

Brainwashed - "The Pierced Heart and The Machete"

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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In the past, I have definitely preferred Sublime Frequencies' musical releases to their cinematic ones, but Olivia Wyatt's follow-up to *Staring into the Sun* is quite a beguiling exception to that trend. Naturally, one major reason that this film is so great is the exotic and fascinating subject matter (Vodou pilgrimages in Haiti). However, Wyatt's skillful execution elevates her footage into something truly wonderful, lushly and kinetically capturing the unique and occasionally disturbing sights and sounds of a world that very few non-Haitians will ever to experience first-hand.

[Sublime Frequencies](#)

The first half of the film is devoted to a pilgrimage to the sacred waterfall in Southwestern Haiti where Èzili Danto is said to reside. Danto is also known as The Black Madonna, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and Our Lady of Lourdes and is believed to be the goddess of love, art, and passion. Also, she is apparently quite fond of pig sacrifices. Danto's section is fairly gripping viewing from the very first moment, as it opens with an a cappella song about vomiting blood and only gets stranger from there. Aside from a brief scene where a bull is killed with a machete and people excitedly run over to chew and lick its wounds, however, the Danto pilgrimage is a remarkably joyous affair filled with wild outdoor dancing that sometimes seems more like a bizarre town-wide rave than anything voodoo-related. The dancing even extends into the next day, where throngs of people visit the waterfall to bathe and dance while an endearingly ramshackle ensemble bleats and clatters away.

The second half follows a pilgrimage north to the sacred mud pool of Ogoun, the god of war, iron, and politics (and also Danto's husband). Unsurprisingly, it is a bit darker and male-centric than the previous segment, offering yet another bull sacrifice, then raising the bar with the addition of cock fights (and later, someone pulling the head off of a chicken). Also, there is some rather singular footage of a dancer eating broken glass, as well as some dangerous-looking tricks with fire. There is still quite a lot of dancing, however, though it is a bit

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more ritualistic this time around: lots of troupes of women in matching, brightly colored dresses, as well as several lone maniacs who dance like they have been satanically possessed (providing some of film's most electric scenes). The culminating scenes of the mud pool, however, do not seem nearly as ecstatic and uninhibited as those from Danto's waterfall, though one fellow (presumably chemically impaired) almost manages to drown and needs to be rescued.

Being a Sublime Frequencies release, music plays an important, omnipresent role in *The Pierced Heart and The Machete*—

in fact, the whole thing could almost be seen as a prolonged, eclectic, and sometimes-unnerving music video. While many disparate native styles are represented, the primary emphasis is upon the various bands of percussionists providing the revelry's pulse. That is a wise move, as it is pretty neat to see a handful of guys armed with a bottle, a few hand drums, and a conch shell whip dancers into an absolute frenzy. Some of the other music is quite wonderful too. I particularly enjoyed a charmingly ridiculous-sounding bit of quasi-reggae, as well as a singularly bludgeoning bit of low-budget techno that was so obsessively repetitive that it resembled a locked-groove.

The other distinctly Sublime Frequencies-esque facet to Wyatt's film is its "anything goes" aesthetic. There is no traditional, linear narrative to the footage at all. Instead, Olivia's camera simply drifts through the throngs of people, lingering on the sights that matter and allowing the more compelling moments as much time as they need to make their impact. To her credit, Wyatt does not dwell long on the more extreme aspects of the pilgrimage, nor is she unnecessarily rigid about what is thematically appropriate. As a result, animal sacrifice gets less time than an amusing sequence of two women's synchronized dancing and the film benefits from many funny, unexpected, and surreal digressions that only add to the singular atmosphere.

While just being able to witness the sights and sounds of two Haitian Vodou pilgrimages from the heart of the chaos makes *The Pierced Heart and The Machete* a unique and fascinating document, the film's success goes deeper than that, as it could not possibly be better edited. I would be hard-pressed to find a single squandered frame, as the flow of curious characters, bold colors, wild dancing, and frenzied percussion rushes by without lull or misstep. More importantly, it is simply a very fun and entertaining film, traits that actually somehow eclipse the exotic subject matter. Some of the pilgrims are clearly engaged in a rapturous, totally uninhibited Bacchanal on a level that my suburban American self can barely comprehend, either dancing beyond the limits of human endurance or just cackling maniacally beneath a waterfall. I cannot imagine this film ever getting boring, no matter how many times I see it, as Wyatt's perfectly distilled tide of colorful, ecstatic craziness is the best, most mesmerizing kind of sensory overload. This easily ranks among Sublime Frequencies' best releases.

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(The trailer can be viewed [here](#) .)