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LOOKING FOR JOHNNY: THE LEGEND OF JOHNNY THUNDERS

STAFF RATING

4.50/5

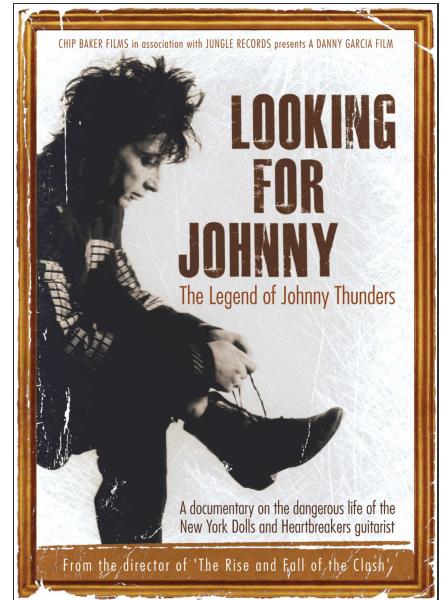
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Views: 383

Genre: Documentary

Studio: Chip Baker Films

Time: 2hrs 18min

Director: Danny Garcia

Prod.: Jungle Records

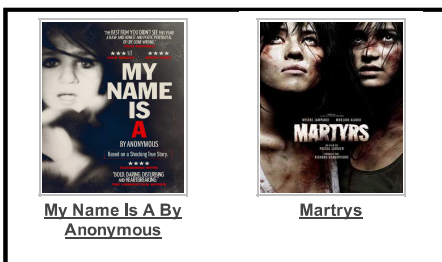
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My Name Is A By Anonymous

Martyrs

Actors: Sylvain Sylvain, Walter Lure, and more

Synopsis: A documentary on the dangerous life of the late New York Dolls and Heartbreakers guitarist.

Johnny Thunders was the legendary hard-living rock and roll guitarist who inspired glam-metal, punk and the music scene in general. "Looking for Johnny" is a 90-minute film directed by Danny Garcia and that documents Thunders' career from his beginnings to his tragic death in 1991.

When Johnny Thunders died in New Orleans on April 23rd 1991, he left behind a mystery. Though MTV and international broadsheets reported the guitarist's demise, for many in the mainstream, Thunders was perceived as an enigmatic outlaw. He was adored by a legion of devotees and cited as an influence by at least three successive generations of musicians. Thunders refused to play the corporate game and was both elevated and damned for it.

Danny Garcia was seized by a question that wouldn't let go – "just who was Johnny Thunders?" He spent 18 months traveling across the USA and Europe, filming interviews with fifty of the people who were closest to Johnny, building a compelling narrative drawn from first hand testimonies.

The film examines Johnny Thunders' career from the early 70's when he was a founding member of the influential New York Dolls, the birth of the punk scene with The Heartbreakers in both New York City and London, and later incarnations including Gang War and The Oddballs. It also explores Johnny's unique musical style, his personal battle with drugs and theories on the circumstances of his death in a New Orleans hotel in 1991 at age 38.

Interviewees include Sylvain Sylvain, Lenny Kaye, Walter Lure, Billy Rath, Bob Gruen, Terry Chimes, Alan Vega, Peter Perrett, Sami Yaffa, three of his late managers (Marty Thau, Lee Black Childers and Malcolm McLaren), and many others.

The film includes forty songs (including Born To Lose and You Can't Put Your Arms Around A Memory) and historic film of Johnny with live performances from all periods, including unseen New York Dolls and Heartbreakers footage and photos. Cult filmmakers Bob Gruen, Don Letts, Patrick Grandperret, Rachael Amadeo and others contribute classic archive footage, helping illustrate the charisma, chaos and heartbreak inherent to the guitarist.

We see a brief snap shot of Johnny's upbringing, raised in NY by his Italian mum and sister – the young John Anthony Genzale Jr. could have been a pro baseball player. Instead he formed his first band "Actress" and his musical career began.

The rock and roll roller coaster ride picked up speed when he joined the New York Dolls. They were an attention grabbing, cross-dressing, making up wearing, over the top at everything type of band. Their fans loved them and matched their outlandish style. This was radical and shocking for the time. Nowadays, this seems to be the blueprint for being in a band. It certainly got them noticed by other musicians and probably laid a lot.

The Dolls were based loosely on the Rolling Stones – Johnny wanted to emulate Keith Richards and his lifestyle. When those closest to Johnny attempted to curb his fondness for drugs, Johnny retorted that Keith Richards seemed to get away it but it was gently pointed out that Keith was famous before he was a junkie.

The Dolls scored their first UK show by opening for Rod Stewart and it ended with the tragic demise of drummer Billy Murcia and Jerry Nolan quickly joining the band. The bands close involvement with the UK punk scene is documented with rare footage supplied by Cult filmmakers Bob Gruen and Don Letts, including Malcolm McLaren's misjudged theme for the band in red leather soviet branding. Band members, albums, record companies, tours and dealers come and go, by the mid 70's Johnny and the Heartbreakers replaced The Ramones and fame continued to come.

Garcia does not shy away from the tales of hedonism nor does he exploit them. The drugs would have been impossible to ignore as they were in each of the various band incarnations. Although some facts are still shocking to hear, somehow through this haze of indulgence they played on and created an influential body of work.

The testimonials are often touching, amusing but punctuated with sadness. Although this is low budget movie, Garcia has crammed a huge amount details into the time frame. Along with the unseen footage, the film is funny, thought provoking and poignant and a must see for all Thunders fans.

Yes, there are notable absences and refreshingly, there are not many celebrity talking heads— those that are present are

the real deal and their stories give great insight to this charismatic man's life.

When Thunders died in New Orleans on April 23rd 1991, the police and media wrote this off as another junkie who checked out. The alleged circumstances are deplorable, Johnny was a sick man, who lay dying whilst all his possessions, money and guitars were stolen and this was never investigated.

This film captured Johnny Thunders' chaotic life and applauds his creativity. This is a harsh and sad tale of a talented 38-year-old man.

Johnny would have been 62 years old on the 15th July.

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