

On Screen

Films & DVDs



Top: Lee Sexton; and below: Lee reading his own 2007 interview to Opal Sexton

Linefork

Vic Rawlings & Jeff Daniel Silva (Directors)

Silva-Rawlings Films DCP/BluRay 2016, 98 mins
Slowly and individually, we're introduced to Lee and Opal Sexton, the elderly couple at the centre of Vic Rawlings and Jeff Silva's film. After an eloquent opening shot of an empty coal train barreling through the frame for what seems like forever, we see Lee silently working in the garden and Opal cooking in the kitchen. We hear chickens and the incessant, high pitched barking of small dogs. Nearly 20 minutes pass before we see Lee Sexton play the banjo.

Rawlings first travelled to Linefork, Kentucky to find Sexton in 2004, intrigued by the four cuts made in 1959 that appeared on Folkways' *Mountain Music Of Kentucky* compilation. He returned a year later and then again in 2012, when he had the idea to make the film. He and Silva spent the next three years completing it.

That the film is titled *Linefork* and not *Sexton* is significant. It is more a portrait of a lifestyle than just another story of discovering an old musician. The couple make trips to the thrift shop, they buy dog food and reading glasses, they speak on the phone, they visit with friends. Throughout there are scenes of Lee playing his banjo in a variety of contexts, but the only hard biographical information comes an hour into the film when Lee reads his own bio from a book of photographs of musicians. The restraint of the mostly still camera combined with the deep patience of the editing makes watching these scenes a mesmerising experience. Far from an exploitative voyage into an antiquated existence, what emerges is an empathetic step into the pace of everyday life in this corner of America, coloured by music.

There are enigmatic references to events we never see. Lee tells a tale of his son

running over one of the dogs, and Lee's crude yet effective triage procedure. Upon being handed a CD transfer of an old eight-track tape, he's asked if he still plays fiddle. He says that he sometimes does, but then admits quickly that he hasn't played the instrument since Phil got killed. We never learn who Phil is, nor do we ever hear Lee play fiddle, but the moment looms over everything around it. We want to know what's being talked about, because we expect access to such information in a documentary. This time we are never granted it. Nor should we be. It's none of our business.

Ernst Karel handled sound design, turning many of the incidental noises into characters in their own right. The chime of a clock, the rumble of a washing machine, the incessant barking of the dogs, and the barrage of weird sounds from the chicken coop occupy the film in a more present way

than its human subjects at times.

The television is the loudest character of all. Lee watches *The Price Is Right* and *Maury Povich* at excruciating volume, presumably due to the hearing loss so evident in many of his interactions. The programmes seem like alien invaders into the film's still landscape. The sensationalised anger of the Povich show and the monetised fantasies offered by *The Price Is Right* might intrigue Lee, but he makes no effort to chase these dreams himself. Perhaps they exist as a narcotic influence, much like the high-proof liquor he reminisces about when describing his time playing square dances in his younger days.

The lack of flash is not a gimmick, nor is it pretentious. It's essential, integral to the subject. The slow exposition is there for a reason – it attunes us to the rhythms of life in Linefork.

Matt Krefting

Vic Rawlings & Jeff Silva