FILM REVIEW

Born For Hard Luck: Peg Leg Sam Jackson.

Reviewed by Brenda McCallum.

Born For Hard Luck is a refreshingly unromanticized folklore film that manages both to sensitively explore the personality of its subject, and to document much of Peg Leg Sam's extensive repertoire of songs, ballads, tales, toasts, jokes, comic routines, parodies, and dances. The film was a project of the Folklore Curriculum at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and was shot in 1975 by Tom Davenport and a student crew. It takes as its title a stock comic refrain from Jackson's days as a medicine-show entertainer:

You look at me, you look at a man that was born for hard luck. I was born on the 13th day, odd day, on Friday, on a bad luck day. To show you that I is in hard luck, if I go up the street walking fast, I run over something. I'm in such hard luck, if I go up there walking slow, something run over me... .

Born in Union County, South Carolina, in 1911, Arthur "Peg Leg Sam" Jackson first ran away from home at the age of ten and began a life of hoboing. He roamed throughout the United States, and to Canada and Cuba, working where he could find a job--digging potatoes, cutting cane, preaching, or playing harmonica on street corners. Jackson performed for many years in rural southern patent-medicine shows, and travelled between small town auctions, carnivals, and fairs, pitching wonder-cure soaps, oils, liniments, and tonics with a variety of troupes. A rare videotape of one of the last regular medicine-show performances--"Peg Leg Sam" Jackson with "Chief Thundercloud" at the 1971 Chatham County Fair in Pittsboro, North Carolina--is incorporated into Born For Hard Luck. Videotaped by Bruce Bastin and Ceci Conway, then University of North Carolina graduate students in folklore, this section is, as the filmmakers admit, technically less-than-perfect. It may be, however, the only extant record of the many troupes of patent-medicine shows that once toured the South. In addition, this segment forms the thematic center of Born For Hard Luck, the performance-in-context to which the rest of the film is related.

Born For Hard Luck is a series of compelling portraits of "Peg Leg Sam," as he quite consciously performs the role of the experienced and highly-skilled entertainer. We see him in a variety of settings--at home, at the county fair, at a local store, and at a neighbor's house. Except for the intercut narratives by his brother Bill, with whom he now lives, it is "Peg Leg Sam," the performer, that is the focus of this film, not his family, community, or audience. The film is about Jackson's persona and skill as a performer, with a repertoire drawn from the popular material of minstrel shows and vaudeville, as well as from folk tradition.

In the accompanying study materials, Daniel W. Patterson (Project Director) and Allen E. Tullos (Associate Producer) comment on Jackson's own deliberate manipulation of the filming, and his awareness and exploitation of his role as showman:

Peg was therefore playing most of the time both for the camera and for his friends. As an old trouper he grasped the problems of the film crew and would warn the Deacon (a friend and fishing buddy with whom he exchanges humorous repartee in one segment of the film) not to step in front of the camera or make the audience keep quiet during a song so as not to spoil the recording. Throughout the film, whether in natural or abnormal context, Peg is either running through his familiar routines or playfully dramatizing himself. The most "staged" scene--his dance in the opening of the film--the controversial buck dance which was intended by Davenport "to parody and puncture the clichés of sentimental 'folklore
films," was suggested to him. He liked, or at least went along with, the idea, trying it several different ways before the filming. He revealed himself a thorough professional, interested in possible effects... He was determined to retain his dignity by being the master of the situation.

Although Tom Davenport and the University of North Carolina crew producing *Born For Hard Luck* may be criticized by analysts of ethnographic film, it is perhaps because of the film's deliberately limited perspective and scope that *Born For Hard Luck* is such a remarkable visual and aural document. By narrowing the focus of this thirty-minute film to that of a filmic "snapshot," a portrait captures in time one facet of Jackson's character—in his role as entertainer—a fuller document is the result. What *Born For Hard Luck* may lack in comprehensiveness, it gains in depth and intensity. *Born For Hard Luck* is a rare film because it presents one aspect of its subject's personality in order to illustrate the complexities of the folk musician as showman, to understand the man that wears the performer's mask.

*Born For Hard Luck* will entertain a general audience, and can be put to use by folklorists, in classes of Afro-American folklore, ethnomusicology, folk narrative, and folk humor. Two criticisms, however, must be pointed out. Although on the whole *Born For Hard Luck* avoids many of the cinematic clichés of folklore documentaries as a genre, some of the film's transitional devices are rather cloying—the obligatory panning from a moving car of the main street of a rural southern town, or the shot of a moving train, for example, used in the film to effect a change in the narrative's subject matter. In addition, the use of subtitles to "translate" portions of the personal narratives seems arbitrary, unnecessary, and often inaccurate. One wonders why portions of the film's dialogue are subtitled when their meaning is clear, and other segments, which are more difficult to understand, are not subtitled. This use of subtitles is distracting and superfluous, since the audio track from the film is transcribed in the accompanying study materials, which also include biographical background data, a sketch of rural southern medicine shows, notes on Jackson's repertoire, performance style and personal aesthetic, notes on the filming, and a bibliography and discography.