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‘Somebody Up There Likes Me’ Review: Through the Years With Ronnie Wood, a Rolling Stone Who Never Stopped Being Lovable, Even in Excess



Courtesy Eagle Rock Entertainment

Ronnie Wood has always seemed like he'd be nothing if not an enjoyable hang. That proves to be very much the case with "Somebody Up There Likes Me," a documentary about the Rolling Stones guitarist from British director Mike Figgis ("Leaving Las Vegas"), who has clearly been hitting it off for quite a while with the musician ... although Wood is so hail-fellow-well-met, you suspect he might have a good rapport with anybody. A surfeit of conviviality and a storied 60-year career do not always add up to a great story, though, and so "Somebody" will be liked by hardcore Stones fans down

here more than raved about by anyone hoping Figgis has sussed out a narrative worthy of one of his fictional projects.

When Wood is glimpsed in the doc's opening, there are pianos tinkling instead of guitars blaring, as we see him at work on his other passion, visual art. That he's working on sketches may serve as premonition of the sketch-like quality of the entire short (72-minute) feature, which dips in and out of bands, eras and tales of druggy excess and family redemption without ever making too much of an impact in any one area. It lacks the harrowing qualities of a lot of rock biopics, although that isn't necessarily for Figgis' lack of trying: There are numerous moments in which the filmmaker tries to cajole Wood into exploring the limits of excess or personal devastations. No danger of this turning into "Leaving Las Vegas 2": The rocker, while never downplaying the danger of the fire he's played with throughout his life, has to chuckle as he admits he's led a largely charmed life. We end up charmed, too, if never really riveted.

Wood fills in a few early details that might have left psychological scars: an alcoholic father who might have ended up spending the night in any random neighbor's garden; a first love who perished in a car crash. From there, things look up for Scott, even if it does take him more than a decade after he first spots the nascent Stones playing blues covers in a nightclub in 1963 and make good on his vow to someday join them. In the interim, he spends the '60s and early '70s making career moves that would be peaks for most musicians, even if it was all prelude for him: stints with a garage band called the Birds (not to be confused with the Byrds), then fruitful hookups with Rod Stewart in the Jeff Beck Group and Faces, before Mick Taylor's abrupt exit from the Stones creates a dream opening.

What's almost funny — but which also precludes "Behind the Music"-level highs or lows — is how utterly functional an alcoholic and addict Wood was. "He has a great immune system. He's very like me, with a great pain threshold," figures Keith Richards, laughing; Charlie Watts allows that he "did do a lot of things to excess" but "never lost it." Wood's third wife, Sally, his junior by several decades (two prior spouses and their children go unmentioned), points out that he's "always a happy person" whether sober or not, but she prefers the extra realness now that, having rounded 70, her husband is completely substance-free. Wood is operated on for lung cancer but comes out being told it's as if he hadn't smoked any cigs, let alone 30 a day for 50 years — what he calls "a get out of jail free card." At some point we can agree with the title: God must enjoy doing the hang with Wood as much as Figgis.

For all that's left out of a movie this short, Figgis makes some curious inclusions, like old video footage of himself talking with the famously scary rock manager Peter Grant, or Mick Jagger discussing about what kind of jazz art-school students favored in the early '60s — interesting subjects for other, longer films. It certainly could have used one more film clip of the Stones with Wood in the band than the one we get, of them playing "When the Whip Comes Down." There's some interesting talk by Richards of how different a flavor Wood brought to the band, entwining with his own efforts instead of going off on melodic solos like his predecessor, Taylor; Jagger talks about how they suddenly became a more "good-timey" band upon Wood's mid-'70s arrival.

Not surprisingly, “Somebody Up There Likes Me” becomes a good-timey movie, too ... as much of one as any movie that introduces the subject of freebasing cocaine and other usually more ominous topics can be. By the way, for anyone whose knowledge of Wood comes mainly from remembering Mike Myers’ impression on “Saturday Night Live”: The movie does not have, or require, subtitles; rest assured that the rocker’s oft-parodied dialect is really as clear as his present-day head.

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Reviewed online, Los Angeles, Sept. 16, 2020. Running time: 72 MIN.

Production: (Documentary — U.K.) An Eagle Rock Films production in association with Sky Arts. Producers: Peter Worsley, Louis Figgis.

Crew: Director: Mike Figgis. Camera: Jamie Gramston, Simon Kennedy, Andrew Muggleton, John Simmons, Tim Sutton. Editors: Matthew Longfellow, Matt Ashton. Music: Ronnie Wood, Rosey Chan.

With:

Music By: