

Interview of Jeff Keen by Jackie Foulds & Duncan White Brighton 2008

JF: [In the 1960s], Jeff saw this thing [the 8mm camera] as a pen. Didn't you? A drawing instrument.

JK: Well, it was really. I suppose it was. 8mm was something that you could take up and drop at any time. And so that became then - with the *Pink Auto* [date] and other films - a continued expression of filmmaking. Which was chopped up into short movies and things like that. So, I don't know when I last - broke through in the 70s really.

DW: So, when you were going through your anti-American period, which films were you watching then? British films?

JK: I stopped watching films actually, in the 50s for a while. During the war years we used to have shows in NAAFI canteens of American films. And they were all glowing Technicolor movies with Victor Mature usually and somebody else. [Laughs] Except one day they had *The Swing Giants of 42*. That was a film that changed my life [Laughs] more or less. It had all the swing bands including Co-Co Boogie in the end, with what's her name? I can't remember her name. And they all came on and did their bit. It was at the - I forgot they were all in it - the Count Basie Band, the what's his name? What's his name's band [Laughs] What's his name band. They were all in this film, you know. One after the other blasting away. And that wasn't an immediate influence but it was a continuing influence, I think, on me. Later on I thought: "Oh yeah, *The Swing Giants of 42*."

JF: It's all that energy isn't it?

JK: It's all that continuous energy, yeah, blasting away on the screen and it was good.

DW: Was it the way it was edited or things like that?

JK: It was just their playing. They'd come on, walk round and play, and it was good.

JF: We're still boggled when we listen to Stan Kenton.

JK: Oh God, yeah.

JF: I discovered Naxos online. It's great... They've got classics, giants of jazz, jazz library, nostalgia.

JK: It's a bind actually. It ties you down.

JF: But you find such terrific things. Rivetting. You can't do anything else. But listening to Stan Kenton still is amazing and Woody Herman and his Herd.

JW: The First Herd was a big one. Thundering Herd. That was his big breakthrough. Woody Herman.

JF: Actually, it's terrible isn't it Jeff? Kids today they never hear this stuff.

JK: They never get to hear it at all... Yes, I think there's been a recent trend to sweep everything away, you know. Rock n roll sweeps everything out of the picture and so on.

DW: So, what was it about the Westerns that you were keen on?

JK: Er...

JF: Randolph Scott?

JK: No, it finished up with Randolph Scott. We were watching these Bud Boetticher films on – in afternoons. One o'clock in the afternoon on television. Bud Boetticher on wide screen and they're so terrific these films. I'm watching them again actually because I saw them not long ago. Then I saw them in the 50s something.

DW: So, do you think it was more about telly then, than cinema?

JK: I don't know. I don't think television has come into it much really for me. Seeing the stuff on the bigger screen, that makes the difference. I remember Shane – everyone cheered when he shot the rock. "What shall I shoot?" – Pyowww! This rock explodes a few feet in front of him. And he runs to the camera like a 3D movie and people used to jump up in the cinema. They used to go and watch that. That was the thrill of cinema really. You couldn't do that on television.

JF: Besides it's the gun thing in Westerns isn't it? I mean, everyone's got such a downer on guns now. They don't...

JK: Guns punctuate the film don't they?

JF: They don't consider the romance of the gun, do they?

JK: No. And the gun punctuates the film. They go off at certain intervals in the film. And getting back to Shane again. First it's – the tall guy - Jack Palance. He's the first guy who shoots and he's got to be answered. His gun has got to be answered later. Doesn't it? It's the code. It has to be answered. And he shoots down Elisha Cook Junior. In the night. It has to be answered.

DW: Like a language of the gun.

JK: Language of the gun. Yeah.

DW: Is it a kind of pop version of the gun. Rather than there being real guns. Do you know what I mean? Or does that not...

JK: I don't know really.

- JF: No, we've always – because of the Westerns – we've always thought the gun was always a great image. Visually, a good image. And this whole thing about them being beautifully made and a piece of engineering, which is...
- JK: I think of them as being beautifully made actually. The Winchester 75 and things like that.
- JF: But because of all this stuff that's gone on with shootings at colleges. People have got this huge downer on them. I think, it's a man thing.
- JK: Yes, it is. It is a man thing. When they have girls doing like – what's her name?– [Laughs] it was in that short film about sheriffs and things like that. She takes on – her husband's killed and she takes on his gun and you know. And does the sheriffing in a small town. It's very rare, isn't it? Very rare for that to happen.
- DW: Because it's a 'male role'?
- JK: Yes, it is.
- JK: Yes, in a way that book. [Looking at one of Keen's graphic books] That little collection of images is rather fascinating. Because it came from all sorts of sources. I don't know where they came from. They must have been lying about in one of the drawers and I put them all together in that box as portraits. And left them there. Not sure where they belong really. So.
- DW: But do you often do that. Do you often group things together in that kind of random way but with – one theme, like portraits?
- JK: I don't know what happened. I've got things in various drawers around there. And they are probably collected in one of the drawers and I thought: "Oh, God. I better put all these together." And they came through as portraits. They're horrible portraits actually. Oh yeah, that's one – *White Dust. Doctor Gaz.* Yes. From an early film. He's been stretched across in 'scope. Given the scope treatment. Stretched across the frame. I think there's another one there of him normal – normal size.
- DW: So, when you said you saw the camera as an extension of the pen, is that because you were coming out of poetry before that? And therefore...
- JK: Yeah. I was doing poetry things in the 60s. In fact I seem to have produced a little book every ten years. *Rayday* came first. Of course, but I'm thinking of books... *Zip Zap* and then the book of collected bits – *Iron Man in 75* - and then *Art War 85*. So every ten years there's been another – perhaps it's time for another one.
- JF: Oh. But you've got enough material Jeff to...
- JK: Well, I don't actually write poetry. I don't sit down and write poetry but I collect it sometimes in my mind. It swirls round, it swirls round. It settles down in a block. And then in the recent selection *Art War* or it has – about 12 volumes in there I think. All have a common theme.

- JF: But he didn't mean pen in writing. He meant the camera as an instrument for drawing.
- JK: Yes, I know. That's the interesting thing really, I think. That's the thing we've got to tackle. [Laughs] next time round. Filmmakers coming up have got to tackle that because – now I watch television. It's changed, hasn't it? Have you noticed Jackie? It's changed since we watched it. Changed radically. And a whole new load of people are making films and things. And they're breaking everything down. So that films have run into films about eating and things like that. At certain points in the film they run into the commercials, which is changing the language of cinema. It's a continuous thing now. Old films look odd and old on television.
- DW: Because you can see the changes? You can see the ruptures?
- JK: Well, I don't know. You can see the way they're made. Can't you? Films on television, when you're watching. Old films are cut in certain ways, aren't they? The new films seem to be cut differently. I watched a film with Tom Cruise – the one time heart throb of cinema. And he ran through this film at great speed [Laughs] and started throwing people out of windows and things like that. All at great speed. And it was terrific really. The film was terrific actually. Films are going different ways I think [Laughs].
- DW: So, who do you think were your main influences as filmmakers?
- JK: I don't know really. I mean it looks as if I've been influenced by everything when you look...
- DW: Yeah, it does.
- JK: All those chance images coming up. That one you put down there.
- DW: This one?
- JK: The one previous to that - was a kind of – of yes that's right. It's an image that's been around a long time and has transferred into an image of the film. An image for the film by someone who was working on the computer at the time. Just by giving it a black background all the way round. [Looking at images] Yes they're all disconnected. But you might find the wartime image eventually. [Laughs]
- DW: [Laughs] Yeah. What I started looking for.
- JF: I think your main influence has been cartoon movies.
- JK: Maybe. I don't know. I'm a great fan of cartoon films. But I don't know about – well it's the shortness. And the compact nature of the film that fascinates me. I think maybe there's a future for that. I don't know.
- JF: They're full of frantic energy.
- JK: Actually, do you notice how The Simpson's have a cartoon film running through the latest film... Itchy and Scratchy. They return to this marvellous cat and mouse chase going on. They're watching it on television aren't they?

DW: Yes. And they're all addicted to it.

JK: Absolutely: Yeah. [But TV has] given up on the Disney cartoons, I think, haven't they? The other ones. The Warner Bros. cartoons. No, you don't see Tom and Jerry. I've got them in my movies. They don't appear on television.

JF: Well, Violent things happen and again one wonders if it's political correctness.

JK: Remember that Tex Avery. We watched that over and over again. He ran all the way up the hill [Laughs]. Bang, bang, bang on his – Ahh!, Ahh! Ahh! – runs all the way up the hill [does impression of panting] Whoohwhoohwhooh. And all the way down again. That was terrific that was.

JF: Yes, the one with the scream. He's hurt himself but for some reason he has to go to Mars to scream with pain doesn't he?

JK: Pain. They have pain all the time. [Laughs] Ruled by pain. Good that was. Good.

JF: But you know, maybe the violence in them is disapproved of now.

JK: I don't know. I just think people forget now just how good they were. And then they discover them later, you know.

JF: I'm surprised they haven't banned Punch and Judy really, because that's full of violence.

JK: Knock about humour.

DW: Hmm. That slapstick.

JF: They seem to have lost their sense of humour. That's the thing, isn't it? You know they take it all so – they're po-faced about them the violence in cartoons and films and stuff. And yet look how vicious the films are now, well some of them. Movies coming out of America.

JK: They're vicious yeah. They're vicious. Cruel. But they're psychologically cruel aren't they? People are driven by destructive tendencies or something like that.

DW: The violence isn't as physical is it?

JK: It isn't as physical as it was. No.

JF: It's the refusal to acknowledge the dark side in all of us, I suppose. We're all primitive creatures with potentially violent natures. But being civilized we keep it under control, don't we? But people are disapproving of the expression of it in art, which is a pity.

JK: Ah well. We must keep on, keeping on to the end of the road. [Laughs]

DW: Is that why you got into the kind of expanded stuff. You said that you used to want to kill the film, or destroy the film.

JK: Kill the work. Don't let the work kill you.

JK: More personal images in here.

DW: Is this the picture?

JK: Oh, that's it. You've got it.

JF: Can you pick Jeff out? The one with the most hair.

JK: The one with the most hair, yeah!

DW: Is this you there?

JK: That's the one. That's me, yeah.

DW: So, do you remember where this is, or?

JK: That's in Suffolk. I think the war had just come again then practically, really. In the sense that the army had got through Europe and was at the gates of the Elbe – the River Elbe – or somewhere and the time that took was taken. It was all very quick then. We were breaking up that was – the camp was breaking up and we were just being photographed and you know for the camera. I didn't know anything about cameras then. I didn't take photographs or anything. I guess I was never interested much. I wish I had now, started film very early. Could have started – well, it doesn't matter. Does it?

DW: Well, they would have been hard to get hold of, do you think?

JK: I don't know. I would have had ten years of filmmaking or something like that I suppose. Before I started. But then suddenly in life things just happen don't they? You get hit by something at some time or other in life and that changes everything and that's how it was with filmmaking. When I made *Like the Time is Now* [1961] there was hardly anything behind me, nothing much behind me, it was just making this movie up as I went along. And that's how it went. Next was *Pink Auto* [1964] up to *Raydayfilm*. [1969] Then everything stopped. Everything stopped after that First International Underground Film Festival [1970] and things. Remember Jackie when we went up to that thing. Avril [Hodges] was there and people. We were photographed on railway stations on very brown, very brown repeated images.

JF: I don't remember, Jeff. But then you always said I've got black holes.

JK: You have you've got black holes in your memory, yeah. [Laughs]

JF: Neither of us has been flat out. [After that it became academic] The teaching thing, we weren't cut out for the academic scene, were we?

JK: No. Not at all.

JF: And if you don't do that as an artist. You've had it.

JK: I think so, today yes. Yeah I think there is a kind of link up of art with academic pursuits.

DW: Well, a lot of those filmmakers from the time, like Malcolm Le Grice, William Raban – they're all working [in academia].

JK: Yes.

DW: David Curtis in his own way.

JK: Yeah. Well, they belong to that era. But they belong to the era of exhibitions. And things like that. I think that [the interesting period] was all before – between 60, maybe a bit earlier perhaps. 59 or something like that. Before the exhibition at 70. Everything was rather wild, you know. A lot of people were making films – they're forgotten now the filmmakers – appeared then and got forgotten, you know. But nothing really came out until later. It was after 70 that these periods came along. People felt that they were all of a certain age or a group or something like that or worked in a certain way.

JF: Also the whole conceptual art thing – I think pushed you into the background as an old hairy.

JK: Well, the first appeared – I remember a short film by Richard Serra, the American sculpture who had some films in that show. And they were framed like that in view frame and all that kind of thing around you know. They were the first concept films. And people felt that Latin films – like Italian films – were square. Because they had surrealist influences.

DW: Oh. I see.

JK: You know, literary... literary modernism. Not cinematic modernism like Richard Serra, or someone like that. That was the breaking point, really. I don't think things have been the same since. Perhaps. I don't know.

JF: Well, it's all got so cleaned up, hasn't it? There's no blotchiness anywhere. And your films are splodgy.

JK: Splodgy? I don't know, they're not that splodgy, really.

JF: They're not some clean, sharp, concerned with the right things. Are they?

JK: No, perhaps they're not. Perhaps not.

JF: Too personal. Do you think?

JK: Maybe, yeah.

DW: So, what's this image?

JK: That's a more recent one, you see. That's gone into that book. Oh, yes. He took it to put into the book.

DW: Some of these are from Brighton – outside.

JK: They're in the town, yes. I took some [cut-out artworks] down and put them in a shop that was empty.

DW: Oh right.

JK: On the walls. Not on the walls, in the shop. And there, stuck them around, three, four years ago.

JF: Three, I think.

JK: It might have been. I took those images with a small movie camera, which was shot with film. Pushed them through, you know. It was good really.

JF: What was great about it is that it was the young kids who were interested in your work. Kids stopping on skateboards, being really enthusiastic about it.

JK: Yeah. Huh.

JF: Because they haven't yet been tamed by the right conceptions about what art's about, I think. They just responded to it in that instant gut reaction which was terrific.

JK: Anyway, it's all come to an end now. For me.

DW: For you. Altogether?

JK: Yes.

JF: Don't say that.

JK: It has Jackie.

JF: You're still drawing.

JK: Oh yes. Still drawing, of course. But filming, no. It's too much for me. I don't want to do it now. I stopped about a year ago. I don't know when I last did any filming, Jackie can you remember?

JF: No, I can't but it must have been but that *Joy Through Film* [2004?], 'cos I haven't seen.

JK: Oh, that was year's ago.

JF: That's your last film.

JK: Yeah. I've done some shooting since then but I call it my last film. Basically it was – can't remember now. I could tell if I remembered from Kevin – and Ian Helliwell. Because he shot some of the stuff at the beginning.

JF: Oh, did he? Well, he would remember when then. Because I don't remember.

JK: Where I'm getting stuff down from the shelf, and the figure in the window, and the figure comes again, and there you go. Beginning of the film.

JF: You see, we were living separately until Jeff became poorly. Then he moved in with me, but I wasn't there when you were making those.

JK: No, you weren't there when I was making that film. And I can't remember what other films I made. I made a number of films round about that time. But that was the last film and I went on and on making it. Left it there in the cupboard – not got it out until recently. I got it out just recently to look at and said: "Ah, my last film." Because it's longer than the other films. I remember I put things into it as they came up. But I was still using the rostrum camera on the table, which I haven't done for some time now.

DW: Were you still using film rather than video?

JK: Oh. I don't know. That's a point really, actually, yes. When I stopped doing video. I have stopped doing video haven't I?

JF: Well, I haven't seen you use it.

JK: She hasn't seen me using a video camera. No it's true. I haven't used a video camera for some time. I've stopped everything except drawing. Perhaps that's enough. I think about film a lot, but I don't want to do it. But when I get down to it, I don't really want to do it, somehow.

JF: Well, you've done it. Let's face it Jeff you've been making movies constantly since 1960.

JK: I don't want to take anything further. I think about it and I see things on television and I get out at certain points and something and then I think: "Oh, I don't want it anyhow." I want something to do anyway.

JK: That thing has got a lot of photographs on it, hasn't it? Photographs from an instamatic – not an instamatic – what do you call it? It's a Mickey Mouse camera.

DW: Oh, right.

JK: It takes small images. I thought: "Oh yeah, I could animate those or something."

DW: What in here?

JK: Yeah. Then I think: "Ah, no. I couldn't really. I couldn't be bothered." [referring to photo] that was from four years ago. Four years ago I took all those little images. 80th

birthday show. Yes, they're on the front of the something or other there. It doesn't really matter but...

DW: Oh, I know. The ones that are like little Polaroids.

JK: That's right. This is the film inside. I haven't used it since.

JF: The thing with Jeff is that he's always been a shy, retiring person, which might not be immediately obvious from the films. But an acquaintance of ours said – I was querying why he'd been so neglected, you know, when you see a lot of people praised for stuff. And he said: "It's not about work, it's about networking." And this is a guy that goes around all over the place, always to openings and parties and what have you. And putting himself about.

JK: It doesn't help him though, all that much really, does it?

JF: That's the impression that I get. That you need to be there talking about your work...

JK: Yes, I know what he means.

JF: To people. So, that they remember your name and all this sort of thing. But you've never done that. He just shut himself up in his flat and just got on with it.

JK: Well, I've never been invited. [Laughs].

JK: No, I've never been invited up to London until *Shoot, Shoot, Shoot* came along and then I was invited up there and I sent some stuff, and that was it really...

JK: The films came to an end. I think, they grew up and then I took time off for *Mad Love*, [1978] which was a bit of a waste of time really, and *White Dust* [1972] and then went back to short films with that – *Blatzom* [1986] And then into *Art War* [1993]. And then *Art War* became the end of it. I had a – it's down here in my box. I keep it close to my body now.

DW: [Laughs].

JK: [Laughs] A friend. [*Artwar's*] a complete show. It's a complete thing. Yes, wait a minute did I? I haven't showed it all together. I've shown the three films together and that's about it really. But not the video with the three films. That's the next stage I suppose to try to do that. That's complete in itself, you see. I don't need to see anything else than that really. I mean, *Joy Through Film*, is another final statement of course. That's it. And I don't really want to go back to it. Get rid of the book. Get rid of that book. But you're starting.

DW: I was going to ask you about *Mad Love* and *White Dust* those kind of films.

JK: They're narrative.

DW: Yeah.

- JK: Oh, they're good. [Laughs]. Oh, I don't know. They could be lost, couldn't they?
- DW: I don't know. They're very different from what was happening at the time.
- JK: Yes. I suppose they are. Well, *Mad Love* is particularly because I just went into domestic scenes and domestic jokes and things, you know, for that. It went on too long. But then I got a final version for the Tate show, which is better. It moves more quickly through it. After that was shown, I got into *Art War* and stuff like that. Life seemed easier.
- DW: How long did it take to make *Mad Love*?
- JK: Well, I went back to it a few years ago, actually. At the time of the show in the Tate Gallery it was necessary to have a new film there. That was the guy who was in charge, he said: "We'll pay for the new print." So, I looked through the new film and decided to make cuts and things like that. And took about 18 minutes out of it. And showed that. It worked much better. But not perfect. As far as I know, Lux distributes it. They never told me anything. They never told me if things go out or not. *Mad Love* has been shown but I don't know which version it is, whether it's the earlier longer version or it's the more up to date short version. But I didn't shoot any more film. I just recut it. That really was the end. I suppose.
- DW: Was it quite influenced by Breton's novel? *Mad Love*?
- JK: Andre Breton, yeah. Not really influenced by it. Just the title really. It was a surrealist film in the sense that, before I made the film I had the music for it, which is interesting. Because I went down to – I used to go every Saturday to Brighton Open Market, which took place in the street, at that time. Probably still does really. There was a whole pile of 78s there someone had left. And they were all Latin American music. Surrealist music. The only music they loved. The only music [known] to Breton that I could understand, that's the trouble. Anyway, I bought them and I thought: "I'll make a movie around these – *Mad Love*". And that came about, and the title with it. It doesn't look much like *Mad Love* I suppose but it's different from the other kinds.
- JK: No, I'm not aware of what happens in London, of course. Or anywhere really. I know things go around. And that's it. Yes, but I suppose all filmmakers are a bit like that. They send out – eventually they send their films out, and they go out, they go where ever they go.
- DW: They have a life of their own.
- JK: Yeah.
- JF: What's remarkable – obviously I'm biased in Jeff's favour, you know – I'm still excited when I see his films. And I'm just amazed that he managed to do all this stuff on his own, literally you know. And I just feel – I do feel miffed that he's been so ignored. So, sidelined. Because I think what he's done is heroic. In the tradition of the Western Man alone... He's done everything himself in very straightened circumstances. When you see his flat, you'll see what I mean. It's just remarkable that he's produced all this stuff that he has. I just got that computer because I'm just so fed up with him feeling isolated

and everything. I thought I'd get this computer and learn how to use it. I mean I've only had it two or three years but I'm still no good technically. But I wanted to put his stuff out there so that everyone could see it without the constriction of institutions. But shame on me, I've never sort of grasped the workings of how to do websites and all that sort of stuff. And at this late stage Jeff has finally got a website but it's unfortunate because it's not really truly representative of what he is. It's too static, and the person who did it had never even met Jeff and didn't discuss what he wanted. It's a pity. You'll see. It's Keenoblatz.com. And it's just static sort of pictures. Isn't it Jeff?

JK: Yeah but that's a problem with stuff that's down on computers.

JF: We were never into computers. Well, couldn't afford it for a start. I mean I don't even use this. And I can't type with two fingers. I think this is the only good page on it, to be honest.

JK: No, the trouble with those things, you get blather in between pictures. Blather, more pictures and so on. It's not like a movie. A movie comes up...to be changed... to dialogue or whatever. It's all there. It's a continuous stream. And you don't get that with computerised imagery.

JK: That's the trouble. You reach a point where you realise that life is going past – zum, zum, zum – much quicker – zumi, zumi, zumi. And you can't catch up with it. And "Oh my God. It's going fast today. Fucking hell. Can't catch up with it now." And you've got to let go. You've got to let everything go.



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