

“THE TREASURES OF LONG GONE JOHN” (DVD Review)

Written by Jack Bennett

Saturday, 14 August 2010 09:48



So what is it with horror fans and our memorabilia? “Some collectors collect for themselves, some collectors collect to make money, and some collectors collect to impress other people,” says artist Frank Kozik toward the beginning of THE TREASURES OF LONG GONE JOHN, a feature-length documentary by director Greg Gibbs, now on DVD from S'More Entertainment.

The observation follows that the titular John (pictured) is so tenacious about his purchases that if the impulse pushes him to buy a piece, he will not rest until it is obtained, regardless of price. Framing these comments is the suggestion that in our consumer-driven society, we define ourselves by our purchases, which has resulted in a mass obsessive-compulsive disorder. So take a long look at that McFarlane-manufactured toy standing next to your computer, or that replica of a weapon mounted on your wall, or the one-sheet framed beneath it. Why did you buy them? What do these objects mean to you, and do you expect them to have meaning to others?



The film asks these questions of us by asking them of Long Gone John (referred to as if that was indeed his full given name), whose lifelong love of music and art transformed him into a pack rat of collectible ephemera. As TREASURES documents his evolution from punk-rock fan to bootleg-record-label founder to toy producer, Long Gone John's experiences are cheerfully psychoanalyzed and his actions politely deconstructed, but the answers are soft-pedaled and the filmmakers seem reluctant to push further. The closest we get to criticism is the suggestion that once upon a time, Long Gone John commissioned work from artists who never saw a dime from it. Compared to the characters observed in other compulsion-based documentaries (gentle transient Mark Bittner in THE WILD PARROTS OF TELEGRAPH HILL or the doomed Timothy Treadwill in GRIZZLY MAN), Long Gone John seems perfectly well-adjusted. His passion is cited, but not necessarily observed.

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Then again, he’s not celebrated by the filmmakers so much as discussed by a long parade of his creative friends. It’s telling when the passages of the film highlighting the extraordinary work of Camille Rose Garcia and Robert Williams feel like tangents, with minimal participation from the primary subject. The end result is a decent docu focused on a low-key eccentric whose infamy comes by association.

After devoting 45 minutes to Long Gone John’s love for paintings and his flirtation with the music industry (he hand-distributed early albums by The Dwarves and The White Stripes, among others), the movie finally provides a tour of his house—the sole jaw-dropping sequence. Among the items in John’s collection are Ed Wood’s original script for PLAN 9 FROM OUTER SPACE, with “Grave Robbers” scribbled out and “Plan 9” written by hand. A vest is presented with stitching that spells out “Devil’s Witches, Devil’s Hole, Death Valley,” that is revealed to be the former possession of a member of the Manson Family from their Death Valley days.

For music fanatics, John is shown to be in possession of items as varied as the NEVER MIND THE BOLLOCKS gold record once owned by Sid Vicious and a bottle of Prozac prescribed to Deborah Harry. The artist Coop relays an anecdote in which he realized the ratty leather coat in John’s closet is the very one worn by Iggy Pop on the back cover of RAW POWER. The scene that follows is likely to be the most edifying to other collectors, as we learn that John founded Necessaries Toys. If you own one of Frank Kozik’s bunnies or a figurine designed by Gary Baseman or Seonna Hong, you have Long Gone John to thank.

The movie on the whole is standard for contemporary interview-heavy docs, compensating for the predominant talking heads with a swift pace and the brevity of the sound bytes. THE TREASURES OF LONG GONE JOHN does break the format with animated paintings, energetic montages, an eclectic soundtrack and an abundance of visual cheekiness (establishing John’s collection in the opening credits, director Gibbs adds a pair of fetish-friendly li’l French maids with feather dusters). The spoken observations are conversational and sincere, and the documentary is rarely slow and frequently engaging. A major highlight are the several time-lapse sequences in which we watch Todd Schorr create a wall-sized painting over 236 days, and the DVD includes a special feature in which Schorr narrates the process from blank canvas to completion.

Other bonus features include a live concert performed in tribute to Long Gone John, a dry commentary track by the director, producer and editor and an absolutely riveting Steadicam shot that lingers over John’s entire collection of art and memorabilia. The overall appeal of THE TREASURES OF LONG GONE JOHN will rely on the viewer’s opinion of that collection; you will either wonder why the spotlight is thrown on a man whose sole achievement is acquiring the

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work of far more creative people, or you will identify with a misfit who lives for the art of others.

OVERALL RATING: 

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