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Imagine This Power Duo Together Again: 'Ike & Tina: On the Road: 1971-72'

By Terrence Butcher 27 November 2012

In the opening scene from the new DVD *Ike & Tina: On the Road: 1971-72*, Ike and a sassy, earthier Tina bicker in a limo's back seat, nothing harsher than you'd get from Ward and June Cleaver, yet you're waiting for Ike to explode into the violent rageaholic we've been taught to expect. Turner may have been precisely that, but it's not even hinted at in this documentary. In fact, *Ike & Tina* seems to function as a revisionist look at this famous duo's stormy relationship. As celebrated rock photographer Bob Gruen - who assembled the film with his wife/partner Nadya Beck - states, "What's Love Got To Do With It" shows why Ike and Tina Turner broke up. This film shows why they were together for twenty years before that".

When I think of Tina Turner, *nee* Anna Mae Bullock, an MTV light bulb unfailingly flashes above my head. Her shadowy silhouette perched on a stool, as the camera slowly zooms in, while she tucks into Al Green's warm "Let's Stay Together", or more vividly, the Queen of Rock sashaying down a sidewalk in a snug leather skirt, hair teased into a flamboyant punk 'do. This was the revitalized Turner, risen Phoenix-like from the ashes of an abusive marriage and embarrassing shtick on *The Brady Bunch Variety Hour*.

Gruen and Beck's 81-minute reality piece compiles footage from Ike and Tina's 1971-72 American jaunt, and that was a propitious year for the duo. Their gospel-inflected cover of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Proud Mary" cracked the national Top 10, and with all due respect to John Fogerty's magnificent quartet, the Turners' rendition remains the definitive one. Of course, it's included here, alongside other chestnuts like "I've Been Loving You Too Long", "A Love Like Yours", and Phil Spector's glorious disappointment "River Deep, Mountain High", which sounds painfully screechy in mono.

"Ike & Tina" takes us backstage as well as under the klieg lights, though few would argue that the exciting moments - and there aren't many - are primarily onstage. A lengthy sequence early on shows Tina at home with her brood, a prototypical suburban ranch house, with multiple cars in the driveway and a Great Dane tolerant of Family Circus-like shenanigans. It's an oddly domestic image of Tina; the popular imagination places her in outsize movie roles (The Acid Queen or desert Dragon Lady-cyberpunk Auntie Entity), massive concerts (Rio or bumpin' and grindin' with Mick at Live Aid), or cavorting with younger male rockers in elaborate videos. We don't imagine her dusting the furniture or making potato salad. It's unfortunate that the footage is often grainy black-and-white, especially as this 'reality show outtake' goes on longer than necessary.

In fact, most of the film's sequences aren't in color, but it's a foregone conclusion that Gruen and



Ike & Tina: On The Road: 1971-72

Cast: Ike Turner, Tina Turner
(MVD Visual; US DVD: 20 Nov 2012)

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Beck weren't necessarily planning a film at the time, so color was likely eschewed for that reason. Needless to say, black & white is often a viable artistic choice for a movie, and I cringe reflecting on the colorization battles of the '80s, but I don't think it serves any aesthetic function here, particularly during the blurry clip from *The Tonight Show*. A low-tech, patched-together feeling reigns throughout, as Gruen admits in the accompanying booklet (the only extra in the DVD release), which may appeal to certain cinematic Luddites, but no one will be reminded of Italian Neorealism or the *Nouvelle Vague*.

As might be expected, Tina figures most prominently in the performance clips, an unrepentant extrovert and a soul and blues belter for the ages. Lord knows what her voice sounds like now, but in her heyday - and this film presents that period - few could touch her. Many songs here exist only in snippets, but they're sufficient to remind the dueless of her talent. It's fashionable to claim that such a vocal style represents a union of the sacred and the profane, as some have said of the late Marvin Gaye, but her gospel high notes and corrosive shouting suggest exactly that. This potent combination is evident in any tune we hear in the film.

It's easy to focus too much attention on Tina, and perhaps smugly satisfying to do so, considering her travails with Ike, but we forget her late husband's seminal contributions to rock 'n' roll. At Memphis' legendary Sun Studios, Ike penned and recorded "Rocket 88", a frequent candidate for the first rock tune. On the duo's '50s Southern tours, he demanded integrated audiences, and later opened a recording studio, Bollic Sound, which was patronized by some of the music world's brightest lights. Not for naught have Johnny Otis and the irrepressible Little Richard deemed him one of rock's great innovators, and the Rolling Stones probably felt similarly, when they invited the duo onto their 1966 world tour. If Tina's forceful charisma hogs the spotlight through most of the film, Ike responds by serving up some mean, bluesy guitar chops on "I Smell Trouble".

Ike Turner certainly recognized raw talent when he stumbled across it, and he knew Anna Mae was something special. Putting aside her windstorm of a voice, Tina also emanated a potent aura of sex, one that channeled Hollywood's white screen sirens of the '30s, '40s, and '50s. The voluptuous, full-figured, curvy gal that elevated male blood pressure before Twiggy made it "in" to be thin. Tina has always possessed a pair of legs to keep Mary Hart awake nights, and perhaps her live performances of ZZ Top's '80s smash "Legs" are a sly self-reference from a woman unafraid to flaunt what she's got.

Ike & Tina: On the Road: 1971-72 is the antithesis of MTV's flash and filigree, and whether or not that's a good thing depends on one's frame of reference. If Tina fashioned a glittery new demimonde with the 20 million-selling *Private Dancer* and its attendant promo videos, then *Ike & Tina* can be read as a gritty prequel to the spectacular comeback she would revel in. Far from slick or pristine, the film is seldom eye-pleasing, but may interest hardcore Turner devotees and rock history geeks.

As for Ike Turner, his reputation remains a troubling one. When Phil Spector worked with Tina, he reportedly paid her husband \$25,000 to steer clear of the studio, possibly because Spector, ironically, feared Ike. Even more disturbing, Ike also once pulled a gun on Stevie Wonder, claims journalist Barney Hoskyns, in his muckraking social history of L.A.'s music scene, *Waiting for the Sun*. Ike passed in 2007, before this film could be released, but whatever mixed feelings I may have about *Ike & Tina: On the Road: 1971-72* as compelling entertainment... oh, to have been in a room with the Turners as they watched this footage, reminiscing, recriminating, and dare I say... recondling?

Rating: 4
Extras rating: 2

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