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Wisconsin Film Festival: Music documentaries worth checking out

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'Sonic Youth: Sleeping Nights Awake' plays Thursday, April 2, at 10:45 p.m. at the Play Circle in the Memorial Union. -

In darker moments, I wonder if all human creativity has dried up into a self-referential black hole of recycled music and pop culture. After "This is Spinal Tap," what more can really be said about a struggling, spontaneously combusting heavy metal band? Seen one documentary about the quirky fanatics of a bizarre, obscure phenomenon, seen 'em all. Concert footage, meh.

The selection of music-related documentaries at this year's Wisconsin Film Festival offer hope that life is still rich with stories and imagination. Here's a round-up of four recommended films to check out.

Anvil!: The Story of Anvil

Thursday, April 2, 8:45 p.m.

Orpheum Main Theatre, 216 State St.

Advance tickets available

I feel about "Anvil!" the way I did about the hilarious, raw, heartbreaking documentary "Song Sung Blue" at last year's film festival. Like "Song Sung Blue," which follows the lives of a Milwaukee couple that perform Neil Diamond covers, it's hard to believe that "Anvil!" is a non-fabricated story. But it's too good to be fiction: filmmaker Sacha Gervasi has captured the spirit of "Spinal Tap" in the real Canadian heavy metal band Anvil, as the men struggle with the degradation of trying to make a comeback in their 50s.

The documentary features interviews with members of Anthrax, Metallica, Slayer, Lemmy of Motorhead and Slash of Guns 'n' Roses, and takes a wild trip through the farthest reaches of Eastern Europe, Canadian Public Access television and tearful "psychoactive therapy" sessions.

In the end Anvil succeeds. But not in the way they imagined, of course. It's worth the ride.

Sonic Youth: Sleeping Nights Awake

Thursday, April 2, 10:45 p.m.

Play Circle in the Memorial Union, 800 Langdon St.

Advance tickets available

"Sleeping Nights Awake" splices together black and white concert and interview footage from a Sonic Youth show in Reno, Nev. What's remarkable about the film is that it was shot and produced by a group of high school kids. Instead of going in with a bunch of self-conscious, "reporter-ly" questions, they come into the project with a natural curiosity. The concert footage is impressionistic, and the interviews are relaxed. Especially interesting is a segment where singer/bassist Kim Gordon talks openly about life on the road and about working with her untrained, limited voice.

The Rock-afire Explosion

Thursday, April 2, 11:15 p.m.

Sunday, April 5, 5:30 p.m.

Bartell Theatre, 113 E. Mifflin St.

Advance tickets available

Before Showbiz Pizza Place was bought out and stripped down by Chuck E. Cheese, the children's restaurant franchise enjoyed a heyday of popularity with kids. The main attraction of the chain in the 1980s was its many animatronic music shows, all lovingly designed by whiz-kid inventor Aaron Fechter.

The children who grew up enthralled in the lights and jerky movements of the Rock-afire Explosion characters are now in their late 20s and early 30s. Houston filmmakers Brett Whitcomb and Bradford Thomason sought and interviewed the adults who have reconnected with their youth by reviving and keeping Rock-afire Explosion alive in their backyards and on YouTube. They also found and interviewed Fechter, who dreams of bringing animatronics back in vogue.

It's entertaining to snicker at Rock-afire fans who get tattoos of their favorite characters and talk as lovingly about their animatronics as if the machines were children. One talks proudly about drinking two liters of Mountain Dew a day, and swishes it around like mouthwash during interviews.

But the real meat of this documentary is in its examination of obsession and of a nostalgic throwback to the pre-digital age. Making animatronics involves painting, music, scriptwriting, engineering, molding, welding, observes Fechter: "Animatronics is like everything put together in the universe because you're creating a life form."

Youssou N'Dour: I Bring What I Love

Sunday, April 5, 6 p.m.

Orpheum Main Theatre, 216 State St.

Advance tickets available

N'Dour is most well-known to Americans for his collaborations with Peter Gabriel ("In Your Eyes") and Neneh Cherry, but the Senegalese singer has been bringing together African factions with his milky rich voice and humble charisma since the 1970s.

"I Bring What I Love" is a loose collection of concert footage and interviews about "The Egypt Project," N'Dour's efforts to unite Senegalese and Egyptian musicians with a global tour. While it doesn't have the linear story arc of a documentary like "Anvil!", it's worth watching for the music alone. N'Dour also talks powerfully about how his role as a griot -- the traditional West African poet -- fits into a generations-long path.