



# DA PENNEBAKER Q&A

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Filmmaker DA Pennebaker answers your questions about his films in the Rock Doc Greats season. The director shares his thoughts on Jimi Hendrix's "noise", David Bowie's fans and Bob Dylan's filmmaking skills.

## DON'T LOOK BACK

**Vincent McGrath, London**

I am sure you are sick of being asked this question. Was the Donovan meeting with Bob Dylan set up in Don't Look Back?

**DA Pennebaker**

No. I couldn't tell these guys what to do; they were completely drifting on their own. There may have been things that other people set up but I was just busy trying to keep up with them. I could never set up anything, I don't know how to do that.

**Joe Neanor, London**

Dylan objected to Don't Look Back at time of release. Any idea what he thinks about it now?

**DA Pennebaker**

He seemed to change his mind about once a week. The last time I talked to him he thinks it's a fantastic film it just makes him a little uncomfortable because it's about him! It's a unique kind of thing. I don't think it could happen with any other person or at any other time.

**BBC Four**

Do you think the film would have been very different if it hadn't been filmed in Britain?

**DA Pennebaker**

Sure. I think the English audiences were amazing. We'd go up to a place like Manchester and there'd be no posters. No indication that he was going to sing. In fact there'd often be a poster for something else. And there'd be people sleeping on the steps waiting for the ticket office to open

and he'd done no publicity or anything. I thought, "These people didn't need the usual methods of communications. They know what's happening and they keep track of it." I don't think you got that kind of audience here in the States in those days. So that really interested me about England. And they were older than what you usually saw at a rock concert in the States. They weren't lugging in cases of beer like they would over here.

**Suzanne Drew**

I greatly admire your work. I was wondering, how did you begin to get your art across?

**DA Pennebaker**

I'm not quite sure what that means. I don't think about how to position things or the aesthetics of the shot when I'm filming. I don't even see those things. If I'm making a film about Dylan I'm just looking for Dylan. It doesn't have a very artistic hold on me in that fashion. The artistry is what he's going to provide.

**BBC Four**

Now for the question most people asked...

**Bryan Adamson, Scotland**

I've admired your films since I was a teenager - first queued up to see Don't Look Back at a late night showing in Aberdeen in Scotland probably in the late 60s. As a long-term Dylan fan the obvious question I have is about Eat the Document. Do you know of any plans for a DVD or cinema release of this film?

**DA Pennebaker**

Eat the Document is peculiar anomaly. After we made Don't Look Back, Dylan said to me, "I want you to help me make a film that I'm going to direct and you're going to be the cameraman." We went out to do this thing the next year. It was fascinating. The whole thing was so different [to Don't Look Back]. I only know how to make one kind of film so it was going to be an extension of Don't Look Back. Well he didn't want that. He wanted another film that he directed that wasn't Don't Look Back. He didn't know how to direct and I didn't know how to direct so it was ridiculous. We were like band that doesn't have a tune to play.

In the end I wasn't supposed to edit it but ABC who put up the money for it kept coming to me and saying, "Where's this film? We agreed to do this because we thought you'd be doing it." I had to say that it's Dylan's film but I'll do whatever I could to help. He eventually said that he'd do it and we set up a couple of editing machines and he and Robbie [Robertson] and Howard Alk all fiddled around and worked on it for long time and eventually they made a film. The fact that they

made a film is interesting. I think they lost a lot of what was in the performances by cutting different days together and other things I wouldn't normally do.

I don't know what Dylan's feelings about it are. For a long time he didn't want to look at it all. Then they got him to show it at the Museum of Television and Radio here in New York. It was interesting in some ways. Having shot most of it I felt guilty about some of the stuff that wasn't very well shot. My feelings about it are a little conflicted. Somewhere in there is an incredible film. Whether it will see the light of day is uncertain. It's up to Bob. They don't even distribute it now.

**Gus Godliman, London**

Are you still friends with Bob Dylan and what are you doing now?

**DA Pennebaker**

We're partners on Don't Look Back so we have to deal with each other. We deal with his manager continually if anyone wants to use anything from the film but I don't see him socially. I haven't seen him in four or five years but certainly I consider him a friend.

We did a film for Miramax called Only the Strong Survive which is about rhythm and blues with Sam Moore, Wilson Pickett and people like that. That film I now think is going to be released in the Spring. In addition we've been working on a film on Elaine Stritch who was just in London. Some of that will be on BBC Four.

**MONTEREY POP**

**Rachel Hughes, London**

Which of the performers at the festival had the most charisma?

**DA Pennebaker**

If you've seen two or three raggedy groups from San Francisco and suddenly Janis walks out everybody knows they're witnessing a special event and the same is true of Otis and Hendrix and a few others. Somebody like Ravi Shankar took people by surprise. They never thought they'd listen to raga and probably hadn't in their lives. But they do realise that they're experiencing something musically that's quite new to them and interesting, probably because everybody around them is listening. It's an event propelled by the whole feelings of the festival.

**Christopher Smith, Derby**

Some of the audience look a bit worried when Jimi Hendrix sets his guitar on fire. Did you share their anxiety?

**DA Pennebaker**

By the time he had finished I knew I'd been present at a cataclysmic event. Musically I don't know what I thought about it. I thought it was really loud because I was standing in front of the amps. I think the only ones that were louder were The Who's. I must admit that it just seemed unbelievably complicated and noisy. He was playing something that he heard as music and I heard as noise. It took me a while to understand that. We spent a little time with each other later in New York and I told him I had a hard time at the beginning with him. He laughed and said, "Everybody does!"

**Julia Cruikshank, Shrewsbury**

I watched the documentary about you on BBC Four [See What Happens] and remember you saying you had problems with TV company regarding the festival. What was that about?

**DA Pennebaker**

It wasn't so much a problem. ABC had put up some money for the festival because they thought they could have a TV programme showing America's young youthfulls in a Disneyesque role presiding over this all-American music festival. They didn't quite understand what it would be like. I think they were right not to show it. I don't think any American audience watching Leave it to Beaver was ready for Jimi Hendrix humping his guitar. Later they ran it as a film and didn't have to take responsibility for it.

**Richard Abrahams, Aberdeen**

I read that you started a film about Janis Joplin but didn't finish it. Is that true and what was the problem?

**DA Pennebaker**

It is true. I shot a fair amount with her over about a month or so when she was in New York recording her first solo album with Columbia [I Got Dem Oi' Kozmic Blues Again Mama!]. I filmed a lot of the recording sessions and she came over to my studio and I'd play records for her. It was a film that I couldn't see how to do so we both abandoned it. I really liked her a lot. She was very smart and I thought she was not taking the road that was most advantageous for her. But who was I to say? I happened to like that band she was with [Big Brother and the Holding Company]. I know they weren't the greatest musicians in the world but I thought they were what she needed.

They were her friends and like a family to her. Later when she had Full Tilt Boogie behind her it made her feel very competitive and she didn't have any instrument apart from her voice so she just started using it as loud as she could to keep up with them. I thought that was not a good way for her to go. I think she needed what Lester Young did for Billie Holiday – something like that.

## **ZIGGY STARDUST AND THE SPIDERS FROM MARS**

### **Manuel, London**

One of the things I particularly enjoy about your concert shows is seeing how the audience react and succumb to the performance. Often these moments are more captivating than the artist on stage - I'm thinking of Ziggy Stardust in particular which has some great shots of the fans. Have you ever been tempted to make a documentary just about the audience, and hardly feature the artists, if at all?

### **DA Pennebaker**

A lot of times it's harder to shoot the audience than the performer. With the performer you just point the camera at them. With the audience you have to find somebody, you have to have the light. It's much harder to do. Somebody could almost spend the entire concert doing nothing else in order to do it really well but nobody wants to do that and miss out on the concert! So no, I've never thought to do it although you could do it in very amusing way. If it was one guy playing ten instruments and you didn't know that, you could make a very funny film of the just showing the audience reactions. I never have been tempted to try though

### **BBC Four**

What did you make of that Ziggy audience?

### **DA Pennebaker**

They were a fantastic audience. After I got over the shock of seeing Bowie turning from a fairly normal personality into some kind of wild creature up there, I was amazed that the entire theatre would sing backup for him. That's why I put up signs in the lobby asking people to take as many flash photos as possible because I wanted to see that audience and feel it. Even more interesting for me was when I looked on the stage I didn't see any back on it. It was like I was looking into a black hole. The whole theatricality knocked me out.

### **Bill Armstrong**

Why were the colours so unreal and unclear? The images seemed to lack definition. A most enjoyable trip down memory lane though!

**DA Pennebaker**

I think it works better on a large theatrical screen. It's very sloppy. There were only three of us filming, which is not a lot to film a concert. We had a fourth camera but we didn't use it very much because it was so far away. The colouring I thought was fantastic. That fawn-yellow that was used throughout I thought was really beautiful. When you film something like this you try to get the frenzy of it and if you're putting cameras on tripods and waiting patiently to get the shot in the middle of the frame I don't think you can achieve that. The frenzy is what makes it exciting as opposed to listening to records.

**BBC Four**

Didn't you tour the film around in your car before it was released properly?

**DA Pennebaker**

I had a 16mm print. I rigged up a Siemens projector so I could play a stereo track on it. I would show it at various places. It took me a while to get a 35mm print with a Dolby four track which is what I showed up in Edinburgh. That was just a fantastic screening. I saw right away that we had to get the film released theatrically. David heard about that screening and came to New York and we mixed it together.

**Mark Porter, Brighton**

Did you know you were filming the last Ziggy show, prior to the concert starting?

**DA Pennebaker**

Somebody had mentioned it but it seemed to me like a little promotional gag of some sort. I didn't know what they quite meant and it didn't seem to me that David was going to give up a career on stage. I was caught by surprise when he said it, and I know a lot of the band was surprised because they were supposed to have been told and hadn't been.

**BBC Four**

Lots of people asked this next question...

**Ronald Thorpe, Edgware**

Why have all re-releases of Ziggy Stardust been deprived of the final encore featuring Jeff Beck? I distinctly remember seeing the full version at a Cinema in Rome around 1974.

**DA Pennebaker**

It was in it originally and added almost 20 minutes to the film. I didn't mind that at all. The problem was later when we remixed. Jeff Beck for some reason wasn't happy. David went to London and he and Beck overdubbed those two songs [Jean Genie and Love Me Do]. They're great songs. They should be in the film in many ways. But Beck still wasn't happy and didn't want to be in it so

we took him out. It helps the film in some ways by making it shorter. It was two hours with Beck in it and as much as I like Jean Genie and the other songs I think it probably plays better shorter. I think it's hard to make a concert film go much more than about 90 to 100 minutes although I'm sure it's worth seeing more of it.

**BBC Four**

On the subject of seeing more of the film, quite a few people have asked about the Ziggy DVD. Is that something that's in your hands?

**DA Pennebaker**

Tony Visconti [Bowie's producer] and I did some stuff to go with the DVD. I think EMI is handling it. When I spoke to David last it hadn't come out.