

Viewing Notes for Julien Temple's *The Ecstasy of Wilko Johnson* (2015)

“If it's going to kill me, I don't want it to bore me.” ~Wilko Johnson

This film's goal is to share what Wilko Johnson learned when he got a grave medical diagnosis, which was “to contemplate a moment of beauty without trying to preserve it for future recollection.”

Johnson calls the year after his cancer diagnosis the “most marvellous year of my life.” He was changed by it for the better, describing his personality previous to the illness as temperamental, jumpy, choleric, and often anti-social.

Filmmaker Jonathan Demme claims that this film uses “cinema at the highest level to look at life in the most creative of ways.” Do you agree?

British film critic Geoffrey Macnab calls Wilko Johnson “a renaissance man.” While that term is maybe used too liberally at times, note how the filmmakers use visuals, voiceover readings, and film clips and to emphasize Johnson's various deep interests: classic English literature, music, film history, and astronomy. Johnson received his university degree in English and especially loved studying Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic sagas.

Note how the image of playing chess with death from *The Seventh Seal* is used throughout the film. What does this allusion add to the idea of confronting mortality? Is Johnson playing a strategic game of sorts? Consider what other visual emphases are most effective for you in capturing or illustrating Wilko's psyche during his “ecstatic” year?

Director Julien Temple cut his teeth as a rock documentarian. His best known work includes the punk movie *UK Subs* (1979) and films about The Sex Pistols, The Clash, and The Kinks, as well as many, many short music videos. He has also directed feature films, including the musical *Absolute Beginners* (1986, featuring David Bowie and Sade) and the comedy *Earth Girls Are Easy* (1988). He has more music documentaries and other films of indefinable genre in the works now.

A bit of trivia: Johnson got to perform a brief role on the popular *Game of Thrones* series as a mute executioner called “Payne.” You'll see a brief clip of it about an hour into the film.

Wilko Johnson's band, Dr. Feelgood, was a “bands' band,” more influential on other musicians than known among the general public. “They were the biggest band in England for a moment, in 1976.” They were seen as a bridge between Rock n' Roll and Punk and influenced famous acts like The Sex Pistols, Blondie, and The Jam. Wilko Johnson eventually left the band after falling out with the other members, but the band kept going, and he pursued other musical projects.

Music writer Zoe Howe and artist Jonny Halifax teamed up to create an illustrated fairytale version of Wilko Johnson's story. You can see it at the artist's website: <http://jonnyhalifax.com>

Johnson also took the opportunity to develop his reflections on living and dying in a memoir that was published in 2016, titled *Don't You Leave Me Here*.