

Tribeca Film Festival Review: 'Gay Chorus' Doc Courts Tears, and Change

By Scott Stiffler on April 29, 2019 · No Comment



The Gay Chorus and the Oakland Gospel Choir cross Selma's historical bridge, reminding us that the fight for equal rights is far from over. | Photo by Adam Hobbs

BY WINNIE McCROY | For a feel-good tearjerker that just might effect social change, see director David Charles Rodrigues' feature documentary debut, *Gay Chorus Deep South*. In this 100-minute film, a stolid LGBTQ ally goes on the road with the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus (SFGMC) for a tour of the Deep South.

Led by Chorus Director Dr. Tim Seelig, the Lavender Pen Tour with its more than 300 singers travel to five Southern states with a message of love, music, and acceptance for communities confronting intolerance. (The SFGMC donates all their proceeds to groups battling discrimination, kicking off the tour in Mississippi because of HB1523, which legalizes discrimination of gays based on "religious beliefs." Currently, LGBTQs can be kicked out of their homes or lose their jobs in 33 states.)

Believing "you have to learn to dance with the storm," Seelig sets an ambitious schedule through Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama, and the Carolinas in an attempt to "sprinkle water on some pretty dry land." Seelig has his own demons to face. The former choir director of the First Baptist Church of Houston, he lost his wife,

children, home, career, and financial stability, when he came out as gay at 35. “It was like *Amazing Grace*,” recalled Seelig. “I once was lost and then was found. That was the day I came out.”

Sadly, the church not only rejected him, but also took legal action that ruined him financially and spiritually, until he found SFGMC, “the vehicle where my life could have meaning.”

Seelig isn't the only one with demons. Chorus member Jimmy White, battling cancer, comes back to Mississippi for the first time in a decade, seeking reconciliation with his conservative father. His parents attend a concert, and Jimmy's dad admits he enjoyed the drag queen performance of Patsy Cline's *She's Got You*.

The tour reveals surprises on both sides. In Tennessee, Seelig is shocked to see conservative talk radio station WYLV welcome his choir and their mission of goodwill and charity. Equally dismayed to find that local queer Southern historians view them as “paternalistic and condescending,” Seelig says, “People show up thinking that we're all dirt-eating cousin fuckers.”



Ashlé, the first trans woman accepted into a Gay Men's Chorus, stands her ground in America's most discriminatory states. | Photo by Adam Hobbs

Still, the chorus members remain resilient. Steve, another choir member, visits his old high school, where the principal ostracized gays, saying, “I came back for those kids”—kids like transman Riley, who attends the concert, unbeknownst to his parents.

Deciding they wouldn't change any minds staying in their “San Francisco bubble,” the SFGMC becomes the first gay chorus to perform in a Southern Baptist Church, welcomed by Pastor Jim Dant simply “because we are Christians.”

Singers link arms and march across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama. They sing proudly at Brown AME Chapel, after

which four sad protestors slink away. They chorus even sits with locals to stitch a commemorative quilt.

Through the simple act of challenging assumptions, the SFGMC facilitates social change, by treating the people of the Deep South the way they want to be treated. And their incredible courage is chronicled in Rodrigues' excellent documentary.

–Runtime: 100 minutes

–Directed by David Charles Rodrigues

–Written by David Charles Rodrigues, Jeff Gilbert

–5:30pm, Mon., 4/29 at The Marriott Bonvoy Boundless Theater from Chase; 6pm, Tues., 4/30 at Regal Cinemas Battery Park; 3:15pm, Thurs., 5/2 at Village East Cinemas.

The 18th annual Tribeca Film Festival happens April 24 through May 5. Venues include Chelsea's SVA Theatre, Regal Cinemas Battery Park, Village East Cinema, BMCC TPAC, and the Tribeca Festival Hub. For info, and to order tickets, visit tribecafilm.com or call 866-941-3378. Matinee screenings are \$12, evening and weekend screenings are \$24, Tribeca Talks and Tribeca Immersive tickets are \$40, and Tribeca Cinema360 tickets are \$15. Discounted packages are available. Free Film Friday (free film screenings) is May 3. Twitter: twitter.com/tribeca.

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