

Tony Palmer

For The Love Of Music



by Ken Shane

Tony Palmer met John Lennon while he was still in school at Cambridge. Later he moved to London, became a film producer for the BBC, and renewed his relationship with Lennon.

Palmer went on to direct several seminal rock and roll films, including Cream's *Farewell Concert* and Frank Zappa's *200 Motels*. He is perhaps best known to popular music fans for two films that he made based on suggestions from his friend John Lennon. In 1968 *All My Loving* became the first film to feature artists like Zappa, Pink Floyd, Jimi Hendrix, and The Who. But his greatest achievement came in 1975/76 with the BBC airing of his seventeen-hour documentary history of popular music, *All You Need Is Love*. Though the film was a sensation in the U.K. and Europe, it has never aired in the United States.

The five-disc DVD set of *All You Need Is Love* was released in the United States on May 13.

You started in the film business working with Ken Russell and Jonathan Miller. Tell me about how you got there.

I was at Cambridge University and I thought I ought to go and do something useful, and not mess around being an academic. I thought I'd try for the BBC. By this time Ken had made his famous film about Elgar, so all the way through the interviews I said if you take me I want to work with Ken Russell. They took me, and I thought I was going to work with Ken Russell. In fact they sent me off to do something completely different. I was rather cross.

Eventually I did work with Ken, and I made a film called *Isadora*, about Isadora Duncan. *Isadora* was a big success, and the BBC told me that Jonathan was going to make a film about *Alice In Wonderland*, and they

were very nervous about letting him loose, because it was quite a big project. They wanted me to make sure that Jonathan didn't go completely off the rails.

Going back to your days at Cambridge, it was there that you met John Lennon following a press conference. Some time later, Lennon suggested a film idea to you.

It was three or four years further down. I'd come to London from Cambridge, and I was working for the BBC. We renewed our acquaintanceship. He complained to me frequently that the great musicians who he admired couldn't get on BBC television, never mind American television. He said they were not treated with the respect that they deserved, and he gave a list. I said I know who these people are, but they are never going to get in a film of mine. He said he would make the introductions, and I would do the film, and get it on the BBC.

So we made a film called *All My Loving*. We got John's permission to use the title. And that had a certain impact because it was the first film on British television that said, you might not like this music, but you can't ignore it. You can't treat it with less respect than it deserves, in terms of the musicianship of the guys.

We sort of kept in touch. I wrote some liner notes for some of The Beatles

LPs – *Yellow Submarine*, I remember. And then he came to New York. It's one of those mad coincidences. I can't remember where it was, but I was actually walking down the street and walking the other way was one John Lennon. He stopped me with a phrase I've never forgotten, "Are you doing anything useful these days?" We went off to lunch, and after that lunch, he told me that what I really should try to do was an overall survey of popular music. As we got up to leave the restaurant, he said he had a great title for me, *All You Need Is Love*, because that's what it's all about.

I thought it was crazy. No one series can turn in all of that. What we certainly didn't realize at the time is that we were getting to people who were dead soon after. It was extraordinary to get them. I was in Memphis a couple of years ago, and all the places that we filmed that were important to Memphis, not just Sam Phillips studio, but Beale Street and all that, gone. Parking lots or Wal-Marts. So again, quite by chance, in '75 when we filmed it, it was the last moment that we could get some sort of record of those places.

The range of live performance footage in the film is remarkable.

I'll give you a perfect example of that, talking about things that were extraordinary at the time, but in retrospect are even more extraordinary. Obviously I knew who Muddy Waters was. Jagger never stopped talking about Muddy Waters. The reason we got so many people is that we went to wherever they were. So we were in

club over on the west side."

I made sure to get there early because I was sure the club would be packed. I was amazed to find that he was playing for about ten people. It was the same for B.B. King when we filmed him. Nobody there. Jerry Lee Lewis playing in a fourth-rate Holiday Inn. This is one of the great heroes of rock and roll. Now you can't imagine how these people could have played in those two-bit, out of the way places, but that was their life at that time.

Although I was very aware of their music, I'd never heard these people discuss their lives and careers in the way they do in your film.



Chicago, and I got hold of Muddy's phone number. I'm now speaking to Muddy Waters on the telephone, and I remember that I stood up. I was so in awe of him. I explained what we were doing, and he said "Sure, come on over, I'm playing tomorrow night in a

I remember interviewing Jimi Hendrix. At the end of the conversation, he thanked me very much. I told him it had been a real pleasure, and very, very interesting. He shook my hand and told me that I was the first person that he'd talked to who clearly loved what he did, and clearly treated him like a gentleman, to which I remember asking why would I not? He told me that there were all kinds of people who wouldn't bother.

I learned that if you treated those people with the respect that they deserved, not just as human beings, but as great musicians, there was nothing that they wouldn't do for you. **Tell me about some of the people you got to comment on the music.**

One of the things that we were keen to understand was how and where all

ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE, AS WELL AS MANY OTHER FILMS BY TONY PALMER, IS AVAILABLE THROUGH AMAZON. FOR MORE INFO, INCLUDING A BIOGRAPHY OF THE FILMMAKER AS WELL AS A HISTORY OF HIS WORK, YOU CAN VISIT TONYPALMER.ORG

