

# IN SEARCH OF BLIND JOE DEATH THE SAGA OF JOHN FAHEY

"THE GUITAR-PLAYING EQUIVALENT  
TO WILLIAM BURROUGHS  
OR CHARLES BUKOWSKI."  
-PETE TOWNSHEND

A FILM BY  
**JAMES CULLINGHAM**

FEATURING  
**PETE TOWNSHEND**  
**CHRIS FUNK**  
**DR. DEMENTO**  
AND MANY MORE



Directed & Written by James Cullingham

Produced by James Cullingham,  
Monica Szenteszky & Tina Witham

Supervising Editor Caroline Christie Cinematographer Igal Hecht

Editors Caroline Christie & Jessica Anne Cullingham

Executive Producers James Cullingham, JoAnn McCaig & Doug Whyte

Produced by Tamarack Productions, Toronto

Produced with support from The John Fahey Trust, Blue Ant Media  
& Oregon Public Broadcasting

GUITAR INNOVATORS  DOUBLE FEATURE

"A true guitar polymath"  
- Rolling Stone

## Approximately Nels Cline

A film by Steven Okazaki



**Approximately Nels Cline**

A film by Steven Okazaki

Featuring The Nels Cline Singers

with Scott Amendola & Devin Hoff

Plus Carla Kihlstedt, Ron Miles, Yuka Honda,

Ben Goldberg, Matthias Bossi

Original Music Nels Cline Music Engineer Jessie Nichols

Location Sound Adriano Bravo, Jim Choi

Camera Mark Kohr, Bart Nagel, Aaron Kohr

Director of Photography Dan Krauss

Produced by Jeffrey Wood, Jason Cohen, Steven Okazaki

Directed & Edited by Steven Okazaki

A co-production of Farallon Films & Fantasy Studios

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# **IN SEARCH OF BLIND JOE DEATH** **THE SAGA OF** **JOHN FAHEY**

In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey  
57 minutes / color / 2012 / Canada / Documentary / Unrated  
1.78.1 / 5.1 Surround Audio  
Available Formats: Blu-Ray / DVD / ProRes

WITH ...

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27 minutes / color / 2012 / USA / Documentary / Unrated  
1.78.1 / 5.1 Surround Audio  
Available Formats: Blu-Ray / DVD / ProRes



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## **IN SEARCH OF BLIND JOE DEATH - Synopsis**

Known as the father of American Primitive Guitar, many consider John Fahey to be a foundational figure in American folk music. As both musician and musicologist, Fahey made a fundamental contribution to our understanding and appreciation of such music genres as Delta blues, Appalachian bluegrass and New Orleans jazz. IN SEARCH OF BLIND JOE DEATH combines interviews, performances and archival footage with animation in a kinetic, musically charged tribute to a tremendously influential composer, guitarist, author and provocateur. Interviewees include Pete Townshend, Joey Burns of Calexico, Chris Funk of The Decemberists and renowned radio personality Dr. Demento, aka Barry Hansen.

## **Director Biography**

Director James Cullingham began his journey into John Fahey's world in 1982 when he produced a radio documentary about him. Cullingham continued to be fascinated with Fahey while producing work on political, historical and cultural subjects. Cullingham was Story Consultant on Festival Express (2002). He has written and produced documentaries about Sunny Ade, Willie Dixon, The Grateful Dead, Peter Green and Brian Wilson.

## **Festival Selections**

**Raindance Film Festival**, UK - September 2012

**Mill Valley Film Festival**, USA - October 2012

**Vancouver International Film Festival**, Canada - October 2012

**Eugene International Film Festival**, USA - October 2012

**Leeds International Film Festival**, UK - November 2012

**Star and Shadow Cinema**, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, UK - December 2012

**Santa Barbara International Film Festival**, USA - January 2013

**Trent University**, Peterborough - January 2013 (by invitation only)

**The Cube Cinema**, Bristol, UK January 2013

**Spokane International Film Festival**, USA - February 2013

**Glasgow Film Festival**, UK - February 2013

**Big Sky Documentary Film Festival**, USA - February 2013

**Summerhall**, Edinburgh, Scotland February 2013

## **Credits**

<b>Directed and written by</b>	James Cullingham
<b>Executive Producers</b>	James Cullingham, JoAnn McCaig, Doug Whyte
<b>Producers</b>	James Cullingham, Monica Szenteszky, Tina Witham
<b>Supervising Editor</b>	Caroline Christie
<b>Director of Photography</b>	Igal Hecht
<b>Editor</b>	Caroline Christie, Jessica Anne Cullingham
<b>Additional Editing</b>	Jonas Crawley
<b>Additional Photography</b>	Peter D. Richardson, Todd Segal, Ben Steinbauer
<b>Reading from the works of John Fahey</b>	James Cullingham
<b>Animators</b>	Bianca de Guzman, Alice Ho and Min Zhou
<b>Animation Supervisors</b>	Professors, Ben McEvoy and Barnabas Wornoff

## **APPROXIMATELY NELS CLINE - Synopsis**

Best known as the lead guitarist of Wilco, endlessly inventive guitarist and avant-garde titan Nels Cline shares his harmonic creations alongside Scott Amendola and Devin Hoff, and special guests Carla Kihlstedt, Ron Miles, Yuka Honda, Ben Goldberg and Matthias Bossi.

## **Director Biography**

Steven Okazaki's film subjects range from heroin addicts to dairy princesses to Hiroshima survivors. He is the recipient of numerous honors, including an Academy Award®, four Academy Award® nominations, a Primetime Emmy and the George Foster Peabody Award. His films, produced for HBO, PBS and NHK, are explorations of the extraordinary lives of ordinary people caught up in dramatic historical events and troubling social issues.

Steven began in children's programming, producing dramatic and documentary shorts for Churchill Films in Los Angeles from 1976-78. In 1982, he produced his first documentary, *Survivors*, for WGBH Boston. In 1985, he received an Academy Award® nomination for *UNFINISHED BUSINESS*, the story of three Japanese Americans who challenged the incarceration of their people. Studs Terkel called it "a powerful warning that hysteria, bigotry and moral cowardice demean us all."

With a fellowship from the American Film Institute, he moved in a different direction with *LIVING ON TOKYO TIME*, a comedy about a Japanese dishwasher and her deadbeat green card husband. It premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and was released theatrically by Skouras Pictures in 1987.

In 1991, he won the Oscar® for *DAYS OF WAITING*, the story of artist Estelle Ishigo, one of the few Caucasians to be interned with the Japanese Americans during World War II. Other PBS documentaries include: *HUNTING TIGERS* (1989) a comic look at pop culture in Tokyo featuring Nobel Prize-winning novelist Kenzaburo Oe; *TROUBLED PARADISE* (1992), about native Hawaiian activism; *AMERICAN SONS* (1994) about how the lives of Asian American men are shaped by racism; and *THE FAIR* (2001), a quirky celebration of the Minnesota State Fair.

In 1999, HBO premiered *BLACK TAR HEROIN*, a cinema-verite chronicle of three years in the lives of five young heroin addicts. It was nominated for an Emmy and was one of HBO's highest rated documentaries that year. In 2005, he produced *REHAB*, a disturbing look at drug treatment, which won the prestigious Nancy Dickerson Whitehead Award, honoring journalists who have "demonstrated the highest standards of reporting on drug issues."

In 2006, he received his third Oscar® nomination for THE MUSHROOM CLUB, a personal reflection on the 60th anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, which aired on HBO/Cinemax. He followed that with WHITE LIGHT/BLACK RAIN, a comprehensive and vivid account of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which premiered at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, won a Primetime Emmy for "Exceptional Merit in Non-fiction Filmmaking" and the Grand Prize at the Banff World Television Festival.

In 2009, he received his fourth Oscar nomination for the HBO documentary THE CONSCIENCE OF NHEM EN, which tells the story of a 16 year-old Khmer Rouge soldier who photographed 6,000 men, women and children before they were tortured and executed.

From 2009 to 2011, Okazaki made five short documentaries — CRUSHED: THE OXYCONTIN INTERVIEWS for ShadowCatcher Films; APPROXIMATELY NELS CLINE for Fantasy Studios; HAVE YOU SEEN ME (Seattle) and HAVE YOU SEEN ME (Hollywood) for HBO; and ALL WE COULD CARRY for the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation.

## **Praise for Nels Cline**

"A new guitar God"- Rolling Stone Magazine

"Among the most versatile and creative players out there"-WNYC

"One of the best guitarists in any genre"-David Carr

"Whether he's playing Wilco or an avant-jazz side project, Cline melds rich, tone-color creations with slashing, climactic solos that are fiery and beautiful."-Premier Guitar

## Festival Screenings



Bydgoszcz, Poland- Invited Film

Producer/ Director Steven Okazaki, recipient of Award for Outstanding Achievements in Documentary Filmmaking



## **Cast & Crew**

### **Crew:**

Director	Steven Okazaki
Producers	Jason, Cohen, Jeffrey Wood & Steven Okazaki
Editor	Steven Okazaki
Cinematographer	Dan Krauss,
Camera Operators	Steven Okazaki, Mark Kohr, Aaron Kohr and Bart Nagel
Sound Engineer	Jesse Nichols
Assistant Sound Engineer	Alberto Hernandez
Sound Recordists	Adriano Bravo and Jim Choi
Sound Mixer	Dan Olmstead
Original Music	Nels Cline
Production Assistants	Steve Yamane, Brandy McNeal

### **Cast (Musicians):**

Nels Cline  
Scott Amendola  
Devin Hoff  
Carla Kihlstedt  
Ron Miles  
Yuka Honda  
Ben Goldberg  
Matthias Bossi



[http://www.filmjournal.com/filmjournal/content\\_display/reviews/specialty-releases/e3i19489d40513260afc6f6bf11eb10afb2](http://www.filmjournal.com/filmjournal/content_display/reviews/specialty-releases/e3i19489d40513260afc6f6bf11eb10afb2)



## Film Review: Guitar Innovators: John Fahey & Nels Cline

Two short documentaries examine the life of pioneering folk guitarist John Fahey and show guitarist Nels Cline in action.

-By Daniel Eagan      Aug 13, 2013

When John Fahey died in 2001, his legacy included albums of guitar instrumentals that changed the direction of folk music. Starting in 1959, Fahey released a series of remarkable recordings, at first on private labels. They seemed to arrive from a distant past of plantations and paddlewheelers.

Fahey resurrected rural blues styles from the Mississippi delta, acoustic jazz from Tin Pan Alley, eerie hymns from backwoods churches. He picked his way through the heart of American music, along the way mastering everything from waltzes to Hawaiian chants, finding common ground between Charles Ives and W.C. Handy, Jerome Kern and Son House.

Fahey essentially invented a new type of folk music, and then built a market for it, touring the country while releasing increasingly idiosyncratic albums that mixed found sound, aural collages, and tape manipulated in unexpected ways. *The Dance of Death*, *The Voice of the Turtle*, *Of Rivers and Religions*—no one made records like Fahey, and although he inspired a generation of guitarists, no one could play like him.

For years details about the guitarist's life were shrouded in mystery, due in part to Fahey's extravagant mythologizing. He grew up in Takoma, a Washington, DC, suburb, studied philosophy at American University, and then moved to the West Coast, where he joined a master's program in folklore at UCLA. His thesis was on rural musician Charley Patton, as much a role model as an influence.

In the early 1960s, Fahey helped rediscover blues musician Bukka White, searching him out in Aberdeen, Mississippi. White recorded for Fahey's Takoma record label, as did musicians like Leo Kottke and George Winston. Fahey continued to turn out solo records and also recorded with jazz and Dixieland musicians.

By all accounts Fahey was a complicated, difficult man, and his personal life was a ruin. He married and divorced several times, drank excessively, institutionalized himself more than once, and by the 1990s

was destitute. After a career resurgence brought about in part by a new generation of fans, Fahey died in 2001 during heart surgery.

For this short documentary, director James Cullingham has assembled a trove of archival material in the form of interviews, performances, home movies, and observations and reminiscences from musicians and friends like Pete Townshend, Stefan Grossman and Barry Hansen. He includes generous samples of Fahey's music, from his earliest recordings with 78 rpm record collector Joe Bussard to what Fahey described as his "Gothic industrial ambience" recordings.

Like its subject, *In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey* can fascinate and irritate at the same time. Footage chosen to accompany Fahey's recordings can seem either obvious or mystifying. Cullingham spends a bit too much time on Fahey's less rewarding works, and seems reluctant to tackle the personal problems that haunted the guitarist throughout his life.

But *In Search of Blind Joe Death* (one of Fahey's many pseudonyms) is still an excellent introduction to one of the key musicians of his time. Newcomers and fans alike will find a lot to treasure here.

*In Search of Blind Joe Death* is being released theatrically with *Approximately Nels Cline*, a straightforward account of a West Coast recording session with the guitarist and other musicians. A veteran of over 100 albums, Cline generally plays free-form jazz, with excursions into avant-garde, punk-rock and novelty pop tunes. Shot in a recording studio, the short includes versions of the folk songs "The Cuckoo" and "Black Is the Color," as well as performances with drummer Scott Amendola and pianist and vocalist Yuka Honda, Cline's wife.



## A Double Feature Contrasting Two Guitar Innovators: John Fahey and Nels Cline

By Nick Schager Wednesday, Aug 14 2013

Guitar virtuosity is given twin billing courtesy of *In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey* and *Approximately Nels Cline*, two documentaries about inventive, innovative axmen. Writer-director James Cullingham's 57-minute nonfiction portrait of John Fahey mixes traditional talking-head soundbites and archival footage with eclectic aesthetics (including animated line drawings and haunting environmental panoramas) to capture the iconoclastic spirit of its subject, who, beginning in the '50s, blazed new musical trails through work—dubbed in a TV interview as "American Primitive"—that combined finger-picking melodies rooted in the Delta blues with more ominous, abstract dissonance. Through his own laconic remarks in old interviews, as well as comments from admirers and collaborators (including Pete Townshend), Fahey—who died in 2001 at age 61—is depicted as a unique explorer who was in constant search of his next sonic revelation. That makes him a kindred soul to Nels Cline, the avant-jazz performer and lead guitarist of Wilco, who comes across in Steven Okazaki's 27-minute jamming-in-the-studio doc as a similarly adventurous artist, always pushing boundaries and investigating new sounds (folksy harmonies, chaotic distortion) through collaboration. Together, these two slight but engaging films present artistic creativity as an unpredictable, ever-flowing journey from one unconventional locale to another.

[http://seattletimes.com/html/entertainment/2021763827\\_guitarinnovatorsxml.html](http://seattletimes.com/html/entertainment/2021763827_guitarinnovatorsxml.html)

# The Seattle Times

## ‘Guitar Innovators’: Fahey, Cline double the pleasure

A movie review of “Guitar Innovators Double Feature,” which includes two documentaries — “In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey” and “Approximately Nels Cline.” It’s a fascinating look at two American originals.

By Tom Keogh

Movie Review 3.5 stars / 4 stars

‘Guitar Innovators Double Feature,’ which includes the documentaries “In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey,” directed by James Cullingham, and “Approximately Nels Cline,” directed by Steven Okazaki. 84 minutes. Not rated. Grand Illusion, through Thursday.

John Fahey was “a provocateur in the Romantic mode,” says a friend of the late seminal guitarist in the engrossing film “In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey.”

“I live for immersion,” says Nels Cline — lead guitarist for the band Wilco and longtime devotee of improvisational, experimental performance — in the satisfying “Approximately Nels Cline.”

In a way, both statements are true of each artist, an exciting discovery that becomes clear through a thoughtful double bill of the two short documentaries.

But comparisons of Fahey and Cline, two American originals who freely explore, and even create, genres and styles on a journey of restless expression, largely end there.

Fahey, a steel-string instrumentalist and nonvocalist who energized the folk-music scene in the early 1960s with his cyclical, repetitive rhythms, lived and created “in a bubble,” says The Who’s Pete Townshend in “Blind Joe Death.”

Filmmaker James Cullingham reveals both psychological and aesthetic reasons for Fahey’s determination to remain a remote iconoclast sheltered by mystique.

Cullingham offers only broad impressions of Fahey’s deliberate experiments in jazz, classical and electric-guitar composition. One wishes for more detail, but the trade-off is in the film’s penetrating commentary about Fahey’s influences (including nature), his legacy and passion for the guitar as a personal instrument.

Anyone who heard Cline's barbed poetry on electric guitar at last year's Wilco concert at the Paramount witnessed this exciting artist's aggressive use of electronics to process sound into something personal, too.

In "Approximately Nels Cline," the musician is largely seen engaging his love for collaboration.

"Let your colleagues come into the music, and let that change you," he says. That's exactly what happens in Steven Okazaki's film, and rewards are plentiful as Cline performs with his wife, the keyboardist Yuka Honda, plus trumpeter Ron Miles, percussionist Matthias Bossi and the extraordinary singer-violinist Carla Kihlstedt.



## *Riddick, Salinger and Blind Joe Death*

Vin Diesel on another planet, a great writer stripped bare, and a legendary guitarist revisited.

**Kurt Loder** | September 6, 2013

### ***In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey***

John Fahey, who opened up glorious new possibilities for the acoustic steel-string guitar in the 1960s and '70s, was a man of odd parts—a credentialed musicologist (his UCLA master's thesis was on Delta legend Charley Patton); a modest indie entrepreneur (he founded two specialty labels, Takoma and Revenant); and a composer of broad musical affinities (from blues to Bartók, and even Rod Stewart).

He was also a hopeless drunk and occasional pillhead—a difficult man to assist in establishing a viable career. But he managed to record more than 30 studio albums, and his eloquent finger-picking (in a self-taught three-finger style) and slashing slide-guitar excursions, together with the clarion harmonies he created through various non-standard tunings, established him as a godhead of what is now known as American roots music. And in James Cunningham's fond new documentary, *In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey*, those unfamiliar with the man's work can discover why.

The film is agreeably compact, tracing Fahey's life from his childhood in suburban Maryland (where he came to revere the box turtle as a totem of the Great Creator) to his alcoholic later years living in a crummy motel room, but still searching out rare records. There's a considerable amount of performance footage, from club dates and old TV shows, that splendidly demonstrates his ringing instrumental technique and the complex structure of his compositions (some of the best of which are preserved on '60s albums like *Requia*, *The Yellow Princess*, and—his biggest hit—*The New Possibility*, a collection of Christmas excursions). And there are admiring words from a number of musicians, among them Who leader Pete Townshend, who says Fahey "created a new language, modally speaking." Townshend also recalls Fahey being sent a copy of the Who's *Tommy* album, and the polite but noncommittal letter he subsequently received. ("He obviously didn't like it," Townshend says).

<http://culturespotla.com/2013/09/in-search-of-blind-joe-death-the-saga-of-john-fahey-reminiscences-and-a-review/>



## **In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey': Reminiscences and a Review**

September 1, 2013 | By Henry Schlinger

Although I hate to admit it, I have known about the iconic American guitarist/composer John Fahey and played his music on the guitar for more than 40 years. So, I'd like to begin my review of the documentary "In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey," written, directed and produced by James Cullingham, with some personal reminiscences.

I started playing guitar when I was 13, largely because of Elvis Presley followed by The Beatles, and even though I started out with a cheap acoustic guitar (a Silvertone), I mostly played electric guitar, thanks to the British Invasion. But during my junior year in high school, I came into possession of a Gibson acoustic guitar said to have belonged to Gene Autry — from a friend whose father worked for American Airlines. Apparently, the guitar was damaged by the airline, and for some reason Autry no longer wanted it. Because of that, and because within a couple of years I would no longer regularly be playing in bands, I began playing acoustic guitar more and more.

When I was a senior in high school in 1969, I was introduced (I don't remember by whom) to a couple who were at that time probably in their 20s. They would invite high school kids over to their apartment and play music and provide food and drinks, and I remember that I thought they were cool. In any case, after we had begun to establish what I thought was a friendship, I learned that they were trying to convert us to Christianity. At that point, I ended my involvement. However, in one way, they forever changed and influenced my life because one of the musicians whose records they frequently played was Fahey.

After I graduated from high school in the lower 25 percent of my graduating class of about 700, my parents, who were exasperated by my poor performance for years in school despite my apparent potential, decided — in their naïvete — to send their long-haired guitar-playing son to a two-year boys' college in Menlo Park, Calif., just down the road from the psychedelic San Francisco music scene. The school, Menlo College, promised to take underachieving boys and transform them into candidates for entry in the school next door — Stanford. However, instead of spending time studying, I spent most every weekend going to concerts at the Fillmore and Winterland and playing my guitar.

One of the other students at Menlo College was one of the Lilly pharmaceutical clan. I remember two things about him other than his wealth: he used cocaine long before it became fashionable, and he was a really good finger picker who had a beautiful Martin D-45 guitar. So I asked him to teach me the basic three-finger picking pattern. I remember sitting in my dorm room for hours practicing that pattern until

it became automatic. Then, I put Fahey's "The Transfiguration of Blind Joe Death" on the turntable and began learning the songs. The process was arduous and took hours every day. By the end of the first semester, my GPA was a dismal 1.3, but I had learned most of the songs on that album, and a few more, some of which I continue to play to this day (e. g., "Brenda's Blues," "Spanish Dance," "How Green Was My Valley," "In Christ There Is No East or West," my own rendition of "Bicycle Built for Two," etc.). I even got a chance to see Fahey play at a small venue, but, alas, for some reason that night I had decided to take psilocybin (Hey, it was 1969!) and was in no condition to appreciate the concert, a decision I still regret.

I continued to buy Fahey albums, and when I bought "The Yellow Princess" and played the title track, I was blown away. The songs on that album were different in many ways from his previous work. He stated on the liner notes that he thought they were his best songs to date. As with the other songs, "The Yellow Princess" was more melodic (perhaps because it was based on a piece by the classical composer Camille Saint-Saëns) and more technically challenging than much of his earlier work. I had to learn it. After many hours of lifting up and putting down the needle of my record player, I finally mastered it. I don't play it much anymore, but I still remember most of it.

Since then I have continued to play finger-style acoustic guitar, including the Fahey songs I learned back in the late '60s and early '70s, and I compose my own. One of the most recent finger-style songs I composed is actually titled "Homage to John Fahey," written after I learned of his death in 2001. And that brings me to the movie.

I am glad that someone has made a documentary of Fahey, and "In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey" is satisfying on so many levels. The film includes the requisite commentary by others who worked with and knew him, including a former wife, musicians, engineers and producers, all overlaid on many of Fahey's tunes with scenes of the places Fahey lived. Among the prominent musicians interviewed are Pete Townshend and Stefan Grossman.

The film intersperses these commentaries with audio and video footage of Fahey himself and excerpts from his prose read by both Fahey and Cullingham. Cullingham superimposes some very creative animation inspired by Fahey's songs and writings, most notably of turtles, which featured prominently in Fahey's own artwork and stories. The end result is a very imaginative work that sets a new bar for documentary filmmaking.

The film traces Fahey's life from his childhood outside of Washington, D.C., to his move to Los Angeles to attend UCLA, to his relentless search, especially in the Mississippi Delta in the turbulent 1960s, for recordings by black country blues musicians, and in some cases (e.g., Skip James and Bukka White), the actual musicians themselves. He was also instrumental in reviving and promoting the legacy of the bluesman Charlie Patton whom Fahey rates as a more important figure historically than Robert Johnson. The title of the film is borrowed from a Fahey album; Blind Joe Death was a fictional blues musician created by Fahey, who made him blind because so many of the early country blues musicians were.

The film also documents Fahey's alcoholism and hints at a major cause of not only that but his gradual decline leading to his early death: sexual abuse by his father when Fahey was a young child. In the end,



we see Fahey's sad last days living unkempt as a recluse in a shoddy, cluttered motel room in Oregon. He died at the age of 61.

The film succeeds in conveying how Fahey didn't just establish a uniquely American style of guitar playing but also a brand new genre of music, described as American Primitive, a label which Fahey himself endorsed.

The film also points out how Fahey was ahead of his time in establishing his own record label to record and promote his music as well as the music of other musicians who found it difficult to get record contracts from more established labels. In fact, Fahey didn't have such a great experience with one such label — Vanguard — the label for arguably two of his best albums, including "The Yellow Princess." Cullingham also notes that Fahey was a maverick in his recordings, even some of his early ones, which included real-life sounds, such as a barking dog ("Poor Boy") and a singing bridge ("The Singing Bridge of Memphis Tennessee" — yes, in Fahey's world bridges sang).

The film deftly takes the viewer on a journey of Fahey's life — presenting a true saga of a hero of American folk music — and painting a portrait of yet another tortured artist. One of the commentators in the film suggests that had Fahey known he would die at 61, he still would have chosen the same life. Such a statement, however, assumes that we choose our lives. Certainly, Fahey didn't choose to be abused. Nevertheless, as with many artists, Fahey's torment resulted in a legacy of music that has enriched the lives of many, including me.

Cullingham's documentary helps to ensure that a whole new generation of music lovers will know about Fahey and his music. "In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey" is a tribute to a musical icon and is a vital contribution to music history, preserving the story of a major American guitarist, composer, musicologist and innovator.

—Henry Schlinger, Culture Spot LA



## **In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey**

JAKE COLE      AUGUST 20, 2013

The best documentaries of enigmatic music figures do not attempt to solve the mystery of their subjects. Bob Dylan, a repository for both bad writing and visual documentation that seeks to figure out the most mysterious of rock icons, has nevertheless enjoyed both a nonfiction film (Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home*) and a fictional one (Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There*) that each pore over his legend while preserving it, finding value in Dylan's insolubility while filling in cracks around it and even critiquing it. The films that attempt to provide a skeleton key to an artist's biography tend to crowd out the effect of the art in question, meticulously piecing together the facts of the person's life without tying them to the very thing that makes that subject worthy of public study in the first place.

To James Cullingham's credit, *In Search of Blind Joe Death*, a 57-minute short documentary on legendary avant-garde/primitivist guitarist John Fahey, does not waste time in explicating any more of Fahey's actual biography than it needs to. Fahey's personal change-ups—moves here and there, marriage and divorce—are remarked upon in passing, and only in relation to how his music bore out such events. The most in-depth focus on Fahey's private life concerns his early years, from a childhood on the rustic, nature-filled edges of Washington D.C to his scheme of getting his hands on old 78 records of blues musicians by traveling to still-segregated black neighborhoods to buy vinyl off people. In the doc, we listen to music writer Li Robbins tie Fahey's roots around parks and streams to the cyclical yet flowing nature of his playing, while old friends reminisce about his dangerous vinyl-grabs and tacitly bridge his obsessive need to discover forgotten bluesmen to his later efforts to resuscitate the careers of some after he founded Takoma Records.

The rest of the film, however, sprints through Fahey's career while devoting most of its energy to reflecting the artist's style, not only his playing but his myriad artistic pursuits, from label-managing to painting. Animations bring his primitivist folk album covers to life, their quirky designs peppered with cartoon signs of nature dancing around the record. Most delightful, though, is Cullingham's layering of talking head tidbits on Fahey that are joined to elements of his sound. When someone makes note of Fahey's alternative tunings, a song in the background bends into some realm between tones, and the Bartók name-drops come complete with light dissonance.

The spare nature of the film's length and scope is reflected in its modest number of interview subjects, but that does not preclude a few intriguing insights. Stefan Grossman recounts the entertaining "feud"

between himself and Fahey, started by the latter seemingly in a bid only to amuse himself, while Joe Bussard, the founder of Fonotone Records (the small label that made Fahey's first recordings), makes clear what a great early match he was for Fahey, doing his interview while standing in front of a wall that appears coated in tacky wood paneling but is revealed to be an endless supply of 78s in yellowed sleeves. Pete Townshend lends big name credibility to Fahey's greatness, speaking reverentially about this fringe figure and comparing his playing to the writing of Burroughs and Bukowski. It's these subjects, who speak less about the concrete facts of Fahey's life than the impressions he made on them, that give *In Search of Blind Joe Death* its greatest power.

Even so, there is a gap here that makes Cullingham's inventive and atypical approach to artist biography feel incorporeal. It avoids the pitfall of over-explaining an artist with a dull information-dump, but it nevertheless fails to fully join its impressionistic melding of image with Fahey's music to any deeper revelations, which results in a play of signs without a signifier. Artist documentaries tend to be judged by the criterion of how well they convince the viewer to seek out that person's music or films or paintings, and by that measuring stick, this film works. But there is a difference between preserving an artist's mystery and failing to engage with it: *In Search of Blind Joe Death* never rises above the mark of a mildly adventurous TV special, and its stylistic cleverness cannot disguise that this is, at heart, not far off from a cursory overview.

<http://www.wnyc.org/shows/lopate/2013/aug/16/>



## The Leonard Lopate Show

Entrepreneurship in the Middle East; Junot Díaz and the Lopate Show Book Club; the Saga of John Fahey; Please Explain

Friday, August 16, 2013

We'll find out how entrepreneurship is shaping the Middle East. Junot Díaz joins us for this month's Leonard Lopate Show Book Club to talk about *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. James Cullingham talks about his documentary about John Fahey, who's been called the father of American primitive guitar, and who helped preserve the sound of the Delta blues and New Orleans jazz. And before you go for a hike this weekend, listen to this week's Please Explain—it's all about ticks!

### "In Search of Blind Joe Death"

Director James Cullingham talks about his documentary, "In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey." Both musician and musicologist, Fahey contributed to our understanding of such music genres as Delta blues, Appalachian bluegrass, New Orleans jazz and even industrial and electronica, influencing everyone from Glenn Jones to Sonic Youth. It's playing at Cinema Village.

<http://social.entertainment.msn.com/movies/blogs/post--interview-wilcos-nels-cline-on-the-music-documentary-approximately-nels-cline>



## Interview: Wilco's Nels Cline on the music documentary 'Approximately Nels Cline'

The short film featuring the improvisational guitar great is part of the double feature 'Guitar Innovators: John Fahey & Nels Cline'

By [Danny Miller](#)

A few years ago Rolling Stone voted Nels Cline one of the 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time. The guitar legend has collaborated with many artists and has played with groups such as the Geraldine Fibbers with Carla Bozulich and his own Nels Cline Singers with Scott Amendola and Devin Hoff. Today Cline is best known as the lead guitarist of Wilco, the Grammy Award-winning alternative rock band featuring Jeff Tweedy, John Stirratt, Glenn Kotche, Mikael Jorgensen, and Pat Sansone. Watching Nels perform live at a Wilco show is like watching a whirling dervish attack a guitar with ferocious and stunning intensity.

Academy Award-winning director Steven Okazaki has captured some of Cline's passion in "Approximately Nels Cline," a riveting documentary short that shows the avant-garde guitarist in action at Berkeley's Fantasy Studios, collaborating with artists such as Carla Kihlstedt, Ron Miles, Yuka Honda, Ben Goldberg, and Matthias Bossi. "It's not your typical music documentary," says Okazaki. "It's about musicianship and collaborative hard work of playing great music." The film has been paired with James Cullingham's "In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Story of John Fahey" for an insightful double feature about two of our greatest guitar virtuosos.

I met up with Nels Cline recently at the penultimate stop on Bob Dylan's "Americanarama Festival of Music" which has been touring the country this summer. As we walked backstage to the Wilco tour bus to talk about Okazaki's film, we passed several of that night's special guest stars including Jackson Browne and Nancy Sinatra who would soon join Cline and the rest of Wilco in a rousing version of "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'."

**MSN Movies: I've been a huge fan of your brilliant guitar playing for years, both your work with Wilco and your work outside of the band. It's so cool to see your improvisational process at work in this film. I could really see this documentary expanded to feature-length.**

Nels Cline: There was a thought of using this as a kind of presentation cut for what could be a longer film. We shot it at Fantasy Studios in the Bay Area and there was also talk of using the film as a kind of TV pilot for a series that would show a different person using the studio in different ways each week.

**Had you already collaborated with everyone we see in the film?**

Yes, except for Ron Miles. My only regret is that you don't see much of my own band in the film. One reason for that is that Scott Amendola, as we discuss in the movie, got seriously ill just as we started. (He's fine now.) They also wanted the film to be more accessible to people so they wanted a vocalist. I suggested several and we ended up using Carla Kihlstedt who is great.

**How did you decide which songs would be featured in the film?**

Well, to be honest, we couldn't get the rights to many of the songs I suggested or it was just too expensive so we ended up doing a lot of public domain stuff. That worked out perfectly for Carla because she always wanted to do "Black Is the Color (of My True Love's Hair)!" And besides singing, Carla is really the best violinist that I know—and I know a lot of very talented violinists!

**I love hearing you talk about the process of making your music in the film—not every musician is able to do that so articulately.**

Thank you! Of course that's the part that makes me the most uncomfortable to watch...

**Really?**

Oh, don't get me wrong, I love to talk about that stuff as long as I don't have to watch it later. (Laughs.) Ask me a simple question and watch two hours go by—I'm loquacious to a fault!

**I think it's so interesting that this short is paired with "In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey." It's a great double feature. Did you know Fahey?**

Yes, actually, he was a friend of mine! We met in the 80s but I'd been a huge John Fahey fan since the age of 14 ever since I heard "Days Have Gone By." John is just a monumental musician and he's become the subject of great cult scrutiny—so much has been written about him posthumously.

**How did you meet him?**

After hearing him play a few times, I finally met John through my friend George Winston. I used to work at Rhino Records and George used to come in there a lot when he was Larry Flynt's driver! He used to have to go pick up Larry's guard dogs at the airport and deliver film from Chic magazine shoots! He was a beautiful guy but a real nut and one night he invited me to go with him to hear John Fahey play at McCabe's Guitar Shop in Santa Monica. John was so ill with the flu that night that George and I ended up driving him home and putting him to bed. So the first time I ever met John Fahey he was sick as a dog and I ended up in his little bungalow in West L.A. We ended up doing this weird little tour of the west coast together with my old trio. The last time I saw him was at a gig at the Ash Grove which was at the Santa Monica Pier at that time, right next to the carousel. I think that was shortly before he died. John was true to form that night, as he was when we were on tour—people called him the room clearer! He always played last and he would play this waltz and repeat the same thing at least nine times until everyone in the audience would finally leave!

**Wow, was that some kind of statement?**

I think it was absolute belligerence! I think he liked taking audiences as far as they could handle. But I really loved John and I'm just fascinated that we ended up in this film together!

**You seem to have found such a great balance in your career between playing in a band like Wilco and having these projects of your own where you are able to do your improvisational music as well.**

I love doing both. My whole thing is that it's not easy for me to play music, it's always a challenge. The simplest things are hard for me—

**What? That's just weird to hear you say! What do you mean?**

Well, I think for some people, playing a certain kind of music is very easy, they could do it in their sleep. But for some reason, the simplest music is never easy for me—maybe I just overthink it! I never feel blasé or jaded and I find that I learn from every situation I end up in, no matter how incredibly straightforward it might seem. I wish I could be a little more relaxed about it, I can get a little edgy! But the one thing I feel completely relaxed about is free improvising.

**Oh, I get it!**

Like in the movie, we weren't planning to use Ben Goldberg, that was just because Scott got sick so I suggested getting Ben to come over with his clarinet and that we'd just improvise some duets. Yuka [Nels' wife] was there I said, "Hey, why not have Yuka play?" I think that was the first duet we ever did together. So what I'm saying is that anything other than complete spontaneous improvisation is quite a challenge for me!

**And yet if you ONLY did that, wouldn't you miss the other?**

Absolutely. I also like songs, I like form. I write songs myself, I have compositions, so I do appreciate structure, too. I'm really fortunate that I get to do both.

**I could watch that kind of improvisation you do all day long.**

Well, you're pretty much alone there! (Laughs.)

**It's such a pure form of creative expression.**

That's how I feel about it, but I know that a lot of people feel like that kind of music excludes them somehow. I try to tell them that they are part of the performance, they are intrinsically involved as listeners. Otherwise, why are we doing what we're doing—we might as well stay home or just play for each other! The ambiance of the audience really affects how the music goes down. I try to help people realize that this is a language. Even if the story is being made up in real time, they're still being told some kind of story, there's some point in all of us being there at that particular moment.

**When you're improvising with other musicians, are there ever nights where it just doesn't seem to be working?**

There have only been a handful of nights in my life where I've been tormented by the lack of connection. I feel like one of my few strengths is the ability to reach across to somebody musically and meet them at least halfway, usually much more, to find a commonality. There were only a couple of times when I felt I had no room or no idea how to reach across to another musician—my brain just couldn't find the connection. That kind of thing makes me very unhappy but it's quite rare.

**It seems like when you're creating this kind of music, you have to listen very hard.**

Absolutely. I certainly can't rely on what I know my "parts" are. I love that because I'm really not that good at playing parts! I've been listening to a lot of music to get ready for this tour and I found myself returning to my love of Steve Howe from Yes. Such beautiful guitar work! I think after Duane Allman and Hendrix, Steve Howe was my favorite guitar idol when I was in high school. I loved listening to him play all these incredibly hard parts so flawlessly. But just yesterday I finally found a clip of him playing in 1972 with Yes where he started improvising on a song and he kind of scuffled around a bit. I was so stoked when I heard that. "Thank God, he isn't completely impeccable!" I was so relieved because my entire life that man has been like a machine. It was marvelous! So yeah, it's a lot easier for me to make up stuff than play something that exists.

**I remember on one solo tour that Jeff [Tweedy] did several years ago, you opened for him with your own improvisational stuff. Were you excited to bring that kind of music to a wider audience?**

For sure! Not in terms of selling records, just in terms of exposing people to something else. I have people who come to my gigs now because of Wilco because they're just curious and I think they go away liking most of it! But I thought it was really funny when Rolling Stone wrote about me and said that because of my improvising tendencies I sometimes play to as few as several hundred people at a time. I laughed because that week I had played for about 60 people!

**Is the disparity in popularity between the two kinds of music ever frustrating for you?**

I can't control any of that but my hope is what you mentioned earlier, that my doing all these things helps to create an awareness. I really don't expect people to like everything, I'd just like them to have choice. A lot of my complaints about media at this point is that it doesn't always seem to offer people choices. Yet we have the information superhighway which pretty much offers us anything we want if we can find the right thread. So I guess I don't worry about it too much.

**You've definitely turned me on to a different kind of music that I probably never would have been exposed to otherwise.**

Thank you, that's my dream—I love hearing that! I'm so grateful for my nine years in Wilco and that all my other endeavors are completely supported by the management. I think it's pretty unusual for a rock band not to consider itself some kind of sovereign state that has a protectionist policy and it's been the exact opposite with Wilco—the idea being that whatever you can do outside the group that enriches your life, you're going to bring that positive stuff back to the group. There are so many ways that Jeff and Tony [Margherita, Wilco's manager] are really smart and ahead of the curve.



**Watching you in Wilco, it's a different kind of music but you do seem to often go into that frenzied improvisational zone!**

Oh, completely. I have this moronic love of sound and once it starts up I'm in another place, I'm not faking that at all! But these days I try not to move around as much when I play because in the early days with the Geraldine Fibbers and with Wilco I would basically give myself whiplash at every show! I used to keep my eyes closed and one night with the Geraldine Fibbers I just couldn't stop and when I finally opened my eyes, I found I was sitting on my main guitar in its stand—I had actually broken parts of it off! I was on the ground and my amp had fallen over.

**I'm envious of those moments of such pure creativity even though I hope you don't kill yourself!**

Yeah, I have to be more careful now. I usually have to ice my neck after every show. Gravity is against us, my guitar strap is not my friend!

**Well, thanks so much for talking to me right before going on stage. I can't wait for tonight's show!**

I hope you enjoy it. This tour has been an incredible, incredible experience!

<http://www.wfmu.org/playlists/shows/51860>



☆ **Miniature Minotaurs with Kurt Gottschalk:  
Playlist from August 9, 2013** ☆

August 9, 2013: Can't It Wait Until Tomorrow? (With a Top 40 Request from John Fahey documentarian James Cullingham, plus a Whitney Houston 50th birthday tribute)

[James Cullingham interviewed by Kurt Gottschalk](#)

[http://www.extracriticum.com/extra\\_criticum/2013/08/double-feature-guitar-innovators-john-fahey-nels-cline-at-cinema-village-.html](http://www.extracriticum.com/extra_criticum/2013/08/double-feature-guitar-innovators-john-fahey-nels-cline-at-cinema-village-.html)

# Extra Criticum

Double Feature! Guitar Innovators: John Fahey & Nels Cline at Cinema Village

David Licata

Beginning Friday, August 16, you will have the rare opportunity to see a documentary double feature ***In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey*** and ***Approximately Nels Cline***. But you shouldn't see go to Cinema Village in NYC just because it's a double bill, you should go Cinema Village because you will see two good films about two exceptional artists, both of whom happen to play guitar.

You should go because you'll hear beautiful music. Go because you'll come away comparing and contrasting the films and their subjects for days: the Fahey film spanning a lifetime to tell its story about a brilliant, eccentric "primitive" composer; the Cline film documenting some recent recording sessions to show his formidable versatility, inventiveness, and artistic restlessness. (Cline is the lead guitarist of Wilco, but there is no Wilco here.) And if you're someone who's ever picked up a guitar there's really no excuse for you not to see these films. I had the good fortune to be able to ask the directors of these films a few questions, and I thought it might be interesting to ask them exactly the same questions, so here now, my mini interviews with the directors of these two films, James Cullingham and Steven Okazaki.

**James Cullingham, director of *In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey***

**Steven Okazaki, director of *Approximately Nels Cline***

*What inspired you to make the film?*

The power and beauty of his music above all. I was already a fan when I met him in 1982. At that time, I made a radio doc about Fahey for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. I believe it was my second nationally broadcast piece. I really enjoyed meeting him. We stayed in touch for about 10 years. We visited when he played Toronto. He and Melody Fahey came to my place for dinner on one occasion. I invited a couple of guitar playing buddies who at first did not believe me when I told them Fahey was coming over.

When he died in 2001 I did an obituary/tribute for VisionTV in Canada. In 2009, I was surprised to learn that there wasn't a film yet. I contacted Mitch Greenhill and Melody of the John Fahey Trust. Mitch liked my work and Melody had good memories of my spaghetti. We got the go-ahead and started working.

Although I hadn't done a music doc before, music is important in all of my films. When I'm starting a project, whether it's about heroin or hula or the end of the world, I think about the soundtrack early on in the process and I'll inject live music into the film whenever possible. Music sets the mood and influences how the viewer reads the images. And I'm just drawn to it. My wife and I made a film about the Minnesota state fair for PBS and I spent way too much time with the marching bands, it was so much fun. Even my very serious HBO film on Hiroshima is loaded with music. It starts with a terrific Osaka punk band called Afrirampo.

Anyway, yeah, the film with Nels just happened. I was aware that Nels was in Wilco but I hadn't really listened. Then I heard his guitar solo on "[Impossible Germany](#)" and I was knocked-out. It's so simple and beautiful, poppy and jazzy, it renews one's faith in rock 'n' roll. Then I listened to more stuff and I realized this is exactly the kind of musician I wanted

to do a film with. I mean, he picks up the guitar and he's immediately physically and emotionally connected to the instrument, and out comes music that's moving, challenging and fun.

*Were you ever concerned that the audience for the film would be limited to guitar aficionados?*

No. My hunch was that Fahey's artistry and character would appeal to a broad audience, if we could get the film made. I hope we made a film that appeals both to Fahey fans and people who never heard of him. After attending screenings on three continents and getting positive buzz from Australia, I think we succeeded but each audience member will have her own opinion on that score.

Well, I'm not interested in making a film about the Eagles or big record company bands like that. But this is also not a guitar geek film. It's for anyone who loves music. It has a wonderful range of songs, from crazy, edgy stuff to jazz to wonderful ballads with Carla Kihlstedt singing and Ron Miles on trumpet. Okay, yes, Nels has an array of seventy pedals, switches and furry electronic thing-a-watts, but I have no idea what they do.

*The film is part of a double feature. How do you think these films work together?  
Any thoughts on why this kind of pairing doesn't happen more often?*

I think it's a great idea. Thanks to Kelly Clement at Mill Valley Film Fest who first wed the films at our USA premiere in October 2012 and to First Run Features for distributing the twin-bill theatrically.

I think such pairings are common at festivals. I have no idea of how often they might occur commercially. I say if it puts rear ends in seats, do it.

I'm happy to have the Fahey film out there with the Cline effort. I like that film and it has been fun to meet its producers. I look forward to meeting Nels who I believe will be in NYC for the opening. And of course I hope to meet Steven, but I can't recall if he is slated to attend. I hope so.

I think it's a brilliant pairing and we thank James Cullingham for that. It was his idea to put our films together, to connect two unique innovative guitarists from two different times. Fahey pushed the acoustic folk guitar into uncharted territory. And I don't know a more fearless guitarist than Nels Cline. They share that spirit of adventure.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/in-search-of-john-fahey-new-doc-highlights-groundbreaking-guitarist/article4586938/>

THE GLOBE AND MAIL



## In search of John Fahey: new doc highlights groundbreaking guitarist

BRAD WHEELER Published Wednesday, Oct. 03 2012

*"Being a genius is tough, I guess." - From the Village Voice, in a review of a performance by the eccentric guitarist John Fahey.*

Greil Marcus's old, weird America had a second generation, one of its children being John Fahey, the "original American primitive," and an untutored, finger-style adventurer on the steel-stringed acoustic guitar. He could be brusque, soused and odd, or provocative, good-natured and wickedly humorous. Pete Townshend, guitarist and composer for the Who, saw him as a musical poet, "dividing time in some new way." He was a self-inventor, musicologist and essayist who liked turtles, thrift-store guitars and the composer Bartok. And from the late Fahey himself: "I've always really thought of myself as a spiritual detective and a psychological detective."

He is the subject of *In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey*, a new documentary by James Cullingham that gets its North American premiere Thursday at the Vancouver International Film Festival. (Blind Joe Death, by the way, was Fahey's bluesy persona – a smart-ass homage from a young white suburbanite in the 1950s, to the pre-war sight-challenged heroes that so entranced him.)

The documentary from Cullingham, a professor, documentary filmmaker and former CBC radio producer, is in the vein of films which attempt to demystify (or track down) idiosyncratic or on-the-fringe musicians. Included in the genre are this year's *Searching for Sugar Man* (on the lost-then-found Detroit folk artist Rodriguez) and 2005's *The Devil and Daniel Johnston* (on the psychologically unique Johnston).

While there's plenty of back-story to Fahey's left-field life, Cullingham, who knew the man, is most interested in the art. "My fascination is with the guy's music," says the director, whose first national radio documentary with CBC was on Fahey. "His music has moved me for my entire life."

The film's most compelling champion is Townshend, who admired Fahey's Bukowski-like power and edge. "He created a new language, modally speaking and harmonically speaking. And if that's not an iconoclast, I don't know what is, really."

The arc of Fahey's career is told in a fluid, reverential and easygoing manner, exploring the times of a man who as a youth went on record-buying sprees in Maryland, which triggered an obsession with African-American blues and gospel artists such as Blind Willie Johnson, whose intensity first made him sick and then left him in tears.

As a musicologist, Fahey tracked down folk-blues pioneers Bukka White and Skip James, and helped revive their careers during the great American folk-blues boom in the 1960s. His essays on those sojourns into the Mississippi Delta were thoroughly journalistic, if somewhat fanciful.

In 1964, as one of the inaugural graduates of the University of California's folklore curriculum, Fahey's master's thesis was on the great country-blues artist Charlie Patton. In his own (mostly instrumental) music, he took the forms of Patton and others and developed his own melodies while introducing resonant syncopation, Eastern meditateness and, later, found sounds.

On the Takoma record label he created with friend Ed Denson, the outsider Fahey issued *The Transfiguration of Blind Joe Death*, a classic obscurity which, according to one reviewer, "balanced whimsy and dignity, melody and dissonance, in a wholly original and very bent manner." The wicked liner notes from Fahey were later described by Denson as a "paranoid vision of reality unrivalled since Kafka."

What's fascinating about Fahey is that he himself became the same source of intrigue as his folk-blues heroes. After a successful career of recording and touring, he wound up homeless in the 1990s in the Pacific Northwest. "As a young man, he was in the Mississippi Delta looking for James and White," says Cullingham. "And then, later, people went to Oregon looking for him. And there he was."

One of seekers was Chris Funk, a multi-instrumentalist with the Decemberists. "You can't get any more American than John Fahey," he says in the film, "in the sense that he took something that existed in our lineage of Americans and American music and tripped out along the way."

Another devotee was Thurston Moore, of the soundscapists Sonic Youth. A Spin magazine feature in 1994 helped resurrect Fahey, who dedicated his revived career to ambient, gothic industrial music.

In the end, Fahey, who died in 2001 at age 61, seemed satisfied. He was touring and recording, and was making enough money to get by. He had troubles, but that wasn't what made him unique. "He had psychological problems and he created enduring art," says Cullingham, who sold the film this week to the BBC for a 2013 broadcast." And it's the enduring art that I'm most interested in."



## Fahey's A Jolly Good Fellow: In Search of Blind Joe Death Reviewed

-Sean Kitching , February 21st, 2013

When I first became aware of John Fahey around 7 years ago, through his connections with esoteric NYC underground improvisers the No Neck Blues Band, I had no idea that instrumental steel-string acoustic guitar music minus vocal accompaniment was something I needed in my life. Yet when I first heard the eerily beautiful, mournful notes of 'When the Springtime Comes Again', I was instantly struck, as if by lightning, by the singular originality of Fahey's sound, which seemed to call forth emotions in me that only the likes of Bartok had previously evoked. Then a year later in December 2006, at the Thurston Moore curated All Tomorrow's Parties, my friends and I were preparing to leave our chalet in order to catch The Melvins' second performance, when Fahey's 1978 Rockpalast performance came on the TV. We all sat down again and watched him instead. As much as we all liked The Melvins, they're no John Fahey.

James Cullingham's wonderful, expressionist documentary In Search of Blind Joe Death - The Saga of John Fahey, admirably portrays the many facets of the man behind the music and the myth. Fahey was a musicologist, folklorist (with a Masters from the University of California, where he wrote a study of blues guitarist Charlie Patton,) writer, independent record label boss, painter and prankster philosopher as well as a guitarist. A true American original of the stature of Sun Ra, Charles Ives or Harry Partch, Fahey existed in his own self-created universe with its own designated deity, which he called the Great Koonaklaster. Cullingham's documentary beautifully evokes the landscapes which influenced Fahey in his formative years: fast-running river water and russet autumn trees, railroad tracks and trains in motion, box-turtles - the totem animals of the Great K. It also utilizes collages of Fahey's illustrations to lyrical effect.

A quote from Fahey's first collection of stories, *How Bluegrass Music Destroyed My Life*, sets the tone for what is to follow: "There is something about guitars - maybe something magical - when played right - which evokes past, mysterious, barely conscious sentiments, both individual and universal. The road to the unconscious past. Guitar is a caller. It brings forth emotions you didn't know you had." Reading Fahey's writing, apparently saved from the garbage and coerced into print by the interest of his friend Jim O'Rourke, reveals how much of an original thinker Fahey truly was, even from his early eccentric childhood onwards.

<http://www.musicfilmweb.com/2012/11/john-fahey-james-cullingham-music-documentary/>



## The Legend of Blind Joe Death: On the Trail of John Fahey

November 8, 2012 | by Andy Markowitz

John Fahey was many things – guitar master, musicologist, unreliable author, indie label owner, childhood abuse victim, an alcoholic and a pill-popper – but his life and career utterly resist the easy characterizations that sometimes come with those terms. Growing up in the then-sleepy Washington suburb of Takoma Park, Maryland, Fahey discovered the vernacular musics of the South, teasing and stretching them into a unique finger-picking style that came to be called “American primitive” and evolved over a 40-year career from blues-based exercises and delicate acoustic meditations to *musique concrete* and electrified avant-noise.

True to its title, James Cullingham’s evocative music documentary *In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey* seeks clues to the essence of the late virtuoso, who died in 2001 at the age of 61 after heart surgery and, in the previous two decades, lengthy bouts with illness and poverty. But like its subject, it doesn’t go in for pat conclusions, instead painting a portrait in gentle grace notes of an iconoclastic and under-sung giant of 20th-century music.

A favorite of and influence on guitarists as varied as Leo Kottke, Thurston Moore, and Pete Townshend (who is interviewed in the film), Fahey was a rigorous musician and scholar who earned a master’s in music at UCLA and built one of the first DIY indie labels, Takoma Records. He was also a lover of the natural world (especially turtles) and a wry raconteur whose essays and voluminous album liner notes at once created myths and deflated pretensions about himself and his work – starting with his first album in 1959, which birthed Fahey’s faux-Delta bluesman alter ego Blind Joe Death.

Cullingham, the head of Toronto-based doc house Tamarack Productions, met the artist in 1982 as a young CBC radio journalist, and for several years they would hook up when Fahey toured in Canada. They lost touch around 1990, but almost 20 years later, the filmmaker – surprised, he told MFW in a recent interview, that no one had yet done a definitive Fahey doc – approached the John Fahey Trust with the idea. (Cullingham jokes that a spaghetti dinner he hosted back in the ’80s for Fahey and his then-wife, Melody, now co-head of the trust, helped get him the commission.) The resulting hour-long film, made in collaboration with the trust and Oregon Public Television, screens next week at the Leeds International Film Festival (of which MusicFilmWeb is a media partner).

### **MFW: When did you first encounter Fahey’s music, and in what way did it speak to you?**

James Cullingham: I was reading an issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine at some point in the late 1960s, and there was an interview with Pete Townshend in which he said that one of his favorite guitar players was John Fahey. I’d never heard of John Fahey at that point. So I began to hunt out early Takoma LPs. I just fell in love with his music. By the time I was 16 or 17 I was a devoted fan.

**I've read that he was always ambivalent, if not puzzled, about this term "American primitive" that was applied to his guitar playing. What does that mean to you?**

I think it's supposed to designate Fahey's astounding ability to pare away first the vocals, and then a lot of ornamentation in classic American Delta blues and Appalachian musicians, and in a deceptively simple way get that music to its essence. That's what it means to me. Of course, Fahey was an extraordinarily accomplished player, in addition to being a wonderful composer, but like so many great musicians he made it sound simple. I think maybe that's why the phrase was coined. He rejected it sometimes, he embraced it sometimes. As he indicates in the film, it wasn't his. He didn't designate himself as the godfather of American primitive guitar or whatever. But if you look at the tradition of primitive painters and whatnot, perhaps some of it is accurate. He was, not entirely, but largely self-taught, and his art, at least certainly in the first six to seven records, is largely a case of taking certain traditions and paring them back to their essence. If that's primitive, I guess it fits.

Obviously, in some respects it doesn't. You're talking about an intellectual; you're talking about a sophisticated guitar player; you're talking about a guy who was worldly in many, many ways. There's a lot about John Fahey that was not primitive. But the guitar style, certainly, to some extent I think it's appropriate.

**Maybe it's a conflation of primitive with simple, deceptively simple, because it was just him playing guitar and that's all there ever was. I read about one song of his which he described in an interview as something that went from a pastiche on a Vaughn Williams symphony into a blues riff, and then some Gregorian chant-type stuff, and then back to Vaughn Williams.**

He was a polymath in all regards, and he had all kinds of influences musically. I think he was as moved by Bartok and Stravinsky as he was by Skip James and Charley Patton. Part of his contribution to our understanding of all of these musicians is that he treated them with equal respect. He treated the music, the so-called primitive African-American music of the American South – he understood just how powerful and extraordinary it was.

**He seemed to have very little truck with people who fetishized the blues, or roots music. The Blind Joe Death persona was a goof on that very thing. The lines between music and myth were something he was always walking.**

As Melody Fahey says in the film, he was always creating the myth of John Fahey. He studied mythology as a graduate student, along with musicology. He did like to goof around. He liked to take the piss out of people who took folk music too seriously. He was deeply suspicious of the folk music establishment's effort to politicize things that he felt were purely musical and should be seen in that respect. If you read the liner notes that go on and on and on to *The Voice of the Turtle*, or to *The Transfiguration of Blind Joe Death*, or any number of other albums, he's sticking his finger in the eye of the folk establishment. At the same time, he was an authority about Charley Patton, and he wrote very a credible biographical and musicological study of Charley Patton for his master's thesis, which is a very good read. He was a serious scholar, but at the same time he liked to poke fun at the people he thought were too reverential.

I think your word "fetishize" is important. He didn't fetishize music. He collected records, but he didn't keep 'em. He made tapes of records, he sold them, he traded them, he gave them away, but he wasn't like a collector who wanted to have a huge, huge stash of these precious 78 rpm records. He was interested in the music, and once he found the record, he and his colleagues could see that it was preserved.



**His feelings about material possessions and money in general – or his relationship with them, let's say – seem to have been rather haphazard, and that created a lot of problems for him later in life.**

The last six years of Fahey's life are this incredibly productive, creative spurt where he's making interesting music, often electric, working with people like Glenn Jones and Cul de Sac, but also putting out these wonderful archival re-releases of people's work. The project that was just being completed as he died, the collected recordings of Charley Patton, along with Fahey's book, and notes by him and other musical scholars, that box set wins Grammy Awards – posthumously, in the case of Fahey [for Best Album Notes]. I would reject the narrative that some people, I think, are tempted to believe, that Fahey was this spectacular but self-destructive creative talent who just kind of burned out and faded away. I don't think so. I think arguably the last five years of his life were as creative as any other period of his life.

**But he did – the film goes into this – he did choose, at many points in his life, to live in a way that was probably not healthy, considering some of the psychological issues he had, his alcoholism, and some of his physical problems. He chose to live in a string of motels at the end of his life, even when he was in this very creatively fertile period. Why do you think that was?**

I don't think I knew the man personally well enough to know. Certainly, reading his writings, and having listened and watched every bit of interview material I could find, I just think he was an anti-materialist. I think he felt that in order to be creative, he couldn't be encumbered with the kind of routine material considerations, or even the structure, of what many of us would consider a well-ordered a life. If that meant living in a motel room with his possessions divided between that and his Buick as he prowled around the country – Salem [Oregon, where Fahey lived for his last 20 years] is, in some ways kind of tucked away in a corner of the United States, but he could get to Los Angeles in a couple hours in a plane, he could get to airport within an hour and go to Boston or New York. For a guy who was interested in tranquilizing drugs, he was very active, and he moved around a lot. He didn't stop doing that.

**It was really interesting seeing a lot of the interviews with him. He seemed to have a very dry and ironic sense of humor, before that was cool, before he got involved with all these people like Sonic Youth and Cul de Sac in the '80s and '90s.**

When Pete Townshend says in the film that he's a guitar equivalent to a William Burroughs or Charles Bukowski character, I think there's great accuracy to that. I mean, Fahey was a kidder, he was a mythologizer, he was a wonderful writer. When you read the essays in *How Bluegrass Music Destroyed My Life*, or *Vampire Vultures*, and the liner notes, you're dealing with someone – I'm not a literary theorist, but I would dare to call him an American magic realist. He swerves from this kind of journalistic, historical, musicological investigation to sheer fantasy, in the same paragraph [laughs]. He did it in his liner notes, and he did it when he talked. [He] came of age during the Beat era, before hippies, and he had a certain attitude. He certainly was his own person, and a unique thinker, but I think that attitude was shared by others. It may seem to predate the great kidders that we came to know in the '80s and '90s, some of whom he ended up working with, but I think he's part of an American tradition of satire and irony and taking the piss out of establishments. In that he's almost an American archetype.

<http://www.inlander.com/spokane/article-18920-american-primitive.html>



## American Primitive

*A Canadian director reassembles a broken American iconoclast*

By: Jon Brown

Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, Vincent Van Gogh — history has left no shortage of tragic artists who achieved their greatest success after they were dead. It's a theme that permeates director James Cullingham's documentary *In Search of Blind Joe Death: The Saga of John Fahey*, a film about late-guitarist and composer John Fahey, whose promising career fizzled out before it ever really took off.

Having had a hand in the "rediscovery" of lost blues legends Skip James, Booker White and Son House, Fahey himself was, ironically, rediscovered in the late 1990s living in an Oregon motel room. He spent the last few years of his life enjoying a modest resurgence as an oddball godfather of the avant-garde music scene, cited as an influence by Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth, among others.

"When John died in 2001, I naturally assumed someone would make a film about him right away," says Cullingham, a journalism instructor at Toronto's Seneca College. "After several years had passed and I realized there was still no film, I approached the Fahey Trust with an idea and they liked it."

Cullingham's film lays out Fahey's life story, growing up in the suburbs outside of Washington, D.C., where he started composing songs for guitar in the 1950s. Primarily influenced by the finger-picking style of Delta blues guitarists Charley Patton and Mississippi John Hurt, Fahey also drew inspiration from classical music, bluegrass and other traditions. His so-called "American Primitive" approach was minimalist and unique for the time: six-string acoustic guitar, no vocals and rarely any accompaniment.

"I'd loved Fahey's music since the late 1960s," says Cullingham. "There was an article in *Rolling Stone* where Pete Townshend talked about him and I became intrigued."

Despite the admiration of other prominent musicians and the following he had garnered as one of the prime movers behind the blues and folk revival of the 1960s, Fahey eschewed traditional notions of success. He despised "folkies" and "hippies" and took umbrage at their admiration, eventually running away from fame and fading into obscurity.

"He was such a great writer, a painter and had such a uniquely bizarre sense of humor," Cullingham says. "I wanted to make a film that showed Fahey as more than just a brilliant guitarist."

<http://obsededeguitare.blogspot.ca/search?q=john+fahey>

# OBSÉDÉ DE GUITARE

I just watched the documentary by James Cullingham "In Search of Blind Joe Death." I must admit that I am completely convinced of his greatness. For those who do not know, Fahey is one of the great originals of the guitar, those who have never followed the beaten track. He is the inventor of what has been called the "American Primitivism" for its mix of traditional music and ultra-personal inflections, almost non-figurative (yes it says for music too). He began his career under the name Blind Joe Death recording of country blues in the 60s (retold in a brief musicology Charley Patton), was a pioneer of self-generation in riding his Takoma Records label, made the acquaintance of Son House and Skip James, battled his alcoholism, and traveled across the United States. At the end of his life, he even collaborated with his disciple Thurston Moore (Sonic Youth), and began to bifurcate from acoustic to electric before his death in 2001.

We see some pictures of Fahey himself in his youth (on a television, playing superbly of course ...) and in concerts and various interviews. His family, friends, admirers and producers (including Pete Townshend and Joey Burns of Calexico) bring their stories to a puzzle that looks like the story of one of the forgotten greats in the history of the guitar ... therefore its urgent we rediscover his work.