

Gimme Danger from Jim Jarmusch

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“Music is life, and life is not a business”

—Iggy Pop, aka James Osterberg

Many music documentaries and films have come out in recent years in the US, a good number of them devoted to the popular music of the 1960s and 1970s. It is not possible to justify all of these films, some of which seem more exercises in nostalgia—made by those stuck in time—than anything else. Does the world need another hour-and-a-half-plus documentary about one more former or aging rock group?

The answer to this question depends, to a certain extent, on personal taste and, more fundamentally, on the significance of the music in question (in so far as that can be objectively determined), but in the case of the Detroit-area band The Stooges, this author would reply in the affirmative. There is a legitimate story here to be told.

The Stooges were a rock group that was active in the late 1960s and early 1970s and based in the college town of Ann Arbor, Michigan. The Asheton brothers, Ron and Scott, played guitar and drums respectively. Dave Alexander played bass, and James Osterberg, later changing his name to Iggy Pop, was the lead singer.

While most “counter-culture” bands of the time focused on long solos and intricate (or pseudo-intricate, often pretentious) songs, The Stooges played an almost minimalist style of music more in the tradition of classic rock and roll, à la Chuck Berry or Elvis Presley.

However, it would be a mistake to describe their music as merely derivative. Their lyrics and sound suggested a certain rot at the heart of postwar American society missing from the “San Francisco Sound.” In my opinion, their first three (and only) albums contain some of the most raw and powerful music of the time.

What was the source of this angry and passionate music, and more importantly, why do many people continue to find it compelling today? Why was this obviously talented band denied greater recognition in their day? Unfortunately, American filmmaker Jim Jarmusch (*Down by Law*, *Dead Man*, *Coffee and Cigarettes*) does not fully address these questions in his documentary-paeon to the group, *Gimme Danger*.

The principal problem with Jarmusch’s approach is that he is not more critical of his sources. He begins his interview with Iggy Pop by terming The Stooges, “the greatest rock and roll band in the world.” However, he fails to make his case.

Pop strikes one as amusing and insightful one moment, and the next, rambling and incoherent. Jarmusch does not challenge him as an objective documentarian should, so too much of the film

reduces itself to hero worship, complete with requisite drug stories and name-dropping.

The greatest strength of the film is the light it sheds on the origins of the group. Pop describes Michigan (he was born in Muskegon in 1947 and grew up in Ypsilanti) in the 1960s as a midway point between Los Angeles and New York. He calls the area “flyover country,” or at least that is the popular stereotype he criticizes. Osterberg-Pop lived with his parents in a trailer and suffered humiliation as a result. The Asheton brothers and Dave Alexander came from similar working-class backgrounds.

Their fathers all fought in World War II, and the band members themselves came of age during the height of US intervention in Vietnam, when they would have been eligible for the draft. Much more could have been said about this in *Gimme Danger*, but, alas, it was not.

Describing a school field trip to Ford’s River Rouge Complex in Dearborn, Michigan (once the largest industrial facility in the world), Pop recalls hearing and seeing a giant press cut or shape large sheets of metal and remarks how he wanted to capture that sound in his music. Inspired by the Chicago blues scene in the mid-1960s, Pop played with several bands in that city and was taken with its vibrant cultural scene. He remarks how he had found a group of people, black and white, who had “not lost their childhood in adulthood.”

In the early days, The Stooges—who called on many musical influences, including jazz and electronic music—appeared on stage with drum, bass, guitar, vacuum cleaner, blender, and other household appliances to create what Pop calls “free form association music.” How successful this combination was remains debatable to say the least, but it does suggest an ambition and humor that has sadly all but disappeared from today’s music.

The band formed in the aftermath of the Detroit riots of 1967, in which the National Guard was called out to put down the rebellion, one of many in the late 1960s. We see footage of soldiers with machine guns mounted on jeeps travelling down a highway intersecting the city, and that is the last we see of them. Might not all this have had something to do with the seething anger and frustration of the group’s music? Jarmusch does not seem to think so and moves on.

The Stooges start playing with the MC5, short for Motor City Five. The latter also specialized in a louder and more “psychedelic” update of Little Richard et al. The MC5 were managed by John Sinclair, a radical who formed the so-called White Panther Party.

A critical episode in the film takes place on the eve of the Democratic Party’s national convention in Chicago in 1968. Amid

escalating violence, mostly on the part of the Chicago Police Department, Sinclair asks the MC5 and The Stooges to play a free concert as part of the protest “festivities.”

Not wanting to be a part of the events, but also not wanting to say no to Sinclair, all Pop can do is perform summersaults around a hotel room in response. At this point in Jarmusch’s documentary, Pop insists that although the band lived in a commune and considered themselves “teenage communists,” they had no desire to be “political” and would have nothing to do with such stunts.

Many issues arise. Of course, the Sinclair-style protest politics of the late 1960s was extremely limited and sometimes sophomoric, or worse. Skeptical of the mass of workers and, in the end, still orbiting around the Democratic Party, “far-left” radicalism of this variety for the most part either expended itself in Weatherman terrorism or evaporated over the coming decades in clouds of bourgeois respectability.

For example, in January 2009, Sinclair—whose politically motivated imprisonment in 1969 sparked outrage and a song by John Lennon—publicly celebrated the inauguration of Barack Obama. Sinclair explained, “I’ve been waiting for this day all my adult life. I never thought it would be possible. ... When you are a white person in America, you have a horrible racist history that you were always uncomfortable with, but you think ‘what can I do?’ And now they’ve made the ultimate choice. ... [I]t feels good to do the right thing and white people feel proud of themselves too.”

Nonetheless, the simple and unthinking rejection of “politics” by artists is damaging in the long run. Jarmusch seems to solidarize himself with the commonplace one often encounters in the pop music world, that “politics” belongs on one side and “everyday life” (including desire, anger, passion) belongs on the other, and never the twain shall meet.

In fact, the greatest modern artists are the ones who have made the connection between “the great questions of the day” and everyday experience in a way that does not come across as didactic or sloganeering, but enlightening and entertaining.

In *Gimme Danger*, Jarmusch chooses largely to leave out the social and political context of the time. A great deal was going on in America at the time: major riots and protests; a seemingly never-ending war in Southeast Asia; political assassinations; a huge political crisis at home—first, under Lyndon Johnson and then, Richard Nixon; widespread poverty. ...

Did all this not find some expression in the group’s music, even if The Stooges weren’t overtly “political”? The answer seems fairly obvious, especially considering the group had a song called “Search and Destroy,” inspired by a newspaper headline about Vietnam.

Their first self-titled album was released in 1969 and produced by John Cale of The Velvet Underground. Much of the content of the album, at least lyrically, can be judged by the song titles: “No Fun,” “Not Right,” “Real Cool Time” and “1969.” The album sounds direct and to the point and more at one with the zeitgeist, for better or worse, than many other bands.

Their next album, *Fun House*, had an even more thrilling and menacing sound. Recorded in Los Angeles and released in 1970,

the album was inspired by Miles Davis’s jazz fusion work, *Bitches Brew*, and the tight funk of James Brown and saxophonist Maceo Parker. Unfortunately, hardly anyone heard it outside Detroit, and the band struggled to gain wider recognition.

In the face of various pressures, the band members began heavily using drugs. Their sound and performance were not well received by audiences who often threw bottles and trash at them. As a result, the group degenerated even further in an anti-social direction and took the musical side of things less and less seriously.

The Stooges broke up by 1974. Alexander had become addicted to heroin and eventually succumbed to pneumonia at the age of 27. The remaining band members reunited for a time with newcomer guitarist James Williamson to record *Raw Power*, produced by David Bowie, which would prove to be their swan song.

In a memorable scene in *Gimme Danger*, the band’s manager asks a record executive what he thought of the group’s live performance, to which the latter responds, “I didn’t hear anything.” Under the present social circumstances, record companies call the shots and no one is going to hear a group or an individual if the media conglomerates don’t believe they can make a profit off them, talented or not.

One positive feature of Jarmusch’s film is its decidedly underdog feel. *Gimme Danger* ends with Iggy Pop and the surviving Stooges accepting an award at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Pop explains that he was accepting the honor for all the “poor people” who make such music possible, no doubt making the well-heeled audience a little uncomfortable. It is doubtful that Bob Dylan will do the same when he accepts the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The author recommends:

The Stooges (1969) Fun House (1970) Raw Power (1973)

Iggy and Stooges live at the Cincinnati Pop Festival (1970)



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