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U2

Achtung Baby [DVD]

[A Classic Album Under Review]

(Sexy Intellectual)

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Rockumentaries—O how we wonder if you will be as silly as *This is Spinal Tap!* And so it is that this now-venerable genre has been taken over by the over-earnest rock critics, the squads of proto-Greil Marcuses for whom the rock business is more akin to the Modern Language Association Convention than it is to, well, . . . fun.

Achtung Baby, A Classic Album Under Review is one of these new-generation rockumentaries—a single-minded and vaguely dorky rock-critics'-view of a single adored album. What makes it considerably more interesting than, say, the same treatment given to *Astral Weeks* or *Are You Experienced?*, though, is the fact that *Achtung Baby* is not an obvious topic for adulation. A pivotal, transitional record in the career of a major band, *AB* actually spurs a more interesting discussion than is typical. Still, when a talking-head rock critic discusses the album's title by batting about "the play of these two sets of associations", you know you are dealing a film where the thoughts of some serious English majors are going to outweigh actual rocking in screen time.

The documentary begins with a quick history of U2 as a band. The set up is this: U2 became a big hand in the 1980s, so big that they stole the show at 1985's Live Aid concert and were named by *Rolling Stone* "The Band of the '80s". But that wasn't all. After Bob Dylan met lead singer Bono and told him that the band needed to know where it was coming from if it was to continue, U2 began a sincere exploration of the America's rock roots—making the colossally successful album *The Joshua Tree* (1987) and growing to superstar status. Their next record, *Rattle and Hum*, however, hit a false note for many. Traveling across the US on a tour, playing in African-American churches and trying—perhaps too hard—to connect to their rockin' soul roots. One of the critics puts it simply: "It just came across as epically pompous." And so, on the last night of that tour, before a hometown Irish audience on New Year's Eve 1989, the band announced that it was regrouping.

And so it was that U2 chose to turn its gaze from the west and America back to the east—toward the Berlin wall. Not only was the wall falling at that very moment, but that is also the place where David Bowie and Brian Eno had recorded a series of classic '70s records such as *Heroes*. U2 had worked with Eno (as well as Daniel Lanois) as a producer on *Joshua Tree*, but here the band was trying to rebel against its recently self-serious reputation. Incorporating elements of 1990's "Manchester sound" and hewing to a tone of irony and show rather than rootsy sincerity, *AB* promised to be more playful and more self-conscious than any U2 record prior.

"On *Achtung Baby*, Bono has become a master of masks and a master of exploring different personas." This is the kind of conversation that may or may not interest you. But this kind of



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conversation dominates *A Classic Album Under Review*. While the critics discuss the first single, "The Fly" at length, only a small portions of the song is used in the film. Again—the point is the conversation about the music and not the music.

But that is not necessarily a bad thing. The detailed discussion of the songs on *AB* is deeply illuminating. The critics pick apart the references contained in the opening song, "Zoo Station", for example, noting that the Zoo Station stop on the Berlin subway is on the line named "U2" and that other specified stops on the line relate to the biography and methods of the band. They trace New Testament references through the lyrics—the story of Herod and Salome in "Mysterious Ways"—and analyze the influence of crooners on Bono's shifting vocal style. They trace themes of betrayal and doubt through the album's cycle of tracks—considering matters of sequencing and juxtaposition as well as individual meaning.

The critics do less well on screen when they are simply spouting subjectively. Their argument, for example, that "One" is U2's greatest song seems oddly thin. The problem isn't that they are dead wrong but rather that the documentary doesn't—can't?—do all that much to back up what is, after all, purely a matter of feeling. When they discuss the "audacity" of *Achtung Baby*, for example, they can talk about the lyrics—and in fact they blow up the lyrics to fill the screen in written form—and about the break-up of The Edge's marriage, but they can't really capture what may have been audacious about the sum total of the music and the lyrics. There's so little actual performance in the film that we're always asked to take these matters of aesthetics on critical faith.

The palette of this documentary simply consists of too few colors: talking heads and music videos, and little else. There are no interviews with the artists and very little news footage or other elements of verisimilitude. It is a British production, with British, American, Irish critics weighing in. But even in the talking head portions, the camera angles and settings don't vary. For the most part, there are just words; that is, it could have as easily been a book.

This lack is particularly painful at the end of the documentary, when the critics are discussion how the Zoo TV tour was "about spectacle" and was the antithesis of "rock classicism". *Hey—Let us see some of it!* you want to shout. But maybe the rights to that material were not available? Something has to explain the nearly defiant plainness of the production.

The DVD contains a few extras, but not much—an interactive quiz on the band, and extended versions of the interviews that already make up the bulk of the documentary. However you slice it, the material is barebones.

The main fact with this "Classic Album Under Review" is that it should not be confused with the album-based documentary series "Classic Albums", where the artists themselves pick apart their work, track by track, at a mixing board. The critical insights of the artists themselves are not necessarily more true, but they are tied up with the real stories of how the albums were made and they are backed up by the immediate experience of the music itself. *Achtung Baby, A Classic Album Under Review* is less a peek under the hood than it is a conversation among automotive snobs while standing in the showroom.

It's interesting, if you're into that kind of thing, but imagine the alternative: just listening to *Achtung Baby* itself. A much more edifying hour with the real thing.

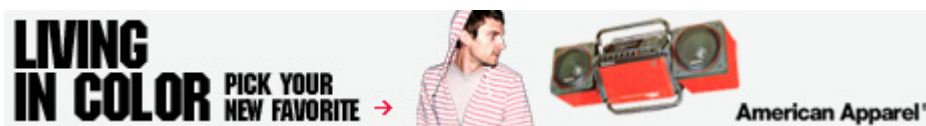


U2, "Mysterious Ways" from the ZooTV tour in Sydney

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