



NEW RELEASES

Sound of Metal

The elevator pitch of Darius Marder's debut film has the ring of a joke set-up: did you hear about the metal drummer who went deaf? It doesn't help that the target of the joke is the butt of so many rock stories. But Hollywood has been reassessing drummers. Rather than Animal from the Muppets or Spinal Tap's exploding rhythm section, we now get Christian Bale bashing his kit in *The Big Short* (2015) and the percussive angst of *Whiplash* (2014). The drummer has become a figure of serious intensity. *Sound of Metal* continues the trend: a deeply moving portrait of a man in freefall, the film is no joke. We first meet Ruben (Riz Ahmed) in his domain, a sweaty rock club where, bare torsoed and inked up, he pounds the skins while girlfriend Lou (Olivia Cooke) provides guitar and vocals. Despite the rock 'n' roll, theirs is a disciplined set up. Ruben rises early, prepares a healthy vegan breakfast. The RV that serves as their tour bus and home is neatly organised. If anything, everything feels too tightly tied in place. Later, we'll learn that Ruben (and possibly Lou too) is a recovering addict and fills days with constant activity, partly to ward off empty moments when temptation might become too much. Ruben's hearing loss is sudden and catastrophic. The sound drops out of the movie and voices become muffled as Ruben struggles to grasp what is happening to him. His music, his sobriety and his life with Lou are on the line. Ruben isn't just losing his hearing, he's losing his purpose in life, his identity.

This could be seen as an issues film. It has a definite thesis – being deaf is not a disability but a lived experience – and pursues it sincerely. This is made most explicit by Joe (Paul Raci), a Vietnam veteran and recovering alcoholic who runs the facility for recovering deaf addicts where Ruben seeks refuge. Joe's rules are strict: no phones, no Lou. Ruben, Joe tells him, must learn to be deaf.

But Marder is deft at avoiding cliché and there are intricacies above and beyond the obvious didactic message. We might appreciate Joe's fervour while also seeing his bucolic retreat as just that, a retreat: a self-contained but narrowly enclosed world.

The film is technically accomplished on almost every level. The sound design is an obvious factor, drawing our attention to sound and silence and the many different colours they come in (the whole film has closed captions). Daniël Bouquet's cinematography asserts a heightened watchfulness, alert to visual information now that sound is unavailable to the protagonist. And the cast all flesh out characters that feel like people whose lives are broader than the film can contain. Olivia Cooke's Lou has her own torments, including a complex bond with her French father, played by the reliably compelling Mathieu Amalric. That relationship feels rich enough for a film all its own.

But the standout element is Riz Ahmed's magnificent performance. He plays Ruben as a man as tightly stretched as the skin of his snare drum. A glare lurks in his stare, and his can-do attitude hints at a desperation to block out his demons. His deafness sends him through a range of emotions, akin to the stages of grief. It alternately infuriates him or imbues him with a childlike insecurity or – in a remarkable scene where he takes his frustrations out on a doughnut – both at the same time. His journey is ultimately one of self-

discovery, moving from his co-dependency with Lou to something different – more mature and hopefully happier.

Ahmed's performances here and in last year's *Mogul Mowgli* – another story about a musician stricken by disease – add to an already impressive filmography, which boasts performances as diverse as his comic terrorist in *Four Lions* (2010) and the murder suspect in the HBO series *The Night Of* (2016). With this latest outing, he cements his status as one of the most exciting British actors currently working.

John Bleasdale, *Sight & Sound*, March 2021

Sound and Vision: Director Darius Marder on working with Riz Ahmed and the sound of *Sound of Metal*

Sound of Metal has a unique sound design, one that lets the viewer experience the world through the perspective of Riz Ahmed's character Ruben as he loses his hearing. Director Darius Marder worked with acclaimed sound editor Nicolas Becker (*Gravity*, 2013; *Ex-Machina*, 2014; *Arrival*, 2016) on the film. He talks about the process, and about Ahmed's dedication to the project.

Darius Marder: I had been working on *Sound of Metal* for ten years before I met Nicolas. My brother – my co-screenwriter Abraham Marder – and I had even started on a low-frequency sound design, just to work up the concept. It's tough to impart this vision. I would sit there going, 'OK, here's the deal, we're going to have a sound perspective and come in and out of omniscient sound, and diegetic sound.' Nicolas and I visited the soundless anechoic chamber of the Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique (Ircam) in Paris. You get this experience of sound being sucked into you when you speak. It's almost like sound doesn't exist.

That informed us a lot because we ended up miking the inside of Riz on set. We expanded upon some language that Nicolas had explored in *Gravity*. We had stethoscopic microphones Nicolas created that you can put in the mouth and throat. We would literally record Riz's heart and pulse, all of the sounds of his body. Then we used these inner sounds in tandem with removing the high frequencies. We were trying to develop this sense of being underwater, or this bubble. At the beginning, Ruben has tinnitus, which is something people have heard in a way before, but that whole soundscape is mirrored. That whole soundscape has in-and-outs, so we're almost in touch with what's going on. And then this frequency hits us, which has its own range of qualities. Then you merge into profound deafness, which has a different quality that is all low frequency. With Riz, I was looking for an actor who had this absurd amount of raw talent, but maybe hadn't experienced something like this process before. I didn't want Riz engaging in cerebral activities around forming his character. What moves me in performance is instinct, impulse – the transcendent moments of the unexpected and unexplored. But in order to achieve that, you have to have a firm and fundamental foundation for your character.

The experiment with Riz – building this character without the frontal lobe – was in creating the performance physically and entirely experientially. Learning the drums and learning sign language are two extremely physical distinct work ethics that you have to dedicate yourself to. He spent a lot of time with a deaf man, Jeremy Stone, and a local drummer, Sean Powell of Surfbort, who had had serious drug issues. He went to AA groups and Narcotics Anonymous groups and various other things. He was dedicated.

So by the time Riz hit the set, he had that foundation. He knew where Ruben was from. Riz knew that accent to a T, and it's a very specific American accent. On set, I had an audiologist make Riz a custom set of earpieces that emitted a white noise that didn't allow him to hear his own voice. I could dial that tone up or down on my phone. So, for instance, the moment that Ruben gets tinnitus, Riz gets tinnitus.

As much as possible, there is very little 'pretend' in this movie. If we had to start communicating, I had to write things down for him. Riz was a complete mess because tinnitus will fuck you up. Imagine having mosquitoes in your ears and you can't get rid of them.

Sight & Sound, March 2021

Sound of Metal

Directed by: Darius Marder
©: Sound of Metal LLC
A Caviar and Flat 7 production
In association with: Ward Four
Presented by: Amazon Studios
Production Services by: Upload Films
International Sales by: Protagonist Pictures
Executive Producers: Riz Ahmed, Michaël Sagol, Daniel Sbrega, Dickey Abedon, Derek Cianfrance, Kirt Gunn, Fredric King
Produced by: Bert Hamelinck, Sacha Ben Harroche
Producer: Kathy Benz, Bill Benz
Line Producer: Chris Stinson
Unit Production Manager: Amy Greene
Production Co-ordinator: Joshua Gonzales
Production Accountant: Bill Wingate
Location Manager: Stephen Hartman
Post-production Supervisor: Corentin De Saedeleer
1st Assistant Director: Matthew Vose Campbell
Casting by: Susan Shopmaker
Screenplay by: Darius Marder, Abraham Marder
Story by: Darius Marder, Derek Cianfrance

Director of Photography: Daniël Bouquet
Unit Stills Photographer: Robert Clark
Editor: Mikkel E.G. Nielsen
Production Designer: Jeremy Woodward
Set Decorator: Tara Pavoni
Graphic Designer: Megan Blake
Prop Master: Hilary Taillie
Costume Designer: Megan Stark Evans
Costume Supervisor: Caroline Errington
Make-up Department Head: Julie LeShane
Hair Department Head: Stuart Gordon Tribble
Music by: Abraham Marder, Nicolas Becker
Score Produced by: Abraham Marder, Nicolas Becker
Sound Designer: Nicolas Becker
Sound Mixer: Phillip Bladh
Sound Supervision and Editorial Provided by: Nicolas Becker
Re-recording Mixers: Jaime Baksht, Michelle Couttolenc, Carlos Cortés
Thanks: Evelyn Glennie

CAST

Riz Ahmed (*Ruben Stone*)
Olivia Cooke (*Lou Berger*)
Paul Raci (*Joe*)
Lauren Ridloff (*Diane*)
Mathieu Amalric (*Richard Berger*)
Domenico Toledo (*Michael*)
Chelsea Lee (*Jenn*)
Shaheem Sanchez (*Shaheem*)
Chris Perfetti (*Harlan*)
Bill Thorpe (*the man*)
Michael Tow (*pharmacist*)
William Xifaras (*Michael’s father*)
Rena Maliszweski (*audiologist*)
Tom Kemp (*Dr Paysinger*)
Elan Sicroff (*pianist*)
Jeremy Stone (*ASL teacher*)
Ezra Marder (*ASL student*)
Hartmut Teuber (*Karl*)
Hillary Baack (*Hanna*)
Joe Toledo (*Toledo*)
Adam Preston (*Jake*)
Jonathon LeJeune (*Frank*)
Sean Powell, Dani Miller, Alex Kilgore (*Surfbort members*)
USA 2019
120 mins

A Vertigo release

BFI Southbank

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.
We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Become a BFI Member

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

BFI Player

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates.
Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

New Releases & Re-Releases

Ammonite

From Mon 17 May

Sound of Metal

From Mon 17 May

Nomadland

From Mon 17 May

First Cow

From Fri 28 May

After Love

From Fri 4 Jun

Fargo

From Fri 11 Jun

The Reason I Jump

From Fri 18 Jun

Nashville

From Fri 25 Jun

Ultraviolence

From Sat 26 Jun

Sat 26 June 14:20 + Q&A with director Ken Fero and contributor Janet Alder