



# Michael Brendan Baker

## Notes on the Rockumentary Renaissance

2009 saw the release of *All Tomorrow's Parties* (Jonathan Caouette), a feature-length film documenting the history of the acclaimed artist-curated annual music festival of the same name on the occasion of its tenth anniversary. The film was compiled and curated by a young filmmaker, Caouette, who burst onto the scene several years earlier with an autobiographical documentary (*Tarnation*, 2003) made with iMovie, Apple's entry-level video editing software. *All Tomorrow's Parties* is comprised of footage shot over the course of a decade on a range of media formats — including Super 8mm, 16mm, DV, and 35mm still-photography — by a mix of professional filmmakers, amateur videographers, and attendees of the yearly festival and its satellite events. Funded in part and “released” by internationally recognized music label Warp Records, the film premiered in the 24 Beats Per Second program of the annual South by Southwest music festival, secured theatrical distribution, appeared at special screening engagements featuring live musical performances from bands featured in the film, streamed online for free at a leading new music website (Pitchfork Media), and appeared on DVD and Blu-Ray home video formats at the end of 2010. Five years after its release, there is still no better example of the life-cycle and vibrancy of the contemporary rockumentary genre than *All Tomorrow's Parties* with its flow across multitudinous creative, cultural, and industrial networks emblematic of our contemporary moment of (trans)media convergence.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, there is no better evidence in support of a proposition I have offered elsewhere: rockumentary is an aesthetically rich and commercially viable documentary genre notable for its visual style, innovation in the area of film sound and image technology, and the ways in which it organizes a complex system of socio-cultural and industrial

1. Media convergence is described by Henry Jenkins as “[...] the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes depending on who's speaking and what they think they are talking about” (Jenkins 2).



interactions (Baker 7). The genre occupies a resonant place within larger histories of film and popular music culture and directly impacts contemporary audiovisual works organized around popular music. The ever-growing number of media objects in theatres, online, and at home invested in the documentary representation of popular music suggest we are in the midst of the genre's expansion and resurgence.

Rockumentaries are, generally speaking, documentary films about rock music and related idioms, and usually feature some combination of performance footage, interviews, and undirected material. The genre arrived when it did because of the profile of rock music within youth culture and the transformation of the music industry, and it



was delivered to the screen with tools and technology newly available to filmmakers at the time. Rockumentary emerges in the 1960s as part of a larger shift in the character and content of Western youth culture and popular music, preceded by Burt Stern's seminal work of film reportage *Jazz on A Summer's Day* (1960). The genre's swift ascent to the status of the theatrical documentary *par excellence* through the latter part of the 1960s and the 1970s occurs directly in proportion to the growth of rock music as a cultural and economic force (Baker 183). A series of high-profile films, soundtrack releases, and box-office success in the 1970s permanently establish the rockumentary as a mainstream nonfiction film genre with an identifiable stable of classics (*Dont Look Back*, 1967; *Monterey Pop*, 1968; *Gimme Shelter*, 1970; *Woodstock*, 1970; *The Concert for Bangladesh*, 1972; *The Last Waltz*, 1978) before diminishing opportunities for theatrical distribution in the era of the Hollywood blockbuster are mitigated by new exhibition outlets in the form of home video and cable television.

The genre consists of five broad currents and trends. Rockumentary biographies are an explicitly hybrid form encompassing interviews, live performance sequences, and observational footage (*Jimi Hendrix*, 1973; *Joe Strummer: The Future Is Written*, 2007; *The Punk Singer*, 2013). These films derive their allure from the featured artist's status within rock culture and popular culture at-large. Concert and other performance-based rockumentaries span the gamut from rigorously choreographed and composed audiovisual spectacles to low-budget, sparsely edited, fan-made films and videos (*Stop Making Sense*, 1984; *Sign O the Times*, 1987; *Shine A Light*, 2007). By any conservative measure, the concert rockumentary is the largest category of work within the genre. A companion to both the biography and concert currents is the 'tour film' or 'making-of' rockumentary (*Let It Be*, 1970; *Journey: Frontiers & Beyond*, 1983; *Truth or Dare*, 1991). Unlike biographies, which span an artist's entire career or the concert film that generally represents a single event, these films are focused on the events surrounding a whole tour or the act of making a single album or planning a special event. A fourth trend within the rockumentary genre is ethnographic studies of rock music, its sub-genres, and subcultures (*Decline of Western Civilization*, 1981; *Buena Vista Social Club*, 1998; *Heavy Metal in Baghdad*, 2007). While other types of rockumentary serve as documents of rock culture and its participants, the ethnographic rockumentary makes explicit claims about the value of the research object and the filmmaker's purpose for documenting the music, musicians, and audiences in



question. The last type of rockumentary, the compilation or archival project, is the most common made-for-television music documentary but it is less often produced for theatrical release (*The Kids Are Alright*, 1979; *The History of Rock'n'Roll*, 1995; *Crossfire Hurricane*, 2012). More than any other type of rockumentary, the compilation or archival project relies on the structure and expository mode of address of classical documentaries with the subordination of the images to a singular rhetorical position and a reliance on didactic commentary (Nichols 34). While a single film might adopt various approaches resulting in hybrid forms and sub-genres, rockumentaries are often best described by the approach that governs its structure and mode of address to the audience.

Notwithstanding the experimentation and innovation that naturally resides in such a large and diverse corpus of

work, rockumentary is a decidedly conservative generic form in terms of its visual style and narrative structures. The basic sonic and photographic strategies of the genre — conventionalized in the late-1960s and early-1970s — were subject to very little revision or reinvention in the decades that followed their emergence. Behind-the-scenes moments are largely observational in nature, interviews are garden-variety talking heads, and the rockumentary soundtrack honours the professional practices of the record studio in combination with live audio production, while the visual representation of musical performance within the corpus is largely limited to two basic approaches. The journalistic strategy for the visual representation of musical performance is “typified by its clear compositional qualities (i.e. stable camera position; sharp focus; balanced lighting) and commitment to a coherent representation of both the performer and performance space [...] It strives to provide an unambiguous photographic record of the performance and is amenable to conventions of analytical editing” (Baker 97). The impressionistic strategy, on the other hand, “offers a highly stylized, often abstract representation of the performance. There is less an interest in documenting the space of the performance than in communicating an emotional or psychological dimension of the music through formal techniques often evinced in experimental practice (i.e. instability of the frame; unusual compositions; unconventional focus and lighting; plastic cutting)” (116). With all of this in mind, rockumentary fails to deliver on the claims of rebellion which rock music and rock culture profess to embody and embrace (accepting, of course, the complexity and contradictory nature of these claims within the context of the global entertainment industry). Through the 2000s, however, there is mounting evidence that the widespread availability and ease-of-use of digital media technologies, combined with the exponential growth of new media platforms for the distribution and exhibition of work, is reinvigorating the rockumentary genre and reconnecting it with mainstream audiences. We might understand this moment as the rockumentary renaissance.

The first signs of this renewal are discernible at the dawn of the millennium: a resurgence in popularity enhanced, in part, by the consolidation of DVD as the premiere home video format (and the re-release of many of the aforementioned classics of the genre on this new format), as well as a degree of mainstream interest in new theatrical releases unheard of for music documentaries dating back at least to the early 1990s. The release of the Wilco making-of portrait, *I Am Trying To Break Your Heart* (Sam Jones, 2002), and the controversy surrounding the behind-the-scenes Metallica tell-all, *Some Kind of Monster* (Joe Berlinger & Bruce Sinofsky, 2003), exemplify this renewed critical interest in the genre which encouraged producers to emulate the popular and financial success of these films.<sup>2</sup> By

2. *I Am Trying To Break Your Heart* is also noteworthy for its marketing and release. The film not only appeared at film festivals,

## I AM TRYING TO BREAK YOUR HEART A FILM ABOUT WILCO BY SAM JONES



the end of the decade, new approaches to form and subject matter fostered in part by digital technology (and the rapid evolution of video compression which permanently established the web as a distribution and exhibition space) had subtly re-shaped the rockumentary, transforming its conventions into a vernacular style immediately recognizable to audiences across generational boundaries. As the global audience grows larger, the ability of cultural institutions like film festivals and new media platforms like Vimeo and Pitchfork Media (specifically, the Pitchfork.tv speciality area) to reach out to niche interest groups and subcultures make the natural audience for rockumentary easier to target. The aforementioned South by Southwest music festival and the esteemed Sundance Film Festival have grown to become destination events and critical marketplaces for fans and distributors of music documentaries in North America and the United Kingdom. Film festivals with programming dedicated entirely to music documentaries, and rockumentary in particular, are popping up with increasing frequency

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art cinemas, and in a multi-disc DVD package courtesy of the boutique imprint, Plexifilm, but also leveraged (and fed) the publicity surrounding the unique circumstances of the newly released *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* (Nonesuch, 2002) album to execute the sort of multi-format media event usually reserved for big budget Hollywood spectacles.



— noteworthy examples include Sound Unseen (Minneapolis), Don't Knock the Rock (Los Angeles), and Film Pop (Montreal) — and websites like Pitchfork and Vice now effectively serve as de facto producers of music documentaries on both mainstream and niche artists and subject matter. Most tellingly, corporate interests now commit millions of dollars to the production of live-streaming concert events (American Express's "Unstaged" series) and music videos because of the value of online venues as advertising space; Sony Music Entertainment and Universal Music Group's Vevo-branded music videos grossed more than \$200 million in advertising in 2012 (Karp) and receives additional revenue depending on the ownership of the recording and its performance.

The audiovisual aesthetic of these non-narrative works is often described as "post-classical" in terms of their relationship to traditional conceptions of cinema (Bordwell; Manovich) while acknowledging its undeniable bond to music video-style as it developed in earlier decades (Goodwin; Vernallis). Most recently, Carol Vernallis has expanded upon Bordwell's conception of "intensified continuity" — an evolution of classical Hollywood style which includes, among other things, a sizeable decrease in the average shot length in narrative films and a willingness on the part of filmmakers to complicate narrative space through the disavowal of several conventions of continuity editing including eyeline matches, cutting-on-action, and camera placement (Bordwell) — to describe "intensified audiovisual aesthetics" (Vernallis 278) across digital media platforms, focusing specifically on YouTube, music videos, and 'post-classical digital cinema'. These intensified audiovisual aesthetics move beyond Bordwell's conceptualization of post-classical narrative through a "heightened" use of traditional and still-emerging sound and image techniques that "create rifts in form that permeate all the way to deep structure" (38). Vernallis celebrates the music video as "a viable site to develop style and technique, and to discover means for communicating musical experience" (26). I would submit that the booming production of online, nonfictional musical shorts typified by the in-house productions of Pitchfork Media

and independent creators is a critical link in this chain of invention and influence connecting post-classical cinema, music videos, and the rockumentary genre.

The preponderance of nonfiction musical shorts and features now produced and distributed primarily with digital and networked technologies demonstrate two especially curious results of the ubiquity of visual representations of popular music performance as it relates to rockumentary aesthetics. The first is an emptying-out of conventional formal stylistics that results in material fitting neither the *journalistic* nor the *impressionistic* strategies for the visual representation of musical performance outlined earlier. A new generation of trained cinematographers and videographers such as France's Mathieu Saura (aka Vincent Moon) are foregrounding the presence of their increasingly mobile cameras within the space of the performance in ways that were truly unattainable (if not completely unimaginable) to previous generations of rockumentarians, effectively collapsing the observational style of classic rockumentaries with varying degrees of interactivity that calls attention to itself. These new works re-imagine the *liveness*<sup>3</sup> of popular music performance by situating the artist in commonplace environments (i.e. private homes, elevators, cafes, public transit, tourist attractions) and capturing the performance in a single continuous take — it is not the illusion of co-presence between the performer and home audience, but rather the co-presence of the performer and the filmmaker-as-creative-force who serves as a surrogate for the viewer as she carves out the performance from quotidian spaces. In online series such as *The Take Away Show* and *Southern Souls*, on-location performances appear to occur spontaneously: there is no clear introduction of the per-

3. Originally defined by Philip Auslander (1999) in the context of mediated spaces or audiovisual events in which the performers and audience are both physically and temporally co-present to one another — a distinction that became necessary with the advent of recorded sound — the concept of *liveness* is adaptable to the digital age with reference to "an interaction produced through our engagement with [an] object and our willingness to accept its claim [that it is, in fact, 'live']" (Auslander 9).

formers apart from on-screen text and no establishing of the technical means by which the performance will be executed (i.e. sound recording devices, additional cameras), just blind faith (or an existing investment in the brand or filmmaker) that sound and image will be effectively captured and communicated in a way that preserves the emotion or energy of the performance. The second consequence of this profusion of rockumentary production is a disavowal of the notion (which gradually emerges within music videos and overtakes the long-form music video format) that the musical performance need not be represented at all. The highly stylized, fictional scenarios featuring popular music soundtracks that defined music videos through the 1980s and 1990s (i.e. *Thriller* 1982 and *Vogue* 1990, respectively) are giving way to a re-investment in nonfictional representations of musical performance and rockumentary's roots in the observational and interactive modes of representation that defined the visual style of the genre in the late-1960s and 1970s.

Perhaps the most curious contemporary example of rockumentary's reach and clear confirmation of its broader cultural impact appears in the form of an interactive digital media project that leverages the history of visual representations of popular music canonized within the genre and the iconic images of specific films for the express purposes of intelligibility and immersion. *The Beatles: Rock Band* (Harmonix, 2009), an example of the rhythm video game genre which focuses on the physical demands of keeping pace with complicated rhythmic cues (both sonic and visual), emphasizes its fidelity to the historical record and its accurate (though not photorealistic) re-creation of various performances and physical environments from the canon of The Beatles on the basis of audio-visual documentary sources — including two rockumentaries: *The Beatles Live at Shea Stadium* (ABC-TV, 1965) and the iconic rooftop concert sequence from *Let It Be* (Michael Lindsay-Hogg, 1970). The faithful reproduction of various mediated audiovisual environments serves both the established narrative of The Beatles' career that structures the gameplay and their cultural mythology. The emphasis on visual evidence by way of the game's evocation of basic conventions of rockumentary's visual stylistics (and the remediation of individual rockumentary images) moves this and other rhythm games into a specific cultural sphere of recognition (one closely associated with the genre's target demography: family and mature player) based in part on the vernacular nature of the rockumentary genre. In these ways, *The Beatles: Rock Band* is distinct from other rhythm games wherein the visual element, while never inconsequential and often indebted to both rockumentary and music video audiovisual aesthetics, is never explicitly historical or nonfictional in its relationship to the musical performance. As a result, *The Beatles: Rock Band* functions as a something like a documentary resource, trading on the evidentiary status of (remediated) documentary images and recordings to enrich the user experience and, ultimately, prompting questions

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about the influence of film style upon interactive texts and stoking debates about what a “documentary video game” might be. The design strategy adopted by the creators at Harmonix depends upon routines and practices deeply rooted in ‘older’ forms of audiovisual representation. Thus, *The Beatles: Rock Band* is an overt illustration of the remediation<sup>4</sup> of visual representations of popular music codified within the rockumentary genre for the purpose of investing a narrow thematic conceit with a rich sense of history and cultural cachet, and it exemplifies Rodowick's theory concerning the *persistence* of the cinematic in this age of the digital and new media with the prominence of cinema's representational strategies in our contemporary audiovisual culture.

Rockumentary films—individually and as a group—make significant contributions to our historical understanding of post-war documentary's development. For this reason alone there is value in turning our critical attention to this corpus. The basic vocabulary for the visual representation of rock music (and popular music in general) in the contemporary moving image has its foundations in the strategies and conventions of a genre that is now fifty

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4. With their theory of remediation, Bolter & Grusin argue “what is in fact new [about new media] is the particular way in which each innovation rearranges and reconstitutes the meaning of earlier elements” (Bolter & Grusin 270). Moreover, it is the remediation of a medium (and within a medium) that offers insight to the representational practices of earlier media (Ibid. 49); the act or process of remediation reveals the influence of the earlier media—its technology, techniques and practices—upon new media.

years old. An understanding of the genre, its development, and trajectories, offers deeper insight to the visual style and soundtracks of contemporary audiovisual works invested in popular music, including those within the paradigm of *intensified audiovisual aesthetics*. There is a persistence to the rockumentary, its codes and conventions, that is in no way diminished by its migration across media formats, platforms, and distribution networks (both concrete and virtual). These spaces are especially vital to the development of works which examine heretofore ignored or marginalized subjects in many mainstream, theatrically-released music documentaries like non-Western, non-white identities (*Taqwacore*, 2011), gender identity within popular music (*Who Took the Bomp?*, 2010), and motherhood and the working musician (*Come Worry With Us!*, 2014). The rockumentary renaissance detailed above is doubly confirmed and its consequences expanded as we enlarge our definition of the category to include interactive digital media and other emergent forms of nonfiction storytelling; i.e. video games, database documentaries, and the multimedia journalism often identified as ‘snowfalling’.<sup>5</sup> It is fair to suggest that we are living in a media moment defined by bounty and the way in which these works flow and converge — rockumentary, its influence, and its progeny are found everywhere.

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5. “Snowfalling” takes its name from the Peabody Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times multimedia story by John Branch which combined traditional journalistic investigation and reportage with extensive audiovisual supplements (including photographs, maps, 3D modelled animations, video interviews, primary documentary material like 911 emergency recordings) to tell the story of a deadly 2012 avalanche in Washington State, all delivered within a fluid web space executed by a team of designers and programmers who sought to fully integrate the audiovisual elements within the story. Similar multimedia features are now common across the web and a large number of the higher profile examples focus on musical subjects; Pitchfork often packages its feature interviews as ‘snowfalls’ and John Jeremiah Sullivan’s recent “The Ballad of Geeshie and Elvie” for the New York Times brilliantly incorporates audiovisual elements in its recuperation of two essentially ‘lost’ (and seemingly misunderstood) figures from the American vernacular blues tradition, Geeshie Wiley and Elvie Thomas.