

Chicago Tribune

ON THE SMALL SCREEN

Christian rocker film avoids bias

Documentary hews to even-handed path

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Published January 10, 2006

53,737.

At last count, that's how many DVD titles are out in North America (discounting imports and porn), according to a trade association called the Digital Entertainment Group. Given the sheer volume of video at our fingertips, the odds are overwhelming that some excellent DVDs fly far under the cultural radar like so many cinematic Frisbees.

One such disc is the ragged-but-spirited documentary "Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?" (Blank Stare/RightRightRight Films, \$20). It tells the story of the independent Christian rock scene -- though definitely not in a way you'd expect, given the tricky subject matter or the fact that first-time directors Vickie Hunter and Heather Whinna are acknowledged atheists.

Seeking neither to proselytize nor criticize, "Devil" casts a levelheaded look at some outsiders in the evangelical Christian music field. Forget anything you may know about artists such as Third Day or Michael W. Smith, who've used their music of late to back right-wing political causes.

The quirky subjects of "Devil" run the gamut from Pedro the Lion (whose latest online demo is titled "The Devil Is Beating His Wife") to Steve Taylor (who penned the controversial abortion-protest satire "I Blew Up the Clinic Real Good").

An Audience Choice Award winner at the Chicago Underground Film Festival, "Devil" also features some local heroes of note. These include Josh Caterer, who appears with his post-Smoking Popes band Duvall, and the Detholz!, a band made up of former Wheaton College students. The Detholz! attracted the filmmakers' attention after causing quite a stir at the Cornerstone Christian music festival in Bushnell, Ill., where much of "Devil" was shot. With guitarist/vocalist Jim Cooper sporting a pea-green Statue of Liberty costume and his bandmates dressed as Communists, the group opened its set by singing the North Korean national anthem in Korean -- this just hours after Independence Day 2003.

The Detholz! -- who count the members of Wilco among their avid fans -- headline a release party for "Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?" 7 p.m. Tuesday at Schubas, 3159 N. Southport Ave.

(free; 773-525-2508). Ahead of that event, On the Small Screen spoke with Hunter and Whinna about the making of their documentary.

Neither of you had made a film, much less a documentary, prior to this. Can you give a sense of how foreign this turf was to you?

Hunter: I don't think I'd ever held a video camera before -- and I'm being literal. ... For our first shoot, we used Sony home video cameras. I don't even know what model they are.

Whinna: When [the Chicago club] Lounge Ax was closing [in 2000], I taped the last two weeks, every single band, and there was talk of doing something. But that was the only time I'd ever held a [video] camera. I have participated in still photography for 15 years, and it was shocking to me the difference. It's not the same at all.

Hunter: Being first-time filmmakers there were lots of things we could do because we didn't know right from wrong. People we know who had gone to film school would say, "You can't do it that way," and we'd say, "Why? Why?" Half the time they were right, and half the time they were wrong. On the other hand, some things took us a year to do that should've taken a month.

Both of you are atheists, yet you made your first film about Christian music. Given your backgrounds, that seems an unusual choice of topic, to say the least.

Whinna: That's what made it really easy for myself and for Vickie as well. We don't really have any grudges. I didn't really have to go to church growing up. ... And I started asking the most simplistic questions when we did the interviews, like "Is Jesus the son of God or is he God?" Our lack of faith gave us an objective eye.

Hunter: People expect you to have an agenda -- either that it's religious propaganda or that it lambastes Christians. And [the movie] really doesn't do either.

Whinna: This is an extremely sensitive topic, someone's faith. And I didn't want to edit a scene before someone had finished a thought, just to make it funny. You can imagine how different it could've been, and how it could've been a mockumentary. All we would've had to do was turn things just a little bit.

Silkworm drummer Michael Dalquist played a big role in finishing this film. He had never edited a movie before, but taught himself how on this project. That sounds amazing.

Hunter: People were telling us that there was no way we could edit a whole film on a home computer, or that we'd have to go to a professional editing suite. ... And then our good friend came along and said, "I'd like to learn how to edit."

Whinna: Vickie [who is married to Silkworm bassist Tim Midgett] logged every minute of tape, and I think we have 170 hours -- and Michael finished a video of the band Squad Five-O doing the Alice Cooper song "School's Out" before he had seen all the tape. I watched it on my TV and thought, "Oh, my God, we made a movie." That moment for me was the most exciting -- that it was really going to look like a movie.

It was just a two-camera shoot and I said, "How did you sync up both of the cameras?" And he said, "I just followed the crash cymbal." Now I tell every drummer that they should be an editor because the sense of timing worked to our advantage.

It seems odd that you got rejections from film festivals that should've been receptive to the project. Do you think maybe they dismissed it as propaganda?

Hunter: That may be educated speculation on our part. I think once people saw it, their opinions changed. ... But with some film festivals, you get so much volume and you have to use superficial means for rejecting something.

Whinna: I feel ridiculous saying that anyone turned down our film for any other reason other than they didn't like it. But some of the film festivals we got turned down for, I was shocked. We don't know why, and we're sort of left to guess -- and we entered into every festival in the world.

Are there any plans for the two of you to embark on another film?

Hunter: To find someone who can put up with us is going to be the hardest part.

Whinna: Vickie and I certainly do sit around and come up with other awesome ideas for films, but it seems like this [movie] will take up some of our time for a while. Universities are interested in the film, and if we can get on the right bill, we'd like to tour with it. Vickie just had a baby, so she'll [tour] when she can.

Maybe some people make movies and they just come out, but that seems really unsatisfying to us. It's important to tell people that you can go out there and do your art.

Got a DVD question or quandary? Write to Louis R. Carlozo at lcarlozo@tribune.com. Include your name and hometown and your question could wind up in a future On the Small Screen column.