



MOVIES | MOVIE REVIEW

Recalling a Disaster Without Uttering a Word

'The Great Flood' Explores Tragedy on the Mississippi in '27

NYT Critics' Pick

By **NEIL GENZLINGER** JAN. 7, 2014

This probably isn't the kind of compliment the filmmakers want to hear in the week of its theatrical release, but "The Great Flood," a beautiful exploration of the Mississippi River flood of 1927, almost demands to be enjoyed using high-quality headphones. Its soundtrack is an artwork in its own right, one worth savoring as you would a fine recording.

This wordless movie, a documentary that is more like visual poetry, is the work of **Bill Morrison**, created from old newsreels and other film records, like his earlier work "The Miners' Hymns." Here his collaborator is the guitarist and composer **Bill Frisell**, whose score (performed by Mr. Frisell, Ron Miles, Tony Scherr and Kenny Wollesen) meshes with the images so evocatively that it seems as if they were born together.

The flood was devastating, especially to what remained of the Mississippi Delta's sharecropper economy, so much so that it helped change the country's demographics, fueling the northward migration of blacks that had already been underway. With just the occasional bit of text on the screen, Mr. Morrison conveys the destruction and the aftermath, although he is sparse enough with the details that viewers might want to prepare by reading at least a summary of the disaster.

The film and Mr. Frisell's music are elegiac over all, but there are sparks of humor in the mournful journey: a rapid trip through a Sears catalog of the period; a look at government officials visiting flood zones for photo ops, much as they might today.

Mr. Morrison's résumé includes an entire movie about decaying film stock ("Decasia"), and his fascination with the phenomenon is evident in "The Great

Flood.” A number of the film fragments he employs are beginning to deteriorate, and he happily leaves the eroded images as they are. Mr. Frisell’s music seems actually to be calling forth the flaws, like a modern-day digital effect. It’s a sublime, somewhat eerie touch in a striking experiment in music and moviemaking.

The Great Flood

Opens on Wednesday in Manhattan.

Directed and edited by Bill Morrison; music by Bill Frisell; produced by Phyllis Oyama; released by Icarus Films. At the IFC Center, 323 Avenue of the Americas, at Third Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 1 hour 16 minutes. This film is not rated.

A version of this review appears in print on January 8, 2014, on page C5 of the New York edition with the headline: Recalling a Disaster Without Uttering a Word.