

'Nationtime' and 'Jazz On A Summer's Day'

Time for two great reissued documentaries

📅 March 23, 2021 📍 Michael Giltz

Jesse Jackson steps up to the microphone and asks a simple question. "What time is it?" The crowd answers immediately, "Nationtime!" Wait, what? This isn't a catch phrase or idea I'd ever heard before. That's ok. They weren't talking to me.

The National Black Political Convention took place in Gary, Indiana in 1972. It didn't cater to white people, even if some 500 media outlets descended on it to see what was what. It was for themselves. It was a revival and a reckoning because Ronald Reagan was the Governor of California and Richard Nixon was the President of the United States and that wasn't good.

You can read up on the Convention and its most notable product, the Gary Declaration. Be inspired by its passion or depressed by how little progress has been made, Obama or no Obama. Or you can watch the time capsule of a documentary called Nationtime by William Greaves (\$29.95 BluRay; KinoLorber, also available on the Criterion Collection app) and feel like you are there. It's essentially cinema verite, simply observing the proceedings in a hot auditorium in Gary as people come together to debate and discuss, argue and joke and try to figure out the future for Black America.

Greaves doesn't dive into committees or wrestle with the hugely important topics at hand. He just captures the intensity and pleasure of the simple fact of the event taking place at all, from a casual look at license plates in the parking lot to demonstrate how folk came from all over the country to the main speakers of the day.

Overseeing it all is Amiri Baraka, who keeps the proceedings even-keeled, whether urging the Michigan delegation *not* to walk out (many do) or calling for African consensus after he amusingly admits they won't be strictly following Robert's Rules Of Orders. Greaves is there, noting the mild frenzy when Richard Roundtree, Shaft himself, makes an appearance, or the quiet intensity of the bodyguards eyeing the crowd when Black Panther Bobby Seale talks.

Greaves is just as good at capturing the silent moments, spotting the young children in the crowd, such as a boy in his Sunday best soberly listening to the proceedings. He notices the women. The convention brings out Coretta Scott King simply to wave and smile, a totem of MLK for the crowd to cheer. But she doesn't speak. Betty Shabazz does speak...but just for two minutes to introduce Jesse Jackson. Yet Greaves cuts back to them. We see these two women deep in conversation throughout the event and yearn to know what they're thinking. Coretta's smart, sharp eyes speak volumes.

At least they're on stage. Queen Mother Moore is stuck in the hallways of the auditorium, handing out fliers and sharing her pointed, funny and sharp observations on the need for reparations to anyone who will stop and listen or at least break their stride for a moment.

The purple prose narration of Sidney Poitier and the poems read at times by Harry Belafonte immediately date the film, almost as much as the Liberace-like coat Belafonte sports when the camera spots him in the crowd.

But Nationtime pulls off a neat trick, capturing how all conventions can prove exhausting affairs without quite exhausting the viewers. Since it peaks so early on, that's even more of an accomplishment. The film is only 80 minutes long and it almost immediately launches into the twenty minute speech of Jesse Jackson. It's a stem-winder and alone makes this film worth seeking out. Jackson is deeply engrossing, self-critical of the community, earthy in his humor, sharply critical of the Democratic Party and inspiring in his call to action for specific and achievable demands. The convention and the movie never come close to topping that and wisely never try.

The timelessness of jazz

Nationtime is of its time and that provides much of its appeal. Jazz On A Summer's Day is simply timeless.

You can catalog this 1958 masterpiece directed by photographer Bert Stern any number of ways. It belongs to that rare group of great films made by directors who never made another movie in their life. It's one of the greatest concert films of all time, ranked right alongside Stop Making Sense and Woodstock and The Last Waltz, and it's definitely the greatest film about jazz. In addition, it's one of the most eye-catchingly beautiful films ever made, equalled by Days Of Heaven, The Long Day Closes, In The Mood For Love and few others. It's an ideal "demo disc," the movie you can pull out to wow your friends when they come to hear your new sound system or ogle your new TV screen and Terminator 2: Judgment Day won't cut it anymore.

Best of all, it's fun. Put this movie on and you'll be smoking cigarettes, drinking a martini and tapping your feet to some of the best performances ever captured on film. The Eisenhower Era was supposed to be square but it seems pretty damn cool here.

Jazz On A Summer's Day begins with a ripple of sunlight dancing on the water. It's mesmerizing to watch, especially as the Jimmy Giuffre 3 launch into their first number. And that sets the style here. Director Stern spends just as much time capturing the laidback beautiful mood of Newport as he does the action on stage. The America's Cup trials were taking place during the festival so cameras also show sailing yachts slicing through the waters offshore. You might watch George Shearing onstage, see musicians waiting away in a jalopy careening down the street, quietly observe a shirtless Fred Katz of the Chico Hamilton Quartet rehearsing in his bedroom with the prelude to Bach's Cello Suite #1, or just soak in the crowd that is soaking in the music of Dinah Washington or Louis Armstrong.

The highlights are nonstop but everyone mentions the early afternoon set by singer Anita O'Day. The seats are half empty at this time of day. Late at night the place will be hopping but here's O'Day, down on her luck and making do with a thankless time slot. No bother. She and her band launch into "Tea For Two" and the camera knows just what to do. It stays put on the microphone as O'Day slides in and out of frame, dancing around the melody of that nonsense song, slicing and dicing it into the coolest tune in the world.

And her hat! It has balls dangling from it and they swoop and dive as O'Day bebops hard and the precious few people in the audience chortle and laugh and clap with delight as she soars to heights few singers ever do. It made her a star again, forever, whatever travails came her way.

Chuck Berry duck-walks in during the evening and it's easy to see why some dismissed rock n roll. Who wants to hear that clanging noise when Big Maybelle and the Gerry Mulligan Quartet dazzled right before him and Armstrong and Jack Teagarden are coming right after? Jazz On A Summer's Day ends with Mahalia Jackson singing "The Lord's Prayer," but this film took us to church long before that.

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One thought on "'Nationtime' and 'Jazz On A Summer's Day'"

👤 Trevor Seigler

📅 March 30, 2021 at 7:17 pm

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I caught "Jazz on a Summer's Day" on TCM last year, and holy crap is it a good movie.

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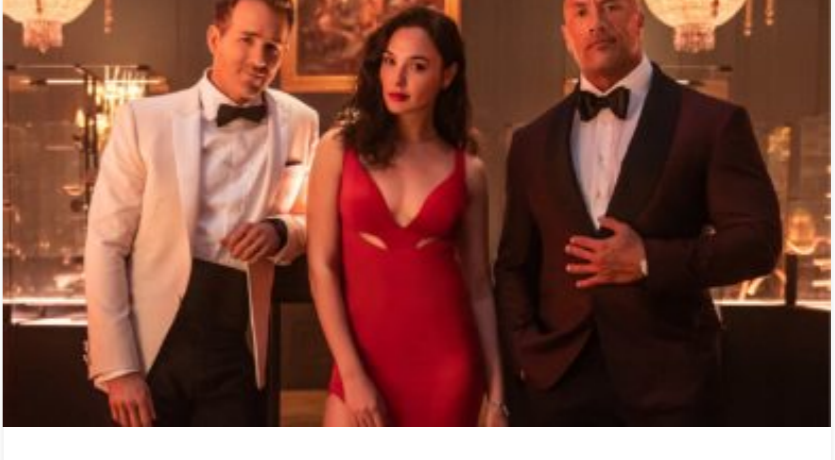
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