

Run, or dance, but do not walk to see the new documentary “20 Feet From Stardom,” directed by Morgan Neville. If ever there were a film about the “star-maker machinery” (a great turn of phrase, courtesy of Joni Mitchell), this is it. Two other recent films paved the way for this extraordinary documentary—“The Wrecking Crew,” by Denny Tedesco, about the LA-based studio and session players who backed hundreds of artists across all genres and the 2002 documentary about the Motown house band for a dozen early years in Detroit and later LA, the Funk Brothers, featured in “Standing in the Shadows of Motown.”

Once again, the summer brings forth a great rock and roll film, this one about the marvelous and transformative women of color (virtually all Black) who sang back up to all the great songs of the 1960’s and 1970’s, before the odd musical marketplace and labor economics of rock and roll squeezed most of them out. Of course, as with rock and roll itself, the gospel roots truly reveal themselves here, as most of these voices were first heard in AME churches and congregations before they were tapped to sing for all of us. The best example of this provenance is in the movie, fleetingly: Mable John, an early Raelette—Ray Charles’ backup singer is shown singing with Charles and his musical director (Billy Preston, the only other musician to play with the Beatles and be named on their records) and preaching in her LA-based Joy in Jesus ministry.

But the real stars are the women who labored unknown (except to music producers and the smart lead singers looking for a smooth backup sound) in the music industry, backing up the singers and in some cases, actually singing the songs for a more photogenic group, particularly some of the so-called “girl-groups” that sprang up in the 1960’s. The ubiquitous Darlene Love (reduced at one point to being a housekeeper, when she was discouraged and broke) has found well-deserved recognition, appearing on Letterman around Christmastime each year to sing her signature

“Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)” and being selected for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame two years ago. She sang first with The Blossoms beginning in 1957, and then with the Crystals, on their 1963 hit “Da Doo Ron Ron,” after which her distinctive voice led her to the studio and touring backing vocals for which she is famous. And Lisa Fischer—probably the most gifted and versatile of the many featured in the film—earned a 1992 Grammy for the single, “How Can I Ease the Pain.”

However, more common is the near-anonymity that has hidden the names Jo Lawry, Judith Hill, Merry Clayton, Claudia Lennear, and Tata Vega from public view and acclaim. (Jo Lawry is the sole white backup singer featured.) We are lucky, as I have pointed out often, that you can go to YouTube for free, plug in their names, and choose from literally dozens of each of these great women in the studio and on tour with the Stones and others. On the issue of near-anonymity and the general unfairness of life, the heir apparent to this genre of overlooked backup artists is the very talented Judith Hill. I do not watch the various talent shows on tv, and here is a reminder why: in May, she was voted off the NBC show “The Voice.” Sometimes, wicked talent alone is not enough, and it requires the star-maker machinery behind the popular song, or the grace of god.

The film, by Morgan Neville, is playing nationally:

<http://tremoloproductions.com/20-feet-from-stardom-screening-dates/> . I saw it this afternoon at the CCA Cinematheque in Santa Fe, with an enthusiastic and appreciative crowd of about 45 people, and I think I was the youngest filmgoer. I had thought Neville was a member of the Neville family from New Orleans, but I was wrong—
<http://www.sundance.org/video/meet-the-artists-13-morgan-neville/> and <http://www.comingsoon.net/news/movienews.php?id=105153> . He has been around for a long time, and was involved in a Johnny Cash project I

had seen, but I had not put two and two together. This is a fascinating documentary, stuffed with great interviews and performance footage, and I promise you, it has a great beat, and you can really dance to it.

Happy Summer to my Rock and Roll Posse. Go see this movie and then jump on YouTube to listen to these great women singers. Then, go to Amazon.com and buy their solo projects, while you can get them.

Michael