

ANTHEM FOR A CONSCIOUSNESS

"DOPE IS DOPE. THE MOVIE IS NOT ABOUT DOPE. DOPE IS THE GROUND, LIKE THE EARTH - ALWAYS THERE."

- FLAME SCHON (FORMERLY DIANE ROCHLIN)

Featuring **Donovan** and Australian artist/dancer **Vali Myers**, the spectre of underground folk legend **Geno Foreman**, **Marianne Faithfull** talking about poppers, **Syd's Floyd** in full UFO freakout mode, **The Fool** and mainlining in Richmond Hill, **DOPE** is the definitive document of counter-cultural life in the capital during 1967. **IAN O'SULLIVAN** prepares to get loaded.



THE RARELY SCREENED documentary *Dope*, by husband and wife directorial team Sheldon and Diane Rochlin, tells of two American couples and a free-spirited New Zealander living together in a large flat in Richmond and provides what is possibly the closest filmic insight to what life in London in 1967 was like for those on the inner circle of the counter-culture.

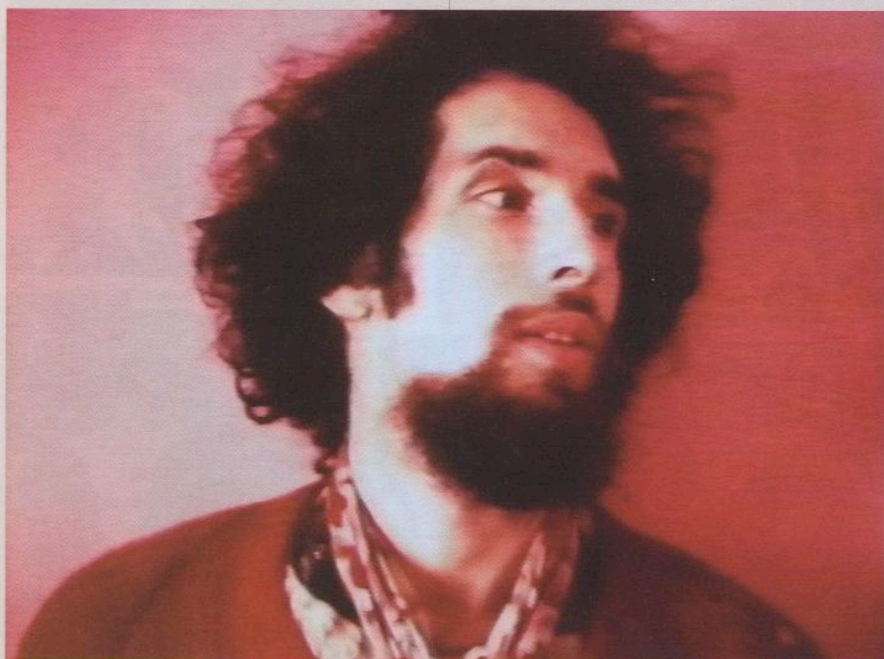
Like Peter Whitehead's *Tonight Let's All Make Love in London* ('67), *Dope* shows the party in full flow as London threw caution to the psychedelic winds, but it also takes us to the downtime world between the fixes and

the happenings. If Whitehead's slowed-down, blurred Piccadilly Circus lights aped the perception of the tripping city reveller's acid gaze, for the Rochlins, the same lights offer a harsher, glaring backdrop to the midnight sprint to Boots for legal prescriptions of heroin. *Dope* takes us to the bed-sits and smoke-filled rooms where the talk is of busted dealers and fallen companions, and to the roadside catts where lorry drivers vacantly pore over newspapers with headlines of drugged up pop stars and moral outrage.

The film follows five main characters: Chris and Sharon are the entrepreneurial couple, with properties in the Balearic Islands and

India. Sharon enthusiastically consumes the fruits of the hip new marketplace, searching out the latest items of bespoke underground chic. Enigmatic hippy Diane, with her artist/musician beau Casey, appear to have simpler needs as they get some wheels together with a view to an unfettered life of the open road. Lastly, weaving in and out of these couples and through a chorus of heads, dealers, artists and lovers is Caroline, whose unquestioning hedonism and direct take on life leads her to embrace the needle with the most zeal and whose decline through addiction is recorded in *Dope*.

Although drugs are prevalent throughout the film, anybody expecting to find an exploitation flick for the flower generation will be sorely disappointed. As US film trade bible *Variety* commented, on its screening at The Locarno Film Festival in '68, *Dope* "is not just another look at the so-called drug, or hippie scene... [it's] a rugged documentary with revealing insights into the sad, touching, downbeat and sometimes tender drug scene". Also, as a documentary, *Dope* is no mere "fly-on-the wall" piece; the filmmakers lived with the subjects of their film, were their friends and as such are part of *Dope* too. One of the film's many strong points is that it does not take sides or make moral judgements about the assortment of people and lifestyles that it depicts. In *Dope*, Diane and Sheldon Rochlin pushed the documentary format into new territory: 90 minutes of rapid montages are accompanied by a multi-layered soundtrack of voices, fleeting narrators, music and significant silences. *Dope*, by seeking to have the effect of the very thing that it depicts, simultaneously transcends the period it was made yet reveals to us the very essence of the era.



AN INTERVIEW WITH FLAME SCHON

Shindig! What were the origins of *Dope*? How did the idea arise to capture on film the drug-scene in London in the late '60s?

Flame Schon: *Dope* came about because the very idea was simply "in the air." The times were so full of the awareness that something was really going on, that Sheldon and I, simply by being in the right place at the right time, and because of our unique personal journey, by being the "right people" as it were, that is, because of all that we'd done before that moment, were simply able to tap into and express all those particular fertile juicy feelings which were the essence of that time and place. For, despite the large emphasis on heroin, or perhaps alongside that "down" state, there is an underlying "up" note. At the end of *Dope*, remember, we see Caroline dancing alone in front of a mirror to 'Midnight Hour', complete, perfect, "owning" herself, and Dutch Bobby's voice saying "I don't know how it will end; it goes on forever..."

As in so much of real-life, it wasn't planned. *Dope* happened because of Vali Myers. The "plan" was simply to go to London from New York and to make a documentary of Vali Myers dancing onstage at a Donovan concert at The Royal Albert Hall.



Vali was a key figure in our (Sheldon's and mine) personal and professional journey. We'd collaborated less than two years before that on a movie about her, named at first simply *Vali*, and then bowing to silly pressures, Sheldon ultimately changed it to *Vali: The Witch Of Positano*, and so it remained. Anyway, there was Vali going off to dance onstage with Donovan singing and we thought it was a good idea for a documentary. What was unsaid was our sense of how odd this seemed to us then, because at that time we still believed in the separation of pop and "underground". To us, Vali was still pretty much "the witch of Positano" - a great neo-shamanic figure and artist from Australia who had yet to be "discovered" as she subsequently was. Of course, she'd always been "discovered". George Plimpton [writer, journalist for *The Paris Review*] had financed the Vali film, but she was known in more underground art literati type circles then, while to us, Donovan appeared as a neo-pop folksinger. We thought this was interesting since it seemed to be a

meeting of mass culture and the "underground" - but we didn't even spell that thought out to ourselves or each other.

So, Sheldon hustled some money and off we went - with no more arrangements than that. We bought two Beaulieu cameras so we'd each have one to shoot, a then newly on the market Kodak film which we could "push" to a high ASA (and this film itself had not really been used before in this way in a feature film - it was beautiful), and we bought a Nagra [portable sound recorder]. We brought an artist friend from NY to London to do sound, and we brought the man who gave us the money as well, whose only request was that he gets to meet Vali whose image he'd fallen in love with. He got to meet her, and subsequently returned to New York, vacating his nominal role as producer, as the scene in which we ultimately found ourselves was far too heavy for him.

So, Donovan or his manager/agent said no way were we going to be allowed to film (except for a great deal of money) and that was that. However, we did buy tickets for the concert, and brought Caroline, who'd been an acolyte of Vali in Positano (and who had also featured in the *Vali* film), and who was then living in London, to the concert. By then we knew that somehow we were making a far different movie. We all sat in the balcony, we must have smuggled the camera in, and

did film Caroline watching Vali onstage. We speeded up the stage footage in post-production to avoid legal problems and no one onstage is quite recognisable.

Anyway, there we were in London with a whole lot of film, without a plan since our "documentary" had become undone, and we just decided to go from there. So, no plan, just a place to live for us and our friends because somehow by then we had convinced ourselves and everyone else that we were in fact making a movie. Sheldon's energy was so extraordinary that these kinds of things always did happen. Like a lovely large four-bedroom flat on top of Richmond Hill overlooking the river loaned to us rent-free for the duration. The flat was donated to us, I think, by someone named Andrew [King] who I believe was manager of The Pink Floyd - how Sheldon found him I'll never remember.

We simply began shooting, tentatively at first, and then,

gaining greater awareness of what it was that we were really doing - or attempting to do - we became surer and surer, more and more confident and trusting in this totally open-ended process which was a real collaboration between us, the filmmakers and our five main characters who all had different contacts with everyone in London at that time. Between all of us, it turned out that we knew quite a lot of people. And because so many people came to be involved even marginally, people from different yet interlocking scenes, *Dope* does communicate the essence of those times.

SD: One gets the impression that the individuals in *Dope* are comfortable with the filming taking place. How did they feel having a camera present a lot of the time recording their everyday lives?

FS: I imagine that some of the time people felt more comfortable than some other times but generally we managed to blend in. The main reason everyone was comfortable is that we'd all tacitly agreed to collaborate on making a film about daily life at that time and place. In a sense we were all equal, not as in filmmakers and subjects, but as in simply friends. Nothing was said about what it was that we were really doing yet, it was, I believe, understood among us that some process was at work, that we were embarked on a filming adventure perhaps unprecedented. Not simply a documentary, which implies a certain distance, but through the gaps and tag ends and trailing off silences of all that is left hanging and unsaid, a living communication of, dare I say, "numinous" energy. And this energy, tacitly acknowledged by all our "characters" as a subtext of each one's life, a stoner's belief in "grace" as it were, animates all the characters as well as us the film-makers.

You see, the key to understanding the ease of the characters in the presence of the camera is twofold: one is simply that they were all extraordinary people, personally developed and "stars" in their own way. The other way to understand this is also to know how we came to know each person and their various backgrounds.

What is important to realise is that our five characters, two couples and Caroline, were not "typical" of anything; they were simply themselves. They were bound together by the fact that for that period of time, Sheldon and I were making a movie about them. They each had separate groups of friends and acquaintances that may occasionally have overlapped. Not all of them knew each other before the making of *Dope*. Chris, Sharon, Casey and Diane were Americans. Casey, though, had a family home in Italy. Caroline and Casey (and perhaps Casey's girlfriend Diane) knew each other from Positano, Italy. I don't think Chris and Sharon knew any of them before. So, we assembled them all to live together with us - and yet none of it was planned.

SD: In as much as there is a central character in the film, Caroline does seem to be the main person that we follow and sympathise with. How did you come across her? What dictated her decision to come to London?

FS: Caroline had lived near Vali in a big cave in Positano during the period of our filming the movie *Vali* in which she appears. We see a portion of *Vali* in *Dope* when the actual movie is being screened in London at a place called Better Books [venue for the fledgling London Filmmakers Co-Op set up in '66], which was a regular underground screening venue. Caroline is in London because her sister Prue lives there with her English boyfriend Tony who was a registered junkie. At that time, heroin in England was legal with a prescription. Junkies were not a criminal



class; nor were they isolated. "Boots at midnight" refers to the chemist's shop where junkies would gather at midnight to fill their prescriptions. When we all got together in London, Caroline was not an actual junkie, just an occasional user, (which may possibly explain her seemingly sloppy technique), but, during the course of the filming which lasted for two or three months, she did become hooked and we do see her definitely deteriorate over the course of the movie. That is the main thrust of Caroline's "story".

I never saw Caroline again after the time of filming but I believe Sheldon did see her, after we'd split up. She lives in the US, is an accomplished painter and we've been in email communication.

SD: There are several instances throughout the film where the viewer gets the sense of a kind of collision between the world of the drug users and the "straight" world, e.g. in cafés, diners etc. Was there any hostility towards the group?

FS: At the time, I think there was a definite collision, a cultural clash based more on miscomprehension than on outright hostility. There was awkwardness mostly, not so much hostility... for instance, we felt quite awkward going for tea and scones at a proper place there in Richmond. So, of course there was a gap between "us" and "them"... we felt it to be an unbridgeable divide between all the drug users – heroin, acid, pot – and the so-called "straight" world. But Caroline actually likes those truck drivers (in the first café sequence); what she is communicating is some kind of feeling of admiration and even, although a convoluted explanation is necessary, kinship.

SD: At one point, a voice on the commentary talks of people "becoming more aware of what life really means." Would this represent the feelings of the group? Or were they more caught up with the nature of drugs and their effects, and their lives as users (waiting for the next fix) than being philosophical about the possibilities of a new society?

FS: Because our characters who were friends from different periods of our lives all came from very different sorts of milieux, and although we were all living together because Sheldon had arranged the flat, a spectrum of ideas is represented.



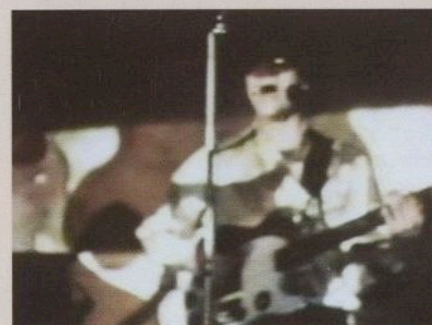
Chris and Sharon (the tall thin American couple with the baby), for instance, were from San Francisco. They were friends of friends of ours in NY who'd all had some connection I think with The San Francisco Art Institute. Chris and Sharon had a house in Formentera (Balearic Islands) where I'd stayed. Sharon especially liked to take acid and dance to The Pink Floyd and their friends were into that sort of thing: tie-dye silks and macrobiotic food. There is a scene in *Dope* at the macrobiotic restaurant owned by someone named Greg Sams. Caroline is sitting there with Casey and Diane and we see her visibly uncomfortable whilst her voice on the soundtrack craving sugar, saying that she knows



Scenes from the film (top and other pages); Vali Myers (above); guest stars Andrew King (co-manager of Pink Floyd), Syd Barrett in full flight and Geno Foreman.

it's not macrobiotic (and she stumbles over the pronunciation of the word "macrobiotic") so this is obviously not her scene. But Chris and Sharon are probably far more in tune with the philosophical underpinnings of the feelings that this is the new society.

We knew Casey from New York. He had had sort of a privileged literary type background, his father was an author, his family had a home in Wellfleet on Cape Cod where we went once for a weekend and we all took acid, and a home in Positano, Italy, so he knew Caroline from Positano as well. Since Casey didn't tend to intellectualise, his feelings regarding a new society would be simply that he was part of it and that it quite obviously existed already.



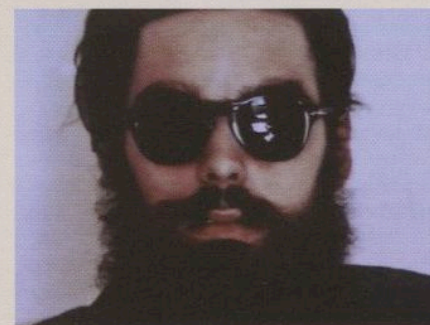
Casey had a connection to Geno Foreman who was part of a group of musicians from which emerged Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, among others. Geno's death is described in the film almost as a centrepiece by someone named Damion. So, Casey was a good musician, Geno was a very good musician whose music was given to us to use in the film by his widow Marci. Casey wasn't really a junkie at all, although he seemed to have a liking for heroin at that time – but you see that he wasn't even capable of shooting himself up. Both Casey and Geno died in what must have been their mid-20s.

If you Google Casey Deiss, you find endless references to a song by musician Shawn Phillips who was apparently a friend of Casey and who wrote a song called 'The Ballad Of Casey Deiss' which was about his great mythic death by lightning in Italy when he stepped outside his door holding an axe.

"The boy of sorrowful eyes... / In his hands he held an axe blade / The Greek symbol of thunder and fire... / Chopping wood to warm his hearthside / The lightning came and my brother died."

So, when we consider whether our characters were more caught up in drugs or in being philosophical about the possibilities of a new society I need to say that probably the question may be irrelevant. Only Caroline of the main characters was a "real" junkie finally, (and the most direct and non-intellectual), but we all perhaps tended to believe that we were living that notion of the new society already. And, then as now, we knew simply that the forces of totalitarian repression were lined up against us. So, when we hear Casey saying as he holds up the newspaper and addresses the camera, saying "Do you think that they're doing this (drug busts) to take people's minds off the economic situation?" we can assume that his philosophical underpinnings are from the "new society" viewpoint. Caroline may well have been preoccupied finally with her next fix but not the others.

SD: The ghost of the musician Geno Foreman forms a strong part of *Dope* through the use of his image and songs. The extended section in which the narrator recounts in detail the circumstances of Geno's death in London is a shock to the viewer as they are confronted with the specifics of his decline and death. Was this a story that you felt was important, and why?



FS: When we were filming *Dope*, Geno had been dead for only a couple of months, so his death was still fresh in many people's recent memories. In that sense, it's important as well as in the way we use it. Of course, we knew that the specifics would be shocking but a shock seemed needed. Using this recounting of his death at that point in the story became sequentially logical in that it was the right mood at that moment.

The "scene" at that time in London wasn't really so permeated with heroin as it was to become later on in the '70s. This was still after all the psychedelic '60s. The Geno story therefore is also almost prophetic or prescient. It sort of underwrites the whole story of drugs in these two decades – how the exultation of the psychedelic revelation gave way to the heroin vibration, and apparently (according to another friend who was around in London in the '70s) this was especially so in London. The fact that this change would occur was of course not consciously known to us. Nonetheless the story (of Geno's death) felt important – and pivotal. It changes the mood of the film. After that we see Caroline spiralling downward. Everyone is seen after that point through the sobering awareness of death and time.



SD: As well as the presence of Geno throughout, we are also occasionally reminded of Vali Myers as she makes brief appearances. It seems fitting that she does so given her importance as an impetus in the creation of the film. Were you consciously bringing us back to her throughout the film?

FS: Yes. Vali exists in the film as a shamanic presence – she appears as a being on another level – which she was. When she appears it's as if a quiet buzz occurs. So, her brief appearances serve to catalyse or underscore some change, some mood. She's a figure of freedom who punctuates the movie; her appearances are reminders of that consciousness, just as the appearances of needles puncturing arms are also punctuation of another sort. So, she can also be seen as a formal device in the construction of the film.

SD: Much of what you've said about *Dope* has been in its social context, as a document of a point in time. In filmic terms, what were your and Sheldon's ambitions at that time? Were you seeking to help to evolve the language of film and its potential to convey meaning?

FS: Yes, absolutely. Both Sheldon and I had watched many, many movies. Sheldon especially was knowledgeable about film history, and we both were quite conscious of "the language of film." We were perhaps trying to use images moving through time to

create a timeless quality, so that the movie *Dope* is almost a musical composition.

The editing was a whole other process. One of the best times of our life really in that we managed a true and inspired collaboration, knowing that we had no actual structure, and somehow following a thread of consciousness-energy, and finding a way to make the transition from one scene to another, often by means of the soundtrack.

Sheldon and I were always aware of form and breaking free of expectations – to a new "look." The "look" of *Dope* (unfortunately to be seen in its beauty maybe only in the original 16mm) is partly what it's all about. That and the "sound" of it. We were conscious of "breaking new ground", and that we were being "subversive". Sheldon and I were never outside documentarians but always proceeded from the sense of creating art which means from within.

SD: The editing is rapid throughout and, accompanied by a multi-layered soundtrack, vies for the attention of our processing faculties. In some senses, we become

overwhelmed by the amount of visual and audio stimulation that we are receiving which could be said to mirror the drug experience. Was this part of the intention of the film?

FS: Yes. Maybe "mirror" is not quite the word. I don't know... "replicate" perhaps. *Dope's* intention is to be dope – to overwhelm so that one uses another part of the mind/senses to process it all. However, it's not just the fast stuff but the slow stuff where it feels as if nothing at all is happening, in other words, an altered tempo in general was part of the drug experience intention of the film. And this presupposed the same frame of reference from the audience as well. There are scenes where not much at all appears to be happening, a blessed nothingness as it were.... an "opening" into another realm and this too is important.

We wanted *Dope* to say everything. We wanted it to speak for a whole subculture generation – to express a unified point of view that we all shared. And in essence this was sort of a mystical magical unitary point of view. And, of course, we never said this to each other or to ourselves in so many words because it was simply one of our bedrock assumptions. So, yes, of course *Dope* is in a way very romanticised, but that's probably because it's not exactly a documentary; it's more or less an extended music video and also an anthem for a consciousness.

SD: What was the connection with DA Pennebaker? How did he become part of the *Dope* story?

FS: When we arrived back in New York with our footage, we needed to find funding to edit. We managed to connect with Leacock-Pennebaker Inc. which was Ricky Leacock and Don Pennebaker who were not only documentary film-makers but had a distribution company at the time. Since they had done *Don't Look Back* ('66) and *Monterey Pop* ('67), on the basis of a tiny edited segment that we showed them, they and the business guy David McMillan, felt that *Dope* would be suitable for their distribution. Ricky Leacock especially liked the movie and said that it was 10 years (at least) ahead of its time. Anyway, we signed a distribution contract with them, they paid for the editing and they agreed to blow it up to 35mm and to arrange and pay for music permissions. Editing was done in perfect circumstances in a country house and studio in Western New Jersey that we'd rented. Not too much later, the distribution arm of Leacock-Pennebaker went bankrupt and the original of *Dope* was literally as I understand it (having been told years later) "lost on the cutting room floor."

SD: What did you do after *Dope*?

FS: Norman Mailer liked the "look" the style of *Dope* so much that he hired both Sheldon and me to be part of his camera team for the movie *Maidstone* ('70) which he was shooting, hoping that we could imbue it with the same stylish look, but I don't think that we managed to do so. Sheldon and I got a video camera in '69, using (actually mis-using) a grant from The American Film Institute which was supposed to be used to make a film and not buy video equipment... but we were very taken by the new technology and its totally new way of "seeing." We participated in the fantasy of guerrilla TV and acid in the drinking water at least on a humorous level for a moment anyway. Sheldon went on to found a video distribution company specialising in spiritual and what he called the "human potential movement" videos, and I went on finally to do video art as you can see on my website. If you look at *Dope* and then look at my present work you will see a progression of the same sensibility, a continuity from then to now even though the subject matter, the content, is very different. A point of view, a certain "eye" is carried through and developed over a lifetime. So, perhaps this can place *Dope* in context not only historically but also within my own "oeuvre", which continues even now.

SD: After years of obscurity and the occasional special screening, you have made *Dope* available through your website. What other plans do you have for the film?

FS: I have now in my possession a D1 transfer made in '97 from a pristine original print which itself needs to be transferred in order to preserve it. If anyone out there is into helping to preserve this movie as film and as tape, as historical document and as part of film history as well I would really welcome help to do this. So, there's a pitch (for something worthwhile)...

My sincere thanks to Flame Schon for her assistance with this article and also for providing the images accompanying it.

Dope is available from www.dopethemovie.net

*Find out more about Flame Schon's current projects at www.reconfiguration.net and Vali Myers (1930-2003) at www.valimyrs.com. Information about Geno Foreman from *Baby, Let Me Follow You Down: The Illustrated Story of the Cambridge Folk Years* (by Eric Von Schmidt and Jim Rooney) can be viewed at books.google.com*