

## Portland Musician Remembered

Long time Portland resident and blues musician Mel Solomon, formerly of "Hank Ballard's Midnighters," died Monday, June 23 after living with diabetes for many years, according to family and friends.

Solomon worked at Freightliner during his child-raising years but continued to work locally as a blues singer part time.

His singing career spanned several decades. Originally hailing from a small farming community outside Shreveport, La., his musical roots began with the traditional rural sounds of Gospel and Spirituals. In 2001, he was named "Best Male Vocalist" at the "Muddy Awards."



Mel Solomon

## Emotional Journey

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Soon, in encounters with local men who have succeeded in erasing members of her family, Wanda is demonstrating the ruthless interrogatory skills that she presumably honed as a state prosecutor. She needs them because, two decades after the war, no one is talking. It seems that all traces of Ida and her parents have disappeared—except Wanda knows different. Though she also has not been back in two decades, something about Anna's appearance on her doorstep has sparked in Wanda a determination as fierce as the energy she must have devoted to other pursuits.

Most of the film is devoted to the journey of the women to find what happened to Ida's parents. Wanda, rarely without a drink and a cigarette, is all hard edges, hardly a suitable protector. She is as devoted to materialism as her niece is to piety, invoking judicial immunity when she is arrested for drunk driving and attracting male attention more by habit than genuine interest.

The young woman clearly and frequently finds Wanda's behavior repellant, and resists her aunt's encouragement to seek out a little action since otherwise her chastity vows won't mean anything. Anna seems unaware of her effect on a young saxophonist, Lis, who Wanda picks up hitchhiking. But

there are signs of a barely perceptible awakening in the understated novitiate, especially when she hears Lis playing John Coltrane.

There is, of course, a Holocaust story here, and it is a tragic one. The two women react to what they find with a shared determination to honor the memory of their lost family members. But in this spare film, the journey has its impact on each, deeply felt if not explained.

Pawlikowski shoots in black-and-white -- or, more accurately, luminous shades of gray. He uses long, still shots so carefully composed that they feel frameable, and often places his human subjects at the bottom of the screen, as if locating them within a larger expanse. We hear music only when the characters do, and it subtly conveys something of the spirituality of the setting; Polish pop music creates a hasty clamor to accompany the journey in Wanda's car, American jazz exerts its subtly subversive pull, and Wanda has a collection of classical LPs that provide glimmers of an inner life. Without seeming fussy, the film displays the subtlety and care of a Vermeer.

We sense huge shifts happening in both women, though this is more from the quality of the filmmaker's attention than from any overt psychologizing. If you let it, the film will leave you in a place of reflection -- about how a young person can

unknowingly carry her family's history in her very bones; about what might drive a person to grab at power, even destructive power, in response to profound powerlessness. In a way, each woman has already been living in response to the deep losses she carries in her body.

The effect of the film's journey on Ida is unresolved. She attempts a return to take her vows, and finds that she cannot easily step back into her former life. It seemed to me that she had not so much lost her faith as found that it required her to struggle with different questions. Although perhaps without knowing it, Anna's mother superior has set her on a truer spiritual path.

[You can catch this lovely film at Livingroom Theaters in Portland, and it will be available on demand and on DVD in September.]

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie review column Opinionated Judge appears regularly in The Portland Observer. You can find her movie blog at [opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com](http://opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com).

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