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### Julien Temple Celebrates a Uniquely English Band with 'Oil City'

By [Jedd Beaudoin](#) 14 November 2013

Formed on Canvey Island, Essex, Dr. Feelgood remains one of the most beloved acts of the British pub rock movement. With guitarist Wilko Johnson and vocalist Lee Brilleaux out front, the quartet (completed by bassist John B. "Sparko" Sparks and drummer John "The Big Figure" Martin), The Feelgoods (as fans called the group) recorded three unassailable albums between 1975 and 1976 that not only gave spark to punk but demonstrated the quartet's ability to carve a new niche within the confines of R&B-inflected rock 'n' roll.

It helped that former schoolteacher and literature student Johnson had a singular, propulsive guitar style and larger-than-life stage persona, and that Brilleaux served as his equally engaging foil. (The former always clad in a black suit, the latter always in white.) Down by the Jetty, the group's debut album, became a favorite among New York's punk and art rock elite (Blondie, Richard Hell, and The Ramones were all early converts) elite to say nothing of its place in the heart of Modfather Paul Weller. One listen to "She Does It Right" will tell you everything you need to know.

The group celebrated its unlikely place of origin and its sense of working man's life with endless

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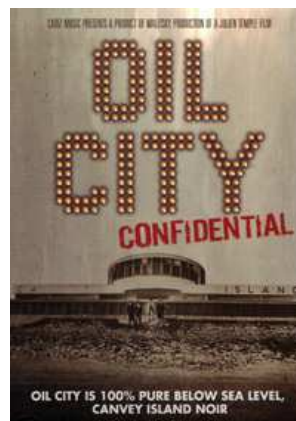
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Director: [Julien Temple](#)

Cast: Wilko Johnson, The Big Figure, Lee Brilleaux, John B Sparks, Alison Moyet

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live gigs and a second LP, *Malpractice*. By the following year, the group had filled up its schedule with so many gigs that Johnson didn't have enough time to pen an LP's worth of tunes, so the group opted to commit part of its live show to tape with the stunning *Stupidity*, which leaned heavily on rock 'n' roll standards.

By then Brilleaux and Johnson were barely speaking, the seeds of acrimony had been sown somewhere on the road and no one now seems able to pinpoint the exact moment when things went bad, but all seem to remember how bad things got. By the time 1977's *Sneakin' Suspicion* came out, the guitarist had distanced himself from the rest of the band, not only by being avidly anti-teetolare (he preferred hash and speed) but by penning "Paradise", a song that celebrated his love for his wife and his mistress. It upset the other three and by the end of the year he'd either quit or been fired.

Johnson's departure is essentially where this film ends, though Dr. Feelgood continues to this day, albeit without one solitary original member. Never able to find an audience in the US, the group has not released an album there since 1977, perhaps explaining *Oil City*, first released in 2009, has been slow to come to US soil. Brilleaux died in 1994, though his specter looms large in the memories of his fans and his bandmates. Johnson, now himself terminally ill with pancreatic cancer, offers some of the film's funniest stories and although he's clearly flawed you can't help but like him.

Those familiar with director Julien Temple's other rock documentaries (*The Filth and the Fury* being the best to date) won't be disappointed by *Oil City* and neither will fans of the original Dr. Feelgood.

Bonus features include outtakes with Wilko and a lengthy Lee Brilleaux interview. A handsome booklet accompanies the DVD, all of it enough to send the newcomer into the deep end of the pool rather quickly. They don't make bands like this anymore and Temple is to be commended for his effort in preserving this important bit of music history.

Rating: 

Extras rating: 




Jedd Beaudoin is an award-winning writer and broadcaster. He holds an MFA in creative writing (fiction) from Wichita State University and hosts *Strange Currency* six nights week for Wichita Public Radio. His writing has appeared in *No Depression* and *The Crab Orchard Review* as well as at websites such as [Ytsejam.com](http://Ytsejam.com) and [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).


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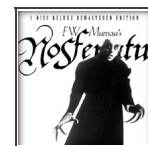
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