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THUNDER SOUL

Directed by Mark Landsman

USA | 2010 | 83 min

TEACHER'S GUIDE

This guide has been designed to help teachers and students enrich their experience of documentary film by providing support in the form of questions and activities. There are a range of questions that will help teachers frame discussions with their classes, activities for before, during and after viewing the film, and some web links that provide starting points for further research or discussion. In separate packages, there will also be support materials available with information regarding general viewing and teaching principles for documentary film and the fundamental aspects of making documentary films.

The Film

Conrad "Prof" Johnson composed original funk songs and arranged fantastic stage antics with Houston's Kashmere High School Stage Band. He became the first black high-school band leader with an all-black high-school band to win the Texas state championship in the 1970s. His "give it all you got" attitude made the group unstoppable, leading them to win 42 out of 46 contests over the course of the decade and establishing them as international funk legends with tours in Paris and Japan. *Thunder Soul* combines archival footage of the kids in action—showing off their James Brown showmanship, platform shoes and Bootsy Collins-type rhythms—with footage of the band members' recent reunion. With nothing but love for the father of funk from their youth, they practice for the first time in three decades, hoping they "still got it" enough to perform a tribute show for the ailing 92-year-old Prof. (Synopsis by Dannielle Dyson)

The Filmmaker

Mark Landsman is an L.A.-based independent filmmaker with a background in documentary film and television productions. He was most recently a director on Morgan Spurlock's new documentary series, *30 Days*, which aired on the FX Network this year, and on the upcoming A&E series *Holy Journey*. For Evolution Film and Tape, he was a director on the first two seasons of the ABC Family series *Switched!* He also produced *Crew Call*, an interstitial series for AMC (American Movie Classics).

He is the producer and director of several documentaries on youth at risk, including the award-winning, *Peace of Mind*, the first documentary to be jointly produced with a group of Palestinian and Israeli teenagers. Broadcast on

the ABC News program, *Nightline with Ted Koppel*, the film was shown on PBS and major networks internationally, won the Audience Award for Best Documentary at the 1999 Hampton's International Film Festival and was featured at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival. For Peter Gabriel's human rights media organization, WITNESS, he produced and directed *Books Not Bars*, on minority youth and the prison system, which premiered at the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival and was awarded the 2004 Open Society's Criminal Justice Award. Also for WITNESS, he produced and directed *Video for Change*, designed to encourage human rights activists worldwide to use video and Internet strategies in their advocacy work. Other projects have included Speak Up Young Africa!, on youth mobilizing around the HIV pandemic in five sub-Saharan African countries, and *Postcard from Peje*, on ethnic Albanian teenagers in post-war Kosovo. For PBS, he was a producer/director for the Emmy Award-winning art series, *Egg, The Art Show*, produced by WNET, New York.

As a teaching artist, Landsman has facilitated film and video workshops for youth in New York City public and private schools, the Jewish Museum of New York, Seeds of Peace Camp and the Balkan Sunflowers Youth Video Program in Peje, Kosovo. Landsman was a 2002-2004 Directing Fellow at The American Film Institute (AFI) in Los Angeles. His first fiction film, *Skylab*, which he wrote and directed, premiered at the Palm Springs International Film Festival and was a finalist for the 2004 Angelus Awards. The film screened at 2005 Santa Barbara International Film Festival and the AFI Conservatory Showcase at L.A.'s ArcLight Cinemas in January.

Educational package written and compiled by Dimitra Tsanos dimitra.tsanos@tdsb.on.ca

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Facts on Jazz Fusion

Jazz fusion, jazz rock or simply fusion, is a musical fusion genre that developed in the late 1960s from a mixture of elements of jazz such as its focus on improvisation with the rhythms and grooves of funk and R&B and the beats and heavily amplified electric instruments and electronic effects of rock. While the term "jazz rock" is often used as a synonym for "jazz fusion," it also refers to the music performed by late '60s and '70s-era rock bands when they added jazz elements to their music such as free-form improvisation.

After a decade of development during the '70s, fusion expanded the improvisatory and experimental approaches through the '80s and '90s.

Fusion albums, even those made by the same group or artist, may include a variety of styles. Rather than being a codified musical style, fusion can be viewed as a musical tradition or approach. Some progressive rock music is also labelled as fusion. Fusion music is typically instrumental, often with complex time signatures, metres, rhythmic patterns and extended track lengths, featuring lengthy improvisations. Many prominent fusion musicians are recognized as having a high level of virtuosity, combined with complex compositions and musical improvisation in complex or mixed metres.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jazz_fusion

Facts on Funk Music

The funk genre evolved as a raw, primal manifestation of R&B, one that focused on the bass-driven groove more than vocal melodies. The openness of the funk groove allowed space for improvisation, a space which Jimi Hendrix, George Clinton and today's trio Medeski, Martin and Wood capitalize on. James Brown's album *Get Up (I Feel Like Being A) Sex Machine* ushered in the age of the funk, introducing the genre's sparse sounds and hefty rhythms to a broad audience. Sly and the Family Stone and George Clinton's Parliament and Funkadelic outfits also contributed to the funk explosion of the middle- and late-1960s. Funk artists paved the road for the '70s disco trend, which adulterated funk with diluted rhythm and over-the-top sounds. Funk also inspired fusion jazz and soul-jazz, which composer and keyboardist Herbie Hancock dominated with his album *Headhunters*. Hip-

hop rediscovered funk in the late '80s and incorporated it into its distinct sound. As a result, funk artists enjoyed something of a renaissance, as the white audience of the '90s began to explore original classics, and bands like Galactic and Medeski, Martin and Wood revived the genre.

Source: <http://media.www.theprofileonline.com>

About the Kashmere Stage Band

Kashmere Stage Band (KSB) was an elite performing unit of the student band at Kashmere High School from the late 1960s until 1978. Kashmere High School is located in a predominantly black neighbourhood known as Kashmere Gardens in Houston, Texas. Music teacher Conrad O. Johnson attended an Otis Redding concert in 1967 and was inspired to translate the style of the concert into a program he could sustain at the high school in order to create opportunities for his student musicians. The Kashmere Stage Band was born. During its time, KSB won national championships in high-school band competitions and gained a reputation as being unbeatable. Johnson served as band director, arranger and principal composer for the band. KSB recorded eight albums during its life. The teenagers in the Kashmere Stage Band produced a sound equal to that of the contemporary funk bands the JB's and the Bar-Kays. Although lost for decades, since 2003 the KSB recordings have been released on 7" or 12" LP records, or on CD, and have become prized by hip-hop artists and DJs for their inimitable sound. A notable sampling occurs on the Handsome Boy Modeling School album *So... How's Your Girl?*; DJ Shadow's track "Holy Calamity (Bear Witness II)" samples "Kashmere" from the album *Kashmere Stage Band Plays Originals*. Many of the modern KSB releases are occurring for the first time. Notable KSB alumni include jazz drummer Bubba Thomas.

In February 2008, 30 original members of the Kashmere Stage Band, all in their mid-50s, reunited for the first time in more than three decades to pay tribute to their legendary leader, Conrad "Prof" Johnson, who was 92 at the time. The story of Prof, the exceptional music program he built and the historic reunion of his former students was captured in the feature-length documentary *Thunder Soul*.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kashmere_Stage_Band

VIEWING THE FILM WITH STUDENTS

There are important themes in this film that have broad implications for students and their futures. Take time to activate your students' background understanding of these themes before viewing. This will help them as they come to their own understanding and develop their critical abilities.

The following three subsections, on this page, are intended to provide you with a range of pre-viewing, viewing and post-viewing activities. They are followed by a set of questions based upon the film's larger thematic domains, some follow-up questions and quotations, sample curricular outcomes, and a page of web links for further investigation.

Pre-Viewing Activities

Show students the poster for the film. Have students work in small groups to try and identify themes or ideas conveyed by the poster.

Discuss with students how effective the film's poster is as a media piece.

Have students list the attributes that make up an inspirational individual. They will then need to rank them according to importance. Share as a class. As an exit slip, students will need to write a short story (of about a half-page) about an individual who inspired them in a difficult moment in their life.

They should include any of the attributes they listed in the first exercise. Have them also include what they were feelings throughout the experience and what they gained from the situation.

For homework, have students read one of the articles referenced in the web links on page seven.

Print several of the questions or quotations from page five on individual sheets of paper. Have students work in small groups or with partners to discuss if they agree with the ideas. Have them share the statements, and what they think or believe about them with the class.

Set a purpose for viewing by having a discussion about one or more of the questions or quotations on page five.

Viewing Activities

Have students take notes on, or jot down connections to, one of the thematic domains on page four of this guide. Ask students to find proof from the film that supports their connections.

Have students think about the characters in the film as they watch it. Who do they think contributed to the Kashmere phenomenon that was happening in the early 1970s?

Have students jot down five ideas for discussion, or questions that the film raised in their minds.

Post-Viewing Activities

Show the students their quotations from the pre-viewing activity and see if their minds were changed or opinions altered or enhanced by the film.

Have students revisit the attributes that make up an inspirational individual. Did the Prof possess any of them? After watching the film, would they add any more to their list? Discuss.

Have student complete an exit note (single small sheet of paper with one phrase or idea written on it) that demonstrates one thing they have learned, felt or decided as a result of watching the film.

Discuss with students their initial reactions to the various characters and situations confronted in the film. Did it change by the end of the film? Why?

For further ideas around how to explore this documentary, use the guiding questions on page four.

THE BIG QUESTIONS/IDEAS/THEMES

Multiple Perspectives

What is the subject of this film? Can you determine the filmmakers' perspective on this subject? What evidence can you find in the film to support your view?

How does this film help you analyze and interpret points of view about issues that concern people?

Does the filmmakers' perspective foster respect for diversity and an inclusive society? If so, how?

Identity

Whose story is told in this documentary? Whose story is not told? How does this story, and the way it is told, help you understand your own community/life?

How do the people in this film identify with their community? What are the common bonds among the people in this film? What challenges do they face in expressing their identity?

What film techniques do the filmmakers use to convey the identity of the people in this film?

Citizenship

What insights does this documentary offer about the ideals of good citizenship in the community depicted in this film?

How does the film deal with issues of freedom, equality, human dignity, and individual and collective rights and responsibilities?

Change and Continuity

How does this film help you understand a community's values and its attitudes towards an issue at a particular time?

What changes do the people in the film experience? What causes those changes? What are the consequences of those changes for the people in the documentary?

Culture and Community

Which aspects of a people's culture does this film focus on? Why do you think the filmmakers focused on those aspects?

How do the images, themes and message of this film help you understand the filmmakers' attitude towards the subject? What do you think might have been the intended audience's attitude towards the documentary subject?

Individuals, Societies and Economic Decisions

What economic systems are at work in this film? What are some of the causes and effects of the economic decisions made by the people in the film's community?

Does money play a part in the decisions being made in the film and what does it tell you about their local culture?

Power and Governance

What system of government control do we see in this documentary? How is power distributed within this society? What are the implications of that distribution on issues affecting the people's well-being and freedom?

Global Connections

What global issues are addressed in this film? What is the filmmakers' point of view on the opportunities and challenges of those issues?

Adapted from NFB Documentary Lens: <http://www.nfb.ca>

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Additional Questions for Pre- or Post-Viewing Activities

How does this story make you feel? Why do you think the filmmaker chose the Kashmere Stage Band to tell its story?

Should it be mandatory to have music and bands in all schools? Explain.

Not-for-profit organizations like the Conrad Johnson Music and Fine Arts Foundation help support children's music education. Find two other groups that have a similar agenda and summarize your findings on both.

The students described entering the band room like "entering a cathedral or grandma's house." Do you have a place that you feel like that, where you look forward going to? Or somewhere you feel a sense of belonging?

Analogies can be useful to explain an issue. The momentum was described as "picked up and rolled like a snowball." Use your own analogy to describe the same issue.

Explain how the term "domino effect" best describes what happened after the 1972 stage band competition.

How was the Prof's timing in-sync to what was happening out in the real world?

Conrad "Prof" Johnson was an inspirational teacher to his students. Have you have someone who has inspired you to pursue an interest? Describe how they influenced you and what you have learned from the experience.

Quotations from the Film to Explore

"You can do the right thing, the right thing, even with the right person, for the right reason, but if it's at the wrong time, everything gets jacked up and twisted."

"He put this place on the map."

"It was a white phenomenon."

"It gave us a sense that we were invincible."

"They didn't have anything to prove, but they wanted to prove something."

Other Quotations to Explore

"I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist and that they are as few as there are any other great artists. Teaching might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit." John Steinbeck

"We must view young people not as empty bottles to be filled, but as candles to be lit." Robert H. Shaffer

"Be a wonderful role model because you will be the window through which many children will see their future." Thomas Mckinnon

"The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it." Michelangelo

"Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." Ralph Waldo Emerson

EXAMPLES OF CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS

COURSE	OVERALL EXPECTATIONS
Grade 9 Music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrate an understanding of music history and its cultural context. • demonstrate the ability to listen attentively and with discernment to live and recorded music, using the stages of critical analysis (initial reaction, description, analysis, interpretation and judgement). • demonstrate an understanding of the effects of music education on themselves and their peers. • demonstrate an understanding of the function of music in society. • identify connections between music education and various careers.
Grade 11 Music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify, analyze and evaluate musical works through listening. • analyze musical works and performances of works, demonstrating an understanding of the process of critical analysis. • analyze the relationship between music and its cultural context. • analyze and evaluate a variety of music productions. • demonstrate an understanding of music in its social context.
Grade 11 Family Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify the personal resources necessary to make a smooth transition from adolescence to adulthood. • demonstrate an understanding of the dynamics of human interaction and communication with others. • demonstrate an understanding of the challenges involved in human interaction.
Grade 11 Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • analyze works of art in relation to their cultural, social, political and historical contexts. • analyze ways in which cultural institutions shape our perception and understanding of art. • analyze the influence of art on their lives.
Grade 12 Family Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • analyze current issues and trends relevant to individual development and speculate on future directions. • investigate and interpret the contributions that schools make to the socialization of individuals across the life span.
Grade 12 Music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrate an understanding of the elements of music in relation to music of the romantic period and the 20th century, including art music, jazz, popular music and Canadian and non-Western music.

WEBSITES AND ONLINE RESOURCES

About the Film

The official website includes information about the film, filmmakers, press info, clips and the poster for the film.

<http://thundersoulmovie.com>

Arts Foundations

The Conrad Johnson Music and Fine Arts Foundation develops, preserves and supports music and the arts through helping youth in the Greater Houston/Gulf Coast area. It is supported with the generous donations and sponsorships of area businesses, corporations and private contributors.

<http://conradjohnsonfoundation.org>

The Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation (MHOF) was inspired by the acclaimed motion picture *Mr. Holland's Opus*, the story of the profound effect a dedicated music teacher had on generations of students. MHOF donates both new and refurbished instruments to school and after-school music programs that lack the resources to keep up with equipment loss due to attrition, depreciation and wear over time and to accommodate students on waiting lists or who have to share instruments. An infusion of instruments enables more students to participate and to experience a quality music education.

<http://www.mhopus.org>

About the Kashmere Stage Band

The band's Myspace page includes information about the band, along with a few of their songs.

<http://www.myspace.com/texasthundersoul>

Related Links

Mr. Holland's Opus was a 1995 drama about a musician who takes a teaching job and ends up becoming an inspirational teacher, offering a great parallel to *Thunder Soul*.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mr._Holland%27s_Opus

Stones Throw: Eothen Alapatt, funk musicologist and general manager of this website, was featured in the film and his biography is included on the site. A "Kashmere Stage Band" search of its online store and forums delivers user posts, and vinyl singles for sale.

<http://www.stonesthrow.com/egon>

Online Articles

This *Austin Chronicle* article, "Kismet in Kashmere 'Thunder Soul' brings the Generations Back Together," written by Kate X. Meeser, discusses the band's reunion.

<http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid%3A977581>

Various Links for Lesson Plan Ideas, Media Awareness, Critical Literacy and Documentary Films

The Association for Media Literacy: This Canadian website examines how media impacts and influences culture.

<http://www.aml.ca/home>

Using Documentaries in the Classroom: This teacher librarian's personal website contains excellent resources for teaching with documentary films.

http://www.frankwbaker.com/using_docs_in_the_classroom.htm

Media Awareness: A Canadian non-profit media education and Internet-literacy resource library.

<http://www.media-awareness.ca>

Center for Media Literacy: A U.S. website which provides several resources for making, understanding and criticizing media.

<http://www.medialit.org>

The National Film Board of Canada website: On this site is an area with teaching resources and short documentary films that can be used as teaching aides.

<http://www.nfb.ca>

Hot Docs Looking at Documentaries: A teaching guide that sets out questions designed to help teachers include the study of documentary film in their curriculum.

http://www.hotdocs.ca/youth/docs_for_schools/2010_docs_for_schools_selections/