



Do the names Merry Clayton, Lisa Fischer, Darlene Love, Claudia Lennear, Tata Vega or Lynn Mabry ring a bell? Probably not, yet you are undoubtedly very familiar with their stellar work as backup singers for a variety of musical icons.

For example, it's Merry's powerful voice which adds a memorable touch of soul to the Rolling Stones' classic "Gimme Shelter" in the brief interlude where she makes the most of the opportunity to belt out the bizarre lyrics "Rape! Murder! It's just a shot away!" The same can be said of Darlene who not only handled backup duties on hundreds of hits by everyone from Elvis Presley to The Beach Boys to Tom Jones to Sonny & Cher, but even anonymously ghost recorded the lead vocals on such Sixties anthems as "Da Doo Ron Ron," "He's a Rebel" and "It's in His Kiss," without getting credit or decent compensation.

Sadly, despite their amazing talents, folks pursuing this profession generally have precious little to show financially for their considerable contributions to the annals of rock, soul and other genres. For most of the backups are Black and female with gospel backgrounds, and have stories to share about being underpaid, underappreciated and/or outright exploited. In fact, Darlene confesses to having to clean houses as a maid between gigs in order to survive at a low point in her career.

"Twenty Feet from Stardom" Backup singers belatedly get their props in pop music documentary

Written by Kam Williams

Most backup singers are frustrated artists who spend years helping others shine while waiting for that big break that might never come that could catapult them into the limelight. Finally, thanks to "Twenty Feet from Stardom," these neglected sisters are finally getting their props, if not the fortune and mega fame that has eluded them for so long.

Directed by Morgan Neville, this very entertaining and illuminating documentary includes testimonials by the likes of Sting, Springsteen, Bette Midler, Sheryl Crow and other greats freely paying tribute. A reverential retrospective representing the first tip of the cap to backups I can remember since Lou Reed warbled "And the colored girls go!" on the gritty ditty "Walk on the Wild Side."

Excellent (4 stars)

Rated PG-13 for profanity and sexuality

Running time: 91 minutes

Distributor: Radius-TWC

To see a trailer for "Twenty Feet from Stardom," visit:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tWyUJcA8Zfo>