



Screen Savor Movie Review: Young@Heart

Screenings begin April 25
Fox Tower

By Kimberly Gadette
April 25, 2008

Refusing to end their world with neither bang nor whimper, these senior, senior citizens save their last breaths for one more lyric to share with each other and — thanks to this amazing documentary — us.

Though the British filmmaking husband-and-wife team of Stephen Walker and Sally George set out to document a lighthearted look at a New England senior citizens' chorus doing their take on rock hits from yesteryear (James Brown, the Bee Gees) to punk (The Ramones, The Clash) and alt rock (Sonic Youth), the documentary ran into a few snags during its seven weeks of filming in March 2006. Namely, real life and death.

The effect is both sobering and celebratory, as we get a firsthand look at how these individuals struggle with challenges from learning discordant new songs, to accepting their physical limitations, to supporting each other in times of mourning. Clear-eyed, one singer says, "If I collapse, just drag me off and go on with the show."

In that spirit, the filmmakers skirt obvious sentimentality. When a beloved chorus member does indeed die, instead of effusive speeches, the movie zeroes in on one woman's solo of "Nothing Compares 2 U." And nothing compares to it.

Deftly blending humor with drama, director Stephen Walker is our tour guide, his behind-the-camera voiceover conducting one-on-one interviews with many of the singing group's "stars": self-described Sexy Beast Steve, who loves the high-energy songs ("they've got a lotta life — like me"), jokester Fred Knittle who can sing extraordinarily low, depending on "how loose my shorts are;" and Lenny, an ex-WWII pilot who still sees well enough to race through town in a jalopy that's almost as old as he is. It turns out that the Young@Heart chorus is just one of his many activities — at 86, he also belongs to a cycling club, a church choir and a group of harmonica players called "The Harmonicats."

We watch Lenny good-naturedly shrug off well-wishers on his birthday ("it's enough 'Happy Birthday's already"). Then suddenly, unexpectedly, the film cuts to a cancer care center, where Lenny's duet partner Joe is receiving an emergency blood transfusion.

In a quiet moment with director Walker, Joe reflects on how important singing is to him, and how he's not at all concerned about his current physical setback. He then peers straight into the camera, his eyes magnified behind enormous spectacles: "Did I convince you?" It's moments like this that elevate the whole, bringing the concept of tap-dancing on the edge of life into an ironically sharp focus. Even the poster advertising the group's upcoming concert is a two-edged sword. In large font, with Joe front and center, the poster crows the message: "Alive & Well."

BBC/Channel 4 television pro Stephen Walker is not the only director at the helm. With extensive directing credits in her own right, producer Sally George directs the four whimsical music videos that thread through the movie. Amid the intimate interviews, the day-to-day events and live stage performances, we are treated to such wacky cinematic takes as a choreographed dance number through a neon-lit bowling alley, the cast crooning the Bee Gees' "Staying Alive," and an army of wheelchairs coming straight for us, the drivers glowering while singing/screaming The Ramones' "I Wanna Be Sedated."

The videos give us an additional treat by revealing different sides of the chorus members' personalities. While some of the retirees can be tentative, almost belligerent during live rehearsals, embarrassed as they stumble over new material, their performances in the music videos are a whole other matter. In front of the camera, costumed and on set, they are transformed into veteran performers, hamming it up while getting down, as unlikely a glam band of rock stars as ever seen.

Though *Young@Heart* concerns itself with the demographic of the senior citizen, it's a two-way camera that focuses right back on the audience — who we are and what we're doing to enhance our own lives, fear of mortality be damned. We may know the songs better than the oldsters — but they know how important it is to keep on singing them.

Note this: Like a multi-vitamin, *Young@Heart* has it all and is good for you.