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Home ⊖ **now playing (film)** ⊖ Not a Photograph: The Mission of Burma Story

Not a Photograph: The Mission of Burma Story

Written by **Jeremy Goldmeier**



Whether pulled from the archives or just a few years ago, the Burma performances are uniformly outstanding, revealing the true foundation of their legend: intense, unpredictable live shows.

(MVD Entertainment Group)



As undisputed patron saints of arty, left-of-center rock 'n' roll, it was only a matter of time before Mission of Burma received an official documentary canonization. It's not all that hard to find a graying music junkie who will testify to this band's boundless influence; the filmmakers could have easily rounded up all of their interviewees out of any Boston record shop. Then there are the unique elements of the ballad of Burma: caustic post-punk trio subverts everything we thought we knew about rock music, disintegrates into obscurity, but then reemerges nearly two decades later to deafening fanfare—with new material that *doesn't* suck. It's a career trajectory that the band members themselves—guitarist Roger Miller, bassist Clint Conley, and drummer Peter Prescott—term "inexplicable." So it becomes incumbent on *Not a Photograph* co-directors David Kleiler Jr. and Jeff Iwanicki to not just relate the

nuts and bolts of MoB's "on/off/on" progression, but to unveil some of the "hows" and "whys" behind the group. How does a band come back this fiery and potent after such a ridiculously long hiatus, during which the scene they helped to construct has subsequently peaked and collapsed? With their legacy already firmly established, why pick up the instruments again?

Turns out, these aren't easy questions to answer. At the peak of their powers, Burma excelled at being impenetrably mysterious. They wrote songs about Dadaist painters and the corruption of Christianity, and masked some of their best hooks with vast stretches of dissonance and awkward rhythmic shifts. So it comes as no surprise that the band often seems to consciously avoid getting too vivid about the music itself or the motivations behind returning to the game they once left behind. Miller probably drops the strongest hint: "It wasn't like nostalgia, because I'm not really a nostalgic person. I don't give a shit what we did in '79 or '83. I'm interested in what we're doing now."

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Perhaps, despite all of the lingering questions fans might have regarding the horrible truth about Burma, it's best to leave it at that.

The behind-the-scenes nature of this film—focusing especially on the band's immediate post-reunion period in 2002 and 2003—illustrates that for all their impressive mythology and dense songwriting, the boys of Burma are human after all. They pick up their old camaraderie with a stunning ease as they rehearse for their comeback shows, and have a ball poking fun at their own abilities and legacy. At one point they even go so far as to jokingly call the original recording of "Max Ernst" a "contrived piece of shit." Perhaps that's what has made MoB's return so overwhelmingly successful—it's not a solemn mission for them, but an exhilarating second shot at their career.

Perhaps the most revealing segments concern Conley and his inter-Burma activities. Apparently, he dropped music cold turkey after the group disbanded, and focused on a broadcast news career while raising a typical suburban family. It's a pretty shocking fate for a guy who once so defiantly exclaimed, "I'm not not not...your academy!" But it's captivating material—far more so than hearing Mike Watt or...uh...Moby discuss what Burma "meant" to alternative music. It would have been nice to learn more about the backgrounds of the tinnitus-stricken Miller or Prescott—who emerges as the most fascinating group member in his candid, casually jaded interviews. Unfortunately, original fourth Burma Martin Swope also chooses to remain shrouded in secrecy—no reunion appearances, no interviews. It's a damn shame the filmmakers couldn't coax him out of his cave.

But, once all of the perfunctory praise and history-tracking finishes, we're left with the music. And whether pulled from the archives or just a few years ago, the Burma performances are uniformly outstanding, revealing the true foundation of their legend: intense, unpredictable live shows. For the Burma diehard on your gift list, it's a wonderful accessory to have, even if it won't necessarily reveal anything new about the group to them. Sometimes, all it takes is a little bit of photographic evidence to validate what a fan already believes...even if this DVD isn't, technically speaking, a photograph. | **Jeremy Goldmeier**

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