



20 feet from stardom

Director: Morgan Neville

Country: USA

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A review by Geoffrey McNab for *The Independent*:

20 Feet from Stardom, this year's Oscar-winner for Best Documentary, is both rousing, upbeat fare... and a film steeped in a strange sense of yearning and regret. It is a celebration of back-up singers.



Their voices are heard on countless well-known songs but their names remain unknown to any but music-world insiders. Their lack of recognition has nothing to do with their talent, which invariably eclipses that of the stars they accompany. It is as if they are held back by invisible strings. Few of them make that journey from the back of the stage to its centre.

"It's a bit of a walk. That walk to the front is... complicated," rock star Bruce Springsteen muses on the anonymity that these singers both resent and seem half to relish. They have huge voices and big stage presences. Many behave like divas and aspire to have solo careers but they can't escape their place in the margins.

The director Morgan Neville (who has made documentaries about Johnny Cash and Muddy Waters) has assembled 20 Feet from Stardom in a random and impressionistic way. There is no particular sense of chronology or structure as he flits between archive footage and contemporary interviews with singers and some of the big names they've worked for, among them Springsteen, Mick Jagger and Stevie Wonder.

Back-up artists who became stars don't seem to interest him. He deals only in passing with Luther Vandross (who sang on David Bowie's "Young Americans") and doesn't even mention Rita Coolidge. Most of his interviewees here are female, African-American and come from a gospel background. They grew up singing in church choirs and associate music with religion, community and transcendence. That's one reason, it is suggested, why they are not (overly) preoccupied with worldly success.

20 Feet from Stardom isn't polemical in tone and yet it hints at the racism and sexism that may have kept the subjects here in the background. TÁta Vega is a prodigiously talented soul singer, compared by many to Aretha Franklin – and that's the problem. The music industry of the 1970s only had room for "one Aretha" and Vega's attempts at a solo career soon fizzled out as a consequence. Other back-up singers were exploited for their looks: dressed in skimpy outfits, made to dance and used as "eye candy". Ike Turner, one interviewee tells us, regarded himself as the pimp and his wife (Tina Turner) and back-up singers as "the women who worked for him".

Neville relishes the contrast between the lives the singers led in their younger years and their humdrum existences today. The supremely glamorous Claudia Lennear, supposedly the inspiration for the Rolling Stones' "Brown Sugar", is now a dutiful foreign language teacher. Another singer, Darlene Love, tells a poignant story about how she had quit the business and was working as a maid. One day, as she was cleaning her employer's house, she heard one of her songs on the radio. She had performed lead vocals on several hits, among them "He's a Rebel", but claims that producer Phil Spector denied her recognition. Hearing the song prompted her to re-enter the music business – and, second time round, she finally made the leap to stardom and was even inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.



The flip side to the disappointment the singers feel about their failure to make the journey to centre stage is their sense of relief. They are engaging and joyful interviewees partly because they don't suffer from any of the neuroses that come with fame. They don't have to worry about record sales falling or fans losing faith in them or sleazy music company bosses or fading looks. One, only partially tongue in cheek, states that if she had achieved the solo career

she once hoped for, she would have ended up committing suicide. "There is a power to what we do," one declares. The public may not have heard of them but stars such as Sting, Joe Cocker and Mick Jagger can't hide their awe at their abilities. (The Brits were often quicker to recognise these women's talents than their fellow Americans.)

At first glance, *20 Feet from Stardom* is a surprising choice to win the Best Documentary Oscar. It doesn't have any of the formal daring, contentiousness or political thrust of rival nominees such as *The Act of Killing*, *Dirty Wars* or *The Square*. This is a straightforward, interview- and archive-based film of the type that turns up regularly on TV. It is nostalgic, funny and full of clips of its subjects in full voice. That, though, is only part of its appeal. Perhaps without intending to, the film-makers have also stumbled on a rich and complicated story about talent, ambition and the nature of success.

It is naive to think that performers such as Merry Clayton, Judith Hill (a former duet partner to Michael Jackson) and Claudia Lennear aren't interested in stardom. The paradox is that the music itself gets in the way. What makes them happy is, as one observer puts it, "when all the harmonies ping".

There's a wonderful scene in which the singers, many of them now in stout late middle-age, come together at the microphone for an impromptu recording. They haven't rehearsed and yet their pitch is perfect. They are capable of performing astonishing solos but they always do so as part of a group. The recognition that matters most to them is that of their peers. They may not have the ruthlessness or egotism to make it as stars but they also realise that the effect they can achieve together will always outstrip anything they can do on their own.

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