Is one sense more powerful than the others? Given the distinct sensations each delivers to us—those of taste, touch, smell, hearing and sight—it would be easy to say that if one sense is lost, then its particular powers can no longer be felt.

However, Thomas Riedelsheimer’s 2004 documentary “Touch the Sound” points out that when one sense is lost, the others make up for it. Evelyn Glennie is a world-renowned percussionist, famous for her ability to discern rhythms within her daily life. She also happens to be severely deaf, and though the documentary doesn’t dwell on that, it does give the viewer a window into how Glennie experiences the world around her.

We first meet Glennie in a train station in New York, where she integrates the sounds being made by passers-by into her drumming routine. Soon, like the walkers around her, Glennie’s beating becomes faster and faster, until all those around her are stopping to listen, and the sounds of her snare drum are the only thing being heard throughout the lobby.

Then we are swooped off to Germany, where Glennie is involved in recording an improvisational album with composer-mentor Fred Frith. They use the remnants of the warehouse around them to create any and all kind of rhythms. At one point, even throwing rolls of toilet paper across the length of the room provides interesting sound for the duo.

After that, we travel with Glennie to her home in Scotland, where she spends some time on the family farm with her brother while teaching music at the local elementary school. And, later in Japan, she rehearses with the infamous Taiko drummers and engages in a duet with some amateur pianists in a local bar.

Less linear in form than most documentaries I’ve seen lately, Riedelsheimer is making an intriguing statement about the way human beings experience the world. Glennie herself says that she doesn’t understand why people are constantly asking how she hears; the vibrations of percussion allow her to hear. She hears through touch. But when she asks others how they hear, they can only say, “With our ears.” She doesn’t understand why she has to explain her senses; most people never think about it. Her touch simply gives her a way to perceive the world.

Riedelsheimer takes her straightforwardness to another level. He creates a movie that’s composed of images rather than stories. We begin to understand how Glennie is able to make music. We hear the traffic whizzing past her as she waits for a train in New York. We see dew dripping off a leaf in a nearby tree. She hears music in the world, and brings it out in rhythms we need to hear in it.

Glennie’s good nature does a lot to fuel the warmth of the feeling. She is practical about her gift and the way she sees the world, and invites students, other musicians and her audience to share in her views. The magical thing about the film is the way Glennie and
Riedelsheimer challenge the viewer to adopt her perceptions—for at least a short time. Only in that way can we truly understand how another person survives and thrives in the world.