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THE MACC LADS: THREE BEARS - BEST OF 1982-1988 (DVD)

by Graham Rae

(2006-02-14)

2005, Un-rated, 80 minutes, Music Video Distributors



★★★★★

"BEER, BEER, WE WANT MORE BEER! ALL THE LADS ARE CHEERIN', GET THE FUCKIN' BEER IN!"

It's ironic, but would-be censors sometimes end up doing more good than harm, much to their annoyance and our delight. The now-defunkt punk beat-em-up beat combo we are going to discuss here are a prime example of what I'm talking about. And who were this band? You sure you really want to know? Well okay, just don't say I didn't warn you...

Flashback to 1985. I am 15 years old. I read in a shitty Scottish tabloid called the Daily Record about a band called The Macc Lads who have just brought out an album, 'Beer And Sex And Chips And Gravy.' They are in the paper because they had made the platter with the help of a government grant, and when the grant granter heard the resulting record they had withdrawn the band's funding in disgust. And why would they do such a thing? Well, the album's title, which accurately sums up the subject matter of the songs on it (indeed, it pretty much sums up the content of EVERY Macc Lads song over the coming years) will give you a clue.

The resulting furore over the album gives the band much more publicity than they would have normally had, and helps many more people (like me) hear about them than probably ever would have before. Thank you would-be censors. You do a good free PR job. You'll never learn, morons. The more you render something forbidden, the more people will want it, especially if they're in their mid-teens and bored. I get the album on a trip to Edinburgh (ah, the joys of having a 50-mile round trip to get decent records or see a half-decent band, sometimes missing the last train home and having to wait six hours in the freezing cold – them were the nights and daze!) and bring it back to infest and infect Falkirk with.

The songs on 'BASACAG' are full of no-frills working class English drinking punk songs, complete with irreverence, irrelevance, ridiculous amounts of swearing (every second word being either 'fuck', 'cunt', 'wank' or 'shit') and references to shagging and fighting and puking. Singer/ bass player Muttley McLadd has a real way with words and his tabloid journalism-like wordwork reveals some flashes of real satiric hilarity and brilliance in amongst all the so-over-the-top-it-becomes-inoffensive stupidity. I mean,



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who can resist lines like: "She said I was good looking and I looked a bit like George Michael/but she didn't want a fucking, she were on her menstrual cycle" or "You are what you drink/and I'm a bitter man" (bitter being a horrible English beer; the Lads will extol the virtues of one particular brand of this fizzy pish, Boddington's, at every opportunity) or "Vauxhall Viva's covered in rust/but you can't fuck a bird on a 29 bus"?

By now, given these examples, you can pretty much gauge the maturity and artistry level on display here. And you can forget about being PC; these guys were spitting and shitting songs long before there even WAS such a fascistic concept. There is genuine intelligence and stoic humor during the songs, and I guess coming from a small-minded, small redneck northern English town like Macclesfield (where the band drew their name from) in Cheshire means that you have to adopt a fundamental sense of humor and fatalism about things or you will go mental. And McLadd is no dummy, despite what his lyrics and song-worldview would have you believe: "He's a part-time philosopher, that cunt," as one Macc Lads fan I used to know in my old Scottish home town of Falkirk put it. Foolosopher might be more like it, but you catch my drift.

Anyway.

I join the band's fanclub when I am all of 17 years old and I get my membership entry in an insert in a live album ('The Macc Lads: Live at Leeds (The Who?') when it comes out in (I seem to recall) 1988. A photo of me clutching a can of Tennent's Special (a terrible Scottish brew – but shit, I was young, what can I say?) is printed on the inside along with the membership forms of several others, but none of us are as cool as the 11-year-old kid in there going on about drinking and shagging and fighting.

It's funny. I follow the band for a few years, but lose track of them the way you do with bands sometimes (and you're always surprised to hear that they're still going years later); they come to symbolize a particular moment in your own youth. As I get older I still like the band, and think they put out some amazing songs, but am more than slightly suspicious of how misogynist Muttley (real name Tristram, which is nowhere near as macho as naming yourself after a cartoon dog, it must be said) does stuff like quote Oscar Wilde yet writes ridiculous homophobic lyrics and appears to be living proof of what they say about the most rampant homophobes (gay writer friend of mine, Mark Simpson, called the lyrics 'camp' when I introduced him to them for a laugh, and I would have to say I agree) and their secret fear of the homo within.

But it hardly matters. I see them live a few times in Edinburgh (always with a skinhead support band called A Fistful of Arseholes – I just remembered that just now) over the years, and the gigs are great: drunk, violent affairs with people spitting and strippers stripping onstage and beer bottles flying. I see Muttley take a Grolsch bottle to the forehead once and stumble and stagger back dazed and confused, then continue singing "WE ARE THE LADS FROM MACC!" as blood courses down his face; nobody throws anything after that. And then I hear that the Mad Macs have split up. Last time I saw Muttley was in 1997 in Manchester, when I was driving a band called Arab Strap on tour and he walked past the venue purely by chance.

But evidence still exists, on CD and DVD, of the brilliance of the band's songs. If you go to www.maccclads.co.uk you can spend many hours checking out their lyrics and wondering what the hell all their references to English working class culture and life mean before buying their records and being clueless as to what they are going on about. And you can also get this excellent (D)VD, which captures the Lads in their scumbag prime. Offensive, obnoxious, drunk, lewd, crude, rude, stupid, sexist...it's all here.

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And less. I actually used to own the two separate videotapes (remember them?) in the late 1980s that comprise this compilation presentation. I have a loan of them to somebody and never got them back, and always kinda regretted it cos they were great. Well, now I can lounge in my lounge in a Chicago suburb and annoy the neighbors with sleazy sonic shit from the 1980s. It's a weight off my mind, let me tell you.

So after me waffling interminably on about the good old bad old daze, what exactly can you expect from this DVD, I hear you ask (all three of you who are either still reading or who are interested in genuine genius old school English punk, that is)? Easy. You get 80 minutes of live performances and promo videos for some of the band's songs from 1982-1988. If you want to know what they sound like, well, let's just say that they obviously learned many a punk lesson from The Ramones (often using their riffs and actually bastardizing 'Blitzkrieg Bop' into a superb song called 'Eh Up! Let's Sup!') (Think of the Ramones' "HEY HO! LET'S GO!" only with reference to drinking, ie 'supping' and you have the phrase that many a Macc Lads gig would start off with the crowd chanting before the band came on) and The Rezillos. This is, of course, no bad thing, because both bands are absolutely excellent. They could steal from far worse; that goes without saying. Somewhat more strange is when the Lads fuck around with songs like 'Nutbush City Limits' (which becomes 'Knutsford Scabby Women,' a subtle, sensitive ode to the females of an English town) or the Monkees theme song or 'Blockbuster' by The Sweet and stick their own coarse lyrics over them for sicko comic effect.

Ultimately, The Macc Lads are an interesting anomaly, a historical music curio. They released their own records and said what they wanted to on then, never selling out because they didn't have anything that more than a few thousand (if that) hardcore fans would have wanted to buy. Once banned in nearly every music venue in the United Kingdom (they never played the States, as far as I know), they played their gigs in 1985 from the back of a van. They were characters, jailbirds and drunks and cretins hopping around to their own internal arrhythmic drumbeat, and they just didn't give a fuck. They set out to offend any-and-everybody they could from their Macclesfield shop called Hectic House, and succeeded fairly well. If you would like an American reference point for them, think The Dwarves circa 'Blood Guts & Pussy'. The fact that Blag Dahlia told me he was a long-term fan of the band when I mentioned them to him a while back came as no real surprise to me, because he and Muttley have certain lyrical stylistic similarities. All I can say is if you're a fan of great raw, crude, drunken, hateful, bitter, wickedly funny small-town punk (and who isn't, except the teenyboppers being sold as 'punk' the worthless mainstream shite despoiling MTV these daze) you could so far worse than check out this quality mayhem DVD. The sound is really good, and the base visceral handheld video immediacy of seeing the spunkpunk band insult the crowd and dodge endless volleys of beercans and spit as skanky women strip really captures quite well what they were like live.

Just be thankful you weren't there.

Macc Lads, RIP. You will not be forgotten. Unfortunately.

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