

ROCKUMENTARY REVIEW

By Pete Roche

Adam Ant - The Blueblack Hussar

Some rock stars retreat from the limelight by choice, deliberately disappearing from public scrutiny to rest and recompose themselves, or perhaps just to focus on family or other pursuits. Some are better than others at rebranding themselves (Prince, Madonna, David Bowie, etc.) or staging impressive comebacks (Aerosmith, Iron Maiden).

Other former idols aren't so lucky. But with rock and roll rebounds, typically it's a case of the longer the hiatus, the more difficult the resurgence.

Consider the case of Stuart Goddard, who conquered the pop world in the late '70s and early '80s as Adam Ant—only to be involuntarily sedated (under Britain's Mental Health Act) after bipolar disorder and depression derailed his career.

Adam and the Ants became media darlings upon the release of *Dirk Wears White Sox*, *Kings of the Wild Frontier*, and *Prince Charming*, what with their infectious new wave melodies, Burundi beat, campy bravado, and “dandy highwayman” costumes. Signature white stripe painted across his proboscis, Ant was a solo heartthrob by '82, strutting his way through cathode tubes in promotional MTV videos for *Friend or Foe* and *Strip* (“Dog Eat Dog,” “Stand and Deliver,” “Goody Two Shoes,” etc.).

More releases followed, but Ant's mental state took a turn for the worse by the end of the decade. He notched another hit with “Wonderful” in 1995, but eventually his thoughts (and behavior) became so erratic that Her Majesty intervened: Adam was forcibly committed and medicated, the drugs continuing to dampen his creativity even after his release.

2003 John Moulson documentary *The Madness of Prince Charming* painted a vivid picture of Ant's stardom, downfall, and recovery...but that was over a decade ago.

Now, with *Adam Ant The Blueblack Hussar*, acclaimed director Jack Bond steps forth to update us on Adam's comeback and current affairs. Turns out everyone's favorite faux English frontiersman is back on his game: The film is an intimate portrait of an artist coping with midlife crisis and malaise by pouring himself into his music and taking baby steps back into the world that once welcomed him with open arms and airwaves (not to mention the un-festooned undergarments of willing groupies).

The movie also shadows Ant on the tour circuit, too, where he test the waters with a well-regarded new album (his first in ages).

Bond (who helmed a critically praised biopic on Salvador Dali in the '60s) followed Ant through London and Paris with his cameras in 2010 and 2011, capturing the eccentric songwriter in his native habitat with remarkable objectivity. Which is another way of saying Bond only briefly engages Adam, lobbing cursory questions here and there; the director prefers to let his lenses catch the singer at work (and at play), sans staging or editorial interruption.

The gambit pays off, mostly, rendering a digital profile in courage of a troubled artist on the mend.

“This is the story of his brave return from exile [and oblivion],” says Bond.

The film's introduction couldn't be more symbolic, what with archival footage of an impossibly young, sliver-slim Ant shattering a milk bottle at the Prince Albert Memorial in Kensington Gardens (as seen in the 1977 Derek Jarman film *Jubilee*), then cutting to footage of a 56 year old Ant meditating at the very same spot, clad in the attire of a 19th century revolutionary.

Cue rebirth analogies, butterfly adjectives, and phoenix metaphors.

“This is the follow-up to the white stripe,” Ant describes his predominantly black wardrobe, drawing on the first of dozens of cigarettes he chain smokes throughout the film. “People will just have to get used to it.”

Cozy in the backseat of a cab, Ant gives Bond a sneak peek of the evening's 30-song set list. He remembers how Roxy Music (Brian Ferry and Brian Eno) impacted his worldview as a kid in the '70s, inspiring his own musical journey, and insists he isn't nervous about performing live again now.

“I've done my work, so I'm ready. I can't wait.”

Indeed, the singer says he's most comfortable either on stage or in bed. Bond's clips bear out this claim, as we watch Ant navigate his way through awkward photoshoots and interviews with varying degrees of confidence and irascibility. He mugs happily for one camerawoman early on, but barks at an assistant to let the dog out during an ill-prepared sit-down with BBC reporters.

“Handle with care,” reads their equipment case.

No kidding.

Like a parrot on Bond's shoulder, we study the piratical Ant as he assembles his new band (The Good, The Mad, and The Lovely Posse) and discusses old times (fashion, guitars, and gobbing) with young recruits and longtime peers (like The Klaxons' Jamie Reynolds, Goldblade's John Robb, and “Uptown Funk” author Mark Ronson) in music shops and secondhand stores, *cinema verite* style. We duck into various studios for acoustic sessions with Ant and his spritely background singers, “Georgie Girl” and “Twinkle,” and get an inside look at the meticulous recording process (one instrument at a time) for what eventually becomes Ant's 2012 album *Adam Ant is the Blueblack Hussar in Marrying the Gunned's Daughter*.

We're also privy to Ant's preshow makeup routine, after-show antics, green room dance-offs, thrift store splurges (Elvis posters and boxing gloves), and kitchenette capers. We tag along as he sits for a new tattoo (to complement the Horatio Nelson / Lewis Edward Nolan ink already on his left arm), eavesdrop as he talks cigars and cycles with Bond, and share in his frustration while browsing magazines with pictorials of James Franco and Johnny Depp co-opting the swashbuckler image he made famous eons ago. Ant invites movie icon Charlotte Rampling (*The Night Porter*) over for tea, but he appears more at ease talking sculpture with pop artist Allen Jones (he of the fetish fiberglass installations from *A Clockwork Orange*). Bond gets inside Ant's songwriting process, too. Ant divulges that he usually starts with lyrics—whether they be jotted in journals or scrawled on napkins—then constructs musical stories around them.

Allen surmises there's no starting something over once the creative spark is gone. Adam, with his off-the-cuff demeanor and tiger-like attack on stage, seems to concur with his mentor. Each new interaction opens a grab-bag of Ant's skills...and insecurities. Bond's subject comes off as intelligent, sensitive, and articulate—and yet one perceives the emotional turmoil bubbling beneath the surface. We thrill when Ant is able to collect himself for the small club gigs on his “World Tour of London” calendar, exploding to life at 100 Club, mildly surprised when the wheels *don't* come spinning off the Posse wagon.

“If you run your thoroughbred in the grand nationals ten times a year, your horse is gonna wear out,” says Adam of the exhaustion that caught up with him in the '90s.

The film (and first phase of Adam's resurgence) climaxes with a concert before tens of thousands of spectators at Hyde Park. It's Ant's largest audience since Live Aid thirty years prior, and the bespectacled bad boy crosses himself (and tugs his curls) before striding out—like one of his French historical heroes triumphantly taking the battlefield.

“It's not about mental illness,” Ant ponders his gestalt (and sense of purpose) during one of the film's quieter moments.

“It's about passion, and what you do with the music. It's about getting better.”

Bonus features include live performances of “Whip in My Valise” (at The Scala in London), “Deutsche Girls” (at Electric Ballroom), and “Young Parisians” (duet with Boy George of Culture Club). There's also an extended Q&A with Bond and Robb.

Adam Ant the Blueblack Hussar is available now on Amazon (DVD / Bluray) and iTunes (digital download).

www.adam-ant.net

