

PRESS INFO

THE SOUNDS OF SILENTS by Ilona Ziok

Documentary, Germany/ Czech Republic 2005, 80min.

He's treated like a rock star by audiences young and old, adored by film lovers and housewives alike, venerated by scholars and punks: Willy Sommerfeld, born in 1904, is a silent movie pianist—the last of his kind, a living legend with a musical memory reaching back more than a century.

“THE SOUNDS OF SILENTS” takes us on an unforgettable journey through the life and music of Willy Sommerfeld and into the world of movies as it was when cinema was born.

SYNOPSIS:

In the film, as in reality, Doris, his wife of 48 Years, is always by his side. His son Sebastian comments on what life was like with a father who's a "Berlin Original" and 62 years his senior. Movie experts, film scholars and impresarios recall the magic of his performances, which never make use of a music sheet, and they praise his unique style of improvisation.

Carefully selected sequences from silent films that Willy Sommerfeld accompanies live on piano become a mirror on his own long life. This artistic device sets the stage for Willy Sommerfeld's unique art. His music becomes the protagonist of the film and testimony to his great talent, and is thus preserved for posterity. This film is not meant as a mere biographical portrait, but rather as the sensitive portrayal of a man who has remained true to himself. A film that is cheery, melancholic and contemplative at the same time, but which always reflects the crafty twinkle in Sommerfeld's eye.

In “THE SOUNDS OF SILENTS” we experience Willy Sommerfeld's inimitable music accompanying movies that range from the well-known to the nearly forgotten and equally mirror his path through life: Willy Sommerfeld hits the mark for the Czarist National Anthem in *THE LAST COMMAND* (Josef von Sternberg), and spontaneously finds the right tones for evil seduction in *METROPOLIS* (Fritz Lang). His hands joyfully teach Quacker's evil daughter her marriage obligations in *THE OYSTER PRINCESS* (Ernst Lubitsch), and endearingly touch the tragedy of old age in *THE LAST LAUGH* (F.W. Murnau). Willy Sommerfeld is the real thing, the hero of a bygone film era and a movie star in his own right!

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CAST:

Willy Sommerfeld
 Doris Sommerfeld
 Sebastian Sommerfeld
 Walter Raffener
 Prof. Dieter Brauer
 Ulrich Gregor
 Prof. Dr. Karl Prümm
 Rudolf Brünger
 Juppi

CREDITS:

Director: Ilona Ziok
 Screenplay: Ilona Ziok
 Directors of Photography: Sergey Jurisditskiy, Wojciech Szepel, Erik Krambeck
 Sound: Peter Domsch
 Editors Dietmar Kraus, Ludmilla Korb-Mann
 Music by Willy Sommerfeld
 Producers: Manuel Goettsching web, Ilona Ziok, Vera Lastuvkova,
 Matthias Wrage

“THE SOUNDS OF SILENTS“ is a production of CV Films (Berlin, Germany) in co-production with German TV NDR, Matti Film (Schleswig-Holstein, Germany) and Vera Vista (Prague, Czech Republic) supported by the Film Fund Hamburg, Film Fund Schleswig-Holstein, Cultural Fund Berlin, Nordmedia and Eurimages.

DIRECTOR’S NOTES:

What distinguishes a silent film pianist who accompanied cinema while it was still in its infancy from his present-day colleagues? That was the question I asked myself as I contemplated the form of my film about the then nearly 100 year-old Willy Sommerfeld, the last original silent film pianist of the silent film era. What is it that makes him so special? If the film he is accompanying requires it, he can come up with the Czarist anthem, because he still has it in his head (watch his live accompaniment of Sternberg's "Last Command"). He also has at his fingertips the old tunes of historical Berlin that Lubitsch's films call for. More fundamentally, with his music, Willy Sommerfeld connects to a time when cinema was born.

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I wanted to capture this fascinating gift of his in my film. But how to document a period that spans 100 years in a mere 80 minutes? How to turn his eccentric piano playing into the protagonist of the film? Of course! Through the silent films themselves, which bear witness to the era and also reflect fabulously on Sommerfeld's own life, even as he accompanies them in his unmistakable style.

The idea for the film was born!

Ilona Ziok, April 2006

The Silent Film Pianist

WILLY SOMMERFELD – VITA:

May 11, 1904 born in Danzig

1920 State Exam as music teacher for violin

1921 Berlin: studies in bandleading and music composition at the Sternsches Konservatorium (under Prof. Felietz)

1921-1926 silent film accompaniment on piano and violin

1926 Braunschweig: proofreader at Litolf music publishing house. Side job as conductor of a 12-man cinema orchestra at the UFA cinema in Braunschweig

1927-1934 bandleader at the Braunschweig Theater

1933 National Socialist seize power. Ban on performing following refusal to show the Nazi director the 'Hitler salute'

1934 Leipzig: pianist with the group 'Four Newsmen' (with Helmut Käutner)

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1935 'Four Newsmen' are banned from performing

1935 return to Berlin

1935-1945 radio drama recordings for German shortwave radio station; house composer at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, Freie Volksbühne Berlin and Schauspielhaus Leipzig

until 1945 music for theater tours and troop entertainment at the front

1945 conductor of the show orchestra Neue Scala (now Metropol) in Berlin

1948 stage music for director Rochus Gliese at the Landestheater Potsdam. Head of March Brandenburg symphonic orchestra

until 1950 performances throughout Germany

1950 onward studio music for records, including light entertainment music and fairy-tales for musical slide shows

1952-1954 conductor of Baclay circus orchestra on Friedrichstraße

1954-1958 musical director and conductor of Hans Otto Theater in Potsdam

1958 marriage to Doris

1958 onward music for records

1961 Berlin Wall is built: record companies leave Berlin. Economic hard times. Musical direction of Theater des Westens; musical entertainment evenings for seniors

1966 birth of son Sebastian

1968 onward retirement

1972 'Friends of the German Cinema' (Freunde der deutschen Kinemathek) discover Sommerfeld as one of the last silent film pianists and hire him as their house pianist in the Arsenal Cinema, where he had played over 50 years ago (originally named Bayreuther Lichtspiele).

1972 onward performances as silent film pianist throughout Germany.
Accompaniment of cinema into the new era, i.e. at the opening of the Hamburg
Cinemaxx

November 29, 1988 receives **National Medal of Merit** of the Federal Republic
of Germany

April 30, 1994 receives **honorary professorship** from the Berlin Senate for his
outstanding activities

1995 receives **Bundesfilmpreis (Federal Film Award)** for exceptional service
to German cinema, **Golden Cinema Ribbon**

2004 receives **Berlinale Camera Award**

Director

ILONA ZIOK - BIO/FILMOGRAPHY:

Born in Gliwice/Poland

School education in England and Germany

Studied Political Science (International Relations) & Slavic Studies in Germany

Theatre & Film in New York and Moscow

Thesis: "The implementation of V. Rozov's drama "Letjat Zuravli"

Freelance Producer, Author and Director

Documentaries as Author, Director, Producer:

2005 THE SOUNDS OF SILENTS; 80 min.

NDR, Vera Vista Prague, Matti Film; film participated in international
festivals, German Film Appraisal Office: Distinction "particularly
valuable" ("besonders wertvoll")

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1999 KURT GERRONS KARUSSELL; 65/80 min.

ARTE/SFB, Filmmuseum Amsterdam, Vera Vista Prague; supported by MAP tv, MFG, Filmbüro NW, Eurimages; About the man who was the Magician in the „Blue Angel“; film participated in over 50 international film festivals, international recognitions, candidate in Documentary-OSCAR-nomination, BANFF (Rocky Award), TELLURIDE (one of three selected documentaries 1999), Sydney (Top Ten), International Critic Award, Portugal (Grand Prix), German Film Appraisal Office: Distinction "particularly valuable" (einstimmig "besonders wertvoll")

1993 DIE REISE NACH TUNESIEN - Psychisch Kranke machen Urlaub

(Trip to Tunisia with mentally ill), 45 min., ARD/SR;

Co-directed with Jacek Blawut

1992 UND DANN MUßTEN WIR NOCH WAT SCHWÖREN

Special Olympics Minneapolis , 45 min., ARD/SR;

Co-directed with Jacek Blawut

1991 WO IST DIE STRAßE, WO IST DAS HAUS, 30 min., Rias TV;

Impressions of the daughter on a journey to Schlesien

1990 HIER SIND WIR DAHEIM, 30 min., Rias TV:

Co-author: Frauke Sandig, on the topic of homeland

DIE JUDEN VON MINSK, 15 min., ARD/HR;

On the topic of Jewish history in Minsk

OH DU MEIN KAZIMIERZ, SCHALOM... , 30 min., Rias TV;

Reflections on Jewish culture in Krakow

1989 DER ZWEITE SIEG DES JURIJ VLASOV, 15 Min., ARD/HR;

The heavyweight Olympian challenges the KGB

Completed as producer/co-producer (a selection):

2006 Pawel M. Starost: TIGER, 60 min.

premiere July 2006 at the Munich Film Festival, International distribution

2005 Patricio Guzmann: MON JULES VERNE, 55 min.

German/French/Canadian co-production for ARTE France,
international distribution

2004 Andrew Horn: THE NOMI SONG, 100 min.

Co-production for ZDF/ARTE, supported by Filmstiftung NRW,
premiered at the Berlin Filmfestival 2004; Teddy Award - Berlinale 2004

Patricio Guzmann: SALVADOR ALLENDE, 105 min.

Co-production for JBA Paris, ARTE/WDR, CANAL +, Spanish TV
Premiere at Cannes, in the Official Programme 2004

2003 Matthias Schmidt: DIE BÜHNENREPUBLIK, 2003 2x45 min.

For ZDF/3SAT; GRIMME AWARD (No1 German TV-Award)

2001 Albrecht Metzger: GEWALT SEI FERN DER DING, 60 min.

Co-production for SR

1998 Jacek Blawut: EIN ANDERES HAUS, 60 min.,

Co-production for SR

1997 Jacek Blawut: LA LEGION ETRANGER, 60 min.

Co-production for ARTE SR and Polish TV; Grand Prix Toronto

1995 Sarunas Bartas: CORRIDIORIUS, 90 min., internationally awarded,

German/Lithuanian co-production for WDR