



The pressure of a Review

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"Queen: perhaps the most unique band in the history of rock music," goes the narration at the beginning of the recently released DVD *Queen under Review: 1973–1980* (Chrome Dreams). Whether or not it's possible to be more unique than other "unique" bands, there's something to this statement. Maybe "Queen: the biggest anomaly in the history of rock" would be more accurate.

In any case, Queen was a multifaceted band, with more depth than its gaudy popular image suggests. (I say "was" out of a refusal to acknowledge the current Paul Rodgers–fronted touring version.) Everybody knows Queen, but generally in just a superficial, greatest-hits-only way. We've all been subjected to "We Will Rock You" and "Another One Bites the Dust" more times than we've cared for, but how many people can name even one song on, say, *Queen II* (Elektra, 1974)?

I listened to "Bohemian Rhapsody" in high school just like everyone else did — Wayne's World came out during my sophomore year — but didn't become an official convert until I finally sat down with *Queen II* a few years ago. It helps that this album of dark, majestic (and, yes, occasionally pompous) hard rock has no big hits and can therefore be listened to without the pop-cultural baggage that weighs down everything from 1975's *A Night at the Opera* (Elektra) through 1980's *The Game* (Hollywood). Once you get past the megahits, though, it turns out that every Queen album from this era has several excellent lesser-known songs — as well as at least one atrocious, unlistenable one (e.g., almost anything sung by drummer Roger Taylor). Sorting through, scrutinizing, and compiling these songs has been a minor obsession of mine for a while.

It was in this mind-set that I welcomed the arrival of *Queen under Review*, released by a UK imprint that's been raining down "unauthorized," cheap-looking DVDs like blood from a lacerated sky. Perusing Chrome Dreams' Geocities-esque Web site reveals a couple other Queen titles as well as a few more installments in the *Under Review* series, including ones on the Who, the Small Faces, and Syd Barrett. It's a worthwhile concept: Gather a group of critics and other insiders to dissect and discuss the work of a band in blow-by-blow fashion and intersperse it with documentary footage (albeit within the somewhat restrictive bounds of "fair use").

Cheap appearances aside, *Queen under Review* makes for an enjoyable and educational viewing experience. For a band with such a sprawling — and often frustratingly uneven — catalog, the critics' analysis provides some valuable and varied perspective. Given its broad fan base, Queen was many things to many people — seminal heavy-metal masters, stadium-rock hitmakers, and subversive genre-hopping chameleons — a diversity that's reflected by the range of commentators. There's

Kerrang!'s Malcolm Dome, a pudgy bloke from *Guitarist* magazine who demonstrates Brian May's guitar setup, and a scholarly BBC DJ who casually uses words such as *fortissimo* and *stadia*. They're a surprisingly likable bunch; fans won't agree with everything they say, but won't want to strangle them, either.

My only criticism here relates to an emphasis on singles over album tracks. We get in-depth analyses of nearly every single, from Queen's overlooked "Keep Yourself Alive" through The Game's anomalous "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" and "Another One Bites the Dust," but there's scarcely a mention of complex, theatrical rock epics like "Death on Two Legs," "Flick of the Wrist," and "March of the Black Queen" — which, to me, have more to do with the real Queen than with their one-off, late-'70s megahits. Brian May's giddy, symphonic guitar leads; Freddie Mercury's octave-spanning vocals; and the entire band's feel for epic, borderline-preposterous song structures and arrangements — that's what made Queen great. Monster hits like "We Will Rock You" and "Crazy Little Thing," however, had nothing to do with that sound — just one anomaly that makes analyzing Queen based on their singles inherently limiting.

Quibbles aside, it will be interesting to see how far the folks at Chrome Dreams take the Under Review idea. The only other DVD of this sort that I've seen is *Inside Thin Lizzy: A Critical Review, 1971–1983*, which is on a different label (Castle Rock) but is similar in concept. Which '70s hard-rockers, I wonder, will be next to get the treatment? Blue Öyster Cult? Budgie? Uriah Heep? The possibilities are promising — and also a bit frightening.

(Will York)