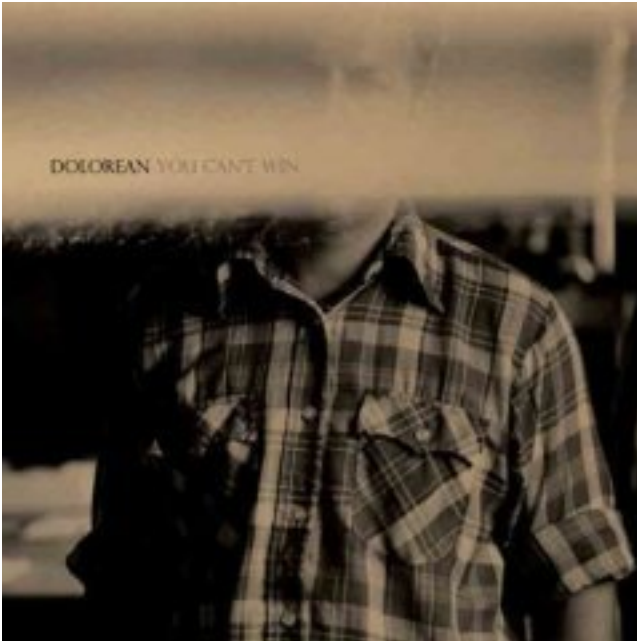


Alec Soth's Archived Blog

March 11, 2007

Presiding over accidents

Filed under: [quotes](#) — alecsothblog @ 11:25 pm



You Can't Win by Dolorean (album cover photo by Gus Van Sant)

I recently was sent a copy of [Dolorean's](#) fantastic new album, [You Can't Win](#). On the [Yep Roc Records](#) website, Al James speaks about the making of the album:

We'd become overly predictable when we entered the studio, so I did my best to change things up. I stole an idea that I came across in Jimmy McDonough's Neil Young biography *Shakey*. Neil used to book studio time and shows for himself and Crazy Horse without rehearsing new songs with the band. I knew that we'd be up for a similar challenge so I booked three shows in three weeks during February. In between the second and third shows I booked three days at a local studio. I didn't leave the band completely in the dark, but I didn't reveal much. I had almost a dozen new songs and we went over the changes a couple times before the first show. The performances were raw, passionate, and loose – everything that we hadn't been able to capture on previous recordings.

It is hard for solo artists to foster this kind of looseness, but it must be much more difficult in an ensemble setting. Orson Welles said that his job was to "preside over accidents."

One of the greatest examples of this approach is Werner Herzog. His entire library is built on the idea of presiding over accidents. He once described it this way:

Coincidences always happen if you keep your mind open, while storyboards remain the instruments of cowards who do not trust in their own imagination and who are slaves of a matrix.

- Listen to Beachcomber Blues by Dolorean [here](#)
- Read the memorable New Yorker profile where Herzog describes “the daily grind of catastrophe” [here](#)
- See Herzog get hit by a sniper on YouTube [here](#).

12 Comments

1. I don't think of Kurosawa as a coward, and he did all his own storyboards. I believe Hitchcock was the same. Herzog's condemnation seems to be attacking anyone with a "visionary" attitude as well as those who hire out the process of coming up with ideas, which I suppose in it's truest form must be just as fearless.

Comment by Michael — March 12, 2007 @ [8:29 am](#)

2. WH is the Keith Richards of film making — he does it so we don't have to (thanks, Werner). On the other hand, that Germanic Romantic Heroic Essentialist Anti-Modern One-Shot Macho trip is something that the rest of us in Europe are entitled to regard with some misgivings and suspicion. "Klassik ist Gesundheit, Romantik ist Krankheit" = "please can't we simulate this in the studio, Werner?".

Comment by Vinegar Tom — March 12, 2007 @ [8:59 am](#)

3. Picking up on Neil Young. I was blown away when I saw Jim Jarmusch's Dead Man, for it was full of beautiful b&w photography, and full of poetry (hey, William Blake was a major character!). I was doubly blown away when I learnt Neil Young's soundtrack was played live in real time while watching the movie, 90% adlibbed. A hero of accidents to be sure.

Comment by rob — March 12, 2007 @ [12:23 pm](#)

4. To bring it around full circle. Richard Thompson's lonely electric guitar soundtrack for Herzog's "Grizzly Man" was composed in the same way. Evidently he watched the film once with tape rolling. It's a wonderful recording. Haunting in the same vein as Neil's riffs on the old out of tune pump organ in "Dead Man". I suppose it all ties into last weeks posts about portraits. I think ultimately giving up control is part of the process, but requires a lot of preparation and often many failures.

Comment by [Al James](#) — March 12, 2007 @ [2:49 pm](#)

5. Wow, that is full circle. Al, any soundtracks in your future?

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — March 12, 2007 @ [3:46 pm](#)

6. <http://www.galleryhopper.org/>

Can you believe that headline?

Now you run Aperture????

Comment by Chad — March 12, 2007 @ [4:49 pm](#)

7. Only an original tune commissioned for the new Paris Hilton movie, "The Hottie and The Nottie" but I probably should never mention it again. P.S. Unfortunately, I'm not joking. And P.S.S. Thanks Alec for covering the new album. All the best, Al

Comment by [Al James](#) — March 13, 2007 @ [12:26 am](#)

8. What are the precedents in a non artistic setting for this type of decision-making? And are the creative processes of Werner Herzog equivalent to those of an adlibbed score?

If we look only for points of comparison, maybe; neither Young nor Herzog have storyboards / scores, but they are hardly callow young creatives in either case. They have engendered systems that work. In the same Herzog article we read about his quest to find a specific shot for the film, which seems not random but rather the result of time pressures combined with – yes – tremendous prior experience.

c.f the NY Times article about 'growing genius' at Spartak, in which 'Michael Howe of the University of Exeter speculates that Mozart studied some 3,500 hours of music with his instructor father by his sixth birthday, a number that places his musical memory into the realm of impressive but obtainable party tricks'.

Without going too deeply into it, are we not confusing methods that use spontaneity with 'randomness'? Chaos with no-order? The reverse of 'all actions are ordered' is 'at least one action is not ordered', right?

Comment by [Oliver Luker](#) — March 13, 2007 @ [5:56 am](#)

9. I think that kinda misses the mark. Herzog's approach isn't simply a creative process, which he employs to make 'interesting' films. Herzog's spontaneous approach is used to problematize fictive and documentary forms of film. And although, yes, they have a certain look, this 'look' comes out of a philosophical and fundamentally critical objective to alter how 'truth' is represented and created through film. This is why Herzog always says, to nauseum, that Fitzcarraldo was his greatest documentary. This blurring of lines between fiction and documentary is not just using spontaneity, Herzogs films (the major ones at least Fitzcarraldo, Aguirre, Woyzek, Stroszek, The Enigma of Caspar Hauser and Nosferatu), are completely dependent on the process of spontaneity to complicate that intenable split between narrative films (fiction) and documentary films (truth).

Comment by T.J. Proechel — March 13, 2007 @ [11:07 pm](#)

10. To clarify – are you saying that one can't use spontaneity and call it part of a process? I don't think I have quite understood your point.

Comment by [Oliver Luker](#) — March 15, 2007 @ [5:12 am](#)

11. No, spontaneity is of course integral to so many folks process. What I take issue with is thinking that Herzog utilized spontaneity in his filmmaking to create a 'look' or feel to his films. His films do, of course, have a very particular look and feel, which is partly due to his use of spontaneity. But Herzog's employment of an on the fly filmmaking approach was an attempt to do much more than engender a look or feel for his films. He sincerely wanted to conflate documentary and narrative forms of filmmaking. He believed and continues to believe that a new type of truth had to be created. He recognized that documentary films were constructed narratives masquerading as truthful accounts and he wanted to break that apart. Of course we know that the most highly guarded photographic and filmic documentary ideology is that what is on the film actually happened, that it was an unaltered and merely witnessed experience, and of course nothing could be further from the truth.

Here's an address to the Henry Rollins Show in which Herzog lays down his critical approach: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4i5WkkXdmc>

Comment by T.J. Proechel — March 16, 2007 @ [4:55 pm](#)

12. OK – firstly, thanks for the link – I hadn't seen this and was glad to have done so. Secondly, I would say that we are in agreement – even more in agreement than perhaps we seemed up-front!

Thanks again for your response.

Comment by [Oliver Luker](#) — March 18, 2007 @ [5:07 am](#)