



The Smiths: Under Review ★★★★★ Label: Sexy Intellectual

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The Under Review series – and I think my fellow music DVD critics David Medsker and Jason Thompson will agree with me on this point – often produces seriously mixed results, depending heavily on who they’ve rounded up to chat about their subject. In the case of the Syd Barrett disc, for instance, there was almost no one involved who actually had anything to do with Barrett. As a result, the program falls to using a seemingly never-ending series of journalists chatting about the former Pink Floyd singer in such a highbrow way that you kept watching not because it was all that illuminating but, rather, to see which of them would be first to disappear up their own arse on camera.

In the case of the Smiths’ volume of “Under Review,” however, it’s highly pleasant to report that there’s a full house of former associates of Morrissey, Marr, and the gang who are glad to speak on the record about the group. Not only does “fifth Smith” Craig Gannon step up to the mike, but, additionally, three of the group’s producers – John Porter, Kenny Jones, and the invaluable Stephen Street – contribute, along with Factory Records head Tony Wilson, Grant Showbiz (who’s worked with Billy Bragg for many moons as well), disc jockey David Jensen, and famed British journalist Paul Morley, as well as Mark Simpson, author of the book, “Saint Morrissey.” (Where, one wonders, was Johnny Rogan, author of “Morrissey and Marr: The Severed Alliance”? Maybe he’s still working on the other two books of his reported Smiths trilogy that, almost fifteen years down the pike, still haven’t shown up.)

It’s impressive that John Porter was willing to speak of his experiences producing the Smiths’ self-titled debut, given that the band never failed to speak ill of his work on the album. It’s also interesting that Craig Gannon’s favorite Smiths’ album is *Meat Is Murder*, which was released prior to his tenure with the band. When tackling their history, the proceedings focus predominantly on the band’s British career, as you’d expect from a group who’re straight out of Manchester, but they do go out of their way to discuss the Smiths’ tour of America after releasing *The Queen Is Dead*, a period where Stateside audiences finally began to warm to the band. (Inevitably, of course, sales never adequately reflected how strong a bond Smiths fans in the US had to the band.)

The assertion on the back of the box that this program is “the first of its kind in documenting the history and the music of this extraordinary group” is, however, untrue. It is, in fact, a highly odd claim to make, given that many of the clips are clearly identified onscreen as having been borrowed from the South Bank special on the band that was aired in Britain in 1987. (Now when will someone release *that* on DVD?) Still, don’t think that makes this *Under Review* any less impressive a documentary. Seeing archival footage from various BBC performances, the promotional films Derek Jarman created for several songs, and the insights of band insiders makes for fascinating viewing and a highlight of this ongoing series.

~Will Harris

wharris@bullz-eye.com