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Documentaries offer fresh perspectives on diverse lives

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Got summer blockbuster fatigue? Well, here's just what the "doc" ordered - a host of new documentaries offering insight into everything from the works of artists both known and not-so-known, to the lives of U.S. troops in Afghanistan; from corrupt judges and brave students, to crusading doctors and Siamese twins who fell from fame.

Many more are readily available, including HBO's "The Case Against 8" and the just-opened "Citizen Koch." Some can be seen on video on demand, or VOD. Here are just a few documentaries of note.

Beyond the Edge: Chronicles the 1953 British expedition to conquer Mount Everest. It has unusually high production values for a documentary and makes extensive use of re-enactments, which can occasionally cause discomfort due to the blending of reporting and interpretation. The film faces an uphill climb as today's viewers may wonder what the big deal was, but can create a you-are-there feeling in moments as when the climbers approach the summit. (VOD, 90 minutes)

Bound by Flesh: The story of the charming and talented Hilton Sisters, conjoined twins who became major vaudeville stars before declining into poverty, is quirky and moving. It's a no-frills documentary that leaves some holes in its storytelling and sometimes moves a little too quickly, but it's also a testament to the primacy of subject matter: No frills are necessary to make this tale tragic and beautiful. (VOD, 90 minutes, adult themes and language)

Bruce Springsteen's High Hopes: The Boss has, against all odds, remained a vital creative force through an amazing five decades of recording. This HBO piece on the making of his newest record, "High Hopes," gives some insight into how he has done so. In this case, not only do Springsteen's brilliant lyrical ideas come to the fore, but an alliance with Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello brings a new kind of electric energy to the E Street sound. (HBO, 30 minutes)

Code Black: A sometimes maddening look at the stark realities of the emergency room at Los Angeles County Hospital, this film follows a group of residents struggling against institutional and financial barriers to cope with an endless flood of patients. It's an accomplished writing and directing debut for Dr. Ryan McGarry, who is also one of the doctors featured in the documentary. (opens July 11, 80 minutes; some graphic images)

The Dog: To tell the possibly true story of the real person at the center of "Dog Day Afternoon," the filmmakers visited with Vietnam vet, gay-rights activist, bank robber and fabulist John Wojtowicz over 10 years. Wojtowicz is an undeniably fascinating figure, but he's so unreliable a narrator, one simply can't be sure how much of the presentation is factual. The film is beautifully shot and edited, with some long digressions. It's a somewhat delusional trip with a charming but ultimately enigmatic figure. (VOD and in Bay Area theaters in mid-August, 100 minutes; strong adult subject matter and language)

Kids for Cash: The runaway winner on the Outrage-o-Meter is this chronicle of the "Kids for Cash" scandal that rocked the juvenile justice system in Pennsylvania. In 2008, two judges were accused of improperly receiving funds from the for-profit detention center to which they sentenced hosts of minors. These juveniles were often put into the system for the mildest of offenses, ruining many families, in the name of zero tolerance. With its stunning contemporaneous interviews with major figures during the run-up to the trial and beyond, this potential Oscar contender serves as a cautionary tale to those who would overreact in the face of fear by taking shortcuts to justice. (VOD, 102 minutes; adult themes and language)

Korengal: The follow-up to the Oscar-nominated "Restrepo" is less about combat than the overall experience of soldiers living in an outpost in the reportedly "most dangerous place on Earth," the Korengal Valley of Afghanistan. It is a valuable reminder of exactly what we are asking our fighting men and women to do, to live through, when we send them to war. (now showing, 84 minutes; adult themes and language)

Remembering the Artist: Robert De Niro Sr.: Yes, it's a labor of love by the artist's actor son. But for philistines such as this writer, it serves partly as primer on the vibrant postwar art scene in New York, and partly as reminder of the personal forces that drive creative people. It's a rich and deeply affectionate tribute. As a bonus, Philip Glass contributes a gorgeous score, especially its haunting closing piece. (HBO; 40 minutes)

Underwater Dreams: Perhaps the liveliest and most life-affirming entry on this list is the story of the ragtag squad that entered a collegiate underwater robotics competition to compete against the likes of M.I.T. in 2004. The team was made up of high schoolers. From land-locked Arizona. From a largely impoverished community. And many were undocumented immigrants. The awards-worthy "Underwater Dreams" is by turns rousing and heartbreaking, and organically touches on important social issues as it examines the wide-ranging impact of that upstart team's efforts. (VOD, 86 minutes)

We Must Go: Soccer in the time of revolution: Egypt's national team struggles to qualify for the World Cup for the first time in 24 years. Its new American coach, an aging but highly respected star, and rising young talent try to navigate social and political earthquakes and terrible tragedies. It sounds like a Disney movie, but it really happened. You don't have to be a futbol fan - this writer isn't - to find this stuff fascinating. (VOD, 94 minutes; contains intense news footage)

Whitey: A CNN piece, with all the resources that entails, about one of the notorious mobsters in American history - James "Whitey" Bulger. The ultimate verdict in Bulger's trial is secondary to questions as to whether the FBI was complicit in his decades-long reign of terror - either due to corruption, an overzealous informant program, or both. (VOD, 107 minutes) {sbox}