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SUNDANCE FESTIVAL

Teen's guitar mentor proves he's high-strung

BY JOHN ANDERSON
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PARK CITY, Utah - This year's Sundance Film Festival is about as rich in musical films as it's ever been, and many of the stories mix music and woe: "The Devil and Daniel Johnston," for instance, takes an enigmatic look at a severely troubled singer-songwriter; the brilliant "Romantico" concerns two mariachi singers playing counterpoint to the American Dream.

On the flip side is "Rock School," which is pure enthusiasm with a backbeat. And few Park City stars have been quite as young, or seasoned, as C.J. Tywoniak, the 14-year-old guitar god of "Rock School," Don Argott's documentary about the Philadelphia after-school program that inspired Rick Linklater's popular 2003 movie, "School of Rock." In "Rock School," the kids prepare to travel to a Frank Zappa festival in Germany and play some of the toughest music in the rock repertory.

Monday night, at a "Rock School" party, the kids played a song with Alice Cooper - "School's Out," of course - before a pulsating throng of Sundance filmgoers.

A teen guitar god

In a black leather coat and shoulder length, coal-black hair, Tywoniak looks a bit different than he does in the film. He was asked what was tougher: playing Zappa music in Germany, Alice Cooper music in Park City or putting up with Paul Green, the director of the Paul Green School, who, as the film so emphatically shows, can breathe both fire and vulgarity (Tywoniak's mom, Monique, is nearby, nodding in agreement).

"Well, definitely the Alice Cooper stuff was, like, easier to play," Tywoniak said. "But it was still a great experience to play with someone who's been in the music business so long, to play with a big star. I mean, that song is legendary. Everyone's heard it. It's even in commercials."

As for Green "he shows a lot more of that kind of stuff in the movie than he really does [off screen]. The movie was filmed over the course of, like, a year. Or six months. And they had to cram all that into the movie, so it showed a lot more. It wasn't real life."

Plus, "he doesn't breathe down my neck so much. I'm pretty solid at learning all my stuff."

Tywoniak is a bona fide prodigy, and one of several young musicians who make "Rock School" so musically satisfying, in addition to being an entertaining portrait of Green and his unorthodox teaching methods. The rock school and Germany had their pressures, but Tywoniak said Park City had its own. "You never know who's in the audience at Sundance," he said.

Fraught with frauds

No kidding. There are directors. Producers. Faux producers. Outright frauds. And every once in a while, people who make up in wisdom what they may lack in youth.

"Two elderly ladies came up to me the other day after a screening of my film," said

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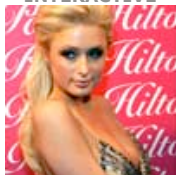
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Pirjo Honkasalo, the Finnish director of the world documentary competition film "The 3 Rooms of Melancholia." "And they said, 'Why don't we see more films like this? Why do they always underestimate American audiences? We're stupid. But we're not that stupid.'"

Stupidity aside, Sundance 2005 offers a pretty fair reflection of the moviegoing nation. On one side there are people who are here for the glitz and the stars and going to movies they'll be able to see in a few weeks, either on DVD, cable or at their local multiplex. On the other hand are people from all walks and ways of life who are here to search out the rare, the obscure - the films they may never be able to see again, especially not in a theater. The two worlds co-exist and collide here, in a town where Sundance won't be able to exist at all, if they don't eventually ban private cars during the festival.

The likelihood of that happening? About the same as Paris Hilton going to a Finnish documentary. But there is room for all kinds of people here in Park City. There just isn't any place for them to park.

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