

FILM REVIEW:

The Bastard Sings the Sweetest Song: A family love story

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- Directed by Christy Garland
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- Classification 14A
- Genre documentary

There was a point in the past decade when the first-person documentary format, used to such commercial rabble-rousing effect by Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock, began to feel self-aggrandizing and disingenuous. Nobody nonchalantly embarks on a venture as complex as a feature-length documentary, which, even in this era of superb consumer-level cameras and home-editing software, is an expensive, time-consuming collaborative process.



[Trailer for The Bastard Sings the Sweetest Song](#)

In contrast to the filmmaker-as-hero tradition, *The Bastard Sings the Sweetest Song*, Canadian director Christy Garland's family documentary set in a small Anglo-Caribbean country on the northern edge of South America, feels radical in its self-effacement. The film is about "Muscle," a produce-delivery man and bird keeper, and his relationship with his elderly alcoholic mother, Mary. The filmmaker never introduces herself, or explains why she came to shoot in Guyana, or why this particular family captured her interest. Even that the director is a "she" is not indicated in the film, though we hear her voice off-camera.

The story belongs to its subjects: Paul "Muscle" Smith is a man in his early 40s living with his family in a small walled compound, which is filled with cages for his roosters and songbirds. The roosters fight, with razor spurs on their heels to slash each other. The songbirds compete in contests to see which bird is quickest to sing the same motif a certain number of times in a row. The film's title refers to one of Muscle's champion songbirds, which he describes as a "bastard."

Muscle is also a devoted son whose determined efforts to protect his mother have turned him into her jailer. Mary has a beatific face and a default expression of gentle resignation. She is a locally admired poet whose work includes both social commentary (a poem about an encounter with an arrogant soldier) and inspiration (an ode to the power of unity). Now, in her 70s, Mary has become a danger to herself as she wanders the roads of Georgetown begging for money for alcohol or cigarettes. Sometimes she falls and hurts herself, so Muscle keeps her locked up in a small cabin, rationing out shots of vodka to keep her placated.

Repeatedly, Mary escapes the compound and goes for a walk through the streets, followed by the camera (she asks the filmmakers for money, or to go back to their hotel and leave her alone). Each time, her son locks her up again. When not tending to his mother, Muscle tends to his birds, both the fighting and singing kinds.

Dispersed throughout these images are interviews with Mary, her sisters and daughter, who relate a devastating history of homicidal family violence, perpetrated by Mary's late husband. "I don't have family skeletons," Muscle tells a friend at one point, "I've got a full cemetery."

The intention here, though, is not a shock exposé or exploration of the sociology of violence. Rather, the Smiths, son and mother, are offered as exemplary figures of endurance, in a way that echoes the dramas of Robert Bresson or the Dardenne brothers. It's a record of daily repetitive struggles to overcome the past, set against the unconcealed metaphor of the caged birds. The film's concision is admirable, though on occasion, Garland's ellipticism can frustrate: Does Muscle have a wife? How many kids?

According to an interview with the filmmaker in *The London Free Press*, Garland shot *Bastards* in 10 weeks over a three-year period, from 2008 to 2010. The idea of the film began with her interest in the phenomenon of bird-singing contests. What she ended up with is something that feels unclassifiable: a documentary as allegory, but mostly a record of a love story between a filmmaker and her subjects, struggling with the cages of intimacy and cruelty that shape their lives.