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The Saddest Music in the World

American cult idol: Johnston battles demons and cultivates genius in radiantly graceful doc

by Jessica Winter
 March 28th, 2006 1:50 PM

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Lunatic talent is the siren call to many an overmatched filmmaker, as a random sampling of biopics can attest—scrambled brain chemistry is too easily romanticized and lends itself to drab miserablism, yet it can't pass muster as a tragic flaw. *The Devil and Daniel Johnston* steers a confident course through this minefield: The titular artist and singer-songwriter's raw genius and cult recognition don't conquer his demons so much as they collaborate, negotiate, and brawl with them. Shot mostly on richly hued Super 16 and stitching together a chaotic life with nary a seam showing, Jeff Feuerzeig's tremendous documentary runs on the motive force of intelligent fandom and radiates an ineffable grace.



Capturing the Johnstons
 photo: Johnston Archive/Sony Pictures Classics

The Devil And Daniel Johnston
 Directed by Jeff Feuerzeig
 Sony Pictures Classics, opens March 31, Landmark Sunshine

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Like its most obvious antecedent, Terry Zwigoff's *Crumb*, *D&DJ* is as much a family portrait as an artist's profile. A "Christian fundamentalist Glass family," in the words of one friend, the Johnstons of West Virginia fretted over young Daniel's stubborn eccentricities and monomaniacal devotion to music and drawing. Always with one eye on his legacy, Johnston constantly kept his tape recorder or camera running, and thus *D&DJ* has some kinship with *Capturing the Friedmans* and *Tarnation* as a compendium of compulsive self-documentation. He may well have missed his vocation as an actor-director—in the Super-8 juvenilia *It Must Be Monday*, Johnston plays both himself and, with the aid of a wig and a rolling pin, his hectoring mother, Mabel, who's good-natured enough to provide commentary on the footage.



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frighteningly evident, *D&DJ* testifies to the selfless heroism of his manager, Jeff Tartakov, and of Mabel and Bill, Johnston's now elderly parents and caretakers.



"I am the ghost of Daniel Johnston," the 1985-era Johnston declares in *D&DJ*'s opening moments, and this phantom haunts the entire movie. Graying and obese in his heavily medicated middle age, the current Johnston bears little resemblance to his *Hi, How Are You* incarnation, and he's a nearly silent subject, the film circling respectfully around him. Feuerzeig sometimes re-enacts signature incidents of the biography using a handheld camera that stands in as Johnston's point of view, underlining the eerie intuitions of an absent presence.

Johnston's outbursts and breakdowns subverted his success, caused his loved ones untold anguish, and, of course, bolstered his legend. The documentary holds no illusions about insanity as a career move; there's a whiff of the freak show in Johnston's latter-day concerts but never in Feuerzeig's approach. *The Devil and Daniel Johnston* could have closed on a triumphant note—Johnston onstage, fascinating his public—but the film's candid, clear-eyed humanism can be gleaned by who in the story gets the last word.

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