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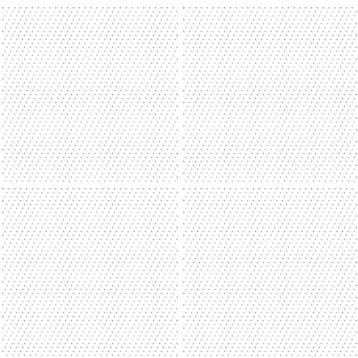
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A scene from the 1982 documentary "Seventeen," which plays in PFA's "Screenagers" series. (Photo courtesy Pacific Film Archive)

Thursday: *Experience* //// Seventeen reasons why "Seventeen" might be the greatest movie about teenagers ever made (Aug 17, 2006)

By Johnny Ray Huston

Children, do you know what your parents are watching? School's (still) out for summer, and curator Kathy Geritz has done her part to provide some viewing material with "Screenagers: Documents from the Teenage Years," an ongoing Tuesday night series at Pacific Film Archive. Focusing on works that strive for realism, rather than mainstream pap, Geritz has already shown a pair of movies titled "Thirteen" (I prefer David Williams's quiet Southern story to Catherine Hardwicke's hyped-up SoCal one), and next week brings "Seventeen" -- Jeff Kreines's and Joel DeMott's legendary and obscure 1982 documentary set in Muncie, Indiana, which was suppressed from PBS by outraged corporate sponsor Xerox.

"Seventeen" isn't the only movie in Geritz's series that is rooted in collaboration between teen subjects and adult so-called creators. (In fact, "Chain Camera" by Kirby Dick, director of the upcoming "This Film is Not Yet Rated," lets the subjects do the filming.) But it could be argued that Kreines's and DeMott's rarely seen movie has laid the groundwork for many of the other entries in "Screenagers," as well as influenced the (perhaps inferior) visions of celebrated photographers-turned-filmmakers ranging from Mary Ellen Mark to Larry Clark. One thing is for sure: "Seventeen" is without a doubt one of the greatest movies, perhaps the greatest, about teenage life (not to mention American life) ever made. The time seems right to break down seventeen reasons why that's the case.

1. Lynn Massie

The protagonist or star of "Seventeen" plays out her life, which is (to quote Armond White) "an American equivalent to Miss 19 in Godard's "Masculine/Feminine,"" and "the greatest Debra Winger role Debra Winger never played." At the beginning of the film, she's brash, giggly, and a bit tricky, but her naïve excitement about being

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a white girl in love with a black boy changes as she encounters the many faces of racism; by the end, she's still motoring forward heedlessly, but in a slightly haunted way, and she's dating a pool hall hustler who talks about "smelly fuckin' n*****."

2. AOR radio.

There is something both dramatic and grim about the way rock songs soundtracked any Midwestern white kids' life in the '70s, and "Seventeen" nails it through diegetic sound, whether it's Pat Benatar's "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" blaring at a carnival or Lynn and her friends turning on the radio at every opportunity. A scene near the end of the movie -- when they call in a request to play "Against the Wind" by Bob Seger for a dead friend, and then grieve together when it is played -- is unforgettable.

3. Wood paneling on the walls.

Larry Clark probably found some inspiration here. Same goes for the Calvin Klein ad stylists who ripped him off.

4. Keggers.

No movie had captured the aimless energy of a drunken teenage party so thoroughly as this one manages to in a single extended amber-tinted sequence.

5. Conversational zingers

"It just ain't a kegger without Church Mouse." "After that cross got burnt the other day, my mom is pissed!" Most of all: "He looks like he's got titties on his arms because he's got muscles so big." John Hughes sure as hell never wrote dialogue like this. Even "Heathers" screenwriter Michael Lehmann might be jealous of some of the offhand and unintentional comments that spring forth from the frequently foul mouths of these babes.

6. Direct cinema.

In making their lightning-rod contribution to a six-part Middletown documentary series planned for PBS broadcast, Kreines and DeMott used a radically different approach from the people behind the other five films. Rejecting the hit-and-run filming schedules with big crews that characterized other entries, the duo spent months living in Muncie, forming intense bonds with their subjects. This method -- perhaps furthered by the fact that one filmmaker (DeMott) is female while the other (Kreines) is male -- pays off in a truly rare intimacy.

7. Fashion.

Dorothy Hamill haircuts. Jerseys with iron-on letters. Hair feathered back, Cherie Currie-style. Thin gold necklaces. Designer jeans. Let's face it: no "Dazed and Confused"-style recreation can give you the '70s buzz that this movie offers.

8. Basketball.

Lynn's boyfriend early in the film, John, plays basketball. Scenes showing basketball games and the coach-player interactions before and after hint at a whole other story that DeMott and Kreines could have explored further -- and one that Steve James did take a long look at in the better-known (and perhaps indebted to "Seventeen") 1994 doc "Hoop Dreams."

9. "The Real World" can kiss this movie's ass.

'Nuff said.

10. Same goes for the rest of MTV's programming and all "reality TV" teen fare.

Ditto.

11. Home Ec class.

Do public high schools still teach kids, or mostly girls, how to bake

cakes? They did during "Seventeen"'s era, and Home Ec class is the ironic heart of the movie, where its demolition of the false American dream begins. Even jaded viewers might be surprised when they hear matronly teacher Ms. Hartley referred to as a "whore" and a "dumb bitch" by a girl acting tough in the classroom. As the movie goes on and the filmmakers return to this setting, some unpredictable interactions bloom between this teacher and her pupils -- and I'm not talking about burnt meringue pies.

12. High school hallways.

Kreines and DeMott walk them with greater conviction (and thus less authority) than Frederick Wiseman in "High School." The result reveals more than even the most marathon-length tracking shot in Gus Van Sant's "Elephant."

13. The library.

What did teenagers in 1980 like to read? If you think it's "The Catcher in the Rye," you've got to be kidding. More like the true crime book "Suicide Cult" (about Jim Jones), and "Wifey" -- which one bored girl longs for, not realizing she's in a movie that could scandalize William F. Buckley and others more than sweet little Judy Bloom could ever hope to.

14. Social studies, or official American history.

Some priceless instructions delivered by a weary-voiced teacher: When writing to the President of the U.S., "Don't start your letter, 'I am required to write this for my government class.'"

15. Inter-racial dating and relationships.

PBS and Xerox can claim that there are a million supposedly valid reasons why "Seventeen" never saw the unflattering light of TV, but it's hard not to suspect that their rejection of the movie, and the majority of the resulting media brouhaha -- in which sources like The Nation also misrepresented the movie in a clueless and drone-like fashion -- was ultimately just another way of putting a burning cross on Lynn Massie's yard. At the time, it might have been fine for Hollywood to concoct fake and generic stories about white girls and black boys in sexually candid love (actually, it probably wasn't). But could a documentary that not only dealt with the subject but treated it as incidental be shown on TV? Aw, hell no! What makes "Seventeen" special is the fact that DeMott and Kreines aren't provocateurs, but pointed observers. When their camera captures the interaction between the brash tough-girl poses of Lynn and her friends and the good-humored skepticism of John and his, the result is truer than anything you'll see in all of "Jungle Fever" by Spike Lee. A scene in which Lynn's mom babbles about reverse racism and one of John's friends promptly bids farewell to the camera ("You guys take it easy now, I gotta go") is priceless.

16. R&B radio

Let's face it -- late '70s R&B is so much more beautiful than its rock-'n'-roll-never-forgets counterpart, especially when John is listening to a song as majestic as Smokey Robinson's "Being With You," which describes the societal clashes at play in his relationship with Lynn better than any of the Van Halen and REO Speedwagon and Eddie Money songs she favors.

17. The final image.

You're in the passenger seat and it feels like the car is speeding. Lynn is practically dancing as she's driving, with Stars on 45's "Beatles Medley" blasting from the car radio. You're watching her, and then the image freezes, and you're left in that moment, wondering where she went to, what roads she took.

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