



HEAVY LOAD

UK, 2008, Cert (UK): 12A, 91 mins

Director: Jerry Rothwell

Cast: Jimmy Nichols, Michael White, Mick Williams, Paul Richards, Simon Barker

Synopsis

Heavy Load is Lewes' answer to the Ramones, a punk outfit subject to the inflammatory mix of ego, fantasy, and desire that fuels any emerging band. They're also, uniquely, made up of musicians with and without learning disabilities, which makes the band's survival a precarious negotiation between two different worlds: on the one hand the institutional timetable of day centres, work placements and social workers; on the other the chaotic slacker life of rehearsal rooms, studios and gigs.

Specialising in thrash covers of late 70's punk – or punk versions of recent pop, Heavy Load is unlikely to have a top ten hit. 'We like to take a classic song' says guitarist Mick, 'and crucify it'. Their cacophonous reinterpretation of Kylie's Can't Get You Out Of My Head possesses a frenzied anarchy that bears no resemblance to the disco original. Their howled version of the Troggs' Wild Thing adds a psychotic menace that makes you forget that this was once a love song. On stage the band fizz with an energy that belies the expectations the world has of the 'spaz' or the 'moron' or the 'idiot'. They survive through a combination of raucous energy, attitude and sheer volume.

Shot over two years when the band record their first album The Queen Mother's Dead, the film is a comedy of conflicting ambitions capturing the sweat and romance of playing in a band as they move out of the ghetto of disability club nights to test whether their dreams can survive in the mainstream.

'Stay Up Late' Campaign

Heavy Load started the 'Stay Up Late' campaign after years of getting fed up with playing to half-empty halls because people with learning disabilities often have to leave early because their staff finish shifts at 10pm. The filming of the band really gave the momentum needed to kick off an energetic campaign. The 'Stay Up Late' aims to make managers and support workers aware that people with learning disabilities want more control over how they structure their lives and to be consulted when staff draw up rotas which affect things like how late they can stay out at gigs and club nights. 'Stay Up Late' has been awarded £5,000 by the Lottery Fund, which it is using to put pressure on service providers and councils and raising awareness by producing leaflets, tee-shirts and posters, signing petitions and organising showcase events. Heavy Load says: We want to stay up late ... we want to have some fun!

Review: Leigh Singer, FilmFour

If you only heard Heavy Load's brand of raucous, lo-fi rock, would you pay them any attention? Possibly not; it's the type of shouty, three-chord, cover version-centric stuff bellowed out in pubs the world over. If you saw Heavy Load on the other hand, you might well sit up and take notice. The drummer, Michael, has Down's syndrome; Simon the singer and Jimmy, one of the guitarists, also have learning difficulties. It's the band's USP, and what attracted documentary maker Jerry Rothwell to follow them for two tumultuous years.

The filmmaker is upfront about his motivations from the outset. Heavy Load from Lewes, consisting of the trio mentioned plus support workers Paul Richards (on bass) and Mick Williams (lead guitar), had already been playing for some nine years before Rothwell happened upon them. Reeling from his own failed film and mid-life crisis, he was enthused by the band's obvious joy at playing music and decided to make them his next project, titling the picture "a film about happiness".

It's a bafflingly limiting thesis on which to posit a film. Heavy Load's members may be unconventional but their ups and downs - successful gigs, inter-band friction, personal crises - are staples of any band ever formed. It's how the group's two divergent worlds - freewheeling punk rock and strictly controlled disabled health care - co-exist that fascinates here and which involves so much more than simple "happiness". Rothwell also insinuates himself into the narrative and his softly-spoken but vaguely irritating voiceover leads one initially to fear the worst; that Heavy Load are merely a prop for him to carry his own personal baggage. Happily the band themselves put paid to that worry. Hyperactive Simon, sincere but sweetly ambitious Michael and laidback Jimmy are a fascinating combination. Their commitment to Heavy Load doesn't preclude clashes of musical taste. Michael loves his old school rock 'n' roll along with an unusual predilection for boy bands; Simon prefers Michael Bolton and George Michael. Something has to give.

Care workers Mick and Paul are affable, endlessly patient and never patronising to the other band members, handling any sudden outburst of alarm or ego with delicacy. It's surely all worth it. Starting off playing for audiences with disabilities, Heavy Load graduate to pub gigs, record an album and, finally, even an appearance at the Wychwood Music Festival, on the same bill as Badly Drawn Boy and the Fun Lovin' Criminals no less.

All the band material is subtly elicited, well filmed and edited and enthralling. It's aspects around this that show a lack of forensic detail. We never learn whether support workers Mick and Paul are still in this profession, nor the exact nature of Jimmy and Simon's conditions. It may respect their privacy but it makes the group portrait frustratingly incomplete, puzzling given that Rothwell filmed for over two years.

Though Rothwell continues to chime in occasionally, he doesn't - or isn't allowed - to overwhelm the band. As much as they claim they don't want to be treated as a charity case, it's undoubtedly their disabilities that make their musical abilities and achievements so deserving of attention; and in that respect, the film is bound to spread a lot of happiness.

Interview with Director Jerry Rothwell

How did you first come across Heavy Load?

I first came across Heavy Load at a doctor's surgery, where I picked up an old edition of a Mencap newsletter and read about this band made up of people with and without learning disabilities doing a version of I Fought the Law. Being a Clash fan, and old enough to remember that song the first time round, I got really excited about the idea and decided to follow it up from there.

What made you think this could make a documentary?

I was drawn to the band because there was an incredible joy about what they did, and I was interested in doing a film that got to that exuberance. I have done work on learning disabilities in the past and liked the idea that this could be a sort of rockumentary, not about the usual issues of services or housing, but about a band, whose learning disabilities are there but are not the main focus.

So this is not an issue-driven film about learning disability?

No, I wanted to treat the band as a fact and just look at the way in which that band had the same kind of struggles and dilemmas, highs and lows as any other band trying to achieve what they wanted to do. As you watch the film you become aware that some of the band have all kinds of things that a lot of us don't have, like social workers or people sitting in when they go out with their girlfriends and telling them when they have to wash up and those are the different circumstances of their lives and you encounter those things in that way rather than being as an aspect of their disability. You see them just as people who are surrounded by a set of conditions in their lives and what we tried to do was to present those things through the eyes of the different members of the band. I don't want the audience to come to it primarily thinking about going to watch a film about disabled people.

What do you think the film is about?

I think it's a film about the tension between ambition and happiness and between success and happiness. We live in a society where we are continually urged to seek happiness and I think that my conclusion through the film is that whole notion of a search for happiness is a false one. In the end we just have to be receptive to the moments of happiness we're offered. In fact one of the things I learned from the band was about being receptive to the world. It's interesting that all of the people in the film, both me and the band, are middle aged – it's partly a film about middle age and getting to a point where you look at your life and wonder what it means. It's as true for me behind the camera as it is for the band in front of the camera and in some ways that is what we have in common – except the band have found a much better way of working it out.

How do you think your presence changed the dynamic within the band?

Obviously filming changes a situation: people become self-conscious or become aware of being watched which is an unusual situation for most people. In some ways filming the band unleashed kinds of hopes that perhaps wouldn't have been expressed without the cameras there, and the expression of those hopes has an impact on the band and can undermine it as well.

What do you hope people will take away from the film?

I hope that people will watch the film and lose the preconceived frame through which people tend to look at people with disabilities. Although in some ways it's a film which may shift people's understandings about learning disability, I wouldn't say that that was what I primarily set out to do. Hopefully people will think about their own lives and their own happiness. I think it's a life-affirming film about being human and taking joy in the world and in the relationships that we have.