

Roger Ebert Doc a Titanic Love Story About Movies, Chaz & 'Life Itself'

Submitted by [HollywoodChicago.com](http://www.hollywoodchicago.com) [1] on July 6, 2014 - 3:41pm

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – We'd all be so lucky to live a full life of love, success and dignity. But earning it and then dying with it is the ultimate accomplishment.

The film festival hit "Life Itself" honestly portrays the life and death of a great man that any man or woman can strive to emulate. In the face of terminal cancer and leaving an empire and the love of your life behind, not many people can close the curtains as Roger Ebert did with so much humility, humor and grace.



Roger Ebert (center) and Gene Siskel in "Life Itself".

Photo credit: Kevin Horan, Magnolia Pictures

But I admit it: I'm typically not a documentary kind of guy. You have to care about the person or the subject or the cause. While the filmmakers always deeply do, many fail to make you feel the same way. "Life Itself" isn't selling you. Even if this man somehow never touched your life at all, you'll enjoy learning about one way to live a life truly worth living.

As many documentary biographies often are, "Life Itself" isn't simply a celebration film about the nation's most important and influential Pulitzer Prize-winning movie critic. Rather, it's the epitome of a *true* story. The film centers on why he's a legend, all the people he touched and how he left the movie industry and life itself better than how found it.

Like so many other movie stars and filmmakers, Chicago director Steve James was elevated to fame because Roger Ebert gave his film "Hoop Dreams" objective notoriety when it was otherwise overlooked. In today's age of reality TV shows designed to make rising stars famous, Ebert was the original *scout* long before social technologies made it so easy.



Chaz Ebert and Roger Ebert in "Life Itself".

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

His ability to *discover* rising talent and undiscovered movie gems became one of his lasting legacies. The list of people he deservedly did it for is long and the amount of people who are who they are today because of him is great. "Life Itself" hones in on a few of them including filmmakers Martin Scorsese, Werner Herzog and Errol Morris.

Fellow film critics A.O. Scott (*The New York Times*) and Richard Corliss (*Time Magazine*) are interviewed about how Ebert forevermore changed the face of movie criticism and the entertainment industry at large.

The film also spends a prominent portion of its 115 minutes dissecting the fascinating and highly entertaining relationship of Ebert's professional partner Gene Siskel. Ebert recalls that "Siskel is such an a**hole, but he is my a**hole". While they fought like cats and dogs and knew exactly how to get under each other's skin, they trailblazed new mediums for film critics unlike anyone else had done before.

Created by Chicago producer Thea Flaum, the industry was forevermore changed when "Sneak Previews" with Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel aired on PBS from 1975 to 1982. Then "At the Movies" (originally "Siskel & Ebert & the Movies" and later "At the Movies with Ebert & Roeper") continued the tradition for decades to come.



Gene Siskel (left) and Roger Ebert in "Life Itself".

Photo credit: Kevin Horan, Magnolia Pictures

Ever since, writers everywhere have been trying to use today's technologies to innovate the way these men did even when they didn't have today's social luxuries. As he was battling throat cancer, Roger Ebert even transcended film criticism and became a social commentator through his active Twitter following, his blog and a computer that voiced him.

Roger's wife, Chaz, recently spoke at the [Chicago red-carpet premiere](#) [21] of "Life Itself" about the importance of his voice both literally and figuratively.

The film ended up documenting the last 4 months of his life, so he had already hung up his ability to speak without computer assistance. Chaz realized how much she missed his voice and how critical it was to convey his story. With Steve James, she decided to hire a voice actor (Stephen Stanton) for much of the film to accurately portray his voice. The film closes out with Roger's computer-assisted voice. The film was edited to 115 minutes from 178 minutes.



Roger Ebert in "Life Itself".

Photo credit: Kevin Horan, Magnolia Pictures

Steve James focuses on documentaries and tends to release them longer than many of his colleagues. While he felt like he "owed" Roger for catapulting his career, he didn't accept the serious responsibility of helming "Life Itself" merely as payback to him. Steve had to fall in love

with Roger's memoir of the same name first, he said in [my interview with him](#) [21], as that's the only way to do justice to his story.

The film doesn't pander to his well-documented absence nor does it ask for your pity. Cancer is a fact of life for too many of us and the film honestly portrays it without using it as a tool for manipulation. Rather, "Life Itself" serves as inspiration for what one man can do and how an empire can be built with a legion of like-minded followers.

We're left inspired about how we can change for the better. While it doesn't preach how you should live your life, it's impossible not to soak in so many tips about the keys to happiness. The film reminds us about some of the highlights we already knew about Roger and reveals a back story we never knew, but it succeeds the most in its ability to personally touch anyone anywhere.

The film might tear on some heartstrings that you might struggle with stomaching – especially if you or someone you love has been adversely impacted by cancer. "Life Itself" might also upset you that you didn't get to know Roger personally or better if you did share some time with him.



Martin Scorsese speaks to director Steve James on the set of "Life Itself".

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

But Roger had a unique ability to be everyone's friend even if he never met you. "Life Itself" pulls you in not only as a fly on the wall – as good documentaries do – but literally as a guest at his family's dinner table. The film isn't afraid of showing pain, anger and struggle just as much as it reveals triumph. And "Life Itself" doesn't apply makeup on Roger's degenerating face or about his story as a whole. It also doesn't shy away from discussing alcoholism – both Roger's and even Chaz's.

After Gene Siskel died privately from cancer, it became important for Roger to be honest about what he was going through. Ebert died of complications due to cancer on [April 4, 2013](#) [22]. He was 70, but his voice continues at [RogerEbert.com](#) [23] and through everyone he gave a voice who wouldn't have otherwise been heard.

"Life Itself" features Roger Ebert, Chaz Ebert, Gene Siskel, Marlene Siskel, Martin Scorsese, Werner Herzog, A.O. Scott, Errol Morris, Ava DuVernay, Richard Corliss, Thea Flaum, Ramin Bahrani and Stephen Stanton from director Steve James. It is rated "R" for brief sexual images and nudity and language. The film has a running time of 115 minutes. "Life Itself" opened on July 4, 2014 and expands on July 11, 2014. In Chicago, it plays at Landmark Century Centre Cinema. The film is produced by CNN Films and Chicago's Kartemquin Films. It is distributed theatrically by Magnolia Pictures and at home by Magnolia Home Entertainment.



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