

Soul Power

Film fans who remember the “Rumble in the Jungle,” the quixotic heavyweight championship fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Zaire in October 1974, will recall its definitive cinematic treatment in the 1996 film *When We Were Kings*, an Academy Award winner of best full-length documentary. Now—35 years after the fight itself—comes a kind of sequel or late-blooming follow-up: the music fest of “Zaire ‘74” as depicted in “Soul Power,” a paean to Afro-American music of the day.

The three-day music festival in the Zairian capital Kinshasa was designed as an offshoot of the fight and was performed in the same large soccer stadium in which the fight took place. Director Jeffrey Levy-Hine somehow came up with this (misplaced?) footage of more than 30 years ago and conjures it into a rough narrative.

The New York City recruitment of performers—by show producers like Hugh Masekela and Lloyd Price—is shown, as is the joyous plane ride of many of the stars as they speed toward exotic Zaire. The footage of the gang swinging in the plane’s aisles on the way back to the “home country” is raucous and invigorating. Once on the ground, the performance set-ups and the tech work and the money matters are all featured, as are some sallies from Muhammad Ali himself. Occasional scenes of Zairians in their daily environment punctuate the story.

But the point of *Soul Power* arrives with the music, and most all the major acts are shown giving at least one full number. The performers include Bill Withers, B.B. King, Celia Cruz, the Spinners, Miriam Makeba, and, wrapping it up in style, James Brown, the “Godfather of Soul,” ringing out in splits and shouts to mammoth cheers from the African brothers. Everybody sweats in the ripe Kinshasa humidity and the parade of African garb--along with bell bottoms, wide collars and high ‘Fros--is wonderful to see.

At its best, *Soul Power* offers a rich mix of rhythmic nostalgia and could send you back to some of your old soul albums...

(“*Soul Power*” is rated “PG-13” with a running time of 93 mins.)

(August 2009)