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Peculiar thrills

Barbie art, wicker kittens, Harry Who, and jingle bells at DocFest 13

06.03.14 - 1:28 pm | [Dennis Harvey](#) ([category/author/dennis-harvey](#)) | (0)

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arts@sfbg.com

<mailto:arts@sfbg.com>

FILM Documentaries are often the best section of any given film festival. But even die-hard fans admit to occasional Social Issue Fatigue — that feeling you get when you've just seen too many all-too-convincing portraits of real life injustices, reasons why the planet is dying, etc. "It was great — I'll just go kill myself now" is a reaction few want to experience, you know, three times in one day.

Yet it's a typical plaint heard on queue at events like Toronto's Hot Docs, let alone the touring United Nations Association Film Festival (a virtual global wrist-slitting orgy).



Nature calls: 'When My Sorrow Died'
PHOTOS COURTESY OF DOCFEST 13

You'd be hard-pressed to have such a hard time at our own SF DocFest, however. For 13 years it's managed to emphasize the entertaining and eccentric over grim reportage. To be sure, the latest edition, opening Thu/5 (with programs primarily at the Roxie and Oakland School for the Arts) has its share of films on topically important subject themes. Centerpiece presentation *The Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz* poignantly recalls the short history of the brilliant young programmer-activist whose fate is especially chilling given the potential imminent death of net neutrality. *Of Kites and Borders* examines the harsh lives of children in the Tijuana area; *Goodbye Gauley Mountain* has Bay Area "eco-sexuals" Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens uniquely protesting the mountaintop removal industry in the Appalachians. But among 2014 SF DocFest's 40 or so features, only *Ivory Tower* — about the increasingly high cost of higher U.S. education — offers straight-up journalistic overview of an urgent social issue.

More typical of DocFest's sensibility are its numerous portraits of peculiar individuals and even more peculiar obsessions. In the jobs-make-the-man department, there's *An Honest Liar*, whose magician subject The Amazing Randi has made it his personal mission to expose those who'd use his profession's tricks to defraud the vulnerable; *The Engineer*, profiling the sole criminologist working in gang crime-ridden El Salvador; *Bronx Obama*, in which one man's uncanny resemblance to the POTUS sets him on a lucrative but discomfiting career of impersonation for (mostly) audiences of hooting conservatives; and *Vessel*, whose protagonist Dr. Rebecca Gomperts sails the world trying to make abortions available to women whose countries ban the procedure.

There are no less than three features about people trying to succeed among the professionally tough: *Fake It So Real* (the South's independent pro wrestling circuit), *Bending Steel* (a Coney Island performing strongman) and *Glena* (struggling mother hopes to hit paydirt as a cage fighter).

On the obsessive side, *Wicker Kittens* examines the world of competitive jigsaw puzzling. *Jingle Bell Rocks!* examines the netherworld of serious Christmas-music aficionados; *Vannin'* observes the 1970s customized-van culture still alive today. *Magical Universe* is Jeremy Workman's very first-person account of his friendship with

an elderly Maine widower who turns out to have secretly created epic quantities of bizarre Barbie-related art. *Hairy Who and the Imagists* recalls the somewhat less "outsider"-ish achievements of Chicago's '60s avant-garde art scene, while Amos Poe's 1976 *The Blank Generation*, DocFest 13's sole archival feature, flashes back to punk's birth throes at CBGB's.

Another legendary moment is remembered in *Led Zeppelin Played Here*, about an extremely early, ill-received 1969 Zep show at a Maryland youth center that few attended, but many claim to have. Portraits of artists expanding their forms in the present tense include *Trash Dance* (a choreographer collaborates with truckers and their big rigs) and *When My Sorrow Died* (theremin!).

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