

Could 'Steve McQueen: American Icon' Trigger an Evangelism Explosion?

When *Steve McQueen: American Icon* opens in theaters this week, viewers will be offered a comprehensive look at the late box-office hero who starred in films such as *The Great Escape*, *The Towering Inferno* and *Bullitt*. The man who was dubbed "The King of Cool" came to faith in Jesus Christ shortly before his untimely death, a fact not widely reported but now the focal point of the new film.

Evangelist Greg Laurie, a McQueen enthusiast, discovered the story of McQueen's conversion and explored it in the recent book *Steve McQueen: The Salvation of an American Icon*. In the new documentary, Laurie steers the conversation, which also includes commentary by Mel Gibson, McQueen's widow Barbara and other notable confidants. Gary Sinise (*Forrest Gump*, *CSI: NY*) narrates the film.

In a recent interview, Jon Erwin (*October Baby*, *Woodlawn*), who directed along with Ben Smallbone, explained how the documentary came to production and the strategy behind the stories he champions.

Some documentaries just have talking heads but this one has action—cars racing around and biplanes flying as well as movie clips. Why did you direct the film in such a way?

We do a very old thing in a new way. We tell stories for a living. God willing, those stories will impact people's lives. We are storytellers serving the greatest storyteller of all time. It begins and ends with us with a passion for story.

I grew up watching McQueen films with my mom and dad. *The Great Escape* we probably watched over and over again. But just

had no idea that Steve McQueen became a believer. And that this was a very meaningful part of his story and come to find out it was the only time, the only place that he truly found peace and happiness. There were even audio recordings. He did an interview shortly before his death where he said the cure to my life was finding the Lord. He wanted to tell people and never had a chance. Those tapes had never been heard. For 35 years, they've been buried. It blew me away.

Greg Laurie came to me. I was working with the *Hacksaw Ridge* marketing campaign a bit and Mel Gibson had come down to his Southern California crusade and I sat with Mel. Greg shared the story from the stage and Mel was thoroughly intrigued and wanted to finish. The day after the crusade, Greg said, "We have to make a documentary film about this." I just caught his vision and got really excited. We were right in the middle of *I Can Only Imagine* and prepping that movie, getting ready to go. I thought it was a fantastic idea and couldn't stop thinking about it. The more I studied it, I just wondered, "Did this really happen?" The more we dug into it, the bigger the story got. It was like a journalist breaking a story. This thing had never been unearthed before. I really don't know why that is. I'm glad to tell it.

Our vision is to reach for quality and try to make these films better and better and better. Excellence is an aspiration. It's never an accomplishment for us. We should always be trying a little harder and do a little more. Also, I go to the movies to be entertained and to feel things, to get wrapped up in a story. We made it much bigger than a documentary would be. It's much more immersive. We took this biplane up in the sky. Mel Gibson does an incredible commentary on the film. Gary Sinise is cutting the narration for it. We're trying to put the gospel on as big a stage as we can.

Woodlawn, the first true story we did, we've seen over 25,000 people come to Christ, mostly high school kids, from that. I think we just saw the power of the true story. It's not just

films, it's for us all as Christians. We forget that the biggest weapon in our arsenal is just our story, what God has done in our life and how it's changed our life. The gospel is good news, and it can change your life. There are so many stories of that happening. We've fallen in love with so many stories of that happening but also real stories that are accessible, that are really emotionally relatable no matter what you believe.

We had come from documentary films before we did features, so to go back was very gratifying. I had a blast on the film. We assembled a great team, including Ben Smallbone, who's also in Nashville, came and co-directed it with me. And we had some ferocious cameramen and great editors, producers. You feel this youthful energy, because it was a lot of up and coming talent in our ranks. I feel that it's very entertaining and it far exceeded my hopes and expectations for what we set out to do. His widow did an incredible interview and those closest to him. It was an authentic, direct look at the spiritual quest of an American icon. And it asks the questions we all ask. I think we all think, "If I just accomplish this, I'd be happy." McQueen was one of those guys who checked all those boxes of accomplishments and found that he still wasn't happy.

There's enough story in there just about the actor that would draw in somebody who's just fascinated with McQueen.

It is kind of a covert strategy. One of the things I've noticed and I've fallen in love with Harvest Ministries and their crusades and everything they stand for. An interesting thing I've heard is that they've had 500,000 decisions for Christ and 5 million people attend the crusades. About 85 percent of the decisions are when Christians bring their friends. That really is how it's supposed to work.

We're beginning to build our films where, if you look under the hood of our movies, we're trying to make them more and more accessible to people that don't believe while maintaining

the power of the message, not watering it down at all, but making it more accessible, translating it better. Sometimes there are phrases we use as Christians that non-Christians don't understand. It's also kind of a slow burn in essence. We start the film in a very relatable way, and the true message we're trying to convey to people creeps up on you, and it only creeps up on you after you're engaged in the film. That's the goal anyway. McQueen is that way. *I Can Only Imagine* is that way. The films get to this powerful place where you say, "I need this in my life." But you don't realize it. We don't come out of the gate swinging. It's a more covert strategy. These films are engineered for you to bring your friends.

Story is the language of our hearts, and entertainment is the language of our time. The movie theater is kind of where those two meet. Other Christian filmmakers, the movies are designed to encourage Christians and the body and you need to be a Christian to watch them. But we're focusing more on the power of the life-changing gospel. Who knew that one of those was the biggest movie star of all time?

This is the first complete documentary of Steve McQueen, mainly because this part of his life doesn't match the "King of Cool" rebel brand. No one has shared his entire story so we just set out to make an authentic, honest, relatable movie that just shared the entire life of Steve McQueen from cradle to grave. It's a very powerful, multi-layered, up-from-nothing story. What I found fascinating is this movie star that had so much going for him. When he was young, it was completely opposite, he was deprived of everything, had a horrible childhood. Yet when he got the chance to remedy that and didn't deprive himself of anything, wealth and fame, everything that society says would make you happy. Yet he still had this gaping hole in his heart and life. In an airstrip in Santa Pala, in a beautiful biplane, he accepts Christ because his pilot instructors. He found a father figure. That's just a powerful story, so much to glean from

it. I think a great film is a complete look at a question. The question of this film is—what really makes you happy in life? Most of us think if we just had one thing, I'd be happy. We don't realize it because we don't get it. But here's a guy who had it all. I work in this business and I work with a lot of very famous miserable people. The top of the cultural ladder is not a very happy place.

You are part of an exciting, emerging movement in Christian entertainment. How does that feel?

There's no us versus them. It's us versus us. It's trying to improve every day and get better at what we do ... and mentoring talent. There's not a lot of talent, young, emerging talent in film and television for Christians. We're trying to remedy that and incubate and empower some of these incredibly skilled younger people. I think if we can do that, we're the first generation that could look at the Great Commission as possible in our time. There are more cell phones than people on the earth, and entertainment is America's second greatest export. This is a way to get the gospel out to people in the world and get them to pay for it. They want the product, so what we have to do is dream bigger and make the films better and do that again and again and again over time. I think we'll blink our eyes and realize we've far exceeded where we are right now as far as faith-based entertainment. It's a slow and steady progress.

Steve McQueen: American Icon premieres in theaters Sept. 28 and has encore presentations scheduled for Oct. 10 and Oct. 19. For more information, including purchasing tickets, visit .

DEWAYNE HAMBY is a communications specialist and longtime journalist covering faith-based music, entertainment, books, and the retail industry. He is also the editor of the White Wing Messenger, director of communications for the Church of God of Prophecy and author of the book Gratitude Adjustment.

Connect with him at or on Twitter—@dewaynehamby.