

In the face of the overwhelming pressures and challenges of 2020 (to put it mildly!) the ever-innovative Doc N Roll Fest has stood firm and managed, despite the constant turmoil of the UK cinema industry and in particular that faced by key partner Cineworld, to not only deliver a (partly) physical event as the country hurtles towards the likelihood of a second lockdown but grow thanks to the launch and growth of its streaming platform Doc N Roll TV. The latest iteration of its flagship London festival, before hopefully taking some titles out to the regions as (kinda) normal, features a now expected array of films featuring heavy-hitting musical talent. There are films about Phil Lynott and Kelly Jones - I'm wondering if that viewing will shift my opinion on that artist in the way last year's offering the brilliant David Crosby: Know My Name did - as well as two sold out screenings of the much anticipated IDLES doc Do Not Go Gentle: A Film About IDLES.

Elsewhere in the programme there are a variety of gems that circle around similar themes and ideas, for better and for lesser. Johana Ožvold's experimental tribute to experimental music, <The Sound Is Innocent mines much of the same formal and thematic territory as Caroline Catz's similarly striking new film Delia Derbyshire: The Myths & Legendary Tapes. It has all the usual elements you'd expect in a documentary - archive, interviews, performance - but the way they have been looped, sampled, mixed and abstracted means this story of the evolution of electronic music and the relationship between performer and technology ends up as a post-modern fable that recalls the labyrinthine underworlds of Jean Cocteau more than a traditional music documentary.

Focusing on a performer on a similarly imaginative avant-garde musical journey is Chuang Xu's Twinkle Dammit!, which tells the story of Margaret Leng Tan, the first woman to receive a doctorate from Juilliard and also, as the film so charmingly illustrates, the world's first toy piano virtuoso. The film follows the pianist and her friend and collaborator, another avant-garde legend, George Crumb, as she prepares to perform the world premiere of a new piece of his, as part of her Three C's world tour which sees her playing Crumb's work alongside that of John Cage and Harry Cohen. As a musician and guide Leng Tan is insightful and funny, her ideas on music education are particularly astute and it's fascinating to hear her talk about how she is still on Singapore time so many years after making her home in Brooklyn. Despite playing toy instruments the film captures the artistry and seriousness of her imagination and artistic vision. The film also includes maybe the most authentic moment of Hipsterdom ever captured on screen in the form of the Brooklyn Toy Piano Festival.

One of the things that the Doc N Roll festival has done is provide a space for showcasing films that would otherwise have likely been delivered directly to fans. That may be a diplomatic way of saying that some of the films have limited appeal but it's nonetheless providing a space for fans to share in a big screen experience with a general curious public. Two films that fall into the possibly fans only bracket this year are JoyCut At Robert Smith's Meltdown and The Holy Gift. The former, a document of the band's performance and 'book us!' promo captured at The Cure frontman's South Bank extravaganza, is co-directed by the band and the latter is made by an avowed fan who took 14 years to make the film in what is an unwitting tribute in itself to the length of time between albums of the band at the heart of this love letter, Tool. Both films are well made but insular, never really getting to anything that might resonate beyond the music and those already drawn to listen. Maybe that's just my taste talking though.

Offering little beyond a good time and a brief reminder of the unique context of New Orleans, and all the better for it, is The Offline Playlist. This is 50 minutes of rollicking good times that brings together a host of New Orleans musicians across the R&B, Soul and Cajun spectrum for a special gig at the legendary Preservation Hall venue. The performances are so good it almost makes you forget the whole thing is a Spotify initiative.

Two real highlights are films with eerily parallel narratives and protagonists. It's Not All Rock & Roll and This Film Should Not Exist tell the stories of Dave Doughman and Swearing At Motorists, and Ben Wallers (The Rebel) and the Country Teasers, respectively. Both are portraits of musicians committed to remaining so, in the face of almost total indifference. Seen as visionaries in their cult post-modern indie spheres the films follow a familiar initial trail, the early days of potential glory fuelled by the ignorance of youth but both end up in unexpected places. Both films touch on the demons of addiction and mental illness in serious, moving ways - themes that are also at the heart of the IDLES film - and both are celebrations of singular, engaging creators and performers who stick to their guns and their art and these are films that feel like important documents but also vital investigations into the nature of careers in independent music. That both Dave and Ben survive as humans by (coincidentally I believe) driving forklifts for a living is telling, making their regular forays into small venues to let their inner voices come to the fore, especially poignant.