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Sandy Denny

Sandy Denny Under Review [DVD]

[An Independent Critical Analysis]

(Music Video Distributors / Sexy Intellectual Productions)

US release date: 29 August 2006

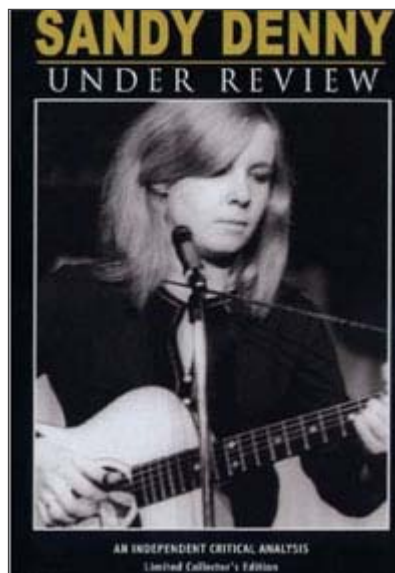
UK release date: 29 August 2006

by **Steve Horowitz**

Email Print Write to the editor

Who knows where the time went?

American audiences best know Sandy Denny as that woman who sang a duet with Robert Plant on "The Ballad of Evermore" from the *Led Zeppelin IV* album, the only Led Zep song to ever feature a guest vocalist. More knowledgeable rock music fans from the U.S. may recall that Denny was a member of the British band Fairport Convention, while folk aficionados might remember her as the writer of "Who Knows Where the Time Goes," made popular by Judy Collins. But in England, Denny was a big star during the late sixties and seventies. Fans voted her best female vocalist several times in *New Music Express* polls, and critics fawned all over her for her beautiful voice and gutsy presence. Denny was, as journalist Nigel Williamson calls her on this DVD, "a combination of Janis Joplin and Joan Baez". This documentary aims to seriously reevaluate Denny's position as a singer and songwriter and revive her reputation among contemporary audiences who may not have heard of her.



AMAZON
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The 115 minute DVD contains some great performance footage of Denny from throughout her career, beginning with her teenage years as a folk artist playing the London clubs to her rock 'n' roll years with and without Fairport Convention. Denny put out five solo albums, and her recorded oeuvre as well as her live impact are assessed by a team of experts that include her peers like Martin Carthy, Dave Swarbrick, John Renbourn, and Dave Mattacks in addition to critics like Patrick Humphries and Colin Irwin. These guys tell some great stories about Denny

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and the English music scene, but I use the word guys on purpose because there are no interviews with women. This failure is telling.

Denny was the premier female English artist during the period when Britannia ruled the global airwaves. Male artists like Led Zep, Elton John, Queen, The Who, Eric Clapton, etc., were global stars. Denny and her distaff contemporaries (i.e., Merry Clayton, Maggie Bell) didn't really crossover. One can't help but wonder why. This disc, which bills itself as "An Independent Critical Analysis" never bothers to ask the question, or even put Denny's career in a cultural context. Why weren't British women musicians as popular as men?

Denny recorded from 1968 until her untimely demise in the later 70s. These are a times of radical social upheavals in terms of gender roles and sexual politics. The men on this disc constantly mention Denny's insecurity as a performer. She apparently made a great impression singing live, but despite intense pressure from her manager (the legendary Joe Boyd) and her record company to launch a solo career, she was afraid to go it alone and preferred the security of being part of a band. After leaving Fairport Convention for the first time, she chose to form a new group (Fotheringay) with her boyfriend and soon to be husband Trevor Lucas, rather than go it alone. When she finally does go solo, she hires her old Fotheringay mates as her back-up band (and then later, rejoins Fairport Convention). Denny never aligns herself professionally with any female musicians. This seems curious. Was there some kind of unwritten rule, only one chick per band, or were there no other women musicians on the scene except singers like her?

The underlying theme of this documentary is that Denny was always right on the edge of superstardom, but that the stars or fate somehow prevented this from happening. By the time her last record came out in 1977, the music scene had changed so much—punk had exploded in England—that she was doomed to be almost famous. Denny died in 1978 of complications as a result of falling down the steps at her parent's home, but it was clear the consumption of alcohol and probably drugs contributed to her accident.

The DVD follows a chronological format. It is not until after Denny dies that the interviewees discuss Denny's problems with drink and substance abuse. Carthy goes on to proclaim that Denny had an unusually low tolerance for alcohol and would be completely drunk on just half a glass of wine! He and the others also hint that Denny probably had serious mental and emotional health problems, but that nobody noticed because everyone at the time partied hard and were applauded by their friends and fans for doing so. Denny's story would have been better served by bringing up this information at the beginning and throughout the narrative. The result would have been a more complex tale of a complicated and talented woman than a basic morality tale chronicling the rise and fall of a talented somebody.

This documentary focuses narrowly on Denny as a musician. It provides a good introduction to those that may be unfamiliar with her work, or those that miss her and hunger for her presence. Perhaps the DVD will stimulate the sale of Denny's old records. They deserve to be heard and remembered. This disc doesn't give much insight into who Denny was and how she connected to the times in which she lived. When she was just a teenager Denny asked musically, "Who knows where the time goes?" Almost 30 years after her death, we still are left with many questions about her life and artistry.

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