

2017 Best Doc Oscar Nominee ‘I Am Not Your Negro’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on February 6, 2017 - 5:15pm

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The terms that have been used to describe African Americans over the years ...black, afro-americans, negro and worse... has always been what others had named them, the others that wanted to marginalize, categorize and group individuals into images of words. The documentary “I Am Not Your Negro” seeks to upend these generalizations and in turn, those words.

In an extraordinarily way into “those who deny the past are condemned to repeat it,” filmmaker Raoul Peck frames a historical piece of writing by author James Baldwin into the counter intuitiveness of race relations today. The film evokes a bit of sadness, because in 2017 there should be less divisiveness between black, white and other shades than when Baldwin plotted his literary vision in 1979, which itself was 16 years after the “I Have a Dream” speech. But in acknowledging this vital voice across time, we can realize that the evolutionary process of these relations are too slow, and our fellow citizens are too willing to demur to the racism and bigotry that is years beyond its expiration date.

In 1979, the prodigious African American author James Baldwin (“Go Tell it On the Mountain”) wrote a letter to his publisher, describing his next project, “Remember This House.” It was to be a tribute and social overview of three friends – Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. All three were different types of African American leaders, all three were murdered by gunfire.



James Baldwin (in sunglasses) is the Voice of ‘I Am Not Your Negro’

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

Director Raoul Peck has taken this unfinished material, the contents of the letter and the 30 pages of the unfinished book (Baldwin died in 1987), and gives them context and life. Using the imagery of Baldwin's lifetime, including the author's appearances on various talk shows, plus the grainy black & white rerun of 1960s news footage and special reports ("The Negro and The American Promise"), Peck creates an "everything old is new again" thesis.

Newscasts, talk shows and their images work as a brilliant exposé in this documentary, and the words of James Baldwin, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. are new again and more vital to the now in these settings. The questions they had to answer, the "representations" they endure and the presumptions of their questioners are on display, and highlights the unfairness that even the highest of African American intellectuals had to endure, and still endure (note the campaign of bigotry against Barack Obama).

The often white moderators in the past keep asking a variation of what the "Negroes" want, which through any human and moral instinct anybody can answer... a full measure of fairness and equality that is based on the content of character rather than the color of skin. Despite the voice they gave these intellectuals on the various news and talk shows, there is still a separation based on these questions, part of the personal indignity that these leaders were expected to endure. The processing of these indignities is the key to "I Am Not Your Negro." How does the individual become whole when a society can't allow them to be so?



Malcolm X in an Archived Photo in 'I Am Not Your Negro'

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

It is narrated by Samuel L. Jackson, who has his own strange relationship with the black image, given his film roles, but his oratory is perfectly appropriate in relating the Baldwin prose. Malcolm X, King and Evers were actual friends of James Baldwin, their deaths by his own admission made him die bit by bit. His remembrance of the three was expanded by Peck's vision. and brings Baldwin to back to a rightful place in the conversation once again. If the words he speaks from many years ago still radiates to the problems of today, then how can we work to lessen their desperate anger and sadness?

Baldwin once stated, "The American White Republic has to ask itself 'why is was necessary to invent the [n-word]'?...the world decides that [a person] is this for their own reasons...in terms of the future, in terms of health and in terms of the transformation we're all seeking, that they face this question of why he needed the [n-word] for something." If we have the opportunity to answer that question individually, could we rise and uplift the collective consciousness? "I Am Not Your Negro" is an igniter of this wisdom and truth.

"I Am Not Your Negro" opened nationwide on February 3rd. See local listings for theaters and showtimes. Narrated by Samuel L. Jackson. Based on the writings of James Baldwin. Directed by Raoul Peck. Rated "PG-13"



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