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Howard Finster's art and the film *I Can Feel Another Planet in My Soul: An Interview with Filmmaker, Visual Artist, and Collector Steven Pattie*

Dan Godston, The Experimental Arts Examiner (Chicago)

Steven Pattie, Executive Producer and Program Creator of the film *I Can Feel Another Planet in My Soul: Strange Visions. Wondrous Art. The Remarkable World of Howard Finster*, will be part of an event that happens on Monday, August 30 at the Chicago Cultural Center. That event will include a screening of *I Can Feel Another Planet in My Soul* and a panel discussion with Steven Pattie, collector Jim Arient, and writer Monica Westin, moderated by Lanny Silverman, Curator of Exhibitions for the Chicago Cultural Center.

Based in the San Francisco Bay Area, Steven Pattie is currently in Chicago to present what he's calling a museum cut of his film in production which is being planned for theatrical release. David Fetcho and Susan English Fetcho are the co-directors and producers of the film. In production for about 8 years, it is a documentary about the artist. Much of the story is driven by Finster's historic last recorded interview that Steven and his team did, filmed over two days just three months before his death at his home in Summerville, Georgia. Finster referred to this as "my last message to the world." Susan English Fetcho, David Fetcho, and Steven Pattie have produced and acquired hours of archival film, video and audio recordings of Finster. It will feature many of the artist's masterworks ever to appear on film, some of those artworks currently on display at the Chicago Cultural Center.

Steven Pattie is a Vice President with Russ Reid, a marketing and communications firm specializing in direct response marketing, television, and government relations on behalf of nonprofit organizations. He is active as a visual artist, and an occasional writer on matters related to the arts, culture and religion. He is also a collector in the field of self-taught art, and he and his

family have assembled a large collection of works from a variety of artists across the country, but particularly from the South.

Recently I spoke with Steven about his artistic influences, the making of this film, and his other projects.



Steven Pattie, at the entrance to the Chicago Cultural Center where his film is featured this weekend alongside a major international retrospective of the work of Howard Finster

DG: *How did you first get interested in the arts?*

SP: I have always been engaged in the arts to one degree or another. Growing up, my earliest interests were music, my focus then the clarinet and the tenor sax. Winning awards, competing in contests, and performing, I was good enough to earn a partial music scholarship for college. I kept at the music a little, but by the time I was about 18 had generally moved on from music to studying American and English literature, with a special interest in California-based writers and the Beats, to name a few areas of particular interest. After a few years of graduate study in theology, I eventually settled into being active in a variety of organizations related to the arts, education, social services, and in recent years working for Russ Reid on behalf of nonprofit organizations.

I have always maintained some level of involvement in the arts, my focus primarily painting and some occasional writing, poetry and articles mostly. I like moving around between the arts, and even now am getting back into music some. One collection of my poetry, *For Fathers of Sons*, was widely distributed and garnered praise from poets/writers I know and respect, like Lawrence Ferlinghetti. On the visual arts front, I have been represented in a variety of galleries and exhibitions over the years. The works that have frankly garnered the most attention and praise have often been the gritty urban street scenes I like to create, my work sometimes referenced by some as reminding them of the Ash Can School of American Realism. The age, discoloration, and weathering of these city "still lives" stand as mute but vibrant testimonies to the different peoples and their livelihoods that have inhabited them for generations and have always remained an object of fascination for me. I am getting back into doing more of these now. But my focus now is finishing this movie.

DG: *What do you think about this exhibit "Stranger in Paradise"?*

SP: Chicago is very fortunate to have this exhibit here, and I am grateful for the invitation to be part of the event. Many of us consider Finster to be among the most important self-taught artists of the last several years. This particular exhibit features major works from several of the best private collections in the country, featuring especially works from the collections of Thomas and Tommye Scanlin, Jim and Beth Arient, and John Denton.



Steven Pattie, at the entrance to the current exhibit at the Cultural Arts Center in Chicago

And it is also appropriate Finster is “back” in Chicago where early on he was introduced to the local art scene, and where was discovered an immediate appreciation for Finster and his work. Astonishingly, while having no exposure to modern art, it could be argued that Howard Finster was years ahead of the contemporary art scene. Galleries and collectors in especially Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, were quick to recognize that. That is why major artists/photographers/writers like Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Todd Oldham, Christopher Makos, Allen Ginsberg and others recognized in Finster that he was real deal, or in Haring’s words, who went to Paradise Garden to spend time with him three months before he died of AIDS, one of the “great ones.”

Beginning in the late 70’s when he’d received a vision to paint “sacred art” this brilliant backwoods preacher’s rise to the top in contemporary art was in remarkable concert with a burgeoning art market that was dominated by an intense and energetic wave of art-making broadly defined as neo-expressionism. Largely a reaction against conceptual and minimalistic art of the 1970s, by the end of the decade artists began challenging the primacy of traditional forms such as painting, drawing, and sculpture. In music, theatre, film, and among writers, these same intentions found similar expression. By the 1980’s a new anti-aesthetic became the dominant style of what quickly became a thriving alternative art community made up creative iconoclasts outside the gallery and museum culture. Finster’s self-described “bad, nasty art” was a perfect fit.

DG: *How did you get involved with this film about Howard Finster?*

SP: It was the keen recognition of the need for this story to be told on film that in 2001 ignited a collaborative partnership between me as Executive Producer and Program Creator and David Fetcho and Susan English Fetcho who together are Co-Directors and Producers of this important project. I had begun a close association with Howard Finster and his family in 1993. Active in the visual arts at the time, doing a lot of shows and following the scene, I was very interested in particularly so-called outsider, or the term I prefer, self-taught art, and while I got to know a lot of artists over the years and collect their works, I was particularly focused on Howard Finster.



Co-Directors David and Susan Fetcho, Steven Pattie, at another recent exhibit of Howard Finster's work in the San Francisco Bay Area.

I subsequently formed relationships with key people -- leading contemporary artists, museum and gallery directors, writers, critics, and others -- within the orbit of Finster's extraordinary story and building on this the film began to come together. My knowledge of and enthusiasm for Howard Finster found a ready match in the talents of filmmakers David Fetcho and Susan English Fetcho. The Fetchos' many years of experience as artists, arts theorists and educators make them uniquely suited to understand the motivations and meanings of an artist like Howard Finster. That, plus their work as live inter-media performance directors in the decades prior to becoming filmmakers has given them a unique vision for creating films of beauty, depth, and narrative intrigue -- the qualities required to tell the story of this.

Based on my relationship with Howard and with the family, I and the Fetchos and two others, Randy White and Nathan Pattie, came out from California and spent a couple days with Finster recording what would be his last known recorded interview. After he died, we began building a film off that footage -- and we're still at it.



Steven Pattie, his back against the Chicago River

All combined, this treasure trove yields a rich and wildly entertaining narration of strange insights, wit-filled monologues, and prophetic reflections on the wonder and crises of this world. Among many others, helping to unravel the mystery are well-known artists and celebrity personalities that have been enthusiastic in their support of us making the film including fashion designer/photographer Todd Oldham, country-western star Marty Stuart, artist/composer Mark Kostabi, photographers Christopher Makos and Mary Ellen Mark, and Mike Mills of R.E.M. Leading scholars, curators and museum directors from major institutions across America and Great Britain contribute important insights into the man both as artist and visionary. Within Finster's more intimate orbit his friends, wife, daughters and grandson also share their thoughts and feelings about the man they loved. The film, which Chicago will see a glimpse of on Monday evening, offers a multi-faceted portrait of Howard Finster that entices the viewer ever deeper into the eccentric and complex reality of the man and his art.

DG: *What are some things that you like about working in film?*

SP: There is also the collaborative element of movie-making – it is as good as the people you have involved in the making of it. And fortunately for me as Executive Producer, I have the support and involvement of so many important people and institutions across the country who are committed to seeing the film made. Working in film brings all the arts together. As someone who appreciates music, visual art, writing, and performance art, in film the telling of the story is supported by all these elements.

DG: *What are some things that you find particularly intriguing about his work and his life?*

SP: I was initially attracted by the exuberance of his work, the passion he brought to his art, and to his life as a whole. He created more than 47,000 works of art over a 26-year period—the largest known body of original art ever created by a single person. His life, like his art and writing, was relentlessly innovative, full of humor and portent, transcending every caricature of a rural fundamentalist preacher.

Wildly autobiographical and audaciously preoccupied with respect to personal, transcendent, and cultural issues, Finster pointed a way to true originality as an artist and an individuality of expression that artists seek but rarely find. It is Jean Dubuffet who says “the characteristic property of inventive art is that it bears no resemblance to art as it is generally recognized and in consequence that it does not seem like art at all.” It is not the inventive faculty that is so uncommon among creative people but the “daring to give it free reign.” He was uncompromising and unfiltered in his art, full with passion and conviction. There is an impoliteness and outrageousness about his work that confronts the viewer and demands a response.

Howard Finster is to contemporary American folk art what Elvis Presley is to the evolution of rock and roll. Here is the story of a true American maverick, a man who beginning in his late 50’s began a meteoric rise to unprecedented heights within both the established art world and popular culture. David Fetcho, Susan English Fetcho, and I have the privilege of being able to tell that story on film.

I Can Feel Another Planet In My Soul is the story of one man who lives out what so many of us only dream about – a wildly creative life, unfettered by convention and dedicated wholly to what he loved. It is therefore a story about all of us in our pursuit of happiness and meaning.

DG: *What’s your next step with this film?*

SP: My main focus in these next several months is to secure the financing required so we can get this made and distributed. Preliminary screenings of work-in-progress cuts of the film have garnered high praise from both arts aficionados familiar with Howard Finster and people introduced to him for the first time. This consistently positive response and support from all sources gives us confidence in the successful marketability of this film.

For the right investor(s), this is a major opportunity to jump into the making of film that with finishing funds secured can be completed relatively soon. Anyone with a passion for the subject

and an appreciation for its commercial viability, I would welcome talking to more about it. I can be contacted by email at stevenpattie@hotmail.com.

The event on Monday, August 30 (6 p.m.) includes a screening of the film "I Can Feel Another Planet in My Soul: Strange Visions. Wondrous Art. The Remarkable World of Howard Finster" and a panel discussion. This event is part of the exhibit "Stranger in Paradise: The Works of Reverend Howard Finster," in the Exhibition Hall at the Chicago Cultural Center till September 26.

Dan Godston teaches and lives in Chicago. His writings have appeared in Chase Park, After Hours, BlazeVOX, Versal, Beard of Bees, Horse Less Review, Moria, Apparatus Magazine, EOAGH, Requited Journal, Sentinel Poetry, and other print publications and online journals. Dan Godston is also known as the man behind "Experimental Arts Examiner", a series of articles chronicling contemporary artists that work in experimental practices.

The Experimental Arts Examiner features spotlights by Dan, on various artists who are active and alive inside of important arts dialogues. He has written about a variety of people, such as Spencer Hutchinson, David Cohen, Glen Weyant, Chris Carlsson, and Krista Franklin, among others.