



Issue #5

THE SMITHS – UNDER REVIEW

An excellently put together 90 minute Johnny Rogan free unauthorised biopic of one of the 80's most crucial ensembles - the Smiths. Quintessentially English by calling themselves something as common place and ordinary as the Smiths they made it difficult at first hand to pigeon hole them into any given generic grouping while invariably setting aside the existing barrier between band and fan and thus diametrically opposing the whole egotistic cultural idiom of the prevailing us and them landscape.

The Smiths appeared on the English landscape like a much needed antidote. Thatcher was in to her second term, Britain cowered as did the rest of the world beneath the nuclear cold war shadow, MTV was still in its crawling and gurgling infancy, the new romantic scene - the chic futuristic half cousin of punk / new wave - was fizzling out with the survivors lauding it up in opulent exotica. The music without substance was over wincingly colourful and cheerful as though enacting upon the nation a mass brain numbing pill - looming ominously on the horizon the apocalyptic 1984 its coming forewarned some 40 years earlier by Orwell's bleak account of the totalitarian might of the state over the individuals free will (which to be honest is what we have now - the only difference being the names have been changed), the miner's strike, the Yuppie and Frankie Says t-shirts. In Marr they had a guitarist for whom it was cool to like guitarists again, perhaps the finest of his generation and certainly the most artistically talented, his wonderfully bitter sweet arrangements acting as a perfect foil for Morrissey's often bitter reposts while in Morrissey a singer / front man like no one before or since who was cast in the best tradition of spokesmen past and present - a surly yet clever twist mix if you like of Lydon / McCulloch.

'Under Review' deals briefly with these issues and the career of Manchester's finest from their beginning to their eventual acrimonious split. For die hard Smiths devotees 'Under Review' may be seen to be lacking in bringing anything new to the table, much of the material present is pretty much well documented and in the public domain but then affording a mere 90 minutes and expecting something detailed and in depth would easily push the capabilities and patience of most writers. Instead 'Under Review' thankfully avoids getting tangled in the wherefores and how's and instead presents an agreeably watchable précis of the bands history briefly touching on the highs and lows and yet managing to cover the crux of the bands lasting appeal.

Featuring a veritable cast of celebrity interviews including considered opinions from long term producer / engineer Stephen Street make for interesting viewing while the appearance of both Anthony Wilson and Paul Morley add a pre-history flavour to the proceedings, elsewhere there's John 'you talking about the 80's - then I'm your man' Robb who seems to appear in these retrospectives with such alarming regularity that you fear the simple act of opening a packet of crisps will have him by your shoulder discussing in detail its cultural significance. The DVD includes TV appearance clips for all the bands singles ranging from archive footage from the

Tube, Top of the Pops and a rare snippet from one of their earliest TV outings on TV-AM's kids magazine 'Charlie's Bus' from 1984. Amid all this there's some rarely seen Morrissey interview material for the South Bank Show. Elsewhere there's the account of how they were strangely turned down by their first choice label - Factory (read the indie equivalent of the Beatles / Decca saga) though in fairness Wilson does admit to feeling that at that precise time and place he felt he and the label was ill equipped to give the band the push he thought they deserved.

At the heart of The Smiths was the imagery, as carefully thought out as the music itself and equally relevant serving as a hermetic backdrop of sorts coalescing perfectly with Marr's ostensibly 60's English pop slant. The sleeves arrived each adorned with an iconic figure on the sleeve - as Morley succinctly puts it - it was as though Morrissey had created a comfort zone in the outside world by having his bedroom wall posters all around him, sessions were recorded in abundance for Peel, there were name checks to books, films and personalities strewn across lyrics and interviews - Morrissey and co knew how to tune into the audience they wanted and were conditioning them such. It might be a far cry given that bands break through by word of mouth via the latest phenomena - my space - but back then it literally was word of mouth, there was no far reaching global community to manipulate or share experiences / ideas / comments, for many (even the music press) the radio offered the only viable access to what was happening, that the Smiths were ever so successful is a feat in itself - that they caught on so fast is an achievement not to be sniffed at. But then just as with Morrissey's hate figure incarnate - Margaret Thatcher - certain fates occurred that couldn't be pre-planned or contrived to happen that shifted the balance - John Peel's as then producer and friend, the late John Walters had returned from a gig where he'd witnessed the Smiths and immediately booked the band for studio time convincing Peel along the way with descriptions that read like 'best thing since sliced bread'. Then there were Morrissey's ambiguous lyrics to contend with, more often than not in the third person much debate surrounded the meaning of 'Reel around the Fountain' and more particularly, as far as the press were concerned, 'Suffer little Children' with its subject matter concerning the infamous Moors Murderers.

For me personally if I had to choose one Smiths track that perfectly encapsulates what they were about then it would have to be 'Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now' - ahead of 'How soon is now' which for many was THE defining cultural soundtrack of the 80's, 'Heaven' for me tells you everything that is wrong with Morrissey's solo work today, Marr's guitar elegiac and casual in equal meters rises and falls superbly drawing with it the perfect coalescence of the bitter and sweet.

Asides the career biopic 'Under Review' features a brief critical appraisal of post Smiths players careers as well as a 25 question interactive quiz for you to get to get your NHS teeth into.

All said and done well worth a peak.

- Mark Barton

Via - www.mvdb2b.com

Additional Technical Info:

Region free

Duration 88 minutes

5:1 stereo surround

