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"loudQUIETloud' probes Pixies split

By Casey McConahay (The Lantern - OSU)

Alternative rock suffered a critical setback with the 1993 split of pioneering quartet the Pixies. Notable for both their inventive style and far-reaching influence - Kurt Cobain used to be an enthusiastic fan - the break-up of the band seemed to herald progressive rock's impending descent from mainstream prominence.

Rather than fading into obscurity as little more than a footnote to rock history, though, the Pixies legacy was sustained with the assistance of a healthy underground buzz and fueled by the fervent sort of cult following that allowed the band's 2004 reunion tour to sell out in four minutes. That same tour is the subject of "loudQUIETloud," a new documentary by directors Steven Cantor and Matthew Galkin.

The documentary is an intimate portrayal of the seminal alternative rock band whose brief but brilliant career ultimately fragmented under the stress and strain of member in-fighting. Cantor and Galkin do not tip-toe around the break-up topic. The question of why the Pixies parted ways frames the film's introduction and is addressed frequently in the span of the film, often with the vague imprecision that seems to characterize any conflict considered in hindsight.

There is a brief "what they have been up to" montage. Vocalist and guitarist Black Francis, who formerly called himself Charles Thomas, has circled the solo circuit as Frank Black; bassist Kim Deal toured with the Breeders before checking into rehab; drummer David Lovering has developed an affinity for metal detectors and magic; and guitarist Joey Santiago started a band with his wife and is scoring, ironically, a documentary.

The real story, however, is the tour. The tour becomes the band's biography in microcosm, a lens of unabashed honesty through which one can escape the smokescreen that formerly concealed the elusive band. Through the tour, we see the artists as they really are - talented men and women, but mere mortals, nonetheless. And it is all here: Black spinning self-help cassettes, Deal's battles with alcoholism and Lovering's several moments of Spinal Tap-inspired insanity while the drummer struggles with demons of his own. Indeed, Lovering's dependence on a cocktail of red wine and Valium culminates in what is perhaps the most honest intervention ever captured on camera, and all of this augmented with a tender and poignant production that challenges the deification of rock stars without ever devaluing its subjects to comic rock star caricatures.

As the Pixies play to packed houses across the United Kingdom, United States and Canada, then, to crowds that raise signs reading "Kim Deal is God," the film adopts a tone of elegiac facetiousness that is at once both tragic and heartwarming. Relying upon simple but gripping cinematography, the picture gets more purchase from glances and gestures than most scripted movies get from pages of dialogue - a sigh from Deal as she reads a book given to her by a fan, which packs an impressive but subdued punch, as does the single instance where Black pushes aside a camera when the conflict born of Lovering's addictions has reached its breaking point.

In the end, Cantor and Galkin present the Pixies as what they are - a group of musicians who have experienced a measure of commercial success and critical acclaim, but both in the past tense. The challenge the film depicts is not only how to regain bygone glories, but also how to progress in one's individual development when handicapped by the remnants of an overbearing and prominent past. "LoudQuietloud" presents four such stories with a quiet profundity that makes the journey all the more compelling.

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