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Songs My Brother Taught Me

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Songs My Brother Taught Me* (2016), directed by Chloe Zhao.

Keywords

Native American film, Pine Ridge

Director Chloe Zhao's *Songs My Brother Taught Me* debuted at the Sundance Film Festival on January 27, 2015 before being widely released on March 2, 2016. The film addresses aspects of contemporary Lakota life on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, focusing particularly on the many difficulties residents face with poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and drug and alcohol addiction. However, unlike so many other films and documentaries depicting poverty in Native American communities, its portrayal here is handled responsibly and avoids the ham-fisted, sensationalistic approach characteristic of many other attempts.

Aside from Zhao's abilities, a major reason for this is due to the outstanding performances of the cast, almost all of which are Native American, five of whom (John Reddy, Alan Reddy, Jashaun St. John, Travis Lone Hill, and Jorge Dullknife) reside on Pine Ridge or are of Lakota heritage. The other major characters are played by Irene Bedard (Inuit, Cree) and Taysha Fuller (Mohawk, Cayuga). The production team is to be commended for using Native talent in general and especially for utilizing local Lakota residents, who lend authenticity to the film's themes.

The story focuses on Johnny Winters (John Reddy) and his sister Jashaun Winters (Jashaun St. John) coming to terms with their father, who they hardly knew, recently dying in a fire during an alcoholic stupor. Both live at home with their depressed mother (Irene Bedard) who seems to sleepwalk her way through the days, feeling remorse for the decisions she has made in her life. Her oldest son is in prison and she is searching for a way to make amends to her children for being so emotionally absent for much of their lives. Johnny works for Bill Britt (Alan Reddy) selling bootlegged liquor to community members in the hopes of earning enough money to move to Los Angeles with his girlfriend Aurelia (Taysha Fuller). Johnny is quite close with his younger sister Jashaun, so when she overhears his and Aurelia's plans to move away, she

looks for a surrogate older brother and finds one in Travis Lone Hill, a tattoo artist and clothing designer.

Johnny's determination to move to Los Angeles and willingness to sell alcohol to a community where alcohol is illegal, along with Jashaun's angst over her brother's plan to leave, remain the overarching focus of the film. However, the movie is not narrative-driven and much of the movie's strengths are in the several exchanges between characters, engaging with everyday occurrences in the community. For example, after Johnny's father's funeral, he and Jashaun meet several of their half-siblings who talk about their late father, his shortcomings, and the schism between community members on how best to handle alcohol on the reservation. The controversy and tragedy over Whiteclay, a small Nebraska village bordering the Pine Ridge Reservation responsible for perpetuating alcohol problems on the reservation, is discussed in such a way that the viewer realizes that these are not simply actors, but individuals with real life experiences grappling with this major issue. One of the more poignant scenes is when Johnny is driving bootlegged liquor down a street filled with Lakota residents protesting the sale of alcohol at Whiteclay. He is spotted by his half-brother Jorge Iron Bear (Jorge Dullknife), who is protesting and later confronts Johnny and offers him a job at his car garage.

For all of the negative press Pine Ridge receives these days, a scene in a high school, where a teacher asks a classroom of students what each of them wants to do now that they are graduating, challenges the assumption that there is a universal lack of optimism in the community. Many of the graduates want to be ranchers; some of them want to become lawyers and artists. The point is that the young people of Pine Ridge are not without hope for a better future. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the character of Jashaun Winters. She is only in the eighth grade, but wise and mature beyond her years. She becomes Travis Lone Hill's apprentice in making

clothing and artwork and gives him hope, despite his own personal demons. Jashaun listens to her mother share her own pain growing up with emotionally unavailable parents, maintaining her composure throughout the film. She embodies the understanding that, beneath the poverty and devastation that colonialism has brought to the Lakota people of Pine Ridge, there remains a vibrant cultural and spiritual tradition that can be tapped into if only one would take the time to look deeply under the surface of current circumstances.

Engaging and moving, *Songs My Brother Taught Me* is a triumph for Chloe Zhao and the Native American actors and community members involved. The cinematography showing the beauty of the Badlands and surrounding landscape help immerse the viewer into the wider storyline. There is a fine line between authenticity and exploitation when it comes to addressing contemporary Native American issues in documentaries and films and Chloe Zhao and the cast offer up a responsible and moving portrayal of some of these topics.