

4-1-2005

Interview with Jim Dee

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Recommended Citation

Harrington, Mary Kay (2005) "Interview with Jim Dee," *Moebius*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 10.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius/vol3/iss1/10>

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INTERVIEW WITH JIM DEE

Owner of The Palm Theatre



The Palm Theatre

The Palm
817 Palm Street
San Luis Obispo, California

Moebius: You are an important part of San Luis Obispo. The Palm Theatre is one of the few art movie houses left in the country. How did you make it successful?

JD: I think, as with any business, challenges are constant. I've been lucky to have support from the community over the years, but it is also accurate to say that the average moviegoer isn't overly adventurous and curious. The occasional foreign film that hits it big is often preceded by a few dozen that were poorly attended. That's just the way it is. Persistence, just making it through the inevitable slow times, is the key to success. I opened The Palm in 1988 and then bought the building in 1991, so I've been lucky not to have to deal with the landlords, rising rents, etc. Also, I was able to move from the original two screens to three in 1993, which gives me more flexibility. I recently installed a solar power system, becoming the first theatre in the country to do so—which really helps with the electricity bills. Finally, people go in and out of movie-going habits, and I have to just go with that sort of ebb and flow.

I also think I have to trust my instincts. For example, when I saw *Sideways* at the Toronto Film Festival last year, I thought, "I just have to have this film for SLO." I was right. Many times, though, I'm not. I bought *Chorus* and it bombed! What a beautiful film it was. *Postmen in the Mountains* was another great film. Everyone who saw it loved it, but few came to see it.

Moebius: You've been in the movie business in San Luis Obispo for a long time. You had another venue for a while before The Palm?

JD: I moved here in 1965. I was in the 8th grade. As a hobby, in 1973 I showed films at what I called the Cinema Zoo (which involved renting the former SLO Little Theatre space which was on Monterey near California. But that was a hobby, a kind of sporadic thing. From 1979–1989, I owned The Rainbow on Osos Street, where the Tai Chi classes are held now. It had 160 seats, which was wonderful.

Moebius: Why did you choose the movie business?

JD: Well, I grew up in New Jersey and had an 8mm projector, so I was always making movies. Then when I moved to SLO, my friends and I got interested (at fourteen or fifteen) in the movies that the Obispo Theatre showed—which was once on the corner of Osos and Monterey. We saw *Blow Up* there, great French films, even Ingmar Bergman. What an education we had! Then, when an arsonist set that wonderful old theatre on fire and it was torn down, instead of saved, there was a real cinema vacuum in town. I decided to do something about that.

Moebius: You have a radio show on KCBX, Monday nights from 6:30P.M.–7:30P.M. How did that come about?

JD: My friends Bob Whiteford (who owns Insomniac Video) and Catherine MacDonald (who works at The Palm and chose the great films at last year's San Luis Obispo Film Festival) approached KCBX about three years ago with our idea. They agreed to have us, and the show has just evolved. Now we do more than just chat—we have film clips, and we have themes we discuss. It's really a great evening, and we now have too many callers to fit into the hour show.

Moebius: You also have had a Cal Poly connection for a number of years. Explain that.

JD: The English Department, with Doug Keesey now, has had a series of film classes. We have the screenings at The Palm, so students can watch the films on the big screen. I love seeing students introduced to the fine classic films, to foreign films, and to The Palm. I worry that we're not building a young, educated audience for film, and this is one small step to doing that.

Moebius: This is a tough question, but what are your top ten favorite films?

JD: *2001: A Space Odyssey*—completely turned my head around about film in 1968, especially since I thought I was going to see a NASA documentary.

Grapes of Wrath—a great American film about the dustbowl and the “Oakies” coming to California by John Ford.

Modern Times—Charlie Chaplin's timeless film will always be “modern” whenever it plays.

Walkabout—Nicolas Roeg's direction and camerawork transform this film of cultures which collide into pure cinema.

A Hard Day's Night—still stylishly alive after all these years. Richard Lester's technique of reckless, slapdash cinema comes together for the perfect non-traditional musical starring The Beatles.

Postmen in the Mountains—a very quiet, yet emotionally rich father/son story from China that is profound in its simplicity.

Harrington: Interview with Jim Dee

Seven Samurai—Akira Kurosawa’s masterpiece. An action film upon which all others should be measured.

Heroes for Sale—William Wellman’s 1933 harrowing pre-code masterpiece is unflinching and plays like a contemporary story of America.

Run, Lola, Run—Proof that cinema clichés can be reinvented, meaningful, and fun. The more you see it, the more you see. 

Interview on behalf of Moebius conducted by Mary Kay Harrington on April 19, 2005.