

## Restoring The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill

by Gary Coates, color grader and restoration editor

An inspiring study of the life work of Mark Bittner, **The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill** is one of the most successful independently made works of nonfiction cinema to screen in theaters in what was briefly known as the golden time for it. Judy Irving of The Independent Documentary Group filmed it on 16mm color negative stock with her Eclair film camera and edited picture and sound to finish it in 2003. Sam Lehmer mixed the sound track and Monaco Film Laboratory of San Francisco color graded and printed it. The 16mm intermediate was optically printed to 35mm intermediates to generate prints to project in theaters. This produced a center cropped 1.85 aspect ratio filling the frame horizontally at the loss of film image on the sides and at some surrender of resolution in the blow up.

The version of the film many have seen in video tapes, DVDs, and streaming is a standard definition film transfer scanned and color graded by my late friend John Carlson of Monaco Film and Video. The aspect ratio preserved the camera full image dimensions but resolution at 525 lines was a significant reduction from the 16mm source. This version of the film release became obsolete in the era of high definition digital cinema and streaming platforms would eventually retire it.

Judy was farsighted and proactively enlisted the help of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to scan the 16mm intermediate reels to 4K (4096x2160 pixels) DPX image sequence digital files. The Academy had prior assisted in the scanning preservation of DARK CIRCLE, a nonfiction feature made by Judy and her partners of the Independent Documentary Group. They had inspired me when I was a film student at San Francisco State and I eventually worked on films made by each of them after the group parted company.

Judy brought the Dark Circle restoration to me and I devised a method to make it affordable for her to help complete. I organized the project in DaVinci Resolve, performed a color grade, and trained Judy and Mark Bittner to manually remove film dirt spots. They got very good at it. And Mark was wise enough not to do it again on the restoration of the film that brought them together.

In 2019, Judy returned to my office with the Wild Parrots scans. After conforming the scans into reels in a Resolve project, I performed a color grade that corrected for color dye age, balanced exposures and made clips match closer than the film laboratory printing methods could achieve. I had been a film timer in the W.A. Palmer photochemical laboratory and was impressed how much work the Monaco lab had done. Resolve opened up the possibilities of secondary color treatments, shapes within the film frame, sharpening soft focus, and applying contrast changes a film printer could not do. I rendered the color grade in clips and handed them to Judy in a Resolve project for her next sentence of dirt removal, an admittedly tedious but

demanding of attention to detail task that the faint of heart should never approach. Automated dirt removal experiments performed a hash of it and the flapping bird wings were scrambled by the amateur cubism of the artificial intelligence agent.

A bird rescue humanitarian came to rescue Judy, too. Sarah Lemarié joined the Wild Parrots restoration project, learned the Resolve application, and began to assiduously attack the spots stuck to the image back from the day it went through the processing machine. Some white spots in screen are black spots on a negative from an incomplete washing off of the anti-halation backing that keeps light from bouncing around inside a camera body and re-exposing the negative and causing halos to appear. Sarah became a good partner in the task with Judy and the team exchanged tips on which method of the application worked best for a spot or a hairline. Sarah even learned to use paint and visual effects tools in Resolve to patch especially meddlesome problems.

The time to manually remove dirt from a feature length film is considerable. The time challenge was compounded three ways. Judy was at the same time trying to complete her new film COLD REFUGE. And Sarah had her work to do for MICABOO Bird Rescue and real life bird emergencies required first place attention. And strike three came in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic begun in March 2020. I left San Francisco for a safe refuge in Santa Barbara and Judy, Sarah, and I began to use ZOOM, Google Docs, and shared Resolve projects to collaborate over the web.

In the summer of 2023 we three had arrived at our finish line. Judy and Sarah approved my renders of their Resolve projects with my further touches of the color grade. I added the latest versions both stereo and 5.1 surround of Sam Lehmer's sound mix. The final pass included my grain reduction through Resolve which further released the image from visual noise.

The latest version of the Wild Parrots film has a new shine with vibrant color and sharpness and a pristine clarity the film has never known from prior photochemical and telecine era versions. Theatrical audiences can see the full width of the 16mm frame inside a 1.85 pillar box in 2K resolution in a Digital Cinema Package (DCP). We also made a 4K DCP but most theaters have not yet upgrade to 4K DCP projection.

When the film comes to streaming platforms, home cinema audiences can enjoy the full 4K resolution with 5.1 surround sound and closed captions. The film is in a form and like-new condition that no one has ever seen in the life of this film.