

I DON'T KNOW (1972). SCRIPT, DIRECTOR: Penelope Spheeris. CAMERA: Robert Schoeller. CAST: Jimmy/Jennifer Michael, Dana Reuben, Andy Spheeris, and Linda Spheeris as themselves. FORMAT: 16 mm. RUNNING TIME: 20 minutes. ORIGINAL THEATRICAL RELEASE: Jan. 21, 1972.

This rare archival treasure is a UCLA student film made by pioneering music videographer, filmmaker, and “rock ’n roll anthropologist” Penelope Spheeris, who received her M.F.A. in Theater Arts before going on to make such noted documentary and fictional features as *THE DECLINE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION* (1981), *SUBURBIA* (1984), *THE DECLINE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION PART II: THE METAL YEARS* (1988), *WAYNE’S WORLD* (1992), and the forthcoming, long awaited Janis Joplin biopic, *THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JANIS* (2010).

The half-scripted, half-improvised *I DON'T KNOW* was made on a barebones budget by a crew of three: writer/director Spheeris, cinematographer Robert Schoeller (father to Spheeris’s daughter Anna, he died of a heroin overdose at age 29), and an older narcoleptic lesbian named Fritzzy Rogers. Shot in and around Los Angeles, *I DON'T KNOW* has a direct cinema sense of improvisation and authenticity, making for an early 1970s time capsule that includes footage from West Hollywood’s first gay pride parade. The story chronicles the final days of a queer couple, lesbian Linda (younger sister to Penelope) and transgender Jimmy/Jennifer, a self-proclaimed “mad flaming queen” who is



debating whether to have a sex change. Together this charismatic, tragic pair share lyrical moments and Warholesque musings in the bath, astride a chopper, and while dancing topless. The companion piece *HATS OFF TO HOLLYWOOD* (1973, 16 mm, color), which Spheeris also made while at UCLA, follows Jennifer’s subsequent relationship with Dana, a gay man and her would-be pimp, who is briefly glimpsed at the end of *I DON'T KNOW* and was dead by decade’s end. Spheeris last spotted Jennifer on Hollywood Boulevard around 15 years ago but has had no news of her since. Apart from a 1972 screening at New York’s Film Forum and inclusion (with *HATS OFF TO HOLLYWOOD*) in the 2007 Identities Queer Film Festival in Vienna, *I DON'T KNOW* has enjoyed extremely few theatrical screenings before this one. Throughout both of these memorable appearances, Jennifer’s wry humor and lust for life rise above, but never obscure, the risks and trials endured by someone who refuses to live by society’s rules.

Program notes by Maria San Filippo

Sources:

Malcolm, Paul. “‘Experimentation is the Only Way to Live’: Interview with Penelope Spheeris” (Los Angeles, November 2, 2006), *Rohstoff* Filmmagazin, Aus Fanzine 3. Online access: http://www.rohstoff-filmmagazin.org/contributions/Penelope_Spheeris_Interview.html.

Spheeris, Penelope. Email correspondence (May 5, 2008).

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Next week (May 14): British circus double feature! *STRANGERS’ MEETING* (Robert Day, 1957), *ANOOP AND THE ELEPHANT* (David Eady, 1972).