

# **BROOKLYN RAIL**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS AND CULTURE

May 2008

<http://brooklynrail.org/2008/05/music/like-all-they-depend-upon-familiar-songs>



Official Monks promo postcard, 1966, after haircut.  
© play loud! + Monks

## Like All, They Depend Upon Familiar Songs

*by Richard Kostelanetz*

To my critical mind, appreciative of both classical music and its modernist derivations, rock at its best is limited music but great theater. That became the theme of my *Fillmore East: Recollections of Rock Theater* (1995), which draws mostly upon notes made in the late 1960s at New York City's principal rock venue. Indeed, among the masterful performers featured there were Janis Joplin,

**press clippings / monks – the transatlantic feedback**



Jimi Hendrix, the Who, Sam & Dave, and Tina Turner. By the time the Fillmore East opened in the East Village in 1968, the Beatles were on the brink of disbanding, while the Rolling Stones were too expensive. Disliking the theatrical scale of arena rock, I never witnessed the Stones (or Springsteen) live.

The most appropriate medium for recording rock concerts therefore seemed to be not records but film. The masterpiece from my youth was D. A. Pennebaker's Monterey Pop (1967), which I've seen and enjoyed many times. I assume that Martin Scorsese, about my age and likewise a denizen of downtown Manhattan, made a similar deduction about filming after attending rock concerts. His first documentary, The Last Waltz (1978), records the final concert of Bob Dylan's onetime backing group, the Band.

Given the appropriateness of musical performance for film, it is not surprising that many of the very best documentaries portray singing groups; some of the best work from veteran documentarians who have explored other subjects likewise focuses on pop music groups. Regarding this last claim, consider Eberhard Fechner's Comedian Harmonists (1976), an intricate collective portrait of six men four decades later, whose subtitled print I've seen only at Goethe House here. (The original German DVD can be found on Amazon.) The theme is that guys who look interchangeable at the beginning of the film become



individuals by its end. Though Fechner later became a distinguished documentarian, this early effort is commonly thought to be his best.

**The retrospective structure of Comedian Harmonists influenced not only a flaccid extended documentary about the Mamas & the Papas broadcast frequently over public television (the title of which I can't remember), but also a more remarkable film portrait I saw recently, also at Goethe House, but thankfully in English, about several American military veterans who in the early 1960s formed in Germany a short-lived proto-punk rock group calling themselves the Monks (and cutting their hair appropriately). Made by Dietmar Post and Lucia Palacios with support from not American but German television, *Monks: The Transatlantic Feedback* (2006) recalls, likewise through individual interviews decades later, how they came together and fell apart, and the remarkable performances they did in between.** Kasper Collin's *My Name Is Albert Ayler* (2005) is yet another superior recent documentary, this likewise made in Europe (Sweden), about the greatest American saxophonist of his generation, whom I remember seeing live, summer of 1966, at the theater that became the Fillmore East.

Scarcely a moviegoer, I don't remember any of Martin

Scorsese's fiction films. I wrote a critical review of his documentary about the blues (reprinted in my forthcoming *Skeptical Critiques on the 21st Century*). His Bob Dylan documentary was limited for a reason he didn't acknowledge—much of the footage available to him was not his own but Dylan's, beginning with the extended interview. Dylan controlled Scorsese to a degree that a more independent filmmaker might have found unacceptable.

The theme of Scorsese's most recent, *Shine a Light*, is that the Stones have been and still are the greatest rock performers—and indeed they are. Ostensibly, the film documents a 2006 concert not at an arena or a sports stadium, but at New York's Beacon Theater, an Upper West Side former movie palace that is, at roughly 2600 seats, the same size as the Fillmore East, since destroyed. People skilled at filling a stage are also skilled at filling a screen.

Disliking the small screens typical of today's multiplexes, I saw *Shine a Light* at Manhattan's Ziegfeld, another historic movie palace, where I'd previously enjoyed the last rerun of David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*. However, whereas Lean's extraordinary cinematography often made me observe things in the corners of the screen, Scorsese's focus reflects television in focusing upon the faces of the performers, mostly Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. Especially on a large screen, they seemed made for TV, so to speak, or a



DVD.

Curious faces they are. Now in their mid-sixties, both men have pronounced vertical lines running down their cheeks. So do their two colleagues, reminding me of a truth observed four decades ago during a year in England: This is how Anglo-Saxons' faces age. (Other Europeans, by contrast, develop double chins and horizontal lines across their forehead.) Sunken cheeks may also reflect too many years of smoking. Scorsese shows enough of them offstage to make it clear that Jagger on stage must have makeup covering a blemish on this right cheek, and that Richards uses eyeliner.

To anyone familiar with contemporary dance, both Jagger and, say, the late James Brown are limited performers. Whereas the latter favored a continuous shuffling that was so easily imitated that his sometime protégé Al Sharpton duplicated it deliciously on Saturday Night Live several years ago, Jagger's choreography is best defined as energetic prancing with finger-pointing. Both men depend upon a capacity sustained into their sixties to keep their stage movement going and going. As a singer, Jagger is better when I can understand him, as when his lyrics are familiar; sometimes here he sounds muddled.

Otherwise, Shine a Light is a brilliant film about brilliant performers. Whenever they played, as they do for most of

the film, I didn't touch my popcorn. Only when Scorsese incorporated interviews from decades ago, or oddly black-and-white footage of himself preparing to shoot the film, or a pre-concert visit from Bill Clinton and his mother-in-law, did my fingers dip into the bag. Since Scorsese employed several first-rank cameramen, he had an abundance of footage to draw upon. However, rather than use extended shots from a single source, as was done in Monterey Pop, Scorsese chose to emulate the currently modish editing style of MTV with a succession of very brief clips from different angles over a continuous song.

What's missing from this film is any sense of the group's preparation, other than a brief sequence of Jagger on an airplane preparing playlists, drawing from printed papers that tell him which past songs have been more successful than the others. How do the Stones rehearse? How do they work up a song? Their performance is portrayed as spontaneous, which it obviously isn't. What are the dynamics within the group? Is Jagger as bossy as he seems and drummer Charlie Watts as deferential?

When Keith Richards says that neither he nor the other guitarist Ron Wood are very good but that together they are great, the viewer would like to know more about how they collaborate. In published interviews Richards has spoken intelligently about how the two men realize "the ancient art of weaving. At our best, me and Ronnie make the Bayeux



Tapestry onstage.” Nothing is said about the culture of the men. Watts reportedly has a sophisticated art collection, while Keith Richards’ personal library is featured in *At Home with Books* (1996).

Another detail not mentioned, reflecting thoughtful preparation, is that Richards appears to have a different guitar for each song. Some of these instruments must be tuned differently; at least one was not a six-string but a twelve-string. One had a visible capo pitching all the strings a few notes higher. Between songs Richards’ guitars are unobtrusively replaced, much as the Pope’s speeches are during his tours.

Caveats notwithstanding, I loved *Shine a Light* as a great music film and will no doubt purchase a DVD (not yet available from the A-train disc pirates!), regretting that I lack at home a screen dozens of feet wide on which to see it best.

For more about the *Monks* documentary, see <http://www.playloud.org/themonks.html>

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Richard Kostelanetz has edited many books of writings of and about John Cage and other contemporary composers