

Nimbin Collective Film

The Nimbin Film is the greatest film that never was.

The Nimbin Film had its gestation at the Lawson Film School, a three week summer crash course in the art of film making sponsored by the Aquarius Foundation, a cultural spin-off from the Australian Union of Students.

The school was conducted in an old coach way-station in the Blue Mountains town of Lawson, where around 25 people undertook a summer intensive in the rudiments of filmmaking, film appreciation that included such masterpieces as 'The Cabinet of Dr Caligari', guest lecturers like Albie Thoms and visitations from counter culture luminaries such as Richard Neville, newly returned from London and the Oz Trials.

Towards the end of the school we got news that the Aquarius Foundation was planning the Nimbin Festival and wanted it documented.

I'm not sure of the machinations that saw some of the Lawson Film School students get the grant, but we were delighted and certain that luminous careers lay ahead as we pondered how seven or so individualistic and nascent auteurs could ever agree on an outline for a linear or even coherent concept.

The Foundation had set aside a sum of \$10,000 for a film and another sum for Bush Video to conduct their ground-breaking community cable network experiments, and so by divining nor some other method, the chosen few would be myself, Peter Gray, Sam Meredith, Brendon Stretch, Diana Kearns and Andy Trenouth.

In some ways the film process that eventuated would reflect much of Nimbin itself, chaotic, and undisciplined while also being experimental and brave.

There were no blueprints for what the festival was to do or what we were setting out to achieve; we were all in uncharted waters.

Part of the problem with our group was that we were meant to be mentored by an experienced filmmaker, but he quickly saw the problems within the group dynamics and relented any responsibility, indeed input.

The other problem with the film's goal was that none of us were counter culturalists. Like the festival goers themselves, we were to a person the products of white, middle class Australia, and while being sympathetic to the aims of the counter culture, most of us would never step far from the fringes of mainstream society.

This would show itself when we arrived at the camping grounds, complete with fridges, alcohol, BBQs and huge slabs of meat, which as it seared on the hot plate the smell would drive our vegetarian neighbours to paroxysms of disgust.

It was at the festival site that we decided to break our film allowance into equal parts allowing us to follow our own visions, with the more experienced of the team taking on board shooting film and sound for those of us less experienced with handling a camera or sound equipment.

In this way the spirit of the festival reached us, but it would be about the limit of cooperation to bring about a unified vision.

After each of us took what we wanted from the festival we returned to Sydney , Adelaide and Brisbane to convert the raw footage into coherent statements with still no idea of how each part was to be integrated into a finished film.

This final product was thwarted even more when the festival made a loss and the film was seen by the organisers as a means to recoup.

We had arranged a screening of composite prints and workprints at the Sydney Filmmakers Coop, (which I believe came the closest to a screening of the complete parts) when an argument broke out between a couple of the filmmakers and a festival organiser, about handing the film over to Aquarius so they could achieve their financial reconciliation.

Being strong headed individualists, the outcome of this situation meant that momentum was lost forever bring the film together, as we each held on to our own projects.

Eventually time, lack of personal contact and different career paths, plus fact that we had nothing left in the budget for a composite print, meant that the final objective got even further away.

Further as to why the film was never integrated was that many of us had lodged our prints with the Coop and these were lost when it dissolved in 1985.

What was salvaged from the Coop library was eventually placed onto U-matic tape, and it is this degraded version that is the closest we have now to a completed film.

Watching the DVD of the tape to write this, after 40 years, I was surprised and elated at how adventurous each filmmaker was; from Andy Trenowth's Godardian viewpoint of the filmmaker's process and the aims of the festival, to the discipline that Brendon Stretch and Peter Gray showed using their newly built optical printers, to my failed experiment of colourising film using 2" video tape and the prosaic interview with Adrian Rawlins.

Along with the non-conventional approach to the image and narrative taken by all of the filmmakers, the tape also contains some extraordinary use of sound with loops, cut-ups and overlays being used which would have been considered groundbreaking for the time.

Did we fail in not delivering a finished film? The answer could be 'yes', but the real answer for both us and the festival could also be seen in the context of the times and the processes we all underwent to get somewhere else.

Out of the seven filmmakers who went to Nimbin, five continued to be involved in the medium in various ways, an extraordinary percentage that would make the Lawson Film School and The Nimbin Film one of the most successful experiments of its day.

In that way The Nimbin Film became the greatest film that never was.