

The Moo Man

United Kingdom 2013
Director: Andy Heathcote



The only whey is Sussex: Stephen Hook

Reviewed by Trevor Johnston

Observational documentaries are always a gamble. The filmmaker chooses to record a certain ongoing situation in the hope that dramatic conflict will manifest itself in the course of time, bringing to light themes and ideas for the audience to take away with them. Reality, needless to say, may or may not play ball, and it can be a headache for directors and editors trying to shape resulting footage into a dramatically cogent feature length.

Looked at in only those terms, Andy Heathcote and Heike Bachelier's portrait of an organic dairy farmer is somewhat problematic, since it's not exactly packed with crunching confrontation, nor indeed does it have quite enough material to fill its generous 98-minute running-time. The striking particularity of *The Moo Man*, however, is that these characteristics are of lesser significance than its telling rendering of the genuine emotional bond between farmer

Stephen Hook and his Friesian cattle. Indeed, it's primarily our emotional connection to the film that gets us thinking about the questions of farming practice and consumer choice – and even the broader arena of humanity's relationship with our four-legged friends – thus generating a viewer response so much larger than the decidedly intimate scale of what's on screen.

The skill of the filmmaking duo here is to choose a situation that keys into our perception of the ongoing crisis in the dairy industry in the UK, where public awareness of farmers going out of business because supermarkets have driven down milk prices doesn't necessarily translate into many of us opting not to pick up that 588ml of semi-skimmed from the chill cabinet on the way home. The Hook family operation shows that there is another way, selling a natural product to a local consumer base, and keeping the numbers down so that animal welfare is an achievable priority. What Hook calls "raw milk", bottled unpasteurised on site, may not be for everyone, since it comes with a health warning that it may contain microorganisms dangerous to pregnant women and so forth, yet the simple fact of seeing the whole production chain in motion gives the viewer something to ponder. Are we pouring something bland and sanitised on our cornflakes, when we could have some of this stuff instead?

It helps, though, that Hook himself exudes common-sense decency, and Ida, his favourite cow, is undoubtedly something of a character – transported to Eastbourne for a publicity shoot on the seafront, she simply refuses to get back in the trailer, prompting much knockabout huff and puff from Hook and his farmhands. Elsewhere there is the donning of veterinarian arm-length rubber gloves and several fairly elemental calving sequences, but what the direction really captures (highlighted by Stephen Daltry's charming Tati-esque chamber score) is the sheer comedic daintiness of the animals as they trot from field to milking shed. They are imposing yet somehow graceful, allowing us to understand why Hook is so attached to them, and the tears he sheds in the film's toughest moment so genuine and affecting. By the end, we're deeply touched too – evidence of a film whose impact comes not from trenchant argument or visceral conflict but from sheer loveliness. No coincidence, then, that Heathcote and Bachelier were successful in raising £20,000 in online crowdfunding to support the film's UK theatrical release. **S**

Credits and Synopsis

Co-director

Heike Bachelier
Produced by
Heike Bachelier
Andy Heathcote
Filmed by
Andy Heathcote
Edited by
Heike Bachelier
Original Music

Stephen Daltry
Post-production
Sound

Peter Hodges

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Production
Company
A Trufflepig Films
production

In Colour
[L85:1]

Distributor
November Films/
Trufflepig Films

A documentary portrait of farmer Stephen Hook and his Friesian dairy herd. Eschewing prevalent industrial farming methods, Hook chooses not to sell his milk to supermarkets at below cost price, instead bottling his own raw milk, which he sells door-to-door and at organic markets. Also unusual is Hook's relationship with his cows, including his favourite, Ida, who shows her determined character when driven to the Eastbourne seafront for a publicity shoot to promote the dairy. Attracting much attention from passers-by, Ida subsequently refuses to leave when the day is over and has to be manhandled back into the trailer. Thus far spared the bovine TB which could lose him his licence to sell unpasteurised milk, Hook works long hours on his farm, not least when several of his heifers calve at the same time. Ida delivers her latest calf, and though she's coming to the end of her working life, Hook plans to keep her as a pet. However, she falls inexplicably ill, and despite the vet's best efforts she dies in the field surrounded by the other cows. Hook is devastated but vows to carry on, knowing that another favourite will soon emerge from the herd.

My Father and the Man in Black

Canada 2012
Director: Jonathan Holiff
Certificate 15 87m 25s

Reviewed by Sam Wigley

Pop-cultural history and personal catharsis are fused to intriguing effect in Jonathan Holiff's trawl through his father's archives. Newspaper cuttings, spoken tape recordings, letters, telegrams and a gold record of Johnny Cash's 1969 single 'A Boy Named Sue' shed more light on Saul Holiff and his relationship with Cash (whom he managed throughout the 1960s) than the director ever gleaned from his emotionally negligent dad in person.

The credits for *Walk the Line*, the 2005 biopic featuring Joaquin Phoenix as Cash and Reese Witherspoon as his eventual wife June Carter, list only anonymous A&R men and record executives among the cast as the music-industry types circulating around the country-music legend in his 1960s heyday, while Cash's own autobiography – the basis for *Walk the Line* – gives short shrift to Saul's significance in his story. But, crate-digging through Saul's storage locker after his death, Jonathan finds a copy of that autobiography, with a personal inscription from Cash to Saul: "We both know you're much more a part of our lives than is told here. Thank you for living it with me."

Though Holiff's film is no doubt an attempt to raise the profile of the man in the shadows behind the man in black, more vitally it is Holiff's effort to fill in his own blanks about an absentee father. When not travelling abroad, Saul would be closed off to his two sons, prematurely treating them like adults or business associates, communicating in notes passed under their bedroom doors,

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Jonathan Holiff
Producers
Tanya Lyn Nazarec
Jennifer Phillips
Written by
Jonathan Holiff
Editors
Rob Ruzic
Nick Harauz
Production
Designer
Adam Weir
Original Music
Michael Timmins
Sound Design
Daniel Pellerin
Costume Designer
Robyn Rosenberg
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Productions Inc.
Production
Companies
Intentionally Left
Blank in association
with New Chapter
Productions
Produced in
association with
Rogers and with
the participation
of Rogers
Documentary Fund
Executive Producer
Jeff Paikin
Film Extracts
Walk the Line (2005)
Eat the Document
(1972)
*Monsieur
Beaucaire* (1946)

A Gunfight (1970)
Gospel Road (1972)

In Colour
[L85:1]

Distributor
Ballpark Film
Distributors

7,867 ft +8 frames

A dramatised documentary following the quest of director Jonathan Holiff to find out more about his emotionally distant father Saul, who managed country singer Johnny Cash during the 1960s. The film begins with a re-enactment of Saul's suicide in 2005. With the Cash biopic 'Walk the Line' in cinemas at the time, media interest in Saul – a forgotten figure in the Cash story – prompts Jonathan to investigate the past of a father who left him nothing and never spoke about his history with the singer.

In his father's storage locker, Jonathan finds Cash memorabilia and letters and telegrams between Cash and Saul. Through these, he tells the story of his father's upbringing, his entrepreneurial prowess, his success as Cash's promoter and his turbulent relationship both with the troubled singer and with his own family.