

“WHO IS HARRY NILSSON...?”
DIRECTOR’S DIARY – PART 5

The reviews from the Santa Barbara screening were wonderful. Trade papers *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* were very complimentary. Leonard Maltin said, “A vivid portrait of a gifted man. What a great reminder of his talent.” Quint of the very cool *Ain’t It Cool News* wrote, “WHO IS HARRY NILSSON is hands down the best movie I've seen at the Santa Barbara Film Festival. Entertaining, informative and incredibly emotional. In short, everything a great documentary needs to be.” The buzz was beginning!

We received a request to show the same cut at the Seattle International Film Festival. Actually, we screened it three times for sold-out crowds. It was a wonderful few days in this great music city where Nilsson is loved and appreciated. Later, we showed the same cut at the Mods and Rockers Film Festival in Los Angeles. The one-off screening was at the Egyptian Theater on Hollywood Boulevard. I arrived an hour ahead of time to find a line backing up from the box office, through the long courtyard, onto the sidewalk and around the block. Sadly, many people had to be turned away when every seat was filled. The film played exceptionally well, topped off by a Q&A afterward with me, producer David Leaf, Executive Producer Lee Blackman and the great record producer Richard Perry.

And then the trouble started.

Issues involving the use of Harry’s master recordings (remember there are more than 60 tracks in the film) that we’d had no reason to anticipate emerged unexpectedly and delayed release of the film. There were times when we feared the film would never be released. Our nearly 12,000 “friends” on our MySpace page hung in with us, chatting endlessly about their excitement to see the film. I don’t think a week went by when we didn’t receive a handful of emails from fans who had heard about the screenings and wondered when they could see the film and/or buy the DVD. Journalists, reporters, music writers and critics were poised to write reviews and feature articles about the film and Harry, but could not do so as long as people couldn’t actually see the film.

Happily, everything was finally resolved, but we’d lost nearly three years. Not only that, but the film distribution landscape had undergone a significant transformation during that time and finding the right distributor proved to be more of a challenge than we thought. It got so bad that film critic and blogger Jeffrey Wells, who’d seen and loved the film at Santa Barbara, Seattle AND the LA screening, wrote this on his great website, *Hollywood Elsewhere* (<http://www.hollywood-elsewhere.com>):

“Homeless Forever

The start of the 2010 Santa Barbara Film Festival in early February will mark the four-year anniversary of the first appearance of **John Scheinfeld's *Who is Harry Nilsson (and Why Is Everybody Talkin' About Him)?*** It has the ironic distinction of being one of the best rock-music docs ever made and at the same time **totally finished** as far as distribution prospects are concerned. If you haven't signed out a distribution deal after four years of trying your film isn't just dead -- it's fish guts lying in a tin bucket on a pier. A real shame. Talking last night to Jeff Bridges about this film is what set me off...”

Jeff Bridges, by the way, who was on his way to winning the Oscar for Best Actor in “Crazy Heart”...and who should have had better things to talk about...was telling anyone who’d listen how great the film was. He even wanted a DVD shipped to him on location during shooting of the Coen Brothers remake of “True Grit” so he could show it to the crew.

Late in 2009 we connected with Richard Lorber of Kino Lorber Films. He was in love with the film and nearly as passionate about it as we were. Although we were considering going with another distributor, Richard wouldn’t take “No” for an answer and made a very persuasive case for what he and his team could do for and with the movie. A deal was struck and release plans started to be formulated.

Editor/Co-Producer Peter Lynch and I went back into the editing room to finish the film. We trimmed several relatively unimportant sequences from the work-in-progress cut, made a few additional nips and tucks for pacing purposes, built a few spaces for laughs based on audience reaction in Santa Barbara, Seattle and LA and, with Lee Blackman on hand, finished and color-corrected the picture and did a final mix on the sound.

Then we went to work editing what turned out to be 90-plus minutes of Bonus Material for the DVD release (another movie’s worth!). Most are “Deleted Scenes,” some are Extended Sequences (expanding on short scenes that appear in the film) and there’s the Alternate Ending (contemplated but abandoned later in the editing process). It was a weird experience to extract the raw materials from our storage facility and re-visit the project. In many ways, it was like spending time with an old friend.

And here we are, 2010, and WHO IS HARRY NILSSON is ready to be unleashed on the world. Thanks to the enthusiasm of Ed Arentz who runs the Cinema Village theaters in New York City, we are opening in New York on September 10th. Richard Lorber and his colleagues are implementing a terrific and creative strategy to get the film in similar theaters across the country and, later the DVD release. Jean Sievers rolling out an intense PR campaign. Requests are coming in from film festivals and the press. Very soon, we hope, everybody will be talkin’ about Harry Nilsson.

END PART FIVE