

52nd Sydney Film Festival

Some interesting documentaries

Richard Phillips
21 July 2005

This is the fourth in a series of articles on the 52nd Sydney Film Festival.

In the time available during this year's festival I watched a range of documentaries—14 in all—with mixed results. These included, *The American Ruling Class*, *Blowin' in the Wind*, *A State of Mind* and two feature-length music documentaries—one about Hank Williams (*Honky Tonk Blues*), a seminal figure of American popular music, and another on singer/songwriter Townes Van Zandt (*Be There to Love Me*).

This diverse group of films, some of which approached their subject matter with thought and care and others that failed to seriously explore the issues they raised, further confirms the increasing popularity of documentaries. With the corporate television networks and other sections of the media functioning as semi-official disseminators of government propaganda, increasing numbers of people are looking for honest and accurate reportage on political and historical events. Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* is the most obvious recent example.

But what was striking about the festival's documentary program was the lack of non-fiction films on the illegal occupation of Iraq or the war in Afghanistan. This is clearly at odds with the widespread international opposition to the US-led invasion and the release of several new antiwar films during the past 12 months.

One movie that should have been screened is *Gunner Palace*, an American feature that examines life for a group of American soldiers in Iraq (see "An uncensored look at America's young soldiers in Iraq"). The documentary was released in US cinemas earlier this year and has been screened at numerous international film festivals. Whether *Gunner Palace's* absence from the Sydney festival program was deliberate or due to lack of availability, it was certainly a noteworthy omission.

The American Ruling Class, which has been described as a dramatic-documentary-musical and draws from all three genres, purports to identify and satirise America's capitalist elite. Director John Kirby claims to be a Marxist but his film largely trivialises its important subject matter and, apart from one or two insights, is a smug and self-satisfied work.

Lewis Lapham, *Harpers Magazine* editor and long-time member of the so-called liberal establishment, who wrote and starred in the film, offers to "educate" two Yale graduates about the American ruling class. One of the Ivy Leaguers—Mike Vanzetti (Paul Cantagallo), who wants to become a novelist, decides to take up Lapham's invitation and answer his flippant question: "To save the world or rule it?"

The film follows the two men as they rub shoulders with some of the rich and famous at exclusive clubs, restaurants and other expensive venues. Various establishment figures, long-standing and newly arrived, are interviewed. These include former US secretary of state James Baker III, *New York Times* chairman and publisher Arthur O. Sulzberger, Hodding Carter III, William Howard Taft IV, Carnegie Corporation president Vartan Gregorian, Hollywood producer Mark Medavoy and Harvard president Larry Summers. Sulzberger cynically explains how the newspaper maintains its "balance" between journalistic credibility and

maximum profitability.

Writers Kurt Vonnegut and Barbara Ehrenreich and film director Robert Altman also appear briefly and make some pithy denunciations of the elite. Pete Seeger is featured with an "appropriate" song which contains the following line: "There's no hope, but I may be wrong."

In one of the few sequences that does reveal the explosive and ever-widening social divide in America, Lapham interviews Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Nickled and Dimed* a hard-hitting book about the extraordinary difficulties facing American workers trying to survive in low wage jobs.

Ehrenreich spent 12 months working as a waitress and in other casual and temporary jobs researching her best-selling book. She passionately describes how millions of Americans live and denounces the so-called philanthropy of sections of the ruling elite. Her sharp comments, however, are rare and weakened by the surfeit of complacent and superficial quips from Lapham and others.

The film has two alternative endings. In the first, Vanzetti decides to forget about becoming a writer and takes a high-paying job at Goldman Sachs. It concludes with the Ivy League graduate repeating American television news anchor Walter Cronkite's trademark sign-off comment, "And that's the way it is folks". The second finale has Vanzetti deciding to become a summer camp counselor and continue his struggle to be a great writer.

While *The American Ruling Class* may impress the politically naïve, it is infused with a deep-rooted skepticism in the working class and will do little to enlighten ordinary people about the real character of the decaying capitalist order.

When the film premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival early this year its producers celebrated with a party on the New York Mercantile Exchange trading floor, with a giant American flag—made from red, white and blue balloons—hanging from the wall. This sort of self-satisfied cleverness pervades *The American Ruling Class*.

Australian filmmaker David Bradbury is a radical environmentalist and left nationalist, who has been making documentaries for almost three decades. A former ABC radio journalist, he reported from Portugal and Greece during the revolutionary upsurges in those countries in the early 1970s, and in 1977 was one of the first journalists to visit and report on the struggle between the Free Papua Movement and the Indonesian military in West Papua. Since then he has made documentaries on the Vietnam War, the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, Castro's Cuba and films about Australian aborigines and local environmental issues. His third film, *Nicaragua: No Pasara* (1984), about Sandinista leader Tomas Borge, won an Academy Award nomination.

Blowin' in the Wind, his latest movie, deals with US military use of depleted uranium and its lethal impact on military and civilian personnel. Bradbury points out that Australia has become an unofficial US base, and that under little known agreements between Washington and Canberra, is being used as a testing ground for depleted uranium and other dangerous

weapons.

The film contains information, together with shocking photographs, of the escalating incidents of birth defects in Iraq, where depleted uranium was used in 1991 and again during the latest US invasion and occupation.

Blowin' in the Wind interviews a former US military officer involved in the 1991 attack on Iraq and now dying from cancer, which he is convinced was caused by exposure to depleted uranium. It also features comments from an Australian family whose fourth child was born last year with multiple genetic defects. The family lives at Shoalwater Bay, just two kilometres from a site where the US has conducted four major military exercises in the past eight years.

Bradbury told audiences at the Sydney Film Festival, where the movie premiered, that 11,000 US soldiers, together with 8,000 Australian troops, were conducting military exercises in Queensland in June and that, contrary to government denials, would probably be using depleted uranium weapons. Australian military personnel have also been involved in joint operations with US forces in Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

In one of the film's more revealing moments, Tom Schaffer, the former US ambassador to Australia, categorically denies that US forces in Australia use depleted uranium weapons. His denials are contradicted in an interview with an American naval officer on a US ship visiting Western Australia. The officer not only admits that the ship will be firing depleted uranium warheads during exercises in Australia, but points to the weapons that will fire the deadly ammunition.

Bradbury is a serious filmmaker and rightly concerned about the dangers posed by Canberra's subservient alliance with the Bush administration and its military aggression. But his political outlook—a combination of environmental reformism and appeals to so-called “progressive elements” within Australia's ruling elite to adopt an “independent” course—is tedious and dangerous.

He writes in press notes accompanying the film: “What's happened to the ‘fair dinkum Australia’ in our new world of lies? I want back [sic] to the healthy nationalism we once had, that had compassion for the underdog and the belief in giving everyone a fair go. In a humble but sincere way, I hope this film can play a small but important role in galvanising us to go back to that.”

In the era of global production, and the emergence of globally coordinated protests and struggles against war and neo-colonialism, this nostalgic harking after a “healthy nationalism” and the so-called Australian “fair go” as an answer to imperialist militarism amounts to peddling utopian and deceitful illusions.

In fact, Bradbury, in his comments, is articulating the key myths propagated over decades by the entire political establishment to cover up the dirty secrets of Australian capitalism and tie workers to the nation state and its ruling elite. In the name of defending the “working man's paradise” and “the lucky country”, these myths were used to split Australian working people from their class brothers and sisters internationally.

But as is the case around the world, every social statistic reveals that Australian capitalism can only offer working people social inequality, declining living standards and the ever-increasing danger of war. Bradbury, having made films exposing the plight of the Aborigines and Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, has firsthand knowledge of the historical record.

The challenge facing Bradbury and other serious documentary filmmakers who oppose imperialist aggression is precisely to undermine nationalist mythology and encourage a new global sensibility. This is the essential foundation for the development of an internationally unified movement of working people against the profit system, the real source of the issues examined in *Blowin' in the Wind*.

A State of Mind, by British television sports director Daniel Gordon,

follows the life of two North Korean schoolgirl gymnasts from Pyongyang and their rigorous preparation for participation in the country's Mass Games. It provides a rare look at the nation menacingly described as part of an “axis of evil” by the Bush administration.

While Washington's bellicose military threats against North Korea are ever-present in the western news media, there is next to nothing available on film and television about life in this country. This becomes ever more apparent as one views *A State of Mind*.

The Mass Games are socialist realist pageants involving thousands of young people. They are held on national holidays and other state occasions. Participants face months of harsh preparation, with hundreds excluded from the prestigious event if they are not considered up to scratch. The Games involve gymnastics, dancing and carefully choreographed hand-held murals generally depicting scenes from the Korean War or the country's deceased head of state and “eternal president” Kim Il Sung. Il Sung's son and the country's current leader Kim Jong Il often attends.

Notwithstanding the crude and false political message of the spectaculars—that North Korea is a genuine communist society, which is not challenged by the filmmakers—the movie does provide some indication of life in Pyongyang, the country's capital.

Gordon and his small crew visited the country 13 times between February and September 2003, closely following the girls and their families in the lead up to the Games. Although the girls are from relatively privileged layers of North Korean society—one is the daughter of a physics professor and the other from a construction worker's family—their living standards are rudimentary.

The families live in small, sparsely furnished apartments with frequent electricity blackouts and candles always on standby to provide emergency lighting. All apartments are fitted with government radios permanently broadcasting propaganda. These can be turned down, but not switched off.

Despite rigorous daily training and rehearsals, the girls' diets, like those of the rest of their families, are basic in the extreme. One mother explains that during the 1990s famine and the US imposed sanctions, the only thing they could afford to give their daughter for her birthday was a bowl of corn soup. The rest of the family had half a bowl each. Thousands starved to death at this time, which is known in North Korea as the “Arduous March”. The film includes a brief visit to a collective farm, where poverty is even more obvious.

A State of Mind ends with spectacular footage from the Mass Games. While the girls fervently hoped that Kim Jong Il would attend the performances, which were held over several months, the North Korean head of state failed to show up.

Although Gordon's film is largely apolitical—it contains no direct editorial comment on the repressive Stalinist regime or the imperialist blockade—it punctures the ongoing black propaganda by Washington and its allies, and gives some indication of the deep-seated animosity amongst ordinary people to US imperialism and their determination to resist any future attacks against their country.

While Hank Williams' songs are known and loved by millions, *Hank Williams: Honky Tonk Blues*, directed by Morgan Neville, is the first detailed documentary about one of the most influential figures of post-WWII American popular music. The movie includes new archival footage and photographs, interviews with still living (and performing) members of Williams' backing band, his children, his last wife and contemporary performers. It is a limited but useful introduction to his life and work.

Williams was born 1923, in Georgiana, a small settlement in south central Alabama. He was afflicted with chronic spinal problems, probably spina bifida occulta, at an early age. Unable to work in the traditional avenues in the area—farming and logging—he turned to music. He learnt to play guitar from a street blues singer Rufus Payne and absorbed a wide-range of styles around him—gospel, old-time music, hillbilly songs, jazz

and other musical genres—translating them into his own unique musical style.

Williams appeared in talent shows and moved to Montgomery in 1937, where he worked on a local radio station and sang at local venues. He spent 10 years performing before recording his first hit—“Move it on over”—in 1947, at the age of 23. Other hits followed, including: “Lovesick Blues,” “Honky Tonkin’,” “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” “Mansion on the Hill,” “Cold, Cold Heart,” “I Can’t Help It (If I’m Still in Love with You),” “Honky Tonk Blues,” “Jambalaya,” “Your Cheatin’ Heart,” and “Take These Chains From My Heart.”

While Williams only released 66 songs under his own name during his lifetime, an extraordinary 37 of these were hits. As well as providing some background to these songs, the documentary explores Williams’ “Luke the Drifter” recordings; a series of recitations and talking-blues style records that offered sombre but compassionate advice on life’s travails.

Williams’ personal life was tumultuous and many of his songs were inspired by his difficult relationship with his second wife Audrey. “Cold, Cold Heart,” for example, was written after he discovered that she had secretly had an abortion rather than have another child with him.

Suffering from his chronic spinal condition, Williams was also an alcoholic, with wild bouts of binge drinking, and he became addicted to morphine and other painkillers. This eventually ruined his health and he tragically died on New Years Day in 1953 at the age of 29. His last single was entitled “I’ll Never Get Out of This World Alive”.

Neville filmed—but did not include in the final cut—an interview with two women from a black gospel group that Williams wanted to include in his touring company—a plan sharply at odds with the Jim Crow conditions in the South at the time. Williams’ management opposed the idea.

Bob Dylan is one of a legion of contemporary American singer/songwriters influenced by Hank Williams. *Chronicles Volume 1*, Dylan’s eclectic biography, briefly, but poetically, pays tribute.

“Hearing about Hank’s death caught me squarely on the shoulder. The silence of outer space never seemed so loud. Intuitively, I knew, though, that his voice would never drop out of sight or fade away—a voice like a beautiful horn,” Dylan writes.

“When I hear Hank sing, all movement ceases. The slightest whisper seems sacrilege “In time, I became aware that in Hank’s recorded songs were the archetype rules of poetic songwriting. The architectural forms are like marble pillars, and they had to be there. Even his words—all of his syllables are divided up so they make perfect mathematical sense. You can learn a lot about songwriting by listening to his records, and I listened to them a lot and had them internalised.”

Neville’s film is not an intense work and could have been extended beyond its 88-minute made-for-television format. But it does capture some of Williams’ spirit and touches on some of the factors that produced his artistry.

Be There to Love Me: A Film about Townes Van Zandt, directed by Margaret Brown, explores the life of another tragic figure in contemporary music. While Van Zandt’s work does not compare with that of Williams, who is rightly regarded as the father of country music, his popularity and influence has grown in recent years.

Born in 1944 into a wealthy Texas family, Van Zandt was at odds with the comfortable life that this afforded him and rebelled against it. He was diagnosed with clinical depression as a teenager and subjected to several months of electric shock treatment. This did little to curb his bouts of depression and often self-destructive behaviour.

Inspired by Texas bluesman Lightning Hopkins, Van Zandt decided to become a folk musician and took to the road. He spent years performing in small folk clubs and juke joints across the country, building up a small but loyal following and recording several albums that were well regarded by his peers. His best known, although one of his weaker songs, was “Pancho and Lefty”, which became a hit when it was recorded by Willie

Nelson and Merle Haggard.

Van Zandt’s work is now widely available, having been recorded on more than 20 albums. Some of his most affecting songs include “Loretta,” “Marie,” “Tower Song,” “If I Needed You,” “For the Sake of the Song” “Tecumseh Valley” and “To Live Is To Fly”.

Brown’s documentary is a heartfelt work. Rather than providing a step-by-step chronology of Van Zandt’s life and work, it attempts to create the mood of his introspective, sardonic and at times wistful songs. There is archival footage, live performances and interviews with Van Zandt and musicians such as Steve Earle, Joe Ely, Guy Clarke, Kris Kristofferson and others, as well as his children and former wives.

Director Brown reportedly wanted the film to have a similar texture to that of *32 Short Films About Glenn Gould*, Francois Girard’s intelligent movie about the Canadian classical pianist. He achieved his aim to some extent, although the film could have perhaps spent more time exploring the inner poetry of Van Zandt’s songs. Moreover, Van Zandt’s harrowing drink and drug abuse tends to be presented as a purely personal issue, and not the by-product of a deeply exploitative industry.

Van Zandt died aged 53 from a heart attack, the result of years of chronic drinking and drug abuse, on January 1, 1997, the 44th anniversary of Williams’ death.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact