

GenEc DVD Review

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The Story of the Yardbirds

The official story of rock in the 60's wants us to believe that the Beatles were the Great Original Innovators of the era, and that everyone else merely followed their lead. Yet months before "Norwegian Wood", the Yardbirds attempted to record a sitar-and-tabla intro to "Heart Full of Soul", only to realize that the result was a much thinner sound than they felt they needed. Thus, Jeff Beck came up with his now-famous nasally, sinuous distorted-guitar intro, which certainly ranks as one of the very first of all Indo-rock fusions. This is just one of the fascinating stories to be found on this British-made DVD documentary (released in the US by MVD) about one of the least-understood and most under-appreciated innovative rock bands ever, the Yardbirds.

You want to talk innovation? While the Beatles were putting the finishing touches on "Rubber Soul", with its fairly tentative (albeit impressive) moves toward a more "artistic" style, the Yardbirds were releasing one of the most mind-bogglingly unexpected rock experiments released up to that time, their drastic re-interpretation of Bo Diddley's "I'm A Man". It wasn't simply that the Yardbirds' version was so much faster and looser than Bo's slow grind. Partway through, the structure of the piece seems to crumble away, as the band gets ready to hammer madly on a single chord. Beck soon begins strumming wildly, scratching at the strings in a timbre that seems virtually devoid of pitch, entering the world of pure noise. With this one bold move, rock'n'roll was forever altered off its firmly established course of being commercial dance music for teenagers. Rock had found its avant-garde.

To be sure, there were precursors, most notably Link Wray's biting power chords in the late 1950's and Dick Dale's heavily reverbed tremolo picking of the early 60's, but neither broke with rock's melodic and rhythmic past as definitively as the Yardbirds did on "I'm a Man". With one uncommon record, the Yardbirds had set into motion what would develop on one hand into psychedelia, and on the other, heavy metal. The Yardbirds would continue to explore the experimental periphery of rock, toying with tempo changes, random voices, distorted timbres, etc., though always rooted squarely within the blues roots of rock'n'roll.

Nevertheless, the Yardbirds had one major failing, which is pointed out more than once in this documentary. One can overlook the fact that their technical skills were sometimes lacking, since the ideas were there, and were realized adequately enough. One can forgive the indifferent production they were sometimes afforded, which is more a symptom of the times than anything else. Their fatal mistake, however, was not recognizing that the times were changing, that the revolution they had helped set into motion (and we must certainly credit the Beatles, the Mothers of Invention, and Beach Boys as significant contributors

here as well) was taking place primarily in the LP format. Thematic “concept albums”, long-form compositions, LP’s built around variety within a distinct stylistic unity, an overall “progressive” outlook – these had all replaced the 7-inch pop single as the way rock musicians were expected to head if they wished to be taken seriously. The Yardbirds, however, heeded the bad advice of their record company and producers, and thus continued to think of themselves as a pop-singles band. Despite the increasing chasm between “serious” adult rock LP buyers and teen pop fans, the Yardbirds continued to gear their music toward the pop charts. When the hits dried up, so did the Yardbirds. Almost everyone of importance connected to the Yardbirds (aside from singer Keith Relf, who died in a freak accident in the 1970’s) is interviewed here. Eric Clapton talks frankly about how, even in their earliest incarnation as a blues band, he left the band because of his dissatisfaction with the band’s pop and rock direction, whereas he wanted to keep the focus purely on the straight-ahead blues he preferred at that time. (One may wish to pause and reflect on Clapton’s music of the 1970’s in this light.) Chris Dreja talks about how Clapton was such a perfectionist, he would spend time practicing how to hold the guitar. Beck talks about how he came to join the band, when the guitarist they really wanted, Jimmy Page, was unavailable at the time. He also reveals the influence of Booker T. and the MG’s and the Mar-Keys on his music. (I wouldn’t have guessed). There are many such revelations, though long-time hard-core fans may very well be familiar with much of the material.

There are also many live and video (lip-synching and, er, hand-synching) clips. The earliest ones, with Clapton still in the band, come off in retrospect as pretty weak, blanched blues. Many of the clips suffer from shoddy sound quality, but retain their fascination as moments in time nonetheless. The clips that hold up best are, ironically, from the band’s later period as a four-piece, with Jimmy Page playing the lone guitar on arrangements originally conceived for two guitars. (The four-piece version of “Happenings Ten Years Time Ago” is the strongest, most-coordinated live clip here.) There is also a too-brief sample of Jimmy Page bowing his guitar as a Yardbird on “Dazed and Confused”, a song which is, of course, more closely associated with the next phase of Page’s career.

The main documentary runs a very-packed 52 minutes. There is also a very welcome bonus feature, a 14-minute performance for German TV by the 1967 four-piece Yardbirds lineup of Relf, Page, Dreja, and Jim McCarty. The band was nearing its commercial ebb and would soon disintegrate, but they’re in top-form here. The disc comes with a 20-page booklet, which brings the Yardbirds’ saga up to 2003. The booklet was obviously assembled to accompany their comeback CD (which featured Dreja and McCarty alongside new Yardbirds members, plus a raft of special guests). Not having seen nor heard that CD, I can’t comment on whether this is an exact reproduction of the notes for that release or not.

Needless to say, this DVD is an item no self-respecting Yardbirds fan should be without. With any luck, it will extend much further than that audience, and help restore the band to its rightful place among mainstream critics, who have ignored the Yardbirds’ highly significant and historically crucial innovations for far too long.

Posted by Tom Bingham at [11:25 AM](#) 

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