

*Ferlinghetti.*

By Christopher Felver.

Chris Felver Productions, 2009.

82 minutes. DVD format, color.

Christopher Felver's documentary *Ferlinghetti* is successful as an introduction to the life, art, and poetry of Lawrence Ferlinghetti. A newcomer to either the Beat Generation or Ferlinghetti appreciates the unfolding of his life's events in a nonlinear order that propels the timeline forward. The filmmaker focuses briefly on Ferlinghetti's childhood (he was born in Yonkers, New York), his years in the Navy during World War II, and his search for his father's village in Italy; however, Felver places greater emphasis on Ferlinghetti's co-founding of City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco with Peter D. Martin and the subsequent *Howl* obscenity trial, his friendship with George Whitman, founder of Shakespeare & Co. in Paris, and his role as an anarchist and poet. Amiri Baraka, Billy Collins, Dave Eggers, Herb Gold, Jack Hirschman, Michael McClure, David Meltzer, Robert Scheer, Gary Snyder, Anne Waldman, and others contribute throughout the piece, speaking about Ferlinghetti's influence on the world of poetry, publishing, and political protest.

Giada Diano, who wrote an Italian biography of Ferlinghetti, *Io sono come Omero* (I am like Homer), interjects information about his life. Felver films her with the sea as a backdrop, which alludes to Ferlinghetti's love of the water and his travels across oceans that began when he was an infant. As a child, Ferlinghetti thought he was French; his Aunt Emily brought him to Strasbourg, France, at one week old, and he lived there until the age of four. His father had died of a heart attack six months before his birth, and his mother had a nervous breakdown soon after his birth and was placed in a mental institution outside of New York City. In 1923, Emily moved with Lawrence from France to New York City, and he learned the truth about his family roots, including his father's immigration to New York at the turn of the century and that he had four brothers. He went by the name Lawrence Ferling for most of his early life. It was not until he joined the Navy, which required his birth certificate, that he learned his birth name, Ferlinghetti. Influenced by the novel *Look Homeward Angel*, Ferlinghetti attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (as Lawrence Ferling) because, as he puts it in the film, "Thomas Wolfe went there." While serving in the Navy, he visited Nagasaki six weeks after the bomb was dropped and at that moment became, again in his own words, an "instant pacifist." After World War II, he graduated from Columbia University with a master's degree and then decided to continue his studies at the Sorbonne in Paris. Although Ferlinghetti returned to America with his Aunt Emily as a child, he knew that he wanted to return to France.

However, he embraced his Italian-American heritage before the publication of his first book of poems, *Pictures of the Gone World* (1955), and later embarked on a search for the birthplace of his father, Carlo. In the film he states that "just before I published my first book, I restored my name to Ferlinghetti." He visits the city of Brescia, Italy, and was arrested for trespassing while trying to see the house where his father was born. The current residents of the house were apparently not sympathetic to his plight and refused Ferlinghetti's repeated attempts to gain entrance.

For this review, I decided to watch the documentary with some students. At its conclusion, I asked them what areas of the film left them confused or wanting more. Their responses provided three areas that required more clarification. Although Felver chose to present a portrait of Ferlinghetti to neophytes, he leaves out necessary connections. For instance, Ferlinghetti's childhood is developed and much is made of his French Aunt Emily, but the film does not explain why he chose San Francisco as opposed to New York or even Paris to eventually settle.

Further, Ferlinghetti's own personal history is problematic. The film shows his son, Lorenzo, celebrating his forty-fifth birthday with his father. The commentary then mentions Ferlinghetti's daughter, Julie, but nothing else. There is no mention of his marriage to Seldon Kirby, which lasted from 1951 to 1976. Upon several viewings, I finally noticed a scene where Lorenzo goes through a series of photographs, and one of them is of his mother. Even the short clips with his son, Lorenzo, do not mesh with the rest of the film, especially since the family (Seldon, Julie, and Lorenzo) is peripheral to the story of Ferlinghetti himself.

Finally, the documentary portrays Ferlinghetti as an anarchist and moves spontaneously from the 1960s to the 1980s. Felver focuses on the Sandinistas; a clip shows Ferlinghetti reading from *Seven Days in Nicaragua Libre*, and the date in the lower right-hand corner is 1989. The next cut of the film discusses existentialism and its importance to him and then depicts Ferlinghetti reciting the poem "Tyrannus Nix" with Nixon in the background. For my students the flow from Nicaragua to existentialism to Nixon was jarring; they made the connection but wanted more of an elaboration in this section of the documentary.

At the making of *Ferlinghetti*, a ninety-year-old Ferlinghetti is depicted as continuing his political activism. The film follows him as he plasters left-leaning slogans and posters onto the second-floor windows of the City Lights Bookstore for the benefit of passers-by: for example, "Indict & Jail Bush & Cheney for Crimes Against Humanity," "Abolish the Death Penalty," "Total Gun Control Now," "Keep Abortion Legal," "Bring Back the New Deal," "U.S. Out of Iraq Now," "Rewrite Law on Corporations," and "The Middle East Obama's Vietnam." The banners in between the windows read "Dissent Is Not Un American."

I spoke with Chris Felver on the telephone and asked him about the title of his documentary. My online searches for the title led me to the Internet Movie Database, which has the title as *Ferlinghetti: A City Light*. Even on the DVD the only title given is *Ferlinghetti*, so I was surprised when Chris stated that the title was *Lawrence Ferlinghetti: A Rebirth of Wonder*. As a fan of the Beats and Ferlinghetti since high school, Chris's documentary initiated a rebirth of wonder in this devotee.

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