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'All You Need is Love': pop's answer to The World at War

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On DVD at last - the music documentary that outgunned even 'Match of the Day'. By Andrew Perry

Television documentaries about pop music are 10 a penny nowadays.

Unfortunately, many are barely worth even that, consistently failing to convey the magic of the music they feature, or to present challenging ideas. Next month, a vintage series is released for the first time on DVD that will provide a mighty yardstick against which to measure the vacuousness of today's coverage. Called All You Need is Love, it was made in the mid-Seventies, when there was little or no pop on TV. Its vast and ambitious task was encapsulated in its subtitle: "The Story of Popular Music".

In the series, every area of Anglo-American music is scrutinized - from the arrival of African rhythms on slave ships through to the commercially driven "glitter rock" that prevailed when the series was made. Whether it be about jazz or blues, or vaudeville or country and Western, each 54-minute episode contains fabulous performance footage. Some was shot specially, some dug up from the archives - or, in the case of the previously unseen film of the bebop saxophonist Charlie Parker, from under someone's bed. After devouring all 14-plus hours in one bleary-eyed weekend, I felt that pop's story had been told to me in all its colour and complexity, and with deep and often piercing insight.

When I meet the series's director, Tony Palmer, at his home in West London, he tells me how the original idea came from British pop's loftiest icon. John Lennon was, in his words, an "ongoing acquaintance". At Lennon's instigation, Palmer - a classical buff - had made an explosive and controversial one-hour documentary for the BBC, called All My Loving, which illuminated the violence and radicalism of the Sixties pop scene. Palmer soon left the Beeb, and went on to become a prolific maker of films about pop, classical, and other cultural subjects. Then one day in 1974, he bumped into Lennon on the street in New York.

"He said, 'Are you doing anything useful?'" Palmer remembers. "Over lunch, he said, 'What you really ought to do now is the whole thing - try to figure out where it all came from.' We talked about it, and just as he got up to leave, he said, 'And I've got the perfect title for you...'" Palmer took the idea of All You Need is Love to ITV, who funded him for a 17-part series - and scheduled it for 10.30 on Saturday evenings through the winter of 1976-77. This was the slot occupied by Match of the Day; so high were the ratings for Palmer's series that the BBC had to move their football stalwart to an earlier start time.

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see that he was playing in this seedy club in Chicago."



Vast and ambitious: the Rolling Stones in All You Need is Love

As a logistical undertaking, the series was hugely ambitious. Palmer shows me his appointments diary from that period. He met several interviewees a day, for months on end, mostly in America. In one day: Bing Crosby, Dizzy Gillespie and Herbie Hancock!

The exclusive performances Palmer filmed are astonishing. His footage of now-deceased rhythm-and-blues men such as Professor Longhair and Jimmy Reed is priceless. Others just take your breath away, such as a gaunt but hyperactive Jerry Lee Lewis blazing through Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On, with the camera set at the level of his piano keys. "He was playing in a Holiday Inn foyer," says Palmer. "People were checking in while he was gyrating away. Muddy Waters was another one. We had terrible trouble finding him till I happened to

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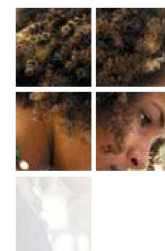
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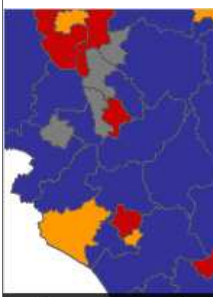
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As Palmer assembled his material, clear themes emerged - the taking of black culture by white musicians; the corruption by commercial interests of musical traditions dating back to the pre-radio age - and the series tackled these thorny issues head-on. Palmer chose not to deploy a narrator, but to allow the music, its makers and associated industry experts to explain their ideas, often at considerable length. Through masterful editing, they effectively slug it out between themselves on screen.

In this manner, the Beatles episode (their first officially sanctioned documentary) leads on to a bitter portrait of Seventies rock, laying bare its moral decline into money-grabbing self-indulgence, oblivious to the principles which fired pop in the Sixties.

A million miles from today's "Top 100 Greatest Musicians Ever", with their meaningless video clips, soundbites and celebrity voiceovers, All You Need is Love is a time capsule from a bygone age. This is a work that is unrepeatable, given that many of its stars have long since died. Palmer went on to make celebrated film portraits of Wagner, Callas, Menuhin and Vaughan Williams.

For many years, the DVD rights to All You Need is Love were locked in legal dispute, but it may now finally come to be seen as pop's equivalent of The World at War - old-school British TV at its definitive, unflinching best.

- 'All You Need is Love' (£46.50) is released on May 5 on Voiceprint, and will be shown in full at BFI Southbank on May 2 and 3.

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