

FILM / VIDEO REVIEWS

The Velvet Underground DVD review [MVD]

By

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THE VELVET UNDERGROUND *Under Review* DVD

The good news is that *The Velvet Underground: Under Review* does have some vintage footage of the band and its members that most of us are likely not to have seen previously. The bad news is: it's relatively scant and the same footage appears repeatedly in the course of this program, relentlessly sliced, diced and tossed in various configurations alongside 5 to 6 promo photos you'll also see again and again and again. Estimating the total of original film footage involved at five minutes is likely very generous; and it's all B&W (save for bits from their 90's reunion tour), and silent. The Velvets music that is heard, by and large, are album tracks, not previously unreleased outtakes or live recordings.

I state all this as actual film of the band performing, being interviewed etc would likely be the main attraction for any fan; certainly *Under Review* has little else to recommend it. The remaining elements of this program consist of various critics and purported "experts" (though Bob Christgau is the only one of these worthies I've ever heard of and he's the least quoted here) holding forth regarding the "brilliance" of the Velvets and running through a cursory history. Basically the account begins with John Cale meeting Lou Reed, starting to play out and looking to record. No one's childhood background is discussed—and certainly Reed's history of being institutionalized and given shock therapy is pertinent. No mention is made of Lou's college days where he met Sterling Morrison and studied under poet Delmore Schwartz. Cale's studies in *avant garde* composition are largely ignored and even his days in the NY Fluxus movement playing with LaMonte Young in the Theater of Eternal Music are barely mentioned in passing.

Criticism *per se* or meaningful analysis of particular songs or the group's aesthetic is too close to non-existent. The talking heads gush about various songs and albums being "incredible" in turn—not something any serious music fan needs to be told at this point in history. The descriptions offered are often derisible in their inaccuracy. Terming Cale's purposefully OCD piano pounding on "All Tomorrow's Parties" "graceful" is patently ridiculous and misses Cale's intended affect—to be relentless and manic—entirely. Likewise, ignoring that "There She Goes" is a loving knock-off of Marvin Gaye's "Hitchhike," or the numerous lyric references to vintage Hank Williams or Delta Blues, or the influence of LaMonte Young is a wholesale devaluation of the depth of knowledge, taste and intelligence at work in this outfit. As the Velvet Underground has been one of the most critically revered, chronicled and closely analyzed bands in rock history for over three decades now to offer a "Review" so facile and shallow is simply pointless.

On the upside... *Under Review* does include sound-footage of a 70's reunion date featuring Reed, John and Nico—a virtual Velvets "unplugged"—which is kinda breathtaking. Additionally, recording engineer/producer Norman Dolph gives one of the first detailed accounts of the group's pre-Verve recording history, which is the one chapter in their history that has remained largely under documented. His reminiscences of the dates ("Cale and Sterling made most of the musical decisions"), noting which recordings eventually wound up on the debut album (and tantalizingly, which ones remain unreleased) are priceless. Recent interviews with Maureen Tucker and Doug Yule (no Reed or Cale) are also very welcome and occasionally telling. Meanwhile, former Factory insider Billy "Name" Linich sheds welcomed light on how this all fit into the Warhol scene. If there were more of this footage rather than the stock footage of subways and street scenes while "Waiting For The Man" plays, and less of the fawning platitude-inizing of the sundry commentators that appear, you might have something worth giving your hip niece who's looking to progress past The Strokes. As it is, get it from Netflix. [Sexy Intellectual]

-Howard W.

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