



## Oil City Confidential [2009/2013]

**Studio:** Cadiz Music CADIZDVD125

**Director:** Julien Temple

**Video:** 1.78:1 for 16×9 color

**Audio:** English Digital 2.0, Digital 5.1

**Subtitles:** French, German, Italian, Spanish

**Extras:** 16-page insert booklet, postcard, 1-page merchandise insert card, full-length director commentary, 20:44 Wilko Johnson interview outtakes, 48:14 bonus Lee Brilleaux interview

**Length:** 106 minutes

**Rating:** \*\*\*\*

*Oil City Confidential* is a documentary, but not about what you might think. This is not an exposé of an oil company polluting the air or water, although a giant oil refinery does have a place in this film. *Oil City Confidential* is an in-depth chronicle of English pub rockers, Dr. Feelgood, a working-class band which spearheaded the 1970s UK pub-rock scene, a loose confederation of likeminded groups that performed hard-driving rock & roll and R'n'B in small clubs in London and other British locales, as a contrast to the glam rock, hard rock, and prog rock prevalent prior to the rise of punk rock in the later 1970s. The same musical setting also produced impending stars such as Nick Lowe, the Clash's Joe Strummer, Elvis Costello (when he still went by his birth name, Declan McManus), Ian Dury and Graham Parker.

Julien Temple's movie (which premiered at the London Film Festival in 2009) is a historical prequel to two of his previous pictures about English music: *The Filth and the Fury* (the 2000 rockumentary about punk pioneers, the Sex Pistols) and the Strummer documentary, *The Future Is Unwritten* (2007). All three share Temple's cinematic flair: irreverent, anarchic and aggressive, with dollops of dark humor; with mixtures of montage, archival and fictionally created footage, animation, and "borrowed" clips from classic English gangster film noir, interviews, live footage, and still photos. *Oil City Confidential* was issued in late 2013 in both DVD and Blu-ray configurations: this review refers to the DVD version.

Dr. Feelgood was not renowned outside of the group's home country: at their peak, they did tour Europe and built up a continental audience; but never were more than a cult item stateside. Dr. Feelgood formed in 1971 by guitarist Wilko Johnson (who also penned lyrics), singer Lee Brilleaux, bassist John B. "Sparko" Sparks, and drummer John Martin, dubbed "The Big Figure." The initial lineup splintered in 1977, when Johnson left (or was kicked out, depending on the source). While most bands were centered on the London hub of pubs and other music venues, the Dr. Feelgood members came from a dodgy seaside town called Canvey Island, notably known as a somewhat isolated area with an outsider attitude, practically hedged in by a huge oil refinery which filled the exterior landscape: thus, *Oil City*. Temple provides an obligatory background to who the artists are, where they came from, and how their biographical elements impacted their future music making.

Temple's movie has a layered linear course, with energy akin to fictive film: he states in his descriptive director's commentary he doesn't perceive a self-conscious difference between documentary and narrative film: *Oil City Confidential* works because the storytelling aspects flow marginally chaotically but enthusiastically. The main highlights feature snippets from Dr. Feelgood's semi-legendary live performances which showcase Johnson's hyperkinetic presence and Brilleaux's vigorous vocalizing often fueled by copious alcohol; Johnson's manic verve and élan during recent interviews; surprisingly low-key discussions with Brilleaux from 1992 (he passed away in 1994); and a who's-

who of musicians who were inspired by or championed Dr. Feelgood (see how both Alison Moyet and [Blondie](#) drummer Clem Burke are connected via being fans of the group).

Temple's film isn't a bittersweet account of rags to riches: the fact the band never made it big in a traditional way actually causes *Oil City Confidential* to be all the more inventive and interesting: viewers get an intense sense of musicians who weren't famous, but had a fascinating experience; thus, a vibrant examination of a specific period, individual music and a unique place. The DVD has plenty of extras: a 16-page insert booklet with photos and artwork, liner notes by Temple and author Will Birch (who wrote a definitive book about pub rock); Temple's informative, full-length commentary; 20 minutes of Johnson interview outtakes (which reveals his endearing eccentricity, as he quotes from Shakespeare and does some stargazing); and an extended, 48-minute Brilleaux interview. *Oil City Confidential* would make a great companion piece to the 3-CD, 1-DVD boxed set, *All Through the City* (issued in 2012 in the UK and as an import in the US this year), which has the band's first four albums, previously unreleased studio outtakes, and live cuts.

—Doug Simpson

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