



Rock Docs Are Go!

As CDs wither, the low-budget rockumentary is born again

BY JOHNNY ANGEL

The digital age has become a major curse to the major labels: Album sales fell 4 percent last year, 4.6 percent in 2006. But for rock-&-rolling indie entrepreneurs with access to editing gear, digital cameras and life-rights, a brand-new art form has descended upon the industry's carcass — the cult-band rockumentary.

Low-budget rock-&-roll films have been popular since *Blackboard Jungle* — think *Cocksucker Blues* or *A Hard Day's Night* in the classic-rock era or, more recently, the *Decline of Western Civilization* series or Social Distortion's *Another State of Mind*. But with the proliferation of digital gadgetry, the quantity of rock docs has shot through the proverbial roof. It seems that any band that was ever spoken of with any reverence — and has footage documenting its golden era — is now represented. From the 13th Floor Elevators' bipolar front man Roky Erickson, to the '60s weirdos the Monks, to the comical Upper Crust, as well as better known but not-quite-mainstream acts like the New York Dolls or MC5, everyone is getting the kind of treatment once reserved for music aristocracy and *Behind the Music* icons.

And like that comico-tragic VH1 series, some of these stories are poignant, some ridiculous and some utterly inexplicable. That virtually none of the acts in this new crop of films ever sold many records only makes the genre more fascinating: Even if you've never heard of the artist at hand, often the subjects' stories, and the filmmaker's narrative skill, carry the movie.

Tommy White, the 48-year-old guitarist from Boston's UnNatural Axe, has spent the better part of the past eight years assembling his group's story, *You'll Pay for This* (which will be commercially available in 2007 through Shiny Object Digital Video). The quintessential cult act — one of their songs was covered by Thurston Moore and Richard Hell's side band, Dim Stars — UnNatural Axe supported the Police and Squeeze on tour in the '70s. One might assume their story would be too obscure to attract much of an audience, but White (himself one of the original kids from the '70s TV classic *Zoom*) was encouraged after becoming Internet-savvy in the '90s.

"I'd Google our name and see that we were everywhere; I could make something to sell," he explains over the phone from his home in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. "I had to **108**

<107 ROCK DOCS ARE GO!

finish what I had begun. I had all of these music videos we'd done for our songs — years before music television — and I didn't want to just put 12 of them in order on a disc. I wanted narration and film from other projects interwoven, to tell the Axe's story."

"Instinctively, from seeing all of these band bootlegs of other garage and punk bands, I knew there was something there."

As White says, digital film technology has finally made it feasible to produce the kind of movie he's always wanted to make. "If you have a story and a good plot line and fascinating players, you can do it," he says. "And besides that, this stuff can't be replicated. From the first wave of punk, unless they invent a time machine, it's the only way to see it." White says he's spent about \$10,000 on the film thus far, and actually expects to recoup his investment.

He should. *You'll Pay for This* is a hoot and a half. (Full disclosure: The author appears as a 22-year-old misogynist thug in footage culled from *The Creeper*, an unfinished film from '79.) Interspersed with Axe onstage madness — including performance of their punk tour de force "They Saved Hitler's Brains" — are prototypical, cheap rock videos. The video for "Somebody Told Me," a gruesome parody of a slasher flick, has bassist Frank Dehler hacking his paramour to pieces. Best of all are the interviews with the group's droll and dry front man, Richie Parsons: His offhand sincerity and enigmatic worldview are so removed from the typically shallow bravado of a rock musician, he comes across as a sort of red-haired, round-faced Rain Man. In fact, when the film played in L.A. last June at the Don't Knock the Rock fest, MC Michael Des Barres peppered White incessantly about the strange and "savantlike" workings of Parsons' mind.

"It's all about the people and their stories," says White — which, in a nutshell, is what makes his rockumentary work. It's also true of the rest of the genre. In a peculiar inversion, the more famous the subjects, the crappier the film tends to be. Witness Metallica's *Some Kind of Monster* (2004), the story of the band's recording of *St. Anger*,

and one of the biggest-selling rockumentaries in any era. Because the band members' personas are so deeply ingrained in the public's consciousness, and because those personas are closely based on reality (James Hetfield as tortured songwriter; Lars Ulrich as scheming businessman; Kirk Hammett as peace-maker), the film isn't revelatory except to those who might view the band as a macho monolith. More importantly, Metallica's story lacks the main element that makes these smaller films so endearing: Metallica could scarcely be called underdogs, and the pathos of their struggle is tempered by the endless shots of them in their expensive cars and homes, playing with costly toys.

Likewise, size doesn't necessarily matter when it comes to the popularity of concert films. Says Michael DeMonte, Music Video Distributors' sales VP, "We've done concert DVDs and the like for Public Enemy and for Converge/AFI, Agnostic Front, acts that have sizable fan bases, and they just don't sell." DeMonte says that the cult acts that have remained just outside the mainstream have done the best so far: The Pixies' terrific *loud-QUIETloud* has already sold 25,000 copies. "Their touring really reawakened people to them," he says.

But the music DVD isn't yet in the ballpark of the CD, no matter how downloading and iPods may have damaged that vehicle. "DVD sales are at best 10 to 20 percent of CD sales," says DeMonte. "After all, you can't drive and watch them. But it really is the only way to see these groups. YouTube's quality is bad, and because some of these acts have such a powerful allure, the compelling rockumentary is the best place to get the whole story in one place." □



Rockumentary recommendations

THE CLASSICS: *DOA*; *Gimme Shelter*; *The Decline of Western Civilization Pts. I & II*; *The Gift*; 1991: *The Year Punk Broke*

THE NEW & GREAT: *New York Doll* (the story of Dolls bassist Arthur Kane, and the best rock movie ever made); *End of the Century: The Story of The Ramones*; *MC5: A True Testimonial*; *Digi!* (Brian Jonestown Massacre vs. The Dandy Warhols).

Fascinating subjects, hilarious interplay, superb pacing.

WORTH YOUR TIME & MONEY: *Not a Photograph: The Mission of Burma Story*; *loudQUIETloud: A Film About The Pixies*. First-rate concert footage, both with the heroic "better late than never" resurrection angle. Too offhand in some ways, though, and the Pixies and Burma carry a bizarre stigma: They seem too well adjusted to be interesting!

NOT RECOMMENDED: *American Hardcore*; *Afro-Punk*; *Born to Lose* (a Johnny Thunders film by Lech Kowalski); *Ghost on the Highway: A Portrait of Jeffrey Lee Pierce and the Gun Club*. Terrific subjects, but strangely impersonal and, in the case of the latter, a lack of Gun Club music and Jeffrey Lee himself.

NOT A ROCKUMENTARY: *Awesome! I Fuckin' Shot That!* Despite the Warholian concept — handing video cameras to 50 fans at a Beastie Boys show — this is still a good, old-fashioned concert film masterfully edited and eerily reminiscent of another concert film shot at Madison Square Garden 30 years earlier: Led Zeppelin's *The Song Remains the Same*. For a great "rap-umentary," stick with the early-'80s tour de Bronx, *Wild Style*.