

Chicago 10

Chicago 10 is a trip back to the Sixties, when we had a truly potent anti-war movement. Forty years on, documentarist Brett Morgen has placed us back in Chicago 1968-69 to relive both the “Days of Rage” around the Democratic National Convention in late August 1968 and to revisit one of our nation’s most bizarre courtroom dramas, the trial of the Chicago 8 (which became 7, then 10—I’ll explain later). This could offer nostalgia for people of a certain age (like this reviewer), or it could be a somewhat funky history lesson for younger folks who know little of the stressed America during the Vietnam era.

Writer/director Brett Morgen is clearly aiming for the younger set. He has emphasized that “this movie is not intended to be a historical document of 1968. I didn’t want to make a film that read like a Cliff’s Notes to an era.” Instead, he wanted to “free myself from the chains of history.”

Chicago 10 proceeds on two alternating tracks. The first track shows footage of the protesters (led by the “Mobe,” i.e., the National Mobilization To End the War) and their protests aimed at disrupting the Democratic Party establishment. The second shows an animated version of highlights (lowlights?) from the trial which ensued in Chicago from September 1969 to February 1970, when eight organizers of the protests were charged with criminal conspiracy and incitement to riot.

The first track is raw, fevered newsreel stuff, showing a nation at odds, highlighting the earnestness of Mobe leader David Dellinger and SDS’s Tom Hayden, along with the giddy nonsense of Yippies Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin. The four days of protests get nastier as the days progress and culminate in the “Police Riot” of August 28, 1968. The accompanying soundtrack music—mostly contemporary blasts from the likes of Rage Against the Machine and Eminem—juices up the action. It occurs to me that people under 40 may have trouble believing these incidents really happened.

The second track uses animated imagery of highlights of the famous, often surreal, Federal trial, which was not open to cameras. With Hollywood actors voicing the principals, the trial sequences are entertaining but clash somewhat with the gritty documentary ones. The animation itself, done with that rotoscoping technique used in Charles Schwab commercials, is here off-putting and distracting, with human faces and forms poorly captured and rendered. It might have been better to have the audio of the voice alone over well-drawn stills of the trial.

Why the 10, by the way? The original Chicago 8 became 7 when Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale was bodily removed from the courtroom—famously bound to a chair and gagged—to be tried separately. Morgen decided to make it 10 based on the action taken by the infamous presiding Judge Hoffman, who also cited the 8’s defense attorneys, William Kunstler and Leonard Weinglass, for contempt.

The Chicago 7 defendants were found not guilty of conspiracy, though five were convicted of crossing state lines with incitement. Ultimately, all of the convictions were reversed by a U. S. Court of Appeals in November 1972. At sentencing, Abbie Hoffman suggested that Judge Hoffman—his namesake—try LSD, offering to set him up with a dealer he knew in Florida, an offer which the judge did not take up. Those were strange times, indeed...

("Chicago 10" is rated "R" for courtroom obscenities and documentary violence.)

(March 2008)