

On Screen

Films & DVDs



Jack Elliott in *Johnny YesNo Redux*

Johnny YesNo Redux

Peter Care (Director)

Mute Films 2×DVD + 2×CD, 1983/2009

DoubleVision, the shortlived VHS label run by Cabaret Voltaire on which Peter Care's film *Johnny YesNo* was first released, proved a prescient name. We can't escape seeing the film doubly: its alternately smoke-dark and bleedingly overlit vision of Britain at the end of the 1970s, rich with psychosis, flashes strangely up over our own moment, with a ruling class once again poised to wreck what remains of the social fabric, and startling distortions of everyday life breaking out daily.

Care, who has spent most of the last 20 years as a music video director, seems to clock this: the original film comes packaged with an even more fragmented and hallucinatory 2009 're-imagining'. Sticky and

fuzzy with the texture of VHS, the original is a small masterpiece, a pulp remix of Chris Petit's *Radio On*, a compressed nightmare journey where the blind, automated rage of *Taxi Driver* becomes the malevolent logic of a world that visits itself on the agency-less creatures losing themselves in its sensuous intensities. Johnny (Jack Elliott, looking like a lost Kray brother) meets and sleeps with Lorraine (Jude Calvert-Toulmin); his pursuit of another woman lands him in mischief – drugged, beaten, dragged through a quarry, left to wander across the moors. The film yields to a happy ending too unbelievable to explain anything.

Cabaret Voltaire's soundtrack was the last material by the original trio, and some of their best, balancing the frenzy and splintered textures of their earlier work with the streamlined language of their

post-Chris Watson albums. Slow pulses are pierced by high, chattering synths; galloping sequencers are followed by whistles and detuned carnival shouts; drones and dissonances turn into electronic screams. The extras – videos made by Care for the group – are quite fascinating, some remixing material from the film, others exploring similar territory, such as one about a skinhead girl wandering around an abandoned industrial district.

A comparison with the other great noir rework of 1982, *Blade Runner*, is instructive. Ridley Scott's film famously invested its rather larger budget in taking on the look of the 1930s rather than one slips into a coat, its chill beauty and visual ease making visible, and comfortable, its interest in the deletion of 'authentic' experience. *Johnny YesNo*, by contrast, incorporates the visual language

of kitchen sink cinema – the grubby bedsit, the good-time girl, the rough, cocky protagonist – but also the 60s reworking of noir (think *Performance*). Its vision of Sheffield as the grave of an industrial world whose grimness at least gave existence coherence becomes one in which the ghosts of authentic life play out their roles with no succour. In an astonishing moment late in the film, the battered Johnny watches the mysterious girl, in sequins and chiffon, getting out of a pink Cadillac at a gas station seemingly summoned out of the American Midwest, and walking a poodle before driving into the night. In a manner that anticipates David Lynch's mature work, Care and Cabaret Voltaire articulate the seduction – and the bloody underside – of a universe of mirages.

Dan Barrow

The New York Dolls

Looking Fine On Television

MVD Visual DVD

As a counterweight to Lou Reed's psychotic nihilism, encapsulated in the statement that he had enough attitude to kill everybody in the state of New Jersey, Lester Bangs once cited David Johansen, the singer of The New York Dolls: Johansen, said Lester, was a bad boy with enough heart to save everybody in the state of New Jersey.

Too easily dismissed, even now, as a grotesque sideshow in a rock 'n' roll circus which had The Rolling Stones at its gated, decadent core, The New York Dolls were the only group in the early 1970s who told you it was OK to be alive and imperfect in this world; that you could achieve a fabulous state of grace precisely because you were socially dysfunctional, emotionally crippled, psychologically scar(r)ed.

And as the film archived on this DVD makes clear, the most fabulous examples

of that queer philosophy in action were The New York Dolls themselves.

So what we have here is a 70 minute montage of black and white video footage shot by photographer Bob Gruen and his wife Nadya in the streets and clubs of New York and Los Angeles between 1971 and 1974, which is to say the glory days of The Dolls, before all the drugs and deaths and diva hissy-fits got too much even for rock 'n' roll to have and hold. During this period the Gruens filmed The Dolls as they posed on street corners, shopped for accessories, goofed around during interview sessions. The film intercuts this footage with clips from *The Lipstick Killers*, the 1974 gangster spoof-cum-promo, and various TV moments, including a news report of the amazing 1973 Halloween party the group hosted at New York's Waldorf Astoria (as Johansen quips, with The Dolls, "it's Halloween 365 days of the year"). And then there is the live footage, which of course is what really commands the attention, those electrifying moments when

The Dolls' queer theory became fabulous praxis, tearing through their small but perfectly formed repertoire in some of the most mythologised spaces of the glam rock counterculture: Kenny's Castaways, Max's Kansas City, the Whisky a Go Go, Rodney Bingenheimer's English Disco.

Beyond all the proto-punk clichés, myth and nostalgia, what becomes apparent the more this history recedes is that The Dolls first absorbed then amplified the essence of a vernacular street culture that was unique to urban America, and that was in turn unique in American culture, because it was so inclusive, in terms of race, gender and sexuality, and because it contained a moral dimension that was deeply humanist. Bo Diddley, The Shangri-Las and Little Richard were the cornerstones of The Dolls' entire aesthetic, and the fact that all this stuff could be mobilised by a group of cross-dressing immigrants from New York's outer boroughs, in the twin heartlands of Entertainment USA, during an era of

draconian social and political pressure, renders The Dolls' story as a facet of the American dream that is rarely commented on.

Some of the Gruens' footage was edited into the 2005 documentary *All Dolled Up*, so *Looking Fine On Television* is a sequel of sorts to that film, or maybe a bonus disc that didn't come with its original DVD edition. Slight in scope and ambition it might be, a collection of home movies almost, but it is a significant addition to the archive for the way it helps rescue American pop history from the forces of cultural conservatism, reminding us that once upon a time it contained an idea for a different way of being in the world. In a reactionary pop age full of mendacious mavericks (plus ça change), The New York Dolls signalled their radicalism by being the kind of boys who never took off their make-up before going to bed (as Nina Antonia almost said of The Shangri-Las). From such tiny advances, battles are sometimes won. The war is not over.

Tony Herrington