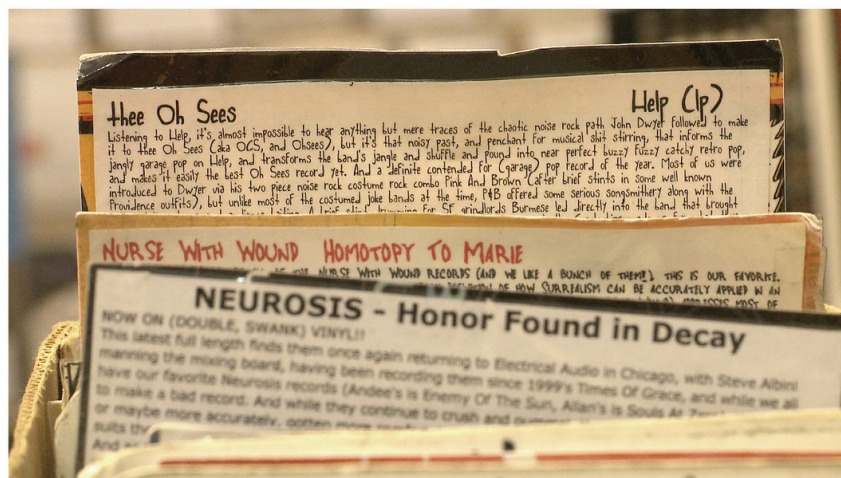


On Screen

Films & DVDs



Still from *It Came From Aquarius Records* (2022)

It Came From Aquarius Records Kenneth Thomas (Director)

The Scourge Productions 2022, 109 mins
Any film which chronicles a beloved independent record store will be categorised as a documentary and a tragedy. In the US, the streaming age plus escalating rents and gentrification in big cities spelled doom for many of these cultural institutions (see the *Other Music* documentary). Nevertheless, Aquarius Records, aka AQ, left its weird mark on San Francisco for nearly half a century. Six years in the making, Kenneth Thomas's film lays out the story. AQ started in 1969 via a self-described classical nerd selling his Bay Area shop to Chris Knab, a krautrock fan. Knab, who still looks back fondly on that time, focused on prog rock cult items until the mid-70s, before diving headlong into punk and hosting release parties for East Coast dignitaries The Ramones, Blondie

and Talking Heads. Even The Sex Pistols swung through, nicking some records before a gunman made off with the shop's *Never Mind The Bollocks* album profits.

As Knab moved on to form the budding punk/new wave label 415 Records, the film glosses over the stretch from 1980 to the mid-90s, but then an AQ clerk named Windy Chien took over the operation, moved it to the fashionable Mission District and led a new heyday for the shop. Chien cherished eccentric releases and novelties while creating mind-bogglingly detailed store cards for favourite releases. She also built up a knowledgeable yet personable mailing list for new releases, featuring snippets of each record (which was novel then), and accumulated thousands of write-ups over the years.

I can attest that the AQ list was an incredibly enticing portal into strange worlds and subgenres of indie rock, punk,

death metal, avant garde composition and more. What amazed me on a visit there was how tiny a store it was, given its seemingly infinite stock.

By the middle of the film, we not only hear from the still exuberant Chien but also the likes of Matt Groening (*The Simpsons*) and John Darnielle (The Mountain Goats) who share stories of their strange discoveries there. Testaments also come from performers such as Finnish psych band Circle, garage rocker Ty Segall and Liz Harris of Grouper, who insist that AQ boosted their careers. Even other indie record stores attest to how AQ's picks would drive their own album orders.

In 2003, a pair of music obsessives who also worked at AQ took over the business – Allan Horrocks and Andee Connors (also in math rock group A Minor Forest), who had no shortage of eagerness or love of outre music to share with customers

as the shop became a meeting place for musical weirdos. But the duo faced the headwinds of the post-millennial digital age and recession, not to mention family obligations. Also, survival in the technology haven of Silicon Valley was for the ultra-rich, while an indie shop was too niche to stay there for long. The inevitable sad closure of AQ in 2016 is drawn out in the film's final half hour, but we also hear from eager customers who revel in rarities and mind-boggling oddities such as a compilation of silent tracks, an album of slowed down bird songs and the mysterious radio transmissions of The Conet Project.

Even the recent vinyl resurgence wasn't enough to save the shop, whose space is now taken up by vinyl mail order Stranded Records, which in a way carries on and honours their tradition, along with this affectionate cinematic tribute.
Jason Gross

The Lost Generation: Outside The Mainstream

William Hooker (Director)

William Hooker 2021, 107 mins
The most evocative and meaningful parts of New York drummer William Hooker's new documentary are the accidents. Indeed, the film itself is something of an accident, coming out of an accumulation of episodes of Hooker's *The Lost Generation: Outside The Mainstream* podcast, featuring his conversations with peers on the US free music scene.

The accidents are in the conversations, and come out of them. One type leads to a kind of structure that itself comes and goes unpredictably: Hooker asks a musician about another musician, and follows the segment with another featuring a new subject. Somewhere between trading fours and a game of telephone, his format provides an

engrossing way to hear the artists speak to and about one another, within and across generations in non-real time.

But the most important accident is how the conversations reveal the true theme at the core of the film, which is the nature of free music for this generation of musicians, and how it connects to their own entrance into that world. Uniformly, their story begins with John Coltrane and/or Cecil Taylor: how the discovery of their music meant finding something, especially from Coltrane, that immediately resonated, that immediately made sense.

It's an epiphany about how music can be made as a search for inner meaning and purpose, a quest to understand one's place in the universe, alone or with companions, rather than about building something with formal and traditional structures of harmony. As musician Richard Keene says, the guiding principle

is authenticity. This is echoed over and over in slightly different language, reinforced by singer Lisa Sokolov talking about how she uses improvisation in therapy sessions with people suffering from profound mental illnesses – a revelation within the film's field of epiphanies and personal truths.

Keene, who died in 2021, fits the definition of 'lost generation' – he was a rarely documented and often under the radar artist belonging to the already culturally marginal genre of free improvisation. Others include guitarist On Ka'a Davis – who introduces the screening with a brief improvised duet with bassist Hill Greene – the sax/drums duo Iconoclast and woodwind player Mixashawn Rozie. There is a posthumous appearance by deeply missed poet Steve Dalachinsky (the one non-musician, though a central part of the scene), and

the conversations frequently touch on the likes of Bern Nix and David S Ware. Interestingly, Matthew Shipp appears in some concert footage but is not in the film.

Ware and Taylor seem like the unspoken bookends of this generation, Taylor establishing the foundation, and Ware achieving some kind of (relatively) popular exposure before his death – all this before Taylor's public stature grew to the point where he was embraced by more mainstream audiences. This film is not for those audiences. Rather, it's for the cognoscenti, the anointed. A degree of familiarity with post-1964 Coltrane helps provide some context for these artists and what they do, and although there are some scintillating live clips – maybe the most exciting comes from bassoonist Karen Borca – there's little talk about the how. This film's all about the why.
George Grella

Kenneth Thomas