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Mission of Burma

Not a Photograph [DVD]

(MVD Visual)

US release date: 21 November 2006

by **Jeremy Estes**

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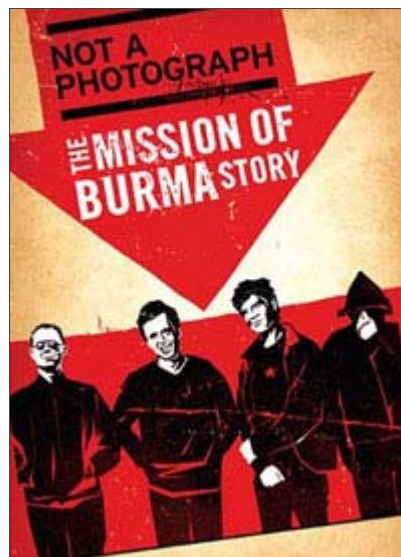
Rock 'n' roll reunions aren't typically worth the effort. They're generally nostalgic, often just sad excuses for musicians past their prime to earn a little supplemental income while giving their aging fans a chance to wear denim jackets and get drunk. In recent years, these reunions have been about self importance (think the Doors of the 21st Century) or simply fail to capture the magic of the glory days (as in the case of the Who's mopey returns).

Still, there are exceptions to the rule, as at least two recent reunions have proved. The Pixies, arguably one of the most influential bands since the Velvet Underground, hit the road again in 2004 to fans' rejoicing and rave reviews; that same year also saw the release of *OnoffOn*, the first Mission of Burma album in two decades, and only the second full length issued by the band.

Not a Photograph details Mission of Burma's resurrection, beginning with reunion shows in 2002 and culminating with *OnoffOn's* release, through a series of interviews and archival footage and film of those triumphant shows that brought the band out of hibernation after 20 years. Fans including Moby, Mike Watt and even Cheap Trick's Robin Zander weigh in with their thoughts on Mission of Burma's impact during their brief career and marvel at the band's seamless transition from early '80s post punk pioneers to 21st century living legends. The film is a worthy, if flawed, look at a band that, despite its limited output, created a lasting legacy of incredible music.

Formed in 1979 in Boston from the remnants of the Moving Parts, Mission of Burma created, in the words of Moving Parts member Mark Lindgren, "jagged, angular anti-pop, in pop way" over the course of one album, an EP and two singles. Though their loud, abrasive brand of music meant they were never destined for fame and fortune on par with '80s contemporaries like Foreigner or REO Speedwagon, MOB were still successful, along with bands like Sonic Youth and the Minutemen, in the burgeoning indie rock scene of the day. In 1983, while still at the peak of the musical prowess, the band—guitarist Roger Miller, bassist Clint Conley, drummer Peter Prescott and tape loop wizard Martin Swope (who declined the invitation to reunite)—broke up. Rock clichés of debauchery on the road and infighting weren't to blame, however—Miller's hearing was suffering after being pummeled for years by loud music. To protect his health, the band had to end.

The film dispenses with those early days in a hurry, covering them because they're necessary but avoiding any in-depth analysis or details of the band's early days. Instead, the focus shifts quickly to the present day, and the band members' excitement over getting back together. There are brief mentions of Miller's solo work, Prescott's band the Volcano Suns, and Conley's total abandonment of music (he didn't even own a guitar "to strum on", he says). Though the break up was anything but acrimonious, co-directors David Kleiler, Jr. and Jeff Iwanicki fail to touch on relations between the band members after the band's demise. Underlining this lack of



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information is the absence of Martin Swope, a man who was somewhat shrouded in mystery even during Mission of Burma's early days. Miller says Swope declined the invitation to play in an email, but that's the only information the audience is given.

The disc's bonus features expand on footage included in the film: a 1978 Moving Parts performance of Mission of Burma's "Max Ernst" and performances from 1979 and '80. Also included is a Boston local news segment on the band; an interesting, if short, nugget that puts Mission of Burma's break up in its original context. These clips aren't high quality in terms of visual or audio fidelity, but they're not unwatchable. Better is the footage from the 2002 reunion. The image and sound quality is pristine, and the performances amazing.

Not a Photograph is not an in-depth, warts and all documentary, but that hardly seems to be its makers' intention. Instead, it's a celebration of an often overlooked band that reappeared out of nowhere and sounding like the last 20 years never happened. The film is, at best, a primer for those who aren't yet but desperately need to be familiar with Mission of Burma. What is really important, of course, is the band's incredible music, and the film certainly succeeds in always putting it front and center.



Mission of Burma *Not A Photograph*

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