



Keep On Keepin' On Discussion Guide

Director: Alan Hicks

Year: 2014

Time: 84 min

You might know this director from:

KEEP ON KEEPIN' ON is the debut feature film from this director.

FILM SUMMARY

Seventy years separate jazz trumpeter legend Clark Terry and pianist Justin Kauflin. But that's about it. A fiercely optimistic and defiantly triumphant take on the power of friendship, *KEEP ON KEEPIN' ON* provides a heartwarming example of how little age matters, and how much shared experiences do in the scheme of life.

As one of 11 children growing up in poverty in Missouri, Terry is used to the struggles of life. Music captured his imagination from an early age, and the rest in his case truly was history. Playing in jazz festivals around the world, serenading a total 8 U.S. Presidents, and recording over 900 albums, Terry has spent a life encompassed in music, testifying to the power of the mind to overcome struggles and create the exact life one desires.

More than a musician, Terry has served as an uplifting musical mentor to thousands, including some of jazz's all-time greats, including Miles Davis and *KEEP ON KEEPIN' ON* producer Quincy Jones. As he starts to go blind as the result of 60 years of diabetes, however, Terry starts to lose grip on the life-saving ropes of positivity. Along comes Justin Kauflin, a young blind jazz pianist, and one of the most intimate, impassioned friendships ever captured on film blossoms, providing both men with the fuel they need to face the battles life presents.

Having introduced Kauflin to Terry, first-time director Alan Hicks follows the journeys of both men over the course of 5 years as they face the challenges of disease, the practicalities of living a life blind, and their own internal fears. An unabiding positivity permeates each and every moment of the film, regardless of the defeats and hardships, making *KEEP ON KEEPIN' ON* an intense testament to the hugely effective capacities of optimism, joy, and friendship.

FILM THEMES

OPTIMISM

“Life is full of challenges.” Opening words from Clark Terry, who has most certainly known his fair share of tough times, from childhood poverty to losing limbs and eyesight through diabetes. But absolutely no one recalls Terry as a negative force. On the contrary his legacy is one of joy, optimism, and the constant fight to fill one’s life and mind with positivity and laughter. Terry’s intense lust for life seeps into everything and everyone he touches, and rather than instilling in others a sense of the struggles of life, he encourages those around him to look for the positive, the possible, to not cave into the dark forces of the mind. To climb aboard Terry’s “plateau of positivity” is to embrace the absolute potential of oneself and reap the rewards of a life lived to its fullest.

FRIENDSHIP THROUGH BLINDNESS

For Justin Kauflin, blindness reached him in his boyhood. Rather than accepting this as a loss, he viewed it as a shift, a new way of perceiving and communicating with the world. The piano became his eyes, music the means to see and be seen in the world. As an old man, blindness knocked upon Clark Terry’s door, and he found it a frightening time. The guidance Kauflin offered Terry paved a two-way street of friendship, a balance of giving and taking. By being a master of the blind world, Kauflin was able to teach the jazz master that the loss of sight signalled the beginning of a new way of perception.

DEVOTION TO ONESELF

Opportunity does not simply fall into one’s lap, regardless of how easily we can convince ourselves otherwise when viewing other’s victories and accomplishments. By challenging oneself and staying dedicated to one’s dreams, results follow suit. The simple path is the one of abandonment, of throwing in the towel at the first sign of failure, at the first difficult fork in the road. The decision at how far we wish to live our lives, how fulfilled we wish our dreams to be, rests in the hands of each one of us. Terry preached that life is not a game of luck but rather a test of self-devotion, where the hard-working believer comes in first.

TO HOARD OR TO SHARE

Having reached the master level in any occupation, in any creative art, many people choose to protect their skills, to shroud their achievements in mystique, to create an invisible impermeable wall that is seemingly impossible to scale. Terry discarded all that as nonsense. Why not share the fruits of one’s labor, encouraging others to reach out and beyond themselves, making the world a more beautiful place in the meantime? Terry is a true mentor. Rather than hoarding the information and skills he had acquired, he pressed people to find and express their inner voice, not just learn all the rules and play the most complex chords. Music, in the heart and mind of Terry, is an intimate artistic expression that any individual can access within themselves and should be treated as such, not a holy grail of great secrets only accessible to a privileged few.

“Your mind is a powerful asset. Use it for positive thoughts.”

Clark Terry

“You hear Clark, you hear his life. Only a master can do that. Clark is a master.”

Herbie Hancock

“I have to figure out how to be me.”

Justin Kauflin

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Had you heard of Clark Terry before watching KEEP ON KEEPIN' ON?
2. What are your thoughts on musical ability and talent? Can someone learn to be a master musician, or is musical talent something one is born with?
3. Have you ever been mentored in a certain aspect of your life? Have you ever mentored someone?
4. Have you ever known someone who is blind? We generally focus on the difficulties of being blind, but can you think of ways in which blind people are more capable than sighted individuals?
5. Do you consider yourself to have more of a positive or negative outlook on life? Discuss the implications of both.
6. What role does music play in your life?
7. Friendships can come in all different forms. In which ways was the relationship shared by Clark Terry and Justin Kauflin unexpected? Have you ever had an unusual friendship?
8. How much do you know about jazz music as a genre? Do you consider jazz to be African-American music?
9. Why do you think Clark Terry isn't as well known as some of the people he taught (Quincy Jones, Miles Davis, etc.)?
10. Why do some people choose to covet their skills and abilities, rather than sharing the knowledge they have? Are you personally more prone to share or protect your abilities?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Soon after its release in 2014, KEEP ON KEEPIN' ON snapped up a number of awards, including a National Board of Review award, Best Documentary at the Seattle International Film Festival, Best New Documentary Director at Tribeca Film Festival, and two Cinema Eyes Honors awards. In addition the film was nominated for a number of accolades, including a Black Reel Award, an Image Award, the Humanitas Award from the International Documentary Association, and a Satellite Award.
- First-time director Alan Hicks is originally from Australia, where he surfed and played drums. Having studied music under Clark Terry at William Paterson University near New York City, Hicks went on to drum in Terry's band during the 2000s, along with pianist Justin Kauflin. Hicks recruited his high school friend Adam Hart to work as director of photography on the film, and the two spent 5 years filming Terry and Kauflin.
- Justin Kauflin's first instrument was violin, which he started at the age of 4.
- Seeing-eye dogs were first used to aid blind people in the late 1920s, followed by the use of canes around 10 years later. Previous to these, blind people were totally dependent on others to guide them and care for them, and were treated as marginalized members of society.
- There are 285 million visually impaired people in the world, of which 39 million are blind.
- According to 2014 statistics, approximately 8.3% of the global population - equivalent to 387 million people - have diabetes. Common diabetic complications include cardiovascular disease, as well as damage to the kidneys, eyes, and nerves. Clark Terry has had diabetes for over 60 years.
- Clark Terry has recorded more than 900 albums with some of jazz's all-time greats, including Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Charles, Thelonious Monk, Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin, and Dizzy Gillespie.
- The word "jazz" was initially a slang term unrelated to music, and there is much debate about its origins. Some say it came from "jasm," a word dating back to 1860 meaning spirit, energy, and vigor. The term jazz has also been said to have sexual connotations, witnessed in the fact that "jasm" derives from "jism," which is defined as spirit, energy, and spunk, as well as semen. "Spunk," also slang for semen, is likewise defined as spirit, energy, and courage. The first known use of the word was in 1912, when baseball pitcher Ben Henderson was quoted as saying, "I call it the Jazz ball because it wobbles and you simply can't do anything with it."
- Jazz has many genres, including Bossa Nova, the blues, Dixieland, Big Band, Free jazz, and swing.
- Ragtime is considered to be the first form of jazz, and came about when African-American composer Scott Joplin combined European immigrant music along with black music.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Depending on where you are in your life, consider becoming or seeking a mentor in order to share or grow your passion.
2. What you feed your mind defines and determines the shape of your life. Offer your mind with positivity, smile a little more every day, and encourage others to do the same.
3. The American Foundation for the Blind and many other organizations offer assistance and information for those who are blind or affected by blindness. There are many ways to help out - learn more online.
4. The Jazz Education Network "seeks to advance jazz education, promote performance and develop new audiences." Support their cause!

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