Birmingham Popular Music Archive and swish films together produced the new music film, MADE IN BIRMINGHAM: Reggae Punk Bhangra.

Directed with a refreshing robustness by Deborah Aston, MADE IN BIRMINGHAM is an hour long mini music documentary that charts the cultural, social and political background to three music genres - Reggae Punk Bhangra - that have strong positive associations with the city of Birmingham.

Funded via the Digital Archive Fund, c/o Screen WM, MADE IN BIRMINGHAM draws extensively on a host of regional, national and international film archives, including the Media Archive for Central England/MACE, ITV, Oom Gallery, and Artelips / Paris. From such archives, material has been unearthed that hasn't been seen publicly for 25 years or more, and it's all as fresh as a digital daisy!

In the context of MADE IN BIRMINGHAM, this footage has now been 're purposed' for current and future use. When the film is screened in Film Festivals and cinemas, the archive material will be re-presented afresh to public audiences. And what marvellous archives they are....

MACE's holdings yielded up fantastic finds, most notably the Central TV programme, from the late '70s and early '80s, 'Here and Now'. Broadcast weekly, 'Here and Now' documented the city's rich Asian and Afro Caribbean cultural life, especially the emergence of reggae music in the city, whether indigenous (eg, Steel Pulse, Musical Youth, Beshara) or visiting/touring (eg, Mighty Diamonds). MACE is the Media Archive for Central England.

MADE IN BIRMINGHAM has all this in abundance, sourced from this gem of an archive at MACE. On another tack, researchers at swish films tracked down live footage of iconic Birmingham post punk band, Au Pairs, shot at New York night club Hurrah's in the early 1980's by film maker Merrill Aldighieri. Now in a Parisian film archive, little known - and little seen - footage of this woefully undervalued, but enormously influential Birmingham band has been 're purposed' and included in the film.

For the film, interviews were undertaken - at Maison Mayci Patisserie in Kings Heath - with 20 key musicians and commentators including UB 40 saxophonist, arranger and lyricist Brian Travers; Bhangra Dj Boy Chana; Bhangra Academic Rajinder Dudrah, and Ammo Talwar, from Punch Records; Au Pairs Peter Hammond and Paul Foad; Dennis Seaton of Musical Youth; S-ENDZ from Asian fusion crossover group Swarn; Denise Johnson, singer and backing singer with UB40 and Simply Red; Amlak Tafari of Pato Banton's band and the mighty Steel Pulse; Alan Apperley of The Prefects and Nightingales; Vix of Fuzzbox; Pogus Caesar from Oom Gallery
......And Janice Connolly aka Birmingham's much loved housewife comedienne, Mrs Barbara Nice, recalls her little documented time in the punk band The Ever Readies.

Also contributing in interviews from various archives are The Beat's Ranking Roger, Robin Campbell of UB 40, Kevin Rowland - The Killjoys, Dexy's Midnight Runners - and the legendary David Hinds, Steel Pulse's eloquent word smith and talismanic front man.

A key film drawn on for archival interviews is MOTOR CITY MUSIC YEARS, the 90 min, 3 x 30 min parts, film directed by Jonnie Turpie for Central Tv and Channel 4, and co produced by swish's Roger Shannon. Originally made to celebrate Birmingham's selection as the UK City of Music in 1992, this was the first film to associate, and culturally interpret, the city with music genres such as Heavy Metal and Reggae.

Deborah Aston's new film groups the interviews and archive footage into three themes - Getting Started; Sense of Community; Creating an Identity - and in doing so explores the interconnectedness of the three music genres, and how individuals and communities express themselves through music and the positive impact this cultural mix has had on the identity of the city.

The film is unapologetic about the city's influences globally on popular music, pointing out that in Steel Pulse, UB40 and Musical Youth the city has a world class legacy in reggae music - in fact, leaving Bob Marley and The Wailers aside, the three best selling reggae bands in the world at one point were from Birmingham; the cult post punk band The Nightingales played more John Peel BBC sessions than any other band, excluding Peel ultra fav, The Fall; and regarding Bhangra, Birmingham is identified as the city where this most cherished of international popular Asian music was actually honed, creatively nurtured, innovatively developed, and from where it rose to global prominence in the '80's and '90's.

Jez Collins form the Birmingham Popular Music Archive and Researcher at Birmingham City University commented in this way -

'I established the archive as a way of celebrating the rich musical heritage of Birmingham. For the last 50 years individuals and groups have continuously produced a vast array of different music and yet as a city we've never recognized this. I simply wanted to use our music heritage to engender civic pride as other cities have done, Manchester, Liverpool, New Orleans, Chicago and so on. This all contributes to the profile of these cities let alone the cultural tourism that arises as a result.

Working with the Centre of Media and Cultural Research team at BCU has resulted in an archive that is about much more than just the 'music'. People’s memories are linked to the venues, gigs, friends bands, record shops etc and this is reflected in both the archive and this brilliant film, which swish films have produced. We get to hear first hand, what was happening culturally, socially and politically, and how individuals and communities used music to express themselves.
I really hope that the film brings some much deserved attention to the city and its music, as what better expression of our culture can there be, than a film that encompasses three musical genres such as Reggae, Punk and Bhangra and impact they have had on the global music industry.

My own thoughts OF MUSIC AND THE CITY....

It's always a satisfying moment, when you can screen a new film for all those who were involved in its making - in industry parlance, a 'cast and crew' screening - and then harvest up the responses, for good or ill. This we did in the MAC Cinema for the new music film about Birmingham - MADE IN BIRMINGHAM/Reggae Punk Bhangra, which was supported by Screen WM.

Fortunately many of the interviewees - and their family and friends - turned up for what turned out to be a buzzy event, and a warmly received film. A packed cinema is always a treat, but when it's packed with those who appear on the screen in front of you, it becomes a different matter. Self reflexive or interactive are meaningless terms to describe what is a very personal and subjectively multi layered occasion.

It was such a buzz seeing all the folk gathering - nervous and tentative - at the new MAC; and as they all took their seats in the cinema I could see that we had performers and musicians from The Ever Readies, Au Pairs, The Prefects, The Nightingales, Fuzzbox, Punch Records, Steel Pulse, UB40, Musical Youth, Pato Banton Band, Swami, Amlak Tafari Band inter alia, all of them interviewed for the film, and representing music from the city - Reggae, Punk, Bhangra - from the late seventies to the Noughties. The opening sequence has Dennis Seaton talking about how he got involved with Musical Youth, intercut with the archival Musical Youth from the early eighties, and once we had got thru' that, I knew we were plain sailing.

Snapshots of time, unlocked memories, retrieved moments, lost images now found - these are all the instruments playing the tempo of film time.

Children glimpsing their parents in performance; partners seeing their loved ones in their musical pomp for the first time; musicians watching their skinny youthful alter egos skim across that stage.....letting us know that's what all the fuss was about, back in the day!

The event was kicked off by Jez Collins, of Birmingham Popular Music Archive - whose vision to get a film produced had driven the whole thing forward. His introduction drew attention to the heavily mythologised role that music has seemed to play in shaping the cultural identities of cities such as New Orleans, Manchester, Liverpool, Detroit etc, and how Birmingham also had its own rich seam of music heritage to mine. We feel that this new film opens up a number of such rich seams.
The film's director, Deborah Aston has skillfully woven the contemporary interviews with the archival material sourced from a number of places. The Media Archive for Central England / MACE - proved to be a great source of television material from the seventies and eighties and the film benefits enormously from our finds there. A generally held understanding is that archive equals 'History with a capital H' equals the Edwardian period or wartime era, when in fact archives are much more fluid, experiential and time bending than that, as we hope this film shows.

A lovely example of this was the response of Dee Johnson's brother, John. Dee, a singer with UB 40 and Simply Red, is interviewed in the film and John, who plays horns for Simply Red, came along to support his sister. When the first archive clip plays - Musical Youth on 'Here and Now' for Central in the early 'eighties - he spots himself as a young boy playing trombone in the horn section! He'd never seen the clip before, or knew it even existed and was enthused to have done so. Having come to big up his sister, he finds himself captured on the screen in a moment of unexpected visibility.

But then, that's what archives deliver, and to adopt a phrase from the property market, it's very much a case of 'Negative Equity'. There's great value in those old negatives......and in 35mm film, in tapes of all formats, in broadcast material, in home movies, and, especially for us, in music programmes from regional tv in the eighties.....

Personally and professionally, I hadn't been involved with documentaries for a while, limiting my factual engagement in recent years to the recording of events and Festivals, eg 'Lost in Adaptation' and 'Lower Eastside Dialogues.' But, when the opportunity arose for my company - swish Ltd - to produce for the Birmingham Popular Archive a film documenting music genres associated closely with the city, I was delighted to get involved.

I had 'form' in this respect, having produced in the early nineties the 3 x 30 min series for Central/Channel 4 MOTOR CITY MUSIC YEARS, which looked at pop music from Birmingham from the beat days of Brum Beat, taking in the Move/ ELO nexus, the origins of Heavy Metal, and the emergence of ska, reggae and Two Tone. A few years later, I also had some involvement at Granada with the documentary, WHO PUT THE BEAT IN THE MERSEYBEAT ?, which traced the sound of Mersey Beat back to African diasporic influences in the city of Liverpool itself - as opposed to the orthodox thesis of the visiting war time GIs or the fifties 'Cunard Yanks'.

Our plan for this new film is to gain Film Festival exposure for the documentary, aiming in the first instance for the Sheffield Documentary Festival and the London Film Festival in the Autumn, while we also wish to ensure that the most immediate audience for the film - folk in Birmingham and the West Midlands - get the opportunity to see the film in the near future at cinemas in the region.
This is what the director, Deborah Aston, has to say on the origins of the film and her approach to it:

"The nature of this documentary was very much dictated by its origins as a project established by Jez Collins at the Birmingham Popular Music Archive and Screen WM to repurpose archive material reflecting themes of Home, Identity and Citizenship.

Even though I had to work creatively within such thematic constraints, I wanted to make an energetic film that reflected a city that has more to offer than just its industrial past and heavy metal. For me this film is really about the city's people, their attitude and giving unsung heros some long overdue credit.

While doing research for the film it took my mind back to times I had spent at The Mermaid, The Powerhouse and other Birmingham music venues that drew in the colourful crowd from the alternative scene and I wanted to share that experience with the people who may have missed it. I always put my creativity and determination down to my own days as a punk, that true working class grit and do-it-yourself ethos - after all, that's how my early films came about!

'Made In Birmingham' took me back to my earlier ambitions of documentary filmmaking, but I never quite found a subject that really excited me enough to do the research; and this is now the first of what I hope will be many projects like this.

There has been the re-emergence of the music documentary in recent years, especially from one of my all time favourite directors, Martin Scorsese, whose film 'No Direction Home' was about Bob Dylan and his impact on American popular music and culture of the 20th century. Scorsese also directed 'Shine a Light', The Rolling Stones concert, and is currently in post with his latest film about The Beatles, George Harrison, and it also looks as though he will make a biopic of the late great Frank Sinatra.

A couple of documentaries that stood out for me and really got me excited by the music documentary genre were 'End Of The Century - The Story of The Ramones' which features one of the last Joe Strummer interviews and 'Metallica: Some Kind of Monster' - both very powerful and engaging films.

In many ways 'Made In Birmingham' is more akin to Julien Temple's 'Oil City Confidential' - about the '70s pub rockers Dr Feelgood and their Canvey Island origins - in its exploration of period, music and place, as well as the social and political conditions of the time.

Using new material juxtaposed with archive footage, the film examines how music has played its part in creating communities, helping to build identities, and how certain spaces and areas all played their part and crucially how it all started.

Using the archives was a great chance to see footage that has been locked away and forgotten, now repurposed for a new audience to enjoy all over again. Gaining access to
some rare footage really did feel like a privilege, and again I can see why there is
growing interest in the creative use of such material. Terence Davies did this to
imaginative effect in his 'Of Time and The City', telling his story of his city mostly via
archive. Another director doing the same is John Akomfrah in his new film installation,
'Mnemosyne.'

You can also draw on the parallels between Davies' film and 'Made in Birmingham', as
the film tells a story of a city via some of its music, and also the archives associated with
that music.

Recently at the Cannes Film Festival I heard John Battsek talking about 'The Stones In
Exile' documentary, that was 2 years in the making and how they had a team of
researchers to realise that film. Needless to say we had neither the time nor the budget
yet I am immensely proud of what was achieved. We had about 6 weeks and a small
budget, but all the money is on the screen and used creatively to full effect thanks to the
support of the likes of MACE, the regional media archive. We made the best use of a
very small team and local facilities to keep the ethos of community and that DIY attitude
to achieve an intimate uncompromising and unsentimental film.

Everyone in this film has been very influential in his or her own unique and engaging
style and that was a story that needed to be told. I am so happy that I got to tell at least a
small part of it. This documentary has only really scratched the surface of some of the
amazing stories that were unearthed.

Deborah Aston, Director, 'Made in Birmingham - Reggae Punk Bhangra.'

And my co Exec Producer, Jez Collins, had this to say....

'I started the Birmingham Popular Music Archive because I was fed up with the lack of
recognition the city received for its musical heritage. I wanted the city - its agencies and
citizens - to celebrate artists such as The Spencer Davis Group, The Move, ELO, Black
Sabbath, Judas Priest, Swami, Steel Pulse, Au Pairs, Dexys Midnight Runners, Beshara,
Duran Duran, Apna Sangeta, UB40, Joan Armatrading and the hundreds of others bands
from Brum, just as Liverpool or Manchester in the UK, or Memphis, Chicago, New
Orleans in the USA celebrate their musical heritage. These cities understand that popular
music is not only a great source of cultural and civic pride but that there can also be
economic benefits brought about by cultural tourism.

Birmingham has a long and extremely diverse history of popular music making and
consumption. From the skiffle and folk of the 50’s to the Brumbeat era of the 60’s, the
heavy metal, reggae, punk and post punk of the 70’s, the new romanticism and ska of the
80’s, to the indie and dance scenes in the 80’s and 90’s.

I wanted to preserve this heritage, celebrate it and also to use it to inspire future
generations of music makers. However, I also wanted users to construct the archive, for
them to tell us what their experiences and memories were, what music meant to them and their communities. I think the archive is achieving this.

When I saw the call from Screen WM for the Digital Film Archive Fund, and its themes of expressing issues of identity, community and home through the use and repurposing of archive material I could immediately see the narrative and the interconnectedness in popular music with identity and community. This was especially true with community where there was a lot of opportunity to interpret the meaning of the word, community as a geographical location, community as ethnicity and community as music genres or scenes.

I wanted to explain that popular music was as much about social and cultural interaction, and was a way of individuals and communities expressing themselves as it was about selling millions of records. I think we have succeed in this aspect in our film.

What Deborah has managed to do, somehow, is take the vision I had in my head and get it onto the screen in a warm, reflective, and engaging way without ever wallowing in nostalgia. I feel we have managed to take a small section of music styles from the city, Reggae, Punk and Bhangra, and show how those communities supported each other, frequented the same spaces, shared ideas and drew from each other’s cultures to reflect the issues that were affecting them.

We have unearthed some amazing footage from organisations such as MACE as well as private holders from as afar afield as America and we have given a voice to those artists who don’t often get the recognition they deserve.

There are lots more stories to tell and films to be made from this rich musical heritage, lots more archive material to repurpose and lots more opportunities for Birmingham to finally realise the amazing cultural resource it has in its popular music history.

Jez Collins, Co Exec Producer, MADE IN BIRMINGHAM / Reggae Punk Bhangra

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