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FILM REVIEW

By Pete Roche

Eric Clapton: The 1970s Review

Eric Clapton has covered so much musical ground over the course of his 50-year career that comprehensive critical review of his work on film would encompass several DVDs. Those crazy cats at Chrome Dreams are doing just that.

Following close hot on the heels of Eric Clapton: The 1960s Review comes second volume—The 1970s Review—wherein filmmakers assemble a collage of fascinating insight, observation, and critique from some of the world’s most notable journalists, interpolating their screen time with archival footage of Clapton himself, both on and off stage. It’s a whopping 150-minute documentary critique spanning the Grammy-winning guitarist’s first decade as a bona fide solo artist.

The first few minutes of the film update viewers with a synopsis of Clapton’s work in the sixties, when he honed his chops in the Yardbirds and John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers before achieving megastar status in Cream with Ginger Baker (drums) and Jack Bruce (bass). We learn why the pioneering super-group was so successful—but also why it was so short-lived, having issued only a couple studio albums during its barely three-year run: Baker was temperamental, Bruce mildly egotistic, and Clapton too bored to continue reworking blues standards into psychedelic hits and proto-metal anthems. Engineers working on Cream’s last album, Goodbye, reveal that the players were hardly ever in the studio at the same time, and that handlers shuttled them from a local hotel for individual tracking sessions.

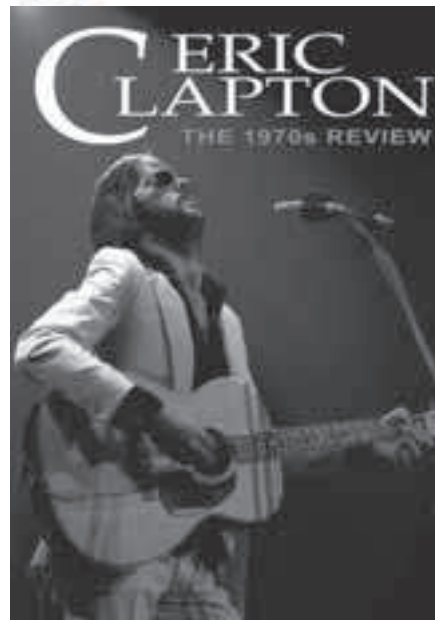
Cast adrift following a highly-touted farewell Cream tour, Clapton teamed with fellow Powerhouse alum Steve Winwood (Spencer Davis Group, Traffic) in a second super-group, which—oddly enough—featured the increasingly eccentric Baker on drums. While Blind Faith concerned itself more with English roots-rock than the overdriven hard rock associated with Cream, the lineup fizzled after releasing only one LP (whose controversial sleeve bore a topless pubescent girl). However, Clapton became fast friends with the husband-wife team of Delaney & Bonnie, whose soul band had been tapped to support Blind Faith on tour at the suggestion of The Beatles’ George Harrison.

Clapton began working on his first solo album in between guest shots and one-offs, like his appearance with John Lennon’s Plastic Ono Band at the “Live Peace” concert in Toronto in September ’69. But the film’s pundits suggest E.C. was so enamored of Delaney Bramlett’s singing and songwriting prowess that his eponymous debut for Atco / Polydor presented Clapton as a Delaney clone rather than the Stratocaster-strangling guitar “God” people expected. That Delaney produced the album and wrote a few tracks didn’t exactly help Clapton find his own identity, but the film’s commentators—including Bonnie herself—report that Delaney’s guidance and voice lessons were of immeasurable value to Eric, who’d become fixated on the grassroots stylings of Bob Dylan’s old backup group, The Band. Still, the 1970 released boasted impressive Clapton originals like “Easy Now” and “Let It Rain,” two collaborations with Leon Russell (“Blues Power,” “Lonesome and a Long Way from Home”), and a terrific cover of J.J. Cale’s “After Midnight.”

Multi-instrumentalist and all-around cool guy Bobby Whitlock talks us through Clapton’s next project, Derek & The Dominoes, and the making of their acclaimed Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs. Disenchanted with the spotlight, Clapton toured with Delaney & Bonnie as a sideman, filing away bits of Delaney’s songwriting technique and stagecraft for future use. When that group sputtered out (due to Delaney & Bonnie’s bohemian lifestyles and constant bickering), Clapton began work-shopping new tunes with organist Whitlock and drummer Jim Gordon at Criteria Studios in Miami. Engineers Ron and Howard Albert explain how Duane Allman joined the sessions (after Clapton met the slide-guitar phenom at a nearby Allman Brothers show) and bonded with E.C. to create magic on the tour de force title track, “Layla,” using a specially mic’ed piano and two smaller-than-they-sound guitar amplifiers. We’re also given the inside scoop on why Eric still wasn’t up to releasing music under his own name and preferred “hiding” within the confines of a group.

“Layla,” of course, spoke to Clapton’s unrequited love for George Harrison’s then-wife, Pattie Boyd; but critics here reflect on how the double-LP’s other entries were likewise written for her (“I Am Yours”), about his depression over not having her (“Bellbottom Blues”), or were otherwise selected because of how neatly they summarized his emotional plight (Billy Myles’ “Have You Ever Loved a Woman”).

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Middle chapters “Dominoes Falling,” “Highest Mountain to Lowest Valley,” and “In Exile” chronicle the Dominoes’ dissolution and Clapton’s subsequent hiatus, circa 1971-74. Frustrated by his inability to connect with Boyd, his failure to keep his bands from disintegrating, and difficulty finding his own voice, E.C. retreated, wallowing in a heroin-fueled haze for months on end. Whitlock recalls trying to coax Clapton out of a hotel room one night, only to have the bathrobe-clad guitarist emerge intoxicated to compliment him on his new car. Eric’s record company issued a stopgap concert album and hoped their star would clean up soon. Concerned for his friend, The Who’s Pete Townshend nudged Clapton into playing a star-studded show at London’s Rainbow Theater in January 1973, with Townshend, Steve Winwood and Ronnie Wood lending their talents.

Come 1974, a heroin-free Eric took to recording again—this time at a rental house in Golden Beach, Florida. The aptly-named 461 Ocean Boulevard saw E.C. teaming with session guitarist George Terry and backup singer Yvonne Elliman on another batch of blues covers (“Steady Rollin’ Man,” “I Can’t Hold On”), a Johnny Otis shuffle (“Willie and The Hand Jive”), and the traditional “Motherless Children.” But the LP also unveiled one of the chameleonic Clapton’s new loves: Reggae. Turn on by the island sounds of Burnin’ by Bob Marley & The Wailers, Eric successfully retooled the Jamaican icon’s “I Shot the Sheriff” for his own purposes. Among the DVDs many live concert clips is a remarkably well-preserved video of Clapton performing the hit on TV with his new lineup on The Old Grey Whistle Test.

Terry talks us through the ups and downs of subsequent efforts There’s One In Every Crowd, E.C. Was Here, and No Reason to Cry, noting his employer’s shifting tastes in music (apart from always keeping one foot in the blues) and mood. The superstar finally got to work with Robbie Robertson and The Band in 1976, tracking Bob Dylan and Otis Rush covers with the boys at Shangri-La Studio in L.A. Terry himself even penned a reggae follow-up to “Sheriff” whose lyrics explained that song’s cryptic characters and mysterious bucket in the well (“Don’t Blame Me”).

The critics here agree it wasn’t until 1977’s Slowhand that Clapton truly found his voice, polishing his songwriting skills to near perfection (with producer Glyn Johns) on the pop masterpiece “Wonderful Tonight.” Commentators Anthony DeCurtis (Rolling Stone), Barney Hoskyns (Melody Maker), and Nigel Williamson (Tribune, The Times) observe how Clapton’s voice renders him completely open and accessible—charmingly vulnerable—on such ballads without sounding weak or hackneyed. Eric would continue churning out love songs and pop gems in the ‘80s, but Slowhand surrounded “Wonderful” with upbeat rock covers (“Cocaine,” “Lay Down Sally”) and slow-burners (“Mean Old Frisco,” “Peaches and Diesel”) in a manner that satisfied old-school fans.

The late ‘70s saw a relatively happy Clapton returning to the charts and (finally) marrying Boyd. But Terry and others concede Eric had traded heroin for booze, which he consumed at an alarming rate. A documentary film capturing the day-to-day life of E.C. and his band on tour (by train) was shelved, allegedly because of its unflattering portrayal of the perpetually-drunken star. The DVD offers several clips, including a funny scene wherein Eric wanders from an interview, leaving French reporters to interrogate a lookalike Clapton roadie. The movie also touches on the publicity firestorm raised when an inebriated Eric echoed the minority-bashing, no-immigration policy of staunchly conservative Parliament member Enoch Powell. Clapton’s U.K. sales nosedived immediately—but the guitarist suffered little backlash in America (where few knew or cared who Powell was), poisoning him for stateside triumph in the ‘80s.

It’s engrossing listening to Terry discuss how he and Clapton would trade solos on stage, or how Eric would give him a nod to “take it” if he wasn’t feeling 100%. Terry—who served as loyal backup guitarist through 1977 (when E.C. reconfigured his band) says his boss’s controversial in-concert statements didn’t bother him, so long as his own ability to play (and earn a paycheck) wasn’t hindered. Journalist Williamson, who found Eric to be sweet and articulate during their several interviews, still feels otherwise, expressing disappointment that Clapton has never taken responsibility or said he’s sorry.

Casual Clapton fans might be intimidated by the film’s 2.5 hour running time, but lovers of Isis Productions / VH-1’s popular Classic Albums series will appreciate the album-by-album chronology and painstaking attention to detail. We could’ve done without the fake digital “lint” added to still photos for the simple sake (we’re guessing) of making such ephemera look even older, but the sheer volume of images on display makes up for such minor style faux pas. And we were taken aback by the out-of-the-blue stock footage of half-naked hippies cavorting in the desert to the sounds of The Band and Blind Faith. The pictures aren’t graphic, but really, why spoil your heady, in-depth documentary with them when a still shot of the musicians under discussion would suffice?



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