

A BIT OF A CULT

Mike Penwolf

I've got an idea that's been bugging me for the last few years that I'd like to see done. It's based on someone around the turn of the century born into a rich family of industrialists with access to lots of new technology like photography. This guy, or it could be a woman, is kind of the black sheep of the family and doesn't really want to go into the business and run a factory and so the family realise the best thing is to send him abroad to get him out of the way. A lot of people used to send their kids to India, 'go and make a man of yourself, do whatever it is you've got to do and then come back and we'll slot you in later when you've calmed down a bit.'

I thought it would be really interesting to see how somebody recorded what they experienced using the technology of the time. Nowadays everybody goes away with a camcorder so they get a pretty high-tech, almost broadcast quality vision of what it is they've just experienced. But in the old days you either would've had to write a book or use new technology. The potential for getting it wrong is always there even today but especially if you're using a more primitive technology. So imagine if you were in the middle of the jungle and you recorded tribal singing onto a phonograph. We know how different the sound would be from what was really occurring at the time. I mean, if you listen to old 78s of opera singers, experts will tell you how wrong it is. But they are entertaining and people probably thought opera singers sounded like that and got a shock if they ever

saw a real one.

The principle would be that this person had travelled the world collecting all this material using very primitive technology, which could even be a musical box. If you're clever enough you could go to a tribe in Africa and transcribe what they were singing and playing to be played on a music box; it would sound absolutely mental but brilliant.

What I imagine is that this person would go and live with the tribe and get initiated deep into the whole thing. I have this vision of someone who manages to record it long before missionaries or anybody else got there. It's what artists want to do; they always want to go back to an Arcadian time when everything was wonderful. And for a period everybody thought it would be found in the so called primitive world, but that's so untrue because there were plenty of tribes who were killing each other at every opportunity long before western man turned up; all he did was give them guns so they could do it more efficiently – the human condition is universal. For that very reason I'd like it to have the full gamut of all the lovely things and all the darkness.

In a way his angle may have been to record the sights and sounds for the sensation, without realising the underlying context. So you could be recording something thinking, this sounds really nice, whereas in fact what they're doing could either be getting ready to go to war or bury or marry someone and you might not have a clue. They could be singing the recipe they're going to cook you with.

I was kind of inspired by the cargo cult phenomena, which would happen when the Americans during World War II turned up on remote Polynesian islands, built an airstrip, put in a hospital and brought in twentieth century technology. The islanders would've been living as they'd done for thousands of years and suddenly the Americans were looking after them with doctors and getting food flown in. Then as the war progressed the Americans disappeared

and of course the islanders would be bereft. So what they did was they started building their own landing strips out of bamboo, with control towers, lights, and everything.

It's so easy to laugh at them but I just thought, that's fantastic, isn't that what we always do in every religion, build a little replica of it on earth? They want to communicate with god so they build a great big religious radio set and make it like a place you imagine that connection could be made. To me there's absolutely no difference between what the islanders were doing and what we've done; it's in our heads to do that. If you want something to happen you'll set the scene, you'll create a place where that could happen.

The way I imagine it is that there's an old stately home that's been in the same family for hundreds of years and finally they've run out of money, their last crooked relative blows it all on the stock market and they have to hand it over to the National Trust. What would've happened if this family had kept all the material? It's probably all still in crates, which they just bunged in the west wing and forgot about. Then the house is finally opened up and people find all these things: the musical boxes, the old magic lantern slides and the diaries that would link everything together. In terms of written material, that's the thing I would like to see, I'd like to read, but I know I can't do it. I'm slightly dyslexic and I don't really get on with written words; I'm more of a visual person. I'm interested in making all the things. I mean I've done it; I've worked in the film business and I know how to make props, how to fake things, age them down.

The end result would be like a museum of the sights and sounds but transposed through old technology so you'd listen to a wax cylinder that this person had recorded what had happened somewhere in the world. With our twenty-first century sensibility it's so easy to say that's wrong because the sound quality is so bad but I would want people get beyond that, to think what an exciting experience this person must've had.

Imagine they were doing a ceremony where they're all singing and dancing with a very specific purpose to evoke the spirits of the ancestors, but he's just recorded it and photographed it thinking what he's got in that box is the thing. It's like holiday photographs; you were there, you felt what it was like but you know how different it is. I love the idea of having to try and get through the interpretation to what the real thing is. In the cargo cult you've got your landing strip made out of bamboo and at one level you can see what they've done there, but what's the deeper intention? Even though it's wrong you can still get to the truth of why they did it. You can say no bamboo planes are going to land but I do understand why they are doing that – they want their ancestors to come with all the goods. It's just like anything we do – why do people sing hymns in church?

I'd love to show it in the courtyard of the British Museum. Or it could be in an exhibition space and working your way through it's up to you whether it's real or not and ultimately, as far as I'm concerned, it wouldn't matter because I wouldn't be presenting a definitive truth. That's what I'm really interested in, the ambiguity of it, so that you walk out thinking lots of thoughts relative to today.

Recorded at Phoenix Gallery, Brighton
12 May 2007

www.unwritten.org.uk

Text of the interview © Mike Penwolf 2007
Editorial © Library of Unwritten Books 2007

Any opinions expressed in this book belong to the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors.