

“Now you need to load the dishwasher” - How Christine Franz captured the electric rise of Sleaford Mods.

We're told that it's not possible anymore for bands to mean something real and true and authentic to people on any kind of large scale because the internet and the loss of reclaimed spaces have made cheap rehearsal rooms and community in urban places where grass roots can grow a thing of the past. However, as Caroline Franz, director of the brilliant music documentary *Bunch of Kunst* says “that's not true, is it?”. Because, here are Sleaford Mods.

Like most great music documentaries *Bunch of Kunst* is not just about the musicians it is following, it's about lots of other things. These things are woven in with subtlety, through the attention that is paid to people on all sides - the band, those around them, the fans - and through Franz's expert understanding of music documentary and wider observational documentary conventions, coupled with a punk willingness to do what she wants. During our conversation she laughs a lot, the laugh of someone confident that they have done something good. It's inspiring, and so is her film. *Bunch of Kunst* charts the move of Nottingham's finest modern punks from cult status to the O2 supporting The Libertines and beyond. It's funny, it's exciting and it's sweet and manages to show myriad human sides of these people just trying to make tunes and stay true to what they believe in. It's brilliant to be reminded of what's possible when you just do stuff. Christine made a film. Sleaford Mods make music. Just do it and if it's good sometimes it breaks through and has real impact. It was a pleasure to talk to her for Directors Notes.

We started talking about how the film resonates at a time of neoliberal oppression and how she captured the genuine power and impact of the band for people living under the realities of austerity and free market politics, the conditions that birthed the band and what they mean to people...

CF ...I've been working as a music journalist for about ten years (for ARTE TV in Germany) and always thought there must be a new thing coming, there must be a new punk. Especially in times like these. People need an outlet. I had been waiting for that for quite a while and luckily these guys popped up. They were everything I'd hoped for. In the beginning I thought it might have been some kind of KLF art project, bored music journalists taking the piss, luckily they weren't. That's why I really wanted to meet them for an interview...

DN... Is that how this all began, you met them for an interview and it went from there? You started shooting really early in terms of their development and exposure...

CF...A friend of mine gave me a copy of their first official album *Austerity Dogs* and said 'this is going to be your new favourite band' and I loved it so he was absolutely right. The humour, there's a lot of humour in it that people don't tend to see. I loved Jason's accent because I was at university in Birmingham so not that far away. The lyrics and the anger and the energy. They came to Berlin really early on, end of 2013. In 2014 we met them when they came over for their second gig, which was in this Neukölln [Berlin] squat venue, sweat dripping from the ceiling, half illegal, next to a garage. It was absolutely amazing, what they did and it really stuck with me. We met them for an interview there and that was for my day job. We had them on our weekly arts programme. Everyone was laughing at me at first, saying 'who's interested in this, it's too niche!' But I told everyone [I work with] that we have to go over to Nottingham to meet them again, which we did. The band showed us round, the places where they first gigged and their favourite record shops. We went to their house and they recorded some stuff. It was great. We got really drunk and the film idea came about. It became clear really quickly that Steve, their manager, had to be in it because he was like the fifth Beatle. He's the heart and soul of it all, without him I don't think they would have gone as far. He had the vision, he discovered them and helping them make the right decisions...

DN...It wouldn't work without him. There's a real tension in the film, where the band get to the point where Rough Trade come in and you wonder, because although they never become part of the industry machine there are hints that inevitable impacts have taken place and the band have got a bit caught up, how's this going to go and it's so sweet that it goes the way it goes and it's pragmatic and friendly and that Steve says it's the best thing even though you can tell the punk in him is rebelling to some degree...

CF...I wanted to get across that they really thought about the decisions that they made and they questioned every step. They were conscious of the way they did things. They were given a 'voice of the people' tag and they weren't really comfortable with that. They didn't want to compromise. They wondered what would happen if they played bigger venues, would their fans tell them to 'fuck off' because they sold out but in reality the fans said 'two of our people have made it and we're super proud' and that was really beautiful. You can see in the interviews with the fans in the film, that they absolutely cherish the band...

NF...Jason, Andrew and Steve are smart and authentic people, and that still has something to offer and why the music feels so visceral because it's tangibly authentic. So many music documentaries, including a lot of the 'classics' are essentially performances by artists, whereas because of how Sleaford Mods have come to be as band they are almost incapable of being inauthentic. They are not seeking it, they are not used to it and the film beautifully captures, something really quite rare in music docs, who they really are as people and how they feel about it all. The way they are able to critique their own experience and situation is amazing. That's a testament to how much time you were able to spend with them and the trust you were able to build up. Did you film in bursts, around tours and recording?

CF...We shot for just over two years. Sometimes we were over there twice a week, which is a bit mad. My camera guys were complaining 'how much longer do you want to keep going? It's always the same' and I replied 'can't you see?!?!' You never know where it's going to go. In the beginning we thought maybe the film would be more political but quite quickly it was clear that's not what the band wanted, it's not what they're about and they were uncomfortable with that whole 'voice of the working class' thing. It's all in the lyrics anyway. You don't need anyone to tell the audience that they are political. Audiences aren't stupid...

DN...So, when did you know when to stop? The band might not change, and their performances might not change per se, but everything around them changes, dramatically, and the amount of footage you shot must help to show that growth and change but when did you think 'this is the time' to put it together. You could keep going...

CF...Absolutely. The beauty of it all was that because we became so close they told us we could go on as long as we wanted, we had access to everything, they would tell us when they were going to do new and exciting stuff and they invited us over for that. We literally camped on their couches for over two years. That's also why we became so close. Lots of my friends joked and said this was going to be my *Chinese Democracy* but then Steve texted me on New Year's Day 2016 saying 'we've got a meeting tomorrow with Geoff Travis at Rough Trade' and I phoned him, he was a bit drunk and emotional and I said 'you're telling me now that you might sign to Rough Trade', he said 'yeah' and explained their thinking. We talked for about an hour and I knew that had to be the end of the film. The chapter I wanted to tell was three guys going against the grain, and the music business, and doing their own thing. The Rough Trade deal was amazing but felt like a new chapter...

DN...Just to go back to what you said earlier about your colleagues who said it was too niche and who would be interested in this, these guys, how did you know this was a film you needed to make and that this band mattered?

CF...You know what it's like when you hear your favourite band for the first time when you are 14 or something? It was like that. I think you get that feeling maybe once or twice in your life and certainly not as late as this so I thought, if this is how it feels [listening to Sleaford Mods] then there must be something there. They were so strikingly different to everything I'd heard in my day job as a music journalist in the last couple of years [before I made the film]. If I feel like that as someone exposed to a lot of music every day then I'm sure it will matter to other people as well. It was also that I just thought they were beautiful people and to see their story unfold in front of us, and them, was amazing. It couldn't have gone any better. The music documentary Gods were certainly on our side all the way through...

DN...Did you have any films you used as a reference once you were underway on the making of it?

CF...Yes! Have you seen *Le Donk & Scor-zay-zee*?

DN...The Shane Meadows film, absolutely. I wasn't expecting you to say that, but I can see it now!

CF...That's one of my favourite films. I showed it to my editor at some point and he got it. He said 'it's got to be funny and it's got to be weird and have that leave all the mistakes in it feel' because their music has all that as well. It's unpolished and that's what we wanted to get across in the film. Obviously *Le Donk & Scor-zay-zee* is a mockumentary but I couldn't think of another music documentary that had that and felt that way. The ones I've seen recently were just archive footage and talking heads, stuff that was in the past. Obviously, that wasn't the case for us, we were there as it was happening...

DN...It's definitely got *Le Donk & Scor-zay-zee*'s sweetness and charm and draws out their humour, in the music and as people and how they feed into each other. I did think about the 'mistakes' in the film - the wind on the mic, Steve's false starts - and then about their music and it always seemed like the form came out of the content...

CF...Absolutely...

DN...They weren't fitting words to music, it was how to communicate the words and your film felt responsive in the same way. You don't see a lot of that. There's a lot of trying to get a narrative into the box of what a music documentary should be. There's more energy in your film...

CF...It's interesting you bring that up. I was talking to people about how to structure the film and one colleague suggested we have different chapters and interviews and talking heads all the way through, with the celebrities, but that wasn't the kind of film I wanted to make. We had the cool chance to make something different to what you normally see. I knew it would work because that's how Sleaford Mods works as a band...

DN...The bookending with the likes of Geoff Barrow, Neil Barnes and Iggy Pop works so well because you become so attached to Jason, Andrew and Steve as characters but it reminds you that they are a really good band. They are not just cool, nice people, this is great music. Those interviews with famous fans helps anchor it...

CF: ...we had a lot of interviews with Iggy and Geoff and lots of other people and they said amazing stuff and it was really hard to let go of that and focus and say that's not what this film is about. We want to have that in the background. It's hard to have a 40-minute interview with Iggy Pop in your pocket and you're hardly using any of it. It was refreshing to let go of it...

DN...It's really a clever device to have the band react to that interview, rather than just leaving it to the audience. I've not seen that before and it's so fitting. The band can't believe that Iggy Pop is doing this. It's sweet...

CF...It was a coincidence. They were playing the same festival but they hadn't met. I told them we had a chance to interview Iggy Pop and they didn't believe me. They wouldn't believe me until I'd showed them the footage so I showed them it and I said to my camera guy 'we should film this it's really cute' and it was perfect...

DN...You've stuck to your guns in terms of how you wanted to make it so finally, what is your hope for the film?

CF...Me and my editor had that discussion a lot, at 4am, still in the editing room after months. Maybe, if we could inspire 2 or 3 people to do their thing and not care what other people think, just do their thing, and to get across how amazing these three guys are and what they've done, then that would be great. And, yesterday, I'm not sure if you noticed in the credits that we asked for a fan from Stockton on Tees to get in touch because we lost contact, well the guy got in touch. We hadn't heard from him in 3 years or something. He said 'I always wondered if I'd make the final cut of the film' and he was absolutely over the moon. He was on twitter all day saying how

much he loved the film and how proud he is. That was such a sweet moment. I sent it to my editor saying 'there you go'. That's all you can hope for.

