



The Devil and Daniel Johnston Discussion Guide

Director: Jeff Feuerzeig
Year: 2005
Time: 110 min

You might know this director from:
Half Japanese: The Band That Would Be King (1993)

FILM SUMMARY

THE DEVIL AND DANIEL JOHNSTON is not a straightforward biographical tale of a madman genius. This manic-depressive escapade has two protagonists, those spelled out in the title itself. Daniel Johnston, the child-like man, the artist, the musician, the living legend, the genius wordsmith with a direct line to the heart. And the Devil, that evil that haunts his mind, the dark tendencies of his mental illness, the forces that motivate him to beat a friend over the head with a metal bar or pull the keys out of the ignition of a mid-air plane.

Director Feuerzeig spent four years piecing together 110-minutes of raw, unfettered footage. Rather than using present-day Daniel as the film's narrator, he chose to feature little of his modern-day persona. Instead he turned to the stockpile of cassettes and videos at his disposal, complete with Daniel's daily meanderings, disjointed thoughts, and heart-wrenching melodies to narrate this tale of an incredible soul who to this day writes songs, paints pictures, and struggles to manage his discombobulated mind.

Daniel Johnston's artistic output is prolific, to say the least and THE DEVIL AND DANIEL JOHNSTON makes great use of this man's vast supply of film footage, cassette recordings, and original artwork, intermingling these relics alongside interviews from the cast of characters who have populated Daniel's winding road through life. These elements meet to form a patchwork of music, art, love, religious fanaticism, and bipolar disorder.

In the early days of his career, Daniel sang: "The artist walks alone. Someone says behind his back: He's got his gall to call himself that. He doesn't even know where he's at." Although Daniel has spent his life on the outside of love, on the outskirts of sanity and on the fringes of normalcy, he gets it wrong to say he walks alone. As this retrospective displays, the devil himself has never been far from his side.

FILM THEMES

Genius? Madman? Artist? Musician? Fighting his way with bipolar disorder, Daniel Johnston writes his way into the history books through an untainted, unedited version of living and expressing life.

THE LINK BETWEEN GENIUS AND MADNESS

We marvel at the madness of Vincent Van Gogh. Who other than a genius could have cut off his ear and painted such masterpieces? Daniel Johnston slid swiftly into the same category, plastered with the defining “genius madman, madman genius” label. Has this served him? It has certainly defined him, and he has taken it on himself either consciously or sub-consciously to fulfil this role. A true living legend, Daniel’s pure brilliance is in his refusal to refine, filter, or adjust his perceptions. He just spits them straight out onto paper, directly into song. With a bipolar diagnosis and plenty of proof that he isn’t equipped to lead a normal life, the tale of Daniel reinforces the lineage of the genius-madman identity.

FAMILY AS CAUSE AND CARETAKER

Right from the get-go, Daniel was different. His mother said so, and all his siblings testified to the fact that he didn’t fit into the average-shaped box they were offered. A right-wing Christian upbringing, complete with the persecution and self-sacrificing it embodies, defined Daniel as the “problem child” early in life. Although the jury is still out on the exact roots of bipolar disorder, environmental factors certainly play their role. Growing up a laughing stock twisted Daniel’s perception of the world around him, arguably encouraging his illness. Where do the chips fall? Back with family? Although in the end, as Daniel proved to be a harm to others and himself his family ultimately provided him the stability that he could not locate in solitude.

THE DEVIL AND RELIGION

Religion has always been present in Daniel’s life. We’re not talking a passive, church on Easter and Christmas sort of Christianity. The Johnston family breed of spirituality was of the mercilessly devout God and the Devil fearing variety – and it is made very clear to Daniel what side he’s on. When Daniel does religion, he does it all out- and not always for the best. The line between the Devil and God blurs in this sphere of extremes, and Daniel repeatedly stepped over it. His delusions became realities. His disease became the stepping stone between light and dark. Unfortunately, In Daniel’s hands, what many consider to be fundamentally good becomes heart-breakingly hurtful.

LOVE

Laurie. The muse. The unrequited obsession. The focal point of so much artistic output. The pining source of songs. Daniel is driven by an unrelenting passion, an overwhelming desire, an overpowering love for a woman, a woman who is entirely out of reach and this motivates and informs the heart of his work. The instinctual nature of his art, and love itself – or the idea of it – becomes the fuel that fires a man and his boundless expressions. Though the Devil did his best to become Daniel, it is pure, unadulterated love that his fans connect with in his work.

“Wherever I am,
I’ve got music in
my heart.”

Daniel Johnston

“I noticed
from the start
that Dan was
different.”

Mabel Johnston

“Daniel Johnston
is his own
movement.”

John Pochna

“You start
out hearing
this noise and
eventually you
hear The Beatles
and the whole
symphony.”

Ken Lieck

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

- 1. When did you first learn about Daniel Johnston? Were you a fan of his music and/or art before watching the film?

- 2. What part of the film had the most impact on you?

- 3. Have you ever been directly or indirectly affected by bipolar disorder or any other mental illness?

- 4. When Daniel was at his worst, displaying delusional tendencies, whose responsibility was it to make sure he was taken care of?

- 5. Is there a connection between genius and madness?

- 6. Daniel Johnston is considered a living legend. How has his mental illness contributed to this? If the public were unaware of his mental condition, would he be granted as much credence?

- 7. Is mental illness stigmatized in your community? How has the public's perception of mental illness altered over the past 10 years?

- 8. Do you feel Daniel's family did the best they could in the face of his illness?

- 9. In what ways does Daniel's music have therapeutic effects on his life? Is he better or worse off having music and art as an outlet?

- 10. Daniel always came off his medication when he was preparing to perform live. Is there some truth behind the thought that a medicated artist is no artist at all?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- THE DEVIL AND DANIEL JOHNSTON was granted the Best Directing award at the Sundance Film Festival in 2005, in addition to being nominated for the Grand Jury Prize the same year.
- Director Jeff Feuerzeig began his career as a film editor before directing commercials. His first venture into feature filmmaking was “Half Japanese: The Band That Would Be King,” released in 1993.
- Director Jeff Feuerzeig and Producer Henry Rosenthal initially met at the Berlin Film Festival in 1993, where they discussed their mutual adoration of Daniel Johnston and planted the initial seed that would become the film.
- Daniel Johnston was born in Sacramento, California, the youngest of five children. Soon after his birth, his family relocated to West Virginia, where he spent his formative years. As of 2014, Johnston had released 17 studio, 3 live, 2 compilation, and 7 tribute albums. He continues to record music and create visual art from the home that was built for him next to his parents’ house in Waller, Texas, where his father and sister Marjory keep a watchful eye over him since his mother passed away. Marjory also runs the Yip Jump Artworks Gallery in Houston, dedicated to Daniel’s artwork. His brother Richard manages his professional schedule and joins him on tour.
- Bill Johnston, Daniel’s father, was a fighter pilot in World War II and later worked as an engineer.
- Daniel got one of his first big breaks when he was featured on the MTV shot “The Cutting Edge”. Some other artists featured on the show over the years have been REM, The Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Tom Waits.
- Bipolar disorder, originally referred to as manic-depressive illness, affects 3% of the American population. Both males and females are affected in equal proportions, and the average age of disease onset is 25. This mental disorder is characterized by periods of depression followed by periods of elevated moods. Signs and symptoms of bipolar disorder include manic episodes (at least one week of an elevated mood, with the inability to sleep and a decreased ability to perform everyday tasks), hypomanic episodes (at least four days of an elevated mood, milder than a manic episode), depressive episodes (persistent feelings of sadness, guilt, hopelessness), and mixed affective episodes (a combination of a manic and depressive episode).
- The exact causes of bipolar disorder are still unknown, but there is a high genetic linkage to the disease, with first-degree relatives being 10 times more likely to be affected.
- Although there is no “cure” for bipolar disorder, medication has proven to be an effective way of enabling people to manage it, and a combination of mood stabilizers and antidepressants are generally prescribed.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Watch “Hi, How Are You: A Short Film,” made by Daniel and a few of his devoted fans, released in 2014.
2. NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, advocates for treatment, services, and support to family members and individuals suffering from mental illness. Support their cause by participating in a walk.
3. Spread the word about indie music you enjoy. Support independent artists directly by visiting their website.
4. The American Psychological Association offers a wealth of information on how to help a family member with mental illness and how to become educated on the symptoms of varying mental illnesses.

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