

MIRACLE FILM DISTRIBUTION



Special Jury Prize vinder: Sundance Film Festival

MATANGI/MAYA/M.I.A. FÅR PREMIERE MANDAG DEN 1. OKTOBER:

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MATANGI/MAYA/M.I.A. er resultatet af 22 års private filmklip og nyt materiale om en af tidens mest bemærkelsesværdige og ikoniske personligheder. Transformationen af en tamilsk flygtning til teenager i London frem mod berømmelsen som verdenskendt aktivist og popstjerne. I dag kendt som M.I.A.

"Hvorfor er du sådan en vanskelig popstjerne", spørger instruktøren M.I.A., da hun midt under optagelserne til en musikvideo står i en havn fyldt med statuer, der skal gøre det ud for bådflugtninge. "Hvorfor...", men hun afbryder ham: "... holder jeg ikke bare kæft?". Det er der rigtig mange grunde til. M.I.A. er ikke den slags berømmelse, der provokerer blot for provokationens skyld. Hendes rødder i det borgerkrigshærgede Sri Lanka, hendes families forbindelser til en tamilsk oprørsgruppe og hendes oplevelser som immigrant i England har alt sammen formet hendes behov for at udtrykke sig og blande sig i alt det, folk ikke ønsker at høre om. Først gennem filmmediet. Siden gennem musikken. I et kryds af M.I.A.'s egne videooptagelser, der strækker sig over flere årtier og nyt materiale, får vi et unikt indblik i en stærk, sensitiv og aktivistisk personlighed: Mennesket Matangi, der gemmer sig bag superstjernen M.I.A. Mennesket, som står på mål mod popkulturens hysteri, mediemaskineriet og endeløse politiske agendaer.

Miracle Film Distribution v/ Jes Graversen

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Matangi Arulpragasm (aka Maya to her friends, aka international superstar M.I.A. to most of the world) has been a huge force in music for decades now, but despite her public presence and outspoken nature she is still something of an enigma, guarded in her personal life. Which is why it is surprising to so many that she allowed her former art school friend Steve Loveridge to make a documentary about her, using her personal archive, an unbelievably rich trove of video shot by Maya over the course of her life, as the main source material. This raw and subjective record opens a window into the musician's innermost reflections on art, politics, identity, how vital the confluence of those things is for her. Steve was equally surprised given Maya's initial reluctance when he first approached the subject. "I basically got the gig because I went and asked her; I said, I think I can make a great documentary out of this. She was like, I don't know what you mean or how this could be a film."

The fact that he was eventually given free rein over the archive ("She finally went, 'okay, here's the tapes, now go off and do your thing'") speaks to the profound trust and artistic connection that bind Maya and Steve, who met at St. Martin's College in the mid-90s while attending school for fine art with a focus on film and video. Although Steve went on to work in animation, graphics, and illustration, and Maya moved towards music to express her creative and political ideas, the two continued to collaborate, with Steve still working on Maya's albums even as her fame skyrocketed, and the Matangi/Maya/M.I.A. documentary could not have been possible without this friendship and a shared love of film.

However, the two could not come from more different backgrounds. Steve grew up in Surrey, London, in what he describes as a relatively safe and stable childhood. Maya meanwhile fled the Sri Lankan civil war with her family before the age of ten, first to relocate to India, then to the UK, leaving behind a father with alleged ties to the Tamil Tigers, a controversial rebel group in a hugely complex and misunderstood conflict. She grew up an immigrant and a refugee on a housing estate in southwest London, an identity which is essential to her work.

Yet the two found each other in part because of their shared understanding of how it feels to be an outsider, which was heightened by the art world environment they found themselves immersed in. Steve describes them as opposites in terms of temperament, yet kindred spirits at Saint Martens. "Maya had seen too much of the world and found it to be there, done that, found it quite mundane...I hadn't done anything or experienced anything and everyone seemed far more sophisticated than I was...and I was very shy" Steve remembers being dazzled by Maya's kinetic energy, her ability to turn everything into an adventure. "She was so good at being poor and having fun on no money and making everything into this exciting experience, like going to the supermarket was really interesting all of a sudden because we were looking for certain colors or certain shapes on packets of food, or because we'd go to the cool kid at the checkout instead of the one with the shortest queue."

"And she always had a camera with her."

It was pop and hip hop music that brought Maya joy and a feeling of belonging in her early years, and Steve believes Maya "...gravitated to pop music because that was what had fed her. Fine art was too elitist, and writing novels was too elitist, it was all sort of out of reach for her, that side of culture." Yet her lifelong love affair with the camera, her impulse to photograph, film, or otherwise document her experience and surroundings, also proved fateful, given the use of her archive in the film. To the many who know Maya only as the pop star, fans and detractors alike, there are just so many astounding moments to be found within her documentation; her generally candid, direct-to-camera addresses and obvious intellect; her frank discussion of growing up immigrant and poor in a sometimes hostile environment; her time in her early 20s traveling back to Sri Lanka to reconnect with her extended family and political heritage, or on the road with Justine Frischman and her seminal Britpop band Elastica in the late 90s. The footage allows us to see Maya making deeply thoughtful inquiries into her identity, an identity now heavily dissected and scrutinized by the wider public yet still not fully understood in all its complexity.

As Steve recounts, "She's been through so many different lives and identities since I've known her, and she always says to me, 'think how many I done before I even met you.'" The film is more than a basic music documentary, stringing bits of celebrity interview between once-televised concert performances, and more

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than a run-of-the-mill biopic, making a case for the subject's fame or providing a tightly managed vision of artist-as-brand, precisely because of the investigation into these many lives, not just the one that has been most frequently observed from the outside. Steve says that "Maya the pop star is the least present in this film." Early on in explaining his vision to Maya he told her, "I'm not making a film about that, that exists already, that's your albums, that's your output and your work. It's out there in the world for people that wanna find it, and this is a film about you."

If the moments of Maya's early life are an opportunity to witness that which the public has never truly known, those that come after she became a well-known personality are an opportunity to see what we thought we knew with fresh eyes, thanks to a deeper understanding earned partly through Steve's intimacy with the subject. Steve speaks to his unique access and refusal to oversimplify when it came to very public and widely discussed events like Maya's controversial actions at the 2012 Super Bowl, or the Lynn Hirschberg profile of M.I.A. for The New York Times Magazine that suggested her radical political stance was at odds with her newfound success (most infamously with a brutally withering line about a truffle fry). "I saw the film as an opportunity to contextualize those well-known incidents in the middle of a twenty year narrative" Steve explains. In focusing on Maya as a person the film has, of course, also helped illuminate M.I.A. the artist. What all the intimate and unflinching archival material cumulatively reveals is an outspoken activist whose work has always sprung from a deeply rooted desire to speak against oppression and to lift up justice. Maya's preoccupation with the immigrant experience isn't some bit of celebrity narcissism; it is the story of her life informing a wider consciousness.

In the film, Steve addressed a common accusation that Maya's identity is either partly fabricated or exploited to give her some kind of street cred, a little gimmick to boost album sales. "People were immediately skeptical and everything's always framed in the context of, 'oh this gives you cool points that your dad's a militant, or that you're an immigrant, or that you're a brown woman in the industry.' People are cynical about how much that's feeding a kind of hipster authenticity." While the film is neither defensive nor indicting of Maya as an opinionated public figure, the record of her upbringing lays to bed these suspicions of misrepresenting her history.

Besides being tinged with the queasily all-too-common practice of doubting a woman's telling of her own experience, this kind of skepticism overlooks the fact that Maya's identity may not necessarily be so easy to accept and find strength in. For many who come from such a background and go through the painful experience of being teased in school, unable to speak the local language, constantly relegated to the 'other' by the society surrounding them, pride in their unique experience or outsider status is very, very hard won. It is often more likely for a background like Maya's to hinder rather than ensure commercial success, but she just does it with such aplomb. Embracing an immigrant identity in private life is hard enough, but embracing it publicly, weaving it visibly, audibly, into performance, music, the entirety of one's public identity, is radical.

In one moment culled from Maya's archival store she is proclaiming proudly in a conversation with her more reticent siblings that the hardships their family has faced as a result of their refugee status and father's absence has made them more interesting. This could be read as bravado, but if so, bravado with sincere emotional underpinnings. Matangi/Maya/M.I.A. is a reminder that regardless of how wealthy or famous she may have become, finding that success by taking ownership over one or multiple marginalized identities is nothing to scoff at, because it is neither easy nor safe. "M.I.A. can read sometimes as a project like this ball of chaos, but actually when you really step back from it, like the film does, i think there is a logic to it, and a sort of consistency in her vision, all the way through, from a long time before she became a musician, just a quest to represent and nail down her identity, and own the positives and negatives about who she was."

However the film is extraordinary not just because of the existing footage, but also because of how it is constructed. "Even though she was handing over kind of an archive," Steve said "I saw it as my job to curate that archive and stitch it together into a coherent story." The film transitions seamlessly from the archival into an unexpected yet totally logical piece of music or performance, showing how that particular moment was like an organic explosion out of the intense personal reflection we just had the opportunity to witness moments earlier. It feels as though the film about her life has been cut to the rhythm of her work, as unified in its artistic vision as Maya is in hers.

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Although many documentary portraits of musicians constructed out of archival exist, Steve took on the task of creating such a portrait of a still living person, someone controversial and complex who is rarely depicted with compassion or nuance in the media, with whom he has a close relationship. "I've been present for a lot of her journey, and a lot of the footage, a lot of the film I'm sort of, just out of frame." This left a lot to reconcile from the perspective of the director, who talked about how uncanny it was spending eight hours a day in the edit suite looking at 2007 Maya then having the living, breathing and much evolved Maya of 2017 ring him up to talk about art and big ideas, just as she always had.

For creative and personal reasons, Steve chose to have some emotional distance during the edit process rather than create a defensive or biased counter narrative to the media representation of Maya. "I had to approach it thinking of her as a subject and not a collaborator because I didn't want it to be too influenced by her own self-consciousness... it's a film made by a friend but I thought it was so important to be objective and to make sure that I lay things out there in a way that people were free to make their own mind up.

While Steve is very much the architect of this film, it was important to make it clear at every turn that he is not the owner of its subject's story; that sometimes traumatic, sometimes fabulous right rests solely with Matangi/Maya/M.I.A. "I didn't want to explain Maya. It's very important that I wasn't putting words in her mouth and that i wasn't owning the story going, this is my telling of her journey."

"She's definitely an artist right down to her core."

MATANGI / MAYA / M.I.A.

USA/England/Sri Lanka 2018

97 minutter

Tilladt over 15 år

Directed & Produced by Steve Loveridge

Produced by Lori Cheatle Andrew Goldman Paul Mezey

Executive Producers Philipp Engelhorn Michael Raisler

Edited by Marina Katz Gabriel Rhodes

Music Supervisor Tracy McKnight

Score by Dhani Harrison & Paul Hicks

Cinereach

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