

Randolph Jordan

“Oh What a Beautiful City”: Performing Transitional Vancouver in the CBUT’s *City Song*

The wind, the wind, the wind blows high. Rain comes dashing from the sky. For her lover she must die, for the want of the Golden City. – “Wind the Wind”



City Song, directed by Jim Carney for CBC Vancouver’s CBUT film unit in 1961,¹ opens on a leisurely traveling shot through the old-growth forest of Stanley Park. The camera is tilted up towards the canopy as it pushes gently forward, carefully concealing the road that makes such a view possible. An ethereal voice sings of the wind and rain, but only the sun is visible peeking through the stands of evergreen, a promenade of natural monuments in this variation on the City Beautiful. Eventually a young girl (Kirstine Murdoch) of 6 or 7 years is revealed sitting in a pool of sunlight amidst the trees. A more contrived situation is scarcely imaginable. Without pretense towards objectivity, the film positions her as guide through the transition to Vancouver’s urbanity as she walks through a well-tended West End park, along the seawall of English Bay and onto the streets of downtown. Here her association with the innocence of nature will die as it is contrasted with the grit, ills, and disillusionment produced by this city on the edge of the wilderness.

1. Film elements and video copies of *City Song* are held in the CBC Vancouver Media Archives (Film Can #CBUT9165).

The opening credits promise narration spoken by Art Hives and Wally Marsh, songs performed by Kell Winzey and Joanne Thomas, and sound recorded by Bill Terry in The Inquisition Coffee House. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that these voices, recorded in this single location, will provide the vast majority of the film’s soundtrack as its wandering camera moves through a variety of different visual settings that reveal the diversity and tensions of early 1960s Vancouver. These settings are inflected not only by John Seale’s exploratory cinematography and the deft cutting of Arla Saare, but also by Barry Hale’s prose along with a variety of traditional folk lyrics emanating from The Inquisition, then at 126 Seymour St., just off of Granville Street’s theatre row, heart of the city’s entertainment district. The Inquisition was a critical node in the network of countercultural spaces that were rethinking Vancouver at the dawn of the massive shifts in urban planning that would, a decade later, begin to shape the city according to the principles of “Vancouverism” that eventually brought the city to the world stage. As such, the coffee house provides a potent sound environment that the film extends out onto the streets of downtown and the wilderness setting that lies beyond.

In this essay I argue that *City Song* enacts a performance of Vancouver that reveals as much about a city in the process of conscious redefinition as it does about the politics of representation in documentary film soundtracks, exposing key ideological overlaps between the making of cities and their cinematic representations. The film stages the city through a set of eight sequences, each roughly delimited by the performance of a particular song, and each offering its own distinct vantage point on the city with attendant shifts in rhetorical tone and aesthetic treatment. The songs cover a range of styles common within the folk repertoire of the day, and beat-style narration offers points of transition between locations. The Inquisition Coffee House is the hub of the film wherein several songs presented in synchronized performance reveal the source of the music we hear throughout the rest of the scenes. The issues facing the city are thus articulated and interrogated by way of musical performance, making *City Song* a striking (and

strikingly early) exploration of what Stella Bruzzi refers to as the “performative” mode in documentary filmmaking (186). As I will demonstrate, *City Song*’s “performativity” is both troubled and enhanced by the way it intersects with issues specific to the music documentary (of which it is also a relatively early example). I argue that this intersection is best understood as a process of the city’s self-representation that I will refer to as “staging” following recent work by Karin Bijsterveld (2013). This staging is only accessible by way of attention to the soundtrack, both in terms of the obvious thematic content of the lyrics and the loaded location in which they are sung and from which they carry over the rest of the film. Ultimately, the overt staging in *City Song* explores the potential for a film to engage actively in the re-imagining of a city, making it a model case study for how works of art can be used for serious soundscape research into urban actualities of the past.

Performing Music as Documentary Practice

City Song makes self-conscious use of musical performance to shape impressions, and expose the tensions, of early 1960s Vancouver. This performance of the city sits at the intersection of two recently theorized documentary forms, the “performative” mode and the “music documentary” genre, an intersection that necessitates addressing issues of performance by way of attention to sonic representation. Stella Bruzzi defines the “performative” documentary as any non-fiction film that uses performance, “whether built around the intrusive presence of the filmmaker or self-conscious performances by its subjects,” to enact “the notion that a documentary only comes into being as it is performed” (186). Bruzzi’s formulation considers how “real” people perform their lives when in front of the camera, and addresses the ways in which filmmakers bring the worlds they document into existence through the act of making their films. Yet this way of recognizing the performative quality of documentary filmmaking is troubled by the tradition – as old as the cinema itself – of filming subjects like theatre actors or musicians who engage in acts conventionally understood as performance but without a reflexive bent.

Michael Chanan frames the issue like this: when filmed musicians are already performing for an audience, “the camera can adopt the same role as any other listener” (341). Performance in a case like this is less likely to serve as the distancing device that premises Bruzzi’s formulation of the “performative” mode. Michael Brendan Baker raises a similar issue when theorizing the role of documentary film music more generally. Defusing the staple critique of music in documentary as marker of biased editorial comment, Baker points out that if the subject of the documentary is musical performance, then “the soundtrack is internally motivated and thus preemptively rationalized for the view-

er” (234). So a film about performing musicians is prone to deflect attention away from the act of “performing” the film itself, while also reducing the music’s potential to be heard as performative editorial commentary.

Yet, as Baker rightly notes, “to have people perform for machines fundamentally changes the process of representation and the event’s subsequent reproduction” (246), necessarily binding filmmaker and subject together in the performative act of filmmaking. This harkens back to Jonathan Sterne’s essential argument about sound reproduction in general: that sonic events are always transformed during the act of recording, not only by the recording itself but also in its staging for the recording process (290). Here there is no room for an a priori performance act to be documented without affecting the act itself, a discursive position increasingly popular with documentary filmmakers and theorists alike.

Documentaries live at the intersection of faith in the ability of recording technologies to provide a window onto the world as it exists outside of networks of representation, and knowledge that the filmmaking process always intervenes in the events being documented. As I will demonstrate, *City Song* gears its approach to musical performance to expose this intersection as a site of production, and the site being produced is the city itself. The film’s musical el-

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ements – in terms of both the formal treatment of performance and the lyrical content of the songs – are born from the city while also commenting upon it. The film’s journey through the varied spaces of Vancouver is cleverly deployed along a formal arc that gradually shifts its mode of performativity from “documentary with music” to “music documentary” before ultimately conflating the two so that it can move beyond both. As such the music of *City Song* calls attention to the ways in which the city itself is performed for its citizens by way of media technologies, and invites us to consider how it might be performed differently in the future.



Structuring Vancouver through Song

The city's urban spaces are first introduced through the well-known spiritual "Oh What a Beautiful City". From there Thomas and Winzey take up "All My Trials" to sing about the perils of growing old in the city as the camera follows the young girl downtown to contrast her youth with shots of the elderly and homeless, ignored by the bustle of busy downtown shoppers. From here the film slips into a vibrant traveling montage that splits trips across the Burrard and Granville bridges into a fractured and disorienting space as narration steps in to muse about the uncertainties of urban existence: "Just a step and you pass from sure things over to only maybe." Then, with the onset of dusk comes a thrust into the neon jungle of Granville Street in the heyday of the city's famous lighted signage as a rousing rendition of the classic "Sinnerman" carries over the transition to the downtown streets at night. Here the film settles into a roving camera sequence in line with the burgeoning tradition of direct cinema, capturing a variety of street scenes through hand-held shots taken from the window of a passing car, without the overtly stylized framing and editing that has characterized the film up to this point.

Until now, the music and prose have provided poetic commentary on the images of the city while keeping their source under wraps. This situation changes dramatically as the film moves into *The Inquisition* to meet the musicians we have been hearing, and "Oh What a Beautiful City" returns as our narrator makes a request: "So sing me a city song. Sing about me and the place with its mess of illusions." And with this reflexive attention to the role of song in shaping the city, the mode suddenly shifts into a veritable music video as Winzey, now visible with his band, soars into lyrics about the ills of the income gap that cities exacerbate.

The audiovisual synchronization is tight as the musicians become the camera's subject, but the images are clearly captured separately from the sound: no audio equipment is visible, and the camera returns to a heavily stylized approach, shooting from oblique angles in various degrees of close-up that would obfuscate views from a live audi-

ence and would require multiple takes for each song. Yet the post-synchronization is effective enough to establish the mood of this sequence as a live performance, grounding the source of the film's music within a specific location positioned as the heart of the city.

After a foray out onto the rain-soaked streets of late night Gastown the film catches up with the little girl waking to a sunlit morning in her comfortable bedroom. Offscreen music returns with strains of "Tell Old Bill" as the girl heads out onto the peaceful and deserted beach of Spanish Banks where she discovers an apparently lifeless old man draped in newspapers, and the lyrics of the music confirm his fate: "Old Sal was baking bread when she found out her Bill was dead." The presentation of the music has returned to the mode of the film's first half. Yet the self-conscious performativity of the coffee house sequences, along with their grounding in a specific location, now carries forward into the world outside to charge the space with the tensions of the film's shifting subject positioning. Here the film takes another dramatic turn as the girl puts on the man's glasses prompting a sudden shift into a proto-psychedelic montage of views onto the ocean, mountains and seagulls superimposed with a series of urban images that revisit the rest of the film's locations now compressed into a few seconds. A micro-narrative emerges, positioning the dead man as a by-product of the urban blight that sits next to this stunning wilderness, set to the sounds of screeching gulls and rushing water, the only soundtrack material presented from a source other than *The Inquisition*.

Finally, the film returns to *The Inquisition* for one last performance: Winzey laments the "900 Miles" that separate him from his home, followed by the narrator musing about getting out of town once and for all - halted only as he realizes how embedded he has become across the city's diverse spaces: "So then I just sit and think about all those parts of me hummin' away in all those places all over town," putting off his exodus for yet another day. And "Oh What a Beautiful City" is reprised once again as the final montage of downtown's waterfront industrial area reveals the city's urbanity in the fresh light of morning's contemplation.

Vancouver in Transition

The Inquisition Coffee House is a significant location from which to present most of the film's soundtrack, representative of the kinds of alternative spaces that would challenge the status quo (see Davis 311) and play a role in shaping the physical and social environments just outside their doors. With its strategy of shifting modes of musical treatment through the space of the coffee house, *City Song* uses film form to engage with the multiple overlapping spaces, both geographical and ideological, that characterize key urban issues of the day. These issues coalesce within the paradox of the city's attempts at urbanity in such a wild setting. As Lance Berelowitz puts it, "the city's growth is founded on the [...] destruction of the very things that attract people in the first place" (25), an "apparently happy coexistence with its natural environment [that] is far more ambiguous than it would have the world (or itself) believe..." (37). *City Song* is eager to lay this contradiction bare in an era that finds Vancouver actively and publicly questioning its brand both at home and abroad.



The issue of municipal rebranding crystallized within the case of Vancouver's famous neon signage, well on display in *City Song*'s "Sinnerman" sequence and squarely brought into confrontation with the city's natural setting in the beach sequence later on. By the 1950s, Vancouver boasted an unparalleled density of neon that served as "the source of the city's urban identity" and "helped demarcate the boundary between the constructed city and the wilderness beyond" (Noble and Fujita 6). But a new consciousness was developing that would eventually engender the tagline "Spectacular by Nature," and neon came to be seen as "obfuscating the backdrop of nature that was now considered to be an important aspect of the city's urban identity" (6). Dealing with such "blight" would drive urban renewal projects like the 1974 bylaw that curtailed the use of neon, an early volley in a major quarter-century plan to reshape the city in ways that continue to influence new local initiatives while being studied and emulated the world over (see Punter 15-111).

Importantly, the transitional years leading up to major urban reforms found the CBC setting up its first Vancouver affiliate station, CBUT, with the express mandate of speaking in a regional dialect to its local audience. Their films would pose questions about what concept of the city its citizens should have, while challenging the dominant images and sounds purveyed through government sponsored tourist propaganda, generally the only window onto the west coast that many in the rest of Canada had at the time. And Canadians to the east would take notice, as films like *City Song* earned these Vancouver filmmakers a reputation as forging a distinct "West Coast School" (see Newman 2013). It is no surprise that a defining theme occupying this regionally inflected filmmaking would be the relationship between urbanism and the wilderness. In *City Song*, this theme is deliberately staged as a performance of the city through the countercultural music of the day, calling attention to both the performance itself and the act of performing as a way of inviting its television audience to engage actively in shaping their city.

The City Staged

The film's most brilliant move is to use The Inquisition as both studio and location simultaneously. As a makeshift studio the coffee house allows the highly constructed reflexivity of the centrepiece musical sequences that frame the city as a performance. This performative quality is ramped up when considered through The Inquisition's status as an ideologically loaded venue and tied to issues of location sound recording as marker of authentic engagement with place – a situation not usually associated with a closed set. One of the defining conundrums of the documentary genre resides in the issue of capturing direct sound to match location shooting, a key point in debates about how documentary should distinguish itself sonically from its fiction film counterparts (Ruoff 27-9). In the early 1960s it would still be a few years before synchronizing sound to the camera on location became standard practice, particularly in the technologically impoverished circumstances of the CBUT film unit (Browne 106). Thus the separate recording of sound and image in *City Song* was, by one measure, a necessity rather than an aesthetic choice. Yet the simultaneity of location-based authenticity and studio fabrication is an essential component governing the way that *City Song* performs its subject matter, offering a compelling example of how today's audience can access rich details of a time long past by navigating the film's staging of the Vancouver soundscape.

As Karin Bijsterveld argues, any appeal to sound recordings as documents of geographical specificity must account for how these soundscapes are "staged," regardless of where they sit on the spectrum between documentary and fiction (14-8). This approach considers the cultural and historical contexts of production, along with the technical and

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conventional norms that govern particular forms of media, in order to assess why any given location is represented the way it is in a particular media item. *City Song* does not offer the same kind of documentary evidence of Vancouver's soundscape associated with field recordings such as those made by the World Soundscape Project at Simon Fraser University (see World Soundscape Project 1973). Yet Bijsterveld's approach troubles the notion that location sound or field recording necessarily provides stronger connections to place than something contrived off site, stressing the need to recognize that all sound recordings are staged for specific reasons and in particular contexts – factors that are, by their own right, highly informative about the specific locales being represented.

City Song wants to have it both ways, emphasizing the authenticity associated with location recordings while using those recordings to reframe a variety of other locales presented on screen. The key to understanding how *City Song* stages the Vancouver soundscape lies in how the film reveals the source of its music as a function of strategies for audiovisual synchronization. *City Song* makes productive use of its necessity for asynchronous recording by structuring the music that dominates the film to drift in and out of synchronization along with the image track's movements in and out of *The Inquisition*. The asynchronous voices are eventually synchronized as they are located within the city's geography, so their commentary upon the image is made to emanate from within and spread outwards – a strategy that extends the soundscape of *The Inquisition* to mark the territory of Vancouver as its ideological jurisdiction just as church bells long served to define the boundaries of a parish. This is an embellishment of the role that “spatial signature” (Altman 24) plays in defining the sonic characteristics of a given location, creating an “acoustic profile” (Truax 67) for *The Inquisition* that has the power to bring the ideological weight of the venue's social position out into a broad area surrounding this space.

Ultimately, *City Song*'s most effective performance comes when the dominance of *The Inquisition* as the film's engine of performativity is thrown into question during the only moment to break free of the venue's acoustic space: the beach sequence in which the young girl finds the body of the old man whose plight is paired with the sounds of waves and seagulls. The sequence is framed around unsettling juxtaposition. As the girl dons the old man's glasses she



takes on his jaded experience of the city's contradictions. The sounds of the city's natural surroundings stand in stark contrast to the music presented as the pulse of the city's urban centre, and this clash – highly contrived – is mirrored on the image track as these differing spaces are forced into the same frame for a series of fleeting moments. Here a crisis of synchronization emerges: the environmental sounds impose upon the varied spaces of the city seen on screen to challenge *The Inquisition* as the location from which the film speaks, just as the girl's innocence is challenged in the face of urban realities. The question to the audience seems clear: from what position might we best interpret the wild

setting of our city and the effects of our urbanization upon it? In the end, the film leaves the question hanging, content to revel in the inevitability that each Vancouverite occupies multiple positions within the city simultaneously, and it is in this simultaneity that we are best positioned to perform the city's future.

Conclusion

City Song's use of musical performance to shape interpretations of Vancouver makes it unusually ripe for consideration as a valuable document for research into the city's past soundscapes while also guiding theoretical inquiry into key problems of addressing recorded sound as documentation. The value of *City Song* as document of Vancouver depends on our understanding of how the sound design has been staged by way of its performative strategies. What this approach reveals is a film that gears its performativity towards demonstrating how the city itself is performed both in the film and in the social consciousness of its audience. Cities and the cinema have a storied affinity, and *City Song* works to expose filmmaking and urban planning as part and parcel of the same processes of ideologically constructing the urban spaces in which we live. In so doing, the film is an invitation to question the shape of one particular city at a highly charged moment in its development, while also issuing a more general call to understand how the arts are deeply embedded within the social constructs of urban spaces. Finally, *City Song* is a shining reminder that, at least for a few years, the CBUT was able to speak creatively to the people of Vancouver from deep within the city's heart. And the city listened.

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