

Arts & Entertainment

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Daniel, his devils and a director's obsession

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The question is poignant. How can one make a film about a manic depressive underground music and artistic icon who has spent time in asylums, worked at McDonalds for years, recorded hours of tapes while committed to his obsession with a soft drink and handed his tapes to people as if he were just as famous as the Beatles had ever hoped to be?

Maybe a misaligned sense of sanity, when exposed to such unstable stories of Daniel Johnston and other eccentric disturbed artists, drives people like director Jeff Feuerzeig to such degrees of obsession.

"The Devil and Daniel Johnston" is a documentary on the prolific artist/poet/musician. Johnston suffered from a type of manic depression that drove him to the limits of mania, and the depths of depression, and Feuerzeig has put together an intimate documentary piecing together the almost senseless life of this obscure man.

The documentary explores his rural beginnings through photographs and interviews with parents and friends. It follows taped communications Johnston maintained

with friends and mixes them with modern day interviews to show just how desperately he wanted to be famous and what that fame did to him.

The documentary is not nearly as compelling as 2004's critically acclaimed "Dig," the story of the Brain Jonestown Massacre and Dandy Warhol rivalry, but it remains an entertaining and interesting movie into the mania that is the indie fame and music scene today.

Johnston gathered his inspiration from the lives of people around him, but his deep emotional torment from the obsession developed in college over the attractive Laurie Allen. Little did she know the hours of tape he would later fill devoted to the love he felt and the loss he suffered when she married the local mortician.

Fortunato Procopio provided a superb effort as director of photography. The rich tones and colors of the film provide a gentle accompaniment to the sometimes difficult to tolerate low quality of the Johnston recordings. The intimate portraits of an outdated tape recorder playing Johnston's brief moments with lucidity captivated the audience.

Johnston's genius was sadly masked by the quality of his recordings. Had his music been smoothed



PHOTO COURTESY SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

"The Devil and Daniel Johnston" documents Daniel Johnston's moments of poetic genius and chaotic manias.

out by slick Hollywood production studios, it likely would have been multi-platinum, but it would have lacked the depth and pain of a tortured soul that he put into his work.

The documentary provides a rare glimpse into intimate live performances by Johnston, where you remain unsure as a viewer if you should be cheering his artistic expression of the simplest of human emotions, or cry with the pain and torment that he suffers as a manic-depressive who has been institutionalized more than once in his life.

Johnston, who today lives at

home with his father/manager Bill Johnston and mother, still stands proud for the moment he was on MTV in the mid 1980s when he lived in Austin, Texas.

"The Devil and Daniel Johnston" is a film for the fans and for people who know why they know about Johnston and so many people in the world haven't a clue who he is. Feuerzeig does not leave those untouched by Johnston's genius wondering why they should be concerned with an overweight and clinically insane person who dedicates every ounce

of his emotion to the production of art and music.

Johnston clearly smiles through his own personal hell, and crusades for all that is pure, before slipping into his own mania that have driven him close to death more than once.

His life story mimics his own lyrics "He was smiling through his own personal hell / Dropped his last dime down a wishing well / But he was hoping too close / and then he fell / Now he's Casper the friendly ghost."

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