

# Candid Eye, & Lonely Boy UNIT B

BY Tammy Stone

Lonely Boy

## TAKE ONE'S INTERVIEW WITH WOLF KOENIG

If the word documentary is synonymous with Canada, and the NFB is synonymous with Canadian documentary, it is impossible to consider the NFB, and particularly its fabled Unit B team, without one of its core members, Wolf Koenig. An integral part of the "dream team," he worked with, among others, Colin Low, Roman Kroitor, Terence Macartney-Filgate and unit head Tom Daly, as part of the NFB's most prolific and innovative ensemble. Koenig began his career as a splicer before moving on to animator, cameraman, director and producer, responsible for much of the output of the renowned *Candid Eye* series produced for CBC-TV between 1958 and 1961. Among Unit B's greatest achievements is *Lonely Boy* (1962), which brilliantly captured the phenomenon of megastar mania before anyone else, and continues to be screened worldwide. I had the opportunity to "speak" to Wolf Koenig in his first Internet interview, a fitting format for a self-professed tinkerer who made a career out of embracing the latest technologies. He reflects on his days as part of Unit B, what the term documentary means to him and the process of making *Lonely Boy*.

*What was your background before joining the NFB?*

In 1937, my family fled Nazi Germany and came to Canada, just in the nick of time. After a couple of years of wondering what he should do, my father decided that we should settle down on a farm. He found the perfect place, 145 acres of beautiful hills and bush bordering the Grand River, just outside of Galt, Ontario. The hills and valleys were beautiful, alright, but hell to plow and harvest. So we got a tractor, one of the first in the area, a Ford-Ferguson - small but strong.

One day, in early May 1948, my father got a call from a neighbour down the road - Mr. Merritt, the local agricultural representative for the federal department of agriculture - who asked if "the boy" could come over with the tractor to try out a new tree-planting machine. The machine was designed to fit only the Ford-Ferguson, and we were the only ones in the area to have one. So my father called me over and said, "Go!" As I was pulling the tree planter across a field, I noticed a couple of guys off to the side. One was pointing and giving directions and the other one was setting up a tripod with a movie camera on it. After the test plant-

ing was done, I went over and asked them what they were filming. Raymond Garceau, the director, told me that they were from the agricultural unit of the NFB, and that they were making a film about this new tree-planting machine. I got talking to them and told them how much I loved films, especially animation films, and that I wanted one day to work in that field. They suggested that I send a job application to the NFB. I think Garceau must have mailed me one, although I don't remember exactly how I got it. Anyway, I sent it off, and about six weeks later I got a letter asking if I were interested in a position as junior splicer at \$100 per month at the National Film Board of Canada. My father said, "Go! It's the government!."

So, on July 12, 1948, I boarded the CPR train in Galt, hay-seed in my hair, hauling a cardboard suitcase bulging with clothing and my mother's cookies and sandwiches. I was off to Toronto and then Ottawa [where the NFB was located at the time]. And on the morning of July 13, I reported for work as junior splicer. I was 20, and had no education save four years at vocational school, where I learned the rudiments of auto mechanics, drafting, house wiring and wood-working – all useful things if you're a farmer, but not much help in filmmaking. So I learned how to splice film and I got rather good at it. I met practically everybody involved in production because they all had to come to my tiny cubicle to get their films spliced. In spare moments, I'd hang around and watch people edit or go down to animation and see how they did it, and then go into the optical camera section and watch how animation was shot. I thought I was in heaven. Anyway, after about a year and a half of splicing and learning, I was invited to come and join the animation department.

*I understand Tom Daly, who would go on to head the Unit B team, was executive producer for the animation department when you were there. What was your relationship like with him?*

Tom was truly the heart of Unit B. He was the executive producer of the unit and its brains and muscle, too. He was a master editor, and still is, and he took great care that we new ones were fully instructed in the rules of the craft. He'd

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give regular lectures and with the help of a 16 mm projector took us through a film shot by shot that he or Stuart Legg – the great British documentarian brought in by Grierson during the war to oversee *The World in Action* – had edited. Tom had apprenticed with Legg and learned the craft from him. In the war years, they invariably had to use newsreel material from disparate sources – British, German, Portuguese, American or Canadian – yet made it look as if it all came from the same source. Later, as head of Unit B, Tom continued to mentor and guide us. And he still edited. I remember Colin Low and me looking over Tom's shoulder as he cut *Cornal* and later *City of Gold*. And he explained everything he did. He was a master teacher as well as an artist. Without his guidance and infinite patience, many of us would never have worked on a film. And Tom challenged us intellectually, too. He'd get those of us who were undereducated to read the classics, like Plato's *Dialogues*. He was giving us a university education. No other executive producer would have taken the trouble to do this. In the end, Tom's efforts paid off. Studio B did some of the NFB's most interesting work and has never seen his like again.



*The Romance of Transportation in Canada*

*It sounds like an ideal work environment. Does your relationship with Roman Kroitor go back to the early days too?*

I met Roman first while I was still a splicing boy. He came to the NFB – I don't know the exact year – as a summer student. He came into Unit B and therefore was under Daly's jurisdiction. Roman was doing his Ph.D. in philosophy, I believe, at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. I met him in the usual way. He brought something in for me to splice. We got to talking and pretty soon we were spending lunch hours debating deep philosophical things while eating our sandwiches. Roman always won any debate. He was just too smart for me. He was also very outspoken, and he spoke his mind without much regard for diplomacy. Once, one veteran NFB director stopped Roman in the hall and asked him how he liked his latest film. It had just been screened and he noticed that Roman was there. And Roman said, "It's a pile of shit!" And I'm sure it was. Needless to say, the "old boys" became a little leery of Roman. They didn't appreciate his frankness. However, at least one of the old boys liked Roman's chutzpah, and so Stanley Jackson would often join us in our philosophical lunches, which we would

often continue at Murray's Restaurant after work, and then we would go see a movie. When I finally got out of splicing, I was fortunate enough to be taken in by the animation department, which was the fulfillment of a dream I had ever since I saw Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. Eventually, I began working with Robert Verrall and Colin Low on *The Romance of Transportation in Canada*.

*Did you work with Kroitor prior to the Candid Eye series?*

Yes. Roman's genius came in handy on *City of Gold*. He helped shape the film, working closely with Tom Daly, who edited it, Colin Low, myself and Pierre Berton, who wrote and read the narration. Roman was a technical wizard. We had the problem of doing the complex, curved camera moves over the photographs. This was an immensely difficult task, and Roman invented a solution. We called it the "Kroitorer" and it consisted of a hand-sized platform with four tiny caster wheels, a magnetic solenoid, within which was a sharply pointed armature and an oscillating power supply that caused the sharp armature to vibrate up and down 24 times a second. The photograph was covered with a sheet of clear acetate. The Kroitorer was powered up, and moved over the photo, the pointed armature leaving a trail of tiny impressions on the surface of the acetate. Then black grease pencil was rubbed into these impressions to make them more visible. Next, the acetate sheet was placed beside the animation table under a small microscope attached to the table and the photo was placed under the camera. The camera operator had only to align the crosshairs of the microscope with the first dot, shoot a frame, line up the second dot, shoot another frame, and so on. The results were perfect. This saved us weeks if not months of work and reshoots. Roman and I then worked together for a couple of years on the *Candid Eye* series.

*How did Candid Eye come about? How was it initially conceived?*

I can answer this very simply – Henri Cartier-Bresson. One year I was given a book of Cartier-Bresson photographs, *The Decisive Moment*. The photographs absolutely stunned me. Here was real life, as it happened, captured on film at the moment of greatest clarity and meaning. I showed the book to Roman, Tom and others, with the purpose of convincing them that we could do this kind of observation on film. We had already seen work from the British Free Cinema and we were impressed. And then there were the earlier films of Pere Lorenz, *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and *The River*. We were also very familiar with the fine wartime documentary features like *Desert Victory* and *The True Glory*. So it was in the air and the Cartier-Bresson photographs were the final inspiration. Roman agreed we should give it a try, so we took the notion to Tom, who agreed with us. Off we went with little experience, but a lot of enthusiasm. I think our first film was *The Days before Christmas*, a natural subject, considering the season was upon us. A whole lot of us fanned out across the city and began running film through the cameras.

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*Lonely Boy*

*Candid Eye was a true departure for CBC-TV and for filmmaking in Canada. Did you have any particular idea about how Candid Eye subjects should be approached? Is it possible to say there was a mandate, or a distinct philosophy, behind the series?*

The idea behind the *Candid Eye* series was simple: show our world and the lives lived by ordinary people without influencing or manipulating them. Observe but do not disturb; preferably remain invisible. Our intention was to put the real world on film – sound and image – in order to help people become more aware of their community and the world they lived in. Who knows whether we succeeded. If nothing else, we recorded a bit of history. Pretty high-minded, if not a little naive, eh? Anyhow, that was it. Not much of a manifesto, but it allowed us a great deal of flexibility and a lot of room to grow. Today, anyone and everyone can do this with the marvellous new DV cameras. I sure wish we'd had these in the old days.

*How much of what you did was made possible by the portable 16 mm cameras and possibilities for synchronized sound, so often hailed as the tools that made cinéma vérité possible?*

Alas, we didn't have a lot of that wonderful new technology at the beginning of *Candid Eye*. All we had was the little 16 mm Arri S, not a silent machine, therefore not suited to shooting sync sound. For sound, the sound recordist had to haul around a portable suitcase-sized recorder, the Mairack, which was spring wound and weighed about 50 pounds. A little later in the game we used the sprocket-tape machine for sync sound. It was designed and built at the NFB, and used specially perforated quarter-inch audio tape. However, this was not a portable device. The Nagra arrived sometime later. For sync picture we had the 16 mm Auricon, but it couldn't be hand-held. It weighed about 40 pounds with a 1,200-foot magazine, so we used tripods. A lot of our stuff was shot on the handy little Arri S. The sound recordist picked up a lot of ambient sound and, with careful picture and sound-editing, we got it to look as if the material was in sync, an editor's trick from the earlier documentary days.



*The Back-Breaking Leaf*

You know, the guy talking on the phone, shot so that you couldn't see his mouth move and editing his voice over the picture.

Here I should digress for a moment and talk about this editing business. The fact is, every cut is a lie. The cutaway of someone intently listening to someone speak is shot after – or before – the actual conversation. Even with multiple camera shoots, the editor uses the ideal reaction shot rather than the exact, matching moment. And when one cuts back to the speaker, likely as not, a long chunk of the actual conversation is dropped in order to get to the point. So, the truth is adjusted. The irony is that, in editing, one has to lie to tell the truth, otherwise the audience would die of boredom or the truth would be smothered under a mountain of chaff. Anyhow, toward the end of the *Candid Eye* series, the camera and engineering departments built a small, noiseless camera. It was a bit awkward to hand-hold, a design problem that could eventually have been corrected; however, just then, the French company Eclair put the NPR on the market. Perfectly balanced for hand-holding, relatively light – about 18 pounds – and almost totally silent. But it came too late for the *Candid Eye*, even for *Lonely Boy* [the immediate heir of the *Candid Eye* series].



*The Days before Christmas*

*A prevailing myth is that there was an active dislike of Unit B and its new ideas at the Film Board, that you were the renegade team. Was it difficult to work as part of this group at the NFB at this time?*

The rumour is only partly true. Yes there was a certain disdain toward these young upstarts who thought they knew how to make films. I don't think it was outright hostility. We were a bit of a joke making films on 16 mm, the "substandard format" as it was called. "Real pros" used 35 mm. Eventually, though, I think we won the old guard's respect. And even they began to try 16mm. It was a lot cheaper than 35 mm and the equipment was much more portable. The BNC Mitchell, a 35mm blimped sound camera, weighed in at about 80 pounds. The French section of the Film Board was much more open to the newer ways and quickly adopted them. Within a couple of years the whole place was moving in the new direction.

*Now, to get to Lonely Boy. There seems to be a dispute whether Lonely Boy was part of Candid Eye or not. Was it?*

*Lonely Boy* wasn't part of the original *Candid Eye* series, although it was a direct descendant. It was made in 1962. *Candid Eye* ended in 1961 with *Festival in Puerto Rico*, which

was about Maureen Forrester in Puerto Rico. The idea for the film, I guess, came from me. We hadn't really looked at pop music yet and here was an opportunity to go that route – a young, successful pop star from Ottawa, of all places. Roman and I went to Boston to see one of his concerts. The scene was totally different from what we had experienced. We were convinced that there was a film here.

*I understand you only had one camera on that shoot. How did your team solve the problems of capturing so much action simultaneously with one camera?*

One camera was all we needed. We had pretty well absorbed Tom's editing lessons by then. We became quite adept at shooting with a mind to the editing process – get lots of cutaway material; get wide shots as well as close-ups; get reaction shots; get material to establish the location, etc. I'm sure you've noticed that at one point in the film Anka gets dressed in a black suit before stepping out on stage. Then, when he appears before the crowd, he's wearing a white suit. Obviously shot at different times. Not an ideal cut, but the general trajectory of the sequence allowed us to get away with it. As I said, every cut is a lie. But sometimes one has to lie to tell the truth.

*There is such a sense of immediacy about the film, as though you and Roman were completely thrown off guard by the sensation Anka had become, which is a credit to how the final film was put together. How much did you know about him before joining him for the few days of the film?*

We didn't know much about Anka when we started out. But we did see his concert in Boston and we knew that the material would be rich and relatively easy to obtain. So, with a fair bit of experience behind us, as well as a considerable helping of naïveté, we jumped into the river. Then it was a matter of being alert to every moment and continually observant and trying not to drown.

*I find it fascinating that while synchronous sound was a triumph of the vérité movement, you eschewed it at several key moments in the film, such as when the camera rests on the screaming girls' faces while we only hear Anka sing. And when Anka is seen writing on stage at the Copacabana, but we hear his voice on the track talking about the gift he'd been given. Can you tell me a little bit about how these decisions were made?*

Sometimes, necessity is the mother of invention. Turning the screaming down as Anka continues to sing happened because even though the sound editor, Kathleen Shannon, painstakingly cut and synchronized every scream to the non-sync picture, the screams got to be a bit too much. The only solution was to turn them off. Surprisingly it worked better without them. The imagination continued to supply them. And the sound of Anka's performance wasn't recorded at that location either. Marcel Carriere, the sound recordist, was off in the crowd recording the screams while I was shooting picture, non-sync. If you look carefully, you'll notice moments when Anka's lips go out of sync a bit as he

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sings. That's because the sound was recorded at another concert, a couple of weeks earlier. The band's and Anka's routine were perfectly repeated every time. The tempos varied very slightly, hence the out of sync, but it was so close we could use it for short pieces. It's the magic of editing. The same thing happened at the Copacabana. We used a recording from another location, but this time the tempos were far off, so we used Anka talking about his gift to mask the discrepancy. This also had the incidental advantage of adding another level of thought, allowing the audience to be in two places at once. So you see, it was necessity that made us become inventive.

*The film is so ambitious, employing cutaways, creative use of sound, self-reflexivity, interviews. Can you expand a little on the editing of Lonely Boy?*

The editing of a documentary is like creating something out of thin air. The shots are often unrelated in time and space and yet, by bringing them together correctly, they begin to attract each other and cohere, like molecules forming a new substance. In editing – like playing an instrument – one has to know the rules as almost second nature. Then one has to let go and allow the material to lead you. The shots often tell one where they should go; one has to be alert and listen. The process of editing, especially documentaries, is probably the most demanding part of filmmaking and it's also the most rewarding. In the editing process, the film begins to live. Even ordinary material, well put together, can really shine. Conversely, good material badly edited can ruin the project. The cutting of *Lonely Boy*, as always, was a collaborative effort. I did the basic assembly and Roman and Tom would look at it and make suggestions. Then John Spotton and Guy Côté took over – each with one half of the film – and did the final polish, adding some ideas that we hadn't thought of. So, you see, even at this stage of the game, film is an ensemble art. This way of working was probably unique to our gang. Many great films have been made by individuals working solo. We were just more comfortable as a chamber orchestra.

*I would like to ask you about what it means to you to make an observational film because there's something transcendent about Lonely Boy and this seems to have something to do with truth, whether it's an emotional or visceral truth. Do you have any thoughts on this?*

Any of Cartier-Bresson's photographs shows us the truth. He was our inspiration because he did it so consistently. Clearly, it was no accident for him. He knew exactly when to trip the shutter. With film, it's a little different. It exists in time, and so the element of time becomes important. In both cases, though, there's a shared commonality – and that's structure. Roman – the great structuralist – used to clutch his forehead after a rushes screening and ask despairingly, "What's the structure? What's the structure?" And he was right to ask it, because that's what a film is really about. I've come to the conclusion in my dotage that "structure" is what all the arts are really about: music, dance, the graphic arts, the theatre, the literary arts, architecture, poetry, etc. They show us by inference something that we otherwise can't see. This "something" is invisible to us, like a fir tree in the dark. But come Christmas time, people hang lights all over the boughs. At first one only sees the lights, but if you step back a bit and squint, you see the shape of the tree, even though the tree itself is still invisible. The lights define it, so we're able to see it by inference. In this laboured analogy, the lights represent the "arts" and the tree the "structure." And

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the structure is what permeates the universe from the sub-atomic particle to the whole cosmos; in effect, we are all little lights hung on the invisible tree. And the arts are about the only way we have of talking about this thing structure or truth. So you are quite right to raise the question. Truth is what it's all about, isn't it?

**Wolf Koenig's films and television include:** *Neighbours* 1952 (ph); *The Romance of Transportation in Canada* 1953 (co-an, AAN-AS); *Corral* 1954 (ph); *Gold* 1955 (sc/ph/ed); *City of Gold* 1957 (d/ph with Colin Low, CFA-FY, AAN-SD); *It's a Crime* 1957 (d); *The Days before Christmas* 1958 (co-p/co-d/co-ed, TV); *Blood and Fire* 1958 (co-p/ed, TV); *Glenn Gould – Off the Record* 1959 (p/d with Roman Kroitor, also ph, TV); *Glenn Gould – On the Record* 1959 (p/d with Kroitor, also ph, TV); *The Back-Breaking Leaf* 1959 (co-p, TV); *Lonely Boy* 1962 (ph/co-d with Kroitor, CFA-FY); *The Great Toy Robbery* 1964 (co-p); *The Drag* 1965 (co-p, AAN-AS); *Stravinsky* 1965 (ph/ed/co-d with Kroitor, TV); *What on Earth!* 1966 (co-p, AAN-AS); *This Is the House That Jack Built* 1967 (co-p, AAN-AS); *Psychocratie* 1969 (co-p, CFA-FY, CFA-AS); *N-Zone* 1970 (co-ph); *Hot Stuff* 1971 (co-p); *The Family that Dwelt Apart* 1973 (p, CFA-AS, AAN-AS); *The Street* 1976 (exp, AAN-AS); *The Hottest Show on Earth* 1977 (co-p/co-d/co-sc, CFA-SD); *Spinnolio* 1977 (p, CFA-AS); *Eve Lambert* 1978 (exp/ph); *Why Men Rape* 1979 (co-p/co-ed); *Ted Baryluk's Grocery* 1982 (co-p, GA-SD); *John Cat* 1984 (d/sc); *Connection* 1986 (d/ed); *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* 1993 (co-p).

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