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Tour film follows ups & downs of the Pixies

November 3, 2006

BY CHRIS BARSANTI

The list of accolades granted over the years to landmark alt-rock group the Pixies would be enough to make any artist blush. Between being cited as one of the great bands of all time by the likes of Bono and Bowie, being granted near-permanent status on most music critics' best-of lists, and being called a major and continuing influence by legions of musicians who came of age in the '80s and '90s, the four members of the band have, enough praise to last several lifetimes. However, good reviews and the undying love of aging college-rock fans don't pay the bills, nor keep the band together.

The Pixies -- Black Francis (a k a Frank Black, a k a Charles Thompson, lead vocals and guitar), Kim Deal (bass), Joey Santiago (guitar) and David Lovering (drums) -- got together in Boston in 1986 and quickly achieved the kind of underground success most bands only dream of. After five albums and six years of frenetic touring, peaking with an opening slot on U2's 1992 tour, Thompson broke the band up with little fanfare and -- it seems from his studiedly distant personality in the new Pixies documentary "loudQUIETloud" -- little regret.

In 2004, the Pixies reformed for a reunion tour that is documented in the film with almost a perverse calm, compared to the feverish audience and critical anticipation. Directors Steven Cantor and Matthew Galkin build their story slowly, first painting portraits of the individual members and their separate lives in the post-Pixies years, which the film presents as a general downhill slide for most of them.

Thompson's solo career as Frank Black seems to have stalled. Santiago has an acoustic project with his wife, and we see them playing to little interest in a bookstore. He even says at one point, "I was eking it out."

LOUDQUIETLOUD

Stick Figure and Cactus Three presents a documentary directed by Steven Cantor and Matthew Galkin. Starring Charles "Black Francis" Thompson, Kim Deal, David Lovering and Joey

Lovering, who has pursued a magic career and controlled-substance addictions, seems to need this reunion more than anybody. The charismatic Deal comes off the only Pixie who was able to put together a substantial career after the breakup, with her band the Breeders, which includes her sister Kelly.

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Santiago. Running time: 82 min. No MPAA rating. Opening today at the Music Box Theatre.

As the filmmakers follow the band across America (playing to bigger and bigger crowds), it becomes clear that they're not interested in rock clichés.

What we witness is a collection of people who were once friends but have since grown apart and have come back together to rekindle some mysterious alchemy that exists only when they are on the stage together.

Given the crowds' explosive response to this long-awaited reunification, and the raucous precision with which the Pixies perform in the crisply captured concert footage, most viewers would imagine the overall tone of "loudQUIETloud" to be one of victory. But the memory of past failures is a hard shadow to dodge, as is the fact Thompson's seemingly arbitrary breakaway in 1992 could well be repeated at any moment.

This melancholy mood shades everything and provides the film with rather more depth than one would expect from a concert film. This is a professionally captured record of one of rock's living legends being given a second and unexpected lease on life.

All that being said, if the question (asked on one fan site), "Where were you when you first heard 'Debaser'?" has no resonance, this is not the film for you.

Film Journal International

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