

On Screen

Films & DVDs

Free Party: A Folk History

Aaron Trinder (Director)

Trinder Films 2023, 107 mins

Aaron Trinder's entertaining account of the early 1990s UK free party scene has much the same trajectory as your typical ecstasy experience: impossibly exciting and hopeful uprush reaching a deliriously blissful peak, followed by a long, slow slide into disappointment. In this case, most of the journey takes place over a very specific two year time frame during which – just like any worthwhile drug-fuelled youth movement – a bright-eyed cohort of British youngsters genuinely thought they could change the world.

The story starts in 1990 just as the euphoric afterglow of 1987's Second Summer of Love had died out, the utopian promise of acid house dissipated by police crackdowns and opportunistic promoters spotting an easy cash cow. Not to be easily discouraged, a smattering of young idealists around the country came up with a radical solution: carry on holding illegal raves but entirely bypass any polluting commercialism by making them always free – great, hedonistic assemblies created by the people, for the people with only the promise of a good time for payment.

To a large extent *Free Party* is the story of the sound systems that spearheaded this movement – Nottingham's DiY and London's Spiral Tribe chief among them – told by the now middle-aged protagonists with a mix of excitement and resigned pragmatism. Such is their honesty, openness and enthusiasm that, by the end of the film, they feel like friends. It's hard not to admire the lengths to which they were prepared to go to keep the parties rolling.

Central to the way it unfolded was a fortuitous coming together of two very different tribes: on one hand, urban party kids, staging weekend raves in squats and abandoned warehouses; on the other, New Age Travellers. Still referred to by British media well into the 1990s as "hippy convoys", the Travellers were a remnant of the vibrant free festival scene that had limped on even after Margaret Thatcher's brutal attempt to stamp them out by unleashing police violence on them at the so-called Battle of the Beanfield in 1985. Crucially, they also represented the continuation of a much older tradition, drawing a line from agrarian socialist groups such as the Diggers and the Levellers that emphasised the basic right of the people to use common land however they see fit.

Once the two groups met – a legendarily anarchic and brilliantly evoked convocation at Glastonbury festival in 1990 – they quickly discovered a shared aim, amplified by the unifying effects of ecstasy, and the sound systems joined the convoys, using the existing

free festival circuit as the infrastructure for the growing rave scene. Some beautifully sundazed VHS footage of raves circa 1990–91 shows what an irresistibly optimistic time this was for those involved – culminating in the huge seven day event at Castlemorton Common in May 1992, attended by between 20,000 and 40,000 ravers.

Of course, they couldn't get away with it for long and the full force of a killjoy state apparatus soon came crashing down, scattering the tribes and notoriously outlawing gatherings with "repetitive beats" through the 1994 Criminal Justice Act. As Trinder suggests, the freedoms fought for in that brief window are still relevant today, with the government continuing to tighten its grip on legal protests, nomadic lifestyles and more. But, at this remove, that last, glorious, late-breaking wave of the postwar, pre-digital countercultural experiment seems like an impossible dream.

Daniel Spicer

Other Music

Puloma Basu & Rob Hatch-Miller (Directors)

Factory 25 2019, 85 mins

This love letter to New York music emporium Other Music, which lands on streaming services to coincide with retail extravaganza Record Store Day, carries extra poignancy in a post-Covid slump that has wrecked city centres across the world. The cameras started rolling in 2016, shortly after OM announced plans to close after 21 hectic years, and the documentary has the tone of the end of a relationship, with friends, colleagues and partners reminiscing about what the store meant to them. With several films dedicated to indie retailers also doing the rounds in recent months, *Other Music* feels of the moment again.

Making a serious documentary about a record shop is challenging. It has to balance the curatorial vision of that store with the harsh realities of retail survival; find a rationale for discussing one outlet in preference to others; and find a way to not be more than a eulogy for a business model of the past. *Other Music* takes the route of exploring the personal connections between the store and its customers, relationships that often went beyond musical curiosity, verging on a mutual support network. Customers say they need therapy as it closes down; shop staff express concern about finding employment in the big bad world; "What a drag," laments regular customer James Chance of The Contortions.

The picture of a record store clerk dropping wisdom on a newbie is a cliché – and *Other Music* bucked many such muso trends, notably by employing more women than most shops – but there are many moments where the staff forget the cameras are rolling and share deep knowledge. Longrunning employee (and supreme DJ) Duane Harriott casually drops tips about original versions of well-known songs, while owners Chris Vanderloo and Josh Madell stand at customers' shoulders and guide them in fatherly fashion through the racks.

One way the shop tried to innovate was through record dividers that shook up familiar categories, including ambiguous zones such as In (songs, intimacy) and Out (noise, alienation). A category of Then was used for older music, letting the store reappraise discs such as Vashti Bunyan's *Just Another Diamond Day* or Os Mutantes's debut album. As well as challenging the canons of music history, it had the handy side effect of coining new cult items to sell.

Other Music's reputation was also bolstered by in-store performances in the

Still from Aaron Trinder's *Free Party: A Folk History* (2023)



heart of Manhattan, and a regular email newsletter which offered creative connections rather than just a consumer guide, just like World Of Echo, Boomkat or Soundohm today. The irony is, that in pushing OM's uniqueness, the documentary matches the mood and message of two recent docs celebrating cult stores, Kenneth Thomas's *It Came From Aquarius Records* (Reviewed by Jason Gross in *The Wire* 462), and Ashley Sabin and David Redmon's *Kim's Video* – the latter where Other Music's founders learned the ropes of retail.

The film's personal focus – it movingly discusses how little money Vanderloo and Madell were making towards the end – sometimes distracts from structural factors. The boom years of Other Music, when it played a part in the indie boom of the early 2000s, were also the zenith of CD sales, and profits inevitably tailed off as digital replaced physical, and vinyl profit margins became ever thinner. OM's stylish download shop, introduced in 2007, never quite hit its stride.

Despite these shortcomings, the final chapter of the film is gripping cinema. Basu and Hatch-Miller keep the cameras rolling as the store is disassembled piece by piece, right down to the bubble wrap attached to a low beam to protect heads, and the record racks casually smashed apart by a sledgehammer. The staff share a moment where they reflect on what they built together. The poignant question left hanging by *Other Music* is whether there are still spaces in the city where these real world encounters can happen.

Derek Walmsley

Soundtrack To A Coup D'Etat

Johan Grimonprez (Director)

Warboys Films/Onamatopee Films 2024, 150 mins

"The United States had plunged in everywhere, dollars in the vanguard, with

[Louis] Armstrong as herald" is the way Frantz Fanon, the great anticolonial militant, described the 'jazz ambassadors', a US State Department-run programme of concerts across Asia, Africa and the Soviet bloc running from the mid-1950s to the mid-70s. A rollcall of greats joined the diplomatic roster. Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Dave Brubeck, Nina Simone and Duke Ellington signed on in the late 1950s and 60s; Thelonious Monk, Art Blakey and others in the early 70s.

Inaugurated with Gillespie's tour of the Middle East in 1956, the coincidence of the programme's founding with the Brown versus Board of Education Supreme Court decision to outlaw segregation in public schools on the domestic front, and the Bandung conference of Asian and African states internationally, was not accidental. The US government wanted to deploy Black music abroad to gloss images of racism back home while drawing closer ties with an emerging post-colonial world.

The programme churned with tensions throughout its existence. Artists weren't always apprised of US operations in the countries they visited. The diplomatic staging of racial harmony sat uneasily alongside ongoing struggles for civil rights. Formal undertakings to woo officials got in the way of attempts to meet local musicians. Black countercultures didn't easily resonate with the new imperialism.

The strains were especially charged around Armstrong's 27 city tour of Africa in 1960–61. It began smoothly enough with a concert in Accra, Ghana (posters announcing "Pepsi brings you Satchmo" blitzed the city). But just as Armstrong moved into Leopoldville that autumn, Patrice Lumumba, recently elected as the first Prime Minister of the Republic of the Congo, was arrested and tortured by a US-supported faction of the army.

A few months later, with Armstrong still in Africa, Lumumba was assassinated.

While it's unclear if the State Department had knowledge of the operation to eliminate Lumumba, Armstrong certainly did not, though his deflection of political questions in the aftermath didn't help his case. There was the denunciation by Fanon as well as Soviet claims of a Trojan Horse sent to pacify the Congolese.

This grisly intersection of jazz and imperialism in the region is the subject of *Soundtrack To A Coup D'Etat*. Though the film doesn't exactly tell this story, strictly speaking, since it mostly eschews narration and proceeds mainly by allusions and citations. It moves through a whole spinning wheel of footage, most of it archival, as it carefully pieces together the events around Armstrong's tour and Lumumba's death. Nikita Krushchev famously bangs his shoe on a UN lectern to condemn colonialism; Armstrong charms a crowd of 100,000 in Ghana; Miriam Makeba testifies against the crimes of apartheid. Most affecting of all, though, is the image of a stoic Lumumba as he's arrested, bound, and manhandled into the back of a truck by opposition soldiers.

These events are carried along in the film by performances by the jazz ambassadors themselves: Dizzy, Duke and Armstrong most of all, though younger artists are included too. Eric Dolphy, John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman all feature. So do Congolese musicians, OK Jazz, Adou Elenga and Rock-A-Mambo, among others. At one point, we hear Ellington describe playing the piano as dreaming. It's an idea that underscores what the film implies: that jazz could oppose the profanity of geopolitics even when it was being put to the most nefarious ends.

Paul Rekrret

Still from *Other Music* (2019)

