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Review of The T.A.M.I. Show

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The T.A.M.I. Show

(Shout! Factory, 3.23.2010)

The T.A.M.I. Show was the second movie I went to see on consecutive nights. (*The Horror of Dracula* was the first, *The Graduate* the third and last.) Like most American teenagers, I went primarily to see the Rolling Stones whose first recordings in the United States began trickling into the market in 1964. I went back to see James Brown again.

Historically important as the first rock-and-roll concert film, *The T.A.M.I. Show* was the creation of producer William Sargent, Jr., who earlier in 1964 had videotaped a performance of Richard Burton's Broadway production of *Hamlet* and had it in theaters a few weeks later. *The T.A.M.I. Show* was recorded at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium on October 29, 1964, and was in theaters by December 29.

The T.A.M.I. Show has attained legendary status over the years because of the difficulty of seeing it in its entirety. The Beach Boys' set was removed from all prints at the request of their manager after the initial theatrical release, and later bootleg videos were of poor quality. Sargent, better at ideas than at business, lost the rights, and it wasn't until Dick Clark Productions acquired them that this DVD became possible. The movie's title refers to Teenage Awards Music International, which Sargent had planned as an annual event, though no awards are in evidence.

The T.A.M.I. Show captures the diversity of the time, with the music ranging from surf rock to rhythm and blues to British invasion. *New York Times* and *USA Today* articles have emphasized the novelty of mixing black and white acts. While black performers were rare on network television, except for Clark's *American Bandstand* and his short-lived prime-time *The Dick Clark Show*, they had been prominent in early rock films, most notably, Frank Tashlin's *The Girl Can't Help It*. In his relaxed commentary director Steve Binder helps place the performers in their historical context.

With the exception of Brown and the obscure Barbarians, all the acts were well-known to anyone who listened to top-forty radio at the time. Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, Marvin Gaye, and the Supremes represented Motown. Gerry and the Pacemakers and Billy J. Kramer and the Dakotas were clients of Brian Epstein, manager of the Beatles. Their recordings were, as with the Beatles, produced by George Martin, and some of their songs written by Lennon and McCartney. Their music was popular at the time simply because almost anything British was well liked in America but it seems trite today, and the performers lack charisma.

Representing surf music are Jan and Dean, who also act as awkward hosts, and the Beach Boys. Chuck Berry is on hand for those who can recall the origins of rock a decade earlier. While all the other acts perform one to four songs, Lesley Gore gets to do six numbers for reasons Binder doesn't explain. Her songs, a precursor of bubblegum, have not aged well.

Binder spends considerable time praising the dancers, including a young Terri Garr, who prance about the stage during most of the acts, but he never explains why he felt they were necessary. More worthy of his attention are the studio musicians, including Glen Campbell and an unrecognizable Leon Russell, who back up most of the performers. The dancers combine with the hosting by Jan and Dean and their truly awful theme song to give *The T.A.M.I. Show* a slightly cheesy quality. But then there is Gaye singing "Stubborn Kind of Fellow," Robinson's "You Really Got a Hold on Me," the Supremes' "Where Did Our Love Go," Berry's "Johnny B. Goode," and the Beach Boys' "Surfer Girl," with Brian Wilson sounding as good live as he does on the recording.

The T.A.M.I. Show would not have achieved its status, however, without Brown, who was just beginning to reach top-forty audiences. No pop music performance captured on film has ever been as electric as Brown's, from his dance steps during "Out of Sight" to the raw emotion of "Prisoner of Love." The highlight occurs during "Please, Please, Please" when he feigns being overcome by emotion and begins to leave the stage only to return to the microphone time and again. While cutting away to audience reactions during all the other sets, Binder keeps his camera on Brown, shifting between close-ups and long shots expertly to capture both the singer's intensity and grace. The rote screams greeting each act become genuine at the end, and when Binder finally cuts to the spectators, some appear as exhausted as Brown himself.

As Keith Richards has admitted, the Stones represent a slight letdown following Brown's explosiveness, but they're still pretty good as they acknowledge their debt to Berry with "Around and Around" and then perform "Off the Hook" (not yet released), "Time is on My Side," and "It's All Over Now." In this context Mick Jagger's dance moves seem pale imitations of Brown's. Binder doesn't explain why Bill Wyman isn't visible until the second number and why Charlie Watts is the only one not to warrant a close-up. All five look startlingly young, with Richards resembling Freddie Highmore's mischievous older brother.

Binder's commentary is at its best when he discusses the directing choices he made. He is joined by Don Waller, author of *The Motown Story*, who has little of interest to add but does provide an enlightening 16-page pamphlet about the making of *The T.A.M.I. Show* and its impact. The other extras are the film's radio ads and a mistake-laden commentary on the trailer by John Landis, who was in the audience. Shout! Factory has created an excellent transfer, with clear black-and-white images and a strong soundtrack.—Michael Adams