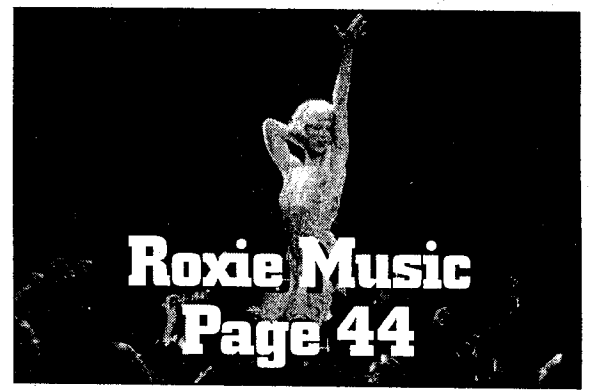


CP Arts



Celluloid Melts

Bob Massey and David Wilson turn old home movies into a new form of not-rock.



Passing Up the Bar: Wilson and Massey decide to take their opera to a grander venue.

By Mark Jenkins

"I sort of have this missionary zeal for pushing my rock friends in new directions," announces Bob Massey, sitting in the Silver Spring bungalow that's become the headquarters for his latest undertaking, *The Nitrate Hymnal*.

You might think that such previous Massey projects as his Punk Not Rock experimental-music salons and the guitar-cello instrumental combo Telegraph Melts would have offered a sufficient challenge to Massey's rock peers, who he says are often unaware of other options besides "just being in a band and pushing a van around until they're 35." But the 33-year-old guitarist's new project goes even further, injecting his punk ethic into the

realm of the venerable Washington Performing Arts Society.

In a couple of weeks, the WPAS will be hosting the world premiere of *The Nitrate Hymnal* at the 350-seat auditorium of Alexandria's George Washington Masonic National Memorial. The piece involves four singers, a dozen rock and classical musicians, and movies and projections by Massey's principal collaborator, 27-year-old Missouri-based filmmaker David Wilson. A number of possible terms for such a multimedia performance come to mind, but Massey prefers a classical one.

"Let's be clear about this," he says. "It's not a rock opera. It's just an opera."

"Bob had the idea to do an opera," Wilson elaborates, "and wasn't really listening to anyone tell him he couldn't do an opera. So we're

doing an opera. We call it an opera because that's what it is—it's sung through, it has these elements that are associated with classical opera. Yet it feels as much our own thing that we're making up as we go along."

In fact, *The Nitrate Hymnal* originally sprang from a source neither rock nor opera. The idea germinated when Massey's grandfather gave him all the home movies he had shot of his married life, beginning in the early '40s. "I wondered what impulse makes someone film their whole life," Massey says. "You watch these films and you start to see patterns. Every home movie is actually sort of a staged moment. It's not this real-life thing necessarily—people put on their best face, and anyone who grew up in a family knows that that's not the way it really works.

"So," he adds, "I thought it would be cool to tell the stories that happened in between these films. The stories we're using are fictional—they're not actually about my grandparents."

Massey received the 8 mm movies about three years ago, around the time he met Wilson. "I was trying to put a film tour together," the filmmaker recalls. "When I heard Punk Not Rock, it just clicked for me. It was like, *That's what I do*. I want to present movies or music or art that are not punk-rock music in the same environment that people are playing that music. So I got in touch with Bob and asked him if he wanted to go on tour with us. Bob was playing in Telegraph Melts at the time, and we ended up doing about 10 days together.

"It was really on that trip that we had the longest conversations about what this project might be. I don't know if the word 'opera' crossed our lips. It was just this idea of a song cycle that would have projections."

The narrative that developed, Wilson explains, is about a young man and his dying grandmother, who's losing her memory: "He's an aspiring filmmaker trying to make a movie about his grandparents' lives. He brings this box of old movies to the hospital to jog her memory. He shows her the movies, and they send her into these dreamlike reveries. But her past is still sort of jumbled."

Massey has only one quibble with Wilson's summary. "The thing that description leaves out," he says, "is that making the grandson a filmmaker is our chance to poke fun at ourselves for having the chutzpah to think that we could do an opera. It's an incredibly pretentious thing to say that you're writing an opera. But on the other hand, we're both totally in love with the idea. So we don't take ourselves that seriously, but we do take the idea pretty seriously."

Perhaps Massey and Wilson's most crucial collaborator is Jean Cook, a crossover-music violinist who used to work for the WPAS and now lives in New York. "She's really the third point in this triangle," Wilson says. "In addition to playing violin, she has crazy administrative skills." "She's got a really intense budget worked out," Massey adds. "The first budget I made was laughable."

Doing the paperwork properly is important because *The Nitrate Hymnal* received a grant from a new private arts endowment, the New York-based Creative Capital. "To them, we suggested that this is a logical extension of what we were already doing," says Massey, who currently fronts the cabaret-rock outfit the Gena Rowlands Band and plays guitar in the noisier Outcircuit. "I

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write songs and do weird avant-guitar stuff. And Dave makes movies. Combining those in this form lets us tell a bigger story than any pop song or a short film would."

Massey admits to having never formally studied composition. "When I was a kid, I took a bunch of piano and a little bit of violin, and sang in choirs and stuff," he says. "So I can read music kind of slowly and inaccurately. But I rely on my friends to do that stuff. There are people around me who are better at it."

"We have a pretty good idea what we're doing," he adds. "But it's not like we spent a lot of time learning how Verdi wrote operas."

The idea for Creative Capital came when the National Endowment for the Arts cut back its funding of individual artists in the mid-'90s, Wilson says. "The project is really modeled on venture capitalism. They make investments of money, resources, and time, and there's an expectation or hope that the investment will return itself. They're funding experimental work, really challenging work. Yet they say, 'If you're going to do this, be serious about an audience. Don't change what you're doing for anybody, but take what you're doing and put it out there, make it accessible.'"

"We're used to thinking about how you sell enough beer to get your show onstage," Massey notes. "This has been a great introduction to the world of arts presenters."

Because *The Nitrate Hymnal* didn't seem suited to rock bars, one of Massey's tasks was locating a small, available venue. "We were having a really hard time finding anything," he remembers. "I was on the Net one day and found something about the Capital City Opera, and they've done some shows [at the Masonic National Memorial]. That's how I figured out that space even existed. I'd walked by that building a dozen times and had no idea there was anything inside it."

Staging the opera inside a local landmark that's modeled on an ancient lighthouse from that other Alexandria (the one in Egypt) "seems to fit the insanity of our venture," Massey says. "The space is really beautiful, although in some ways it's not a perfect match. It's sort of a semicircle, and with projections the line of sight would be better if it were just a long narrow box. But we've got some strategies to make it work."

Making the piece fit the space is partly the responsibility of director David Schweizer, who's working with four singer-actors playing five roles and one character who appears only as a projection. "There's live projection of the actors, who may appear at one moment as a person and at the next moment as a projection, but still interacting with other actors," Wilson notes. "There are the home movies, which in some cases are barely manipulated and in some cases heavily manipulated visually. And then there's some original footage to fill in certain chinks in the story."

If *The Nitrate Hymnal* is well-received, Massey supposes, the next step will be to take it on the road, enlisting other WPAS-like presenters around the country.

"From what I've heard, there is touring potential for this in Europe," Wilson adds. "I would be ecstatic if that happened."

The duo has already been invited to present the opera at the New York Underground Film Festival and to tinker with it at the Sundance Theater Lab. "I've started to see this thing as having multiple stages," Massey says. "This D.C. premiere is just the first stage, and not necessarily the final phase of its evolution. This is the biggest, most unwieldy project I've ever tried to do, and I feel like it's inevitable that we'll learn a lot about what works and what doesn't only once it goes on stage. So there'll probably be a serious revision after that."

However the piece evolves, though, there's one person who may never quite get it: Although his grandfather told him that he could do whatever he wanted with the home movies, Massey isn't sure that the older man will appreciate the results. "My grandfather doesn't like movies made after the '50s. The very idea of theater probably never crossed his mind. I've been trying to think of a way to explain it to him that he'll understand."

He grins. "If you have any suggestions, I'm all ears." **CP**

The Nitrate Hymnal will be performed at 8 p.m. Friday, Jan. 24, and Saturday, Jan. 25, at the George Washington Masonic National Memorial, 101 Callahan Drive, Alexandria. For more information, call (202) 785-9727. A pay-what-you-can performance will take place at 8 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 23. For more information, visit www.nitratehymnal.net.