Playing To The Camera: Musicians and Musical Performance in Documentary Cinema
By Thomas F. Cohen
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As I began to write this review I was distracted by an interview on NPR about a new, soon to be released concert film; *Shut Up and Play the Hits* that documents the final performance in Madison Square Garden of the band LCD Soundsystem. The directors, Will Lovelace and Dylan Southern were discussing the making of this film with NPR's David Green. Normally I would not have paid too much attention to this film, or the interview, that now completely engaged me as a result of having read Thomas Cohen's book; *Playing To The Camera: Musicians and Musical Performance in Documentary Cinema.* I confess I was one of those folks in the film community that Cohen talks about who considered concert films to be marginal to cinema in general. This interestingly conceived and well-annotated book managed to change the way I looked at and perceived musical performance captured on film.

While I learned a lot from this in depth analysis does not mean I agreed completely with everything Cohen had to say about the mind/body problem as it relates to music in film. In the introduction Cohen remarks, " I link this marginalization of the concert film with a broader denigration of performers of all sorts in our culture." To give him credit, Cohen continues: "Considering how we reward top athletes, popular musicians and movie stars with disproportionate amounts of fame and money, I anticipate some skepticism on the point. Nevertheless, the performers status relates to the devaluing of physical skill in favor of mental work (for example, musical composition), and underlying this hierarchy is a persistent metaphysical dualism." I believe Cohen's premise holds up, only with a certain audience, those with a more intellectual, less visceral approach to both music and film. It seems to me that musician's movement as well as their stamina has always been held in high regard by their audiences, whether watching a performance live or on film. Witness Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, Michael Jackson and many others whose performances influenced the culture of whole generations who were enraptured not only by their voices, and the sound of their instruments, but how they looked and moved on camera.

Cohen's past experience as a musician and a scholar serve him well in this book where he "endeavors to show what moving images can teach us about musical performance as well as what musical performance can teach us about the cinema". Cohen traces his own engagement with music, historically, through his fascination with the electric guitar and those performers such as Scotty Moore (with Elvis Presley), the British Invasion bands of the 1960's, to Jimi Hendrix, B.B. King and Eric Clapton which sensitized him to understanding how physical movement related to sound.

In the subchapter on *Musical Performance and Film History* Cohen tells us that the first musical performance depicted in cinema was Thomas Edison's *Dickson Experimental Sound Film* (1894-95). It was a single take, lasting twenty seconds in which the stationary camera captures Edison's assistant, W.K.L. Dickson playing his violin into an acoustic horn while two Edison employees dance. This film was the answer to combining moving pictures with Edison's earlier invention of the phonograph. Cohen goes on to mention the ensuing development in 1926 of sound cinema and the premiere of the *Vitaphone*. Following swiftly was the release in 1927 of the Al Jolson film *The Jazz Singer that* Cohen uses as an example of the authenticity paradox between musical and dramatic performance.

Although not an aficionado of the concert film, when asked to name an important title of the genre, most of us would immediately mention *Monterey Pop* or *Woodstock* and while Cohen goes on to deconstruct both these films he begins the first chapter by featuring Bert Stern's documentary on the 5th annual Newport Jazz Festival: *Jazz on a Summer's Day*, which he anoints as the archetype of the music festival film. This was no rough and tumble cinema verité style film which only came to fruition in the following decade. Stern had five 35mm cameras at his disposal, allowing him to make a film about musical performance that was also cinematic. As Cohen analyzes this film, the underlying racism that so totally saturated our culture in this time, is laid bare by the various decisions made by Stern, resulting in an "atmosphere of cheerful hope I (Cohen) experienced that existed almost exclusively for white males in post-war America." "Racial discord lies just beneath the patina of harmony in *Jazz on a Summer's Day*." I found Cohen's sharp focus analyzing how the various performers were treated on camera in this film quite revealing, reinforcing my own experience and memories of that time. Unfortunately, race and racism is an insidious problem that was not wiped away by the hopes and dreams of the reformers of the 1960's. In the Ken Burns miniseries *Jazz*, (2000) a majority of the 'brain trust' assembled by Burns to work on the series is characterized as "largely white, mainly unhip".

In the imaginatively titled chapter *Wild Guitarists and Spastic Singers: Virtuosic Performers on Film* Cohen juxtaposes the work of two undeniably amazing performers: Jimi Hendrix and David Byrne. This extreme in contrast made Cohen's insightful reflections on that relationship of movement, style, aesthetics, sound and cinema all the clearer. And he does not let us off the hook regarding race when he states, "Much of the critical animosity directed at Hendrix can be traced to racial issues". Discussion of the work of David Byrne allows Cohen the opportunity to mention performance Art (with a capital "A") and the appearance on the scene of MTV in the 1980's. He also covers Jonathan Demme's Talking Heads concert film *Stop Making Sense*.

Direct Cinema, Rock and Roll's Public Persona and the emergence of the Rock Star is a particularly engaging chapter and also deals with filmmakers and films of which I am most familiar. Cohen reviews the complicated and at times contentious relationship that revolves around Robert Drew, D.A. Pennebaker and Richard Leacock, the emergence of cinema verité or direct cinema and how this more flexible and intimate style of filming

impacted the feeling of "being there" or authenticity of the performer both on and off the stage. However, Cohen chooses the films of the Maysles brothers as his primary case studies with a particular focus on Mick Jagger in *Gimme Shelter*. For Cohen, Jagger is the quintessential representative of the rock star as performer.

Shirley Clarke is the only woman filmmaker mentioned (there are no female performers – and while race was a theme most honestly confronted by the author, gender seems to have been largely ignored). Her film, about the legendary jazz musician Ornette Coleman; *Ornette: Made in America* was saved for the next to last chapter. Clarke was treated with great respect. I was totally unfamiliar with her work prior to reading this book. She seems like a fascinating character, as Cohen states, "She refused to respect the borders between fiction and nonfiction film and averred that she 'never made a documentary' because, according to her, no such thing exists."

One of my biggest complaints about books dealing with visual representation, particularly academic books on film, is that they have few, if any, high quality images to support the text. I do understand that there are cost restrictions in any print on paper publication; however, I see little excuse for the lack of images when the printing is all black and white. In this case, the few images that have been selected for reproduction are of such poor quality they may as well have been left out. (I did find the image of the Sex Pistols Sid Vicious demanding a fix titillating in spite of the bad reproduction.)

But given my early skepticism (I absolutely do not agree with the author that there is a "denigration of performers of all sorts in our culture") this book was well worth the time spent reading it.

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