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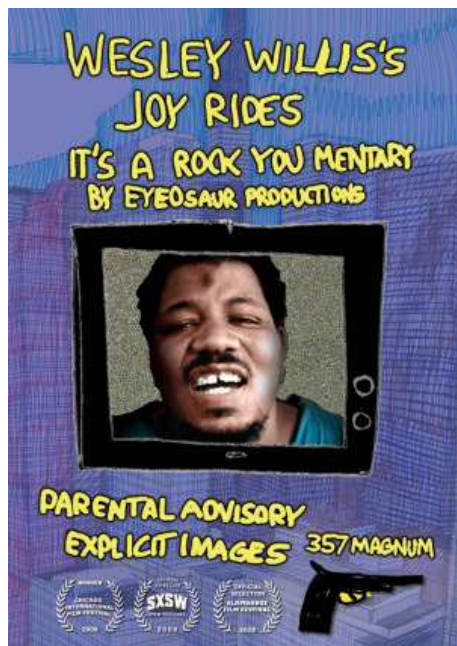
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Wesley Willis' s Joy Rides: Portrait of a Schizophrenic Chicago City Artist and "Rock Star"

By Niki D'Andrea in [DVD Review](#)

Mon., Dec. 21 2009 @ 8:00AM



Wesley Willis sits at a computer and adjusts his ever-present headphones, pushes them up against his ears, turns up the volume of the music. He's frustrated because he still can't hear his beloved rock 'n' roll over all the shouts of "Bum!" and "You're a stupid asshole!" He begins to cuss, and smack himself in the side of the head. The guy at the computer next to him glances over, wide-eyed behind his spectacles. "I'm sorry," Willis tells him. "I'm hearing voices."

This is one of the scenes from *Wesley Willis's Joy Rides*, a documentary about the schizophrenic street artist from Chicago turned

self-proclaimed "rock star." First impressions of Willis weren't always so unnerving for everybody. Although his massive stature and peculiar facial scars made him look intimidating, Willis was "really just a big teddy bear," as one of his friends describes him in *Joy Rides*.

Willis' music wasn't revolutionary, or even very good. He and his band, The Wesley Willis Fiasco, had a record deal with Alternative Tentacles Records, the label owned by former Dead Kennedys singer and all-around punk icon Jello Biafra. But most people, including some of his fans, viewed Willis' music as a novelty or joke: Here was this huge black guy sporting a big dreadlock afro and stained sweatpants, holding up a lyric sheet or sitting at a Technics keyboard looping the same canned beat, barking out eclectic lyrics like "You bring me damaging disharmony in my life by cussing at me for no reason at all" and "Suck a

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buildings, buses, and trains; to London, where he performs his brand of "rock and roll" for an enthusiastic club; to California, where Biafra talks about Willis' prolific music (he self-released more than 45 "albums" before Biafra signed him); and finally, back to Illinois, where he succumbed to leukemia at the age of 40.

In addition to the footage of Willis talking to the camera, there are also interviews with his family, friends, and art patrons. It's interesting to hear architecture teachers and art buyers talk about Willis' drawings, marveling at the perfect lines and hard angles, the double vanishing points, and his attention to detail.

It's even more interesting to watch him interact with the public. Willis was a friendly person, and talked to pretty much everybody he saw. He was known for gently head-butting people, and had a callous on his forehead from doing it. He would proudly talk about his music, ask people to buy CDs or artwork, ask them questions about themselves. Anybody who gave him a chance stuck around to talk.

What's so great about *Wesley Willis's Joy Rides* is it really provides a portrait of Willis not only as an artist, but a person, and it does so without histrionics or mushy pontificating -- a pitfall of some documentaries about the deceased.

Willis died from leukemia in 2003, before this film was finished, yet he's so brilliantly alive here, even after his friends talk about their last moments with him and the end credits start to roll.

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golstein

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