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# A Sharp Focus to Controversy

## OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE  
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### New documentaries worth waiting for

I see a lot of feature-length documentaries throughout the year, and the few that achieve wide release are not necessarily the best; some are overly slick or don't reflect the careful editing that enables the best docs to make plain a complex story.

The last 11 docs that I saw at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival in Durham, N.C., this month represent a range of quality, too. None are in theaters or online yet, but several are worth watching for. My brief reviews rank them from best to least successful.

My favorite film of the entire festival was "Peace Officer," which I understand will be widely available sometime this summer. The picture won awards at both Full Frame and last month's South by Southwest film festival in Austin, Texas addressing complex issues around the increased militarization of police.

Its co-directors, Brad Barber and Scott Christopherson, weren't originally attracted to that topic, but rather to William "Dub" Lawrence, the relentless former sheriff who forms the backbone of the film. When Lawrence's own son-in-law was killed in a brutal show-down with the same SWAT team that Lawrence himself founded back in the 1970s, Lawrence's own investigation into the incident caused a major shift in his thinking about law enforcement, from trust to alarm.

Calling on his long years of experience as a sheriff and his particularly dogged skills as an investigator, Lawrence became concerned about the increasingly violent responses of police in making arrests and serving warrants. For him, it's a matter of the sacred trust officers owe to the public, which he sees getting lost in the escalation of assault weaponry and military gear that has become so prevalent.

Lawrence does indeed make for a compelling figure around which to build this film; he understands and respects law enforcement and appreciates the real dangers they face. He also credibly analyzes several incidents in which members of the public were killed or injured as a result of police conduct and presents convincing alternatives to the justifying narratives put forth by police.

Barber and Christopherson did not rest on the fact that they found a compelling spokesperson; rather they build a skillful narrative around Lawrence's concerns, filling in details of specific stories he has investigated and panning out to the larger issues around police conduct. They also give meaningful air time to the views of law enforcement. They have assembled an extremely compelling and nuanced approach to a topic that demands but rarely gets that



The militarization of police becomes the target in "Peace Officer" a feature documentary told through the story of a former sheriff who established his state's first SWAT team only to see that same unit kill his son-in-law in a controversial standoff 30 years later.



"Mavis!" explores the life and of gospel and soul music legend and civil rights icon Mavis Staples and her family group, The Staple Singers.

kind of care. It's a first-rate piece of documentary filmmaking that I hope will attain a larger audience.

Another award winner that deserves a broader audience is "(T)ERROR." Also a co-directed first feature, it won prizes at Full Frame and the Sundance Film Festival in

Utah, and provides a gutsy look inside an active FBI counterterrorism sting operation. Filmmakers Lyric R. Cabral and David Felix Sutcliffe follow the story through the perspective of "Shariff," a former Black Panther turned FBI informant who irascibly narrates his justifications for and perceptions of the government's counterterrorism tactics. It would be hard to imagine more treacherous terrain to attempt to capture, and these filmmakers illuminate plenty of reasons for concern about how the war on terror is being conducted. The film will air on PBS's "Independent Lens" and on the BBC later this year.

On a lighter and quite delightful note, "Mavis!" explores the life and music of legendary vocalist Mavis Staples. Director Jessica Edwards was inspired after seeing Mavis perform and, taking her own advice to "make the films you want to see," cold-called Mavis's manager to begin the project, her first feature. Though the treatment here is standard, Edwards has assembled a wealth of wonderful footage of the performances of the Staples Singers and Mavis's continuing work with Jeff Tweedy of Wilco, and the film features artists like Bonnie Raitt and Bob Dylan (who "smooched" with Mavis when they were both young) discussing Mavis's influence.

Mavis and the Staples Singers have long deserved a documentary celebration of their astonishing range of

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