



East End Babylon: The Story of the Cockney Rejects

Although the well-made and surprisingly engaging rock-doc **“East End Babylon: The Story of the Cockney Rejects”** focuses on the roots and output of the titular post-punk rock group, it also serves as a primer on the East End culture celebrated in the films of Guy Ritchie. While it references Cockney rhyming slang and the rough-hewn dialect that separates the extended working-class neighborhood from the rest of the English-speaking world, it doesn’t dwell on it. The young East Enders interviewed here by Richard England argue that no one uses it, anyway. It’s more important to know that the band members and their rough-and-ready fans are the descendants of poor Londoners forced to live in overcrowded tenements and work in industries free to take advantage of their poverty and/or immigrant status. We are reminded that the region experienced the brunt of the damage during the World War II bombings and rocket attacks. Boom periods in the shipping industry would, for a time, give dockworkers a decent income and a sense of pride in their blue-collar ethos. By the mid-1970s, though, the warehouses and docks were left to rot by companies who had deserted the port. Without steady incomes, East End lads were left with “football, boxing or rock ‘n’ roll” as escape routes. In the film, it’s also noted that unemployment caused an already lively hoodlum culture to embrace drugs and other pursuits favored by organized criminals. Just as punk music was a reaction to the glam and progressive rock favored in the mid-’70s, the Cockney Rejects’ “Oi!” movement was strictly working class. The band attracted disaffected punks, skinheads, football hooligans, laborers and others drawn to the mosh pit. The band members, some of whom had been competitive boxers, could give as well as they got when confronted by their own fans. Their lyrics emphasized unemployment, workers’ rights, harassment by police and other authorities, and government oppression. The media attempted to lump the Cockney Rejects in with white-supremacist groups, but those assertions are denied in interviews. “East End Babylon” deserves to be seen by any anyone who considers himself to be an expert in rock history and how the music reflects society at large.

– Gary Dretzka

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