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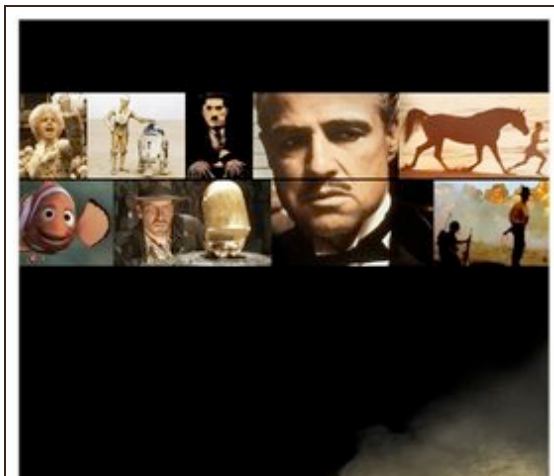


The Place to Chat about Rare Kung Fu and More!

TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2008

FOG CITY MAVERICKS -- DVD review by porfle

As a history of the San Francisco movie scene, Gary Leva's 2007 documentary FOG CITY MAVERICKS offers endless unfavorable comparisons between the artistic freedom of the Bay Area community



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and the impersonal, factory-like atmosphere of Los Angeles, where creativity is stifled by bean counters in suits who want to control every aspect of the filmmaking



process and churn out bland Hollywood "product" for mass consumption. We're given several examples of the different sensibilities and priorities of these opposing mindsets, and in hindsight are able to see how utterly wrong the studio heads were in their negative reactions to such innovative works-in-progress as AMERICAN GRAFFITI, THE GODFATHER, ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST, and STAR WARS.

This story of San Francisco as a hub of creative expression begins about as far back as one can go, with Eadweard Muybridge and his photographic studies of horses and people in motion. Next comes the founding of Essanay Studios by Western star "Bronco Billy" Anderson, who wisely snatched Charlie Chaplin away from Mack Sennett and gave him full control over his own movies. Chaplin later compared the different creative settings: "In San Francisco, one felt the spirit of optimism, of enterprise. Los Angeles, on the other hand, was an ugly city, hot and oppressive."

As one might expect, the two main subjects of this documentary turn out to be Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas, whose frustrating experiences within the studio system early on prompted them to seek more independent means of cinematic expression. Coppola tells of how the opportunity to direct FINIAN'S RAINBOW for Jack Warner while still in film school gave him a taste of the kind of regimented filmmaking he wanted to avoid, leading him to establish his American Zoetrope studio in San Francisco as a haven for film artists such as Carroll Ballard, John Milius, and George Lucas. When the new studio went into debt, the cash-strapped Coppola was forced to direct a quickie gangster flick for Paramount based on a sensational novel. After a long, difficult struggle to make the film his way against constant pressure from the studio, Coppola's epic THE GODFATHER went on to sweep the Oscars and become the highest-grossing film to date.

George Lucas, meanwhile, was having his own problems, with brilliant early films such as THX-1138 and AMERICAN GRAFFITI being misunderstood, mishandled, and badly edited by the studios. Despite

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this, the latter proved so lucrative (to the tune of over a hundred million 1973 box-office dollars) that Lucas was able to get a new sci-fi project off the ground amidst still further adversity from the suits, who grumbled that there was "no future in science fiction." The incredible success of STAR WARS revolutionized filmmaking and allowed Lucas total artistic freedom and independence from that point forward. This led to his creation of Lucasfilm, Skywalker Ranch, Industrial Light and Magic, and the development of computer graphics and digital filmmaking, motivated by his conviction that "an entirely new approach was needed to expand the boundaries of cinema."

FOG CITY MAVERICKS goes on to showcase the creative exploits of other cinematic pioneers such as Phillip Kaufman, Pixar's John Lassiter, actor-turned-director Clint Eastwood, and, representing the next generation, Coppola's own daughter Sofia. The career of legendary "maverick" producer Saul Zaentz, whose creative vision inspired such classics as ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST, AMADEUS, and THE ENGLISH PATIENT, is also explored in depth. One reason for the success of Zaentz, who often gambled on his projects by financing them himself, is summed up by director Anthony Minghella: "A Saul Zaentz movie isn't going to be like any other movie because...it hasn't gone through a machine."

Rather than presenting each filmmaker's story in a series of isolated segments, writer-director Gary Leva weaves them together as integral, interlocking elements of San Francisco's collective moviemaking history in the 20th century and beyond. Stunning location footage is intercut with a wealth of interviews, film clips, photographs, and movie scenes to add to Leva's portrait of the city as a veritable utopia of creative expression.

FOG CITY MAVERICKS is a lovingly-crafted documentary that succeeds in both drawing a clear distinction between the artistic and purely commercial aspects of cinema, and celebrating the joy and wonder one can derive from it. The first aspect of the film's message is clearly stated by Zaentz: "Studios are like flies...they'll eat both honey and sh** with the same enthusiasm." The second is contained in Coppola's boyhood motivation for joining together with like-minded artists to make movies--the idea that "filmmakers could play together like children, making magic."

POSTED BY PORFLE AT 9:53 PM 

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