

PLAYBACK stf

JULY 2006

The Smiths Under Review: An Independent Critical Analysis (Sexy Intellectual)

You never know what you're going to get with documentaries produced independently of the artist. In the case of *The Smiths Under Review*, although none of the actual Smiths participated (unless you could be the "fifth" Smiths member, Craig Gannon—and, really, who ever does?), the result is still an honest and relatively decent look at an intriguing and legendary band. Some big names are interviewed, including Factory Records' Tony Wilson, producer Stephen Street, journalist Jake Kennedy, and Smiths roadie/associate Grant Showbiz, among others.

Through these interviews, bits of video, and still shots, the band's history is retold, complete with dates, singles/albums charting, and public/industry opinion. There are some great memories, including Wilson recalling his first meeting with Morrissey: "There was no way on god's green earth this strange, strange kid was going to be a pop star. I almost laughed in his face." As for why he failed to sign them to Factory when he had the chance, Wilson explains the label was "going through a cold period. I didn't want to sacrifice Stephen at the altar."

Explains journalist/author Nigel Wilson, with the Smiths' first single, "Hand in Glove," the band reestablished four-piece guitar rock. Of second single, "This Charming Man," Wilson enthuses, "You expect great bands to write their hit song on their second album. To have come up with 'This Charming Man' that early in their career was genius."

Morrissey's sexual persuasion is touched on, too, though not in an is-he-or-isn't-he forum. Rather, as one writer explains, "He really did seem to reinvent gender. He became his own special creation."

Wilson describes "How Soon Is Now?" as the first great Smiths masterpiece. "It's Morrissey at his best and bleakest," he explains, enthusing that the song represented the "first great coming together of Morrissey and Marr." Over time, of course, that chemistry is tested, weakened, and ultimately destroyed, but not before hitting its collaborative peak on *The Queen Is Dead*.

All the chart hits and television show appearances are touched on, as is the fact that the Smiths were relatively opposed to making videos (a factor which would go on to hurt their U.S. popularity...or lack thereof. As Street explains, "All the British bands making it in the States were on MTV"). As such, the DVD pans across an awful lot of stills and song titles where actual footage would have been much more effective. There are snippets, of course, from such British mainstays as *Top of the Pops*, which are always fun—the music may be as timeless as ever, but the band's look is certainly dated.

All the history's there, albeit without the input of the four whose memories really matter. Still, it holds up reasonably well, until one painful scene in which journalist John Robb offers explanations—unsubstantiated speculation, all of it—for Morrissey's attraction to ruffians, as evidenced by his lyrics. It's an interesting idea, to be sure, but ultimately, presented as utterly pointless speculation.

Of the band's demise, which ultimately preceded its final release, *Strangeways Here We Come*, Wilson says, "I don't think it was inevitable artistically; I think it was inevitable personally. The word in Manchester was that Angie [Marr's wife] had just had fucking enough." In hindsight, the critics are quick to point out the "signs" on *Strangeways* that hinted that the band had run its course, including Morrissey's whining about the record industry and his increased presence on the album. "It's obvious they are pulling in different directions," one says. "It didn't sound like the last Smiths album; it sounded like the first Morrissey album," says another. Still, without fanfare, the band was suddenly no more, its brief history relegated to musical legendry.

DVD extras are slim, but include extensive bios of the participants, as well as the crew discussing Morrissey and Marr's respective post-Smiths careers (Street: "Since going off and doing his own thing, Johnny hasn't yet found that chemistry, the other half." Kennedy: "As long as Morrissey keeps writing half-decent songs with half-decent producers, he'll be fine. He's always going to be adored.") For the diehard fan, there's also "The hardest Smiths interactive quiz in the world ever."

If you're a Smiths fan or even just curious, *The Smiths Under Review* provides a fascinating glimpse into the history of this iconic band. While there's not enough actual footage to warrant multiple viewings, it's well worth your 90 minutes and then some. | **Laura Hamlett**