

The Difficult Road to Success (A Film Essay on 'Black Music')

(By Toshio U.-P.)

In the study of four films showcasing the broad diversity of 'black music', we will discuss the difficult road to commercial success in an often unforgiving and fickle environment where industry and art are hard to reconcile. Drawing from the rich pool of hip hop, reggae, rock fusion and jazz music, we will talk about how resilience, visibility and redemption are channeled, playing a role in bringing these eclectic and unique styles into the spotlight and out to the masses.

In Beats, Rhymes & Life: The Travels of A Tribe Called Quest (1), documentary director Michael Rapaport invites us behind the scenes and into the lives of Q-Tip, Phife Dawg, Ali Shaheed Muhammad and Jarobi White of the popular 1990s hip hop group A Tribe Called Quest. Tracing back their roots to the St. Albans, Queens neighbourhood of New York City, we learn about how the group first formed as a member of the Native Tongues Collective and attained commercial success with their unique style of Afrocentric rhythms and their popular use of catchy jazz loops and upbeat sampling. Five years after the documentary was released, the Tribe finally released the long-awaited last studio album on their original record deal contract with posthumous contributions from the late Phife Dawg.

In Rebel Music: The Bob Marley Story (2), we follow the rise of reggae group sensation Bob Marley & the Wailers in the wake of Jamaica's independence in 1962 and amid the turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The group, who were both Rastafari and Rude Boy with their influence and style, created a unique Caribbean sound that informed its listeners about the turbulence and context of the time while advocating unity, freedom and love. Marley's rise and commercial success unfortunately led to him having to go in self-imposed exile in Europe following an assassination attempt from political rivals. Despite battling cancer at the end of his life, Marley and his loyal group continued to create meaningful reggae music, leading them on a path to worldwide fame and stardom.

In popular 1980s musical Purple Rain (3), based in part on the rise to stardom of black rock/pop star Prince, we are taken to a trendy concert venue in Minneapolis, Minnesota where Prince's band "The Revolution" is trying to gain a fan base and find a way to compete with popular rival band "The Time" led by big shot performer Morris. Soon, Prince meets the attractive Apollonia at the same club, and the two soon become romantically linked. While Prince has to deal with problems stemming from an abusive and alcoholic musician father back at home, he learns that his band is always behind him as is the sometimes capricious Apollonia. Soon, Prince and "The Revolution" tap into the mainstream ears of their avid club listeners and have a breakthrough performance with a unique style of rock which fuses with soul, funk, R&B and other styles of 'black music'.

In documentary film Jimmy Scott: If You Only Knew (4), we meet the late jazz vocalist Jimmy Scott well into his seventies when he is travelling in Japan at the turn of the millennium to perform in places like Tokyo, where a sudden fan base had emerged in the twilight years of the undervalued musician's life. Through interviews from Scott, family members and musician friends, we learn about the hardships that James Victor Scott faced in the 'macho world of jazz' for singing in a high-pitched women's key due to a rare genetic condition. While collaborating with some of the contemporary jazz greats of his time, Jimmy Scott—who lacked the conventional image on stage that was required by the music industry of his day—was mostly invisible throughout his earlier years, rarely credited for his role in delivering his unique brand of sentimental and romantic vocal melodies which always seemed to hit the right notes with their drawn out cords, delivered impeccably with characteristic slow timing. Following two decades of relative obscurity stemming from a long contract dispute, Scott's fame developed in the 1990s and beyond when his work was re-explored and finally appreciated.

While 'black music' often consists of a sub-culture in a world and music industry ruled and shaped by prevailing systems of white dominance, its diverse and eclectic styles sometimes catch the ear of avid listeners, bent on consuming music originating from a less known milieu with insights and lived experience gleaned from struggles against the status quo and the establishment. While success is often elusive and ephemeral, 'black music' and its struggle to find a commercial outlet often represents a path to redemption for black artists and performers determined to bring their unique song stories to life.

Sources:

1. Beats, Rhymes & Life: The Travels of A Tribe Called Quest (2011). Dir. Michael Rapaport. Sony Pictures Classics. USA. 97 min.
2. Rebel Music: The Bob Marley Story (2001). Dir. Jeremy Marre. Antelope Productions. England. 84 min.
3. Purple Rain (1984). Dir. Albert Magnoli. Warner Bros. USA. 111 min.
4. Jimmy Scott: If You Only Knew (2002). Dir. Matthew Buzzell. Celebrity Ashtray Productions. USA. 78 min.