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'All You Need Is Love' is lovely, if dated

In the mid-1970s, at the suggestion of John Lennon, director Tony Palmer began to document the history of 20th century popular music, mostly British and American, up to that point in time. The result was the 17-part "All You Need Is Love," which ran on television from 1976 to 1981 and has never been seen since.

It was an audacious project for the time. Nothing on its scale had ever been attempted before or since. He didn't just cover rock and roll, either. He started with European folk and African tribal rhythms, progressing to ragtime, jazz, blues and gospel, minstrel shows and the commercialization of black music. And that was just in the second, third and fourth episodes.

The set starts out with an hour-long overview, showcasing what Palmer planned to cover over the next five years. He starts off the set with a performance by Jerry Lee Lewis, naming him the "King of Rock and Roll." Then he shows a short clip of Elvis. Funny, I always thought of Elvis as "The King" whereas Lewis had a few minor hits in comparison. But then again, this was the Seventies.

The series must be given serious points for devoting entire episodes to vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley, the musical, swing, war and the protest movement. Most documentaries would have skipped those forms, or given them a few minutes and moved on to the mainstream forms. Artists showcased include Liberace, Bing Crosby, Irving Berlin, Al Jolson, Stephen Sondheim, Oscar Hammerstein, the Who ("Tommy"), Benny Goodman, Guy Lombardo, Lawrence Welk, Linoel Hampton, Buddy Rich, Frank Sinatra, and Cab Calloway.

The rhythm and blues chapter focuses on Bo Diddley, Motown's stable of artists, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, gospel music (black and white), Ike and Tina Turner; even Pat Boone. The country music chapter mostly focuses on Grand Ole Opry artists (at least to my way of thinking): Minnie Pearl, Doug Kershaw, Ernest Tubb, Roy Acuff, Roy and Dale Rogers. Now most of these type of country singers seem to be migrating to Branson, Missouri in favor of the mainstream artists of today. I know because I'm writing this review in Branson and I see all of their billboards along the highway.

Rock and roll is given the lion's share of the coverage over the final five episodes, progressing from its beginning in the 50's to the end of the 70's. There's an entire chapter on the Beatles, although other documentaries have done a much better job on them. There's one episode focusing on "Sour Rock;" which showcases the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa, Pink Floyd, the Doors, Janis Joplin and others. The next chapter focuses on "Glitter Rock," with sequences on Kiss, Alice Cooper, David Bowie, Elton John, and, believe it or not, the Osmonds. And the final episode covers "New Directions," of which I've only heard of Electric Light Orchestra, Tangerine Dream, Manfred Mann and MUZAK.

All in all, this is a very impressive document on the history of modern music. But there are a lot of influences missing, whether because of time or money or other reasons not stated. For example, the current musical style in the late 70's was disco. There's no chapter on it, even though it was largely dominant from about 1977 to 1980. And where's the segment on funk, or urban contemporary, or the other black forms of music? There's no Parliament, or Donna Summer, or Chic, or even the Jacksons.

As for rock and roll; where's "The Boss," Bruce Springsteen? He made Time and Newsweek's covers in the same week in 1975. No Bob Seger? Lynyrd Skynyrd? Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young? ZZ Top? How about progressive rock artists such as Genesis, Queen or Yes? The punk/new wave movement? Sex Pistols? Devo? Talking Heads? Where's the sequence on heavy metal with AC/DC, Judas Priest or Black Sabbath? And what about a little startup cable channel called MTV? Or the phenomenon that is Rolling Stone magazine?

The little to no-narrative style may be a little slow for audiences raised on the quick-cut excesses of the MTV generation. I found it a little slow, and I started getting into music and television in the 70's. And the lack of familiar faces and songs may also doom this set with viewers for whom most of this music was considered an "oldie" before they were born. That's a pity, because this stuff is important. There is some real pioneer material here.

So, who is the audience for this set? Best bet are the generations that lived through these eras, naturally. But for those who weren't alive during this time frame, the ones who might find it to their interest are budding musicians. The kind of kids who listen to music, and then try to recreate it. Anyone who can actually read music is a good candidate.

At \$99.95, this is a bit pricey for the average fan. I would heartily recommend it to music teachers like Professor Stuessy. Advanced courses might even sell it as course material, as they do with books. High school band teachers could use it as well. But I don't think the typical teen of today will get too much into it.

Besides, they just spent \$70 on buying the latest version of "Grand Theft Auto." There goes their allowance for the week.

All You Need Is Love: Tony Palmer's Classic Series — The Story of Popular Music

MVD Visual, 885 minutes, not rated, \$99.95

- Harry Thomas