

Streetcar film comes full circle

Still-relevant 1996 documentary focus of media arts event

By Lauren Bishop • lbishop@enquirer.com • July 12, 2009

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In 1996, Wright State University professor and Oscar-nominated documentary filmmaker Jim Klein and archival researcher Martha Olson produced the 55-minute documentary "Taken for a Ride."



Provided/Jim Klein

The Pacific Electric Railway served the Los Angeles basin through World War II. In 1950, it abandoned most of its lines. The "red cars" were junked, stacked and left to rot.



Jim Klein is a Wright State University professor of motion studies and documentary filmmaker. His 1996 film, "Taken for a Ride," will be shown at the Carnegie Arts Center in Covington on July 14-15 at a fundraiser for the Southern Ohio Filmmakers Association presented by Cincinnati World Cinema. .

If you go

What: Screening of "Taken for a Ride," Jim Klein and Martha Olson's documentary about the death of streetcars, and "A Crack in the Pavement," Andrea Torrice's short film about urban sprawl, presented by Southern Ohio Filmmakers Association and Cincinnati World Cinema.

When: 7 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday. The Tuesday program will include a pre-show reception at 6 p.m. and a question-and-answer session with the filmmakers afterward. After Wednesday's screening, Andrea Torrice,

Liz Blume of Xavier Community Building Institute and Madeira City Manager Tom Moeller will discuss urban and suburban growth issues.

Where: Carnegie Visual and Performing Arts Center, 1028 Scott Blvd., Covington.

Cost: Tuesday's screening costs \$12 in advance and \$15 at the door. Tickets to the Wednesday screening are \$8 in advance and \$10 at the door. Buy in advance at www.cincyworldcinema.org or 859-781-8151. Also, Lookout Joe in Mount Lookout, Shake It Records in Northside, Sitwell's Coffee Emporium in Clifton and Coffee Emporium, Downtown. Proceeds benefit Southern Ohio Filmmakers' Association and Cincinnati World Cinema.

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The film's still-controversial premise was that General Motors bought up and dismantled the nation's streetcar lines to replace them with its diesel buses, while auto industry and highway lobbyists pushed through Congress the vast network of interstate highways that led to America's car-dependent culture.

Fast-forward 13 years. General Motors is just emerging from bankruptcy, and Cincinnati and other U.S. cities are trying to bring back streetcars. And there's more interest than ever in making short films and documentaries like "Taken for a Ride," thanks to widely available, inexpensive digital media equipment and the ease of sharing video on the Internet.

That's why the Southern Ohio Filmmakers Association and Cincinnati World Cinema are bringing "Taken for a Ride" and a short film on urban sprawl, "A Crack in the Pavement," to the Carnegie Visual and Performing Arts Center this week and asking the documentary filmmakers who worked on them to discuss their craft.

The event is the first fundraiser for the 9-year-old Southern Ohio Filmmakers Association, the region's networking organization for people involved in media arts.

"We encompass a pool of talented and experienced people who could be invaluable, to give just one example, in helping the many small arts groups who are hungry to add digital media to their toolboxes," says SOFA board member Margaret McGurk, a former Enquirer film critic.

In a recent interview, Klein - whose recent credits include film editing on

2006's "A Lion in the House," Julia Reichert's Primetime Emmy Award-winning documentary on young cancer patients in Cincinnati - explained why he wanted to explore the demise of streetcars and why the documentary is relevant today.

Question: Why did you make the film?

Answer: When I started on it, I was not someone who put a lot of focus on environmental issues. I really got more interested in it as a cautionary tale about the idea that you let the free market make all the decisions for the society, and that will be the best.

I was very interested in the corporate power story of it - General Motors at the time was the largest and most powerful corporation in the world - and its ability to shape what our urban society looks like. I didn't come up with the idea. I got a phone call from my partner on the film, (archival researcher) Martha Olson. She called me up with this tale about General Motors destroying public transportation and streetcars in America. Up until that point, this had been sort of what I thought of as an urban myth. But Martha had a lot of the goods. She really had a lot of base materials on it and knew a lot of people who had done research and had original documents.

Q: What did you learn while making the film?

A: What I discovered in making the film is the type of transit you have impacts the type of city you have. A city that has more opportunity for its citizens to travel around with each other and for neighborhoods to be places where business takes place rather than the car-oriented, mall-oriented type of society, I think is a lot healthier and has a lot more long-term potential.

Q: There was no one currently with GM interviewed in the film. You did talk to Barney Larrick, who dismantled transit systems for (GM-controlled) National City Lines. A lot of those people who were at GM at the time are no longer around, but did you make an attempt to talk to anyone with the company?

A: We certainly made an attempt to talk to General Motors at the time ... and they really had no interest whatsoever. (Barney Larrick) was the only person who was actually part of the General Motors side of the thing that we could find who was still alive.

Q: Did National City Lines operate in Cincinnati?

A: I'm pretty sure NCL was not in Cincinnati. I'm thinking (the streetcar lines) there were one of hundreds of private companies that took NCL's lead to dismantle the lines, heavily worn out after WWII, buy buses with attractive GM financing, sell the very valuable real estate associated with running streetcars, and eventually dump the whole thing on the public. That was the standard pattern

Q: After the film came out, GM wrote a letter to PBS and called it an "electronic character assassination."

A: Yes. I was very upset at the time. They sent this three-page letter, but it mainly said things like, it was a smear on the hundreds of thousands of people who worked for General Motors. They didn't come up with anything to attack as inaccurate in the film.

Q: A September 2008 Automotive News article on the death of streetcars quoted a GM spokesman as saying: "Trolley systems went out of business on their own. It was a combination of high capital costs and tracks and overhead lines, and as population began to shift around, it was very expensive. Cities moved to buses on their own because they were more economical and more flexible."

A: It's just not true. Of the top 10 cities in the country, every single (trolley operation) that wasn't already publicly owned was bought by (General Motors-controlled) National City Lines. And the argument was made before all kinds of public utility commissions to allow the destruction of the rail for buses based on these lines that had been purchased actually by this General Motors-controlled company, showing that this was the new wave and the new way.

Every single city in Europe rebuilt their rail transportation lines after World War II and because of that, had much stronger transportation.

Q: What was the reaction when this film first came out?

A: It was very positively reviewed in newspapers across the country. It got very strong press. The response to the (PBS) broadcast was amazing. I had contact with transportation systems all over the country wanting copies of it to show their legislators and to use in getting the word out about this.

Q: What are you hoping people who see the film in Cincinnati take from it now?

A: It's really like the very same concerns and interests that I'm hoping people take away that they would have a decade ago. But in a way that's disturbing, because so much has needed to be

done in the last 10, 15, 20 years that really hasn't happened in terms of public transportation taking care of it, funding it properly, expanding it in places where it makes sense

Q: How do you get people to go back to relying on public transportation?

A: Obviously there will be a need for cars in cities like Cincinnati. They're not going to go away. But people might not need to have two or three of them for a single family. And in areas where there is a density of population, and a good path, I think that public transportation will be extraordinarily valuable. The cities that have developed transit lines, like Portland and Seattle and a lot of places more on the West Coast, they have flourished.

Q: You're also leading a workshop on Tuesday titled "The Art and Craft of Non-fiction Film." What do you think about the current state of documentary films?

A: We're in a renaissance of documentary right now. A decade ago, people were saying documentary might be dead. It's an exciting time with the new technologies and the inexpensive, extraordinarily high quality, first digital video and now high-definition video. And with this new generation of makers, all kinds of powerful, powerful work from every corner of the globe, I feel really proud to be a documentary filmmaker.