

Rock Past Reverberates With ‘Echo in the Canyon’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on June 21, 2019 - 8:53am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – So much ink and retrospective media space has been taken up with the British Invasion of America, starting with The Beatles in 1964. Well, finally there is a new documentary that goes back to the good old USA during that era, to give that folk/rock “California Sound” its due. It begins with the first jingle-jangle of the 12 string electric guitar from Roger McGuinn and The Byrds in 1965 on “Mr. Tambourine Man,” and resonates as the “Echo in the Canyon.”

This folk/rock movement during mid-1960s, primarily based in Laurel Canyon (the Los Angeles neighborhood where many of the rockers lived) is the basis for this documentary overview, directed by Andrew Slater. The interviews are conducted by Jakob Dylan (yes, he is Bob’s son) and features the the inventors and contemporaries of the Sound, including McGuinn, Brian Wilson, David Crosby, Michelle Phillips, Graham Nash, Stephen Stills, John Sebastian and even cheeky Ringo Starr himself. The focus is on four influential groups ... The Byrds, The Mamas & the Papas, Buffalo Springfield and The Beach Boys.

Jakob Dylan has the role of a seeker, as he puts together a modern line-up of fellow troubadours – Beck, Fiona Apple, Cat Power, Regina Spektor and Norah Jones among them – to emulate the songs, and coordinate a 50th Anniversary concert in 2015. When he talks to the California Sound originators, Dylan sits at the feet of the masters like an eager student, and also gets perspective from the icons influenced by them, like Eric Clapton, Jackson Browne and especially Tom Petty, in his last interview before his death in 2017.



The Mamas & the Papas Back in the Day of ‘Echo in the Canyon’

Photo credit: Greenwich Entertainment

The film goes back and forth from the interviews, archival footage of the four groups’ histories and the preparations/performances of the 50th Anniversary Tribute event. It is a righteous journey, even using “Model Shop” (1969) – a film set in the Los Angeles of the time – as a mirror to Jakob Dylan’s path of redemption and remembrance. The now old time rockers have nothing to lose 50 years on, and their memories are punctuated with refreshing honesty, even in describing themselves ... David Crosby (The Byrds) and Michelle Phillips (The Mamas & the Papas) especially getting points for their candor.

The modern interpreters are intriguing in their own way, as the centerpiece meetings regarding the 2015 concert’s songs takes place at a groovy California home, and the singers lovingly go over the old record albums like worshipers handling artifacts. They rightly point out that it’s a treasure trove, marvelous in its depth and breadth (the four bands put out an astounding 20 studio albums in total during the period outlined in the film). But the admiration really comes through during the actual concert clips, when even stoic senders like Beck had an illumination in his eyes as he performs the holy writ. It’s an unusual format for a rock doc, and captures more enlightenment than what is standard.

The outliers have their say, and The Beatles get their props, for it was their appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show in 1964 that lit the fuse for the California Sound explosion (and steered The Beach Boys towards “Pet Sounds”). Ringo Starr is especially funny in relating his and George Harrison’s attraction towards the L.A. “hippies” and their habits (and in turn, The Beatle albums “Rubber Soul” and “Revolver” were directly influenced by their friends in America). And it is truly heart rending to see Tom Petty’s reminiscence of a Buffalo Springfield concert in his native Florida in 1968 ... the old man got to be a kid again, shortly before his shuffle off the mortal coil.



Jakob Dylan (left) and Tom Petty in 'Echo in the Canyon'

Photo credit: Greenwich Entertainment

But it is the music and songs that still sounds fresh, even overplayed hits like "California Dreaming" (Mama/Papas) and "Turn! Turn! Turn!" (The Byrds), because the documentary gets under the skin of the Sound's development. The most reverence seems to be for The Beach Boys "Pet Sounds," and its creator Brian Wilson is almost animated (he must be on new meds) as he describes his use of four different L.A. studios to get the song "Good Vibrations" just right. Producer Lou Adler (Mamas/Papas) is also present, representing the background guys, although Stephen Stills of Buffalo Springfield points out that many of the old school engineers would get a day rate just by "sitting in," as the inventors of the Sound went in their own direction.

And what a direction is was, all pointing to both revolution and evolution. As a second wave admirer of the era, based in The Beatles but hungry for every other band that got a chance because of them, I was most impressed with the Laurel Canyon expression being compared to the 1930s Moveable Feast eon of Hemingway and Paris. Time and place and people, together at a moment that sparks all of them, then going out into the world, and creating the Sound that continues to inspire our collective cultural soul. That Canyon Echo, so resilient and clear, still pulsing in the universe. "I'm picking up good vibrations, she's giving me excitations ... "

This essay originally appeared in the Music Box Theatre Film Calendar magazine, June 7 - July 25, 2019 Edition, available at the theatre and elsewhere in Chicago.

"Echo in the Canyon" continues its limited release in Chicago on June 21st at the Music Box Theatre, 3733 North Southport, Chicago. See local listings for other theaters and show times. Rocker Jakob Dylan and director Andrew Slater will appear at the 7pm screening on June 21st on behalf of the film. Featuring interviews with Tom Petty, Roger McGuinn, Brian Wilson, David Crosby, Michelle Phillips, Graham Nash, Stephen Stills and Ringo Starr. Rated "PG-13"



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