

# How Ellen Kuras translated

"Neil really trusted Jonathan to do the right thing, and they both trusted me. We took quite a bit of time to let our minds explore the possibilities of the color palette. I think this film has heart and soul that flowed from that mutual trust." - Ellen Kuras, ASC

What do you get when you mix the director of *The Silence of the Lambs* with the cinematographer who shot *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and they share a passion for Neil Young's music? The answer is *Neil Young: Heart of Gold*. The 106-minute film features Neil Young and his band performing songs from his "Prairie Wind" album, as well as some old favorites. Jonathan Demme was the director, and Ellen Kuras, ASC, lyrically rendered the images onto film.

"Jonathan and I have known each other for years because we're neighbors in Nyack, New York," Kuras says. "He's also the uncle of (director) Ted Demme, whom I worked with on *Blow*. I was trying to finish a documentary, and Jonathan offered me space in his editing suite in Nyack. One day I happened to mention that I love Neil Young's music. Jonathan laughed and said he was also a huge fan."

A week later Demme asked Kuras if she wanted to shoot a concert film with Young. It was a rhetorical question. Within two days they had their first meeting with Neil about translating the music on the "Prairie Wind" album to film. Two months later, *Neil Young: Heart of Gold* was filmed with a live audience at Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Tennessee.

"The Ryman is a very intimate environment where they used to stage radio shows with country and western singers," Kuras says. "Before that, it was a tabernacle, and still has the aura of a church. The seats are pews in the round. Jonathan did a lot of research and found photographs documenting what it looked like when they were airing radio programs featuring Hank Williams and other musicians performing on stage. We used those photos as a reference not only for the positioning of the musicians on stage but also for the backdrops, which were used as advertisements."

"Jonathan was kind enough to invite me to his lake house in Maine for a week," Kuras relates. "We discussed the ideas behind the music and how colors, textures and light could enhance and work with the songs and performances."

These backdrops that towered behind the singers during the old radio shows intrigued Jonathan. He also noticed that the singers usually congregated on the stage in no real order, waiting to go in front of the microphone. We discussed how to choreograph the musicians, bringing them from downstage at times and moving them upstage during others. This was a very unconventional way of conducting a concert, especially because the guitar techs and road crew had to scramble between songs to reset the mics, but it was part of Jonathan's overall vision to create relationships of Neil to the brass for example, using the various camera angles."

Demme told Kuras that he wanted everyone in the audience to feel as though they had the best seat in the house. "That was my guiding mantra," she says. "We want everyone in the audience to feel like they are right next to Neil. Sometimes they are looking right at him, and other times they see his fingers strumming the guitar."

Kuras, Demme and Young went for a day-long scouting trip to the Ryman Auditorium. She was surprised to see how small the stage was.

"The Ryman is stunningly beautiful," she says. "It has two tiers with beautiful, tall, stained glass windows at the back of the auditorium. It was almost a sacred place to shoot. I think the musicians really responded to the setting, too. It has a certain kind of roundness both literally and acoustically. Jonathan also had an idea for creating painted backdrops that summon up visions of the prairie, which is the heart of the album."

Production designer Michael Zansky, Demme and Kuras discussed the backdrops and the feelings that the director wanted to evoke. Demme empowered Kuras to collaborate with Zansky about the use of colors and tones in the background paintings that would work with her lighting to help create a sense of infinity.

"When trying to 'picture' the lighting, I listened to each song many times and visualized what colors I felt from the music," she says. "It was intuitive. I wanted the colors and lighting to feel like visual metaphors for the songs, and help to connect the audience with their meanings."

"All of us agreed that the concert should be on film because it's an analog medium that has roundness and depth like his music."

Above: Neil Young in a scene from *Neil Young: Heart of Gold*, shot by DP Ellen Kuras, ASC.  
PHOTO BY BOB VERGARA

# Neil Young's music to film



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They began pre-production in Nashville about two weeks before they were slated to begin shooting. The musicians arrived a week later and began rehearsing on a different stage that was the same size as the one at the Ryman. That gave Demme, Kuras and the rest of the production team opportunities to watch how Young staged and moved the musicians and background singers for different songs. Kuras observed that unlike more traditional concerts where the musicians mainly stay in the same place, everyone, including Young, was moving around the stage.

"Neil creates organic music with analog instruments, including a favorite old guitar—the actual Hank Williams' guitar," Kuras says. "All of us agreed that the concert should be on film because it's an analog medium that has roundness and depth like his music."

Kuras suggested shooting the film in Super 16 format combined with digital intermediate (DI) timing as a gateway for generating 35mm prints. She had followed that path on *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*, an independent feature written and directed by Rebecca Miller. That gave



her experience with recording a timed digital master onto a 35mm intermediate, which negates the need for an optical blow-up.

The opening sequence consists of interviews with the performers while they are in a car driving around Nashville looking at the changing cityscape. Demme shot that footage himself with a mini-DV camera while Kuras made preparations to film the concert.

She decided to cover the performances with nine ARRI SR-3 cameras. Camera Service Center (CSC) provided the rental equipment. Three cameras were mounted with 35mm Angenieux Optima 24-290mm zoom lenses, and two had 35mm Angenieux HR 25-250mm zooms.

**Above left:** Neil Young acknowledges the applause in a scene from the film.

PHOTO BY BOB VERGARA

**Above right:** (standing) DP Ellen Kuras, ASC preparing to shoot a scene.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PARAMOUNT CLASSICS



**Above:** Neil Young and band on stage at the "stunningly beautiful" Ryman Auditorium.

PHOTO BY KEN REGAN

The others carried Canon 16mm 7-81 and 11-165 mm zooms. Kuras limited her palette to Kodak VISION2 500T 7218 film, which provided the latitude she needed to work at stop T4 with the HR zooms.

"I chose the 24 to 290mm zoom for close-ups of Neil because I know it is super sharp on the long end," she explains. "We got intimate close-ups at stop T2.8 with the long end of the zoom. The resolution is spectacular. It feels like you're standing next to him. I shot at T4 with the 25 to 250 zooms because the resolution isn't as crisp."

Three of the cameras were rigged on dollies, including two on platforms just downstage. One camera was on a Steadicam that roamed the stage and other areas. The other cameras were in fixed positions on platforms in the audience just below Young's eyeline. Kuras used 800-foot magazines and staggered roll times so performances were filmed from beginning to end.

With the beautifully rendered backdrops to work with, Kuras' visual strategy for lighting was to make the musicians look like part of a painting. There were three different backdrops. Demme conferred with Kuras about placement and which one was appropriate for each song. There wasn't room to lower them from above the stage, so they had to be pulled across the stage like a curtain and hidden when they were offstage.

"We rigged two 10Ks to create hard backlight and sidelight," she explains. "We had planned to use some moving electronic lights but the mechanically-generated colors didn't feel right. My gaffer John (Nadeau) suggested replacing

them all with tungsten Lekos and gelled Par cans less than one day before show time so that I would finally be happy with the feel of the light sources. We also found fantastic footlights that were half cans with mirrors in them. They created beautiful reflections that looked like pictures we saw of the radio shows at the Ryman, and they provided perfect eyelight for Neil."

Kuras and Nadeau also discussed ideas for lighting each song. Kuras says that when she first heard "Falling off the Face of the Earth," she had a mental image of Young standing on a planet looking down upon a distant light emerging from behind a darkened planet at the beginning of an eclipse. They positioned a Leko at the right spot in the audience to bounce light off a reflector through Opal diffusion into Young's eyes.

Kuras wanted to give everyone individual lighting. It was difficult because they were standing so close together, but she had some flexibility because all lights had programmed cues controlled from a dimmer board operated by Steve Lieberman.

"We basically had a day to load in the lights and a day and a half to completely design coverage and lighting," Kuras says. "And to boot, we were sharing the space with the musicians because they had to load their equipment on the stage too. Fortunately, Neil's band and crew are absolutely amazing people. We became part of his family."

Kuras dabbed painterly touches onto the film that evoke emotional responses on a subliminal level, the same way that the music does.

You can't learn that in a textbook on filmmaking. It requires innate talent bolstered by experience.

"For example, I put a little diffusion on the lenses because I wanted the hot highlights to halate just slightly," she says. "When we were filming "No Wonder", the second song of the set, I pushed the highlights even more so they bloomed in a way that felt right for that music. I really loved the softness of the light in that song."

Kuras stresses that no one successfully does a project like this alone. She says that it required a team effort, including camera operators Declan Quinn, ASC, Chris Norr, Charles Libin, Alison Kelly, Tony Jannelli, Peter Agliata, Jack Donnelly and Mark Schmidt, Steadicam operator Kyle Rudolph and the rest of her crew.

The conformed negative was scanned at 2K resolution at PostWorks in New York, where Kuras timed the film for continuity in an interactive environment.

"We made some adjustments in black tones and highlights, but I knew we were going to get close to what we wanted on the negative," she concludes. "I mainly wanted a DI to get the best possible resolution when we recorded out to 35mm film because I knew that a film like this would be widely released. Fortunately, there are Neil Young fans like me all over the world." ■



Top: Neil Young in a scene from the film.

Above: (L - R) Neil Young, executive Producer Elliot Rabinowitz and Producer-Director Jonathan Demme while on location.

Below: (Far left) Producer/Director Jonathan Demme filming on location with Neil Young.

PHOTOS BY KEN REGAN



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