

Permissive

UK | 1970 | 75 minutes

Credits

Director Lindsay Shonteff
Screenplay Jeremy Craig Dryden
Photography John C. Taylor
Music Andrew Hellaby, Colin Pearson & Roger Wootton (as Comus)

Cast

Suzy Maggie Stride
Fiona Gay Singleton
Jimi Gilbert Wynne
Lee Alan Gorrie

In Brief

Suzie arrives in London from the provinces, hoping to catch some of that Swinging London vibe that she has heard about through the mass media. Fiona takes Suzy under her wing and introduces her to the band she hangs out with. After a short while Suzy does an All About Eve and usurps Fiona's position, with fatal consequences...

It may have plenty of sex, drugs and rock and roll, but 1970's Permissive is not exactly what you'd call a fun film. Rather it's one of the most dreary, drab and depressing films you could hope to see about the realities of the music world, more Cocksucker Blues than Almost Famous, but with a band whose material circumstances are more akin to those of Black Flag than the Rolling Stones.

Stylistically the film is an odd combination of pseudo-documentary nothing much to see for the most part punctuated by moments of machine gun editing, as if someone had decided to make a kitchen sink drama of the Cathy Come Home or Bleak Moments type with editing inspired by Performance.

- Keith Brown (giallo-fever.blogspot.co.uk)

I know very little about the world of progressive folk/rock in the 1970s but, judging by Lindsay Shonteff's Permissive, the life of a groupie - constantly on the road, staying in seedy hotels, used and abused in a game of sexual 'pass the parcel' - well...it doesn't look like a barrel of laughs to me.

Shonteff is, along with the likes of Stanley Long, Pete Walker and Arnold Miller, part of a group of film makers who operated within the growing British sexploitation film industry of the late 60s and early 70s. Much of that industry represented the, albeit unselfconscious, nadir of the British film industry's output (the endless Confessions and Adventures Of... films raking in the cash despite or because of their low rent appeal) when transatlantic funding all but dried up and we saw the likes of Hammer, Amicus and other British independents and majors curl up and die. The British exploitation film persevered in this climate, primarily because of the continued presence of the Eady levy combined with a loosening of censorship rules, and much of the output was clumsy soft porn comedy and genre spoofs or sensational horror flicks.

What's arresting about watching Permissive now is that even in its restored state (the BBFC reduced the 89 minute running time to 75 minutes for the original release thus removing much of the 'tits and ass' content) it's unlikely to titillate anyone never mind the 'dirty mac brigade' that clapped eyes on it back in 1970. Goodness knows what they thought of it then and what they'd think of it now in its restored state. It's a far cry from the cheerful nonsense of Stanley Long's spy spoofs and Walker's gangster and horror slashers. And anyone, particularly impressionable young women, who may have thought a career as a rock groupie was glamorous would certainly have had pause for thought here. But then it's not a film targeted at them.

It's a grim film, hardly the cheeriest endorsement of the British folk/rock music scene of the times, and spins out a cautionary tale of a young woman seduced into the groupie scene, something of a social concern in the late 1960s and regularly a subject of many screaming tabloid headlines. Suzy, played rather effectively by Maggie Stride, arrives, duffle coat clad, in the dressing room of prog folk-rock group Forever More and the film takes us, very much in documentary, verite style, on her journey from naive, innocent hanger-on to alienated, deadened groupie.

She befriends former schoolfriend Fiona (the less effective Gay Singleton who sounds like she's had her original dialogue ADR'd) who both protects her from and inducts her into the harem of regular fucks on offer to stoned band members and grumpy road managers (Gilbert Wynne is particularly good as the heartless, craggy faced Jimi). Gradually, Suzy is dehumanised by her nihilistic experience of sex and drugs on the road and works her way through the band and crew, each man throwing her aside as she goes onto the next, until she seduces lead singer Lee (the disturbingly hairy Alan Gorrie) and usurps Fiona's position at the top of





the groupie pile. Fiona takes this badly, her love for Lee exposing her true sensitivity, and the lasting image of the film is of Suzy discovering her body, a suicide in a hotel bathroom, and barely acknowledging it as she pretties herself in the mirror and, without flinching, momentarily stares her dead friend in the eye.

It's a depressing coda to a film where there are very few positive relationships between men and women, where both simply use and abuse each other and then move on. The only friendship of note for Suzy is the one she forms, early on, with Fiona (who as 'madam' to the groupies is the most compassionate of the lot) and which is then momentarily supplanted by her buddying with a homeless hippie beggar Pogo (Robert Daubigny), which does temporarily allow her to escape from the Forever More tour. This is abruptly curtailed when Pogo is killed by a car and it necessitates a return to life on the road.

It's part sexploitation flick, featuring the familiar figures of the Collinson Twins (see them in Hammer's *Twins Of Evil* as an example of how sexploitation was used to shore up the company's tired horror output in the 1970s) and various top models of the day, and, oddly, a less than effective promotional exercise for Forever More. The band was real, making several records for RCA, but, to be honest, the film does little for them or their music and seems to use the same three or four songs over and over again to blanket the soundtrack. Not only do they start to grate but they also drown out much of the dialogue. But perhaps that's the point as it's the tits, ass and fleeting glimpses of pubic hair or the rather obvious, and somewhat incongruous, lesbian seduction scene which takes place after Suzy has physically attacked Fiona to emphasise her dominance of the groupie coterie, that the cinema club audiences of yesteryear were interested in.

Despite these rather torrid roots, the film is a seedy, searingly claustrophobic examination of the times, showing us a London that's drab, grey and bleak and, from the windows of the tour bus, a brooding, anonymous winter landscape redolent of hopelessness. Shonteff edits the film with a certain amount of experimental flair, dropping in flashcuts to the deaths of Pogo and Fiona early on, suggesting a foretelling of the narrative's end, preparing you for what will turn out to be a numbing, alienating experience.

By Frank Collinson (www.cathoderaytube.co.uk)

EDINBURGH
FILM
GUILD