A Love Letter
John Alexander films the ups and downs of funk musician Rudy Love.
by ALEX HULS

Filmmaker John Alexander ’11 never thought he would make a music documentary. He’d heard too many horror stories: how editing them could be a logistical headache, how securing music rights could eat up a budget. But then he met Wichita funk musician Rudy Love.

Alexander was at the wrap party for Bender, his 2016 feature-film directorial debut, based on the true story of a Kansas family of serial killers who preyed on travelers in the early 1870s. Shawn Rhodes, the film’s associate producer, had hired Love to perform at the party, in part so the musician could meet Alexander and his artistic collaborator and wife, JC Guest ’11. Rhodes had been documenting the singer’s story since the early 2000s, amassing a catalog of footage he wasn’t sure what to do with, and he hoped the duo could help.

Alexander was immediately intrigued. When Love was a promising 17-year-old funk musician, he’d been tricked into signing a fraudulent contract with a company called Canyon Records that allowed distributors to steal his songs for decades: a generation of musicians was influenced by Love’s work—hits like “I’ve Just Got to Tell Somebody” and “Your Love is So Doggone Good”—without ever knowing his name. But his life wasn’t the tragedy one might expect. Love had other chances at stardom, only to return again and again to what mattered to him more than fame, money, or bitterness: love for family and music. He continues to write songs, and to perform and record locally with his bandmates, most of whom are his siblings. For many years, he helped his mother run her Wichita soul food restaurant, Mama Love’s Kitchen.

Following a serial killer movie with a music documentary did not deter Alexander. This Is Love is the result. “When making art, you have to channel your inner child...
and not overthink things,” he says. He felt compelled to bring attention to Love’s overlooked influence and talent, and his indomitable spirit. Part of that talent and spirit came from Love’s father, Robert, a pastor and accomplished gospel singer who had a brief recording career of his own (complete with an unhappy experience with duplicitous music-industry executives). Robert Love’s church services became a destination for artists like Sam Cook and Aretha Franklin when they came to Wichita on tour, and Lou Rawls was an old friend. The oldest of 17 children, Rudy Love formed his first band in grade school, and in college began performing with siblings as Rudy Love & the Love Family. Over the years, he wrote songs that were recorded by Ray Charles and Isaac Hayes; Jay-Z sampled Love’s “Does Your Mama Know” in his 2007 single, “Sweet.”

Love spent a decade as a bandleader and manager for Sly and the Family Stone, and he has written or performed with Little Richard, Chuck Berry, B.B. King, Stevie Wonder, The Temptations, Tina Turner, Michael Jackson, Aretha Franklin, Lionel Richie, James Brown. (One admirer, Mick Fleetwood of Fleetwood Mac, served as an executive producer for the documentary and sat for an interview.) In This Is Love, funk icon George Clinton recalls discovering Love’s music in the 1960s and 70s, calling him one of the “for-real unsung heroes of that era.” The more Alexander learned about him, he says, “I could not resist this undeniable force of nature that was drawing us toward this man, this voice, this story.”

A version of that same force has been with Alexander himself since he was five years old, growing up in Santa Monica and making movies with his parents’ camcorder. He’d round up some local kids, and shoot musical comedies or thrillers with Hot Wheels car crashes. As a teenager, he attended Adelerey School for the Performing Arts in Los Angeles, where he dabbled in acting and continued to make films. Sometimes he’d rent out small local theaters to screen his and his friends’ work. “It was definitely rinky-dink and small time, but it felt great to actually have something tangible to show for all of my adolescent goofing around,” he says now. He was determined to become a filmmaker.

At Harvard, he concentrated in linguistics and kept working at his artistic ambitions. He filmed statistics and economic lectures for Harvard’s AV office to earn extra money, made short films, and even interned with director Sam Raimi during...

McArthur University Professor Rebecca Henderson, a leading voice on climate change, teaches “Reimagining Capitalism” at the Business School: an immersion in “business and big problems”—from the integrity of the Earth to inequality, institutional incapacity, and more. Now, she has synthesized her ideas about the role of private enterprises in solving them (in their own interest), in completely circular economy and halt the damage we are causing to the natural world, we can. In the course of World War Two, the Russians moved their entire economy more than a thousand miles to the east—in less than a year.…

Last, I am convinced that we have a secret weapon. I spent 20 years of my life working with firms that were trying to transform themselves….The firms that mastered change were those that had a reason to do so: the ones that had a purpose greater than simply maximizing profits.… This is not easy work. It sometimes feels exactly like climbing down a metal ladder into a hole cut through foot-thick ice. But…while taking the plunge is hard, it is also exhilarating. Doing something different makes you feel alive. Being surrounded by friends and allies, fighting to protect the things you love, makes life feel rich and often hopeful. It is worth braving the cold.

Join me. We have a world to save.
the making of 2009’s Drag Me to Hell. He met Guest on their first day at Hollis Hall. As the two grew closer, she learned about the film industry and saw a chance to combine her own kaleidoscopic interests—art, business, technical skills, craftsmanship—into the role of producer.

The couple heard about the Bender family during their sophomore year and thought it had movie potential. They began writing scenes, positioning the story as a Hitchcockian Western, and eventually devoted their senior year to completing a script that they could shop after graduation, when they moved to Los Angeles. “At the time, it didn’t even feel like a dream,” Alexander says. “We were so driven to do it, that it wasn’t just a mission…We were just going to get this done.” In less than a year, Bender was approved by producer Scott Adler and Casadelic Pictures. Then, a few years later, came the party where they met Rudy Love.

After they decided to take on his story, they spent a year sifting through the extensive interview and concert footage Shawn Rhodes gave them. Alexander also drove thousands of miles with Love to shoot interviews, concerts, and other events and encounters. During editing, he drew on the experience he’d picked up running Crook & Nanny, the post-production company he and Guest had founded in 2016. His approach was to let the style reflect the content, a technique he gravitates toward.

Off the Shelf
Recent books with Harvard connections

Inside the Hot Zone, by Mark G. Kortepeter ’83, M.P.H. ’95 (Potomac Books/University of Nebraska, $34.95). Now a public-health professor at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, the author is a retired army colonel with long experience in defense against biological agents. His thriller-like account, subtitled “a soldier on the front lines of biological warfare,” is a timely reminder that alongside natural threats (Ebola, coronavirus), life sciences can be weaponized in stealthy, alarming ways.

Traces of J.B. Jackson, by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, Ph.D. ’69, RF ’01 (University of Virginia, $39.50). John Brinckerhoff Jackson ’32 had an engaging, diverse, creative three-year undergraduate career at Harvard, following which his life experiences in Europe, New Mexico, and the military led him to create Landscape magazine and to shape, profoundly, landscape studies at Berkeley, the Graduate School of Design, and elsewhere. Horowitz, now emerita from Smith College, provides an accessible, handsomely illustrated guide to the life and work of “the man who taught us to see everyday America.”

Baby Jails: The Fight to End the Incarceration of Refugee Children in America, by Philip G. Schrag ’64 (University of California, $29.95 paper). A George-town Law professor details the too-long history of locking up minors (he worked in a “jail full of toddlers”) brought into this country, often for basic reasons of safety, and political leaders’ refusal to address their needs for minimally humane care. An issue that lingers because the people who would have to care…don’t.

Nothing Is Wrong and Here Is Why, by Alexandra Petri ’10 (W.W. Norton, $25.95). A collection from the work of The Washington Post columnist, whose zany satires—far more carefully and wickedly crafted than they at first seem—go far beyond her role as dedicated humorist in the nation’s capital. It seems almost unfair for her to get to practice in an era so rich in possibilities. “A Good Time to Talk About Gun Laws” (President Donald Trump said he would do so “as time goes by”) notes that “Not now’ is not the same as never. It must be on a day when there has been not recent gun violence. So not today, and not tomorrow, and not the day after that. But someday.” That was in 2017.

The Last Negroes at Harvard: The Class of 1963 and the 18 Young Men Who Changed Harvard Forever, by Kent Garrett ’83 and Jeanne Ellsworth (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, $27). A retired television journalist (see “Reel Revolution,” March-April 2017, page 55) tells the stories of 18 youngsters who grew up when Brown vs. Board of Education was decided; entered Harvard as “the largest group of Negroes admitted to a freshman class to date”; and graduated as the civil-rights “confrontation” campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, began to break segregation: the era when “Negro” gave way to “black” (hence the title). He recalls the special sting of dorm crew: “I was a Negro doing Negro work—I was in my place.” In recording what it meant to be “pulled…into an unknown world,” Garrett and Ellsworth have captured the nascent movement toward a broadened institution—a change well worth remembering.

Why We Swim, by Bonnie Tsui ’99 (Algonquin Books, $26.95). The writer/swimmer/surfer reports on the enigma of land-adapted Homo sapiens loving to live by and plunge into the water. Journalism sum po- etry: “We submerge ourselves in the natural world because the natural world has a way of eliciting awe.”

The Long Fix, by Vivian S. Lee ’87, M.D. ’92 (W.W. Norton, $26.95). The president of “health platforms” at Verily Life Sciences, an Alphabet/Google analytics enterprise—
The film is rarely still, constantly shifting in time, place, and visual perspective. “Consistently inconsistent,” is how Alexander describes it. “Much like funk music, it’s all over the place. Aesthetically, it’s smooth and then it’s choppy. It’s slow and then it’s fast. It’s dancing around a lot, like Rudy’s music.” He says that’s how Love recalls his own life: “I do not believe Rudy views his own story as linear, clean, and conventional, but rather as scattered, euphoric, puzzling, and fleeting.”

The result is a love letter to Love’s infectious funk music, propelled by the bounce of his guitar licks and the lift of his voice. The seeming effortlessness of his talent belies the difficulty of his past ordeals. The documentary tracks, too, how the music industry sold his sound and voice as far as England and China, and how he never became a household name, despite his prolific output and touring. But This Is Love makes clear that Love doesn’t view his life as a disappointment. He has a voice inherited from his father, a family he’s performed with for decades, and a bone-deep connection to music that no one can steal. After working on Love’s story for nearly four years, Alexander says, “It’s really kind of an antidote to the vanity of our times, where people are measuring success based on things they can look up on their phone. It’s very important and refreshing to remind ourselves that a human impact can be measured in different ways.”


A Registry of My Passage Upon the Earth, by Daniel Mason ’98 (Little, Brown, $27). The physician-novelist (The Winter Soldier, The Piano Tuner) presents a series of precisely crafted, often historically informed, stories about mystery and the unexpected turns of diverse lives.

Healthy Buildings, by Joseph G. Allen, assistant professor of exposure and assessment science, and John D. Macomber, senior lecturer in finance (Harvard, $35). A public-health scientist and a Business School teacher join forces to explain why the indoors—where humans in developed societies spend 90 percent of their time—“drive performance and productivity,” as the subtitle puts it. A useful complement to the energy- and climate-focused concerns of the “green-building” movement.

Dare to Speak: Defending Free Speech for All, by Suzanne Nossel ’91, J.D. ’96 (Dey Street, $28.99). The CEO of PEN America—formerly COO of Human Rights Watch—advances “a common set of rules” for speech in an era when “our global conversation is now a mosh pit of expression” and “[h]ateful speech is on the rise.”

When Truth-Mattered, by Robert Giles, curator emeritus, Nieman Foundation for Journalism (Mission Point Press, $16.95 paper). The then-managing editor of the Akron Beacon Journal, Giles now has written a fiftieth-anniversary account of the Akron Beacon Journal, Giles now has written a fiftieth-anniversary account of the Kent State shootings—when protest was cut down by state power gone horribly wrong—and of the role of a free press in getting the news right. In an uncomfortable number of ways, his story resonates with current circumstances.