



FEATURES

TV Party the Documentary

By Chris Hughes

QUOTES

[Theatrical Trailer](#)

Disc Details:

Video:	Fullscreen 1.33:1
Anamorphic:	No
Audio:	• English (Dolby Digital 2.0)
Subtitles:	English
Runtime:	91 minutes
Rating:	N/R
Release Date:	September 1, 2005
Production Year:	2005
Director:	Danny Vlnic
Released by :	Brink Films
Region:	1 NTSC

RATING



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In 1978, then *High Times* columnist Glenn O'Brien was interviewed for a New York cable access program that he thought no one would ever see. Cable access was a tiny, government-mandated backwater in the emerging cable television industry of the late '70s and O'Brien had no reason to believe that anyone was watching. But on the bus the next morning, one of the passengers recognized Glenn from the show and a light went on in O'Brien's head.



At the close of the '70s there

was a lingering notion, born of '60s' idealism, that a few social revolutionaries could effect widespread change by disseminating a counter-cultural viewpoint through established media channels. Initially this manifested itself in, among other things, posters, music and highly publicized gatherings. In public access television, Glenn O'Brien saw an avenue towards the articulation of a rebellious, counter-culture world view that he hoped would contribute in some small way to the enlightenment of the nation. So, armed with a high concept, O'Brien set out to create the show that the name implies: a party on your TV and, as he put it, "possibly a political party."

O'Brien used two existing programs as templates for the show, the **Tonight Show with Johnny Carson** and, more importantly, Hugh Hefner's **Playboy After Dark**. The idea was to assemble his friends and host a free form "variety show" with guests from the worlds of rock and art. O'Brien would be the MC and his close friend and co-creator of **TV Party** Chris Stein of the band Blondie would be his sidekick. To this mix they added Walter Steding as the leader of the TV Party Orchestra, which was actually just Steding playing guitar and violin accompanied by assorted other musicians on assorted other instruments.

Because O'Brien and Stein were at the center of the New York music scene they had access to a wide variety of up and coming musicians and artists including David Byrne, Fred Schneider, Mick Jones, Iggy Pop and **TV Party** regulars Debbie Harry and graffiti artist Jean Michel Basquiat. This motley crew of the soon to be famous simply brought the party from Mud Club and CBGB to the studio, and thus **TV Party** was born.

To modern eyes **TV Party** looks a lot like any number of contemporary cable access shows. The production values were non-existent, the hosts rambles on about very little while laughing, joking, smoking and drinking. The camera swings around and zooms in and out. Words flash across the screen and a sense of confusion reigns. But there was more going on



went into creating this groundbreaking program."

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with **TV Party**. In the control room, Amos Poe - later to found the so-called No Wave Cinema movement - played the knobs and dials like a musical instrument, reacting to the action on stage in a proto MTV style of chaotic cuts. Jean Michel Basquiat sat at a keyboard and wrote video graffiti that flashed across the screen. "Doc" Steding and his "orchestra" added a droning art-rock sound track and, at the center of it all, O'Brien careened around in dark glasses, making wry comments, interviewing guests and taking angry phone calls from viewers.



Danny Vinic's 2005 film **TV Party the Documentary** recounts the whole wild affair through the use of archival footage of the show and extensive interviews with O'Brien, Stein, Harry, Poe and Steding. The only person missing is Jean Michel Basquiat who died from a heroin overdose in 1988. The film does a good job of laying out the historical narrative from the show's beginning to its eventual demise in 1982. Color interview material is inter-cut with black and

white clips from the show and the transitions are achieved with clever graphics. The interviewees recount their experiences, share a few anecdotes and genuinely seem to be enjoying their memories of both the show and that period of their lives. The documentary successfully imparts a sense of the passion and excitement that went into creating this groundbreaking program.

Unfortunately, the shows themselves were actually pretty boring to watch. The chaotic jumps from camera to camera could be headache inducing and when Poe was giving the knobs a rest, it was filled with people talking over each other, out of focus images and very little, if any, structure. When bands played the show, the sound was several steps below lo-fi and if it weren't for the novelty of seeing David Byrne or Debbie Harry, one

would be tempted to switch the channel as quickly as possible. By carefully cutting together the best moments, **TV Party the Documentary** is able to bring a more modern sensibility to the show and get to the heart of its unique personality without driving the viewer to distraction.

Image is Everything

It's no surprise that the video images from the original *TV party* are in less than perfect condition. The low quality videos are further marred by wear and tear but they're more than good enough to represent the show. The interview segments are nice and crisp with good color saturation and contrast.



The Sound of Music

The Dolby stereo track is about what you'd expect from a dialogue driven documentary. Interviews are clear and understandable. The archival footage is a different story though. You may find yourself straining to hear what people are saying and if you're expecting good quality audio of the various bands that played **TV Party** you're going to have to look elsewhere. But this DVD isn't about audio quality, so it's more than fine just the way it is.

Closing Argument

TV Party the Documentary is a fun film for both the seasoned **TV Party** fan and the completely uninitiated. At 91 minutes, it's long enough to cover all the history but brief enough to leave the viewer wanting more. If you're interested in the history of community television, early '80s culture or the New York punk/pop scene, **TV Party** is worth a watch.



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