“We Were Not The Part”: Pondering the importance of The Go-Betweens

Why am I still watching?

That’s the question I ask myself half way through *The Go-Betweens: Right Here*. I’ve heard of The Go-Betweens and know that they matter, and that they inspire devotion, and inspired many artists that came in their wake. I’ve heard of them, but I’ve never heard them. I couldn’t name you one of their songs. I used to get them mixed up with The Go-Gos in my mind. I know they matter because they are in the ether in a positive way. I don’t know whether I like them, or if I like this film (if those things even matter), but half way through I’m still watching and I can’t turn the film off, and that intrigues me.

It intrigues me because I watch a lot of music documentaries. A lot. I love them and wanted to see this film because it gave me a chance to learn about a band I’d heard about, but never heard, in the cinematic form I gravitate towards as a fan and a critic. Formally, this isn’t a particular interesting documentary. It tells the story of important, cult Australian band The Go-Betweens and the working life of the two men at the centre of the band, Robert Forster and Grant McLennan (the Aussie Lennon and McCartney) from their emergence in the late 70s and early 80s, through to McLennan’s tragic death in 2006.

The film looks like a lot of music docs look now, it follows the same beats in terms of how it tells the story and uses the same techniques as so many other films. There’s the cutaways to vintage radios and spinning vinyl, there’s the archive footage of the band and the archive footage of Brisbane in the seventies for context, there’s the moody black and white interview against a black backdrop, there’s the interviews in a random farmhouse where those who left the band back in the day are forced to make another symbolic exit into the distance on camera (ok, that’s a less common trope). There’s the dramatic reconstruction. There’s the chronology. Record by record. Beat by beat. Oh wait, here’s a song I know. 45 minutes in, *Streets of Your Town*, ace. Band romance. Band break-up. Creative respect. Creative differences. Drugs. Alcohol. Romantic breakup. The band reunites. It’s all there and yet, it’s greater than the sum of these obvious parts.

There’s the sound of the band. They are part of the Velvet Underground’s lineage and sound like a band hearing the Velvets from thousands and thousands of miles away, which of course they were. They are also clearly part of the post Modern Lovers wave and they have a connective tissue to their contemporaries R.E.M. Their influence can be heard along a long spectrum that includes everything from Jeffrey Lewis to The Wave Pictures to Badly Drawn Boy. Their tendrils reach out across the indie landscape and the film beautifully captures this in the form of their shared journey for a time with The Birthday Party, their collision with Orange Juice and Postcard Records and Rough Trade and The Smiths and there’s also a fleeting eulogy from Lloyd Cole.

There’s the persistence. Despite the fact that they never really had a hit, and kept getting dropped by their label, and despite the usual problems of personality and personnel bands can face, they kept at it. They were committed to their sound and produced a string of well crafted and much beloved, by critics and a small diehard following, albums. After a decade hiatus they returned in the early 2000s to produce 3 more albums that rank amongst the finest they produced in the minds of those who know about these things. This stubbornness and commitment to Art, despite the difficulties and obvious financial signs that maybe they should have quit, is beautiful and admirable. It’s a poignant and powerful document of what it takes to keep creating, to emerge from a creative life with a substantial body of work.

There’s also the strange feeling. Robert is weird and the film does weird things. Alongside the aforementioned ranch interviews there are long lingering close ups of Robert looking off into the distance or directly down the camera at the very end. He’s off kilter and the film spends a lot of time just focusing the camera on him. He discusses his collaborative relationship with Grant using a beautifully odd recurring rear view mirror analogy that clearly he understands, and the filmmakers just kind of leave it at that, wonderfully. Robert gives off the impression that his remembrance is maybe not the whole story, but it’s a good one and he’s very generous with plaudits for his band mates. Slowly, the realisation emerges that his off-kilterness is what marks out the Go-Betweens music in a deep and significant way. As the amazing drummer Lindy says at one point, discussing the band’s lack of mainstream and chart success, “We were not the part”. They never were, but they made an impact and alongside the weirdness what emerges is a portrait of two men, Robert and Grant, and their special creative and personal bond. The rest of the band members that came and went and all the contributors featured were merely in their orbit.

So, even though the film is formally by the numbers a lot of the time, as with the best music films the music and the personalities and artistry that created it wins out. At one point someone says that The Go-Betweens were a mutant pop band and stranger in the long run than pop music. Not sure I buy that. It’s pop. Pop as a form not a derivative of popular. That seems to me to be the beauty of it. They may have had no hits, but they can keep even the most ignorant viewer and listener watching and listening, and that’s a beautiful thing.

I kept watching and I’m glad I did.