

!!! DVD O.D. !!!

The spiritually cleansing and pervasively life-changing experience of watching certain DVDs became even clearer to me once I'd greedily gotten my paws on a copy of the Dead Moon documentary *Unknown Passage*. I'd already seen the 88-minute film back in August 2004, when it was screened just once locally at the Arlight movie theater (next to the Cinerama Dome) in Hollywood, but the DVD version comes with 90 more minutes of similarly wonderful and necessary bonus features. The documentary was already an entertaining look at the little-known wild adventures and contrarian, reclusive lives of one of my favorite bands, but when singer Fred Cole recently announced (in a brief message on the Dead Moon website) the shocking news that the seemingly indestructible group had just broken up, the DVD immediately became an iconic, totemic, talismanic and magical disc that seemingly contained most, if not all, of the secrets of the universe. Along with several of the other DVDs we're sternly examining today, *Unknown Passage* would make for a perfect midnight movie in a musically saner universe. Instead we have to watch these DVDs furtively in the privacy of our homes as if we're living in a totalitarian country (can you imagine that?), hoping our neighbors won't overhear and turn us in. Nonetheless, I suppose we must be grateful that our dream policemen and curmudgeonly cultural overlords haven't yet been able to stop the recent proliferation of DVDs about proudly obscure bands you can't see on TV. It's the golden age of something, there's no doubt about that.

Bad Brains: Live At CBGB 1982

(MVD Visual; www.musicvideodistributors.com)

This DVD contains an hour's worth of unadulterated concert footage from the Bad Brains' three-night stand at CBGB from December 24 to 26, 1982. The sound quality varies somewhat, with some segments having a fuller bass end and others having more clearly defined drums and more sizzling guitars, but the band's hyperspeed attack usually comes through with full, throttling impact. You could say these guys are great musicians; when a fuse blows and the club's lights suddenly go dark halfway through "Riot Squad" (no relation to the song by the Chiefs), the band literally doesn't miss a beat. And when they drop into a reggae lope, they're able to pull it off with all the mysterious spaciness of dub, which isn't easy live, with Darryl Jennifer's boom-tastic bass floating in the soup of Dr. Know's chippy guitar echoes. The DVD catches the Bad Brains when they were still in their hardcore phase, when they not only played faster than, say, Black Flag, but also delivered those blurry flurries of chords and drum fills with exacting consistency and crushing strength. It's a rush to see the charismatic H.R. bobbing and weaving and somehow avoiding the constant rain of beefy stage-divers. It's like he's got this magic sixth sense and awareness of the utter bedlam breaking out. Such madness swirling around him looks so quaint now - like, what are all these geeky jock-punks doing on the stage? What are they achieving with their salmon-like dives upstream into the mosh pit? And yet as comically archaic as these goofs look with their constant commotion of swinging limbs and jerky steps to nowhere, the Bad Brains appear wise and timelessly calm at the center of it all, even as they themselves are writhing and thrashing uncontrollably to the music they're making. The DVD is pretty much nonstop live action and doesn't waste time with backstage preparations or behind the scenes stuff.

BONUSES: There are some band interviews from 1982 and an audio bonus track of "I And I Survive," but that's about it. On the other hand, you won't need many extras because the concert footage will be enough to knock you out.

Not A Photograph: The Mission Of Burma Story

(Element Productions; www.notaphotograph.com, www.mvdvisual.com, www.element.cc)



Second chances in life rarely happen when you need 'em, and when they do, they usually turn out badly. Every band that's ever existed has already reunited, even the dead ones, usually as some hideously splintered mutation or replanted limb from a bigger, fallen tree. We're so used to bands getting back together that we're pleasantly surprised and nostalgically satisfied if they can croak it up at merely 25 percent of their former speed and power. We don't expect much; we the audience just want our chance to shine, to

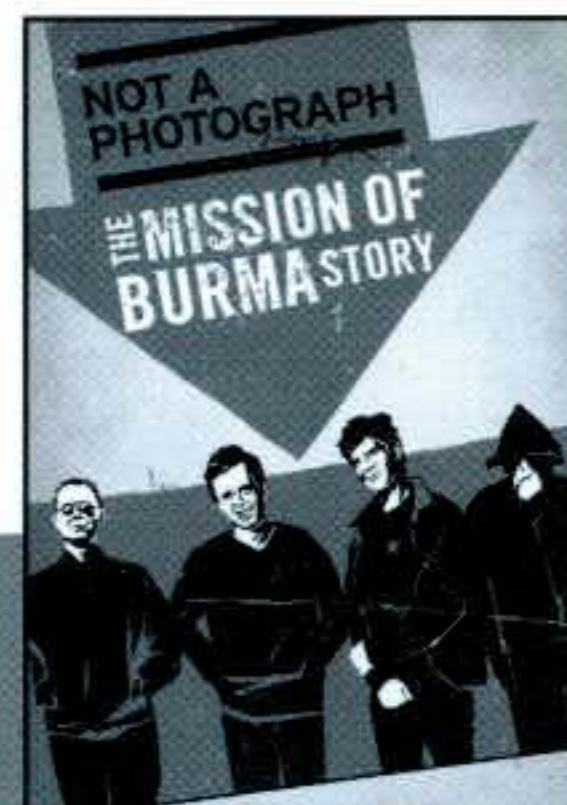
make up for lost time, to stand in the spotlight and scream inappropriately and show that we do love their music... now. It's really about us, not the reunited band. It's a group hug from society, from us late-arriving appreciators of culture. We want to prove that we would have checked out these edgy weirdo bands 20 years ago if someone had told us back then... and now that we do know, we'll give 'em the old arena-rock treatment to make up for lost time. Can't we act like we were there all along? That's why Mission Of Burma's reunion in 2002 was so astonishing. It didn't matter if you'd never seen them in the old days because they were ripping your head off now. And if you had seen them back in 1983, you didn't have to pretend that they weren't just a sliver of their old selves... Not only did M.O.B. sound heavy and compulsive and gigantic, their old songs still felt modern, far ahead of their imitators' times. And unlike most reunited bands, the all-new songs from the 2002 studio CD *ONOFFON* immediately ranked with their early classics. That's when a comeback gets really exciting, when it can still surprise you. Not *A Photograph* focuses on preparations for M.O.B.'s 2002 reunion concerts and does a good job of touching on the highlights of the band's early legend: guitarist Roger Miller and bassist Clint Conley's decision to leave the complex late-'70s Boston new-wave mishmash *Moving Parts* to start the more elementally forceful and art-rocking *Mission Of Burma* with drummer Peter Prescott; how a hidden fourth member, Martin Swope, used to sit offstage at the sound board manipulating live sounds with tape loops, much like Bob Weston does for the band today; the semi-obscure band's impact on bigger acts like Moby and R.E.M, who covered their songs; M.O.B.'s premature breakup in 1983, when tinnitus forced Miller into quieter musical endeavors for a few years; and how Conley didn't play music again or even pick up his bass for much of the next two decades. (He says he wasn't "a casual strummer"; his wife didn't even know he'd been in a band.) Brief testimonials to M.O.B.'s wonderfulness are provided by Jeff "Mono Man" Conolly, Gang of Four's Hugo Burnham, Mike Watt, Moby and even Cheap Trick's Robin Zander. The scenes from the comeback concerts, plus early footage and news segments about the band on Boston television, are exhilarating, but it's also frustrating that the directors didn't use more full-length versions of the live songs. It's fine to hear Moby explain how his life was changed by "That's When I Reach For My Revolver," but it would have had more impact to hear a complete version of this and other songs. That's where the real story of Mission Of Burma really lies.

BONUSES: There are six full versions of songs from the 2002 reunion shows (although, sadly, no live versions of any of the songs from *ONOFFON*), plus two live songs from the early days and one tune by *Moving Parts*. What's missing are potential treats like Mike Watt singing a *Stooges* song with M.O.B. during an encore at their show at Hollywood's El Rey Theatre in 2002. The film shows a few seconds of this, so we know the footage exists, but we don't get to hear Mike Watt sing, which is a missed opportunity. Maybe such gaps will be filled in if Mission of Burma ever releases a full concert DVD, but this documentary is still a pretty definitive overview.

Unknown Passage: The Dead Moon Story

(Magic Umbrella Films; www.magicumbrella.com)

If Dead Moon really has to break up, at least we have this entertaining, pleasingly fast-paced yet nearly comprehensive documentary to hold on to. *Unknown Passage* is actually much more than just the Dead Moon story, as filmmakers Jason Summers and Kate Fix trace singer Fred Cole's long and winding road through a multitude of fairly amazing bands, from his teenage solo incarnation, *Deep Soul Cole* (who was billed as "the white Stevie Wonder"), and participation in Las Vegas and Hollywood '60s garage-rock groups like the *Barracudas*, the *Lords*, the *Weeds* and the relatively famous *Lollipop Shoppe* (best known for their psychedelic nugget "You Must Be a Witch") to fronting the underrated *Led Zep/Jimi Hendrix*-style hard-rock band *Zipper* in the early '70s (who even released an LP on their own label, which was unheard of back then) to virtually kick-starting the entire Pacific Northwest punk and new-wave scene in the late '70s with wife Toody in *The Rats*. (Fred wasn't exaggerating when he once sang, "I was so gone/I was dead-eyed/I've been screamin' at the top of my lungs since 1965.") Even more fascinating is the way this all happened, with Fred dragging Toody and their kids into a stubbornly literal DIY lifestyle after being ripped off by major labels in the '60s. The couple and their infant children tried homesteading in 1970 in the middle of the Yukon wilderness, living in a tent during the Alaskan winter (!) while Fred built a cabin by hand. It was "one big camping trip," son Weeden Cole says of his childhood. Once reality and



!!! BY FALLING JAMES