

LEON RUSSELL IN

# A POEM IS A NAKED PERSON

FILMED AND EDITED BY LES BLANK

An ineffable mix of unbridled joy and vérité realism, *A Poem Is a Naked Person* presents the beloved singer-songwriter and Rock and Roll Hall of Famer Leon Russell as filmed by documentarian Les Blank between 1972 and 1974. Blank's camera lets us into the world of Russell and his friends and fellow artists in and around his recording studio in northeast Oklahoma, capturing intimate, off-the-cuff moments and combining them with mesmerizing scenes of Russell and his band performing live. This singular film about an artist and his community never got an official theatrical release and has attained legendary status. Now, after more than forty years, it can finally be seen and heard in all its rough beauty.

FILMED AND EDITED BY LES BLANK

EXECUTIVE PRODUCED BY HARROD BLANK

PRODUCED BY DENNY CORDELL, LEON RUSSELL, AND LES BLANK FILMS

SOUND RECORDING AND ASSISTANT EDITING BY MAUREEN GOSLING

FEATURING

LEON RUSSELL

JIM FRANKLIN

GEORGE JONES

WILLIE NELSON

U.S. • 1974, 2015 • 90 minutes • Color • 1.33:1

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## THE STORY OF A POEM

In 1972, musician Leon Russell was looking for a filmmaker to make a documentary about him, so he and his record producer, Denny Cordell, called the American Film Institute in Los Angeles to ask who might be a good fit. AFI suggested an exciting filmmaker named Les Blank, who had demonstrated his unique skill at documenting musicians with *The Blues Accordin' to Lightnin' Hopkins* (1968) and *A Well Spent Life* (1971).

In May of that year, Blank and his collaborator Maureen Gosling, fresh from shooting hours of footage in Southwest Louisiana about black Creole music and culture, were making a pit stop in Dallas for the USA Film Festival. It was there that Blank was informed that Russell and Cordell were trying to get in touch with him. Though he had not heard of Russell, Blank was intrigued, so he and Gosling immediately headed north to Oklahoma and met the two men at Russell's recording complex, Paradise Studios, in Grand Lake o' the Cherokees, about ninety miles northeast of Tulsa. Blank agreed to shoot a film about Russell as long as he could set up shop at the studio and simultaneously edit his Louisiana footage (which would ultimately become two separate 1973 films, *Dry Wood* and *Hot Pepper*).

Blank and Gosling set up his Moviola editing machine and started working day and night. Their new quarters, according to Gosling, consisted of "a five-room floating motel on Leon's property, which had been used by fishermen in the property's last incarnation as a fishing dock retreat." The recording compound was frequented by other artists and musicians, and the environment was communelike. It soon became clear to Blank that the film would be about not just Leon Russell but an entire community of people, including painter Jim Franklin, whom Russell had

brought in from Austin, Texas, to paint the walls of his recording studio, but who discovered a more interesting canvas in the blank walls of an empty swimming pool. Blank also filmed other musicians who came through, including Eric Andersen, Charlie McCoy, and Willis Alan Ramsey.

Blank kept his camera rolling over the course of two years, ending up with nearly sixty hours of 16 mm footage. This included Russell playing music—in rehearsals, recording sessions, and concerts in New Orleans and Anaheim, California—as well as performances by such music legends as Willie Nelson and George Jones. Yet Blank was ultimately after something more ineffable and atmospheric, something that reflected the odd juxtaposition of the state-of-the-art music studio and its rural surroundings. The result, *A Poem Is a Naked Person*, is more a collagelike, abstract film about a time and place than a straightforward portrait of a performer. Thus, footage of a building demolition is as crucial to the overall tapestry as Russell's performances of his singles "Tightrope" and "A Song for You."

The first cut, which clocked in at just over 100 minutes, was accepted into the 1974 Cannes Film Festival, but the screening was canceled when the print didn't arrive in time. As history would have it, the film wasn't released for another forty years. Blank was still a comparatively little-known filmmaker at the time, and while this movie reflects what we now recognize as the genius of one of America's premiere chroniclers of music and culture, it was not what Russell and his team were expecting, and Russell did not approve the release. Blank had only a work-for-hire contract and therefore didn't have the rights to the finished product, although he was permitted to show the film at nonprofit venues if he was there in person.

Blank continued to work on the film, shaving off nearly eleven minutes over the years. He considered this essentially lost film his masterpiece, and he always wished it could see the light of day. In early 2013, two months before Blank died, his son, filmmaker Harrod Blank, made contact with Russell via Facebook—the first time the Blank family had been in touch with the musician in nearly forty years. The two continued to communicate, and met face-to-face when Harrod attended Russell's concert in Oakland, California, in October. That month, encouraged by their friendly encounter, Harrod began work restoring and remastering the film in New York, even though Russell hadn't yet formally given his blessing to an official release. Working from various elements, Harrod and his collaborators tried their best to match Blank's most recent cut, a ninety-minute version from 2011.

In 2014, after Russell had seen a remastered Blu-ray of the final version of *A Poem Is a Naked Person*, he made an agreement with Harrod Blank to release the film. Harrod decided to work with Janus Films on the theatrical release, as he was pleased with the deluxe treatment Janus's sister company, the Criterion Collection, had just given his father's work with the box set *Les Blank: Always for Pleasure*. *A Poem Is a Naked Person* finally had its official Janus Films premiere at the South by Southwest festival in Austin in March 2015, attended by Russell, who received a standing ovation after the screening. We can safely assume that Les Blank would have been thrilled to be there. Says Harrod, "It was his dream to see this released. I sort of put my life on hold to see this through." When Russell was asked why it took so long for the film to come out, he responded, "I don't know. Maybe because it needed to come out now." With the benefit of hindsight, everyone, not least Russell, recognizes this film as one of Blank's greatest achievements.

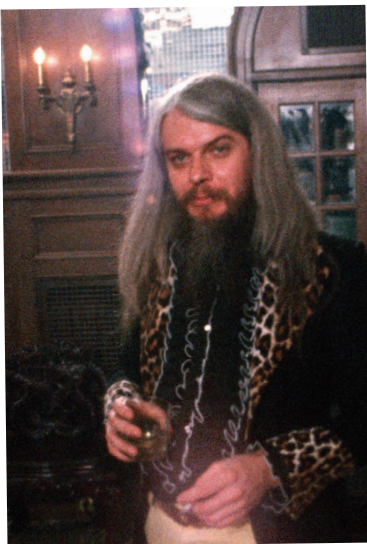


## BIOGRAPHIES



### LES BLANK

Among American cinema's most singular and prolific figures, Les Blank (1935–2013) is known for his intimate, idiosyncratic, and poetic glimpses into the lives of those on the peripheries of American society. The San Francisco Bay Area director's most widely seen film is 1982's BAFTA-winning *Burden of Dreams*, a feature documentary that captures German filmmaker Werner Herzog's perilous shooting of the feature *Fitzcarraldo* in the Peruvian Amazon. Blank's work is dominated by freewheeling films about the music, food, and cultures of specific regions of the United States. Other career highlights include *The Blues Accordin' to Lightnin' Hopkins* (1968), *Spend It All* (1971), *A Well Spent Life* (1971), *Dry Wood* (1973), *Hot Pepper* (1973), *Always for Pleasure* (1978), *Garlic Is as Good as Ten Mothers* (1980), and *The Maestro: King of the Cowboy Artists* (1994). In June 2011, the Museum of Modern Art in New York honored Blank with a two-week retrospective. A collection of his films, *Les Blank: Always for Pleasure*, was released on Blu-ray and DVD by the Criterion Collection in 2014. He considered the posthumously released *A Poem Is a Naked Person* his masterpiece.



### LEON RUSSELL

Leon Russell's music is influenced equally by rock, country, and gospel traditions. Born in southwestern Oklahoma in 1942, Russell began piano lessons at age four and was playing in Tulsa nightclubs by fourteen. As a session musician, he has worked with many of the top figures in the business, including the Beach Boys, the Byrds, Joe Cocker, Bob Dylan, George Harrison, Elton John, the Monkees, Willie Nelson, Gram Parsons, the Ronettes, and others. In 1970, he recorded his first solo album, *Leon Russell*, which was released by Shelter Records, the label he started with producer Denny Cordell. In the four decades since, Russell has continued to write songs and perform, and has released over twenty albums. Russell was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2011. His most recent album, *Life Journey*, came out in 2014.



## MAUREEN GOSLING

A filmmaker for over forty years, Maureen Gosling has worked variously as a director, producer, editor, sound recordist, and distributor. Her films have been shown in festivals around the world; broadcast on American national public and cable television, and on television in Europe, Australia, Latin America, and Asia; and distributed widely to educational institutions. She is best known for her twenty-year collaboration with Les Blank on more than two dozen documentaries, including *Burden of Dreams* and *A Poem Is a Naked Person* (her second film with Blank), on which she served as sound recordist and assistant editor. Gosling's recent work includes coproducing, codirecting (with Chris Simon), and editing the 2013 film *This Ain't No Mouse Music!*, which premiered at the South by Southwest Film Festival in Austin, Texas, and won audience awards at Toronto's Hot Docs Festival and the Mill Valley Film Festival in Marin County, California.



## HARROD BLANK

Les Blank's son Harrod Blank is an artist and filmmaker, trained on the job by his father from an early age. He is known for his work with art cars, making them and also documenting them on film. A cofounder of the annual San Francisco Bay Area event ArtCar Fest, Blank has been building Art Car World, a museum in Douglas, Arizona, since 2005. He has been working for twenty-five years on an epic film project about the Burning Man festival, on which his father served as a cinematographer. Since Les Blank's death in 2013, Harrod Blank has been running the nonprofit Les Blank Films to continue his father's legacy, including the restoration, remastering, and release of *A Poem Is a Naked Person*.



## JIM FRANKLIN

Born in Galveston, Texas, the painter, illustrator, and underground cartoonist Jim Franklin is memorably featured in *A Poem Is a Naked Person*, painting the bottom of the recording studio's swimming pool. After studying at the San Francisco Art Institute and living briefly in New York, he returned to Texas, settling in Austin and eventually opening the art venue Armadillo World Headquarters, named after the animal that had become his artistic trademark. Franklin, known for his murals, posters, and comics, remains an art-world fixture in Austin to this day.

## LES BLANK SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 1960 *Running Around Like a Chicken with Its Head Cut Off*
- 1961 *Strike!*
- 1962 *Freedom Came!?*
- 1964 *Dizzy Gillespie*
- 1967 *Christopher Tree*
- 1968 *The Blues Accordin' to Lightnin' Hopkins*
- 1969 *The Arch*
- 1969 *The Sun's Gonna Shine*
- 1970 *Chicken Real*
- 1971 *Spend It All*
- 1971 *A Well Spent Life*
- 1973 *Dry Wood*
- 1973 *Hot Pepper*
- 1974 *A Poem Is a Naked Person*
- 1976 *Chulas Fronteras*
- 1978 *Always for Pleasure*
- 1979 *Del Mero Corazon*
- 1979 *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe*
- 1980 *Garlic Is as Good as Ten Mothers*
- 1982 *Burden of Dreams*
- 1983 *Sprout Wings and Fly*
- 1984 *In Heaven There Is No Beer?*
- 1985 *Cigarette Blues*
- 1986 *Huey Lewis and the News: Be-Fore!*
- 1987 *Gap-Toothed Women*
- 1987 *Ziveli! Medicine for the Heart*
- 1988 *Ry Cooder Group '88 in Santa Cruz*
- 1989 *J'ai été au bal / I Went to the Dance*
- 1990 *Yum, Yum, Yum! A Taste of Cajun and Creole Cooking*
- 1991 *Innocents Abroad*
- 1991 *Julie: Old Time Tales of the Blue Ridge*
- 1991 *Marc and Ann*
- 1991 *Puamana*
- 1994 *The Maestro: King of the Cowboy Artists*
- 1994 *My Old Fiddle: A Visit with Tommy Jarrell in the Blue Ridge*
- 1995 *Sworn to the Drum: A Tribute to Francisco Aguabella*
- 2005 *The Maestro Rides Again!*
- 2007 *All in This Tea*
- 2014 *How to Smell a Rose*

# SONGS IN THE FILM

## **"Magic Mirror"**

Written and performed by Leon Russell

## **"Joe Avery's Blues"**

Performed by Dejan's Olympia Brass Band

## **"Jambalaya (On the Bayou)"**

Written by Hank Williams

Performed by Leon Russell

## **"Take Me"**

Written by George Jones and Leon Payne

Performed by George Jones

## **"Acid Annapolis"**

Written by Leon Russell and Don Preston

Performed by Leon Russell

## **"Shoot Out on the Plantation"**

Written and performed by Leon Russell

## **"Roll Away the Stone"**

Written by Leon Russell and Greg Dempsey

Performed by Leon Russell

## **"Good Hearted Woman"**

Written by Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings

Performed by Willie Nelson

## **"I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry"**

Written by Hank Williams

Performed by Leon Russell

## **"Farther Along"**

Traditional arranged by Leon Russell

Performed by Leon Russell

## **"Tight Rope"**

Written and performed by Leon Russell

## **"I'll Take You There"**

Written by Alvertis Isbell

Performed by Leon Russell

## **"Tip Toe Through the Tulips with Me"**

Written by Al Dubin and Joseph Burke

Performed by Phyllis Lindsey

## **"If the Shoe Fits"**

Written and performed by Leon Russell

## **"Joy to the World"**

Written by Hoyt Wayne Axton

Performed by Malissa Bates

## **"Wedding March," from *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

Written by Felix Mendelssohn

Arranged and performed by Leon Russell

## **"Kentucky Waltz"**

Written by Bill Monroe

Performed by Leon Russell and studio musicians

## **"Rollin' in My Sweet Baby's Arms"**

Traditional arranged by Leon Russell

Performed by Leon Russell and studio musicians

## **"Tennessee Traveler"**

Written by Robert Taylor

Performed by Tut Taylor, Butch Robins, and Charlie Collins

## **"Lady Madonna"**

Written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney

Performed by Leon Russell and David Briggs

## **"Hello Little Friend"**

Written and performed by Leon Russell

## **"Jubilee March"**

Performed by the Adair High School Marching Band

## **"Time Run Like a Freight Train"**

Written and performed by Eric Andersen

## **"Song for You"**

Written and performed by Leon Russell

## **"Yes I Am"**

Written and performed by Leon Russell

## **"A Great Day"**

Performed by Patrick Henderson

## **"Orange Blossom Special"**

Written by Ervin Thomas Rouse

Performed by Mary Egan and Willie Nelson

## **"Goodnight, Irene"**

Written by Huddie Ledbetter and John A. Lomax

Performed by Leon Russell and Charlie McCoy

## **"Amazing Grace"**

Traditional arranged by Leon Russell

Performed by Leon Russell

## **"Of Thee I Sing"**

Written and performed by Leon Russell

## **"Naked at the Lake"**

Written and performed by Willis Alan Ramsey

## **"A Satisfied Mind"**

Written by Joe "Red" Hayes and Jack Rhodes

Performed by Leon Russell and studio musicians



## FUN FACTS ABOUT *A POEM IS A NAKED PERSON*

- The film's title is a quote from Bob Dylan's liner notes for his 1965 album *Bringing It All Back Home*: "A poem is a naked person . . . Some people say that I am a poet."
- Among the many musicians who showed up at Leon Russell's studio while director Les Blank was shooting was Dylan, although they were not allowed to film him.
- The scene that proved the most complicated in terms of music clearance was the one in which Russell and David Briggs perform an impromptu version of the Beatles' "Lady Madonna" in the studio. We hear only the first few seconds of the song in the final film, as ultimately Russell asked that the filmmakers replace most of the sequence's soundtrack with a song of his own, "Hello Little Friend," which was a demo, recorded only once for Joe Cocker's consideration. It has never been released.
- Upon meeting banjo player Butch Robins, Blank and his collaborator Maureen Gosling convinced Russell to take Robins's group, the progressive bluegrass band New Grass Revival, on the road with him as an opening act. They have since become popular.
- The demolition of the ten-story Bliss Hotel in the film took place in Tulsa at 8:00 a.m. on a Sunday. Blank and Gosling found it while on the lookout for curious things in the area that might add weird but appropriate texture to the movie.
- In 1987, in an attempt to get the film released, Harrod Blank proposed an idea to Miramax for a new edit of the film, which would intercut the original footage with a contemporary interview with Russell. Though Miramax was interested, Les Blank wasn't, so the project never materialized.
- The poster for the 2015 Janus Films release of *A Poem Is a Naked Person* was designed by Jim Franklin, the artist seen painting a swimming pool in the film.
- Chula, the boa constrictor in the film, belonged to Franklin, who brought her to Oklahoma from Austin, Texas. One day, Chula petrified the crew by getting lost, then turning up coiled in a bathroom drawer.
- The parachutist who eats broken glass in the film is rumored to be D. B. Cooper, the infamous figure who, in November 1971, hijacked a Boeing 727 for a \$200,000 ransom, before parachuting from the aircraft. He was never found or identified.

