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DVD REVIEW: STRANGE FRUIT: THE BEATLES' APPLE RECORDS

DAN WIENCEK MAY 3, 2012 1 COMMENT AND 4 REACTIONS

Equal parts vanity imprint, utopian fantasy and corporate boondoggle, Apple Records has a story worth telling, and boy does it get told in *Strange Fruit: The Beatles' Apple Records*. Clocking in at a robust 162 minutes — that's two and three-quarter hours, I did the math — this film adds depth to an interesting sub-chapter of rock and roll that's usually relegated to a cursory paragraph or two in between *Let It Be* and *All Things Must Pass*.

In the formative, pre-Allen Klein days, Apple was a fun place to be for both artists and staff, and the company racked up some early successes that any major label would have envied. Mary Hopkin's "Those Were the Days," produced by Paul McCartney, sold roughly a quarter-jillion copies and probably would have sold twice that if it hadn't come out the same week as "Hey Jude." Badfinger, having dicked around for a year or two as the keys and gotten nowhere, blazed into the rock stratosphere clinging to a lightweight but irresistible McCartney confection, "Come and Get It." The problem was that McCartney couldn't be there for everyone all the time, and the label's successes correlate pretty exactly with his direct involvement or lack thereof. Where Paul could sneeze and make it a hit, George Harrison, the film makes clear, had little acumen as a record producer. Helming disks for Jackie Lomax, Billy Preston and Doris Troy, Harrison's M.O. was to pack the studio with as many ringers as he could (Eric Clapton, for one, seems to have played on half of Apple's output) and have them let 'er rip. With no firm hand at the tiller, the resulting musical whole was less than the sum of its parts, and Harrison never produced a breakaway hit for the label.



The picture that emerges of Apple as the film goes on is of a pet project that never had the commitment, talent and resources it needed to become a lasting force in the music industry. Sure, they could make money with a flash-in-the-pan hit like "Those Were the Days," but for someone like Jackie Lomax, a not-untalented guy who might have developed into a worthwhile artist on a mainstream label, Apple offered little apart from the cachet of working alongside the Beatles, and even that didn't end up counting for very much. Apple didn't send their artists on promotional tours or offer tour support, the Beatles having decided several years prior that live touring was passé. Because at least one Beatle had to approve all signings, many promising acts who came near Apple's orbit, including Fleetwood Mac and David Bowie, were allowed to slip away. And when Apple did manage to find a genuine star, they blew it. I am no fan of James Taylor, but you'd have to deaf, dumb and obstinate not to recognize the man has something special. Apple couldn't make Taylor's first album a hit — Apple did get him a BBC special that didn't air for months — and the Beatles eventually did the right thing and released him from his Apple contract. It is rather sad to watch Apple slowly wither as its four founders drift away from it, and by the time John Lennon signs David Peel and Elephant's Memory, fringe acts with no prospect of wide commercial success, the writing is pretty much on the wall already.

While the story of Apple on the whole is kind of a bummer, it's colorfully told by the artists and staff who made it happen: Jackie Lomax (looking inexplicably like Wild Bill Hickock, complete with Stetson, handlebar 'stache and tin star), promotions manager Tony Bramwell, Badfinger members Ron Griffiths and Joey Molland, Elephant's Memory bassist Gary Van Scyoc and street musician David Peel, still as freaky as ever he was. (The one person sorely missed is Mary Hopkin, who surely has some good stories of working with McCartney.) In a straight-up Beatles doc, these people would come across as distinctly second-tier; here, they get to tell their own story, and serve as an important reminder that the Beatles were not the only ones with hopes and dreams invested in Apple.

Despite the tasteless pun of its title (I think *Did I Hear You Say That Their Must Be a Catch?* would've been a nice, lynching-connotations-free option), its bare-bones visual approach and gargantuan running time, *Strange Fruit* is worth checking out for the way it rescues many talented and interesting people from the Beatles' shadows.

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