

Riffing on Bird and Other Sad Songs



Lisa Janssen

Riffing on Bird and Other Sad Songs

Poems by Lisa Janssen



Copyright 2007 by Lisa Janssen

Cover designed and hand printed by Pamela Olson

Riffing on Bird, Unsung

Born: September 26, 1953

Somewhere, we think, on the East Coast
somewhere on the East
Coast, out East. No one says for sure.

First seen

or discovered as said history designates, was 1970

on the East Coast.

Film director Monte Hellman and [sensational] casting director Fred Roos
audition dozens of girls for the part of “The Girl” in Two-Lane Blacktop.

One might note how many unsung were in this film, like Rudolph Wurlitzer.
Rudy unsung
for decades now. It’s said he doesn’t like to work. A Slow Fade.

“In New York we met Laurie Bird, and she seemed like a prototype for the kind
of character we had in mind . . .

[a young female hitchhiker, nameless]

. . . it never occurred to us to that she could play the part . . .

she was, ‘a teenager with a strange history that

fit her role as a . . .’

[drifting hitchhiker]

we spent several hours recording an interview with her which we used
in the creation of the part . .

[of “The Girl,” nameless]

later we couldn’t find anyone to play the part.”

According to production notes she was:

“asked to fly to Little Rock, Ark., this time as a candidate for the role.

A screen test was arranged in Hollywood after she was rehearsed by Hellman and his wife. . .

A few days later she was signed to the picture."

Principle photography commenced on August 13, 1970.

Rolling Stone visits the set in October, 1970 and finds:

a 17-year-old high school graduate they pick up somewhere in Arizona.

JT finishes shaving, and sings a line or two from "Mean Mr. Mustard" to the desert.

Laurie, who looks like she has just gotten out of the hospital for some undiagnosed high fever (she has), picks up the song. She sings softly, privately,
really to herself. "You know,

this is just how I imagined this movie would be. All I knew about it before I read the script was that it was about some people who drive cross-country, and sometimes their car breaks down and they fix it.

And that's just what's happening."

. . . she mutters something, and the sound man complains, 'That's too soft Monte, I'm not getting it.' 'All she said was that she wanted some orange juice,' says JT.

'I know the lines. . . The first line is I wish we were back in Santa Fe. The second line is, San Francisco is groovy.'

She has been keeping a diary-a mixed media collage with annotations in different colored inks and she lets us read some of it:

'Beginning of her story . . . although she has been on her own for two years and she hasn't any plans of what to do. Now that she has broached this odd predicament, she has to find an answer right away . . . to bring herself into Summer happily!'

The conversation drifts predictably to the problems attendant on being a superstar. 'I'll have my day' 85 percent kidding. She smiles a private smile. . .

The last line is 'No good.'

Film is released in 1971

1972, Montana: she writes dialog for a character in the film *Dream of Passion*.
She was

not cast in the film.

The film was never completed. . .

1974 in Los Angeles she lives with Monte Hellman on Sunset Plaza.

They live next door to some porno mafia gangsters ala Cassevetes. She
acts in the *Cockfighter*, screenwriter Charles Willeford will say,

“Monte has a personal theory about being the director of
repertoire films. He has used Warren Oates, Harry Dean Stanton,
Pat Percy,

Laurie Bird, and Millie Perkins in his other films

I could see why he wanted to use Laurie Bird for Dody White they live
together and her salary stays in the family, so to speak), but now there
are three tall, skinny women playing the only three major female roles
in the film.”

Later Monte Hellman will marry a . . .

In July 1975 the Bird meets Art Garfunkel

She makes the cover photo on his LP *Breakaway* along with the fast
talking hitchhiker (Helena Kallianiotis) from *Five Easy Pieces*.

It's worth noting that screenplays for *Five Easy Pieces*,

The Shooting, and

Ride the Whirlwind were written by

Carole Eastman,

another unsung bird.

1977 she plays Paul Simon's girlfriend in Annie Hall.

Paul Simon plays record producer Tony Lacey, a LA music biz type.
The Bird wears all white and walks slowly towering above him.

. . . in 1978 AG and Laurie move from the West Coast back to New York.

*March 1979, AG spends the next four months shooting on location in Vienna and
London for Bad Timing.*

... filming was to take place in New York in June. On June 15th she commits suicide in his penthouse apartment overlooking Central Park.

“She left a note indicating that she was depressed.”

Willeford writes that she:

“leaped out of a window and killed herself in New York. She was with a famous pop singer when she defenestrated herself, and he was quite upset by her suicide.”

Hellman counters:

Although the overdose of valium was not accidental, Laurie expected Art Garfunkel to arrive momentarily and save her, and therefore didn't intend to die”

... [too] curiously echoing Theresa Russell's OD in *Bad Timing*. As does the photograph on AG's LP *Scissors Cut*.

And doesn't explain the note, or how

she could not bring herself into Summer happily.

Jenny checks out

In one picture near the end you are on a beach in Malibu, wrapped in a blanket and sky light blue with him. The eyes are over. The wind blows your hair frozen in dead beach silence. Was this a good day?

Back home in North Hollywood the light grows dim, the door shuts. The eyes close for good. The sun beats down and bleaches white all the bones of true romance. They are bones now. You can still live in them if you want.

At the end a note on the door says,

Says to let you sleep.

The photographs are of a young woman

often nude,

often wearing the kinds of vintage clothes or intimate garments that her friends say she wore

Born in Denver, Colorado April 3, 1958

Grew up in Boulder under her father's heavy academic scene / hand

her mother's absent hand

Golden Colorado hair in the sun sits like a man with long hands

face hides in self portrait at thirteen when you are seventeen

defying 1972 and pulls the rope through

In Providence the old curtains flap in the wind and turn into your dresseswhite socks

knee high socks and black shoes buckled over socks

wallpaper peels your thumb in your mouth hair on a shelf tucked under a window in the sun and sun escaping into a crack in the floor but not before the shutter snaps shut

In this one you look into the camera it was this one that one day a man came to me and said, she reminds me of you

Hands move the air fingertips and dresses blur one on top of the other white leg on velvet chair on dirty floor covered

always seems a breeze comes but there is no breeze

Black socks horizontale disappearing dress

white dress

flowered dress

see through dress

see you through dress

dear turned-in feet

Photographs to take:

woman with clothespins

two women with cutout paper baby

shoes full of powder to pour

women as housewives

becoming the wall under the wallpaper

Camera out to full frame, I raise my hands which I have carefully sewn together

Last morning

a house in the shape of a house.

a street in the shape of a street.

a hand in the shape of a hand.

pairs of skinny arms hang in the dark.

not like the hand which fades against a sidewalk

to a color that is the color of a sidewalk.

no more the color of a hand.

a window in the shape of a window.

a breeze has no shape of a breeze.

it just blows.

blows on a morning.

someone's last morning.

someone who wished they were the shape of a breeze.

Lisa Janssen is a poet and archivist living in Chicago. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Blonds Have More Fun* and *Not too High on the Horse*, both from Backyard Press. Her work has appeared in such journals as *WSQ – Women’s Studies Quarterly*, *Make*, *Colorado North Review*, and *Bombay Gin*. She is a graduate of the Naropa Institute (now Naropa University) writing program and currently co-edits the literary journal *MoonLit*.