

On Screen



Still from Alain Gomis's *The Monks: Rewind & Play* (2022)



Still from Michael P Aust's *Can And Me* (2022)

Films & DVDs

In-Edit International Music Documentary Film Festival

Melkweg, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

For its fifth edition, the In-Edit music documentary festival happily steered its own course in relation to its mother festival in Barcelona, founded 20 years ago. With this year's theme "Looking Back - The Power Of The Archive", In-Edit's programme interrogated the archive-based documentary format from Melkweg's cosy upstairs cinema space.

The weird and wonderful opening film *u.Q.* (2021, 83 mins) immediately tackled the theme by gleefully subverting the idea of the archival effect, which has become a key element in music documentaries. Archival footage, preferably rare and dated, appears to be the norm for suggesting truth and authenticity in film, and contemporary music documentaries use it pervasively to indicate that their subjects deserve their part in music history.

In *u.Q.*, Estonian director Ivar Murd intentionally blurs the lines between archival footage and re-enacted scenes, which seem just as colourfully entangled as the lives of its protagonists Marju and Uku Kuut. Back when Estonia was part of communist Russia, the mother-son pop duo tried their luck by leaving for Sweden and, later, California. Developing a synth-funk style that they deemed commercial, they turned out to be tragically out of step with the music industry.

It's heartbreaking to see Marju ostracised for leaving Estonia, after being propagated as one of the best jazz singers inside the Eastern Bloc before. And it's uplifting to see Uku's music being picked up by the chillwave scene while he was suffering from ALS, which led to his death in 2017. However, Murd never

portrays the Kuuts as heroes or victims, more like characters in a wilfully confusing mix of sitcom and soap opera in faded colours, livened up with vibrant tabloid-style collages reflecting the duo's peculiar symbiotic bond.

Little Richard: I Am Everything (2023, 98 mins) also thrives on the tension between tragic and comic. With a sharp juxtaposition between performance footage of Little Richard and Elvis Presley, which painfully relegates the latter to an imitator, director Lisa Cortes argues that Richard should have been crowned the king of rock 'n' roll, not Elvis. But ultimately, Cortes aims to expose Richard's neglected side, that of a Black queer rebel in a segregated, heteronormative environment. Talking heads such as Billy Porter and John Waters emphasise the boldness of their idol, how he managed to score a mainstream hit with a song about anal sex ("Tutti Frutti"), and appeal to religious crowds even though he was often torn, as he stated, between orgies and the Bible.

Through all its sensationalism, Cortes's documentary is comprehensive, giving credit to artists who played a part in shaping Richard's persona. One example is singer-pianist Esquerita, who used flamboyant make-up and costumes that would now be considered drag. Cortes keeps it lighthearted and disarming throughout. Even when Richard is wheeled into an ambulance after a car accident, there's the urge to smile through the tears when his signature voice appears triumphantly intact, even while he's in serious pain.

Just as Cortes shakes up conventional rock history through re-examining archival material, so director Alain Gomis similarly approaches the jazz canon in *The Monks: Rewind & Play* (2022, 65 mins). By focusing on rediscovered material from the cutting room floor, Gomis sheds new light on Monk's solo piano performance filmed for French

television in 1969. The high quality colour footage effectively conveys the tension that the American composer must have felt throughout his demanding European tour, profusely sweating throughout his performance and agonising over how his interviewer Henri Renaud steers his raw and honest replies into a narrative deemed more acceptable. When Monk pours out his grief over his first French concert, which left him shamefully underpaid, Renaud immediately censors him, interjecting: "That's not nice" in an uncomfortable exchange obviously meant to be edited out of jazz history.

While Gomis provokes a different historical perspective through limited material, other directors in the festival branch out into sprawling documentaries where the archival becomes the aesthetic: for example, *Can And Me* (2022, 90 mins), for which director Michael P Aust was given access to the extensive family archive of Can keyboardist Irmin Schmidt. Although the Cologne band often claimed to be without a leader, the documentary clearly establishes Irmin and his wife Hildegard as Can's parental figures and safekeepers of its legacy. *Can And Me* was presented as a companion piece to *The Sound Of Cologne* (2022, 93 mins), a similarly ornate overview of Cologne's postwar electronic music history that Aust co-directed with Kristina Schippling.

An already expanded short documentary that deserves to be even longer is *Kids Of The BIMS* (2021, 34 mins), a concise history of Amsterdam suburb De Bijlmer through the lens of its influential local hip-hop and Afrobeats club scene. Tailored to channels such as Vice or even Netflix, directors Max Paschke and Maik Schuster's film examines a neglected, ghettoised culture threatened by gentrification, using the archival aesthetic to proclaim its global significance.

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