

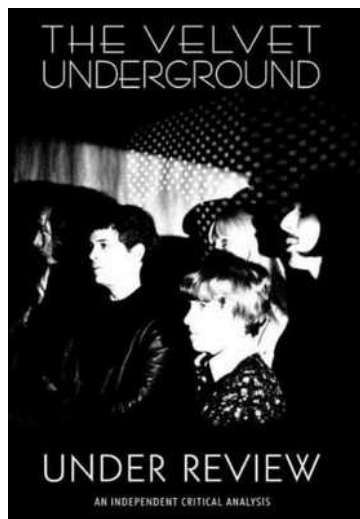


Music Documentary Monday

The Velvet Underground – Under Review

Posted on November 26, 2012 by Daniel Dylan Wray

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Directed by Tom Barbor-Might
UK, 2006

Genre: Rock

Ah, the The Velvet Underground. Has there ever been a band so fervently appreciated, worshiped, and discussed in front of a camera that generated so little actual footage to discuss? Andy Warhol shot endless hours of abstract, surrealist art projects

varying from the brilliant to the banal, yet he seemed unable to focus his camera on the Velvets for more than a few shaky minutes. Of course, this all adds to the mystique of a group that readily tops lists of the coolest as well as the greatest bands, but it's hardly a great start for an entry in the ostensibly analytical Under Review music documentary series.

The Velvet Underground – Under Review starts on pretty shaky ground itself with the by-now painfully routine intro. The insights aren't the freshest, and within minutes we've seen about all the video footage that exists of the band (pre-late '90s reunion, that is.) But what at first seems an immediate switch-it-off doc soon garners a little momentum and intrigue. The absence of Lou Reed, John Cale, and Sterling Morrison certainly leaves a gap, but cooperating Velvets Mo Tucker and Doug Yule do a pretty honorable job of filling it. Critics and authors throw in their two cents, along with Reed fan/friend Dean Wareham of Galaxie 500 (or Galaxy 500, according to the film's typo), the odd person who was present at studio sessions, and Andy Warhol crony/VU cover artist Billy Name. The story they collectively relay will be familiar to any Velvets

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fan, but they manage to throw in a few surprises along the way (like an amphetamine-fueled anecdote Wareham shares about the late Morrison, or the fact that for much of its life the band boycotted playing in its spawning ground of New York).

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As befits a documentary series dedicated more to extracting information from interviewees rather than any cinematic aspirations, the film is visually drab. Thankfully, the Velvets' story and music – fully licensed and plentifully provided – are engaging enough to keep your attention fixed. Indeed, the film is essentially dedicated to reinforcing Lester Bangs' famous assertion, cited at the end, that “modern music begins with the Velvets.” The true originality of their work is hammered on by the talking heads but is really brought home by the music, some of which still sounds terrifyingly ahead of its time.

So, a complete and and definitive film on the Velvet Underground this is not. But it begs the question, what would be? Their importance, relevance, and influence continues to flow through music today; the beauty of their records is that 40-odd years after they were created, they continue to change people's lives – including mine – and will probably still be doing so 40 years hence. Even a Velvets doc featuring every living member and a cache of heretofore lost footage would have a hard time capturing *that*. The seeds the Velvet Underground sowed have spread so far and wide, and bloomed in such gorgeous, monstrous and surprising forms that attempting to account for them in one digestible piece would be like trying to cut a radio edit of “Sister Ray.” All those things (and, admittedly, the lack of Reed or Cale) keep this from being an excellent documentary, but it ends up a pretty good one, an arm's length but absorbing peek into the Velvet Underground's world.

Daniel Dylan Wray is the editor of online music and film magazine [Kicking Against the Pricks](#), in which a version of this review originally appeared.

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