

A FILM BY OLIVIER JOLIAT & MATTHIAS WILLI



Documentary, 72 min, Switzerland, 2023
OV: Swiss-German, English, German with English, German or French subtitles

Produced by soap factory GmbH
in co-production with Recycled TV AG
and SRF Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen

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Swiss theatrical release: March 16th, 2023
International release: TBA

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I. SYNOPSIS

With his band Zeal & Ardor Swiss musician Manuel Gagneux was catapulted overnight from the underground to the big stages of the world. The bold mix of Black Metal and old work songs and field hollers by African-American slaves – his answer to a racist provocation on the Internet – is politically explosive. Religion, racism, segregation and appropriation: With his music Gagneux is questioning and breaking taboos. But being praised as a new kind of leader by his fans frightens the introverted artist. How can he deal with the oversized expectations?

WITH

Manuel Gagneux
Marco von Allmen
Rafaela Dieu
Marc Obrist
Tiziano Volante
Denis Wagner
and many others



II. BACKGROUND

Zeal & Ardor is a Swiss avant-garde metal band started and led by Manuel Gagneux, a Swiss-American musician who had previously created a chamber pop project called Birdmask. Formed in 2013, the band mixes sounds of African-American spirituals with black metal.

Initially a solo project, the band signed with MVKA records in 2016 and expanded to a full lineup, with Gagneux on vocals and guitar, backing vocalists Denis Wagner and Marc Obrist, guitarist Tiziano Volante, bassist Mia Rafaela Dieu, and drummer Marco Von Allmen.

Zeal & Ardor have released the albums *Devil Is Fine* (2016), and *Stranger Fruit* (2018), as well as a demo album *Zeal and Ardor* (2014). In 2020, they released their first EP, *Wake of a Nation*. A third studio album, *Zeal & Ardor*, was released in February 2022.

Source & more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeal_%26_Ardor

Black metal is an extreme subgenre of heavy metal music. Common traits include fast tempos, a shrieking vocal style, heavily distorted guitars played with tremolo picking, raw (lo-fi) recording, unconventional song structures, and an emphasis on atmosphere. Artists often appear in corpse paint and adopt pseudonyms. (...) Initially a synonym for "Satanic metal", black metal has often sparked controversy, due to the actions and ideologies associated with the genre.

Source & more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_metal



III. DIRECTORS' STATEMENTS

Olivier Joliat:

I knew Manuel Gagneux from the «Off-Bar» in Basel and having heard him playing as Birdmask I was aware that he is an extremely talented solo musician. But I didn't know anything about his new project Zeal & Ardor until Manuel's best friend posted an article from the «Rolling Stone» on Facebook in the summer of 2016. The renowned music magazine called Z&A's debut «the most interesting metal album of the year». Quickly, other U.S. papers followed, and stars like Slash wrote enthusiastic posts. I was amazed: News got around faster on the World Wide Web than in the local scene network, creating a virtual hype and lifting a young artist overnight into the spotlight of the international music business. Until then Manuel had mostly lived in the publicity-shy and anti-capitalist environment of the subversive «Off-Bar» and had never had a label nor a manager.

I wanted to interview Manuel about his transformation for a press article. But unexpectedly he referred me to a manager, David Burger whom I also knew well (Basel is small). Nevertheless, David refused to let me talk to Manuel: There were too many requests from the press, from labels and festivals. And everything was so new and still in limbo, that they didn't want to say anything wrong now. But what David told me off the record matured into a film idea.

Matthias Willi and I had already worked together on internationally acclaimed book projects about music and people, the last one about the punk scene in Indonesia. And both of us had just recently had the first experiences with working with video. Now a unique story was developing on our doorstep. We couldn't tell yet what exactly was going to happen but we could feel the potential. That was enough to get us going. There are enough music documentaries made retrospectively. We didn't want to miss the momentum of: «Something is happening right now».

Fortunately, David and Manuel knew us well enough to trust us - perhaps precisely because we had no clear concept. In a way we were in the same position as the musicians themselves: pretty inexperienced and getting ready for the big stages of the world. And because we were a team of two, there was just enough room for us in the tour bus.

In the beginning, we were mainly interested in the phenomenon of the «rock star»: Is it still possible to build a long career in these times of the fast-moving Internet or do you disappear again with the next wave of hype?

I experienced myself what it's like to be hyped in the music business. In 2007, the Swiss band Navel was hailed as «the new Nirvana» after releasing their first single. So the young trio was sent on tour to further fire up the media and the fans. Soon the drummer left. I was on friendly terms with the band and spontaneously jumped in. After just one rehearsal I played my first Navel concert and only a day later I found myself in a TV show. We made another single, toured Europe and played the most important newcomer festivals. The career wasn't quite as steep as Zeal & Ardor's - but pretty awesome. But more and more I started to ask myself: Should I really continue to conquer the world with the «young savages» or should I be loyal to my old band, The Lombego Surfers? I had to make a decision - and I'm still playing with the Lombegos, mostly in small clubs.

The decisions Manuel had to make are of a far more significant dimension. The longer we followed him through Europe and the USA, the more our focus changed. Tour life offered no dangers for Manuel and his band. Everyone is too smart and firmly rooted in life for the usual pitfalls like drugs or ego excesses, and Manuel is not pushed by money-hungry executives of a major label, but supported by young managers from Basel who are themselves getting a first taste of international big business.

Thus, his story is nothing like the classic drama of countless music documentaries, where a fairy-tale-like rise turns into a nightmare full of crashes and scandals. Instead, it was a positive success story: Finally a musician who uses his talents and his luck to move people all over the world with his music and to build a nice life for himself and his band. Or so it seemed. But then all of a sudden Manuel wants to end it all.

The hype around his person just got too intense and frightening. The fans didn't just pay homage to a poster boy, they started to worship him like a leader. Manuel's stage presence with the angry look in his eyes indeed suggests a strong personality who could become a leader - but this only partly corresponds with his real character. Manuel was full of doubts and went into some sort of identity crisis. This turning point was important for us. Finally our film had a story that had the potential to carry a full-length documentary.

Around the same time we found a producer who was the ideal collaborator for this project. With his DIY background, Frank Matter understood our enthusiasm-driven, spontaneous approach well. And with his experience as a filmmaker, Frank also had the necessary know-how to help us complete our first film - from structuring the fundraising process to solving dramaturgical issues: with Frank, the project began to take shape.

But as soon as the film project had really taken off, it threatened to end abruptly. A film crew is the devil if you want to disappear into anonymity like Manuel did. It took all the trust that had been built up to convince him to let us continue working. This process led to a deeper mutual understanding of what we were doing and why. Thanks to the confrontation, our working relationship changed from being a close career companion to a critical observer.

When editor Christian Büttiker joined the team, we were very grateful for his fresh perspective and his patient disposition. Christian provided guidance when we were lost in five years of material ... Especially when it came to combining the music with the pictures, Christian had to set the tone. Because quite honestly: As soon as I hear Zeal & Ardor play, I'm simply a fan. As Manuel did, Matthias and I needed the full support of comrades-in-arms like Frank and Christian to turn our «learning by doing» film project into «Play with the Devil».

Matthias Willi:

In the fall of 2016, I received a call from David Burger, a band manager from Basel, for whom I regularly photographed musicians. He told me enthusiastically about a new artist he had just signed: Manuel Gagneux.

Manuel's project Zeal & Ardor didn't even exist as a band yet, but he was already celebrated by the American magazine «Rolling Stone» as one of the most important newcomers. Exciting, a story like out of a fairy tale. I became curious, accepted the job to shoot stills of Manuel and thus got to know him.

At that time I had been working as a photographer for well over 10 years, mostly in portrait and documentary photography, often with musicians. Parallel to this, my interest in moving images had steadily grown - because certain stories can only be told very poorly with still images.

Olivier Joliat and me have been friends for a long time, and we had done various documentary book projects together, mostly about music and musicians. The best known is certainly «The Moment after the Show», for which we portrayed rock stars in the moment when they came from the stage after a concert.

When we told each other about Manuel's sensational story, it quickly became clear that we wanted to follow this story with a camera. We simply had to, when such a fairy tale takes place right on our doorstep!

We had to get ready quickly if we didn't want to miss anything. We were pretty inexperienced as filmmakers and had to jump in at the deep end, but we were happy to accept the challenge, using minimal film equipment, which fitted even into the smallest tour bus. Working with a minimal team and minimal equipment allowed us to get very close to the protagonists which might have been difficult with a larger team.

Weeks later Zeal & Ardor went on their first European tour and many trips and conversations with Manuel and the band followed. On the one hand we became almost part of the band, on the other hand we wanted to keep a healthy distance to our protagonists. The shooting conditions were often very difficult: We had to work late at night, in the smallest of spaces and with little light. It was also a challenge to deal with a protagonist who was himself in search of something.

Yet it wasn't only Manuel's «coming of age» story, but in a way also ours: How we matured as filmmakers during the long production period.

Fortunately, after more than two years, with the soap factory and Frank Matter we finally found a professional partner for our project. Also thanks to his support and to our editor Christian Büttiker the story took shape and the project now finds its conclusion after more than six years.

IV. CREW

Written & directed by	Olivier Joliat Matthias Willi
Cinematography	Matthias Willi
Location sound	Olivier Joliat
Editor	Christian Büttiker
Music by	Manuel Gagneux
Producer	Frank Matter
Co-producers	Madeleine Corbat, Peter Guyer
A co-production by	soap factory GmbH RecycledTv AG and Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen SRF
Production coordinator	Loredana-Nastassja Fernández
Development producer	Aline Pieth, culturelles GmbH
Production assistant RecycledTV	Kim Odermatt
Commissioning editors SRF	Urs Augstburger Markus Wicker Barbara Seiler
Sound design & mix	Peter von Siebenthal Kathleen Moser Anna Bühlmann Projektstudio GmbH
Color grading	Peter Guyer
Video post-production	doc&post
Additional camera	Chrigu Blum, Christian Taro, Mike DeMellia Manuel Bürkli, Zeal & Ardor
Assistant editors	Carmen Walker Marlen Schmid

Titles design	Heinz Reber «H1», Büro Destruct
Art work & graphic design	Noé Herrmann
Website	bytes & bones, Klaus Affolter
Translations & subtitles	Apostroph Group on behalf of Swiss TXT AG
Research social media	T-Nice
Original music	Written and performed by Zeal & Ardor and Manuel Gagneux, published by Bosworth Music GmbH & licensed by MVKA Limited, courtesy of Bosworth Music & MVKA



V. PRODUCED WITH THE FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF

Fachausschuss Film und Medienkunst BS/BL

Berner Filmförderung

Ernst Göhner Stiftung

Kulturfonds SUISSIMAGE

Migros-Kulturprozent

L'Unique Foundation | Rock'n'Roll with a Cause! (lunique-foundation.org)

Burggemeinde Bern

Musikbüro Basel

BLKB Stiftung für Bildung und Kultur

Scheidegger-Thommen Stiftung



VI. BIO-/FILMOGRAPHIES DIRECTORS & PRODUCER

OLIVIER JOLIAT, director



Born in 1977 in Switzerland. Freelance journalist, author, musician. Worked on several film projects. «Play with the Devil – Becoming Zeal & Ardor» is his first feature film, in co-direction with Matthias Willi.

MATTHIAS WILLI, director



Born in 1975 in Switzerland. 1997-2001 apprenticeship in photography and Schule für Gestaltung Basel. Since 2004 freelance photographer with homebase Basel, Switzerland. He's working for national and international clients with a focus on people, portrait and fashion photography. Since 2013 video works. 2016 Documentary portrait «Tony, You Rock». «Play with the Devil – Becoming Zeal & Ardor» is his first feature film, in co-direction with Olivier Joliat.

FRANK MATTER, producer



Frank Matter, born in 1964, got into filmmaking in 1992. A year later he moved to Brooklyn, NY, where he has been working for many years as a director, producer and writer. After returning to Basel in 2006, he founded the film production company soap factory GmbH. His films have won numerous awards.

Filmography as a producer:

«Life is Everything» by Beatrice Minger and Christoph Schaub (in production); «Segnali di vita» by Leandro Picarella (in production); «Becoming vulnerable» by Gregor Brändli and Deneth Piumakshi Wedaarachchige (in production); «Love Stories» by Nicola Bellucci (in production); «Play with the devil» by Olivier Joliat and Matthias Willi (2023); «Ruäch» by Andreas Müller, Simon Guy Fässler and Marcel Bächtiger (2023); «Ann's Pub» by Thabea Furrer (2021); «Arada» by Jonas Schaffter (2020); «Who's afraid of Alice Miller?» (2020); «I'll be your mirror» by Johanna Faust (2019) «Ciao Babylon» by Kurt Reinhard and Christoph Schreiber (2017); «Amalia e Giancarlo» by Kurt Reinhard and Christoph Schreiber (2017); «Grozny Blues» by Nicola Bellucci (2015); «La buena vida – The Good Life» by Jens Schanze (2015); «Thomas Hirschhorn – Gramsci Monument» by Angelo A. Lüdin (2015); «Nel giardino dei suoni» by Nicola Bellucci (2010); «Judge Not» by Robert Champi (2000)

As a director, producer, writer:

«Reise ans Ende der Nacht» (in development); «Parallel Lives» (2021); «From One Day To The Next» (2013); «The Definition of Insanity» (2004); «The Beauty Of My Island – Shooting Klaus Lutz» (1999); «Morocco» (1997); «Hannelore» (1994)

RecycledTv AG, co-producers

Films

2023 PLAY WITH THE DEVIL by Olivier Joliat & Matthias Willi (with soap factory GmbH)
2022 HALTLOS by Peter Guyer and Jürg Halter
2021 PARALLEL LIVES by Frank Matter (with soap factory GmbH)
2020 CONTRADICT von Peter Guyer und Thomas Burkhalter
2018 JANET HAUFLER von Manuela Trapp
2018 A LONG WAY HOME by Luc Schaedler (with go between films)
2017 FELL IN LOVE WITH A GIRL by Kaleo LaBelle (with LaBelle Films)
2016 MELODY OF NOISE by Gitta Gsell (with Mirapix)
2016 ZEN FOR NOTHING by Werner Penzel (with Werner Penzel)
2016 DEM HIMMEL ZU NAH by Annina Furrer
2015 CONFUSION by Laurent Nègre (with Bord cadre films)
2014 LIFE IN PROGRESS by Irene Loebell
2013 ADIOS by Madeleine Corbat
2012 IM SCHNITT by Konstantin Gutscher
2012 BUEBE GÖ Z'TANZ by Steve Walker
2011 HO UND ÜBERALL by Peter Guyer and Balthasar Jucker
2011 ZAFFARAYA 3.0 by Andreas Berger
2009 NACHGIFT by Remo Legnazzi
2009 SOUNDS AND SILENCE by Peter Guyer and Norbert Wiedmer
2001 BIG MAC SMALL WORLD by Peter Guyer
2000 AREAL BLUM by Steff Bossert
1995 SIGNERS KOFFER by Peter Liechti (co-production)

In production

WIR HABEN KEINE ANGST by Dennis Stauffer (Release 2023)
LAS TORERAS by Jackie Brutsche (Release 2023)
UNSER VATER by Miklos Gimes (Release 2023)
IDDU by Miriam Ernst (Release 2023)
NATHALIE by Tamara Milosevic (Release 2024)

In development

MORE HUMAN THAN ROBOTS by Irene Loebell
KIENTAL by Tamara Milosevic
DIE FRAUEN DER HELDEN by Reto Camenisch

www.rectv.ch

VII. CONTACT & LINKS

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Trailer Play with the Devil – Becoming Zeal & Ardor:

<https://vimeo.com/785918355>

Official Film Website:

www.playwiththedevil.com

Official Band Website:

www.zealandardor.com