

Bring The Ruckus

L.A. concert promoter reunites Wu-Tang Clan for one last show By Andy Beta

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Rock the Bells

[CIVILIAN PICTURES] ★★½

Live hip-hop can be an iffy proposition. Once extracted from the din of Bronx block parties and put onstage in classic-rock venues, something is lost. In acoustic spaces designed for instruments and with sound systems emphasizing frequencies other than digitized bass, too often the live sound is muddled, and the voices lost in a slurry of overblown low-end. Add to it the fact that mere mention of the genre's name leads most law-enforcement officials and security personnel to unveil their metal detectors and clench up their leather gloves—you'd have to be insane to want to book a festival of the stuff.

As documentary *Rock the Bells* makes clear, Chang Weisberg is insane. Chang—who cops to being “Chinese-Jewish, [meaning] I’m as mixed up [as my audience]”—is an acne-scarred, buzz-cut hip-hop fiend and L.A. concert promoter with wide shoulders, a tireless vision for the music, and jags of blood vessels that grow more pronounced across his pate as the pressures of organizing a live hip-hop event mount and manifest themselves. And it’s a good thing he has such



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broad shoulders—he’s been lugging a chip on them for nearly a decade.

Ever since the Wu-Tang Clan notoriously dropped off Rage Against the Machine’s summer tour in the mid ’90s, Weisberg has dreamed of reuniting the fractured and confounding nine-man hip-hop crew (plus unofficial 10th MC, Cappadonna) of schizophrenic rappers who rose up from Staten Island in the early ’90s, altering hip-hop’s trajectory. Like any heavy element though, the nucleus could not hold, and by the late ’90s, the Wu-Tang Clan had drifted apart amidst separate solo deals and in-fighting, with only a handful of the crew coming together to record and play shows. It didn’t help that sparkplug Ol’ Dirty Bastard had been incarcerated for two years.

Creating the Rock the Bells Festival in 2004 as a means to an end, Weisberg clandestinely booked all nine members of the Clan separately (meaning Method Man, Ghostface, Raekwon, Inspectah Deck, U-God, Masta Killa, GZA, RZA and the beleaguered Ol’

Dirty Bastard) and then attempted to reunite them. He also booked back-pack fare like Eyedea & Abilities, Sage Francis, MC Supernatural, Dilated Peoples, Chali 2na of Jurassic 5, and Redman, but the cameras of Denis Hennelly and Casey Suchan’s crew focus mainly on the soap opera that was the Wu-Tang Clan reunion.

Captured with nearly 20 cameras on the days leading up to the concert, Hennelly and Suchan edit together a linear trajectory out of the chaos. From the start, this is a nightmare production, from security lapses to shoddy sound equipment, not to mention Chang’s lack of math skills, deeming that he can pack 12,000 people into a building the fire marshal esteems can hold 5,500 at capacity, while also dishing 300,000 fliers around L.A. The entire event hinges on whether Ol’ Dirty Bastard, the beloved but hellhound-chased rapper, can come out of his crack-rock induced catatonia to make it to the venue.

Along the way, the documentary captures some compelling footage, be it Supernatural and his son picking beats and freestyling splendidly or Redman and his son sharing an inti-

mate moment in an SUV. Soon after, we see a now-THC-sodden Redman bouncing on a hotel bed like he himself is five. As the crowd suffers through the teeth-gnashing noise of Eyedea & Abilities as well as the goading antics of Sage Francis (the self-proclaimed “Bill O’Reilly of hip-hop”), the cries of “Wu-Tang” grow more ominous. The gates begin to buckle and the seething of bodies threatens to boil over, the tension growing more palpable by the second. Will a riot break out? Will the obdurate ODB crawl out from under his crack-rock? Will the Wu-Tang form like Voltron?

At the edge of our seats, the answer is... sorta. While the teeming crowd—whose “Wu-Tang” chants verge on the cannibalistic—does get to see the Clan’s final live performance (before ODB’s OD death just four months later), viewers at home only get stage introductions and a brief glimpse of the Bastard. The postscript mentions they put on an amazing two-hour performance, but we don’t get a second of that. At the end of *Rock the Bells*, anti-climactically given neither violence nor music, you get the feeling you’ve been cheated.

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SXSW Live 2007

[SHOUT! FACTORY] ★★½

Unibrows... now in HD

The spawn of stellar performances and a PowerPoint presentation, *SXSW Live 2007* is a vivid reminder of why HD might best be left for the Super Bowl. Swooping zoom-ins of every glorious sideburn and drop of sweat filmed last spring makes the shows more real than if you actually attended the Austin festival. Though the 18 featured performances (including



Peter Bjorn & John, Rickie Lee Jones, Aqualung and The Bravery) were recorded with crisp 5.1 surround sound, some just don’t translate well in the two custom-built clubs. Razorlight seems oddly out of place amid the Texas pride that leaks onto the Lone Star Lounge stage. And while the Bat Bar is more modern, its spacious interior is only fit for The Polyphonic Spree, dwarfing whatever presence any other band usually totes onstage to feed off crowd energy. Haphazard editing, clapping montages and shots of the audience awkwardly bopping along almost negate the solid lineup and exclusive Andrew W.K. interviews—God bless his white-clad soul. *Kasia Galazka*

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Deep Roots Music 1: Revival / Ranking Sounds

[MVD VISUAL] ★★★★★

Fascinating doc digs up the roots of Jamaican Music

When it comes to films of Jamaican music, there’s a holy trinity: 1972’s *The Harder They Come*, 1978’s *Rockers*, and 1982’s *Countryman*. While these three tucked the island’s indigenous music into rather cursory stories, this early-’80s documentary—shot by filmmaker Howard Johnson in the wake of Bob Marley’s untimely passing—presents an eye-opening account of how this tiny

island’s music became a worldwide phenomenon. Much like American blues, Jamaican music was rooted in slavery, and the film details how tribal (and social) dances evolved into calypso and ska, and how this music borrowed ideas from American soul and jazz in the process. Johnson also investigates how political change spurred musical evolution. It’s the scenes of street musicians and Rastafarian drumming intertwined with footage of Count Ossie, a teenaged Jimmy Cliff, and a Jack Ruby soundclash that most deftly expose these deep roots. *Andy Beta*

