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## FILM

## Blankety-Blank

By J. Hoberman

**IN HEAVEN THERE IS NO BEER?** Produced, directed, and photographed by Les Blank. **SPROUT WINGS AND FLY.** Directed and photographed by Les Blank. Produced and co-directed by Alice Gerrard and Cece Conway. Both distributed by Flower Films. At the Film Forum, through June 5.

**DANNY BOY.** Written and directed by Neil Jordan. Produced by Barry Blackmore. Released by Triumph Films. At the Waverly.

**BODY AND SOUL.** Written, directed, and produced by Oscar Micheaux. Distributed by Chamba Educational Film Service. At the Whitney Museum, through May 27.

Given that we've yet to see Ronald Reagan's reelection ads, Les Blank's oeuvre embodies the American pastoral with more consistency and a deeper nostalgia than that of any filmmaker since John Ford. Predicated upon the notion of folk consciousness as a kind of innately utopian (and literally harmonious) ideology, Blank's pieties are closer to the Old Left than they are to the New Right. He's the poet laureate of a lost (native) American *gemeinschaft* and, as a documentary filmmaker, makes an apt cross-reference to Frederick Wiseman, whose subject is characteristically the hell of the industrial *gesellschaft*.

Part ethnographer, part mythologist (and perhaps the only cult populist in American movies), Blank has spent the past 15 years celebrating American folk communities—enclaves of Creoles, Cajuns, or garlic-lovers who have seemingly resisted the homogenization of McDonald's and mass culture. The tendency to romanticize his subject matter makes Blank that much more suspicious of the impulse in others; his *Burden of Dreams*, a feature-length documentary on Werner Herzog and the shooting of *Fitzcarraldo*, is a dourly titillated, gently mocking account of one (or any) white man's hubris in the wilderness.

*Sprout Wings and Fly*, an affectionate portrait of the 78-year-old country fiddler Tommy Jarrell, currently at the Film Forum, is quintessential Blank. Although set in the western North Carolina foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, it could be any rustic Arcadia without social problems, Big Macs, and MTV. The half-hour film would make an excellent double bill with *Dhrupad*, Mani Kaul's feature documentary on India's fabulous Dagar brothers. Apart from the fact that both films showcase fretted-instrument virtuosos, their pairing would provide a satisfyingly paradoxical juxtaposition of third world sophistication with new world primitivism.

Jarrell is the noble savage as rural boho—a onetime moonshiner with an impressive collection of plaid sportsjackets and the twinkling eye of the naturally crooked. Whether shrieking an off-key version of "John Hardy" or stashing a caterpillar in his fiddle, posing amid the stones of some verdant graveyard or attending a geriatric cookout (a typical Blank feast of chicken and dumplings, steaming corn bread, greens, and deep-dish apple pie) prepared by a lively trio of elderly women in lime-green double-knit polyester pants suits, introducing his lady friend "old man McGinny's granddaughter" or holding forth at the Blue Grass and Old Time Fiddlers' Convention, recounting his dreams or spinning recondite anecdotes about backwoods personalities who cut off their toes to get rid of a corn, Jarrell is never less than Mr. Natural. He's not just a master of the high lonesome sound but a living reproach to ulcers and conformity.

"White people are just amazing sometimes," my companion remarked, as we pondered Jarrell's falsetto hiccup. Indeed they are: witness Blank's hour-long *In Heaven There Is No Beer?*, the main fea-

ture on the Film Forum bill. Here Blank explores America's polka subculture, documenting such floor-shaking rituals as the 1982 "Polkabration" (on the beach at New London, Connecticut) and a Pittsburgh "Polka Mass" complete with Holy Communion and climactic rendition of Bobby Vinton's "Melody of Love."

Once a rebellious popular form in middle Europe, now almost entirely an American mode, the polka is, as someone in the film says, "a jovial kind of music." Blank pounds the thought into your brain with about 40 examples, ranging from "The Rock of Ages Polka" to "The Polish Power Polka," played by such stars as Happy Louie, Li'l Wally, Eddie Blazonczyk and his Versatones, Renata Romanek and Her Girls, Girls, Girls, the Mrozinski Brothers' Aleatoric Ensemble,

here, no organic way of life. Rather than the pastoral feeling of traditional wholeness, one senses a desperate loss of community. Forget the ostensive subject, *In Heaven There Is No Beer?* is something like Les Blank's trip through Hell.



Renata Romanek demonstrates Polka Power in Les Blank's latest.

and Marv Herzog's Bavarian Polka Band—none as strongly individuated as the musicians in Blank's prior films, but many wearing funny hats, and most represented by suitably grotesque album covers. The beat never lets up—it's like being handcuffed to the Staten Island teenager who fantasizes going to school with Li'l Wally booming out of her ghetto blaster, using fire to fight fire.

There's no romantic nostalgia in this film. Blank doesn't even seem to be having fun. The proof is the traditional cooking and eating scene (which has the same cosmic significance in Blank's films as the singing of "Shall We Gather at the River" in a John Ford western), here reduced to unappetizing close-ups of raw chickens, the Swiftian spectacle of sausages mass-produced, and the bilious visual metaphor of an ocean of beer. One of the film's cruelest shots has a pair of hefty polkateers stuffing their faces behind a church statue of Jesus Christ, and there are other, scarcely more subtle, clues to Blank's feelings as well. *Sprout Wings and Fly* is punctuated by bucolic inserts of berry bushes and streams. In *Heaven*, which, in keeping with its near hysterical persistence, has many more close-ups, Blank virtually pushes the flowers up your nose.

Folk jive, another crucial element in any Blank film, is here reduced to grandiose pronouncements, e.g., "You'll never get fat doing the polka" (an assertion the film does its best to disprove), or polka is a "rejection of the mass media." Perhaps it is, but there's no redemptive landscape