



Normally, when people think of a documentary, they think of one of two types. First, there is the historical documentary, where the filmmaker is piecing together information about a past event to educate. Second, there is the crisis documentary, where the filmmaker is trying to shine a light on something that is happening “right now” which they feel more people need to know about.

Bombay Beach is another sort of documentary. A sort of “slice of life” work of art. It is not trying to raise awareness, or to explain how something happened or came to be. It is only examining its subjects to capture them, to tell a story that doesn’t necessarily have a point or meaning except to be told.

Bombay Beach is a small town on the coast of the Salton Sea. The surface of this seas sits at over 225 feet below sea level (the water level of the oceans), and it’s salinity is increasing every year, making it less and less hospitable to wild life. In 1905, heavy rainfall and snowmelt caused the Colorado River to swell, overrun the headgates of the Alamo Canal and begin a chain reaction that lead to the flooding of the Salton Sink. By 1935, the Hoover Dam was built and the flooding problems resolved. Beginning in the 1920s and lasting through the 1960s, the Salton Sea became a tourist destination, until the salinity of the water got high enough to start killing off species of fish and elevating bacterial levels. Very little of this is mentioned in the documentary at all.

Instead, we meet Red, CeeJay and Benny (and by extension, his family), residents of the town of Bombay Beach.

Red is an older gentleman who likes to smoke. And he has a heat stroke, because he lives in the desert, where it is really hot. And he lives in a trailer park community largely made up of older folks, where at one point during the documentary they state that three people died in the last week.

CeeJay used to live in LA, but he moved in order to get away from gang life. He’s trying to get his grades together while playing football in hopes of getting a scholarship to college to he can get out of Bombay. He’s also in love with his friend’s sister, and he likes to dance.

Benny is an imaginative kid with some behavioral issues. We first meet him when he’s being scolded (sort of) for having thrown rocks at a kid (this isn’t the first time). His parents have been to jail, and they’ve been told that if social services has to take their kids away again it’ll be permanent.

This isn’t your normal “just the facts” documentary. The entire documentary is set to music, and many scenes are choreographed. Because of this it floats back and forth between a grim, soul sucking reality of being trapped in a dying town and whimsical dream-like sequences that try to lift the spirit.

Overall, the document is fairly boring. The only person I cared about was CeeJay because he really seemed to want to make his life better. The soundtrack, however, was fantastic. It had songs by Bob Dylan and original music by Beirut.

The DVD presentation includes the film along with a few bonus features. There are selected scenes with commentary, deleted scenes and a “Where are they now?” segment where we learn that CeeJay gets out, Benny is getting better help, and Red is still alive. However, it’s the music videos for three songs by Beirut that are the most interesting. If anything, this documentary made me want to buy their album. I'd give it a lower rating on content, but the music was just so good that it offset the rest of it.

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