

Movies

Review

Vaychiletik review - beautifully-shot Mexican folk music study in the high arthouse style

★★★★☆

A tender film about the music of Mayan descendants is hampered by the lofty adherence to a documentary aesthetic where nothing is explained

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Elevated ... José Pérez López (left) in Vaychiletik.

This film about a flute player and farmer named José Pérez López from Zinacantán in Chiapas, Mexico, teems with beautifully shot images of folks playing music, embroidering, participating in days-long community rituals, and tending their crops of flowers in polytunnels - pretty normal everyday stuff. It feels a little more elevated because it affords a glimpse into the life of descendants of the Mayans who practice ancestor worship and polytheistic beliefs but also have shrines with Catholic saints. The film's website has a handy chunk of text about Bats'i son ta Sots'leb, the traditional music of Zinacantán, described in fascinating musicological detail.

It's a shame that kind of explanatory background can't be found anywhere in the movie. In fact, the subtitles and dialogue never even give the names of the people we are observing for most of the running time. You can only work out that the old guy is named José, and the woman who laughingly scolds him for drinking so much is Elvia Pérez Suárez, presumably his wife, and that they also live with a hard-working younger man named Esteban Pérez Pérez (presumably José and Elvia's son) and some even younger kids: Esteban's children? Random kids from next door? Who knows, because this scrupulously verité-style film is determined to adhere to the high-arthouse documentary aesthetic wherein nothing is explained, nothing is contextualised, and there's no sense of what point or purpose this all serves other than a little digital tourism to a far-flung corner of the globe.



Also, to reinforce the air of lofty seriousness, the editing consists of long takes seemingly abutted randomly together, with barely any variation in pace as we watch the subjects have banal conversations and go about their business. The film only really comes alive when the music is playing, and there's a teensy bit of insight provided by the voiceover reflections of Jose himself, explaining how he was effectively told he must become a flute player by a visitor from his ancestors in a dream. But the film-makers don't probe any deeper than that; the studied air of folksy artlessness feels somewhat pretentious and dismissive to its subjects, who are served up as mystical indigenous others through the camera's macroscopic lens.

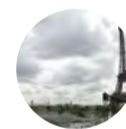
• Vaychiletik is on True Story from 17 May.

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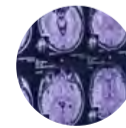
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