

Salute: A moving tribute

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Salute is a documentary about Australian sprinter Peter Norman and his public gesture of political solidarity with African American athletes John Carlos and Tommy Smith at the 1968 Olympic Games. Directed by Matt Norman, it was first shown at the 2008 Sydney Film Festival where it won the Best Australian documentary prize. (See interview with Matt Norman).

The review below was originally posted on September 19, 2008 as part of the World Socialist Web Site's coverage of last year's Sydney Film Festival. Salute was recently named as the biggest earning Australian documentary for 2008 and will be released on DVD this month.

Peter Norman (1942-2006), an Australian sprinter whose sporting career was cut short following his gesture of political solidarity with medal-winning African-American athletes at the Mexico City Olympic Games in 1968, is the subject of *Salute*, one of the better documentaries at the 2008 Sydney Film Festival.

The lead-up to the Mexico Games occurred in the midst of a series of violent and bitter struggles by working people around the world. The assassination of American civil rights leader Martin Luther King in April 1968 provoked the eruption of ghetto riots in US cities; French workers and students challenged capitalism in the May-June general strike; and in Mexico City the military opened fire on thousands of protesting students in Tlatelolco plaza demanding democratic reform and social justice just 10 days before the Olympic Games opening ceremony. Over 500 Mexican students were arrested and at least 200 killed, with some investigations putting the death toll as high as 1,000.

One year prior to the Games, an American civil rights organisation—the Olympic Project for Human Rights—proposed that African-American athletes who

qualified for the international event boycott it in order to highlight ongoing racial oppression in the US. The athletes decided, however, that they would gain more publicity for the civil rights movement by participating, but that each individual should be free to develop their own protest at the Games.

This led to one of the most iconic images in the history of the Olympic Games, when Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the first and third place-getters in the 200-metre sprint, raised their clenched fists during the medal presentation ceremony as the American national anthem was being played. Norman, who came second in the event, stood on the podium wearing an Olympic Project for Human Rights button given to him by one of the athletes just prior to the ceremony, and then publicly defended their protest.

To his credit, *Salute's* director Matt Norman—Peter Norman's nephew—spends considerable time outlining the historical and political context of the event. Utilising archival footage, interviews and intelligent narration, he makes clear that the heroic actions of the three athletes were not accidental, but an organic part of an international movement against racism and for democratic rights.

A couple of local film reviewers have superficially criticised *Salute*, claiming that the documentary is too long. Matt Norman, however, explained in one media interview that he wanted to "push the archival footage to the max to show younger people what it was like" and to "promote civil rights issues".

Salute, for example, details the Tlatelolco massacre in October, 1968 when Mexican authorities shot student demonstrators, an event that was hidden from the athletes and the international media at the time. In addition, the movie explains the social and political tensions in Australia in order to provide some background to Norman's actions.

Importantly, Matt Norman was able to bring the three

athletes together before the cameras to tell their story. The two black athletes had previously given slightly different versions about the 200-metre race, with Carlos claiming that he let Smith win the event. Fortunately the interview was held not long before Norman's untimely death from a heart attack in 2006.

And what a remarkable and inspiring story it is. Smith and Carlos consulted with Peter Norman before the medals ceremony, in case he might have felt that they were spoiling his moment of glory. Norman immediately agreed with their proposed protest, and decided to wear the Olympic Project for Human Rights badge in solidarity. While the rest is history, the subsequent events and how the protest ruined the sporting careers of all three athletes are not well known.

Prior to and during the Mexico Games, US sporting authorities repeatedly threatened African-American athletes that any form of protest would lead to instant dismissal from the Olympic team. There were anonymous death threats and a rumour circulated that there was a sniper in Mexico City's main stadium prepared to shoot any African-American athlete who dared stage a protest. The three athletes, therefore, had real reason to fear for their lives.

After the ceremony, Smith and Carlos were immediately expelled from the Games by the US authorities and both lost their jobs; Smith's mother died from a heart attack in 1970 when local farmers sent her manure and dead rats in protest against her son's actions; and Carlos's wife committed suicide.

Likewise Norman, who qualified for the next Olympic Games in Munich in 1972, was excluded by Australian Olympic officials. The Australian selectors were so eager to punish Norman over his participation in the 1968 protest that they decided against sending any Australian sprinters at all, in order to prevent him from competing. Norman's sprint times were fast enough for him to qualify for both the 100 and 200-metre events in Munich. In fact, his Mexico City 200-metre sprint would have been a gold medal winning time at the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000. So trenchant was the vendetta by Australian sporting officials against Norman that they refused to even invite him to the 2000 event.

Peter Norman comes across in the documentary as a warm and remarkably modest man, with no sense of regret or bitterness over his appalling treatment by

Australian sporting officials. His sense of humour is infectious and on camera he constantly downplays his role in the protest, simply emphasising that he felt privileged to be part of the historic protest. *Salute* is a fitting tribute to Norman's humanity and an important reminder that there was a time when champion athletes courageously spoke out in defence of democratic rights and in defiance of their national governments.



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