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SXSW starts to swing

The festival premieres films about Al Franken, the Pixies and the music biz. Plus: Did Andy Dick really hump an audience member's head?

By Andrew O'Hehir

When it comes to peaking early, the Pixies were lucky. The innovative Boston band that dominated alternative rock in the late '80s and early '90s was too early by only half a generation. When they decided to reunite in 2003, they were many times more popular than they'd ever been the first time around. In a quote superimposed over the opening frames of Steven Cantor and Matthew Galkin's "loudQUIETloud: A Film About the Pixies," the late Kurt Cobain explains that "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was basically his effort to rip them off.

If "Before the Music Dies" tells you that contemporary pop has a problem with authenticity, "loudQUIETloud" shows you. I wasn't a massive Pixies fan in the old days (like a lot of other people, I learned to appreciate them more after their breakup in 1994), so I didn't approach this movie as a tear-drenched trip down memory lane. It's more like an extraordinary spectacle: Here are four middle-aged people who look like they've lived pretty hard -- OK, really, really hard -- playing dense, thrilling, loud rock music that sounds more dangerous (and a lot less derivative) than about 95 percent of what passes for indie rock these days.

If the live shows in Cantor and Galkin's film positively burn down the barn -- they said after the screening that they shot roughly 65 hours of concert footage -- "loudQUIETloud" also offers a fascinating look at the band's peculiar inner dynamics. If the Pixies split up the first time around because of constant tension between lead singer Charles Thompson (aka Black Francis) and bass player Kim Deal, these two prickly talents seem to have healed the rift a decade later by barely speaking at all.

No Mick-and-Keith antics are on display here; the tour is alcohol-free (in deference to Deal's clean-and-sober status) and the band members spend the evenings in their separate hotel rooms, talking to their families, reading or working on side projects. While the reunion tours of Europe and North America were massively successful, the band's future is unclear; they haven't recorded any new material, or even seriously discussed doing so.

I don't know whether this is intentional, but Pixies fans close to the band's age may experience the film as a sobering look in the mirror. Black Francis is now a bald, overweight husband and father, with two kids, two stepkids, a minivan and a house. Guitarist Joey Santiago is a film composer with two kids of his own; drummer David Lovering has basically quit music for a career as a professional magician. When we first see Deal, she's sitting at home in Dayton, Ohio, doing embroidery. You'd pass her in the aisles of K-mart without even noticing; it's as if the drugged-out alt-rock goddess of the

early '90s had evaporated. Onstage, though, they sound as good -- if not tighter, leaner and actually better -- than ever.

At the after-party in a just-opened Austin club, Santiago and Lovering hung out late into the night, looking like about every other badge-wearing SXSW hipster of a certain age. (Deal and Thompson sent their regrets.) Clad in an orange Texas Longhorns cap, Santiago responded to questions about the band's future with a shrug. His parents live in San Antonio, he explained; he came to the premiere on his way home. "I'm a professional magician," said Lovering. "I don't reveal trade secrets." A familiar skunky, smoky odor rose into the Texas night.

This is a complicated movie, a story of resistance and rebellion grown old and adapting to changing times, but without losing its resonance. In that sense it's the perfect film for this festival, and late in the night it was impossible not to feel great affection for both. Galkin told me after the film that he and Cantor spent several hundred thousand dollars of their own money on "loudQUIETloud," essentially mortgaging their professional future on a rock documentary that compels you to think uncomfortable thoughts. May it come back to them, as money or as karma. Money would no doubt be preferable.