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guide

1984

The world's superpowers are at flashpoint
and Midnight Oil's manning the barricades

CRAIG MATHIESON

The new Australian documentary *Midnight Oil 1984* follows the groundbreaking rock band on a national tour where their popularity not only vaulted to a new level, but their lead singer, Peter Garrett ran for the Senate in a federal election. If you were at one of those ferocious outdoor gigs that year, chances are there's a trace element of your voice in the finished film.

"Often with a lot of live concert material that you see filmed the point of mixing it is to get the audience out,

but with this film it felt wrong that when you see an active audience you can't hear them. We spent a long time making the audience a part of the film," says the movie's director, Ray Argall. "There's a really strong story to it, but when the music is up there you had to feel it."

Rock documentaries that look back are too often either coronations after the fact or are driven by nostalgic longing, but *Midnight Oil 1984* has such a palpable energy - as sound and as a shared experience - that it exists as more than a period piece. Promoting their fifth studio album, and the first to

top the Australian charts, *Red Sails in the Sunset*, the group perform as one, from Garrett's electric current limbs to drummer Rob Hirst's charging backbeat.

"It wasn't about the lead singer being up front, commanding the audience, it was about how every person on stage worked together and communicated," Argall notes. "The communication between them is incredible. It's still a rock and roll concert, but the way they communicated was really important."

Despite this, the documentary was in a state of limbo for 25 years. Then

in his mid-20s, Argall had already made several film clips with the group and shot live shows, so when Midnight Oil expressed an interest in filming a show on the tour he tagged along from the start to capture footage. But the sound from what was to be the source gigs, at Sydney's Hordern Pavilion, never satisfied the band, and the project was put on hold.

Periodically Argall, who went on to direct the features *Return Home* and *Eight Ball* as well as episodic television, would check in with the band's

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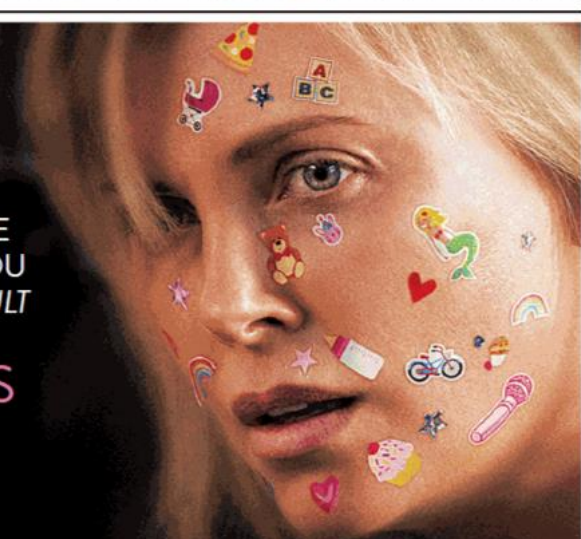
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1984

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long-time manager, Gary Morris Vasicek, about working on the material. Argall had more than 8500 metres of footage, a substantial archive that he transported from Melbourne to Sydney, where he now lives, but even while he kept it safe his memory of it became clouded by time's uncertainty.

"It's a feeling where you have something ingrained in your mind, like these beautiful gum trees that were a backdrop in the Adelaide Gardens," Argall says. "Then there are things that I have no memory of that we obviously shot, because we have the proof."

Eight years ago he began to work with the footage, assiduously matching footage Argall shot by himself on a 16mm camera with existing concert recordings. It was a giant jigsaw – because film stock was so expensive, there were few song-length takes. When he had enough sequences to reassure himself that he had more than an "expensive home movie", Argall visited the band members, who had put Midnight Oil aside in 2002 after a storied career.

Hirst and guitarists Jim Moginie and Martin Rotsey were still creatively involved (bassist Peter Gifford had departed in 1987), and their first question was "have you spoken to Pete?". Garrett, then a Labor party MP and



Midnight Oil and Peter Garrett brought power and passion to everything they did.

federal minister as part of his second political tilt, asked what "the boys thought?". With their eventual joint blessing Argall got to work, although advanced plans to counterpoint the 1984 material with their contemporary careers was put aside after Midnight Oil reunited 2017's world tour.

"As I started to build the songs up the audience's participation became more and more apparent," Argall says. "The [Red Sails] album had only just come out, but they were singing every single word. If you went to any of the recent concerts, you saw the same thing. It was great music, but it also genuinely meant something to the audience."

The connection between Midnight Oil's political views and their often rapturous

audience's beliefs outside the music has long been debated, and in his contemporary interview Garrett positions the events of 1984 as evidence of a genuine influence. His last-minute decision to stand for the Senate in NSW as a candidate with the fledgling Nuclear Disarmament Party (NDP) gave focus to the band's fears about the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union ending in nuclear obliteration.

Labor, fearful of losing the youth vote, attacked the NDP as a one-policy party, and despite receiving an impressive 9.6 per cent of the primary vote, Garrett fell short of a quota. But another way of looking at *Midnight Oil 1984* politically is in the footage of a burgeoning Australia leaving behind a stalled

Commonwealth economy for a new commercial order. While they were attacking the NDP, Prime Minister Bob Hawke and his treasurer, Paul Keating, were also laying the groundwork for globalisation.

"The integrity is still there," says Argall of Garrett and his bandmates, and the connection between the 1984 seen in the film and the Australia of today is the ongoing separation of the generations coming of age and the ones that hold the reins of power.

"What you're seeing," Argall notes, "is another group of people who were in their 20s and trying to deal with the world."

Midnight Oil 1984 is in cinemas until Wednesday, May 16.

A modest comedy that packs a serious message

JAKE WILSON

"I want to change the world," the French writer-director Blandine Lenoir says of her new film *Aurore*. It's a big statement to make about a movie that could be viewed as a modest comedy, but the themes of *Aurore*, while likely to strike a chord with many, aren't the kind most often put on screen.

At the age of 50, the title character (Agnes Jaoui) has many problems including divorce, job loss, menopause, age discrimination and the unsettling knowledge that she's soon to become a grandmother.

This is only Lenoir's second feature, but as she points out, speaking through an interpreter, she's no beginner when it comes to cinema. A few years younger than her heroine, she started out acting in her teens, as a protegee of the famously provocative – some would say notorious –

French director Gaspar Noe. In Noe's 1990s films *Carne* and *I Stand Alone*, she played a mute girl who becomes the victim of the incestuous desires of her father (Philippe Nahon), a brutish butcher.

Noe's brand of provocation is a far cry from anything found in *Aurore*, and Lenoir says that while she planned to become a filmmaker from early on, she didn't look to him for inspiration.

As examples of what she admires, she mentions Maurice Pialat's 1983 film *A Nos Amours* – which gave a breakout role to another teenage actor, Sandrine Bonnaire – and all the work of the great US independent actor-director John Cassavetes.

Where *Aurore* is concerned, she says, the inspiration came directly from the life around her. "Basically this kind of subject matter is not seen in cinema. And it was, I felt, a real lack as a cinema-goer. And



Agnes Jaoui plays the title character in *Aurore*.

around me there were a lot of women around their 50s who were beautiful, who were funny, to whom interesting things were happening, and they were not at all represented in cinema." In a way, I suggest,

this cuts against a view that France is a country where older women are valued, and where female stars can maintain their status, in contrast to the premium Hollywood puts on youth.

If this is true, Lenoir says, it's only to a certain extent. "I think you can get this impression because we have a few actresses who actually are working a lot – like Juliette Binoche, Isabelle Huppert, Karin Viard, all these women who are in their 50s. But it's a handful ... all the others, equally talented, get no roles offered."

Aurore's spirit is optimistic and Lenoir can see reasons for optimism, in French cinema and elsewhere. "I think things are changing. Slowly, but they are."

Aurore now screening. Jake Wilson travelled to France courtesy of the Alliance Francaise.

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