



Film Pop Montreal Festival Review

by Alyssa Beaton

For the last twelve years, the early fall announces the arrival of Pop Montreal, an encompassing cultural event which showcases international independent artists. Though often thought of as primarily a live music festival, Pop features numerous subsections, such as Film Pop, Art Pop, Puces Pop, Pop Symposium, Kids Pop and more. Beginning Wednesday evening and extending to Sunday night, the festival offers a rich and varied schedule of activities situated throughout the city. Coming to the festival for the first time as an out-of-towner, attending concerts and screenings doubled as the perfect excuse to explore different parts of the city as I moved from one event to the next.

Despite its longevity, the festival continues to draw something of a niche audience, particularly at the Film Pop screenings. Calling Film Pop “a boutique festival,” programmer Kier-La Janisse describes the film portion of the festival as an ideal venue for up-and-coming filmmakers to display their films, and programming in recent years has been strongly oriented towards featuring relatively unknown independent films and filmmakers. The opening film of 2013, Lily Keber’s *Bayou Maharajah*, reflects this emphasis; Janisse first heard of the film on the popular crowd-sourcing website, Kickstarter, and has been following it ever since.

Janisse’s primary consideration when organizing the film portion is to firmly establish a musical connection: music documentaries or films with notable scores, films featuring famous musicians as actors, and so on. The program is structured to align with the general independent sensibility of the Pop Montreal festival, focusing on non-mainstream animation and experimental film. In Janisse’s words, the films selected for the festival are meant to appeal to artists and creators of any genre and to offer a stimulating experience overall.

Yet the Pop Montreal festival is not solely concerned with “off the radar” filmmakers and musicians. In 2013, far more than in previous years, higher budget and higher profile film presentations were featured prominently in nightly screenings at the Phi Centre. These documentary features explore a range of musical genres and artists, from the relatively obscure to the more (in)famous, and formed the focal point of this year's programming lineup.

Bayou Maharajah: The Tragic Genius of James Booker

Dir. Lily Keber, 2013 – Opening film

Bayou Maharajah recounts the genius of New Orleans pianist James Booker. Made up of interviews of musicians, friends and fans, archival footage of nightlife in the city, photographs and recorded interviews of the late Booker, the film pieces together his turbulent life and enduring legacy. Actor and musician Harry Connick Jr., a friend of Booker's, is featured early on in the film to explain the brilliance of Booker's musical style by walking us through how he could approach any ordinary piece of music and turn it into something with layers of depth and complexity. Over the course of the film, the viewer is able to truly hear his brilliance during the lengthy musical interludes, including pieces like the infamous “Gonzo” and “One Helluva Nerve”, which reflect Booker's genius more than any friendly or professional anecdote.

Beyond providing a portrait of the artist, the film equally presents a glimpse of the rich musical history of New Orleans. The archival footage serves to demonstrate the integral role music plays in the city and contextualizes Booker within it, allowing Booker's playing to fill the soundtrack and overflow onto archival footage of dark cafes and lively street parades. Despite his legacy, Booker is portrayed as something of an enigma, and the film strings together Booker's life to present a brief portrait of his past and the roles he fulfilled to the people around him, from talented virtuoso to a clerk at City Hall. As the interviews and recordings assert, Booker never gave the whole truth to anyone. Instead, *Maharajah* uncovers its own truth about Booker, solidifying his distinction as the Piano

Prince of New Orleans, and demonstrates his continued relevance within modern music.

Filmage: The Story of Descendents/ALL

Dir. Deedle LaCour and Matt Riggle, 2013

The festival's only sold-out screening, *Filmage: The Story of Descendents/ALL* is an impressive compilation of interviews, live footage, recordings and photographs, recounting the formation and history of these two seminal punk/hardcore bands over the last thirty years. Bill Stevenson, drummer for Descendents, Black Flag and ALL, serves as the central figure in the film, alongside fellow members Milo Aukerman, Karl Alvarez and Stephen Egerton, and other members of the band's ever-changing line-up.

Descendents are understood to be the originators of pop-punk as we know it today, with melodic songs about love and breaking up - not to mention coffee and flatulence - disguised as hardcore punk. The success and ongoing legacy of Descendents is contrasted with the band's secondary project ALL (consisting of the same musicians minus Descendents' anti-frontman Milo Aukerman), which never achieved the same level of recognition. While the bands were promoted in the same way, and played at the same musical caliber, ALL never saw great success.

In this way, the film debates what makes a band truly great or memorable, and whether this greatness lies in composition, performance, or marketing. The success and staying power of the Descendents is credited to the aura of Aukerman, who is at once a part-time punk rocker and full-time biochemist, and serves as the band's iconic mascot, while ALL, based on an abstract conception of "the utmost," was seemingly not tangible enough for an audience to grasp to the same degree.

The film affords special attention to the writing talents and contributions of each member both past and present, allowing existing fans to relish in their music and spend time with

the band members, while accessible enough for newcomers to discover these bands for the first time.

Good Ol' Freda

Dir. Ryan White, 2013 – Closing film

Following *Filmage*, *Good Ol' Freda* pursues a similar question regarding the greatness of a band. The documentary film features Freda, the one-time secretary for The Beatles. Her role as their secretary pre-dated the band's formation, and she oversaw the entirety of the Beatles' lifespan, serving as a close contact and confidante between the respective Beatles, their families and their manager, Brian Epstein (affectionately referred to as 'Eppy'). Freda is charming, and her storytelling is at once a testament to the life of a working woman in the 1960s, while equally serving as a lovely nostalgia trip back to the days of Beatlemania, which proves to be engaging whether you actually experienced them or not.

The film is a thoughtful mediation on fame and privacy in an industry that predominantly feeds on the gossip of insiders. Despite The Beatles' fame, and her devotion to the band, Freda's unfaltering hard work was largely unaccounted for in the past. As the title intimates, director Ryan White seeks to reverse this elision, arguing that Freda figured centrally in the Beatles' personal and professional lives. Her daughter serves as an aggressive counterpoint to Freda's passive attitude towards her accomplishments, stressing that her mother should have received more, asked for more, and is due more. While the film presents clippings of news stories featuring Freda, it often paints her as a young girl who admires the band alongside their vast female (and of course, male) fan network the world over. Yet much more than just another fan girl, Freda set an administrative precedent and supplied the fans with meaningful fan materials, cementing the Beatles' tangible presence in the lives of their devoted listeners, changing fan culture and playing a structuring role within the phenomenon of Beatlemania. Her story serves as a testament to the accomplishment of a woman who held one of the largest and most successful bands of this era together.

After the closing film, the organizers invited us all to join them at a small reception in the Phi Centre lounge to drink complimentary beer and discuss the film. While the screening was unfortunately sparsely attended, most gathered around a single table as festival organizers encouraged our speedy drinking, thus securing the night as a memorable one. Modest evenings like this one epitomize why Janisse asserts that Film Pop will remain a mere subsection of Pop Montreal. Although, by affording a level of engagement and intimacy that larger festivals are sorely lacking, small festivals like Film Pop are able to retain their magnetism. This is not to say, however, that many more should and would benefit from the thoughtfully curated screening schedule (and all the free beer).