

WISCONSIN FILM FESTIVAL

***Song Sung Blue* at the 2008 Wisconsin Film Festival**

Kathy Bailey on Sunday 04/06/2008 1:30 pm , (7) Recommendations

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The crowd at the Bartell Theater on Saturday was doubtlessly expecting to hear lots of Neil Diamond songs in *Song Sung Blue* by Greg Kohs, a documentary about a husband-and-wife Neil Diamond tribute act from Milwaukee. Filmgoers were singing the pop star's songs in their seats *before* the show.

Festival director Meg Hamel introduced the film, calling it "marvelous and arresting," and guaranteed that it "will blow your mind." And she was completely right. The crowd had no idea what they were in for, which was a raw look at the life of Mike Sardina and his wife Claire, and their struggle as the duo dubbed Lightning and Thunder to make it as performers. They were completely committed to their act to the point of referring to themselves by their stage names.

Lightning and Thunder performed an increasing number of large gigs in the '90s with high energy renditions of Neil Diamond songs, complete with all the costumes and sweat you'd expect.

Then came the first strike of bad luck for the couple. While gardening in front of their small home, Claire was hit by a car that lost control and pinned her underneath it. This violent accident caused her to lose part of her leg. The ensuing recovery, underscored by medication issues, loss of income, and stress tested their marriage and all but doomed their career.

As Mike tried to keep the family afloat, the stress heightened, the crowds stopped coming, bankruptcy loomed and he became ill himself. But their love of performing and their romantic vision of a comeback kept them going.

Ultimately and rather swiftly, Mike succumbed to heart disease, and you hear his last breath in this film. This unflinching look at a couple, their lives and the people that loved them in *Song Sung Blue* was sometimes embarrassing and painful to watch, sometimes uplifting, but always real.

When Mike died, Eddie Vedder sent Claire a heartfelt letter and a guitar. He met them when he introduced them at the Wisconsin State Fair, and they convinced him to sing "Forever in Blue Jeans" with them to the extreme delight of the 30,000 people in attendance. Mike did not know who Eddie was and had only vaguely heard of Pearl Jam, but the couple's sweetness and drive pulled Eddie in, and the rock star told Claire that he still had the scarf that he took off Mike's neck that night.

During the post-screening Q&A, editor Nicholas Kleczewski said he worked 90 hours a week on editing footage for over a year, trying to figure out if there was a movie in it. He's now working on two other documentaries.

Later outside the Bartell, Claire got ready to depart in her limo. She looked much healthier than in the film, and I asked her if she'd do it all over again. She said she absolutely would, the only thing she'd change is to have Mike with her again. She said although it was hard being alone, as her father died when she was nine and she grew up without a man in her life, and now it's "like going back in time for me".

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