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Plasmatics

Wendy O. Williams and The Plasmatics: The DVD - Ten Years of Revolutionary Rock and Roll

(MVD)

US release date: 21 November 2006

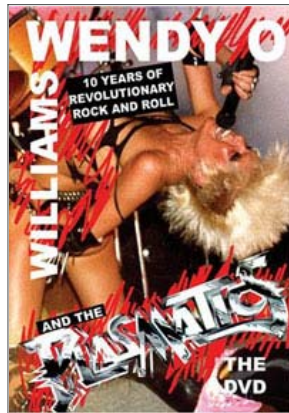
by Terry Sawyer

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Many people assume that when a music critic champions a band they've never heard of as some lost treasure from the vault, that the writer is seeking merely to justify their craft through discovery. Though a market-based system surely misses as much artistic greatness as it promotes glutting trends, it's also frequently the case that obscurity happens for a reason. When I watched *Wendy O Williams and the Plasmatics* and felt like I stumbled across one of the greatest bands I've never heard, I didn't need to stretch the truth in order to make grandiose claims about the Plasmatics' importance. Lead singer Wendy O. Williams was the feminist anti-Christ.

It's also not as if the Plasmatics really toiled away as unknowns. Between various trials, a tour with KISS, and appearances (with chainsaw) on Joan Rivers, The Plasmatics had a devoted following. But they had no easily marketable niche: they were too metal for punk and too overtly and confrontationally political for your average metal fan. It wasn't just that the Plasmatics couldn't have been more aesthetically at war with chart-topping contemporaries like Duran Duran, but that the band's outrageous live show courted tremendous controversy, particularly in middle America. From William's appearing onstage with a Mohawk and duct tape X's covering her nipples, to the cars they detonated onstage during nearly every performance, the Plasmatics fit in perfect opposition to the '80s odd couple of consumer hedonism and the kingship of Reagan's feral religious Right.

Wendy O Williams and the Plasmatics only succeeds as a documentary because the compelling subject matter happens to airbrush out the obvious presentation flaws. The documentary gets hobbled, for starters, by the British voiceover whose tone rakes across the seriousness of the content by sounding like the same voiceover they use on VH-1 to chronicle the meteoric crashes of people like Corey Haim. The Plasmatics emerged out of an ad placed in the *Village Voice* by conceptualist artist, Rob Swenson, who remained the groups co-writer and visionary. There is no interview footage or even quotes from him. Although it's understandable why Williams' might divert any filmmaker's gaze, it doesn't seem particularly accurate in characterizing the Plasmatics. Music critics have some of the same habits of focusing on the vocalist of every band as if the stage placement of the lead singer was the hierarchical clue for figuring out a band's sound. Still, the documentary begins by trying to place the Plasmatics for their contributions to culture and music and ends in slavish, beatific thrall to Wendy's many charms.



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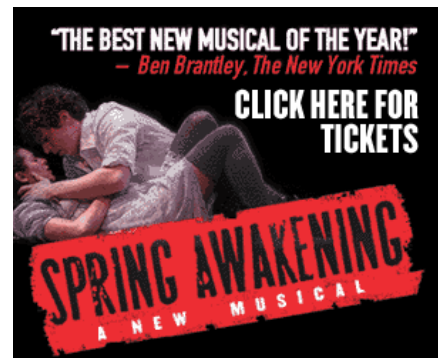
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Although I'd be the first person to suggest that the manger scene get re-envisioned with Williams at its center, as a critic I can't help but fault the documentary for its worshipful tone. Williams' suicide doesn't receive the scantest mention. I can understand this intellectually as a response to the tendency to use suicides as framing devices in portraits of the artist as the world's great vessels of suffering. For someone as politically involved as Williams to off herself in the woods, surely it bears mentioning even just in the sense that she obviously found her 10 years out of the lead singer spotlight less than fulfilling. In that sense, the film unfolds more as testament than music history.

Certainly a critic might be excused for finding the pulverizing, constantly in-your-face tone of the Plasmatics one dimensional. For all their speechifying about the evils of corporate media, it is apparent that the Plasmatics never turned down any of their major label offers despite repeated major label disappointments.

While I found it wholly admirable that The Plasmatics refused to drop a couple of songs on William Friedkin's *Cruising* because the band didn't want to promote homophobia, the viewer is left scratching their head about why the band wouldn't find doing songs and a video for 1986's *Reform School Girls* slightly sexist. Similarly, for all her refusal to bow to the sexism of traditional femininity, it's hard to comprehend why Williams wouldn't find something mildly nauseating about working with Gene Simmons, fairly known for his rather pronounced chauvinism. Given all her vitriol about commercialism, could she have been blind to Simmons artless embrace of the most crass levels of merchandising his glossy-metal garbage pop? *Wendy O Williams and the Plasmatics* avoids this level of interrogation in part because The Plasmatics never leave the pedestal in order to have ordinary lives filled with complicated contradiction and nuance. A more adept filmmaker would have found some middle ground between hagiography and the band as people. The lack of biographical depth (beyond a list of musicians and producers who worked with the band) has the effect of creating an aura of unreality more suited to political campaign advertisers than documentarians.

Once you get over the fact that the creators don't make a driveby pass at objectivity, there's much to commend in what they do get right. Music writer Maria Raha lends a judiciously analytic tone in describing Williams' feminist contributions to rock 'n' roll. In this respect, Williams seems somewhat of a marvel for managing to be both sexual and intellectual, proudly displaying her beautiful, leanly muscular physique without lapsing into the *Girls Gone Wild* object of the wacking male voyeur. When you look at pop stars of today like Gwen Stefani and Nelly Furtado trying to retrieve some kind of independence through feigning promiscuity and/or infantilization, it's refreshing to see a woman not afraid to literally expose herself without for a second implying a surrender of her body.

The film also chronicles (with every *Fall Guy* detail) the death-defying streak in the Plasmatics concerts, which melded leftist performance art with an energy that foams like a can of Coke shaken on a paint mixer. The Plasmatics took their anti-consumerism message on the road by relegating expensive cars, a living room set, and numerous TVs to the category "just things" by either blowing them up, smashing them with a sledgehammer, or chainsawing through their center.

After seeing the panic and finger-pointing that ensued after the Great White pyrotechnic disaster, it's impossible not to realize that a Plasmatics concert wouldn't take place today unless people came accompanied by their lawyers. Indeed, many on the religious Right who found Williams' stage shows to be obscene on their face, what with the butt cheeks and feminism, would take the back route of trying to violate the performances through the fire codes. Swenson went to great lengths to push some of the shows forward, often giving phony demonstrations with half the number of explosives used during the live set. It's the live shots that show how confrontational and dangerous this band was, not just for its own sake or in some backstage, self-indulgent decadence, but in the interests of being at the nervous edge of entertainment while aggressively politicizing their stage antics.

Many of the critiques seem to argue (again, sadly unopposed) that the political environment of the '80s completely explains why the Plasmatics did not become household names. While writing a concept record about environmental degradation and corporate diseasing of American culture probably won the band no accolades from the board room, it's difficult to

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believe that their failure to become popular was entirely about the suppression of leftist art. There's not really an extensive history for the mass appeal of heavily conceptual pop art. Even the supposed rebellion of '60s rock icons ignores the fact that the music remains political only in the most inchoate sense. Individuality was celebrated, authority defied, but none of the surviving canon (with notable exceptions like Bob Dylan) addresses livable politics. Many of the artists themselves diluted the political message of rule-breaking and rebellion by dying of overdoses. It's easy to focus on the groove when the artist in question has destroyed their own life through their limited, individual forms of political middle fingering.

The Plasmatics deserve praise for taking on global warming in the '80s when few people would have even heard of the issue, but their acolytes in the documentary seem to forget that many people look to music for an escape from political reality, not to have someone scream out the gory details inches from their face. The Plasmatics seem to have understood this entirely, Williams (in one of the far too few interview clips) acknowledges that their music aims to be aggressively confrontational. Given that, it's far more likely that a band like Motley Cure would make it big, not for overtly political reasons, but for passively political and aesthetic ones. But above and beyond the various hindsight retellings of "almost famous", I think the writers, collaborators, and critics featured in *Wendy O Williams and the Plasmatics* ignore the dominance of consumer culture in a way that The Plasmatics didn't. After all, even punk rock was simply fed into the machine and spat back out as a mere moment of nihilistic fashion. One could easily see The Plasmatics fed through the same shredder and passed in some Courtney Loved form.

A band so bold and extraordinary in its thinking and live intensity deserves a more driven and inquisitive introduction. Though the live footage alone makes the DVD worth purchasing, the documentary has little merit beyond its choice in subject. Perhaps its appearance will whet the appetites or spur the uninitiated to give The Plasmatics a close listen. Even in my most cynical moments, I couldn't help but star in awe at Wendy O. Williams driving a school bus loaded with explosives through a wall of televisions in their only lightly rotated video on MTV. (No camera tricks, she actually did the stunt with a sprained ankle wrapped in gaffer tape.) But most filmmakers seek some sort of illumination of their subject rather than weak, drab indoctrination.

Plasmatics - The Damned

RATING: 

— 30 May 2007

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