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GenEc DVD Review

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Lydia Lunch - Video Hysterie: 1978-2006

The world first encountered Lydia Lunch in 1978 as the "star" member of the anarchic New York "No-Wave" band, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. If anyone would have suggested that she would still be around thirty years later, I would have laughed in their face.

But here we are in 2008, and MVD has recently issued a career-spanning compilation of videos, film clips, and live performances covering not only TJ&J live at Max's Kansas City in 1978 as well as her almost-as-fabled band, 8 Eyed Spy, from 1980, but numerous solo performances and collaborations from the 1990's and 2000's as well. The impression that the viewer is left with is that of an uncompromising, ever-evolving artist who may or may not have begun as a poseur, but who has developed into a artist of strength, purpose, and imagination.

One thing that needs to be acknowledged right off the bat is that many of these selections are primarily of documentary significance. The Teenage Jesus material in particular is shoddily filmed with poor sound. But when historians wish to get a real feel for what the late 70's New York scene was like, these clips will be found to capture the story much more effectively than controlled studio recordings ever could. Who on that scene could afford major productions, anyway? In any case, there is Lydia shouting anti-melodically in her highest register over an explosive warped-power-trio backdrop of anti-music, looking as deadpan as can be imagined given the urgency of the performance. I find it fascinating, though I'm sure not everyone will agree.

With 8 Eyed Spy, Lydia put down her guitar and worked with a band resembling real musicians, blending elements of punk, pseudo-funk, pseudo-blues, and avant-garde jazz. The band is loose, yet energetic, and the music holds up surprisingly well. Lydia's vocals had dropped down an octave or so to a talk-shout closer emotionally to Iggy Pop than to commercial pop. Visually, her blank, yet belligerent attitude is priceless. Bad-girl wannabes can still learn a lot from watching her performances here. By the way, there's a rare cover song here, John Fogarty's "Run Through the Jungle," though you'd hardly recognize it if weren't for the guitar riff.

Cut to 1991, by which time I personally had lost track of Lydia Lunch's activities. Thus, everything from this point on is a surprise to me. We find a matured and mellowed Lydia whose declamations over a musical backdrop are closer to poetry-with-music than to rap. But unlike too many recorded poetry/music

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