Radiohead - OK Computer: Classic Album Under Review [DVD]

(MidHeaven)

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by Michael Franco

During the late '90s, rock was in a pathetic state. Still in the throes of the grunge hangover, it was dry heaving bands like Bush—bands that tried to pass off opaque lyrics, distorted guitars, and third-rate vocal Vedderisms as something original. Perhaps because the decade had started off so brilliantly, fans and critics alike were waiting for anything that might kill such garbage, and electronica was deemed the next big movement. Ultimately, however, bands like the Prodigy made nothing more than a dent on the charts, and electronica proved inept at breathing life into a pallid genre. By early 1997, rock was an embarrassment to its history and pedigree.

Enter *OK Computer*, Radiohead's third LP, and an album so stunningly original that nobody could have imagined it at all, much less have foreseen it landing right at the moment when rock was in danger of drowning in its own excrement. Filled with images of aliens, transportation, computers, and paranoia, the album was so ahead of its time that it was deemed the first album of the 21st century, even though the new millennium was two and a half years away. Such critical lauding was not unwarranted; not only were the album's themes indicative of the alienation of life in the ensuing digital age, *OK Computer* also sounded like nothing before. Brooding yet beautiful, unwieldy yet engrossing, electronic but warm, it was immediately accepted as a seminal work in rock history. Moreover, the inspiration jump-started rock. Not too long after, such brilliant and original albums were coming once a year, with Wilco releasing *Summerteeth* and the Flaming Lips dropping *The Soft Bulletin* soon after.

OK Computer: A Classic Album Under Review takes another look at Radiohead's masterpiece. While the album has been scrutinized ad nauseum, this documentary looks at it from the objective distance of nearly a decade. With interviews from authors Mark Paytress, Barney Hoskins, Alex Ogg, Dai Griffiths, David Stubbs, and Jake Kennedy, this

film reassesses the album's impact and influence, as well as tries to decipher the LP's meaning and message. While the film gives articulate insight into both the band and the album, however, it begins to wear thin by mid-point.

Perhaps this is because it becomes formulaic early on. Beginning with a very brief synopsis of Radiohead's career before *OK Computer*, the film then simply comments upon each track from the album in chronological order. At first, it's an engrossing approach. When writer Davd Stubbs astutely notes that the album is the antithesis to punk because it's a protest against a time of surplus rather than a time of deficit, the comment underscores the ridiculous and empty materialism that began in the Reagan era and reached a fever pitch by the late '90s.

Soon, however, the pacing and format of this film become tedious, if only because it's too predictable. By examining the album track-by track, the film begins to plod, and comments that might seem provocative in another context become trite. While there is footage from Radiohead in concert, the film mainly rotates between interviews from the various authors on the album's themes and possible meanings. Again, commentary by those who know both the music and the band's background is enlightening, but not exactly riveting.

Ultimately, this documentary is mildly interesting simply because its topic is undeniably so. Listening to music critics and musicologists get philosophical about a masterpiece is never as intriguing as listening to the work itself, and this film contains moments when the discussion gets too hypothetical and obscure to matter. Such, however, is the nature of criticism—it's inherently one step removed from the artifact, and it's often too large a step. For instance, one segment deals with the cover of *OK Computer* and what it means. When author Dai Griffith goes so far to suggest that the use of the color blue on the cover warrants a dissertation in itself, well, you realize admiration has given way to hyperbole.

If, however, there were ever a pop album worthy of such critical scrutiny, it's *OK Computer*. Whatever it's definitive message, it reminded the world that rock is indeed capable of being undeniable art on par with older art forms. And, even if deciphering Thom Yorke's lyrics is a futile endeavor, the album's overall tone did capture the paranoia and isolation of the modern era, and served as a warning against its pitfalls. Because of this, it's worth another examination—if it ever left your CD player in the first place. *OK Computer: A Classic Album Under Review* isn't enthralling, but it's a timely reminder that Radiohead is capable of genius. Ten years, after all, is long enough for rock to reach exciting heights—only to find itself in need of another masterpiece.

RATING: ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

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