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Steven Lawrence on Bringing The Long Way Home Back

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A documentary made in a moment of hope returns decades later with a new epilogue reflecting on Russia, artistic conscience and film preservation. As the world has changed, The Long Way Home reminds us how differently the future once seemed, and what remains of that hope.

When The Long Way Home was made in 1989, the atmosphere was one of possibility. Directed by Michael Apted and produced by Steven Lawrence, the documentary followed Soviet musician Boris Grebenshchikov and his band Aquarium as they travelled to the West during the Glasnost era to record an album. It was a time when cultural exchange seemed to offer a glimpse of a more open future, and the film carried some of that optimism with it.

Decades later, however, that ending reads differently. With the documentary returning in a newly remastered 4K edition, accompanied by a 14-minute epilogue, Lawrence has had the opportunity to revisit Boris's story and consider what became of the hopes that surrounded the original film.
“The ending took place in 1988, and of course, that was a time of optimism,” Lawrence reflects. “There was hope for a future that would be democratic, or at least free of tyranny. And obviously, it didn't work out that way.”

The new epilogue brings Boris's journey into the present. Having spoken out against Russia's war in Ukraine, the musician was forced to leave his home country and eventually settled in London, where he had already been working for many years. He has since become a British citizen. For Lawrence, his story offers a way of looking at the political changes that have taken place since the original documentary was made. “Boris is a prism for that change,” he explains.

There is a particular sadness in returning to a film that once looked towards a more hopeful future and seeing how much has changed. Lawrence speaks openly about the disappointment of that contrast, particularly for those who lived through the period and believed that a different future was possible.
Yet the epilogue is not simply an attempt to revisit the past through the lens of present-day politics. It also raises a question about the responsibility that comes with having a public voice, especially when speaking out can come at a personal cost.

For Lawrence, that responsibility ultimately comes down to conscience. He sees Boris's decision to speak

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against the war as a reflection of the musician's moral convictions, but also recognises the position he occupies in the Russian-speaking world.
“Boris made his choice. He's a very moral person,” Lawrence says. “He was speaking his conscience.”
As an artist with such a large following, Lawrence believes Boris also carries a responsibility towards the people who look to him for inspiration. Remaining silent, he suggests, might have disappointed the very audience that has followed his work for so long.

The consequences, of course, have been significant. Boris may never return to Russia, but Lawrence points to the way he has continued to make music and maintain a connection with his audience from London. There is something particularly moving about that continuation. Even when an artist is separated from the place they once called home, their work can still travel, reach people and create a sense of connection.
Lawrence does not want to reveal too much about how Boris reflects on his decision in the epilogue, but he describes the musician's perspective as especially interesting.

The return to The Long Way Home also carries a more personal significance for Lawrence. The restoration is, in many ways, a tribute to Michael Apted, whose documentary had been unavailable for more than 30 years. Lawrence describes it as one of Apted's finest films, and bringing it back was the first priority.
The two had previously discussed making a sequel around 2010, although the project never received the funding needed to move forward. When Lawrence and his collaborator Susanne Rostock began working on the new epilogue, they knew that a separate feature-length film was not possible.

Instead, they set out to tell enough of Boris's story to bring the original documentary into the present while allowing the past to remain part of the conversation.
The result is a 14-minute addition that draws on a technique closely associated with Apted's filmmaking: longitudinal storytelling. Best known through his Up documentary series, which followed a group of British children from the age of seven into adulthood, the approach allows the passage of time to become part of the story itself.
Lawrence wanted to carry something of that method into the epilogue, moving between the present and the original footage to show how two very different moments in history remain connected.

It is a fitting way to honour Apted. Rather than simply adding an update, the epilogue allows the original film to speak to the present, while giving audiences a sense of the distance travelled since its first release.
But bringing the documentary back was not without its challenges. The restoration had to be made from the only surviving 16mm print, after the original negative, sound mix and other production materials were lost.
For Lawrence, working with the print required considerable technical effort to recreate an image as close as possible to the film they had originally shot.

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The loss of the original material was particularly difficult to accept. Hours of footage, including the dailies and other material that never made it into the finished documentary, had disappeared.
“It's just a wake-up call to all filmmakers,” Lawrence says, reflecting on the experience. “If you have something that you feel is important and will be important historically in the future, you should do everything you can to preserve that material.”

There is something almost archaeological about the process of recovering a film decades after it was made. Lawrence describes searching through his basement while looking for surviving elements, comparing the experience to an archaeological dig. In the process, he came across additional material that had escaped the original loss, including behind-the-scenes footage and an impromptu jam session featuring Boris and Dave Stewart.
It is a reminder that a film's history does not necessarily end when its final cut is completed. There are often stories, performances and moments that remain outside the finished work, waiting to be discovered again.

In the case of The Long Way Home, the restoration has made it possible for a documentary that might otherwise have disappeared to find a new audience. Its return also gives viewers the opportunity to consider the distance between the optimism of the late 1980s and the political realities of today.
Perhaps that is what makes revisiting the film so meaningful. It preserves more than a moment in music history. It captures a period when the future seemed open to possibility, while the new epilogue reminds us that history rarely follows the path we expect. And through Boris's continued journey, Lawrence and his collaborators have given that story another chapter.

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