

## Film Reviews:

### **'The Hills Are Alive,' Channel Four**

#### **'Lingering legacy of Chernobyl**

I have yet to see a more disturbing and moving programme about the unseen and least obvious horrors of radiation than C4's Fragile Earth.

The breath-snatching splendour of the Cumbrian hills, filmed in bright, see-for-ever North-westerly conditions was speeded up. The shadows of cumulous clouds dashed and jumped across the valleys and mountainsides, giving an end of the world feeling to the proceedings.

A farmer, standing before a background of magnificent rolling beauty, spoke of men from the ministry who had come down to check the sheep – but not the humans for traces of the deadly dusts from Chernobyl.

The fact is that the contamination remains. No one knows what it will lead to. And few any longer seem to care very much.

This was an utterly stunning programme.'

**Daily Express, April 1989**

'There was remarkable beauty in the Cumbrian hills, which formed a constant backdrop to Border's sombre film **The Hills are Alive** (Channel 4). The hills may be alive with radioactivity, not only from Chernobyl but from nearby Sellafield.

The film's low-key interviews were an object lesson in the ability of ordinary people to think for themselves. The farmers were suspicious, angry and remarkably well-informed. It was also a lesson in the fact that, despite British Nuclear Fuel's high-powered PR campaigns, you cannot pull wool over a sheep-farmer's eyes.'

**Lesley Garner, The Daily Telegraph, April 1989**

#### **'John Cooper Clarke – Ten Years in an Open Necked Shirt'**

(Nick May, 1982 Br) John Cooper Clarke, Linton Kewsi Johnson, Hilary Mason. 60 minutes. **ICA Cinema.**

"Yes it was be there or be square, as clad in the slum chic of the hipster he issued the slang anthems of the zip age in the desperate Esperanto of the bop. John Cooper Clarke, the name behind the hairstyle.' JCC's fantasy autobiography, set partly in a surreal convent (and featuring a fine spittle-flecked performance by Hilary Mason as Mother Cyrene), is just one lens through which we are invited to view this high speed king of new wave poetry. Nick May's beautiful, funny and stylish film is no simple documentary. JCC is an expert at piling disguise on disguise, at wearing self revelation as another mask,

and the film expertly capitalises on this. We're shown interviews with journalists suffering from varying degrees of pomposity, all neatly punctured by our hero's throwaway wit, haunting montages and backdrops which tellingly illuminate the poems on voiceover, and live film of JCC's gigs in clubs and on tour with Linton Kwesi Johnston. Marvellous entertainment.'

**Michele Roberts, City Limits, December 1982**

#### **'Working-class hero?**

The ICA continues as a useful showcase for British independent cinema this month by programming a long short by a talented young film-maker Nick May. **John Cooper Clarke - Ten Years in an Open Necked Shirt** (uncertified: 60 minutes). Selected by the London Film Festival, produced for the Arts Council and Channel Four it is a surprisingly engaging foray into another artistic phenomenon – that of the working-class poet. Although taken from John Cooper Clark's autobiography the film actually sketches in, in a vivid and impressionistic way, the whole movement (if such it can be styled) of punkish poetry, and includes scenes of other contemporary 'bard-performers' as Linton Kwesi Johnson and Attila the Stockbroker. The result is a celluloid collage that is as vigorous and nervy as the poetry it portrays. It is indeed a "poly-syllabic excursion through thrillville UK" matching freewheeling camerawork and imagery, much of it shot in quite vibrant colour (for 16mm), "to the desperate Esperanto of the bop." Through interviews staged or natural, and scenes of suburbia out of which these pavement poets sprang, Nick May has managed to make a film that both documents and goes some way to explaining the subjects he has chosen with obvious affection. There is a poem-within-the-poem sequence, with the fine character actress Hilary Mason as a dominant nun, that brings to life Clarke's religious background and is worthy of Fellini. The concert scenes and dramatised readings have been well edited together in one of the most exuberant British 'shorts' for years. The feature it supports is a revival of the celebrated Bob Dylan concert movie **Don't Look Back** directed by D.A. Pennabaker back in 1966.'

**What's On & Where to go in London, December, 1982.**

#### **'John Cooper Clarke – Ten Years in an Open Necked Shirt,' Channel 4.**

'The man behind the haircut is given a chance to remind us that John Cooper Clarke is still the very best modern-day poet around. A rare chance to see this wonderful documentary based on C-C's 'polysyllabic excursion through Thrillville UK' proves his high speed brilliant wit *is* thrilling. And the filler interviews are fascinating to watch: while Patrick Humphries of *Melody Maker* touches the relevant response nerves, two Manchester Student Union devotees are embarrassingly wide of the mark: 'I reckon there's a limited amount of themes in the Platonic heaven?' drones Clarke with a de-li-ve-ry as sl-ow as hu-man-ly po-si-ble. 'Yeah,' enthuse the two fans. Meanwhile John claims his on-stage main influence is Peter O' Sullivan and a desire to be funny all the time. He is. Oh, and a final word for his band - The Invisible Girls – whose musicianship and sensitivity for their work is, like the Blockheads' used to be, impeccable.'

**Sally Payne, Time Out, March 1984.**

## Scala Cinema

The Great Rock' n Roll Swindle (Julian Temple, 1979) + Iggy Pop Videos (Nick May, 1980) 'Made last spring for a remarkable £3,000. by the inventive 3 Kliks company – video arm of the rock'n'roll firm Rocking Russian – three promotional films have been shown on American TV but never before in Britain. Notable for their economy and enjoyably subversive editing, they were also made in full collaboration with Iggy Pop (the director was Nick May, a National Film School grad with one feature film 'Invaders', 1977, already to his credit. The result is rock video which **can** truly promote – film which captures the ambiguities and complexities of both the performer and his material with hot, hard-hitting dynamism. 'Dogfood' and 'Knockin' Em Down in the City' were shot in studio settings with the artist improvising and the team working quickly to keep up. 'Loco Mosquito', planned with Pop in a half-hour after one of his gigs, was shot the following evening. (The crew simply followed him in hotel room and limo, as he dresses and heads out to a (Clash) gig. But the finished product is a superb representation of the song's actual itchy, ironic and many-layered context.'

**Cynthia Rose, Time Out, October, 1980.**

### **'The Invaders, Directed by Nick May, London Film Festival, 1977.**

We're all too rarely treated to accurate and entertaining documentaries about the state of play down in the counter-culture, so *The Invaders* (shown last Wednesday at the London Film Festival) should be unreservedly welcomed.

It covers six months in the fraught life of funk-rock band; but whereas previous films of aspects of contemporary music have generally (if inevitably) focussed on the fortunes of people who were to some degree successful, here it is apparent that this band's chances of making it are something less than zero.

However, the film is more than merely a closely observed disintegrating bunch of unimaginative musicians; it is the epitaph for a sub-culture. The people here are the redundant debris of the hippie generation. Some remain vividly in the memory. The band's guitarist and most formidable personality Steve (a quintessential representative of alternative society) is a superb raconteur, while the film gives a generous length of rope to the band's manager who responds by hanging himself several times over; at one point he utters the immortal line, "I've been a social secretary at University, and I know what this business is all about."

It's strange that such an erstwhile familiar lifestyle can now be viewed with nostalgia, but the film clearly reveals that the way of life is outmoded, but also that its accompanying ideology is thoroughly bankrupt; the vibes turned sour a long time ago.

Probably the *cinema-verite* works so powerfully because the director Nick May, was actually living in the same Warren Street squat as the protagonists, and so his presence is no way intrusive. Once when the camera is noticed he quickly deflates rising

inhibitions by saying blithely, “Don’t worry – no one will ever see this film anyway.” That would no doubt have been true, since this is a small-budget project of the National Film School and it is almost wilfully uncommercial in conventional terms. It is shot in grainy – i.e. cheap – black-and-white, and offers the viewers no comfortable aids, often using deliberately disjuncting techniques, as well as sloganeering captions in the style of punk fanzines.

However, in the final analysis this film – to use the parlance of the very mentality it knocks on the head – tells it like it is, and will be seen (probably at venues like Islington Screen) for that reason.

Hitherto an unrepentant old-waver, I find *The Invaders* the most persuasive argument yet for punk rock; old hippies everywhere will feel the same.’

**Bob Woofinden, NME, 1977.**

‘Nick May’s admirable first feature **‘The Invaders’** (Co-op, Saturday) documents the brief, doomed existence of the old-wave band of the same name, a group of hopeless losers whose aspirations apparently ran no higher than to be pub-rock’s answer to Fleetwood Mac. In 1977, yet May has painfully incisive observational footage that reveals a lot about the band’s ego problems, musical problems, personnel problems and managerial problems. But to his credit, he’s not content with simple reportage. The film is shot through with devices that challenge the very notion of ‘documentary’ : Superimposed Situationist slogans give events an explicit political dimension, while strobe pulses, stills and other effects raise aesthetic and ideological questions that are more vital than the band’s internal bickerings. The assemblage is messy, unresolved and continuously provocative. It all ends with a healthy blast of Buzzcocks on the soundtrack. It’s probably the liveliest post mortem ever conducted, and it deserves to become a key film for rock fans and documentarists alike.’ **(Tony Rayns, City Limits, Nov. 1978).**