



a decade of drama

NBC's miniseries 'The '70s' remembers more than just pet rocks and bell bottoms by examining the social changes that took place during those turbulent years

By Joe Walsh
Oregon Daily Emerald

It's unusual that a made-for-TV movie boasts solid acting, a compelling story and impressive cinematography. But NBC's latest miniseries "The '70s" does just that.

Following last season's highly rated miniseries "The '60s," MTV meets the History Channel once again in this chronicle of a tumultuous decade as experienced through the lives of four friends.

Throughout the decade, the four experience everything from the Kent State massacre to the Watergate scandal. Through the characters, we see how the key moments of the decade changed not just their lives, but the entire nation. We relearn the history of the decade that saw three presidencies, Watergate, the end of the Vietnam War, the rise of the women's liberation movement and the first Earth Day. Only this history lesson is told through a personal perspective.

The story begins at Kent State University in 1970, where the four attend college. After witnessing the killing of four fellow students by Ohio National Guardsmen, the four friends go their separate ways.

Guy Torry ("American History X") is Dexter Johnson, a young man who joins the Ohio National Guard to avoid Vietnam. He moves to L.A., where he falls victim to racial profiling and consequently gets involved with the Black Power movement.

Brad Rowe ("Wasteland") plays Byron Shales — a bright, upper-class young man with a promising future in law. After getting caught up in the Watergate scandal, Byron struggles to sort out his political ideals.

Amy Smart ("Varsity Blues," "Felicity") plays Byron's sister Christie. It quickly becomes evident that Christie's innocent homecoming queen image is nothing more than a facade masking her drug addictions. She dabbles in modeling and dancing with moderate success, but even her triumphs (grabbing a spot as a bikini-clad Martini

Girl) seem to be regarded as failures by an increasingly visible women's movement.

Vinessa Shaw ("Eyes Wide Shut") is Eileen Wells, a middle-class young woman with conservative values who is in love with Byron. At Barnard College, she meets Wendy (Laurel Morgan), her radical feminist roommate and slowly begins to rethink her long-established values.

Having graduated, Byron heads to law school in New York. Eileen transfers to Barnard to escape the memories of Kent State and get closer to Byron. Soon after, Christie drops out and moves to New York to pursue modeling. Dexter, ashamed of his role in the Kent State shooting, moves to L.A. where he buys and restores an old movie theater and meets Yolanda (Leslie Silva), who steers him toward the Black Power movement.

Not long after Eileen's move to New York, Byron gets a job offer to work for the Nixon reelection campaign in Washington D.C., and accepts. That's when Byron gets used by Washington bigwigs and finds himself in the middle of the Watergate scandal. We watch as Byron loses faith in American politics, symbolic of the effect Watergate had on the psyche of the entire country.

Fresh out of college with a degree in visual arts, Eileen heads out into the job market only to crash into the barriers of a still-sexist society. She applies for several art design positions, but is only offered secretarial jobs. Through Eileen, we see the feminist movement not just as some nondescript revolution, but as a change in thinking that affected the lives of individual women. But through Christie, we see another female's perspective during the rise of feminism. As a model, she depends on sexism and is not quite ready to embrace the movement.

After moving to L.A. where he is confronted by a fascist police force, Dexter becomes actively involved in the Black Power movement. Through his trials, we are al-

lowed a fresh perspective on racism in the '70s.

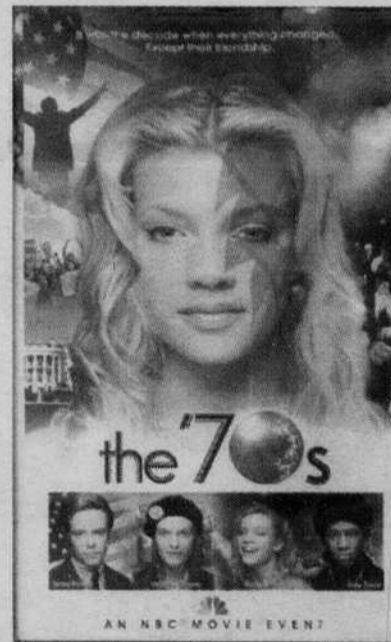
Besides placing a new personal spin on old political and social issues, "The '70s" weaves in an entertaining depiction of pop culture during those times. We see how the proliferation of television united the country. Via television's commonality, trends in music, clothes and ideas became universal.

Also brilliantly woven into the film is the music. With songs such as Donna Summer's "Hot Stuff," Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son" and Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On," the soundtrack features not only the pop hits of the times, but also the songs that really captured the feeling of the nation.

But while most modern recreations of the '70s overdo it ("Dazed and Confused," "That '70s Show"), "The '70s" brilliantly portrays the decade as it was, rather than how it is remembered. As the costume designers of the miniseries found, it can be challenging to separate memory from reality, because the extremes are remembered the most. These become stereotypes. It's true that polyester, hip-huggers and platform shoes were popular in the '70s — but only in the mid-'70s. NBC's miniseries pays close attention to these details, creating a realistic sense of the decade.

Where other '70s movies miss, "The '70s" hits with precision. Though it often seems like a bit of a Forrest Gump rip off, "The '70s" is a fresh illustration of a turbulent decade that is too often remembered only for its pet rocks and bell-bottoms.

all photos courtesy of NBC
The stars of "The '70s" are (above, l-r): Brad Rowe as Byron Shales; Vinessa Shaw as his love interest, Eileen Wells; Guy Torry as Dexter Johnson; and Amy Smart as Byron's sister, Christie Shales.
(below) The NBC promotional poster combines some of the most important moments of the 1970s into one striking image.



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