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Bastards of the Party directed by Cle "Bone" Sloan (review)

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In addition to making excellent use of archival concert footage, the film uses television news clips effectively to convey the topics and sentiments about which Ochs sang, including political leaders, civil rights, and especially the Vietnam War. The one area where the film notably lacks balance is in the many interviews interspersed between the songs and personal commentary by Ochs. Too many of the interviews about Ochs are carried out with family members and relatively unknown friends: folksinger Judy Henske; his sister, Sunny Ochs; his divorced wife, Alice Ochs; his daughter Meegan; and his brother, Michael Ochs, who is also the film's director. Michael Ochs' role as filmmaker likely explains why there were so many family interviews. There are two brief present-day comments by Joan Baez, two by Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary, and one by Pete Seeger. Political activists Tom Hayden, Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman add brief reflections, and actor Sean Penn declares that he was a big Ochs fan. Notably absent is any commentary, past or present, by Bob Dylan.

Comparable films on Ochs' contemporaries, such as Martin Scorsese's 2006 Bob Dylan documentary, *No Direction Home* and the 2009 PBS *American Masters* film on Joan Baez, had the advantage of long segments with Dylan and Baez, with their present thoughts about music and their careers, as well as interviews with the many famous singers who knew them. The Ochs film obviously lacks that backward-looking, reflective dimension. It would have been very interesting to hear a sober, mentally alert Ochs weigh in on American music, politics, and his own career, from a contemporary perspective.

Although Ochs performed in Dylan's shadow throughout the decade, the film demonstrates that in the long *durée*, cultural history may have another story to tell. Its dynamic archival footage clearly and emotionally captures the atmosphere of the 1960s, and the interrelationship of political activism and music, highlighting for new generations Ochs' unique talent and his role in the shaping of an era.

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Bastards of the Party (2005)

Directed by Cle "Bone" Sloan

Produced and Distributed by Fuqua Films

www.bastardsofthepartyDVD.com

95 min.

"Gang bangers," like the members of the infamous Bloods and Crips in Los Angeles, live lives defined by violence and violent retribution: a never-

ending "cycle of death." Few, however, can explain the roots of that cycle, or why they would choose such a life. Cle "Bone" Sloan -- a member of the Bloods, turned actor and filmmaker -- set out, in 2005, to ask those questions. *Bastards of the Party*, produced by Hollywood director Antoine Fuqua (*Training Day*, *Tears of the Sun*), sets out the answers that Sloan found. It provides essential context by reaching deep into black history and addressing a wide range of social issues, but its focus always returns to 2005, and the reality of gang life on the streets of Los Angeles.

Sloan opens the film with images of Antebellum-era "Negroes for Sale" signs and photographs of lynchings from the early twentieth century. The images highlight the deliberate annihilation of black people in America at the hands of white racists and suggest why, between the end of American slavery and World War II, thousands of blacks fled the South to escape racial prejudice and to seek better employment opportunities. Upon their arrival in the North and in the West, however, these were met with racism and restrictions on where they could work, how much they could earn, and where they could live. Long after slavery was abolished, the quality of life for most black people was defined by underpaid labor, segregation, pervasive racial discrimination, and perpetual poverty.

Having established this background, Sloan reveals the early hatred of whites toward blacks in Los Angeles, and the division of the city of Los Angeles along racial lines. The film describes how whites restricted blacks to certain residential areas, in the hope that "the weeds choke out the roses," and chronicles the systematic attacks on blacks by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and racist white gangs such as the "spook hunters." The last legal lynching in Los Angeles occurred in 1948, but throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the LAPD cracked down on "race mixing," raided black clubs that featured R&B music, and harassed black youths. This pattern of institutionalized terrorism, violence, and even murder led to the formation of early black "gangs" such as the Gladiators for protection against the police and racist whites.

Sloan's film also discusses the demise of the Black Panther Party, the subsequent rise in gun violence (c. 1969-1972), and the decline in black leadership. The waning of the modern civil rights movement, he argues, was hastened by a consistent pattern in which the most effective black leaders were murdered or wrongfully incarcerated. Sloan presents evidence and testimony for his argument that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) not only orchestrated the decline of the Black Panthers but also instigated the friction between the Black Panthers and another black activist group, the US Organization. With these types of groups -- considered by the FBI to be radicals -- finally defused, the gangs expanded to fill their place. "The Crips and Bloods are the bastard offspring of the political parties of the 60s."

Although many blacks were simply trying to make ends meet, some began to replace the "we" mentality with a "me" or an "I'm going to get

mine” mentality. This was exacerbated by the fact that the “have nots” had always been constantly reminded of what the “haves” possessed. The loss of semi-skilled jobs for black men in post-industrial America made matters worse, and led to increasing rates of poverty and crime. Drugs offered both an escape from poverty and the promise of wealth, but they also intensified the culture of violence. Drug-related violence spilled into white neighborhoods, leading to a national “war on drugs” and renewed anti-black violence by the LAPD that climaxed with the beating of Rodney King. Sloan continues his story with the Los Angeles Riots of 1992, the temporary truce between the Bloods and Crips gangs, concluding with the destructive conditions that have persisted to the present.

Although Sloan emphasizes the historical context, his film is not limited to uncovering gang culture’s origins in racial terror, discrimination, and oppression. It also addresses the current issue of self-accountability. Returning to the issue of leadership, he makes the powerful statement: “I don’t know who the leaders are. They’re all dead. If they’re still alive, they’re not doing their job.” At the same time, he indicts the remainder of the black community for their inaction: “Our generation has failed to live up to what we were supposed to be.” Regarding social expectations and self-fulfilling prophecy, he continues: “You can’t let other people label your child.”

As these quotes suggest, Sloan’s social analysis is intense, raw, and personal. In one striking passage, he criticizes the use of the word “nigger,” which dehumanizes and reduces a slain person to a number. It has the opposite effect, he argues, of the word “brother,” which acknowledges the fact that one is dealing with a “real person,” a human being. The word “brother” creates inner conflict when one even considers taking someone else’s life. His work to reconcile the Bloods and Crips is, he declares, about one’s love for the men who have died right there by one’s side and about the simple fact that at this point, one must proclaim: “Fuck this... I’m not doing this anymore.” Ultimately, he exclaims: “I’m denouncing killing. This is bullshit!”

Sloan’s storytelling is effective. Even though his premise is not introduced from the very beginning of the film, it is convincing. Scenes are shot and edited to make the story flow well, which is important, especially considering the vast amount of visual material available and the film’s potentially daunting 95-minute length. Sloan presents the historical aspects of the film in a decade-by-decade manner, but he also relies on evidentiary editing and weaves in a number of short interviews that were shot over an extended period of time. The interviewees include with past and present members of the Bloods, members of the community, a former rival Crip gang member turned ally in the anti-violence cause, and important historical figures such as former Black Panther Geronimo Pratt.

Bastards of the Party illustrates the current trend of documentary filmmakers using their own voices and experiences in their films. Sloan

incorporates his own personal testimony in a compelling manner, blending it with interviews, newspaper articles, photographs, candid video footage, and a timeless yet fitting soundtrack. The film concludes, for example, with a 2Pac (Tupac Shakur) song entitled “Shed So Many Tears,” played over numerous photographs of young men – all of whom Sloan knew, all of whom died in gang violence. In the end, *Bastards of the Party* brilliantly demonstrates that a documentary can be both the subject’s story and the filmmaker’s, as well.

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Jerome Robbins: Something to Dance About (2009)

Directed by Judy Kinberg

Distributed by 13/WNET PBS

www.pbs.org

113 minutes

As a dancer, and later as a choreographer and director, the legendary Jerome Robbins (1918-1998) worked to combine the high art of ballet with the commercial art of the Broadway musical. More often than not, his efforts resulted in landmarks of American dance: *West Side Story* (1957), *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), and *Dances at a Gathering* (1969). In exploring his career, the Peabody-award winning documentary “Jerome Robbins: Something to Dance About” effectively provides a history of dance in the United States during the twentieth century. Yet, the documentary also reveals Robbins’ innately contradictory character. Despite his efforts, Robbins was never completely at ease when moving between highbrow and middlebrow, between the ballet and the chorus line. He, together with many of the dancers who worked for him, suffered from his desire for perfection coupled with a deep-seated and persistent sense of being an outsider. Director Judy Kinberg works hard to present a balanced picture of Robbins as an easy man to hate but equally an easy man to love; his genius and drive for perfection made both equally possible.

Kinberg had unprecedented access to Robbins’ personal journals, dating back to his early childhood, and to previously unseen rehearsal footage of Robbins at various stages in his career. Even so, “Something to Dance About” focuses primarily on Robbins’ career and dips into his personal life only to trace how it influenced his development as a dancer and choreographer. The tone is set right from the start: Stephen Sondheim begins the documentary, saying, “Jerry is the only genius I’ve ever met.” After a series of quick snippets of impressions of Robbins from a succession of talking heads—ranging from “he was a doll” to “he was a terror”—the documentary