



Music for Humans

Color Me Obsessed captures glory of The Replacements

For a moment that was all too brief — but perfectly, preciously, bittersweetly too brief — it looked to all of us like it was theirs for the taking. It wasn't only punk rock that needed saving, but music itself, and therefore the world itself. There it sat like some overripe fruit, waiting to be plucked and eaten and thrown back up: the world of our parents, the world of Ronald Reagan, the world of the suburbs. That world was ready, almost begging, to be destroyed and saved. Here was a talent show the boys might actually, for once, win.

Even at those basement parties where the Minneapolis police started banging on the door, they kept it turned up loud and teetering on the brink of beautiful chaos. The trick was to not try, and not to try to not try. You can't fake that shit. Years before Nirvana, these were the real losers: a band of precocious, smirking, raggedy-ass misfits who knew the score but never forgot that music is not some toe-gazing mope fest. It's about joy.

And then, in a blink, they were gone — just like that, not with a bang but a whimper. Ashes to ashes, dust to dustbin. The Replacements were a mere flash in the pan, and they didn't leave even one hit to wonder about. They came, they saw, and — seeing what was there to conquer — they shot themselves in the foot, one last time. Everybody saw it coming, so it was kind of funny. It was kind of terrible, too. It was, in the grandest sense, totally tragic and comic, in the same way Charlie Chaplin and Charlie Brown and Townes Van Zandt are tragic and comic. Tragicomic like the continent itself — like America.

Color Me Obsessed:
The potentially true story of the last best band plays Oct. 20-22 at Bijou Cinemas.
Director Gorman Bechard will hold a live Q&A following the 9 pm Thursday, Oct. 20, screening; info at bijou-cinemas.com

In the short, shoddy, glorious span of years they existed — from, say, 1980 until, say, 1989 — the Replacements were untouchable. They embraced anarchy, inspired chaos, oozed charm, electrified the scene, overwhelmed the shadows and underachieved themselves into extinction. Led by singer/songwriter Paul Westerberg, the band inadvertently created an underground that they immediately repudiated, and in so doing they undid the damage that a decade of mock-heroic cock rock and sleazy easy listening had wreaked on the only recognizably original American art form. The Replacements were legend.

It wasn't all shits and giggles. Nobody's perfect. The Replacements refused, on principle and probably to a fault, to take themselves too seriously. Long before Kurt Cobain satirized the music industry's radio-friendly unit shifters, the band goosed the glam machine's inverted Midas touch — "Label wants a hit, we don't give a shit," Westerberg growls drunkenly on *Hootenanny*, the Replacement's imperfect pre-masterpiece masterpiece. This neener-neener, fuck-you punk fury was, and still is, exhilarating, equal parts lame, hilarious, tongue-in-cheek and serious as the shakes. "Fucked 'em up," Westerberg drawls after blowing a couple chords at the end of "Treatment Bound," old beyond his years.

Classic snotty moments like these are part and parcel of the mystique, to be sure, but not so long after this Westerberg started laying down some of the finest lines ever committed to tape — lyrics soaked in heart and heartbreak, and as razor-sharp scary as drinking yourself sober. The man could

turn a phrase to stop you short and just crush you, as he does in the bridge to "Bastards of Young":

*"The ones who love us best
Are the ones we'll lay to rest
And visit their graves on holidays
at best.
The ones who love us least
Are the ones we'll die to please
If it's any consolation I don't begin to understand
them."*

Every new Replacements record, of course, was pegged by fanatics as a sell out, in the days when being called a sell out was a deep insult. It's funny now, in retrospect, how dearly we held the Replacements — how the band's intimacy and spontaneity were met with such a personal stake, how close we held them, how bad they pissed us off, betrayed us, took us back in, won us back over.

Listen, once you start making a case for the Replacements, it just keeps coming, like the trots: They were the only real punk band. They were the last great rock band. They laid down two of the greatest pop songs of all time — "Left of the Dial" and "Alex Chilton" — as well as another baker's dozen that could be argued so, like "Can't Hardly Wait" or "Unsatisfied" or "Color Me Impressed" or "Skyway" or "I Will Dare."

But the hell with all that. Analyzing the Replacements is like reading comic books with a telescope. Sure, they were the ultimate critic's darlings but, way more than that, they were the hoi polloi, the down and out. They were us. Before talking his way into the band, Westerberg was a janitor. Before the biggest interview of their career, they all shaved off their eyebrows. The Replacements didn't give a shit.

Director Gorman Bechard's documentary, *Color Me Obsessed*, captures in all its tattered, passionate glory the earnest devotion and sloppy love of hard-core Replacements fans. Subtitled "The potentially true story of the last best band," Bechard's film works nicely as a companion piece to author Jim Walsh's 2009 *All Over But the Shouting*, a stunning oral history that peeks into every knuckleheaded nook and emetic cranny of the band's mythic and legendary anti-heroic status.

Color Me Obsessed is, like its subject, a strange, slippery beast: The film contains no footage of, or music by, the band. Opening with a still shot of a cigarette smoldering in an ashtray beside an old answering machine, the movie progresses in roughly chronological fashion, following the timeline of the Replacement's albums. Bechard seems little concerned with creating a definitive cinematic biography. Instead, he taps a load of interviews — with producers, label reps, writers, fans, as well as musicians like Husker Du's Grant Hart, REM guitarist Scott McCaughey and Gaslight Anthem singer Brian Fallon — to eke out what it is about the Replacements that continues to exert such a fascination. As musician Jim McGuinn puts it: "Kind of brilliant. Kind of dumb. Kind of Replacements."

Strangely, it all works. *Color Me Obsessed* is a hilarious and moving love letter to the little train that could but didn't — a Minneapolis garage band that, for one exhilarating and excruciating moment, stood poised on the brink of something enormous. Whether that brink was the cutting edge of success or a ledge into the abyss doesn't really matter. What's important is that the Replacements took the plunge. And the rest is history. **EW**

Holiness and Hell

Charismatic preacher Edmund Creffield was known to send his followers into seizures of religious ecstasy, sermonizing passionately for up to 24 hours straight. Combine that with the fact that most of Creffield's followers were young women, that the preacher held a belief in communal nudity and spent several months in a hole under a house in Corvallis, and you have a creepy, early 19th-century cult worthy of a feature film.

Few hard facts are known about the Church of the Bride of Christ, and Portland filmmaker Edward P. Davee's imagination fills in to illuminate the connection between sex, murder and salvation.

Cryptic storytelling quickly puts the viewer on edge with the film's black-and-white images, minimal dialogue and heavy music. The pacing is designed for discomfort. Time and events clip along too quickly, but in long, slow takes. An illuminating scene is

purposefully shortened, followed by an uncomfortably long look at a tree branch. It's as though a series of old photographs is laid out, one after the next, and we are left to piece together the clues.

Shot through mullioned windows or backwoods brush, *How the Fire Fell* casts the audience in the role of uncomfortable voyeur. This makes the film interesting but ultimately unsatisfying, as we never really understand any one character, only see them.

While one can forgive the film it's somewhat obvious imagery and heavy aesthetic, I cannot come to terms with the way the filmmaking upstaged the very story it was trying to tell. *How the Fire Fell* would have benefitted from more psychological introspection and fewer explicitly self-conscious gestures.

Davee is a passionate filmmaker with a strong, innovative approach. I look forward to his future films. It's only a matter of time before this director discovers a more seamless way of meshing the story and the telling in his work. — Anna Grace

A special screening of *How the Fire Fell*, followed by a Q&A with the film's director, Edward P. Davee, will be held 8pm Thursday, Oct. 13, at Bijou Cinemas; info at bijou-cinemas.com