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Film Review

The Soul of a Man

(by Wim Wenders)

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The US senate declared 2003 as the "Year of the Blues." As a result, American director Martin Scorsese has decided to act as producer for a series of documentaries on the history of one of America's most genuine art forms. All in all, there will be seven films made by prominent directors, among them Scorsese himself, Clint Eastwood and Mike Figgis (apparently, no black filmmaker is involved in the project).

The series opens with a contribution by German director Wim Wenders who has repeatedly declared his love and admiration for the blues. And indeed, his documentary *The Soul of a Man* (USA 2004) is a typical example of what German critic Konrad Heitkamp has called "der liebevolle Museumsblick des Weißen, der den Blues vor dem Vergessen gerettet hat" (the white man's romantic view of the blues which has saved the musical form from oblivion).[1] Wenders presents us with a mixture of rare archive material, interviews, stylishly recreated live performances and modern cover versions of blues classics (presented by Bonnie Raitt, T-Bone Burnette, Lou Reed and Cassandra Wilson, to name just a few). Some of the original 78 recordings have been technically reconstructed for the film.

Wenders concentrates on three influential but less prominent blues singers. One of them is Blind Willie Johnson whose blues songs are currently flying towards eternity on the *Voyager* (they have been selected, among others, to represent our culture for potential civilizations in the universe, as Lawrence Fishburne explains as Johnson's narrative voice). Johnson was a highly religious person who left us with a number of outstanding spirituals but without a single photo (apart from the fact that we know virtually nothing about his life). Therefore, his street performances

[1] Konrad Heitkamp: "Der Blues lacht." *Die Zeit* 6 May 2004: 41.

(with a black singer) have been stylishly recreated in black and white, by the help of an old hand camera and a young blues musician called Chris Thomas King who performs Johnson's songs.

Skip James (1902-69) has always been one of Wenders's favourite blues artists. James had to survive in total obscurity for 30 years after his records had died a sudden death in the world depression of the late 20s and early 1930s. James was finally rediscovered at the Newport Festival in 1963.

The third artist is J.B. Lenoir (1929-67) who has been immortalized in a song by John Mayall ("The Death of J.B. Lenoir"). Lenoir, with his political lyrics and his sharp commentaries upon the Vietnam War, was one of the key influences on the British blues scene in the 1960s but a totally obscure figure in the US. No American concert of his has been recorded on film. It was only after the English blues rock band Cream covered his song "I'm so glad" that he was able to earn a minimum amount of money from his music (money that helped him to pay for an operation that enabled him to live for another 3 years until he finally died of cancer). Wenders has unearthed an amateur film which, at that time, was rejected by Swedish television because of its poor technical quality. The film was made by an American couple, and it is undoubtedly a musical document of great historical value. But it is also touching on a human level; seeing the couple sitting together with their idol on a couch in Sweden and looking at Lenoir full of reverence and admiration is one of the film's most memorable moments.

After his *Buena Vista Social Club* (USA 1998) Wenders has created another outstanding example of a musical documentary. This time, he even presents us with a solar perspective (the narrative voice of Blind Willie Johnson on the *Voyager*). All in all, *The Soul of a Man* is a careful homage to one of the great art forms of our time, a charming footnote to the history of the blues.