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Movie/DVD Review

The Specials - 30th Anniversary Tour

By Bob Lange
August 18, 2010

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Back in 1998, I was lucky enough to catch the Specials on the Warped Tour. Despite being only a subset of the band's classic line-up, they were outstanding. Nonetheless, the constant parade of half-hearted reunions that permeate the rock scene today still kept my guard up for this release of the 2009 reunion show. Once again, and this time as the full line-up (minus Jerry Dammers), the Specials prove that the years have not been unkind to them.

Thirty years from the release of their 1979 self-titled debut, the Specials are still excited to play and exciting to watch. They're all in their 50s (some of them in their late 50s) and yet nothing about them (or their three decade old songs) seems old. They're so tight that it's hard to imagine that this unit was apart nearly ten times as long as they were together. The crowd, young and old alike, responds appropriately with sing-alongs and non-stop dancing, just as it likely was back in 1979. The sound and video quality is flawless and far exceeds the expectations set by most live films. The highly professional production does all that can possibly be done to capture the essence of this live performance.

The Specials music was always a great mix of joy and hope and that often included lyrics that spoke to the problems of the day. Many of the songs are still relevant, partly because things haven't changed, but also because the songs are infused with a hope that is timeless. Whether due to a lack of real social change or simply that the path to the human heart remains the same, the Specials still connect. They still matter. While it is, in a sense, sad that their songs are still relevant to today's problems, it is simply wonderful to see these problems attacked with the Specials' own positive vibe.

The DVD also includes a short documentary about the anniversary. Usually, such bonus material just features a superficial look at the band preparing for the main event, but this one was different. It focused as much on the fans as it did on the band, including interviews with young and old alike as well as their personal photographs from back in the day. They discuss memories and expectations and why the Specials matter to them (which usually amounts to that mix of fun with "values"). The excitement of both band and fans is as palpable in the documentary as it is in the performance itself. One fan says, "Your biggest fear is that you're just gonna get a bunch of fat old blokes that just turn up for a paycheck." It's clear that, not only was that fear not realized, but the show was probably even better than he could have imagined.

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