



## 20 Feet From Stardom Discussion Guide

Director: Morgan Neville

Year: 2013

Time: 91 min

### You might know this director from:

Troubadours (2011)

The Cool School (2008)

Shotgun Freeway: Drives Through Lost L.A. (1995)

## FILM SUMMARY

Oscar-winning **20 FEET FROM STARDOM** shines the spotlight on the backup singers who have lent their voices to support some of the greatest musical legends of the past several decades. While their voices have electrified, amplified, and emboldened, their names and faces have lurked in the shadows. This film is a tribute to these gifted musical artists—Darlene Love, Merry Clayton, Claudia Lennear, Lisa Fischer, Tata Vega, Judith Hill, and others—who share their stories of heartbreak, struggles, and triumphs, as well as the rhapsodic joys and incandescent magic of making music with others.

Featuring archival footage and interviews with Mick Jagger, Stevie Wonder, Sting, Bruce Springsteen, Bette Midler and others, **20 FEET FROM STARDOM** is a rousing and illuminating film that explores artistic aspiration and examines a money-focused music industry that is often treacherous and exploitative.

Ultimately, **20 FEET FROM STARDOM** is a celebration of these amazing vocalists. Their work as backup singers required them to blend, harmonize, and be invisible. This film pushes them to the front and center of stage, highlighting their musical contributions to some of the most famous songs in American music, allowing them to finally speak and sing purely for themselves.

## FILM THEMES

The film reveals how race and gender power dynamics in the music industry can be exploitative and reinforce the status quo. But through riffs, refrains, and hooks, some backup singers are able to add their own mark and commentary.

### BACKUP SINGER VS. SOLOIST

The film presents various personal stories to show that there's no definite formula or strategy in becoming a star, nor is it a desire shared by all. Love says, "I think you've got to have that 'kill spirit' to really want it." The immense talent of the backup singers is evident, but it's not enough. Even those who've "made it" know that it's a mystery, as it's a combination of ego, drive, narcissism, and incredible luck in finding the right song, the right arrangement, and the right time in the music scene.

### CHURCH CHOIR AND GOSPEL

Many backup singers featured in the film came from a church choir background. Some were even daughters of preachers. Thus they were trained from the beginning to blend and harmonize and improvise with others to create a unified sound. The call and response between preacher and choir influenced the dynamic between soloist and backup singers for artists such as Ray Charles, whose pop songs borrowed from the gospel tradition. It's suggested that the choir background of the backup vocalists trained them to become incredible support singers, but perhaps also made it trickier for them to break out as soloists.

### RACE AND MUSIC

The singers jokingly refer to the white female backup singers as "readers" because they sang according to the sheet music. A relationship between race and music is alluded to throughout the film especially regarding the soul-inspired rock scene of Joe Cocker and the Rolling Stones. The vocalists say they were recruited to add a "blacker sound" to these white male rockers. Some critics call this 'cultural appropriation,' arguing that American popular music is an appropriation of Black American music. Those who win the most commercial success are white male interpreters. Some claim that using black women as backup singers is an attempt to add visual and aural authenticity.

### GENDER DYNAMICS

In the case of Ray Charles, the relationship between the soloist and backup singers is compared to a preacher and choir. But Ike Turner was known for presenting himself as a "pimp" in control of "his women." Backup singers are often pressured to be "eye candy," to use their sexuality as well as their voices to support the lead singer. For example, Darlene Love was exploited by Phil Spector when he ghosted her voice and kept her under a restrictive contract. The film doesn't really explore what it's like for male backup singers, nor does it examine the relationship between female backup singers and female soloists.

**"I felt that if I gave my heart to what I was doing I would automatically be a star."**

Merry Clayton

**"I reject the notion that the job you excel at is somehow not enough to aspire to, that there has to be something more. I love supporting other artists. I guess it came down to not letting other people decide what was right for me... My happy is different from your happy."**

Lisa Fischer



## FILM FACTS:

- Producer Gil Friesen, a veteran music executive, formerly of A&M Records, got the idea for *20 FEET FROM STARDOM* when he was at a Leonard Cohen concert. He was entranced by the backup singers and wanted to focus a film on them. He saw a final cut of the film shortly before his death from leukemia in December 2012.
- Darlene Love wrote a memoir, “My Name is Love: The Darlene Love Story.” OWN acquired the rights for adaptation as a TV movie, with Oprah Winfrey as executive producer.
- In 1997, Darlene Love won \$250,000 in a suit against Phil Spector for unpaid royalties.
- Tata Vega provided the singing voice of Shug Avery in the film *The Color Purple*. She is featured on four songs on the soundtrack album. One song, “Miss Celie’s Blues (Sister),” was nominated for an Academy Award in the Best Song category.
- In February 2014, Motown digitally released Tata Vega’s solo albums.
- Merry Clayton originated the role of the Acid Queen in the original 1972 London production of *The Who’s Tommy*.
- In 1970, Merry Clayton released her own version of “Gimme Shelter,” which was the title track of her debut solo album.
- Set for release in June 2014, “The Best of Merry Clayton” will feature a compilation of 17 tracks from her three solo albums.
- Mick Jagger is planning to adapt *20 FEET FROM STARDOM* into a one-hour scripted TV series and Broadway musical. Both adaptations would focus on the lives of backup singers.
- Allegedly, Claudia Lennear was the inspiration for the Rolling Stones’ “Brown Sugar” and other famous songs. After the Oscars, David Bowie told her for the first time that she was indeed the inspiration for “Lady Grinning Soul.”
- Claudia Lennear told reporters that she got a call from David Bowie. He told her he wanted to write her next project.
- Claudia Lennear earned degrees from Pitzer College, in French literature and art history. She currently lives in Pomona, teaches short stories at Mt. San Antonio College, and tutors students in Spanish and French. She can also speak Italian and German.
- Judith Hill, who was Michael Jackson’s former duet partner, was touted as a frontrunner on *The Voice*, but was shockingly eliminated.
- In October 2013, Hill signed a record deal with Sony Music.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film with others, give them the chance to learn about the fascinating stories of these talented vocalists.
2. Support these vocalists who are continuing to perform in concert tours and recording their own music.
3. Pick up a musical instrument or revive an artistic passion that you’ve neglected.
4. Get involved in your local music community. Teach music, learn music, or simply share your musical interests with others and enjoy music in a shared environment.

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