

San Diego Exclusive

TONY PALMER:

The Creative Genius behind *All You Need is Love*

by bill biss

TONY PALMER has more than a hundred films to his credit. Beginning under the wing of filmmaker and director, Ken Russell in the mid 1960s, Palmer forged ahead to create some of the most outstanding music, classical and opera documentaries ever filmed. He has won numerous awards worldwide and now his documentary entitled *All You Need is Love* has just been released on DVD this past May 13. I felt very fortunate to spend twenty minutes on the phone, while I talked with him long distance from London about this remarkable effort of craftsmanship. The journey is a history of popular music and is an extensive history with a cast of thousands. Palmer interviewed a "who's who" of music. No need to drop any names... it seems that Tony Palmer has pretty much spoken with them all in the years from 1966 to 1975 and then some. Shall we begin?

Rage: *All You Need is Love* was originally broadcast from 1976 until 1980, is that correct?

Tony Palmer: In different countries... 1977 to 1981 is more accurate. In '77, it went out in England and then the following year in Australia and Canada. I mean, it was in different places all around the world.

Rage: It also was broadcast in the United States?

TP: Not the whole series, only some of them. They refused to show some of them or they wanted them cut and I refused.

Rage: There are so many interviews. It's such a time capsule for people who forget. You see performers who are still at the top of their game and you see performers who have long since been forgotten.

TP: That was one of the fascinating things when we were doing it. For example, if I just take the swing episode. Having decided to do an episode about swing, I then thought, "Who would I really like to talk to?" I must talk to Artie Shaw. I didn't think I'd ever seen an



interview with Artie Shaw up to that point. I must talk to Bing Crosby, must talk to Frank Sinatra, must talk to Cab Calloway... must talk to Benny Goodman. I mean, we managed to get most if not all the people who we made a list of. But, as we were doing it, we realized that these people weren't going to be around much longer.

I mean, it was as you said, "a time capsule." It really was a moment of truth. It really was now or never. That was absolutely fascinating.

Rage: There are several interviews as well that are somewhat disturbing.

TP: I think there's a lot that are somewhat disturbing. (Laughter)

Rage: My brothers were the long-haired hippies. They were going to all these concerts. I was exposed to a lot of the music through them. The Phil Spector interview, it's sad. The glitter rock with Gary Glitter singing, "Rock and Roll," there are only three words in the song.

TP: Right. I think you've read the story about the brown rice lunch with John Lennon, where he said what was needed. He said, "... what was needed was a kind of overview." The context of that was, in the early '70s, when I had that conversation with him. Television at that time was used to sort of big series. I mean there was Lord Clarke 13-part series of civilization, 13-part history of America with Alistair Cooke, *The World at War*... there were these big series.

Lennon's point was simply, "If it's good for civilization, why can't we do one about popular music? Popular music deserves to be taken seriously. It's not this frivolous light entertainment." By that, what he meant, which I think is very important, and it put a great responsibility on me, is that I thought it was really necessary to show the kind of social and political and historical context, in which these different music periods had emerged. I simply was... the thing that really pisses me off. You seen them, you will know why I get pissed off, is when somebody says to me, "Oh, ah... yeah. That's a clip show, isn't it?"

That says a lot. They are thinking in terms of clip shows... the hundred greatest films or the hundred greatest silly jokes. But, what we were trying to tell was a story. Where did this music come from? Why? What were the social implications of it? What sort of social world did it come from? What was its political effect? That's terribly important.

But you say and you're right of course, some of it is really quite disturbing. Isn't it? You gulp when you



realize the kind of social milieu that quite a lot of this music came from.

Rage: One thing I noticed at the end of the final disc, with the profile on Mike Oldfield, is his aloneness at the sound board. I thought it was a fitting ending. Also, the other gentleman, I can't remember his name, he bought the island.

TP: Jack Bruce from Cream. I think that's very interesting. I'm really glad you picked that up. We just got back from Canada. It's [*All You Need is Love*] almost selling faster than we can print it there. Canada! For God sake, what was interesting was some people said, "Did I regret the fact that in episode 17 that I was saying, and 'This is the future?'" I'm saying, "No. That's not what I'm saying in episode 17." You...you Bill. You've got your finger right on it.

As it says on the back of the box-set, the story of popular music is the story of an incredible group of creative individuals who somehow, survived the demands of big business. Of a kind of thieving and capricious industry... now what episode 16 says, "There's no hope." Nobody is going to survive because big business, sure as hell, emasculates anything that it gets its greasy little fingers on. Episode 17 is saying, "No. Hang On." If you take a very extreme case like Black Oak Arkansas at the beginning... there's that guy pretending to masturbate like crazy and you think, "This is the end of civilization as we know it." Suddenly, what they (Black Oak Arkansas) are trying to do is establish this little community, because

that's the way they think as creative individuals can survive.

Jack Bruce goes and buys an island. Mike Oldfield sits alone in his studio. That's curiously prophetic. That is precisely of course, it's taken thirty years... what is now happening. People want to really sit on their own, in their studio, making the music and doing their best to keep the demands of big business at bay.

Rage: Exactly.

TP: Episode 17, if it's really about anything is the triumph of the individual against this sort of behemoth which is trying to gobble everything and everybody up. What was interesting was the more we preceded, the more I realized... it didn't matter which bit of music you were talking about. Whether it was country music or rock and roll or blues, the same pattern always happened.

Country music, it starts with somebody twanging a dulcimer and singing a sort of semi-folk song. Then, other people like it. Suddenly, there is radio, so a lot of people like it. Suddenly, there are gramophone records, so more people like it. So, big business sets its beady eye on it and says, "Ah, that's a way we can make money on it, by just manufacturing this stuff!"

With the result, that you finish up... you go all the way from just the simple twanging of a dulcimer to a theme park, which is the Grand Ol' Opry today.

So, even something like country music goes through that cycle. We found that over and over and over, again. People just got swept up by big business, with the result that the eloquence and the feeling, that they had inside themselves... they felt they had something to say and wanted to say it, just got flattened!

And McCartney... well all of The Beatles, that's why Shea Stadium was the end for them. They couldn't hear themselves. They had no idea what they were playing. The audience and the kids were miles away. This is really before stadium rock got going. The Beatles, the greatest songwriters we... on this side of the pond, they quit because they realized they couldn't hear themselves, it was a complete waste of time... trying to express their creativity, in the ways that big business expected, i.e. big stadiums, lots of money that night.

Rage: It's been such an honor to speak with you.

TP: Oh, it's a pleasure.

For even more with Tony Palmer, read the complete interview online at www.ragemonthly.com.