

# Guys with guitars,

## trading riffs and metaphysical musings

'It Might Get Loud' is a portrait of three rock stars and, more intriguingly, a historical and philosophical essay on the instrument that unites them

BY A. O. SCOTT  
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Jack Black, Jimmy Page and The Edge feature in Davis Guggenheim's *It Might Get Loud*.  
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Some documentaries — *Soul Power* is an excellent recent example — immerse the viewer in the sensory spectacle of a live performance. Others, like *Anvil: The Story of Anvil*, acquaint us with the lives and personalities of performers. *It Might Get Loud*, a film directed by Davis Guggenheim (*An Inconvenient Truth*), is more unusual. It's a group portrait of three musicians and also, more intriguingly, a free-form historical and philosophical essay on the instrument that unites them.

The mystique of the electric guitar is as durable as anything in rock 'n' roll. Whenever the power chord or the screaming solo seems destined for oblivion, it's rescued and revived, either by a new generation of players or, as has been the case more recently, by a video game. There has been no shortage of innovators, from

Chuck Berry to Jimi Hendrix to Bob Mould, and *It Might Get Loud*, rather than surveying the whole field, assembles a representative power trio made up of Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin, the Edge of U2 and Jack White, most famously of the White Stripes.

Interview and archival clips are interspersed with a summit meeting, half jam session, half graduate seminar in guitar metaphysics, on a soundstage loaded with all kinds of cool equipment. The guitarists trade riffs and thoughts and at the end make their way through an acoustic rendition of *The Weight*. It is both stirring and amusing to see three superstars strumming along to this song, originally recorded by the Band, which has long since become a staple for desultory buskers and late-night dorm-room singalongs. It's a serviceable

ballad, hard to butcher and tough to make your own, and thus a safe meeting ground for these three thorny individualists.

Page and the Edge, in their principal jobs, occupy the traditional guitarist's role of sidekick, wingman and sonic bulwark for a flamboyant lead vocalist. Perhaps as a result, and perhaps also because of temperamental reticence, they prefer to talk with their fingers and strings.

White, whose singing style is as distinctive as his guitar playing, is a bit more voluble. As the junior member of this august delegation, he may also have the most to prove. He proves himself to be, along with everything else, a serious intellectual with a deep sense of the traditions, influences and latent possibilities of the modern musical vernacular.

Guggenheim spends some time following his

subjects back to their roots, a fascinating journey into the musical past during which some notable commonalities emerge. Page, the Edge and White all honed their art in reaction to what they perceived as the dominant styles of the time.

Page came up playing skiffle, a peppy, folk-inflected genre that ruled British pop in the 1950s. After a successful stint as a studio session prodigy, he made his way to the Yardbirds and then to Led Zeppelin, where his interest in the blues, Eastern music and in the nuances of amplification reached full, thundering fruition.

The Edge, growing up in the downtrodden Dublin of the 1970s, discovered punk as an antidote to the bloated arena rock and fatuously shiny pop that saturated the airwaves. And White, in 1980s Detroit, wondered if hip-hop would permanently eclipse the instrumental

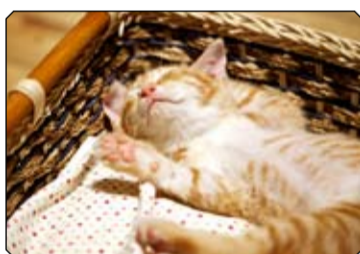
sounds he cherished.

Each man has a different relationship to the musical past, and also to technology. White, a traditionalist wary of digital effects and innovations, is nonetheless as much given to tinkering as the Edge, who finds lyricism in complicated sonic treatments and modifications, or Page, famous for playing a double-necked guitar and recording John Bonham's drum parts in the echoey atrium of a big, old house in the country.

For rock geeks of any age or taste, the lore in this documentary will be catnip. But *It Might Get Loud* is more than a narrowly focused fan artifact. It gives those of us with tin ears and clumsy fingers a chance to linger in the presence of serious artists with formidable chops and big, if not always clearly expressed, ideas about what they do. And it will put you in the mood to listen.

## OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY HO YI AND IAN BARTHOLOMEW



### In Case of Love (街角的小王子)

For his glossy debut feature, up-and-coming director Gavin Lin (林孝謙) tells a love story that centers on Claire, a reticent college student whose mother died 10 years ago.

One day she meets James, a guitarist who reminds her of a little boy with whom she once shared secrets, played music and raised an abandoned kitten until her mother died and the family moved away.

Believing that James is her childhood friend, Claire is immediately drawn to the musician. But when she divulges her thoughts to the young man, he serves up some revelations of his own.

The movie is a slipshod effort that languidly plods the romantic genre with its tedious plot and wooden characters who wander aimlessly in and out of frame.

Stiff performances by the cast of youthful celebrities, including Taiwan's Bea Kuo (郭碧婷), Jaline Yeh (葉羿君) and Christ Lee (李至正), as well as China's Yang Zishan (楊子珊), kill the story — their annoyingly perfect and permanent smiles seem to be taken from a toothpaste advert.

The movie's feline actor, however, deserves an Oscar.



### Kingfisher (魚狗)

Written by young filmmaker Kao Ping-chuan (高炳權), *Kingfisher*'s script offers promising material for a dark drama that revolves

around policeman A Gou (阿狗) and young hooligan Yu Zai (魚仔) but fails to deliver.

The story begins with a teenaged Yu Zai being wrongfully accused of murdering his baby sister by a corrupt police officer. A Gou, new to the police force, is too weak to help Yu Zai prove his innocence.

Ten years later, Yu Zai has grown into a misfit who is repeatedly jailed for petty crimes, while A Gou leads a drab life married to a dissatisfied woman. The two men's paths cross once more when a city councilor is assassinated, and their fates are soon entangled in a web of betrayal, vengeance, guilt and intrigue.

Unfortunately, director Kuang Sheng (鄒盛) completely mutilated the script, creating a ridiculous hodgepodge of dull humor, hackneyed romance and wearisome melodrama populated by a cast of bungling models and soap opera actors, including Ivan Chen (陳恩峰) and Enson Zhang (張雁名). Kuang's feature debut *The Fatal City* (總動員), which he co-directed with three other filmmakers, was a rudderless mess. *Kingfisher*, despite its solid script, is further indication that Kuang should stick with making music videos.

A recipient of the government's Subsidy for Film Production (電影輔導金) with a grant worth NT\$7 million, this film is a good example of how to pour taxpayers' money down the drain.



### 22 Bullets

You either like fast-paced, exotic action of Luc Besson productions or you don't. His glorification of violence might seem unduly cynical, but he usually manages to ensure a high level of technical proficiency. *22 Bullets* has plenty of violence and also features Jean

Reno, who has developed his own line in the Gallic hard-boiled style of acting. Originally released as *L'Immortel*, the film is loosely based on a real Mafia story. Charly Mattei (Reno) is a mob boss who has retired, his operation handed over to childhood friend Tony Zacchia (Kad Merad). Old antagonisms linger, and Mattei gets shot, 22 times, and survives (hence the French title). Those responsible pay a high price for their failure to kill him.



### The Tournament

Simple-minded action film about a tournament of the "world's greatest assassins," who come together in a sleepy British town in a kill or be killed tournament to see who's the best. Behind the scenes there are a bunch of punters beating on the outcome. It's really the same sort of set up as *The Running Man* (1987) or the more recently *Death Race* (2008), but with 30 assassins going at it with knives, guns and explosives, there is so much blood-letting that it's a bit difficult to care much who gets axed. A competent bang-bang movie with some reasonable action talent, including Ving Rhames and parkour athlete Sebastien Foucan, with Kelly Hu providing some eye candy, but despite all the athleticism and explosions, it begins to drag even before its 95 minutes are up.



### Memoirs of a Teenage Amnesiac

Loosely based on a novel by Gabrielle Zevin and directed by Hans Canosa, the film *Memoirs of a Teenage Amnesiac* is actually a product of the Japanese film industry with a mixed Japanese and American cast and starring teen idol Maki Horikita as the amnesiac in question. Set in an international school in Japan, the film mixes the familiar motifs of Japanese teen romance with Zevin's high-concept conceit about discovering who you really are by forgetting about who you thought you were. Released in Japan in March, it is making tentative moves into the regional market, but seems not to have attracted much international interest. Horikita plays Naomi, a girl who loses her memory after suffering head trauma and who is faced with deciding between three suitors, none of whom she can remember anything about.

### Puzzle (Rompecabezas)

Argentine art house production about jigsaw puzzles and how they relate to the complexities of human relationships. The story focuses on Maria, a middle-aged married woman who is given a jigsaw puzzle for her 50th birthday. She becomes engrossed in the challenge and beauty of the puzzle, and eventually, despite family misgivings, signs up to participate in a jigsaw puzzle competition. Intimate, romantic,



### A Brand New Life (Yeo-haeng-ja)

South Korean film by French-Korean filmmaker Ounie Lecomte, *A Brand New Life* draws on the director's own childhood experience to tell the story of Jinhee (Kim Sae Ron), who is abandoned at an orphanage by her father. She becomes something of a rebel, but also finds friendship with another orphan. The film



### Going the Distance

A perfectly good rom-com premise — long-distance relationships — and more than adequate performers — Drew Barrymore and Justin Long — manage to crash and burn in what *Hollywood Reporter* describes, in the least of its criticisms, as a "misbegotten production." A script that apes the Judd Apatow school of comedy fails to be funny or even convincing in a movie supposedly about sophisticated young men and women. It is hard to imagine how a film about a no-strings-attached summer fling between two attractive young people could be quite this dull. This is a feature debut by documentary filmmaker Nanette Burstein, who is clearly out of her depth in the shifting sociological sands of romantic comedy.

explores the tribulations of childhood friendships and the resilience of kids in the face of tumultuous change with sensitivity, but without overblown sentimentality. The intimacy of the picture and strong performances by the child actors have seen *A Brand New Life* doing well on the festival circuit in categories dealing with children, and it picked up the Cinekid Film Award and Best Children's Feature Film at the Asia Pacific Screen Awards among other awards in 2009.

### The Housemaid (Hanyo)

South Korean film about a housemaid, Eun-yi, played by Jeon Do Yeon, only the second Asian actress after Maggie Cheung (張曼玉) to pick up a Best Actress Award at Cannes (2007 for *Secret Sunshine*). In this erotically charged revenge drama, the gentle Eun-yi is first seduced by the man of the house, then subsequently becomes the target for retribution from his wife and mother-in-law. This is a remake of a 1960 South Korean film which was the box office hit of its day, and the remake brings it up to date with a few more titillating thrills, including a fair bit of art house nudity.



### Anita

Argentine film about a young woman with Down Syndrome who lives with her mother running a small shop in Buenos Aires. The relationship is carefully crafted

by director Marcos Carnevale and features excellent acting by veteran Norma Aleandro as the mother and Alejandra Manzo as the title character. After a horrific terrorist event, the AMIA bombing against the Jewish organization Asociacion Mutual Israelita Argentina, Anita is separated from her mother and wanders the streets of Buenos Aires, protected by nothing more than her own innocence. *Anita* seems to have resisted the temptations of both the feel-good movie and the sentimental melodrama. In allowing Anita, for all her disability, to be a real character with both good and bad elements, the film has more to offer than a short synopsis might suggest.

### Barbarossa



Big historical drama from Italian director Renzo Marinelli featuring Rutger Hauer as Frederick Barbarossa, aka Frederick the First, who became Holy Roman Emperor in 1155. Frederick fought a long a bitter campaign to recreate the empire of Charlemagne, who had become the first Holy Roman Emperor three centuries before, and fought many bitter military campaigns to bring Germans and Italians together under his rule. *Barbarossa* deals specifically with his conflict against Alberto da Giussano, who formed what became known as the Company of Death, which swore to resist Frederick's ambitions and preserve regional independence from a central imperial power.