

Rock 'n roll treasure

A 1970 concert tour in Canada, where the musicians rode from one gig to the next on a train, was recorded extensively on film, but music rights and financial problems with the tour caused the material to be put aside and essentially forgotten about, until it was re-discovered in a garage decades later. That footage has now been assembled on the nostalgic and exciting New Line Home Entertainment two-platter release, **Festival Express** (N7573, \$25).

A good dozen bands were involved with the tour and are seen on the 2004 film and in the supplement, including The Grateful Dead, The Band, Delaney & Bonnie, Ian & Sylvia, Sha Na Na, The Flying Burrito Brothers, Seatrain, Eric Anderson, Tom Rush, Mashmakon and Buddy Guy, but in both the offstage material and especially the concert performances, the 89-minute show belongs to Janis Joplin. Her performance sequences are riveting, as she sings out her gut even when it was in front of a half-filled stadium in Winnipeg, and every unguarded backstage moment, whether she's chatting with Jerry Garcia or just looking out the window of the train, seems precious. The film combines the concert footage, backstage footage and (maybe the most nostalgic component) crowd footage with recent interviews by some of the band members and tour organizers. It tells an enjoyable story (the tour had overpriced tickets and ran into gate crashing problems at every venue) and preserves some wonderful moments of rock 'n roll that had been thought to be lost to the ages.

The picture is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The source material is naturally grainy, but colors look fresh and fleshtones are accurate. The quality of the audio recording varies a bit from one set to the next—again, Joplin's sounds the best—but is generally strong and clear, and is presented on both a 5.1-channel Dolby Digital track and a slightly crisper DTS track. There are optional English and Spanish subtitles, and an additional 57 minutes of songs and interviews. The second platter has another 19 minutes of unused interviews and a fascinating 14-minute segment about the history of the film. There is also a collection of stills and a trailer.

The 'black Woodstock'

A remarkable snapshot of African-American culture in the twilight before the dawn of hip-hop, **Wattstax**, has been released as a 30th Anniversary Special Edition by Warner Home Video (34997, \$25). Ostensibly a concert film depicting an unprecedented event—a 1972 all-star concert of black performers staged without incident at the filled-to-the-rafters Los Angeles Coliseum, the film intercuts numbers from the concert with interviews (including a comedy riff by Richard Pryor that is scattered through the entire 103-minute film) discussing values and lifestyles, and clips of the rejuvenated Watts, which a few years earlier had been the scene of divisive riots (or 'rebellion,' depending upon your perspective). Among the performers are The Staple Singers, Rufus Thomas, Albert King, The Emotions, Luther Ingram and Isaac Hayes. Hayes' *Theme from Shaft* was originally intended to close out the film, but at the last minute *Shaft*'s producers nixed the deal (rather stupidly, since it would have been excellent publicity). A soundstage performance by Hayes, wearing the same outfit he had on in the concert, was substituted, but for the DVD, the original concert segment and his performance of *Shaft* have been restored, with the alternate cut, *Rolling Down a Mountain*, which runs 4 minutes, relegated to the special features.

The film is a compelling creation, especially on DVD. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound gives the music a vivid presence, accentuating a concentration and involvement with the thoughtful interviews. The picture is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The image has a documentary grain but fresh colors. There is English captioning. Along with an extended 3-minute clip of King's performance, a 5-minute interview with Public Enemy's Chuck D. on how he was influenced by the event, and two trailers, there are two commentary tracks. One features an amalgam of speakers, including Hayes and director Mel Stuart, reflecting upon their involvement with the event. The other has Chuck D. and music historian Rob Bowman talking about the film and the performers. "Many artists told me, in fact I think everybody told me, when they played Wattstax, none of them had ever appeared before an audience that size. If you think about it, there were not African-American shows in football stadiums. There were arena-size shows, but even those were for a handful of artists. So the immensity of the event, the way the event was framed from an Afro-centric point of view, you know, before people were using terms like 'Afro-centricity.' So many people talked about the fact, and this was so meaningful to people, that the security was all black. Part of the idea, as always, was empowerment. You know, same reason why the camera crew, at least forty-five of the forty-eight cameramen were black. Part of it was empowerment, employment, giving to the community economically by hiring people, but it was also a statement."

Punk compendium

A compendium of footage featuring the breakthrough punk rock group, The Ramones, is available on the Image Entertainment release, **Ramones Raw** (ID2278RMDVD, \$20). The primary 105-minute documentary mixes clips from concerts all around the world with backstage

footage (including some good groupie material), interviews, TV clips and music videos. The footage was collected, rather than being shot for a designed purpose, but there is clearly a lot to choose from as the band came to prominence during the video age, and the 2004 program conveys the feel of both the group's musical achievements and the tone of their collaboration offstage. Other documentaries will come along that will be more focused on the history of the band and its contribution to world culture, but this collection is accomplished enough to feel more like a cluttered living room than an attic.

The DVD pretty much doubles the value of the program as well, by adding on so many extra features. The film itself is presented in full screen format, though some clips are letterboxed where appropriate. The quality of the images changes from clip to clip, but the presentation is stable. The stereo surround soundtrack has a basic dimensionality but serves as a reminder that anti-fidelity was one of the band's defining themes. There is a commentary track by Marky Ramone, the late Johnny Ramone and director John Cafiero, in which they reminisce about the activities depicted in the clips and talk about the band and the music. As fans are probably aware, the band took the 'Ramone' stage name from Paul McCartney, the irony being that the late Joey Ramone's real name was Joey Hyman, and by substituting one vowel in that name he would have had a killer punk band appellation, to be sure.

Additionally, there is a complete 27-minute concert program shot in Italy in 1980 by Italian television, 18 minutes of deleted scenes, and 25 minutes of TV clips (some of which are excerpted in the main feature). There are also 'hidden' menu options that have brief, innocuous clips of members of the band hanging out.

Pure punk

As pure an American punk band as you can find, the Dead Boys, are showcased on the fine MVD release, **The Dead Boys Live! At CBGB OMFUG 1977** (DR4418, \$15). The 29-minute program depicts a concert from the absolute heart of the brief, exciting explosion of punk, and the band sounds terrific—more melodic and more focused than they normally were, but still hard-driving and dynamic, fully conveying the sense, as they did at the time, that rock 'n roll was not over yet. The music is as raw as it is compelling. The intimate club setting also adds to that excitement, as you can see that they weren't playing to the world—the world barely knows them, then or now—but to a few dozen enthusiasts, just enough to pack the floor and energize the band. It doesn't so much feel like a concert program as window onto the past.

The full screen image has the restrictions of a primitive video recording, but that said, it is in pretty good condition. Colors are discernible and the grain is not too intense. There is a 5.1-channel Dolby Digital track, and the music is mildly separated. There is no captioning. Also featured is a great 6-minute interview with the band from 1977, a nice 9-minute retrospective interview with one of the band members, another good 10-minute retrospective interview with their former manager, a half-minute promo for the band from 1977, a 2-minute interview with the director of the footage, a 3-minute alternate angle shot of the band playing a number and a 7-minute performance clip by a more bizarre punk band from the Seventies, Steel Clip.

Unreal reality

A full 148-minute concert program, **David Bowie - A Reality Tour**, has been released by Columbia Music Video (CVD58755, \$15). Compiled from a number of shows at different locales, the 2004 production retains the feel of a single epic concert, in which Bowie performs both his new material and many of his older hits—there are more than two-dozen songs. The manner of the presentation, however, has deliberate distancing effects. It is shot in a grainy and contrasty style, designed to accentuate rather than circumvent the stage lighting. Between the long shots, the freezes and the constantly shifting angles, the editing rarely lingers on Bowie for long, and you never get the feeling of closeness or raw immediacy that some concert programs convey. Instead, the whole show has a kind of unreal, delirious atmosphere that makes the program seem superficial. The music, too, is clearly live, as it lacks the melodic subtleties of a studio recording, but it is pushed a little too hard, so you don't get the unevenness of a good live mix. What the show does have going for it is its scope. With more than two hours of camera angles and musical eras, you end up not feeling like you've missed anything. You get to see Bowie in action and can imagine what attending one of his concerts must have felt like; and the breadth of numbers brings a sense of organization and underlying consistency to a pop musician who, while he has always gone his own way, has also had a tendency to absorb whatever musical style was in favor at the time he was composing.

The picture is presented in letterboxed format only, with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The picture transfer is clearly an accurate rendering of the cinematography. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital track is not as glaring as the PCM track and is really preferable in this regard. There is no captioning. A Bowie discography is also included.

Springsteen at MTV

There's an 'X' over the 'Un' part of the *MTV Unplugged* subheading on the Columbia Music Video release, **Bruce Springsteen • In Concert** (CVD58798, \$15), because while he does pick up his acoustical guitar for a couple song segments, including the opening, most of the 114-