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cdn culture shock

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FLICK: parking lot philosophers to splendid butterflies

-barbara bruederlin

I would have been wise to invest in a Tardis for Sled Island festival this year, because there was more on offer than one mortal could possibly handle without a little technological/magical intervention. Sadly I wasn't able to make it to near as much of the stellar film festival segment as I had hoped, but I made up for it by cramming in as much Plaza Theatre popcorn as I could. Buckets.

The Parking Lot Movie:

You would think that a documentary about the parking lot attendants at one iconic lot in Charlottesville, Virginia would not exactly be fraught with dramatic potential, but that's where you would be mistaken. When the parking lot is located in a section of downtown filled with bars frequented by university students, there is bound to be significant drama.

The attendants at this lot are a seemingly ragged band of misfits, but in reality they are philosophers and intellectuals, artists and musicians. Working in this parking lot is a highly coveted gig; it's a select club whose membership you can only gain by being brought into the fraternity (and the parking lot attendants are all male) by existing members.

Between customizing the vast selection of frequently-broken wooden entrance gates with cryptic or iconic slogans, cleaning up the vomit of drunken frat boys, and arguing with people who try to skip out on their \$4.00 payment, the parking lot attendants essentially spend the remainder of their time on

duty sitting and thinking. They make collages out of religious pamphlets, invent traffic cone games, and speculate on class struggle, entitlement, and the human condition.

Eventually, these parking lot philosophers burn out and move on. But from their positions as university professors, musicians, baristas, and writers, they reflect on their years at the parking lot with a mix of fondness and bemusement, tempered with some residual resentment at the idiots who pissed them off. Way more entertaining than it should be.

Band:

A perplexing 12 minute short, featuring black and white footage of Deerhoof during warmup, with a voiceover of Black Panther audio. It made no sense whatsoever.

Strange Powers: Stephin Merritt and the Magnetic Fields:

If you are a Magnetic Fields fan, then you need to see this. If you have no idea who the Magnetic Fields are, then you need to see this.

One of the directors was in attendance at the screening and she explained why the documentary was 10 years in the making. And it wasn't entirely because Stephin Merritt is such a taciturn and difficult interview. Although he is that.

Merritt has been called the Cole Porter of his generation, for his theatrical sensibilities and his ability to pen the most perfect songs, songs that are an irresistible blend of art pop musical and bubble gum folk, songs that are always too short. The film is almost as much about bandmate Claudia Gonson, a close friend of Merritt's since high school, and an equally fascinating personality in her own right. In addition to contributing piano, vocals, and percussion, Gonson manages the band, gets into daily passionate arguments with Merritt and functions as his self-described "fag-hag".

Merritt writes most of his songs, sitting for hours at a time in a darkened gay bar. He is a perfectionist who prefers to micro-manage the music at the studio level. Part of this can be attributed to hyperacusis, a condition with which he is afflicted that causes painful feedback in the ears when sound rises above a certain volume. Live shows are understandably a rare occurrence with the Magnetic Fields, because of Merritt's condition, but also because he prefers the control that a studio affords him.

Stephin Merritt is incredibly ambitious in his musical vision. He originally envisioned The Magnetic Fields' most noted album, 69 Love Songs, as 100 love songs. The more subversive smaller number is infinitely more suitable. Subversion, gender-bending, and perfect pop melodies are what defines the music of Stephin Merritt and the Magnetic Fields. I can't wait to see what happens when he tackles his next ambitious project – 100 musicals. Gawd, I hope they film that.

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