

# WE DID IT ON A SONG

## GRADES 8-12 CLASSROOM GUIDE

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## TEACHING THE FILM:

**We Did It on a Song** is a hybrid documentary and musical film about a group of high school students in a small industrial town in France. A class screening of the film may complement a French language, music or social studies curriculum. Taught in conjunction with this guide, the film will encourage students to think critically about their personal goals and the transition from childhood to adulthood. Discussion questions and supplemental materials facilitate further research into related topics such as relationships with family, academics, and the challenges of coming of age in a depressed economy.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFS Youth Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

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## USING THIS GUIDE

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of **We Did It on a Song**. Support

materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

## ABOUT THE FILM

This charming and innovative documentary follows a group of friends from Boulogne-Sur-Mer, a French town, whose 45,000 inhabitants have been hit hard by the financial crisis and the consequences of prolonged deindustrialization. Focusing on a group of five 17-year old friends who are just about to finish high school and take their baccalaureate exam, director David Andre records each of the students as they struggle through a year caught between dreams and disillusion. They deal with the traditional teenage range of issues including: falling in love, getting along with their parents, getting into college, and deciding what they want to be when they grow up. In a clever twist on what we normally expect in a documentary, the young subjects insert moments of singing throughout the film that seem to come out of nowhere. The songs work as a way for the subjects to present their feelings in a refreshing way that steers clear of the more traditional talking head interview. The original songs composed by professional musicians, with lyrics by the students and Andre, add a touch of poetry, humor, and emotion to the reality of the situation. It's as if the popular American TV show Glee, was turned on its head and given a distinctively Gaelic makeover.

Program Note: mild profanity

David Andre (France, 2014)  
84 minutes, In French with English Subtitles  
Grades 8-12

### Recommended Subject Areas:

- Arts/Media
- French
- Journalism
- Music
- Peer/Youth Issues
- Social Science

### Key concepts / buzzwords:

- Academics
- Art
- Career
- College
- Economic Opportunity
- Family
- French Culture
- French Language
- Friendship
- Introspection
- Music
- Poetry
- Youth



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### PRE-VIEWING TOPICS AND DISCUSSION:

**We Did It on a Song** takes a lyrical approach to a subject that will hit home for many high school students. Using musical theater and poetry, the film explores the transition from high school to college or career, and the many decisions and personal transformations that occur for students in a few short months.

Before viewing the film, give students a moment to consider their own personal goals. In a group discussion or a free writing exercise, ask students to consider the following questions:

- What do you see as the greatest challenges that young people face as they move from high school life to college or a job?
- What freedoms and opportunities for personal growth and learning exist in that transition?
- When you think about leaving home and continuing your education or your career as an individual in the world, what emotions do you feel? Are you afraid, exciting, or both?

You may wish to revisit this discussion after students have watched the film and experienced that process of transitioning alongside the film's characters.

AT WHAT  
 MOMENT DOES A  
 YOUNG PERSON  
 BECOME AN  
 ADULT?

### POST-VIEWING DISCUSSION:

#### Character and Story

- 1) Describe the students that you meet in **We Did It on a Song**.
    - Do you like them?
    - Who are your favorite characters? Are there any characters that remind you of yourself or your friends?
    - How do these students see the world?
    - What are their goals and dreams?
    - What challenges do they face?
  - 2) Describe the families that you meet in **We Did It on a Song**.
    - In what ways are they like and unlike families that you know?
    - Describe the relationships that these young people have with their parents.
    - What do the parents want for their children?
    - How will life be different for the students than it was for their parents?
  - 3) Describe the town of Boulogne-sur-Mer.
    - Is this a town that you would like to live in?
    - Do you think it's a good place to grow up?
    - How is the town changing?
  - Do you think that the young people will grow up to raise families here?
  - Do you see any connections between Boulogne-sur-Mer and your own community?
- 4) At what moment does a young person stop being a kid and become an adult?

- Do you think that the characters in this film are children or adults?
- In what ways are they mature?
- In what ways are they immature or childlike?
- Do you think there is a relationship between innocence, creativity and passion?
- How can young people cultivate maturity while at the same time preserving creativity and passion?

5) Describe Gaelle, the film's narrator.

- What are her goals and interests at the beginning of the film?
- What is her relationship with her family like at the beginning of the film?
- How does she change during the course of the film?
- Do you think Gaelle learns anything during the course of the film? What does she learn?

## Context

1) What does it mean for a young person to have a dream?

- Do you have a specific dream or goal for your life?
- Do you have any friends who have specific dreams or goals for their lives?
- What if a young person doesn't have a specific dream? Can you still live a fulfilling life?
- When you are making decisions about your future, what are your priorities? What do you keep in mind?

2) What did you observe about French culture in watching this film?

- How is French culture similar and different than American culture?
- Do you think that these students would fit in at your school?
- How is the French school system different than the American school system?
- What elements of education and community remain similar across cultures?

3) Several times during the film, the characters make reference to "the crisis". What crisis are they talking about?

- How does the sluggish economy effect the characters' decisions about their futures?
- Are these kids rich or poor? What are the economic situations of their families?
- How does the question of money factor into the students' decisions about their career paths?
- During the film, one of the characters says "A job's a job- it doesn't matter." What do you think? Does it matter what your job is, or just that you have one?
- Do you think that it is a wise decision for Gaelle to go to art school?

4) Who are the role models that these young people look up to?

- What examples do these kids have for possible careers and lifestyles?
- How does Rachel's aunt help to inspire Rachel and Gaelle as they consider a future in the arts?
- Why do you think that role models are important for young people as they transition into adulthood?
- Do you have any mentors or role models outside of your immediate family who have inspired your career plans?

5) What personal challenges do young people face when they finish high school?

- What emotional, personal and interpersonal challenges did you witness among the characters in the film?
- Do you think these characters are ready for the next phase in their lives?
- Do you think they will succeed and achieve their goals?
- What skills and support systems do young people need in order to successfully transition from high school to the next phase in life?

## Style and Message/Reading the Film for Media Literacy

1) How did you feel after watching **We Did It on a Song**?

- Did you enjoy this film?
- What do you think is the central theme or message in **We Did It on a Song**?
- If you were to take away one lesson or memory from the film, what is it?

2) How did the singing contribute to the story in this film?

- Did you think the singing was important in telling the story?
- Did you like the songs?
- Do you think you could write these kinds of songs about the issues and moments that are central to your life?

3) Was this a documentary film?

- What is a documentary? (You can refer to the Making a Documentary section of this guide if you're not sure).
- What elements of this film broke from the documentary form?
- Why do you think the director chose to break documentary conventions?
- Do you think that was a successful choice?

4) Can you imagine what it would be like if someone came to your high school to make a movie like this?

- How would the film be similar and how would it be different if it were about you and your friends?
- Would you like it if someone made a film about your life, or would you feel like it was an intrusion?
- How do you think Gaelle and her friends will feel about this film ten years from now?

## POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

### Journaling Activity: Reflect on a Character.

Choose one of the characters from **We Did It on a Song** and write about him or her. What are the character's values? What are his/her hopes, goals and dreams? What is he or she afraid of?

What about your character is universal and common among many young people, and what is unique?

Imagine your character ten years in the future. Where is he or she living? What is his or her job? Does he/she have a family? What does he/she do for fun? Is your character still close with his or her parents?

## WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY FILM?

### Sing a Song in French

Using the Supplemental Resources section of this guide, sing a song and translate the song into English. In addition to singing the song, talk about what it means. Which character sings this song and how does it relate to his or her particular situation. What is the song about?

### Write Your Own Song or Poem

Drawing inspiration from the film, write a song or a poem about a moment, an issue or a challenge that you are facing in your own life. Use concrete examples, imagery and storytelling to add power to your original artwork.

### California Media Literacy Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

- **Grade 8:** Standard 1.9 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, illustrators, news photographers) communicate information and affect impressions and opinions.
- **Grades 9 & 10:** Standard 1.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and evaluate the techniques used to create them (e.g., compare Shakespeare's Henry V with Kenneth Branagh's 1990 film version).
- **Grades 9 & 10:** Standard 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.
- **Grades 11 & 12:** Standard 1.1 Recognize strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture (e.g., advertisements; perpetuation of stereotypes; use of visual representations, special effects, language); Standard 1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education. <http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm>
- Frank W Baker's guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy. [http://frankwbaker.com/state\\_lit.htm](http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm)

### Common Core Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

This lesson addresses the English and Language Arts standards for Reading Informational Texts grades 9-12. Additional specific standard applications are listed below:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.



## MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

### SCREENING WITH MEANING

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive.

Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

- (1) Medium: the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
- (2) Author: the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
- (3) Content: the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
- (4) Audience: the target audience to whom it is delivered
- (5) Purpose: the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

### CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

<b>MEDIUM</b>	<p><b>All Media Is Constructed.</b></p> <p>How is the message delivered and in what format?                      What technologies are used to present the message?                      What visual and auditory elements are used?                      What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?</p>
<b>AUTHOR</b>	<p><b>All Media Is Constructed by Someone.</b></p> <p>Who is delivering the message?                      Who originally constructed the message?                      What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?</p>
<b>CONTENT</b>	<p><b>All Media Is A Language.</b></p> <p>What is the subject of the media message?                      What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?                      What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response?                      To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?</p>
<b>AUDIENCE</b>	<p><b>All Media Messages Reach an Audience.</b></p> <p>Who receives the message?                      For whom is the message intended?                      What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?                      What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?                      How might others perceive this message differently? Why?</p>
<b>PURPOSE</b>	<p><b>All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.</b></p> <p>Why was the message constructed?                      Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?                      To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?                      What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?</p>

## THE NON-FICTION FILM WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl's propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth. The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

## A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

**1895** The Lumiere brothers developed the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called "actualities" (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*)

**1900-1920** Travelogue or "Scenic" films became popular, showcasing exoticised images from around the globe.

**1926** John Grierson coined the term "documentary" to describe Robert Flaherty's romantic nonfiction film, *Moana*.

**1929** Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino-Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With a Movie Camera*.

**1935** Leni Reifenstahl released *Triumph of the Will*, the infamous propaganda film that chronicled the 1934 Nazi Party Congress.

**1939** John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in support of the war.

**1960s** The cinema vérité movement began in Europe, shortly followed by "direct cinema" in the U.S. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

**1968** The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces)* opened the door to the activist cinema of the 1970s, which used film as a tool to counter capitalist and neo-colonial politics in Latin America.

**1988** The US Congress mandated that the US government support the creation of independent non-commercial media, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

**2000s** The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium vastly more affordable to independent and amateur filmmakers. Video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allowed amateur filmmakers to broadcast their work.

**PRESENT DAY** The term "documentary" has come to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema. Contemporary filmmakers continue to push the boundaries of truth in film and to explore new avenues and applications for the medium.



## THE MAKING OF A DOCUMENTARY

### Idea, Issue, Story.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

### The Production Process.

To capture candid moments on film, modern documentary makers often leave the camera running, collecting far more footage than the final film requires. They may do this during interviews or in observational-style encounters with their subjects. To get increased access and an observational aesthetic, documentary makers often use handheld cameras and natural light, rather than staging a more formal filming environment.

### Post-Production and the Documentary.

Because a documentary film relies upon candid footage, a large part of the film's construction occurs in the editing room, where you work with what you've captured. A documentary editor will sift through long interviews just to find a few phrases that will summarize the film's message. To emphasize important points and build the story, some documentaries use a voiceover,

an interview or a scripted narrative that brings candid footage together into a coherent statement. An original score can work alongside the voiceover to unify the footage and shape the mood of the film. Audiences often underestimate the power of sound to generate an emotional response. Many documentaries also use charts, graphs and historical footage to add context and emphasize key points.

### Distribution.

Once a film is completed, the filmmaker needs to help it find its audience. Many documentaries are made independently on small budgets, but what's the point of all your work if no one hears your message? Some documentaries will be released in theaters around the country or get programmed on public or cable TV channels, but most documentary filmmakers will start by submitting their work to film festivals, in hopes of attracting distributors for the theater and television markets. Filmmakers may also make their films available online and use social media to reach their target audience.



## SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES: SONGS FROM THE FILM

### CHANSON GAELLE:

Si vous avez 17 ans  
 Si un beau jour vous les avez eus  
 Si vous êtes encore enfant  
 Au fond  
 Ou si vous n'y croyez plus

C'est l'histoire de nos 17 ans  
 Comme vous les avez vécus  
 C'est l'histoire de nos parents  
 Comme vous l'êtes devenus

Une ville au bord de mer  
 Loin de ses années dorées, passées  
 Une ville au grand air  
 Aux grands airs désenchantés

Mais quand on a 17 ans  
 On se fout évidemment  
 Du vieux monde des parents  
 De leurs avertissements

Pas maintenant...Pas maintenant.

Si vous êtes adolescent  
 Ou si vous l'avez été  
 Est-ce que le monde a changé ?  
 Est-ce que le monde a changé ?

### CHANSON

#### PEUT ETRE BIEN QUE OUI/ PEUT ETRE BIEN QUE NON

Est ce que je joue un personnage ?  
 Peut-être bien que oui  
 Est-ce inévitable à mon âge ?  
 Peut-être bien que non

Est-il vrai que personne ne voit ?  
 Peut-être bien que oui  
 Ne voit à travers moi ?  
 Peut-être bien que non

Si c'est vrai  
 Il y aurait de quoi s'étonner  
 Peut-être bien que oui  
 Vu que mon père est vitrier  
 Ouais, vitrier

Après tout  
 Peut-être suis-je suis moins transparent  
 Peut-être bien que oui  
 Que mes gentils parents  
 Peut-être bien que non

**CHANSON ALEX**

Je pourrais un jour décéder d'une crise de rire  
 D'une chute de pierre  
 D'un deuxième cancer  
 Ou je pourrais finir écrabouillé contre un bus  
 Sous ma contrebasse  
 Je vous en passe  
 Je vous en passe

Non non non

Je ne veux plus m'en faire  
 Car j'ai déjà donné  
 Petit enfant j'ai déjà tant souffert  
 Alors non non non  
 Je veux plus m'en faire  
 Pour les petits soucis  
 De la vie

On me dit souvent que l'on me trouve trop  
 insouciant

Mais ça, ça dépend  
 Ça dépend des mamans  
 Il se trouve que moi je l'adore ma petite  
 maman  
 Elle m'a sauvé la vie  
 Et mon papa aussi, il m'a sauvé la vie

**Chanson Caroline  
PARTIR D'ICI**

Dans ma maison  
 Il n'y a rien  
 Qui me retient  
 Et tout autour  
 De ma maison  
 Il n'y a rien  
 Un champ de terre  
 Un chemin de fer

Où vais-je aller  
 Après le bac ?  
 Que vais-je faire ?  
 Tout le monde s'en fout  
 Et je me dis  
 Chaque matin  
 Au fond du train  
 Au fond du trou

Comment partir d'ici ?  
 Partir d'ici  
 Loin loin d'ici  
 Partir d'ici

Parfois je sens  
 Que je descends  
 Au fond de moi  
 Tout au fond de moi  
 Et je me fous  
 Et je me fous  
 De tout

## CHANSON LOIN DE MES RÊVES

Je ne veux plus que l'on me plaigne  
 La pauvre ado qui déraisonne  
 La pauvre conne mal dans sa peau  
 Qu'on lui pardonne  
 Qu'on lui pardonne

Je passe mes nuits à me juger  
 Sans rien pouvoir me pardonner  
 Dois-je écouter mon tribunal ?  
 Laisser tomber ma terminale ?

Comment partir d'ici  
 Partir d'ici  
 Loin loin d'ici  
 Loin loin

Dans le vent d'hiver qui se lève  
 Je sens bien qu'il est trop tard  
 J'ai échoué loin de mes rêves  
 Loin de mes rêves

## CHANSON C'EST LA FIN LE DEBUT C'EST LA FIN, LE DEBUT

L'année a filé  
 Comme un rêve éveillé  
 Nos 17 ans  
 Évanouis, envolés  
 Comme si une autre vie  
 Allait commencer  
 Tout a changé

Est-ce qu'on se souhaitera  
 Encore  
 Nos anniversaires  
 Est ce nos amitiés deviendront  
 De la poussière ?  
 Est-ce que vous reviendrez  
 De temps en temps boire une bière  
 Au bord de la mer ?

C'est la fin le début  
 Le départ vers l'inconnu  
 Séparés perdus de vue  
 De vous à nous  
 On aurait voulu  
 Que ça dure  
 Encore un peu  
 Juste encore un peu  
 Encore un peu...

Est-ce qu'on sera choisi par la chance ?  
 Est-ce qu'on sera perdus pour la France ?  
 Est-ce qu'on fera la fierté de nos parents  
 Avec le temps

C'est la fin le début  
 Le départ vers l'inconnu  
 Séparés perdus de vue  
 De vous à nous  
 On aurait voulu  
 Que ça dure  
 Encore un peu  
 Que ça dure  
 Juste encore un peu  
 Que ça dure  
 Encore un peu  
 Que ça dure  
 Encore un peu...



## REVIEWS

### The Hollywood Reporter

10/28/2014 by Jordan Mintzer

*Glee* meets *To Be and To Have* is perhaps the best way to describe *We Did It on a Song* (*Chante ton bac d'abord*), a hybrid French docudrama-musical comedy about five high school students who sing their way through senior year. Shot in the distressed seaside town of Boulogne-sur-Mer (the setting of the Alain Resnais classic *Muriel*), this touching yearlong chronicle by filmmaker David Andre mixes the hard facts of growing up with several showstopping numbers that were written and performed by the stars themselves. It's a risky gamble that mostly pays off, even if the realities depicted are ultimately more convincing than all the attempts at music and lyrics.

Released in late October on local screens after airing on co-producing network France 2, *Song* should see a few pickups in Francophone territories, while overseas action could include doc fests and film weeks. (All of which would be better off using the movie's original-language title, which is a pun on a popular French expression that translates to: "Graduate first." It's also the name of a terrific 1978 film by Maurice Pialat.)

In France, students in their last year of high school are faced with two major challenges: applying to college and passing the baccalaureat exam, a cumulative test in different subjects that requires many months of preparation. Tracking five such pupils from September through June as they plan their futures and get ready for finals, Andre reveals the ups and downs of 17-year-old Gallic life, though he does it by introducing a slew of song-and-dance numbers that the kids stage throughout the film.

Narrated by the photogenic Gaelle Bridoux, who defies her father's wishes by applying to art school, the story follows your typical teenage follies and foibles — even if the distinct setting reveals a recurring pattern among the characters: With few job prospects in their economically strained hometown, most of them have no choice but to move elsewhere, leaving their friends and parents behind for good.

Gaelle's best buds include fellow artist Rachel Motte and her brooding, Bob Dylan-esque boyfriend Nicolas Dourdin; as well as the pierced and punked-up Alex Margolle, who plays in a band with his working-class dad (the two look like the forgotten French members of Anthrax, though the music they perform sounds more like amped-up regional folk). There's also Alex's girlfriend, Caroline Brimeux, who has no clear career goals and whose parents are facing their own share of problems.

While the film's portrait of contemporary rural France feels entirely apt and sadly, far from encouraging, the director's decision to insert a series of original songs — composed by Nicolas Weil, Sylvain Ohrel and Alexandre Lier, with lyrics by Andre and the students — definitely enhances the originality level, even if the numbers themselves are not all that convincing and sometimes poorly recorded. And unlike *Glee*, which mixes up show tunes with pop and hip-hop classics, the music is strictly of the chanson francaise variety: extremely illustrative and not exactly refreshing.

Still, *We Did It on a Song* deserves extra credit for trying to pull off something new amid the rather homogenous landscape of French documentaries, while the film's pro tech package — including swooping Hollywood



crane shots by director of photography Thibault Delavigne — gives it a sheen that contrasts with all the grim surroundings. In the end, André orchestrates a moving portrait of several youngsters who define themselves by their acts (in all senses of the term), rather than by where they come from.

### Eye for Film

Reviewed by: Michael Pattison

David André's *We Did It On a Song* is a docudrama musical with heart and charm, in which six 17-year-olds head towards that ominous threshold of adulthood as they near their end-of-school exams and the uncertain prospects of Real Life. Familial expectations are exacerbated by the gloomy social forecast: the film is shot in Boulogne-sur-Mer, a French city whose 45,000 inhabitants are currently enduring the disastrous consequences of prolonged deindustrialisation. With an original title *Chante Ton Bac d'Abord* recalling Maurice Pialat's casually freeform and similar tonal curio *Passe Ton Bac D'abord* (1978), *We Did It On A Song* is a confident and crowd-pleasing boundary-pusher — at least stylistically speaking.

At the moment at which the film snaps into song, with lead character G elle beginning to sing on a public bus, it becomes clear that Andr e isn't too bothered about keeping up appearances with regard to documentary authenticity. Put another way, the comparatively elaborative shot selection and the editorial style during the musical numbers themselves are the stuff of narrative filmmaking. And yet, between what are palpably the products of numerous re-takes and rehearsals, the film retains an undeniably doc-like sensibility. Working

closely with his selected cast, Andr e has allowed these youngsters to express their current fears and anxieties in a distinctive and personalised way. The lyrics are the teenagers' own.

After her exams, G elle wishes to attend art school, much to her father's alarm. His concerns are, however, purely financial: rather than being tyrannically dismissive, he is largely understanding of his daughter's ambitions, and his conservatism is painted as the result of his own years of hardship. G elle's friends also come from working-class homes. Relatably ordinary, each has a likeable personality and a healthy relationship with their parent(s). There is no over-dramatised melodrama here.

To a fault, perhaps. But for its musical numbers, the film does little — or isn't in a position to do more — with its characters, regarding both their individual situations and their collective plight. On the one hand, it is to Andr e's credit that he has embarked upon a project about as under-represented a part of France as Boulogne-sur-Mer. In addition, the songs add zest and energy. On the other hand, such experimentation brings its own limitations, and the deceptively ambitious aim to keep one foot firmly in the documentary door seemingly precludes the filmmaker from going beyond the immediate situation and making a more damning and concrete assessment of the problems facing the working classes and younger generations of France today. Perhaps it's something to think about for the sequel — should there be one.