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AFI DOCS INTERVIEW WITH THE FILMMAKERS BEHIND LINDA RONSTADT: THE SOUND OF MY VOICE

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Directors Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman discuss making their film, in which they chronicle Ronstadtâ??s trailblazing success.

LINDA RONSTADT: THE SOUND OF MY VOICE plays as part of the Anthem program at AFI DOCS at the Landmark E Street Cinema in Washington DC on Thursday, June 20 and at the AFI Silver Theatre in Silver Spring, MD on Sunday, June 23. Directors Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman will be in attendance.Buy tickets to the screening here.

With her dynamic voice, Linda Ronstadt became a superstar pop artist during the male-dominated music industry of the 1970s. Esteemed filmmakers Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman chronicle Ronstadtâ??s trailblazing success, from her early days on the folk music scene to her sold-out stadium concerts and the sisterhood she created through music.

Ronstadt began performing solo after breaking into music with the Stone Poneys. Through rocking archival footage and rare photos, Ronstadt shares the challenges of showbusiness and her creative interests in exploring other music genres including opera, country and Mexican folk. Featuring interviews with Dolly Parton, Bonnie Raitt, Emmylou Harris and Don Henley, LINDA RONSTADT: THE SOUND OF MY VOICE is a portrait of a strong and talented woman that gave voice to a generation.

Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedmanâ??s work as directors, writers, producers and editors has been honored with two Academy AwardsÂ®, five EmmyÂ® Awards and three Peabody Awards. They have had retrospectives at London Institute of Contemporary Art, Taipei International Film Festival, CinÃ©mathÃ©que QuÃ©bÃ©coise and Zurich Pink Apple Film Festival. We spoke with Epstein and Friedman about their latest work.

AFI: What led you to pursue documentary filmmaking?

JF: I began my film career as an assistant film editor on both nonfiction and fiction feature films. They both interested me in different ways. Fiction was magical, creating the illusion of real life from whole cloth. Documentaries had a different magic, distilling bits of real life into a coherent dramatic narrative â?? most of which happened in the editing room. Creatively, this felt challenging and satisfying. The subjects of the documentaries I worked on felt more urgent, more relevant to my experience and more engaged with real-world issues.

RE: While I was in college, I had little notion of what I wanted to study or why. I took a leave of absence to explore alternative creative pathways. This led me to take a filmmaking class at San Francisco State University, while simultaneously snagging a gig as a production assistant on a documentary in its early stages of production. This project would eventually become the landmark documentary WORD IS OUT, the first documentary about being LGBT in America, made by a collective of LGBT filmmakers (of which I was a part). Finding my way into nonfiction filmmaking opened up something within my own creative self, and it gave me the opportunity to speak to the world about matters of importance.

AFI: How did you become interested in making a documentary about Linda Ronstadt? What inspired you to tell it?

RE: Iâ??ve long been a fan of Linda Ronstadt. My first record was a 45 single of her hit â??Different Drum.â?• Decades later, while driving in my car, I heard Linda on the NPR show *Fresh Air* being interviewed by Terry Gross, after the publication of her memoir *Simple Dreams.* I was taken by her intelligence, and her down-to-earthness, and the way in which she spoke of her own musical career as a self-taught singer and musician. I read the book and immediately thought â??this should be a filmâ?• â?? and it should be in her voice, like her direct and honest first-person literary voice.

JF: Reading Lindaâ??s memoir *Simple Dreams*, I was impressed and inspired by her devotion to her craft and by her artistic restlessness. Itâ??s the story of a phenomenally successful artist whose success seemed to grow organically out of her love of music â?? rather than out of a yearning for fame or fortune that seems to motivate people today.



AFI: How did you find and connect with Linda for the film?

RE: My computer guy was making a house call to tend to my computer and noticed Lindaâ??s book *Simple Dreams* on my desk in my home office. â??Linda Ronstadt is a client of mine too,â?• he said. And thatâ??s how we made the first approach. Jeffrey and I invited Linda to lunch â?? we all live in San Francisco â?? and presented her with our ideas and approach. At first, she was reluctant to even entertain the idea of a film. She said, â??No one is going to want to see this. No one is going to want to fund it.â?• But eventually she came around. And then we got an out-of-the-blue call from producer James Keach, who said CNN Films was interested in doing a Linda Ronstadt project, and he heard we had the rights to her book. Once James came on board, the project took off.

AFI: What was a particular hurdle you faced while making the documentary?

JF: Linda didnâ??t write her own songs, so each of the songs had to be cleared with different rights-holders. This ended up being less onerous than it might have, thanks to the love and respect Linda engenders in artists sheâ??s worked with and songwriters whose music she sang.

RE: Unfortunately, Linda has Parkinsonâ??s Disease now, so her participation had to be extremely limited. But we were able to accomplish what we set out to do, which is to have her tell her own story, in her own voice, by threading together interviews she did over the course of five decades to create a first-person perspective.

AFI: What do you want audiences to walk away with after screening your film?

JF: Iâ??d like for viewers to take away an appreciation of Linda Ronstadt as an artist with astonishing talent and range.

RE: And also realize how much of a pioneer she was, coming through the gauntlet of superstardom undamaged as a human being, with her humanity intact.

AFI: Why is Washington, DC an important place to screen your film?

RE: Linda Ronstadt is an American pop icon, so where better to celebrate than the nationâ??s capital?

AFI: Why are documentary films still crucial in todayâ??s world?

RE: This is a golden age for documentary for a whole complex of reasons â??means of production are more accessible to a wider cross-section of artists, audiences are hungry for authenticity and streaming services have created new funding opportunities and distribution platforms. All of this is good news.

JF: As the very notion of truth is daily battered and bruised, documentaries can offer a way of understanding the world in a deeper, more nuanced way. They can also mislead and manipulate. A lot depends on the intellectual honesty of the filmmakers, as well as the capacity for critical thinking on the part of media consumers.

Buy tickets to LINDA RONSTADT: THE SOUND OF MY VOICE here.



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