

Review: In ‘Songs My Brothers Taught Me,’ Reservation Dreams and Their Limits

Songs My Brothers Taught Me

By STEPHEN HOLDEN MARCH 1, 2016



John Reddy in “Songs My Brothers Taught Me,” written and directed by Chloé Zhao. Credit Kino Lorber

“[Songs My Brothers Taught Me](#),” a melancholic portrait of Lakota Indian life on the Pine Ridge Reservation in the South Dakota Badlands, suggests a Native American answer to “[The Last Picture Show](#).” As in the dying Texas town where that movie is set, a demoralizing stasis prevails, along with a lingering pride in tribal rituals that preserve a sense of continuity. When the residents don traditional headdresses and dance around a bonfire, there is joy in the air.

Alcohol, illegal on the reservation, is a scourge of this impoverished community. Johnny Winters (John Reddy), the movie's teenage protagonist and sporadic narrator, has a history of substance abuse and is involved in a bootlegging operation that leads to a vicious beating by more experienced rivals. In the first words heard in the film, Johnny, on horseback, warns that if you keep running a horse, you'll break its spirit. He observes: "Anything that runs wild got something bad in 'em. You want to leave some of that in there 'cause they need it to survive out here."

Johnny is one of 25 children, from nine wives, of a bull rider who died in a fire. He and his peers jokingly address one another as "brother from another mother." Johnny's embittered older brother, Cody (Justin Reddy), is in prison. When their alcoholic, guilt-ridden single mother, Lisa (Irene Bedard), visits Cody and tells him that she's found God, he sarcastically replies, "Just don't make God another man you abandoned your children for."

Most of Johnny's fellow students at Little Wound High School have no expectations of leaving the reservation. When a teacher questions them about their dreams for the future, Johnny, awakening from a hangover, says he wants to be a boxer or a bull rider. He also fantasizes about escaping his dead-end existence by following his girlfriend, Aurelia (Taysha Fuller), an aspiring lawyer, who's moving to Los Angeles for college. Asked by the teacher where he would live and what he would do for work, his answer is a sullen "I'll figure it out."

Johnny has a sweet-natured 11-year-old sister, Jashaun (Jashaun St. John), who adores him and has yet to succumb to the community malaise. The most intriguing minor character, Travis (Travis Lone Hill), is a heavily tattooed ex-convict, amateur rapper and drunk who makes cartoon-illustrated clothing of reservation life.

The directorial feature debut of the Chinese-American filmmaker [Chloé Zhao](#), "Songs My Brothers Taught Me" could easily be mistaken for a documentary. Its nonprofessional actors mumble dialogue that sounds improvised, although Ms. Zhao is credited as screenwriter.

Because her laissez-faire approach makes little effort to fit the fragmentary scenes into a tidy portrait of reservation life, “Songs My Brothers Taught Me” feels more authentic than if she had chosen to impose a tighter structure. You come at the story, such as it is, as a visitor from the outside world, picking up information as the movie goes along. This approach impedes comprehension, and at moments you may be tempted to sit back and not try to make the pieces fit.

For those unwilling to make the effort, “Songs My Brothers Taught Me” has other rewards. The panoramic cinematography by Joshua James Richards is often breathtaking. Whether the camera observes horseback riders atop a bluff or a distant thunderstorm on the horizon, you are mesmerized by the desolate beauty of the Great Plains and the changing sky overhead.

“Songs My Brothers Taught Me” is not rated. Running time: 1 hour 34 minutes.

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