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DVD Review: 'Oil City Confidential' - A Julien Temple Film

By **Richard Marcus** | Monday, November 11, 2013

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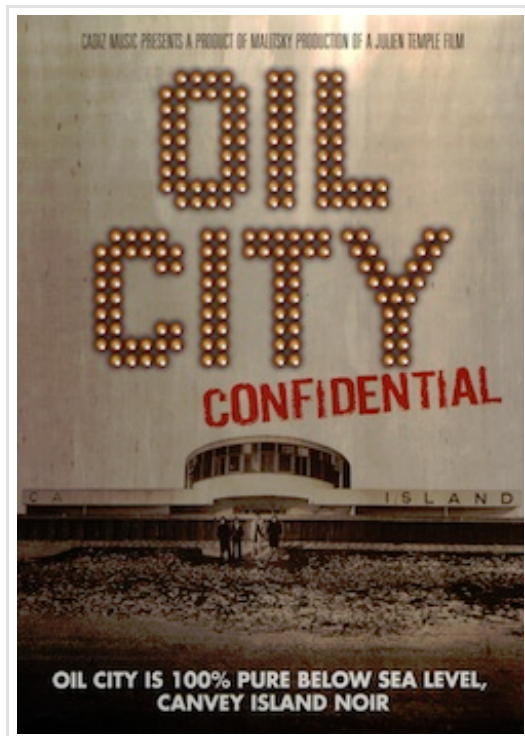
When people talk of the genesis of punk rock they usually refer to bands like Television, The Ramones, The Sex Pistols, and The Clash as being at the forefront of the movement. Sometimes, it seems like the music sprang from nowhere, as if all of a sudden people like Richard Hell, John Lyndon and Joe Strummer came up with the idea out of thin air. While these bands and individuals were vital to the genre's success and their role in its history can't be denied, there were others who laid the groundwork for what would become punk. Iggy Pop and the Stooges, The New York Dolls and the recently deceased Lou Reed are the names mentioned most frequently as being their inspiration.

A new documentary by acclaimed director [Julien Temple](#), [Oil City Confidential](#), distributed in North America by [MVD Entertainment Group](#), tells the story of a band whose contributions have largely been forgotten, but who probably had just as much influence on the punk scene as any of those mentioned above, [Dr. Feelgood](#). Temple has made a career out of charting the history of British punk through a series of documentary movies including *The Great Rock and Roll Swindle*, about the Sex Pistols and *The Future is Unwritten* about Joe Strummer, so he's not someone whose opinion you can dismiss lightly.

While a version of Dr. Feelgood continues to exist and tour today, it was the original line up and the period between 1971 and 1977 which concern us and

Temple's movie. However, Temple does more than just focus on the story of a band and rock and roll, he creates the context for both their birth, character, success and failure. Employing the band's original guitarist, Wilko Johnson, as a kind of tour guide and oral historian, Temple sets the stage for their beginnings by taking us back to the land of their birth, Canvey Island. Thirty miles east of London in the county of Essex, Canvey Island is located offshore in the Thames River. While a type of holiday resort for

Londoners in the early part of the 20th century, 1936 saw the construction of the first oil terminal in the region and since then refineries and terminals have sprouted up like boils until they now cover the landscape.



So when the band formed in 1971, the smokestacks of gas refineries and the huge oil storage tanks dominated the landscape. As the oil business loomed large in the life of those from Canvey Island, so Canvey Island loomed large in the development of Dr. Feelgood. In order to establish what the island meant to these four guys and how it figured in the character of the band, Temple spends a portion of the movie telling us the history of the island.

Using archival footage dating back to pre-WW II we learn the island had a wild reputation. It was a place where you went to do things you wouldn't do back home. Loose women, booze, gambling – almost anything went on Canvey Island. In 1953, the below-sea level island suffered its worst recorded disaster when it flooded, killing 58 people, and forcing a great deal of the population to be evacuated. The flood hit the tourists areas, including the amusement parks and holiday camps, hardest as they were closest to the Thames. Following the flood a new concrete flood wall was built. As a result the island now closely resembles pictures you see of fortified beaches in France during WWII as its completely surrounded by concrete.

Interspersed with the history of the Island we learn the history of the four original band members and how they found each other. Brilleaux had formed a jug band when he was a teenager. They would take their instruments around in an old baby pram to various tourist spots and pubs and set up outside and

busk for some extra cash. Temple has unearthed some great footage of them wheeling a pram piled high with instruments as they head out to gigs. However, it was the blues and R&B Brilleaux really wanted to play. So he, Sparks, and Martin approached the older Wilco – he'd actually been a teacher in the local school- who'd they heard played guitar to join them.

As Temple reminds us, pop music in the early 1970s in the U.K. was dominated by progressive rock groups playing longwinded synthesizer pieces, which had nothing to do with rock and roll. It would seem to have been the worst time in the world to form a band who wanted to play down and dirty blues and R&B based music. However, it was also the time when pubs in London were just starting to book bands. So instead of having to book venues, bands were cramming themselves into whatever corner of a pub they could fit and playing for a crowd who was right in their face.



Dr.

Feelgood, dressed in cheap suits, looking a little like low rent gangsters, and playing their raw blues and R&B were very much the antithesis of the progressive rock bands on the radio. They'd climb into their old beat up van after work and drive the 30 odd miles to London to play a gig and at the end of the night make the return journey. When describing this juncture of their career, Temple intercuts current interviews with members of the band with footage from black and white British crime movies. In doing so he creates the atmosphere surrounding them in those early days. They, like the criminals in the movies, were making smash and grab raids on London before retreating to their hide out on Canvey.

Watching footage of the band playing live, there's a definite element of menace to their stage presence. Brilleaux looms over the centre of the stage, a large figure hunched over his microphone while Wilco glides around stage playing his guitar with his eyes boring into the audience like he's sizing them up for his next victim. In a brief clip Richard Hell of Television sums up by saying about Wilco something along the lines of "He had this whole crazy stare which was awesome." Hell wasn't the only one impressed by the band. During

their times playing the pubs in London, people like John Lydon and Glen Matlock (Sex Pistols) and Joe Strummer were catching their act.

While you might think it hyperbole before you see the movie, Temple's description in his notes accompanying the DVD of Dr. Feelgood being John The Baptist to Johnny Rotten's Anti-Christ, is quite accurate. They were the initial tremor foreshadowing the shockwave of punk in England. Even if they didn't have the same status in New York City, they were treated as fellow travellers and compatriots when they played there in 1976.

Unfortunately, by then, Wilco was starting to fall off the rails. He had been the band's primary songwriter on their first two albums and when it was time to go into the studio for the third album, he had nothing. He was isolated from the rest of the band by his use of drugs and not being a drinker. When he was supposed to be writing songs, he was merely sitting in a room doing drugs. He's completely candid about his behaviour today, and how it caused him and Brilleaux to fall out. As Wilco says, there's always one guy in the band who falls in love with being a rock star when they first start achieving success, and he was the guy in Dr Feelgood.

Temple has created some of the finest documentaries about punk rock ever made. They don't just do a good job of capturing their subject matter warts and all, they allow audiences to understand the context which created the music and how the various individuals developed. With *Oil City Confidential* he has not only created a movie which captures the spirit of the times and tells the story of the band, Dr. Feelgood, he has created a movie whose form itself is a tribute to the anarchic nature of punk.

One thing you'll notice during the movie is that the interviews done in the present never have all four original members of the band together. This isn't because of any lasting acrimony between them, it's because Brilleaux died of cancer in 1994. The interview footage of him has been taken from a BBC interview done in the early 1990s. As well as other clips not included in the movie, one of the bonus features included with the DVD is this interview in its entirety.

Dr. Feelgood's original line up put out three studio albums, *Down By The Jetty* (January 1975), *Malpractice* (October 1975), and *Sneakin' Suspicion* (1977). The band also did one live album, *Stupidity* (1976), which went to the top of the U.K. Charts. Their heyday may have only lasted three years and four recordings, but their place in the history of rock and roll and pop music can not be underestimated.

Would punk rock in England have happened without them? Of course it would

have. However, without them there wouldn't have been an audience ready and waiting for the bands who came after. As the film shows they set the table for others to reap the rewards of fame. Hopefully *Oil City Confidential* will help ensure the names Lee Brilleaux, Wilco Johnson, John B Sparks, and The Big Figure will now be remembered and given their due place in the annals of pop music.

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About Richard Marcus

Richard Marcus is the author of two books commissioned by Ulysses Press, "What Will Happen In Eragon IV?" (2009) and "The Unofficial Heroes Of Olympus Companion". Aside from Blogcritics his work has appeared around the world in publications like the German edition of Rolling Stone Magazine and the multilingual web site Qantara.de. He has been writing for Blogcritics.org since 2005 and has published around 1900 articles at the site.

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