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ENGAGED CIRCLE

IN THE DOC

Beyond the lines of the blues

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A MAN SINGING random lines of love while strumming the guitar probably isn't enough to capture interest. But when he launches into an explanation of the history of blues

FILM: **SONGLINES**
 DIRECTOR: **VASUDHA JOSHI**

music and arrives at a disingenuous comparison of a girl and a woman to explain the similarity between folk and blues music, he has your full attention. "One is a woman, one is a girl," he gestures randomly. "What is the difference? Nothing. Blues and folk same thing. Are you understand?" he asks in broken English. Within 10 minutes of her film, Joshi has introduced you to a man you want to understand. Even if you are smiling at his choice of allegory. This is Rewben Mashangwa, or the father of Naga folk blues, as he calls himself in the film.

And there are others that follow. A blind baul singer from Tarapeeth, West Bengal. An Adivasi woman from Singbhum, Jharkhand, who sings a traditional ho tune. A Bangla urban baul blues singer from Kolkata. A blues band from Shillong. If this seems like an eclectic mix, in Joshi's film they don't strike discordant notes as they explore and explain the terrain between blues and folk music. Tipriti Kharbangar, the blues singer from Soulmate is perhaps the most coherent one when she proffers her understanding: "Blues is evolving all the time. It is never a finished state of being."

Snatches of music take us across the unnecessary divisive lines of blues and folk music

Neither is this film an exhaustive account of the evolution of blues music. Or its Indianisation. Or the similarities between folks and blues music. To Joshi's credit and our relief, an academic narrative is cast

aside for snatches of music as the lines between the two are erased. Even as they let us in on their understanding of the two genres, it is evident that these are personal viewpoints. *Songlines* is incredibly patient; Joshi holds back as she creates spaces for conversation. On a basic note, this film could be just a series of musicians sharing their work. But listen closer and the harmony emerges.

But perhaps the best recommendation for *Songlines* is Joshi and editor Tarun Bhartiya's ability to make voyeurs of us. In the opening frame, a woman lounging comfortably sings a few lines, a casual comment perhaps on Kolkata. Towards the end of the film, when we return to the same space, we realise we are actually watching Joshi unwinding in the comfort of what could well be her home. An incredibly intimate moment as we try to take away as many details as we possibly can.



Sensation Father of the Naga folk blues, Mashangwa, has an enviable fan following

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