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Making it: Kathleen McNamara explores an artists struggle in "Why Isn't Chris von Sneidem Famous?"  
(Photo Jan Tiura)

IN PRODUCTION

By Michael Fox

## Kathleen McNamara rolls with "Chris von Sneidern"

Wannabe stars and novelty acts attain instant immortality (or at least one-hit wonderland) on American Idol, while countless talented musicians devote years to anonymously honing their craft and playing for tiny crowds in small clubs. Kathleen McNamara isn't bothered by the unfairness of it all so much as the underlying existential concerns: How do we choose who gets to be famous and who doesn't? And what are the benefits, and the price, of making it? (Fame, you'll recall Bowie cautioning us back in the day, "puts you there where things are hollow.") "Why Isn't Chris von Sneidern Famous?" McNamara's revealing portrait of the veteran local singer-songwriter-guitarist with a cult following, yet still awaiting his big break, investigates those questions with respect, empathy and self-reflection. Success, you see, is a tricky topic for the filmmaker, too.

McNamara didn't arrive at documentary filmmaking via the usual routes of journalism, or photography, or activism, or film school. An oil painter for some 25 years, she was initially impelled to pick up a camera in 2004 because of her love of von Sneidern's music. "It just hit me," she recalls. "I've got to do this. I want to hear his music on a screen in a theater.' I really didn't think it through. I was kind of blinded." The professional doc makers in the crowd might shudder at McNamara's confession, or perhaps identify. But McNamara doesn't view her initial impulse, no matter how quixotic, as a sign of bad judgment. To the contrary, she says, "I think it's a necessity."

One of the upshots of being a first-time filmmaker with neither commercial pipe dreams nor manic youthful ambition was that McNamara wasn't on a fast track. "We took a lot of time with it; nothing was rushed. We were patient and the film was allowed to evolve on its own. We didn't do that many interviews. They're spaced over time, but they show Chris' transformation. There wasn't a lot of planning, or a grand idea how this was going to turn out in the end." Similarly, she wasn't on the lookout for the big dramatic moments that documentary filmmakers (and audiences, frankly) find so essential. As the project stretched into 2008, and McNamara continued interviewing von Sneidern and recording his performances at the Make-Out Room and the Red Devil Lounge, she remained drawn to character more than story.

"It was just interesting to sit down and talk to somebody and see where they're at," she says. "He's always changing. He's a complex person. Every interview he's a little different. And after his mother was diagnosed with cancer, he started really changing." What fascinated McNamara, in large measure, wasn't only von Sneidern's talent but his continual grappling—even after a dozen albums—with the pull, the payoff and the penalties of success. "It's a cliché to say someone's a true artist, but he is a true artist," McNamara attests. "I saw him in a way protecting himself from the awful things of success. What does it actually do to your art? As artists we want that approval, but do we really want everything that comes with great success?" Plainly, these are concerns that McNamara shares with her subject. One of the more intriguing aspects of "Why Isn't Chris von Sneidern Famous?" is how the documentarian's standard one-way view gradually gives way to a more balanced dialogue.

"At one point Chris gets his own camera and starts filming me and asking questions," McNamara recalls. "He was really concerned having a novice filmmaker make a film about him. He tries to take control." Although it took a while for McNamara to muster the courage to put herself in the film, she never objected to von Sneidern's attempt at "collaboration." "A documentary is so one-sided," she says. "I thought it was great [that he said], 'Wait a minute. What about you? What are you doing to me?'"

Now that "Why Isn't Chris von Sneidern Famous?" is finished, McNamara is again confronting her own ambivalence. It's become routine, if not required, for documentary filmmakers to enthusiastically deliver a spiel about their latest baby to any remotely interested bystander. Yet McNamara put off our interview for a couple months, and it wasn't a publicity strategy. "I always wrestled with success, and the relationship between art and commerce," McNamara says. "I'm just much more comfortable with creating, by itself. I'm really struggling with promoting the film, talking about the film and packaging it."

Until "Why Isn't Chris von Sneidern Famous?" debuts and goes out in the world, her original goal of providing recognition to a deserving artist is on hold. The doc wasn't accepted into some top-tier festivals, and some friends suggested that McNamara change the title and the ending. She hasn't and she won't, perhaps attune to the moral of the Byrds' only partly tongue-in-cheek gem. "So You Want to Be a Rock 'N' Roll Star: The price you paid for your riches and fame/Was it all a strange game?/You're a little insane."

"My idea of success in the beginning was a well-received film that's going to go into theaters," McNamara says. "That's what successful films do. Now that's not the path for this film: it's a smaller film. I like that I'm sticking to my idea. Chris has an incredible amount of artistic integrity. And I think that's the most important thing when it comes to art, and I'm focusing on that. I made the film I wanted to make. Now I think that maybe that is success."

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