

I Am Not Your Negro

This striking documentary channels the life and times of James Baldwin through offering his prescient, still relevant words about US race relations. The text of the film is based on Baldwin's memories and musings on the lives of three African-American giants murdered in the 1960's: Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The creator of this homage is Haitian director Raoul Peck, who frames Baldwin's reminiscences triggered by a letter and outline he wrote to an editor in 1979, contemplating an unfinished book about the three fallen leaders. Peck said he "envisioned the book James Baldwin never finished" and, in homage, the film uses the credit "written by James Baldwin".

That framing premise is used throughout, with quotes from Baldwin's writings read by Samuel L. Jackson standing in for the writer. More telling, though, are numerous clips of Baldwin himself in television and film images, speaking in his distinctive, preacher-trained style, graced by a precise and practiced cadence, though often delivering fiery language. He is particularly eloquent on the theme of the black man in a white world during a 1965 speech to the Cambridge (England) Union.

Peck himself, in describing how he fashioned the work, said: "Baldwin gave me a voice, gave me the words, gave me the rhetoric. All I knew through instinct or through experience, Baldwin gave it a name and a shape. I had all the intellectual weapons I needed."

Baldwin's growing up is described, with movies being particularly influential, and he comments on his relationships with the three leaders and his whereabouts when he heard of each man's death. All this, the core of the man and his words, is, however, marred somewhat by Peck's constant interventions with short blasts of newsreels and clips, period photos, pop tunes, and random coverage of current racial strife in Ferguson, Missouri, and in "Black Lives Matter" rallies.

Peck seems to be aiming at the effect of classic film montage where disparate, even clashing, images are supposed to combine into some revelatory unity, yet for every effect that comes off (a glossy Doris Day close-up cutting to a grisly lynching), there are several that just cause head-scratching. He might have left some of the jump cuts to just concentrate more on that mournful yet still hopeful face of one James Baldwin

(The film is rated PG-13 and runs 93 mins.)

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