

Pop, techno, soul: music keeps the blood pumping at Byron Bay Film Festival

Roots troubadour **Michael Franti's** film **Stay Human** opens the **Byron Bay Film Festival** this year, kicking off a feast of vision – and sound – that keeps the audience's blood pumping for the 10-day fiesta.

The range of music-based films throughout the festival means there is something for everyone. From the sublime compositions of synth-pop pioneer, experimental minimalist and lauded film composer **Ryuichi Sakamoto**, to the occasionally ridiculous pop songs sung by boy bands, and everything in between, Festival films examine music, its creators and its audiences in close and often colourful detail.

While the music emanating from boy bands might seem frivolous to some, there are plenty of others who adore it, and the young men who record it, with a passionate intensity.

For these fans (usually adolescent and teenage girls) the boybands provide excitement and joy and a focus for their hormonal drive. But more, the shared enthusiasm gives them a tribe to belong to, and a reliable, if distant, source of comfort during the challenging times.

Melbourne director Jessica Leski addresses the issue in a documentary titled **I Used To Be Normal: A Boyband Fangirl Story**.

There's much more to the adoration that the four women of different generations profiled here feel for **The Backstreet Boys, One Direction, Take That** and **The Beatles** than mere teeny-bopper hysteria and the film explores the complex emotions behind it in an intelligent and empathetic way.

Combining interviews with archival material, animation and home movies, Leski discovers lives that have been dramatically affected by the love of a boyband, and the highs and lows it has brought them.

The film also looks at why pop music holds such a place in our hearts and shapes our interior world, and is sure to have audiences revisiting their own youth, and happily recalling the fads and excitement of their own early loves.

Ryuichi Sakamoto's music will hold memories for many older filmgoers, who discovered him through his performance opposite **David Bowie** in the 1983 film **Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence**, for which he also wrote the BAFTA Award-winning score.

He went on to compose acclaimed scores for two Bernardo Bertolucci films **The Last Emperor** and **The Sheltering Sky**.

In 2014 he was diagnosed with throat cancer and retired from music, but was enticed back into composing by an offer from the Mexican director Alejandro G. Iñárritu to score his film **The Revenant**, alongside German electronic musician **Alva Noto** and **Bryce Dessner** of **The National**.

The score "straddles the line between weariness and wonder, like someone constantly recalling the danger this stunning planet is capable of unleashing", according to a Pitchfork reviewer, and Sakamoto is sure to draw on it in his Sydney and Melbourne concerts with Noto at the end of the month.

Ryuichi Sakamoto: Coda screens four times during the **Byron Bay Film Festival** and documents the composer's obsessive search for the exact sounds – often in nature – to incorporate into his compositions.

We watch – and listen – as he slides a violin bow across a cymbal's edge, pounds a hollow log and plucks away at a

piano that has been “warped and frayed” by its drowning in the tsunami that devastated Fukushima in 2011 – the focus of Sakamoto’s other preoccupation, the insanity of the world’s embrace of the nuclear option.

From Fukushima to Vanuatu, and music of a very different sort – that performed in a Port Vila nightclub by a girl band that will remind viewers of **The Sapphires**.

Life is Sweet was produced and filmed in Vanuatu and is entirely spoken and sung in the language of Bislama.

Sonia and her friends are performers at Club Tequila, and when the MC gives them a chance to dissect her marriage to Max, they take over the nightclub to tell the story – and examine the role of women in a patriarchal society.

Max thinks he’s free to do as he wants but the women have a different view. Director Peter Walker’s idea was to be true to Pacific Island life but the story has universal appeal, approaching its themes of love, relationships and family with irony and a delicate human psychology – and plenty of great songs.

The “hero” in the short Basque film **Waiting** is a morose singer, as stiff and dry as the Vanuatu women are sinewy and passionate. It’s painful watching him in his existential straitjacket, but the film is hilarious, and tells us something quite new about musical expression.

While he attempts to free himself from the Groundhog Day prison of performing, the farmer in **Techno** finds freedom in the electronic genre, dancing his way to a life-and-death decision.

The subject of Bangalow filmmakers **Sophie Hexter** and **Poppy Walker**’s short film **Drummer Girl** knows a thing or two about performing: Renee Kelly plays with an instinctive fluidity and sense of rhythm. The only trouble

is, she's blind, and frustrated at not being able to find a group to play with.

Finally, there's the annual BBFF **Music Video Showcase** at the **Byron Bay Brewery**, a party to which everyone is invited.

It's the opportunity to enjoy one of the many fine beers and boutique drinks the Brewery serves while watching some of the world's most recent music videos.

Among them is **Wonderwall**, a seven-minute film from Ukraine bursting with excitement and romance, and the sense of loss that good pop music can so powerfully express. The film is based on a song by Ukraine's biggest rock stars, **Skai**. It's a perfect fit for the teen drama with a real-world message.

Director and musician **Alexander Denysenko** realises his aim of combining cinematic narrative to help magnify the emotional soul of the music and to make a film that would be a "wonderwall", something that gives strength and hope.

Wonderwall is a candidate for BBFF 2018's Music Video Award – but it's a tough field. Competition comes from the likes of **DZ Deathrays: Like People**, in which red Wiggle Murray gets his rock socks on with the head-banging 'Rays; **Bianca Tomchin** and **Mathew Harvey's** colourful and highly original **Who's A Flybird?**, **Jonathan Nix's** trippy – and topical – **Sola**; the electronic funk and diversity of **Victorian Cassie De Colling's GRRRL Wanna Dance**; the stirring and sensuous soul of **Lord**; and many more, including Byron Shire's own **Bunny Racket**.

Byron Bay Film Festival runs from October 12-21.
For full program and tickets, go to BBFF.com.au

