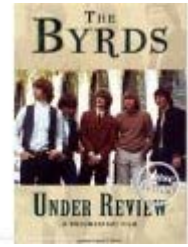


## REVIEW

DVD Review: *The Byrds Under Review*Written by [Kory Lanphear](#)

Published September 19, 2007



Having the somewhat dubious distinction of simultaneously being possibly the most interesting and arguably the least-heard American band of the 1960s, The Byrds' influence both as a band and a cultural vehicle is usually overstated, although it shouldn't be.

Often compared to the Beatles for their penchant for musical exploration and experimentation, The Byrds have largely been ignored as a pinpoint-accurate influence on American music since they began recording in 1964. That is possibly due to the pervasiveness and superiority of the British Invasion during that time. However it could also be said that the band's uncanny ability to transcend pop convention is what makes their influence hard to quantify.

But sadly, what little most people know of The Byrds is that they recorded two of the most recognizable pop tunes of the 1960s – "Tambourine Man" and "Turn, Turn, Turn." Of course, a handful of bands have bent their ears to The Byrds incredible sound and let that influence creep into their music, but few have embraced The Byrds as the quintessential American rock band of the experimental '60s, though many critics claim that this is, in fact the case. However, to lament The Byrds lack of cultural impact is not to diminish the efficacy and brilliance of their brief existence as a band. Those claims are justified and abundant.

The Byrds' touch-and-go approach to genre seems to be the most acute reflection of the almost blinding speed with which the musical geography of the '60s changed. The Byrds greatest talent was perhaps its ability to not only exploit and master musical trends, but also to recognize, maybe even dictate, the fleeting nature of those trends.

To discuss the Byrds is to discuss a snapshot of an important musical heritage that spans the very beginnings of the blending of rock, folk, psychedelia and country. One seemingly cannot, or perhaps rather should not discuss, The Byrds without seriously exploring the many prolific bands/careers/projects that came into existence because of The Byrds, including Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, The Flying Burrito Brothers, and the various solo careers of the original members.

Though it may be that The Byrds as a band are the very American definition of the music culture of the 1960s, they are not necessarily the *prime* example of either the experimental climate, like The Beatles, or sex, drugs and rock-n-roll success and excess like The Rolling Stones.

As a result The Byrds' history does not beg for repeated investigation, unless it is of a musically specific or culturally broad nature. There is a wealth of material exploring their complicated and all-too brief history, the latest of which is the double-disc DVD set *The Byrds Under Review*.

Broken down into chapters mostly by album, the film functions as a history of the band, beginning just before they formed and obviously ending when they broke up. Unfortunately, no members of the original line-up participated in the film, though there are some scant archival interviews. Instead the film relies on mostly archival footage, and still photographs, which are combined with

narration and various current interviews with rock journalists, critics, session players and a few members of later line-ups.

In this way it is very reminiscent of VH1's *Behind the Music* series, except for a welcome lack of flair for the dramatics and (mostly) without the actual participants relating the story. The involvement of critics gives the film a little bit of a critical bent, shedding light on the sort of influences, etc. that informed The Byrds catalogue. But, with some very minor exceptions, *The Byrds Under Review* ignores any pretense for depth in exploring specific creative relationships in the band, focusing on the recording process of certain songs or albums or critically analyzing the impact of the music in a way that hasn't already been done.

Very little is revealed here in the way of inside perspective or broad cultural strokes that would lend the film an ambitious originality, in comparison to other Byrds histories, including those printed on the jacket sleeves of their digitally remastered and expanded original albums.

It is not my intention to project "shouldas" or "couldas" onto the filmmakers, and it was certainly not within the scope or purpose of the film to explore in depth The Byrds critical and cultural impact. However, with the title *Under Review*, one would hope that the film would have more perspective to offer in the way that only the benefit of time can provide.

The film is somehow both and neither an outsider history and a critical response to their music because both perspectives are employed but neither feels fully developed.

Unfortunately the end result is that the film is just a biography, in lieu of other compelling and provocative possibilities. This combined with low production value and a dearth of extras, (though I do admit that Gene Parsons' demonstration of the "string-bender" he invented for guitarist Clarence White is pretty fascinating) combine to make *The Byrds Under Review* a noble but flawed effort at an analysis of a great band by informed filmmakers.

**Overall:**, *The Byrds Under Review* is a marginal documentary inhabited by mostly peripheral characters made without much concern for production value or particularly insightful perspective. There are some notable moments, but people familiar with The Byrds' story will likely find most of the material therein redundant. Even Byrd maniacs may deem *The Byrds Under Review* a little disappointing. In the end it's not really clear at whom this documentary was aimed. Consequently, *The Byrds Under Review* can be added to the mounting pile of unremarkable Byrds' biographies.

Kory Lanphear is a reality-television producer newly moved to Denver, CO from Los Angeles, CA. He enjoys living slow.

## Comments

#1 – September 19, 2007 @ 15:18PM – JC Mosquito

The Byrds should occupy the same pedestal as that other quintessential mid 60's American rock and roll act, the Beach Boys. At the risk of opening up another can o' worms, as a very loose analogy, in some ways the Byrds were to John as the Beach Boys were to Paul. I haven't figured out who was George and Ringo yet.

