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film reviews



Daniel Johnston in *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*

MAN OUTSIDE

The Devil and Daniel Johnston

review by Donny Kutzbach

The last year has proved a film boon for Texas music's cult legends, with a pair of films. First Margaret Brown's brittle documentary *Be Here to Love Me: A Film About Townes Van Zandt* shed light on the story of a life hard-lived by the troubled late troubadour of its title, and now *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*, which offers a look deep into the mind of a manic depressive, child-like, middle-aged man who has been heralded as one of the world's premier outsider artists and a musical genius.

Daniel Johnston's tender and simplistic yet profound songs have earned him an international audience and fans like Wilco, Beck and Tom Waits, who have covered him extensively. His artwork, primarily ink and marker drawings inspired by Marvel and Harvey comics, was recently part of the prestigious biennial exhibition at New York's taste-making Whitney Museum and is starting to demand high prices from elite collectors and dealers.

On screen in *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*, his unpretentious artistry, fragile mental state and the remarkable life that both have swirled around take center stage for a documentary deft in exposing a bewildering rawness and pain with a certain underlying beauty that echoes Johnston's own work. Director Jeff Feurzeig uses interviews with friends and family, as well as Johnston's own remarkable collection of homemade Super-8 films and obsessive volumes of cassette tapes from conversations logged for 30 years to tell the agony and the ecstasy of this story.

We follow Johnston from his precocious youth through college and an unrequited love that fuels his work to this day. Stints in a carnival and then

cleaning up at McDonalds in Austin, Texas eventually led him to fall in among that city's thriving music scene, where word of his homespun, Beatles-inspired folk pop and lo-fi recordings gain attention.

Johnston's artistry is not the only thing that blossomed and grew in Texas, as mental illness also sadly began to rear its head during this period. Butthole Surfers frontman Gibby Haynes, interviewed here while in the dentist's chair, recalls an already unbalanced Johnston becoming completely unhinged after being dosed with LSD. Johnston's elderly parents, with whom the 45-year-old currently lives in rural Texas, retell stories veering from warm and fuzzy to grim and harrowing. Their youngest child, from youth it seemed, always knew he was going to be a star. Deluded grandeur or no, Johnston's journey toward fame and impending superstardom were real, as seen during a scene-stealing appearance on MTV's 1980s underground show *The Cutting Edge*, his triumphant return gig in Austin after years away and Kurt Cobain wearing one his shirts on countless magazine covers and TV appearances at Nirvana's heights. But never far behind are manic-depressive breakdowns, wrestling matches with the demons he believes are inside him and prolonged stays at mental institutions.

Chilling and sad at times, it is an ultimately inspiring film and classic underdog story. All in all, *The Devil and Daniel Johnston* stands as more than just a must-see memento for fans and followers of Johnston's unique career. Anyone who questions for a second whether distinctive and inspired art comes from deeply tortured souls should also take a good look here.

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