in the mid-sixties. This project, complete with letters of agreement from some lawyers and

Background to Janis Documentary

by Tony Lofaro

managers of those named above as well as a hair and consciousness raising glossary of sacred drugs from around the world have been scrapped due to unfavourable reaction from investors.

"The new thing is magic," said Alk with a twinkle in his eye as he burst into Cinema Canada's offices recently with characteristic gusto. He left a four page outline, not nearly as comprehensive as the *Phantastica* folder, but obviously trying to keep up with changing trends in our consciousness.

Whereas the *raison d'être* behind the drug film seemed to be to educate North American youth to use organic and synthetic drugs *properly*, instead of abusing them, the new proposal begins with: "Everybody wants to see wonderful things, and there are true wonders to be seen in this world." Triggered off by a quote from the Castaneda books about his magical experiences with a 'brujo' named Don Juan, the outline discusses shamanism in Colombia, fire-walking in Sri Lanka, healing the sick in Mexico, and how Doug Henning's magic show has replaced witches' covens and Black Magic in most parts of North America. Has he seen *Rosemary's Baby* or the sleuth of devil worshipping movies currently in vogue on the made-for-TV circuit?

"Sometimes these states are drug induced, sometimes the product of intense discipline as in yoga, sometimes an ecstatic practice such as chanting, dance, etc. . . . Mircea Eliade, in his book *Shamanism*, says, 'what is fundamental and universal is the shaman's struggle against what we call "the powers of evil." Shamans are "specialists" in the sacred, men able to "see" the spirits, to go up into the sky and meet the gods, then descend to the underworld and fight the demons, sickness and death.' During the three years that we have been researching this project," the outline continues, "this current interest in all things 'magical' seems to be reaching a new peak in the West."

How does he intend to film all this? Alk's outline cites the spectacular nature of most of these ceremonies, this "fabulous world of gods and magicians, the world in which everything seems possible." Except a storyboard, maybe? But all kidding aside, he also mentions that "anyone who saw the CBC film where a Yanomana shaman changed into a jaguar and a bird can understand this."

The old hocus-pocus is still with us, hopefully to star in a film directed by none other than Howard Alk. Starring? Some of the same people *Phantastica* would have starred (Hopper, Pollard, Corso and Grogan) but also Tom and John Philip Law, John Brent, "Albert Hofman, chemist, discoverer of LSD, synthesizer of psilocibin, and Andrew Weil, M.D., author of *The Natural Mind* and research for a NY Institute, who'll travel with the crew, acting as special consultant and medical officer. Negotiations are still in progress with others." And that's a good place to suspend reality and wish Legion Films many successful productions. Howard, we're glad you came up here to work with us.

Budge Crawley's special baby, *Janis*, began when he first saw Janis perform and became fascinated with her persona. Later, he viewed film of the Canadian Festival Express, the travelling rock show of 1970 which featured footage of Janis, and felt that the Joplin footage was the nucleus for a great film.

So, Crawley went out on a financial limb and started tracking down all the available film on Janis without a guarantee the film would be released. The arduous task of obtaining all known material on Janis was complicated since all legal rights and clearances had to be received from many sources.

More importantly, before the film could be released, the film had to meet the approval of Janis' parents. Over 50 producers had expressed interest in making a film on Janis but Mr. Crawley says he was given a chance because "I got along well with Janis' mother and she figured we were going to make a good film". When the film was completed, Crawley took it down to Port Arthur, where Mr. and Mrs. Joplin saw the film, were pleased with it, and gave permission for its release.

Howard Alk said he wanted to stay away from promoting any editorial comment on Janis' death, "I wanted to let the character of Janis come through in the film". Even though several scenes were shot only weeks before, there is no mention of her death in 1970.

Alk expressed surprise to the reaction the film received at its Canadian premiere, which he thought was a bit restrained. According to Alk, in San Francisco where *Janis* has been playing for several months to sold-out showings, audiences gave standing ovations after every song in the film.

Janis premiered at the San Francisco Film Festival in October to ecstatic reviews. The only criticism San Francisco reviewers could pick at was the fact that the song, *Ball and Chain* was sung three times too many. But, Alk points out, "it is fascinating to see how Janis changed in the three different times she sang that song".

Although *Janis* was made by a Canadian company, its premiere was held in the United States. Budge Crawley explained, "we've tried that once before and it's the worst thing you can do. Never open before the Americans. If you get a good opening down there it makes your job so much easier here. Canadians have such an inferiority complex that if it goes down there they think it's great."

Universal put up 20 per cent of the production costs and will distribute the film in the United States. Crawley Films of Toronto is distributing the film in Canada. *Janis* is expected to be the biggest Canadian movie hit at our box-offices this year. It will be a successful scoop for Ottawa-based Crawley Films after investing nearly four years and gambling over \$600,000 on a documentary on an American rock singer. □