

**Movie discussion resource**                      **The Sapphires**  
*Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.*

**Genre:** Musical/drama

**Rating:** PG

**Length:** 103 minutes

**Starring** Deborah Mailman, Jessica Mauboy, Shari Sebbens, Miranda Tapsell, Chris O'Dowd

**Director:** first time Aboriginal film maker and actor, Wayne Blair

**Script:** Tony Briggs, son of one of the women the film is based on.

**Cinematographer:** Warwick Thornton (Samson and Delilah)



**Brief synopsis**

The film is set in 1968, a period when the racial divide was significant in Australian history. Aboriginal people had just received the right to vote and children were still being separated from their families. Around the globe, there was protest and revolution in the streets. There were drugs and the shock of a brutal assassination. And there was Vietnam. The sisters Cynthia, Gail and Julie are 'discovered' by Dave - a talent scout with a kind heart and a great knowledge of soul music. They travel from their home in a remote rural Aboriginal mission to Melbourne for an audition to entertain American troops in Vietnam. The sisters are joined by cousin Kay, who lives in Melbourne. They transition their singing talents from country and western to soul - Australia's answer to 'The Supremes'. Based on a true story, *The Sapphires* celebrates youthful emotion, family, community, love and respect - and music. It is a testament to resilience, spiritedness and strength. Further information: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Sapphires\\_%28film%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sapphires_%28film%29)

**Questions for discussion**

*Some general questions might provide enough framework for you to discuss the movie:*

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

*The following provides some particular aspects of the movie that could be explored. Feel free to use these ideas as a catalyst for further discussion and reflection.*

**Intents and purposes**

It's easy to be fooled by the film as a 'feel good movie', or a 'sweet 'n' dumb feelgood bopper' (Henry Barnes in *The Guardian*), or a 'workaday Australian comedy' (Robbie Collin, *The Daily Telegraph*). . What do you think the scriptwriter and film makers were hoping to achieve? (*note: the credits above for the script writer, director and cinematographer*).

**Community**

What does the film reveal about the nature of the Aboriginal community on the mission station in terms of values that hold the community together?

**Stolen Generations**

While the film doesn't have the 'pathos' of *Rabbit Proof Fence* that focuses on Stolen Generations, it does make reference to the ongoing threat of children being taken. At a moments notice, the black cars may roll up and children taken away. This is 1968 in Australia! Kay, the cousin, is one who has been taken as her skin is fair and she can be absorbed into mainstream 'white' culture. The incongruence between the living

situation on the mission and Kay's world with Tupperware parties is comical but profound. It reveals the way fractures were created amongst and between families.

### **Character**

This is not a film with a 'political' agenda but serves to highlight the strong, defiant, resilient and joyful character of the young women. For some Aboriginal people, dysfunction and dislocation have created a culture of fatigue and despair, affecting whole communities, where no hope lies on the horizon. For others, there is a determination that provides the catalyst and a means to make a change, and to thumb your nose at the 'naysayers' and racists, such as in the film. It's complex, but a question for consideration – what are the building blocks that enable change to happen, for people to determine their own future, to rise above being victims of abuse or disregard? What are the disincentives?

### **Country and western to soul**

One of the film's strengths is the amazing soul soundtrack and the brilliant vocal performance by Jessica Mauboy. It does raise a question about what is required for success. Do the soul songs of the 60's serve the self-expression of the young women (a musical soundtrack for their own lives), or do the young women serve the need for people to sing like The Supremes (who would never venture into Vietnam). As it was said in the film, there were a number of 'wannabe' girl groups lined up who sing the same 'songbook' of soul songs – are The Sapphires simply groomed to provide for the market place, or is there something authentic for them in discovering soul music as a medium that provides the musical landscape of their own lives? How does the soul music contrast to the simple gospel song in their native Yorta Yorta language, which the young women sing in harmony to their mother on the phone from Vietnam? Since 1968, consider ways in which Aboriginal culture has been brought into 'mainstream' arts (for instance, the Bangarra Dance Theatre is considered Australia's leading Indigenous performing arts company, combining the spirituality of traditional culture with modern storytelling, <http://www.bangarra.com.au>).

### **The film as educator**

What capacity does a film have to become a vehicle to educate and inspire? In what way might telling a story like this, especially one based on real people and events, have the power to persuade and inspire about ways of becoming all one can be – for people of all cultures? How might this compare to the genre of documentary, which may have been an alternate way of telling the story of these remarkable women?

### **My people will be your people**

The relationship with Dave Lovelace (talent scout) and Gail ('mother bear') transcends culture – he being Irish and she being an Aboriginal Yorta Yorta woman. He speaks about her family being his family. It brings to mind the story of Ruth who, according to the biblical narrative, was a Moabite woman who married into an Israelite family. She tells Naomi, her mother in law, "*Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.*" (Ruth 1:16).

What is involved when tightly contained circles of 'belonging' become more permeable to welcome and embrace what is 'other'? What is involved in our global community to embrace 'other' wholeheartedly in this way?