

CINEMA LOUNGE: ON ALAN ZWEIG'S VINYL

by Bruce McDonald

Curatorial essay accompanying the Cinema Lounge: Bruce McDonald on Alan Zweig's Vinyl program screened at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque on March 6, 2009.

Alan Zweig – the director and leading man of the movie *Vinyl* – searches for his wife and child between the record stacks and racks and shelves in the many homes of single middle aged collectors of one of the greatest things on Earth: music. Mr. Zweig blames his long-standing addiction to record collecting for wrecking his life. He blames The Louvin Brothers, Curtis Mayfield, and all the rest of those recording artist pricks for distracting preventing and arresting his ability to grow, to be a real man with a home and family.

Many record collectors are interviewed by Alan Zweig in their homes – amidst their sonic temples and from his spot from behind the camera Mr. Zweig asks them questions about collecting – but he's really just warming them up for the real question of the movie: Why are you alone? And he turns the camera on himself and talks to us the audience, through a mirror bouncing his handsome beleaguered image into the camera and back to us – revealing his warm heart inside his tough guy exterior. Alan Zweig is pretty awesome as a leading man – more Bogart than Michael Moore.

Shot on what looks like somebody's sister's video camera – things like cinemascope and groovy lighting and 5.1 surround sound don't matter in this movie. It's all about the truth and how to get it. Or how to get at it. I like this movie because of the subjects that appear – talking about music, peculiar obsessions and how to organize it all. I like it a lot because of how brave and funny and touching Alan Zweig is. And smart. There is a certain thrill you get from watching *Vinyl* because here is someone who didn't wait for permission, who just did it, and did it in a very entertaining truthful way. Making movies is often a long, complex process involving legions of creators, writers, designers, money folk, marketing experts, focus groups, wise guys and idiots. But the movie making on *Vinyl* was done by one guy and his talented editor, and they side stepped 'cute', they dodged "indulgent" and managed to go right for the jugular of truth with shimmers of funny. There's muscle in it. There is the fight of someone not settling for a very modern and very common condition of loneliness and doing something about it. It's a movie that claws its way to redemption and illumination by the action of making it all of course by the conversations and confessions that occur as we watch.

General Patton once said ‘You never go to war with the army you want, you go to war with the army you’ve got or you lose your country’. This applies to the filmmaking and this applies in Alan Zweig’s case – to his own life of being a single record collector guy who desired a really big change up, so he ‘went to war’ and made a movie in order to save the country that was his life. Amidst the Watchmen and Batman and the loud bang, bang of movie culture it is a shock and a delight to see a guy with a spear or somebody’s sister’s video camera taking on all comers and winning.

So, how does Alan Zweig win? Well, like all single music loving record collector guys he and we start out listening to our heroes. We attempt to grow up by channeling Mick Jagger singing Midnight Rambler sticking his knife right down your throat. Marvin Gaye crooning “What’s goin’ on”, Strummer fighting the Clampdown and Dylan on 4th Street. Van Morrison conjuring Sweet thing and the Dead Boys roaring through Sonic Reducer. The Louvin Brothers claiming Satan is real and Bitches Brew and we learn to appreciate dope with Wish You Were Here and Electric Lady land and we dance like Mutha Fuka’s to The Blitzkrieg Bob and worship Patti Smith as she takes us across Land on Horses and we make mixed tapes for girlfriends. The songs heading from the groovy hustle of Lou Reed into the white soul of young Americans into the get the clothes off music of Jeff Beck (it works!) and Everything But The Girl and more Van of Poetic Champions right down to the good ole’ fuck music of Prince’s Cream, Zeppelin’s Whole Lotta Love, and the slow hand going the distance sounds of Koln Concert, Kruder, and Dorfmeister and side two of Avalon by Roxy Music. And suddenly we’re 40 sitting alone at “home” in a rented apartment over Scorpio Shoes smoking short ends out of the film can ashtray, eating peanut butter off the kitchen knife wondering where it all went Pete Tong.

I’m sure if Alan Zweig had been providing the mixed tapes for the critical seductions during my thirties – or yours – it could’ve been a whole different story. For a while, all the single guys with growing record collections thought that it would just be a matter of weeks or days before they themselves – through all that listening and gathering of heroic sonics – would ascend to the Mothership of (in my case) Rock’n Roll nirvana. For others – a Soul Asylum or Jazz Koo Koo Ka Choo or Blues – Rhythm or otherwise. Even Country guys have their special place. And then most of us slowly and quietly begin admitting that the time has passed for us to play piano like Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell or to glitter like Bowie and we content ourselves with listening and organizing and accepting the job as caretaker to – the gods – forgetting and shutting off those early impulses flashes and possibilities of transformation, of changing, of doing something. The garage bands of our teens and 20’s are left behind, weekly jams postponed, instruments pawned or given away or left to crack and rust.

The new band members become collectors – dueling with one another using imports, EP rarities, and first pressings as substitutes for killer jams, fucking, and living fast and sweet. The collectors are sort of cool for a while but then they just become like everyone else in the west – and spend the rest of their miserable lives watching T.V. on a dull day and listening to echoes of passion and expression on days without too much work goin’ on. What I like about *Vinyl* is that it’s about a guy – who found himself up to his ears in a shitty life and decided it didn’t have to be that way. Got up. Did shit. Used what he had. Talked to his tribe. Challenged them. Confessed. Repented. Ascended. And not only changed his own world – but the world around him. Maybe he heard an answer or the call to arms way down in the groove.

But whatever, however, filmmaker Alan Zweig has become a minor god – by ‘kick out the jams’ ‘doin’ it’ or whatever name you want to give to taking action and responsibility for the land you stand on and the deepness of real good ole feelings.

Seek out this movie. It’s wonderful and great.

Thank you Alan Zweig. Keep on Rockin’ in the Free World.

Sincerely,

Bruce McDonald

Commander of The Northern Tribes

About Bruce McDonald

One of Canada’s pre-eminent maverick filmmakers, Bruce has been a rebel on the Canadian film scene since making his breakthrough feature Roadkill (1989) which won the Best Canadian Feature Film award at the Toronto International Film Festival. Director of the highly acclaimed road movie Hard Core Logo - his other classics include Dance Me Outside, Highway 61 and the recent The Tracey Fragments (based on the novel by former Winnipeg writer Maureen Medved) with Ellen Page, which opened the Panorama program at the Berlin Film Festival. McDonald is also an accomplished television director, having worked for shows such as Queer as Folk, Deglassi: The Next Generation, The Tournament, This is Wonderland and Twitch City, which he also executive produced. McDonald’s most recent feature is the film Pontypool.