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Guns N' Roses

DVD Collector's Box

(Chrome Dream)
US release date: 30 January 2007

by **Dara Kartz**

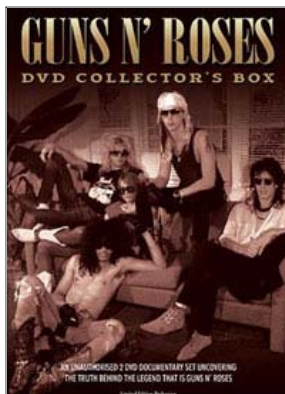
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In the grand tradition of rock n' roll, the glory days of Guns N' Roses certainly hold enough material to fill countless books, movies, documentaries, and any other media form that can tell a story. It's the stuff that rock legends are made of, and frankly there aren't too many rock stars left these days to be able to hold an audience's attention the way that the original lineup of Axl Rose, Slash, Izzy Stradlin, Duff McKagan and Steven Adler could.

We all want to hear more, and especially if you're actually a fan of the band, you'll eagerly snap up anything that promises "exclusive" footage and photos of the guys in their early days and beyond. In the case of *Guns N' Roses: The DVD Collector's Box*, that knee-jerk reaction would actually be an unfortunate response since a few hardcore fans writing a digital fan letter to Axl and the boys is hardly the sort of thing you want to waste two hours witnessing.

The DVD Collector's Box is a two-disc set that attempts to chronicle the extraordinary rise of Guns N' Roses from a bunch of guys on the LA club scene in the mid-'80s to become the biggest band on the planet in the early '90s. Even better, they propose to do this through unseen performance and interview footage, and interviews with band mates, close friends, family members and close collaborators. Now, I'm sure even the most non-GN'R fan is aware of the huge rift that exists between Axl and the rest of the boys these days, so this promise of interviews with band mates should immediately make anyone skeptical.

And rightly so, because what we end up with here on Disc One, *Sex n' Drugs n' Rock n' Roll*, is essentially footage from one interview with Slash and Duff back in the early '90s that ultimately gets chopped up and re-used as often as possible as sound bites throughout this first half of the "documentary". Even worse, these close friends and collaborators that we're supposed to be hearing from literally include a current Guitar World employee, a studio engineer that mistakenly refers to Axl as "Alex" during his interview, and promoters that worked the LA clubs around the same time that the band was making their first appearances, but can't seem to recall any definite details about their interactions with the band members themselves. It's hard to take any of what these folks have to say seriously, and it's all a clear indication that in this case "unauthorized" does not mean "cutting edge".



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What it does mean is that the producers literally couldn't clear any entertaining or original footage from the band or perk the interest of any credible sources to get involved. In what might be the most painful consequence of this, the film's entire background soundtrack is made up of not a single Guns N' Roses tune, but instead features really generic, looped guitar riffs. Hardly the sort

of soundtrack that should accompany the "true story" of such a ground-breaking rock band, and just one of the many things that will make viewers cringe when trying to get through this first disc in the hopes that there may be some nugget of new or interesting information.

Let me save you the trouble, and tell you to skip this first disc altogether and go directly to Disc Two, if only to escape the over-dramatic British woman who serves as narrator. Don't even bother stopping for the DVD's Extras which feature only some stock photos and, of course, further information on where to purchase other DVDs produced by the same company.

The second half of *The DVD Collector's Box* is dedicated to Axl, specifically *Axl: The Prettiest Star*. Assuming you can get past this title and the cartoon rose graphics that persist in floating across the screen, this disc at least offers up some more remotely qualified participants: Chris Weber, the guitarist in GN'R pre-band *Hollywood Rose*, and Vicky Hamilton, the band's first manager who did double-duty as housemother, being most notable.

While neither interviews get to any of the nitty-gritty questions you'd hope for, and certainly suffer from the hands of a lazy editor, these are people that participated in the birth of the band and their perspectives offer an entertaining glimpse into that time, no matter how incoherent. Chris offers insights about his first show playing with a very green Axl, along with his version of how accidentally hitting Axl in the head with his guitar during a gig at The Music Machine resulted in his departure from the band and ultimately the introduction of Slash and Axl. Vicky offers quips about the boys living in one room of her apartment with sleeping bags, amps and McDonald's fries constantly littering the floor, and provides a colorful recollection of searching for a missing Axl on the day of the band's record deal signing with Geffen and finding him sitting Buddha-style atop the Whisky a Go Go nightclub. See? It's the stuff that rock legends are made of.

Beyond these barstool stories from the early days, we get a glimpse into the later, rocky years from a photographer that often accompanied the band on tour along with some very animated commentary from British metal music journalist Malcolm Dome. Stories from the two are the main sources here trying to piece together the incredible popularity of the band with the release of *Illusions I* and *II* in 1991, Axl's increasingly difficult reputation and distancing from the rest of the band, and the group's ultimate demise. It's this period of the band, along with Axl's later and current antics, that seem to have the most question marks surrounding them, but again without any "real" sources contributing to the film here, there's not much light that can be shed other than the same stories that have been printed in various music magazines over the years.

Guns N' Roses mastered the art of what a rock band should be, seemingly without even trying, and Axl undeniably holds a special talent for maintaining the illusion of mystery that we expect from a rock star. Early fans talk about their shows in the small LA clubs as an event, all saying that the band was literally something you just couldn't take your eyes off. Stories of their wild times starting out in LA, the incredible rise to fame, the riots and ongoing fights with members of the press, band members quitting, Axl's later reclusion and recent reappearance: it's the turbulence of rock n' roll that made GN'R a band that people could not stop talking about and it's likely what inspires fans to make these sorts of digital love letters to the group today.

Both discs in this set are ultimately just a collection of random stories from hardcore fans, some more random than others, that miss that band. Unfortunately, we still never get a real sense of what was at the heart of this group: what those first years in LA felt like, the songwriting and recording process, their experiences with fame, their stories as friends in the studio and on the road together, and why the band actually did fall apart. Those are all the real question marks surrounding the band, and what would ultimately provide a real glimpse into the "story" of Guns N' Roses. Hopefully, all the guys will someday be willing to stand in the same room together again to be able to tell it.

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