

Slate of Documentaries Worth Watching

Scoping out the best at Full Frame

I just made my annual sojourn to Durham, North Carolina for the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, the premier documentary film festival in the U.S. It's a highlight of my year and gives me a chance to scope out some of the best documentaries to watch out for. I saw a terrific slate of films, all worth seeing. Here's what I saw, in order of my preferences--and where I can, I've noted distribution information.

1. "Two Trains Runnin'" blew me away with its melding of several musical and civil rights' stories, all culminating in the events of June 1964. During the very time period that hundreds of college students traveled to Mississippi for what came to be known as Freedom Summer, a critical turning point in the Civil Rights Movement, two groups of young white men--musicians, college students, and record collectors--also separately traveled to Mississippi, but their interest was music, not activism. They came in search of Skip James and Son House, obscure country blues singers who had recorded magnificent music 30 years before and then disappeared. Through a deftly assembled collection of interviews, remarkable archive footage, and brilliant animated sequences, the film captures what a foolish thing this was for young whites to do at the time--only thinkable because most whites outside the South could not really comprehend the extent of the racial divide that severed their own country. And the thrill and danger of the search for musicians who had captured their imaginations (very much in the manner of "Searching for Sugarman") becomes a touchstone for the awakening of white Americans to the importance of the struggle of their black brothers and sisters and the beauty and truth that has long fought for expression in their music. The very summer--indeed, the very weekend--that Andrew Goodwin, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner were murdered by the police and the Ku Klux Klan, these other young men made a similar journey, discovered these two forgotten voices, and brought them to play at the Newport Folk Festival a month later to a thunderstruck audience of privileged folk fans. Watching their faces as they listen to James' gorgeous falsetto is like watching a spiritual awakening. This remarkable film captures the way in which music holds and carries the truths we are not yet ready to recognize in full,

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE DARLEEN ORTEGA



PHOTO COURTESY OF MAGNOLIA PICTURES
Samantha Montgomery in "Presenting Princess Shaw," in inspired film about a talented singer who became an Internet sensation after toiling in obscurity for years.

and the confluence of forces that came together at that time in our history through the voices of black Americans and birthed social action that we still desperately need today. The film had its premiere at Full Frame and features music from James and House as well as some of the greats who have covered them. You can follow the film on its website (twotrainsrunnin.com) and on Facebook to look for screenings; I am really hoping it will find a broad audience.

2. "Presenting Princess Shaw" was my favorite film at the Portland International Film Festival this year, under its former title, "Thru You Princess." It holds up well on second screening, and at

Full Frame Princess Shaw herself came on stage afterwards and performed a couple of songs and took questions (plus I caught her in the halls for a hug the day before). This genuine, open-hearted, and talented singer toiled in obscurity for so many years, posting songs and a video diary on YouTube (that is, into the void)--until a visionary Israeli musician and composer, Kutiman, built arrangements around her original acapella music and she became an internet sensation. In the meantime, the director of this film found her while making a doc about "YouTubers" and connected with Kutiman and

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