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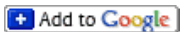
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Wesley Willis's Joy Rides

[MVD Entertainment Group](#) // Unrated // December 8, 2009

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Review by [Casey Burchby](#) | posted December 16, 2009 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Start a Discussion](#)



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Wesley Willis (1963 - 2003) was a Chicago artist and musician who enjoyed a short but significant burst of fame in the mid-to-late 1990s, when his band, the Wesley Willis Fiasco, toured widely. Willis suffered from paranoid schizophrenia, which appears to have had its onset following a knife attack that left him with a long, scaly scar down the right side of his face. Despite his premature death from leukemia at age 40, Willis left behind a huge body of work. His simple, repetitive, hilarious, and often profane songs number in the hundreds (he recorded about 50 albums), and his innumerable ballpoint and marker drawings of the Dan Ryan Expressway and other cityscapes represent a significant contribution to the art of Chicago.

Chris Bagley and Kim Shively's film **Wesley Willis's Joy Rides** chronicles Willis's life, from cradle to grave. Most of the documentary's original footage appears to have been shot over the last three years of its subject's life. What the filmmakers ended up with was a portrait of a man equally disturbed, joyful, prolific, gifted, energetic, and beloved. Willis started out using Chicago's Genesis Art Supplies as a base of operations. There, he'd obtain his materials - ballpoints, color markers, posterboard - and draw fastidiously detailed views of the city that displayed a fine architectural accuracy, along with an odd use of perspective. Often, Willis used double vanishing points, placing his point of view at the image's center.

Willis set himself up on the sidewalk outside Genesis, drawing at a table that also held a selection of his CDs for sale. Willis's music was his second passion, and he was just as productive in that area, if not more so, as he was making art. His songs usually consisted of spoken-word lyrics over a simple synthesizer beat, with the sung repetition of the song's title serving as a chorus. Songs like "Rock and Roll McDonald's" and "I Whipped Spiderman's Ass" typify this structure. The bulk of the lyrics are usually stream-of-consciousness rants that incorporate observations and events from Willis's life. Later songs that address bestiality (like "Suck a Cheetah's Dick") were meant to shame and drive away the demons that haunted Willis's brain.

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Those demons started visiting him in 1989. As Willis himself describes in the film, they took him on "hellrides," calling him obscene names. Willis's innate response was to yell back at them, one-upping their use of profanity, and smack himself in the head. This kind of behavior got him thrown off buses, out of shops, and once, briefly, resulted in him being committed against his will. Willis's schizophrenia, however, did not slow down his productivity, even while his medications slowed his physical activity. He continued to draw, write songs, and tour, even making it to Europe at least once.

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One thing Bagley and Shively's highlight in their moving film is how much people cared about Willis and how much he reciprocated the feelings of his friends and fans. Despite his many handicaps - besides his mental illness, Willis was hugely overweight and was hard-pressed to maintain his personal hygiene - Willis had many friends who took him in when he needed a place to stay, and saw to it that he was safe and had drawing materials and access to musical equipment and recording studios. Willis was absolutely driven to create and committed to art and music. His strange, unique mind and point-of-view was well worth protecting, and Wesley's friends and associates made his work possible, when it could have very well been lost - trapped within the walls of an institution, or worse.

This fine film, a mere 77 minutes, captures the endless energy behind Wesley Willis's huge personality and prodigious output. Ridicule, which could have dogged someone like Willis, never distracted him, and his mind, while plagued by awful voices that would have decimated the average person, was remarkably free. Willis loved his work, and he loved living, and this film is an effective testament to a rare human being and his challenging, disturbing, wonderful, and hilarious work.

The DVD

The Video

The full-frame transfer comes from a video master and the results are about what you'd expect from a low-budget documentary. Although low-light shots are quite choppy, everything else is quite clear and clean.

The Audio

The stereo soundtrack is perfectly serviceable. In places where recording was less than optimal, or when Willis's words are mumbled or slurred, subtitles are provided. Music comes off very well.

The Extras

There is a selection of **Deleted Scenes** that runs just under an hour; there is some good stuff here that, although wisely cut, makes a good supplement for those who enjoy the feature. There is also a short **Audio Recording** of Willis made by a friend. An **Art Gallery** of Willis's drawings is a very welcome bonus; the **Still Gallery** is less essential.

Final Thoughts

Wesley Willis's Joy Rides is a vibrant, entertaining, and moving portrait of a gifted, driven artist who left a sizable legacy of artwork and music. A unique man who refused to be limited by painful mental illness, Willis's story is unexpectedly uplifting. **Highly recommended.**

Casey Burchby is a writer and editor who lives in San Jose, CA.

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