

Interview with James Marsh

14 August 2009

*This is the full interview I did with James Marsh for my blog Carnival Saloon (<http://carnivalsaloon.blogspot.com/>). The shorter version on the website concentrates on the documentary *The Burger and the King*, a brilliant film about Elvis Presley's formidable appetite that James made for the BBC in the mid-90s. This longer version meanders towards the end to take in James' other films, including *Wisconsin Death Trip* and the Oscar-winning *Man on Wire*.*

Nigel Smith
carnivalsaloon@gmail.com

How did the film come together?

I was working at the BBC in the Arena office at the time. I had made another Arena film before *The Burger and the King* about the song *Heartbreak Hotel* so I'd been to Graceland. There are all these official souvenir gift and book shops and there were two or three Elvis cookbooks even then, that was in 1991. I remember glancing at one that one of his uncles had written. Then David Adler came up with a far more postmodern, far more curious and quite cheeky rendering of the same idea. His book came to Anthony Wall at Arena and he gave it to me and said, "You can't make a film about this can you?" and I said, "Yes, maybe I can".

Why did you think you could make a film from what's essentially an annotated cookbook?

I think it was a neat way of making a film about Elvis, which is a very well-known subject and exposing a different way of understanding him. What I saw in the book was a way of telling Elvis' life story through these food choices he made throughout his life. Hopefully the insights you get are quite sharp, and quite pointed and quite interesting even though the whole manner of the film is like a black comedy essentially.

What does knowledge of Elvis' diet add to our understanding of the man?

What it gives you is access to his upbringing and this childhood in a very particular part of America. A psychologist would have a field day with stuff. He grew up with a very underprivileged background in Tupelo, this small town in Mississippi, during the Depression. If you don't have very much to eat then it's a big deal when you grow up and can afford anything you want. With Elvis, he didn't have a great imagination or a desire to collect Picasso paintings but did have a desire to eat the things he couldn't when he was younger. He had no means of restraining himself, and no reason to either. In a sense that's the simple story of his life and it ended up killing him to some extent. It's like with Michael Jackson; it's a time honoured story of indulgence and excess.

The food in the film is pretty extreme. Did you eat all the meals?

Everything you see in the film we actually ate. By the end a lot of the crew had put on a lot of weight, including me, and I'm really skinny. You had to really force yourself to eat it. That day we filmed the peanut butter and banana sandwich we must have made about 25 of them. We had to eat them because it would have been incredibly rude not to. I ate squirrel very early on in the shoot. It was kind of alright. They are quite bony so there's not much meat; you need about three squirrels to have a proper meal. It's a tangy chicken-like flavour but kind of gristly too. I think if you stew and tenderise it it's probably better than having it fried up in a pan like we did.

Have you cooked any of the recipes since?

Certainly not. It was the one and only time I was exposed to that cooking. It's comfort food. It's food that's designed to fill you up essentially. It's true of peasant cooking all over the world in a way. It fills you up and it keeps you going. And Elvis loved it.

You mentioned your film about Heartbreak Hotel and as well as The Burger and the King you made the feature film The King with Gael Garcia Bernal which references Elvis in a different way but it's full of that Southern Gothic. What is about Presley that seems to continually interest you?

That's a good question and I don't really ask myself those questions. I read Albert Goldman's book which is a scurrilous and sensationalist biography of Elvis which isn't always accurate but is a very gripping story. What you see in Elvis is an archetypal 20th-century story. You have this innocent, pure talent that's corrupted by the world itself. His story has become a modern myth in the best sense of the word. It just so happens that I made one, then another film, The Burger and the King, about Elvis. Calling the feature The King wasn't my idea. I resisted it. It was my co-writer's idea to call our lead character Elvis. He was called Joe until the final draft of the script. My co-writer said we should call him Elvis. I said I can't do that because I'd already been part of so much of that mythology. We got into an argument. Literally the following day I saw a piece in the New York Times about a Hispanic soldier who'd been killed in Iraq and he was called Elvis. Perfect! In a sense the use of that title and the name in the film was a little clumsy but it kind of works and I guess it carried on this obsession, if you want to call it that, with Elvis Presley. Our Elvis has been in the army and there are other interesting connotations with the character. Elvis is not a name that the white population of America has adopted but you find that Hispanic and black people are called Elvis which is really odd. And we decided to call this Mexican character in the film Elvis and it kind of stuck. And Gael loved it. He loved being called Elvis.

Talking about black people and Elvis reminds me of Bubba Ho-tep.

I haven't seen it. I should see it right?

You should certainly see it.

I wrote this treatment for a drama before I made *The King*. It was after I made *The Burger and the King*. It was called the *Shrouds of Elvis*. The idea was this. Elvis didn't die. As the conspiracy alleged he actually manufactured his own death so he could go and have a different life somewhere. I converted that into the people around him, those who stood to profit from his death, organised his abduction and he was taken off to Kalamazoo, Michigan and locked up in a mansion. At one point the BBC were going to make this drama. I think *Bubba Ho-tep* may have something in common with that idea.

Yes. It's a very bizarre but amusing film. It's not a black Elvis in *Bubba Ho-tep*. It's a black JFK!

That's even weirder! I must check it out.

Do you have many memories of the people you interviewed for *The Burger and the King*?

Quite strong ones because it was such an unusual trip we took. The two people I remember vividly are his main cook at Graceland who was this lovely black lady called Mary Jenkins. We went and saw her three or four times and every time we were given all these peanut butter and banana sandwiches. She had this really tender relationship with Elvis, like his mother almost. She was on call at Graceland every day for 12 hours waiting for his orders. It was like a restaurant he had going there. So she invited us to this house that Elvis had bought for her in gratitude for her cooking services. She was great. She did some shopping for us. In the film you see her pushing the cart around the Piggly Wiggly food store.

She was a wonderful character and very honest. She knew that he was getting big and this wasn't the right thing to do but she wanted to make him happy. It's the classic thing of the love between them expressed through food. He was very nice to the people around him. He wasn't one of these awful celebrities who are rude and mean to his staff. He's very endearing in that respect.

The other person was this guy Dan Warlick who was the medical examiner in Memphis when Elvis died. His job was basically to find out why Elvis died which involved an autopsy essentially. At one point he told me he had Elvis' voice box in his hand. So he was holding the seed of Elvis' genius. It was amazing; I shook that hand, warmly and calmly, grasping it in a very loving and intense way. He was the guy who got us Dr Nick. He was no longer the coroner; he had retired and was a lawyer in private practice and Dr Nick was basically one of his clients. Because he liked us and thought we were alright he brokered that meeting, which was very weird and very awkward.

Dr Nick is a very controversial character in Elvis lore of course. A lot of people obviously blame him for Elvis' death because of the amount of drugs he prescribed. I think he eventually had his medical licence removed some time after you made *The Burger and the King*.

And rightly so. Dr Nick is an interesting figure. I think he's dead now. I was led into this sort of antechamber to his office and Dr Nick was on the other side of the room. We had about

five minutes to set our gear up and he gave us about 20 minutes of his time. But within that we got a lot out of him. He hadn't spoken about this for a very long time. He was obviously feeling very guilty. He looks very furtive and very haunted in the interview in the film. But he was really open about the nature of Elvis' health problems and the prescriptions he was giving him. He wasn't the only person by the way who was prescribing drugs to Elvis, it's the whole Michael Jackson story all over again, there were other doctors he had lined up around Memphis who were supplying him with medication but Dr Nick was obviously the main supplier. In a sense his alibi was that he knew someone was going to do it so he'd rather control it. For better or for worse that was his line and that's what he did. And I think that at a certain point everyone can agree that what he was doing was incredibly irresponsible and presumably contributed to Elvis' demise, if not his actual death. Clearly his health had suffered enormously.

The problem was this. He was taking sedatives a lot, downers, barbiturates that slowed down his metabolism and also eating an enormous amount of food. He wasn't digesting the food properly or indeed going through the proper bodily motions you need to keep going. He died in this extraordinary way. He died on the toilet trying to have shit basically. He tried so hard he gave himself a heart attack. It's a very symbolic end to his eating career. We also met the undertaker who had kept the pillows which he'd laid Elvis on, like relics. There are Elvis relics all over the place.

The film's look and the association with Memphis make me think of William Eggleston. There's even an ominous ceiling fan in the final shot. Was that a conscious influence?

I actually didn't know Eggleston's work at that time. It was only doing Wisconsin Death Trip that really turned me on to American photography so I wasn't really aware of Eggleston's work then. I would say that Errol Morris and other documentary filmmakers who were using quite sophisticated stylistic devices to tell stories were probably more important at that time to the way I shot the film. I'd made a film before that called Trouble Man about Marvin Gaye and that has again these image type reconstructions which are a paradigm of what you see in The Burger and the King. What you're seeing are not dramatic reconstructions per se; you're getting imagery that comments on the story and visualises certain aspects in some way that we can't get through archive or interviews or documentary shooting. So this style emerged from Trouble Man and a general awareness that the documentary form could support that visual style. It doesn't have to be reverential and puritanical; you can actually have fun while making a documentary. Man on Wire is the ultimate expression of that. This idea that you can make a film that is a documentary but doesn't have to be responsible or observe documentary type restrictions. You can break that open and deal in potent imagery that you feel the audience will respond to.

What is about American stories that have drawn you to them?

I lived in America until this time last year. I'd lived there since 1995 when I got fired from the BBC. When I say fired I was let go from the BBC just as I'd made the Burger and the King. They were laying people off in one of the perennial BBC let's get rid of more staff. I was laid-

off having made that film and went to America. As a result I was in position to explore more and more of this part of American life that I found very interesting, this Sothern Gothic as you mentioned. The Burger and the King has elements of that; Wisconsin Death Trip definitely does. Midwestern Gothic! The King is definitely southern Gothic and this is a really rich part of American folklore and as an outsider you have a different reaction to it. In a sense it's easier for me as an English filmmaker to go to Texas or Wisconsin and do what I did. If I was an American filmmaker I think the reception would be different from the people there. Your view would be different too. I loved the imagery that you find in these different parts of America. It became a kind of professional and personal preoccupation and Man on Wire is a New York version of that. I'd lived in New York for 14 years and came to New York in a very similar way as the people in the film do. They'd come to have an adventure and take the city over so I really connected to that with man on Wire and saw New York as a place of endless possibility. And that's what Petite and his friends saw when they were planning a walk there. So there was a very definite personal connection. Also that's when I knew I was going to leave America at that time; I knew it would be the last film I was going to make before leaving so it was a very good film to leave behind. It was wonderful. I left the week before it went into the cinemas in America. One cinema played it for seven months straight in New York. It was very good to leave that behind as a kind of thank you I guess to the city that I'd grown to love and had lived in for so long.

What was funny about Man on Wire for me was seeing Mark Lewis in it. I know him a little bit from working at Storyville when we showed The Natural History of the Chicken and Cane Toads.

Philippe mentioned that he thought Mark was some kind of filmmaker. I'd seen Cane Toads; it was one of those films that I saw as a young director. I thought what a great a great film it was. So my first conversation with Mark, he didn't sell himself that way, and he said he was working for Discovery, and at that point and I realised he's Mark Lewis. He's THAT Mark Lewis. He's fucking made a bunch of really great films, mainly about animals and the bizarre vicissitudes of nature. Mark was a great interviewee. Mark didn't see the walk through of course but he was a very important ally along the way. It was very pleasing that Mark was at the heart of this great adventure.

You mentioned the influence of Errol Morris earlier and I guess Mark's films evoke that spirit too.

I think with Wisconsin Death Trip I got beyond that and found a much more personal style that wasn't about Errol Morris or documentaries that I'd seen. I'd seen a couple of films. La Jette, the Chris Marker film, was very important to way we used stills in Wisconsin Death Trip and indeed in Man on Wire. I also think Man with a Movie Camera, the Vertoz film from the 20s. But as far as Man on Wire I felt I had my own style and wasn't really beholden to anyone. The Burger and the King was really the last time there was a conscious sense of being influenced by other directors and borrowing and working within terrain that you felt they'd laid for you. That's true of Burger and the King but less so after that. I felt that one was the bridge to finding out the way to do things the way I wanted to do them.

Finally, since this is primarily a music blog, what's your favourite Elvis song?

That's easy. It's Blue Moon from the Sun sessions. Interestingly, I never used it in any of the films I've made that relate to Elvis - though I tried to use it at the end of The King and we couldn't afford to clear it. I find the purity of the voice and the simplicity of the song overwhelming and very moving. At the end of the song there are these angelic moans that always make me shiver - they are the purest expression of longing that I know.

Before we finish let me tell you about this odd coincidence. On Tuesday I got home and found I'd been sent a parcel. It contained a DVD of Werner Herzog's Woyzeck, Mean Streets on VHS and the paperpack copy of Wisconsin Death Trip. This was all my stuff. I must have lent it all to someone ages ago and now they sent it back to me anonymously. No return address. I thought Wisconsin Death Trip was still on our bookshelf.

Ha! It's a wonderful book. I can't praise that book enough. Michael Lesy became a friend over the course of making the film and we're still in touch. He's coming to stay with me in a couple of weeks time. The book itself is a wonderful, interesting, fascinating piece of work. It's an amazing book and as you can gather I was obsessed with it for years before I got to make the film.

I discovered the book via your film.

Yes. You can come to it either way. Michael is a very difficult, prickly guy in some respects and he gave me the book option for free. I was about the tenth person to approach him and he thought I might be for real. He loves the finished film and it's so rare to find that. You've stolen their book and made it in to a film. The best result of that whole film was that Michael, whose book I adored, really loved the finished film and has very publicly supported it since. It's a brilliant book and I'm pleased you've got it back again.

I remember when the film was first shown at the NFT. When I was a student I spent a semester at this little college in a small town about 15 miles west of Milwaukee so not that far from Black River Falls. Obviously I had to go and see the film.

Oh god. Were you there in the winter?

September to December.

It's even more brutal in January and February.

