Interview: D.A. Pennebaker

by Sam Adams May 4, 2011

There aren't many filmmakers who can claim to have changed the face of their art form, but D.A. Pennebaker could make a strong case twice over. As a sound recordist on Robert Drew's 1960 documentary *Primary*, he helped invent what would become known as cinéma vérité, as well as the tools that were critical in its establishment. And with *Don't Look Back*, which has just been reissued on Blu-ray, he effectively gave birth to the modern concert film, shadowing Bob Dylan on a European tour just as the literate folk singer was reinventing himself as a plugged-in poet. Thanks to *Don't Look Back*, *Monterey Pop*, and films on Jimi Hendrix, John Lennon, David Bowie, and Jerry Lee Lewis, Pennebaker is best known for his music documentaries, but he's made landmark films in many other areas, many co-directed by his wife, Chris Hegedus: *The War Room*, which documented the rapid-response strategy of Bill Clinton's first presidential campaign; *Company: Original Cast Album*, a fascinating look inside the recording of Steven Sondheim's *Company*; and *Town Bloody Hall*, a confrontation between Norman Mailer and the leading lights of '70s feminism. In the process of reflecting on *Don't Look Back*, Pennebaker talked to *The A.V. Club* about Dylan, Depeche Mode, Jean-Luc Godard, and his many films that have disappeared from the public eye.

The A.V. Club: What sort of context was there for *Don't Look Back*? Had you seen *Lonely Boy*, the portrait of Paul Anka?

D.A. Pennebaker: *Lonely Boy*, I think, was done before, but I didn't see it until later. We went up at the [National] Film Board [of Canada] and they showed it. I kind of felt a little uneasy at first, because when he was doing his song, they were narrating over it. Whether I like his music or not, that sort of seemed like a poor thing to do. That depressed me a little bit. I had done a film—we just saw it last night, oddly enough—with Jane Fonda, called *Jane*. That was done when I was with [Robert] Drew at Time-Life. For years, since it was about play she was in on Broadway, which folded the next day, it's always been sort of a sore point for her. But she's finally decided she rather likes it, and we're going to release it. It was a precursor to *Don't Look Back* in that when I did it, it was only going to be half an hour, and it was supposed to part of a bunch of shows we were hoping to get on television. It didn't have quite the, I don't know, whatever you call it, the angst that I thought was there, that we could have gotten. When I did *Don't Look Back*, I no longer had Time-Life looking over my shoulder, so I could kind of do it as I wanted, and it was like I was really correcting *Jane.*

AVC: When you and cinematographer Ricky Leacock decided to split off from Robert Drew and Time-Life, was editorial independence the crux of it?

DAP: Well, I could see that we weren't a big hit at Time-Life anymore. I think that what had been going on in the heads of those far above us was that maybe they were going to buy ABC, or get a network, or something where they could join TV the way they had magazines. I think they were looking for something that would play on TV that would have that same sort of behind-the-scenes quality that their candid photography had. They welcomed us in at the beginning because they needed to train people and do it. I think their expectations were a little beyond us. They were looking for a film a month, and we were lucky if we could do one in a year. It wasn't very well thought through, but I don't think anybody, even us, understood what would happen when we got the equipment, which was what we were able to do at Time-Life, when we were able to develop the equipment. When we got equipment in hand, what was possible was so much more incredible than we had ever imagined. I think Drew thought that we were going to be making documentaries, which is to say, we would be interviewing people about things going on and it would be kind of a journalism thing. I had no such intentions, but I didn't quite know what else to do. There was nobody else in town, there was no place you could sell a film. Well, *The Quiet One* I think got into theaters, but it was a written film, it was acted and written. The idea of a documentary, whatever, that was anathema. Nobody quite knew what it was or quite how to handle it when you got one.

AVC: Speaking of technological developments, one of your major contributions to *Primary* was to put the sound back in sync with the picture after the fact, right? That could easily have ruined the whole film.

DAP: Well, Ricky too. Ricky was a physics major at Harvard, and I was an engineer at Yale, in electronics. So I had some idea, but really we were dependent on outside engineers and people

who had gone much further with camera development than we could. We just knew what we needed. We knew what the parameters should be, that it should be light, it should be quiet, and it should be sync [sound]. At that point, there was nothing, so we had to make a camera, and the making of a camera got us into working out things that if we had just gone to a camera designer and said, "Make a camera," we would never have gotten. So in a way, it formulated us, and it formulated the thinking of the films. Because the problem was, how do you keep a camera steady when you're walking around with it? It took us a while to sort of understand that it should be against your eye socket, your forehead, and probably on your shoulder. But getting it on your shoulder, that had to be figured out. It had to come to us that we needed a handle on the front that you could to hold onto and turn it on. We were making what we now have as a video camera, but at the time, we didn't really know that that's what we needed.

AVC: So it was trial and error, mechanical problem solving?

DAP: It's like going into a hardware store and seeing what you want for Christmas. It was weird.

AVC: With *Don't Look Back*, how much did you envision beforehand?

DAP: Nothing. I didn't really know much about Dylan. I had heard one of his songs on the radio, and I had read in *Time* magazine that he was not a very good folk singer, which interested me a little bit because I didn't think that their recognition of folk singers was going to be world-renowned. I didn't really know what to expect. I had made a film with [jazz singer] Dave Lambert, he was a friend of Bob Van Dyke's who was doing sound for us. He had put a new group together. And I knew him because I had the earlier record that he'd done for Columbia. I also knew that he'd been an arranger for Gene Krupa, when Krupa had his orchestra. He'd been arranging for two or three trumpets, which was astonishing. So I was always intrigued by him. When I met him, it turned out he was also a carpenter, and he helped us build our studio. So we got to be very good friends with him. He brought his little group in that he'd been putting together, and had written three or four new songs for. He was going to go to RCA to do a tryout to make a record. We were doing films then; anything we should shoot in a day we would try to do, because the film was cheap; we were shooting black and white. We were trying out the cameras, which by then I had made three or four of them, and we were renting them out to the film board, in fact, in some cases. And we were walking in place, as it were, with no idea what we were doing. That is, we no longer had a job. Ricky and I were sitting there staring at each other. There was no place to sell these films. They were little 10- to 12-minute films. TV didn't buy films from us. You couldn't show them in movie houses. They just were something that we did. So this film [*Lambert & Co.*], when we got through with it, it was kind of a nice little film, but I didn't know what to do with it. I didn't even edit it. I just put it up on the shelf in our little editing place on 43rd Street.