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Nick Drake

Under Review [DVD]

(Sexy Intellectual)

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by Ryan Scott

I became aware of Nick Drake through his influence on other artists. He was often cited as an influence by musical idols such as Robert Smith and Lou Barlow, so I wanted to seek him out. When I heard his haunting performances, especially the album *Pink Moon*, I immediately became mesmerized. This was music stark and raw yet tender and above all, quietly beautiful.

The other quality of Drake and his work was the sense that 'discovering' him was an entirely personal affair. The music speaks so intimately that it's easy to forget that by the '90s, when I became acquainted with him, his three albums were readily available. Yet the music sustained this illusion of a faint star that only the most discerning could catch a glimpse amidst the glitter and glare of contemporary music. For this reason, *Nick Drake: Under Review* is a times disconcerting viewing. It's uncomfortable to see a figure, whose mystery is an intrinsic part of his appeal, being brought under closer scrutiny.

That being said, the producers of this documentary possess an understanding of the many dimensions of the man. They've assembled an array of fellow musicians, music critics and personal acquaintances to create a deeper portrait of this quintessentially enigmatic artist. They are interviewed about Drake's formative years, the British folk scene of the late sixties, his impact on music and even the technical aspects of his compositions. For a fan there is a lot to learn from all these different perspectives. However, with a better understanding comes the loss of some of the magic.

Under Review follows a fairly tried and true music documentary structure. It starts with his now famously upper middle class background in Tanworth-in-Arden. Despite following the formula, the film hits an early snag. The only people interviewed about Drake's childhood are the family's former neighbors the Crabtrees. His only surviving family member, his sister Gabrielle Drake, is conspicuously absent. No doubt this is because the film wasn't authorized by the Estate of Nick Drake nor Island Records. We can only speculate as to how she would've deepened the audience's understanding of her brother.

The Crabtrees don't offer much more than is already known. Mrs Crabtree shares the opinion with Gabrielle and the biographer, Trevor Dann (*Darker than the Deepest Sea*), that Drake had the same fragile vocal delivery as his mother. More importantly, the presence of the Crabtrees reinforces the rural, English, middle class side of the singer. With all the attention on the dark undercurrent of his work, it is easy to forget that this was a young man who came from a world of privilege.

His school years are covered equally quickly. We see Marlborough College, where he finished his schooling before going to Aix-en-Provence and later Cambridge. From this time there is a photo of him in the cadet forces band, for which he played saxophone, dressed in kilt with a crew cut and traditional beret. It's a stark contrast to the thin, longhaired waif that appeared on his albums. Unfortunately, the rest of the details of his time at Marlborough are skipped over. There is no reference in the film to his sporting prowess or the views of the other students that Drake was quietly confident.

One point the documentary makes is that there is little sign of the solitary artist at this time. Even his ostensible study trip to Aix-en-Provence showed that Drake was not yet a loner. Jeremy Mason, the one college friend to take part in the documentary, accompanied Drake on this trip. From his point of view he, Drake and their friends spent their time enjoying the relatively more liberal atmosphere in Provence. Drugs, especially marijuana, were easily available and the lifestyle and people seemed much less inhibited, especially about sex. As Drake's biographer Dann says, while in Aix, Drake "went off just on a complete jolly." The retreat from the world began when he enrolled in Fitzwilliams College, Cambridge.

Music, which was already a passion while in Aix become, is Drakes single preoccupation while at Cambridge. He eventually quit his studies to focus only on song writing. For this famously taciturn man music would become the principle 'voice' he spoke with. It is in the treatment of the music that the documentary really succeeds. By considering both the context and

structure of the songs, *Nick Drake: Under Review* lays the pieces all out for us and at the end we still marvel that Drake was able to come up with such an individual style.

John Renbourn, one of the major figures in the British folk scene, explains that there were two main styles of guitar playing at the time, the dampened technique of blues player and the finger picking which derived from ragtime. His demonstration of these is so clear it feels like a lesson. Drake basically became a guitarist as these two styles merged in the British folk and blues scene. To these traditions Drake added other sensibilities, which he had picked up from jazz, especially the modality of Miles Davis.

The musician, producer and Drake aficionado, Keith James expounds on these ideas. He suggests that Drake's vocal phrasing stems from jazz phrasing, particularly jazz saxophone. This is probably not surprising given Drake grew up listening to jazz. This interpretation also challenges the notion that Drake's style came from his mother, suggesting it was something he cultivated alone. Of course, there is a sense that James is removing some of the mystery to the art by laying everything so bare. It's like having a magic trick explained to us. We know how it works and we might even dare to attempt it, but the wonder is gone.

One aspect of the Drake story that fits squarely in the classic rock narrative is his discovery. Drake was playing at a four-day festival in 1967 at the Round House, a famous venue in London's Camden Town. Among the few people watching him was Ashley Hutchings of Fairport Convention, one of the prominent bands in the British folk music scene. Hutchings brought Drake to the attention of their producer and manager Joe Boyd. Boyd was equally taken by this young performer and agreed to record him with the assistance of John Wood, who was the main producer at Boyd's Witchseason Records.

The result, *Five Leaves Left*, released in 1969 is seen today as a classic in modern folk music. For some it is the ultimate work of a singer-songwriter. Poetic and foreboding lyrics such as "River Man" and "Fruit Tree" underscored by Drake's signature guitar work and the spare arrangements of Robert Kirby. *Nick Drake: Under Review*, however, shows, that this album, like all of Drake's output, was not the work of design. In many ways, Drake's albums were acts of compromise. Quite a shocking revelation given the impact that his work has on people and how often Drake's artistic vision is taken as a given.

Tensions were evident from the moment Drake started working with Boyd. Both men appeared to acquiesce to each other, the musician a little more than the producer. As a result, some saw the finished record as a little uneven. Equally the world didn't seem ready for Drake's blend of jazz and folk. Jerry Gilbert, the only journalist to have interviewed Drake, was one of the few critics to have admired *Five Leaves Left*. For the music press and the world at large it slipped by unnoticed and the first seeds of the legend were planted.

Frustrated by this lack of success Drake returned almost immediately to the studio to record his second album *Bryter Layter*. Again the myth is challenged. Far from being a recluse, Drake was hungry for success. Consequently he agreed to more input from Boyd, albeit grudgingly. Many purists deride the finished product and point the finger at the producer manipulating the naïve artist from behind the mixing desk. The sense from the documentary is that Drake went along if it meant reaching a wider audience.

Some of the musicians and critics also disagree that this album was an artistic failure. Kathryn Williams, a Mercury award winning songwriter noticeably influenced by Drake, argues that the lushness of the production offers a contrast to the brooding lyrics. Dann points out that Drake's collaboration with Velvet Underground violinist John Cale resulted in two of the strongest and most well received tracks on the album, "Northern Sky" and "Fly". Rock critic Peter Paphides suggests that the first verse of Hazy Jane II, (And what will happen in the morning / when the world it gets / so crowded that you can't look out the / window in the morning) encapsulate living in the modern world. Only folk singer Ralph McTell maintains that the real Nick Drake was not represented on this album.

True intention is perhaps one of the most debatable points of any artistic endeavor. *Nick Drake: Under Review* doesn't provide definitive answers in the case of Drake. However, it shatters one prevailing myth of Drake and that is of him being an artist who was completely in control of his own vision. I'm not suggesting that Drake wasn't a consummate songwriter or musician but the Drake we hear isn't necessarily an unadulterated one. The journalist Caitlin Moran is right when she says that Drake's songs come to us fully formed. Yet as the film shows the route they took was not as pure and direct as many imagine.

This route becomes surprisingly clear when Drake came to record his final album *Pink Moon*, which would become the album by which he was posthumously renowned. By this stage Drake was finding touring an unbearable strain. He made one last attempt to tour in 1970, supporting

his label mates, Fotheringay. According to McTell who was at the gig, he left the stage halfway through the performance and never played live again. His cannabis use was becoming increasingly heavy and perhaps this, coupled with his artistic frustration, spurred his even greater insularity. He returned to his parents home in Tamworth-in-Arden, rarely left his room and may have remained a footnote in folk music history if it wasn't for his decision to record another album with John Wood.

The album with its stripped down sound is the work on which the Drake legacy is based. Though it's his last album it is the point from which most people start to approach his music. Both the music and the lyrics seem as honest an artistic statement as has ever appeared in the history of popular music. Again the documentary challenges some of the retrospective interpretations. While no one denies that Drake's mental health had deteriorated, a few such as Dann challenge the view that *Pink Moon* was simply valedictory. Drake would record four more songs after this and Dann even speculates that Drake felt some renewed hope and saw another chance for himself.

When Drake died of an overdose of the anti-depressant, amitriptyline, in 1974 it could be cynically said that he took the final step toward his legendary status. It has long been disputed whether Drake committed suicide. Given his lyrics and his withdrawn state toward the end of his life it is of course tempting to think so. His former friend Hutchings prefers a romanticized version and says that the world Drake had grown up in, as an artist was gone. The '70s was an age of vulgarity and excess in which the ideals of the '60s had become distorted. While this interpretation is tempting, Drake was as much removed from his era as he was paradoxically an embodiment of it. He never became a spokesperson for his generation and his songs rather than being the backdrop to those heady times went largely ignored.

Instead what we get from *Nick Drake: Under Review* is a sense of Drake's timelessness. By reconsidering his life and his approach to his work it presents Drake as a rare talent whose gifts came through despite adversity and not as someone who wrote with his mind on the cemetery. His early death shouldn't be how we define his work. Rather it should be seen as the tragedy it was because it denied Drake the opportunity to bring his voice to many more people.

The extras included in this special edition do not broaden our understanding. The tarot reading of Drake's character by the guitarist Robin Williamson is quaint but unnecessary. The quiz and biographical information at the end are fun and interesting but not relevant.

RATING:  7

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