



The Yardbirds: Making Tracks, On Tour (2010-2012)

Studio: MVD Visual MVD56060 [12/11/12] (2 discs)

Director: Bruce Maccomber

Video: 1.77:1 for 16:9 Color

Audio: English Dolby 2.0

Extras (on DVD 2): *Glimpses—The Tour Documentary; Chris Dreja Interview; Jim McCarty interview; Ben King visits guitar shop; “Tinker Tailor Soldier Sailor,” Downtown Concert; “Smokestack Lightning,” Downtown Concert; “Dream Within a Dream,” Iridium Jazz Club; “Isadora,” Iridium Jazz Club*

Length: 127 minutes

Rating: ***

The Yardbirds were an eminent English band who bridged the gap between the early ‘60s British blues revival and the psychedelic and hard rock of the late ‘60s. Three very important guitarists passed through: [Eric Clapton](#), [Jeff Beck](#) and Jimmy Page. Clapton performed briefly in [John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers](#), later formed the world’s first power rock trio, Cream, and then commenced a lucrative solo career; Beck devised The Jeff Beck Group; and Page put together the most celebrated hard rock ensemble in existence, Led Zeppelin.

The Yardbirds were founded in 1963 and by 1965 began experimenting with pop elements; and subsequently added psychedelic and hard rock musical portions to their repertoire. The Yardbirds collapsed in 1968. Over time, The Yardbirds gained credibility and a myth-like stance from listeners who rediscovered their discography. That information can be unearthed in books and other films including MVD’s 2008 DVD, *The Story of the Yardbirds*.

The 2-DVD *The Yardbirds: Making Tracks, On Tour 2010-2012* documents the ostensible reformation no one thought could or would occur (the band reunited in 1992, when they were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and has been on the road and in the studio, on and off, since then). But for all intents and purposes, this is not The Yardbirds of yore. The new five-piece only comprises two founding members: rhythm guitarist Chris Dreja and drummer Jim McCarty. Original vocalist Keith Relf tragically died in 1976 (he accidentally electrocuted himself when he used an improperly grounded amp); and it is no surprise Beck, Clapton and Page have nothing to do with their old group. Oddly, several Yardbirds participants did get together, in 1984, when McCarty, Dreja, and Yardbirds’ bassist Paul Samwell-Smith created Box of Frogs, with guest appearances from Beck (on the Box of Frogs first album) and Page (who appended a slice of his six-string talent to the Box of Frogs sophomore release). Beck came aboard again, for one song, on The Yardbirds’ *Birdland* in 2003.

This DVD can be considered one of two ways. The Yardbirds’ music survives and stands on its own, regardless of who performs it. Or, due to absence of primary members, the outfit comes across as a youthful Yardbirds cover band rather than the real deal, particularly because lead singer Andy Mitchell (who was enlisted in 2009 along with current bassist Dave Smale) sounds nothing at all like Relf; and guitarist Ben King (who joined in 2005) echoes and apes Clapton, Beck and Page throughout, replicating riffs nearly 50 years old. Essentially, it’s a bit of both. Yardbirds fans who pine for the older material may find these renditions lacking in form, even though they capture The Yardbirds’ spirit. Those who just want to hear someone kick through Yardbirds’ favorites such as “Train Kept a Rollin’,” “Over Under Sideways Down” and “Shapes of Things” will enjoy what’s available.

The first DVD chronicles various venue appearances from 2010 and 2011. The set list summarizes The Yardbirds’

entire back catalog, and runs the gamut from Clapton's tenure up through their final album, and tracks from *Birdland*. The Yardbirds open with "I'm Not Talkin'," a basic blues romp from the Clapton era. Not vital, but a credible warm-up. Better, though, is a virtually note-for-note translation of "Heart Full of Soul," which was notable as a 1965 single: experimental (several tempo changes; exotic, Eastern-shaded touches; and a distorted guitar riff) and commercial appeal via a compelling melody, and a fittingly forlorn romantic lyric (appropriately, Chris Isaak had a minor success with the same tune in 1986). The one caveat: "Heart Full of Soul" could have been improved with some instrumental sizzle, and it ends too soon.

Fortunately, there is some fire during "Train Kept a Rollin'," a scorching Yardbirds live staple and afterwards, from the 1970s onward, an indispensable showpiece for avowed Yardbirds aficionados Aerosmith. Again, some pyrotechnics from King would have been great, but this is a definite high point. There are some surprises from the Beck period, including the obscure blues burner "The Nazz Are Blue," which contains some fine, high notes and riffs from King. Historical side note: Todd Rundgren's first group, The Nazz, nicked their name from this Yardbirds song. Also memorable are two more relics from the Beck years. "Shapes of Things" is a tough tune which combines psychedelic and hard rock portions and at the time of release was a portent of things to come. The rafter shaking "Over Under Sideways Down," where King displays some blistering string bending, gets a rousing audience response. But the unquestionable workout is a 12-minute medley of "Happenings Ten Years Time Ago," (one of only three tunes which featured both Beck and Page on guitar) and "Dazed and Confused." "Happenings Ten Years Time Ago" focuses on a shadowy, Middle Eastern/psychedelic guitar riff and a vivid rhythmic foundation, which generates an eerie and potent impression. "Dazed and Confused" is famously known as a Led Zeppelin arena epic. But the cut was originally conceived as a Yardbirds cover by Page (the track, with a different title, started life as a folk/blues tune written by Jake Holmes), and transformed into a proto-heavy metal onslaught. While The Yardbirds never taped it, it's an historical reminder Led Zeppelin was justifiably inspired by what The Yardbirds produced. Newer pieces such as medium rocker "Mystery of Being" and the boogie-buoyed "My Blind Life" (both from *Birdland*) are less crucial. "My Blind Life" seems more Savoy Brown than Yardbirds, which is not necessarily beneficial. *Making Tracks* is basically a souvenir present for those who saw one or some of these Yardbirds tour shows, or might want to. This is not a best way to introduce newbies to The Yardbirds. Long-time fans and/or completists should probably incorporate this package to their collections.

The visuals and audio are both professionally credible, but the method of going from one nightclub or stage to another one (typically from song to the next) is disconcerting and sometimes confirms the camerawork was done better at some locations than others. The footage (shot in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York City, and New Hampshire) employs multiple cameras, although the video quality is not uniform throughout. The audio mix stays the course throughout, which is a plus.

DVD Two is strictly for the aforementioned completists. The main item is a 26-minute, behind-scenes documentary with soundchecks, interviews, backstage moments and so on. An 8-minute extra recounting King's visit to a guitar shop is superfluous (although he reveals his acoustic guitar skills); there are two supplementary interviews with McCarty and Dreja (significant for stories about the early Yardbirds saga; Dreja also dispels the legend he was asked to be in Led Zeppelin). The best bonuses are live tracks which did not make it onto the first DVD, including disregarded pop piece "Tinker Tailor Soldier Sailor" (from the concluding Yardbirds record, *Little Games*, 1968) and a slowed-down, extended jam on "Smokestack Lightning."

—Doug Simpson

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