Projection Series #9
Len Lye's Jazz

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Curated by Paul Brobbel
Essay by Nicolas Pillai
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Projection Series #9: Len Lye's Jazz
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The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery/Len Lye Centre’s state-of-the-art 62-seat cinema encourages audiences to experience the films of Len Lye and the wider world of local and international cinema. We welcome you to see historical experimental film, contemporary artists’ moving image and regular film festival programming. At the heart of the Len Lye Centre’s cinema programme is the Projection Series, our regular film programme surveying the landscape of historical and contemporary fine art filmmaking.
Len Lye's Jazz

Curated by Paul Brobbel
Essay by Nicolas Pillai

It is no exaggeration to say that Len Lye's films represent cinema's most joyful engagement with jazz. In the hands of more conventional film-makers, jazz would be used across the 20th century to symbolize drug addiction, racial anxiety and ruinous lives. At Lye's hands (scratching, stencilling and painting directly onto celluloid), the music became a metaphor for human happiness.

In the standard British jazz histories, Lye's film-making during the 1930s has been largely forgotten. Writing in 1945, Peter Noble summed up conventional wisdom: "the English film on the whole is not conducive to the playing of real jazz". Yet the experimentation and invention of Lye's British jazz films is startling. A committed jazz fan, Lye and his frequent musical collaborators Jack Ellitt and Ernst Meyer synchronized the movement of abstract shapes to the rhythms of commercial dance records. In doing so, Lye challenged the contemporary understanding of jazz as 'natural' and unrehearsed.

Firstly, by privileging the recorded over the live, his films confronted head-on the industrial processes involved in the creation of both music and cinema. Secondly, the structuring thread of advertising running through the films presented an affront to those who would seek to disentangle art films and jazz music from the world of commerce.

Projection Series #9 opens with Life's Musical Minute, a later experiment from the early 1950s when Lye was living in America. Set to Gene Krupa's drum solo from 'The Golden Wedding' (Woody Herman and his Orchestra), the film is themed around a set of recurring stencils, some of which are surprisingly representational. A trumpet, a musical quaver and a set of drumsticks seen from above stand out amidst the more familiar vibrating shapes and colours in Lye's repertoire. Lye's skill with branding is evident through his deployment of the LIFE magazine logo in the film's title credit.

Experimental Animation (Peanut Vendor) finds the artist at his most playful. Through a clever combination of puppetry and stop-motion animation, Lye inventively yet affectionately pastiches the choreography of 1930s Hollywood musicals. The sweet sound of Red Nichols and his Five Pennies creates an aural space in which Lye explores the relationships between mass entertainment, exoticism, commerce and pleasure. Today, the singing monkey may seem somewhat grotesque but Lye's attention to expression and movement help to create a character of humour and charm. The detail of the set and simulation of realist depth-of-field heighten the effect of a fully-realized musical sequence, in which one's surroundings may at any moment magically spring to life and join in the dance.

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Projection Series
The gorgeous N. or N.W. sees Lye experimenting with narrative for the General Post Office Film Unit, one of his key employers during the 1930s. One senses the relish with which Lye uses expressionist visual effects and elaborate transitions as a means of surrounding his actors with words. Here, words are not simply marks on a page but the material traces of emotion, powerful signals through which love can be conjured and reconciliation effected. Again, Lye invests inanimate objects with magic – the dancing post-box recalls the swaying palm tree in Experimental Animation (Peanut Vendor) – and the fragmentation of the editing is smoothed by the soundtrack of Fats Waller, Benny Goodman and Bob Howard hits. But it is the postman who ultimately deserves credit for casting the spell of love, a paternalistic figure whose intervention at the last minute provides a pleasing deus ex machina.

From the idyll of the lido to the paranoia of war. Musical Poster #1 may surprise us now with its conflation of bright colours, jaunty jazz and warnings of Nazi infiltrators. In some ways, the film might be seen as a negative image of the international positivity of Swinging the Lambeth Walk. Like that earlier film, the soundtrack here is an amalgam of existing commercial jazz records but is dominated by Benny Goodman’s ‘Bugle Call Rag’. It’s an inspired choice: swing music repackaging the militaristic bugle call to set the toes tapping, even as one peers over one’s shoulder at the imagined ‘enemy’.

The most complex Lye soundtrack belongs to Swinging the Lambeth Walk, for which Meyer spliced together numerous recordings of the popular East End London anthem. An upturned thumb and chant of ‘Oi!’ references the cockney dance-craze associated with ‘doing the Lambeth Walk’ during the 1930s, popularised by music-hall star Lupino Lane. Masquerading as a folk tradition, the dance seems to have inspired a similar magpie impulse in Lye. The film is a cheery mash-up of cover versions of the song, including those by organist Milt Herth and French violinist Stephane Grappelli. But it’s also a heady mix of contradictions that reveal Lye’s complex identity: a New Zealander riffing on a cockney song, a Hammersmith Modernist reworking the commercial appropriation of working-class fun, a Gentile taking up the Jewish ‘Oi!’. Lye understood the hybrid nature of jazz and, through a process of mixing and remixing, he uses the music to present a hopeful vision of 1930s’ internationalism.
After the war, Lye took a job in New York directing for *The March of Time* newsreel series, which was well-paid but not time-consuming. Disappointed that Madison Avenue ad execs were not more interested in his work, Lye nevertheless made a number of interesting films during this period. Although not included in the present programme, *The Sign of Plexiglas* (1958) is worth noting. For this promotional film advertising the Rohm and Hass Company, Lye cut shapes of coloured Plexiglas which danced and swayed to the ice-cool sound of vibraphonist Milt Jackson’s ‘Opus de Jazz’. During this period, Lye also worked with Count Basie and made an unused ad for Cheerios breakfast cereal using Charlie Parker’s recording of ‘Confirmation’.

We end the programme with *Tal Farlow*, the absolute refinement of Lye’s craft as a film-maker. Simple white lines of varying breadth and number move against a black background to the song ‘Rock n Rye’ by American guitarist Farlow. In fact, Lye began the film in the late 1950s, picking it up again in the 1980s but it was ultimately synchronised posthumously by his assistant Steven Jones, overseen by Ann Lye. In his biography of Lye, Roger Horrocks notes that Farlow, who had been generous with music rights, was delighted with the outcome of the film.3

Len Lye’s lifelong enthusiasm for jazz shaped much of his most successful work. As this film programme demonstrates, jazz rhythm provided a useful structure for Lye’s visual experimentation. The music’s freedom and vitality perfectly matched the distinctive qualities of his artistic practice; drawing upon musical tradition, improvising within the moment, looking towards the modern. And most importantly, they are films that remind us of life’s happiness, films to make us smile and tap our feet.

Dr Nicolas Pillai (Birmingham City University, UK) is the author of *Jazz as Visual Language: Film, Television and the Dissonant Image*, which contains a chapter on Len Lye and jazz. He was recently awarded a prestigious Research Leadership grant by the Arts and Humanities Research Council for a project entitled *Jazz on BBC-TV 1960-1969*.

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Life’s Musical Minute
1953
16mm colour transferred to digital sound, 1.50 min.

One of Len Lye’s less well-known works, Life’s Musical Minute was one of several films he produced in the United States during the 1950s in search of corporate sponsorship. Lye created sample advertisements to pitch to producers, in this case the familiar Life magazine. The music behind Lye’s animations in this film was Gene Krupa’s drum solo from ‘The Golden Wedding’ by Woody Herman and his Orchestra.

Experimental Animation
1934
35mm B/W transferred to digital sound, 1.54 min.

One of Lye’s earliest films, Experimental Animation is more frequently known by the name Peanut Vendor, the title of the musical piece heard in the film and a testament to the importance of music in Lye’s work. Lye used a 1930 recording of ‘Peanut Vendor’ by Red Nichols and his Five Pennies, a soundtrack to which he could showcase his rhythmic animation skills for prospective sponsors.

Swinging the Lambeth Walk 1939
35mm Dufaycolor transferred to digital sound, 4 min.

One of Lye’s most accomplished films, Swinging the Lambeth Walk, placed pieces of various recordings of the popular 1937 show tune ‘Lambeth Walk’ in accompaniment with Lye’s visuals. As particular instruments took solo spots in the soundtrack, Lye’s hand painted animations followed suit. Piano flourishes produced a burst of coloured dots and circles while a violin or bass solo featured waving lines of the appropriate size and tone.

Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation. From material preserved and made available by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision.
**N. or N.W.**

1937

35mm B/W transferred to digital sound, 7.28 min.

*N. or N.W.* was one of four films that were commissioned from Lye by the General Post Office Film Unit, providing the Unit with some of their most visually stunning works. While this film appears more conventional by Lye's usual standards it is very much a Lye film, with a generous jazz soundtrack that includes pieces by Fats Waller and Benny Goodman.

**Musical Poster #1**

1940

35mm Technicolor transferred to digital sound, 2.28 min.

Sponsored by the British Government Ministry of Information during the Second World War, *Musical Poster* features Lye's jazz fuelled abstract images overlaid with images of government propaganda ('Careful, the enemy is listening to you'). Fittingly for a military inspired film, Lye synchronised his images to Benny Goodman's 'Bugle Call Rag'.

**Tal Farlow**

1980

16mm B/W transferred to digital sound, 2.14 min.

One of Lye's last film works (edited by an assistant following the artist's death), *Tal Farlow* takes its name from one of the greats of jazz guitar, Talmadge Farlow. Over the Tal Farlow Quartet's 1954 bebop recording 'Rock n Rye', Lye's scratched lines to emulate the guitarist's own slinky licks.

Courtesy of the Len Lye Foundation.
From material preserved and made available by Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision

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