

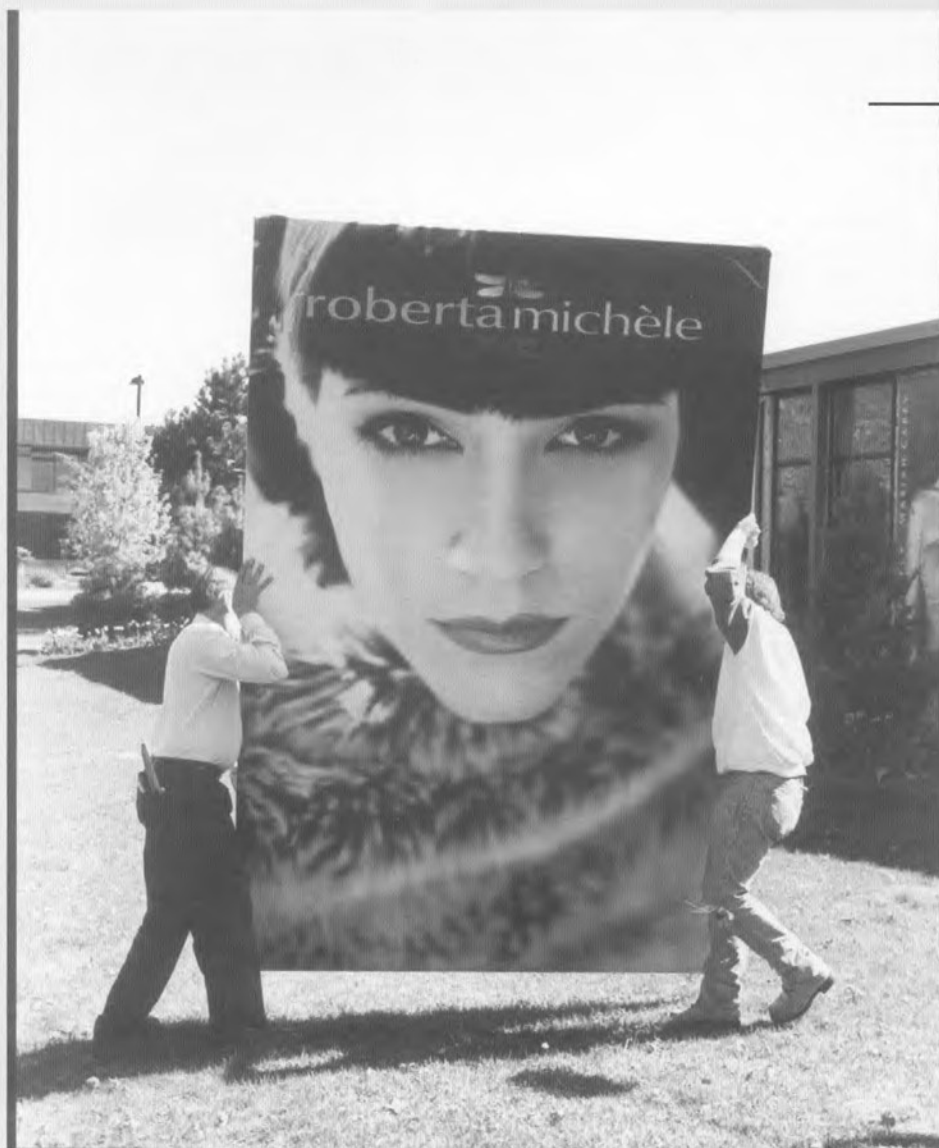
LONELY GIRL

SU RYNARD
CHARTS GHOSTS IN
THE DREAM MACHINE

BY TOM MCSORLEY

In the beginning, there was *Lonely Boy*. Wolf Koenig and Roman Kroitor's groundbreaking 1962 documentary portrait of Paul Anka's stardom penetrated the inner sanctum of celebrity construction, revealing how Anka's image was being managed (which included his losing weight and, yes, getting a nose job), and on how carefully calculated would be the next career move for the pop prodigy. After seeing the NFB's new feature documentary about the contemporary music business, *Dream Machine*, *Lonely Boy* has never seemed more prescient. While it might be a stretch to call it the female version of *Lonely Boy*, *Dream Machine* shares its storied predecessor's fascination with, and fly-on-the-wall observation of, the mechanics of star-making. And times have changed. In these multimedia corporate conglomerate days, to borrow from Mr. Anka, the journey to the top has little to do with doing it "my way."

Images courtesy of the NFB



"Is who I am enough?"
ROBERTA MICHÈLE

"Breathe the air we have blown you."
PETE TOWNSHEND,

"THE PUNK MEETS THE GODFATHER"
FROM QUADROPHENIA

DREAM MACHINE



Director Su Rynard

Dream Machine follows Edmonton-born singer Roberta Michèle (née Roberta Packolyk) from the time she signs a recording contract with Sony Music in October 1998 until the release of her album in April 2000. We accompany Michèle to recording sessions, rehearsals, image-management meetings, upscale clothing stores, photo and video shoots. Along with interviews with Michèle and her husband, there are revealing encounters with Sony A&R rep and Roberta-booster, Michael Roth, influential deejays and veejays, Sony image makers, as well as sobering observations on the music business by veteran producer Bruce Allen and singer/songwriter Jann Arden. There is much talk of how much money Sony has "invested" in Michèle's arrival and of how, logically, it wants a return. As the film chronicles her dedication to her craft and her desire to "succeed" with what is referred to as "the project," it also presents in withering counterpoint the Darwinian war to get programmers to select her single from the hundreds received virtually every week. From its presentation of Michèle's path to this moment (there are dark hints of sibling resentment and a bossy stage mom) to the highlighting of the ruthless delivery system into which her product will be placed, *Dream Machine* delivers a troubling anatomy of pop culture. One wonders how and why anyone would find seductive such a labyrinth of insecurity, opportunism and avarice.

The film was initiated by NFB producer Peter Starr (*The Herd*, *Spirits of Havana*), an avid music fan whose father was a jazz musician. Sitting in Toronto's NFB offices, located across the street from MuchMusic, Starr became intrigued by the endless parade of limousines disgorging the latest music stars into the MuchMusic "environment." Having made a few friends in the music business who scout talent for the major labels, Starr wanted to produce a "process documentary" about this phenomenon, a film which would follow an artist's development from signing the recording contract to the release of the first album. Starr hired a researcher from the music industry and,

after meeting with her and talking with her record company, settled on Roberta Michèle.

Selecting the subject was the only real certainty for the production says Starr. "What appealed to me was that this would be a process-oriented, cinéma-vérité-style film with no predictable outcome. Who knows where it's going? It basically follows a person entering into a new world. It's not an investigative *fifth estate*- or *60 Minutes*-style piece, you know, looking for blood and guts but more an examination of the process of how an artist is developed by a studio. I was always interested in how the old Hollywood studio system would groom stars and a lot of that happens in the contemporary music business. I'm also a huge fan of *Lonely Boy*. Although our film is very different, there are aspects of it which are similar." The other uncertainty for the film was the degree of access granted the filmmakers to Roberta Michèle herself as she is carefully constructed for public consumption by Sony. Starr admits, "We didn't get even remotely close to total access. Sony is media savvy, and we knew the risks of working 'with' them, because if we had lost access, we would have lost the film. We worried about that as the pressure got more intense and the marketing machine took over the process of handling the release of the album."

Director Su Rynard also found what she calls the "dance of access" to be the most daunting aspect of the film. "Access was by far the most difficult thing about making *Dream Machine*. The challenge was that at every stage of the game, a new group of people at Sony became involved and would have to be told about the reason for our being there. No matter how much background work we did, every time we went out to shoot, it was 'Nice to meet you,' and then, 'Roberta, why is there a camera crew here?' Our most turbulent time was when Roberta graduated from the recording stage to the marketing stage. At this point, marketing people at Sony were very reluctant to allow us to continue shooting. It became a chess game. The fact of the situation was that our objective was to shoot a 'truthful' cinéma-vérité-ish documentary within a corporation that has entire departments dedicated to expertly controlling what words and images are released. We were turning the camera on them, and they didn't like it. Our very presence was antithetical to their corporate objectives. To this day, I'm amazed that we shot what we did."

Hired by Starr and without any previous documentary experience, the aesthetically varied and formally flexible Rynard did find the process a challenge. Although she has made everything from experimental film (*Within Dialogue, Signal*) to



DREAM MACHINE

mockumentary (*Eight Men Called Eugene*) to short dramas (*Big Deal So What*, *Strands*), *Dream Machine* was her first feature and her first foray into documentary. "I'm a genre jumper, and for me the idea dictates the form; I've always been the one to conceive of the idea for my films, the one in control. Because *Dream Machine* is a 'process' documentary, an intuitive approach was required. I had to work totally in the moment while shooting, and essentially write and direct the piece as we went along. Aside from the general framework of following the subject from signing to release, we didn't know exactly where this might take us. As a director, I started to map out, within that framework, the thematic territory that I wanted the film to explore. I had just finished my Canadian Film Centre short drama, *Strands*, which has a Pygmalion-identity theme. These ideas became a departure point for *Dream Machine*. Themes of image and identity become very interesting when the intention is to make a film about someone travelling toward celebrity and how that celebrity persona will be constructed."



Dream Machine: The journey to the top has little to do with doing it "My Way."

In the shooting and shaping of the 80 hours of footage into its final taut 75 minutes, Rynard was often surprised. "I assumed that we might come across some artist v. the big corporation conflict. What I saw was very little opposition to corporate culture. In pop culture, things that used to be considered marginal or alternative are all somehow now under the corporate umbrella. Big record companies are the yellow brick road for young recording artists, and the recording artists are good corporate employees. And another structure emerged. Roberta's journey really begins in the mall where she worked at Mr. Entertainment selling music products. In a sense, she travels through the looking glass of the pop-culture entertainment industry and ends up back at the mall as a product, a CD."

During the production, Rynard did not concern herself with her subject's failure or success in industry terms. "Whether or not Roberta becomes a 'star' was never an issue. My intention was to dig a little deeper to dissect the cult of celebrity. I'm interested in the story of someone who wants to become a star and to look at the machinery that profits from that desire." Upon its completion, after Michèle's CD had been released and she had toured with Amanda Marshall, "We showed Roberta and her husband the film. Roberta said she thought it was honest, which means a lot to me. Sony? I really don't know what they think of the film in the end. There was a long battle between Sony and the NFB. The film has a few battle scars."

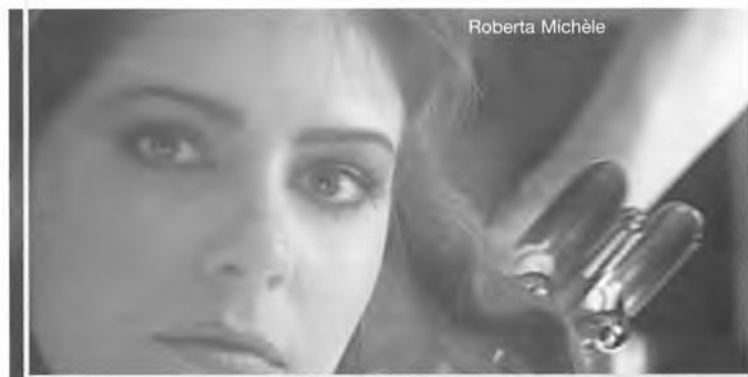
For all its "battle scars," the film is certainly not a thunderous,

indignant expose of the corruption of the music business. It is both less and more than that. Intended more as a portrait of how an artist is brought to public attention than of the artist herself, *Dream Machine* offers an illumination of the underlying assumptions of corporate culture generally. It is a film that exposes this now ascendant culture's self-aggrandizing ideas of predestination (e.g., you will be something if we make you something: "breathe the air we have blown you"), its predatory self-awareness ("We're very media conscious," say several Sony employees), its teleological certitude about programming decisions ("People like to hear what they already know," offers a programming director) and its time-annihilating greed that insists upon instant return on its investment. It also reveals the impact of such thinking on those who enter the system, encapsulated in Michèle's unflinching, fundamental and poignant question: "Is who I am enough?" While *Dream Machine* may not stridently denounce these attitudes, its very presentation of them offers ample critique.

As Roberta Michèle moves from uncertainty and passive acceptance of her manipulation by the "machine" to a quietly insistent control over her career, there are no guarantees of success. Despite the self-assured efforts of the machine on the "project" of Roberta Michèle, uncertainty prevails. In this sense, *Dream Machine* illuminates deep fissures in the process, in the logic of accelerated corporate capitalism, and in the dreams of stardom itself. As Rynard observes, "For me, an interesting irony is that a superstar like Céline says she wants to be an ordinary person, have children and barbecues, while the 'ordinary people' clamour to be stars." Each wants what the other has. What is wrong with this picture? Plenty. Beyond the case of Roberta Michèle, this film insinuates that we are all participants in the social, political, economic and mythopoeic processes that combine to construct and maintain popular culture's ideas of fame, celebrity and success.

Ultimately, *Dream Machine* is a film about preserving individual identity and individual power in a system designed to repackage it and put it on sale. Roberta Michèle is a knowing participant in her own commodification, and yet she begins to resist as that process threatens to, paradoxically enough, eliminate her from decision-making. From the recording to the release, the film captures effectively the unsettling strangeness of this world she has entered and its unreal quality. (Witness the film's inclusion of the 1999 Juno press conference given by Dion, while shiny hubby/Svengali René Angélil watches closely.) It is a world in which premeditation informs every gesture, every hesitation, every utterance, even every silence. It is precisely its accentuation of the underlying assumptions of this premeditated corporate world that gives *Dream Machine's* observations power and relevance. In such a world, as Roberta Michèle discovers and perhaps Paul Anka already knew, we can be very lonely indeed.

TAKE ONE



Roberta Michèle