

# Look Out Kids!

## D A Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus Hermione Good



At the Edinburgh Film Festival in a special BAFTA presentation D. A. Pennebaker spoke recently of his 40 years experience in documentary film making. A pioneer of the 'Direct Cinema' movement of the 50s, his first directorial triumph was *Primary* (1960) which established him as a major figure in American film. In the 60s Pennebaker filmed a range of cultural figures: Bob Dylan in *Don't Look Back* (1967), Hendrix, Joplin and others in *Monterey Pop* (1969) and David Bowie in *Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars: The Movie*. Pennebaker's projects have also included collaborations with Jean-Luc Godard. A collaborative approach with his partner, Chris Hegedus began with *Town Bloody Hall* (1977) which captured Norman Mailer vs. Germaine Greer in their notoriously flamboyant debate on Womans' Liberation in New York. Other participants included Diana Trilling and Susan Sontag. More recently they made the Oscar-nominated *The War Room*, which followed Bill Clinton's campaign strategists during the 1992 election. Another well-received documentary, *Moon Over Broadway* followed Carol Burnett's stage comeback. They had two films at the festival, *Startup.com* (which was co-directed by Hegedus and newcomer Jahane Noujaim) which followed the boom and bust of a dot com venture, and *Down From the Mountain* a concert film featuring music from the Coen brothers' film *O Brother Where Art Thou?*

For further information their web site is at: <http://www.pennebakerhegedusfilms.com/index.html>

The interview was introduced by Nick Fraser, the Editor of BBC's *Storyville* who started by saying that documentaries generally made him feel bad about life, but the great thing about Pennebaker and Hegedus' work was that it made him feel good. The first clip was *Don't Look Back* and Bob Dylan's lyrics on cards sequence to 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' (yes that is Allen Ginsberg at the edge of the frame).

Was this the first 'Rockumentary' and pop video? The sequence was Dylan's idea—a rejoinder to the Beatles singing the wrong lyrics on 'Ready-Steady-Go'. They sat up all night drawing the cards and started shooting in a garden at 8 am. After being hassled by a cop they ducked into a New York alleyway and did it in two takes.

With *Don't look Back*, like taking a walk, Pennebaker has an agenda but doesn't have a structure. His role wasn't to provide information about Dylan (he claims to be suspicious of this approach) but simply to observe. He didn't want to ask questions like 'why did you change your name?' or ask him to do anything again if he missed it on camera—he doesn't want to put the pressure of filmmaking onto the subject.

The second clip was Dylan's argument with the hack from Time magazine. Fraser asked why they

didn't interview their subjects or have a commentary? Chris Hegedus answered that she doesn't have rules but what interests her is the excitement of being dropped in someone else's world. They want a relationship where they hang in the background and watch rather than interview. Fraser asked whether the term 'Direct Cinema' meant anything to them now? Pennebaker said that firstly, their films are 'movies'. They want people to watch documentaries the same way they go to watch feature films, and believe the word *documentary* sometimes has connotations of an attached agenda.

Clip three was from 'Town Bloody Hall' (72 - 79) recording an event billed as the "last event of the 1960s in the theatre of ideas" and centring on a debate on feminism. For Pennebaker: 'the most ineptly shot film I've ever seen'. He didn't want to make a comedy film about a serious issue but the footage seemed filled with jokes and rude words. At this point Hegedus approached him as he struggled with the footage—she came in and saved it. Hegedus spoke of how *Life* magazine in the 60s had elevated the status of photography and was attempting to do the same with film. Through *Life* she became aware of Pennebaker and Albert and David Maysles work dealing with real subjects (Kennedy, Fonda and so on) and became inspired. So, aware of Pennebaker's documentary on Feminism she asked him for a job as his editor, adding: "The women's movement meant a lot to me but the event was hilarious and there was an incredible electricity between Germaine Greer and Norman Mailer. Working on the project it felt in a sense like putting a cap on the 60s."

Since then they have continued to work together. Hegedus said the bonus is that shooting on a long project can be lonely, sometimes subjects don't want you there so working with a partner is a bonus. She joked though that in the editing room they "get divorced at least once". "Usually Penne gives in" met with "normally she's wrong..." which was followed by another clip of Germaine and Norman.

Their work isn't broadly funded, so Fraser asked them how they kept going as independent film makers. Pennebaker joked that they stay alive because of dead rock stars, as he retained the rights to footage of early stuff like 'Monterey Pop'.

They like to release the films in cinema theatres because it's the only way to get a critical response, interest grows through word of mouth and the film has a chance to build. By contrast on TV the films play once and are gone, they tend to get lost within the ratings-led ethos. US TV stations don't normally want their films anyway, they weren't interested in 'The War Room'. With 'Start.up.com' they took a risk and started without

any backing—half way through they made a short pilot version and showed it to Nick Fraser who commissioned it for the BBC. Pennebaker added that he'd made films for CBS in the past but ended up keeping them. They didn't want what he turned out.

The next clip was 'The War Room' which followed Clinton's presidential campaign, showing the unexpected Jennifer Flowers' confession of a long term relationship during the campaign. How did they get such intimate access? Hegedus started by saying "Films come in the door like little cold cats that come in out the rain."

A couple of guys came to see them and said 'don't you think the election is so strange that somebody should make a film about it?' Pennebaker and Hegedus said they were interested but didn't have an entree to the Whitehouse. The two people came back with money and the necessary introductions. Beginning the project they wondered if it would be a good idea. Would the campaign team be candid on camera? Would they say 'shit'? In a meeting with James Carvell (Clinton's spin doctor), he blew a chewing gum bubble until it exploded all over his face—that swung it for them.

A clip from 'The War Room' met with the response that the film wouldn't have had the same impact if it had been about a losing campaign team: again, they took a risk in the subject matter. It paid off—the people the documentary caught showed a fired-up energy, youthful enthusiasm and the determination to get the Republicans out. For them Clinton was a dream candidate: very charismatic, incredible memory, knew every issue, smart, energetic.

The next clip was from 'Moon Over Broadway'. This followed Carol Burnett's return to the Broadway stage. Nick Fraser observed that this was not a bad ploy to start with. Their producer for the project had links with top Broadway producers and got a list of what everyone was working on. Burnett's name and the notion of a play with behind the scenes aspects was the draw. The problem was the expense and technical difficulty in getting access to a Broadway show and a large number of actors for a long period of time. After discussions with the unions they got a two week trial on set and managed to establish a strong enough relationship to enable the film to go ahead.

Speaking on their latest film 'Startup.com' in which Pennebaker took a producer's role, Hegedus said she got into the idea because of the way the net was changing people's lives. She read about a place called 'Silicon Alley' in New York: kids in their 20s were starting companies with three page ideas and they'd get funding and make their fortunes. Again fate played a part and a cat came in from the cold: her co-director Jahane Noujaim came to them and suggested that they make a film about her friends Kaleil Tuzman and Tom Herman, best friends since childhood who were about to start up a dot com venture. So they had





started with the notion of an optimistic adventure where they would all become millionaires. Then the market turned. The first clip showed the founder member of the company, Kaleil sacking his best friend, Tom as their venture began to go horribly wrong.

Asked if she ever felt uncomfortable filming such events, Hedegus stated that there are always things you can't film; "it's like a dance, we get to know each other, what the limits are. We suggested let us film but if you're not happy we won't use it." It was a gift from the subjects to let them keep filming because of the trust they had built up shooting 400 hours of footage. She is aware that their films become viewed differently with the perspective of history. They began making 'Startup' in a boom time, now everyone knows nearly 99% of dot com companies have failed. Audiences view the film with the expectancy of failure, but that wasn't the idea when they started. Hedegus stressed they do not set out to portray people in a bad light, they only make films about

people they like and so it is sometimes tough when things go wrong. On Moon over Broadway, "watching playwrights getting bad reviews was difficult".

Were their films intrusive? Pennebaker said it might be intrusive to film someone making love but in most of the situations they filmed he felt the idea of a camera being there was not outrageous. One question was about 'releases' how did they get clearance for all the

people that feature incidentally in their films? "Fake them!" came the reply. Pennebaker claimed they have only ever got one in all their years as film-makers—a Liverpoolian Dylan Fan when making 'Don't Look Back'.

'Startup' was completely shot on DV video cameras. Hedegus said they had become 'wedded to DV', particularly the Sony VX1000 model with the flip out screen. Prior to this they had mainly

worked on film, but Pennebaker agreed that working with DV had been a fantastic advantage to their kind of film-making—lightweight cameras being less intrusive and tape stock being so much

cheaper than film. In the past, a major problem had been that transferring from video to film for theatrical release had never looked good, but now telecine technology was so much improved he has finally become an advocate of DV.

Was there any story they started and couldn't finish? Yes, said

Pennebaker—Janis Joplin. He found her scary and just couldn't deal with the drugs. He wanted to avoid the issue yet with her it was unavoidable. "Who was to say she didn't need it? In making a documentary you don't want to be romantic or judgmental about drugs...I ran away."

