

REVIEW**Movie Review: *Put The Needle On The Record* - "Oh So Pretty, Oh So Vacant"**

September 26, 2006

Richard Marcus

You don't realize how spoiled you are sometimes until you are able to compare what you have with what the rest of the world has. Canada doesn't have much we can boast about, but one thing we do have and can take justifiable pride in, is the number of great documentary films that have been produced here.

Part of that is because of the existence of the National Film Board of Canada (N.F.B.) where countless men and women have not only made movies, but learned how to make them as well. With notoriously limited budgets all that were ever possible was low-tech short movies. How better to utilize your resources then to make movies that can best take advantage of your circumstances – hence Canadians at the N.F.B. made documentaries.

They were well researched, well written and filmed with intelligence and respect for both their audience and their subject matter. They were never just flattering portraits of a person or subject either – all points of view were sought out to present the viewer with the most complete picture possible. You would invariably come away from an N.F.B. documentary feeling that you knew more about the subject then you did before you watched it.

The only problem is that now whenever I watch something calling itself a documentary I expect that same sort of excellence. Unfortunately what one hopes for and the reality of a situation aren't always going to mesh. Such was the case with the documentary film *Put The Needle On The Record*.

Shot primarily on location in Miami during the Winter Music Conference, a yearly weeklong event attended by thousands of house music professionals and fans. It bills itself as an inside look at one of the fastest growing musical phenomena today. Chock full of interviews and footage of events it wants you to believe that it will tell all you need to know about house music and the electronic wave of the future.

Now I have to admit to having a bias against the whole house music scene – thousands of people crammed together in one place having their brains pounded by incessant bass beats has little or no appeal to me. But I figured there had to be an explanation as to why so many people liked it, and perhaps this film would help me understand the attraction.

But instead of the "perfect example of documentary filmmaking at its absolute best" that was promised by something called *MicroCinema Magazine* I was treated to something as low rent and unintelligent as anything that I would expect to find on *Entertainment Tonight* or one of its cheap derivatives. Actually that's not fair to *Entertainment Tonight*, they make no bones about who and what they are, and there is a certain kind of perverse integrity to that.

This on the other hand is attempting to pass itself off as an objective overview of a new style of music, produced almost entirely by D.J.s, and all it comes off as is a shill for the industry. Lots of shots of sexy women half naked and gyrating; long shots of decadent Miami Beach; and backstage looks at the glamorous life of being a D.J.

Of course they also have a more serious side where we get a quick genesis of dance music

from swing through disco to the glories of what it has become now. One piece of information that does manage to poke through its head is how the whole scene originated in the gay bars of Chicago, much the same way Disco got its start in the gay bars of San Francisco. That would have been an interesting documentary in itself, finding out more about the connection between the gay community and dance music, but they don't go into detail on anything that would be remotely political or less than mainstream.

Basically they've taken the political element out of Rap and made it safe for the general public to be mindless is the impression presented from their historical overview. What I found most interesting of this overview is how there was so little mention of anybody from outside North America or England having anything to do with house music.

Where were the Indians and the Jamaican? Even I've heard of the Asian Dub Foundation and other groups from those parts of the world. Ah, maybe it's because they are musicians who actually make music, and not D.J.s who simply spin records and mix other peoples sounds into something.

Did that sound a bit scathing, well that's the impression they give of themselves. They are the new way that music is going to reach the masses. Now the D.J.s are the stars and music really has nothing to do with it anymore. One of them even went as far as to say something along the lines of "you used to have to have a band if you wanted to get people to dance, now all you need is a computer and some good software"

Maybe in some people's minds that's an advancement, but not in mine, and if that's what the people involved in the industry are boasting about, then it only increases my lack of respect for it. Only one person they interviewed for this documentary didn't just gush over the fact that you didn't even need to be a musician to be a D.J. ("as long as it sounds good who cares" was how somebody put it) But his warning that it could be the industries downfall seems to be falling on deaf ears.

I knew I wouldn't have to wait long for it, and sure enough someone said it: this was the democratization of music because anybody could do it. What they were describing sounded to me more like the reduction of music to its lowest common denominator so the whole idea of creativity is forgotten.

Instead of being inspired by some event in your life or something that you see in the world to create something that represents that moment musically, you use other people's inspiration in an attempt to create moments. If I were to cut and paste chunks of other reviews and add a few conjunctive phrases here and there, and call it my review of this movie would it be my work?

No. I would be accused of stealing and plagiarizing from other people. Sure folk musicians have borrowed tunes over the years from each other, but they've put whole new lyrics to them and put their own stamp on it. Adding a computer generated bass line and drum beats to clips of other people's music does not make you a musician. It makes you a fairly decent engineer or producer at best.

The picture that is presented in *Put The Needle On The Record* is that house music and electronic music as these people practice it, is a lifestyle to be aspired to, not as a musical genre. If the intent of this movie was to confirm the prejudices of people like myself about this music then they have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

I wanted to learn more about house music and see what it was that people liked about it so much. Nothing that they told me in *Put The Needle On The Record* did anything to explain the appeal to me at all. It just looked like one more rejection of thinking and reducing everything down to its lowest common denominator.

The filmmakers had a real opportunity to make a movie that could have explored the way

multiple cultures are incorporating the music to spread political messages, how its being used in developing nations to protect and protest the treatment of indigenous populations, and any of the other ways dub music is being used to educate and help people throughout the world.

Instead they've made at most an infomercial that plays up how wonderful it is to be part of the jet-set life style, and aren't we sexy. As a documentary on their subject matter I think they have failed miserably, as an expose of how vacuous their whole industry is it's a roaring success. I doubt it that was their intent.

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Richard Marcus is a long - haired Canadian iconoclast who writes reviews and opines on the world as he sees it at [Leap In The Dark](#) and [Desicritics](#)

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Author: Richard Marcus

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#1
 Mark Saleski
 September 26,
 2006
 12:17 PM

the number of great documentary films that have been produced here

very true. i have a documentary called *Vinyl* produced by a guy named Alan Zweig. fantastic look at collectors of vinyl records. even has harvey pekar in it.

#2
 Brian aka
 Guppusmaximu
 September 26,
 2006
 01:43 PM

"Adding a computer generated bass line and drum beats to clips of other people's music does not a make you a musician."

I'd be careful,man... There are some people(No Names)on BC who would cry "Fascist" if they ever came to the realization that their profound form of expression could be compared to E-Mailing after reading your review.

Other than that...Excellent Article! I have a fondness for a well done documentary. Maybe you could enlighten me with some available titles from Canada

#3
 Brian aka
 Guppusmaximu
 September 26,
 2006
 01:44 PM

BTW "March of the Penguins" is still one of my favs...

#4
 zingzing
 September 26,
 2006
 01:47 PM

haha! (noname here.) plunderphonics. all i got to say. if you don't know what it is, look it up. maybe not a musician, but an artist.

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