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STREAMING (/COLUMN/STREAMING)

A Brief History of American Independent Film: 'Split Screen' on FilmStruck



John Pierson with Spike Lee. Mr. Pierson was instrumental in the sale of Mr. Lee's breakthrough feature, "She's Gotta Have It." Criterion Collection

By Glenn Kenny (<https://www.nytimes.com/by/glenn-kenny>) Jan. 11, 2018

For as long as I've been professionally acquainted with him, John Pierson has been an unusually energetic guy. In his early line of work, as a sales agent for independent movies, one had to be unusually energetic, with the travels, the marathon deal-negotiating sessions, and all the eccentric and sometimes volatile personalities at play. In the mid-90s he shifted from making deals to chronicling the deals he'd made and the people he'd met along the way.

His 1996 book, “Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes: A Guided Tour Across a Decade of American Independent Cinema.” (reissued in 2004 as “Spike, Mike Reloaded”) told of his adventures with Spike Lee, Kevin Smith, Jim Jarmusch, Rose Troche and other filmmakers whose careers Mr. Pierson assisted and kick-started. After it was published, Mr. Pierson began producing and hosting an unusual TV program “Split Screen,” which had its premiere on IFC in 1997. Over four years he made more than 60 half-hour episodes containing freewheeling informative interviews and video essays covering a wide range of topics in American indie film.

“Split Screen” served up many of what you might call the usual suspects — Mr. Smith, whose outrageous 1994 no-budget comedy “Clerks” remains an American indie landmark, showed up early and spoke freely and at length. But “Split Screen” approached familiar figures from unusual angles. An episode from 1999 features Christopher Walken and Julian Schnabel giving cooking tips and sharing a meal with John Ciarria, known as Cha Cha or the Mayor of Little Italy. The show also made room for, say, a segment in which John Waters exchanged notes with the gore schlockmeister Herschell Gordon Lewis and an entire episode about animals in film.

Mr. Pierson had long hoped to find a permanent home for the series on physical media, or elsewhere, and times being what they are, he’s gone with “elsewhere.” “Split Screen” now resides on the Criterion Channel of the streaming site FilmStruck, and Season 10 is scheduled for a Jan. 13 premiere there. The division of seasons is somewhat arbitrary, but at six episodes per season (five standard episodes, and one subtitled “Projections,” which focuses on a single film or filmmaker), it’s a reasonable system for mini-binge watches. Mr. Pierson has taped brand-new introductions for each season. (The Christopher Walken cooking segment opens Season 9.)

The show took up the “guided tour” theme of Mr. Pierson’s book by depicting the host tooling around the country in an RV. One running joke was to “park” the vehicle outside New York’s Ziegfeld Theater starting three months before the 1999 opening of “The Phantom Menace,” the “Star Wars” episode. (Also noteworthy are Mr. Pierson’s casual-wear choices, which the host cheerfully recognizes as appalling. The pullover he sports in a “Projections” interview with the actor and screenwriter Buck Henry, in Season 10, is particularly vivid.)

Mr. Pierson's passion for his brand of cinema is a palpable thread throughout. It's infectious, and the segments produced by other film folk that Mr. Pierson picked up along the way testifies to that; their work has the same informed, fervent quality.

"I had to cobble the first 10 episodes on my own, for the most part, with my wife, Janet, helping," he said. (Janet Pierson is now the chief programmer of the film section of South by Southwest, the annual festival in Austin, Tex.)

"Most of the ideas were things I myself was wildly enthusiastic about," he continued. "But there was a pool of larger people coming to me with their ideas, and the point of the whole show was to spread that enthusiasm around — I've sometimes described myself as the Johnny Appleseed of this world. So when people who were capable came to me with ideas they loved, but I might not have had the same personal attachment to, I was beholden to give them opportunities to create segments around stuff they loved."

After years of pursuing the Criterion Collection about putting together a DVD or Blu-ray package of the show, Mr. Pierson eventually had to accept that TV content was, with one or two exceptions, not something that Criterion did. That changed when Criterion teamed up with Turner on the FilmStruck site. "The show fits really well with what the site does; it's a very happy home for it," he said.

Once the determination was made, Mr. Pierson was slightly surprised that the site insisted on putting up all 66 episodes over a period of time.

While the show is, by definition, of a certain age, it's not as dated as it might have seemed, in part because Mr. Pierson rarely did segments based entirely on time-specific pegs. And almost all the individual films and filmmakers he focused on turned out to have staying power. (In this sense, the series is a good companion

to “Cinéastes de Notre Temps,” the French TV documentary series that ran from 1964 to 2009; right now three episodes of that show are on FilmStruck’s Criterion site.)

When I spoke to Mr. Pierson on the phone from his home, where he says he’s keeping busy cooking for his wife while she prepares the slate for the next SXSW, I asked his veteran’s view of what streaming is doing for indie movies today. He expressed some skepticism. “As someone who began as a sales agent, I’m an empiricist. So I find it frustrating to have no idea of how many people are watching anything across the streaming spectrum. Back in the day, if someone said, ‘Hey my film’s doing great,’ you could verify if they were delusional or right. Now, who knows?”

Streaming services don’t gauge their success according to ratings, or box office numbers, because they don’t need to. But Mr. Pierson sees in this business model not just great potential for exposure, but great potential for anonymity. “What’s notable to me, too, is that you once could gauge things to the degree by which they got traction in the general cultural conversation,” he said. “When you could have any newspaper in America riffing in headlines on ‘sex, lies, and videotape’ or ‘Slacker,’ and ‘Do the Right Thing,’ you could feel how those filmmakers are penetrating the culture. You can tell that it had gotten outside the indie community echo chamber. In the current landscape, I find myself in the dark, but thinking maybe the cultural impact has been lessened.”

My own feeling is it’s too soon to tell, and that’s one thing I’ll be exploring in future columns.

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