

MOVIES *FOR A* DESERT ISLE

Forty-Two Well-Known
Film Lovers in Search
of Their Favorite Movie

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Filmmaker; producer

Filmography:

- 1976 *Frostburg*
- 1977 *George Crumb: Voice of the Whale*
- 1978 *Amateur Night at City Hall*
- 1980 *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise*
- 1983 *Cool Runnings: The Reggae Movie*
Black Wax (portrait of Gil Scott-Heron)
- 1984 *The Gospel According to Al Green*
- 1985 *The Return of Ruben Blades*

It's a valid question, but I'm not sure my answer could be limited to one film. I couldn't even pick my favorite Fassbinder film or my favorite Godard film, because with both of them I see every one of their films as contributing to a larger vision, whereas there are some other artists in film and other fields who have made one great film or who have written one great book and you remember them for that. Maybe because of the auteur theory having come about, so many filmmakers seem to care more about creating a body of work than they do about making one great film. You almost have to wonder these days about how many great films there are. Back in the days when I was going to film school, late sixties, early seventies, you could say, "Okay, here's your *Citizen Kane*, your *Battleship Potemkin*, *Seven Samurai* or any number of films by Kurosawa." But as you

see more and more films and you make films, you start to find smaller pleasures in the details of lots of different films, and, of course, that leads to the whole French film critic thing of raising very minor directors to the level almost of those great directors of whom they've grown tired. And so I almost might tend to do that because I've seen *Citizen Kane* so many times. I'd probably, as so many people do now, pick a different Orson Welles film as my favorite. Or I'd probably be more likely to pick a Sam Fuller film or a Nicholas Ray film as one that would give me pleasure in seeing repeatedly.

Because I make music documentaries, one of the biggest influences on me is almost a heretical notion, but it's Ken Russell. I love his BBC music biographies, some of which started out to be documentaries, but he was at the BBC pushing the edges, bringing more and more fiction material into them, being audacious both in the crossing over of styles and genres and also in bringing fiction together with documentary. Unfortunately, he got used to shocking people and he began to shock people in silly ways, but some of his really influential films for me were his *Dante's Inferno*, about Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Isadora Duncan*, and *Song of Summer*, about Frederick Delius. And then I followed him into his early feature films to the point where I got to a film like *The Music Lovers*, which a lot of people put down. I loved the film despite its having by some standards some tasteless moments. I found in that film and in some of the other films he made at that time, a real richness of expression, a simultaneous romanticism, and a criticism of romanticism implicit in the material. I just found enough things directorially going on that I was able to watch the film twenty-five times and still enjoy it. So if I say the film I would take to a desert island with me is *The Music Lovers*, on the surface it sounds like an abominable bit of taste on my part; but in terms of music-related filmmaking, that was a very important, informative film for me, and so it would certainly be one of the films I would take.

In fact when you go with this whole idea of a film on a desert island notion, your choices tend to be almost more emotional than they are intellectual. One of the interesting things that happens is no matter how much we study film, no matter how much we think about it, analyze it, and all that, there are

always films that we like for emotional reasons, that we feel passionate about, and we don't know quite what it is.

The notion of intellectual reasons versus emotional ones is interesting. With Kurosawa, I would pick maybe a film like *High and Low* for purely intellectual reasons, because I love the sense of formal composition, the sense of a very logical mystery at work, and the logic of plot. I especially love the stylistic use of the black and white film that suddenly has this dab of color, right in the middle, and then the whole style changes after that. Intellectually, I love that. But to take a film to a desert island, I'd probably take *Red Beard*, which is a wonderful, emotional, humanistic experience. If I were to take the best Godard film, intellectually, I'd probably take *Numéro Deux*, but emotionally, I'd probably take something a lot easier, maybe *Breathless* or *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*. If I were picking one film in terms of greatness, and, again, it's totally subjective, God! Even that is tough.

I think the combination of motion and idea and music in film gives it some of its most overwhelming moments, even in films where you don't think about it. What would *Kane* be without Bernard Herrmann's score? It'd still be a fascinating film, but it would not have that immediate emotional impact. Nor would many of the Hitchcock films without Herrmann's scores.

My cameraman's father is a well-known writer, James McConkey, and he usually thinks of the most important art films as being those without any music. He comes out of a kind of neorealistic film tradition. I think those were the kind of films that were big when he was in college, and the American films that were connected with that—Cassavetes and all that. But Larry McConkey, his son, and I both look for creative use of music with image. We both studied with Slavko Vorkapich, who was responsible for many of the finest montage sequences in the Hollywood films of the thirties, films like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. All of a sudden, the plot stops and all these pictures go by, time passes, there's an earthquake, and so on. He made all those sequences. He had a theory of cinema that was this real intense picture, motion, sound, and music all together—that was pure cinema. He used to give lectures illustrated with film clips at the American Film Institute in which he'd take these

excerpts from films and show you the lyrical heights that film could reach with the combination of picture, motion within picture, camera angles, shot changes, music, and sound. That was very influential for both Larry and me. Like Jean-Pierre Gorin said about Godard, in every one of his films there's this one ten-minute section that he really cares about. All the rest is almost a kind of filler to get people to come to the theater to see the ten minutes he really cares about, as in the first ten minutes of *Contempt*.

I have moments in my films too. There's a moment in the Ruben Blades film where Ruben reads lyrics to a song by a Peruvian composer, a song that means everyone returns. I have a series of shots, almost dreamlike, of Panama, that go over that. And, for me, what I see and hear, the rhythmic, almost musical sounds of his voice reading the lyrics, the meaning of what he is saying, the nostalgic look back along with these dreamlike pictures is a moment of visual and aural poetry. That's one of the reasons I work with music, because there are a lot of opportunities to play with those things.

Most of my films are not entirely performance; they're what I call portrait films. What I usually do is pick an artist I really care about and find ways, whatever ways I think are pertinent, to project what it is I think is important about that artist's work—the old dialectic between art and life and the intercutting between them. That is pretty obvious, but there's some less obvious ways to do that. In *Black Wax* with Gil Scott-Heron, what I did was have him play his music at a place called the Wax Museum, which is a club that until recently existed in Washington. It had been built out of a former wax museum, and, in the back room, they had all these life-size figures covered in dust of past presidents and historical figures, including black historical figures. We built a fantasy set in which he walked through, and, of course, we had him walking through the streets of Washington singing the song "Washington, D.C.," along with a ghetto blaster that had the backup tracks on it. That was a way of communicating some complex social and political ideas, which most of my films try to do, while also presenting his art, his ideas.

Ken Russell, whatever he may have done in his later films

—flipping out in certain ways—was making films that were about music and art and culture but also were often saying things about related issues in society. In fact, I now organize all of these music films of mine into a larger grouping that I call “Vox Americana,” different voices, not just from this country but from the continent, this hemisphere—people talking, usually eccentric, fascinating people who are sort of on the periphery of what’s considered commercially important in music, but who are right in the center of what’s important musically in the larger picture, music that will last when all the stuff that’s making millions now fades.

I’ve also written half a dozen fiction screenplays. Twice I’ve gotten halfway toward raising the money for the budget and then ended up in near starvation with things falling through. In 1975, Ford closed all the tax loopholes for film and that killed me halfway there. All our investors dropped out. Under Jimmy Carter, the interest rates got so high, all our investors dropped out and put their money in money-market funds.

But this has become comfortable because there have been people like Britain’s Channel 4 who are willing to fund me to do the sort of film that I can do very cheaply, between \$100,000 and \$150,000. But, yes, I want to do fiction films and part of the progress toward that is promoting these music films.

[Robert Mugge evidently gave this question further and considered thought, as the following excerpt from a letter he sent me will illustrate.]

I’ve thought more about this “desert island” idea, and I think that the only way I could deal with it would be to make a compilation film out of sections from a *number* of my favorite movies. Included would be scenes from Max Ophüls’ *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, Sam Fuller’s *Pickup on South Street*, Fellini’s *Amarcord*, Ernst Lubitsch’s *Heaven Can Wait*, Welles’ *Citizen Kane*, Ken Russell’s *The Music Lovers*, Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai*, Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, and Truffaut’s *Jules and Jim*. And if there were still a bit more room on the reel, I’d stick on all of Chuck Jones’ *What’s Opera, Doc?* as well. I suppose I’m attracted to each of these films for essentially the same reasons: (1) each is beautifully crafted; (2) each provides an intense emotional experience

while also stimulating the intellect; (3) each displays a romantic, even bittersweet view of life; and (4) each uses music brilliantly. Not that I think these are necessarily the qualities that make a film “great”; they are simply the qualities which so endear the film to me that it becomes almost a part of my flesh. Take these movies to a desert island? I take them everywhere I go.