

Photos by Paul Schrader



A FREE PRESS INTERVIEW WITH:

D. A. Pennebaker

PAUL SCHRADER

The American division of the world-wide cinema-verite movement originated, for all practical purposes, in 1960 when D.A. Pennebaker, Ricky Leacock, and Robert Drew formed the Drew Associates, then contracted to ABC-TV. For the next three years they produced the most exciting films of the period, candid and relentless examinations of people and events—"Primary" (1960 Wisconsin Primary), "On the Pole" (the late Eddie Sachs), "The Chair" (Paul Crump), "David" (Synanon), "Jane" (Fonda), and "Crisis" (1963 Alabama school crisis). After ABC got cold feet Leacock and Pennebaker formed their own company, Leacock-Pennebaker Inc. Since then Pennebaker has made films about Timothy Leary's wedding, the Fisher twins, a half-normal half-retarded set of twins, and was the cameraman for both of Norman Mailer's films. His first theatrical film was "Don't Look Back" with Bob Dylan. His most recent release is "Monterey Pop,"

about the 1967 pop festival. Pennebaker was interviewed by Paul Schrader in Hollywood on May 3, 1969.

FREEP: "Monterey Pop" was shot in 1967. What has held up the releasing of the film?

PENNEBAKER: Getting releases from the groups. We had a release for TV, not theaters. We had to renegotiate a contract with ABC to hold up the television release and allow for a theatrical release. It takes a while for an independent distributor to do anything. It's like moving through a swamp.

FREEP: Did any of the groups refuse to sign releases?

PENNEBAKER: There was some problem because as soon as you say "movie" it says a lot of money to a group. You find these guys really hustle and don't make a lot of bread—the top ones do. The agents and everyone else does, but when the groups set down tax free there isn't much left. That had to be straightened out. But

when they realized that we hadn't gotten paid for doing the thing, they saw it a little differently?

FREEP: What about Paul Butterfield?

PENNEBAKER: It would be easy for me to say he wouldn't sign a release, but, no, the decision to leave him out was my own. There weren't any groups which wouldn't sign releases.

FREEP: Did you get any static from the performers after they saw "Monterey Pop?"

PENNEBAKER: We got various degrees of static. Most performers get their real sense of where they're at from their recordings. The sense of a recording session is to go for the perfect take. In many instances this is at variance with what they do at concerts, and while they know this, they see a film as being closer to a recording than to a concert. When Janis first saw it she said, "Oh my God, I made a lot of mistakes." But looking at it twice she agreed that it was good,

and I don't think anyone would argue with her now. But others weren't persuaded of this. The tendency was to regard the film as some kind of prize awards, and that the groups in the film were somehow the best. And, of course, that's totally wrong. There's no doubt in my mind that in terms of performance as musicians Butterfield is every bit as good as the Canned Heat, at least as good as the Heat was then. And I personally think that there were performers better than Simon and Garfunkel who are out of the film. There was some flak from them. Simon and Garfunkel felt that their song wasn't important

enough; they would have liked it to be "Sound of Silence." But speaking of the theater audience the nature of that film is to start somewhere and go someplace else, and that song is just as important as any other. Also Joe McDonald felt that his performance wasn't very good because he had trouble with the speakers, but I think that sound was better than any of the recordings.

FREEP: What criteria did you use for inclusion into "Monterey Pop?"

PENNEBAKER: I guess my own sense of it.

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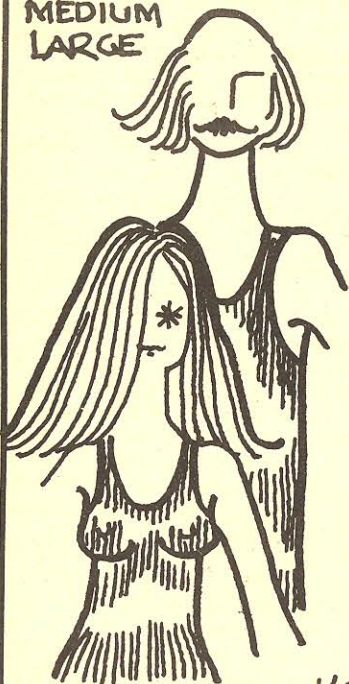
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FREEP: Your sense of the film or your sense of the festival?

PENNEBAKER: My sense of the film. The sense of the festival was John Philips and somebody else's.

FREEP: Did the preponderance of shots of Mama Cass have anything to do with the fact that John Philips produced the film?

PENNEBAKER: There weren't that many. No, in fact, I think that using John's music and the Mamas and Papas probably embarrassed John more than anything else. They asked me to try and not make so much use of them. But it wasn't

that way, because I'm making it as a show. I'm not trying to make a record of the festival. It's not supposed to be "What happened Last Summer" because that's a documentary and that's a different kind of film. This film has got to have the same effect on an audience as their performances had on their audiences. And so my problem is to make that thing start someplace and go somewhere and be a kind of entity.

FREEP: "Monterey Pop" is your first film in which you haven't adhered to a straight-forward time sequence. Did you alter the chronology to make "Monterey Pop" a better "show"?

PENNEBAKER: I've done films out of chronology before. A film like "Jane" isn't in chronology. Most of them are though, you're right. When I started looking at all the material the chronology of the acts wasn't important as if I was pursuing a situation by myself. The chronology was a chronology of my getting into the thing. The element of surprise or revelation for the general audience in Monterey came during Shankar as much as any other act. So that logically falls at the end. I never had in mind to make a record of the festival. It would have been a groovy thing to do, and it still can be done. It would be six hours long. There's a lot of footage there. It's just that you right away say that instead of having a broad audience you're going to have a tiny audience.

FREEP: You also ignore backstage activities and the many political statements made by the

groups at Monterey, a technique you used to a great extent in the political films and "Don't Look Back."

PENNEBAKER: If you were making a recording of the festival that would be part of it. When you are setting up this progression of performances—which is what it is—for a movie house, I think you're obliged to stick with a certain level of performance. Digressions have to be pauses but they can't take you any great distance. Or you lose a certain element of the performance.

FREEP: What is missing in "Monterey Pop," I think, is the Pennebaker hallmark. "Monterey Pop" stays outside of its characters, no perspective is offered as in your earlier films. The Who

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smash their equipment and run off stage. What comes next? Are they excited, nonchalant? Yet that is the last we see of them. Momentarily we see Philips on the phone, but that is all.

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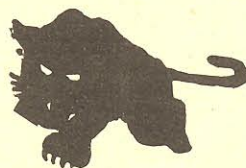
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PENNEBAKER: I honestly don't think that in this kind of film it would be a benefit, I think for instance to find out more about John Philips' personal life would not help the film. It would hurt it. We didn't do it, for one reason, because of the lighting problem, but also because I wanted to trade off things. And if you start off by saying we're going to show you all the shit there is to know about all the performers then I think that people are not going to do the work they need to do for watching the performance. To get people to stick with the Ravi Shankar—which is long and to many people boring—and stay in the movie theater is one of your great disciplines in movie-making, to get your viewers to do a little work.

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"It's no problem to make 'Don't Look Back' and distribute it to all the people who think Dylan is a worthwhile phenomenon to know about. You could make it five hours long, you could make it so boring, you could show it upside down, those people will stick it out because they want to know badly. But to take an only slightly persuaded audience, to make them get in there and figure out why the hell Dylan is like this without having a narrator explain everything, to have it so you have no more leverage on that situation than any person sitting in that room where Dylan owes you nothing, to only have that position, the truthful one and not the bullshit one, and still have people work on what they see is, after all, the purpose of the movie. To make the people do the work you have to trade off those other places where they could do the work. In the longer version of "Monterey Pop" there's a fantastic set of Paul Butterfield playing for fifteen minutes. He has the same thing going there as Ravi Shankar, but when you get to Shankar, Shankar doesn't work. I don't fully understand all the forces at work here but I do have the feeling that if the film were ten minutes longer it would seem



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twenty minutes longer. You can't do Ravi Shankar twice."

FREEP: Your rule of thumb then was to give each of the acts his time on the stage?

PENNEBAKER: Sort of, not exactly. Some groups have two, like the Airplane. I see the Mamas and Papas as having only one song but everyone says, My God, they have four songs in there. I see "Creek Alley" as narration. It's a little history lesson. I wanted to set up a sense of the California scene. For most people in this country there is such a thing as the "California scene" and, fantasy or not, it's very real to them and in the back of their heads is the thought that someday when I can get the bread together, get it from my old lady or whatever, I'll go out there and see what it's like. And I think that's very important, and in a sense that's what the music is about and why the festival worked. The preamble starting off with Scott McKenzie and going through "Creek Alley" is a necessary start. I don't know why. We started out with a whole different idea of the film. I thought we would only show parts of songs; I thought we would show much more variety; I saw much more of what was going around. In coming out here I had a sense that the interest was with what was happening around the festival. I changed my mind first when I heard Big Brother singing "Combination of the Two." Something snapped in my head and I suddenly realized that the whole thing could be done musically. The next thing I saw was the Airplane coming on and there was a fantastic sense of anticipation, like wildfire going through the crowd. It's actually a film about six people, the cameramen, getting into the event.

FREEP: One gets the feeling from "Monterey Pop" that you have a great many girlfriends, or at least that you were laying a lot of chicks at that time. Most of the cutaway shots were static views of young beauties. What rule did you use for the "intermission" shots?

PENNEBAKER: I guess the only way I can justify my method is not to be totally consistent or obvious. The main emphasis has got to be on the performance and I don't really have any rules about the pauses in between.

FREEP: Was the set with Otis Redding cut from your best footage? I found that the rear-view camerawork put me right out of the performance, which was regrettable since Redding was such a great stage performer.

PENNEBAKER: Yes it was. Some people don't dig it, some people do. It's cut from one camera—the back stuff—the others are cut from two or three. It seemed to be that it made the best effect this way. I was hesitant; I felt it had to be all this way or not at all.

FREEP: Another thing I found disrupting about "Monterey Pop," even more than in your other films, was your continual use of the 100-yard dash zoom.

PENNEBAKER: The zoom has become an indigenous part of this sort of film for a very basic reason. The only point you can stabilize focus is at the end of a zoom so the tendency is always to go into that zoom. Also, this sort of film always leads you to close in on the character. You are doing it intellectually, emotionally, and also physically with the camera. It's like bearing in at the end of a hunt. While zooming you think it's footage that you're not going to use. You see getting close and establishing a focus only as a pause before you start shooting again. But often the action occurs during the closing in. In fact, it probably happens more than enough so that you can see a pattern in that the thing which makes you close in is also the thing that makes the film hold up. You've got to accept it—there's no way to get rid of it the way the camera is presently designed. In some instances you don't even use a view-finder, just a wide-angle lens. A lot of "Don't Look Back" was shot that way. You're just guessing where you're looking. That's the alternative to the zoom. It's one or the other.

FREEP: What do you foresee as the immediate future of the cinema-verite movement? The novelty of this type of film-making has worn off for cineaste, yet the mass TV audience remains as unapproachable as ever.

PENNEBAKER: It's pretty new to the theatrical audience and I think it has the most possibility in that direction. But again you are talking about the style of cinema-verite which interests me a lot less than the thing you capture with it. A cinema-verite study of Fabian would be less interesting to me than a cinema-verite study of Leonard Cohen. I don't think the style itself is as important as the subject.

FREEP: I mean the theoretical future.

PENNEBAKER: It's in such a state of flux. Everybody's trying to get reality and fiction into bed and nobody's sure whether they are both males, females, or one's a dog and one's a horse. And that's got everybody going crazy. Even people with the intellectual possibilities of Mailer or Godard are baffled by it. Neither of them have licked it. Godard as well as anyone because he's done it through style and if there is one thing that makes movies work it is style. Norman has had the balls to try not to worry about style because I don't think he has any real sense of film style. He has a sense of intellectual need. He sees that the people in the audience need something that they're not getting otherwise and he can give it to them. He says I can't get

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them in books or any other way so I've got to get them in movies. He's more persuaded of what he

wants to deliver than the style in which he's going to do it. It makes him appear very clumsy and gross. Over a long period of time people's ideas toward these films may change. I am now interested in doing something with fiction—

and reality. With actors and a script. But I'm very dubious about it. Like "Monterey" I just don't know how it will turn out. You can have a story which is very superficial, very predictable, but if in the middle of it you have a sense of another kind of reality you know is true, it makes the film work. Like when Steve McQueen drives the car in "Bullit." You're into another level of reality because you know Steve McQueen is driving that car in a way which few other actors can. Some say, "What was the film about?" and you reply "Well, Steve McQueen was driving this car." It doesn't even matter what his name was. But supposing you had somebody you didn't know as the driver and you still wanted to get that level of reality. You would have to shoot it in a different way. You would have to set the camera in the car, from a passenger's viewpoint which would be ever more harrowing. Given this concept, if it's true—and I think it's true—you could make a film with a stylized fictional story with people, and they don't have to be Steve McQueens, who you believe are in a real situation, like a storm at sea; then there are levels of reality which transcend the fictional non-reality which people will accept and still get all the dramatic excitement that theater needs.

FREEP: How was "Monterey Pop" received in Europe? Did they have similar complaints about the lack of in-depth coverage?

PENNEBAKER: Well, it's just a musical. If anybody wants to see anything more in it, that's OK. In Europe they saw it as a totally different film. You can't imagine. They discuss it as if the music wasn't even a part of it. They are talking sociology and all sorts of things. I think that people are able to look at the film and get as wide a variance of whatever aspect they want to get into, the times, hippies, music, as they could from a detailed study of one musician, like "Don't Look Back." There was a very dumb showing in Venice because the people were into nothing but going to a party. In France, Jean Rouch, the verite anthropology film-maker, saw it and was outraged. He said, "I like you, Pennebaker, but that film is a fascist film and is terrible." I don't know exactly why. He said it showed that we were all controlled by a police state. But Henri Langlois, head of the Cinematheque, got so angered at Rouch that he could not speak. He said, "Not at all. This shows that the amount of freedom that exists in America is a kind of freedom which hasn't existed in France for one hundred years. It's the kind of freedom people don't even know about anymore, and what's going to unsettle people is the nature of this kind of freedom." He said it was a great film and showed the hippie culture. The two of them were at each others' throats. So Rouch said that he would invite some of his students in, the ye-yes of his anthropology class, and Langlois would see what they thought. So we had one screening for them and they kept piling in and they loved it, and were yelling and screaming. Rouch was furious. He kept saying, "The cunts, the cunts." Later they had all these hassles in the cafes about the sociology of the film, the freedom thing.

FREEP: Was it the interview with the police captain which set off this reaction?

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PENNEBAKER: No, it wasn't that. I'll tell you what I think the dividing line is. There are just some people who don't dig music, like your mother who says, "Turn the Victrola down, it's too loud." Right away you say she's nice but

she doesn't dig music. There are people like Rouch who just don't dig music. People like that are out of the film, especially film critics whose business is to go and find out what's wrong or good with the film. They are really lost because there's nothing else in the film. The rest of the film is sort of a poor structure to hold some music together. And if you don't happen to dig the music or some

part of the music, it's like looking at the wrong side of the mirror: there's nothing in it.

FREEP: What is the progress of the film you and Ricky Leacock were shooting on the set of Jean-Luc Godard's "One American Movie" in New York City?

PENNEBAKER: There are two films: "One AM" and "One PM," "One AM" is Jean-Luc's idea. It's like any idea for a movie and has

nothing to do with the way things will really happen. Jean-Luc started out with his own concept, but we started out with no concept except shooting it the best way we could. It was very hard for us to set-up and shoot with the procedures he was used to. We spent some time seeing what the other was up to. It isn't finished yet. It has a couple more days of shooting. But I think more than

that has to be done. I think Jean-Luc has to sit down and think about what he got which was quite different from what he intended to get. Not so much in the Cleaver or Hayden interviews, but the general quality of the shooting changed as we got into it. He started shooting himself with the Airplane, which I think was the first time he really got into the

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camera itself, I think that it kind of got to him. Jean-Luc is into this tremendously changing period in his ideas about movies. He's stopped seeing the movie as the end of a set of efforts and sees it more as a way to get somewhere else. Hopefully that film will be ready by fall. "One PM" is the anterior film I started shooting. It became sort of fatuous having Ricky and I as alternative cameramen, so I started making "One PM." There were some instances with situations that he'd start, because he does have the ability to create a thing which is ongoing and which produces its own momentum, and it would develop beyond what he had set up to shoot and I would keep shooting and he would realize that, in fact, the thing had become more interesting than he had originally planned and he wanted to have access to that footage also. So we made an arrangement that he could use all my footage for his film and then I would go back and shoot some more for my own use.

FREEP: What did Godard think of "Monterey Pop?"

PENNEBAKER: He brought his wife who is twenty-one and digs music, and she loved it. So he kind of sees it through her eyes. But, again, Jean-Luc sees film as a means to an end. And "Monterey Pop" is kind of an end. It's a nice thing to do if you haven't anything better to do, but I personally have something better to do which is start a riot over here in someplace or another. If Jean-Luc thought that the movie would help Eldridge Cleaver get something going somewhere he would take a whole different attitude toward it. I don't personally see film working that way. Maybe it does, but I don't see how to make it.