

Sound of Metal: Searching for relief in “a damn cruel place”

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Directed by Darius Marder; written by Darius Marder and Abraham Marder

Sound of Metal is a film directed and co-written by Darius Marder, released in the US in November 2020. It is a sympathetic effort that sheds light on some of the difficulties facing particularly vulnerable social layers and individuals.

The story initially follows a musician couple, Ruben (Riz Ahmed) and Lou (Olivia Cooke), who play in a “sludge metal” band, Blackgammon. They live out of their RV and play gigs in cities across the US. Both Ruben and Lou depend on music, not only for money but for their various emotional needs. Ruben is a recovering drug addict, and Lou is still visibly reeling from a difficult past.

The nightly, high-volume shows suddenly cause a rapid deterioration in drummer Ruben’s hearing. Feeling he has no other option, he continues to play on and, during a concert, loses his hearing entirely. The pair’s world is immediately thrown into crisis. Ruben learns that expensive cochlear implants may repair his hearing, but he cannot afford them without insurance.

He finds a rural community shelter for the hearing-impaired run by a recovering alcoholic and deaf Vietnam War veteran named Joe (Paul Raci). The couple must separate, however, for Ruben to be able to enter the shelter. After initially rejecting the offer, they make the difficult decision that Ruben should receive help while Lou returns to her estranged father in Europe.

At the shelter, Joe works with Ruben to convince him to accept the reality of his deafness. Ruben anxiously wants to return to his previous life. Eventually, he begins to learn American Sign Language and works with deaf grade-school students as a teacher’s assistant. Several moving scenes of the classroom and other

forms of interaction take up the middle portion of the film, which has little vocal communication. One begins to have a small inkling of what it means to live and feel without hearing.

Eventually, Ruben’s anxiety to return to “normal hearing” and to get back to Lou leads to drastic efforts to raise money for the cochlear implant surgery. The surgery causes a falling out with Joe, who has insisted all along that being deaf is “not a handicap. Not something to fix. ... All of these kids, all of us need to be reminded of it every day.”

When Ruben leaves the shelter and activates his implants, he learns that sound is now distorted and difficult to process. He flies to France and reunites with Lou. But his hearing is now deeply unpleasant, everything off-kilter. The film ends, to its credit, without a convenient solution to Ruben’s situation.

There are genuine strengths to *Sound of Metal*. The precariousness of Lou and Ruben’s daily life will be familiar to multitudes of people, particularly among the younger generation. Ruben relies on a disciplined regimen to get him through the day, and the pair need each other as a means of emotional and economic survival. A major health crisis instantly and despairingly throws everything into question. One palpably grasps the dread overwhelming the pair of artists as Ruben loses his hearing, while medical and financial help are nowhere available. This is an everyday occurrence in America.

Of course, the desperate condition of the artists in *Sound of Metal* has become more even widely generalized since the film was shot in 2018. Countless musicians, music venue workers, technicians and workers in related fields have been left entirely vulnerable to the coronavirus pandemic. The profit-hungry ruling elite has pursued profits above all else

over the past 12 months, resulting in the deaths of some 2.8 million people so far.

Even prior to the present health disaster, an artist like Ruben had almost nowhere to turn. Now, with the live music industry essentially left to collapse, his sudden loss takes on an even broader significance, emblematic of conditions facing entire generations of artists.

Ahmed and Cooke give admirable performances. They are particularly adept at conveying the difficulties of life—we see and feel it in their worried eyes, their psychic and physical apprehension and even their anger. One does not need a full accounting of their personal histories to understand they are trying to survive as artists under painful, turbulent conditions.

The same could be said of Raci's performance. Joe confronts Ruben, following the latter's surgery, in one of *Sound of Metal's* more moving scenes. The older man feels a trust has been broken. Ruben explains he has to reclaim the life he had before the hearing loss. "What does it matter? All this shit, it just passes. Nobody cares if I vanish, man. ... It's all gonna just keep moving, and ... That's what life does."

Joe acknowledges that the world "can be a damn cruel place" but argues that the shelter's methods, which he has been trying to pass on to Ruben, can help combat the "clamoring, or running or desperately clutching" and produce moments "where this crappy mundane world suddenly becomes radiant and magnificent, and all fear is gone." But the pressures are ultimately too great for Ruben.

Though it was perhaps not filmmaker Marder's conscious intention, the contrast between Ruben's desperate individualist reaction to his crisis, understandable as it may be, and the more socially oriented response offered by Joe's deaf community shelter is a compelling subtheme.

At each turn, Ruben can only conceive of a way out of his distressing condition in terms of tireless individual effort and will power. As social and arts programs are defunded, privatized or destroyed, the youthful artist is given to believe that his or her well-being—and even the very possibility of pursuing a life in art—depends more than ever on personal gumption and "hard work."

Ruben's demanding work ethic and ingenuity were previously responsible for "saving" both Lou and himself. Even when threatened with total hearing loss,

Ruben cannot allow himself to pause—everything is dependent on the couple's internal ecosystem (including the RV routine, the shows, recording, their relationship, perhaps the sobriety) being sustained. His first instinct is to try and "play through it." After the hearing loss, the "silver bullet" of a cochlear implant fix proves illusory.

The shelter attempts to deal with reality as it exists—in this case with the lack of hearing—in a demonstrably social manner. One is not alone in one's struggles, and it is possible to overcome them collectively. Of course, this may be a little too easy to say—for a musician, it is hard to imagine anything more "life-threatening" than losing one's ability to hear sounds distinctly.

As noted, the value of a social response is likely not the filmmakers' conscious concern. At one point, Joe emphasizes the necessity of searching for a "kingdom of god" and a "stillness" in oneself as a means of coping with the difficulties. This suggests resignation or retreat. (On the other hand, Lou is "saved" by her rich, estranged father.)

Darius Marder told an interviewer that he grew up "in a spiritual community, and ... was raised Buddhist eventually" and, furthermore, that *Sound of Metal* "is so much about acceptance and ... impermanence and letting go."

Ruben's drama has been structured so that "acceptance" turns out to be the only rational alternative. But while individuals may discover "letting go" to be a solution, entire peoples and social classes cannot succumb to such fatalism. Great numbers of workers and young people, including artists, who have been left to fend for themselves in the midst of an increasingly unbearable social crisis, will seek a way out by different means, finding their own "kingdom of god" in their powerful and necessary class unity and strength, in the fight for their own social interests based on material and spiritual needs.



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