

Documentary celebrates native Indian conductor

Produced/directed by
York film grad

By IAN CLARKE

John Kim Bell is, in the words of the promotional brochure, "a cinematic portrait of the first North American Indian to establish a career as a symphony conductor." Such an announcement seems somewhat crass in light of John Kim Bell's own condemnation of associating his heritage with his professional position. Fortunately the film itself never exploits the cultural status of the subject. Instead, this short documentary (37 minutes) celebrates those qualities of talent and integrity which occasioned John Kim Bell's rise in the world of music.

Director-producer Anthony Azzopardi, who graduated from York in 1976 after studying theatre and film, delivers the standard documentary format (typified by the National Film Board) consisting of candid interviews, photographs and reminiscences about the early years, and a dramatic presentation of the subject's *raison d'être*, in this case, conducting a symphony. Azzopardi highlights the virtuoso's entertaining bravado, charismatic intelligence

and fundamental dignity. Thankfully there are no gratuitous digressions into sensational revelations or behind-the-scenes confessions.

Portraits of success, however eclectic the subject, seem to inspire an innate curiosity. *John Kim Bell* examines those attributes of character which permit a man to conduct his life from the top of the ladder.

Azzopardi is currently negotiating with CBC and PBS for distribution of the film. He and Kim Bell recently spoke with Excalibur about the making of *John Kim Bell*.

Q: How valuable was your work at York in establishing a career as a filmmaker?

Azzopardi: I was in both the film and the theatre departments . . . I did a split major so to speak. Both the editor and the cameraman on this film are graduates of York University. So I have kept in contact with people from York who are in the business.

Q: How did you finance the film?

Azzopardi: It took about a year and a half to get the financing. Initially, I went ahead with the filming even though I didn't have all the money in place. I was short at least thirty percent of the total budget. Most of the money that was committed was grant money. Fortunately, the National Film Board in

Montreal came through with an Assistance Program. There was no money involved but they did provide lab services. In Toronto, the NFB supplied editing facilities. I did get a minimum of funding from the Native Community Branch which is part of the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation. The Ministry of Indian Affairs did not put any money into the film. I find this upsetting and ironic.

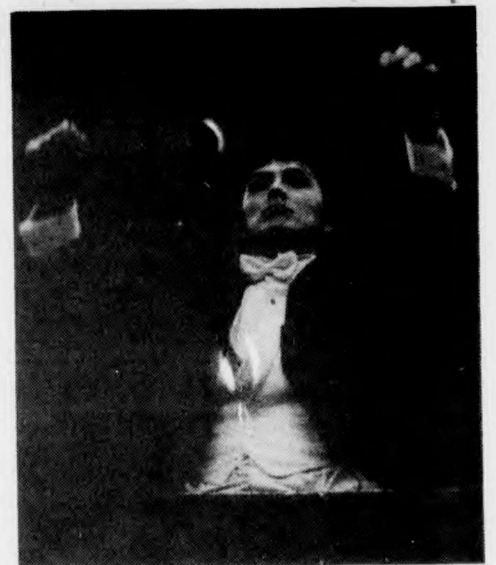
Q: In the film you condemn the notion of being known as an "Indian conductor," yet in most of the publicity you are portrayed as such. Can you reconcile the problem?

Bell: Indian conductor? I want it also to be known that I conduct Russians, Italians, and Jews! No, but obviously that is what the press likes to pick up on. Because it's interesting to the general public, it is not "another conductor" but an "Indian conductor." But I do get tired of it.

Q: The film briefly examines your work in New York City. Is the conducting of Broadway shows only a minor point in developing your career?

Bell: I do work in New York only to make money—to pay the rent. That is all.

Q: Do you feel the film was successful in capturing the essence of your work?



Conductor John Kim Bell

Bell: It's difficult to say. I don't know if such a thing is ever possible. But obviously the film catches you at your best moments. I think one way of looking at it is to follow the development of a career, as the film does . . . the hard work that is necessary.



Times Roman!

The cast of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, out of costume. The play, York Independent Theatre Company's revival of the Broadway hit, plays at Burton next Tuesday to Saturday. Musical comedy, a reworking of the plays Plautus, is directed by Frank Canino, who transports the ancient burlesque motif to the roaring twenties.



Ulmer delivers complex musical fusion

James Blood Ulmer
Larry's Hideaway
February 10

By RICHARD UNDERHILL

"Fusion" commonly refers to the commercial comingling of jazz and rock music that has sprung to the forefront of instrumental pop in the past decade.

The concept, however, is not new and thankfully not merely a marketing strategy concocted by tin-ear industrialists in pursuit of gold and platinum. On the contrary, the fusion of diverse musical styles is a primary step in the formulation of new and exciting music. James Blood Ulmer, who appeared recently with his trio at Larry's Hideaway, is a good example of a player whose musical vision encompasses several such complementary idioms.

Ironically, Ulmer's garb gave a pretty clear indication of his musical direction. Imagine the torso of an avant-garde jazzman (complete with African skullcap and flowing colorful shirt) grafted onto the lower body of a southern urban blues player—from the hollowbody guitar right down to the baggy white pants and shoes—and you have a good idea not only of James Blood Ulmer's appearance but also of his musical influences.

Raised in the southern U.S., Ulmer's early experiences were primarily with gospel and blues. The late 1950s and '60s saw him playing guitar on the road with various organ trios. Tiring of the road and hoping to broaden his musical horizons, Blood moved to New York in the early 1970s and, with the help of jazz innovator Ornette Coleman, began developing a mode of playing that attempted to incorporate his many diverse

influences. Labeling his music alternately Punk Jazz, Harmolodic Diatonic Funk and most recently No Wave, Ulmer's fusion of folk/blues spirit with complex free-blowing techniques gleaned from Coleman gained him popularity in Europe and America.

Working with an odd and rather sparse palette of instrumental resources—violin, drums and guitar—Ulmer opened the first set on his recent Toronto visit with a frenetic free improvisation punctuated by unison groups shots. The small band had no trouble projecting, overwhelming the audience with a high energy, high volume outburst. The intensity level plummeted, however, when Ulmer lapsed into one of several vocal numbers. Resembling a sedate Jimi Hendrix with a mouthful of cotton, Ulmer sacrificed much of his fine guitar solo work for his somewhat garbled and lethargic vocalizing. And, although Charles Burnham on violin adequately filled the soloing void, with each succeeding vocal number one felt the performance sagging, Ulmer's short outbursts of uniquely percussive guitar teasing but failing to deliver.

Although obviously well-rehearsed, Ulmer's concert seemed to lack the fire and daring essential to the success of a performance of this nature. Potential highlights of the evening—solos by drummer Warren Benbow and violinist Burnham—were rather flat, Benbow sacrificing interest for intensity and Burnham ending a confused rambling of notes by pandering to the audience with a quick rendition of "Shortnin' Bread." Far too much room was allotted to Ulmer's relaxed, unintelligible singing.

One felt that there was a great reservoir of talent and ingenuity left untouched—had the potential of the performers been exploited the evening could have been an unforgettable success rather than a mere happening.

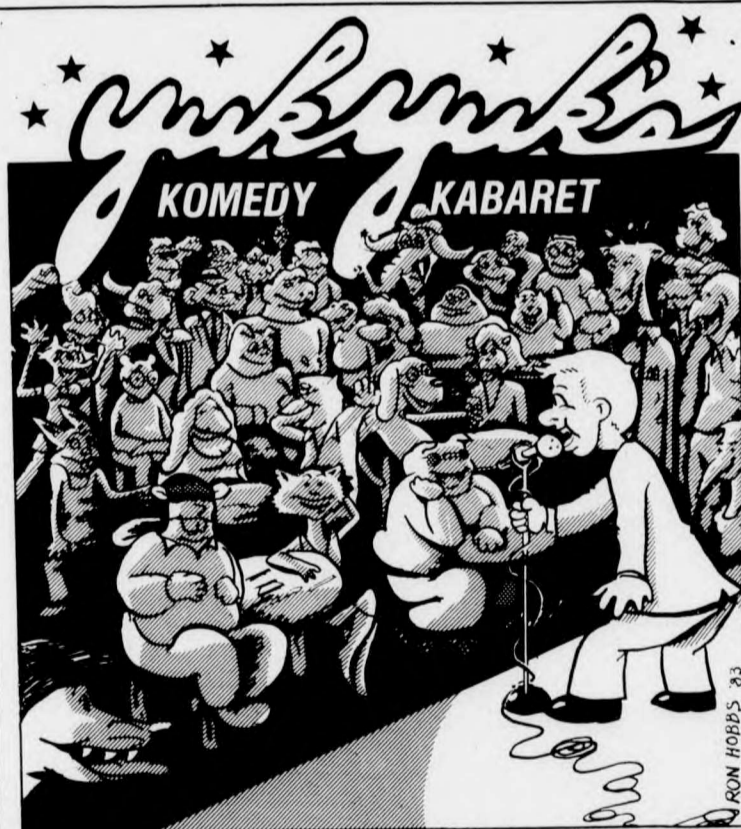
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