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DVD REVIEW: 'OIL CITY CONFIDENTIAL'

Posted by: Pat Padua January 10, 2014 in DVD and Blu-ray Reviews, Top Stories

How many documentaries get a prequel? *Oil City Confidential* is director Julien Temple's third documentary to cover British music of the 1970s.

The director's career began in music videos, the single tracking shot of his video for Janet Jackson's "When I think of You" typical of his early, elaborate success. But his career turned south with the ambitious flop *Absolute Beginners* (1986)



Wilko Johnson and Lee Brilleaux

Temple makes more documentaries than fiction features these days. He sees this 2009 documentary about Dr. Feelgood as a musical prequel to his films about the Clash (*Joe Strummer: The Future is Unwritten*, 2007) and the Sex Pistols (*The Filth and the Fury*, 2000). If you were to ask a random vinyl shopper at Urban Outfitters who Joe Strummer and Johnny Rotten were, you might get a look of recognition. But how many on American shores know who Wilko Johnson is?

The music of Dr. Feelgood seems tame today, but it was a bridge to punk rock, albeit a bridge that isn't celebrated much outside of the band's home turf of Canvey Island. It's hard to imagine that at its peak, Dr. Feelgood filled a stadium. The band's local legend is so deep that you can take a two-hour walking tour around Canvey Island that immerses the pub rock-inclined tourist in the working class métier of the band members, who lived within blocks of each other.

Wilko Johnson is Dr. Feelgood's charismatic guitarist. Tall, bald, his menacing appearance hiding the soul of a softie, he's a great documentary subject, and he leads the proceedings. Born John Wilkinson, he took his stage name to be distinguished from other band members named John, as if he could be mistaken for anyone else.

Johnson leads the viewer on a tour of Canvey Island and her history. The depressed English resort town was the scene of a tragic flood in the 1950s and became home to oil refineries comes off vaguely like the UK version of the Jersey Shore. Scenes of Englishmen at leisure recall the work of Magnum photographer Martin Parr.

The film works best when it deals with Canvey Island and puts Wilko in the spotlight. But this can be a problem when the subject of your documentary is a band. The context and locale is entertaining, but Temple doesn't capture what it is that made Dr. Feelgood successful and influential. Lead singer Lee Brilleaux seems like an ordinary white R&B singer whose charisma doesn't translate to screen, despite his defenders. The band's repertoire was solidly bar band, while Wilko Johnson's thousand-yard-stare and nervous stage strut looked totally punk rock. The movie won't convert anybody to Dr. Feelgood, and by that standard *Oil City Confidential* fails as a music documentary. But as a study of Canvey Island and one of her most colorful residents, it's diverting enough.



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ABOUT PAT PADUA



Pat Padua is a writer, photographer, native Washingtonian, and Oxford comma defender. The Washington Post called him "a talented, if quirky, photographer." Pat has also contributed to the All Music Guide, Cinescene, and DCist, where he is currently senior film critic.



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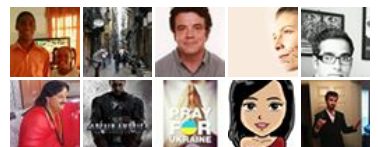
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