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TV & DVD

Time Out New York / Issue 658 : May 7-13, 2008

Love is all around

A wildly ambitious pop-music epic finally arrives on DVD.

By Bilge Ebiri



FAB FIVE The Beatles's influence on pop music is explored in *All You Need Is Love*.

The idea of documenting the entire in-depth history of something as mercurial as popular music is the kind of epic task that could make even Ken Burns blanch. And yet that's exactly what British journalist and filmmaker Tony Palmer did in the mid-'70s, with the impossibly expansive *All You Need Is Love: The Story of Popular Music*, a 14-hour series made up of 17 episodes, each devoted to a genre or subgenre, be it ragtime (episode 3), swing (episode 9) or rock & roll (episode 13). Palmer's film, which was first broadcast in 1976, is now out in a five-disc box set that will come as an epiphany for music fans everywhere.

There's a vaguely anal-retentive quality to the structure here: Seemingly similar genres, like vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley and the stage musical, each get their own episode, while interview subjects are often seen on camera obsessing over the differences between their chosen art forms and others (for example, New Orleans jazz historian Al Rose defines the genre as "any melody played by two or more musical voices improvising collectively in 2/4 or 4/4 time, and syncopated").

However, anyone worried that Palmer's film focuses only on music nerds can rest easy. *Love's* greatest virtue is the emphasis it gives to performance. Palmer included such haunting scenes as blues great Victoria Spivey, near the end of her life, all dressed up, hunched over a piano and singing "Black Snake Blues" in a tiny, strange room crowded with pictures and cardboard boxes. Even iconic footage becomes transformed through editing

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English miniseries *Wagner* and *Testimony*, which explores the life of Shostakovich).

Watching the episodes in succession, one marvels at the epic arc that leads from Scott Joplin's virtual invention of the popular hit in 1899 with "Maple Leaf Rag" to the explosive power of celebrity enjoyed by musicians in the 1960s and '70s. In each case, artists needed audiences to make their work truly come alive: Joplin brought a young boy to dance along at his first audition, and the Beatles were ignored by the media until their fans began making themselves heard. It only makes sense, therefore, that the opening image of the entire series is of fans peering through the windows of a car, attempting to see an unknown, off-camera celebrity. The tale of popular music, as Palmer tells it, is the story not of musicians or listeners, but of the unpredictable emotional exchange that occurs between them.

There is, of course, a time-capsule quality to *All You Need Is Love*, since it came before the worldwide emergence of punk, new wave and a host of other now seemingly indispensable genres. In its own way, this makes Palmer's film more revealing. Made at a time when the Summer of Love was still a recent memory and Elvis was alive, it maintains a wide-eyed fascination with the transforming power of music—a quaint notion, perhaps, in our current age of irony. But how else could anyone make such an ambitious, wonderful work without this earnest belief in the power of art to change the world?

All You Need Is Love is available May 13, 2008 (\$99.95).