

from **fROOTS** June 2008
www.frootsmag.com

Alex Reuben

The DJ turned film maker talks to **Ken Hunt** about his recent dance film **Routes**.

Let's face it, the appreciation of most art boils down to one thing: was the journey worth taking? Chancing upon the final-cut premiere of Alex Reuben's film *Routes* at the 2007 MOFFOM film festival made the trip worth taking twice over. Reuben is a DJ and filmmaker – British out of Ukrainian Jewish – with shorts like *Big Hair* (2001) and *A Prayer From The Living* (2002) under his belt. *Routes* is different, yet builds on earlier foundations. "I was a DJ so that's how I started making films," he tells me in Prague. "Through the money I made DJing that's how I made films. All of the films are related to DJing in some way. More in the method I make them, though."

Routes is the eye-catching offspring of Harry Smith and Les Blank. Picaresque, without spoken commentary, it is a fly-on-the-wall, fly-on-the-windscreen road movie about dance encountered on a journey through the Southern States of Ameri-

ca. Reuben's focus is dance, down-home and urban, dance steeped in tradition or dance stepped in emergent dance forms like clowning, krump and hip-hop. It

"I wanted to collect dance and music in the same way that Harry Smith wanted to collect songs."

opens with a sequence of barefooting – a hybrid between clogging and a form of barefoot dancing associated with Negro slave ships – performed on a square of wood to fiddle, guitar, banjo and double-bass accompaniment. Only these are white

feet dancing and white musicians pounding out dance rhythms at the Shindig on the Green in Ashville, NC. As he drives to New Orleans – the travel footage feeds the narrative, seldom seeming makeweight or 'make-length' – he encounters white, black and Native American dancers in settings that include solo dancers, family pair dancing and what looks like sprung ballroom, Cajun and zydeco, clowning, gang dance and, in New Orleans, second-lining and Mardi Gras Indian parading. "It was all pretty organic..." he smiles.

In early August 2005 he arrived in Kentucky where he prepared and collated information and contacts ("I got a lot of good information in Kentucky"). At the end of August he reached New Orleans – just after Katrina struck on 29 August; just before

the next strike. He had taken advice from, amongst others, Mike Seeger. A one-man film crew, he began filming on the North Carolina leg with a HDV camera rigged to the side of the car so he could film road miles hands-free while driving. He also developed a two-handed filming technique with hand-held camera in one hand and microphone in the other. "I'm not always pointing the microphone the same place I'm pointing the camera," he grins. "I tried to make the sound *move*, as if I'm drawing or painting in space. That's why you get those variations in sound; which I *deliberately* tried to do. I'm not interested in getting sound like you'd get from a mixing desk in a normal concert."

Routes consciously builds on earlier work, whether David LaChapelle's dance film *Rize* or Harry Smith's *Anthology Of American Folk Music*. He is aware of the baton thrust into his hand. Asked about the Harry Smith connection, he replies, "People think he was an anthropologist in that collection. When I looked into it and really listened to the reissue all the way through, I heard it completely differently. The *Anthology* is much more an artist's project. For example, he was an expert on American Indian culture but there's no American Indian music in the project, so it's clear that he wasn't out to make an anthropological study of all the music in the States. He was making a very personal connection between all those sounds. When I heard it, he programmed it like a DJ would select the set. It's really like that. It really moves and builds to a climax. He's categorised it. I wanted to collect dance and music in the same way that Harry Smith wanted to collect songs. He thought it was going to be lost and die out; which, of course, as we know, it hasn't. I wanted to collect 'it' in relation to dance."

Routes contains the most eidetic dance sequence I've ever seen, courtesy of the Melrose Golden Girls. They are a bunch of split-second choreographed black cheerleaders performing krump moves like wide-eyed, psychedelised meerkats out of Mati Klarwein's *Annunciation* painting (the one on Santana's *Abraxas* cover). Most people would have seen them as nothing more than a sideshow at a sports fixture. Reuben captures their *perfection*. The Melrose Golden Girls burn into the retina like nothing less than the hot sauce of community culture. From North Carolina to Louisiana, *Routes* captures a cosmopolitan, multiracial, community-based America, the existence of which we forget at our peril. This is another sort of Americana. And one I can relate to.

More at www.alexreuben.com

