

HER VOICE: BLACK WOMEN FROM THE SPOTLIGHT TO THE SCREEN

Whitney 'Can I Be Me'

Nick Broomfield made his name in the 1990s with a series of exposés in which he thrust his trademark oversized boom microphone into the lives of people who would rather not talk to him. This feature-length biography of the singer Whitney Houston is a much more nuanced affair, with Broomfield staying out of sight behind the camera, appearing only rarely as a disembodied voice asking a softly spoken question. In the main, the film simply cuts together interviews and archive footage to unfold the tragic story of a natural talent snuffed out by drug addiction and self-sabotage.

Opening with media footage of the night in 2012 when Houston's body was found in a hotel room in Beverly Hills, Broomfield never lets her impending death stray far from our minds. Yet the film depicts her rise to fame as an almost magical process, as if she were carried up into the stratosphere by forces beyond her control. First, there was that enormous voice, almost a separate life form, piggybacking parasitically on this skinny, wide-eyed waif. And then there was Whitney Inc, the autonomous business entity with its own priorities, objectives and momentum; those who dissented, such as her friend and sometime lover Robyn Crawford, were pushed out as the machine grew stronger and hungrier for dollars on the bottom line, while the woman trapped inside it became ever more frail and vulnerable.

Broomfield goes to some lengths to think through the sources of Houston's emotional vulnerability, tracing it back to the early decision to pitch her at the mainstream, rather than staying within the parameters of soul and R&B.

This brought her fame and wealth, but arguably cost her the recognition she craved from her African-American peers. Broomfield suggests, intriguingly, that her emotional reliance on her husband Bobby Brown stemmed from the little-known moment in 1989 when she was booed at the Soul Train Music Awards for 'selling out'; it was the night she and Brown first met. Judging from the archive footage, theirs was a genuine love match when it started, but the relationship was turbulent, to say the least, and Brown was charged in 2003 for allegedly assaulting Houston.

Unfortunately, Broomfield can't really come close to this part of the story: Brown is not interviewed, and the film has to step carefully around him.

Nor does it include footage from *Being Bobby Brown*, the hypnotically dreadful reality television show the couple made in 2005, not long before their divorce, in which Houston appeared at times as a hollow shell, huddled under a shawl and begging to be left in peace. One of the most heartbreaking threads of Broomfield's film is the story of Bobbi Kristina, their daughter, who comes across as a lost little girl, clearly loved but never able to access the kind of humdrum normality that provides a child with security. Bobbi died at the age of 22, three years after she lost her mother, after being found unconscious in the bathtub of a Beverly Hills hotel.

The core of the film, without doubt, is a treasure trove of footage of Houston on tour in 1999 (shot by Rudi Dolezal, who gets a co-director credit), which Broomfield rightly lingers over in some detail. It shows Houston, both behind the scenes and on stage, in full professional mode, entering the spotlight like an exhausted boxer coming out of her corner on pure adrenaline. However easy it looked from a distance, her vocal power did not come cheap: her tiny, already drug-wizened frame strains with effort as she hits perfect note after perfect note, and rivers of sweat pour off her. Showbiz cliché has it that performers come alive at such moments; Houston seems close to death. Which, in a way, she was.

Lisa Mullen, *Sight & Sound*, July 2017

Whitney ‘Can I Be Me’
Directed by: Nick Broomfield, Rudi Dolezal
©: Gospel And Beyond Ltd
a Lafayette Film production
In association with: Passion Pictures
Presented by: Showtime Documentary Films, BBC
Executive Producers: John Battsek, Vinnie Malhotra, Shani Hinton, Ben Silverman
Executive Producers for BBC: Patrick Holland, Kate Townsend, Charles Finch
Produced by: Nick Broomfield, Marc Hoferlin
Archive Consultant: Tom Haigh
Associate Producers: Joe Siegal, Gracie Otto
Production Executive for Passion Pictures: Nicole Stott
Production Accountants: Kay Cundall, Caroline Wooden
Post-production Supervisor: Ben Coulson
Researchers: Stephanie Purcell, Michelle Ganney, Kyle Gibbon
Archive Researchers: Lisa Savage, Erin Li, Susan Ricketts, Samantha Kerzner
Additional Archive Research: Michelle Sullivan
Camera: Sam Mitchell
Additional Photography: Barney Broomfield, Denson Baker
Motion Design by: The Ether
Creative Director: Greg Kupiec
Designers/Animators: Colin Knighton, Jada Sacco
Edited by: Marc Hoferlin
Additional Editing: Paul Marchand
Additional Editing Assistance: Harry Locke IV
Post-production Facility: Roundtable Films
Titles Designer: Matt Curtus
Supervising Digital Colourists: Jack Jones, Claire Winter
Original Music by: Nick Laird-Clowes
String Arrangements Performed by: The London Metropolitan Orchestra, Janice Graham

Violin 2: Tom Lemp
Viola: Joel Hunter
Cello: Caroline Dale
Original Music Orchestrated by: Nick Laird-Clowes, Paul Saunderson, Steve Wright
Orchestration: Marli Wren
Original Music Arranged by: Nick Laird-Clowes, Paul Saunderson, Steve Wright
Original Music Produced By: Steve McLaughlin
Original Music Programmed by: Nick Laird-Clowes, Paul Saunderson, Steve Wright
Original Music Recorded by: Steve McLaughlin, Jason Elliott
Original Music Recorded at: Northpole Studio
Original Music Mixed by: Steve McLaughlin, Jason Elliott
Original Music Mixed at: Northpole Studio
Music Preparation: Marli Wren
Sound Supervisor: Mark Rozett
Re-recording Mixer: Mark Rozett
Dialogue Editing: Gene Hobson
Sound Effects Editing: Cale Rozett
US Legal Services: Alonzo Wickers
UK Production Lawyer: Shani Hinton
Rights and Clearing: Lisa Savage
Music Clearance: CS+, Anna Cardovillis, Karen Hoferlin
Transcripts: Tobias James, Thelma John, Wangari Kavila, Gosia Nowicka
Private Investigator: Sheila McPhilamy
Newark Expert: Douglas Rodney Davis
Digital Cinema Mastering: Andres Del Cano
Additional Mastering: Sergei Dimlic, Isolbel Akiwumi, Craig Hobson
Thanks to: Michael Lindsay-Hogg, Amanda Palmer
UK/USA 2017©
105 mins

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Amazing Grace
Mon 17 May 18:10; Sat 29 May 15:15;
Tue 8 Jun 18:10
Whitney: Can I Be Me
Tue 18 May 20:50; Sat 26 Jun 18:10
Siren of the Tropics (La sirène des tropiques)
Wed 19 May 18:10; Sat 5 Jun 12:20
Stormy Weather
Wed 19 May 20:40; Sat 5 Jun 16:00
Dreamgirls
Sat 22 May 17:50; Wed 23 Jun 20:30
Ella Fitzgerald: Just One of Those Things
Mon 24 May 18:10; Sat 19 Jun 15:20
...But Then, She’s Betty Carter
Sat 29 May 12:10; Mon 7 Jun 18:00
Sparkle
Sun 30 May 18:40; Thu 10 Jun 20:35
Mavis!
Mon 31 May 16:10; Thu 17 Jun 20:40
Billie
Wed 2 Jun 18:00; Tue 15 Jun 20:40
What’s Love Got to Do with It
Fri 4 Jun 18:00; Sat 26 Jun 20:45
Twenty Feet from Stardom
Fri 4 Jun 20:45; Thu 10 Jun 18:20
The Wiz
Sun 6 Jun 12:20; Fri 18 Jun 17:45

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