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Wesley Willis's Joy Ride  
It's A Rock You Mentary

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One of the most entertaining documentaries I've seen in years is the newly released DVD from Eyeosaur and MVD Visual, *Wesley Willis Joy Rides*. It's hard to not be entertained when your subject is the legendary 300-pound schizophrenic cult rocker and artist from Chicago, Wesley Willis. The film is directed by Chris Bagley and Kim Shively, who admit a friendship developed between them and the late Willis over the years, and it has already won acclaim, including the Gold Hugo for the Chicago Award at the 2008 Chicago International Film Festival.

The film is dedicated to telling the story of Wesley Willis, but does so through following him around over a period of several years and through interviews of those who were close to the man. There is no annoying narrator trying to interpret the motives or give context to Willis. Instead, the directors let the man himself do the talking, which is precisely why the movie is so interesting. It's hard not to be captivated by the enigmatic and personable Willis, and to be caught up in his excitement and passion for life in his city. It's easy to see how a man who can't remember to tie his shoes or take a shower can follow his dream to be a rock star and succeed. The interviews and comments from those who encountered Wesley add insight into his background and character, which prevent him from ever becoming a "sideshow act" or one dimensional novelty artist. What used to seem ludicrous and funny, such as when Willis would sing about his "hell rides" on the bus, become touchingly heartbreaking when the viewer learns the origin of those statements. Other things we learn is how the infamous Wesley Willis head-butt originated, and why the commercial jingles were introduced into his acts/songs. You'll even hear his take of where he got the scar on the side of his face.

The film basically begins with Wesley the artist, as it focuses on his drawings and unique attention to detail of the city around him. I never saw his work as much more than childlike drawings with markers, until this film. His use of lines, angles, and depth make him worthy of the artist moniker. After some interviews with his family and a section recapping his childhood, the film switches to Wesley the musician. Backed by a soundtrack of his own songs, the movie follows his career from the very first time someone brought a keyboard into an art store he was hanging out at, to his tours with the Wesley Willis Fiasco, and his recording relationship with Jello Biafra. Another section focuses on his schizophrenia and the challenges of accomplishing what he has in spite of it, as well as the experiences of his band mates touring with the man and what he was like when he wasn't taking his medication. Sadly, Willis' life was cut short in 2003, and the film touches on the final years in this "joy ride" as well.

I was only mildly familiar with Wesley Willis and his music when I saw this movie. I really enjoyed it, and even longed for more footage, which was happily found in the bonus features, including a couple haircuts. Nothing the guy does is boring. Fans will definitely love this "day in the life" documentary which traverses so many years of his experience, but those who have never heard of Wesley Willis will also be intrigued and entertained by the endearing artist who gained a cult following and "Rocked over London...rock on Chicago....Wheaties, the breakfast of champions."

Reviewed by Matt Milligan

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