

unheard music: thoughts on BORDER RADIO

Contributed by wyatt doyle
Tuesday, 16 January 2007

My first real job as a teenager was working in a video store. It was a small place, independently owned and nestled in a relatively cozy suburban strip mall around the corner from our house. It was the same store my mom and dad would end up buying a few years later, in hopes it would be a kind of "retirement business"; for them once my dad stopped teaching.

It didn't work out that way. Maybe it was only to be expected, as my dad stubbornly tried to bend the laws of commerce to suit his whim: while faceless, corporate Blockbuster Video devoured every mom and pop store in its path, he'd decided the surest way to make a success of the place was to employ a knowledgeable staff (family and a few friends) and invest in the most extensive collection of foreign cinema, silent film and hard to see cult movies in town. But as much as my dad loved movies, he lacked the ruthlessness of a proper businessman when it came to something he was so passionate about. If it came down to choosing between a third copy of BASIC INSTINCT or a newly restored version of some Lilian Gish obscurity, customers seeking Sharon Stone's brand of homicidal peek-a-boo were forced to look elsewhere.

We never stood a chance.

But in the beginning, my family's owning a video store was like being handed the keys to a film vault. Thursday trips to the distributor to pick up the latest releases and advance screening cassettes made every week a kind of Christmas, and my Dad was always ready to take a chance on titles simply because they appealed to his curiosity. BORDER RADIO, released to VHS by Michael Nesmith's Pacific Arts Video in 1987, was one of those titles. I couldn't say for sure what in its pre-release publicity impressed my dad enough to pick that one up, but it was on our shelves the week it was released.

(To understand the scale of that leap of faith, bear in mind that this was a time when a new release VHS cassette retailed for something like \$89; wholesale was usually around \$56. Now take the price of the rental — in our case, two bucks — and do the math. Every title had to rent thirty-three times before it began to turn a profit. Thirty-three times! Even in the best possible case scenario, it would take over a month of renting every single night for a title to become an actual source of income, and most new releases were old news after three weeks at the longest. Imagine an entire store with its walls and walls of videos, all waiting to turn that magic number, thirty-three. Most never made it; many never even came close. Arcade crane games have better odds of return.)

BORDER RADIO is a strange picture regardless of your frame of reference, but we sure didn't hear much from X, The Blasters or The Flesh Eaters on either of the Philadelphia rock stations our radios were set to. Besides, the L.A. music scene my dad identified with ended about the time Buffalo Springfield moved out of Topanga Canyon. So how exactly this shoestring black and white indie, assembled on the fly from three years' shooting to chronicle a group of morally ambiguous, petty larcenous characters adrift in post-punk Los Angeles, spoke to my middle-aged, straight-arrow father was difficult to say at the time; but in revisiting the film via the Criterion Collection's typically exhaustive DVD edition, its unlikely appeal to my dad has begun to make a lot more sense.

The plot is simple, but by the end it's taken such a circuitous route that hostile critics who claim none exists can be forgiven their oversight, if not their shortsightedness. In brief, musician and local icon Jeff Bailey (Chris D. of The Flesh Eaters) finds himself on the wrong side of some local thugs and decides to skip town, dropping out to drink in a Baja trailer park. Back in Los Angeles, his long suffering wife Luanna (Luanna Anders, whose no-bullshit performance anchors the picture) leaves their young daughter (Devon Anders) with a succession of the absolute worst babysitters in Hollywood as she tries to wrestle answers out of Jeff's self-absorbed music scene buddies (John Doe of X, Dave Alvin of The Blasters and Chris Shearer), who all know more than they're telling, but maybe less than they think.

Originally scripted as a grim homage to classic film noir with no connection to the music industry, a series of bottom-scraping financial dry spells ended up stretching the film's production schedule to something like three years, and the resulting screen story underwent about as many dramatic changes as any of the hard-living bands from the music scene the film ultimately adopted as its backdrop.

(Star Chris D. insists in the DVD's supplemental features that the original script's noir aspects are what attracted him to the project, but it was only once he became involved that the whole thing began to move away from noir and tilt toward a re-imagining as "rock movie," including the added participation of D.'s friends (and sometime bandmates) like John Doe (in his first acting role) and Dave Alvin. Alvin even went on to create an eclectic and

memorable score for the film (unfortunately now out of circulation), with players culled from friends and colleagues in X, Los Lobos, The Blasters and other local heroes.)

Regularly facing the kind of setbacks that have spelled crib death for many an ambitious indie production, the team behind BORDER RADIO dug in their bootheels and toughed out the rough patches - rewriting, reshooting, and even turning to their gifted cast for creative contributions, squeezing tequila out of cacti time and time again. Even the staggered production schedule ended up working to the film's advantage, with the shifting tone and focus offering insight into its characters' differing perspectives. Jeff's scenes (mostly shot in the noir stage of production) are quiet and brooding, giving way to understated poetic interludes; whereas Luanna's (often in tandem with dodgy, slumming rich kid Chris Shearer) provide a snappier, pragmatic, and frequently very funny counterpoint, her search for an explanation powering the plot's forward momentum.

It's not every film that can survive three directors and active contributions by everyone in the cast, but then it's a rare project that manages to pack this much simpatico talent onto one movie poster. In both their joint directors' commentary and in the entertaining "Making Of" documentary that accompany the film on Criterion's release, the three directors (Allison Anders, Kurt Voss and Dean Lent, all making their feature film debuts) give the impression that the prolonged shoot ultimately lent itself to better sharing the burden, rather than triggering a compulsion to jockey for position.

It's that willingness to go with whatever is working that makes the film compelling, even if that means allowing scenes to roll into extended takes that would send more experienced filmmakers running for the scissors. But a more experienced filmmaker might not share the same confidence in their actors' charisma that would allow them to park the camera long enough to capture something as simple as the swagger in Chris D.'s walk as he wanders the sands of an empty beach.

Similarly, in a sequence where Jeff's former bandmate Dean (John Doe) shows Luanna the pistol he's carrying as protection, he can't resist the opportunity to pose with it adolescently, firing off potshots like a dopey kid with a new toy. The awkwardness inherent in his tough guy delivery is the kind of thing no amount of careful scripting could sell quite as effectively as simply turning Doe loose on it.

A good first step for any filmmaker seeking to bring realism to their work would be to get over popular culture's mania for polish and certainty. To smooth away the rough edges of BORDER RADIO would be to miss the point of the entire film, with its constant reminders of just how untidy real life can be.

Had it followed its intended "straight noir" course, BORDER RADIO may well have survived the decades as an interesting curio; instead, the film stands as something more: a fittingly low-key elegy, not only for a musical phenomenon captured at its sunset, but also for a uniquely collaborative approach to filmmaking too good to last.

And revisiting this imperfect story of hardscrabble dreamers too in love with a dream of how it ought to be to trade it for something as mundane as reality, I've begun to see what about it must have spoken so clearly to my dad twenty years ago, as he poured his teacher's paychecks into the little shop a few doors up from the pizza place, the video store with the finest collection of Kurosawa epics and forgotten Buster Keaton shorts in Lansdowne, PA.

copyright, © 2007 Wyatt Doyle

for information on Wyatt Doyle's collaboration with Stanley Jason Zappa, STOP REQUESTED, [click here](#).

visit our blog: <http://newtextureblog.blogspot.com>

visit us on MySpace: <http://www.myspace.com/newtexture>