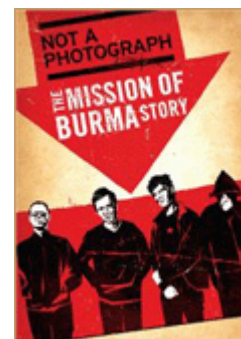




Not a Photograph: The Mission of Burma Story (2006)

Review Rating: Very Good
Label/Studio: MVD Visual
Catalog #: DR-4549
Region: 0 (NTSC)
Released: November 21, 2006



Genre: Documentary
Synopsis: Chronicle of the 2002 reunion tour of famous indie band, Mission of Burma.

Directed by: David Kleiler, Jr., and Jeff Iwanicki
Screenplay by: (none credited)
Music by: Mission of Burma
Produced by: Eran Lobel
Cast: Clint Conley, Roger Miller, Peter Prescott, Moby.

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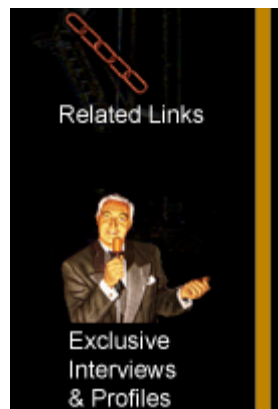
Book Reviews
by Author
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CD/LP Reviews

DVD Film Music

Isolated Scores
on DVD and
Laserdisc



Film Length: 70 mins

Process/Ratio: 1.33:1

Colour

Anamorphic DVD: No

Languages: English Dolby Stereo

Subtitles:

Special Features :

Archival Live performances: "Peking Spring" from the Space, Boston MA, 1979 (3:50) + "This Is Not a Photograph" from the Paradise, Boston MA, 1981 (1:56) / "Max Ernst" Performance extract by the Moving Parts from the Boston Film/Video Foundation, 1979 (3:08) / 6 live performances from Mission of Burma's 2002 Inexplicable Tour (28:52) / In-studio footage from the ONoffON recording session (5:12) / WBZ-CBS local news segment, 1983 (1:10) / Liner notes by Michael Azerrad / Trailer

Comments :

Billed as the most influential band no one's heard of, Mission of Burma's core was a three-man team (drummer Peter Prescott, singer/guitarist Roger Miller, and singer/bassist Clint Conley) that played a loud, hard mix of post-indie punk/new wave music, with a heavy guitar sound, driving bass chords, and aggressive percussion that made it hard to give the band an easy stylistic label.

Influenced by groups such as the Ramones and the Moving Parts, Mission sought to go beyond their own technical limitations and reconstruct idiomatic conventions that had your ear recognizing stylistic traits from more mainstream music, but confound you, with Dadaist vocal patterns, anguished youth lyrics, or new wave guitar phrasing popping up alongside influences from Bela Bartok.

From 1979-1983, the band played hard in clubs, produced a few singles and EPs, and released a studio album called **Vs.** before they folded in 1983, just as critics and fellow musicians felt they were ready for massive, international stardom. Archived in complete form on the DVD is an interview the Boston-based band gave a local reporter, and one can see a mix of relief and sadness across the band's faces as they knew something exhaustive and exciting had come to an end.

Feeling they had creatively peaked, the decision to fold was also affected by the continued hearing loss guitarist Miller was experiencing, and a lifestyle that may have been too hard to push on for another four years. The band may have realized that, collectively, they'd also reached the apex of their experimentation, and what lay ahead was either repetition, or stagnation - although critics and fans certainly felt a lot more could have been accomplished, had the band lasted just a bit longer.

What's unusual about Mission is how they never reassembled and produced another album for almost two decades. The maturity that develops within an artist was never re-applied to a reconfigured band, and the careers of the three primary musicians went on vastly different paths: drummer Prescott felt he never found the same level of satisfaction and creative energy with other same-aged musicians; Miller explored other music venues, including membership with the prolific silent film composing group, the [Alloy Orchestra](#); while bassist Conley went into TV news production as a producer, and never once picked up a guitar, until 2002.

Money was flaunted at the former bandmates every so often by interested promoters, but they seemed content not to relive or repeat their music for a graying fan base, except respect for the band increased over the years, ultimately culminating in a book, and an interested music producer who pitched the right formula for a reunion tour. Mostly for the fun of it, and perhaps out of curiosity - just to see why people were still fussing over their tiny output - the band reunited without the bickering, in-fighting, lawsuits, or petty differences of other veteran bands, and toured for a month across the U.S., and recorded a new

album, **ONoffOn**. (A small extract from the album's recording session is archived in the DVD's extras gallery.)

That's pretty much where David Kleiler, Jr., and Jeff Iwanicki's documentary begins, and it's a lovingly assembled tribute that captures the nervousness, energy, and euphoria of the fans, the musicians, and their families. Fans will be pleased with the anecdotes, new interviews, and archival news and new concerts clips included in the doc and in longer form in a separate DVD gallery, but those totally unfamiliar with the band might still wonder what all the fuss is about.

A few music critics (and Mission band members, as well) make note of how the band's style - aggressively blending contradictory elements - alienated mainstream listeners, but what's missing is a detailed analysis of exactly what the band was doing that's since branded them as influential; not just for novitiates, but also for the fans, so they can understand what concepts made them gravitate towards the band's music.

Guitarist Miller actually details some of the ideas he tried to apply in a few songs, particularly "New Disco," but what's lacking is a greater breakdown of what the band practiced, applied, and achieved, and how those concepts influenced specific aspects of popular music, and its related idioms and sub-genres.

An excellent example are the diverse examinations - all accessible to non-musicians - that are so beautifully assembled in MVD's band portraits in the **Under Review** series; missing from **Not a Photograph** are light musicological details that reveal the Mission men as clever, idiosyncratic craftsmen who broke a lot of rules when everyone was playing it safe, and mainstream America was hooked on REO Speedwagon. Michael Azerrad's DVD liner notes fill in some gaps, but it's those meatier specifics that are missing from the doc's otherwise engaging narrative.

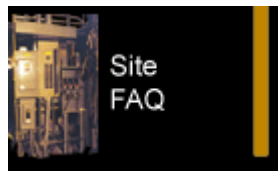
Not a Photograph is still a well-constructed doc, and the filmmakers approach isn't larded with crazy editing or sexy CGI effects, and there's some clever sound transitions that dramatically punctuate past archival performances, and the band's current sound (although technically, as the musicians explain, the band is still no longer extant). Also effective are seamless condensations of performance sets from the reunion tour, and perfect edits within a song as the directors cut to footage from another performance in a different city.

Mission of Burma benefited from performing at a time when video cameras were being used to document musical performances, and the archived sessions on the DVD are rare glimpses of a band playing raw in the local clubs, and doing the rounds that ultimately formulated its style and identity.

A good document that rescues pioneers from the margins of music history.

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