

America's Musical Journey

"America's Musical Journey" is the latest of the Smithsonian-sponsored family films for showing in its museums. It is an historical travelogue in 3-D of musical creativity throughout the US, led by Grammy-nominated singer/songwriter Aloe Blacc, an entertainer with Panamanian roots who was born and is still based in LA. An amiable, good-natured guide, Blacc comes across as a John Legend clone, both in his look and, at times, his smooth bluesy delivery.

The trigger for the film is Blacc's discovering the rich legacy of American music by visiting its wellsprings. Thus, in a lively, if necessarily hurried (the film is only 40 minutes long) tour de horizon, we see him discover early jazz in New Orleans (emphasis on Louis Armstrong), mature jazz in Chicago, country music in Nashville, Elvis in Memphis and Vegas, and *la musica latina* in Miami, etc. Besides Blacc's dialogue, overall narration is provided by that voice for the ages, Morgan Freeman.

During his stops, Blacc is accompanied by a musical comrade, like bandleader Jon Baptiste in New Orleans, jazz pianist Ramsey Lewis in Chicago, the Fisk Jubilee Singers in Nashville, and Gloria and Emilio Estefan in Miami. As with most travelogues, the brief stops highlight a tidbit or two of each city's lore or landscape, including side trips for local food, landmarks, or history. Given time limitations, some major musical locations—such as Detroit ("Hitsville, USA"), Seattle, and Austin are merely mentioned.

History is most emphasized in a Louis Armstrong segment, culminating in a visit by Blacc to the Armstrong House Museum in Queens where he narrates—through some effective old images in sepia—the origins of American jazz. The roots of American music are traced to black field singing and the blues, these mutating into jazz, and its spreading via the Great Migration and the growth of urban communities.

Since it is in 3-D, the narrative accentuates some dazzling visual effects, like skydiving Elvis impersonators ("The Flying Elvi"), a flash mob in Chicago's Millennium Park, swaying conga dancers on Miami Beach, a dance company gliding over a high-rise tower, leading to Blacc himself performing on the National Mall. However, the movie doesn't depend that much on 3-D; in truth, the best three dimensional effects come from overhead plane-or-drone shots taken above the various cities (not for acrophobes).

"America's Musical Journey" is an IMAX product of the well-known McGillivray family (Greg MacGillivray is the director), who pioneered IMAX filmmaking in 1976. The film, which opened February 17th at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, had a short one-week run in the 3-D IMAX format, but it is reviewed here because it will have an extended run at the renovated Warner Brothers Theater at the Smithsonian's American History Museum in 3-D.

This good-hearted film carries a pure "G" rating, with absolutely nothing objectionable. That, and the fact that the storyline is essentially a basic primer on popular music history make this an experience for kids and families. In fact, I would argue that the perfect audience for "America's Musical Journey" is a grandparent and grandkids, who could have something to muse on while eating an ice cream after the show...

(February 2018)