

The World Leaks In - *Upstairs Planet: Cleaners From Venus & The Universe of Martin Newell*

Neil Fox

Every seven years Graham Bendel turns up with a film about key outsiders from the UK music scene. In 2005 he brought the world Billy Childish *Is Dead*. 2012 saw the release of *Derailed Sense: A Film About Vic Godard & Subway Sect*. Now he's back in 2019 with a film about maybe the most outsider-y of outsiders yet, Martin Newell. *Upstairs Planet: Cleaners From Venus & The Universe of Martin Newell* is the third in Bendel's 'rugged individualists' trilogy and its subject is far more obscure and difficult to grasp than those of the earlier films. However, rather than creating a slick and mythologising cinematic document Bendel honours Newell with a low-budget video testament that feels perfectly suited to the story of the 'Godfather of Lo-Fi'.

*Upstairs Planet* joins a recent flurry of films celebrating fringe musicians and bands whose legacy has lasted or created a lineage of varied value. These films tend to take as their form a cinematic style and aesthetic akin to the music and personalities being profiled. The keenest comparison is with Bob Hannam's *The Colossus of Destiny: A Melvins Tale* from 2016 but there are also shades of similarity with Michael Cumming and Stewart Lee's upcoming Robert Lloyd film, *King Rocker*, and for the story of a band that never quite made it over the line and what that can mean for financial and mental health, Caroline Richards's sadly unheralded *The Parkinsons: The Long Road To Nowhere*, also from 2016.

This film works beautifully because it tells the story of a man, Martin Newell, who rejected anything that resembled a marketing plan or an advertising hook. The film is a traditional mix of interviews and live footage but there are key differences to other films of its ilk, even those mentioned above and in Bendel's previous filmography.

Much of this is because the Cleaners From Venus never made it. They never did a Peel session and there are no long-lost TV appearances from the early 80s to dredge up. There was no Omnibus programme about them or their scene. Their influence is nebulous. Listening to Newell and his Cleaners From Venus co-founder Lawrence 'Lol' Elliott, who is also interviewed here, it's not clear as to the reason(s) why it never really clicked, or if they even would have spotted it if it did. This though, is what makes the film so thrilling.

The interviews and inserted title cards featuring information, facts and musings about Newell and his music. They simply present events and ideas, without any sense of a coherent narrative idea in terms of artistic or career trajectory. Through this superficially ramshackle but ultimately incisive and enlightening technique the film becomes a moving and fascinating

portrait of an artist who has dedicated his life to music and rejected at every turn the corporate machinations of the music industry. Newell released music on self-distributed cassettes – something that is all the rage again, making the timing of the film apt – and pioneered, through a commitment to independence, a lo-fi sound that has (apparently) inspired artists including XTC, Ariel Pink and John Cooper Clarke, the latter writing a poem in Newell’s honour.

(Apparently), because in the film the only evidence of this inspiration is a text quote from an Ariel Pink interview saying he liked the band but also that he doesn’t like talking about music. How fitting! R.Stevie Moore and Anton Newcombe (Brian Jonestown Massacre) were not able to be in the film. The audience knows this because Bendel says so on one of his many title cards. This is one of the charms of the film’s commitment to the kind of warts n all approach that Martin Newell is synonymous with. Stuart Moxham from Young Marble Giants does make an appearance though and compares Newell to Nick Drake. Interviews take place in Newell’s kitchen and lounge. There’s no fancy lighting, a lot of the editing of sound and image is deliberately jarring and rough around the edges and the interview audio is layered with noise. As the academic Adam Harper says in the film, the “world leaks into the recordings” of the Cleaners From Venus and their lo-fi sound. Bendel leaves his fingerprints and traces of the film’s making all over it, creating an aesthetic that echoes and honours the band’s approach to artistic output.

Harper also traces the Newell sound to the likes of Pavement, Sebadoh and Guided by Voices. He notes that the fact that they were American from the period when college radio was at its peak may be a reason that Cleaners From Venus never took off and Newell never got his due for what would become a key sound in indie music. After all, they never did that Peel session. But The Nightingales did loads and, as Cumming and Lee’s film shows, they still drifted into obscurity.

Bendel’s film doesn’t present a thesis as to why Newell never became a superstar. It allows Newell to suggest, through his ideas and beliefs and experiences – as well as his social awkwardness - some kind of explanation. Bendel invites the audience to make their own mind up. Through its energy and composition, the film presents a portrait of a fascinating person with a moving story. It tells of artistic integrity, self-sabotage, mental health and drug abuse, and forms a document that will hopefully introduce new listeners to a beautiful body of work. It’s hard not to think of David Berman, an inheritor of Newell’s aesthetics and spirit, and just be pleased that Bendel’s testament exists because as the film and music history has proven, sometimes great artists don’t make it.