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Film Reviews from Two Guys in the Dark

Ken Burke and Pat Craig offer reviews of current films.

Wednesday, March 9, 2016

Only Yesterday and The Promised Band

Getting to Know You (or myself, as the case may be)

Reviews by Ken Burke

This posting's out a bit earlier than usual because I'm going to a critics' screening instead of my usual Wednesday night marathon; also, the documentary reviewed below is still playing this week at the San Jose, CA [Cinequest festival](#) so in case locals (San Francisco area) want to check it out, Saturday [March 12, 2016, 7:15pm](#) is your last chance unless any of you'd like to plan a trip to Chicago in April for its next appearance (see the official website under [Related Links](#) far below). And, why am I reviewing such an obscure film, you may ask; because I was requested to do so, an offer that Two Guys always try to accommodate, as long as it's an actual film to review rather than giving notice to some type of promotional or business venture. Therefore, if anyone else out there has a film they'd like for us to explore please contact us as we'd be glad to oblige if at all possible.

Take care, curious readers, for plot spoilers gallop rampantly throughout the Two Guys' insightful reviews. Therefore, be warned, beware, and read on when you're ready to be transported to ... wherever we end up. Please protect your eyes from the dazzling brilliance.

Only Yesterday (Isao Takahata)

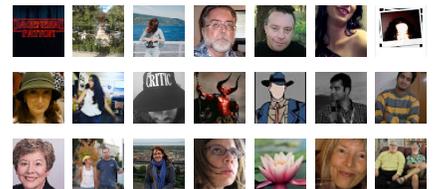


A young woman working in Tokyo takes her standard vacation working on a farm in the countryside where she ponders the next direction in her life while being constantly reminded of events involving her 5th-grade self even as she's mulling over an attraction to a local young farmer; the animation's beautiful to watch, even if the story's impact is constantly low-key.

What Happens: In 1982 Tokyo we meet 27-year-old Taeko Okajima (voiced by Daisy Ridley), a romantically-uninvolved-office-worker who's off to her countryside vacation in the Yamagata Prefecture where she'll work for 10 days on a safflower farm owned by the older brother of her direct brother-in-law (she has 2 older sisters, 1 is married). Her boss can't understand her fascination with such manual labor, but she's been intrigued by the outdoors since she was a little girl yearning to get away from the city, a common activity by many of her classmates, although an intended family trip back then was recast as only Takeo and her grandmother visiting a site with multiple public baths (there's a little mild nudity in this scene but drawn so subtly that there's nothing titillating about butts resting on poolsides or breasts barely submerged beneath the water). Upon arrival, Taeko is met by the brother-in-law's 2nd cousin, Toshio (Dev Patel), a local organic farmer (and former office worker) who spends a good bit of time with her during the ensuing days but seemingly just as a friend. Much of what we see in this leisurely-paced, charming movie, though, are flashbacks to Taeko's time in 5th grade (she then voiced by Alison Fernandez) where boys were just discovering their interests in girls (but playfully denying it), Taeko herself became intrigued with a boy in another class who quietly expressed an interest in her (leading to lots of giggly gossip from the girls in both of their classes, along with her admiration for his skills as a baseball pitcher and batter), and the era of embarrassment came for her and other girls (except for the confident "early developers") when they first get their periods, with unending teasing from the boys. Sometimes we stay with Taeko's memories for extended periods, other scenes quickly cut between past and present with occasional appearances of Taeko's 1966 self in the contemporary world as an indication of how present these memories are for Taeko during this particular summer.

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About Me



Ken Burke; Pat Craig

Ken--Gordon Lightfoot's song "A Painter Passing Through" says it all because if life had allowed I'd be a painter or a musician; Pat--John Stewart song, "The road is my woman and she's never done me wrong ..."

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[Salty Popcorn](#) (an Australian site run by Jason King)

[Odean Online](#) (an Australian site run by Steven East)

[CineSocialUK](#) (a UK site run by Jason Day)

[Something Cinematic](#) (a US site run by Tim Dunn)

[MaddWolf](#) (a US site run by Hope Madden and George Wolf)

[Outtakes with Fiore \[1\]](#) (a US site run by Fiore Mastracci, critic and professor, whose views are often oppositional to mine but his coverage is concise and precise; this site is his older one which has now been replaced with a new one on Blogspot)

[Outtakes with Fiore \[2\]](#) (this is Fiore's new review site, beginning in Feb. 2016; we still don't agree much but I respect his opinions about film if not always about politics)

[Fiore Mastracci reviews on YouTube](#)

[Short and to the Point Reviews](#) (YouTube reviews by Colton Hunt)

[IMDb](#) (the massive Internet Movie Data base; put in a film title, then click User Reviews and External Reviews)

[Rotten Tomatoes](#) (huge survey site of reviews)

[Metacritic](#) (another major site for reviews)

After almost 2 hours of watching a very nice but predictable childhood past (lots of energetic joy coupled with the rough, inevitable squabbles between Taeko and her slightly-older-siblings; problems with cutting a pineapple that turns out to not be quite ripe enough to eat after all; a focus on her difficulty with math [which had the slight added benefit of reminding me how to divide fractions—



although the specifics of their example might have run too quickly by me to have been properly noted but based on the numbers I think they were using they got the answer wrong even though the process was correct, just not the concept used to justify their result)) broken up at times by shocking acts of parental distain (Taeko throws a fit over using her sister's enameled purse leading to an abrupt slap from her father [Matt Yang King]; later, her determination to make her small role in a school play more interesting with active body movements leads to an offer to appear in a local university staging which Dad strictly forbids—she can't even talk about it so as to not embarrass the girl who was the 2nd choice), along with the bucolic life our protagonist leads during her vacation picking safflowers (we also get a quick lesson in how they're processed into oil or paste to use for medicinal purposes, cooking, as a dye, etc.) while also sharing time with Toshio (who gives us lectures on organic farming), Taeko's still ruminating about what she wants to do with her life, but as she prepares to return to the city Granny—of the in-laws family—(Nika Futterman) says it's obvious that Taeko and Toshio are attracted to each other so she should stay to marry him.

Everyone's shocked and apologetic about this outburst (except Granny, whose confidence in her earned wisdom shows no regret), so Taeko simply ignores it, then boards the homebound-train; once in motion, though, she's surrounded by her younger self and friends (apparently visible only to us) who seem to help her change her mind so she gets off at the next station, reverses course, returning to the farm and a happily-ever-after-ending, strangely enough capped off with the end credits over a Japanese version of "The Rose" (listed in the credits as "Ai wa Hana, Kimi wa sono Tane" ["Love is a flower, you are it's seed"]; much more on that farther below), leaving the clear impression that Taeko's long suffered from unrequited love which has now been happily resolved.

So What? *Only Yesterday* is based on a manga (Japanese comic book—or graphic novel as the hipsters say), *Omoide Poroporo* (or *Omoide Poro Poro*; I've seen it both ways), written by Hotaru Okamoto, illustrated by Yuko Tone (although that origin source concerns only the events of Taeko's younger life, with director Takahata providing the adult material; [see here](#) for other interesting facts about it), originally released in 1991 by Studio Ghibi in Japan but just now making its way to North America (with its outstanding critical success, don't be surprised if it ends up with an Oscar nomination for Best Animated Feature next year as Academy rules would allow such, in that a film has to play for at least one week in a Los Angeles county theater during a year of eligibility, which



would be 2016 in this case). In order to enhance its current marketability (which doesn't seem to have accomplished much, in that this movie didn't even make Box Office Mojo's list of the top 92 from last weekend's ticket sales [the previous weekend it was at #46 with roughly \$122,000 domestically after 9 weeks on screen—only 13 of them, though], so maybe that Oscar nom's not so likely after all) the original Japanese voice cast was completely re-recorded using name-

brand-actors in the lead roles (Ridley is the new face of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* [J.J. Abrams, 2015; review in our December 31, 2015 posting], Patel's best known for *Slumdog Millionaire* [Danny Boyle, 2008] but maybe also for *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* [John Madden, 2012; review in our June 4, 2012 posting] and its sequel, *The Second Best ...* [Madden, 2015; review in our March 12, 2015 posting]), with the rest of the new voice work done by names unknown to me but certainly most of them sounding more of European than Asian descent, which actually matches the on-screen-appearance of most of the characters who may be Japanese in origin and lifestyle but curiously are presented as more Anglo-like, just as in most of the later-20th-century-anime-films that I've seen.

The story's still the same, though, as Taeko prefers the fresh air of the open countryside to her Tokyo job (with appropriate visual contrasts of the lush renderings of the rural outdoors vs. the sparse depictions of city life where frequently the backgrounds of her flashbacks are usually left open or incomplete with washes of color tints, which further remind us that these are past, remembered events), has recurring memories of her 5th-grade-life, and ultimately resolves her "anxieties" about her future (more below about



why I don't find her qualms all that disturbing) with Toshio (accompanied in the photo above by his younger sister). The only really impactful scene for me from her earlier life is her memory of a new boy, Abe, coming to her school; he's a defensive, isolated kid who then had to move away again but refused to shake her hand as he bid goodbye to the rest of his classmates. In discussing this with Toshio, Taeko assumed it was because Abe'd become aware of how she privately badmouthed him while Toshio offers a counter-interpretation that the kid was attracted to her but didn't know how to show it so his snub was more from his own frustration at his longing for an unattainable girl.

What probably makes or breaks *Only Yesterday* for you (at least, this was the ultimate foundation of my response) is how much you're charmed by Taeko's memories of her family life (as she's the youngest of 3 daughters, along with parents and a grandmother, her wants were often not as fully attended to as were the needs of all of the older people she lived with, especially where the authoritarian decisions of her silent, constantly-newspaper-reading-father were concerned), her grammar school years (with particular focus on the incessant teasing [illustrated with cheek hatchmarks and pink faces] that goes on at that age, either about the boy who's hesitantly fond of her or the humiliation that the girls suffer about periods, with the monthly condition made obvious as specific girls—including Taeko—get permission to skip PE because of their situations), and her stunted theatre career (cut short by her father's abrupt refusal—although, given that she tried acting in high school only to find that she wasn't very good at it, she didn't have much of a career loss anyway [reminds me of *Seinfeld*'s "The Ticket" {4th season, 4th episode, 1992 TV} where Kramer tries to help Newman beat a speeding charge with the latter claiming he was racing across town to prevent his friend from committing suicide in despair over never having been able to be a banker—



neither of these would-be-aspirants really had much of an investment in their dreams (a complete hoax in Kramer's case)], so I'm not that moved by Taeko's depicted-disappointment). These memories may convey marvelous melancholy, enhancing their sense of nostalgia and loss, or—as with me—they may simply be a standard set of childhood remembrances by a woman still trying to find a desired career path, pleasant enough to watch but nothing notably unique, charming, nor

revealing. With that sour admission, I'd better move on to my rating for this movie before taking my usual afternoon break to yell at kids for playing on my lawn (always a difficult task, because I live in a 3rd-floor-flat).

Bottom Line Final

Comments: As genial and open-minded as I usually try to be (except when discussing Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, or Marco Rubio—but they're also not very embracing where each other are concerned either, except for spewing insults), I admit that I must seem like some sort of merge of Scrooge and the Grinch in my restrained evaluation of *Only Yesterday* in comparison to what you'd find at Rotten



Tomatoes (a stunning 100% score, based on 34 positive—not even mixed—reviews including people I admire quite a bit such as Ty Burr [*Boston Globe*], Steven Rea [*Philadelphia Inquirer*], Peter Travers [*Rolling Stone*], Kenneth Turan [*Los Angeles Times*] and Metacritic (a 90% score, the average of their assigned numerical “grades” to each of their 17 reviews [for example, Burr's, Rea's, and Travers' comments, which are simply noted as positive by RT, are each listed as 88 at MC based on their actual 3½ of 4 stars, which does come out as 88%; however, Turan offers no numerical rating {details from both of these composite sites are available below in the **Related Links** connected to this movie if you ever want to read full reviews from these experts} so I guess someone at MC must assume a number for him to add into ... *Yesterday's* calculated average]), given that I offer only 3½ of 5 stars, a relatively measly 70% in mathematical terms (although, that's still a solid response and somewhat deceiving, given that I rarely give anything a full 5 stars or even 4½ [except for the marvelous *Spotlight* {Tom McCarthy; review in our November 19, 2015 posting}, the well-deserved-Best Picture-Oscar winner for 2015 releases], so with 4 being my normal high a 3½ from me isn't as bad as it might seem).

Still, no matter how I might explain what 3½ stars implies for me there's no way that those clarifications can really reconcile my response to *Only Yesterday* with so many others so eager to call it a masterpiece. Maybe it's just that on my usual-viewing-with-no-intention-of-reviewing-Monday nights for the last 2 weeks my Netflix choices have been *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010) and *Reds* (Warren Beatty, 1981), both of which I'd easily give at least 4½ stars, with lingering-disappointment that neither took Oscar's Best Picture in their competitive years (both losing to British productions: first *Chariots of Fire* [Hugh Hudson]—the counterpoint to the current *Race* [Stephen Hopkins; review in our February 23, 2016 posting] in focusing on runners who triumphed in the 1924 Paris Olympics unlike Jesse Owens' 1936 coach, Larry Snyder, who missed those previous Games because of injury—then *The King's Speech* [Tom Hooper] more recently, although maybe the '81 results were appropriate in dividing up Best Picture and Best Director [Beatty won the latter], just as was done this year with *Spotlight* being the more gripping story overall but another director's applied-flamboyance [Alejandro González Iñárritu with *The Revenant*] was impossible to overlook), so I could just be overcome with past grandeur that I don't think *Only Yesterday* even begins to match, in my outlier opinion. This is a very sweet story with universally-relatable-subject-matter about childhood reminiscences connected to unresolved questions about



where/how/when to proceed with adult life, made with gorgeous visuals that take on a watercolor-and-ink-presence, reflective of the meticulous work that goes into hand-drawn-and-painted-cell-animation (a long-ago-dream-career of mine, after a childhood filled with Disney movies and TV shows), but I'm not as overcome with what I see here as the consensus of my critical brethren seems to indicate what I should feel.

My objections are not about the very warm characters (except for Taeko's stern father) nor the foundational structure of the adult protagonist thinking back on her much younger days (and certainly not on the images, which are always a pleasure to behold, sometimes almost breathtaking in their well-crafted-simplicity); rather, I find the whole narrative to just be mundane, not revelatory, especially when the relatively-young-woman this whole story revolves around is facing what seems to me



to be a mild crisis at age 27 (in terms of not fully knowing what direction she'd like for the rest of her life to take; hell, at that age [in 1975 vs. her 1982] I was already divorced, desperately looking for a full-time-job after graduate school; I didn't really get stabilized for another dozen years so I can't get too worked up over things she doesn't really seem that disturbed by either) nor was there much in her childhood that truly provided much trauma for her future—except that uncalled-for-slap (at least it was the only time Dad ever did that). It's very nice that she finds her destiny by becoming a farmer's wife with immediate dreams of children of their own to provide a continuum with the recollections of her own girlhood, but, for grouchy old me, the conflict didn't seem all that intense nor did the resolution rise above the level of sentimental expectation. What moved me much more than most of the rest of this (very well-regarded by just about everyone else) cinematic presentation was the song used under the final credits, a Japanese version of "The Rose" (with translated lyrics by director Takahata; sung by Harumi Miyako), a song well-known to me from a film of that same name (Mark Rydell, 1979)—available on its soundtrack album—sung by Bette Midler, who also stars as a fictionalized-version of Janis Joplin in a tragic story of a talented star overcome by her abusive life/lifestyle. The lyrics (in English at least; I can't speak for the Japanese version) are very touching to me, possibly because of their connection to my fellow-Texan, Ms. Joplin (ironically, this song was written prior to Rydell's film by Amanda McBroom with no intended connection to it, yet its lyrics provide an accidentally-appropriate finale for *The Rose* when linked with its own final credits).

I try to not use the same choices for my Musical Metaphors to give a final comment on whatever I'm reviewing, but even though I've used "The Rose" once before I think it's appropriate here, if for no other reason than it conveys for me the emotions that all those other critics are finding in Taeko's total story, although I just don't see her as being "the heart, afraid of breaking that never learns to dance" nor "the dream, afraid of waking that never takes a chance," as I guess I'm supposed to feel linking this final number to her movie's activities. What I respond to much more isn't in *Only Yesterday* at all but instead still haunts my memories of *The Rose* where Mary Rose Foster (Midler) —along with her long-lost-actual-inspiration (see our review of the powerful documentary *Janis: Little Girl Blue* [Amy Berg, 2015], easily earning its 4 stars, in our December 2, 2015 posting [itself no money-mint as it's earned only about \$388,000 domestically even after 15 weeks in release])—is the more effective-embodiment of the lines, "When the night has been too lonely and the road has been too long And you think that love is only for the lucky and the strong." Sure, Taeko has her memories of unresolved childhood dreams (Don't we all?) which channel some melancholy into her present selfhood, but I fail to see her as truly facing any "hunger" that generates "an endless aching need," instead just some standard-young-adult-confusion about her future (if she thinks she has



problems she should watch *The Graduate* [Mike Nichols, 1967]. But while she's waiting for Amazon to deliver her copy of that Simon and Garfunkel soundtrack (Yes, I know Amazon didn't begin until 1994, well

after both this movie's initial release and its storyline, but we're still in metaphor-mode here, OK?) she (and you) could listen to a good number of versions of "The Rose," so I'll offer 3: At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KF4qKwvrVMo> you'll find Midler singing, backed by illustrations from *Only Yesterday*, allowing you to see more of its strongest aspect—those stunning, marvelously-rendered-visuals; at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CB4EgdpYlnk&ebc=ANYPxKrt9pTlJ5kerYqLuXO6tLaJ8_itzpv57jCv9W0eNu88KyU-T884pqzhMZ7FH0htwn_NtDDxZT17LGTBLytwlDgBUak8EA you'll find Midler singing again, this time with the lyrics as subtitles in both English and Japanese, accompanied by generic pictures matching the words; then at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SV8FpQuLpYQ> is a live performance by a Japanese singer in her native language (I don't know who nor when), also with subtitles but just in Japanese. If you somehow put all of these together you'd have a result somewhat like watching the actual ending of *Only Yesterday* but more efficiently-effective in my seemingly-singular-opinion, as this final song conveys to me the poignancy that others are finding in the totality of *Only Yesterday*, admittedly because I know its lyrics about the pain and promise of love (which don't apply nearly as much to Taeko as they do to Mary Rose) and the more painful memories they evoke in me about wintery crises of despair (along with the joy that may come "with the sun's love," as it did with my 2nd, ongoing marriage) even when I hear the song sung in Japanese, a far more touching feeling that anything I got about Taeko in this movie, as I never sensed that her supposedly-lost-life was drowning like "the tender reed," although she does hesitate as "the one who won't be taken" before giving herself over joyously to the future glories of organic farming, which her inner child embraces.



at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CB4EgdpYlnk&ebc=ANYPxKrt9pTlJ5kerYqLuXO6tLaJ8_itzpv57jCv9W0eNu88KyU-T884pqzhMZ7FH0htwn_NtDDxZT17LGTBLytwlDgBUak8EA you'll find Midler singing again, this time with the lyrics as subtitles in both English and Japanese, accompanied by generic pictures matching the words; then at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SV8FpQuLpYQ> is a live performance by a Japanese singer in her native language (I don't know who nor when), also with subtitles but just in Japanese. If you somehow put all of these together you'd have a result somewhat like watching the actual ending of *Only Yesterday* but more efficiently-effective in my seemingly-singular-opinion, as this final song conveys to me the poignancy that others are finding in the totality of *Only Yesterday*, admittedly because I know its lyrics about the pain and promise of love (which don't apply nearly as much to Taeko as they do to Mary Rose) and the more painful memories they evoke in me about wintery crises of despair (along with the joy that may come "with the sun's love," as it did with my 2nd, ongoing marriage) even when I hear the song sung in Japanese, a far more touching feeling that anything I got about Taeko in this movie, as I never sensed that her supposedly-lost-life was drowning like "the tender reed," although she does hesitate as "the one who won't be taken" before giving herself over joyously to the future glories of organic farming, which her inner child embraces.

The Promised Band (Jen Heck, 2015)



This meaningful documentary follows the attempts of its director to provide an opportunity for a few Israeli women (one of whom is an Arab) to cross the restrictive border into the West Bank territory to meet with a Palestinian woman, with the excuse of forming a band for a performance in Israel, although the "musical" aspect is the least important thing explored here.

My standard review structure (used above) doesn't work as well with documentaries, as their *whats* and *whys* need to be more constantly interrelated throughout, so I'll just buzz along with this artifact of a marvelous idea that doesn't quite fulfill its potential but still is unique, uplifting, and intriguing enough to be well worth your time to see (as long as you can find it, as I noted in my many-moons-ago opening paragraph of this posting; hopefully, success on the festival circuit will widen its availability). What we have here is an account of an American filmmaker, Heck (my wife, Nina, in recounting stories of her own childhood, à la *Only Yesterday*, frequently notes how a kid's name can lead to ongoing teasing from the other brutal brats in their vicinity—she was constantly called a ship due to the constant focus in Catholic school on Columbus' 1st voyage to the New World—so I can imagine the hell of a time that Ms. Heck faced in earlier years [to wit, my Hispanic colleague named Hector started going by his middle name of Mario when he moved to this country in his undergrad



years decades ago because friends kept shortening his name to “Heck,” which he wasn’t too pleased with)), who was making a documentary in the Himalayas with her close Palestinian friend, Mostafa Salameh (1st Palestinian and Jordanian to reach the top of Mt. Everest), about his efforts to organize a large group of his countrymen for another such climb (not so much to achieve it but at least to make the attempt, which later becomes the model for Jen’s intercultural quest). After listening to him talk about his good friend, Lina Qadri, living in the West Bank with her husband and teenage daughter, Jen decided to meet this woman herself so, beginning with visits to existing friends in Israel, our intrepid filmmaker took it upon herself to cross the notorious “Green Line” (the boundary separating the state of Israel from its occupied West Bank territory—that is, the land formerly a part of the country of Jordan lying to the west of the Jordan River, occupied since the 1967 Six-Day War with several Arab countries, now serving as part of the re-emerging nation of Palestine [along with the Mediterranean-bordered Gaza strip taken from Egypt in that same war], providing an ongoing dispute over sovereignty, security, and international recognition) to meet Lina.

Their conversations proved so productive that Heck took it upon herself to find a process for easier movement across this heavily-fortified-border so that Palestinian and Israeli women could come to better know and understand each other. However, given the level of mutual enmity between these 2 political entities that was no easy task, with required permission from the occupying state (a term by which I mean no condemnation; it’s just a fact that since 1967 Israel has controlled



seized Jordanian territory, even as slow, difficult explorations continue to formally acknowledge this area as part of the separate nation of Palestine) needed for Lina to go into Israel, just as posted signs and discussions throughout the film remind us that it’s illegal for Israelis to enter certain sections of the West Bank, including Nablus where Lina lived—and this was all in 2012 when most of *The Promised Band* was shot; today the situation is one of almost-open-warfare between militants from both sides, with killings, desecrations of holy sites, constantly-growing-tensions between West Bank Arabs and the expanding-influx of government-sponsored-Israeli-settlements into this contested territory. Given all of the current recurring violence, this film would likely have been impossible to make today, so we should be doubly thankful that it exists as a tribute to supposed-enemies finding common ground in their mutually-hostile-environments, risking personal and legal repercussions for trying to radically change the assumptions of hatred in situations where such acts of courage can easily lead to retaliation from occupants of either side of the Green Line. (Of the 3 sections of the West Bank, only Area A [comprising about 18% of the territory, containing Lina’s town of Nablus] is completely ruled by the Palestinian Authority, with areas B and C under joint Israeli-Palestinian control.)



What Jen and Lina decided to do is set up the premise that they're part of an intercultural (or international or whatever inter-term would be most appropriate) pop music group, therefore certain dispensations should be made for them to travel across the Green Line for rehearsals and public performances. However, if the situation weren't difficult enough already, Shlomit admitted that she had no musical talent (not that all of the others who eventually ended up in this difficult enterprise did either) so she took on managerial duties while

Lina showed herself to be at least competent or somewhat more so on accordion and guitar. From this beginning, the first part of Heck's quest was to recruit others to the cause so in turn we meet 4 Israeli women: Shlomit Ravid of Tel Aviv; Viki Auslender (whose parents came from the Soviet Union) a former army soldier, currently teaching at Hebrew University in Jerusalem; Noa Bassel, also from Tel Aviv (her mother is Syrian); Alhan Jeries, of Arab heritage, Christian faith, and Israeli citizenship, whose family has lived in this area for several generations. While it was hard enough to get these 5 into Nablus to meet with Lina, the larger problem in even trying to pass themselves off as a band was the lack of musical ability among the group (although they were all willing to sing) so Jen found an Orthodox rabbi, Shimshon Nadel, who migrated to Israel from New Jersey where he had developed some skill with the electric guitar; however, unlike with the women, his religious restrictions prevented him from being part of a performance where they'd be singing (to prevent problems stemming from their sensuality—hey, I'm just reporting this, I didn't dictate it—but then Lina constantly wears her head scarf for similar reasons, even though the source of that dictate didn't anticipate her slender jeans and high heels, I guess). He says he's willing to find some sort of workaround—although he has no idea what—while Lina's not willing to accept that he'd be the only one singing (nor likely would the other women, given that's their chief role in this wild enterprise).

While the problems with Shimshon's restrictions (plus concerns about reprisal from his religious community for even participating in such a venture with these non-Orthodox folks, as well as Lina facing punishment from the Palestinian Authority for inviting such a Jew into her home) go back and forth, the 5 non-Palestinian women make a few trips into the West Bank (past intimidating entry points, a very high wall, and their constant concerns that they might run afoul of Palestinian soldiers at any time).



Upon their 1st visit to Lina, the car—with its Israeli-colored-license-plate (different from the Palestinian plates)—is hidden in her garage so it won't be seen, causing problems with her neighbors; how that was more dangerous than driving to and from the Green Line checkpoint where soldiers could take action against them I still don't understand, but these events occurred as we see them with no staging for dramatic impact so I just have to accept what comes through upon viewing the scary-arbitrarily-constructed-reality these brave women navigated: How these non-access and restricted-movement laws are enforced in the West Bank seems totally up to the "kindness of strangers" where the Palestinian troops are concerned, but disaster could occur at any time (in fact, at one point one of the women's cars is pulled over—filming continues from Heck's co-cinematographer, Martina Radwan, in the other car—but somehow Lina manages to talk their way out of trouble). When they all (except for Shimshon, who was scheduled for a West Bank appearance but never showed up) do gather at Lina's, though, their collective inherent musical limitations continue to plague the process so they mostly fill the time with getting to know each other better, sharing food, and discovering various similarities or differences in their cultures. Of course, this is the real focus of the film, the

removal of mental walls between people even if the physical ones still loom 26 feet above them.

Ultimately, nothing comes of their attempted concert as Shimshon never actually works with them, Alhan drops out dealing with depression over rejection by her Arab friends when she divorces her husband, Lina finally gets approval to cross briefly into Israel but the act's never come together to allow a show, Jen is called back to New York for work so she can no longer oversee their attempted project, and Mostafa (who could have provided some needed musical talent) isn't allowed by Israel back into Palestine (despite having been knighted by Jordan for his accomplishments). Still, the important result is that they've all come to know each other, barriers put up by misunderstandings and rumors are cleared away, while those of us watching these events are given hope that political conflicts might someday be resolved when enough progress begins on the interpersonal level.



As a viewing experience, though, *The Promised Band* (excellent title) does have its limitations, none of which could have been avoided given that this is all cinéma vérité where events can't be controlled but simply occur as the cameras roll. Thus, because there's so much hostility between these neighboring (at best) states it's hard to even understand the confusion between the absolutist-cross-border-restrictions vs. the seeming ease of movement of these non-Palestinian women into the West Bank; because

the situations of anticipated musicians Shimshon and Mustafa never are finalized we end up with both of them as unresolved, somewhat sidetracking entities in this intercultural adventure; in that the "band" premise results in little rehearsal nor any performance as anticipated, a lot of time is simply filled up with frustrated conversations and footage taken from moving cars as attempts to give feature-length-substance to a situation that probably could have worked as effectively as a longish short doc; finally, a lot of the on-location-audio is inherently hard to understand but we're provided with useful subtitles of the conversations (fine for me, but another roadblock for some viewers who have to be led to the topic to begin with then chafe at having to read instead of just watch and listen, an ongoing limitation for many who hesitate to watch foreign-language-films as well). Even with these limitations, though, Heck's film is a noble-yet-necessary-one, the genuine camaraderie among these 6 women is life-affirming, and the hope they give for the larger context of such intercultural embrace is a positive alternative to the ongoing brutality that continues to grow on either side of the Green Line (fueled by a never-ending-argument, the side voiced by Lina that her homeland has been occupied since the late 1940s while the occupiers can legitimately claim that they were forcefully displaced from these lands 2 millennia ago by the brutal Roman Empire).

Those contested-border-tensions were already escalating by 2014 when the goal of performing at least one song together was finally realized although not in the manner 1st intended. Although Lina had divorced her husband, lost her head scarf, and moved to the somewhat-more-cosmopolitan West Bank city of Ramallah she was now completely barred from travel into Israel so with her—joined by Jen—in a recording studio on her side of the Green Line and her



remaining Israeli colleagues in a studio on their side they finally recorded a song together, linked up by technology (all vocals, no instruments played by them), "In a Big Country" (originally on the **Scottish rock band** Big Country's 1983 *The Crossing* album), with **hopeful lyrics** (only tangentially-related to the original music video's imagery) and the refrain of "In a big country dreams stay with you." Appropriately, I'll wrap up this review of a well-conceived idea (even with all of the actual limitations that prevented it from fully coming to desired fruition) put into documentary form is to offer my own Musical Metaphor for this worthwhile film, Bob Dylan's "I Shall Be Released" (written

in 1967, available in many recorded versions including The Band's 1968 album *Music from Big Pink* and Dylan's 1971 album *Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits Vol. II*; I've used this one before once already also but felt it was too appropriate here to pass up) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjtPBJEz-BA>, where you get both Dylan and The Band from the latter's last public concert, captured by Martin Scorsese as *The Last Waltz* (1976), with help from the night's other guests including Ringo Starr, Ron Wood, Van Morrison, Joni Mitchell, Neil Diamond, Ronnie Hawkins, Dr. John, and Neil Young. I think that Jen Heck and her "band" (with their quite different impact than the group Scorsese put into the all-time-great-documentary-archives) could appreciate the intent and lyrics of this song, especially "Yet I swear I see my reflection Somewhere so high above this wall," with hopes that someday that Green Line-based-wall around the West Bank will be gone like the one now absent from the unified city of Berlin (except for some memorial sections, although I doubt that anyone wants memories of the divisive barrier around what someday should be globally recognized as the nation of Palestine, hopefully functioning in peacefully coexistence with the nation of Israel).

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Here's more information about *Only Yesterday*:

<http://onlyyesterdayfilm.com/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0ZrjocXVJ4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbBLLKrb45Q0> (43:40 documentary on the making of *Only Yesterday*, in Japanese with English subtitles)

http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/only_yesterday_1991/?search=only%20yes

<http://www.metacritic.com/movie/only-yesterday-1991>

Here's more information about *The Promised Band*:

<http://thepromised.band/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5a99kIUQs>

<http://www.nonfictionfilm.com/blog/docs-in-progress-the-promised-band-makes-nuanced-plea-for-middle-east-peace> (interview with director Jen Heck)

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3551450/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

(These ... *Promised Band* references are a bit different from the usual ones because of a dearth of public and critical awareness of this film thus far; you might want to do some searches yourself later for possible additions on Rotten Tomatoes and/or Metacritic, possibly other sites as well.)

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If you'd rather contact Ken directly rather than leaving a comment here please use my new email at kenburke409@gmail.com. Thanks.

By the way, if you're ever at The Hotel California knock on my door—but you know what the check out policy is so be prepared to stay for awhile. Ken

P.S. Just to show that I haven't fully flushed Texas out of my system here's an alternative destination for you, [Home in a Texas Bar](#), with Gary P. Nunn and Jerry Jeff Walker.

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