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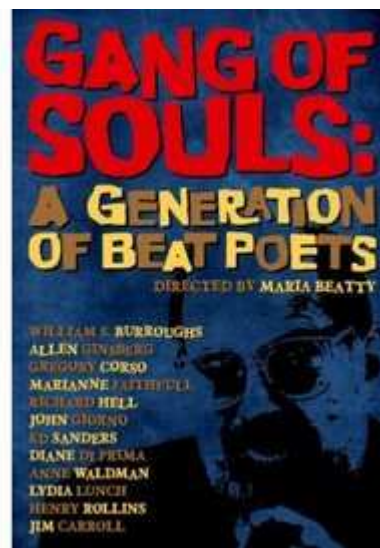
Gang of Souls: A Generation of Beat Poets (1989/MVD DVD)

Picture: C- Sound: D
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Gang of Souls is the documentary that PBS forgot, and for good reason. Made in 1989, yet for some reason not released until now, the film consists entirely of interwoven interviews with (then) surviving beat generation greats as William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Gregory Corso among others. There are also interviews with more current poets and artists who were influenced by the beats and share their creative spirit. So far so good. The idea is great, the content of the interviews is great, and the message is as inspiring as anyone would expect from a collection of some of the greatest American literary minds. But that's why it is such a crying shame that this documentary is so poorly executed.

There are two equally successful routes that this film could have taken in order to pay tribute to these great artists. The first would be to strive to have the documentary disappear around the interviews so that the viewer's attention is solely on the artists' words; to make the viewer listen and engage in the interview and the ideas being expressed because there is nothing else to distract from them. The other route would be to pay tribute to the artists by creating an artistic film that compliments and reinforces the beats' message and follows in their tradition of creativity. But **Gang of Souls** has managed to find that doomed spot between the two routes where each implodes on the other and keeps either from being successful.

The bread and butter of shooting interviews are set and lighting, yet all of the interviews in **Gang of Souls** are shot in front of a white backdrop with the most bland, uninteresting lighting imaginable. And by itself this would be okay; it would put the emphasis on the poets' words, which is where it belongs. But even then there are better, more visually interesting ways to achieve the same goal. And there is some creative filmmaking attempted via the editing which a few times will repeat, chop up sentences, or have one poet finish what another was saying, and there is even one point where the editor either decided to get really creative, had a seizure on the



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editing equipment, or wanted the viewer to have a seizure. But even this could have worked, it could have been creative, it could have been expressive, but it needed to build towards something. As it is, the unusual editing pops up maybe three or four times in the hour-long documentary and lasts maybe two minutes each time. It is just not enough to correlate to anything or build towards anything or amount to anything more than a feeble attempt in post-production to inject some life in a creatively failed project. Plus bad camerawork with poor framing, jerky movements, and the occasional loss of focus doesn't help either.

Having been shot on video nearly twenty years ago, the picture quality is understandably not up to standards, but even so varies from interview to interview. Marianne Faithful looks as though she was shot with an extremely unnecessary gauze effect while we can see every pore on Gregory Corso's unwashed face in 1.33:1 full screen. The sound quality is no better. It is muffled at times, probably due to the original microphone recording, and cutting between interviews reveals an inconsistent room tone that could have easily been covered up in post-production. Yet for some reason on the DVD the need was apparently felt to present the sound in Dolby Digital 5.1 Surround.

Yet despite all of this, the bonus features actually manage to be even worse than the feature. Each interviewee has his or her own updated mini-biography featurette which, in contrast to the feature, are each loaded down with far too many canned effects and a name label at the bottom that looks as though it were stolen from a Bar Mitzvah party. And to top it all off, each featurette, thankfully only about two minutes long, sounds as if it is being narrated by the computer voice that reads alert messages on a 90s Macintosh.

The decently designed cover and matching menus show what this film could have been. But unfortunately, the documentary itself shows only that no matter how good the original idea and the source material, a bad filmmaker will still make a bad film.

- Matthew Carrick

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