



NEW RELEASES

Sweet Thing

Teenager Billie (Lana Rockwell), a 15-year-old girl who fantasises that Billie Holiday is her sort of fairy godmother, and younger brother Nico (Nico Rockwell) share time between their separated parents. They befriend Malik, a boy as equally adrift as they are and the three leave their troubled homes to set off on a trip across Massachusetts, crossing paths with a variety of American eccentrics, angels and desperados. This intimate, personal film from accomplished indie filmmaker Alexandre Rockwell (*In the Soup*, *Little Feet*) features his own children in the two lead roles and is shot in rich monotone (with occasional bursts of colour). Described by Tarantino as one of the most powerful new films he's seen in years, *Sweet Thing* is an extraordinary and at times poetic rendering of childhood in an intense and also uplifting way.

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After his feature debut *In the Soup* won the Grand Jury Prize in Sundance's decade-shaping 1992 US indie line-up – ahead of Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, Allison Anders's *Gas Food Lodging*, Gregg Araki's *The Living End* and others – director Alexandre Rockwell became something of a forgotten man of American cinema. It's taken the twin pillars of family and film – specifically, black-and-white celluloid, Rockwell's so-called 'language of dreams' – to bring him back: his young children Lana and Nico starred in his 2013 monochrome, micro-budget *Little Feet*; and they again take centre stage in this Berlinale 2020 prize-winner.

Like *Little Feet*, *Sweet Thing* is a lo-fi picaresque about two siblings largely let down by their parents, who join up with another youngster to grapple with the adult world. Here, though, the more mature Rockwell clan expand their storytelling ambitions. The previous film felt like an experimental home movie, setting up situations and then capturing the kids' reactions. This offers a developed narrative about escaping a neglected, sometimes dangerous home life, navigating poverty and finding resilience, kinship and wonder on the road. The deadbeat alcoholic dad (briefly and wordlessly played by Rockwell himself in *Little Feet*) is a fully fleshed out character here, with veteran actor Will Patton continuing his recent fine run of ambitious indie supporting roles (*American Honey*, *Minari*). And there's genuine jeopardy in the abusive boyfriend of their estranged mother (played by Rockwell's wife and Lana and Nico's own mother, Karyn Parsons), inciting violent self-defence that sends the youngsters on the run.

It's a delicate balance to maintain, between gritty life-on-the-margins and the lyrical, cine-literate style that Rockwell favours, complete with silent-movie iris effects, bursts of saturated colour, and even borrowing Carl Orff's tune 'Gassenhauer', so associated with Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (and, more shamelessly, Tony Scott's *True Romance*). That it largely works is due largely to the refreshingly raw young cast – Rockwell apparently found his third juvenile lead, Jabari Watkins, at a New York skate park – and crew, largely drawn from Rockwell's own New York University graduate students. The resulting authenticity and dynamism help knit together the film's occasionally jarring tonal shifts.

Lana Rockwell’s Billie is named after Billie Holliday, but the film’s real musical guardian angel is Van Morrison, whose lilting track from *Astral Weeks* inspired its title. The way the song is re-sung and its meaning reconfigured throughout the film shows how attuned Rockwell is to his material. One hopes the reinvigorated sincerity and commitment exhibited here are the springboard for a continuing belated return to form, and to the timeless storytelling he clearly still loves.

Three Films by Alexandre Rockwell

In the Soup (1992)

An auspicious breakthrough feature, Rockwell’s Sundance winner has Steve Buscemi’s budding filmmaker struggling to get finance for his portentous 500-page screenplay. In desperation he turns to Seymour Cassel’s smalltime gangster for help, only to get embroiled in a life of crime. A link between American independent film’s roots (black-and-white, Cassavetes alumni Cassel) and its 90s talent explosion, it’s a comic charmer that momentarily positioned Rockwell as the Next Big Thing.

Four Rooms (1995)

Rockwell, alongside fellow up-and-comers Allison Anders, Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, co-directed this four-part anthology set in a hotel, with Tim Roth’s hapless bellboy its unwitting linchpin. Chock-full of stars (Madonna, Antonio Banderas, an uncredited Bruce Willis), it’s a wildly uneven farce. Sadly, Rockwell’s haranguing infidelity caper ‘The Wrong Man’ might be its weakest link.

Little Feet (2013)

Something of a self-dare to see if he was still a real filmmaker: Rockwell enlisted his own two young kids for a Kickstarter-funded 60-minute experiment about siblings in a broken home who set out to release their pet goldfish into the Los Angeles River. It’s freestyle and impressionistic, with an eclectic soundtrack, and the Rockwell family’s engaging, playful efforts helped reignite his creative desires.

Leigh Singer, *Sight and Sound*, October 2021

SWEET THING

Director: Alexandre Rockwell
Written by: Alexandre Rockwell
Cinematography: Lasse Tolboll
Editing: Alan Wu
Production Designer: Andy Curtin
Wardrobe: Haley Anderson
A Eureka! release

Cast

Lana Rockwell
Nico Rockwell
Jabari Watkins
M.L. Josepher
Karyn Parsons
Will Patton
Steven Randazzo

USA 2020
91 mins

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