

The Cola Conquest

by Joe Chidley
Macleans

An attractive young woman stands on a high plateau and starts to sing, as other people—male and female, white, black, brown and yellow, young and old—join her with bottles in hand, and take up the chant: "I'd like to buy the world a Coke." On one hand, that 1971 commercial—released at the height of the turmoil over U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War—was inspired advertising, portraying Coca-Cola as a tonic to a nation at odds with itself. On the other hand, it represented the apex of corporate cynicism—an attempt to reduce the great social and political issues of the day into a pitch for a cheap bottle of fizz.

The strength of **The Cola Conquest**, a three-hour look at the history of the Atlanta-based Coca-Cola Co. by Montreal producer-director Irene Angelico, lies precisely in that kind of double perspective: it draws back the curtain on the world's most familiar product to reveal the men, machinations and social forces that shaped it. Relying on archival material and perceptive interviews with past presidents, advertising gurus and social commentators, the documentary traces Coke from its humble beginnings in Georgia—where a morphine-addicted Civil War veteran, John Pemberton, peddled his secret formula as a cure-all for shattered nerves—to its current status as a pop empire worth about \$180 billion.

Along the way, the show, filmed in seven countries, gives the scoop on the cola wars, the infamous "taste tests" between Coke and Pepsi, and demonstrates among other things how the Coca-Cola Co. more or less invented the modern image of Santa Claus—jolly, fat and clad in the same red and white of the company symbol. The final episode looks at the company's aspirations in China and the rest of the Third World, a process one commentator calls "an inadvertent cultural war." Controversial and effervescent, *The Cola Conquest* is a fascinating portrait of manifest destiny in a bottle—and worth watching, even for Pepsi drinkers.