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Tony Palmer

All My Loving [DVD]

(BBC, 1968) Rated: Unrated

US release date: 18 September 2007 (MVD Visual)

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by Stuart Henderson

By 1968, rock 'n' roll had been so transformed that it seemed to demand a new, fresh introduction. So much had happened in the six or seven years since the emergence of a new wave in British pop, and so much had shifted in the nature of cultural consumption, that what had been cutting edge rock 'n' roll music in 1962 already seemed distant, passé. The staggering stylistic revolutions that washed through pop music in the '60's (remember, it was merely five years between *Meet the Beatles* and *Sgt Pepper*) remain today the most exciting arena of study and appreciation for music fans. However, what appears now as a coherent progression, fueled by the turn to psychedelic drugs, the pyrotechnic innovations in sound and recording methods, and the expanding space for inventive, experimental artists in the pop world, was, at the time, simply confounding.

All My Loving, the prolific Tony Palmer's 1968 "masterpiece", is a 52-minute made-for-BBC examination of the state of the art in pop music, replete with interviews with key players, and never-before-seen footage of such heroes as Cream, Pink Floyd, and The Who. It touches on everything from the idealism of youth to the market realities of the popular; from the black man in America to the influence of LSD; from the coming of a new Parthenon to the probability of permanent ear damage; and from pop demagoguery to the global reach of George Harrison. Although this cacophonous, incoherent ramble through the music scene was widely discussed when it was first broadcast, it hardly needs to be reconsidered today.

The film is about everything and nothing, so it sidesteps casual description. In the hands of another filmmaker, perhaps, this might have been refreshing—a film dealing with the indefinable realm of art, creativity, and performance without trying to force confines around the issue would have been welcome—but Palmer's cut-and-paste approach leads us instead to a state of numbed detachment. As the film moves from one "issue" to another – here is Paul McCartney reminding us that he is not Hitler because he uses his power for "the Good"; here is an ex-Tin Pan Alley exec complaining about a lack of melody and lyricism in pop music; here is graphic footage of a Vietnamese man being unceremoniously shot in the head; here is Pete Townsend describing himself as an angry young man; here is Jimi Hendrix shyly discussing groupies; here are emaciated bodies being piled onto a conveyor belt; here is Lulu mocking opera singers; here is a napalmed child on fire – one reels from the implications of it all, but is offered no means of interpreting the findings. It's all just so much shapeless fear.

For many, the promise of copious footage of live performances by such fabled '60s-era rockers as Cream, Pink Floyd and Hendrix will be enough to convince them to fast-forward past the absurd, plainly offensive juxtapositions of charred flesh with extreme close-ups of Frank Zappa's artfully mustachioed face. However, they should be forewarned that not one performance is complete, nor are any particularly transcendent. Rather, what we are offered is a series of verse-and-chorus clips, some presented in bewildering kaleidoscope, others in stifling close-up. This is not a performance film.

In a section presented in dated weird-vision (woah, everything's gone RED, man), Pink Floyd, fresh from the loss of Syd Barrett and the hiring of David Gilmour, play an appropriately spooky "Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun" that builds in intensity to a huge crescendo before a startling jump cut clips the thing off in mid-flow. This technique, repeated throughout the film, has the intended effect: it shocks and refocuses the viewer, amplifying the significance of whatever is said next. However, it also tends to annoy you if you're enjoying the mood shaped by the performance.

Cream – clearly the favourite band of the moment, given their prominence in the film – is found performing in a faux-live setting, shot entirely in close-ups, with audience noise

annoyingly dubbed into the mix. Eric Clapton (all glasses, mustache, and golden curls) is nearly absent from the footage, while Ginger Baker's thrilling Bam-Bam drumming is given front seat. The lack of even one wide shot, however, disconnects us from the performance in a profoundly disconcerting way. Without any prior knowledge of the group, you wouldn't even know how many people were in the band.

There are a few moments of amusement and even significance amid the clutter. Eric Burden's retrospective view (in 1968!) of LSD's effect on the music industry ("now that the drugs are gone") is fascinating; the use of Jimi Hendrix to symbolize sexuality is, while clichéd, provocative; the utter absence of any women (apart from an ironic Lulu who is otherwise completely silenced) speaks volumes; and Donovan's immense propensity for hippie idealism ("the sea is so heavy, it really inspires me") is great fun. Indeed, if the film is worth our time, it is for the extraordinary curiosity of a three-minute rant by none other than Anthony Burgess, author of *A Clockwork Orange*. His precise, prescient observations are so well-formed that we almost don't care that we have no idea why in the world he is being interviewed, given that he has nothing whatever to do with the music industry.

But such is the nature of this beastly film; we are offered no direction, apart from a mildly hilarious voice-over from the stuffedest shirt this side of Ed Sullivan. Rather, we are offered a bunch of truncated rock 'n' roll music, a series of not-altogether illuminating interviews with otherwise interesting people, and more than enough juxtapositions of such stuff with intensely graphic images of frightful carnage and real-time death to force the connection between rock 'n' roll and Burgess' vision of ultra-violence. The obsessive, lingering footage of a young person staggering around, his or her body painted with sticking napalm, dreadfully engulfed in flames but still horrifically alive, agonizingly aware of what unspeakable awfulness had befallen them, plays out by way of ending to this "film of pop music".

The limited extras consist of a recent single-camera interview with Tony Palmer that, at 40 minutes, lasts nearly as long as the film itself, and a slideshow of rock 'n' roll-themed cartoons by Ralph Steadman (for some reason). The DVD, quite inexplicably, comes with no booklet.

RATING:  3

EXTRAS:  2

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