



2019 MFF: Rambling with Richard Thompson



Richard Thompson performs at Outpost in the Burbs on Saturday, May 11. COURTESY MICHAEL STAHL/OUTPOST IN THE BURBS

By GWEN OREL

orel@montclairlocal.news

You can rock.

Or you can roll.

But you can't do both at the same time, or you might get a hernia.

So says [Richard Thompson](#) on a tour bus one day, in the new film "A Winding Road: A Ramble with Richard Thompson," that screened at Cinema505 the [Montclair Film Festival](#) this past Saturday, May 11.

The folk-rock legend, who now lives in Montclair, performed in concert at [Outpost in the Burbs](#) later that evening. "A Winding Road" was a joint presentation by Montclair Film and Outpost.

In a Q&A after the film, rocker Warren Zanes, also a Montclair resident, challenged Thompson on this statement, saying this movie both rocked and rolled.

Thompson disagreed, saying it was all rolling. And after all, you don't hear about The Rocking Stones. His cheeky humor animated both the movie and the Q&A that followed.

The film often took place in a bus rolling down the road. Director Edmond Deraedt, who has been working lights for Thompson for many years, took a "fly on the wall" approach in the roughly hour-long documentary.

[READ: FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS; DOCTOR ROCKER WARREN ZANES](#)

[READ: MONTCLAIR LITERARY FESTIVAL; THOMPSON, ZANES, PHILLIPS HAVE A MUSICAL, LITERARY BEAT](#)

It is not a history that follows Thompson's own winding road from West London, England, through the folk-rock years of the seminal group Fairport Convention, to his current career touring with Richard Thompson Electric Trio. (A BBC documentary from 2003 fills in some of that, and features interviews with Billy Connolly, ex-wife Linda Thompson and Harry Shearer, among others.)

Nor is it a concert video.

It is a hybrid of concert and cinema verité. Almost nobody but Thompson talks in the film, as his tour bus travels through several states. (Two of the musicians weigh in). There are many shots of the audience, of hotel lobbies, of highways. Some songs are heard all the way through. There are no captions filling in Thompson's history. Thompson, born in 1949, was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for services to music.

In some ways, the film mirrors the experience of being on the road, and is, as its title suggests, a ramble with the rocker.

Capturing the “hallucination of life on the road” was what the film was about, Thompson told the MFF audience.

Zanes asked Thompson how touring solo was different than a band tour. Touring solo, Thompson said, is easy, and “like church. You want to create stillness in the room.” Every audience member is important, and shares in the process.

Band tours are more sociable, and include practical jokes. For example, his tour bus has a fine infraction jar: a dollar for every minute late for the bus.

Zanes, quoting Keith Richards, said that rockers often have trouble when the tour is over, and talked about the temptations of drinks and drugs.

Thompson disagreed. There is a lot of downtime on the road, he said, and boredom is one reason people turn to drugs. He never did that, but did drink early on: “Fairport was a hard-drinking band,” he said. Drink could fill up time and attention. But he stopped drinking in the early '70s. You can instead be an avid reader, or be interested in nature, or look at architecture. Or get better at Scrabble.

Back at home, he likes to keep “office hours” for songwriting. He compared it to having a rusty faucet: eventually the water runs clear.

“But after a few weeks, I can’t sleep. I have to dull it down, and watch ‘The Price Is Right’ or something,” he said.

On the road is when he might start a tune, and finish it at home.

Thompson also says in the film that not having a hit has kept audiences with him. At Cinema505, he expanded on the idea, talking about how he came of age in an album era. Pink Floyd might release a single, as might Fairport Convention, but it was not the point. As far as fans are concerned, he finds that people who like an artist sometimes stumble upon a related artist, and then stick with him.

Although, as Deraedt pointed out, certainly some Fairport songs, like “Who Knows Where the Time Goes,” have endured.

At the Q&A, audience members asked about his style of guitar playing, on sounding British, and how he remembers all those songs. Thompson talked about growing up with traditional music in the house, and loving the Border Ballads. Fairport made a conscious decision to keep the rhythm section, but sing English songs, including some ballads that might be hundreds of years old.

As for remembering the songs, in his own work, and in a [City Winery](#) song request show he does every year?

"I do a lot of bluffing," he said.