

# 20 FEET FROM STARDOM

Directed by Morgan Neville  
Produced by Gil Friesen

Produced by Caitrin Rogers

WORLD PREMIERE  
U.S. DOCUMENTARY COMPETITION  
SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL 2013

Running Time: 90 minutes | Language: English

## SYNOPSIS

*Millions know their voices, but no one knows their names.* In his compelling new film **TWENTY FEET FROM STARDOM**, award-winning director Morgan Neville shines a spotlight on the untold true story of the backup singers behind some of the greatest musical legends of the 21st century. Triumphant and heartbreaking in equal measure, the film is both a tribute to the unsung voices who brought shape and style to popular music and a reflection on the conflicts, sacrifices and rewards of a career spent harmonizing with others.

These gifted artists span a range of styles, genres and eras of popular music, but each has a uniquely fascinating and personal story to share of life spent in the shadows of superstardom. Along with rare archival footage and a peerless soundtrack, **TWENTY FEET FROM STARDOM** boasts intimate interviews with Bruce Springsteen, Stevie Wonder, Mick Jagger and Sting to name just a few. However, these world-famous figures take a backseat to the diverse array of backup singers whose lives and stories take center stage in the film.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

About two years ago, I sat down with Gil Friesen, a longtime music industry veteran from A&M Records, whom I only knew by reputation. He told me he wanted to make a film about backup singers. He didn't know what the film was going to be, but he knew there was something intriguing in there. Together we would go on a search.

I have made music documentaries over the years and know a fair amount of obscure music history, but backup singing was new territory. A few great songs came to mind— "Gimme Shelter", Aretha's "Respect"—and I'd seen people like Darlene Love and Cissy Houston perform before, but backup singing was a bit of a mystery.

As I started talking to friends who knew a lot about music, I quickly discovered that *nobody* knew much about backup singers. I looked for a book or even a website on the subject, but there was nothing. Who were these people? What were their stories?

We began by conducting oral histories with background singers and quickly things came into focus. Here was a community, where everybody knew everybody else. One interview led to three more. By the end, we'd ended up conducting more than 50 interviews with backup singers.

We learned a few things right away:

- Backup singers don't self-identify as such. They are just singers.
- Backup singers pretty much all started in church choirs.
- Backup singers can sing circles around most lead singers.

-Just because you're not a household name, doesn't mean you're not a diva.

I began to listen to music differently. Suddenly, I heard backup vocals everywhere. I began collecting hundreds of songs with great backup parts.

The themes also came out. These were people who had spent their careers helping other people sound good. Most often the object was to meld perfectly in what everybody called "The Blend"—an almost spiritual state of harmony, where there is no individual identity. To me this seemed at the essence of the experience of backup singing. It's soulful caregiving, with few rewards. For some, this is bliss. For others, it's purgatory.

As we got deeper into production, we learned that—true to our subject-- not everybody wanted to be in a documentary. There are people who in some cases chose to stay on the margins and did not want to get near the spotlight. They'd had a front row seat to fame at work and saw its many pitfalls. In the end, they saw the value in the work we were doing and opened up their lives.

Over two years, Gil and I grew close to the many singers, not just those in our film. They put their trust in us and we are grateful to them for letting us in.

— Morgan Neville, Los Angeles

## **PRODUCER'S STATEMENT**

When Gil Friesen died this past December 13th, he left in mid-conversation. Gil was a man of ideas, always connected to the arts in one way or another, always wanting to know what you thought. *TWENTY FEET FROM STARDOM* began as a casual question he asked himself, then others, and, finally, a dialogue grew into a movie he felt compelled to make. The question was simple: what goes on in the world of back-up singers? The answer was more complicated.

Gil was one of the last true "record men," having helped build A&M Records into what was arguably the most influential and successful independent label of the industry's golden age.

A&M didn't go after the established acts but built careers where he sensed the early signs of artistic promise. Together With Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss, Gil Friesen and the A&M team brought us the Police, Sting, Cat Stevens, the Flying Burrito Brothers, Peter Frampton, Suzanne Vega, the Carpenters, Joe Cocker, Janet Jackson, and many more. Extending his work into film, television, and the visual arts, Friesen produced *The Breakfast Club*, *Better Off Dead*, and other films, co-founded the Classic Sports Cable Network, and chaired the MOCA board of directors.

When asked why *TWENTY FEET FROM STARDOM* went from being a passing idea to a personal obsession, Friesen recalled a Leonard Cohen performance he attended with his wife, Janet. Just prior to the show, he smoked a joint, after which, lost in the music, he began thinking about Cohen's back-up singers, about who they were and what their lives were like. Many months later, he referred to it as "the most expensive joint I'd ever smoked." But Friesen recognized that he'd intuitively found a unique angle from which to consider popular music and the world

in which it got made.

After early conversations with friends Friesen considered several directors, eventually selecting Morgan Neville. In order to find that territory between knowing the film they wanted to make and allowing the process to surprise them, Friesen and Neville let the singers themselves be the guides. For Friesen, it also meant encountering his own past, singers and artists who had worked at A&M on various projects.

But, in the end, *TWENTY FEET FROM STARDOM* is an apt and moving final statement from this producer in particular. As a *New York Times* obituary noted, Friesen was, throughout a rich career, “someone who worked just beyond the footlights,” just like the singers featured in the film.

With the film completed at the time of his passing, Friesen acknowledged that *TWENTY FEET* had become, among other things, a way to tip his hat to some of the talent that had so enlivened his long career in the music business. And, aware that the film would premiere on opening night at Sundance, he felt satisfaction knowing that a conversation that he’d started, one that was important to him, was far from over.

— Warren Zanes, Consulting Producer

## **ABOUT THE SUBJECTS**

The names and faces of the artists featured in *TWENTY FEET FROM STARDOM* may not be widely recognized, but it’s safe to say their voices will be familiar to most pop music fans.

As a member of vocal trio the Blossoms—who sang on dozens of Top 40 tracks—**Darlene Love** backed up heavy hitters such as Sam Cooke, Dionne Warwick, and Frank Sinatra while still a young woman. In the early 60s, Love was one of the bricks in legendary producer Phil Spector’s “Wall of Sound,” providing lead vocals for chart-toppers such as “He’s a Rebel” and “Today I Met The Boy I’m Gonna Marry,” and background vocals on scores of other hits. But stardom proved elusive for Love, her dreams of a solo career continuously thwarted by the controlling producer’s efforts to keep her in the background. Music historian Warren Zanes explains, “With Phil Spector, there couldn’t be another star in the same room, so he really put Darlene in a box. The best material she put out wasn’t even under her name.” Instead of becoming a household name, Love wound up becoming a housekeeper at one point in order to make ends meet. But

in counterpoint to the moments of agony and heartbreak, the film also sees the singer, now in her 70s and enjoying a triumphant resurgence, reunite with her Blossoms bandmates for the first time in four decades, with exhilarating results.

Like many of her fellow backup singers, **Merry Clayton** was a preacher's daughter who started out singing gospel in church. Her soulful voice enhances Carole King's blockbuster album *Tapestry* (dueting on "Way Over Yonder"), Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama" and Joe Cocker's "Feelin' Alright," but Clayton is best known for her spine-tingling vocals on the Rolling Stones' 1969 classic "Gimme Shelter." The song's middle-of-the-night recording session, recounted in *TWENTY FEET FROM STARDOM* by both Mick Jagger and Clayton provides one of the film's most riveting set-pieces.

One of the very few singers who could match Clayton's intensity and power on "Gimme Shelter" is **Lisa Fischer**, who currently tours with the Stones as well as performing with Sting and Chris Botti. Viewed by many in the industry as a star in her own right, Fischer, who has also released a Grammy-winning solo album, offers a unique window into the particular ego and mindset required of backup singers versus that of solo artists. As Fischer sees it, "Some people will do anything to be famous; other people just want to sing."

One of the more idiosyncratic voices in the business is **Tata Vega**, who has sung in a wide variety of settings. After being signed to Motown in the 1970s as a solo artist and releasing several albums, Tata found herself dropped and unsure of what to do next. After years of scraping by she found herself working with Gospel singer Andre Crouch, who in turn introduced her to Quincy Jones. When they were looking for voices for *The Color Purple*, Quincy played director Steven Spielberg a tape of Tata, with whose voice he fell in love. Only then did Spielberg learn that Tata was not African-American., she's Puerto Rican. Tata's featured vocals in that film brought her back into the music business. She now tours with Elton John.

Another of the artists spotlighted is **Judith Hill**, who was booked to backup Michael Jackson on his highly anticipated “This is It” concert series at London's O2 Arena, but instead found herself performing as a lead vocalist at Jackson’s memorial service when the musical icon passed away a few weeks before the concerts were to take place. Approximately one billion people worldwide are believed to have viewed Hill’s rendition of Jackson’s “Heal the World.” TWENTY FEET FROM STARDOM catches Hill at a pivotal crossroads in her career as she struggles to find the courage to turn down the kind of plum gigs other backup vocalists would kill to land, working with artists such as Elton John and Stevie Wonder, in order to pursue her own dreams of solo stardom. Hill eloquently sums up the particular conundrum those in her profession must face: “When you’re a background singer, there’s a springboard at the beginning, but it can easily become quicksand if that’s not what you want to do.”

**Other performers who share their experiences in the film include:**

- \* **Claudia Lennear**, background singer with Ike & Tina Turner, George Harrison, and Joe Cocker.
- \* **Gloria Jones**, background singer with Joe Cocker, Ike and Tina Turner, and T. Rex. She had a child with singer Marc Bolan, named Roland Bolan.
- \* **Dr. Mable John**, former Raelette. Signed to Stax and Motown as a solo singer.
- \* **Lynn Maybry**, background singer with Parliament Funkadelic, Brides of Dr. Funkenstein, Sly and The Family Stone, The Talking Heads
- \* **Cindy Mizelle**, background singer with Luther Vandross, Whitney Houston, Bruce Springsteen and Steely Dan
- \* **Susaye Greene**, former Raelette, Supreme and member of Wonder Love.
- \* **Jo Lawry**, a jazz vocalist by training, who has been Sting’s featured backup singer for over three years.
- \* **The Waters Family**, who recorded background vocals for Michael Jackson, Paul Simon, Patti LaBelle, and Donna Summer.
- \* **Rose Stone**, background vocalist for Sly & the Family Stone and Elton John
- \* **Janice Pendarvis**, background vocalist for Sting and Stevie Wonder

## **FILMMAKER BIOS**

### **DIRECTOR – MORGAN NEVILLE**

Over the past 18 years, Neville has made films about many of the musicians who have helped shape 20th Century music. Neville has been nominated for three Grammys for his music films: Respect Yourself: The Stax Records Story and Muddy Waters Can't Be Satisfied, Johnny Cash's America and won an Emmy for Hank Williams: Honky Tonk Blues. His film Troubadours, with James Taylor and Carole King, premiered at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival.

Neville founded Tremolo Productions in 1999, and the company is now regarded as a top producer of cultural documentary films. Productions include: Crossfire Hurricane for The Rolling Stones/HBO, Beauty Is Embarrassing, The Cool School, Burn, Pearl Jam Twenty and The Union for director Cameron Crowe, The Night James Brown Saved Boston (VH-1), and Ray Charles America (A&E Indie Films). Neville is now working on a film about the rivalry between Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley.

### **PRODUCER – GIL FRIESEN**

Friesen joined the record industry soon after graduating school, starting in the mailroom at Capitol Records. Friesen eventually spent 27 years at A&M Records, 13 years of which he was the President and Partner. He was often referred to as the ampersand in A&M (The "A" standing for Herb Alpert and the "M" for Jerry Moss). The Breakfast Club and Blaze are two of the ten films he produced during the 1980s with A&M Films. Subsequent to A&M, Friesen helped start the Classic Sports Network and was President of the Board of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

## **ADDITIONAL BIOS**

### **PRODUCER – CAITRIN ROGERS**

Rogers began her career as an editor, working for a variety of companies including MTV, Vh1, BET and Disney. In 2005 she started working with award-winning editor Paul Crowder on Once in a Lifetime, which he edited and co-directed and was nominated for the 2007 WGA Award, 2006 IDA award and selected for 2006 Berlin Film festival. Rogers moved on to work with Crowder again for an Amazing Journey: The Story of the Who, which was nominated for a 2009 Grammy Award.

In 2007 Caitrin began working for Passion Pictures as a producer on The Tillman Story, which premiered at The Sundance Film Festival and was short-listed for a 2011 Academy Award.

Subsequently she moved on to work with Sundance award-winning Sergio director Greg Barker on productions for PBS Frontline and HBO.

**EDITOR- JASON ZELDES**

Jason Zeldes has been working exclusively in documentary filmmaking for the past four years, racking up credits on several feature films and getting the opportunity to work with several Sundance Film Fest alums, including Patrick Creadon, Doug Blush, Kirby Dick, and Morgan Neville. Jason has been steadily rising through LA's documentary community as a film editor since he graduated from USC's School of the Cinematic Arts in 2009. Jason is now directing his first documentary, *ROMEO IS BLEEDING*.

**EDITOR- KEVIN KLAUBER**

Kevin Klauber has spent the last several working on feature documentaries. He worked with Cameron Crowe to shape over two decades worth of footage into the feature documentary, *Pearl Jam Twenty*, as well as Academy Award-Nominee Brett Morgen on the HBO Rolling Stones documentary *Crossfire Hurricane*. While frequently working in the mainstream, Kevin has also fostered credibility in the independent film market, as well as critical acclaim. 2012 has brought his second nomination for the Golden Reel Award by the MPSE, as well as a nomination by the WGA for the indie-favorite documentary *Beauty is Embarrassing* that critics are calling "a future perennial favorite on the order of Crumb," which Kevin co-wrote and edited.

**SUPERVISING EDITOR- DOUG BLUSH**

Doug Blush has worked in documentary filmmaking for over fifteen years, as a director, editor, producer and DP. His previous editorial work includes *WORDPLAY*, *IOUSA*, *DUMBSTRUCK*, *BEER WARS*, *OUTRAGE*, and *FREAKONOMICS*, and more recently, he edited and co-wrote *THESE AMAZING SHADOWS* on Independent Lens and edited and executive produced *SUPERHEROES* on HBO. *THE INVISIBLE WAR*, which he edited and associate produced, won the Audience Award for Best Documentary at Sundance 2012. His new documentary *OF TWO MINDS*, which he co-directed, edited and shot, will premiere in 2012.

**CREDITS:**

“Twenty Feet From Stardom”

A Gil Friesen and Tremolo Production.

**Directed by**

Morgan Neville

**Produced by**

Gil Friesen



**Produced by**

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Post-Production Sound Services By  
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a Lucasfilm Ltd. Company  
Marin County, California

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Merry Clayton  
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Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.  
Warner Bros. Records  
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Music Credits:

**WALK ON THE WILD SIDE**

Written by Lou Reed  
Published by Oakfield Avenue Music Ltd. (BMI)  
Performed by Lou Reed  
Courtesy of RCA Records Label  
By Arrangement with Sony Music Licensing

**SLIPPERY PEOPLE**

Written by David Byrne, Tina Weymouth, Chris Frantz and Jerry Harrison  
Published by WB Music Corp. (ASCAP) on behalf of itself and Index Music, Inc. (ASCAP)

**SILVER AND GOLD**

Written by Bob Crosby, Henry Prichard and Del Sharbutt  
Published by Blue River Music, Inc. (BMI)

**I DO THE SHIMMY SHIMMY**

Written by Albert Shubert and Bill Massey  
Published by Fort Knox Music, Inc. (BMI) and Trio Music Company (BMI) c/o BMG Rights Management (US) LLC

**DA DOO RON RON**

Written by Jeff Barry, Ellie Greenwich and Philip Spector  
Published by Universal – Songs of Polygram International, Inc. (BMI), EMI Blackwood Music Inc. (BMI) and Trio Music Company (BMI) c/o BMG Rights Management (US) LLC

**WHAT'D I SAY**

Written by Ray Charles  
Published by Unichappell Music Inc. (BMI) and Mijac Music (BMI) c/o Sony/ATV Songs LLC

**HE'S A REBEL**

Written by Gene Pitney

Published by Unichappell Music Inc. (BMI)

Performed by The Crystals

Courtesy of EMI Blackwood Music Inc. on behalf of Phil Spector Records and Mother Bertha Music, Inc.

**MAYBE GOD IS TRYING TO TELL YOU SOMETHING**

Written by Andrae Edward Crouch, David Francis Del Sesto, Quincy D. Jones and William D. Maxwell

Published by Universal Music Corp. on behalf of Warner Olive Music LLC (ASCAP)

**LET'S MAKE A BETTER WORLD**

Written by Earl King

Published by Trick Bag, LLC d/b/a Shirley's Music (BMI)

**BOLD SOUL SISTER**

Written by Ike Turner

Published by Placid Music Corp. (BMI)

**SPACE CAPTAIN**

Written by Matthew Moore

Published by Irving Music, Inc. (BMI)

Performed by Joe Cocker from the film "Mad Dogs and Englishmen"

Courtesy of A&M Records

Under license from Universal Music Enterprises

Courtesy of Straight Ahead Productions Ltd.

**GIMME SHELTER**

Written by Mick Jagger and Keith Richards

Published by ABKCO Music, Inc. (BMI)

Performed by The Rolling Stones

Courtesy of ABKCO Music & Records, Inc.

[www.abkco.com](http://www.abkco.com)

**HOUNDS OF WINTER**

Music and lyrics by Sting

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**YOUNG AMERICANS**

Written by David Bowie

Published by Jones Music America (ASCAP) administered by ARZO Publishing, Colgems-EMI Music Inc. (ASCAP) and Chrysalis Music Ltd. (PRS) c/o BMG Rights Management (US) LLC

**WAH WAH**

Written by George Harrison

Published by Harrisongs, Ltd. (ASCAP)

**SWEET HOME ALABAMA**

Written by Edward C. King, Gary Robert Rossington and Ronnie Van Zant

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Performed by Lynyrd Skynyrd

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**UP WHERE WE BELONG**

Written by Jack Nitzsche, Will Jennings and Buffy Sainte-Marie

Published by Sony/ATV Melody (BMI)

**RIVER DEEP, MOUNTAIN HIGH**

Written by Jeff Barry, Ellie Greenwich and Philip Spector

Published by Universal - Songs of Polygram International, Inc. (BMI), EMI Blackwood Music Inc. (BMI) and Trio Music Company (BMI) c/o BMG Rights Management (US) LLC

**SOUTHERN MAN**

Written by Neil Young

Published by Broken Arrow Music Corp. (BMI)

**I'VE GOT DREAMS TO REMEMBER**

Written by Otis Redding, Zelma Redding and Joe Rock

Published by Irving Music, Inc. on behalf of East Memphis Music Corp. (BMI)

Performed by Otis Redding

Courtesy of Atlantic Recording Corp.

By Arrangement with Warner Music Group Film & TV Licensing

**CHRISTMAS (BABY PLEASE COME HOME)**

Written by Jeff Barry, Ellie Greenwich and Philip Spector

Published by Universal - Songs of Polygram International, Inc. (BMI), EMI Blackwood Music Inc. (BMI) and Trio Music Company (BMI) c/o BMG Rights Management (US) LLC

Performed by Darlene Love

Courtesy of EMI Blackwood Music Inc. on behalf of Phil Spector Records and Mother Bertha Music, Inc.

**HOW CAN I EASE THE PAIN**

Written by Narada Michael Walden and Lisa Melonie Fischer

Published by WB Music Corp on behalf of Gratitude Music (ASCAP) and Universal Music Corp. (ASCAP) on behalf of itself and Lynneliese Songs (ASCAP)

**HOW SWEET IT IS (TO BE LOVED BY YOU)**

Written by Lamont Dozier, Brian Holland and Eddie Holland

Published by Stone Agate Music Corp. (BMI)

**SURE ON THIS SHINING NIGHT**

Composed by Samuel Barber and James Agee

Published by G. Schirmer, Inc. (ASCAP)

**LEAN ON ME**

Written by Bill Withers

Published by Songs of Universal, Inc. on behalf of Interior Music Corp. (BMI)

**A FINE, FINE BOY**

Written by Jeff Barry, Ellie Greenwich and Philip Spector

Published by Universal - Songs of Polygram International, Inc. (BMI), EMI Blackwood Music Inc. (BMI) and Trio Music Company (BMI) c/o BMG Rights Management (US) LLC

**Additional Music By:**

"Monster Mash" 1962 Garpax Records/Capizzi Music Co, House of Paxton Music Press, Chrysalis One Songs

"That's Life" 1966 Reprise Records, Universal Polygram International Publishing Inc

"The Shoop Shoop Song (It's In His Kiss)" 1964 Vee-Jay Records/By the Bay Music Trio Music Company

"Love the One You're With" 1970 Gold Hill Music Dub Plate Music Publishers LTD

"Bad Girls" 1979 Universal Music Group, Earborne Music, Rick S Music Inc, Sweet Summer Night Music

"As Long As We've Got Each Other" 1985 Warner Bros. Entertainment Songs of Universal Inc Warner- Barham Music LLC, Warner Olive Music LLC

"Thriller" 1982 Epic A division of Sony BMG Music Entertainment, Rodsongs Rondor Music International Inc.

"Circle of Life" 1994 Walt Disney Records, Wonderland Music Company Inc

"I know how (to make you love me)" 1988 Nia Peeples Music, Universal Polygram International Publishinhg Inc.

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