

Not A Photograph: The Mission Of Burma Story - DVD

Posted by **Ian Wright** on 11.26.2006

***Listen up and I'll tell a story
About the most influential band you never heard.***

Feature:

I'll begin this review with a quick caveat for the reader. I'm a fan of Mission Of Burma's music and I approached this film as such. While I'm predisposed to liking their music and as a result wanting to like the members of the band I'm not predisposed to liking a film about them. Ok?

OK. Lets start with a very brief recap of who exactly Mission Of Burma are. They are a band and in the 80's they rocked. They rocked hard and fast and loud. So loud in fact that the reason they split up was because their guitarist was destroying his ears.

A bit too brief? Fine, I'll expand a bit. Mission Of Burma formed in Boston in 1980 when former members of the Moving Parts Roger Miller and Clint Conley recruited Peter Prescott and Martin Swope into their new band and over the course of 3 years they released some stunning music in the form one EP, *Signals, Calls And Marches*, and one full length album *Vs.*. They also toured the US to, for the most part, raging indifference. This was the era when classic rock dinosaurs like Rush and Journey roamed the earth and there wasn't much in the way of avenues for underground bands to get the word out about themselves. Xerox machines were still something of a rarity so there weren't all that many fanzines doing the rounds, Rolling Stone wasn't all that interested in covering them and the network of places around the US where underground bands could tour was still being established by the likes of Black Flag and The Minutemen. So with this in mind, in addition to Miller's now constant tinnitus which resulted in him having to wear rifle range ear protectors on stage, they decided to call it a day.

And following that not much happened for the members of the band in terms of successful post-Burma musical careers. Bassist and singer Clint Conley produced the first Yo La Tengo record then put down his guitar for almost 2 decades and took to life as a suburban husband and father whilst working as a news producer for a local TV station before forming Consonant in 2001; Roger Miller continued to make music in a number of bands, all significantly quieter than Burma and which were less likely to inflame his tinnitus; drummer Peter Prescott continued playing in a number of bands and went to work as a buyer in Smash City Records in Boston; and mysterious 4th Burma Martin Swope, who never appeared on stage with the band but who rather worked from the sound desk manipulating tape loops took part in a couple of projects Miller was involved in. Worth investigating these other endeavours may be but none of them had the impact that Mission Of Burma had though.

And what impact, Michael Azzerad, author of pretty much the definitive history on US 80's indie *Our Band Could Be Your Life* argues that Mission Of Burma could well be one of the most influential bands of the last 30 years. It may be The Pixies that are credited with first bringing the quiet/loud/quiet dynamic to rock music (indeed their own reunion film is entitled *quietLOUDquiet*) but it was Burma, with their stuttering rhythms, odd time changes and aggressive vocals who really pioneered the idea. And in doing so they changed the face of music, maybe. Mission Of Burma begat Husker Du, Husker Du begat The Pixies, The Pixies begat Nirvana; and Nirvana brought the alternative to the mainstream.

Most of the above and some more is covered in *Not A Photograph: The Mission Of Burma Story*, which pretty obviously is a film telling the story of Mission Of Burma.

Far from being a nostalgia trip covering "the most influential band you never heard" the film focuses mainly on their 2002 reunion tour (Oh, did I not cover earlier that they got back together after 19 years? Sorry). It doesn't really go into the reasons why the band reformed, probably because the guys in Mission Of Burma don't seem too sure of the reasons themselves. "We never wanted to reform," says Roger Miller at the start of the film, "and I'm still not sure why we're doing it now. But I don't mind it. It feels right."

Certainly recapturing past glory doesn't seem to be the motivation. Miller and Conley seem happy with their lot, the latter not even having a musical instrument in his house for many years and managing to be married for almost two decades without his wife being fully aware of his life as a musician before he met her. His colleagues at work barely knew anything of it either and new employees at the TV station were just given a whispered "Clint used to be in Mission Of Burma" by way of an explanation for the occasional fan mail and phone calls asking him if he was "THE Clint Conley" he'd receive.

It's only Prescott who seems in anyway bitter about what might have been. He was the member of the band who was most against them breaking up and notably he's the one who pursued a post-Burma musical career most aggressively. He certainly seems somewhat conflicted when talking about the reaction that they received on the first reunion tour when he says that after years of feeling as though he didn't get what he deserved he's now headlining the Fillmore and playing sold out shows and feels as though he's getting more than he deserves. He also reveals himself to be a bit wary of the whole thing before it starts when he wonders, "How can you not do a lamer version of what you did when you were 20 years younger."

As for Martin Swope, he chose not to take part in the reunion nor the film and his place was taken by Bob Weston, who probably deserves his own place in the indie-rock pantheon thanks to his work as a member of Shellac, but who when faced with the prospect of joining Burma seems somewhat nervous about attempting to fill Swope's shoes.

The Weston/Swope substitution appears to be the only major difference between Burma classic and Burma redux. The original members have all aged remarkably well and comparing the live footage of them from the 80's against the modern day footage reveals that they are just as incendiary live today as they were the first time around and quite possibly still way ahead of their time. The other changes are that they play nicer venues these days and now erect a clear plastic wall around the drum riser in order to protect Miller's ears as much as possible. Oh and they also on occasion feature guest appearances from Moby as well as members of Sonic Youth, Gang of Four, Yo La Tengo and Verses. Most fortunately of all they haven't attempted to move with the times and rename themselves Mission Of Myanmar.

In the past few years there's been a number of car crash style rock documentaries released which depict their subject's as beyond fucked up, most notably The Brian Jonestown Massacre's Anton Newcombe in *Dig!* and all of Metallica in *Some Kind Of Monster*, *Not A Photograph* is not one of those movies. Mission Of Burma are depicted, as they probably are, as a bunch of nice middle-aged dudes who happen to be in a band. There's no stints in rehab, painfully funny incidents where fans get kicked in the head or insane quotes like "You fucking broke my sitar, motherfucker!" although Miller does come close with "We're kinda legendary".

That's not to say that there aren't moments of lightness in the film, it's revealed that some members of Conley's family don't quite get what his music is about, they were "awful" according to his mother Nancy and his tween niece says of his music "sometimes it doesn't exactly make sense." We also learn that Moby covering 'That's When I Reach For My Revolver' bought Conley a septic tank. Then there's the interaction between Miller, Conley and Prescott. There's many exchanges which just shows them as a bunch of old friends riffing off each other and busting each other's balls. There's always the suspicion that when a band reforms it's the lure of the cash which has led the band members to get back together and put aside old grudges (I can think of at least two bands from Burma's neck of the woods I could throw that accusation at) and this doesn't seem to be their motivation for reforming. They can't have expected to have made much money out of reforming, they were too obscure, too niche. As it turned out they're probably selling more records and concert tickets now than before but that's just a bonus. They could only have reformed for the love of the music and that's probably the most heart-warming thing about the film. Whether or not

they're getting, as Prescott said "more than they deserve", they're certainly getting more than they could have expected.

Extras:

The film features excerpts of live performances from the band both from the 80's and from the new millennium. Many of them are included in full in the extras. There's also some footage of the band recording the follow up to *Vs.*, 2002's *ONoffON*.

The 411: As a fan I really enjoyed *Not A Photograph*, it's an insight into what I would consider to be one of the greatest bands of all time. And a very entertaining one at that. At the same time I wonder if I'd enjoy it as much were I not a fan of the band, the film demands the viewer's attention and is only worthwhile when taken as a whole. There's no "Steven Drozt shooting up" type scene to post up on YouTube to grab the passing viewers interest but as a fan I feel that it's a stronger film for not having something so sensationalistic. Those with little or no interest in Mission Of Burma might feel it's just 70 minutes about a band they don't care about. Then again, if they see the live footage and don't become fans then they probably don't care about music.

Final Score: 8.0 [Very Good]

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