

VARIETY

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FILM REVIEWS

BLUES DIVAS

(DOCU)

A Blue M production. (International sales: Prime Entertainment Group, Paris.) Produced by Robert Mugge. Executive producer, Ty Warren.

Directed, edited by Robert Mugge. Camera (color, HDCam), Stanley Graham, Earnest Seals, Adam Daniel, Eris Wilson, Randy Kwan, Kenneth Sullivan, Darryl Moses, Randy Tinney, Jeremy Burson; music, Big Mo Recording; art director, Karen Wing; sound, John Busbice. Reviewed at AFI Silver Theater, Silver Spring, Md., Jan. 21, 2005. Running time: 116 MIN.

With: Morgan Freeman, Irma Thomas, Odetta, Mavis Staples, Deborah Coleman, Bettye LaVette, Ann Peebles, Renee Austin, Denise LaSalle.

By EDDIE COCKRELL

Eight fabulous femmes strut their substantial stuff in "Blues Divas," newest in a long line of joyous music-themed docus from director Robert Mugge. The tangy fruits of helmer's recent alliance with Mississippi's Foundation for Public Broadcasting and his new Blue M shingle, work's varied assemblages as eight hourlong tube programs (one per diva), single-artist DVDs and the theatrical feature caught here ensures fest coverage, small-screen play and brisk business in a variety of formats, kicking off with Feb. 3 Mississippi Public Broadcasting preem.

Straightforward docu opens with brief intro from thesp and enthusiast Morgan Freeman, whose Clarksdale juke joint Ground Zero Blues Club hosted festivities and Mugge's high-def crew over a three-day weekend in spring 2004. The actor's laid-back and often adulatory chats with the talent punctuate uncut numbers performed in front of 50 or so racially diverse patrons on a stage brightly lit to emphasize the graffiti and gig posters on the walls.

From the religious fervor of Mavis

Staples to the defiant raunch of Denise LaSalle, perfs are uniformly strong, as each act gets at least one tune and some as many as three. Vet Irma Thomas shouts her way through Otis Redding's "I've Been Loving You Too Long," after which the self-deprecating humor of singer-storyteller Odetta lends added bite to Leadbelly's "Beourgeois Blues."

Staples' self-described "nice grunt" gives oomph to late-dad Roebuck's arrangement of "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," followed by guitar slinger Deborah Coleman's blazing sprint through Koko Taylor's signature "I'm a Woman" as Stevie Ray Vaughan's image gazes down from the wall.

During Bettye LaVette's fiery "Serves Him Right," the soul survivor cracks up a member of Mugge's crew with midsong growl "He can go to hell for all I care." The energy level dips slightly during Ann Peebles' perf, though garish outfits sported by the thrush and her motley-looking nine-piece band can't detract from the haunting vibe of her 1973 hit "I Can't Stand the Rain."

Relative newcomer Renee Austin's slinky "Fool Moon" provides a blessed calm before the storm that is LaSalle's rampage through a sweaty set list capped by the inevitable "Still the Queen."

As has become Mugge's trademark, a more visceral visual approach to the tech package replaces surface slickness prevalent in similar recent docus such as "Lightning in a Bottle." Not that there's anything wrong with that; throughout an illustrious quarter-century career dating back to 16mm docu on George Crumb, Sun Ra, Al Green, Ruben Blades, Sonny Rollins and many others, Mugge's movies have been more about the combustible mix of forceful personalities and powerful music than surface gloss. Sound mix on the vivid DV tape projected was punchy and full.



Bettye LaVette is one of eight femmes featured in music documentary helmer Robert Mugge's "Blues Divas."