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On the Record

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Abstract

This is a film review of *On the Record* (2020) directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering.

Keywords

Hip hop, #MeToo, Sexual Assault

Author Notes

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On the Record (2020) dir. Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering

On the Record explores allegations against Russell Simmons, the founder of Def Jam Records. Simmons has been involved in several other enterprises such as the clothing line Phat Farm and Def Comedy Jam. The film primarily follows his abuse of power through his role at Def Jam Records.

The documentary features interviews with the survivors (or as one woman describes herself, “warriors”) who have brought forward the allegations. Feminist leaders are also interviewed, providing some important context. What makes this film unique is that it is one of the few films in the post #MeToo movement that looks at the African American woman’s experience. This intersectional approach is crucial to furthering this movement. The film does a good job of pointing out the challenges that these women specifically face when bringing forward such allegations, from concerns about playing into the bias against African American men, to the view that such assaults are to be expected in hip hop culture. Framing the issue that violence against

woman and misogyny is common across white popular culture (for example, in the famous Beatles line “I’d rather see you dead little girl than to see you with another man”) helps to point out that hip hop is not operating in a bubble; and further, the hip hop movement also has had many important cultural and political messages. The fact that some of those in power were able to use their influence to rape and harass women is the crucial issue, and the film makes careful effort to show that the music scene itself was not the problem, but rather a few “bad actors” within it. Surely by this point, with the #MeToo movement showing us that women can be assaulted in most industries, viewers will not be so myopic; but perhaps that is hoping for too much. Essentially, this film seeks to remove cultural and racial biases viewers might have about African American women and their assaults.

The film primarily follows Drew Dixon, who had worked her way up to an executive position at Def Jam. Dixon was raped by Simmons which led her to leave Def Jam Records. She then went on to another record label where she eventually felt pressure to perform sexually for one of the executives. In this job, she started to get the impression that unless she slept with the executive, she wouldn’t progress at work. During this time, she brought in key performers such as Usher and Kanye West, who the executive would not sign on out of spite: this inability to perform her position caused her to leave the company and the recording industry for good.

The other side of this coin is that Drew Dixon was extremely good at her job. She had signed amazing talent over the years and pulled off unique music specials. She worked with Notorious B.I.G, Method Man, Aretha Franklin, and many more. She was involved in bringing together Mary J. Blige and Method Man for “I’ll be There for You/You’re all I Need to Get By,” which was number 3 on the Billboard Hot 100. She started in the music industry as a Stanford graduate with experience assisting in her mother’s political career. She was a young, energetic

African American woman filled with promise, skill and aptitude for the work. Several of the people in the film (and those who have seen it) are lamenting her departure from the industry. They wonder what might have been. This may be a new direction for those who are becoming aware of the #MeToo movement, to consider what has been lost as women have been forced from these careers, and what our landscape might look like if there was more inclusion of women, how our popular culture might reflect that.

Throughout the film several women come forward with their allegations of rape against Simmons. As the film closes, we learn that Simmons has sold off his assets and moved to Bali, a place with no extradition laws.