

VERITAS VAMPIRUS

LEFT OF THE "LEFT"

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PETER, PAUL, & MARY – *50 Years with Peter, Paul, and Mary* (2016 | MVD) (DVD)

Crammed to the joists with rare, archival, and very absorbing footage from diverse sources, *50 Years with Peter, Paul, and Mary* is going to, for Boomers, leave many a parlor across America in longing, reminiscences, and most likely a tear or two; and for later generations: a picture of the 60s much different from the trash MTV was prone to present in its boneheaded heyday, now thankfully resting with mammoths and tyrannosaurs.

50 Years was put together by 4-time Emmy winner Jim Brown (*Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*, etc.) and is a bit different from one of the many very cool biographical narratives now thankfully bounding all over the landscape so much as it's a bountiful cornucopia of music with explanatory interleaves. The complete performances are marvelous and mostly in crystal clear, indeed breath-taking, black & white. I don't know if Brown did a Criterion clean-up on them – I have to suspect he did, as some should be much more aged than is the case - but, man what clarity! They alone are worth the price of admission.

Something not often noted, though, and that makes its way early in the narrative here is the fact that Paul Stookey was a well-received Village comedian as well as a folkie, but when he joined with Peter Yarrow and Mary Travers, success was lightning-swift, taking the musicians and the label by surprise and the music world by storm and so the joker persona went by the wayside. The very first LP, released in 1962, went straight to #1 in the charts, and the very next year, 1963, saw them with three LPs simultaneously in the Top 10: their debut (*Peter, Paul, and Mary*) and *Moving* along with *In the Wind*.

The trio was a group representing the protestative and rebellious spirit of the times, thus it's a tad sardonic to see a very rousing version of "If I Had my Way" performed with Peter and Paul in suits, ties, and *MadMen* shoes (I immediately thought of Zappa's "Brown Shoes Don't Make It") flanking Mary in her Evening-at-Sardi's uppa crust dress. Ah well, when the forces of Leftism collide with capitalism writ large, we know who wins, but, in the end, the group was able to subvert all that, even a member of Nixon's enemy lists, a prominent set of figures in the popular movement to end the war, racial discrimination, and other social ills, so much in the forefront so that MKL Jr. introduced them at a rally.

The film then rapidly turns to artistic crises – constant touring, LP after LP to make, family lives, etc. – and the group's first 7-year hiatus leading to a reshuffling of priorities and then a series of reunions charted in the film's later performance footage, the musicians slowly aging along with their audiences. By this time, Boomers were now a good deal more bourgeoisie but still not terribly happy with growing social inequalities. PP&M remained an artistic center in all that, influential, always for change, and even a 25-year anniversary saw them steadfast in their advocacies. That section gets a tad maudlin and sweetsy...but that was PP&M all over as time wore on, and they drew large enthusiastic audiences as easily as in the heyday.

At this stage, though, it's evident the largest talent in the trio from start to finish was Noel Paul Stookey, who, purely in terms of interplay, reminds me of Michael Nesmith and his anchor relationship in the Monkees. Regardless, this document is long overdue, and the b&w performances are just stellar. Four bonus cuts from the later years put sugar on the cake, and those who dug the folkie scene and this group's very large presence in it are going to be starry-eyed when the 78 minutes draw to a close.