



Mississippi
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East County
Beaverton



Jo Lawry, Judith Hill and Lisa Fischer in "20 Feet from Stardom" (Tremolo Productions)

Relegated to Background

Unsung heroes
from the greatest
music of our time

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

At the start of "20 Feet from Stardom," which opened in Portland on Friday, the camera pans over vintage album covers and photographs, with dots applied to the faces of the lead singers to emphasize the faces of the unknown singers backing them. As accompaniment, Lou Reed sings "Walk on the Wild Side," with its notorious lyric, "and the colored girls sing/doo-da-doo, da-doo, doo doo doo doo..."-- and indeed-- most of those

backing vocalists are African-American women.

As this inspiring and subtly subversive documentary reveals, you know the voices of these women; it is frequently the lines they sang (and originated) with which you sing along when you hear some of the biggest hits of the last 50 years. Director Morgan Neville aims to retrain your ears, and eyes, to hear and appreciate these remarkable vocalists, and to reflect on, and to question, the contrast between their obscurity and the fame of those credited for making that music great.

Much of the first part of the film is devoted to introducing you to these singers. Darlene Love, whose voice you'll recognize from any number of hits dating back to the 1960s, is

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE
DARLEEN ORTEGA



credited with being an important driver of a shift from a more vanilla sound, with white women doing generic backing vocals, to a more lively and soulful, call-and-response style with roots in the black church. Indeed, most of these singers got their start in Gospel choirs and many were preacher's daughters.

craft.

Several members of the Waters family, who have accompanied everything from Michael Jackson's "Thriller" to The Lion King, recreate some of their signature contributions. Merry Clayton describes being summoned to a recording studio in the middle

*Film shines light on singers
between obscurity and fame*

The documentary takes time to savor the artistry of the singers, with clips from past performances and interviews deconstructing and reminiscing about their creative process. Their voices are versatile and rich and varied, and one of the film's deep pleasures is just listening to them sing and explain their

of the night, very pregnant and her hair in curlers, to sing with a British group unknown to her. She found the lyrics curious, but caught their vibe, added her own amazing spin, and produced the iconic "Rape! Mur-

continued ▼ on page 13