

INDY^{week}

Violinist Jenny Scheinman turns obscure Tar Heel films into an hour-long musical meditation

By Grayson Haver Curren | March 18, 2015



Jenny Scheinman struggles when she starts to speak about her new project. Her sentences turn sometimes into fragments and other times into paragraphs, as if, when she tries to connect all the factors that made *Kannapolis: A Moving Portrait* possible, the project's historic sprawl eludes her.

For good reason: *Kannapolis* presents an hour of laboriously edited film from the enormous archives of H. Lee Waters, a Depression-era filmmaker who traveled across the region shooting short "moving portraits" of people in small, rather undocumented towns. Scheinman first learned of the trove, which is housed in Duke's Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, when Duke Performances' Aaron Greenwald approached her about turning the movies into music. She was in Durham to play with Bill Frisell's Disfarmer Project, another concert that reanimates obscure images of an almost-lost past.

On Friday, Scheinman offers the world premiere of the multimedia *Kannapolis* at Duke, with help from two singers, several filmmakers and a whole lot of preserved history.

After Duke Performances' Aaron Greenwald asked if you'd be willing to explore H. Lee Waters' material in a new work, he sent you three DVDs of films. What were your impressions?

The first one I put on was *Kannapolis*; they're all called just the name of the town where the footage was shot. It was gorgeous. It's about half black-and-white and half color. The color is really striking. It's a lot of shots

There's an honesty in the way people look at the camera, probably because they were unaware of cameras in general, unlike modern culture, which is completely immersed in selfies and YouTube. We see ourselves constantly in that way, and these people didn't. It probably had to do with the character of H. Lee Waters, too, which was disarming and charming.

I didn't know anything about him when I first put the DVD in. I later found out that he was a portrait photographer that had picked up a movie camera for the latter years of the Depression. Looking at the footage for the first time, one of the things that really did strike me were these moments that were like moving portraits. They were very short shots—maybe five seconds—of a face. Some feeling changed inside the character, which would change the face, which would turn the lips from a downturn to an upturn. The eyes would slightly widen. I don't know if I'd ever really seen that before.

That honesty you mention seems like a quality you'd try to match as a songwriter or arranger. Did you try to mirror it in Kannapolis?

My music is like that. I'm a pretty simple composer. That may be why Aaron asked me to do it; it's sort of a natural match. I love sophisticated, ironic music, but I'm not very good at that. I wasn't worried about not being guileless enough, because my music tends to be like that.

How did you otherwise approach writing the music to fit the film?

A lot of the score that I wrote is fiddle-based music, coming out of the long tradition in this area of fiddle music, which was even more dominant in the late '30s. I have one tune that's an old American songbook tune, roughly inspired by "Begin the Beguine," which was very famous around then. I wrote three hours of music, very loosely connected to the film, and then I went through and picked the stuff that worked.

There are actually three songs I didn't write. The footage is a portrait of a town, and I wanted to do anything I could do to make it feel like a more broad community on the stage, even though we're only three people. Having multiple voices was a goal of mine, so I picked three tunes that I didn't write. They're three perspectives other than my music.

For this project, you were staring at images and writing music for a place you'd never been and a time in which you'd never lived. Was speaking for ghosts in that way a concern?

A song called "City of Looms" in *Kannapolis* came out of my nervousness about making a piece about people I didn't know. What right do I have to do that? It's about marrying yourself to the other.

I was living in New York for most of my adult life, but I'm basically a country girl from the Northwest. It's a totally different world. It has some connections, and I was able to relate to the footage somewhat. But this is unfamiliar territory. The era is more unfamiliar even than the region. Kannapolis is completely different than it was at the time. The mill has closed. We're in a different culture, too. We're in a culture that's very connected to national pop culture. We're connected through the Internet. This is really before television.

I had to overcome the understanding that I was making a piece about people I didn't know and a place that I had never been, nor had any cultural connection to. People have done that all the time; people make documentaries about polar bears, for God's sake, and they know nothing about them. But it's an art piece.

Is that instant, alien immersion difficult?

A lot of things I do are like that. Especially when I was a little younger and taking absolutely every gig that came my way, I was often doing some crash course in Balkan music. Violin, especially, is a real gypsy instrument, so we're always taking on different characters and faking it. Improvisers are always flying by the seat of their pants. We're all total hacks. I believe in going beyond the familiar.

But in this case, there's so much dealing with the historical document. H. Lee Waters ended up inadvertently making one of the most comprehensive documents on American life that we really have. It is the look of the world in that time, in that place. I hope other people work with it.

Is that a goal for Duke and even for you—to make people more aware of remarkable but little-known material in hopes more artists may explore it?

Universities and libraries could be more creative about the way they approach their archives. Rather than just letting them sit there and be discovered by people doing their doctoral theses, they could invite artists and historians and musicians and theater people in to look at them and make pieces out of them that more people

public is a really important endeavor.

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