

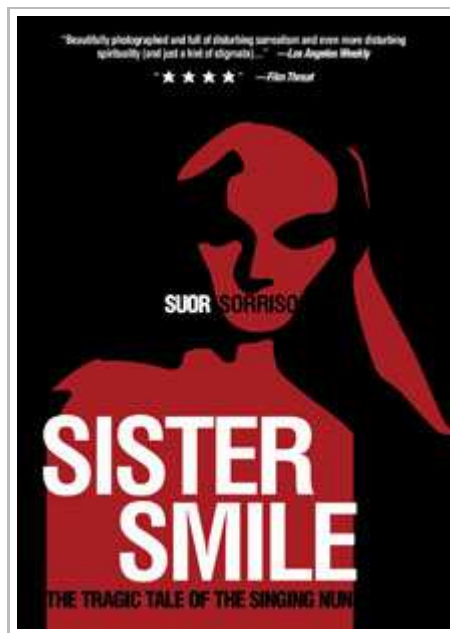
FFanzeen: Rock'n'Roll Attitude With Integrity

Through the writings and photography of Robert Barry Francos, a view of the arts and culture, including everyday life.

SATURDAY, MARCH 12, 2011

DVD Review: Sister Smile (Suor Sorriso)

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Sister Smile (Suor Sorriso)

Directed by Roger Deutsch
MVD Visual, 2000
90 minutes, USD \$xx.95
MVDvisual.com

Let me get this straight... This is an Italian language film made by an American director about a Belgian nun who spoke French.

Perhaps it's appropriate that it is splintered that way, as it is reflected in the film, but more on that later. First a bit of background: the person we know as The Singing Nun (aka Soeur Sourire, French for Sister Smile, or Suor Sorriso in Italian, which is the original name of this film), was born as Jeanne-Paule Deckers in 1933. While in the Dominican order, she was at the Fischermont Convent in Waterloo, Belgium. Her new name was Sister Luc Gabriel. While there, she recorded an album to sell to visitors to help bring in some extra income to the convent. A song from it, "Dominique,"

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About Me

Robert Barry Francos
Currently living in Saskatoon (email at RBF55@msn.com for address). From 1977-88, I used to publish a print version of a music magazine in New York called FFanzeen, which dealt with the wide-ranging independent music scene. I also photographed many bands from the period (and since). Now I write this blog, and have a column at jerseybeat (dot) com (slash) quietcorner (dot)

went viral (or, to the Top 10 in then-speak), which was a blessing for the church who kept the proceeds that were not taken by the record label (the latter of whom also owned the Soeur Souire name). After leaving the church to pursue a musical career that quickly failed under the name Luc Dominique, she became a pro-contraception activist and opened a school for autistic children. Following a lengthy legal battle with the Belgian government over taxes and a second failed career attempt (including a disco version of "Dominique"), At the age of 51, Jeanne and her lover of a decade, Anna Pécher, committed joint suicide in 1985 (they are buried together).

Now about the DVD. Broken into five parts (noted by chapter cards), the film is more of a pastiche of Jeanne-Paule's (changed to Janine here) than a straight bio-pic. Lots of liberties are taken with details, though some are spot on, and it touches down on parts of her life in almost vignettes rather than a straightforward narrative. At times, it's almost impressionistic in artistic licensing.

Note that for clarification, when I am discussing the real person, I will refer to her as Jeanne, and the fictional film version, Janine.

Ginerva Colonna plays Janine from beginning to end with long, dark hair (Jeanne had short-cropped hair, which was turning white by the '80s), and does an excellent job in presenting a nearly bi-polar, unreliable, and substance abuse-addled, Janine. As she sinks deeper and deeper into a life of hard drugs and promiscuous sex (of both genders), she still remains somewhat sympathetic, and that is all due to Ginerva's textured performance, which ranges from sullen to manic and back, and finally to pathetic.

When we meet Janine, she is sneaking out of her father's house by shimmying down from a window by a sheet, on her way to join the convent and buying a guitar she christens Adele along the way. The abstract, artistic level of the film starts right off, with her having a poetic conversation with a rose in a park. In a voice-over, she queries, "'Who knows,' she asked a lush red rose, twinkling in the morning dew, 'who knows what you, Adele, my guitar, and I might do together.'"

The first scene shown in the abbey, she's already discontent, and then, eight minutes into the film, she has the hit record. The film plays her life like a stone skipped on the water. When Ginerva starts to sing as Janine, well, it's pretty bad, but after a couple of lines, the actual recording plays with her lip syncing over it. Other songs touched on in part are "Je Voudrais" and "Entre Les Etoiles." In another scene, she is watching Debbie Reynolds playing her in the Hollywood rendition, *The Singing Nun*. Both the real and fictional nun in this newer version did not like the 1966 rendition of her life. I've occasionally wondered what Jeanne thought of *The Flying Nun*, which was more inspired than based on her, though it is not addressed here. Also invented is having a radio announcer state that she had never made a live appearance. This, of course, is untrue, as she famously played on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, as well as many concerts in her convent days, in full habit. For the film's version, the first section

html. And the beat goes on.

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ends with her voice-over saying, "I am only a voice."

The start of the second act begins with her taking an action that is repeated often throughout the story: she runs away. Somehow (and unexplained here), she ends up at Hope House, a shelter for "wayward girls" run by another ex-nun who will become her lover, renamed Clara (a powerful and emotional performance by Simona Caprarrini) for the film. Janine becomes overly possessive of Clara, which causes people in their care to leave, leading to the eventual closing of the house as the government pulls their funding. Yet Janine blames Clara for being bored and suffering from writers block. This leads to running back to her dad's house (who is remarried to someone who looks a lot like her, and is about the same age), by climbing up the same sheet, still hanging from the window after all these years (and still white)!

Her dad getting on with his life has her running back to Clara (a common theme is going to and leaving her). As the film progresses from this point, Janine decline through mental illness, attempted suicide and excessive behavior begin to take their toll, both spiritually and physically. One of the better lines she says is, "from angel dust we come, and to angel dust we go."

By the film's final fifth, her woes with the tax bureau are shown at a point when she's trying to heal and stay sober. All the proceeds of her music went to the record label and the church, but because of the lack of paperwork; Jeanne was fined US\$63,000. This sets her off on an attempt to be with Clara, and yet another binge after that. As the end of both the tale and their lives nears, Janine develops stigmata as she and Clara drift off together.

This is a very aesthetically beautiful piece of cinema. The writing, lighting, acting, and even the editing work well in a piece of pseudo-verities. While being far more *map* than *territory*, director Deutsch has made more a piece of art - albeit depressing as all get-out at parts - than a true bio-pic, but that's okay. This is an art form that is closer to oral tradition than a book, and liberties taken are nothing new. In fact, there are probably more correct pieces here than in the 1966 saccharine telling. I just wonder what Sister Smile would make of a film of her life that has that smile turned upside down.

There are two very interesting documentary shorts included in the special features, both early works by Deutsch in Super 8mm black-and-white, and narrated by him in a calm, soothing voice. *Dead People* (finished 2005) bring us into the life of Tres Frank Butler, an elderly African-American man from the small town of Ellicott City (Maryland?). He is a hopeless alcoholic who spent the early years of his life being traded to various people outside the family. Shot mostly in 1974, we see and hear Frank hanging out and talking. Most of what he says is captioned, because even Deutsch admits it took years to understand what he was mumbling. Deutsch comes back to Ellicott City in 1985 to attend Frank's funeral. It's a lovely portrait of a life that has had unbelievably hard moments, and even though most of what he talks about is his past and death, there is something positive

about the man that Deutsch obviously saw and captured.

The second feature is the 12-minute long *Mario Makes a Movie* (completed 2004), which was shot in 1987. Back then, Deutsch worked in a school for mentally challenged teens. One of the projects he gave his class was to hand out cameras and let them film whatever they wanted. After an introduction, we meet a troublesome student named Mario, who was perfectly normal until falling out a window as a toddler, and suffering brain damage. Much of what we see from that point on is the footage that Mario shot, with Deutsch describing what Mario was seeing, and stories about him. A lot of it is Brakhage-like (personally I couldn't tell the difference between Mario's and Stan's work), with out of focus close-ups of, well, whatever, including train windows. It's a sad but engaging snapshot of a life that was irrevocably changed in a moment.

BONUS VIDEO

EXTRA BONUS VIDEO

SCARY EXTRA-EXTRA BONUS VIDEO

SCARIER YET EXTRA-EXTRA-EXTRA BONUS VIDEO

Posted by Robert Barry Francos at [12:01 AM](#)

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