

EAST OREGONIAN

LIFESTYLES

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Slow-mo rodeo

New York indie star Sufjan Stevens supplies score to Pendleton Round-Up documentary

Sufjan Stevens, a musician based in New York City, created “Round-Up,” a 75-minute slow-motion documentary about the Pendleton Round-Up.

The film premiered Jan. 20 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, featuring Stevens playing live on electronics along with other band members on piano and percussion.

Stevens, 39, was born in Detroit and has made 10 albums, from singer-songwriter style to traditional Christmas music, indie rock and orchestral compositions that incorporated film elements.

For this documentary, about 60 hours of footage was shot at the 2013 Round-Up. You can watch the trailer at www.eastoregonian.com.

East Oregonian editor Tim Trainor conducted a short interview with Sufjan Stevens via email. These are his answers, edited for length.

How did you become aware of the rodeo? What was your first impression, visually and emotionally? What about it spurred you to attempt this project?

I was on a road trip out west and happened upon the Mule Days parade in Enterprise (Hells Canyon Mule Days). I think that’s when I noticed an advertisement for the Pendleton Round-Up in a local newspaper. I drove out to Pendleton the next day and bought a ticket to the rodeo. It was amazing. I felt like a kid on Christmas — there was so much to look at, and it all seemed very old and exotic to me. My senses were heightened. I also began to notice an innate choreography to the events, the way in which horse and rider move systematically — even though they are at odds with each other, they create a beautiful, symbiotic dance. I wanted to capture this on film. The next year I sent a crew out there, and the rest is history.

Growing up as an urban kid, did you mythologize cowboy culture? What about tribal culture, and how did you feel about the two interacting so uniquely at the Round-Up?

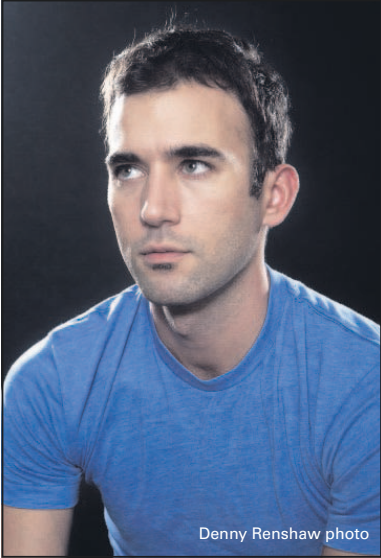
I grew up in Detroit, which is pretty far from anything resembling rodeo. I was more into sci-fi and apocalyptic zombie movies. We did watch some of those classic westerns with John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, but they represented fables of the past, the land before time. When I first saw the Pendleton Round-Up, I was struck by its traditional aesthetic, with its formal dress code and the participation of the local tribes in native dress. It was like watching a movie, but it was utterly real. This was very exciting to me, because I live in New York City, which is fiercely obsessed with all things new. Any kind of tradition, outside of commerce, is pushed to the sidelines here. A lot of immigrant culture in America tends to erase its own history for survival or for convenience; this puts us at a disadvantage, to forget where you come from. The preservation of what’s left of Native Americans and the celebration of location traditions is imperative. It’s not about cowboys and Indians anymore; it’s about humanity. That the Round-Up has included local tribes from the very beginning speaks to its investment in what’s important, in spite of our troubled history.



Stills from “Round-Up,” a 75-minute slow-motion documentary filmed at the 2013 Pendleton Round-Up.

I saw some men rope a calf in seven seconds, or get bucked off a bull in one. The strength and skill required to compete in rodeo is completely lost in real time.

— Sufjan Stevens



Denny Renshaw photo

Why slow motion and why musical accompaniment? What do they add/reveal about the experience of watching the Round-Up?

Rodeo is so fast, it’s easy to miss something. I saw some men rope a calf in seven seconds, or get bucked off a bull in one. The strength and skill required to compete in rodeo is completely lost in real time. By slowing down the action, you can start to see the extent of the physical and mental requirements to stay on a bucking horse or U-turn around a barrel. This documentary is just a visual investigation of that physical motion, to reveal the intense choreography at play in these events, without the distraction of sound. The musical accompaniment I’ve written is subdued and repetitive; it’s meant to support the physical movement, but it should otherwise stay out of the way.

Will people in Eastern Oregon have the opportunity to see the film? Have you given any thought to performing the piece in Pendleton?

No plans yet. This project is intended for urban audiences, for people who don’t have the chance to see rodeo in person. But I would gladly bring it to Pendleton.

What do you think about rodeo culture in general? What did you want to say about it with this film? What does the popularity of the Round-Up say about the West, about Americans, about cowboys and Indians?

Rodeo can often look like the “gladiators of the west,” but we should remind ourselves it comes out of the vocations of animal husbandry and cattle ranching, ways of life that must endure the hardships of nature, a very noble task. This is completely lost on people who live in cities where nature is nothing more than an inconvenience. My anxiety about my own detachment from nature may have stirred a fascination with rodeo, but these issues really have nothing to do with my project. I am simply trying to illustrate the events with absolute purity. By slowing down movement (and slowing down heart rates), you begin to see things as they really are. There have been a lot of great historical and informative documentaries about rodeo, but the conversation of my piece is more about aesthetics than history or polemics. My job as an artist is to unveil new ways of seeing beauty in the world, to uncover miracles in the mundane. The Pendleton Round-Up is a goldmine for this kind of work. It’s a beautiful tradition.