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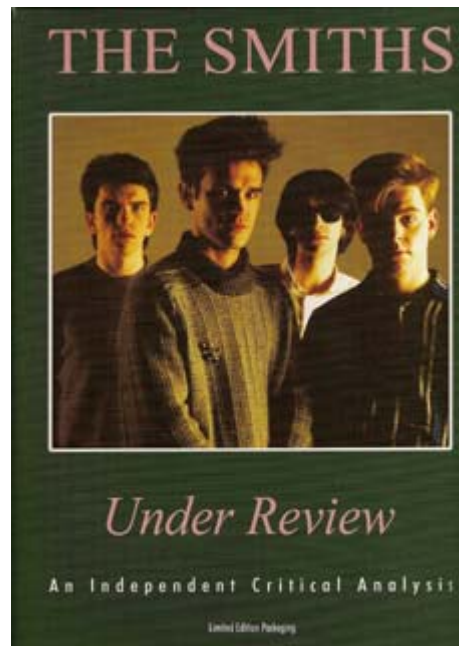


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Under Review: The Smiths (2006)

R0 America - (Sexy Intellectual/MVD Distribution)



THE FILM:

British alternative rock has always been close to my heart for many reasons. I was in high school in the early 1990s and generally very passionate about music at that time. I didn't read many books back then - let alone something like poetry, but rock lyrics were something that I constantly read and interpreted, and music was like a (positive) drug for me. It has been debated when the new era of the so-called "Britpop" started, but I guess the consensus is that it started during my high school times, and peaked in the mid-1990s. Bands like "Blur", "Oasis", "Elastica", "Gene", "Echobelly", "Suede", "Sleeper", "Radiohead" - and of course "The Stone Roses" a bit earlier - were on the top of their game, and produced many memorable records and songs. Now bands like "Coldplay", "Muse", and "Travis" are high on the charts and making good music, but that certain angriness, freshness, and boy-ish attitude that these bands mentioned earlier had is no longer that prominent. It's still safe to say, that ALL of these bands were somewhat influenced by the band from Manchester, that recorded 4 studio albums between the years 1982-1987, and then split - leaving a strong legacy that just doesn't get forgotten very easily. The band was of course "The Smiths".

The real strength of "The Smiths" was its musical core of the singer [Morrissey](#) (real name Steven Patrick Morrissey) and the lead guitarist [Johnny Marr](#) (real name John Maher). The very original, ironic, critical, and often melancholy lyrics by Morrissey, and the highly catchy guitar-based music by Marr was a combination that is still known as one of the best partnerships in modern pop-music. Behind them was drummer [Mike Joyce](#) and bass player [Andy Rourke](#) - very good musicians in their own, but always more on the background when Marr and especially Morrissey stole all the headlines. The band recorded their first single, "Hand in Glove" to the indie record label "Rough Trade" in 1983, and their first self-titled debut album in the following year. Three studio albums followed; "Meat Is Murder" (1985), "The Queen Is Dead" (1986) - for many considered as their masterpiece, and the swan song "Strangeways, Here We Come" (1987). They also produced several compilations (probably many still to come) and one live record, along with 18 singles ("The Smiths" is almost as known for their singles as their albums). During this relatively short period that "The Smiths" was active (for the reference; "The Rolling Stones" was formed in 1962, and is still going), it left the permanent stamp to the popular music, and is probably considered as a "Top 10" band of all time. They're said to be the "masters of the 3-minute pop-songs", a great live-band, and the band that did everything in their own way, and this included several controversial songs of vegetarianism, English politics and government, the greedy music industry, shoplifters, events such as "The Moors murders" (about the serial child murders in the UK during the 1960s), and singing "hang the DJ" (referring to DJ Steve Wright, who infamously played the song from "Wham!" right after the announcement of the "Chernobyl disaster") in the chorus. They also created unique art in all of their single- and album-releases. In short; "The Smiths" is British popular music at its finest.

The "Under Review"-series from "Sexy Intellectual/MVD Distribution" includes

full-length documentaries of the important artists and bands, labeled as "An independent critical analysis of the music and career". "Critical" is the key here, since the documentary mainly includes interviews (full list can be found in the "extras"-section) from the different music journalists, DJs, and producers, with the support of brief narration and photos, and of course musical footage. It's a bit like in some film extras on DVD, where the history of the film is guided through via movie critics, and there are no interviews from the cast & crew. In the case of "Under Review: The Smiths", we hear a few brief vintage comments from both Morrissey and Marr, but they're very superficial and basically serve only as an example how these people sounded and looked "off stage". Perhaps you could say that this series is aimed for the fans that already know the music, and they want to hear some more analytic observations of the band and their art. Fortunately this also serves a pretty good guide to the history of the band, but since the "main players" are absent, it's hard to call this "definitive" (again, the cover honestly says "independent", and that this documentary is not "authorized" by the band members). Further more, it's often a bit dangerous to allow too much room for the "professional critics", since they might go too deep into the music, occasionally overanalyzing every lyric and event down the road. That's not the case here, since most of the comments from the critics are actually quite interesting and enjoyable, and they're balanced by the producers such as John Porter, [Stephen Street](#), and [Grant Showbiz](#) - who actually worked with the band, and the "fifth member", the 2nd guitarist [Craig Gannon](#), who was part of the band briefly in 1986. You don't hear any "big revelations", nor stories about the recent legal battles, but some interesting anecdotes are still shared, and the basic timeline of the band is covered (you would think that 90 minutes is a long time, but still plenty of material was probably left on the cutting room floor). A few comments about Morrissey and his "sexuality" are said (there are rumours..), but the documentary doesn't go very far to that road - which is good.

Music is of course heard on the documentary, but none of the songs are in their full-length form (Should they be? I believe not, since this isn't a live concert, nor a video collection). You will hear experts from the following songs:

- This Charming Man
- Hand in Glove
- What Difference Does It Make?
- Girl Afraid
- Suffer Little Children
- Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now
- How Soon Is Now?
- Well I Wonder
- Meat Is Murder
- Shakespeare's Sister
- The Boy with the Thorn in His Side
- Ask
- Stop Me If You Think You've Heard This One Before
- Bigmouth Strikes Again
- The Queen Is Dead

- Panic
- Shoplifters of the World Unite
- Girlfriend in a Coma
- Paint a Vulgar Picture
- Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me

It's of course disappointing that the songs like "There Is a Light That Never Goes Out" (probably their finest song - which is said a lot), "Sweet and Tender Hooligan", and "Oscillate Wildly" (best instrumental pop song of all times, if you ask me) are not heard, but still plenty of good stuff is. Material is taken from various sources, including videos, TV and live performances, and some seems to be put together just for this DVD. A nice touch is to show a few video clips from the other artists; "Duran Duran: Rio" and "Wham!: I'm Your Man", which shows the other side of British music at the time. We also see some interesting promo photos and album- and single-covers (along with "New Order", the band created some great cover-art).

In the end, "Under Review: The Smiths" rises above the average when it comes to musical documentaries, and offers a quite solid package of information for the fans, and also for the newcomers of the band. Occasional viewers (or those who want some "sensationalism") might find this too "dry" and "critical", and most viewers are probably disappointed that it doesn't include any proper, new, interviews from the band, nor any particularly "exclusive" live material. High points include the comments from those individuals that actually worked with the band, but even they (especially Gannon) seems to be holding something back. Stories are also shared from the other members of the band, not just Morrissey and Marr, which is always how it should be ("The Smiths" was a band after all). It's also nice that so many songs are heard during the documentary, since they really show how many great pop-songs they recorded, and how much potential they had - until it all ended, too soon. The documentary is directed by Chris Davies.

THE DVD:

Video:

The documentary is mostly presented in 4:3 (obviously non-Anamorphic), but there are a few clips here and there that are letterboxed. The overall look is clean and sharp, and most interviews are professionally done and edited. The music video and TV-material is usually softer and doesn't look as good as the rest of the footage, but also those segments are fairly clean. There are minor compression issues, and since the interviews are shot in video this doesn't look as good as the film-based material, but I don't have any real complaints about the quality. "Single layer" disc is coded "R0", and there are 18 chapters. The documentary runs 88:08 minutes (NTSC).

Audio:

The disc has one audio track, English Dolby Digital 2.0 Stereo (with surround encoding). There are no subtitles. The track is generally very clean and well balanced (you don't have to turn the volume up and down between the interviews and the music), and there were only few issues with some of the interview-segments, which were recorded a bit more sloppily than the others. There are also a few (minor) issues with the British accent (particularly one journalist comes to mind), where the subtitles would've helped.

Extras:

A few extras are also included, and the "Menu" receives my special "slow as hell"-award.

- "After the Split" **-featurette** runs 8:25 minutes, and is a little collection of outtakes from the interview-sessions, where people comment on the careers of Morrissey and Marr after the band broke up.

- "The Hardest Smiths Interactive **Quiz** In The World Ever" includes 25 questions, and you can view the answers at the end. These could be fun, but not when they're made in amateurish way like in this one (the structure I mean).

- "Contributor **biographies**" includes 12 people; guitarist Craig Gannon; DJ David Jensen; producers Kenny Jones, John Porter, Grant Showbiz (was also a member of "The Smiths" road crew), and Stephen Street; journalists Jake Kennedy (author of the upcoming book "Joy Division and the Making of Unknown Pleasures"), [Paul Morley](#) (author of the book "Words and Music: A History of Pop in the Shape of a City"), John Robb (author of "The "Stone Roses" and the Resurrection of British Pop"), Mark Simpson (author of the book "Saint Morrissey"), Tony Wilson (founder of the "Factory Records"), and [Nigel Williamson](#) (author of the book "The Rough Guide to Bob Dylan").

- "More Smiths Titles by Chrome Dreams" **promo page** includes one page of info about the other titles by "Chrome Dreams", which is the original UK-company behind this DVD.

There's also "Limited Edition Packaging", but that's just the cardboard slipcase (the disc is packaged in the regular Keep case).

OVERALL:

This was my first opportunity to see one of the documentaries in the "Under Review"-series, and my biggest fear was that it would be very boring and lacking any serious musical input. After seeing it, I can say that the

documentary was actually quite enjoyable, and you can hear plenty of music from the band (as "teasers" mostly, but still), as well as their history. Technically the DVD is good, although nothing special, and it's lacking some good extras.

For more info, please visit the homepage of [MVD Entertainment Group](#).

View the comparison for this film [here](#).

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"There is no normal life, there's just life. You live it."

-Tombstone

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