

Film News: That's a Wrap! 2021 Sundance Film Festival Top Five

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CHICAGO – It was one week of 73 feature films and 50 shorts, and it was shared with a virtual and online audience. The 2021 Sundance Film Festival will be remembered as within the pandemic sphere, but it also was notable for the depth and breadth of their film offerings, and how it reached a larger cinema universe.

The Sundance Film Festival is an annual event organized by the Sundance Institute – an organization founded by actor Robert Redford in 1980 – and dedicated to the growth of independent artists. It usually takes place each January in Park City, Utah, and other locations, and is the largest independent film festival in the United States. It includes competitive categories in documentary and dramatic films, both feature length and short works, as well as out-of-competition categories for showcasing new films.



That's a Wrap!

Photo credit: Sundance Film Festival



SUNDANCE: Five Films That Stood Out

Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com spent the week watching the offerings from the 2021 Sundance Film Festival. These are the five films that stood out and will be coming to a theater or streaming service near you.

“CODA” – The film that won the Grand Jury Prize for Best Film at the 2021 festival is deceptively expressive. The premise is almost TV movie-like, as a daughter (Emilia Jones) is the only person in an all-deaf family – with father (Troy Kotsur), mother (Marlee Matlin) and brother (Daniel Durant) – who can hear. Ironically, the girl is blessed with a high level singing voice, and wants to pursue it. This simple story keeps expanding, until it hits all the high notes and becomes a grand opera of emotional deliverance and character redemption ... it surprisingly convinced me of its power. Directed (and she won Best Director) by Sian Heder.

“Pleasure” – This is one harsh film. Sofia Kappel portrays Bella Cherry, a woman fresh off the boat from Sweden, who thinks she wants a career as a performer in adult films in Los Angeles. What follows is a freakish ride down a hell scape rabbit hole of “making porno” ... full of deceit, sexist behavior to a degree not fathomable and her ultimate addiction to be the “best.” That superlative has no height or depth in that branch of the film industry. It will be impossible to “look at” pornography in the same way again after experiencing “Pleasure.” Directed with fearlessness by Ninja Thyberg.

“Jockey” – Essentially a western, substituting the race jockey for the cowboy. The writer/director Clint Bentley comes from that horse racing world, and creates his main jockey character Jackson (Clifton Collins Jr., who received a Special Jury honor for Best Actor) with the old gunslinger mentality, albeit in another profession. When the young upstart (Moisés Arias) comes to town to challenge Jackson’s legacy, the old cowboy has to think about riding into the sunset. Director Bentley uses the sunset as a magic hour light to symbolize this twilight, and actor Collins provides the rest. A film lesson in integrity and morality.

“On the Count of Three” – Comic Actor Jerrod Carmichael deftly directs and stars in this pitch black comedy on coming to terms. Carmichael is Val, a dead-ender in a dead end town in which he sees no way out. After hearing that his institutionalized best friend Kevin (Christopher Abbott) has attempted suicide, Val goes to the mental clinic and busts his friend out, and convinces him to agree to a double suicide. The pair’s “last day” is full of revelations, leading to many outcomes. There is so much truth in this film, with underlying themes of mental health in America, man-boys and race, as well as those coming to terms. It’s also extremely funny, in addition to being a reflective and artistic director debut for Carmichael.

“Summer of Soul (... Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)” – Truly a miracle of a film, and the Grand Jury Prize for Best U.S. Documentary at the Festival. The director Ahmir Khalib “Questlove” Thompson (of “The Roots”) put together footage from the 52 year old (1969) Harlem Cultural Festival, AKA the “Black Woodstock,” which hasn’t seen the light of screen since it was filmed. He essentially combined these amazing musical acts – including 19-year-old Stevie Wonder, Sly and the Family Stone, The Fifth Dimension, young Gladys Knight and the Pips and the Staple Singers – with reminisces from the artists and attendees. This is an important document of the transition between Dr. King and the Black Empowerment that evolved from that era. A must see for music fans, history buffs, those who study black sociology and everyone else.

As an epilogue, here’s a clip of Sundance Institute/Film Festival Founder Robert Redford, reflecting on what he created ...

For the complete coverage of the 2021 Sundance Film Festival, from Patrick McDonald, click on [Opening Night \[23\]](#), [DAY 3 \[24\]](#), [DAY 4 \[25\]](#), [DAY 5 \[26\]](#), [DAY 6 \[27\]](#) and the [Awards Ceremony \[28\]](#).

The Sundance Film Festival is presented by the Sundance Institute. For more information click on [Sundance.org \[29\]](#)



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By [PATRICK McDONALD \[31\]](#)
Editor, Film Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [30]

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