

Soul Power, (2008, USA, Director Jeffrey Levy-Hinte)

Review

In 1974, as a warm-up to the legendary 'Rumble in the Jungle' heavy-weight title fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Kinshasa, Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo), a music festival took place that brought together some of the finest African and African-American artists of the 1970s. *Soul Power* is a record of this event, and the sheer scale of musical talent showcased within it - from B. B. King, Miriam Makeba and Bill Withers to Tabu Ley Rochereaux and James Brown - is enough to demand one's immediate attention. For fans of black music, this film is essential viewing. For those unfortunate, aurally impoverished people not already familiar with these musicians, *Soul Power* is about the best audio-visual introduction available (along with *Wattstax* (1973), Mel Stuart's film of the 'black Woodstock' festival the year before).

And yet this film was very nearly not available at all. Every second of footage in *Soul Power* was shot thirty-six years ago by Leon Gast's crew for what was to become *When We Were Kings* (1996), the academy-award winning documentary of the Ali-Foreman bout. Tragically, the images of the festival were dropped in order to maintain the *King's* focus on the fight and its socio-cultural and political significance. In rescuing the images that constitute *Soul Power*, then, Jeffrey Levy-Hinte and co. do a service to the history of black music on film. This was no light undertaking. 'Zaire '74', as the festival was named, took place over three days. Recordings of the performances themselves totalled over 12 hours, not to mention the extensive behind-the-scenes footage of the organisation of the event, all of which had to be cleaned, transferred and digitised from the raw 16mm negative.

The reconstitution of this source material into a fascinating 93 minute narrative thus constitutes a worthy editing feat. Eschewing the expositional mode of *Kings*, in which contemporary talking-heads guide the viewer authoritatively through the archive footage, *Soul Power* exploits the textured grain of the 16mm film and kinetic quality of the shoulder mounted cameras to create an archetypal *verité* style. Such a formal strategy brings the film's content to the fore, an adroit choice given the compelling nature of the personalities on display. Indeed, the representations of the off-stage personas are some of *Soul Power's* most precious. Celia Cruz leads an impromptu jam session on the stars' flight to Kinshasa, for example, drumming her shoe heels against the luggage compartment, accompanied by B. B. King's guitar and somebody else playing a soft-drink can with a paracetamol packet. Other memorable scenes include B. B. King casually putting together his set-list backstage, Muhammad Ali's amiable reaction when his political convictions are confronted by a member of his entourage (the latter surrounded by a selection of worried looking colleagues), and the camera following an exhilarated James Brown off-stage having closed the festival.

Wonderful though these moments are, however, its *verité* structure is also *Soul Power's* primary limitation, preventing the film from engaging some of the more troubling, contradictory elements of 'Zaire '74'. Setting up the fight that established his career, boxing promoter Don King made a deal with the then president of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko, to host the fight. Having risen to power in a *coup d'état* funded by the CIA in 1960, Mobutu took control of imperial business ventures in the country and used the wealth to wildly enrich himself and his supporters, becoming one of the richest men on the planet while illiteracy, unemployment and infant mortality in Zaire soared. It is this despotic control of the country's economic capital that enabled the publicity hungry Mobutu to finance the fighters' \$5 million paychecks. Despite such levels of exploitation, however, the entire event was touted as a landmark in black liberation and the progressive reconciliation of African-Americans with their homeland. *Soul Power's*, faux 'objective' style, dedicated to effacing the role of the filmmaker in constructing the material, prevents the film from gaining any kind of critical grip on these incongruities at the heart of the events it represents. Thus the film unproblematically presents Ali's condemnation of American racism and Miriam Makeba's incisive anti-colonialist discourse alongside Don King's attempt to reconcile Mobutu's dictatorship with the 'emancipatory' purpose of the gig (an attitude encapsulated by James Brown's rather more astute comment that 'you can't get liberated broke'). Structuring these images in such a way that implies impartiality, the film cannot take a stance on its own content, and the contradiction between the exploitative needs and demands of capital and the rhetoric of cultural togetherness is ultimately skirted.

However, this is not to say that the ethos of cultural exchange was entirely disingenuous, just that those expecting the more critically engaged (albeit tinged with racism), socio-historical perspective of *Kings* will be disappointed. Indeed, much of *Soul Power's* strength lies in its depiction of the African-American performers genuinely trying to come to terms with a culture they feel connected to and yet are alienated from. This is especially captivating given that these experiences unfold amongst the chaotic and often very amusing processes (think enormous, 1970s walkie-talkies and stressed out money-men) of organising a major media event in a country without the infrastructures on which such events usually depend. Along with cinematography that at times sparkles with the poetic – the image of a technician's spotlight dancing with an African boy on the stands during Bill Withers' 'Hope She'll be Happier', for instance – and the remarkable footage of musical legends in the prime of their careers, *Soul Power* makes for fascinating viewing.

Contributor details

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Credits

Producers Jeffrey Levy-Hinte, Leon Gast, David Sonenberg

Cinematographers Paul Goldsmith, Kevin Keating, Albert Maysles, Roderick Young

Editor David A. Smith

Sound Design John Moros

With The Spinners, OK Jazz feat. Franco, Bill Withers, Miriam Makeba, Pembe Dance Troupe, The Crusaders, Fania All-Stars, Big Black, Afrisa feat. Tabu Ley Rochereaux, James Brown and The Mighty J. B.'s, Muhammad Ali, Don King, Yomo Toro, Celia Cruz, Trio Madjesi, George Plimpton, Sister Sledge and The Crusaders.

Runtime 93 minutes

DVD

USA 2009

Produced and distributed by Eureka Entertainment as part of the Masters of Cinema series

Aspect Ratio 1.85: 1

Sound Mix Dolby Digital

Extras Extra scenes; extra performances by James Brown, Sister Sledge, Abeti, Pointer Sisters and Pembe Dance Troupe; interview with director; UK theatrical trailer.