

20 Feet From Stardom: The “most incredible artists you’ve never heard of”

By James Brewer
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Directed by Morgan Neville

The title of Morgan Neville’s documentary, *20 Feet from Stardom*, is explained at the film’s outset. Bruce Springsteen tells the camera, not without sympathy, that “It’s a bit of a walk. That walk to the front [of the stage] is complicated.” Indeed.

The names of Merry Clayton, Darlene Love, Claudia Lennear, Lisa Fischer and Tata Vega are by no means household words. Yet their voices have appeared in the background of such a wide range of popular music that virtually every listener of R&B and rock music has heard and enjoyed them.

Neville describes his film’s subjects as “some of the most incredible artists you’ve never heard of.” *20 Feet from Stardom* features backup singers from different eras—the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s—“to give a general sense of the sweep of what was happening.”

Mick Jagger, Sting, Stevie Wonder, Sheryl Crow and Springsteen are interviewed in *20 Feet from Stardom*. Others, such as Lou Reed, David Bowie, Ray Charles, Elton John, the late Luther Vandross, Joe Cocker, Tom Jones and Leon Russell appear in archive footage. They all recognized the tremendous talents of these mostly black female backup singers.

The human voice can be the most sublime of all musical instruments. The intensity of a well-trained and powerful singer can move us, almost regardless of the words being sung. This effect is demonstrated in the film when Merry Clayton revisits Elektra Studios in Los Angeles, where, in 1969, she recorded the vocal track for the Rolling Stones’ “Gimme Shelter.” As she sits in the vacant studio and reminisces, her isolated vocal track plays loudly. Her voice sings, “Rape, murder, is just a shot away,” several times, increasing in intensity, with breathtaking effect. Clayton listens, and smiles knowingly.

The narrative points out that the source of the talent brought into popular music was often the church choirs that were the childhood experience of many who would become backup singers. It started with gospel music and became secularized, under the conditions of the Civil Rights movement and protest era. Black vocalists brought a new dimension to backup singing. “We brought what we took from our church choirs.” Of course, this new element was not only artistic, it also expressed outrage and indignation at social oppression.

It has never been easy to pursue a career as a vocalist. Clayton’s adolescent dream was realized when she joined the group of backup vocalists and performed with Ray Charles as one of The Raelettes.

In 1957, Darlene Love became the lead for a group known as The Blossoms, in Los Angeles. However, their first hit record (“He’s a Rebel”), in 1962, was released by young producer Phil Spector under the name of another group—The Crystals. The Blossoms sang backup throughout the 1960s for Dionne Warwick, Sam Cooke, Elvis Presley, Jones and others. Love describes the difficult professional relationship she had with Spector, who, she maintains, was the primary impediment to stardom for her. She recounts in *20 Feet from Stardom* that she found working with the producer so oppressive she left for a career cleaning houses for the wealthy.

Returning to performing in the 1980s, Love moved to New York City at the urging of Steve Van Zandt, guitarist for Bruce Springsteen’s E Street Band, where she enjoyed success performing at clubs.

Lisa Fischer, born in 1958 and raised in Fort Greene, Brooklyn comes across as an entirely unpretentious person who has had, and continues to have, a remarkable career. She has an incredible vocal range and has released several solo albums, but expresses a

preference for being a session singer. In 1992 she won a Grammy for Best Female R&B Vocal Singer for her single “ How Can I Ease the Pain ” on the album *So Intense*. While she was recording solo, since 1989, she was also touring with the Rolling Stones.

Táta Vega first performed professionally at the age of 13. She explains in the film her determination to move to California from New York to perform, a desire her parents encouraged. In 1969-70 she was cast in the Los Angeles production of *Hair*, and while singing at one of the Hollywood clubs was noticed by Berry Gordy, founder of Motown Records. After releasing four solo albums for Tamla Records, she solidified her career as a backup singer for artists as diverse as Patti LaBelle, Elton John, Ray Charles and Leon Russell.

Claudia Lennear has recorded and toured with Stephen Stills, Russell and Joe Cocker, George Harrison and, most famously with Ike and Tina Turner as one of the “Ikettes.” She has a beautiful husky, dynamic voice. Lennear participated in the Concert for Bangladesh organized by Harrison and Ravi Shankar in 1971, describing the experience as “cosmic.”

Judith Hill, the youngest featured artist in the film, aspires to a solo career. She was selected by Michael Jackson to tour in his “This is It” show in 2009. Jackson’s sudden death in June of that year was a shock to her, but she was acclaimed for her performance of “ Heal the World ” at his memorial service. As the film makes clear, Hill wants to be a star in her own right. She has turned down backup gigs in order to avoid being trapped in that archetypal “quicksand.”

It is difficult to avoid comparing *20 Feet from Stardom* to the earlier documentary directed by Paul Justman, *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* (2002), that highlighted the “Funk Brothers,” the musicians who played the instrumentals behind every act in Motown Records’ lineup of performers. The story of backup vocalists encompasses a much broader scope, however, entailing virtually the entire range of popular music and extending throughout the postwar era.

20 Feet from Stardom doesn’t tell the whole story, but it really couldn’t. Some of its anecdotes, however, speak to more than just the details of individuals’ lives, but to cultural-historical processes. It is striking, for example, that after Clayton’s stunning work on “Gimme Shelter” in 1969, black vocalists backing

what would otherwise be stereotyped as “white” rock groups became almost ubiquitous.

Clearly, something was going on. Cultural trends in general and popular music in particular express social processes in a complex way. Shortly after the ghetto rebellions and at the height of the Civil Rights movement, audiences were ready to accept—even more, to embrace—the breakdown of stereotypes that had long been foisted on society, particularly in America.

One could easily complain that *20 Feet from Stardom* doesn’t feature enough of the great music it explores. That may be true, but the film covers so much ground in its 91 minutes it seems fair to suggest that the viewer will have to satisfy his or her interest and curiosity elsewhere. The release of Neville’s film is already, deservedly, opening doors and creating audiences for these artists.

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