“Stupid things are best” Conny Plank: The Potential of Noise

The opening stages of this music documentary about the (truly) pioneering music producer Conny Plank, directed by his son Stephan along with Reto Caduff, see Stephan embarking on a journey to discover more about his father, who died when Stephan was only thirteen years old. The footage, of differing cities and modes of transportation is underscored by one of Plank’s earliest and most seminal productions, ‘Hallogallo’ by Neu!. The footage conveys visually the cinematic feeling of motion, urbanity and the modern that is conjured in sound by the music that Plank made his name bringing to life in the studio. Alongside Neu!, Plank produced early works by Kraftwerk and Harmonia before spreading his wings and becoming the producer and engineer of choice for pop behemoths such as Devo, the Eurythmics, Ultravox, Scorpions and many more. Most of who feature in the film eulogising about Plank’s work.

The film is packed with insight into Plank’s successes and abilities to coax classic after classic out of those he collaborated with, but this not the film’s central concern. Stephan’s journey to meet those who worked with his father before and after he was born is the central plot and motif of the film as the audience follows him seeking to reconnect with the memory and spirit of a man who, it becomes increasingly clear, achieved success at the expense of those closest to him. Like Donal Foreman’s exquisite <i>The Image You Missed</i>, currently playing film festivals, <i>The Potential of Noise</i> is a conversation between a son and a father. Where Foreman’s film is also a conversation between two filmmakers, one of the joys of Stephan Plank’s filmic journey is that Stephan isn’t a filmmaker by trade and as a result there’s a raw honesty to the film that makes it especially moving. When interviewing author David Stubbs who wrote the brilliant book <i>Future Days: Krautrock And The Building Of Modern Germany</i>, Plank shifts awkwardly and fidgets almost constantly. There’s no media training or documentary prowess in his interview style and the film is all the more rewarding for that.

It’s this naturalness, and his connection to Conny and that world having been a child that all these artists remember from their visits to the Plank family’s studio and farmhouse that mean those interviewed are effusive in sharing their memories and deeply fond affection for his father. All are quick to remind Stephan and the world via the film of how integral Conny Plank was to their biggest successes and most vital career moments. The sequence where the rappers Whodini recall working with Plank and how they felt valued by him more than by anyone else they’d encountered and what his production meant for them really captures what made Plank such a special musical force. <i>The Potential of Noise</i> never forces its point. A cursory look at Plank’s discography attests to his importance in late 20th Century popular music culture and the documentary instead uses vignettes and archive footage to provide insight into the character and working practices that are suggested by the music but never known. There’s a sequence towards the end where David Allen, a producer for The Cure amongst others, dismantles the legendary studio desk from Plank’s studio and has it moved piece-by-piece, board-by-board to his own in the UK. It’s a bittersweet moment that manages to capture the importance of the right tools for the job as Allen eulogises on the spatial and physical dimensions of the desk and its role and position in the studio as well as representing a physical symbol of the end of Plank’s life’s work and the studio as a practical space, as it is placed in a removals van and disappears from where it was built and had such impact, for good.

In terms of archive, the most moving footage is that which pretty much bookends the film, taken when Conny and family are in Japan. At the outset, Conny is seen on film espousing his philosophy of music and how he tries to ‘make music out of noise’. It’s a scene that sets the creative and mythological tone for the first half of the film. However, the context changes when we learn that the trip was taken when Conny knew he was ill, likely dying, and as Stephan came to realise, making sure the family had quality time together before the end came. It’s a device that’s frequently common in music documentary, documentary in general to be fair, but it’s used to excellent effect here.

The overwhelming strength of the film is undoubtedly Stephan’s journey to discover more about his father, of which the above archive deployment, becomes a key part. The familial aspect echoes, with more earnestness and less irony, Tom Berninger’s superb film about The National, <i>Mistaken For Strangers</i>. His honest desire to understand and know his father better is the beating heart of the film even if the revelations at the centre of the film regarding Conny’s many dismissals and cruelties to Stephan when he was a boy cast an uneasy shadow over the remainder of the narrative. There’s bravery in sitting and listening to how your dad ignored you and sharing that with the world, but it also means anything after that where praise is heaped on a man who was a successful producer but a questionable father can’t help but taste a tad bittersweet.